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Curtains in the Palace of Theodoric  
in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo mosaic:  
iconography and semantics

## **The curtains of the Theodoric's palace in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo: monumental art and semantics**

**Анотація.** Завіси Палацу Теодоріха на мозаїці в Сант-Аполлінаре-Нуово: іконографія та семантика. Із безлічі зображень тканин у равеннських мозаїках, де вони зазвичай розташовані на задньому плані, лише в композиції «Палац Теодоріха» у базиліці Сант-Аполлінаре-Нуово завіси посідають центральне місце. Спочатку під арками палацу Теодоріха розміщувались портрети остготських придворних, очолюваних Теодоріхом. Після вигнання готів із Равенни мозаїки були перероблені, а персонажі, що знаходилися під арками палацу, приховані завісами та фоном. Розміщення великих тканин у композиції вимагало від майстрів більших зусиль, ніж проста «заміна» однієї фігури іншою. З цього випливає, що вибір тканин був обдуманий і суворо вивірений, тому без уваги на сукупність сенсу та символіки тканин сприйняття і розуміння мозаїки залишалось неповним. За допомогою аналізу семантики тканин і візерунків на них у статті показується, що зображені на так званому палаці Теодоріха завіси стали рішенням відразу декількох задач. По-перше, прибиралися портрети єретиків, що мало певний повчальний ефект, оскільки завіси показували, як вхід до раю слідом за праведниками для єретиків закривався. По-друге, завіси перетворювали колишній палац на триумфальний киворій-вхід до Царства Небесного. По-третє, зображення на центральних завісах просфор нагадувало про заклик апостола Павла увійти до Царства Небесного через завісу, тобто через тіло Христа, а зображені на бічних завісах мальви - квіти безсмертя та найкращою їжі, що приносить радість, користь і воскресіння, – втворювали його словами.

**Ключові слова:** завіси, палац, Теодоріх, Сант-Аполлинаре-Нуово, мозаїки, іконографія, ківорій.

There are a lot of curtains in the mosaics of Ravenna. Most of them are located on the periphery of the composition and have been interpreted by the researchers as decorative or framing elements of the images. However, as far as I am aware, they have never been the subject of a particular study. At the same time, in the Byzantine iconographic tradition even marginal motifs were never accidental. They were carefully thought-out and selected to match the main plot. They drew attention to the central event, revealing its meaning, helping in understanding the context. The textile imagery had to follow this rule even more.

Among the variety of textile images in the mosaics, the curtains of the so-called Theodoric's palace in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo basilica (Fig. 1) occupy a unique and special place. Typically, fabrics frame the compositions on both sides, however, here the curtains play almost the main role – they are depicted on all the entrances of the building and serve as a central element. A special meaning of an object in Byzantine compositions is always emphasized by their special place but in case of these curtains it was no the focus of attention. Researchers often use the image of the palace to demonstrate the examples of curtains and their patterns [7, c. 12, ill. 5, 151; 22, p. 8 – 9; 30, St. 134; 28, p. 80]. However, the semantic value of the fabrics in this mosaic remains outside the scope of research, because it was widely believed that the meaning of the fabrics is decorative, auxiliary and secondary.

The curtains on the the so-called Theodoric's palace were not always on this place. Initially, under the arches of Theodoric's palace and against the background of the Porto di Classe wall there were portraits of Ostrogothic courtiers headed by Theodoric and his wife. All of them were Arianism followers. After the expulsion of the Goths from Ravenna, in the '60s of the 6th century, a pragmatic reason for altering the composition substantially appeared. The mosaics were

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<sup>1</sup> The mosaic from San Vitale is the perfect example of this phenomenon. The Empress Theodora is depicted at the head of her retinue, and the hem of the Augusta's robe is embroidered with a scene of the Magi carrying their gifts for the newborn Christ. Their images set the desired course of interpreting Theodora's actions, who brings a golden communion vessel as the imperial offering to the temple. Therefore, the royal family and their entourage symbolically represent the Magi bringing gifts to Christ. See: [5, c. 45, fig. 57; 4, c. 122].

remade by the bishop Agnello in the third decade of the 6th century and the basilica that before had served for Arian cult purposes was “adapted for Catholic worship and dedicated to St. Martin, Bishop of Tours, who was known as *Malleus Haereticorum*, the Hammer of Heretics” [5, c. 43, footnote 23]. The mosaics were altered, some of the characters were replaced by images of saints, while the curtains and the background disguised the figures under the palace arches [5, c. 43, footnotes 23, 24]. A silent reminder about Theodoric and his retinue’s disappearance is the parts of once-depicted characters’ hands, clearly distinguishable against the background of the Theodoric’s palace columns, (Fig. 2).

