



THE BASILICA AND THE MONASTIC COMPLEX OF SAN SEVERO IN CLASSE/RAVENNA

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Introduction

The fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of early medieval power centres was one of the most debated historical issues in the last century. Historical, archaeological, and religious studies were dedicated to this problem, and military, economic and climatic explanations were put forward to highlight and to explain the relatively fast decline of the Western Roman Empire and the emergence of new power centres (Byzantine, Carolingian).² The survival of the Late Antique economic system in the early medieval period is one of the most powerful historical concepts for the explanation of the transitional period, and it has been the most debated historical question of the period since the beginning of the twentieth century. Recently, major monographic studies have reinterpreted the whole period and there propose fundamentally new concepts for the explanation of this period.³ They represent an extremely wide range of modern

¹ For the preparation of this article preliminary reports of the recent excavations were also used. They were prepared by the four research teams of the University of Barcelona, University of Leicester, University Bologna/Ravenna, and Central European University. Among many other colleagues Enrico Cirelli, Federica Boschi, Miguel Angel Cau, Gavin Speed, Irene Barbiera, Debora Ferreri, Gergely Buzás and Andrea Fiorino should be mentioned, who played crucial role in this research project. For the preliminary results of the project: Andrea Augenti, ed., *La basilica e il monastero di San Severo in Classe. La storia, gli scavi*. (The basilica and monastery of San Severo at Classe. The history, the excavation). (Ravenna: RavennAntica 2006) (henceforth: Augenti, *La basilica*).

² The most recent summary of these issues can be found in the volumes: *The Transformation of the Roman World* (A scientific program of the European Science Foundation). (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill). The most relevant volume of the series for this article is: Gianpietro Brogiolo – Nancy Gauthier – Neil Christie (eds.), *Towns and their Territories between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (The Transformation of the Roman World) 9. (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill 2000).

³ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005); Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages (Europe and the*



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ideas of reinterpretation and many complex issues concerning the concept of Roman continuity, regional development patterns in early medieval Europe and the wider aspect concerning the clashes of cultures.

The present article is connected to these problem areas, since it is based on a heritage project (Ravenna-Classe), which focuses on the archaeological investigation and presentation of an important archaeological site. The investigation plans to answer major, historical and archaeological research questions and at the same time wants to prepare the site to be visited by the wider public as part of an archeological park.

In 2005–2006, the Department of Medieval Studies of CEU joined an international research project in Ravenna. The main aim of this project is to focus on the archaeological evidence concerning the economic, administrative and religious changes of the Late Antique (Roman), Byzantine, and Early Medieval cultural heritage in the area of the most important power centre of this period, and to put it in the context of an European-wide image of this transitional period. The participating institutions, their specialists (Neil Christie, University of Leicester; Gisela Ripoll, University of Barcelona; Andrea Augenti, University of Bologna/Ravenna; József Laszlovszky, CEU) and the students, carried out an archaeological investigation at one of the most important and complex monuments, the church of San Severo – Classe/Ravenna, and they also investigated the local-regional contexts (Britannia, Iberian peninsula, Italy and Pannonia) of this historical period. Three important workshops were organized in the framework of this project (*Abandoned Antique Towns* – Leicester, *Transformation of Religious Practices and Cult Places* – Budapest, *Church Architecture and its Historical Context* – Barcelona), and some aspects of the most important results of the excavation are summarized in these preliminary articles of this volume.⁴

Until very recently the main emphasis of research was connected to the artistic monuments of Ravenna, and mainly their mosaics, but recent studies have shifted the focus to the archaeological investigations of economic and topographic issues and on their impact on the Later Medieval period.⁵ The

Mediterranean, 400–800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005); Neil Christie, *From Constantine to Charlemagne (An Archaeology of Italy AD 300–800)* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006).

⁴ See also: Augenti, *La basilica*.

⁵ *Convegno per lo studio della zona archeologica di Classe a mezzo dell'aerofotografia*. Promosso dal LIONS CLUB di Ravenna nei giorni 29–30 aprile 1961. (Faenza: Stab. Grafico F.lli Lega, S.R.L. 1962); Sauro Gelichi, “L’arco nord-orientale dell’Adriatico nel medioevo: bilancio critico delle ricerche archeologiche e prospettive future,” in *L’Archeologia dell’Adriatico dalla Preistoria al Medioevo*. Atti del convegno internazionale Ravenna, 7–8–9 giugno 2001. *Archeologia dell’Adriatico* 1. (2003): 479–498; Andrea Augenti, “Ravenna:



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interaction of Late Antique (Roman) heritage, its Byzantine transformation and the emergence of the new power center is one of the most debated issues, and the site of San Severo can significantly contribute to the understanding of the transformation processes. The changing character of a major ecclesiastical site can be interpreted as an important indicator for the development of the larger area and region. At the same time, functional changes of the basilica and the transformation of the burial practices around it can also contribute to the general interpretation of the period. Finally, the emergence of a new monastic complex near San Severo and the afterlife of these places and sites will be discussed. This can shed light on the problems to what extent this Late Antique artistic and architectural heritage was reinterpreted, transformed, and re-utilised in the Later Medieval period.

Ravenna and Classe: The Urban Landscape of San Severo

The most important period for the urban development of Ravenna was in the Augustan period, when the emperor decided that the city of Ravenna was to become the seat of the military fleet meant to control the Adriatic Sea. Thus the soldier-sailors of the imperial fleet began to settle in an area south of the inhabited center of Ravenna, near the coast, and in that same area they founded their cemeteries. This situation started to change at the beginning of the fifth century, when Ravenna was chosen as the imperial seat of the Western Empire and equipped with a new, wider wall circuit. At the same time also the area south of Ravenna was enclosed by walls, thus determining the formation of a new city south of the gates of Ravenna: Classe. Between the fifth and the sixth century the development of these two centres entailed the construction of numerous elements of infrastructure, vital for the proper functioning of urban areas: aqueducts, roads, bridges, and in the case of Classe, its commercial harbor.⁶

The excavations in the harbor area, which resumed in 2001, are providing results of great interest, because it is through the excavated evidence that we are now able to understand the wide commercial network of which Ravenna was

problemi di archeologia urbana,” in *L’Archeologia dell’Adriatico dalla Preistoria al Medioevo*. Atti del convegno internazionale Ravenna, 7–8–9 giugno 2001. *Archeologia dell’Adriatico* 1, 2003, 537–551.

