

ST. MICHAEL'S BASILICA
The Sanctuary of Italic Kingdom
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The chronology of the monuments of our Middle Ages has gone defining and specifying in the last 150 years, after the Italian unification. In the absence of precise written documents, the students lost generic and imaginative hypothesis, ranging from the late Roman period (the time of Emperor Constantine and the recognition of the Christian religion) to the period of the Lombard kingdom, in favour of comparisons and successive approximations to a 'chronology of styles'. During the second half of the 19th century, the term "Romanesque art" was established, to distinguish a precise artistic taste and style in the long artistic phase of the Middle Ages, used to be loosely defined as "Gothic art" or sometimes "Byzantine". In Italy, however, sometimes we tend to overlook or minimize the social and cultural flows that connected the Benedictine reform of Cluny and the great currents of the German imperial power with the erection of the medieval monuments of our religious architecture. Not always the chronological sequence given in an inductive way, by comparisons between contemporary buildings, corresponds to a temporal succession acceptable and incontrovertible.

As for St. Michael's Basilica in Pavia, for example, it is rare to read considerations relating to the circumstances and the opportunity that drove the builders to engage in the creation of a real 'machine for kings' coronations', with all the complex symbolism of sculptures that we found today, perfectly adhering to the walls and pillars of the medieval building, although damaged by time and the elements and by the men.

THE ITALIC KINGDOM

Odoacer, King of the Heruli, in 476 proclaimed himself a Roman patrician, but was Theodoric who took for himself the charge of the king of Italy, from the Palace of Ravenna, in the name of the Eastern Roman Emperor (498-500). King not only of the Ostrogoths, therefore, but of Italy. On this the speculation poured of Ennodius bishop, referring to the powers of the Pope and the Emperor. Ennodius (474-521) was a supporter of the royal power of Theodoric, first king of Italy, and the absolute, undeniable power, held by the Emperor or the Pope, could not therefore, in his view, be judged by none of their subordinates.

The accession of the king and his neighbours to Christianity began to become sensitive at the court of Theodoric, at the time of the bishops Epiphanius and Ennodius and of Boethius. The court of the Goths - like after the Lombard one - had more sympathy for the Arian belief than for the Orthodox Church of Rome. The Aryan cathedral became important because it was - at the same time - the chapel of the Royal Palace.

It was an Aryan custom to call the bishop 'papas' (a Greek-Byzantine word), and this would indicate as 'Papia' the city that was still called Ticinum; but the bishop was also called "St. Sir," or "Holy Lord". It was a title that belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ and by transposition it was attributed to the head of his Church. So the name of San Siro did not state a specific historical figure, but rather a title, given in succession to all of the ancient bishops of the city. Not one, but several would have therefore been "St. Siri" in the history of the local Church.

The Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Burgundians, converted to Arianism and the Orthodox Church pledged in a tough fight against the continued rise of Arian bishops, despite repeated condemnations of councils. Heretical ideas were banned by the Church of Rome in 381, during the Council of Constantinople. Just when they think the Aryan

had elsewhere extinct, persecuted as heresy after the Council of Nicaea, in Pavia, capital of the Lombard kingdom, it flourished in the mid 7th century, in particular by the will of the king Grimoald, the same who established the cult of St. Michael.

Paulus Diaconus wrote (IV, 42) that in 7th century each of the two cults, Arian and Orthodox, had its own cathedral, in Pavia and other cities of the Lombard kingdom. No official document points out, however, in which saints the Arian cathedral was consecrated during its glory. The last members of the Arian clergy in Pavia were purged at the end of the 8th century, after the defeat of King Desiderius by Charlemagne.

