

*Et magi antecedents*

**The Adoration of the Magi in Ravenna art between Late Antiquity to  
Early Middle Ages**

Elisa Emaldi\*

**ABSTRACT**

*The Adoration of the Magi was among the most popular narratives depicted in early Christian iconography, even above the Nativity episode itself, because this first epiphany also contains the mystery of the incarnation in the birth of the Savior. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the composition of the scene — derived from imperial iconography— crystallized, and the episode could be depicted in the most diverse media and scales. In Ravenna artworks (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> c.), the Magi can be appreciated in monumental mosaics, marble (reliquary and sarcophagus), and a recently rediscovered small silver ring bezel.*

Keywords: Magi, Christian iconography, Late Antiquity, Ravenna, mosaics.

**T**he Adoration of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-14) was in the 3rd and 4th centuries among the most popular narratives depicted in early Christian iconography, even above the Nativity episode itself, because this first epiphany also contains the narrative of the mystery of the incarnation in the birth of the Savior<sup>1</sup>.

Already present in the catacombs, the Adoration of the Magi experienced iconographic favor when liturgical prominence began to be given to celebrations dedicated to the incarnation of the Verb in the Constantinian age, especially in Roman Christian funerary art, for reasons that are still debated<sup>2</sup>. The Adoration of the Magi is particularly present on 4th-century Roman sarcophagi, where it is often depicted above the lid<sup>3</sup>, in a smaller form than the other scenes.

---

\* Elisa Emaldi works at the educational section of the National Museum of Ravenna, also delving the history of its collections. Her research focuses on topics related to iconography and local history.

©2025 Emaldi. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Proposed to the devotion of the faithful, this secondary event of the Nativity, with the enthroned Virgin holding the infant Jesus in her arms and receiving the Wise Men from the East, was intended to emphasize several themes, such as the regality of Christ, Mary's role as the bearer of Salvation, and the eschatological significance related to the redemption open to the pagans. The Magi are archetypes of the pilgrim and the worshipper and allow us to visualize the experience of encountering the divine through love and tenderness. The message, which may have considerable emotional appeal, perhaps underlies the emblematic journey of the Magi, which conceals all Christians to Paradise.<sup>4</sup>

In the 5th and 6th centuries, the Adoration<sup>5</sup> is presented in the most disparate media and scales, in a composition usually modeled on a pattern already common in Roman art, used to depict conquered eastern peoples, subjugated, that bring gifts to the victorious ruler. The

Magi are always dressed in the Oriental<sup>6</sup> manner, with *bracae*/anaxyrides, short tunics or kitons, chlamys, and Phrygian caps. They advance carrying – normally on a plate – the incense beads, the golden crown, and myrrh toward the infant Jesus, who holds out his hands to them. This crystallized imperial iconography grew by incorporating other suggestions, from the Matthew Gospel and other texts, such as apocryphal infancy gospels along with sermons, that echoed deep theological readings, or perhaps even para-liturgical traditions that staged the Adoration. Interestingly, when Herrad of Landsberg (ca. 1130-1195), abbess of Hohenburg, complained<sup>7</sup> about the excess of theatrical activities, she specifically mentioned the performances that took place during Epiphany and its octave, referring the tradition to “the old Fathers of the Church”.

On the topic of sermons, it is necessary to mention at least Peter Chrysologus, who was Bishop of Ravenna during the period in which the town was capital of the west part of the Roman Empire and precisely during the regency of Galla Placidia (the two of them died in the same year, 450). Peter is known as the “Doctor of Homilies” and the Magi are mentioned<sup>8</sup> in more than one of his concise but theologically rich reflections, read and passed on in the church of Ravenna.

Peter connected the traditional themes of the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Magi, with the baptism and Jesus' first sign at the marriage in Cana, a third event that was a traditional part of the Epiphany celebrations

In Ravenna, maybe also on the influence of the Homilies, the Adoration seem to have been very popular<sup>9</sup>: it is the Gospel episode that occurs the

most in the surviving monuments, in a reliquary, a marble sarcophagus and wall mosaics. Other mediums and forms were involved that are no more visible in town, such as the carved ivory bookbinding today in Milan or an embroidered silk altar cover of Maximianus, forever lost. And hopefully other objects await to be put in light, as the recently rediscovered small silver ring of the National Museum.

