

# The Relationship between Ritual and Space at the Neonian Baptistery of Ravenna<sup>1</sup>

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The rite of baptism, as it was practiced in the early Christian Church as well as in modern denominations, is a public denouncement of previously erroneous ways along with assimilation into the Christian faith and community. The roots of this ritual date back to the early days of Christianity and ritualistic Jewish initiation washing. John the Baptist appears to have been performing a similar Jewish ritual that “was to invite penitent Jews to put themselves in the position of proselytes for whom a ritual bath was the appropriate symbol of the putting-away of past iniquity.”<sup>2</sup> The apostle Mark furthers the connection between the Jewish ritual and the Christian ritual as a wiping of the slate of transgression by the description of John the Baptist as “preaching a

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written under the tutelage of Dr. Carr and Dr. Babcock, University Distinguished Professors at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. A preliminary form of this research was presented at *Inner Sanctums, Outer Spaces*, the Graduate Colloquium of the University of Alberta hosted by the Medieval and Early Modern Institute. The comments received were instrumental to the development of this project. The most comprehensive collection of reproductions of the Neonian baptistery, as well as comparison images of contemporary structures, can be found in Spiro Kostof's *The Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). Although the Neonian baptistery is often included in surveys of early Christian architecture, Kostof's work remains the most comprehensive source on this monument. The relationship between the structure and the ritual was first begun in Annabel Jan Wharton's "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna" *The Art Bulletin* 69 n. 3 (Sept., 1987): 358-75. However, as Wharton focuses primarily on the mosaic in the cupola, especially as it relates to the *Arian Baptistery* in the same city, a more thorough analysis of the decorative program is needed.

<sup>2</sup> Edward R. Hardy, "Jewish and Christian Baptism: Some Notes and Queries," *A Tribute to Arthur Voobus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Chicago: The Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), 310.

baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>3</sup> The Baptism of Christ, however, deepened the meaning of this rite for the Christian community. The description of the event by Matthew emphasizes the awe-inspiring aspects of the rite:

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[T]hen Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. . . And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he was the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo a voice from heaven, saying, “this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>4</sup>

Quickly, the early Church appropriated the Jewish ritualistic bath as the initiation rite by which one becomes a full-fledged member of the Christian community. The apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost is believed to have cried to the multitude “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>5</sup>

By the fourth and fifth centuries, the ritual of Baptism had evolved into a complex liturgical performance orchestrated by the bishop to produce a sense of wonder in addition to a personally emotional reaction to the rite by the neophyte. Contemporary knowledge of post-Constantinian baptismal liturgy is based on the writing of four church fathers: St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and St. Ambrose of Milan. The combined writings of these men provide modern scholars with

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:4. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical text is taken from the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup> Matt 3:13-17.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:38.

a fairly complete view of baptismal liturgies. As all four writers also inhabited different parts of the Christian world, their writings also express regional variations. For example, the act of anointing as part of the baptismal ritual, as well as the locus of the transference of the Holy Spirit, was anything but universal.<sup>6</sup> However, even with these differences, the basic nature of the rite as a proclamation of one's allegiance as a Christian and the gateway to participation in the sacraments was common throughout the Christian world. | 3

One of the primary facets of baptismal rituals in the fourth century was the condensation of many temporal schemata. The first facet, and most obvious, is the participation in the baptismal act within a person's lifetime. Even though the baptism of children has a long tradition going back into antiquity, the writings that exist suggest that most people waited until they were well into their adult years before choosing to become a neophyte.<sup>7</sup> The need to postpone baptism was due to the uncertainty of the ability of the church to forgive sin after baptism. Saint Augustine describes how as a boy, he became ill and requested the rite of baptism. However, his mother requested that his "cleansing was deferred, because the defilements of sin would, after that washing, bring greater and more perilous guilt," with the exception that if he appeared close to death, she would allow the rite.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the differences in fourth and fifth century baptismal rites, see George Kretschmar, "Recent Research on Christian Initiation" *Studia Liturgica* 12 (1977): 87-106, Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), specifically chapter 7 "Christian Initiation: A Study in Diversity."

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the baptism of children see Joachim Jeremias *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>8</sup> *The Confessions* i.XI.17 *The Confessions of St. Augustine* E. B. Pusey, trans. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2003) 11-12.

4 | In addition to the personal aspects of temporal organization, the rite of baptism also intersects liturgical time. By the fourth century, Easter was the accepted time for baptism.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of Lent, those interested in being baptized were called to petition the bishop for their participation in the ceremony. If accepted, the catechumen underwent intense training. The pilgrim Egeria describes the Lenten process in Jerusalem:

[T]hroughout the forty days on which there is fasting, for those who are preparing for baptism to be exorcised by the clergy early in the morning, as soon as the dismissal from the morning service has been given at the Anastasis. Immediately a throne is placed for the bishop in the major church, the Martyrium. All those who are to be baptized, both men and women sit closely around the bishop, while the godmothers and godfathers stand there . . . beginning with Genesis he [referring to the bishop] goes through the whole of Scripture during these forty days, expounding first its literal meaning and then explaining the spiritual meaning . . . when the five weeks of instruction have been completed, they [referring to the catechumen] then receive the Creed. He explains the meaning of each of the phrases of the creed in the same way he explained Holy Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on this development see Paul F. Bradshaw, “*Diem baptismi sollemniorum*: Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity” *Εὐλόγημα: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft*, S. J. E. Carr, S. Parenti, and A. Theirmeyer, eds. (Rome: Analecta liturgica, 1993): 41-51.

