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JOHN OSBORNE, *Rome in the Ninth Century. A History in Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023. xi+348 pp., 53 figs. – ISBN 978-1-009-41537-8

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Any scholar who studies the Roman orbit of the Middle Ages, early to late, knows to anticipate thoughtful and thorough work in any scholarship produced by JOHN OSBORNE. His research has shaped how students of the field see and study medieval Rome – from his translations of the Master Gregorius’ medieval accounts of its landscape to his annotated publication of the seventeenth-century sketches and watercolors recording now lost medieval monuments, mosaics, and frescoes. In this way, his secondary title for *Rome in the Ninth Century* – ‘A History in Art’ – is particularly meaningful. In this new book, OSBORNE continues to enrich our understanding of Rome by providing a complete history, a broad view of the period, a wide lens offering insight into patterns and changes over time in the city of Rome.

In his introductory chapter, OSBORNE clearly explains that there are three main themes in the book. The first is the use of material culture as ‘documentary evidence for the exploration of history’. The second, revealed through that material culture, is evidence of a dwindling papal largess such that ninth-century Rome is a ‘tale of two cities’, beginning in wealth and ending enervated (p. 6). The third touches on the relationship between Rome and its erstwhile allies, the emperors of Constantinople. OSBORNE contends that Rome is mainly in the political orbit of the transalpine Frankish monarchy during the ninth century; however, that relationship does not have any bearing on ‘underlying cultural attitudes or cultural products’ and, in truth, the relationship with Constantinople is never fully interrupted (p. 7). Osborne introduces TOM BROWN’s understanding of a ‘lingering undercurrent of nostalgic attachment to Byzantium in the city’s political life’, a stance endorsed by OSBORNE, and fundamental to his assessment of the Roman monuments that he discusses in the book.

Rome’s relationship with the Frankish rulers is critical to the personae and projects of OSBORNE’s chronology. The dramatic crowning of Charlemagne as the new ‘Roman emperor’ on December 25 in the year 800 was in many ways the culmination of Rome’s dependence upon the military

might of the Frankish rule, as Constantinople had not been able to protect the city since the middle of the eighth century. Pope Leo III was much bolstered by his Frankish allies, allowing him to overcome an attempted assassination and, afterwards, lavish many gifts on the city. After setting the political stage, OSBORNE is able to turn to the material evidence of Leo's generosity, which appears throughout the city, such as at Santa Susanna, Santi Nereo ed Achilleo, and Saint Peter's. Leo's work at the Lateran especially highlights the underlying tension that OSBORNE identifies, that of Frankish versus Constantinopolitan influences in Rome.

This dichotomy sets up the reader to look for one or the other, for either Carolingian elements or Byzantine elements. OSBORNE's position is clear: 'Rome was never "Carolingian" in terms of its material culture' (p. 8). Connections with the East are ever-present: 'In terms of material culture, however, we can state with assurance that Roman links to the world of eastern Christianity remained both continual and vibrant... Consequently it is difficult to understand the recent contention that "Art historians have been increasingly aware of [...] the impact of Frankish ideas, iconography, and building techniques in the city.'" To the contrary, the evidence would seem to point very markedly in a rather different compass direction' (p. 234). For example, when he describes the design for the two large formal halls (*triclinia*) at the Lateran, the first of which is known as the 'Aula Leonina', OSBORNE is clear to explain that the form emulated structures derived from the imperial palace in Constantinople (pp. 20, 29). He naturally points out the significance of the Frankish association, since the triclinium mosaic is a clear representation or 'visual manifesto' of the political relationship with the Franks (p. 20). He explains that the message of the mosaics was 'presumably aimed largely at a Frankish audience ... and was likely intended as an invitation to Charlemagne to take on more formally the responsibility for protecting the city of Rome, as well as its Church' (p. 27). However, OSBORNE does not acknowledge Frankish cultural influences, despite the presence of Charlemagne in the mosaic, receiving the military standard from Saint Peter.