It should be noted that placing large pieces of fabrics in the composition required more efforts from masters than, for example, “replacing” one figure with another, which would not require removing large pieces of the mosaic, as it was done while laying out the curtains. This observation indicates that the choice of fabrics was well-considered and rigorously checked.

Without taking into account both the meaning and symbolism of textiles the perception and understanding of their separate elements, as well as of the composition as a whole, will be incomplete.

The mosaic with the image of the structure in which the characters were depicted is conventionally called a palace, which corresponds to the inscription on its facade – *Palatium*, however the question regarding the purpose of this building remains open [13, c. 26]. Considering the general context of the iconographic program for decorating the entire wall, it seems that the image of the palace was not there for illustrative purposes only – the real architecture of the palace transferred to the mosaic was attributed the meaning of a ciborium (both before and after the alteration of the building sections and the appearance of curtains). When Theodoric ordered his portrait with his retinue, most likely, he wished to see himself as an emperor, and that’s why he wanted the masters to focus on the appropriate official samples of those days, when an emperor’s image was almost always accompanied by a ciborium or its symbol. Furthermore, in accordance with the context of the mosaic covering the entire wall, the characters exiting the ciborium were the last in the procession of the righteous heading to Christ. The image of the entire procession refers to the spiritual world – to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is indicated by the vast golden background and

idyllic flowers growing at the foot of the throne of Christ. The entrance and exit into this space is usually symbolically depicted as a ciborium, while the ciborium itself could sometimes be called words close to the concept of a “palace”, for example: πύργος (tower), turris (tower, tall building, palace) [32, Sp. 1055], fastigium (palace, portico, fronton) [32, Sp. 1055; 2, c. 33 – 35, 38, 40], τερημ [10, c. 48 – 49; 11, c. 101 – 102; 12, c. 71 – 72]. The curtains introduced into the composition afterwards could be evidence in favor of both a ciborium, which was traditional, and a palace, between the outer columns of which fabrics were suspended as well. However, there were still more indications of a ciborium, since the mosaic authors placed symbolic images of Eucharistic bread – prosphora [8, c. 56 – 91] on the central curtains and images of suspended wreaths under the archways of side passages.

Therefore, the new church curtains which appeared instead of the image of Theodoric and his retinue indicated that for them the curtains had closed forever. It was enough clear because usually curtains were drawn open in front of emperors. One can see an opened ciborium above Justinian the Great and his wife, the empress Theodora. Considering that the mosaics were created 20 years apart, and that the images of Theodoric with his retinue were remade after AD 570, the year of victory over Arians, the curtain imagery carries a somewhat moralistic effect. Alternatively, for the characters initially depicted in the arches of the “palatium”, its exit was the place of transitioning into a sacral and spiritual space, which closed before the disciples of heresy upon the advent of the hanging fabrics. The appearance of the curtains made such an interpretation more vivid – the righteous following the procession towards Christ were perceived as those who had already passed the curtains that let them through and closed behind them. Thus, the veils changed the plot, turning the palace from a secular building into a sacral entrance to

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<sup>2</sup> “The indescribable tower rises into the ample air” – “ἀσπετος εὐρυκέλευθον ἐς ἕρα πύργος”, <the translation is ours – Y.M.> see: [26, line 721; 2, c. 139 – 140].

<sup>3</sup> Hanging the curtains between the outer columns of temples, which is known both from the aforementioned text about Constantius' gifts and the miniatures of the Madrid manuscript of the John Skylitzes Chronicle from the 12th century serves as evidence of this possibility. See: [31, p. 11, cat. 338] (Fol. 210v). In general, and besides the tradition of paying tribute to the Tabernacle, the location of curtains on a building facade was also inherent in the ancient culture, which can be seen in the so-called Nile mosaic of Palestrina, created ca. 1st cent. BC and representing the Nile of the Ptolemaic era, where an ancient portico with a huge curtain before the entrance to the Temple of Fortuna are depicted, see: [6].

the Kingdom of Heaven. Normally, the entrance and the exit of such a space is symbolically marked with a ciborium both in iconography and in the ecclesiastic practice. St. John Chrysostom frequently compares the fabrics of the ciborium to the opening of Heaven, for example, in his comments to the Epistle to the Ephesians: “When you see the curtains being lifted, imagine the heavens are opening, and the angels are descending from above” [24, col. 29, 30] <translation is mine, J. M.> . The same thought is repeated in the comments to the First Epistle to the Corinthians: “Who sees just the throne of the king is excited in his soul waiting for the king to appear, follow his in the same way even before the fearful time, be afraid and awake, and even before seeing the lifted curtains and the preceding host of angels, ascend to the very heaven” <emphasis is mine – J. M.> [23, col. 313].