⁶ For the most important research problems see: *Ravenna da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale: atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di studio sull’alto medioevo: Ravenna, 6–12 giugno 2004*. Mario Mazza et al. eds., (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo 2005).



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part during Late Antiquity. Large containers, mainly amphorae, in which goods were transported, indicated the existence of a sort of Commonwealth, which included the coastal areas of Northern Africa, Nubia, the Aegean Area, Palestine, Sicily, Southern Italy, Istria and Dalmatia.⁷

During the same period, the growth of the two cities also included the evolution of a landscape of monuments. Ravenna was endowed with an enormous palace, the imperial residence, that was to be reused at a later date, by the Gothic King Theoderic as his palace.⁸ From 540, the year in which the town was conquered by the Byzantines, this was used as the palace of the Exarch, the Byzantine governor-general of the province of Italy. At the same time, the most widespread monuments of this period were churches, emblemata and media for the diffusion and consolidation of orthodox Christianity. During Late Antiquity and in the Medieval period, it is through the construction of these churches that local identity was fully expressed. This is the period in which were built, in Ravenna, monuments like San Giovanni Evangelista, Santo Spirito, Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, San Vitale and San Michele in Africisco. In Classe, churches like the Basilica Petriana, the church of Probus and Sant' Apollinare in Classe, the great martyrial basilica located outside of the walls of the city, were also constructed. From this point of view, the fifth and the sixth centuries are truly the golden age of what we can consider an enlarged urban area, placed at the centre of the geopolitical scene of the Mediterranean Sea.

This is the general context in which the basilica of San Severo is placed, a magnificent building, similar to that dedicated to Sant' Apollinare in Classe. After the construction of this monument, at the end of the sixth century, and starting from the seventh century, the history of the two centres (Ravenna and Classe) became increasingly distinct. A long period of crisis begins for Classe, probably due to the gradual end of the long-scale Mediterranean trade. As early as the beginning of the ninth century Andreas Agnellus, a cleric and historian from Ravenna, describes Classe as a “destroyed city”. It can be argued that a few hundred people carried on living in the area and also that some churches and monasteries (including San Severo) survived here for some time. However, the common perception for Classe was more and more of a once thriving but now abandoned place. Ravenna, on the other hand, remained one of the most important centers in the peninsula up to the mid-eighth century. In 751, it was conquered for the first and last time by the Lombards and this event marked the

⁷ Andrea Augenti – Carlo Bertelli, eds., *Ravenna tra Oriente e Occidente: storia e archeologia*, I Quaderni di “Flaminia” 8. (Ravenna: Longo Editore 2006).

⁸ Andrea Augenti, “Archeologia e topografia a Ravenna: il palazzo di Teoderico e la *Moneta Aurea*,” *Archeologia Medievale* 32 (2005): 7–33.



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beginning of a slow and inevitable decline. Charlemagne, in fact, robbed the city of Ravenna of marblework in the 770s. After that date the capital city, seat of civil power and one of the most powerful archbishopric seats of the entire Western world was no longer able to reach the power achieved in the past and it became a city-state similar to many other centres of medieval Italy.

Classe: Topography and Monuments

The city of Classe was founded south of Ravenna in an area that had been previously occupied by necropoleis and suburban buildings, mainly villae. According to the most commonly accepted reconstruction attempts, the urban walls enclosed the city in a semi-circular circuit. The northern area of the town was defended by a wide canal, within which an island was located. It is right along this canal that the harbor area of the town developed with several warehouses and other infrastructure. This area flourished until the seventh century: during this period the warehouses were gradually replaced by domestic dwellings, while the volume of the Mediterranean trade decreased towards zero. The most vital phase of the history of Classe is, therefore, placed between the fifth and the seventh century. This is the time during which the most important monuments were built: grand Christian basilicae, proposed to the community as a landmark for remembrance and local identity.

The most ancient church in this area is probably the Basilica Petriana, founded by bishop St. Peter Crisologo (432–450). According to the ninth-century local historian Agnellus, this complex had enormous dimensions and was provided with a baptistery. It is possible, therefore, that it was used to carry out parish functions for the people of Classe. The site of the Basilica Petriana has not yet been identified with certainty: the remains that had been for decades supposed to have belonged to the building, do not show elements which connect this to a Christian church. The other very important church, the basilica of San Severo, was also built within the walls. It was founded at the end of the sixth century and can be regarded as the last great ecclesiastical monument built in Classe and in the territory of Ravenna.

Around the city of Classe other important basilicae were placed. The main one was that of Sant' Apollinare, built during the Gothic period in the site of a necropolis, where possibly the bishop had been buried; later it was rededicated in 549. This was the burial site of the majority of bishops of Ravenna in the sixth century and in the following period. This fact designates the monument as a true and proper location of remembrance, and a cardinal landmark of the urban and suburban landscape. Many other churches were documented in Classe between the sixth and the twelfth century, witnessing the vitality that the



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inhabited area kept for a long time, even when it stopped being perceived as a true urban entity. The surviving population probably concentrated around the most important churches and those that remained active in the medieval period. However, the data from the written sources related to most of these churches do not correspond to a correct location of the same monuments on the ground.

