

DOSSIER

Éclat

Brilliance and its erasure in societies,
past and present: vocabulary, operations,
scenographies, meanings

RESTAURO,
CONSERVAZIONE
E TUTELA DEL
PATRIMONIO
CULTURALE



CRONACHE DEL RESTAURO

*Il Gabinetto cinese
nella Villa Reale di Monza*

Un inedito di Turner

*Il Ritratto del Conte Antonio Porcà
di Tiziano*

*Il Modulo bianco a tripla struttura
di Vanna Nicolotti*

LA RICERCA

*Conservazione in "cold storage"
di materiali sensibili su pellicola*

*Studio per il restauro
di un abito del XVII secolo*

Le rubriche

INTERNET

SICUREZZA

DENTRO LA PITTURA

PILLOLE DI RESTAURO TIMIDO

LE FONTI

NORMATIVA TECNICA EUROPEA

NOTIZIE E INFORMAZIONI



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Immagine in copertina e qui a fianco:
3D Gilded Digital Model of the *Diadoumenos* - Delos, Greece, marble Hellenistic copy after a famous original bronze by Polykleitos (5th century B.C.). This reconstruction is based on the study of its surface treatments by Brigitte Bourgeois (C2RMF) and Philippe Jockey (Ecole Française d'Athènes). ©Archeomed / Fabricia Fauquet



Dossier

Éclat. Brilliance and its erasure in societies, past and present: vocabulary, operations, scenographies, meanings

edited by Philippe Jockey, Helen Glanville, Claudio Seccaroni

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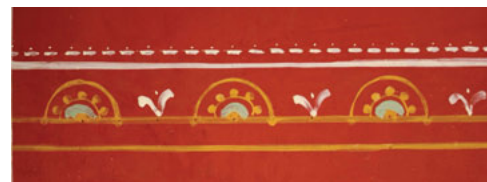
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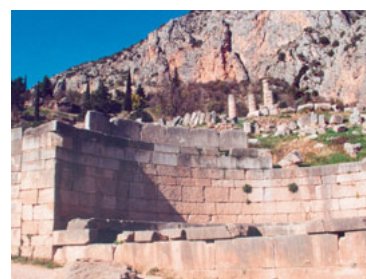
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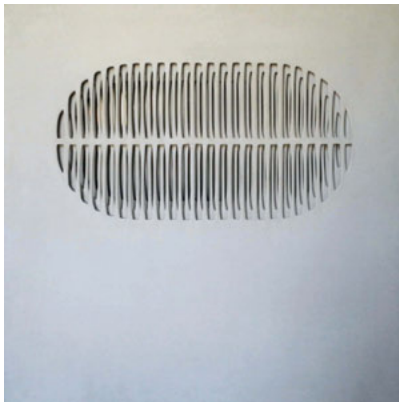
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De-gild, re-gild, erase

The decorations of Paleo-Christian churches (4th-6th century). The morals of religion and the political discourse of erasure and obliteration – the role of materials

Elisabetta Neri

Fig. 1. Rome, Horti Lamiani, metal elements for the plating. On the right: metal plating for the coffering, and nails for the fixing of the plates. Cima, La Rocca 1986.



Introduction

Beginning with the era of Constantine, the legitimisation of Christianity in 313 accelerates the search for a monumental and iconographic language suitable for the new religion. The propaganda of the Christian emperors, with its ideologies and messages, also finds expression through religious monuments, which offer a new – and necessary – kind of visibility, especially when Christianity becomes the state religion in 390. However, the search for a language that would be specific to Christianity had begun long before and placed itself dialectically in tension with the pagan world: on the one hand through the obliteration and destruction of pagan elements, on the other, through the heritage, and the giving of new meanings to the symbols of Romano-Hellenic culture. This broad issue, that has enjoyed a long historiographical fortune,¹ constitutes the cultural and historical background of this essay.

The birth of wall decoration in churches takes its place in the context of a dialectical heritage of the Hellenic-Roman tradition within Christian art: the search for a

language that would be consistent with the religion, but which could at the same time continue to express the political and social role of the patron.

The monumental decorations and the iconography of the scenes represented in them should, in effect, be considered as a reflection or the visual translation of liturgical practices, as well as of particular historical and political circumstances which reflect the cultural and social context of an era.

In this context, I shall be investigating the meaning, the actions and gestures (*gestes*), the materials, and the practice of three types of obliteration.

Firstly, I will reflect on the meaning of the complete obliteration of a decoration within a process of destruction-replacement, through the study of the substitution of a gilded coffered wooden ceiling with gold mosaics. Secondly, I will be investigating the obliteration strategy of the decoration of a nymphaeum which was turned into a church in the 'gymnasium' of Butrint in Albania, and reflecting on the possible ritual context of this intervention. And thirdly, I shall describe the materials and tech-

niques used to obliterate the decoration in St. Apollinare the New in Ravenna, where Theodorik's mosaics were removed at the time of Justinian, as a result of the intervention of bishop Agnellus.

From Caesar's gold to the gold of God: from gilded coffered ceiling to gold mosaics

"To your eyes, henceforth, the ceilings highlighted in gold (*auro distincta laquearia*) and the houses covered with precious slabs of marble will appear dirty, when you will understand that it is you who needs to be adorned, you who must be embellished, that for you has more worth the house in which the Lord has taken his abode as in a temple, in which the Holy Spirit has begun to dwell. Let us paint this house in the colours of innocence, flood it with the light of Justice. Never will this house crumble as a result of being too old and the colours of the walls and the gold on becoming dull, will not lose their beauty. All will perish that glitters with a false brilliance, and it will offer no guarantees to those who possess these things that we do not truly possess. This – [what is truly ours] – will for ever keep the freshness of its adornment, its beauty intact, its brilliance everlasting. It cannot be obliterated, only transfigured, when its body will be revived."² Thus writes Cyprian of Carthage (258 A.D.) on the subject of the interior man, who is the true basilica of which the sumptuous and luminous decoration must be the object of constant rebirth, reformation and renovation. In contrast, he refers to the decoration of houses with their ceilings highlighted in gold and their walls lined with marble, the most luxurious decoration of a Roman home. The transience of this decoration in contrast with the soul of the man-house of God: the ephemeral character of the decoration and its link with *luxuria* are condemned, but the light, the colours, the brilliance which characterise it, remain a visual counterpart of the luminosity and brilliance of the man who has been the recipient of Grace in the image erected by the Apologist.