Thus, the curtain is a sign of union and separation of the sacred and profane, a possibility and a permission to enter/exit. And if earlier the depiction of drapes instead of Theodoric’s portrait seemed like a forced iconographic choice due to technical reasons, then, given the tradition of using curtains this choice turns out to be deeply thought out, indicating that a katapetasma is an eloquent polysymbolic sign of connection with sacral space, like a “pass” into it, which is widely used in Ravenna mosaics.

So, of all the plots with veils in the mosaics of Ravenna, the veils in Theodoric’s palace are not in the periphery but in the center of the composition turning the entrance itself into an event and a plot. Taking into account the fact that this was not accidental we can see that the things depicted on these curtains were of utmost importance.

Fabric patterns on the Palace of Theodoric’s curtains in Sant’Apollinare Nuovo mosaic. The decoration of the panels hanging in the central passage (Fig. 1) and between the side columns of the palace (Fig. 1, 2) is an important element of the plot, which requires to be examined separately.

To understand the meaning of the pattern of curtains we should keep in mind the symbolical understanding of the curtains themselves. They were interpreted as the entrance to Heaven and the Holiest by Ioannes Chrysostomus [24, col. 29, 30; 23, col. 313] which were based on the words of the apostle Paul: “Having therefore

<sup>4</sup> I present here my translation just to emphasize that St. John used the plural form of the word “curtains” (τὰ ἀμφίθυρα). It is of importance for this research because it corresponds to the real practice of the ciborium veils. Common translation use the singular form “curtain” with no significance attached.

boldness, brethren, to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living Way, which He hath consecrated for us through the veil (that is to say, His flesh)" (Hebrews 10:19 –21). This direction, initiated by the apostle, was developed among the Church Fathers. For example, St. Proclus, Patriarch of Constantinople (†446/447; the apprentice of St. John Chrysostom), also compared *katapetasma* to the Body of Christ [25, col. 433] and St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople interpreted the curtain - *katapetasma* (καταπέτασμα) by the words of the apostle Paul as the Body of Christ [3, c. 71]. So the images of curtains could have semantic connection with the entrance to Heaven and the Body of Christ.

The central cloths in their upper corners have large terracotta crossed circles getting lighter to the center. In the 5 – 6th centuries a crossed circle is used in Communion bread stamps (Fig. 3) and reproduces a cross not only as the sign of Crucifixion but also presents an image of simple antique bread (Fig. 4) found in example images of art [19, p. 157, il. 169, p. 145. il. 155; 17, p. 170, fig. 87; 20, p. 135, il. 137].

Interesting data are given by M. A. Bobrik who shows a series of examples where the repast, traditionally pictured over tomb entrances, transformed in Christian burial structures into a Eucharist [1, c. 530 – 533], was often presented in an abridged version: "In the Christian churches of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, this role was played by an ultimately generalized symbol of the Eucharistic bread disk with a cross formed by intersecting breaking lines" [1, c. 536]. M. A. Bobrik also shows that the theme of Eucharist present both in Christian burials and churches was focused on the symbolic transition boundaries along not only the vertical axis but also along the horizontal one [1, c. 536]. This could happen, for example, at the church entrance, at the boundary between the naos and the altar, and at the symbolic transition from the mundane to the divine along the vertical axis, i.e. from lower registers to the higher ones [1, c. 536 – 538]. The veil in the so-called Theodoric's palace also corresponds to this principle being a sacral boundary marked with Eucharistic symbols of crossed circles.

The pictures on the side palace veils (Fig. 1, 2) pose some difficulties. They are covered with images evenly strewn on a white background. These images resemble the crossed circles but they are slightly different, i.e. they are smaller and not of so regular circular

shape, similar to flowers. It is this minute difference in the décor details that I. A. Sterligova drew our attention to. She argued that because of the skills the mosaic makers of the time had, the shape differences – no matter how trifling they were – could be intentional only. To study the reasons for simultaneous employment of the two forms, i.e. the circle-like and the flower-like, we are to study their analogues.

First of all, we are interested in the cases when both the types are used together. It is sure to enable understanding whether the employment of these two different forms was just a coincidence or an intentional and repeated reiteration in a united context of meaning. Almost perfect crossed circles and shapes close to crossed flowers can be found alternating each other in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia under the arches around the central cupola, at the boundary between the lower and the higher registers. It should be noted that these alternations lack a definite order and therefore create an impression the shape differences were immaterial for the mosaic makers, i.e. in this context, both the types had a common or close meaning.

