San Vitale Apse: A Holistic Consideration

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ABSTRACT

The decorative program within San Vitale plays an important role within Byzantine art history. As a deliberately planned layout, intimate connections exist among all elements that form the church's interior. Nevertheless, past scholarly literature has invested immense attention on specific components of the overall program, making a holistic consideration necessary. This paper reveals the coherent holistic program of San Vitale by examining each detail section of the apse decorations as well as several links between the apse and the presbytery. From the dados to the apse vault mosaic, from the decorative borders on the apse vault to the spandrels on presbytery walls, the comprehensive perspective employed resulted in a better understanding of San Vitale as a whole. While the contents of the mosaics fall under the general theme of Christ's redemption of humanity, there is also an emphasis on divinity and imperial power.

Keywords: *San Vitale, Medieval Mediterranean, Byzantine.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The decorative program in San Vitale, Ravenna (526-47), which includes mosaics and *opus sectile* panellings, is regarded as one of the finest ever created. Covering the vault and walls of the apse, the overall mosaic program is under the theme of Christ's redemption of humanity. Among them, the imperial panels play a significant role in Byzantine art history.[1] With their depiction of Emperor Justinian and his wife, Empress Theodora, the two panels receive extensive treatment in the scholarly literature, causing the remaining interior decorations of San Vitale to receive reduced emphasis.[2] However, as a part of a deliberately planned decorative program with a central theme, the imperial panels inevitably have intimate connections with the other mosaics or *opus sectile* panels. Consequently, this paper takes a holistic approach to the decorative program of San Vitale. Given their visual impressiveness, liturgical importance, and excellent condition, this study will focus on the apse and presbytery of San Vitale. By examining the relationship between the apse mosaics, the dados, and the adjacent presbytery walls, the overall program can be understood better by using a holistic perspective. (fig.1)
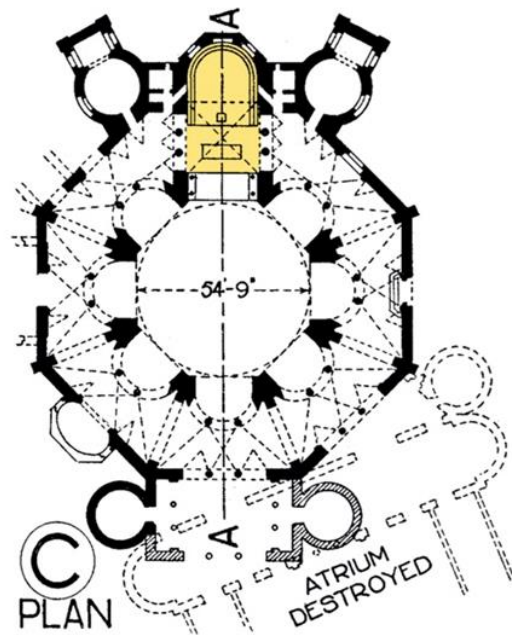

Figure 1 plan of San Vitale with apse and presbytery marked

A detailed examination of the San Vitale east end reveals a holistic coherent program that is part of a macrocosmic layout centered around Christ's redemption of humanity. In other words, individual sections of the apse decoration connect formally with one another and the presbytery. This paper explores the program through a discussion of the subject matter, formal qualities, and social contexts. The San Vitale apse is analyzed in the

following order: an overall description of the apse, the imperial panels, the apse vault mosaic, the dados, and the decorative borders. A final section explores relationships between the apse and the presbytery of the church.

2. OVERALL DESCRIPTION OF THE APSE

The construction of San Vitale began under Ostrogothic rule in 526 or 527 CE and was completed in 547 CE. By the time, Justinian's general Belisarius had captured the city of Ravenna.[3] Justinian (r.527-65) was the emperor of Byzantium during this time, and Theodora was his empress. In 547 CE, Bishop Maximianus dedicated the church in honor of a martyr named Saint Vitalis, who died at Ravenna in the 2nd century.

