John Osborne: Rome in the Eighth Century. A History in Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020 (British School at Rome Studies). XX, 291 pp., 53 ill. £ 90.00/$ 120.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-83458-2.

John Osborne: Rome in the Ninth Century. A History in Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023 (British School at Rome Studies). XI, 326 pp., 49 ill., 2 maps. £ 85.00/$ 110.00. ISBN: 978-1-009-41537-8.

A certain kind of things are nowadays conventionally called 'art'. The academic discipline known as 'History of Art' examines how and why such things were made in the past, as well as what they meant to those who saw or used them. Three 'genres' prevail in scholarly writing about European art between, roughly, the third and tenth centuries AD: one can follow change in the way things look (i. e. style),[1] one can investigate the origin and meaning of specific imagery (iconography),[2] or one can focus on single things in an attempt to see how they were embedded in their physical and social setting ('object biography').[3] Osborne develops a fourth approach which he terms "history *in* art". "Context is essential" (E, p. XV),[4] he says. "[T]he picture presented by any single class of document is inadequate on its own" (E, p. 19). "If material culture constitutes the 'warp', then written documents provide the 'weft'" (E, p. XVII). One must

> "weave together [...] various strands of evidence in the hope of creating a comprehensive picture that exceeds the sum of its individual parts. [...] [B]uildings, along with their painted, sculptural and mosaic decorations, and a range of objects [...] such as metalwork, textiles and manuscripts – will all be treated as documentary evidence for the exploration of [...] history" (N, p. 1). "What is intended here is not so much a *political* history, although to some extent it cannot

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1   E. g., E. Kitzinger: Byzantine Art in the Making. Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century. Cambridge, MA 1977.

2   E. g., A. D. Kartsonis: Anastasis. The Making of an Image. Princeton, NJ 1986.

3   E. g., D. Deliyannis/H. Dey/P. Squatriti: Fifty Early Medieval Things. Materials of Culture in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Ithaca, NY/London 2019.

4   I refer to the eight-century volume as E, and to the ninth-century one as N.

escape being such, but rather a *cultural* history, in the broadest possible sense of that term [...]" (E, p. XVIII).[5]

The stage of John Osborne's history is the city of Rome. Its timeline stretches from ca. 700 to ca. 1000. (His two books will be followed in due course by one about the "third act in the fortunes of the early medieval city" [N, p. 9]). Inevitably, "the 'culture' being investigated is primarily that of the ecclesiastical and secular élite" (E, p. 20). Osborne writes a kind of *histoire événementielle*:[6] "I have constructed this narrative chronologically. It is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (E, p. XVII). Thus conceived, the books' plot implies four questions: what did not change, what changed, what ensured stability, what caused flux?

Down to the year 900 (which is as far as Osborne has gone for now), Rome stayed within "the cultural orbit of the eastern Mediterranean" (E, p. 190). Silk, relics, lazurite, and other rarities could be imported from the East; eastern saints were venerated in the city; immigrant scribes and artists worked there; leading local families spoke Greek. "'Greek' culture continued to be regarded as prestigious" (N, p. 162). Continuity there was. But even as "the city's ecclesiastical and monastic infrastructure remained firmly embedded in the artistic and religious [traditions] of the broader Christian Mediterranean" (E, p. 87; cf. N, p. 7), "Rome's political 'gaze' increasingly and unsurprisingly turned away from Byzantium" (E, p. 231). The last medieval pope to visit Constantinople was Constantine (708–715), whose successors would travel, if at all, only north of the Alps. Thus, papal politics changed. Two "important catalysts were, firstly, a continuing struggle between the pope and the [Byzantine] emperor for authority in matters of the faith and, secondly, the pressing need for Rome to defend itself militarily against the expansionist ambitions of the Lombard kingdom" (E, p. 88). Political realignments culminated with the pope crowning a western, Frankish Emperor in 800. Yet Frankish military power grew weak under Charlemagne's successors, leaving Rome defenceless against renewed hostile raids. By ca. 875, "the Carolingian 'security umbrella', which over the course of one hundred years had served with considerable success to protect the city [...] [from] external

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5   Cf. E. H. Gombrich: In Search of Cultural History. Oxford 1969 (The Philip Maurice Deneke Lectures 1967); P. Burke: What Is Cultural History? Cambridge 2004.

6   "The flow of history is of course a never-ending stream of actors and events" (E, p. 238).

threats, had finally disintegrated" (N, p. 204). The 880s and 890s mark "an exceptionally low point in the history of the papacy, and [...] of Rome more generally" (N, p. 235).