Nevertheless, beginning in the reign of Constantine, gold will cover the ceilings of Christian basilicas. The richness of the decor and its refulgence are interpreted as a manifestation and attestation of the greatness of faith.

The letter from the emperor to Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem (in the *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea (III, 30), which is on the subject of the construction of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, explicitly emphasises the necessity of decorating churches so as to make manifest the refulgence and brilliance of faith through gold and marble. It is not only the description of a real site, but also that of the prototype of a church: "Now that the evidence of faith is no longer hidden and shines out," it is necessary to "make this basilica the most beautiful" through its decoration. Thus, "because it is right that the most magnificent place in the universe should shine with a brilliance equal to its dignity," the emperor invites the bishop to have the most brilliant decoration of marble veneer with a ceiling of gold made for the basilica.³ The moral value of the decoration and its intrinsic preciousity is legitimised.



2a

Basilikès kamera and *lacunar* are the terms employed to describe the decoration of the ceilings; the meaning of the terms and the nature of their material counterpart, have been much debated in the literature, as *camera* could indicate a space restricted to the apse of the church, or else the building as a whole, whilst *lacunar* could indicate a coffered ceiling in gilded wood, or else a mosaic made out of gold *tesserae*.⁴

The source does not name the support, and whether the reference is indeed to mosaics has been the subject of much debate; but the rare mosaic cycles from the age of Constantine, such as the one in Santa Costanza or the mausoleum of Centelles, have white limestone backgrounds. The use of gold *tesserae* is sporadic during the 4th century, and is restricted to isolated examples. Archaeological remains consisting of large ensembles of *tesserae* found in the backfill of buildings dating to the age of Constantine, have not been dated precisely, and could also belong to later phases of the building. The earliest mosaics with a gold background, date from the middle of the 5th century.⁵

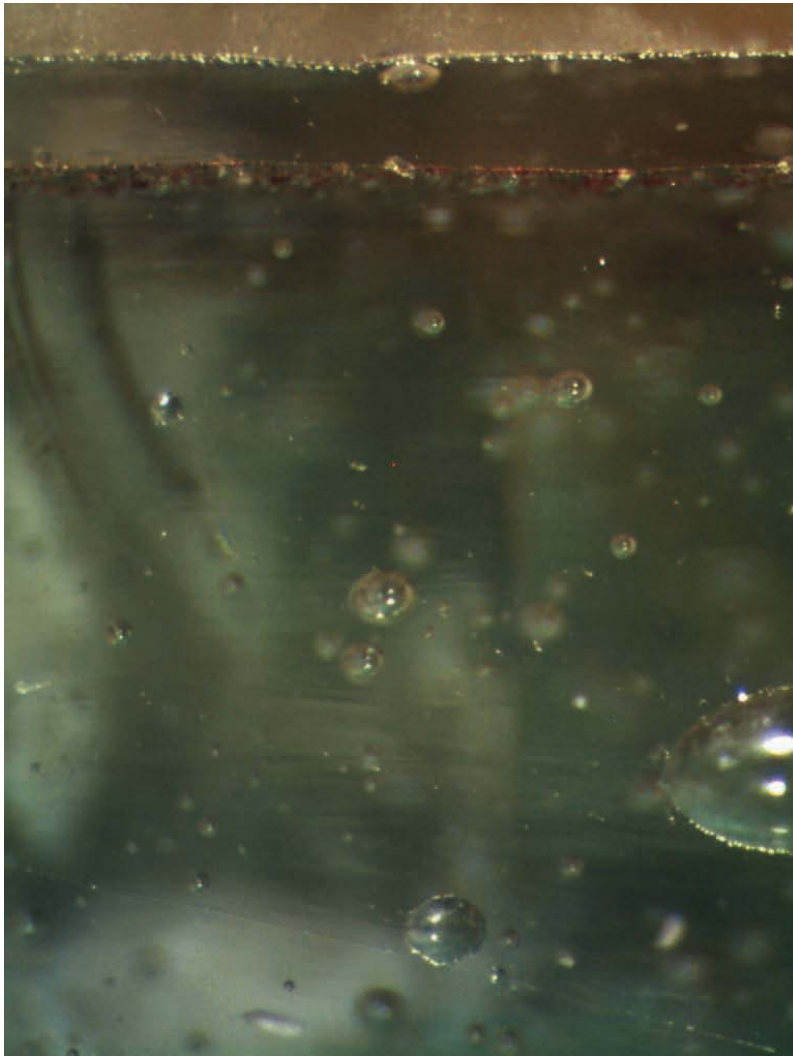
The description of the realisation of the project envisaged by the emperor is again presented in the *Life of Constantine* (III, 33), in which Greek and less ambiguous terms clearly describe a coffered ceiling covering the entire surface of the church. "Up above, for the roof, the exterior covering was of lead, a sure protection against winter rains; but the interior of the roof was a perfect example of coffering which, as though a vast sea, unfolded through the entirety of the basilica the succession of its intertwined motifs; entirely covered in pure gold, it made the entire temple resplendent as though with rays of light."

Eusebius therefore presents Constantine's project to decorate the church in the manner of an imperial residence. The same type of ceiling was in fact also put in place in the reception hall of the palace of Constantinople,⁶ following an age-old tradition. The imitation of wood coffering in painting is found in the Hellenic funerary tradition, possibly an allusion to the palatial tradition in which the

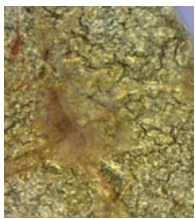


2b

Fig. 2. Milan, St. Aquilinus. a) paintings imitating metal-plated wood coffering, b) details of the painted imitation gems. Author's photograph.



3a



3b

Fig. 3. a) macro-photograph of a gold-leaf tessera (3.5 mm) and b) macro-photograph of the gold-leaf (2 mm). Author's photograph.

ceilings, made of gilded wood and encrusted with gems, are described in the sources for the palace of Alexandria, for example.⁷ Coffered ceilings with gold leaf encrusted with gems decorated the *aulae regiae* of the Imperial residences, and the most sumptuous of the private *domus*. The allusions in the sources to this type of formal decoration, which was at one and the same time a manifestation of wealth and of power,⁸ are frequent. Material vestiges on the other hand are rare, amongst which the gilded bronze plaques with cabochon gems of the *horti Lamiani*, the imperial residence thought to have belonged to Caligula⁹ (fig. 1).¹⁰ The painted representations are just as rare; the best known are those of the *cubiculum* 14 of the villa of Oplontis and the *cubiculum* M of Boscoreale.

