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Quick jump to page content

- [Main Navigation](#)
- [Main Content](#)
- [Sidebar](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
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Toggle navigation

- [Current](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Editors](#)
- [About](#)
 - [About the Journal](#)
 - [Review Guidelines](#)
 - [Contact](#)

Search

1. [Home](#)
2. [Archives](#)
3. [2008 Reviews](#)
4. Reviews

08.09.27, Sundell, Mosaics in The Eternal City

Main Article Content

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Sundell, Michael G.. *Mosaics in The Eternal City*. ACMRS Occasional Publications. Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2007. Pp. 220. ISBN: \$39.

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This book describes and interprets a series of medieval mosaics found in Roman churches and dating from the Early Christian period to the end of the 13th century. It is divided

into four chapters, assessing first the mosaics commissioned by Pope Paschal I (817-824) in the churches of Santa Prassede, Santa Cecilia and Santa Maria in Domnica, then going back in time to the Early Christian mosaics of Santa Pudenziana and Santi Cosma e Damiano, returning again to the 12th-century church of San Clemente, before finally ending with the 12th and 13th-century mosaics at Santa Maria in Trastevere and Santa Maria Maggiore. Despite the author's attempt at justifying, in his Preface, this non-chronological order of study, reflecting a deliberate design to begin with Paschal I and then study material at a point equidistant in time from him in the past and in the future, this choice adds a rather confusing note, particularly for readers not already familiar with the history of the city of Rome. This is not only unnecessary, but does rather detract from the pursuit of the main point made throughout the book: the layering of art from different periods within Roman medieval art and, in particular, the deliberate re-use of classical motifs, endlessly reinvented until the end of the Middle Ages.

While there does not seem to be any advantage in not following this taste for the reinventing, adapting, and recreating the classical Roman motifs from its start in the age following the Conversion of Constantine and the building of the first basilicas and churches in the 4th century, to the apse mosaics of Pietro Cavallini and Jacopo Toritti in the 13th century, it might in fact have been of some advantage to highlight the choice of using various classical motifs at various periods during these ten centuries in chronological order. This would have highlighted the adoption of different themes at different times, for different purposes and in different contexts, just as Rome itself evolved from having been relegated to a relatively unimportant imperial city by the 4th century, to one which took renewed pride in the civic values put forward as a model of unity and local strength of the inhabitants against the Lombards, Byzantines, Franks or Germans, notably through the power struggle between the main aristocratic families in the post-Carolingian era to gain control over the city and even to revive the glory of republican Rome. Most important, of course, was the constant struggle of these families, then of foreign rulers, to control the papacy, just as the hold of the popes over the city became overwhelming, first by necessity since the bishop was the last bastion of public authority, political strength and administrative organisation, then increasingly from the mid-11th century, in parallel with the rise in power of the papacy in Europe as a key figure on the international scene, up to the height of this power in the early 14th century.

Such a general historical background would have been most welcome, as a help to the more casual reader who may not know his Krautheimer by heart, and would have anchored the study of individual churches and their mosaics within the context of the historical development of Rome both as a city and as the Church capital of the medieval world. There are, at regular intervals in the book, and within specific contexts, some excellent summaries of the historical background for that particular church. Such are, for example, that on Christianity in the Roman Empire (pp. 53-54, 58-62 and 128-9), on Theodoric and Ostrogothic rule (pp. 73-76), on the papal reform begun by Gregory VII (pp. 88-9) and on the in-fighting between aristocratic families (pp. 125-6), though of course not in that order, since they are placed wherever they are deemed to be indispensable for understanding the history of a particular church. In effect, however, they add to the overall impression of this book being more of a travelogue than a history

of Roman medieval mosaics and their significance.

