

Power and Hierarchy in Byzantine Art and Architecture

GREGORY GIANNAKIS

The dissemination and assertion of power in building and landscape, or in other words, art and architecture, is said to be extremely pervasive in societies with a strict and complex state hierarchy.¹ Thus, the Eastern Roman Empire, during Late Antique and Byzantine times—where society was rigidly structured along political lines—was an ideal environment for this deliberate and pervasive manipulation of space. This paper will discuss how the Byzantines used their art and architecture to unite and divide, to construct their social hierarchy, and to make clear the relationships between the different entities and institutions of the Empire. In particular, Byzantine art and architecture established the hierarchical dimensions of power in three fundamental relations: those of the commoners and the Church, the emperor and his subjects, and the emperor and the Church.

The art and architecture of the Byzantines vividly expressed the power relationship between commoners and the Church. As Taft believes, the Byzantine religious community deliberately created an environment for themselves in which they could stage ceremonies and religious acts that promoted a hierarchy within the congregation.² Here one turns to San Vitale in Ravenna to look at Paliou and Knight's study "Mapping of the Senses," wherein they create a sensory map using isovists and visibility graphs to shed light on how different parts of the congregations would have observed and experienced the service.³ By not conforming to the more prevalent basilica-style construction, San Vitale is of a much more focused and concentrated shape. In such a church, as in the later cross-in-square churches, the role of the laity, or the commoners, became increasingly passive, and was restricted mostly to listening and observing.⁴ Naturally, some found themselves in better vantage points than others, thus corresponding to the social order of Byzantium. In San Vitale, women were either in the *matroneum*, the second storey balcony, or in the left and right ambulatories flanking the main nave in which the men sat.⁵ Whereas female members had quite restricted visual

¹ P. Magdalino, "Power Building and Power Space in Byzantine Constantinople: The Ethics and Dynamics of Construction and Conservation," in *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture; Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium, Istanbul 21 - 23 June 2010*, ed. Ayla Ödekan, Nevra Necipoğlu, and Engin Akyürek (Istanbul: Koç UP, 2010), 55.

² R. F. Taft. "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When and Why?" in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 52.

³ E. Paliou and D. J. Knight, "Mapping the Senses: Perceptual and Social Aspects of Late Antique Liturgy in San Vitale, Ravenna," *Computer Applications and Quantitative Methods in Archaeology*, 2010.

⁴ R. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 230.

⁵ Paliou and Knight, "Mapping the Senses," 2.

access to the focus of the ceremony, the chancel, there were no architectural features in the main nave that obstructed the view of the men.⁶

Nevertheless, there are some locations in the *matroneum* that offered women a unique perspective, affording them the opportunity not only to observe the ceremony unfolding below, but also the male congregation members themselves.⁷ Due to this elevated position, these women would have had close eye-level access to symbolically important architectural and decorative features invisible and inaccessible to their male counterparts below.⁸ This could be indicative of the special place of women in Byzantine religious spheres, and suggestive of their stout devotion to the sole institution in which they could hope to wield any power.⁹ This position is best exemplified by images of the Virgin and Child, as a “silent witness of women in Orthodox Christianity.”¹⁰ These devotional images were presented in the apse, a revered but notably inferior location within the decorative scheme of Byzantine churches.

Segregation also occurred between the clergy and the laity. This was realized physically by the division between the sanctuary and the nave of the church. Over time, the chancel barrier between these two areas grew in height and opacity, using the now hidden space of the sanctuary to give an air of mystery, power and inaccessibility to the acts performed and the mysteries observed behind these closed doors.¹¹

Paulus Silentiarius, a sixth-century poet and palace official of Justinian, describes the sanctuary as an “inside place reserved as the Holy of Holies and accessible only to priest [with the] barrier of bronze as a holy reminder, so no one may simply enter by accident.”¹²

A structural element of the church that did allow for more interaction between these two distinct realms was the *ambo*, an elevated platform in the middle of the nave, from which the Gospel and Epistle would be recited. While access to the *ambo* could only be gained from the sanctuary, it extended



Figure 1: Procession of the Holy Martyrs at S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.

⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ J. L. Bintliff, *The Complete Archaeology of Greece: From Hunter-Gatherers to the 20th Century A.D.* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 405.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paul. Sil. *Descr. s. Sophiae*, 563-66. Translated by Immanuel Bekker.

out into and high above the assembly before it so that it could be surrounded by the congregation.¹³ The *ambo* allowed both clergy and laity—and by extension, heaven and earth—to temporarily co-exist in a less segregated relationship, as preachers gave their homilies here rather than from their chair within the apse, which would have placed them at a much greater distance from their followers.¹⁴

This temporary co-existence was further encouraged by varieties of churches such as the cross-in-square, the dominant style from the Middle Byzantine period onwards. By concentrating the congregation beneath its main dome and in a central position, as in Hosias Loukas, the laity was now surrounded on all sides by powerful religious activities, images and messages.¹⁵ Within an architectural style that best lent itself to the expression of a celestial hierarchy, with those most powerful and revered within the domes of the church, and those below them decreasing in importance the closer one moved to the ground, the congregation would find themselves “bodily enclosed in a grand icon” that was the church itself.¹⁶

This spatial order was hinted at even earlier in the basilica church of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, with its procession of saints just above the laity, as part of the church’s redecoration after the Byzantine conquest in 540 A.D. The sequence features two rows, one on each side of the nave, with the gender of each row’s members corresponding to the gender occupying their side of the floor below them. These saints (Figure 1), carrying crowns toward the Virgin and Christ at the church’s eastern end, mimic the wine and bread (or *coronae*) of



Figure 2: Justinian in processional mosaic in apse of San Vitale, Ravenna

the Eucharist brought to the same end of the church by the congregants below.¹⁷ In doing so, the laity “imitates the sacrifice of the martyrs,”¹⁸ and looks to the holy men and

¹³D. L. C. Clark, “Viewing the Liturgy: A Space Syntax Study of Changing Visibility and Accessibility in the Development of the Byzantine Church in Jordan,” *World Archaeology* Vol. 39, No. 1. (2007): 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bintliff, *The Complete Archaeology of Greece*, 404.

¹⁶ O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London: Kegan Paul, 1948), 13.

¹⁷ O. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1948). 90-103.

¹⁸ Clementina Rizzardi, “Il mausoleo nel mondo culturale e artistico di Galla Placidia / The Mausoleum in the cultural-artistic world of Galla Placidia,” in *Il mausoleo di Galla Placidia a Ravenna*, eds. Clementina Rizzardi and Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli, (Modena, 1996), 112.

women directly above them as the heavenly embodiment of their own spiritual devotion on Earth.¹⁹ These holy individuals offered the commoners temporary entrance into the celestial to the commoners, blurring the lines of an otherwise strict cosmic hierarchy. Therefore, architecture and art illuminated the complexities of the power relations between the Church and its devoted laity.

Byzantine art and architecture also played a role in delineating the power relationship between the emperor and his subjects. An expression of the power held by the emperor in this relationship could most readily be seen in newly annexed parts of the empire, as with the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, after the city's conquest in 540. While a discussion of the symbolism of the images within Theodora and Justinian's panels in the building's apse will soon follow, the very presence of these two figures in a city they never actually visited themselves must first be explained.

