



EARLY CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS OF RAVENNA

“Ravenna, the night is glaucous shimmering with gold, /the tomb of violent men guarded / from terrible gazes / the dark hull filled with an imperial, iron cargo / built from that iron where Fate is invincible, driven by the shipwreck/ to the ends of the world/ above the extreme shore!”

Le città del silenzio, Gabriele d'Annunzio

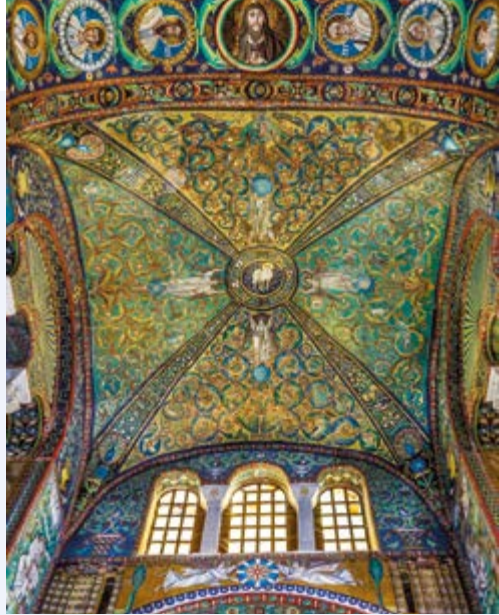
Ravenna is known the world over for its shimmering mosaics: churches, baptisteries and town-houses attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, invariably destined for a great shock when in the vicinity of this dizzying sensory experience. However, Ravenna is not a place that is unique in the world only for purely aesthetic reasons: the superb decorations dating from between the 5th and the 6th centuries, when the city was the capital of the Western Roman Empire and then outpost of the Byzantine Empire, completely codified the first expressions of Christian iconography. Ravenna thus represents the decisive piece in the mosaic of the history of art that can bring together the West and the East, antiquity and the Middle Ages, crossing whole seas and centuries.



SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 788
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: MÉRIDA, MEXICO
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1996

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The early Christian monuments of Ravenna are the highest expression of the art of the mosaic, unequalled in the synthesis of Western and oriental influences, in the integration of the Greek-Roman styles with Christian iconography and in representing the cultural and artistic climates of the 6th century. They represent a fundamental testimony of relations and exchanges, in a very important period in the formation of the European identity.





*“O lone Ravenna! many a tale
is told / Of thy great glories
in the days of old.”*

And many continue to do so, because the city of mosaics, praised by Oscar Wilde in a poem written in his youth, can generate a tangible sense of wonder in any visitor.

Visiting the sites that makeup the UNESCO area is mandatory in Ravenna: you leave from the **1 Basilica of San Vitale**, consecrated in 548 under the Archbishop Maximian and the symbol of world Byzantine art. When you have crossed the threshold, you will find it hard to understand whether the octagonal structure with the ambulatory limited by exedras, the forest of columns and the women's gallery on the upper floor, belong to a church, the place of worship of an exotic Oriental religion or to a pagan temple, until you reach the presbyter area: here are Ravenna's most celebrated mosaics, with Jesus represented with all the pomp and glory of an emperor and the figures of Justinian and Theodora. A few dozen metres away, there is the

2 Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, built a century earlier, its mosaics still imbued with the naturalism of Roman art.

Immediately afterwards, you can compare the splendid mosaic of the *Baptism of Christ* in the bare

3 Arian Baptistery with the more opulent **4 Neonian Baptistery**, where every image and the architectonic elements themselves seem to soar above the visitor in a hypnotic and tireless fluctuation. At that point, the **5 Archiepiscopal Museum** is just a few steps away. Your attention will be captured by the Throne of Maximian (6th century), finely crafted in ivory and made up of 27 carved panels, and by St Andrew's Chapel, with one of the most unusual representations of Christ in the history

of art: dressed as a warrior, wearing military sandals and armour. Before leaving the centre of Ravenna, you should definitely pay a visit to the **6 Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo**, not to be missed for the two processions of martyrs and saints that glimmer in the mosaics of the central nave, while the **7 Mausoleum of Theodoric** stands out for having been built with blocks of Istria stone (and not of bricks) without using mortar, like a gigantic early Middle Ages Lego. The itinerary comes to an end a few kilometres south of Ravenna, with one of the greatest expressions of early Christian art: the **8 Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe**, soaring vertically like all great cathedrals, which has a last, sensational cycle of mosaics in the apse area.



THE PIECES OF A FIRMAMENT

"It was in Ravenna, at the end of last March. In the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, the pale blue, of an intensity close to despair, can, by the intimate fury of the fire, melt and be pulverised into rays."

Svaghi, in *Un grido e paesaggi*, Giuseppe Ungaretti

It is not surprising that over the centuries, the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, built, according to tradition, by the daughter of Theodosius, but which has never actually held her remains, has inspired odes, poems and all sorts of thoughts.

The immediate impact is immense: from the outside, this small cross-shaped building is as modest as you can imagine; inside, on the other hand, the mosaic decorations overwhelm the senses in as aesthetic epiphany of explosive power. It is also a privileged place to observe the evolution and the changes in the history of Christian art: for example, observe the difference between the relaxed realism of Christ in the version of the *Good Shepherd* above the entrance door, influenced by the Roman figurative tradition, and the severity of the Jesus dressed in an emperor's robes in the nearby Basilica of San Vitale, completed one century later and showing a Byzantine trait. The building houses the first example of a ceiling decorated with the very widespread theme of the star-studded sky, which was to be perpetuated in the Middle Ages, until Giotto and even later, in hundreds of churches all over Europe.