After the defeat of the Arian heresy it was deemed appropriate to erase that chapter of history, with the systematic oblivion of an age that they wanted to forget and with the attribution of the title of Eusebius to the ancient Arian cathedral, in sign of contempt for the defeated Arians. Actually, bishops Ambrose of Milan and Eusebius of Vercelli had been the main opponents of the heresy of Arius. The change of dedication in the ancient Arian cathedral sanctioned all the weight of their defeat. Not only the Church of Pavia did his best to destroy the long chapter of 'relapsed' Arianism, which had marked it and - however - had guaranteed full autonomy of the local bishops. Anyway they wanted to erase from history the same memory of the facts, to reduce the importance the vanquished had in the civil and religious life of the city, but they aspired anyhow to maintain the acquired privileges. They wanted to attribute the importance of the bishops of Pavia to a hypothetical, invented birthright by the Church of Pavia with respect to the Chair of the Bishop of Milan, where St. Ambrose much had worked to combat and suppress the Arian heresy. Particularly after the Council of Trent, local historians undertook to rebuild their virginity intact and amorphous, instead of the fought and lively history of the city that had been the seat of the kingdom.

In addition, the well-established popular tradition that the bishop was called "San Sir" (holy lord) could not be erased with a sponge. They invented a mythical character, who was at the origin of the whole tradition: a man named Syrus, who in reality never existed. They also invented a "brand" pedigree and described him as the boy who had brought to Christ the bread and the fish of miracle. They invented other successors, adopting names from other stories or - better - by other myths. Names like Pompeus, Profuturus, Obedianus, Leontius and Urciscenus sound like fakes or fruit of fantasy.

In a passage of the Chronicle of Novalesa (Chronicon Novalicense), by no later than the mid 11th century, we read that King Desiderius, at the time of the siege by the Franks, used to go in the middle of the night to pray "ad ecclesiam Sancti Michaelis vel Sancti Syri, çeu for ceteras alias" (III, 14). The news confirms a special relationship between the royal palace and a St. Michael's church, which was to be located relatively close to the royal throne and enjoyed priority, on a visit, than others. After 'ecclesia', in the singular, it is a double joint dedication to St. Michael and St. Syrus.

The dedication of the church to the patron St. Syrus immediately makes us think of the cathedral of Pavia. The history of the cathedrals of Pavia is particularly complex, in fact, it may well define indecipherable, until the moment when, toward the 8th century, they built the twin churches of St. Stephen and St. Mary 'del Popolo', on the site of the ancient temple of Cybele. An important clue may, however, help us in trying to reconstruct the "missing link".

Recall that, according to Spelta (1597, p. 109), then quoted by Father Romualdus (1699), in Saint Michael's church existed a "mound" (cenotaph) dedicated to Theodoric. Spelta indeed came to argue that Theodoric was buried in St. Michael's.

The presence of a similar "tomb", with the statues of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and his wife, Beatrice, in the nave of St. Stephen's Cathedral, would suggest that in St. Stephen, and not in St. Michael, the young emperor had received the crown of king of Italy. Especially since at the time, being the Royal Palace destroyed, the emperor was staying at the monks of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro, well away from St. Michael. Moreover,

there is the well known predilection of Frederick Barbarossa to the places dedicated to St. Stephen. However, on the basis of tradition and the testimony of Otto of Freising (II, 21), generally they continue to believe that the Barbarossa was crowned in St. Michael.

We mention the phrases of Father Romualdus, for St. Stephen's cathedral: "Very much worked to its construction the same King Frederick, who has his tomb here, as is evident from what the Bishop wrote to the College of Merchants, in 1400, allowing them to build a chapel here, with the following conditions written into the Instrument of concession: "You cannot demolish the graves and tombs of the illustrious ancient King Frederick, who built most of this church, and His illustrious wife". But the Council of Trent came. At the end of the 16th century, they removed from the churches all the monuments of this kind.

WHY ST. MICHAEL "THE MAJOR"?

It must be recalled that a few dozen meters from the façade of St. Michael's there was the church-mausoleum commissioned for himself from the Lombard king Grimoald, who introduced the cult of the Archangel at the Lombard army, after the victory against the Byzantines on Mount Gargano, when he was Duke of Benevento (650). Since Grimoald is known as a restorer of the Aryan cult, it is not difficult to read at the dedication to St. Ambrose, with which the church was known, an exaugural will, similar to the one that named in St. Eusebius the ancient Arian cathedral. We might therefore think that Grimoald has devoted just to St. Michael the church he founded. A good reason to call 'Mayor' another church, consecrated to St. Michael, larger of the first and almost adjacent to it.