St. Severus: His Life and the Historical Context

Severus was one of the most emblematic bishops of Ravenna in the mid-fourth century and his life is known through iconographic, written and archaeological sources. The personality of the bishop, his participation in the transcendental council of Sardis and his influential presence in Ravenna, show him as a very important member of the city church. For these reasons his portrait is present in the church of Sant' Apollinare in Classe, in the lower part of the apse between the windows. The portrait of St. Severus is dated to the period of Iulianus Argentarius, who sponsored the construction of this church between 532 and 536. The image of the bishop is the second among the bishops represented: Ecclesius, Severus, Ursus, Ursicinus. The bishops' portraits provide a clear representation of the church of Ravenna, accomplished by the most important figures from the fourth to the end of the sixth century.

Concerning the written sources on the life of St. Severus, his *vita* by Andreas Agnellus is the most important text, preserved in the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* (LP XII), dated between 830–832. In this text, Severus was represented according to the hagiographic stereotypes of the time, as a good and simple person, whose daily activity was that of a wool-worker. His election as a bishop was surprising—both for him and his family, but also for the good citizens of Ravenna—because of the subtle way in which he was appointed, by a white dove that descended over him as the image of the Holy Spirit. In the same text, in the *Vita Sancti Severi*, appears the famous phrase “*Ravenna misera, vicinae destructae Classisi.*” The relatively short mandate of St. Severus is marked by his presence at the Council of Sardis (Sophia), celebrated in the years 343–344. As far as his family is concerned, it is known that his brother, Geminian, was a bishop of Modena. The wife of St. Severus, Vincentia, and his daughter Innocentia died prematurely and the bishop buried them in the same place where he was later worshipped after his death in the year 346 or 348. As the *Vita* presents: “*Et multa mirabilia ad sepulcrum Dominus ostendit in ipsius ecclesia, quae sita est in civitate dudum Classis,*” what is in other texts identified as St. Rufillus’ *monasterium*.

Earlier archaeological investigation has shed light on some buildings at the foot of the church of San Severo, which leaves no doubt about their funerary



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function. In front of the northern mausoleum a very fragmentary mosaic inscription was found with the name of Severus, that dates to the end of the sixth century. It is important to stress the relationship between the mausolea and the basilica. It was inferred that the mausoleum on the northern side was the first place of inhumation of the remains of Severus and his family.

Regarding Severus' relics we only have indirect information. Thanks to the *Liber Pontificalis*, we know that the basilica of San Severo was built between 570 and 582 by the bishops Peter III (570–578), who was the promoter, and Johannes II (578–595), who consecrated it, moving the relics from one place to another in 582. The text clearly specifies Peter as the founder of the church,⁹ and Johannes (Johannes Romanus) who moved the relics to the middle of the nave.¹⁰ The relics were thus moved from an already existing building, alongside the church, known to have been dedicated to St. Rufillus.¹¹ The architectural remains retrieved southeast of the church have been identified as the *monasterium* of Rufillus, the first bishop of Forum Pompilii (Forlimpopoli). This building complex was a mausoleum and the body of Rufillus as well as of Severus was placed here. Note that as the contemporary meaning of monastery was different, it cannot be identified with a monastic community, but rather with an oratory above the relics of these saints.

Archaeologically, Severus' relics leave several questions unanswered. The building constructed in his memory at the end of the sixth century has undergone a long series of reconstructions and robbing. Because of this, it is impossible to affirm with certainty where the relics were placed within the church when bishop Johannes moved them.¹² Furthermore, since the relics were stolen and moved to Germany in the ninth century, so later buildings or building parts erected in the church no longer contained the relics, but perhaps they attached importance to the original place where the body had been located in the church.

⁹ "...fundavitque ecclesia beati Severi..." *Liber Pontificalis* XXIX.

¹⁰ *Liber Pontificalis* XXX.

¹¹ "...sublatum est ab eo sanctus corpus de monasterio sancti Rophili, quod ab ipsius ecclesia sufultum est..." *Liber Pontificalis* XXX.

¹² The descriptions used in the source are clear but from the architectural point of view they can offer different solutions: "...in medio dedicanit templo...", "...in media ecclesia collocavit..." *Liber Pontificalis* XXX.



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Classe and the Basilica of San Severo

The transformations of the basilica, and Classe itself, had already begun during the construction period of the church. Much financing would have been required to renew and rededicate the largely Arian churches in Ravenna. The economic damages caused by the long and bitter Gothic-Byzantine Wars (534–554) meant that only limited resources were available. When substantial building operations at San Severo's church did commence, however, this too was a new period of upheaval and conflict. As the Lombards entered north-eastern Italy in 569 and rapidly gained footholds in the territory, the Byzantine exarch of Ravenna was at the front of military operations to counter the expansion. The Exarch Longinus is recorded to have erected a palisade defense around the suburb of Caesarea between Classe and Ravenna. Despite these efforts, Classe was captured in 578 by the Lombard duke Faroald—apparently a rebellious Byzantine commander rather than an invading enemy. As a result of this much of Classe's portable wealth was removed as Faroald moved south to establish his duchy in Spoleto. We must assume that work at San Severo was interrupted for some time by these events, although bishop Johannes II no doubt sought to make its completion a priority to give new pride and hope to the community of Classe. The ninth-century historian Agnellus, the most important author for the early history of the basilica, offers no later insights into the basilica's importance and evolution, but it is likely that the archbishops duly added to the internal decoration and fittings of San Severo, and contributed similarly to the costs of maintenance of this large church. Such renewal became increasingly difficult in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries especially as Ravenna's sphere of political, economic and indeed religious influence diminished. The ejection of Byzantine power in the Exarchate in the mid-eighth century by the Lombards and the peripheral role played by the city and its port in the Frankish period, as noted, appear to have caused dramatic shrinkage and decay at Classe.