The answer is found in the two figures to Justinian's left, the man explicitly labelled as Maximian, and the figure between the two, most likely Julianus Argentarius, the church's founder and benefactor (Figure 2).²⁰ While it must be made clear that plans to build San Vitale were already in the works before Ravenna was annexed by the Byzantines, it was only finished post-conquest and was consecrated by an archbishop (Maximian) appointed by the Emperor and Empress themselves. Maximian's presence in Ravenna is important here because he was, as Verhoeven states, "the one outstanding representative of Byzantium in Italy," especially in ecclesiastical matters and dogmatic controversies.²¹

Thus, these panels strongly identify Ravenna with Maximian's, and by association the imperial court's, political and ecclesiastical stance.²² Even the plan of the church brings to mind the Church of Saints Sergios and Backhos, completed before the construction of San Vitale had even begun. The Church of San Vitale, while undeniably influenced by local traditions, oozes of a distinctly Constantinopolitan and imperial flavour and reinforce the power relationship between the subjugated, Ravenna, and the subjugator, Justinian and his recently expanded Byzantine Empire.²³

Defining power over one's subjects in art was also essential in times of Byzantine decline, especially when dealing with foreign allies. This can be observed in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries leading up to the Crusaders' sack of the capital in 1204, when allies were inscribed into the Byzantine hierarchy by means of "title-diplomacy," subordinating them in a more symbolic and implicit way.²⁴ For instance, on the Holy Crown of Hungary, the Hungarian King Geza I is placed beneath the imperial

¹⁹ Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*, 48.

²⁰ M. Verhoeven, *The Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna: Transformations and Memory* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

²² *Ibid.*, 129.

²³ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁴ H. Maguire. "'Signs and Symbols of Your Always Victorious Reign.' The Political Ideology and Meaning of Falconry in Byzantium," in *Images of the Byzantine World: Visions, Messages and Meanings: Studies Presented to Leslie Brubaker*, ed. Angeliki Lymberopoulou, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 138.

family in status, as he lacks the halo and costume of Emperor Michael VII and his son Constantine. So too does his pose exude an air of deference. Instead of looking straight ahead like the other figures, his gaze is directed towards the centre, to the holder of real, albeit weakening power in the physical world; towards the Byzantine Emperor.²⁵

This statement of what Jonathan Shepard terms “soft power” is also exemplified by falconry and its corresponding imagery, as in the Pala D’Oro medallions (Figure 3).²⁶ Here, emperors are depicted on horseback, with birds of prey in their right hands.²⁷ Some contemporary writers such as Achmet in his tenth-century *Oneirocriticon* argue that these creatures symbolize the subjugated lands and rulers that allow the Byzantine Emperor to rule his empire by proxy.²⁸ For the first time, these images of obedient and trained birds of prey replaced the similarly symbolic scene of the Emperor hunting wild beasts himself. Now the Emperor had subjects to do his work for him, and required portrayals of his allies in

subordinate positions to preserve this system. This effectively highlights the use of art to represent and accompany the non-static political realities of Byzantium and the medieval world at large. Hence, art and architecture played a strong role in establishing the power

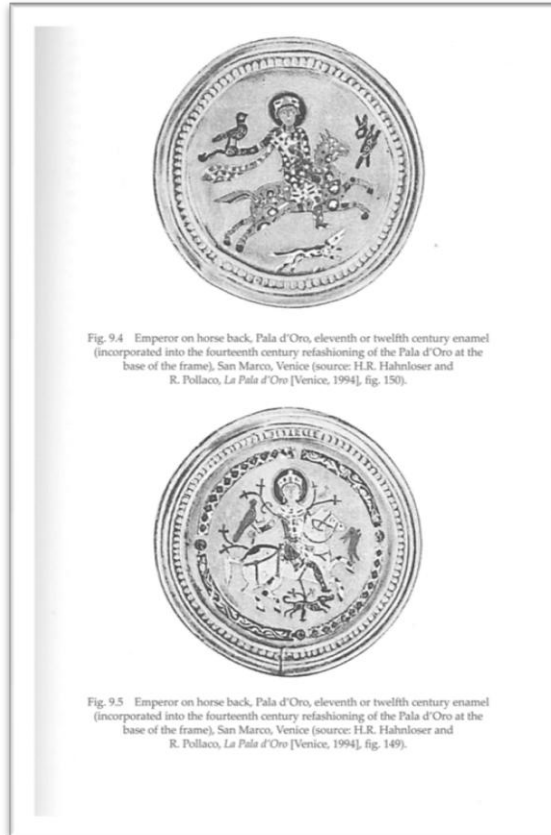


Fig. 9.4 Emperor on horse back, Pala d’Oro, eleventh or twelfth century enamel (incorporated into the fourteenth century refashioning of the Pala d’Oro at the base of the frame), San Marco, Venice (source: H.R. Hahnloser and R. Pollacco, *La Pala d’Oro* [Venice, 1994], fig. 150).