<sup>10</sup> *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* George E. Gringras trans., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, eds. Johannes Quasten and Walter J. Burghardt No. 38. (New York: Newman Press, 1970), 123. For a discussion on the relationship between the description by Egeria and the writings of St. Cyril see Maxwell E. Johnson, “Reconciling Cyril and Egeria on the Catechetical Process in Fourth-

The bishop used this time with the catechumens to begin creating a sense of awe for the upcoming ritual as well as for the general mysteries of Christianity. For example, the catechumens were specifically forbidden to write down the Creed, they are instructed to memorize it. Saint Ambrose states “[T]he Symbol [creed] is not to be written down, seeing that you have yet to deliver it. But let no one write it down.”<sup>11</sup> By insisting that everyone memorize the creed, the bishop suggested that the mysteries of Christianity were a deeply guarded secret. In addition, throughout all of this intensive instruction, which increases in intensity during the Holy Week, little was actually revealed about the upcoming ritual. The bishop withheld this information intentionally until after the catechumen had experienced the rite. Saint Ambrose suggests that the sacraments must remain secret just as Abraham instructed Sarah in the making of cakes, described in Genesis 18:6.<sup>12</sup> He states: “[E]very mystery ought to be hidden and, so to speak, concealed in a faithful silence . . . lest by premature speech you should commit them half-baked, so to speak, to faithless of weak ears and the hearer be repelled and feel repugnance and loathing; if he tasted them more fully baked he would enjoy a taste of spiritual food.”<sup>13</sup>

On Easter Eve those prepared for baptism, along with their godparents, participated in the paschal vigil saying prayers, chanting, and working themselves into a religious fervor late into

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Century Jerusalem” *Essays in Early Eastern Initiation* Paul F. Bradshaw, ed. (Bramcote, England, Grove Books Limited, 1988): 18-30.

<sup>11</sup> St. Ambrose, *The ‘Explanatio Symboli ad initiandos’* R.H. Connolly, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 26.

<sup>12</sup> *De Cain*, i.35-37 (PL 14.334-5).

<sup>13</sup> Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: Baptismal Homilies of the Fourth Century* (Slough, England, St. Paul Publications, 1971), 53.

the night. This emotion culminated in the pre-dawn baptism that included, according to Saint John Chrysostom, disembodied voices calling in the dark for the renouncement of Satan as well as a minimum of three anointings.<sup>14</sup> These activities created a spectacle of wonder that emphasized the basic nature of the rite as a denouncement of Satan and affiliation with Christ.

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The basic nature of baptism, the denouncement and re-affiliation, causes the baptism to intersect time eternal. When one is baptized one is symbolically entombed with Christ and reborn in his resurrection; one is prepared for his second coming. The importance of this symbolism derives from baptism's danger in the fourth century of becoming merely an eschatological sacrament. Many, like Constantine, postponed baptism until they were upon their deathbed. However, by connecting the rite of baptism with admission to the sacraments, as well as providing the neophyte with the spirituality of the Christian life in this world, the early Church fathers were able to reconnect baptism with one's union to Christ.<sup>15</sup>

The changes that occurred within the liturgy of the fourth and fifth centuries, including the incorporation of the three temporal schemas, necessitated the creation of an elaborate space designed specifically to accommodate the rite. Therefore, the baptistery became a freestanding building with a rich visual program that supported the awe-inspiring ritual. The most beautifully preserved is the Orthodox, or Neonian, baptistery of

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<sup>14</sup> Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation: A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal Liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan* (Washington D. C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 21. For a discussion of the variations in anoints in late antique Christendom, see Gabriele Winkler, "Confirmation or Chrismation? A Study in Comparative Liturgy" *Worship* 58 (1984): 2-17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-23.

Ravenna. Bishop Ursus in the early fifth century began construction of the baptistery as a part of the cathedral complex. The bishop Neon, however, created the interior program in the mid-fifth century. The relationship between Neon and the baptistery can be found in Agnellus' "Life of Bishop Neon" where he states: "[H]e [Neon] beautifully decorated the Baptistery of the Basilica Ursiana. With mosaics and golden tesserae he fashioned the images and the names of the apostles around the vault, and covered the walls with various stones. His name is inscribed in mosaic."<sup>16</sup> By attempting to place the ritual within its designated location, specifically the Neonian baptistery, it is possible to explain the iconographic nuances of the structure and its visual program. Additionally, the details of the location provide additional evidence concerning how the ritual was practiced in late antiquity beyond its discussion in textual accounts.