Figure 2 overview of the apse

The apse of San Vitale (fig.2) can be roughly divided into three horizontal sections: the apse vault mosaic, the two imperial panels, and the dados. The dado section consists of marble and porphyry *opus sectile,*[4] geometrical stone-inlaid decorations, as well as pilaster elements. (fig.3) Directly above the dado section are the two imperial panels on either side of the three windows. When facing the apse, Emperor Justinian and an accompanying group of male figures can be seen on the left-hand side. (fig.4) Empress Theodora, depicted in a similar style, can be seen on the other side, acting as the counterpart to the Justinian panel. (fig.5) Above the imperial panels is the apse vault mosaic, which consists of five figures and a paradisiacal garden background with a large proportion of gold. (fig.6) The central figure is the young Christ, who sits on a blue orb. Surrounding him are two angels, Saint Vitalis, and Bishop Ecclesius. All three sections of the apse mosaics are connected by decorative borders, and the borders can be divided into three parts: a rainbow border, two thin geometrically patterned borders, and a wider border. (fig.7) All four of the borders pass around the hemispherical edge of the apse vault mosaic, but the thin geometric border extends to the upper edge of the imperial panels and the windows. Extending from the apse are two presbytery walls with

mosaics depicting biblical scenes. (fig.8 and 9) The apse and the side walls together form the chancel of San Vitale, the absolute center for all liturgical actions and the entire church. (fig.10)

Figure 3 the dado section

3. THE IMPERIAL PANELS

As the central focus of scholarly literature, the imperial panels within San Vitale are the most renowned section of the entire church. From the arrangement of figures, the two panels both depict a scene of the procession, which is connected with the eucharistic liturgy in the Eastern Orthodox Church.[5] (fig.4 and 5) Therefore, the mosaic positioned Justinian and Theodora as part of the liturgy happening in the church since they are holding paten and chalice. A noteworthy characteristic demonstrated by the two mosaics, which is common among many medieval artworks, is a lack of foreshortening in certain sections. By displaying all essential parts of an object to the viewer, the clarity of narration was augmented. Moreover, the lack of foreshortening also has significance in the rendering of an unrealistic sense. For example, the feet of the figures appear to be floating above the ground, detaching them from the mundane world visually. (fig.4) Simultaneously, the unidentified background of the Justinian Panel, with gold on top and greens at the bottom that hint at the ground, enhances the feeling that both panels are depicted in an isolated space unaffected by reality, and therefore unaffected by time. (fig.4) Since neither sovereigns had ever visited Ravenna, the panels give Justinian and Theodora a symbolic presence in the church. Nonetheless, the panels "were intended to retain their significance independently of that occasion,"[6] extending its meaning beyond the original purpose as well as a specific place and time. The unnaturalistic sense, along with solemn facial expressions and rigid poses, lends a sense of timelessness and perpetuity to the panels. At the same time, the haloes around Theodora and Justinian express divinity as well as their imperial status, which corresponds with many other decorative sections in San Vitale.

Aside from the expression of divinity through an emphasis on timelessness, similarities in the composition of the two panels may also be found. In both mosaics, Justinian and Theodora stand out from the accompanying crowds by their crowns, purple robes, and haloes which imply their imperial status. Individuals in the accompanying groups all have distinct facial features, and scholars have debated over their specific identities. Among them, only the male figure to the right of Justinian was identified by inscriptions on the mosaic, indicating that he was Bishop Maximianus, the person responsible for the completion of San Vitale. (fig.4) The groups are arranged in a similar pattern for both two panels, with a larger group in orange and green further from the central windows of the church and a smaller group closer. Simultaneously, the accompanying figures' attire signifies that the group on the Justinian Panel consists of imperial guards and clergy, elucidating his position as both the head of the Byzantine church and the state. In the case of Theodora, women with luxurious dresses and clergy stand to flank her, also indicating her exceptional status as the empress.