The oldest extant representations in Ravenna are dated to the mid-5th century: it is a very rare *capsella*, called of Saints Cyricus and Julitta, because it related to the devotion to the two saints.<sup>10</sup> The marble box came from the church of San Giovanni Battista and is exhibited in the Archepiscopal Museum of Ravenna. It is rectangular in shape, measures 20.5 cm high, 38 cm wide and 51 cm long. It is decorated on all 4 sides with images, very rich in details, set in a molded frame and rendered in low relief. Grooves for housing the sliding lid – probably made of wood – are still visible along the inner edges. To my knowledge, this is the only 5<sup>th</sup> century stone casket decorated with figures; other coeval examples, normally used to contain relics or liturgy items, are in more noble materials, such as silver or ivory.

On one of the long sides<sup>11</sup> is depicted the Adoration of the Magi from the left: naked Baby Jesus is on his mother's lap; Mary, also in profile and seated on a wicker throne, is clad in a wide cloak partially covering her head.

Mary seems to offer Baby Jesus child holding out her arms, while Christ is receiving in outstretched hands the gifts from the Magi, proceeding to the right, advancing in single file; the three of them have a plate or *missorium* with different shapes inside, indicating the offering of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. All three wear Phrygian caps, tunics, anaxyrides and chlamys. Here, as in all the other depictions in Ravenna, the Magi advance on foot, and no background is suggested<sup>12</sup>.

Another marble depiction of the 5th century presents the three Wise men: it is a sarcophagus reused in the 7th century as a tomb for the Exarch Isaacius.<sup>13</sup>

The sarcophagus presents other eternal messages from the Bible, such as the resurrection of Lazarus and Daniel in the lions' den, but the scene of the Adoration is the richest. The three wise men are dressed in broad mantles, caps, and soft boots; Mary is all wrapped in her tunic and palla and stands, with her legs crossed, in a highly unusual jump-seat. Behind her head, a 6-points star is leading the Magi, and the Child is stretching a huge hand to welcome the gifts brought inside deep bowls.

Another unusual detail is the position of the second Magus, looking back over his shoulder towards the third man. Wolfgang Volbach<sup>14</sup> was the first scholar to notice the detail present in other Adorations that can be connected with Ravenna, for instance, the ivory bookbinding held at the Cathedral Treasury of Milan, an alleged product of the Ravenna's ateliers<sup>15</sup>, called Diptych of Five parts: in the back half, the adoration of the Magi is depicted with synthetic elegance and the second magus is represented vividly looking backward, as to encourage or hurry his companion or announce him that the longed-for destination is reached.

This detail, for which no proper explanation is known to me, is also found on the left side of the Catervius sarcophagus (end of the 4th or beginning of the 5th century) in Tolentino (Italy), in the ivory pyxis in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello at Florence<sup>16</sup> dated in the 6th century, in one side of a gold medallion with inscription in the British Museum<sup>17</sup>, dating from the same period, and then taken up in various depictions over a fair chronological span to early medieval objects, such as the Warden Ivory at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The well-known and meaningful<sup>18</sup> representation of the Magi in Ravenna is in the mosaic of the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the greater surviving basilica among those built under Theodoric's patronage. The church, founded as the Arian palace church (late 5<sup>th</sup> —early 6<sup>th</sup> century) and dedicated to Christ the Savior, was re-consecrated by Archbishop Agnellus, after Justinian's edict of 561, to the Orthodox cult with the dedication to St. Martin.

The basilica has three naves, and some parts of the original mosaic program – for example, the architecture of the palatium of Ravenna and the port of Classe – stand in the walls of the nave; this first program dates back to the time of the Gothic king, and was partially purged in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the presence of Theodoric and members of his court were effaced from the urban profiles of mosaics, and the large band in the lower part reoccupied by the twin processions of martyrs and virgins.