Gold plating was probably employed on the ceilings of the temples: the coffered ceiling of the Pantheon would have been covered in gilded copper,¹¹ and gilded decorative tiles would have glittered on the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol.¹² This decoration must have been maintained for a long time as Jerome, in his description of the decadence of Rome and of its temples, attributes to the *Capitolium* the adjective *auratum*.¹³ Eusebius of Cesarea therefore finds himself in the position of having to justify Constantine's choice, and in his description of the church, he will put forward themes which will recur in the descriptions

of the decorations of Byzantine churches. As the church is presented as an image of the macrocosm, a model of the Universe as made by God, its structures and decorations must allow a glimpse of the Celestial kingdom, the Celestial Jerusalem.¹⁴ The gilded ceilings become a means of representing both Creation and Heavenly light. Eusebius is therefore alluding to the capacity of gold to be a source of light; as for the inter-twined motifs, they resemble the waves of the sea. These two symbols will remain a constant and become fixed *topoi* in the descriptions of the decorations (*ekphraseis*) of Byzantine churches.¹⁵ Eusebius' allusion to the purity of the gold employed, could also be an allusion to one of the materials with which the Celestial Jerusalem is built.¹⁶ As to the palace, it will be the place for the materialisation of the Kingdom of Heaven, in which God will realise his project, as declared by Eusebius.

This borrowing by the churches of the decoration of palaces, takes on a new meaning if looked at in this light.

Moreover, at the time of presentation of the project, the letter from the emperor informs the bishop of the possibility of realising the ceiling in gold, and invites him to send him an estimate so as to know what sum of money would be required, so that he could supply this directly.¹⁷ The gold is therefore an Imperial offering to God which is transmuted into celestial light, a manifestation of faith and, at the same time, of royal munificence: "This temple was erected by the emperor as dazzling evidence of the resurrection of the Saviour, and he decorated it in its entirety with royal magnificence" concluded Eusebius. The sources are insistent on the use of gold in the decoration of churches beginning in the age of Constantine, without specifying its support that is, wood or glass. Imperial munificence is also expressed with gifts of gold because the value of gold in circulation increased after Constantine's monetary reforms, based on the gold coin (the *solidus*). A sumptuous roof-covering in gold is therefore put in place in the gold octagon in Antioch, which Jerome describes as *dominicum quod vocatur aureum*.¹⁸ The basilica of the Lateran, consecrated by pope Sylvester in 318 and dedicated to Christ the Saviour, also had a gilded ceiling: in order to bring it to completion, Constantine spent 500 pounds according to the *Liber pontificalis* (*posuit in cameram basilicae ex auro trimita in longum et in latum, lib. D.*)¹⁹ The Vatican basilica had also been endowed by Constantine with a coffered roof with gilded highlights (*camera aurifulgentem*).²⁰

The translation into mosaic and paint of the wood coffering also confirms its presence in the catacombs and in churches:²¹ one finds such material translations in the basilica Teodoriana north of Aquileia, in the *cubiculum* of Leo in the catacomb of Commodilla, in the upper gallery of the mausoleum of St. Aquilino in Milan (fig. 2), in the vaults of the arches of the Rotonda in Thessalonika and of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople. The frozen chromaticism of these decorations aims to imitate the appearance of metal: yellow for gold, blue for silver, green for bronze, red for copper.²² What is the fate of these decorations in gilded wood of which the sources speak, and which painting and mosaics continue to imitate?

In the case of Roman basilicas we have clear sources which report the replacement and complete erasure of these decorations.

In the Basilica Laterana, the gilded beams (*bratteolas auratas sublevit* according to the *Peristephanon* of Prudentius) had been removed between 428 and 430. At the end of the 5th century, the gilded ceiling was replaced by a mosaic with doctrinarian figurative elements, later integrated within the gold background mosaic in the 13th century. At the time of pope Sixtus, the *patricius* Flavius Felix and his wife Padusia do in fact finance a cycle of biblical “paintings.”²³

In the Basilica Vaticana during the 7th century (638-640), the *Liber pontificalis* informs us that mosaics have replaced the *lacunaria* for reasons of maintenance.²⁴ The sources are not explicit on the reasons for the replacement, nor on the modalities of the process, but they describe the substitution as deliberate even though the mosaics probably did not occupy the same space as the coffering.

Nevertheless, the wood coffering plated with metal must have occupied the ceilings and not the apse, where the new mosaics were located; the two kinds of decoration therefore may also have been present at one and the same time. According to Agnellus, a gilded ceiling covered the palatine church of Theodoric in Ravenna, the present St. Apollinare the New, that was called St. Martin in *coelo aureo*²⁵ at the time of Justinian; walls and apse were here decorated with mosaics. The skills required to maintain this type of decoration were not lacking: between the 5th-6th centuries, Gregorius of Tours (*Hist. Franc.* II, 14) and Cassiodorus provide us with evidence of this (*Var.* I, 25, *Var.* IX, 3),²⁶ referring also to the profession (*Var.* VII, 5) of *camerarum rotator*.

Moreover, the removal of the beams plated with gilded copper also implied substantial demolition and the recovery of the precious materials, for all of which specialised skills would have been required. This cultural choice, perceived as a kind of erasure, deserves to be discussed, in order to try and understand the reasoning behind it:

1. A change in the social and political standing of the patron entails a change in the message that the decoration needs to express. The goal of Constantine’s intervention would have been quite different to that of the two *potentiores* with regard to the high ranking church officials who financed the decoration of the Basilica Laterana in the 6th century.

2. Religious reflection on the decorations of churches between the 4th and 6th centuries,²⁷ insists on their didactic nature. The mosaics, in comparison to the wood coffering, would allow better expression of the religious message through the images, whilst at the same time making manifest power, and the representation of light, thanks to the use of gold and colour. The *carmen* 27 of Paulinus of Nola (431 A.D.) on the subject of the paintings or the mosaics of Cimitile, is specific with regard to the educational value of colour, and of the refulgence of the paintings or mosaics: their brilliance (*éclat*) draws attention to the images, and



4

makes for pleasant ‘reading’. The boorish peasants, captivated by the colour, read the images and at the same time soak in religion, thus keeping away from the taverns and neglecting wine.²⁸

Gold, the means through which brilliance was given to the decorations of the wood coffering, was used to give tangible form to divine light, and from the 5th century onwards, will progressively conquer the background of mosaics. Thin leaves of gold, less than a micron in thickness, were used to cover both the decorative elements in copper in the coffering, and the glass in the *tesserae*. The leaves used to highlight the *lacunaria* are also used as part of the material of the mosaics: they are inserted – under heat – between one layer of molten cast glass (the support) and another thinner layer of blown glass (the *cartellina*) (fig. 3).