Figure 4 Justinian panel

Figure 5 Theodora panel

Theodora's appearance as the counterpart of Justinian in San Vitale can be attributed to her intelligence, which made her a very unusual empress. During a revolt that constrained Justinian's ministers to advise a flight from the city, Theodora persuaded them to stay and successfully oppressed it by the sheer force of her personality.[7] Theodora was not born into an aristocratic family, so the mere fact that she had become the empress is already remarkable, let alone her nearing equal status with Justinian, as implied by the similarities of the two panels. Nonetheless, the appearance of Theodora does not denote an equal status of all Byzantine women compared to men. Laws under the rule of Justinian instituted divisions between public and private spheres as well as men's authority over women.[8] For example, the law "denie[d] women the right to have a role in local and central government, to perform civic duties, to act as a judge or to be a banker."[9]

Despite the aforementioned similarities, differing arrangements of figures and background in the imperial panels imply Theodora's lower status compared to Justinian as well as the general lower social position of Byzantine women. Covered by thirteen figures, the background of the Justinian Panel is not naturalistic: only an abstract gold space is visible aside from the green colors which signify the ground. The Theodora panel, however, is situated within a specific architectural setting, encompassing a niche and a doorway. (fig.5) Theodora panel's specific background of a private space correlates with the social context: Byzantine women were "excluded from public life… and reduced to a very private existence."[10] Thus, the differing background is a presentation of unequal status between Theodora and Justinian based on their gender.

A meticulous look at the Justinian panel reveals that distinguishing the frontmost figure is impossible. While it is reasonable that Justinian, the emperor, is depicted as the figure in front of all the other twelve, Bishop Maximianus' feet are positioned lower than Justinian's, creating an optical appearance that Maximianus stands in front of Justinian. Nevertheless, Justinian's arms are still above those of Maximianus', making the identification of the frontmost figure impossible. By placing the bishop both in front of and behind the emperor, the duality between religion and imperial power is expressed. On the other hand, Theodora is the absolute leading figure in her panel, standing out from her accompanying crowd. Consequently, while Justinian's Panel delineates the similar status of the bishop and the emperor, Theodora's Panel demonstrates the unique status of the empress at which "neither for the position within the image nor majesty is there any figure to rival her".[11] Although such arrangement of figures corroborates the higher position of Theodora compared with other Byzantine women, for a group of men stand behind her as well, it also implies that there are no figures around to specifically identify her actual position. In other words, Theodora's position, and therefore power, was only hinted at on the panel while Justinian's was shown directly in his relationship with Maximianus. In this sense, the fact that figures are arranged in varying ways reaffirmed a difference in status between Justinian and Theodora.

Overall, from the similarities in composition to the differences in background and figure arrangement, a complex relationship exists between the two imperial panels. An examination of the social context reveals that while similarities show how Theodora had a special position, the remaining differences indicate that she still has a lower status than Justinian.

Notably, the presence of the two panels extends the theme of the San Vitale mosaics into imperial purposes. While several other mosaics focus on Christ's redemption of humanity, the two panels relate the redemption to Justinian, the emperor and the head of the church. Byzantine emperors were both religious and political figures, since Orthodox Church, which does not recognize bishops as supreme as the Pope for the Catholics, dominants the empire. Supported by the fact that Justinian and Theodora are holding paten and chalice used during Eucharist, a ritual in which Christ's sacrifices were reenacted, the significance of the two panels within the general decorative program is enhanced.

4. THE APSE VAULT MOSAIC

On the apse vault mosaic, Christ is shown sitting on a blue circle with the accompaniment of four figures. (fig.6) Compared to the Justinian panel, this mosaic has a similar exclusively gold background, but the ground on which the figures stand is more detailed and specific. The specificity of background implies a heavenly realm; for example, the four rivers of paradise lie under the blue sphere on which Christ sits. (fig.11) The four rivers are parted river that flows out from Eden within the Christian context. Simultaneously, two peacocks on the lowest right and left section of the mosaic (fig.12) signify immortality, resurrection, and the glorified soul, further denoting the paradisiacal setting.[12] With the theme of Christ's redemption of humanity, the appearance of heaven reminds the devotee of Christ's sacrifice by depicting his afterlife. Meanwhile, decorative borders surrounding the apse vault mosaic echo its content, for example, the reappearance of birds and the rainbow-hued clouds, which will be explained in a later section. (fig.6)

