XXI.—*On the Byzantine Origin of the Church of St. Vitalis at Ravenna, with Remarks on other Churches in that City.* By EDWIN FRESHFIELD, Esq. F.S.A.

Read February 24, 1876.

It is hardly necessary to describe the situation of the town of Ravenna. Its ancient fortress occupied a strong position, resting on the sea towards the east and south, and, with an ample harbour for those days, it could not be blockaded by any army not possessing also a fleet. Lying out of the beaten track, and thus defended by the sea, Ravenna, at a time when Western Europe was convulsed with the commotions dependent upon the extinction of the Western Empire, was contentedly secure under the protection of the yet powerful empire of Constantinople.

In the sixth and seventh centuries there, at least, was one comparatively peaceful spot in Italy.

The result is the erection of a series of Christian churches in the town of an age and style to which there is nothing comparable in any other part of Western Europe, and these decorated in a manner superior to any other buildings of that age out of Constantinople itself.

It is of one of these buildings, viz. the church of St. Vitalis, that I propose to say a few words.

The church of St. Vitalis is one of the most remarkable buildings in Italy. It is fortunate that the date of it and the name of the builder are well known, and inferentially some of the circumstances in which the church was erected. I propose in the first place to describe the building, and then to give something of an historical account of it, next to give some of the theories respecting it, and, lastly, my own.

The church of St. Vitalis is throughout octagonal in shape. (See plan, Plate XXXIV.^a) It consists of an internal octagon supported by eight piers, surmounted by a round dome with Byzantine pendentives. There is an octagonal aisle round the central octagon, which is inclosed by an octagonal wall forming

^a This plan and that of the church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus in the same plate have been adapted from Baron Hubsch's work, *Monuments de l'Architecture Chrétienne*. Paris, 1866.

the outside wall of the church. Between each of the piers, except the two easternmost, there is a semicircular apse, the dome-shaped covering of which is supported by the piers and by two pillars between each pier. The space between the two easternmost piers is open, and forms with a large eastern apse a deep chancel. (See Plate XXXV.) The aisle does not open into the chancel, but is screened from it by a wall in which are opened three small arches, each arch being supported by two small pillars. There was a large and curious porch at the west end, now, however, in part destroyed, and quite inaccessible owing to a large building, formerly part of the monastery but now used as a barrack, having been erected against it. It opened, however, into the church with a triplet of arches, as in the church now called the Khodsha Mustafa Pasha Djamessi at Constantinople, and I think it opened on two faces. Over the octagonal aisle is a large women's gallery exactly similar in plan to the aisle below, and terminating at the north and south-eastern ends with three arches opening into the chancel, corresponding to the arches in the screen below. On each side of the great eastern apse there are two small buildings containing staircases leading up to the women's gallery, and adjoining them again are two later circular buildings, which I think must have been intended as the foundation of two of the tall circular towers for which Ravenna is celebrated, but these were never completed. There are two at either end of the porch which have been partially completed, but none of them rise to the height of many of the other circular towers in the town.

The building is constructed entirely of brick—the bricks are thin—bearing a great resemblance to the ordinary Roman brick. The windows were all round-headed, but have in some instances been modernised.

The dome, which is supported upon the eight piers by means of Byzantine pendentives, is small, so small that the pendentives are hardly apparent, but they exist nevertheless. The dome is remarkable for having been built entirely of pots placed horizontally, the end of each pot being inserted into the mouth of the pot to which it is joined. This construction was used for lightness—but either the architect doubted the durability of his building or did not know how to coat the outside of a dome, and therefore made it only a ceiling. It is covered with a wooden roof which is tiled, and the aisles are covered in the same manner.

The piers in the octagon body of the church up to the women's gallery are ornamented with marble cut into slabs as in Santa Sophia and other well-known Byzantine examples. It would appear as if the dome had been originally lined with mosaic. This has now been removed and is replaced by some very vile painting. The whole of the chancel is, however, covered with mosaics which are

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still perfect, and form the most important of the extraordinary series still remaining in Ravenna.

The pavement was originally of tessellated work, a white ground with figures, birds, and flowers; some portion of it still remains, but owing to the rising of the bed of the river the water level has also risen, and the floor of the church has been raised to a corresponding degree; and, although the Italian Government has attempted to do so, it has been found impossible to uncover the original floor. The present floor is about two feet above the original level.