Glass becomes the preferred support for gold in ceilings and replaces the gold plating on wood, especially for its capacity to reflect light and create subtle effects of refraction which were sought to help visualise the celestial dimension. Purity and transparency in the glass are also described as being paradigmatic in the description of the Villa Celeste of the Apocalypse (Ch. 21, 18 ff.): “The villa itself was of pure gold, as clear as glass.”

Fig. 4. Butrint, nymphaeum of the *Gymnasium*, 2nd century B.C. (?), after restoration. Photograph D. Dubois.

Fig. 5. Butrint, Proto-Byzantine church erected over the nymphaeum of the *Gymnasium*, before restoration. Archives Nationales de l’Institut du Patrimoine de Tirana.



5



6a



6b

Fig. 6. Butrint, nymphaeum of the Gymnasium, 2nd century B.C. (?): a) central niche; b) right-hand niche. Author's photographs.

There are several parameters which will affect the brilliance and the colour of the gold-leaf *tesserae*: the condition of the surface through which light will enter and exit, the colour, the texture and the thickness of the glass cover; the fineness, the composition and the texture of the gold-leaf alloy, the colour of the glass of the support. The analyses of the glass compositions have shown how, especially from the 5th-6th centuries, the palette of different golds²⁹ becomes broader, thanks to variations in the colour of the glass.

The colours of the glass which acts as a support can be very different. Tonalities ranging through yellow, green and blue-green are termed natural tonalities because they are produced by the presence of iron in the sand which is used in the production of the glass. The quantity of iron present, in combination with the temperature and the atmosphere during the melting of the glass matrix, results in variations in the tonalities of the colours. These colours can be attenuated through the deliberate addition of antimony (Sb_2O_3) or manganese (MnO). Darker tonalities are obtained through the addition of iron ($\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3 > 1$ percent, from dark green to black) or manganese (MnO between 2.90 – 6.00 percent from violet to black). The gold leaf, very thin and often fractured, allows light to pass through the glass of the support.

The technical effort required to produce a variety of different golds is probably in response to the requirement to make tangible the Christian theology of light, which between the 4th and 6th centuries finds both theoretical and visual iconographic expression.³⁰ In parallel to the birth of a theology of light, the preferred support for gold also changes, in order to seek light and enhance its splendour.

The context and strategy of erasure: the mosaic of the nymphaeum of Butrint (Albania)

In the town of Butrint, in southern Albania, a complex of buildings in the district to the east of the theatre, was brought to light in the 1940s by the Italian mission. This was identified as a Gymnasium by Pirro Marconi, an identification not accepted by Domenico Mustilli, who however did not propose an alternative one.³¹

The Gymnasium was built during the 1st century, and during the 2nd century it was enlarged and endowed with a monumental fountain, a Nymphaeum (fig. 4). In the Proto-Byzantine era, the nymphaeum was transformed into a church. The plan of excavated walls of the site, and a few documentary photographs allow us to state that the three niches of the nymphaeum were transformed into the apse of the church; the *presbyterium* had as its limits the *cancel-la* in the western section, and the nave occupied the space originally taken up by the basin (fig. 5).

Originally, and re-established during the restoration, the niches of the Roman fountain were decorated with



7a



7b

Fig. 7. Butrint, nymphaeum of the Gymnasium, left-hand niche: a) detail of the area from which *tesserae* have been removed; b) the hole and surrounding area with mortar, covering the remaining *tesserae*. Author's photographs.



Fig. 8. Butrint, a) triconch hall with apse: and b) c) details of the glass tesserae of the apse. Photograph courtesy D. Dubois.

mosaics: the central niche against a white limestone background has a mask of Dionysus wearing a crown of ivy and bearing a *thyrsus*, while the two lateral niches have two *cantharoi* from which spring *rinceaux* (leafy stems), probably of ivy (fig. 6).

Traces of the erasure are clearly evident on the mosaic: an investigation of the materials and techniques permits us to study them.

The mosaics have been obliterated with a layer of lime-based plaster, practically without inclusions, which has fortuitously been preserved on the surface of certain tesserae and on the walls of the niches, where it was used to smooth over the marks left when the marble was removed (fig. 7).

Before hiding these mosaics beneath the white of the lime, certain parts had been deliberately erased. In particular, the parts in which glass tesserae had been used, in order to compromise the legibility of the image with their removal. For instance in the systematic removal of the green and deep blue tesserae of the ivy leaves in the *thyrsus* of Dionysus; the hollows left behind filled with the lime-rich plaster which obliterates the entire mosaic.

It is possible that these tesserae were removed in order to be reused in a later mosaic. Tesserae similar in colour and in the cutting technique used in their manufacture, have been found in the floor mosaic of the triconch, in the section restored in the 4th century,³² that is in in the apse of the hall (fig. 8). The compositional analysis of the glass, carried out with PIXE/PIGE analysis, shows that the sea-green tesserae of the triconch have the same composition as those in the niches of the nymphaeum: they consist of a glass produced according to Roman technology. This is a natron-based glass, probably of eastern manufacture because of the Al_2O_3 content (between 2-3 percent) (fig. 9), and coloured with copper. The

blue tesserae used in the triconch have a higher content in CaO and are coloured with cobalt associated to iron, copper arsenic and nickel.³³ This allows us to formulate the hypothesis that the tesserae from the mosaic in the nymphaeum may have been removed in order to be used in the decoration of the floor of the hall of the triconch, in which a small group newly manufactured blue tesserae are also being used.

The central niche, with the mask of Dionysus was the object of further erasure: a layer of black paint is present over the tesserae, tracing squares and rectangles which partially obscure the mosaic (fig. 10).

The transformation of the nymphaeum into a church brings about the necessity of erasing its pagan decoration: in the lateral niches, the materials made of glass have been

Fig. 9. Scatterplot of CaO vs Al_2O_3 contents in the glass tesserae from the nymphaeum (black triangles) and the triconch (empty triangles). All the tesserae are grouped in the same group.