The Lombard kings were "Lombard kings of Italy" until the final conversion to Catholic orthodoxy. The Pope of Rome had not a great fear for an Aryan kingdom with its headquarters in Pavia, but he began instead to have a great fear by a Catholic king settled in Pavia, who wanted to be king of Italy, who founded churches and monasteries and accumulated relics of saints to claim also the religious centrality of the city. This situation is said with Liutprand, but in particular it was his successor, Aistulf-Astolfo, which tended to unify the Italian territory (751).

Aistulf enacted new laws, turned into laws the old edicts, reorganized the relationship between Lombard population and Romanesque population; finally he drove the Byzantines from Italy, occupied the royal palace in Ravenna (who represented the power of the Emperor of the East) and then turned to the emperor of Byzantium, Constantine V, to administer the Italian territory with a direct delegation of the imperial power. He strengthened the military draft, opening widely the ranks to soldiers and officers of Romanesque origin, but by doing so he ended up weakening the inner cohesion of the army.

After noting the success of Liutprand, with the 'rescue' in Sardinia of the body of St. Augustine, Aistulf unleashed himself to hunt for relics, to accumulate them in his capital, with a view to strengthening it in the Catholic faith and to the same time to consolidate the sacred tradition of Pavia "city of the Pope."

So he looked for accrediting himself as "Christian King" and to assert the final supremacy (religious and royal) of the seat of Pavia, compared to Rome and Ravenna, who counted by centuries an unquestioned tradition of imperial headquarters.

Aistulf unearthed bones of (real or imagined) martyrs from all the catacombs of the suburbs of Rome, to bring them to Pavia and place in the Church of All Saints, which he founded in 753, at which established as his own royal mausoleum.

This church was later dedicated to St. Marinus because, among other, it welcomed the relics of Marinus and Leo, the patrons of Mount Titano.

The Lombard king brought to Pavia also the relics of Eleucadius, third bishop of Ravenna, who represented the eastern (Greek) empire, and that he joined with the relics

of Ennodius (transferring these from St. Victor's, where the bishop was buried in origin) to 'reunify' symbolically the two major regions of the imperial power.

Father Romualdus (1699) tells about St. Eleucadius: "Bishop of Ravenna and Confessor. Nationality Greek, Platonic philosopher, converted to the faith by Apollinaris, after he had bitterly fought, later defended well with words and writings, under the sign of the dove. Assumed to the episcopal ministry ended his work with admirable zeal. His body was brought to Pavia from Ravenna, by willings of Constantine the Great".

He wasn't Constantine the Great, but Constantine V of Byzantium!



SCULPTURAL GROUPS

The complex and detailed set of sculptures of St. Michael's is the subject of organic interpretation difficulties, caused:

- by damage from the outside weather and the erosion of the sandstone;
- by damage due to renovations, destructions and 'integrative' restorations, leading to misunderstandings;
- finally, and above all, by the general lack of interest of academic scholars for the complex symbolic 'corpus' depicted in the capitals, on the shelves, in the decorated bands outside of the basilica.

Despite all this, it appears with some evidence the link between these representations and sculptural series with the themes of royalty and death (cf. ARECCHI, 2014).

It also appears clearly the close matching of the groups of figures carved on the capitals, in the shelves and in the front with the current architectural structure, in its final construction (putting aside, for the moment, the questions raised about the shells and tops of the walls).

Saint Michael's Basilica appears as a unique piece, and as a sacred building of very significant importance, which it did not derive either from being an Abbey, nor from being a cathedral, but from being the place of coronation and consecration for the Italian kings.

We must therefore ask ourselves the hard question: who, when and by what means might have thought to fund and implement such a unique building, which had no equal in the whole of western Christianity - or at least in the territory of the Italic - and which certainly required the mobilization of significant resources: design conception, artistic material and financial resources?