By the time of the first decades of the ninth century this decline was so strong that Agnellus wrote about the "former town" of Classe, implying that little more than the churches remained of what had been a thriving commercial centre. This decay and desertion also led to one of the most dramatic events in the history of the basilica of San Severo. In 836, a Frankish monk, Felix engineered the theft of the remains of the saint, which were passed onto the bishop of Magonza (Mainz), the leading German see, who was conveniently visiting Pavia.¹⁵ The relics were swiftly transferred onto St Albano in Mainz,

¹⁵ Giuseppe Morini, *Ravenna d'altri tempi* (Ravenna: Libreria Antiquaria Tonini, 2004) 294–298; Martina Caroli, "Culto e commercio delle reliquie a ravenna nell'alto



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before being definitely relocated in the church of St. Paul's in Erfurt. This church, founded around the mid-eighth century by Bonifacius, changed, upon arrival of the relics, its dedication to that of St. Severus. His cult became one of the most wide-spread of the Medieval period. The theft of St. Severus' body from Classe was not an unique event in the period, but it formed just a part of an outward loss of precious Italian possessions. Other Franks had busily sought and even stolen relics from Rome, while Charlemagne had already plundered Ravenna's palace and churches for marble-work for his own German palaces in the late eighth century. In Classe, the San Severo complex, now empty of its relics, started to transform into a place of remembrance, through phases of major and minor activity and vitality, but overall it fell slowly into oblivion.

In the second half of the tenth century, however, San Severo started to regain its visual and symbolic significance when Emperor Otto I established a palace alongside the basilica in 967. He and his Ottonian successors utilised Ravenna and Classe on a number of occasions, including holding church synods and issuing laws. The symbolic importance of Ravenna as the center of emperors and that of San Severo in Classe, as the original burial place of an important saint in the German areas played a crucial role in the political power games of Otto I. It also transformed the development of the building complex of San Severo. The previously established monastic complex near the basilica was only one of the monastic communities in the area of the former urban settlement of Classe, but it became one of the most important established in the medieval period. The visit of the emperor¹⁴ marked an important event in the development of the monastery and various donations¹⁵ received in this period helped maintain and perpetuate the basilica and the monastery for more than five hundred years. The Benedictine, Cistercian and Camaldulian monasteries, following each other in the history of San Severo, represent different monastic ideas attached to the Late Antique basilica and mark significant transformations of the complex.¹⁶

Medievo,” in Andrea Augenti – Carlo Bertelli eds., *Ravenna tra Oriente e Occidente: storia e archeologia*, I Quaderni di “Flaminia” 8. (Ravenna: Longo Editore 2006): 15–27.

¹⁴ David A. Warner, “The Representation of Empire: Otto I at Ravenna,” in Björn Weiler – Simon MacLean eds., *Representations of Power in Medieval Germany 800–1500* International Medieval Research 16 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers 2006) 121–140.

¹⁵ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Diplomatum regum et imperatorum Germaniae. I. Conradi i. Henrici i. et Ottonis I. Diplomata* (Hannoverae: Impensis Bibliopoli Hahniani, 1879–1884) 476–477.

¹⁶ The history and archaeology of the monastic complex is discussed in the article of József Laszlovszky in this volume.



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Various attempts failed to revitalize the monastic community at San Severo during the second half of the fifteenth century and the monks finally moved to the town of Ravenna in 1512. The decline of the monastery was parallel with the decline of the church and the former urban area of Classe. In the Early Modern period, the church of San Severo, its campanile a belltower, remained an important landmark in the landscape and close to the small settlement of Sant' Apollinare. However, it was rather a ruin than the site of an active monastic community. By 1754, it was in such bad repair that large-scale rebuilding work became essential, as indicated in a contract from this year. This time the building was reconstructed in a much smaller form than the original basilica with the following dimensions: 26.60m in length by 12.40m in width, therefore only slightly bigger than the previous restructuring of the fifteenth century. This time also the orientation of the church was inverted and it was possible to enter the building from the eastern side. This final attempt to save the basilica did not stop its disintegration and decline. By 1820 the church had lost its function as an ecclesiastical site, and what follows after this date is not the history of a basilica or of a monastery, but the history of antiquarian interest and collection of spolia from an ancient and medieval monument.¹⁷

Archaeological Investigations of the Basilica of San Severo

Previous archaeological investigations

The basilica of San Severo was the object of several excavation campaigns starting from the sixties of the twentieth century.¹⁸ This archaeological interest

¹⁷ *Santi banchieri re. Ravenna e Classe nel VI secolo. San Severo il tempio ritrovato.* eds. Andrea Augenti, Carlo Bertelli (Milano: Skira editore, 2006).

¹⁸ G. Bermond Montanari, "Scavi e ricerche nella zona basilica di S. Severo," *Bollettino Economico della Camera di Commercio di Ravenna* (BECCR) 1 (1966): 1. 12–18; G. Bermond Montanari, "Nuove scoperte archeologiche nel classicano," *Bollettino Economico della Camera di Commercio di Ravenna.* (BECCR) 6 (1967): 457–466; G. Bermond Montanari, *La chiesa di S. Severo nel territorio di Classe.* (Bologna: Pàtron 1968) (henceforth: Montanari, *La chiesa*); G. Cortesi, *La zona e la basilica di S. Severo nel territorio di Classe.* (Ravenna, 1964); Maria Grazia Maioli, "La basilica di S. Severo e la casa Romana," in Maria Grazia Maioli – Maria Luisa Stoppioni, *Classe e Ravenna fra terra e mare. (Città – necropoli – monumenti. Un'avventura della archeologia gli scavi nella zona archeologica di Classe.)* (Ravenna: Edizioni Sirri 1987); Maria Grazia Maioli, "Nuovi dati sul complesso archeologico di S. Severo a Classe (RA): 1981–1991," *Corsi di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* (CARB) 39 (1992): 498–520; Maria Grazia Maioli, "La basilica di San Severo a Classe: scavo e



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can be explained by the fact that most of the other early medieval and medieval churches of Classe cannot be identified and pinpointed at this stage of research as no visible remains survived up to the modern period. The surviving torso of the campanile attached to San Severo and the written evidence indicating its place close to the still standing church of Sant' Apollinare in Classe helped the localization of this church and the published written records indicated the importance of this monument in the history of Classe. The mosaic decoration of the church of Sant' Apollinare in Classe also contributed to the growing interest in the history and archaeological remains of the basilica of San Severo, since St. Severus is depicted there as one of the leading figures in Ravenna's religious history.

