INTERPRETING THE MOSAIC OF SANTA PUDENZIANA

BY

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Current interpreters of the apsidal mosaic of Santa Pudenziana unanimously agree with earlier scholars in identifying the seated figure as Christ and in stressing the conscious use of imperial motifs to express the theme of Christus-rex or Christus-iudex. In forming such an interpretation on the basis of parallel Christian and imperial images there is a danger of the "dictionary fallacy" in which there is assumed a one-to-one relationship between sign and significance even though the total context may alone provide the meaning of the details so industriously catalogued. Anthony Cutler has discussed this problem of art historians and neatly summarized the point by quoting V. A. Kolve: "It is content alone that turns a sign into communication, limiting its possibilities, defining its exact and immediate intent."

It is clear from the nature of this decoration that the underlying motif reflects the Christian faith of a Roman congregation during the years 402 and 417. I have pointed out elsewhere that a text at the bottom of the mosaic, no longer extant but recoverable from a transcription Panvinio made before 1588, dates the dedication of the mosaic Sala(uo) Innocent(ius), and hence I have argued that the mosaic dates to the pontificate of Innocent I (402-417) and commemorates the escape of the church building from the destruction of the sack of Rome in 410 and therefore is to be dated to the period of 410 to 417. Whatever the cogency of these assertions they at least suggest the milieu in which the mosaic was created.

An inventory of distinctive features of the mosaic points to images derived originally from Ez. 1.4-28 but also utilized in Rev. 4. Critics quite aware of the Old Testament source deduce from the mosaic a reference to the text of Ezechiel in which the prophet records his vision of the Lord who foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. The chief elements pictured in the mosaic are the four creatures, the throne, and the seated figure. The deduction, then, is that the mosaic is a parallel
Apse mosaic, S. Pudenziana, Rome