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Sources for the Story of the Creation in the Mosaics of Sicily and Venice

The story of the Creation from the Book of Genesis (Gen 1:1–2:25) was depicted in three cycles of ‘Byzantine’ mosaics in Italy. In medieval Sicily the narrative appears on the south nave wall of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, c.1143–66 [Figs 48–9], and in the same position in the abbey church at Monreale, c.1176–85 [Figs 50–1]. At S. Marco in Venice, c.1200–25, the Creation story is told in the Creation cupola at the southern end of the narthex [Fig. 52]. In each case the narrative unfolds in a series of images, from the dove of the Holy Spirit brooding over the waters to the creation of Eve. In each of the Sicilian churches the


3. At the Cappella Palatina the scenes are: 1. The Holy Spirit hovering over the waters and the creation of light; 2. The Creation of the Firmament; 3. Separation of the Waters (with the creation of plants); 3. The Creation of the Plants on the third day; 4. The Creation of the Heavenly Bodies on the fourth day; 5. The birds of the air and the sea creatures; 6. The Creation of the Quadrupeds; 7. God resting on the Sabbath Day; 8. Adam in the Garden of Eden; 9. God with Adam in the Garden of Eden, instructing him not to eat of the Tree of Life; and 10. The Creation of Eve.


In the Creation Cupola at San Marco the scenes are:

Inner register: 1. The Holy Spirit hovers over the Waters; 2. The Creation of Light and Day and Night; 3. The Separation of the Waters on the second day; 4. The Earth appears; 5. The Creation of the Plants on the third day;

Second Register: 6. The Creation of the Heavenly Bodies on the fourth day; 7. The birds of the air and the sea creatures; 8. The Creation of the Birds and Sea creatures on the fifth day; 9. The Creation of the Quadrupeds; 10. The Forming of Adam on

Byzantine Narrative. Papers in Honour of Roger Scott. Edited by J. Burke et al. (Melbourne 2006).
Creation mosaics are situated high up above the south colonnade of the nave in the zone between the clerestory windows. The series begins a cyclical narrative from the Book of Genesis, from the story of the Creation to Jacob wrestling with the Angel, which wraps around the nave walls in two superimposed registers. In Venice the Creation narrative is fitted into the concentric circles that fill the southernmost of six small domes in the L-shaped narthex. It forms part of a much more extensive sequence of Old Testament scenes from Genesis and Exodus that decorates the atrium or narthex of San Marco.

This paper will investigate some of the artistic sources for these images. As with any written narrative that has been transformed into visual imagery, one has to consider the textual and the visual origins of the depictions in order to understand their significance. Both the text and the imagery depend on long traditions, which in the case of the three mosaic Creation cycles are quite complex. As often happens with Byzantine art in Italy, one finds a fusion of Byzantine and Italian influences, along with references to the art of Late Antiquity and ancient Rome.

The original biblical text on which the images are based is itself far from simple. Modern biblical scholars in fact distinguish two creation narratives in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. The first account (Genesis 1–2:3) is by the ‘Priestly writer’, whose work is followed by another account by a second author, the ‘Yahwist’. The Priestly writer measures the story of the creation in six days, with God taking a rest and blessing the seventh day. The narrative is clear, sequential and rhythmical. After a short introduction, referring to the earth as a formless void and the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, God commands, ‘Let there be light’ and light is created. God separates light from darkness, calls the light day and the darkness night, and there is evening and morning, the first day. There follows the separation of the waters, and the creation of the sky on the second day. On the third day God creates the land and the sixth day; 11. The Blessing of the Sabbath Day; 12. The Animation of Adam; 13. Adam led into Paradise; Third Register: 13. Adam naming the Animals; 14. God takes Adam’s rib and forms Eve; followed by episodes related to the Fall.

4. M.A. Lavin, The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431–1600 (Chicago 1990) 7, ‘W’ for the type of Wraparound pattern of these cycles. Lavin does not refer to these cycles, but they clearly follow this pattern. At the Cappella Palatina, the sequence of images from the book of Genesis runs from east to west along the south clerestory wall, then from west to east along the north wall and is then repeated at a lower level. The cycle at Monreale follows a similar pattern, but it also includes scenes along the inner façade. In both churches the story of the Creation is located at the eastern end of the south clerestory wall.


6. From this division into days there arose the fashion of writing about the six days of God’s work in creating the universe in early Christian and medieval literature, as for example in St Ambrose’s Hexameron: Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel tr. J.J. Savage (Washington 1961, rp. 1985).