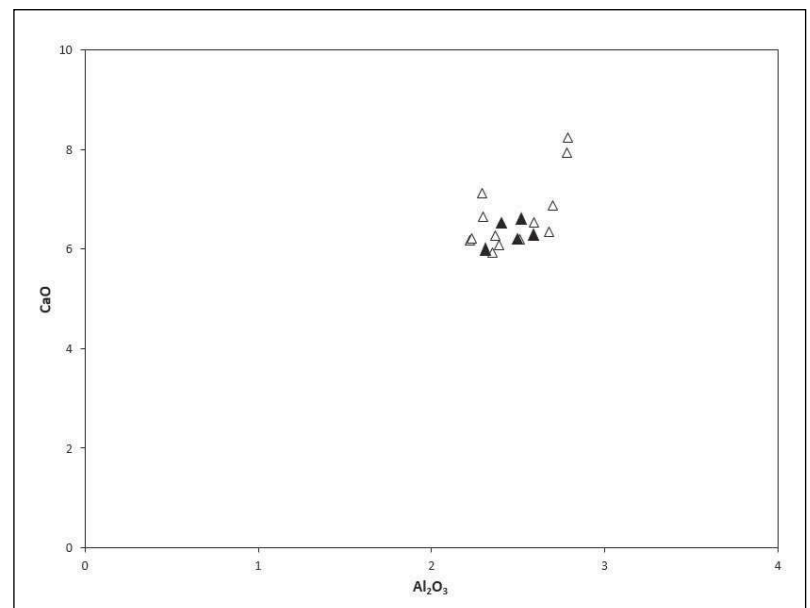
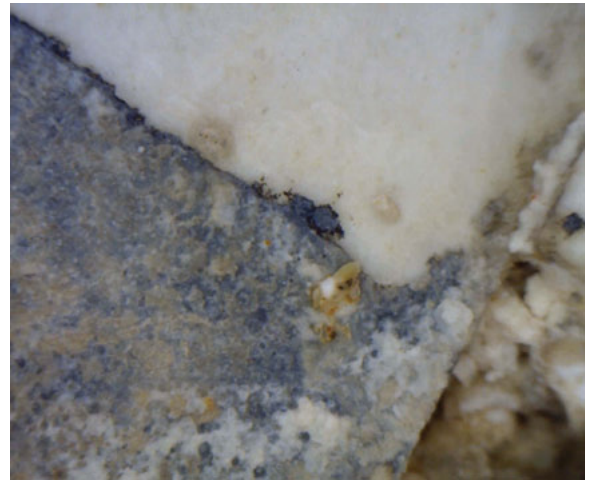


Fig. 10. Butrint, nymphaeum of the *Gymnasium*, central niche: a) layer of black paint covering the tesserae; b) taken under magnification (250x by Dino-lite microscopy). Author's photograph.



10a



10b

removed for utilitarian reasons, in the central niche black paint has also been applied; and finally, white lime plaster has been applied to cover the mosaic and the walls of the three niches.

Fig. 11. Ravenna, St. Apollinare the New, mosaic from the palace of Theodoric. Author's photograph.

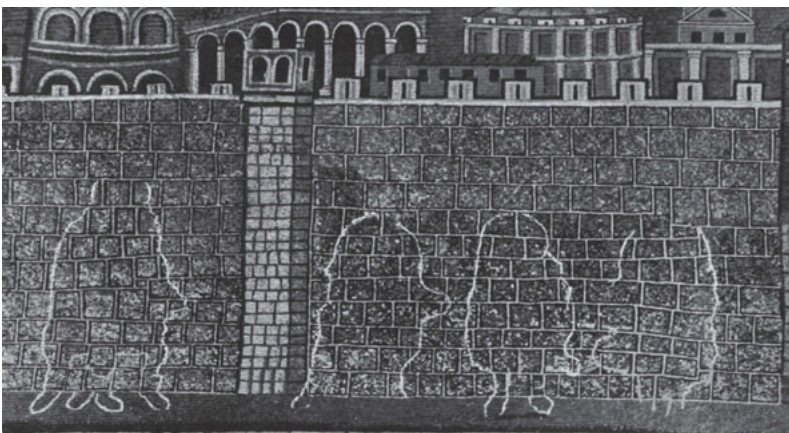
Fig. 12. Ravenna, St. Apollinare the New, mosaic of the *Civitas Classis* with the silhouettes of the dignitaries that were removed (Bovini 1971). Foto SABAAR.

The reasons behind this deliberate defacing and erasure of the images before the application of the plaster, has still to be fathomed. One hypothesis can be suggested if one takes into consideration the ritual context in which a pagan edifice is transformed into a church. Official dictates are difficult to find in the normative literature. However, on the subject of the destruction of pagan temples and their conversion into churches, the *Codex theodosianus* (6.10.25)³⁴ relates an edict of 435

which suggests the custom of exorcism which in practice led to the destruction of pagan elements, and to the affixing of a Christian symbol on the temples. The clearest archaeological evidence of this ritual were brought to light in the temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias before its transformation into a cathedral during the 5th century:³⁵ crosses have been incised in the exterior perimeter of the temple, and the figurative elements sculpted on stone have been erased. In the same way as official regulations transform widespread practice into rules and forbid others which are just as widely practiced, this ritual of exorcism was probably more widely practiced than we imagine and may have been adopted prior to the transformation of pagan buildings into edifices of the Christian cult. Evidence of this practice is also frequently found on architectural elements originating in pagan buildings which have been re-used in Christian contexts, where we see affixed to the obliterated pagan images, symbols of the Christian cult. Only comparison with other examples of this singular type of erasure could open the way to a better understanding of the phenomenon.



11



12

Techniques and materials of politico-religious obliteration: the mosaics of St. Apollinare the New

The mosaics of the basilica founded by Theodoric on the north side of his palace, as an Arian chapel for the palace, were renovated at the time of Justinian, in the context of a religious and political transformation of the edifice.

The present *facies* of the decoration is attributed to bishop Agnellus who re-consecrated the church and dedicated it to saint Martin, a foe of Arianism. During this transformation, certain parts of the decoration that expressed a political and religious message that did not conform to his ideology, were erased. Visible traces of this obliteration were left as a testimony to this intervention, in order to affirm the superiority of the new patron.³⁶

The mosaics that have been preserved, part of a much larger whole, run the length of the nave and are organised into three superimposed bands: the first – the highest – illustrates the miracle of Christ on the left and the scenes from the Passion on the right.