During the course of the first archaeological investigations by Bermond Montanari the remains of a great ecclesiastical building (c. 65x27 metres) with three naves and a single central apse were retrieved. The main characteristic features of this basilica (building material, ground-plan, size, fragments of the interior decoration) were very similar to the close-by church of Sant' Apollinare in Classe. The excavations also brought to light two chapels of small dimensions, rectangular in shape, joined to the church vestibule. The only monument still visible at the time of the first excavations was the bell tower, widely restored and consolidated during the following years. The publication of the first excavation results led to various interpretations of the basilica: that the basilica was built on the remains of a former building, dated to the Roman Imperial period (second century AD), identified as a Roman villa.

The first excavations, however, failed to clarify many important archaeological problems as they were limited in their scope and also did not elaborate important aspects of the interpretation, such as the detailed stratigraphic sequence of the excavated layers. In various parts of the complex Bermond Montanari only followed the walls of the basilica and concentrated on the Late Antique features of the architectural remains. The other main result of this project was the documentation and preservation of the rich floor mosaic decoration of the basilica. (Fig. 1) These important monuments of Late Antique art in Classe were removed from the church and they were stored until very recently in depots.¹⁹ Nonetheless the archaeological importance and potential of

architettura,” in *Santi banchieri re. Ravenna e Classe nel VI secolo. San Severo il tempio ritrovato*. eds. Andrea Augenti, Carlo Bertelli (Milano: Skira editore, 2006) 63–70.

¹⁹ Raffaella Oliveri Farioli, “Ambientazione e idee informatrici del mosaico pavimentale Ravennate, con particolare riferimento ai mosaici rinvenuti a Classe,” *Corsi di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* (CARB) 18 (1971): 419–473; Raffaella Farioli Campanati, “I mosaici di San Severo e i mosaici pavimentali di Ravenna nel VI secolo,” in *Santi banchieri re. Ravenna e Classe nel VI secolo. San Severo il tempio ritrovato*. eds. Andrea Augenti,



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the site was clearly identified and various studies were dedicated to the interpretation of finds and architectural remains.²⁰ During the preservation work at the site, further small-scale excavations were carried out under Maria Grazia Maioli, which contributed to the understanding of the chronological sequence and which produced some new burials on the northern side of the basilica. Some details of these new results were discussed in studies connected to the archeological remains of Classe and to the burials of this area. Further elements of the history of the basilica were collected, and publication on the medieval historical sources of Ravenna also brought to light important written documents.

During the last decade, the archaeological potential of Classe has been clearly defined, and new research projects have begun to explore the economic, social and ecclesiastical history of Classe on the basis of the archaeological evidence. The first crucial excavations at the port of Classe mainly focused on economic problems, while the new project at San Severo wanted to concentrate on the ecclesiastical aspects. The plans for a new archaeological investigation at San Severo raised interest in these mosaics and a big exhibition project recently helped to restore these monuments. As a result, the most important floor mosaics of the basilica were presented for the wider public in the framework of the exhibition on Severus. Furthermore, the new archaeological investigation wanted to take into consideration not only the artistic aspects of the site, but also its ecclesiastical and urban historical aspects in terms of its extent and its relationship with the surrounding urban network.

Progetto Classe: A New Archaeological Project (Culture 2000)

The main aim of this project, briefly described above in the Introduction, was to clarify the evolution of the topographic context into which the basilica was constructed. For this purpose, a new archaeological investigation based on the stratigraphic principle was needed, combined with a complex building-

Carlo Bertelli (Milano: Skira editore, 2006) 71–76; Cetty Muscolino – Paolo Racagni, “Il restauro dei mosaici” in *Santi banchieri re. Ravenna e Classe nel VI secolo. San Severo il tempio ritrovato*. eds. Andrea Augenti-Carlo Bertelli (Milano: Skira editore, 2006) 77–79.

²⁰ Paola Novara, “Materiali dallo scavo della Chiesa di S. Severo in Classe (RA),” in *I Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*. Società degli Archaeologi Medievisti Italiani, Dipartimento di Scienze Archeologiche, Università di Pisa. (Pisa: Edizioni all’insegna del Giglio) 328–331; Paola Novara, “Materiali marmorei tardoantichi dalla basilica di S. Severo in Classe (RA),” *Ravenna Studi e Ricerche* 3 (1996): 29–74; Paola Novara, “Sectilia parietali inediti dagli scavi delle chiese di S. Severo e di S. Appolinare in Classe (Ravenna),” in Federico Guidobaldi – Andrea Paribeni eds., *AISCOM Atti del V Colloquio dell’Associazione Italiana per lo Studio e la Conservazione del Mozaico* (Roma, 3–6 novembre 1997) (Ravenna: Edizione del Girasole 1997) 83–96.