Fig. 9.5 Emperor on horse back, Pala d’Oro, eleventh or twelfth century enamel (incorporated into the fourteenth century refashioning of the Pala d’Oro at the base of the frame), San Marco, Venice (source: H.R. Hahnloser and R. Pollacco, *La Pala d’Oro* [Venice, 1994], fig. 149).

Figure 3: Pala d’Oro Medallions with Images of Falconry

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ J. Shepard. “Byzantium’s Overlapping Circles,” in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, London 21-26 August 2006, Vol 1 Plenary Papers*, ed. F.K Haarer and E. Jeffreys (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006), 22.

²⁷ Maguire, “The Heavenly Court,” 137.

²⁸ Achmet, *Oneirocriticon* 285. Translated by Steven M. Oberhelman.

relations between the emperor and his subjects, even if the nature of these relations changes throughout the lifetime of the Empire.



Figure 4: Constantine IX Monomachos and Zoe flanking Christ in a mosaic in Hagia Sophia

III Argyros, highlights the need Byzantine emperors felt to continuously outdo one another in their contributions to the Church, and by doing so, guaranteeing their place in heaven after death.²⁹ The fact that Romanos' body was preserved on the mosaic, however, suggests a tradition of emperors, regardless of a change in face and name, constantly giving generous sums of money to the Church. This is shown by the full bag in his hands, and further emphasizes the dependence of the Church on the imperial court for financial support.³⁰

The relationship between the emperor and the state religion was likewise exploited to assert his position within the celestial hierarchy. San Vitale's panels of Justinian and Theodora in a procession towards Christ do just this. Justinian is surrounded specifically by twelve individuals, explicitly referencing the twelve Apostles

The Byzantine hierarchy was also defined by the relationship between the imperial court and the Church, something constantly mirrored in the Empire's artistic and architectural programs. This is shown in several depictions of the court donating to and funding the Church, as seen with the mosaic of Empress Zoe and Constantine IX flanking Christ (Figure 4). The obvious erasure of the face of a previous Emperor, here Zoe's first husband, Romanos



Figure 5: Side of Leo VI's Ivory Comb depicting Leo, Mary and Gabriel

²⁹ R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons* (London: George Philip, 1985), 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

of Christ.³¹ The division of these men's military and religious associations reflects the balance of power held by the Emperor.³² Nevertheless, it is the clergy that leads the procession, perhaps showing Justinian's need to demonstrate the origin of his earthly power.³³ Furthermore, Justinian carries the host bread of the Eucharist, strongly likening himself to Christ as the Redemptive Bread of Life, or at least to a High Priest.³⁴ Finally, the Chi-Rho emblem on the shields of the soldiers on his right reminds us of Constantine's vision and victory at the Milvian Bridge, where the very foundation of Constantinople as capital of the Empire rested on a triumphant and militant Christ.³⁵

By commissioning works such as these, the emperor alone had the privilege of placing his portrait and ideology where that of an ordinary person could not be permitted.³⁶ By placing himself within the celestially symbolic Hagia Sophia, he situated himself in a location and relationship both physically and symbolically closer to God, exemplifying his special status within the Byzantine world and the court of heaven.³⁷