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The exterior view of the Orthodox baptistery in Ravenna, the every-day view of the structure, is of simple brick. The ground plan is octagonal with four apses. The eight-sided structure may be based on a Milanese predecessor near the Basilica of Saint Thecla described by Saint Ambrose: "[A]n octagon with diagonal sides expanding in semi-circular niches, its remaining sides forming rectangular niches; a domed center room; and in the center, the eight-sided font."<sup>17</sup> The importance of the number eight in the construction of the baptistery, appearing twice in Saint Ambrose's description, may have been symbolic of the eternal eight day of Christ's resurrection, described by St. Augustine.<sup>18</sup> Ambrose

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<sup>16</sup> Kostof, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), 132.

<sup>18</sup> Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Janet Seligman, trans. vol I, (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society LTD, 1971), 127.

indicates this symbolism directly in relation to the St. Thecla baptistery stating “it was fitting that this edifice should be built according to the sacred number eight: for here there springs eternal salvation.”<sup>19</sup> Although the exterior appearance of the baptistery is relatively unimposing, it is probable that the significance of the structure, as well as the ritual orchestrated within it, was not lost on those walking by. Pope Leo the Great inscribed the following poem on the exterior of the Lateran baptistery:

A Race destined for Heaven is born here of holy seed  
 Which the Spirit begets from life-bearing waters.  
 Plunge, sinner, in the holy flood which will make you  
 clean,  
 For the wave which receives the old man will bring him  
 forth as new.  
 There is no difference between those reborn,  
 Whom one font, one Spirit, one Faith have made one.  
 The children Mother Church has conceived in her  
 virginal womb  
 By God’s Breath, she bears in this stream.  
 If you wish to be guiltless you must wash in this bath,  
 Whether Adam’s sin or your own presses you down.  
 This is the fount of life, which has cleansed the whole  
 world,  
 Flowing from its source, Christ’s Wound.  
 Only those reborn here may hope for the Kingdom of  
 Heaven:  
 The Blessed life is not for those born once.

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<sup>19</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Early Christian Art*, trans. Peter and Friedl Brown (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1967). 76.

Let no one fear the number or the nature of his sins:  
The man born in this stream will be holy.<sup>20</sup>

This poem appears to address the as of yet unconverted, urging them to participate in a ritual that will allow for the forgiveness of sin as well as the possibility of attaining life everlasting. The inscription also suggests the layering of time as suggested by the octagonal structure's reference to the eighth day through the repeated suggestion of rebirth. Although this inscription describes the importance of water, as well as the result of baptism, it does not make clear the nature of the actually practiced ritual.

In a similar manner, the exterior of the baptistery, specifically the Neonian baptistery, masks a rich interior visible only once in a lifetime. Some writers, such as Robert Milburn in *Early Christian Art and Architecture* suggest that the doors of the baptistery were left open so that passers-by could be reminded of their own baptism.<sup>21</sup> The basis of this theory does not appear to be textual, but visual. A sarcophagus now in the Vatican Museum appears to depict a baptistery with the doors thrown wide open. This depiction of a round building, topped with a dome with windows set high is similar to the Neonian Baptistery, as well as many other baptisteries. However, this image is also similar to mausoleum structures such as Santa Costanza in Rome. The connection between baptism and rebirth in life eternal allows for similarities in imagery between baptisteries and funeral contexts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> J. N. Hillgarth ed., *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750, the Conversion of Western Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Milburn, 206.

<sup>22</sup> The connection between baptism and death can be traced back to Paul's writings in Romans 6:1-11, Ephesians 4:5, and 1 Corinth 1: 17. For a discussion of these texts see Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1974), 5-6, and Adela Yarbro Collins "The Origins of Christian Baptism" *Studia Liturgica* 19 (1977): 87-106.

Therefore, it is possible that the image on the sarcophagus depicts either a baptistery or a mausoleum. In either case, it is possible that the opening of the doors may be influenced by the funerary context of the sarcophagus itself. The opening of the doors may relate to the revelations that will occur at the end of time. Furthermore, the choice to leave the baptismal doors open does not coincide with the *disciplina arcani* practiced by fourth century bishops. Saint Ambrose alludes to the probability that the doors of the baptistery remained closed with exception of the Easter rite. Saint Ambrose reminds the neophyte: “[T]he *Holy of holies* was unbarred to thee, thou didst enter the shrine of regeneration.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, if the doors of the baptistery were continually left open with the interior visual program available to the general public it would be unnecessary for Pope Leo the Great to place such a lengthy description directed to the general public on the exterior of the Lateran baptistery. Instead, it is much more likely that the internal visual program, much like the rite itself, was a closely guarded secret.

