

Eikón Imago

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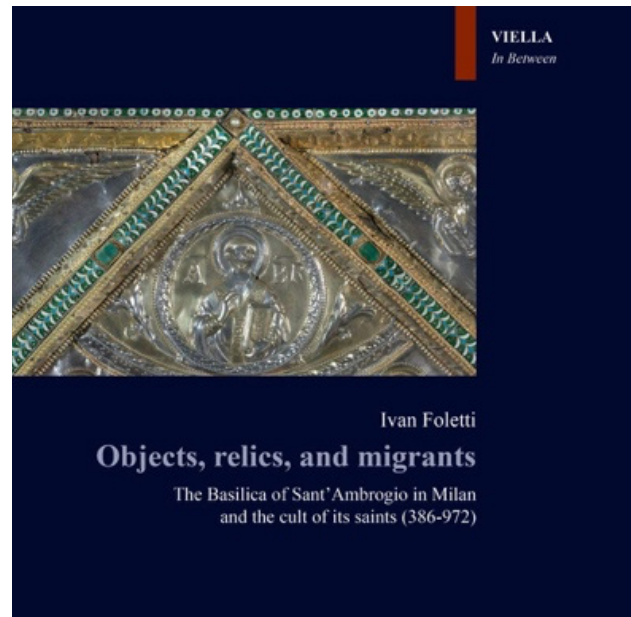
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 EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Foletti, Ivan. *Objects, Relics, and Migrants. The Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan and the Cult of Its Saints (386–972)*. In *Between. Images, Words and Objects 2* (Rome: Viella, 2020) [ISBN: 9788867289509].

Conceived with a wider audience in mind, this is the English translation of a book on the Basilica of Saint Ambrose in Milan that Ivan Foletti published two years ago in Italian. The author intends to open up the discourse about Milan and its Basilica Ambrosiana for the period between the late fourth and the late tenth centuries in ways which are unprecedented. His concise introduction clarifies for the reader two elements which recur throughout the six chapters of the book: the presence of relics and the interaction with what is different or “other”, as the author puts it. Immediately after, he explains his choice of words for the title. He uses the term “objects” to refer to chapels (the Sacello di S. Vittore), liturgical furnishings (the Golden Altar and the ciborium), as well as mosaics (in the apse and in the Sacello) dating between the late fourth and the late tenth centuries and mostly preserved in or by the Basilica Ambrosiana. Foletti carefully selects his “objects” and focuses only on those he thinks have been conceived to be in visual and conceptual dialogue with one another in the sacred space of the basilica – a dialogue centred upon important relics of saints it still hosts. He also posits that in the ethnically and culturally mixed society of late antique and early medieval Milan, these “objects”, and the relics with which they were eventually associated, became instruments of ethnic – or perhaps better, cultural – inclusion or exclusion.

This innovative viewpoint on the history of the art of the Basilica Ambrosiana is supported by the many pictures Foletti provides of each of his selected “objects”. They are taken from different standpoints but usually from the ground floor, as a person from the past would have viewed and appreciated them. He tries to conjure up an immersive experience of these “objects” – notwithstanding the fact that a book can only offer a bi-dimensional experience of a building or of any object – by intentionally rejecting a frontal and often flattening photographic perspective. He remarks that instead he had “each object ... photographed just as we see it and presumably how it was seen by the medieval viewer’s ‘period eye’” (p. 8). The numerous illustrations, especially the colour plates, do indeed provide new views on the selected “objects”, such as bottom-up views as well as increasingly closer views and views of their reverse sides, which would have been visible only to clergy. However, a few lines later Foletti admits that photographic reproductions have their limits – it goes



without saying that they can hardly assist in reproducing or evoking the experience of the medieval viewer.

In the introduction Foletti also explains why the word “relics” appears in the title: the presence of the bodies of Gervasius and Protasius (and later of Ambrose) is, in his eyes, the leitmotif of the late antique and medieval Basilica Ambrosiana. The dissemination of relics is also the instrument through which in the late fourth century Ambrose carefully created and supported a vast network of relations with key figures in Christian clergy. Foletti argues that in the period of the Longobard occupation of northern Italy, that is between the late sixth and the late eighth centuries, the cult of (the relics of) Ambrose functioned as an instrument of ethnic exclusion/inclusion, with the Longobards seen as “heretic” (heathens or followers of Arianism) and thus excluded. He expands this argument later (pp. 155–56), where he maintains that Ambrose, the champion of orthodoxy against the Arian heresy, was used by the Carolingians against the Longobards. I agree with the idea that the Carolingians in Italy adopted Ambrose and Milanese saints as their patron saints and used them as elements of religious–cultural identity both in and outside northern Italy. However, I would be more cautious in stating that the Carolingians used Ambrose and Milanese saints against the Longobards and that they regarded the Longobards as followers of Arianism.

But to return for the last time to the title of this book, Foletti, in using the term “migrants” instead of “ethnicities”, admits to having been influenced by the current migrant crisis which has undoubtedly sharpened public perceptions of phenomena such as cultural appropriation and separation (p. 10).