**'EVEN AS FROM BRANCH
TO BRANCH, / ALONG THE
PINEY FORESTS ON THE
SHORE OF CHIASSI, / ROLLS
THE GATH'RING MELODY,
WHEN EOLUS HATH FROM
HIS CAVERN LOOS'D THE
DRIPPING SOUTH.'**

In addition to the mosaics, the iconic theme of the city of Ravenna is Dante (these are verses from *Purgatory*), who lived the last years of his life in the city in Romagna, a guest of Guido Novello da Polenta, until his death in 1321.

In this regard, the **1 Dante Museum** is a privileged opportunity to get to know more about the figure of the great poet, particularly appreciable by youngsters: children will enjoy the very high rate of interactivity of the multimedia and the pop-culture references to Lego and Mickey Mouse. There is also the chest in which the Franciscan friars laid the poet's bones, after having stolen them. Immediately next to it lies **2 Dante's Tomb**, which has held his mortal remains since 1780 and the **3 Basilica of San Francesco**, the most "entertaining" church in the city, due to the presence in the crypt

of a mosaic submerged by thousands of litres of water, with chubby goldfish which cheerfully swim between the inscriptions. The reference to Dante is then inevitable visiting the **4 Classe Pine Grove**, where it is said that the poet liked to seek refuge (after all, he knew a thing or two about forests) in search of inspiration. Children will delight in walking through the pine trees, oaks and holm oaks, flanking the rushes that mark the passage to the wetlands. This is only the prelude to the real special effects that the area south of Ravenna has in store for them: **5 Mirabilandia** is one of the best-known amusement parks in the country and, with all types of roller coasters, haunted houses, water coasters, rafting, oil towers and laser fights, there is something for all tastes. The adjoining Mirabeach guarantees hours of fun for fans of water slides and swimming pools. Not far away, there is the **6 Dedalo Maze**, an enormous field of maize, where you can have a real adventure: remember that to find your way out of the most difficult route, you need a good sense of direction. Lastly, considering that the municipality of Ravenna stretches for a very long 35 kilometres along the coast, the itinerary can only end with a lovely afternoon at the beach: **7 Lido di Savio** is a destination that is particularly recommended for families, for swimming, playing on the sand and admiring the many fishing huts, equipped with enormous nets, near the mouth of the River Savio.



RAVENNA in books

Reading suggestions to discover
the city of mosaics.

• **The Divine Comedy**, Dante Alighieri (1314-21). The most important, representative and ingenious work in the history of Italian literature has an inseparable bond with Ravenna, as the city was the last refuge of its author. Dante mentioned it in some passages of *Inferno*, answering Guido da Montefeltro, and dedicates a passage to the Classe Pine Grove in *Purgatory*.

• **Ravenna**, in *Poems*, Oscar Wilde (1878). Oscar Wilde wrote most of his poems in his youth. The one dedicated to Ravenna guaranteed the great writer's first important literary success. He describes entering the city on horseback, struck by the silence in the streets and enraptured by the aura of greatness of the figures that had made the name of the city immortal: Theodoric, Dante and Lord Byron.

• **Le città del silenzio**, in *Elettra*, Gabriele d'Annunzio (1903). In this book published in the early 20th century, the

second in the collection of the *Laudi*, the poet dedicates his compositions to some Italian cities, celebrating their greatness which has never lulled. He writes in particular of Ravenna's relationship with the sea, which over the centuries has moved further and further away, causing its inevitable decline.

• **Italian Hours**, Henry James (1909). Of all the great writers who were subjugated by the marvels of Italy, James plays a leading role for the refinement of his words and the ability to wring original interpretations out of even the best-known monuments. The pages on the mosaics of Ravenna are particularly evocative: "and everywhere too by the same deep amazement of the fact that, while centuries had worn themselves away and empires risen and fallen, these little cubes of coloured glass had stuck in their allotted places and kept their freshness".

• **Byron a Ravenna. L'uomo e il poeta**, Alieto Benini (1960). Among the great men of letters who celebrated Ravenna, a special place is due to Lord Byron, who fell madly in love with Teresa Guiccioli and the city itself. The book by Benini tells these stories.

• **Un grido e paesaggi**, Giuseppe Ungaretti (1968). The poet produces some melancholic impressions on spring written in Amsterdam and Ravenna, where he dwells on the Mausoleums of Galla Placidia and of Theodoric, and contemplates the animal occupations of doves.

• **La delfina bizantina**, Aldo Busi (1986). In the usual tangle of registers and linguistic expressions which distinguishes his style, Aldo Busi produces an intriguing work. The main character is called Anastasia and manages a funeral home in Ravenna.

Children's books:

• **Una pigna per Ravenna**, Silvia Togni, Enrico Rambaldi (2012). An illustrated guide of the city for children, which reveals a number of strange things and breaks down stereotypes and clichés.

• **Ravenna for Kids**, A City Guide with Pimpa, Altan (2017). For an image of Ravenna from a dreamy and cheerful perspective, here is the famous red-spotted dog's exploration of the city.