Figure 6 apse vault mosaic

Gestures of the figures on the apse vault mosaic relate San Vitale to Christ, both through a depiction of the church's model and the appearance of Saint Vitalis. Similar to the inscriptions that denote Maximianus' name on the Justinian panel, the names of Saint Vitalis and Bishop Ecclesius are both included in the mosaic. Christ holds a golden martyr's wreath (fig.6) and offers it to Saint Vitalis, the martyr to whom the church is dedicated.[13] Such arrangement reminds the viewers that the church of San Vitale was constructed for a martyr

for Christianity. Paralleling Christ's sacrifices, Saint Vitalis' martyrdom relates the mosaic again to the general theme of the program. To the left of Christ stands Bishop Ecclesius, who is the Bishop of Ravenna (522-633)[14] and is responsible for the foundations of San Vitale. Bishop Ecclesius holds a model of San Vitale in his hands and extends it towards Christ, while the angel on his side also gestures toward the model. By directly depicting the church of San Vitale being offered to Christ, the mosaic conveys the message that the church

was built for Christ. Therefore, the content of the apse vault mosaic reinforced the church's relationship with Christ and specifically his redemption of humanity, blending the most prominent mosaic of the church with the overall theme.

The use of gold in apse vault mosaic, as well as other sections of the church, is also worth discussing. Glass tesserae with gold leaf is mainly used in the golden sections of the San Vitale mosaics.[15] Considering its preciousness, gold itself is already intrinsically valuable upon its appearance. As Christians gathered pieces of precious stone to create mosaics instead of frescoes, the intention was to demonstrate their devotion, for the creation of mosaics required more time and money. Therefore, it is inevitable that gold, the most precious material, would be used to further indicate their faithfulness towards Christianity. Nonetheless, gold itself has more symbolic values than material values. Since gold itself possess a metallic luster, and the reflection of sunlight enhances its shine, it has a symbolic connection with the divine. The association between light and the divine can be traced to Aristotle in *The Treaty of the Soul*, "where he states that God is light and the source of light."[16] Meanwhile, the reflection of light on golden surfaces can be interpreted as "a spiritual essence penetrating the material."[17] Correlating to the timelessness pursued in the Imperial Panels, the divinity behind the use of gold is essential to the overall atmosphere of the church while demonstrating the faithfulness of the devotees.

5. DADO SECTION

The dado section, comprised of geometric-shaped *opus sectile* and pilaster elements, mainly served a decorative purpose in San Vitale, but they also connected the church with the notion of imperial power. *Opus sectile* is defined as "polychrome inlay of cut pieces of marble, mother-of-pearl, or glass, shaped to fit a pattern or picture for pavement, wall covering, or icons."[18] This technique was widely used by Romans in the richest mansions. Meanwhile, the materials used to create the geometric pattern could be immensely valuable. Over time, the *opus sectile* began to act as a symbol for aristocracy or imperial powers. Simultaneously, pilasters were also widely used in ancient Greek and Roman architecture, so both elements found in the dado section have a long cultural history. Thus, correlating with the imperial panels, the dados reinforced San Vitale's connection with the imperial power by being valuable both materially and culturally: such extent of preciousness may only be matched by the aristocracies.

Several elements found on the dado made an appearance in other sections as well. For example, the shiny white mother-pearl-inlay (fig.3) also composes the crowns worn by Justinian and Theodora, (fig.5) and the purple marble (fig.3) echoes the purple robes worn by Justinian, Theodora, and Christ. (fig.4) This correlation may also be found between the decorative borders and mosaics, implying deliberate choices behind the use of abstract patterns.

