
**On the symbolic Function of
the Baptistry as Holy Place
- A systematic comprehension of
archaeological bases and writings of Ambrose
of Milan in view of the transformation from
corruption to chasteness -**

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Abstract

Hearing 'Holy Place' in Christianity these days, it occurs to us that splendid and famous churches appear to be typical of it. However, in the 4th century, no one had a fixed idea about the form and function of 'Holy Place'. Thus, there were some cases to exploit the form of existing buildings as such sacred places in order to practice the ritual more adequately. These buildings were turned not only to the church, but also to the special another building for the ritual of baptism, so called the baptistry. It leads us to question the reason why the baptistry was additionally in need of, although it was able to practice rituals in the church. The present study puts its focus on a systematic comprehension of archaeological bases and details of baptism which Ambrose of Milan explained. As the result, it became light that archaeological bases supported the symbol of baptism as the rebirth of from corruption to chasteness. It can be seen from this point that the visible and repeatable procedure impressed a candidate with the way how to live as a Christian in the center of the city where is full of enticements.

Introduction

Thinking of 'Holy Place' in Christianity, splendid and famous churches come to mind without difficulties. We can image that pious believer worship at those places and tourists visited there. However in the 4th century, after the construction of 'Holy Place' was permitted in the city of the Roman

Empire, no one had a fixed idea about the form and function of such sacred places. Thus, there were some cases to exploit the form of existing buildings. These buildings were turned not only to the church, but likewise to the special another building for the rite of baptism, then called the baptistery. It leads us to question the reason why the baptistery was additionally in need of, although it was able to practice rituals in the church.

The present study puts its focus on archaeological bases of the baptistery in Milan and Ambrose's writings about the ritual of baptism. The reason is that the form and function of the baptistery in Milan were recognized as a model of other baptisteries. Ambrose, a bishop of Milan, explained details of baptism in the baptistery in Milan, and he urged the general public to be baptized.

There have been a great discussion about archaeological bases and interpretations of Ambrose's writings. At first, in 1870, semicircular and rectangular walls were accidentally discovered when there was the construction to run waste disposal pipelines in the area in front of the cathedral of Milan². In 1904, Ugo Monneret de Villard recognized them as components of the baptistery of the former cathedral of Milan³. After Alberto de Capitani d' Arzago continued to try to find new parts out from 1942 to 1943⁴, Mario Mirabella Roberti detected all structure of this baptistery and protected these neighboring areas from 1961 to 1962 under the construction for the opening of a subway⁵. In 1996, examining a duct in these areas, it became clear that there were two stages of the construction of this baptistery⁶. In 2011, the diagram of strata in these areas was so completely drawn that the process of this reconstruction became evident⁷.

As archaeological bases were gradually proved, many attentions have been given to the relation with Ambrose's writings.

Mario Mirabella Roberti pointed out the role of its baptismal font to wash a sin away⁸. Moreover, he took notice of the fact that the octagonal baptismal font was derived from mausoleum in Italia⁹. These archaeological evidences indicated the character of baptism to repent of one's sin and believe in God, symbolizing a resurrection from death to life as Jesus Christ.

Besides Roberti's explanation, S. Lusuardi Siena, etc. attended to an axis east-west of this baptismal font¹⁰. A candidate for baptism was immersed in this font and fell flat on his back, turning his head to the west like a corpse, and he sat up toward the east¹¹. This behavior implied a resurrection from death to life, in that the west is a direction of a sunset like a dark place, while the east is located for a sunrise like a shinier place¹². Further, they made clear

the relation between this behavior and the passage of crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus¹³. This archaeological evidence and biblical basis supported the aspect of baptism as a resurrection from death to life.

However, the viewpoint of these examines of the relation between archaeological bases and Ambrose's writings was mainly limited into the symbol as death, reducing this relation only to a resurrection from death to life. The reason is that little attention has been given to the archaeological bases to fill up a storage of a body with a fresh water and flavor in the interior of a building. Therefore, the present study puts its focus on a systematic comprehension between archaeological bases and Ambrose's writings, clarifying the meaning of baptism as rebirth from corruption to chasteness. This leads to the understanding that the visible and repeatable procedure impressed a candidate with the way how to live as a Christian in the center of the city where is full of enticements.

1. Archaeological Bases

First of all, I will summarize archaeological bases of the baptistery, so called the baptistery of Saint Giovanni, following some studies.