Foletti’s book has a clear and helpful structure: each chapter is focussed on one object, be it a chapel, a relic, an architectural decoration or a liturgical furnishing of the Basilica Ambrosiana which he treats in a chronological sequence. Each “object” is first presented visually, through colour images, then described and discussed in the context of its time, and finally used to reconstruct histories. The first chapter is centred on the now lost original apse mosaic made in the late fourth century at the time of the Basilica’s foundation by Saint Ambrose. The second chapter deals with the Sacello di S. Vittore in Ciel d’oro, a funerary chapel annexed to the Basilica Ambrosiana with mosaics dated c.500, which show Saint Victor in a clypeus in the centre of the dome. Ambrose and his predecessor Bishop Maternus of Milan (c.316–28), are flanked respectively by the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, and Felix and Nabor. These are depicted in mosaic on the walls to either side of the windows. This chapel can certainly be regarded as an early attestation of the cult of Saint Ambrose promoted by one of his successors, Bishop Lawrence (490–512), who had him portrayed with facial features and garments evoking both the dignity of a philosopher and the civic virtues of a high officer of the Roman Empire. In chapter three Foletti deals with the period in which Milanese bishops went into exile in Genoa following the Longobard conquest of Italy. During this period the cult of Gervasius and Protasius declined as a consequence of the fact that it was not actively promoted by Milanese bishops. Chapter four is a detailed discussion of the one of the most attractive furnishings of the basilica, the so-called “Golden Altar”, commissioned by the Frankish Bishop Angilbert II (824–59) to enshrine a porphyry sarcophagus in which he had translated the bodies of Gervasius, Protasius, and Ambrose. Chapter five discusses two narrative scenes which were added to the apse mosaic of the basilica in the second half of the ninth century when they were placed either side of the depictions of Gervasius and Protasius. The final chapter is about the elaborately carved ciborium which enshrines the Golden Altar.

A detailed examination of each chapter would exceed the space allowed to this review. Therefore, I will focus on certain questions which emerge in three of the chapters: the first, the fourth, and the fifth. In the first chapter, after a careful examination of earlier literature and comparable materials, Foletti builds on a previous interpretation by Carlo Bertelli. He confirms that the present apse mosaic, a thirteenth-century remake heavily restored between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, which has at its centre an enthroned Christ flanked by Gervasius and Protasius, is a “conceptual spoliium” of the original mosaic (p. 27). Although the two martyrs were not as popular in the late Middle Ages as they had been earlier, this late medieval mosaic arguably repro-

duced the main traits of the original one, that is Christ and the martyrs. Ambrose was left out, although he certainly was, and still is, the main cultural focus in the church. In the original fourth-century apse Ambrose possibly had Christ depicted as standing and flanked by the martyrs, whose bodies Ambrose had found in 386. This hypothetical reconstruction is not far from what has been reconstructed for the apsidal mosaic in the fourth-century Basilica of St Peter’s in Rome, with Christ standing between Peter and Paul. In trying to reconstruct as closely as possible the original Milanese mosaic, Foletti looks at more or less contemporary as well as later depictions in various media, trying to find how they may have left traces on the imagery of Christ in the apse. He concludes that given the relative abundance of standing Christs in the apses of medieval churches in Lombardy, their prototype may well have been local and hence points to the Basilica Ambrosiana (p. 31). The fourth-century Milanese mosaic, then, must have been conceived by Ambrose as a celebration of Gervasius and Protasius. Their relics finally made up for Milan’s relative scarcity of holy bodies, satisfying what Ambrose felt was a fundamental requirement for cementing the identity of the local Christian community. To the sides of the fourth-century mosaic with Christ and the two martyrs, Foletti argues that we might well imagine Ambrose and another saint (Victor?) or Simplicianus, his successor as bishop of Milan. Foletti regards the apse of S. Ambrogio alla Rienna, a ninth-century church in a secluded corner of the countryside of Salerno, in southern *Langobardia*, as a late reflection of the Milanese fourth-century apse. In S. Ambrogio alla Rienna an enthroned Virgin Mary with the Christ Child is flanked by Ambrose, Simplicianus, Gervasius, and Protasius. Unattested elsewhere in the region in the Longobard period, the cult of these Milanese saints may only be explained through Carolingian patrons, since the church lay on land belonging to the monastery of S. Vincenzo al Volturno, where the presence of Frankish monks and Carolingian patronage is attested (p. 44).

Near the end of the chapter, Foletti suggests that in promoting the cult of the martyrs in Milan, and in spreading their contact relics through his network of acquaintances, Ambrose gained for Milan an international prestige as a holy place—superior even to the international prestige of Rome, as Foletti arguably maintains (p. 45).