The answer to this question leads us by successive approximations to the rise of the Italic Kingdom (887-1024 AD), to the Italian kingdom of the Saxon emperors, which was the heyday, under the supervision of his wife Adelaide of Burgundy (931-999), who was a great friend and sponsor of the Benedictine Order of Cluny and its reformer St. Maieul (910-994), and in particular to the years of the reign of Otto I, husband of the same Adelaide (951-973).

The city of Pavia was subjected to severe destruction in 924, because of the looting and fires set by the Hungarians of voivode Salard (Liutprand in MGH, IV, 2). The reporter Flodoard (Frodoard) then spoke of the destruction of some 43 religious buildings and said that in Pavia only two hundred men survived the massacre (MGH, III, 924 years; DUCHESNE, II, 504). Two years later, in fact, in 926, Hugh of Provence was crowned king in the Basilica of St. Ambrose in Milan (MURATORI). Muratori (950) and the chronicler of Novalesa (V, 4), reflect that in 950 Berenguer I and his son Adalbert were crowned in Pavia, in the Basilica of St. Michael the Major.

Otto I the Great came to Italy in 951, September 23 defeated his rival Berengar at Pavia and then, in Pavia, was crowned King of Italy (some argue that a coronation ceremony had never been) and before Christmas he married to his second wife, Adelaide. However, soon he had to return to Germany. He came the second time in Italy with his wife, in 962, to be crowned emperor in Rome and created the "Holy Roman German Empire". The golden period for the construction of St. Michael's Basilica, as the site of coronation for the Saxon Kings, has so to be identified in the years between the imperial coronation in Rome and the death of Otto I (962-973).

His son, Otto II, would prefer Rome as the seat of his kingdom (973-983).

Finally the grandson Otto III made Pavia flourish as the capital of the Italian Kingdom (984-1002), in the early years under the action of protecting grandmother Adelaide. Under the reign of Otto III, two councils of bishops were held in Pavia, in 997 and in 998.

We are approaching the end: 15 May 1004, when the coronation of the successor Henry II happened, the inhabitants of Pavia unleashed a revolt with fire extended to the royal quarters and most of the city (v. MURATORI, year 1004).

We know that in the years of the Ottonian Kingdom the architecture of the renovated Benedictine order was carried to Pavia with a large construction program: the founding of St. Mary's Monastery (founded by St. Maieul and after dedicated to his name), the reconstruction of St. Peter's in Golden Sky (in Ciel d'Oro), already built by the Lombard king Liutprand, and the new construction of the Abbey of the Holy Savior, built in 971 by Adelaide.

All these considerations help to identify the date of the groups of symbolic sculptures and then the architecture of St. Michael's in that same period. Especially since the same considerations lead to exclude an integral reconstruction of the stone basilica (note: it is the only church in Pavia built in the medieval period with the almost exclusive use of stone, at least externally) in another historical period, even less in the 12th century, in which there is no sign of great wealth, available for a building to be used as a 'machine for kings' coronations', which didn't yet take place, neither in Pavia or elsewhere. Only the coronation of Frederick Barbarossa was held again in Pavia in 1155, as evidenced by Otto of Freising (II, 21), but there is no reason to believe that it has had sufficient notice to justify the erection of the basilica in thirty years earlier, as usually we are driven to think from the current interpretations, undisputed and shared by current texts.

The main monuments of the flourishing of the Saxon Ottonian architecture are as follows:

Cluny Abbey II - 948-981

Cathedral of Saints Catherine and Maurice, Magdeburg - 955 (rebuilt in 13th century, it holds the tomb of Otto I)