6. DECORATIVE BORDERS

The thin border around the apse vault mosaic consisting of a gradient from blue to yellow to red to purple has a significant relationship with both the wider border above and the mosaic below. (fig.7) The border
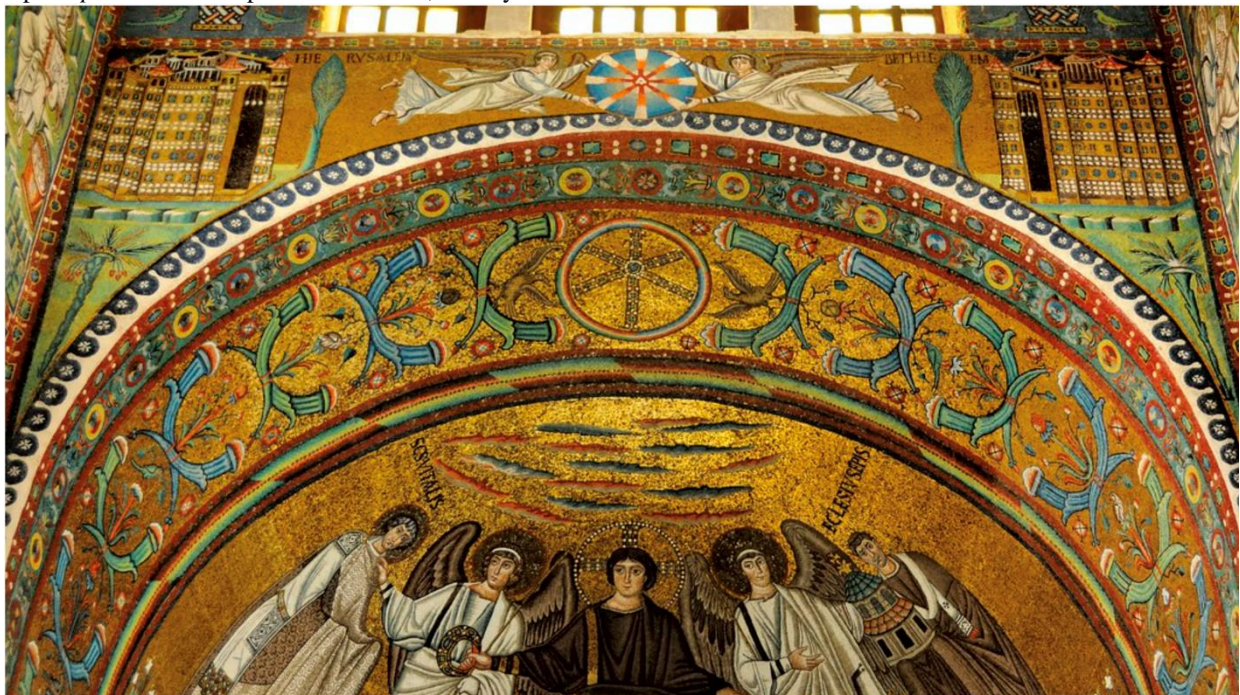

Figure 7 decorative borders

Figure 8 presbytery wall (Justinian side)

Figure 9 presbytery wall (Theodora side)