Leading the procession of the women saints, maybe from an anti-Arian perspective<sup>19</sup>, are the three Magi, walking towards the enthroned Virgin and Child, a part of the original mosaic installation and the oldest monumental image of the Virgin survived in Ravenna's mosaics. By its nature, as this part of the decoration, namely Mary and Jesus enthroned, precedes the composition with the arrival of the Magi, the presentation is somehow

hybridizing the narrative scene into a deeper iconography of divine triumph, conceived as an image of worship.<sup>20</sup>

The mosaic has been damaged over the centuries, and a drawing by Giovanni Ciampini from the 1690s shows the restored head of the Magi with the crown on top. The upper part of the body was ruined and rebuilt following the taste of time: the crowns were placed to follow the tradition of the Wise men as kings but then removed in late-century restorations<sup>21</sup>. The striking detail is that the brightly colored leggings, studded with gold, pearls, and animal motifs, are original to the 6th century. The chronologies of mosaics are known thanks to the meticulous study undertaken by Corrado Ricci at the beginning of the 20th century, leading to the production of the thematic tables, the *Tavole Storiche*, a milestone in the history of studies on ancient wall mosaics and restoration work that is still valid today.<sup>22</sup>

Another precious source illustrates the Magi's mosaic: Agnellus of Ravenna reported the colors of the garments worn by the Magi in his *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* between 830 and 846.<sup>23</sup>

Andreas Agnellus explains the significance of gifts and colors, but it is unknown how old and widespread this tradition was, and no traces of survival are attested in Italy<sup>24</sup>.

Caspar carries gold – for regal wealth – and his reddish garment signifies marriage; Balthasar offers frankincense – for the priesthood – and his yellow costume signifies virginity, while Melchior, who brings myrrh symbol of death, is dressed in a multicolored garment that signifies penitence. Agnellus adds that the purple cloak means that the King was born and suffered, and the cloak of various colors means that Christ has taken our infirmities upon Himself. The white mantle signifies He is in divine splendor after the resurrection, leaving us a little confused about the precise order in his description.

The same Agnellus informs us that the bishop of the 6th century, also named Agnellus, ordered the completion of an embroidered byssus cloth, wanted by his predecessor Maximian<sup>25</sup>, with the story of the Magi magnificently depicted. Still, it is impossible to tell if the color code on it was the same.

Another mosaic presentation of the Magi is in the church of San Vitale<sup>26</sup>, consecrated a few years after the Byzantine reconquest of Ravenna. The whole iconographic program is centered on the theme of the Eucharistic offering and sacrifice for the Redemption of man. The two panels

representing the earthly court are proposed in the apsidal space, which is a little lower than the manifestation of the heavenly and divine court.

The emperors Justinian and Theodora, with their retinue, are depicted with a vivid sense of detail and color as they present gifts for the service of the divine liturgy. The gesture of the offering is amplified and enlivened in the detail embroidered in gold tesserae on the edge of Theodora's cloak: the Magi, in their traditional robes, advance briskly. The theme of regality —of the imperial couple as earthly servants of the King of Kings— is reflected in the panel.<sup>27</sup>

A recently published object in the National Museum of Ravenna also shows the Wise Men: it is a small bezel of a rotating ring<sup>28</sup> from the 6<sup>th</sup> century ca. The prism with an octagonal base (cm 1.3) bears a name inscribed on the side and, on both faces, two Christological scenes: the Adoration of the Magi and the Ascension. Even in the tiny proportions of the object, we can notice the reiteration of an established iconography for both episodes. In the Adoration, the Virgin is shown frontally, seated, her face surrounded by the veil, i.e., an incised line; her feet and arms barely protrude from the robe that covers her to support the Child who is sitting on her lap. Jesus also has his head surrounded by an incised line, representing a halo; he wears a richly pleated V-neck tunic and extends his arm and hand towards the advancing Magi. The three Wise men, wearing oriental trousers and a short tunic, proceed towards the throne with their gifts at breast height; to depict the Phrygian cap, a small circle has been added to the engraved line above the head with a punch. This detail gives the impression that the second wise man is facing the third because he is turning towards it, as in the pattern already mentioned.

