



International Conference on Communication in Multicultural Society, CMSC 2015, 6-8 December
2015, Moscow, Russian Federation

Constantinople of emperors and Rome of popes in 6th-8th centuries: dialogue and separation

Maria Grafova*

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Myasnitskaya 20, Moscow 101100, Russian Federation

Abstract

The article deals with the political, theological and cultural dialogue between papal Rome and Imperial Constantinople. The period of 6-8th centuries is the one of Byzantine domination in Rome, and a number of Roman frescoes belong to this period, whose style and iconography give insights into the theological and political polemics, or into the cultural influence of early Byzantine art on the local tradition. Art works are rarely used or not used at all as sources in the study of relations between the two capitals and iconoclasm. This study can helpfully contribute to the overall research view on the subject.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the National Research Nuclear University MEPHI (Moscow Engineering Physics Institute).

Keywords: Rome; Constantinople; church history; fresco; iconoclasm

1. Introduction

From the first centuries of Christianity the Western and Eastern Christian world felt they were different; they differed by language and mentality. Since the 5th-6th centuries Rome and Constantinople had been in a unique situation. On the one hand, Constantinople actually became the capital of the Empire, having concentrated the power and strength. Rome became a distant province lapsing into barbarism, which, like the whole Latin West, had to attain to the high standards of wealth, culture and taste set by Byzantium.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-916-315-6467; fax: +7-495-952-3924.
E-mail address: mgrafova@hse.ru, mgrafova@yandex.ru

Since the 6th-7th centuries, out of all members of Justinian pentarchy, which was the union of the five main patriarchal Sees, only Rome and Constantinople had remained unconquered by Muslims (Meiendorf, 2005), and the older Rome had more spiritual authority as the seat of St. Peter, but the younger Constantinople dominated in terms of political and economic potential. The dialogue between the West and the East was basically carried on by Rome and Constantinople as long as the latter had retained its status of the Christian capital of the empire.

The subject of the research is the political and artistic dialogue between Rome and Constantinople in the period from the 6th to 8th centuries, which is the era of the Byzantine presence in Rome. Roman frescoes, whose style and composition reveal dialogue and interaction between the two cultures, belong to this period. The task of the article is to analyze this material which, as of present, has been little used in the study of the iconoclasm era in a broader historical and philological context. The innovative aspect of the research is an attempt at making use of such artistic sources as 6th-8th c. Roman frescoes in the historical study. The history of political and theological controversy between Rome and Constantinople, as well as the artistic influence of late classical art in its early Byzantine version on the Roman tradition of painting can be traced on the basis of this material. The very issue of constructing relationships and finding reference points between cultures, related, yet distinct in the light of objective historical conditions, is itself interesting and relevant.

It is the time when paintings of an entirely different type of expression appear at the background of the Roman artistic tradition time and interact with it. Their style is clearly associated with the art of classical antiquity, whose continuity had been broken on the Roman soil long ago. To us, it seemed interesting to juxtapose the data of the political and ecclesiastical history, as well as the issue of the language distribution and art data.

2. Research methods and material

The amount of literature on the history of Byzantium and Rome, their political and theological relations and art is vast. The selection of the bibliography for this work is determined by two reasons.

I. Most of the source monuments are located in Rome, so, of the early history of the Byzantine Empire, we are predominantly interested in aspects of its relations with the papacy. It shapes the choice of a large part of the article historiography.

II. The very nature of the original sources, i.e. monumental painting, dictates the involvement of literature on art history. The sources in question are mostly frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua, a Roman Church which presumably belonged to the Greek community of Rome in 6th-9th centuries. The building collapsed in an earthquake, most likely in the mid-9th century, after which it was abandoned and then forgotten, buried under a huge cultural layer, and only in the early 20th century excavated and studied. Due to this natural disaster, the interior escaped erasure and alterations beyond recognition that have befallen almost all late antiquity and early medieval monuments of Rome. A great amount of literature is dedicated to the building, but the most recent monograph dates from the 60s (Romanelli and Nordhagen, 1964).

The choice of artistic sources dictates the interdisciplinary approach to the study: the body of historical sources of the early medieval period is very incomplete, so the juxtaposition of the results obtained in the framework of different disciplines, such as history, philology and art history, seems particularly efficient. Gaps in the material of written sources can be filled by using the data of linguistics, theology and art studies. This allows one to create a relevant context for understanding the artistic material and for achieving more positive and fruitful results. Some frescoes regarded in the present work have yet never received attention as sources for studying political history.

3. Analysis

3.1. *Byzantium reclaiming Rome in the 6th century: family reunification or meeting the outsider?*

The history of the Roman state for many centuries was endless expansion. And yet, at a certain point the empire began to crumble under pressure of circumstances which may be equally seen as political, social, and global demographic. Initially, Constantinople was never intended as a rival to Rome. The new capital was designed to increase the power and glory of the unified Roman Empire (Dagron, 1974).

