

Re: Q: Student Questions on Byzantine Art

Jeanne Nuechterlein

I forwarded this question to a colleague (Jane Hawkes) who seems to know some answers.

Jeanne Nuechterlein

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Dr J Hawkes wrote:

Both these mosaics suffer from the TLC of 19th-century restorers. The 'clubs' on the virgin's cushion in the apse of Hagia Sophia MAY originally have depicted pomegranates (symbols of eternal life), but REALLY don't know for sure. The Z on the stole of Christ in San Vitale is a 'classic' 19th-century boo-boo. Originally, togas had little logos on them denoting social status - particularly those of gentlemen who were illustrious enough to hang out in the senate. This idea got transmitted into early Christian art so there would originally have been 'something' on Christ's frock, but when the 19th-century 'restorers' got their hands on this, a. they didn't understand what they were, and put all sorts of letters of the alphabet in the place of the 'logo', and b. don't seem to have had any logic or rationale behind their choice of letter. If you want a really great insight into this incomprehensibility, check out the letters on the togas of the string of male martyrs in Sant'Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna.

Reference:

Q: Re: Q: Student Questions on Byzantine Art. In: ArtHist.net, Nov 13, 2002 (accessed Jul 15, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/25329>>.