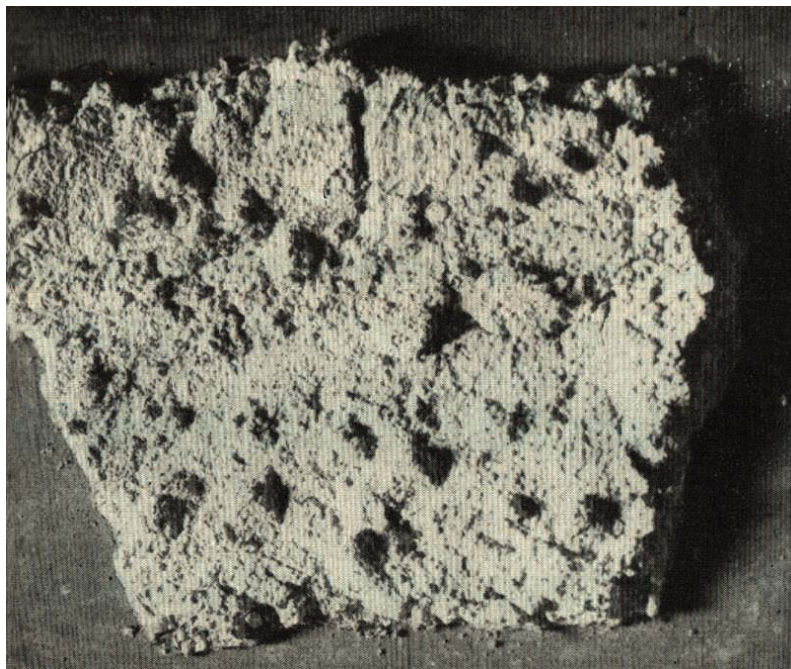
The second band illustrates the prophets on the left, and the Apostles on the right. The third – the lowest – represents two processions: on the left that of the virgins departing from the port of Ravenna and ending with the *Adoration of the Three Kings*, and on the right a procession of saints led by saint Martin leaving the imperial palace, and ending with Christ enthroned. The mosaic was restored in the 19th century by Felice Kibel. Investigations led by Bovini in the 1950s, made it possible to identify the original sections; and to isolate within these the parts which Agnellus had clearly had modified, erasing Theodoric's mosaic.³⁷ The most recent interventions of restoration have allowed one to determine the organisation of the workforce and the materials used in the two interventions. The elements which were erased by Justinian were:

1. The palace in which the standing figure of Theodoric was represented among other figures, have been replaced by curtains (fig. 11).
2. The *Civitas classis* where a number of dignitaries stood along the ramparts (fig. 12).
3. Two processions and the angels, in the scenes of the *Adoration of the Magi*.

The only place where traces of the obliteration have been left visible, is the section of the palace in which the figure of Theodoric was eliminated.

The erasure of the image of the conquered by the conqueror is a frequently recurring gesture which finds an inverse parallel in a lost mosaic of the Imperial palace in Milan. In this latter example, it is a barbarian who obliterates the image of the enthroned Roman emperors. The representation and the episode are known through the *Suidas* lexicon (10th century), which draws on the episode described in Priscus (5th century). The source recounts the taking of Milan by Attila, king of the Huns: when the king enters the palace and sees the representation of the two emperors with the Barbarians at their feet pouring out sacs of gold, he finds a craftsman and has him make a portrait of himself, depicted sitting on the throne, with the Romans at his feet, pouring out sacs of gold.³⁸

A similar transformation has been retraced on an Imperial portrait on the façade of St. Apollinare the New.³⁹ The critics are divided on the identity of the personage represented. The historian Agnellus tells of the existence of a portrait of Justinian in the church.⁴⁰ Nevertheless Bovini thought rather that the figure represented was either Anastasius I or Justinian, emperors who were contemporaries of Theodoric. Deichmann was the first to formulate the hypothesis that originally it must have been a portrait of Theodoric, represented armed, and later transformed into a portrait of Justinian with Imperial attributes.⁴¹ This idea was confirmed by observations on the technique of the preparatory layers of the mosaic: the Imperial attributes (crown, *pendilia*, fibula) were indeed added during an ancient restoration.⁴² Baldini Lippolis subsequently proposed that the portrait was inserted into an iconographic program that celebrated the victory of Justinian over a Barbarian.⁴³ In order to carry out this political and religious obliteration, Byzantine craftsmen were called



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upon, and they employed different materials and different skills to those employed previously. The available documentation from the 1950s restoration,⁴⁴ observations on the *tesserae* employed⁴⁵ and a series of PIXE/PIGE and SEM/EDX analyses,⁴⁶ document the intervention and the materials used.

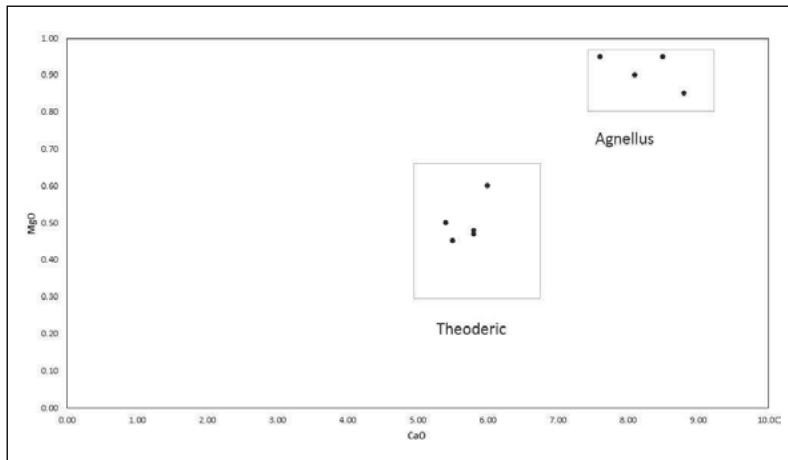
The samples taken in the 1950s show that the mosaic has an initial and uniform preparatory layer which has imprints of the negative impressions from a trowel: this is therefore a mortar that ensures adhesion (*arriccio*) (fig. 13). The more superficial layers differ both in composition and in their application in the phase dating to Theodoric's time, and in that of Agnellus. The preparatory layers of the older mosaic are three in number: an initial one which is very rich in lime and which has had its surface worked in negative, with incised losanges (and of which one finds the positive on the reverse); the second layer is lime with inclusions of straw and sand, the third – the smooth final setting bed plaster is without aggregates. The parts of the mosaic laid by Agnellus' work-force have only two preparatory layers: the first in *cocciopesto* and the second with a lime-rich mortar (fig. 14). Agnellus' restoration did not, therefore, take place over the entire mosaic, but kept the *arriccio* of the earlier composition and was limited to cer-

Fig. 13. Ravenna, St. Apollinare the New, *arriccio* (Bovini 1971). Foto SABAAR.