The internal walls of the Neonian baptistery are covered in blue and gold mosaics, relief sculpture that would have been painted, and liturgical furniture including an elaborate font. Although the original font at the Neonian baptistery is buried several meters beneath the floor, it is possible that the font resembled that found at the Lateran baptistery in Rome. A description of the Lateran font can be found in the *Liber Pontificalis*, which records Constantine’s dedication:

[I]n the center of the baptismal font there is a porphyry column topped by a golden basin where a candle is

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<sup>23</sup> *The Mysteries* II.5 *St. Ambrose On the Sacraments and On the Mysteries* trans. T. Thompson, (London: S.P.C.K., 1950), 124.

placed. It is of pure gold weighing 52 lb. And at Easter 299 lb. of incense is burned by a stick of compressed asbestos. On the edge of the font there is a gold lamb from which water flows and which weighs 30 lb. And on the right side of the lamb the Savior in purest silver, 5 ft. high weighing 170 lb., on the left of the lamb is Saint John the Baptist in silver, 5 ft. high, holding a scroll with the message, "Behold the Lamb of God-beholden-that which lifts off the sins of the world." It weighs 125 lb. There are seven silver stags from which water flows, each weighing 80 lb. And an incense burner of purest gold with 48 green gems weighing 15lb.<sup>24</sup>

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This description clearly suggests that the font was a luxurious and beautiful item intended to overwhelm the viewer. It is interesting to note that the description of the font, with the exception of the stags, does not include a description of its practical aspects. Archeological evidence suggests that the original pool of the Lateran baptistery was 8.5 meters in diameter, and was sunken 1 meter into the floor with probably three steps descending into the pool.<sup>25</sup> While the font at the Neonian baptistery was probably not as elaborate, this description and reconstruction give a general idea of the amount of importance, and thus the amount of money, invested in the font.

Although the font was the spiritual locus of the ritual, the walls of the Neonian baptistery reinforce the symbolic nature of the rite. The ground level of the baptistery contains four niches above which inscriptions provide textual relationships to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ross Holloway, *Constantine and Rome*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>25</sup> S. Anita Stauffer, *On Baptismal Fonts: Ancient and Modern*, (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1994), 19.

liturgy in addition to the imagery. The inscription above the north apse is from the twenty-third Psalm and reads: “[H]e maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.”<sup>26</sup> The reference to waters probably refers to the waters of baptism, but the overall context of the poem is in regards to Christ as the good shepherd. Even though the imagery of the Neonian baptistery does not explicitly depict the good shepherd, this text is reminiscent of the image found at Dura Europa. To the east, the inscription is from the Gospel of John: “he [Christ] riseth from supper and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet.”<sup>27</sup> This inscription has a complex set of meanings. The ritual of the washing of feet is described by Saint Ambrose as being a part of the baptismal ritual in Milan and it is probable that a similar ritual occurred in Ravenna.<sup>28</sup> Also, the text presents the washing of feet in relation to the Last Supper. As the initiates had just gone through many weeks of intensive biblical study, it is likely that those who could read would recognize the quote for its Eucharistic relationship, especially as the rite of baptism was immediately followed by the neophyte’s first communion. Thirdly, the inscription includes the reference to Christ laying aside his garments; just as he is depicted in the cupola. To the South, or more truly to the southeast, reads an inscription from the Thirty-second Psalm “blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the

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<sup>26</sup> “IN LOCUM PASCUAE IBI ME CONLOCAVIT SUPER AQUA REFECTIONIS EDOCAVIT ME” translated by Kostof, 61.

<sup>27</sup> “UBI DEPOSITIS HIS VESTIMENTA SUA ET MISIT AQUAM IN PELVEM ET LABIT PEDES DISCIPULORUM SUORUM” translated by Kostof, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Riley, 353.

Lord imputeth not iniquity.”<sup>29</sup> This inscription relates quite explicitly to baptism’s ability to remove sin. The fourth inscription above the remaining niche is a paraphrase from Matthew “and when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus . . . and immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him . . . and when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased.”<sup>30</sup> The story of Peter walking on the water can be seen as related to baptism through Christ’s protection of Peter. In addition, the wind of the storm can be read as symbolic of the blowing of breath upon the catechumen that occurred in the many exorcisms preceding the baptismal rite.

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The orientation of these inscriptions can deepen the understanding of the baptismal rite through an understanding of the movement of the catechumen. The initiate entered through a door on the south side of the building and was turned to the west in order to proclaim their renunciation of Satan.<sup>31</sup> This orientation emphasizes the inscription describing Peter’s walk on the water to the left of true west, as well as the excerpt from the Twenty-third Psalm just to the right. The combination of these two inscriptions emphasizes Christ as the protector. The initiate would then turn to the east in order to proclaim their devotion to Christ. From this position, the inscription describing the washing of feet would be in front, slightly to the left, while the inscription from the Thirty-second Psalm would be slightly to the right. The combination of these two inscriptions emphasizes the washing

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<sup>29</sup> “BEATIQUORUM REMISSAE SUNT INIQUITATES ET QUORUM TECTA SUNT PECCATA BEATUS VIR CUI NON IMPUTAVIT DOMINUS” translated by Kostof, 59.

