



Dark Age Brilliance

Late Antique and Pre-Romanesque in Northern Italy and the Adriatic

12–19 April 2026 (MM 914)

£3,240 • 8 days

Speaker: Dr Meg Boulton

A journey through north-east Italy to Croatia, via Ravenna, Torcello and Cividale.

Private evening visit to San Vitale, Ravenna's finest church, and the adjacent Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, to see the magnificent mosaics.

Includes some of the finest art and architecture of the Early Middle Ages to be found anywhere.

Byzantine heritage of unique range and richness, with exceptional mosaics.

It is now commonplace to believe, contrary to the assumptions of centuries, that the Dark Ages which succeeded the glories of the Roman Empire were not so dark, and that the later history of the Empire was not so glorious. A concomitant reappraisal has led to the acceptance of Early Christian and Byzantine art not as a regression to primitivism – an aspect of the decline and fall – but as one of the most brilliant chapters in the history of Western art.

But it remains true that in the territories of the Western Empire from the fifth to the ninth century there was little in the way of monumental building or large-scale artistic production. Only in a few dispersed pockets was the flame of ambitious artistic and intellectual endeavour kept alive.

A string of such pockets are gathered around the northern end of the Adriatic and north-east Italy, the last redoubt of the Empire in the West. Born of an Umbrian past and raised in Imperial retreat, Ravenna remains anchored in the Adriatic marshes, humbled by the rise of her great neighbours, Bologna and Venice, and unhindered by later political commerce. The effect of this marginal status has been to spare her Early Christian buildings and leave a Byzantine heritage of unique range and richness. Given the intensity with which Ravenna developed between 402, when Honorius chose it as his capital, and 751, when the last of the Exarchs returned to Constantinople, it makes a fitting introduction to Early Christian and early medieval culture in north-eastern Italy.

Arising from the need to cater for the spiritual requirements of newly emancipated Christianity, the clarity and humanism of the classical tradition were superseded by images



Ravenna, San Vitale, engraving from 'The Shores of the Adriatic: The Italian Side', 1906

and decoration designed to instil a kind of sacred dread, and to intimate the glories of the world to come. Mosaic was the key element in creating church interiors of awesome splendour and intense spirituality.

Early Christian forms were endorsed throughout the whole of the Adriatic seaboard, and the second half of the tour embraces Aquileia, Grado, Poreč (Parenzo) in Croatia and Concordia Sagittaria. The theme is rounded off with the astonishing little eighth-century church in Cividale in the foothills of the Julian Alps which preserves the earliest monumental sculpture of the Middle Ages.

Itinerary

Day 1: Ravenna. Fly at c. 8.30am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Bologna. Drive to Ravenna for the first of three nights.

Day 2: Ravenna. Begin with an exploration of the fifth-century forms at the cathedral and Orthodox Baptistery, and the superlative sixth-century ivory throne of Maximian in the Museo Arcivescovile. In the afternoon study Arian Ravenna at the Arian Baptistery and Theodoric's great Palatine church of S. Apollinare Nuovo. Investigate the fifth-century basilica design which provided Theodoric's court with its most immediate models, and Galla Placidia's splendid ex-voto basilica of S. Giovanni Evangelista.

Day 3: Ravenna, Classe. In the morning see the outstanding National Museum, with excellent Byzantine ivory carvings. Travel by coach to Theodoric's superb Mausoleum and to the ancient port of Classe for the great basilica of S. Apollinare. Private evening visit to the church of S. Vitale, the greatest sixth-century building of the West; the invention with which form, colour, space and narrative meaning are combined is breathtaking. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is the earliest Christian structure in Europe to retain its mosaic decoration in its entirety.

Day 4: Pomposa, Concordia Sagittaria. Drive north to the Po delta. Pomposa is an important eighth-century Benedictine abbey, richly extended by Abbot Guido's magnificent 11th-century porch and campanile. Lunch in Chioggia. The Roman road station at Concordia Sagittaria, whose modest medieval cathedral was built alongside a fourth-century basilica and martyrium, is splendidly revealed through archaeological excavation. Stay four nights in Cividale.

Day 5: Cividale. Although founded as Forum Julii in the first century BC, Cividale is best known to historians as the site of the earliest Longobard settlement in northern Italy, and most celebrated by art historians for the astonishing quality and quantity of the eighth-century work which has survived here. See the superb 'Tempietto' of Sta. Maria in Valle, Longobardic work in the cathedral museum and spectacular early medieval collections in the archaeological museum. The afternoon is free in Cividale.

Day 6: Poreč (Croatia). Drive south, cross Slovenia and enter the part of Croatia formerly known as Istria. The sole object of the excursion is to visit Poreč (Parenzo), a longish journey justified by the existence of an unusually complete sixth-century cathedral complex: basilican church, baptistery and bishop's palace. The church proper was built above an earlier basilica c. 540 by Bishop Euphrasius, whose complete episcopal throne is set within an apse which, for once, has retained its full complement of furnishings and fittings.

Day 7: Aquileia, Grado. Aquileia was a major Roman city whose influential cathedral was complete by 319. Sections of walls and mosaic pavements were preserved within the present 11th-century cathedral, a rather wonderful survival. The Longobard sack of 568 resulted in the removal of the see to the more defensible

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continued

position on the coast at Grado, whose two great sixth-century churches, Sta. Maria della Grazie and the cathedral, also have outstanding floor mosaics.

Day 8: Torcello. Drive to the Adriatic and take a water taxi to the island of Torcello in the Venetian lagoon, a major city while Venice was little more than a fishing village. Visit the largely 11th-century cathedral of Sta. Maria Assunta and adjacent Greek-cross reliquary church of Sta. Fosca. Continue to Venice Airport and fly to London Heathrow, arriving at c. 6.00pm.

Lecturer

Dr Meg Boulton. Meg Boulton PhD, FRSA, has held the post of Teaching Fellow in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh, and is a lecturer on the medieval History of Art courses for the V&A online Academy. She has studied and taught at the universities of York and Leeds, and has published on a range of topics including medieval art, architecture, sculpture and theories of space. Her monograph is entitled *Set in Stone: Phenomenologies of early medieval sculpture in England*.

Practicalities

Price. Two sharing: £3,240 or £2,910 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,670 or £3,340 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 319); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 1 lunch and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Palazzo Bezzi, Ravenna (palazzobezzi.it): new 4-star superior hotel, located on the edge of the historic centre. **Hotel Roma, Cividale** (hotelroma-cividale.it): simple, functional if basic 3-star, located in the centre of town. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres where vehicular access is restricted and a lot of standing in museums and churches. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 76 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.