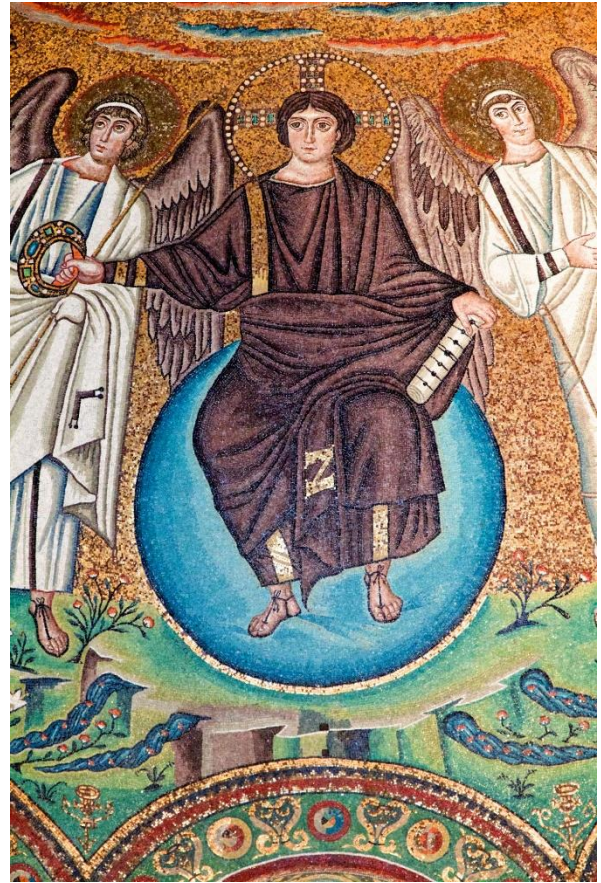
Figure 10 overview of presbytery

Figure 11 detail of apse vault mosaics, the four rivers of paradise

Figure 12 detail of apse vault mosaic, peacock

Figure 13 detail of decorative borders, vines and birds

resembles a rainbow with its semi-circular shape and gradually changing color that ranges from red to yellow to blue to purple. On the one hand, the border may be an allusion to the arch of the rainbow, "the border between heaven and earth."[19] Aside from the resemblance, the position of the rainbow border also marks a border between heaven and earth in terms of content. Below the border, the apse vault mosaic was depicted in a paradisiacal setting among all of the other mosaics in earthly settings. Directly above the apse and on the spandrels are the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem noted by the nearby inscriptions.[20] Even though the two cities are located above the depicted heaven, the rainbow border logically separates the heavenly and earthly realms in terms of the contents. On the other hand, the rainbow border can be related to the divine. As attested by the Bible: "Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."[21] Being an optical phenomenon as well as transcendental, rainbows can be easily associated with the divine.

Around the rainbow border, three outer borders also cover the edge of the apse vault mosaic. (fig.7) While the wider one connects with the rainbow border in terms of content and function, specifically that of directing the viewers' gazes, the two thinner ones increase the intricacy of the overall program in a perfectly harmonious manner.

The wider border has a repeating pattern of a plant amidst two short intertwined vines and half of the patterns include a standing bird. (fig.13) Within the Christian context, birds can symbolize souls in paradise or a link between heaven and earth, and birds in vines, specifically, can symbolize souls abiding with Christ.[22] Therefore, the patterns on this wider border correlate with the rainbow border since both act as an intermediary between heaven and earth.

A fundamental function of the decorative borders is that they all direct the eyes of the viewers towards the apse vault mosaic. The two most conspicuous borders instruct viewers to gaze upward through their detail: the rainbow border was cut by diagonal lines that slope upward, while the wider abstract border has its vines facing upward.

7. APSE AND THE REMAINING SPACE

Spaces aside from the apse in San Vitale also form a coherent layout. To illustrate this point, this paper will share two examples: the relationship between the imperial panels and sidewalls of the chancel, along with the reoccurring circle element.

Extending from the two imperial panels are two presbytery walls with mosaics depicting biblical scenes; both of the walls have an intimate relationship with the