<sup>30</sup> “HIS AMBULAS SUPER MARE PETRO MERGENTI MANUM CAPIT ET IUBENTE DOMNO VENTUS CESSAVIT” translated by Kostof, 59.

<sup>31</sup> Annabel JaneWharton, “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: the Neonian baptistery in Ravenna,” *Art Bulletin* v. 69 n. 3 (September 1987): 362.

away of the old life. The suggestion of the washing of feet implies the physical disjoint with the catechumen's previous lifestyle even as the description of the washing away of sin prepares the initiate for spiritual cleansing.

14 | Saint Ambrose is particularly clear as to the movement of the catechumen stating "thou didst enter, therefore, to look upon thine adversary, whom thou mayest suppose that thou shouldst renounce to his face; thou dost turn to the east, [f]or he who renounces the devil, turns to Christ, looks at him with direct gaze."<sup>32</sup> However, the organization of the Neonian inscriptions would be better suited to the movement of the ritual if the inscriptions invoking the cleansing of sin were viewed while denouncing Satan, leaving those invoking Christ as the protector for viewing while stating one's affiliation with Christ. The rite, as described by Saint Ambrose, further complicates the issue of orientation with respect to the inscriptions. Saint Ambrose maintains that the font was only made visible after the rite of renunciation and affiliation.<sup>33</sup> Due to the structure of the Neonian baptistery, it is impossible for the initiate to move about as previously supposed without seeing the font. The spatial organization of the Neonian baptistery is similar to that found in the excavations of the baptistery of Milan. Like the Neonian baptistery, the baptistery at Saint Thecla is a one-roomed structure surrounding a central font. In order for the initiate to move about the structure without seeing the font there must have been some sort of internal division, such as a curtain. Such a division of space would impede the initiate's ability to see the inscriptions, as well as the totality of the entire visual program, all at one time. Another

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<sup>32</sup> *The Mysteries* II.7, Thomson, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Riley, 152.

possibility is that the renunciation of Satan and pledge to Christ occurred outside of the baptistery. In either situation, whether a curtain was hung or the rites that emphasize movement occurred outside of the baptistery, the choice of inscriptions emphasizes the important part of the ritual as a removal of old ways paired with a new life in Christ.

The choice of inscriptions, two from the Book of Psalms paired with two scenes from the life of Christ, emphasize time past as well as aspects of liturgical time in the ritual. The compression of time is heightened by the greater mosaic program of which the inscriptions are but a part. The area surrounding the inscriptions is decorated with acanthus vines; prophets stand on the arch spandrels, holding scrolls and books in their left hands. The men are placed against a gold ovular background while the golden foliage swirls around in a deep blue background. The men are depicted frontally with white tunic, white palladium, and black sandals holding their right hand in a gesture of speech. Oddly, the exact identities of the men are undeterminable; they are simply a group of learned men. Interestingly, the depiction of golden foliage has a complex history that deepens the temporal symbolism. Golden vine motifs in Hagia Sophia, St. Polyeuktos, and the Great Mosque of Damascus, contain textual Solomonic references.<sup>34</sup> The connection between golden foliage and the temple of Solomon suggests the historical facet of time in addition to the paradisiacal associations. An additional aspect to the golden foliage, through the association with Solomon, is regal in implication. Therefore the inclusion of golden foliage not only compresses aspects of time, as

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<sup>34</sup> Finbarr Barry Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus, Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*, (Boston: Brill, 2001), 101.

well as visions of paradise, but also the importance of Ravenna as a court city.

16 | This group of unidentifiable philosophers extends to include the figures in the second region of the baptistery, composed predominately of sculptural decoration. Although modern images of the Neonian baptistery suggest that the sculpted region serves as a division between the two mosaic programs, this area of the visual program would have been painted to match the mosaics. The underlying marble is of varying colors suggesting that the marble was not meant to be seen. The marble was then plastered in the same manner as contemporary paintings.<sup>35</sup> Much like the lower mosaics, the second area is dominated by its architectural structure, within which are placed a second group of men. They are depicted with wind-blown tunics, palladia, and sandals. They carry either a scroll or a book, without any apparent pattern to one or the other.

