WHERE IS THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND ICONOGRAPHY OF GERMANIC ARIANISM?

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Abstract

This article examines the evidence for Germanic ‘Arianism’ in the exceptionally well preserved buildings and mosaics of Ravenna. Despite theological differences, Arian iconography appears to be almost identical to that of the ‘Catholics’ (e.g. in depictions of Christ in S. Apollinare Nuovo and the Arian Baptistery). Different attitudes to God the Son are only really apparent when supported by texts. However, there are clear material traces of Catholic triumphalism after the defeat of the Arian Goths; and we should not assume that there were no strongly held differences of view, just because the iconography of the two sects is so similar.

‘Arianism’, as David Gwynn explains in his article in this volume, never really existed, except in the eyes of its rivals and detractors. It is an inaccurate, but convenient, blanket term to describe the beliefs of a diverse body of Christians who held to varying degrees a particular conception of the Trinity, and especially of God the Son—arguing, with considerable scriptural support, that he was different in nature to God the Father, and a somewhat subordinate power. The people who held views of this kind believed themselves to be the Orthodox and Catholic (i.e. Universal) Church. But they were lumped together, and branded as ‘Arians’ (after Arius of Alexandria, condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325), by the Christians whose doctrine eventually triumphed—that Son and Father shared the same nature, and were absolutely equal within the Trinity. Although the terminology is one-sided and deceptively homogenising, I shall, for the sake of convenience, continue to call the Christian group I am interested in here the ‘Arians’, and give the privileged label ‘Catholics’ to those whose views prevailed in the end.

D. Gwynn, S. Bangert (edd.) Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity (Late Antique Archaeology 6 – 2008) (Leiden 2010), pp. 265–289
There were, as has been explained, two main phases of ‘Arianism’. The first came in the 4th c. and very nearly triumphed as the orthodoxy of the empire, but was eventually defeated, primarily by the rise of the passionately Catholic Theodosian dynasty at the end of the century. A second and distinct phase began in the 5th c., and affected primarily the western provinces of the empire. It came about because almost all of the Germanic peoples who invaded and settled the West—including the Burgundians, the Vandals, the Sueves, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and the Lombards—happened to espouse a particular form of Christianity, usually described as ‘Homoian’, which the Catholic Christians of the West regarded as Arian. This phase came to an end in the 6th and 7th c., with the Byzantine conquest of Vandal Africa and Ostrogothic Italy (followed by an enforced re-imposition of Catholicism), and with the eventual voluntary rejection of Arianism by the Burgundians, the Sueves, the Visigoths and the Lombards. It is on this latter phase, which can be termed ‘Germanic Arianism’, that I shall concentrate here—partly because this will complement the focus of David Gwynn’s article; but mainly because it is from this period that the best material evidence survives.2

There is no doubt at all—from the evidence of written texts—that there should be plenty of material evidence for Arianism, because the Arians, like the Catholics, needed and used things that leave material traces: churches, liturgical fittings, and religious art. There is a plentiful archaeology and iconography of Christianity, so the same should be true for one of its most important sub-sets, Arianism. Indeed, we know from textual evidence that Catholics and Arians often clashed over the possession of physical objects: for instance, over the control of existing churches (as at Milan in the 380s), and the graves of martyrs (as at Mérida, towards the end of the 6th c.).3

Not only should the archaeology and iconography of Arianism exist, they certainly do as well, given that large numbers of Arian churches must have been excavated, particularly in North Africa, or are still

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1 See Gwynn 229–33.
2 There is a useful, short and general account of Germanic Arianism in Wiles (1996) 40–51.
3 For Ambrose and the dispute at Milan: see David Gwynn’s article above 253–5; and McLynn (1994) 174–96. For disputes over the possession of the church and tunic of St. Eulalia of Mérida: Lives of the Fathers of Merida 78–82 (5.5), 84 (5.6.12), and 97 (5.6.16).