The second chapter of the book sets up a template for the following chapters. OSBORNE introduces the next pope, details key dynastic shifts, and then describes the major monuments that are part of that papal reign. This follows the shape and format of the most significant text from the period, the *Liber Pontificalis*, which is a series of papal biographies. Naturally, when the *LP* has more material about a certain pontiff, OSBORNE's chapter about him is longer. For example, Pope Paschal I is one of the longest

entries of the medieval biographies and, as such, he is allotted two chapters, 3 and 4.<sup>1</sup> OSBORNE places the turning point in the fortunes of Rome and the popes at the Muslim invasion of Italy in 846. The chapters towards the end of OSBORNE's book incorporate more popes, reflecting the fact that, as the century progresses, Rome's popes rule for shorter periods, have less power, and are able to produce fewer monuments. The final chapter, 'Not with a Bang but a Whimper', covers six popes between 885 and the end of the century. Formosus is the only pope in this sequence associated with projects in Rome, none of which survive – an episcopal residence, an oratory built into a temple on the Caelian hill, and a redecoration of Saint Peter's.

OSBORNE is the most scrupulous of scholars, and he summarizes many disputed issues in scholarship, some unresolved for many years. His careful process makes him show great caution, sometimes perhaps to a fault. Even when he is assertive about the fact that the Frankish impacts on Roman culture are minimal, he uses softening and qualifying terms like 'seem to' and 'rather' (p. 234). Despite the fact that he identifies Greek culture in the aristocracy (specifically the 'descendants of the hellenophone military, administrative, and clerical families') and the 'continuing presence and activity of the Greek monasteries', he is cautious about the cultural impact of Greek residents in Rome: 'But have they left a footprint in the city's material culture? The answer, as we shall see, is a qualified affirmative' (p. 184).

OSBORNE is particularly careful when discussing the utility of descriptions of style in determining influence. Are the illuminations of manuscript Vat. gr. 749 and the Anastasis fresco at San Clemente both Roman in origin? OSBORNE says '[T]here is simply insufficient surviving evidence to provide a definitive answer' (pp. 192–193). Although he tends toward the influence of Constantinople, he refuses to go on 'inclination': 'Such assertions are surely an unwarranted overreach, as our understanding of "style" in the pictorial arts of early medieval Europe and Byzantium is still much too inadequate to permit conclusions of this sort. It is simply not possible to localize any particular figure style with such specificity' (p. 193). He says elsewhere, '[w]e have no real understanding of the factors which influenced the "style" of a painting or mosaic' (p. 78). Of the 'double-line

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1. Leo III also has one of the longer entries in the *LP*. He only is allotted one chapter in OSBORNE's book. However, OSBORNE gives Leo his full due by describing and discussing the pope's gifts, including his contributions of the Aula Leonina and at Saint Peter's, in a chapter in his previous monograph *Rome in the Eighth Century* (2020).

fold style', first seen as a signature of Byzantine art by KURT WEITZMANN in the 1930s, OSBORNE writes: 'Perhaps wisely, Weitzmann would eventually conclude that "the double-line fold style as such provides no clue to locale, but must be understood as a general reflection of the style of the time"' (p. 79).

It is perhaps his caution that causes OSBORNE to avoid comparisons and close readings of works of art and monuments. There is nothing resembling *ekphrasis* here. The decorative program of the Formosus Oratory, only known from a seventeenth-century sketch, shows a standing figure of Christ flanked by Saints Peter and Lawrence on the left and Saints Paul and Hippolytus on the right. OSBORNE explains that the mural was a variation of the *traditio legis*. At this point the reader might expect a dialogue of sorts between the *traditio legis* in the Aula Leonina at the Lateran (from Chapter 2) and the one supported by Pope Formosus (Chapter 9). The very fact that two variations on the same theme bookend the century and the book would seem to have offered possible considerations, comparisons, and suggestions.