Above the sculpted men, located directly under the arch, are twelve pairs of heraldic animals, consisting of goats, doves, deer, seahorses, eagles, lions, sheep, roebucks, peacocks, hares, cocks, and pheasants as well as four figural images. The biblical scenes are clustered on the north end of the building opposite the door; therefore, the scenes would be immediately visible upon entering the baptistery. Two scenes, one depicting Daniel in the lion's den and the other the *traditio legis* are located above the inscription from the twenty-third Psalm. Two additional scenes of Christ trampling the lion and adder along with a scene of Jonah placed between two whales are placed above the adjacent niche. The images of Jonah and Daniel are standard images of redemption;

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<sup>35</sup> Kostof, p. 99

they appear consistently in early Christian funerary contexts.<sup>36</sup> The inclusion of these scenes in the Neonian baptistery further links the ceremony of baptism with the themes of death and resurrection. The depiction of Christ giving the law to Saint Peter introduces the importance of the bishop in the ceremony as the sole proprietor of the sacrament. Therefore, the image also emphasizes the role of the bishop in the greater Christian community of which the initiate will soon be a full-fledged member. The fourth image, that of Christ crushing the lion and the adder is an unusual theme, though it does appear in mosaic at the Archiepiscopal Chapel in Ravenna from approximately 500. Both images depict Christ dressed in armor and cape, carrying a cross as well as an open book. Although the composition of Christ in the Neonian baptistery is similar, the position of the animals has been flipped so that the adder is below Christ's left foot and the lion is below the right, whereas in the Archiepiscopal Chapel the lion is below Christ's left foot and the adder the right. The composition from the Archiepiscopal chapel appears later on an Ivory Carolingian relief from the early ninth century. This image of Christ triumphant appears to be a combination of Psalm 91:13, "you will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot"<sup>37</sup> with the tenth chapter of Luke "behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you."<sup>38</sup> These passages describe the ability of Christ to

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<sup>36</sup> For examples of Noah and Daniel in a funerary context, see the *Story of Johan Sarcophagus* in the Lateran Museum, Rome, and the *Sarcophagus of Julius Bassus*, in the Grottoes of St. Peter, Vatican City. Both works appear in Snyder, figures 8 and 13 respectively.

<sup>37</sup> Psalms 91:13

<sup>38</sup> Luke 10:19

overcome the devil in the form of lions, snakes, and scorpions. Because the source of Christ's power is his death and resurrection, the initiate receives the power of Christ through baptism.

18 | The organization of all four narrative scenes develops the compression of time as it applies to the rite of baptism. The Old Testament images of Daniel and Jonah are placed outside of the images of Christ giving the law and Christ triumphant. If one interprets the image of Christ triumphant as an image of Christ's resurrection, the two Old Testament scenes frame images from the life of Christ. Representations of time eternal can then be found in the large paradisiacal mosaics, which dominate the middle zone of the decorative program. In a manner similar to the lower mosaics, golden acanthus foliage swirls around a blue background. Depictions of animals and birds, specifically peacocks inhabit the winding leaves. Although the foliage is quite stylized, the overall impression of paradise is not unlike that found in funerary contexts such as Santa Costanza in Rome.

The dome proper of the Neonian baptistery is comprised of three zones. The bottom area depicts an alternating sequence of thrones and altars. The space is divided by eight elaborate plant like forms that sprout from the spandrels of the lower arches. The four altars present the gospels and are each flanked by two curved chairs. Although the meaning of the chairs has yet to be adequately explained, the proliferation of furniture surely recalls for the initiate the many hours spent sitting with the bishop, enthroned, learning the various facets of Christianity. Four particularly elaborate thrones inhabit their own space. Each of these pieces is topped by a cross, reserving them for Christ's use. The repetition of these thrones emphasizes Christ as a regal figure. The combination

of elaborate thrones with more simplistic pieces of furniture may allude to the power of the bishop as Christ's agent on earth.

The relationship between Christ and the clergy, via the apostles, can be found in the second band of the dome. Here, the disciples are depicted dressed in white philosophers' cloaks, carrying crowns, and divided by floral candelabra. The use of candles in the baptismal liturgy, and the light they emit, is symbolic of the ritual itself. In Hebrews 6:14 and Hebrews 10:32, the phrase "receiving light" is used as a synonym for "being baptized."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, an unknown writer of the fourth century describes the "shining light of the neophytes" as "the white robed members of the heavenly kingdom."<sup>40</sup> In addition, Gregory of Nazianzus in 381 connects the lights of baptism with the parable of the bridesmaids, saying: "[T]he lamps which you will light symbolize the torchlight in the next world, in which our shining, virgin souls will meet the bridegroom with the shining light of faith."<sup>41</sup> The symbolism of the candelabra is heightened by the fact that the timing of baptism in the pre-dawn hours necessitates the inclusion of artificial lights. It is not impossible that similar structures would be mirrored on the base level of the baptistery. The style of the candelabras, with their elaborate foliage, connects the imagery of the apostles to the lower levels of the baptistery. However, in contrast to the lower figural images, the apostles are shown in a state of movement. The apostles are presented upon a dark blue ground topped by golden swags, which serve as halos. The physiognomies of the figures distinguish the apostles as

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<sup>39</sup> This passage is discussed in Allen Cabanis, *Pattern in Early Christian Worship* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1989), 57.

<sup>40</sup> This work was originally attributed to St. Ambrose, *De Sapsu Virginis*, 5.19 (PL 16.372.)