The simultaneous use of both the circular shape and the flower-like one can be also seen in the mosaics of the presbytery cupola in San Vitale. Here, the signs of Communion breads appearing around the figures of angels while approaching the medallion with the Amnos sometimes alternate with smaller images which look like flowers with distinct four petals.

A corresponding alternation of flowers and crossed circles is also above the entrance to the apse in San Vitale.

Similar flowers also fill the baskets looking very close to the baskets filled with bread. Sometimes these similarities are read very clearly. The breads and flowers are of common shape, color, silhouette, angle of objects and the character of drawing, they are created with almost similar artistic techniques. We can determine whether it is flowers or breads that fill the baskets only with the help of the plot, context, and some details.

In the mosaics of Ravenna all the studied cases of the simultaneous use of flower and bread shapes are within the context of entry/transition into the heavenly world of Resurrection, salvation and eternal life (veils of Theodoric's palace; the transition from the lower register to the higher one in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia; the border with the Amnos medallion and the arch-entry in San Vitale).

We mentioned the most striking examples but their series may be continued both within the mosaics of Ravenna and outside it. For example, the Communion bread stamps [17, p. 94 – 95, fig. 46, 48] where crossed circles (Fig. 3) are replaced with flowers. The shape of a four-petal flower, abundant in mosaics, is used all over Communion bread and bread stamps. The Communion breads themselves prove the obvious abundance and free interchangeability of the symbols of a crossed circle and a four-petal flower in the mosaics of Ravenna: in one case, circled crosses are in the center, in the other case, they are replaced with distinct flowers.

The analogies of flowers and breads repeated many times, their interchangeability indicate that these symbols are interrelated. The images of red flowers with heart-shaped petals and crosses are placed within the context of entry to the Kingdom of Heaven, the heavenly space and the Eucharistic feast.

These flowers with a cross have been considered in detail in a special research (Matveyeva, p. 56 – 91) which showed that this symbol had an ancient origin and then was used in Christian symbolism. During the Classic period it were hollyhock or mallow flowers which represented the most simple and wholesome food, a medicine, and also the food which dead people could eat to come to life. A great number of references to this flower appears in diverse sources: texts on funeral cult, philosophy, medicine and cookery [16, part 5, line 19; 27, conv. 157, F, 4 ; 18, part 9, line 3]. It's attributed to Pythagoras that he is actually exalted the mallow to the centre of the universe. He would begin a conversation with his pupils saying: "The most sacred thing in the world is a leaf of a mallow, the wisest is number, and after it – that among people who have named all things" [14, IV. 17, line 11 – 13]. Hesiod speaks about a mallow already in the first lines of the poem "Works and Days". He writes: "Fools! They know not how much more the half is than the whole, nor what great advantage there is in mallow and asphodel" [21, lines 40 – 41]. In one of scholiya to Hesiod these lines are commented so: "The simplest food which we can eat, is a mallow and asphodelus; from them we receive juice which is used in food. There is a lot of advantage in them, and more than in the most magnificent dishes which do harm, or in the most prosperous life, so speaks (Hesiod). Possibly, he tells it from his experience. Germip in the composition "About seven wise men" speaks about it as the food satisfying hunger. Gerodor remembers



it satisfying hunger as well in the fifth book "Word about Heracles". Platon in the third book of "Laws" says that Epimenid spent the whole day without sustenance and food, using something small and edible instead. And it has been made from asphodelus and mallow, and it did not make him hungry and thirsty" [29, 41.1 – 41.15].

With arrival of Christian era flowers began to symbolize food of Revival and life which Christ gives, as with Communion bread – Christ's Body. The association of mallow with bread leads to its stylizations as bread (in the form of a circle or a circle with a cross) or to images of flower in the context similar of bread.

It is reflected in the names of the flower itself. The names have the general lexical roots with the word bread in different tongues and cultures. For example, these words are closely related in Hebrew: the mallow with borrowed "malvah" is called "chalamith" and bread – "lechem". In the Arabic language those two words mallow - "hubeza", and "hubz" - bread just have the same root. In the Russian and Ukrainian languages one of the synonyms for "mallow" is not just "bread", but exactly "Communion bread" – "prosfornik"! In Russian the Communion bread is called "prosfora" the same in Greek. Other term - "kalachik" just means small bread [8, p. 79 – 80].