If we cannot draw 'firm conclusions' about Formosus' restoration of Saint Peter's, are there perhaps still other points to consider about things that are known, such as what one might make of the unusual size of the Crucifixion, or how Formosus continued or deviated from the traditions of past iconographic programs, or why Saint Peter's was remodeled so many times? With his guarded attitude towards 'style', OSBORNE notes again and again examples of the 'double-line fold style', warily concluding only that it is evidence of the 'diffusion' of the form (p. 234). But he never addresses the fact that most figures are not in a double-line fold style. Nor, for that matter, does he say how the style is significant, for example in the depiction of the pope in the Ascension at San Clemente. Is the style used for particular individuals or in particular settings? Or is it a convenient sort of shorthand for artists? Why is it an 'exceptional enigma' in the frescoes at Santa Passera (p. 108)? Just how many times can the reader be given the assessment of a 'puzzling enigma' (260) before feeling disappointed?

One area where OSBORNE is remarkably emphatic is in the denial of cultural influence from the Franks. But this creates the sense that perhaps 'material culture' is not clearly defined. Of course there are clear political implications when Charlemagne is depicted in the mosaic of the triclinium and on the lost apse mosaic at Santa Susanna. But is there not also cultural influence? If a major public mosaic does not count as cultural influence,

what would such influence have to look like to be significant? OSBORNE does not say.

The exact interaction between Rome and the East also could use more exploration. OSBORNE waits until page 227 to say that what he means by ‘Byzantine’ is ‘what Catherine Holmes has recently referred to as “a much more fluid set of political and cultural practices showed by a series of polities and peoples within what has sometimes referred to as the Byzantine Commonwealth”’. In other words, it is a convenient shorthand for the eastern Christian world, broadly conceived’. The notion of fluidity, and the idea of broad conception, offer much leeway, much more than originally implied by the idea of ‘nostalgia’ for ‘Constantinople’ (p. 7). The metaphor of ‘nostalgia’ suggests separation, with Rome hankering for a culture from which it is growing apart. Perhaps this explains OSBORNE’s apparent uneasiness throughout the book, indicated by his frequent use of ‘scare quotes’ around the word ‘Byzantine’. If Rome is part of a ‘commonwealth’, the question then becomes what differences do exist, or what innovations might be getting contributed by Rome to the culture of the commonwealth. On occasion OSBORNE does cite innovations, as in the apse mosaic of Santa Susanna (p. 37), but the strong impression generally is that all the influence is visited upon Rome from the East.

The reader might wish for OSBORNE to go out on a limb a bit more with his assessments. However, OSBORNE does precisely what he says he will do: ‘The intention is to weave together strands of evidence in the hope of creating a comprehensive picture that exceeds the sum of its individual parts’ (p. 1). His survey of the popes and their projects allows the reader to envision the city in a wide sweep, one that encompasses one hundred years in a comprehensible way. This is enjoyable to those scholars who know OSBORNE’s writing because, heretofore, OSBORNE’s scholarship has used one work of art or one monument as a springboard for broader observations about the period, as in a distinguished article about a wall painting in the lower church of San Clemente or another about the atrium at Santa Maria Antiqua.<sup>2</sup>

For the cover of his book, OSBORNE has chosen an image of the mother of Pope Paschal, Theodora *episcopa*, from the San Zeno chapel at Santa

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2. J. OSBORNE, The Painting of the Anastasis in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome. A Reexamination of the Evidence for the Location of the Tomb of St. Cyril. *Byzantion* 51 (1981) pp. 255–287; IDEM, The Atrium of S. Maria Antiqua, Rome. A History in Art. *Papers of the British School at Rome* 55 (1987) pp. 186–223.

Prassede. Pope Paschal's mother stands in her square halo in attendance on the Virgin Mary. Her own face, that of a real person in the presence of the divine, gives a sense of what OSBORNE is trying to do. He places us so that, like Theodora and the square-haloed people of the ninth century, we can experience the popes and their projects, their politics and their culture, up close and in a way that brings to life the rich culture of ninth-century Rome.

**Keywords**

early medieval Italy; cross-cultural interaction; Rome