The monastery attached to the church having been dissolved by the Italian Government, the church is almost disused, but is preserved as a national monument. It has been frightfully maltreated, and shows some sign of decay, chiefly through damp, but it is otherwise now well cared for, and is less likely to suffer than it was under the hands of its former owners. In many places pieces of the mosaics have been removed by the custodians for sale to visitors, and our attendant, an old woman, lamented those good days which were now passed. The building being now under the superintendence of a Government official, this robbery is put an end to.

The pillars of the building are mostly of single blocks of grey marble, selected with great care, and apparently cut for the church, and not taken from a more ancient building. The capitals of the pillars are of different orders. The capitals in the women's gallery, with the exception of those opening into the eastern apse, are of foliage in high relief. The capitals of the lower story of the octagon, and those in both stories of the screen separating the eastern apse from the aisle, are all Byzantine; the latter are of a particularly beautiful description. The ornaments upon all these are in low relief. The arches are not supported directly upon the capitals, but there is a sort of abacus above them called, I observe, by M. Texier, a "dossieret."

These abaci are ornamented in some instances with a cross, and in other instances with remarkable monograms, which have formed the subject of some antiquarian discussion. The balustrade of the women's gallery has unfortunately been modernised, and there is no trace of the original construction.

The cupola of the church is surmounted by a bronze cross, which is believed to be coeval with the building.

In the chancel are, with many other subjects, the two celebrated mosaic groups of Justinian and Theodora. The group on the north represents the Emperor Justinian inside a church, accompanied by his nobles and guard, delivering a basin with offerings to the Bishop Maximianus, who holds a cross and

is preceded by a deacon with the censer. That on the south represents the Empress Theodora and her ladies, also delivering a basin with other offerings to the attendant of the church, probably a deacon, and apparently at the outer door of the church. The mosaic also shows the fountain for washing hands outside the church.

This is a general description of the church, and now as to its history.

It fortunately happens that there is no doubt as to the date of the erection of the church. An account of its building is preserved in the annals of a monk of Ravenna named Agnellus. Agnellus lived in the reign of the Emperor Charlemagne, and in the year 775, and wrote an account of the Bishops of Ravenna and their transactions from the foundation of the Christian church there down to the time just preceding his death. The book is full of interest. Agnellus was cordially attached to the autonomy of Ravenna, and regrets deeply the fact of its falling under the papal dominion, a misfortune which must have happened about the year 750.

The book is divided into chapters, giving various incidents, both religious and secular, in the lives of the bishops.

In describing the life of Ecclesius, who was elected Bishop of Ravenna in the year 524, during the reign of Theodoric, Agnellus says, "In his time the church of the Blessed Martyr Vitalis was founded by Julianus Argentarius in conjunction with the bishop himself."

Vita Sancti Ecclesii, caput primum. De Sancto Ecclesio^a

Ipsius temporibus Ecclesia B. Vitalis Martyris a Juliano Argentario una cum ipso Præsule fundata est.

Agnellus continues: "The commencement of the building of the church was made by Julianus, after that the Bishop Ecclesius had returned to Rome from Constantinople with John the Pope, whither he had been sent by Theodoric."^b

Ecclesius went to Constantinople with the Pope John in the year 525, and returned in the year 526. Theodoric, the Gothic and Arian King of Italy and Ravenna, died in July of the same year; a few months before his death Ecclesius returned to Ravenna.

Agnellus, after making some observations upon bishops in general, not very complimentary to those of his own time, proceeds to say, "But, as I said before, in his time the church of the Blessed Martyr Vitalis was built by Julianus Argentarius. There is no church like it in Italy either for its construction or

^a Agnelli *Liber Pontificalis*. Modena, 1708. *Pars Secunda*, p. 38.

^b Idem, p. 39.

for its mechanical works." He then mentions that the expense of building the church, as was recorded in the eulogium upon its consecration, and in memory of its founder Julianus, was twenty-six thousand golden solidi.^a "Sed sicut superius dixi in tempore ipsius ecclesia B. Vitalis Martyris a Juliano Argentario constructa est. Nulla in Italia ecclesia similis est in ædificiis et in mechanicis operibus. Expensus vero in predicti Martyris Vitalis ecclesia sicut in elogio sanctæ recordationis et memoriæ Juliani fundatoris invenimus xxvi millia aureorum expensa sunt solidorum." Agnellus goes on to say that when Ecclesius died he was buried in the church of St. Vitalis, within the monastery of St. Nazarius. Ecclesius died in the year 534, and was succeeded by a bishop of the name of Ursicinus.