The depiction of the Adoration on small portable objects such as charms, amulets, and other “Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art” is well studied: the Magi could have been perceived as a protector, especially during the travels. Even today, the simple act of wearing a devotional object is intended as an act of prayer in people's religiosity.

## REFERENCES

---

<sup>1</sup> The literature on this topic is extensive and summarizing it is beyond the scope of this article: Bayet 1876, pp. 249-299; Bisconti 1989, pp. 367-412; Ruth 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Kyratas 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Milinović 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Harley-McGowan 2020, p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Massara 2000, pp. 205-211.

<sup>6</sup> For iconographic correspondences between East and West, see Labat 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Norton 2017, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Montanari 2002, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Deliyannis 2010, pp. 169-171.

<sup>10</sup> Angiolini Martinelli 1968, p. 80; Novara 1991, pp. 119-122.

<sup>11</sup> The other sides unusually blend two iconographies: Christ's announcement to the pious women of His Ascension and the moment of the Ascension itself. Daniel, saved from the beasts and fed by Habakkuk, is on the short side.

<sup>12</sup> For background and context in other Adoration's scenes, see Sena Chiesa 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Rizzardi 1997, pp. 177-178.

<sup>14</sup> Volbach 1977, p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Carile 2020, pp. 129-132.

The most famous ivory object in Ravenna is the Throne of bishop Maximianus, which was not crafted in Italy: it shows a rich scene of the Nativity but the plaque with the representation of the Magi is sadly missing. For a complete survey on the Nativity of Christ on Late Antique ivories, see Varalis 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Museum number: Bargello Avori 10; General Catalogue n. 00645297.

<sup>17</sup> Museum number: 1983,0704.1; Entwistle 2005, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Lepri 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Deliyannis 2010, p. 170.

<sup>20</sup> For the passage from narrative compositions to iconic representations see Lidova 2021, pp. 214-238.

<sup>21</sup> Ranaldi, Novara 2013, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> David 2015, pp. 254-261.

<sup>23</sup> Deliyannis 2004, English version with relevant introduction and notes.

<sup>24</sup> A very similar description of the costumes of the magi is found in a sermon for Epiphany in an early 15th-century Irish manuscript called the "Leabhar Breac", see Deliyannis 2004, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 202.

<sup>26</sup> Angiolini Martinelli 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Rizzardi 2011, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> Emaldi 2023.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANGIOLINI MARTINELLI, P. (1968), *Corpus della scultura paleocristiana bizantina ed altomedievale di Ravenna*, I. Roma: De Luca.

ANGIOLINI MARTINELLI, P. (1997), *Basilica di San Vitale a Ravenna*. Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini.

BAYET, C. (1876). Mémoire sur un ambon conservé à Salonique. La représentation des Mages en orient et en occident durant les premiers siècles du Christianisme. *Archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires*, 3, 3 (2), pp. 249-299.

BISCONTI, F. (1989). Letteratura patristica e iconografia paleocristiana. In A. Quacquarelli, ed. *Complementi interdisciplinari di patrologia*, Roma: Città Nuova, pp. 367-412.