St. Ciriac's at Gemrode - 960-965

St. Michael's, Hildesheim - 1010-1033

St. Mary's in Capitol, Cologne - 1065

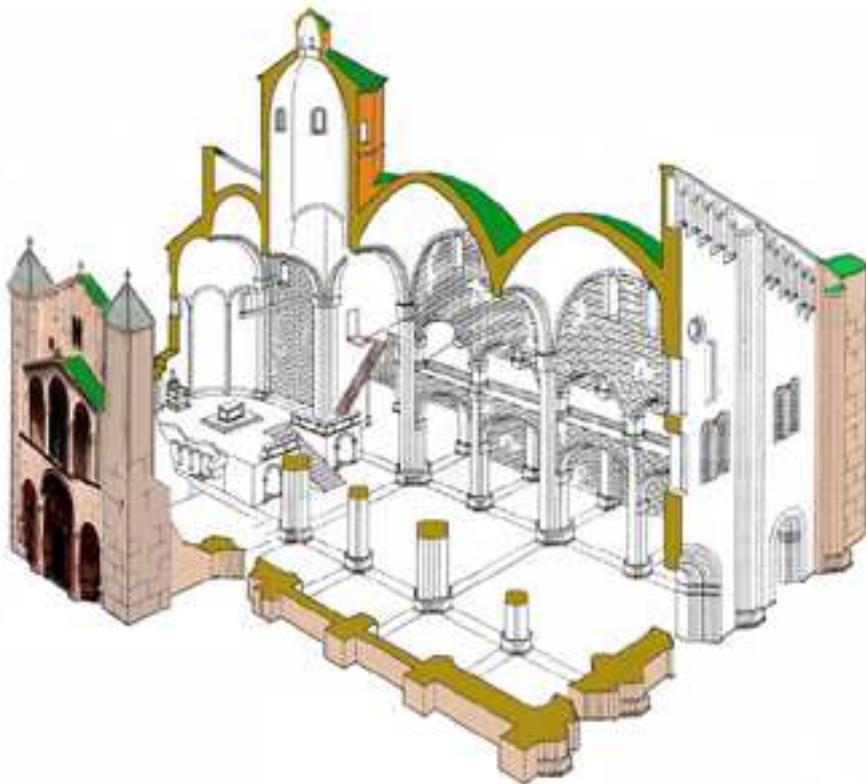
Speyer Cathedral - 1024-1061

Even the taste of the sculptures of St. Michael's does not match any of the styles that sculpture that currently dominated, in 1100 and later, in Italy along the pilgrimage routes. It is a unique style, which linked these sculptures only with the surviving ones of contemporary St. John 'in Borgo'. So we should compare them with the tastes and the parameters of art during the tenth century.

The two massive buttresses holding the northern front of the body cross, used mostly for coronations, are clear references to the towers of the façade architecture Cluny and Saxon. Moreover, it seems increasingly probable that the two parts north and south of this cross body had an upper wooden floor, set on wooden beams, providing real women galleries for the royal court (ARECCHI, 2014).

As for the roofs, the naves of Cluny II and of Ottonian architecture were generally covered with wooden structures and perhaps we could suggest the same solution for the original coverage of St. Michael's, in a manner similar to those of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello (large transversal arches, supported by the pillars of the nave). We may also assume a date of origin for the great vaults of the cross arm. We believe, however, that the aisles were covered in wood and all the galleries were established on these wooden flooring, as well as their continuations on the bodies north and south (no longer existing), improperly called 'transept'.

In any case, for the two great 'domes' that covered the nave, before the reconstruction of the 15th century, it must be said that the structural pressures were not resolved by a correct dimensioning of the supports, so that they had to cause landslides and collapses. A 'primitive' technique and certainly less evolved than the great vaults that covered, at half 11th century, for example, the Cluny Abbey of St. Philibert in Tournus (Burgundy).



DESTRUCTIVE EVENTS

The major disruptive events occurred in the period that interests us were:

A. In 1004, the fire set by citizen of Pavia to the districts surrounding the Royal Palace, which could damage much of the combustible elements in the architecture of the temple;

B. in 1024, the final destruction of the Royal Palace, by popular riots, resulting in possible damage to other buildings close of the Palace;

C. January 3, 1117, the much terrible earthquake that struck the Po Valley, causing an estimated 30,000 deaths and destroying much of the Romanesque architecture that existed in cities such as Verona, Padua, Piacenza and Cremona.