Ursicinus died in the year 538 and was buried in St. Vitalis, and it is reasonable to suppose that in his time the building proceeded. He was succeeded by a bishop of the name of Victor, who died in the year 546, and it was in the episcopate of his successor, Maximianus, that the church was consecrated.

After the death of Theodoric, in 526, the kingdom of Ravenna was assumed by his daughter, Amalasuntha, as guardian of her son, Amalaric. Amalasuntha formed an alliance with the Emperor Justinian. She reigned with her son until his death in 538; she was shortly afterwards murdered and the government taken by Vitiges, who in his turn in the year 539 was conquered by Belisarius, and Ravenna was taken for Justinian.

Maximianus was consecrated Bishop of Ravenna in the year 546, and in the same year he consecrated the church of St. Vitalis, exactly twenty years after its commencement. It would appear, therefore, that the church was twenty years in process of building, or, perhaps, to speak more strictly, in process of building and decoration. At all events it is probable that it was in his time that the mosaics were erected in the chancel, because he is represented there with the Emperor Justinian. I think there is no doubt that the consecration in the time of Maximianus was a real consecration of the church, and not a re-consecration consequent upon the use of the church by the Arians. Agnellus uses two different expressions to signify a consecration and a re-consecration of a building.

Agnellus in the account he gives of the life of St. Maximianus and of a journey he made to Constantinople, which is most entertaining, adds,^b "Consecravit ecclesiam B. Vitalis Martyris in Ravenna. Et in tribunâ B. Vitalis ejusdem Maximiani effigies atque Augusti et Augustæ tessellis valde computatæ sunt."

In the mosaics on the eastern apse there is a portrait of Ecclesius holding a

^a Idem, p. 40.

^b Idem, p. 94.

model of the church. Probably, therefore, the church was substantially erected by him, but not actually completed until the time of Maximianus.

It may be interesting to remember that during these twenty years the churches of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, Sta. Sophia, of the Apostles, and of St. Eirene at Constantinople, were all in the course of erection; and, when the Bishops Ecclesius and Maximianus went to Constantinople, they must have seen these buildings in course of construction and completed.

It will be seen that St. Vitalis was begun and completed in the reigns of two bishops, both in direct personal communication with Constantinople, and in the very best times of Byzantine architecture, the lifetime of Anthemus and Isidore.

Simultaneously with this church two others were built in Ravenna. One is the celebrated church of St. Apollinaris, in the old suburb of Classis, of which it is now the sole representative, and the other is the church of St. Martin, now called S. Apollinari Nuovo. Both churches are plain basilicas, and entirely unlike St. Vitalis. The former of them—viz. St. Apollinaris, in the suburb of Classis—was commenced by the Bishop Ursicinus, the successor of Ecclesius. It was consecrated by Maximianus, and the same man who appears as aiding in the building of the church of St. Vitalis—viz. Julianus Argentarius—appears as aiding in the building of this church also.

There has been some discussion as to who Julianus Argentarius was, and whether he was the architect or a munificent contributor to the church, but the probability is that Julianus was the banker of the diocese of Ravenna, and that he saw to the payment for these buildings, and that Argentarius is a description and not a name.

Of the other building, S. Apollinari Nuovo, there is not so much known. It was commenced in the reign of Theodoric and was most probably used as an Arian church. It was consecrated to the Catholic use by Agnellus, the successor of Maximianus, in the year 553, and was decorated by him with a series of mosaics hardly inferior in interest to those at St. Vitalis, and no doubt by the same hand.

While the churches of St. Apollinaris, in the suburb of Classis, and S. Apollinari Nuovo, are of the ordinary basilica shape, it is quite otherwise with the church of St. Vitalis, and many writers upon architecture and Ravenna, including Mr. Fergusson, have been much exercised in attempting to discover the origin of its design.

There is an interesting work upon architecture, written in French, by Baron Hubsch,^a who spent a considerable time in Constantinople and Ravenna. He has

^a *Monuments de l'Architecture Chrétienne.* Paris, 1866.

come to the conclusion that the church of St. Vitalis is an imitation of the church of S. Lorenzo at Milan. Baron Hubsch's account is too long to quote, but it entirely proceeds upon an assumption for which we have no authority, viz. that S. Lorenzo at Milan is anterior in date to St. Vitalis. Even if it were, there are so many differences in principle that I think the theory is in every respect untenable.