Even before the barbaric conquests separated Italy from the Eastern Roman Empire for long, the separation process had been perceptible both in the East and the West. One of the clearest indicators of increasing alienation was gradual growth of the language barrier. In the West, Greek was almost forgotten and Latin was artificially maintained as the formal language of the empire in the East (Ostrogorsky, 2011), although it was still spoken by family members of the senatorial aristocracy that had moved to Constantinople. However, from the Byzantine point of view, the lost territories of the empire remained an inalienable part of it and returning them was considered a sacred duty (Ostrogorsky, 2011).

The 6th century saw crucial events in the history of relations between Rome and Byzantium that seemed to change the vector of their development. After the death of Theodoric the Great, King of the Ostrogoths, who sympathized with the members of old Roman families and had them involved in the management of his domain (Von Falkenhausen, 1982), a dynastic strife began, and Justinian considered it to be the best time for a successful reclaim of the Italian territory. Was this reunion a real restoration of the old empire, with all its political and cultural unity?

3.2. 7th century: on the way to political, linguistic and cultural alienation

It is intriguing to juxtapose the outline of political events against the distribution of the two main languages - Greek and Latin. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), a prominent politician and church leader, was a staunch proponent of Latin. For example, having spent many years as an apocrisiarius (a permanent representative of the papal curia) in Constantinople, he never learnt Greek well (apparently, on purpose) and once did not respond to a letter of a noble Byzantine lady who wrote in Greek, although she was of Latin origin (Berschin, 1980). It is significant that nearly all secular correspondents of the 850 surviving letters of Gregory the Great lived in Constantinople or Sicily, but wrote to him in Latin (Von Falkenhausen, 1982). By the end of the 6th century, there was so much non-assimilated old Roman nobility in Constantinople that even the unfortunate Emperor Mauritius, being a native of Cappadocia, claimed that he came from an old Roman family, following the fashion. Many of these families moved away from the turbulent Rome and especially from the Lombards, to the south, to their Sicilian domains, and most typically, to Constantinople in the 6th century (Von Falkenhausen, 1982). And yet, even in the early 7th century it was a matter of communication between parts of a single old senatorial class, now divided between the old and the new capitals. By the end of the century the situation changed radically. What happened then?

First of all, the whole life of the empire changed irrevocably. As early as in the first half of the century Italy had gone from the foreground of the Byzantine politics, after the Arabian invasion. It was at that point that Greek became the official language of the empire, and the old Roman aristocracy had to assimilate. Sources from Byzantium and Rome have little awareness of each other, except as far as any dispute between the Pope, the Patriarch and the Emperor is involved (Von Falkenhausen, 1982). The most notorious of these disputes of the 7th century was the debate about monothelism, a theological doctrine which was the imperial power's attempt to find a compromise solution to the dispute that divided the supporters of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and Monophysites who comprised most of the Christians of the East (e.g. Ullmann, 2003). As a result of the conflict, Pope Martin was displaced by the Emperor's orders and died in exile as a confessor.

Not only was Constantinople still keenly watching its formal prerogatives in Rome, it also was able to have its will for the time being. However, it was probably the empire's last efficient intervention in the life of what later became Papal State. After this incident the two sides had diligently maintained parity for some time: the relationship of the Pope and the Emperor remained, in general, formally polite. Emperor Constans II, whose discord had proved so costly to Pope Martin, even made a pious visit to Rome in the second half of the 60s. However, when at the end of the 7th century the messenger of the Emperor Justinian II arrived in Rome to urge the Pope to clarify some controversial theological questions, the latter had to rescue the envoy from an infuriated mob that threatened to kill him (Noble, 1984).

3.3. *Rome above all, and the effects of the strengthening papal authority*

Life in Italy also changed. Since the time of Gregory the Great, Papacy was being established as the de facto principal source of power on the Apennine peninsula. This process of power accumulation started by the 5th century and had a completely objective basis: Church appropriated many of the most important functions previously incumbent on the Empire, such as, for example, public charity (Noble, 1984). It happened, in general, for a simple reason: there was no other institution to perform them. By the end of the 7th century political, social and economic leadership in Italy had been transferred to the new military aristocracy, whose wealth, family connections and careers were linked with the interests of local communities, and was not necessarily identified with the imperial aristocracy (Noble, 1984). Proficiency in both languages was apparently so rare at that time that the *Liber Pontificalis* highlights knowledge of Latin and Greek among special virtues of Pope Leo II (682-683), despite the fact that Leo was ethnically Greek (Berschin, 1980).