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archaeological approach. Written sources inform us that a monastery was placed beside the basilica and that this was one of the few sites of the city of Classe inhabited across the Early and Late Medieval periods. One of the objectives of the new project was also the identification of the archaeological deposits linked to the monastery, so to be able to shed light on a long diachronic sequence, also with respect to the evolution of the material culture of this area. In order to achieve the first objective (the interpretation of the stratigraphic and chronological sequence), three different sectors were opened within the basilica (area I), one inside each nave. These sectors were placed at the edges of the stratification still untouched by previous archaeological excavations. Other research questions of the project were investigated by opening a wide excavation area (area II, cc. 400sqm) in the zone located immediately north of the basilica. Further areas were sited in the building right against the apse of the basilica (the so-called vestry) and in the bell tower. The remains of the tower were also the subject of a building-archaeological approach. The superficial cleaning of the area of the mausoleum annexed to the basilica was also made—this a zone having been excavated in the 1960s.

The fieldwork of the project was carried out in 2006, after two workshops organized to clarify the research problems and investigation methods. The excavation campaign was organized for the summer months of 2006 with the continuous presence and work of the Bologna/Ravenna team, while the three other universities worked for one month each in a rotating system. The selection of the excavation areas was also made on the basis of a geophysical survey. The investigation used Ground Penetrating Radar in the zone north of the basilica to explore the ground with great precision through the emission of electromagnetic waves, allowing to take a “radar-stratigraphy” of the subsoil in real time. The main aim here was to identify and map the presence of new or supposed archaeological structures in an area not investigated by previous excavations. The results obtained by georadar survey showed the presence of numerous archaeological features in the subsoil. The area closest to the north nave had the largest concentration of anomalies indicating buried structures, identified at a depth between 40 cm and 110 cm. Thus the investigation carried out has further confirmed and pointed to the archaeological wealth of the complex of San Severo and corroborated the previous assumptions about the existence of significant building complexes and archaeological features in the northern zone.

Finally we can note that the main research results of the fieldwork were discussed and interpreted in two workshops in Budapest and Barcelona, while the project results were presented in Ravenna in the autumn of 2006. Related summary booklets and a CD-ROM produced; the full excavation archive was deposited with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Ravenna.



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Preliminary Results of the Archaeological Fieldwork in 2006 and its Interpretation

The basilica of San Severo was built in the vicinity of an ancient necropolis and in a site where a building complex of the Roman period had stood. Several walls of this building were located during the excavations in the 1960s, while later investigations brought to light further structures. The fieldwork in 2006 revealed elements of this complex and in particular made possible some precise definitions about its size. First of all it was possible to verify that the room paved with *cocciopesto* and in floral pattern (*opus scutulatum*) extended further north of the area occupied by the basilica. Also in this zone, further north, the bases of two columns have been located, which suggests the presence of a columned courtyard (*peristilium*) or a series of columns placed to surround the complex, at least in this area. Another structure, perhaps datable to the Roman period, was also retrieved near the bell tower. The excavation carried out within the basilica has shown that there was no wall or floor from the Roman period located in the western half of the church building or near its apse.

Even though the plan of the building complex of the Roman period that precedes the basilica of San Severo has not been clearly understood to its full extent, it seems likely that it was a villa. This villa was built in the Classe territory when Classe was not yet a city. The brickstamps and the typology of the floor mosaics suggest that the first phase of this building can be dated to the time of Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138), but at least some of its sectors continued to be inhabited up to the Late Antiquity, probably intact until the first decades of the sixth century.

The ecclesiastical plan of the basilica of San Severo is made up of several structural complexes that, even if not built at the same time, sometimes functioned together. The first complex, outside the church on the south-eastern side, consists of two funerary mausolea, adjacent to an unclear architectural feature. These were built before the church and were given paved floors at the end of the sixth century. The basilica itself, made of three naves, choir, and apse, was built at the end of the sixth century and widened with the addition of an annex on the north-eastern side by the mid-seventh century. All these buildings had decorative façades. The connection and passage from the church vestibule to the mausolea is now clear. During the period of the utilization of the church, from the end of the sixth century to the mid-ninth century, the two complexes were joined, incorporating some changes. Linkage was along a narrow corridor paved with floor mosaic of white large *tesserae*; this corridor led to a space open on the eastern side, where the mosaic inscription of San Severo was discovered.

The main architectural characteristics of the basilica were also investigated and further details of its chronology, transformations, and decorations were clarified. The three-naved, basilica-type church was 65 m in length and 27 m in



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width at the time of its largest extension. It was entered via a vestibule and the eastern side ended with an apse (semicircular inside and hexagonal externally). The apse was paved with white marble and decorated like that of Sant' Apollinare in Classe and other churches in Ravenna. The subdivision into three naves was carried out with two stylobates with twelve columns. In front of the presbiterium, and therefore in front of the altar, was a *chorus* with the liturgical function of greeting the clergy inside it. A continuous priests' bench, paved in marble, probably ran inside the *chorus*. The central nave was covered with a two-sided sloping roof and the side naves with one-sided sloping roofs. The apse was covered with a semicircular vault made with *tubi fittili* (ceramic tubes to lighten the weight). Several types of bricks were used to construct the building, mainly reused, dating from around the age of Hadrian in the second century AD.

The church, over the whole central sector and at its foot, was built over structures of the Roman villa. The fabric of the church, for the most part, was placed directly on top of these structures, although fill of soil and in some cases heaps of building material were discovered in some areas. On both the side of the nave and the choir, the stratigraphic sequence consists of a first level of thick fill material of intense black colour, on top of which lay the substantial levelling relative to the building work for the construction of the church. These layers date to the beginning and second half of the sixth century; on top of them are the layers for the preparation of the mosaic floors. Large parts of the southern nave, the central nave, and all of the northern nave had been robbed of mosaics, architectural decoration, liturgical sculpture, building material, and bricks. The excavation of the robber trenches and the fill in the southern and northern naves gives a clear idea that the beginning of the spoliation at San Severo started as early as the fifteenth century, but that it became very intense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As far as the location of Severus' burial place or the place of deposition of his relics is concerned, it is possible to claim from the data of the 2006 excavations that the relics were moved from the mausoleum located at the south-western corner of the church when the basilica was built. The exact place is unknown, although the structure was located in the middle of the central nave, which was transformed into a monumental aedicula in the medieval period. The reason for the monumentalizing this place is still being researched, but it suggests the development of a place of remembrance, forming a sort of sacralization within the architectonic space designed for the church.

