

Preface

“No church in Italy is similar in structures and artistic intricacy.”
Agnellus

Writing in the ninth century, Agnellus, bishop of Ravenna and author of a history of his predecessors, was justifiably proud of the church of San Vitale in his city – it was unlike any other church in Italy. He could have easily been more expansive in his celebration of the singularity of the church, for there were very few similar churches to be found in all of Christianity at his time. It was this uniqueness, a church that looked so different than the vast majority of Late Antique churches dating from the fourth to the sixth centuries that first caught my attention as an undergraduate in an art history survey course. I was so intrigued that on my next trip to Italy, I made my way to Ravenna to see it with my own eyes, an experience that was indeed very different from that of visiting basilicas – its double octagonal plan, with the inner octagon formed of eight piers rising to support a drum and dome, encircled by an ambulatory and gallery that are linked through columnar exedrae that push out from the central core into the surrounding spaces, create a very different sense of interior space. These characteristics, paired with a lively decoration of finely carved architectural sculpture, colorful marbles, and, of course, the splendid mosaics of the sanctuary all stood out as remarkably unique and interesting. That visit led me to want to learn more, to major in art history, and then pursue a career as a professor of art and architectural history. From the beginning, I have thought that someday I would like to study the church of San Vitale, learn even more, and perhaps write about it. After many years and many more visits, my enthusiasm for the building has not waned and the moment arrived in which I could devote my research time to the present book.

What makes the church of San Vitale important? In part, it is uniqueness in the architecture of Late Antiquity in Italy and its rarity in all Christian architecture of the fourth through sixth centuries. It is also the fact that the building was created at an important moment in the history of architecture – the concluding phase of what is known as “Early Christian” or “Late Antique” and the beginning decades of what we call “Byzantine.” The church of San Vitale was founded by Bishop Ecclesius (522–533), most likely towards the end of life, and dedicated by a later successor in 547. This was the period of the early rule of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, whose architects revolutionized ecclesiastical architecture, making domed buildings the standard for churches in the eastern, later Orthodox, part of the Christian world.

San Vitale fits comfortably into the churches built by Justinian that embraced the dome as a key architectural feature and that included on occasion centrally-planned structures. Its model may well have been a Constantinopolitan one, just as the source for many of its marbles – revetment, columns, capitals and impost blocks had come from the capital or near it. While part of this new church architecture, San Vitale also

represents the culmination and end of another architectural tradition, one that had its origins in Roman funerary monuments and evolved for the most part as part of the martyrrium tradition in Christian architecture – buildings constructed to hold the remains of sainted martyrs who had died for the faith or mark the sites of their martyrdom, or in a broader sense, buildings constructed to mark other places sacred to Christians. Though not all, or even most, martyria were octagonal in plan, most octagonal Christian churches were, in fact, part of this tradition, a tradition that ended in the sixth century as the martyrial function of some churches came to be combined with that of a regular church for the liturgy.

It is this unique unification of function and tradition with the latest trends in ecclesiastical architecture that seem to be most worth exploring. From the beginning a question that has always intrigued me is why the church was built on an octagonal plan? What did that mean to the founders, builders and contemporaries? How unique or common was the use of the octagonal plan for ecclesiastical buildings in this period? I had learned early on that many Early Christian baptisteries were built as octagons, but how many octagonal churches were there in the Late Antique period? How were they alike or different from San Vitale? Why had their builders chosen this particular plan type?

A complete understanding of San Vitale is to be based at least in part on understanding its predecessors and contemporaries among octagonal church buildings. My research has led me to identify 34 other octagonal churches from late antiquity, many of which are known only from literary sources, and of the others, most lie in ruins. Only two other octagonal churches from the period survive and are in use: the small church of St. George at Izraa in southern Syria and the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Istanbul, now a functioning mosque. Both, like San Vitale, are from the first half of the sixth century.

Knowledge of the octagonal churches that lie in ruins varies considerably from building to building. Some octagons, like that in the center of the church of St. Simeon Stylites at Qa'lat Si'man, are well studied with numerous publications. Others, particularly those in Isaura (Zengibar Kalesi) and Constantia (Viransehir), Turkey, are known mostly from descriptions written by British and German explorers from the 19th or early 20th century, with several of these monuments, including those at Sivasa and Polemana, Turkey, now completely lost.

A number of remains of octagonal churches have been discovered in the past few decades. The most important are the churches of St Paul at Philippi and St. Phillip at Hierapolis in Turkey, have been thoroughly excavated if not thoroughly published. Others at Gadara and Gerasa in Jordan, Homs in Syria, Capernaum, Caesarea, and Jerusalem in the Holy Land demonstrate that the use of the octagonal plan, while rare, was more common than previously thought.

The present book will study all of these buildings together for the first time. Every scholar who has dealt with San Vitale has made comparisons between it and the church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, and sometimes mentioned a few of the other octagonal churches, but no one until now has understood either the frequency of the use of the octagonal plan type or its evolution or diffusion across the Christian world. Through an examination of these buildings, the place held by San Vitale in the history of ecclesi-

astical architecture in late antiquity will finally be understood as it represents both the culmination and the crowning jewel of this rare type of building.

It should be noted that San Vitale is still awaiting a proper architectural study and monograph. The closest thing to that is found in Deichmann's treatment of the church in his magisterial *Ravenna. Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes*, published in several volumes between 1958 and 1976, but even his is a limited study in some aspects. A complete architectural survey, using up-to-date equipment is sorely needed; small test trenches to examine parts of the foundations would help to clarify their design as part of the structural system of the building.

The book will investigate the use of the octagon in church architecture, from its beginnings to its use in San Vitale, after the construction of which the independent octagonal church disappears until revived in Charlemagne's palace church in Aachen founded at the end of the eighth century and its copies. It will follow a chronological ordering for the most part, starting with private fourth-century structures that show the type's close ties to Roman funerary architecture both in form and function and continuing with Constantine's two octagonal buildings that brought the form into public ecclesiastical architecture. The end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth century saw the wider adoption of the type for martyrial structures, largely in the Holy land but also in Asia Minor and Greece. This trend continues into the early sixth century, largely in the same territories. It is during the period of Justinian that the combination of martyrrium and liturgical church is found, both in the remodeling of earlier churches, but also in the construction of the last of the octagonal churches of late Antiquity, including San Vitale, the most impressive survivor of the type and truly one of the great buildings of its time.