The amount of wealth available to pay for art would of course depend on Rome's momentary fortunes: while John VII, pope for just two and a half years (705–707), started "a flurry of new [...] building[s] and artistic patronage" (E, p. 22) and the pontificate of Paschal I (817–824) formed an "apogee of early medieval Roman achievement in the realm of material culture" (N, p. 51), a mere two decades later Leo IV (845–855) became "the last of a line of popes who were responsible for substantial building activity" (N, p. 160). Yet even at the worst of times, "life in the city remained vibrant and active and anything but 'invisible'" (E, p. XX). Fluctuations of security and resources did not affect the shaping of a local sense of *Romanitas*, distinct from the global one associated with the old Empire: as the popes' autonomy from imperial rule increased (E, p. 231), "divisions began to arise along a more sharply defined divide between 'Greek East' and 'Latin West'", and patrons "sought to forge [for themselves] new and specifically 'Roman' identities" (E, p. 136) "in keeping with the new ambitions of the city's emerging aristocratic élite" (E, p. 173). The interplay of Byzantine, Carolingian, and locally Roman culture forms an important 'subplot' in Osborne's story (N, p. 8).

The above is a summary of sorts – but Osborne is hard to summarise because his "warp" and "weft" are densely woven. Despite his relatively abundant and usually well-dated primary sources, both textual and non-verbal, he recognises that evidence is limited and does not shrink from saying, ever so often: "we shall (probably) never know" (E, pp. 33, 40, 173; N, pp. 26, 158, 259, 265). What evidence there is, he interprets with a sharp eye. Here is an example: Some forty years ago, Osborne proved that an arcosolium next to the altar of the old Church of San Clemente marks the original burying place of the Byzantine missionary Constantine-Cyril from Thessalonica, who died in Rome on 14 February 869 (N, pp. 175–184).[7] A ninth-century mural above this tomb portrays the deceased in a white hood ornamented with red geometric embroideries. The exact same embroidered motif occurs in the paintings, datable between 872 and 882, at another Roman church, that of

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7   J. Osborne: The Painting of the Anastasis in the Lower Church of San Clemente, Rome. A Re-examination of the Evidence for the Location of the Tomb of St. Cyril. In: Byzantion 51, 1981, pp. 255–287.

Santa Maria *de Secundicerio*. "This provides very strong evidence that the two murals are not only [...] very close in date, but indeed probably also the products of the same artistic workshop, one which made use of these idiosyncratic designs in appropriate contexts" (N, p. 227). A number of features, both iconographical and stylistic, connect that workshop with the art of the Eastern Mediterranean – which "accords well with the intellectual climate in the early 870s" (N, p. 222), when a circle around Anastasius *Bibliothecarius* would render Greek hagiographical texts into Latin. The political background to such literary activities was John VIII's search for a new "security umbrella" (N, p. 204) in place of the ineffective Carolingian one and his resultant rapprochement with Constantinople (N, pp. 201–203). An inscription at Santa Maria names that pope (*Ioannes octavus*) and records the "pious work" (*pium opus*) of one Stephen and his (unnamed) spouse:[8] since the building itself is an ancient Roman temple converted for Christian use, this can only refer to the aforesaid wall-paintings, and Stephen is most probably the *Stephanus sancte Romane sedis secundicerius* known to have sponsored translations from Greek. His patronage of Santa Maria is significant as "the first securely documented decoration of a Roman church undertaken in the ninth century by someone other than the pope or another member of the clergy" (N, p. 212), probably reflecting a "passage of wealth from the institution of the Roman Church into private hands" (N, p. 237). Thus presented, Osborne's is really a history of identifiable "actors" (E, p. 238): a painter (anonymous but recognizable from his peculiar artistic manner), a patron (the source of whose riches is unknown but whose cultural preferences are documented), a pontiff (with his all-too-secular concerns), the Apostle of the Slavs (whom we see portrayed almost 'from life' in the mural at San Clemente).

Osborne is a very good writer – clear and sober, yet far from colourless:

> "If this story were being made into a film, it would perhaps open in the reign of Pope Sergius I (687–701)" (E, p. 88); "When Pope Leo III (795–816) awoke on the morning of 1 January 801, at the dawn of a new century, he must have felt reasonably satisfied with the security of his own position [...]" (N, p. 10); "either the reports of the atrocities suffered are exaggerated or the efforts of the attackers were extraordinarily inept" (N, p. 15).

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8   Cf. "there is no evidence for 'matronage' in eighth-century Rome" (E, p. 20).

His second volume might perhaps have used some very light editing.[9] The Dutch company Printforce did not do too good a job in 2020: most photographs in the eighth-century book are pale and a bit fuzzy. The 2023 sequel, on the other hand, was excellently produced by TJ Books Limited. Yet the main thing is that the text itself is genuinely interesting and will be worth rereading. I usually give away copies that I have received for review – but these two I am going to keep.

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9   A few pedantically chosen examples (all emphases are mine): "We are often *provided* with very detailed descriptions [...]. Taken as a whole, these entries *provide* us [...]" (N, p. 43). "[...] the new Carolingian institutions being *founded* [...] particularly as new monasteries were *founded* [...]" (N, p. 57). "[...] the principal *means* of access to that subterranean space, with pilgrims entering by *means* of a staircase [...]" (N, p. 59). "[...] not on*ly* like*ly* [...]" (N, p. 227). "Lawrence *additionally* holds a long processional cross [...]. But what makes the mural of particular interest is the apparent presence of two *additional* figures [...]" (N, p. 257).

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