The mallow had several meanings related to curtains and transition to the world of Resurrection and Christ. It was: the food that Christ gives; the food He represents – the Bread of life; the food that leads to the Resurrection, unity with the Savior, opportunity to enter the underworld and come out of it like Christ – to overcome death with Christ and to be in the Kingdom of Heaven. The mallow flowers as symbols of the Body of Christ are naturally depicted on curtains, which, according to the apostle Paul, also signified the Body of Christ as a door to the Kingdom of Heaven. These images were filled with the meaning that constituted a very rich, important and strong emotional accent, while the images of mallows were an aesthetic, understandable and laconic symbol. The most beautiful example of this in Ravenna mosaics is the curtains of Theodoric's palace. These fabrics played two main roles at once: they turned Theodoric's palace into a ciborium – the symbolic entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven (this is indicated by the ornaments with mallows and hosts – the symbols of the Body of Christ); and, at the same time, the curtains depicted in place of Theodoric and his retinue meant that the entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven closed before them, for

they were heretics. The mallow as the symbol of the Body of Christ was actively used until the 7th century after which these images gradually started to disappear, which may have been due to the departure from the symbolic images of Christ in iconography after the Quinisext Council (AD 692).

The above observations let us understand and summarize the following. The curtains were deliberately created in place of the initial portrait of Theodoric and his retinue. The drawings on the panels hanging between the columns strip away the original purpose of the building as a personal palace, transforming it into a triumphant ciborium – the entrance into the Kingdom of Christ, immortality and eternal life, the passage for the righteous seeking the Savior. Replacing Theodoric and his retinue's figures by curtains with symbols of the Resurrection feast solved several problems at once. Firstly, the portraits of the heretics were removed, thus achieving an educational goal, since the curtains meant that the entry to paradise is closed behind the righteous and in front of heretics. Secondly, the curtains transformed the previous palace into a triumphal ciborium-entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. Thirdly, the prosphora images on the central curtains reminded us of the apostle Paul's call to enter the Kingdom of Heaven through a veil, which is the Body of Christ, and mallows – the flowers of immortality and the best food, which brings joy, benefit, and resurrection, which are depicted on the secondary entrances with curtains, echoed Paul's words.

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#### АННОТАЦИЯ

**Юлия Матвеева. Завесы Дворца Теодориха на мозаике в Сант-Аполлинару-Нуово: иконография и семантика.** Из множества изображений тканей в равеннских мозаиках, где они обычно располагаются на заднем плане, только в композиции «Дворец Теодориха» в базилике Сант-Аполлинару-Нуово завесы занимают центральное место. Первоначально под арками дворца Теодориха находились портреты

остготских придворных, возглавляемых Теодорихом. После изгнания готов из Равенны мозаики были переделаны, и персонажи, находящиеся под арками дворца, скрыты завесами и фоном. Размещение в композиции крупных тканей требовало от мастеров больших усилий, чем простая «замена» одной фигуры другой. Из этого следует, что выбор тканей был обдуман и строго выверен, поэтому без учета совокупности смысла и символики тканей восприятие и понимание мозаики оставалось неполным. Посредством анализа семантики тканей и узоров на них в статье показывается, что изображенные на так называемом дворце Теодориха завесы решали сразу несколько задач. Во-первых, убирались портреты еретиков, чем достигался определенный назидательный эффект, поскольку завесы показывали, что вход в рай вслед за праведниками для еретиков закрывался. Во-вторых, завесы превращали бывший дворец в триумфальный киворий-вход в Царство Небесное. В-третьих, изображение на центральных завесах просфор напоминало о призыве апостола Павла войти в Царство Небесное через завесу, то есть плоть Христа, а изображенные на боковых завесах мальвы цветы бессмертия и самой лучшей пищи, приносящей радость, пользу и воскресение, – вторили его словам.

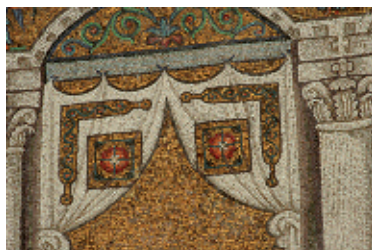
**Ключевые слова:** завесы, Теодорих, дворец, Сант-Аполлинаре-Нуово, мозаики, иконография, киворий.



Ил. 1 Sant Apollinare Nuovo Theodorix palace



Ил. 2. Sant Apollinare Nuovo  
Theodorix palace (fragment)



Ил. 3. Sant Apollinare Nuovo  
Theodorix palace (fragment)



Ил. 4. Sant Apollinare Nuovo  
Theodorix palace (fragment)