mosaic of Justinian or Theodora on their side. Positioned on the side of Justinian, the side wall's adjoining spandrels illustrate the story of Moses receiving the law on Mt. Sinai (fig.14), while Theodora's side has Moses tending a flock of sheep and loosening his sandals before the Burning Bush.[23] (fig.15) The scene of Moses receiving law echoes precisely Justinian's position and power as the ruler of Byzantium. At the same time, the story of Moses encountering the Burning Bush and hearing God's voice relates to the empress' role as a counterpart of Justinian, but her power was expressed more indirectly as compared to Justinian. Relevant under the aforementioned social context in the section on the imperial panels, such differences are comprehensible. Another interpretation is that the two mosaics on spandrels demonstrate power in both a worldly aspect and an other-worldly aspect.[24] In this sense, Theodora's death by the time the mosaics are created might be the reason why she was positioned with the other-worldly demonstration. The niche in which Theodora stands on the panel (fig.5) has been interpreted as a special niche for the dead. In Ravenna, many similar niches house important figures, and they were "a way of highlighting the position of persons of special importance or sanctity, persons, furthermore, who had died."[25]
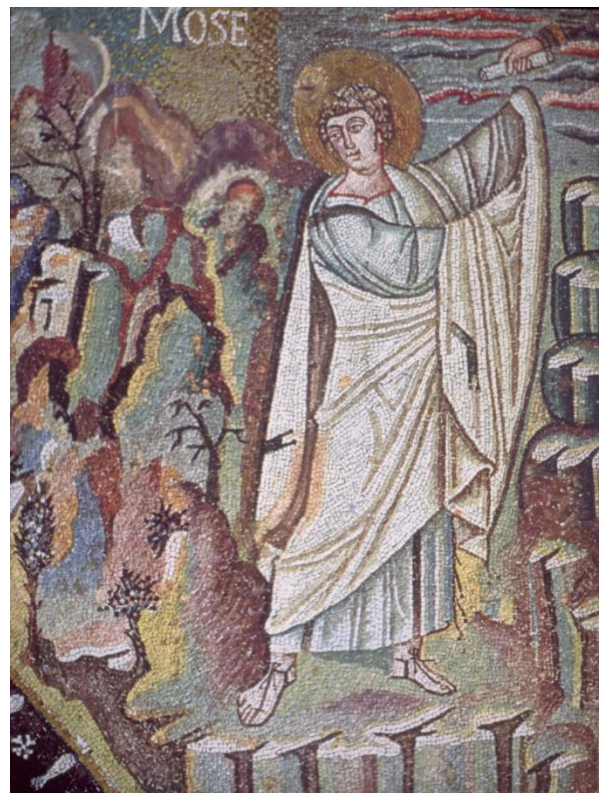

Figure 14 detail of presbytery walls, Moses receiving law on Mt. Sinai

Figure 15 detail of presbytery walls, Moses before the Burning Bush

Below the spandrels on the side walls are the lunettes. Scenes of Abel and Melchisedech making their offerings, Abraham with the Three Angels, and the Sacrifice of Isaac are depicted on the two side walls. [26] Together with the apse, the mosaics form "the course of history, leading from the Old Testament Judaic kingdoms to the Christian kingdom of Byzantium, for which the people called on God's protection at imperial processions."[27]

Figure 16 detail of dome, Agnus Dei symbol

Also, within the chancel, an abundance of reoccurring elements may be found in all of the mosaic scenes, mosaic borders, and dados. Inevitably, the element circle is the most significant one. It is impossible to list out all circular patterns within San Vitale mosaics, for even the thinnest border found around the apse vault mosaic includes small white dots. Nonetheless, a series of circles aligned on the central axis of San Vitale chancel is worth a discussion. Situated on the dome is a wreath supported by four angels, with the *Agnus Dei*(fig.16) appearing inside.[28] Down to the apse, an *Iota-Chi* cross can be found within a rainbow-bordered circle on the conch of the apse. (fig.7) Continuing down is the circular halo of

Christ and the orb on which he sits. *Agnus Dei*, or the Lamb of God, is an emblem of Christ, and it is closely related to the sacrifice of Jesus. In the Bible, John the Baptist exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"[29] after seeing Jesus. On the other hand, the *Iota-Chi* cross is composed of the first alphabet of "Jesus" and "Christ" in Greek. Since *Agnus Dei* and *Iota-Chi* are two symbols that both represent Christ, the continuous line of four circles on the central axis of San Vitale chancel connects all three representations of Christ in the entire church.

8. CONCLUSION

Overall, through an examination of each section located within the San Vitale apse, an abundance of connections was found either between or within the sections, and a similar phenomenon is seen outside the apse as well. The two infamous imperial panels shared similarities and differences, which may be interpreted through the social context, creating a complicated relationship between them. Together with the dados, the imperial panels connect the religious atmosphere with the imperial power of Justinian and Theodora. The conch mosaic and its surrounding borders also formed a harmonious whole in terms of content. Specifically, the gold mosaics and the rainbow borders both allude to the divine. Simultaneously, the apse relates to the presbytery through a complete narration on the mosaics and reoccurring circular elements that represents Christ. Therefore, it may be concluded that the mosaics and dados in the San Vitale Apse form a coherent holistic program while being part of a macrocosmic layout. The theme of the layout is Christ's redemption of humanity, and emphasis on divinity as well as the imperial power can also be found.

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