The diagram of the neighboring area including this baptistery is following:

I will explain the dimensions of this octagonal baptistery. These dimensions of the outside between opposite angles are 19.30 m, and these dimensions of the inside between opposite angles are 12.80 m¹⁴. There are four semicircle niche where a candidate for baptism change his clothes and is anointed by a priest¹⁵. Moreover, four rectangular niches are located in correspondence with four gates¹⁶.

There are vestiges of square pillars, which seem to be only decorative in the classic Roman style, not to sustain the roof¹⁷. The reason is that mark of the restoration of pavement and remove of pillars are detected, although this building had never been completely demolished¹⁸. This roof was supposed to be sustained by walls following same examples of the baptistery in Milan¹⁹.

The discussion turns to the diagram on the baptismal font following:

I will clarify the dimensions of this baptismal font. These dimensions between opposite angles are 5.56 m, and those between opposite sides are 5.16 m²⁰. The side is 2.14 m, and the depth is 80 cm²¹.

The form of this baptismal font is so octagonal that this form was derived from the mausoleum²². In fact, there were famous mausoleums in Milan and Rome, which could be set as a model.

There were two stages of the construction of this baptismal font. At first, in the 4th century, the duct for emission of water for baptism was equipped, while the duct for an insertion of water was not furnished in the baptistery²³. Later in the 6th century, this duct for an insertion was added to this fund to supply water more smoothly, and the circular pipeline was installed around this font²⁴. This water service clearly shows the similarity to a large cold pool at the Roman bath, so called frigidarium²⁵.

It should be noted that this font was built later than the main building which contained this font²⁶. The reason is that the trace of pillars, which had nothing to do with this font, were found²⁷. This leads us to presume that this main building was originally constructed for the different purpose from the baptistery.

The date of this font still remains controversial. It can be only seen from the examination of the condition of walls and mortars that this font was built in the period from the 4th century to the 5th century²⁸.

2. Writings of Ambrose of Milan

The theme moves on writings of Ambrose of Milan. Ambrose mentioned the existence of one baptistery, and he clarified details of baptism explaining two meanings of it. I will analyze these points following.

2.1. The Mention to the baptistery

Ambrose's reference to the existence of one baptistery, so called the baptistery of the basilica, is found in his letter to his sister, Marcellina. Ambrose noted that he went on giving an exposition of the Creed to several candidates for baptism in the baptistery of the basilica²⁹. Hearing the disturbance near the basilica portiana to seize it, Ambrose decided to keep his duty and began to celebrate Mass³⁰.

Several studies have proved that this baptistery of the basilica was identified with the baptistery of saint Giovanni we discussed³¹. However, another baptistery, so called the baptistery of saint Stefano, was so discovered in the basilica vetus that it is not clear which baptistery was identified with the baptistery of the basilica³². Considering Ambrose's letter to his sister, it became clear that the baptistery of the basilica was located far from the basilica nova³³. It followed that the baptistery of the basilica was not identified with the baptistery of saint Giovanni, in that this baptistery was attached to the basilica nova³⁴. Taking it into account that no baptistery could

be found near this area than the baptistery of Stefano, it can be presumed that the baptistery of the basilica was identified with the baptistery of Stefano³⁵.

On the other, Ambrose referred the baptistery of Saint Giovanni in his epigraph which caved in this baptistery³⁶. The poetic style of this epigraph is Ottawa Rima explaining the meaning of baptism, which is especially similar to the content of his writing *De Sacramentis* written in 387³⁷. It can be recognized from this similarity that this baptistery was constructed before 387³⁸.

2.2. Details of Baptism

The baptism took place for all those joining the church only once a year, on Easter morning, the spring celebration of rebirth. Those candidates were set apart from the rest of the congregation, and they entered into the entrance of the baptistery where Ambrose performed a ceremony of opening, so called “*Effetha*”³⁹, by touching their ears and nostrils⁴⁰. Then, just inside the baptistery, these candidates faced the west to renounce the devil, and turned to the east welcoming the advent of Christ into their hearts⁴¹. These candidates stripped off their clothes in one niche, and, after being anointed, they were immersed into the baptismal font by Ambrose and his deacon who ducked each person’s head under the water three times as they professed belief in each three times of the Trinity⁴². These candidates went out from this font, and they were wrapped in a white garment, which signified their innocence⁴³. Then, these candidates were anointed on the head, and Ambrose so washed their feet that they received a seal of the spirits⁴⁴.

2.3. The Meaning of Baptism

Ambrose compared the baptism to the transformation to repent one’s sin and to believe in God⁴⁵. This transformation was so based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death to life that a candidate appeared to pass away once renouncing his sin, however to come to life again⁴⁶.