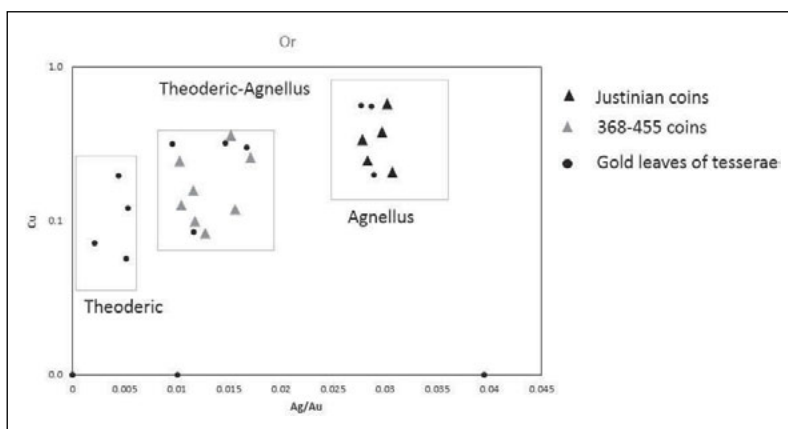
Fig. 14. Ravenna, St. Apollinare the New, preparatory *cocciopesto* layer of the mosaic of Agnellus (on the right) and preparatory layer made of a mortar rich in lime of the mosaic of Theodoric (on the left) (Bovini 1971). Foto SABAAR.



14



15



16

Fig. 15. Scatterplot of MgO vs CaO contents in glass tesserae from St. Apollinare the New in Ravenna. Items from Agnellus' and Theoderic's phases belong to different groups.

Data drawn from Neri, *Verità* 2013 and Neri et al. 2016.

Fig. 16. Scatterplot of Cu percent vs Ag/Au weight ratio in the gold leaves of tesserae from St. Apollinare the New in Ravenna and in coins under Justinian's and Theoderic's reigns.

Some tesserae show a weak grouping with the two coins groups.

Data drawn from Neri, *Verità* 2013 and Neri et al. 2016.

tain sections. The mosaicists intervened by detaching the superficial preparatory layers, then introducing a mortar made of *cocciopesto* into isolated sections, and finally placing the *tesserae* on a final lime-rich mortar. The different compositions of the mortars employed suggests the presence of different groups of artisans.

In terms of the *tesserae* used, not only is a different range of stone, glass and mother-of-pearl⁴⁷ evident in the two separate campaigns, but one can also prove the different chronologies and provenance by means of analysis.

The raw glass with which the *tesserae* were produced, is of two kinds: one glass called blue-green is typical of the western part of the Mediterranean and is de-coloured with manganese and antimony, whilst the other is the HIMT glass, which probably came from Egypt.⁴⁸ The first, retained to be from the Levant because of its content of aluminium, calcium and magnesium, is used in the Agnellus mosaics; the second, from Egypt, is used in Theoderic's mosaics. Moreover (fig. 15)⁴⁹, Agnellus' work-force used *tesserae* that have a gold content and a ratio of gold-silver that correspond to the coins of Justinian's reign, whilst Theoderic's craftsmen employed partly recycled gold from contemporary coins (produced between Valentinian and Zenon), and partly pure gold (Au 100%) which has no parallel with monetary gold. This suggests the possibility of another route of supply of for the gold, as is also suggested by the sources (fig. 16).⁵⁰

Thus, Agnellus did not re-use the *tesserae* of the sections that he erased, but instead materials which came

from another route (Byzantium?) in order to differentiate his work from the preceding one. The financial backing for the work was probably Imperial, as it was for other mosaics of the epoch: St. Severus in Classe, St. Vitale and St. Michele in Afrisco paid for by an intermediary banker (*Giulianus Argentarius*). The artisans, moreover, worked with their own materials, and sending for artisans and importing the materials gave visibility to the project and constituted a 'signature' for it. Several tons of glass and books of gold leaf were required in order to complete a project of this type, over a long period of execution.⁵¹ The *mise en scène* of the execution gave enhanced visibility to the patron, and constituted a spectacular event in terms of the transport required and the use of foreign masters.

The materials and their provenance are at that moment in time a marker, making evident the affiliation of the patron and his intentions. In this kind of erasure, the will to obliterate the political and religious identity of the conquered predecessor, and to demonstrate one's own superiority, is also manifested in the signing of the work through the *hic et nunc* of the project.

NOTES

1. Inglebert et al. 2011; Bowes 2008.
2. Cyprianus Carthaginensis 1982: 112-115. For the commentary on this passage see Palazzo 2012: 55-59.
3. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 30 (ed. cit.: 391-395).
4. The debate especially concerned the passage from the *Liber pontificalis* 1886-1892, I: 172. Bisconti 2002: 1641 hypothesises an aniconic decoration reserved to the apse; Guarducci 1981: 799-817 draws a parallel with the *aulae regiae*, decorated with gilded metal plaques or gilded textiles. Mango 1992 and De Blaauw 1994: 115, n. 42 with references, support the presence of gilded coffering (Liverani 2004).
5. Neri, in press.
6. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 49.
7. Guimier-Sorbets 2003.
8. Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, XXIV, 723: the ceilings of houses are covered with gold. The author also alludes to the gold plating of theatres. Suetonius, *Vita Neronis*, 31; Philon of Alexandria, *Legatus ad Gaium*, XLIV. Cyprianus Carthaginensis, *À Donat et la vertu de Patience* (see n. 2).
9. Cima, La Rocca 1986. Other vestiges regard the *domus transitoria* on the Palatine. There was also silver plating in the *Domus* of the Flavii in/on the Palatine (Fea 1790) or solely in bronze (Rossignani 1969).
10. Mulliez *infra*.
11. Cima 1990.
12. Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, XXIII, 18,57.
13. Jerome, *Epistula* 107, 1,2.
14. Demus 1964: 14-16; McVey 1983: 118; Finney 1994: 290; Webb 1999: 66; Hansen 2003: 200-201.
15. Fobelli 2005: 112, vv. 224-239; Fobelli 2011: 122-127; Preger 1975: 74-108; Mango, Parker 1960: 243.
16. *Apocalypse*, 21,18 ff.
17. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 30 (ed. cit.: 391-395). This is the letter to Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, who participated in the Council of Nicea. The same letter is reproduced by Socrates of Constantinople, *Historia ecclesiastica*, I, 9,56-63 and by Theodoret of Cyrus, *Philotheos historia*, I, 17 and dates to the end of 325 or the beginning of 326.
18. Jerome, *Chronicon*, an. 327; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 50. This church was erected between 327 and 341. On the issue of the representation of this building in the mosaic of Yakto and on its possible location, see Saliou 2000 and Saliou 2014.
19. Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis*, I: 172.
20. *Ibid.*: 176. "fecit autem et cameram basilicae ex trimma aurifulgentem."