The archaeological investigation in 2006 also clarified some additional architectural features of the basilica, particularly their chronological sequence and their possible functional interpretations. On the north flank of the apse is a



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small irregular chapel measuring 9.5 m by 9 m. As the construction of the chapel is undocumented in the written sources, and the stratigraphic sequence was unclear because of the previous excavations, special attention was paid to the dating problems. The principal aims were to understand the chronological sequence between this chapel, the basilica, and the bell-tower. Work focused on the categorization of the development of the internal features of the chapel. At the same time, identifying the date of its construction and verifying the plan of the structure made during the excavations in the 1960s and 1980s were crucial. The complete outline of the chapel was traced, including part of the original standing brick-built wall overlying an original buttress to the northeast corner of the basilica, constructed against the apse of the basilica. The building methods and materials are almost identical to those used in the original basilica, therefore suggesting a similar (though not contemporary) date of construction. The excavation also showed that the bell-tower was built on top of the western wall of the chapel after the chapel had gone out of use. Internally, two phases of flooring were recorded in the chapel. The earliest phase was a mortar layer, with only fragmentary traces of a marble slab floor. A coin found lying on this robbed layer dates to the reign of Constans II (658–668), which would suggest a late seventh-century date for this early floor or its robbing. The second phase saw the removal of the marble paving and its replacement by a tile floor. Some, if not all, of the tile was re-used Roman material (two had brick stamps of Antonius Pius and Septimius Severus). During this second phase a small internal wall partition was inserted, indicating a change in use within the chapel. The previous removal of the earlier excavation deposits overlying the brick floor prevents any discussion of the date of abandonment of the chapel, although it is clear that some of the walls, like those of the northern aisle of the main church, were robbed in the medieval period. On the basis of pottery and other finds underlying the first floor, the chapel was constructed in the mid-seventh to eighth century. Its construction involved considerable levelling of the ground prior to building operations (thus repeating effectively clearance work for the the basilica's construction earlier, in the late sixth century). The expectation is that the chapel remained in use for some time, at least up to the construction of the bell tower in the twelfth century. What remains unclear is the unusual orientation of the chapel in relation to the basilica, which may have been determined by pre-existing features—such as tombs built up to and around the church apse. Such burials were found outside of the chapel indicating an important burial zone around the apse.

The excavation of graves and burial constructions was also an important task of the archaeological investigations at San Severo. Almost the entire life of the site was characterised by the presence of burials. This practice started before



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the construction of the basilica with the development of the Roman necropolis and continued over time, linked to the ecclesiastical and later monastic complex. The importance of this element as a mirror of cultural practice and transformations, and its intense occurrence in the stratification of the site, requires us to analyse it with particular care. Graves and burial monuments can be used as indicators for the social transformations of the surrounding area, and in an indirect way for the development or decline of Classe as a habitation zone.²¹

The northern zone of the basilica was, as noted, characterized by intensive geophysical anomalies indicating archaeological features and buried architectural units. Previous, although limited, archaeological excavations in this area also revealed the existence of graves and burial constructions along the northern wall of the basilica. Therefore, the main research was directed toward the identification of the structures and the characterization of the area. One possible functional interpretation was an urban milieu near the basilica, while written evidence indicated the presence of a large monastic complex. The 2006 excavation brought to light a very complex stratigraphic sequence and a building history with continuous transformations, spoliation, and rebuilding. Thus, the history of the basilica of San Severo as a Late Antique church can be reinterpreted as a church and a monastic complex that played an important role in the High and Late Middle Ages, providing a major architectural monument with significant archeological remains.²²

The bell-tower (*campanile*) is the only architectural element of the northern zone still standing. Between 1821 and 1822 the church of San Severo was demolished and after that date the ruins of the bell-tower were left as the only witness of the former ecclesiastical complex. The excavation campaigns carried out between 1964 and 1967 and later between 1981 and 1991 brought to light the foundations of the walls of the basilica, but did not touch the archaeological deposits preserved inside the bell tower. This was an important factor for the recent investigations, as the tower's chronology was a debated question. Detailed documentation of the still-standing features and examination of the buried stratification revealed fundamental data for the absolute dating of the different building phases. The tower was rectangular in shape with sides about 7 x 7.4 m. It was leaning against the north wall of the north nave. The sides are

²¹ The preliminary results of these investigations and the first detailed analytical approach for the interpretation of burials can be found in the article of Irene Barbiera and Debora Ferrei in this volume.

²² The results of the investigation of the monastic complex can be found in the article of József Laszlovszky in this volume.



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preserved up to about 3.6 in height. The interior of the tower consists of one room, only accessible from a single door with a circular arch. The archaeological investigation showed that the bell-tower was not constructed from new materials, but from material probably gathered from ruins of buildings and burials located nearby. Bricks of various size, bonded with mortar, were reused for building the walls, while several trachyte slabs (stones of polygonal shape widely utilized in the Roman period for paving roads), sculpture fragments from architectural fittings, and stone blocks of large dimensions, (which have could originated from local funerary monuments) were used at the base of the wall. This foundation is thus fundamentally different from the foundations of the Late Antique basilica, where only reused Roman bricks were utilized. The external façades of the bell-tower have been partially reconstructed during recent restoration campaigns, which brought to light some additional structures such as what has been interpreted as the remains of a round bell-tower, a distinctive feature of Ravennate churches in the Middle Ages. However, during the excavation and from the analysis carried out on the walls, it was not possible to locate other structural elements linked to the architectural typology of circular-plan bell-towers. The stratigraphic analysis of the walls—together with data obtained from published and archival documents—made it possible to identify with certainty four different construction phases that marked the development of the bell-tower. In the first phase, during the twelfth century, a fabric of square shape was built leaning against the north wall of the nave. Not before the thirteenth or fourteenth century, and probably infact during the sixteenth century, when there is information about some restoration, was the structure replaced by a bell-tower of rectangular shape, built with reused bricks. Its walls, which are still preserved to a height of several metres, present different patterns of laying of the bricks when compared to the previous fabric. In the Early Modern period the tower was probably abandoned and its structures, progressively decaying, reused with aims different from the original one. Finally, from 1981 to 1991 different restoration and maintenance campaigns followed one another with significant changes in the structure of the façades of the tower.