Besides, Ambrose interpreted this transformation to wash strains from his body away and to be born more pure again⁴⁷. One’s sin was so tangled with his body⁴⁸ that baptism changed him to become chaste⁴⁹. It should be noted that this interpretation emphasized the aspect of deviating a present condition and being reduced to the original condition as an origin body in birth.

3. A Systematic Comprehension between Archaeological Bases and Writings of Ambrose of Milan.

Taking archaeological bases and writings of Ambrose of Milan into account, I will examine the relation between them. Several Studies have proved that the similarity between the baptismal font and the mausoleum supported the meaning of baptism as a resurrection from death to life⁵⁰. Another archaeological evidence of an axis east-west is recognized as one of the grounds of this opinion⁵¹. However, there was another meaning of baptism as rebirth from corruption to chasteness. I will discuss how this meaning was based on archaeological bases.

First of all, I took notice of the symbol of number eight of an octagonal baptismal font. Some studies argued that the number eight symbolized a resurrection in comparison of the creation of worlds⁵². However, Ambrose pointed out another symbol of number eight. According to him, the number eight implied the mystery of regeneration and the shelter from the enticements of the world and own flesh⁵³.

Second, several studies have shown that mausoleum, from which the baptismal font is derived, is the place to put a noble corpse, which leads us to understand the symbol of the mausoleum as death. However, what is to be noted is the function of mausoleum to keep his body clean in order to save from corruption⁵⁴. Moreover, it is important too that a mausoleum is the monument which honors one's activity in public⁵⁵.

Third, it should be noted that the baptismal font was located in the interior of a room⁵⁶. Before entering into this font in the ritual, a candidate was anointed with flavor which is the symbol of chasteness⁵⁷. The space in the interior of a room so enabled to keep flavor longer that a candidate could be impressed to be pure⁵⁸. Thus, Ambrose compared the baptistery to the second tabernacle, in which alter was furnished with flavor⁵⁹.

Forth, it is important that a water service was so equipped in the baptistery to serve a fresh water in this font⁶⁰. Thus, it was possible to clean one's body repeatedly with this Roman water service. Therefore, Ambrose might often put emphasis on pure water, explaining the way how to remove one's sin⁶¹. Thus, it was impossible to practice the ritual of baptism adequately without this Roman water service⁶².

Taking these four points into account, it became light that there is the relation between archaeological bases and the meaning of baptism as rebirth. Ambrose explained the meaning of baptism as the transformation to wash one's sin tangled with his body away and to become chaste as rebirth. Thus,

it is clear that these four archaeological bases supported this explanation of baptism.

Conclusion

We have come to the conclusion that archaeological bases of the baptistery supported the meaning of baptism as the transformation from corruption to chasteness as rebirth. It is important that this meaning was consistent with the ascetic idea about the birth of human, on which Ambrose put emphasis since the beginning of a bishop of Milan⁶³.

In comparison with the baptistery, the church, so called basilica which was derived from a court of justice, was equipped with spaces, not only to worship but also to bury remains of believers⁶⁴. However, it was difficult in the church to practice baptism adequately, in that the ritual of baptism needed many archaeological supports. This is the reason why the baptistery was additionally in need of.

It should be noted that this visible and repeatable procedure impressed a candidate with the way how to live as a Christian in the center of the city where is full of enticements.

One of the limitations of this study is that the objective is only a typical case of Ambrose of Milan. Several cases of baptisteries at that time should be studied further.

It is hoped that the outcome of the present study would be of some use to the historical analysis of the relation of the Roman Empire and the church, and the sociological study of the reason why Christianity was prevailed over the west.

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³⁰ Ibid.

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³⁶ “*otachorum scos templum surrexit in usus,
octagonus fons est munere dingus eo.
hoc numero decuit sacri baptismatis aulam
surgere, quo pupulis vera salus rediit.
luce resurgentis Xpi, qui claustra resoluit
mortis et e tumulis suscitatur examines
confessosq. reos maculoso crimine soluens
fontis purifluidi diuit inriguo
hic quicumq. Volent probrosa<e> crimin vitae
ponere, corda lauent, pectora munda gerant.
huc veniant alacres: quamvis tenebrosus adire
audeat, abscedet candidior nivivus.
huc sci properent: non expers ullus aquarum
scs, in his regnum est consiliumq. di,
gloria iustitiae. Nam quid divinius isto,
ut puncto exiguo culpa cadat populi?”*

(E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones latinae christianae veteres* vol. I, Berolini, 1925, numero 1841 p. 362.)

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³⁹ Gospel of Mark 7: 34.

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