

Mausoleum of Theodoric

Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List

Historical background

This impressive monument is located approximately one kilometer from the centre of Ravenna, beyond the ancient town walls, in an area used as a graveyard by the Goths. Theodoric (493-526) had it built when he was still alive, as the Anonymous Valesiano (546 - 552) and the protohistorian A. Agnello (middle of the 9th century) report.

It was later dedicated to Saint Mary and used as a Christian oratory after Justinian's edict (561 A.D.) and its consecration to the orthodox creed; during that period of anti-Arian fanaticism the corpse of Theodoric was removed from its tomb. Beside the building a square tower was erected and then used as a lighthouse, so that the oratory was later called S. Maria ad Pharum. In the 12th century a Benedictine monastery was built next to it.

The mausoleum was then used in the Middle Ages for the burial of important people (Pope Vittore II in 1057; Paolo Traversari in 1240, etc.). The following centuries witnessed its complete abandonment, eloquently revealed in various illustrations, from a 16th century anonymous drawing to be found in Vienna to the 19th century drawing by Vincenzo Coronelli, both showing the monument covered up to, the impostes of the first floor arches. This was mainly due to inundations of the nearby river Badareno, a tributary of the Po, at the time still flowing on its old river bed.

In 1748 attempts were made to reclaim the surrounding areas, which were completely swamped, and in 1774, two stairways were built up to the first floor. Then, in 1844, Severo Carnevale set about effectively resolving the problems of drainage and excavation around the monument. The stairways were removed in 1918, the present metal walkway dates from 1927. Toward the end of World War II a bomb was dropped to the South-West of the Mausoleum, seriously damaging the second and third base pillars, which were later restored with botticino marble which has a lighter colour than the stone from Istria. After the works carried out in 1977 under the direction of the Soprintendenza ai Beni Ambientali e Architettonici of Ravenna, the surrounding area has been landscaped and the floors of the upper and lower parts have been restored.

Description

The impressive and austere mausoleum has its base at 1.50 metres under the ground level. Today it is no longer provided with a cordon of pillars and balusters which originally characterized it and increased its safety and its general appearance. Indeed it must have been surrounded by ten pillars, some of which were discovered in the foundations, others in ancient drawings, and they were all connected to each other by railings.

It must have been built on a foundation platform, made of mixed material, obtained from lime and pozzolana. This platform was found at depth of 2 metres and had to ensure its stability since in that area there was an unstable soil.

Compared to the other buildings of Ravenna built in brick the mausoleum is unusual for its walls of Istrian stone blocks. In assembly, a dry technique was employed without the use of any binding material. The blocks were actually cut and shaped according to their exact position and function: for example at the wall corners we do not find at various levels two blocks side by side but rather a single block cut purposely in an L-shape in order to give the two faces of the corner. In addition the blocks perfectly fitted together and connected by iron cramps have been worked with great precision and have a groove along the edges which accentuates their

regularity. In the archways the blocks have interlocking teeth giving a perfect joint and this feature of construction is also used in the blocks of the cross-vault which covers the lower room.

The mausoleum consists of two superimposed levels: the lower level is decagonal and in each side there is a niche; in the western niche is situated the entrance which leads inside, i.e. to a cross-shaped room with a cross vault, lit by six small windows, and which must have been destined to religious services. The upper story is 1.30 metres narrower than the lower one; it is not finished and is also decagonal up to the door which is orientated westwards, then it becomes circular, perhaps in order to make the mounting of the big dome easier. In the large circle there are some small mullioned windows (with one and two lights); it is delimited in the lower part by a projecting ledge and in its upper part by a ledge decorated with a frieze called "pincer frieze": this decorative pattern is also present in the goldsmith's art of the Goths.

On the frieze there is a big monolithic dome crowned with twelve loops where the names of eight Apostles and four Evangelists are carved. The *ingens saxum* mentioned by the Anonimo Valesiano is 10.76 metres of diameter, 3.09 metres high and weighs, according to recent calculations, 2.30 tons.