The preliminary results and the first interpretations of the new archaeological investigation were mainly based on the stratigraphic sequence of the site and on the functional interpretation of the architectural features. A more detailed discussion of the archaeological features and structures should be based on a thorough investigation of the finds. At this point we can only refer to some important characteristics of these finds. The materials retrieved date to the period from the Early Roman Imperial age to the Renaissance and Modern epoch. Most of the identifiable material was found in the layers for raising and intentionally levelling the building site while building the great Late Antique



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basilica. A high number of pottery sherds was found dating from this period—the mid-sixth century—including transport containers and fine tableware originating from different areas of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. A number of objects came from the fabric of buildings demolished during the construction of the basilica: fragments of mosaic floors, marble revetment slabs, and wall paintings. Elements of the internal fittings of the ecclesiastical monument were found in the stratigraphy showing the different phases of robbing of the building, such as fragments of a capital and pieces of marble screens sometimes reused in the construction of the Early Medieval burials. Materials dating from the end of the ninth to the eleventh century recovered from the strata of the building complex on the northern side of the basilica were particularly important as they can be linked to the emergence of the monastic complex. These are mainly objects related to daily life, such as glazed pottery and containers for domestic use. This material shows many similarities with the material culture of Northern and Central Italy, a picture from which, up to now, Ravenna and Classe seemed to be excluded.

Conclusions

The archaeological investigation of the basilica of San Severo in 2006 thus created a new, and more coherent image of the site and its setting than was known before. The archaeological features of the Late Antique period, mainly identified with this site as a result of the previous excavations, were enriched by a very complex sequence of architectural remains and archaeological finds. They represent a much more intricate systematization of the chronological framework of the site, where important transformations took place during the High and Late Middle Ages; the afterlife of the church in the Modern period can also be traced with the help of these archaeological investigations. The rich written evidence for the basilica can now be compared with multi-layered archaeological stratigraphy, partly in the basilica, and partly in the area of the monastic complex. In sum, the architectural complex of San Severo can be interpreted as a significant indicator of the ecclesiastical, social, and economic history of Classe and Ravenna from the sixth all the way through to the nineteenth century.

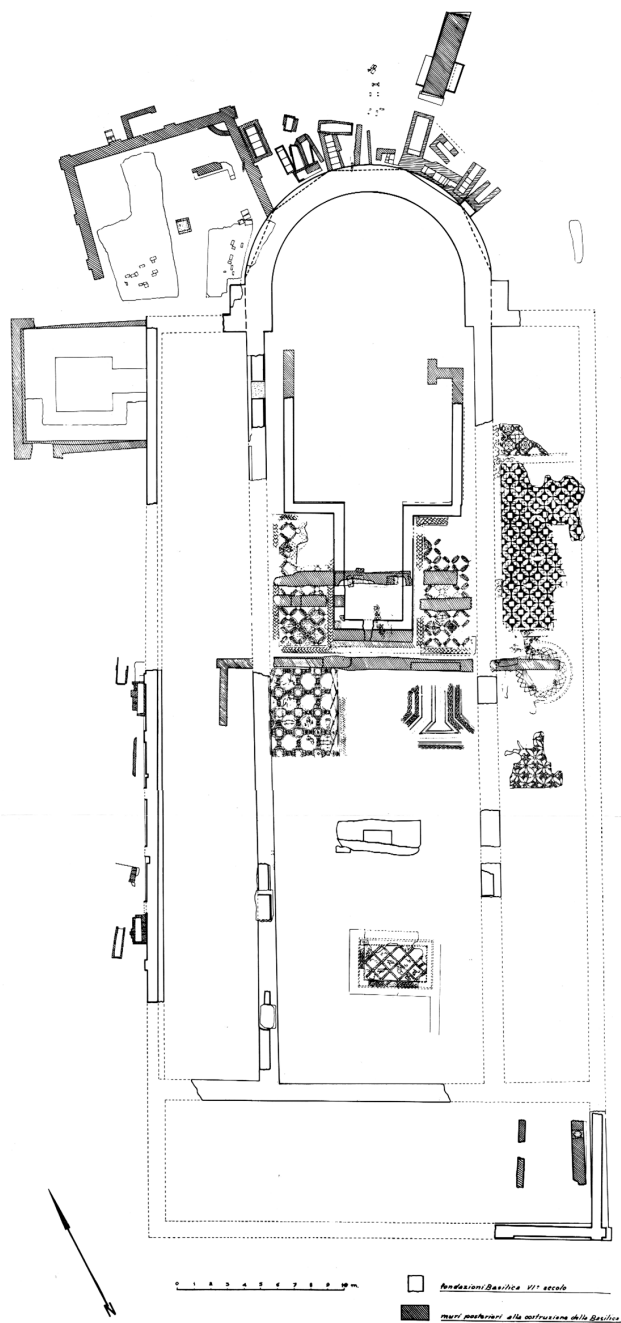


Fig. 1. The basilica of San Severo after the archeological investigations of G. Bermond Montanari (after Montanari 1968).