The first of these events may well have led to the re-roofing of St. Michael's, if its roof was wooden, as occurs in most of Ottonian. Perhaps in such a circumstance they built the two great domes covering the nave, undergoing collapses after the mid 15th century. A reconstruction of that date would fit well with the limited technical ability explicated in these domes, today no longer existing, which had to be made so as to exclude a wooden roof, for the avoidance of further risk of fire; rather thick and chunky, these domes had a feature that increased the horizontal pressure on the walls.

The second, i.e. the final destruction of the Palace, could not have caused serious damage to St. Michael's, which didn't stand closely adjacent to the palatial. Traces remain however in the two fragments of the royal palace of Theodoric which were preserved and embedded in the walls of the apse of St. Michael's.

We must now focus on the event of the 1117 earthquake that wreaked so much damage in Verona and the cities of Emilia.

On January 3rd, 1117 the northern Italy was hit by a violent earthquake, intensity higher than 7 on the Mercalli scale. The epicenter of the first quake was in the city of Verona. Verona was severely damaged: the outside of the Arena fell, leaving a portion of the monument that gave the impressive current form. Almost all the churches and monasteries of the early Middle Age were destroyed or seriously damaged. The quake was felt across northern Italy, in Pisa, and even in Switzerland. It also badly hit the area between Lake Garda and Padua, and that between Piacenza and the Apennines and the area of Pisa. From documents of the time it would seem that the quake was also felt in the monasteries of Monte Cassino and Reims in France.

The damages, as well as in Verona, were serious in the entire region of Emilia. The sources became troubled and dirty, many trees were uprooted and the earth opened up in many places; water from the Po river was seen to rise up and then fall back down. The banks of the Adige and the Po rivers were destroyed; after the earthquake, terrible floods occurred; in the lagoon of Venice there was an eruption of sulphurous water. There have been at least 30,000 deaths. The first tremors were followed by a swarm of more than 40 days.

The epicenter of the following earthquakes moved to Lombardy, where strong performances took place throughout 1117: January 12th, June 4th, July 1st, October 1st and December 30th.

According to some authors the main epicenters in the Po Valley were two, one at Verona and the other at Cremona. The latter was to cause the collapse of the cathedral workshop in Cremona and damages in the cities of Emilia.

The episode of the quake is referred in the chronicle of Landulf Junior, recalling that the Synod meetings were held outdoors. However, no written record or memory of damage concerns Pavia. We are then led to believe that the earthquake damages, in the city of Pavia, were not so consistent and terrible as in recent years it has come to assume. Pavia was far from the epicenters of the various earthquakes, and indeed the chroniclers

do not mention any damage to the architecture of the city, as it happened in Verona and in Emilia. The myth of the integral destruction of the city, its monuments and masonry, is only a recent echo, gathered by historians of the last century, while the geological studies show that the area of Pavia remained relatively outside of the center of earthquakes.

We think, therefore, we can abandon the simplistic assumption that all Romanesque art in Pavia should assume a date next year 1117 and that the city has made to rebuild, in a few decades, all its churches, at a time where the urban economy was not particularly flourishing. The heyday of the Kingdom of Italy was definitely set and - in particular - lacked any stimulus, cultural, economic and political, to build a temple intended for crowning the kings, no more existing. It would not be enough the episode of the passage from Pavia of Frederick Barbarossa to revive a tradition that, after two centuries splendor, had set in May 1004, with the revolt provoked by the last coronation of Henry II.

So what is the most logical assumption? A complex building as St. Michael's, challenging because it was all covered with stone carved by groups of sculptors, who elaborated narrative cycles and symbolic themes related to the sanctity of the Kingdom in the name of a complex symbolism, entirely foreign to the preaching popular then developed by the monastic orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites), was right to be born only during the full bloom of the Kingdom of Italy, at the time of the empire Saxon, not before nor after.

The reliefs (formerly coloured) of this "machine for coronations" are stylistically comparable with no one of the sculptural currents acting along the Italian peninsula after the year one thousand, while we can begin to investigate the influence that some typological solutions adopted in St. Michael may have had on architecture Saxon era, although little evidence of that era has reached us.

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