In the fourth chapter, the author considers the unusual altar—reliquary—tomb of the Basilica Ambrosiana in the context of the political and cultural tensions between Milan, as capital of the Carolingians in Italy, and Rome. Decorated with gems, gold and silver laminas, and cloisonné enamels, the altar has a repoussé Christological cycle on the gilded front side and stories of Saint Ambrose on its gilt silver reverse side, with a gemmed cross in gilt silver surrounded by the busts of Ambrose, Martin of Tours, Maternus, and Milanese martyrs on both its short sides. In consideration of liturgical partitions which prevented lay people from having access to the sanctuary, the Golden Altar was visible only at a distance to the majority of the worshippers. While they were likely mesmerised by its gleaming surfaces, in fact they would

have had only a glimpse of its intricate decoration, possibly only of its geometrical partitions and of the three crosses on the front and sides of the altar. The sign of the cross, he posits, was used to attract attention to the presence of holy bodies, in the way Ambrose had used the sign of the cross to signal the presence of the body of martyr Nazarius in verses he composed for the solemn translation of his relics in the *Basilica Apostolorum* of Milan. Foletti suggests that a more detailed reading of the narrative programmes of the front and reverse sides of the Golden Altar was possible only to those with access to the presbytery (p. 140). On the reverse side of the altar, these “privileged beholders” could see a sort of *fenestella confessionis* made with two silver gilt doors which gave access to the relics. The two doors are decorated with four clypei encircling figures: on one side, the Archangel Michael is above and Saint Ambrose blessing the patron of the altar, Angilbertus II, is below. On the other side, the Archangel Gabriel is above Ambrose blessing the master goldsmith Vuolvinius, who led the workshop responsible for this extraordinary artefact. On the reverse side, as on the sides of the altar, the figures depicted are also clearly identified with *tituli*. In fact, while the Christological cycle on the front was matter universally known and recognisable, the stories involving Ambrose were not, and Foletti remarks that the illustration of this hagiographical cycle is a unicum, with scenes created *ad hoc* (p. 146). The juxtaposition of the figures of Christ and Ambrose on the front and back of the altar reveals, in Foletti’s eyes, the intention to present Ambrose as an *alter Christus*. While this notion may be subject to debate, it is the case that Ambrose is presented as an example of a good bishop, a good shepherd for his flock, and that the function of the altar as tomb–reliquary is alluded to in two scenes in which he is on his deathbed (p. 150). The exaltation of Ambrose and the reprise of his cult in this phase are grounded, in the author’s opinion, in the Carolingian effort to restore the prestige associated with the Roman Empire. Ambrose had been a Roman officer before becoming a religious man; later he gained immense spiritual and political influence as a bishop of the late imperial capital of Milan. The revival of his cult allowed the Carolingians to claim their share in the imperial legacy. This may well have been the case, for there is a hint of this in the cycle of Ambrose on the reverse side of the altar, where there is no sign of the tensions that existed between Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius (r. 379–95). For Foletti this may reflect the intention of the Carolingians to present Ambrose as a role-model – a charismatic Church leader who operates in accordance with imperial power, as Bishop Angilbertus actually did (p. 151). Finally, the emphasis of this re-poussé cycle on the relation of Ambrose to his contem-

porary Saint Martin, (the apostle of Gaul, who would become the national saint for the Franks), suggests to Foletti that Ambrose had been engaged in Carolingian propaganda against the Longobards (p. 156).

As indicated, chapter five deals with two mosaic panels in the apse that were added to either side of Gervasius and Protasius in the second half of the ninth century. The panels represent two scenes from the life of Saint Ambrose which allegedly happened at the same time by means of a miracle: on the right Ambrose is officiating Mass in Milan while on the left he is officiating at the funeral of Saint Martin in Gaul. A hagiographical text, the *De uita et meritis Ambrosii*, composed between the mid and the second half of the ninth century, asserts that Ambrose fell asleep while officiating Mass and was transported to the funeral of Martin. This episode was not present in an earlier retelling of Ambrose’s life. In describing Ambrose and his role, the *De uita et meritis Ambrosii* relies on figures of speech used by Gregory the Great in his *Life of Saint Martin of Tours*, thus remarking on the spiritual proximity of the two saints. Foletti rightly points out that the “rhetoric” of the newly added mosaics is different from the “rhetoric” of the Golden Altar and that they cannot be seen as contemporary. Moreover, in the mosaics Ambrose is given the facial features of Saint Peter, arguably to appropriate his spiritual authority and antagonise Rome. After considering a number of historical circumstances as well as visual comparanda with regard to the facial features of Ambrose, Foletti dates these mosaics to c.877. At that time, Bishop Anspertus of Milan, and the pope collided for political reasons linked to the succession of Charles the Bald (d. 877). Anspertus did in fact contest the authority of the pope (pp. 173–74).

In sum, one may agree or disagree with the main tenets of this book. However, its undoubted merits lie in Foletti’s adoption of a *longue durée* approach to his analysis of some of the main features of the Basilica Ambrosiana. This enabled him to overcome the disciplinary separation of earlier studies of the Ambrosiana in which archaeologists dealt with late Antiquity and art historians with the Longobard, Carolingian, and Ottonian periods. Possibly as a consequence of this approach, Foletti is able to offer much food for thought to those interested in Milan, a centre of significant political and cultural developments between late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, given that it has not yet had sufficient attention from scholars.

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