- CARILE, M. C. (2016). Production, promotion and reception: the visual culture of Ravenna between late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In: J. Herrin, J. Nelson, eds., *Ravenna, Its Role in Earlier Medieval Change and Exchange*. London: University of London, pp. 53-85.
- CARILE, M.C. (2020), Ivory Production: Commerce, Culture and Power. In: S. Cosentino, ed. *Ravenna and the Traditions of Late Antique and Early Byzantine Craftsmanship: Labour, Culture, and the Economy* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 115-152.
- CHIESI, B. (2022), *Il Dittico delle cinque parti. I restauri del Duomo di Milano*. Milano: Reverenda Fabbrica del Duomo.
- CIAMPINI, G.G. (1690). *Vetera monimenta, in quibus praecipue musiva opera sacrarum (...)* Pars prima, Roma.
- DAVID, M. V. (2015), *Corrado Ricci and his Tavole storiche dei mosaici di Ravenna (1930-1937)*. In: L. Kniffitz, E. Carbonara, eds. *Ravenna Musiva. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference*. Ravenna: Comune di Ravenna, pp. 254-261.
- DELIYANNIS, M. D. (2004), *Agnellus of Ravenna. The Book of the Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- (2010), *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- EMALDI, E. (2023). Un piccolo monile bizantino nel Museo Nazionale di Ravenna. *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 99 (2), pp. 265-273.
- ENTWISTLE, C. (2005), Some notes on two late-antique gold pendants in the British Museum. In: N. Crummy, ed. *Image, Craft and the Classical World. Essays in honour of Donald Bailey and Catherine Johns*. Montagnac: Mergoïl, pp. 267-276.
- LEPRI, N. (2010). Arte e potere: il mosaico dei magi in S. Apollinare Nuovo a Ravenna. *Porphyra*, 7 (14), pp. 4-21.
- HARLEY-MCGOWAN, F. (2020), Magi in Motion: the making of an image in early Christian Rome, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 63, pp. 188-216.
- KYRTATAS, D. J. (2004). The meaning of Christian epiphany. *Illinois Classical Studies*, 29, pp. 205-215.
- LABATT, A. M. (2015) The Transmission of Images in the Mediterranean. In: H. C. Evans, ed. *Age of Transition: Byzantine Culture in the Islamic World*. New York: Yale University Press, pp. 70-81.
- LIDOVA, M. (2021), Virgin Mary and the Adoration of the Magi. From Iconic Space to Icon in Space In: J. Bogdanović, ed. *Icon in Space. Advances in Hierotopy*. London-New York: Routledge.

- MAGUIRE, H. (1990). Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 44, pp. 215–224.
- MASSARA, F. P. (2000), s.v. *Magi*, in F. Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*. Città del Vaticano: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, pp. 238-240.
- MILINOVIC, D. (2000), L'origine de la scène de la nativité dans l'art paléochrétien (d'après les sarcophages d'Occident). Catalogue et interprétation. *Antiquité Tardive*, 7, pp. 299-329.
- MONTANARI, G. (2002), Culto e liturgia a Ravenna dal IV al IX secolo. In: G. Montanari, ed. *Ravenna: l'iconologia. Saggi di interpretazione culturale e religiosa dei cicli musivi*. Ravenna: Longo, pp. 87-138.
- NORTON, M. (2017). *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications Western Michigan University.
- RICCI, C. (1933), *Monumenti. Tavole storiche dei Mosaici di Ravenna. S. Apollinare nuovo; Cappella Arcivescovile (Oratorio di S. Andrea). Fascicolo IV-V.*, Roma: R. Istituto d'archeologia e storia dell'arte - Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.
- RANALDI A., NOVARA P. (2013). *Restauri dei monumenti paleocristiani e bizantini di Ravenna*. Ravenna, Comune di Ravenna.
- RIZZARDI, C. (1997) Sarcofago di Isacio (scheda 137). In: P. Angiolini Martinelli, ed.. *La basilica di San Vitale a Ravenna*, Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, pp. 177-178.
- RIZZARDI, C. (2011). *Il mosaico a Ravenna. Ideologia e arte*, Bologna: Ante Quem.
- RUTH, L. (1994). The early Roman Christmas gospel. Magi, manger, or verbum factum? *Studia Liturgica*, 24 (2), pp. 214-221.
- SENA CHIESA, G. (2020). La costruzione di una iconografia. Arredi e paesaggio nelle scene della natività fra IV e V secolo d.c. Qualche considerazione. In: F. Bisconti et alii, eds. *Legite, tenete, in corde habete. Miscellanea in onore di Giuseppe Cuscito. Antichità Altoadriatiche*, 92, pp. 401-422.
- VARALIS, Y. (2021) The Nativity of Christ on Late Antique Ivories. *After Constantine*, 1, pp. 55-67.
- VIKAN, G. (2003). *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Co.
- VOLBACH, W. F. (1977), *Avori di scuola ravennate nel V e VI secolo*. Ravenna: Longo.