21. For example, Ennodius, *Carmina*, 2,56 refers to a *lacunar* that decorated the baptistery of Milan where excavations have brought to light fragments of wall mosaics.
22. Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Coloribus*.
23. Bovini 1968.
24. Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis*, I: 329: "hic renovavit absidem Beati Petri Apostoli ex lacunari, quod dirutum erat."
25. Ibid.: 332. "Nulla ecclesia vel domus similis in laquearibus vel trabis ista." Penni Iacco 2004: 23, 7-75.
26. Gregorius of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, II, 14, Cassiodorus, *Variarum*, I, 25, and IX, 3.
27. Viard 2006.
28. Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 27: 580-595.
29. Neri, Verità 2013; Neri *et al.* 2016.
30. Hellemo 1989; James 1996; Mondini, Ivanovici 2014, Neri 2016.
31. Hodges 2007.
32. Ibid.
33. The analyses were undertaken in collaboration with Isabelle Biron at the Centre de Recherche et Restauration des Musées de France in Paris within the framework of the Charisma programme. For the analytical conditions see Biron, Beauchoux 2003.
34. *Codex Theodosianus*, 6.10.25 *Impm. Theodosius et Valentinianus aa. Isidoro praefecto praetorio*. "Omnibus sceleratae mentis paganarum execrandis hostiarum immolationibus dammandisque sacrificiis ceterisque antiquorum sanctionum auctoritate prohibitis interdicimus cunctaque eorum fana templa delubra, si qua etiam nunc restant integra, praecepto magistratum destrui collocationeque venerandarum christianae religionis signi expiari praecipimus, scientibus universis, si quem huic legi aput competentem iudicem idoneis probationibus illussisse constiterit, eum morte esse multandum." Dat. XVIII kal. dec. Constantinopoli Theodosio XV et Valentiniano IIII aa. cons. (435 nov. 14).
35. Hebert 2000.
36. Penni Iacco 2004, with bibliography
37. Bovini 1951; Bovini 1954; Bovini 1959; Bovini 1966.
38. Lexicon Suda, s.v. *Mediolanon*; cfr. Priscus, *Fragmenta Historiarum Graecorum*, 22, 3. Cagianò 1969: 42; Zecchini 1999: 790, n. 50.
39. Bertelli, Augenti 2006: 107; Baldini Lippolis 1999; Penni Iacco 2004.
40. Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis*, I: 335.
41. Deichman 1976.
42. Bovini 1957.
43. Baldini Lippolis 1999.
44. See n. 36.
45. Tedeschi 2013; Muscolino 2013.
46. Verità 2013; Neri, Verità 2013; Neri *et al.* 2016.
47. Tedeschi 2013.
48. Nenna 2015.
49. Freestone 2003.
50. Cassiodorus, *Variarum*, 4.34 and 9.3 on the search for gold in the tombs and in new mines.
51. Neri 2016.
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ABSTRACT

DE-DORARE, RI-DORARE, CANCELLARE. LE DECORAZIONI DELLE CHIESE PALEOCRISTIANE (IV-VI SEC.). LE FINALITÀ DEL DISCORSO RELIGIOSO E POLITICO DELLA CANCELLAZIONE E DELL'OBBLITERAZIONE. IL RUOLO DEI MATERIALI

Quest'articolo si concentra sulla cancellazione e sull'obliterazione delle decorazioni parietali nella tarda antichità e all'inizio del periodo bizantino. Combinando dati testuali, archeologici e archeometrici, i differenti aspetti di questa pratica e i suoi significati sono analizzati in tre esempi: 1) la completa oblitterazione di una decorazione con un processo di distruzione-sostituzione, attraverso l'indagine della sostituzione di soffitti lignei a cassettoni dorati con mosaici d'oro in alcune chiese paleocristiane di Roma; 2) l'oblitterazione strategica di decorazioni di un ninfeo trasformato in chiesa nel ginnasio di Butrinto in Albania, che riflette il possibile contesto rituale di questo intervento. 3) i materiali e le tecniche esecutive dell'oblitterazione nella chiesa di Sant'Apollinare a Ravenna, dove i mosaici di Teodorico sono parzialmente rimossi nella fase agnelliana di epoca giustiniana. I canali di approvvigionamento dei materiali per questi due interventi sono differenti. In sintesi si afferma che la scelta dei materiali utilizzati nella decorazione murale contribuisce alla comprensione della sua cancellazione o sostituzione.

DE-GILD, RE-GILD, ERASE. THE DECORATIONS OF PALEO-CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (4TH-6TH CENTURY). THE MORALS OF RELIGION AND THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF ERASURE AND OBLITERATION – THE ROLE OF MATERIALS This paper focuses on the erasure and obliteration of wall decoration in the Late Antique and Early Byzantine period. Combining textual, archaeological, archaeometrical data, the different typologies of this practice and its meanings are studied through the following three examples: firstly, the complete obliteration of a decoration within a process of destruction-replacement, through the investigation of the substitution of a gilded coffered wooden ceiling with gold mosaics in some early Christian churches of Rome. Secondly, the obliteration strategy of the decoration of a *nymphaeum* which was turned into a church in the *gymnasium* of Butrint in Albania, reflecting the possible ritual context of this intervention. Thirdly, the materials and techniques of the decoration in St. Apollinare the New in Ravenna are investigated. Here Theodorico's mosaics were removed at the time of Justinian, as a result of the intervention of bishop Agnellus. The supply route of these two interventions are different. The choice of the materials employed in the wall decoration contributes to an understanding of the erasure. The theological speculation, the ritual context and the underlying political reasons, allow one to begin to interpret this phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

early Christian churches, Ravenna, Roman world, Byzantine art, gold, gilding, mosaics, coffered ceiling, glass composition, erasure

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