

The Cosmati Mosaics at Westminster. Art, Politics, and Exchanges with Rome in the Age of Gothic

Abstract

This paper offers a radical reassessment of the thirteenth-century Cosmati mosaics in Westminster Abbey, commissioned during the reigns of Kings Henry III and Edward I. By offering the fullest yet account of the documentary sources, we seek to challenge the recent tendency to discount the international narrative of Roman and especially papal art in England and the omission of any account of the contemporary political situation which, we suggest, provided the context for these mosaics. As Henry III recovered from the damaging civil war of the 1260s in England, he received significant papal support in restabilizing his regime. Contrary to the tradition that the initiative came from Westminster, we argue that the major agent was the brilliantly successful legate in England Ottobuono Fieschi, later Adrian V. Ottobuono shaped the post-civil war settlement with the support of Clement IV. We argue that the first of the mosaics to be completed, the sanctuary pavement, was in effect provided via channels opened up by Ottobuono, and was intended to be a coronation pavement modelled on a hitherto neglected coronation pavement in Old St Peter's. Edward I was crowned on the Westminster pavement in 1274. The paper offers new in-depth readings of the various inscriptions on the Westminster mosaics which stress curial or Roman origin, in order to reassess the evidence they provide for date and patronage. A thorough re-examination of the archaeological and stylistic issues raised by the mosaics is put forward. This includes the signed and dated shrine base of St Edward the Confessor and the tomb of Henry III, which we maintain was commissioned from the circle of Arnolfo di Cambio with the support of Charles of Anjou. The paper also re-examines the identification of *Odericus* and *Petrus Romanus civis*, who signed the pavement and shrine respectively, in order to arrive at a reassessment of the impact of their movement not only from Rome to London, but also back to Viterbo and Rome. Only by taking a firmly internationalist position on the mosaics, seeing them in the wider context of European and especially Roman medieval art, can the increasingly localized debates about these monuments best be enlarged in such a way as to illuminate the situation in England and in Rome.