His elite status was perpetrated too by the increasing iconographic association of emperors with angels. For instance, the ceremonial comb of Leo VI shows on one side Christ flanked by the Saints Paul and Peter, and on the other the Virgin flanked by the Archangel Gabriel and Leo himself (Figure 5). The figures on both sides of the comb are framed within domes that remind the viewer of either the Hagia Sophia or the apsidal rooms used for receptions in the Great Palace.³⁸ Perhaps this ambiguity was created consciously, to further imply the links between the earthly and heavenly courts.³⁹

We find that the Mary shown on the comb diverges in interesting ways from her otherwise very similar depiction in the church's central apse. On the comb, the Emperor has replaced one of the archangels. Both Gabriel and Leo don the imperial robes, complete with *loroi* (embroidered scarves) and orbs, and bear staffs positioned at identical angles. Similarly, the Mary on the comb adds a single pearl to Leo's crown on her right, explicitly stating the divine approval of the Emperor's earthly rule.

³¹ P. Hunt, "Byzantine Art as Propaganda: Justinian and Theodora at Ravenna," *Philolog.* Stanford University, 2006.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons* (London: George Philip, 1985), 193.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ W.T Woodfin, "Celestial Hierarchies and Earthly Hierarchies in the art of the Byzantine Church," in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson, 334-351, (London: Routledge, 2010), 305.

³⁹ *Ibid.*



Figure 6: Figure 6: Side of Leo VI's Ivory Comb depicting Leo, Mary and Gabriel (Photo: Museum fur Spantantike un Byzantinische Kunst, Byzantine, Constantinople)

the corporeal and celestial world was instrumental in justifying the emperor's position in society. Placing himself as first-in-command in this world, and second only to God in the world above, served not only to convince his subjects but also himself of his power and the place he had secured for himself in heaven after death.⁴³

In the eyes of the Byzantines, the wings of angels embodied their ability to travel freely between the two worlds.⁴⁴ By assuming these wings as seen on coins issued by John Komnenos-Doukas and Michael VII from Thessaloniki (Figure 7), the Emperors could now firmly assert that they too were a mediator between God and his believers, between heaven and earth. Hence, art and architecture clearly served to define the power relationship between the emperor and the Church.

This contrasts with the image we are confronted with in the portrayal of Nikephoros III Botaneiates' in a 1072 frontispiece to a compilation of John Chrysostom's homilies (Figure 6). Here, the Archangel Michael and St. John Chrysostom flank the Emperor, wearing the antique tunic and *himation* (mantle). As referenced in the poem above the painting, they fulfill the roles of the Emperor's courtiers or eunuchs, mediating interactions between the Emperor and his subjects by means of their heavenly associations.⁴⁰

Why then do we have two incongruent portrayals of the relationship between angels and emperors? For Byzantines, this was because the earthly imperial court, where imperial dress attributed the highest position in court hierarchy to its wearer, and the heavenly court, where imperial dress was a marker of second rank and deference to

Christ, were not completely synonymous entities.⁴¹ Instead, the two realms were

"interpenetrating, with each incorporating members of the other."⁴² This assignment of

a powerful position to the emperor in both

⁴⁰ Maguire, 249.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 256-7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

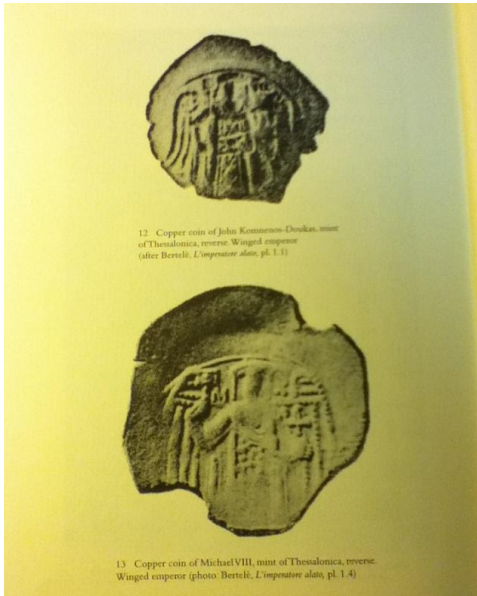


Figure 7: Coins depicting John Komnenos-Doukas and Michael VIII as winged. (Photo: Maguire)