<sup>41</sup> *Oratio*, 40.46 (PG 36.425.)

individuals, unlike the more generalized countenances of the lower figures. The un-idealized depictions contrast with the attempts to situate the figures in paradise. Instead, the figures call to the viewer through their movement and physicality, linking the initiate with the mystical symbolism of the dome. In addition, the apostles are carrying their crowns of martyrdom to an unidentified recipient, possibly the neophyte.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the mosaics re-layer the many facets of time at work in the baptistery, preparing the viewer for the image of Christ.

The central image of the cupola, depicting the original baptism of Christ, is an immediately accessible and yet complex image. Christ stands nude in the river Jordan receiving the sacrament of baptism. St. Cyril of Jerusalem states the connection between nakedness and paradise to the catechumens before the baptismal pool as: “[O] wondrous thing! You were naked in the sight of all, and were not ashamed; for truly you bore the likeness of the first-formed Adam, who was naked in the garden and was not ashamed.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike the rite in Jerusalem, it is believed that initiates in northern Italy wore some sort of shift into the baptismal font.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, this knowledge of the Milanese baptismal ritual is contrasted with two references to Christ disrobed in the Neonian baptistery. Christ is depicted visually nude in the cupola, as well as described textually in the inscription from Matthew at the ground level. Therefore, further investigation is needed into the issues of disrobing in baptismal practice. Saint Cyril, Saint Chrysostom, and Saint Theodore include in their writings the complex symbolism for the act of undressing. Although there are slight variations in

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<sup>42</sup> Wharton, 373.

<sup>43</sup> *Myst. Cat.* I.1. Translation by Riley, 181.

<sup>44</sup> Wharton, 363.

interpretation, all three emphasize the association of the disrobing with the removal of sin, both one's own as well as the original sin of Adam.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Saint Ambrose is noticeably silent concerning the act of disrobing. His writings concerning the act of anointing, however, may allude to the situation. Ambrose describes the pre-baptismal anointing as follows:

[W]e came to the fount, thou didst enter. Consider whom thou sawest; consider what thou saidst, recall it carefully. A levit met thee, a presbyter met thee. Thou wast anointed as Christ's athlete; as about to wrestle in the fight of this world, thou didst profess the objects of thy wrestling. He who wrestles has something to hope for; where the contest is, there is the crown. Thou wrestlest in the world, but thou art crowned by Christ, and thou art crowned for contests in the world; for, though the reward is in heaven, yet the earning of the reward is placed here.<sup>46</sup>

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The comparison between the anointed catechumen and the athlete emphasizes the aspect of baptism concerning the conquering of sin. However, this comparison also suggests that the very act of anointing was similar to that of an athlete, and therefore may have occurred over a substantial portion of the initiate's body. It is unlikely that if such a full body anointing took place that it could occur while the body was fully clothed. A second aspect of the ritual, the donning of white robes, also implies that the initiates were at one point nude. Ambrose describes how the putting on of the white garment symbolizes one's union with the risen Christ.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Riley, 161-162.

<sup>46</sup> *The Sacraments* I.4, Thompson, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Riley, 438.

The ability to put on Christ's robes necessitates the removal of one's soiled garment at some point previously.

22 | The open architectural style of both the Milanese baptistery and the Neonian baptistery has been considered an implication of possible non-nudity in the northern European rite.<sup>48</sup> This theory derives from archeological excavations around the Mediterranean, which have exposed multi-room baptisteries.<sup>49</sup> It is supposed that these additional spaces provide separate locations for the varying aspects of the ritual, specifically disrobing.<sup>50</sup> Saint Cyril in fact describes the use of a "vestibule"<sup>51</sup> as well as an "outer chamber . . . [and an] inner chamber."<sup>52</sup> However, it is in the inner chamber where "they divest themselves of their garments, and stand there 'naked in the sight of all.' Once stripped of their clothing . . . the candidates were led by hand to the 'holy pool' of baptism."<sup>53</sup> This description in fact does not denote a separate chamber for the act of disrobing, but implies that the entirety of the rite occurred in a single space. J. G. Davies suggests that "the only limiting factor would have been lack of material resources, and it is this that probably explains why some baptisteries are no more than a single room containing a font while others have two or more rooms adjoining the one in which the font was placed."<sup>54</sup> While this analysis does not seem applicable to Ravenna, where imperial funding allowed for a plethora of building projects, the statement suggests that the form of the structure may have been

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<sup>48</sup> Wharton, 362.

<sup>49</sup> For an example of a baptisteries with divided interiors, see St. Theodore, Gerasa

<sup>50</sup> J. G. Davies, *The Architectural setting of Baptism*, (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Mystery Cat* I.2. Riley, 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Mystery Cat* I.11. Riley, 144.

<sup>53</sup> Riley, 145.

<sup>54</sup> Davies, 27.

influenced by many factors, instead of simply the requirements of the ritual.