The church of S. Lorenzo is not octagonal, and one great difference between it and St. Vitalis is the total absence in the Milan church of any chancel.

Again, the dome of S. Lorenzo, according to its present formation, is not circular, and the Byzantine pendentives are of the rudest construction; nor is there in the church, as far as I remember, anything like a trace of the Byzantine detail which may be seen so plentifully in St. Vitalis; and lastly, there is the well-known Lombard Gallery under the eaves of the roof. I should say, therefore, that it is more likely that the church of S. Lorenzo was a Lombard copy of St. Vitalis than that St. Vitalis was a Byzantine copy of S. Lorenzo.

Mr. Fergusson has also given an account of this church. He says: "In design it is nearly identical with the Minerva Medica at Rome, except that this is an octagon instead of a decagon, and that it is wholly inclosed by an octagonal wall, whereas the Roman example has besides two curvilinear wings inclosing its sides. There are also some minor alterations, such as the introduction of galleries and the prominence given to the choir; but still nothing to justify the title of Byzantine usually applied to this church. It is in reality a bad copy from a building in Rome, and very unlike any building in the East we are acquainted with, though no doubt there are certain forms of similarity, as indeed must be found in all the buildings of the age before the final separation of the two churches took place.^a"

It is of course almost impossible to compare the church with the now shapeless temple of Minerva Medica, but I know by personal examination that the dome of the temple was not supported on pendentives.

I cannot understand the paragraph in which he says, "that no doubt there are certain forms of similarity, as indeed must be found in all the buildings of the age before the final separation of the two Churches took place."

No one knows better than Mr. Fergusson that the contemporaries of St. Vitalis in the East are the churches of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, Sta. Sofia, St. Eirene at Constantinople, and St. John at Ephesus, and there is not a single church out of the Levant which was built in that age which could in any way compare with

^a *Handbook of Architecture*, p. 512.

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any one of these churches, unless it be St. Vitalis, either in design, detail, or ornament.

As to the octagon form, that was in use in the East from the earliest time.

There is an excellent description of St. Vitalis in Mr. Murray's Handbook of Italy. He observes that "It was an imitation of Sta. Sofia at Constantinople." Without in the least contradicting the fact, which I presently hope to establish, that its builder received his inspiration in part, at least, from Sta. Sofia, this proposition is too broadly stated. Too broadly also does Murray speak when he talks of "a colossal dome" when it is only 50 ft. in diameter. But in most respects his account is most accurate.

Having thus spoken of my neighbours' theories I will come to my own.

If we turn to the churches of Constantinople building at the same time as St. Vitalis we find the following similarity; in the first place, the deep chancel and apse; in the second place, the semicircular apses between the piers. These in St. Vitalis, indeed, seem to be an exact copy of those in Sta. Sophia, and not unlike those in SS. Sergius and Bacchus, except that the arrangement of St. Vitalis appears somewhat more complete than either of the Byzantine examples. The large women's gallery, the marble decoration, the mosaics, all point to Constantinople. The arrangement of the staircases leading to the women's gallery is exactly like that at St. Eirene.

There are, on the contrary, some remarkable differences in detail between this church and the churches of Constantinople. In the first place, the dome of the church at Ravenna is covered with a roof; in Constantinople the domes invariably form their own roof. But, if we turn from Constantinople to Salonica, there we see in the circular church of St. George a deep chancel similar to that of St. Vitalis and a dome covered with a roof. In another church at Salonica, St. Demetrius, we find further peculiarities and details similar to those in the church of Ravenna; the church of St. Demetrius appears to have been built as a T-shaped basilica, a nave and four aisles, with a transept in front of the apse. In order to form a deep chancel the transepts have been cut off by a screen like that which in St. Vitalis separates the chancel from the octagonal aisles.

Again, we find over the capitals in St. Demetrius the same large abacus that we find in the church of St. Vitalis, and with respect to the capitals there is one beautiful capital, which, allowing for the difference in execution, is found at St. Vitalis, St. Demetrius at Salonica, Sta. Sofia, and SS. Sergius and Bacchus, and, to the best of my belief, nowhere else. (See Plate XXXVI.) There is another peculiar ornament which is confined to St. Vitalis and Constantinople.