In closing, art and architecture succeeds in accurately representing the power relations and hierarchy of the Byzantine Empire. The relationship between the Church and its followers in art, while at some times more segregated, separating women from men, and often the clergy from the laity, could also have its boundaries loosened, as with the clergy's use of the *ambo* and the proximity of holy men and women to the congregation on the ground. So too did the power structure existing between the emperor and his subjects find its expression in visual representations, especially in cases of indirect assertions of power throughout the Byzantine period.

This method was changed to suit the different periods of the Empire's decline and growth. Art made clear

the intimacy in the hierarchy between the emperor and the Church, through depictions of church funding, imperial processions mimicking those of a religious nature, and the images of archangels.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Paulus Silentarius. *Descriptio ecclesiae sanctae Sophiae et ambonis*. Translated by Immanuel Bekker. University of Bonn, 1837.

Achmet. *Oneirocriticon*. Translated by Steven M. Oberhelman. Lubbock, Tex.: Texas Tech University Press, 1991

Secondary Sources

Bintliff, J. L. *The Complete Archaeology of Greece: From Hunter-Gatherers to the 20th Century A.D.* Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Clark, D. L. C. "Viewing the Liturgy: A Space Syntax Study of Changing Visibility and Accessibility in the Development of the Byzantine Church in Jordan." *World Archaeology Vol. 39, No. 1*, (2007): 84-104.

- Cormack, R. *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons*. London: George Philip, 1985
- Deliyannis, D. M. *Ravenna in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010
- Demus, O. *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium*. London: Kegan Paul, 1948.
- Hunt, P. "Byzantine Art as Propaganda: Justinian and Theodora at Ravenna." *Philolog*. Stanford University, 2006.
- Magdalino, P. "Power Building and Power Space in Byzantine Constantinople: The Ethics and Dynamics of Construction and Conservation." In *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture; Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium, Istanbul 21 - 23 June 2010*. Ed. Ayla Ödekan, Nevra Necipoğlu, and Engin Akyürek, 55-62. Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2013.
- Maguire, Henry. "'Signs and Symbols of Your Always Victorious Reign.' The Political Ideology and Meaning of Falconry in Byzantium." In *Images of the Byzantine World: Visions, Messages and Meanings: Studies Presented to Leslie Brubaker*. Ed. Angeliki Lymberopoulou. 135-147. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Maguire, H. "The Heavenly Court." In *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*. Ed. Henry Maguire, 247-58. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997.
- Mainstone, R. *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Mathews, T. F. *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971.
- Paliou, E. and D. J. Knight. "Mapping the Senses: Perceptual and Social Aspects of Late Antique Liturgy in San Vitale, Ravenna." *Computer Applications and Quantitative Methods in Archaeology*. Granada: Online publication, 2010.
- Rizzardi, Clementina. "Il mausoleo nel mondo culturale e artistico di Galla Placidia / The Mausoleum in the cultural-artistic world of Galla Placidia." In *Il mausoleo di Galla Placidia a Ravenna*. Eds. Clementina Rizzardi and Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli: 109-128. Modena, 1996.
- Shepard, J. "Byzantium's overlapping circles." In *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21-26 August 2006. Vol 1: Plenary Papers*. Eds. F. K. Haarer and E. Jeffreys. Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, (2006): 15-55.
- Taft, R. F. "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When and Why." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 52 (1998): 27-87.
- Verhoeven, M. *The Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna: Transformations and Memory*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011
- von Simson, Otto. *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948.

Woodfin, W.T. "Celestial Hierarchies and Earthly Hierarchies in the art of the Byzantine Church." In *The Byzantine World*. Ed. P. Stephenson, 334-351. London: Routledge, 2010.