The depiction of the action in the cupola, the actual pouring of water over Christ's head, relates further to the symbological program. The use of a gold background, indicating paradise, contrasts with the image of a specific event. In addition, the inclusion of the bejeweled cross held by John the Baptist indicates the relationship between the rite of baptism and Christ's glory through resurrection. Therefore the image of Christ, in and of itself, represents the three facets of time depicted in the baptistery. The golden background indicates time eternal, the strong sense of immediacy suggests the actual historical event, and the nature of the event relates to the similar positioning of the initiate.

|23

While each area of decoration in the Neonian baptistery works independently to indicate the mythological nuances of the baptismal rite, the overall organization introduces an additional theme. Unlike an Apse mosaic, such as Saint'Apollinare Nuovo,<sup>55</sup> which was viewed at least weekly, when the bishop or other priest gave sermons, the baptistery was viewed for a relatively short period of time, purposefully without explanation. Therefore it is unlikely that bishop Neon would organize a complex program with many layers of meaning that could only be revealed by continued looking over time. Instead, the imagery of baptism necessitates an immediate accessibility for the neophyte. The multitude of figures on the spandrels of the lower arches along with the sculpted figures is intentionally ambiguous. They are not specific personages, simply learned men who stand with the neophyte. In

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<sup>55</sup> Images of the Apse of Saint'Apollinare Nuovo can be found in Ralph Snyder's *Medieval Art* mentioned above.

contrast, the apostles have a strong sense of personality along with individual name labels.

24 |

After the rite of renunciation and affiliation, the initiate would then turn to the southeast niche, the probable location of either the cathedra or altar.<sup>56</sup> From this location, the eye of the initiate would move from the living bishop, to the anonymous prophets, to the depiction of Peter and Paul, to the feet of Christ. This vertical alignment introduces the bishop, probably garbed in richly decorated robes, into the visual program. His relationship to the figures though, is somewhat ambiguous. The apostles are positioned so that the recipient of their crowns is unclear, though their movement culminates directly below the image of Christ and above the living bishop. One possibility is that the apostles are bringing their crowns to the newly baptized members of the Christian community. It is also possible that they are bringing their crowns to place on the elaborate throne topped by the cross at the feet of Peter and Paul. Therefore, the apostles may be bringing the crowns to a symbolized Christ. And yet, the image of the throne was possibly repeated on the ground level, as a cathedra for the living bishop, the coordinator of the entire ritual. As an agent of God's power on earth, the bishop is also a possible candidate for the reception of the crowns. The relationship between the apostles and the bishop has been previously suggested in Agnellus' "Life of Bishop Neon": "[W]ith mosaics and golden tesserae he fashioned the images and the names of the apostles around the vault, and covered the walls with various stones. His name is inscribed in mosaic."<sup>57</sup> The lack of a specific recipient underscores the multi-layered nature of the visual program. However, the inclusion

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<sup>56</sup> Wharton, 362.

<sup>57</sup> Kostof, 11.

of the bishop as a possible recipient emphasizes his personal position not only within the administration of the baptismal rite, but also in the greater Christian community. The power of the bishop is further accentuated by the figural image of Christ. Although it is possible for the initiate to recognize the role of the bishop as similar to John the Baptist, and therefore associate himself or herself with Christ, the mental construct of the initiate may have been influenced by the apse imagery, such as at Sant'Apollinare Nuove, where the bishop is depicted as the vertical vehicle to Christ.

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The elevated importance of the bishop coincides with the historical situation of Ravenna. In 402, coinciding approximately with bishop Ursus' construction of the baptistery, Honorius moved the capital of the western empire from Milan to Ravenna.<sup>58</sup> This switch elevated the role of the bishop of Ravenna in the greater Church community. The further elevation of Ravenna as an imperial residence under Galla Placidia coincided with the redecoration of the baptistery under the bishop Neon. Therefore, the emphasis of the visual program on the importance of the bishop, through both its luscious decoration as well as its symbolic program, can be understood as the result of Ravenna being elevated to the likes of Milan and Rome.<sup>59</sup> The creation of such an expensive space simply for use once a year, and only seen by members of the congregation once in their life, attests not only to the increased power of Ravenna, but also to the role of baptism in the fourth and fifth centuries. The creation of a specific space in

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<sup>58</sup> Snyder, 111.

<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note that Ambrose purposefully mimicked contemporary Roman ritual. This is discussed in Maxwell Johnson's *Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evaluation and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999.)

order to house the closely guarded secret linked the physical baptistery along with the visual program to the theological thought of the times. The mosaic program of the Neonian baptistery was designed to comment visually on the ritual occurring within it. Therefore, images and inscriptions such as the figural scenes of the second zone, in both their content and composition, relate to themes in the baptismal ceremony of the fourth and fifth centuries. Additionally, the placement of the ritual within its physical context allowed for reconstruction of the rite itself, beyond that provided by textual references alone.