A disc on the extrados of the dome protrudes for 10 cm. and is m. 3,75 in diameter with a parallelepiped element jutting out from the centre, which today bears a metallic cross. Just under the disc there is a large fissure which reaches as far as the border of the cupola. This crack probably originated during the positioning of the monolith, whereas, according to the popular legend the dome was split by a divine thunderbolt which struck and reduced the Gothic king to ashes in punishment for his crimes.

The dome overhangs and covers the cella of the upper floor with the porphyry sarcophagus which contained the remains of the Gothic king and has therefore a funerary function. The sarcophagus was removed after a long series of vicissitudes and shiftings in the course of the centuries and was taken back to its original site only in 1913.

Corresponding to the deep niches in the lower story there are in each of the nine faces of the upper story two rectangular cavities surmounted by blind lunettes in relief. At the side of each there is a small rectangular hole perhaps to accommodate a shelf. The angles of the decagon are worked at the top to form a pyramidal element.

This unusual decoration, which according to some was left unfinished, makes one think that originally the second story of the monument was completed with a covered gallery supported by little columns along the external border of the terrace.

Traces of an access stairway to the upper story have never been found. This lack of access seems to confirm the use of the upper room as a funeral chamber to which the remains of the king were perhaps brought up by a temporary stairway subsequently destroyed and so ensuring the inviolability of the tomb.

Justification for the inclusion in the World Heritage List

In no other place of late antiquity has the tomb of a barbarian king of the Arian religion come down to us. The uniqueness of the Mausoleum of Theodoric, inasmuch as it is the funeral monument of an Ostrogothic king, is evident even in the architectonic structure of a building which is without parallel in Roman or Oriental-Byzantine buildings. It manages to amalgamate, in the most original manner, elements from differing cultures and traditions: Roman, Constantinopolitan and barbarian. In the material employed, Istrian stone, rather than brick, it distinguishes itself

completely from all other buildings in Ravenna and, more generally, from early Christian architecture in the West, from the Byzantine architecture of Constantinople, the west coast of Asia Minor and the Balkans. A building which rests on blocks of stone is typical of Syria and Palestine a large part of Asia Minor, and would seem that from this very part of the world the highly specialized craftsmen who made it came, fashioning a perfect system of mortarless blocks which are rigorously squared and finished. Each block was, in fact, planned and cut in such a way that the most efficient form of stability could be achieved. , This building technique, known by the Romans as *opus quadratum*, had been abandoned by them towards the end of the 2nd century, so its utilisation in the first decades of the 6th century is significant as marking the exceptional character of a building which was meant to immortalize the glory of the great Gothic king. Whilst the architecture of big stone blocks lends itself marvellously to the construction of vertical surfaces, it was less adapted to roofing which, from the examples left in the East, were in stone only when it had to do with small spaces, and otherwise, in bigger buildings, were covered with wood or other light material such as brick. No historical records exist which testify to the use of a monolith of such extraordinary size as that of the mausoleum of Theodoric. It seems, in its form, a shallow monolithic cupola, a translation in stone of the brick cupolas of Byzantium which Theodoric, coming from the court of Constantinople where he had lived as the adopted son of the emperor Zeno, must have been well familiar with. We know, in fact, that this choice was made at the express will of Theodoric who. according to the Anonymous Valesiano "*se autem vivo fecit sibi monumentum ex lapide quadrato mirae magnitudinis opus, et saxum ingentem quem superponet inquisivit*" - He built for himself, while still alive, a funerary monument in squared stone of marvellous size and had his servants look for a huge mass to cover it.

For this reason, many historians have tried to find significance in this beyond simple considerations of structure and isostatic loads, hazarding explanations of a purely celebratory character: the monolith as a symbol of power.

Scholars have put forward various symbolical interpretations with regard to this singular covering: it might be a re-evocation of the great megalithic tombs of the north, the original territory of the Goths, or else it is meant to recall a royal crown or a warrior's helmet, there might be, again, a specific allusion to the dome of the heavens or even the translation into stone of the tent of the ancient Goths (the eyelets would thus correspond to the supporting rods for the tent cover, the round protuberance on top, a reevocation of the smoke hole, the cornice with 'pincer' motif in the frieze, an allusion to the metal parts of the tent opening). The theory that the placing of the tomb beneath a cupola with twelve eyelets recalls the disposition of the tomb of Constantine, in the mausoleum of Constantinople, is more creditable, the eyelets representing the twelve apostles.