Writing such a travelogue, in the tradition of Norman Douglas or H.V. Morton, or indeed in that of major literary figures repeatedly mentioned by Sundell himself (Goethe, Stendhal, Ruskin or Chesterton) is no criticism. The author defines himself as a literary man, and the book gives equal weight to such past literary figures or to literary historians of Rome, such as Gibbon and Gregorovius, as it does to current historical and archaeological research, or to source material such as the *Liber Pontificalis* or the 12th-century *Mirabilia*. While it incorporates a sizeable bibliography at the end, one is sometimes frustrated at failing to recognize its elements within the text itself, or to note the absence of some key names who wrote on the history of Rome and Roman art, such as Bertolini, Huelsen and Llewelyn. Equally surprising is the absence of some key works among the primary material, such as the pilgrimage itineraries published by Valentini and Zuchetti in their 3 volumes of the *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma* (Itinerary of Einsiedeln, The *De Mirabilibus Urbis Romae* of Master Gregory, the Catalogues of Benedict and of Cencius the Chamberlain), while *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, a less impressive reference, figures prominently. There are advantages and disadvantages to such an approach. A distinct advantage is the author's willingness to use a variety of less frequently-used sources, including popular tradition and folklore, such as the development of the stories linked to the *Fons Olei* and the *Taberna Meritoria*, stemming from Cassius Dio but expanded into local stories concerning Santa Maria in Trastevere. A somewhat less fortunate use, from a historical point of view, is the intensely personal reading of particular mosaics, to which feelings are attributed which may seem to reflect the author's view rather than that of the artists', in what is sometimes an almost Berensonian-style modern view of "Renaissance" art. It is a sad fact that historians and art historians of the Middle Ages can only read so much from the visual evidence when this is not described in terms of motifs, similarities to other such evidence, use of composition, dress, placing and so on, since the monumental art of the period was so fundamentally programmatic and didactic. Readings of expressions and reflections of inner feelings are, unfortunately, not a real option in our work, at least not in the manner attributed to the figures at Santa Prassede (p. 10), Santi Cosma e Damiano (p. 71), Santa Maria in Trastevere (pp. 139-40 and 146) and Santa Cecilia (p. 42), where, we are told that "these saintly men and women seem introspective and even distraught, as though Paradise had fallen short of their expectations, or the process of resurrection proven more painful in retrospect than they could endure."

A few additional general or methodological flaws must be remarked on briefly. The upside-down chronology in the discussion of Santa Maria Maggiore, which begins with Torriti's apse mosaic, follows with 16th-century and later additions in the church, and ends with the 5th-century mosaics, is once again difficult to support. The exceptionally detailed study of San Clemente cannot be justified by the place of its 12th-century mosaic, which is technically the reason for its inclusion, and the long discussion of the earlier structures, Mithraeum and early basilica, can only be explained by the author's particular fondness for this church; an entirely understandable liking but, historically, if the early frescoes at San Clemente are studied as well as the mosaic, why not other frescoes, some of crucial interest in terms of the Roman iconography of the Virgin in Rome, for example, that at Santa Maria Antiqua, or the icon of Santa Maria in Cosmedin?

A few historical errors appear, for which the author has apologised in advance as a non-historian: the title of Holy Roman Emperor was not used by Charlemagne or indeed before the 12th century in Germany and the Donation of Constantine was probably forged within the papal Curia not long before Pope Zacharias in the mid-8th century (p. 7). Last but not least, a constant difficulty throughout the book is the absence of really good reproductions of the main apse mosaics in particular, all of which ought to have been at least full page to allow for the details discussed to be visible.

The main positive contribution of this book, however, remains its central argument, which is the analysis of the constant return of Roman medieval art to its classicising past, in various forms and at various periods. In the early stages of Christian art in Rome, we have the mosaic at Santa Pudenziana with its cultivation of Late Roman style and iconography (pp. 69-71 and 78-80), the modelling of the series of mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore on the contemporary classical-revival manuscript of the Vatican Virgil (p. 165), and the use of the ever-renewed popular Roman attachment to the twin brothers' theme from Romulus and Remus and the Dioscuri to SS Cosmas and Damian (pp. 69-84). At Santa Prassede (p. 36) and Santa Cecilia (pp. 36-43), Paschal I attempted to "revive the infrastructure, prestige and economy of Rome" (p. 5) and to further civic renewal, through his use of classical Roman and Early Christian triumphal iconography, architectural models, inscriptions in Latin hexameters and a variety of devices and symbols designed to bring to his contemporaries' minds the uninterrupted glory of Rome in the present as well as in the past. This may not have been for the sake of the Romans alone, but also very much as a point to be made about the role of the papacy vis-à-vis its perceived Carolingian masters in the early 8th century--of which perhaps more could be made. At San Clemente (pp. 89-94), the symbols of the Early Christian Church, such as the acanthus-vine, the Tree of Life, the birds, beasts and cherubs and the Latin inscription are used both to express "the reformers' celebration of institutional Christianity and their insistence on the primacy of ecclesiastical over secular rule" (p. 90) and their "larger effort to cleanse Christianity by resurrecting the spiritual and moral purity of its primitive days" (p. 92). The main point of the book comes through at its best in this analysis of the Roman past, revived at various points as a programme of authority and inspiration for the present.

This book follows a path of its own, being more of a wandering around Roman churches, with explanations of their background, rather than a history of Roman mosaics in the medieval period. Though not strictly speaking a historical text, it is much more than a guidebook or a travel diary: an enjoyable and informed promenade for any reader who wants to see a less obvious, more secret and outstandingly beautiful form of Roman art, and understand how and why it was produced in the Middle Ages.

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Issue

[2008 Reviews](#)

Section

Reviews

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