

# Salvatore Cosentino

## Introduction

Most of the contributions in this volume were presented in a workshop held in New York in March 2013. Other contributions have since been added to this initial nucleus, which have considerably enriched the original project. In some ways, the present volume stands in an intellectual dialogue with another book recently published on the history of Ravenna, that edited by Judith Herrin and Jinty Nelson.<sup>1</sup> The interplay between the present publication and the London volume lies not only in the fact that some authors participated in both projects, but above all in their shared purpose: to address the history of Ravenna from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages from both an international and interdisciplinary perspective. In the last twenty years, scholarship on late antique and early medieval Ravenna has resulted in remarkable publications mainly focused on the fields of architecture, mosaics and archaeology.<sup>2</sup> While the *fil rouge* of the London workshop was the topic of change and the transformation of the city, that of the present volume is focused on labour – both manual and intellectual – as well as the structure of production and objects derived from manufacturing activities. Although some of the single aspects dealt with here cannot be considered as original, the book as a whole nevertheless offers an approach to the history of Ravenna which is not very common in the extant scholarship. For reasons not depending on the present writer, it was not possible to include chapters on mosaics and metals. However, if one considers that the former has already been thoroughly investigated by scholars and the production of the latter was very limited within the late antique city, it can be claimed that the present publication does indeed present aspects of originality within the rich Ravennate historiography.

The structure of the volume is basically divided in two parts. Three contributions deal with issues of ‘framing’ that concern the changing geography of artifact production in the late antique Mediterranean (Paul Arthur), the perception and meaning of late antique manufacturing making (Glenn Peers), as well as the features of the socio-economic history of Ravenna during the period under scrutiny (Salvatore Cosentino).

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1 Herrin/Nelson 2017.

2 I limit myself to the quotation of monographs and edited books (in chronological order): Manzelli 2000; Mauro 2001; Vespignani 2001; Russo 2003; Montevecchi 2004; Penni Iacco 2004; *Ravenna da capitale imperiale a capitale esarcale* 2005; Mauro 2005; Tagliaferri 2005; Augenti 2006; Augenti/Bertelli 2006; Pasi 2006; Ranieri 2006; Augenti, Bertelli 2007; Spadoni, Kniffitz 2007; Barsanti/Paribeni/Pedone 2008; Cirelli 2008; Kniffitz 2009; Vernia 2009; Mauskopf Deliyannis 2010; Augenti 2011; Baldini 2011; Rizzardi 2011; Penni 2011; Verhoeven 2011; Augenti/Ficara/Ravaioli 2012; David 2013; Jäggi 2013; Sotira 2013; Fiori/Tozzola 2014; Baldi 2015; Dresken-Weiland 2016; Munkhammar 2016; Augenti/Christie/Laszlovsky/Ripoll 2017; Bencivenni 2018; Fiori 2018; Guarnieri/Montevecchi 2018; Johnson 2018.

There is, then, a series of contributions devoted to specific objects or production activities: imports and use of marble (Isabella Baldini); production and patronage of ivory (Cristina Carile); bricks and vaulting tubes (Enrico Cirelli); pottery (Chiara Guarnieri); the generation of writing culture (Deborah Deliyannis); grave goods and funerary customs (Debora Ferreri); minting (Vivien Prigent). The volume ends with stimulating final remarks by John Haldon and Judith Herrin.

Seen through the prism of labour and production, what kind of image did Ravenna convey in Late Antiquity? We have a city that connotes itself simultaneously as both consumer and productive centre. It could be argued that this feature was shared by most urban settlements in the ancient and medieval world; and yet, what is really peculiar about Ravenna is the contrast between a city which was not big demographically-speaking and the sophisticated articulation of its labour market. We are told by the contributions in this volume that Ravennate society imported huge quantities of Proconnesian marble from the East, ivory from Egypt, high-priced wines and olive oil from the Fertile Crescent and Istria, papyrus perhaps from Sicily, and grain from Istria and Sicily. It also necessarily had to import precious metals such as gold, silver and copper for the functioning of its mint. Who were the actors who supported this economic demand? Certainly, in addition to the imperial court and that of the Ostrogothic kings, the church of Ravenna also played a remarkable role, becoming increasingly important starting from the early 6th century onwards. Furthermore, the army should especially be taken into account when analyzing the 5th century, as it must have reached important numerical concentrations at certain moments during this time span. Yet if, on the one hand, these prominent 'public' actors provided Ravenna with its late antique economic imprint, it did not constitute the unique forces that supported the demand. There was also an active middle class in the city that was styled in the written sources as *virii honesti*. It represented a segment of the population which was endowed with economic means that was active along with the big public actors (court and church) in supporting the cycle of production, consumption and demand in a much larger way than the laic aristocracy did – which was in itself quite evanescent in Ravenna until at least the early 9th century. I would add that this feature, namely the socially-composed nature of economic demand in the city, remained a visible trait even during the early Middle Ages. Due to the series of characteristics that the history of production and craftsmanship has in Ravenna, it constitutes a privileged observatory for economic and social history, although perhaps not easily comparable to other urban models witnessed in the late antique Mediterranean.

In completing this volume, I have incurred some debts. I want to thank Prof. David Freedberg and the Italian Academy at Columbia University for hosting the workshop in New York in (the now-distant) March 2013, as well as the Fondazione Flaminia of Ravenna and the former vice-mayor of Ravenna, Mr. Giannantonio Mingozi, for having generously co-funded the organization of this same workshop. I also wish to thank all the Editors of the 'Millennium Studies', especially

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