Apart from symbolical interpretations, it should be noted that, even today, the central problem concerning scholars remains the practical one of how the monolith was put into place. As for its transportation by sea from the Istrian coast to the building site, this was made easier by the fact that, in ancient days, the destined area was by the sea itself. Once it had been unloaded and moved to the foot of the construction, the monolith was then lifted to the top of the mausoleum.

The method by which this was accomplished is uncertain and has given rise to various theories: the first favours the idea of an earthen ramp up which the monolith was slowly drawn by a series of rollers and ropes which were passed through the twelve radial eyelets. A second theory tends another way, that is, for the lifting of the block from the ground by means of a specially constructed wooden device made up of cranes, ropes and pulleys.

This latter hypothesis is based on the knowledge, in that epoch, the mechanics of Archimedes were well known and that Roman building techniques employed machines with winches to lift stone blocks. It is therefore quite reasonable that the builders of the mausoleum.

should study a suitable mechanism of this order rather than have recourse to the 'primitive method'. What is beyond question is the exceptional and daring nature of the enterprise.

A further element of its uniqueness is in the architectonic form of the monument, deriving from the superimposition of a narrower, at first decagonal and then circular, body on a shorter decagonal section.

Some authors maintain that the lower order, characterized by a deep arcade, is distinctly Roman, whilst the decorative part of the upper order with the crowning cupola shows influences from Syria and the Ostrogothic Germans (the 'pincer' frieze). For this reason, there are authors who have suggested that the monument is the work of two architects, a Roman who projected it with the second order decagonal as the first but, for reasons unknown, had to cede the execution of the work to a Gothic architect who changed the original project by giving the crown of the tomb a circular form.

It is quite feasible that there was a strong Syrian influence in that this type of two-tiered mausoleum with the upper cell for the deceased being made quite inaccessible and the lower cell dedicated to worship, is to be found in Syria and Asia Minor. It is fascinating to speculate, nonetheless, in the way of certain authors who see a Roman influence in the lower order and a 'nordic' one in the upper, and thus envisage the whole as the symbol of the controversial life of the great Gothic king, struggling with the two ethnic elements of his subjects, the GothicArian on the one hand and the Latin-Catholic on the other.

The uniqueness of the monument, which, as we have seen, presents problems of an architectonic character as well as historiographical, plastic and semantic, is confirmed by the interest it has excited in artists and architects of the past.

Apart from a drawing by an anonymous Italian author of the 16th century kept in the Hofbibliothek of Vienna, two drawings are known by the famous architect Giuliano da Sangallo (1443 - 1516), one of which is part of his "Book of Roman sketches" and the other is kept in the Uffizi in Florence, and there are, in addition various prints by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1744) and Vincenzo Coronelli (1708), as well as Pietro Santi (1760), who showed the monument as buried in the earth up to the base of the arches in the upper level.

In the field of painting, the Mausoleum appears as a detail in the "Transfiguration" of Giovanni Bellini (1430 - 1516), now in the National Gallery of Capodimonte in Naples, and in a painting by Marco Palmezzano (1459 - 1539), depicting the "Piet...", kept in the sacristy of Ravenna Cathedral. Bellini's painting, executed between 1480 and 1485.

This interest shown by artists in the Mausoleum of Theodoric is quite significant. 'when one thinks that in the period of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, there was a rediscovery of classical Greco-Roman art, together with a distaste for the "Gothic barbarism" (Vasari).

In actual fact, the 16th-century artists portrayed the Mausoleum because they believed it was one of the best examples of Roman architecture, whereas an artist such as Piranesi, considered to be one of the main figures of the European Pre-Romantic movement anticipated that taste for barbaric and medieval art which was to be fully appreciated only in the 19th century, in the Romantic period.

It was in the context of this change in sensibility that the Mausoleum of the Gothic king became one of the main attractions for travellers on the Grand Tour of the last centuries.