I mean the strange monograms on the capitals of the pillars. Those at St. Vitalis are obviously all copied in idea from the monograms upon the capitals in the church of Sta. Sophia, and one at least is an exact reproduction. The Ravenna monograms have caused a great deal of discussion, and the meaning of them is by no means clear. Every kind of interpretation has been put upon them, but the usually received opinion seems to be that the monogram with the cross, occurring often on the capitals (Plate XXXVI.), represents the word *Ecclesius*, the other (see woodcut) *Julianus*. I cannot follow the former, and unless there was a *Julianus* connected with Sta. Sofia the latter reading is incorrect, as this monogram appears in Sta. Sofia also.

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SANTA SOFIA.

SANTA SOFIA.

With regard to the prominence of the chancel, although there are many circular churches in Italy, not one of them has any chancel beyond the smallest apse, whereas all the eastern churches have well developed chancels.

From all which considerations I come to the conclusion that the church of St. Vitalis, commenced by the Bishop *Ecclesius* and completed by *Maximianus*, was built after the fashion of an eastern church, both in design and in detail, and that it was built by workmen who had seen the designs of, or who had been employed on, the churches of Sta. Sophia and of Salonica.

On the contrary, the two churches of St. Apollinaris were built in the ordinary form of an Italian church at that date, and any Byzantine ornaments that are found in them are due to the fact that they were built under the same *Julianus Argentarius* who superintended the building of the church of St. Vitalis, and to the general communication between Ravenna and the East, which was much more intimate than between Rome and Ravenna. The ecclesiastical names and ornaments were brought from Constantinople and not Rome.

One of the principal monasteries in Ravenna was named Sta. Maria ad Blachernas, of which our historian, *Agnellus*, was abbot.

And for ornaments there is still preserved in the cathedral at Ravenna the episcopal chair of the Bishop *Maximianus* of ivory, upon which there may be seen

a Byzantine monogram. There is no doubt that this chair^a (Plate XXXVII) is Byzantine, because, in addition to the monogram, the figures are giving the blessing in the Greek and not the Latin form. This is interesting, because in a Latin representation of this chair the figures are shown as giving the blessing in the Latin form.

I have not said anything about the mosaics, because I do not think that they touch the matter in any way. The mosaics are of course Byzantine, and exceedingly interesting, particularly the groups of Justinian and Theodora. There are two mosaics of Justinian in Ravenna, one in St. Vitalis and the other in S. Apollinari Nuovo, and I should think there is little doubt these must be portraits.

The portrait in mosaic of Justinian is characteristically ugly, and not unlike his figure as it appears upon his coins.

Time does not allow me to describe the other mosaics, but I must say a word more about the great group at the eastern end of St. Vitalis. In it is the representation of St. Ecclesius carrying the church in his arms. The Emperor and Empress both are represented as bearing bowls, which have given rise to a great deal of discussion. It has been suggested that the Emperor and Empress were present at the dedication of the church, and that these mosaics represent them bringing their offerings, but I believe this is altogether unfounded; there is no evidence that the Emperor and Empress ever went to Italy. I should think that the figures more probably represent the Emperor and Empress bringing offerings at the celebration of the Holy Communion. In fact, the group of the Emperor Justinian with his nobles and men-at-arms is most probably the representation of a Byzantine Emperor at one of the entrances. The Empress Theodora is outside the church, probably going up into her seat in the women's gallery.

In the church of St. Apollinaris ad Classem is a singular group representing the Emperor Constantine Pogonatus giving privileges to the Bishop Reparatus, the dresses in which may be usefully compared with those in St. Vitalis.

I need hardly say that this paper by no means exhausts the subjects of interest in St. Vitalis. My object has been, and I hope I have succeeded in so doing, to throw some additional light upon its Byzantine origin.

^a A description of this chair is given in Westwood's Catalogue of the Fictile Ivories in the South Kensington Museum, p. 357. An unsatisfactory engraving of it may be found in Du Sommerard's *Arts du Moyen Age*, Album, 1^{re} Série, pl. xi., and also in the appendix to the *Liber Pontificalis* of Agnellus. Our engraving, together with the others from Ravenna, is reproduced from photographs by Signor Luigi Ricci of Ravenna, who has printed a list of nearly 500 photographs of buildings and antiquities in that city.

EPISCOPAL CHAIR OF IVORY. CATHEDRAL OF RAVENNA.