While our task does not include a detailed review of the history of the complex political relations between Popes and Emperors, one key point should be noted: in the first half of the 8th century, the most important thing for any pope, whoever he was by birth, were the interests of Rome. Therefore, even the proclamation of the iconoclastic policy by the Byzantine emperor itself did not prevent acts of political cooperation between the Popes and Constantinople, although it caused protests from the Papacy. If it was profitable, they would put up with heretical policies of Constantinople, and if the Emperor demanded, for example, too many taxes, protests and uprisings would start (Von Falkenhausen, 1982). It was only after the middle of the 8th century that concerns of the impertinence of the heretic Emperor's claims raised, when there emerged an urgent need to protect the Papal State from the Lombards. Byzantium helped with advice at best, but Pipin, King of the Franks, provided actual help, that is why the Pope made a bet on the Franks and their protection. Now they openly designated their breaking-off with Byzantium that proved to be useless for solving their problems, the much more so that they had the excuse of the iconoclastic heresy at hand. In the documents of the Roman Chancery, the name of iconoclast emperor Constantine is only mentioned before the year 772. From 781 on, the emperor's name was replaced by the name of the Pope, that is, Adrian I. But even before the death of Constantine in 775, the coins minted in Rome had the profile-view bust and the name of the Pope (Von Falkenhausen, 1982). There came a new political era for Rome, which is beyond the scope of this study.

3.4. *Roman frescoes: an unexpected source on the history of the dialogue between Popes and Emperors*

Early Middle Ages are relatively poor in written sources. Thus data which can be obtained from unconventional source material, for example, art, is especially valuable. Firstly, this option is more habitual to a historian, and can be considered from both historical and archaeological point of view. The iconography, composition, selection of saints, donor portraits and inscriptions can be very informative. The 6th-8th century Roman art bears many interesting implications about the dialogue, or rather, dispute between Constantinople and Rome. Given how little of Rome's early medieval monumental art has survived, the fact that many of the extant artworks bear clear polemical, as well as theological and political connotations, suggests that this component was very important. This applies to the following frescoes:

I. In the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum, fragments of a composition from the mid-7th century are preserved. This composition included the image of the Church Fathers (Leo the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Basil the Great) (Nordhagen, 1990), holding scrolls with texts from the Lateran council against monothelism [see i.e. 3, p. 67-82 for connection between its decisions and the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua], condemning the heretics of Constantinople. When the Monothelite Emperor Philippikos Bardanes, rejected by Rome, ordered to remove the image of the VI Ecumenical Council from the imperial palace in Constantinople, the Pope Constantine (708-715) responded by having the image of all six Ecumenical Councils placed in St. Peter's Cathedral (Ostrogorsky, 2011).

II. The Arch (i.e., the altar wall) of Santa Maria Antiqua bearing a huge composition from the pontificate of John VII (705-707), namely, "Adoration of the Cross" (Nordhagen, 1968). It also represents four Popes, including Martin the Confessor, the victim of the emperor's envoys; moreover, the image of the latter is emphatically inscribed

SANCTUS MARTINUS PAPA ROMANUS (St. Martin Pope), although he was not formally canonized at that time (Nordhagen, 2000).

III. The fresco of the left nave of Santa Maria Antiqua is a revealing document of the era of disagreement between Rome and Byzantium caused by iconoclasm. It depicts Christ with the saints. It dates, most likely, from the time of Pope Paul I (757-767), when the conflict with the iconoclast emperor became open. On the right, there are saints worshipped in Rome, among whom martyrs, Popes, and venerables are present, including those of Eastern origin. On the left, mainly Eastern saints, theologians and bishops, little-known in Rome, but almost all having reputation of fighters with all sorts of heresies.

Thus, in the 7th-8th centuries Rome (and Constantinople) the opinions of authorities on political and theological differences (which at that time were almost synonymic) were often expressed through art, as the preserved examples imply.

3.5. Byzantine artistic influence on the conquered Rome: a brief return of ancient art to the Roman soil

The dialogue of Western and Eastern Christianity may be traced by using purely artistic material as a historical source. Since Late Antiquity, Rome had a distinct tradition of painting whose main features can be characterized, basically, as a taste for rigid shapes, stylized outlines, exaggerated details, intense colors. Classic examples of such art are observable in the 6th century mosaic in the basilica of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the Roman Forum, representing Christ with saints and Pope Felix (Andaloro, 2006, p. 39, fig. 6-8), and in the fresco from the presbytery of Santa Maria Antiqua bearing the image of the Virgin and Child with Angels ("Maria Regina") (Nordhagen, 1990).

All this is at odds with the traditional Greek orientation towards reproducing ideal, harmoniously balanced shapes and elaborate rendition of colour and air. This "hellenizing" trend was transferred to the Constantinople soil, but in Rome, it had been lost for about two hundred years. Yet at some point during the second half of the 6th century or at the beginning of the 7th century frescoes appeared in Rome, the closest parallels to which can be seen only in late antiquity. The most characteristic examples are the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua: the so-called "Fair" angel, "Solomone with Eleazar and Holy Seven Maccabees," (Nordhagen, 1990), a cherub from the above mentioned scene "Adoration of the Cross". Any analysis of these works in the light of art criticism is beyond the scope of this paper, but for a layman they look very similar to high-quality antique frescoes.

Only the date of John VII's decoration can be pinpointed (705-707), the precise dating of the rest works has long been disputed, but for a number of reasons it is possible to determine the time of their creation with a high degree of certainty as the period from the late 6th century to the beginning of the 8th century. In general, what is undeniable is that a wave of high-quality hellenized art arose in the rather barbaric early medieval Rome during the Byzantine conquest. By the mid-8th century - the time of strong political disengagement of Rome and Constantinople – there were, one may safely assume, no monuments of this tradition in Rome anymore. Roman artistic tradition continued to evolve following its own inherent laws, but the direct impact or admixture from the Hellenistic tradition in its Byzantine form never happened again.

4. Conclusion

Thus, the article attempts to briefly trace the history of political relations, theological dialogue and bilingualism between Constantinople and Rome in 6th-8th centuries.

Artwork sources are considered from both historical and archaeological point of view: while few frescoes of this era survive in Rome, some of them clearly express political and theological positions. This understanding of art as a means of dialogue is rather explicit and needs historical and iconographic analysis for its identification and interpretation. Our analysis shows that painting was frequently and persistently used to highlight the position of the papal Rome in disputes with Constantinople.

There is another, less obvious, purely artistic level of dialogue. In paintings, different levels can be identified, such as of iconography (i.e., the subject of the image, composition, its components, selected by the artist and the customer) and style, i.e., the combination of techniques characteristic of a particular era or tradition. Style is to a

great extent a kind of "collective unconscious" in the field of art. What does it mean? A customer (whether or not consulting with the artist, a theologian, or a scholar) can choose what and why should be painted, that is, the iconography of the ordered work. However, the way it is painted is determined rather by the era and the environment than the individual will. Frescoes of the 6th-7th centuries in Rome which obviously look like frescoes of the Late Antiquity at the level of methods and techniques, are the continuation of an authentic tradition preserved in Constantinople and brought back to Rome through the Byzantine influence. There had been nothing of the kind in Rome for a long time, which precludes the possibility of local imitation. Therefore samples of "antique-like" painting preserved in Rome from 6th-8th centuries are also a kind of historical evidence. Moreover, it was not so much political and theological dialogue between Rome and Constantinople as cultural.

References

- Andaloro, M. (2006). *L'Orizzonto tardoantico e le nuove immagini*. 312-468. Corpus, volume I. Roma: Brepols.
- Berschin, W. (1980). *Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter: Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues*. Bern und München: Francke Verlag.
- Brenk, B. (2004). Papal patronage in a Greek Church in Rome. In J. Osborne, G. Morganti, and J. Rasmus Brandt (Eds.), *Santa Maria Antiqua al Foro Romano cento anni dopo. Atti del colloquio internazionale, Roma 5-6 maggio 2000* (pp.67-82). Roma: Campisano editore.
- Dagron, G. (1974). *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Meiendorf, J. (2005). *Rome and Constantinople*. Moscow: PSTGU.
- Noble, T.F.X. (1984). The Republic of St.Peter. *The Birth of the Papal State*. 680-825. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nordhagen, P.J. (1968). The Frescoes of John VII (A.D. 705-707) in S.Maria Antiqua in Rome. *Acta ad Archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia (Institutum Romanum Norvegiae)*, (3), 1-123.
- Nordhagen, P.J. (1990a). S. Maria Antiqua: the Frescoes of the Seventh Century and Their Date. In P.J. Nordhagen (Ed.), *Studies in Byzantine and Early Medieval Painting* (pp. 177-296). London: David Brown book company.
- Nordhagen, P.J. (1990b). The Earliest Decorations in Santa Maria Antiqua and Their Date. In P.J. Nordhagen (Ed), *Studies in Byzantine and Early Medieval Painting* (pp. 157-176). London: David Brown book company.
- Nordhagen, P.J. (2000). Constantinople on the Tiber: the Byzantines in Rome and the Iconography of their Images. In J.M. Smith (Ed.), *Early Medieval Rome and Christian West. Essays in Honor of D.A. Bullough* (pp. 113-134). Leiden: Brill.
- Ostrogorsky, G. A. (2011). *History of Byzantium*. Moscow: Sibirskaya Blagozvonitsa.
- Romanelli, P., and Nordhagen, P.J. (1964). *S. Maria Antiqua*. Roma: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato.
- Ullmann, W. (2003). *A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Von Falkenhausen, V. (1982). I bizantini in Italia. In G. Pugliese Carratelli (Ed.), *I Bizantini in Italia* (pp.1-136). Milano: Libri Scheiwiller.