

# Forgetting and Remembering Arian Ravenna

A GIS-based analysis of Gothic symbols and urban memory from Justinian's Reconquest to UNESCO heritage.

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## 1 – Ravenna under Gothic Rule (493–540 AD)

In 493 Theoderic took Ravenna. Within a generation, an Ostrogothic building programme reshaped the city’s topography: an **Arian Episcopal complex** (cathedral and baptistery) was erected in the north-eastern quadrant, while **Theoderic’s palatine basilica**—dedicated to Christ (today Sant’Apollinare Nuovo)—was built in the south-eastern quarter. The church adjoined the late **Roman imperial palace**, which the Gothic court reoccupied and enlarged. In the same quarter lay the **mint** (*Moneta Aurea*) and the **Circus**. Theoderic also restored public infrastructure such as the **Trajanic aqueduct**. After the **Byzantine conquest of 540**, these Arian buildings were not demolished but systematically ‘reconciled’ for Catholic worship under Archbishop Agnellus (557–570). **The buildings survived. Only their confessional identity was erased.**

## 2 – Condemned and rehabilitated: Theoderic in later memory

Memories of Theoderic in the Middle Ages and the early modern period swung between condemnation and admiration. **Gregory the Great’s** Dialogues, written around **593**, transmit the earliest legend of the king’s damnation: a hermit’s vision of his soul cast into the volcano of Lipari, punishment for the deaths of Pope John I and Symmachus. Thirteenth-century chronicler **Salimbene de Adam** repeats the tradition; the later legend of a physical desecration of his remains is a further accretion, absent from Gregory’s own text. Rehabilitation came with local Renaissance historiography: **Girolamo Rossi’s** *Historiae Ravennates* (1572) and **Vincenzo Carrari’s** *Istoria di Romagna* (1583) praise Theoderic’s wisdom, blaming only the "Arian heresy" for his downfall.

## 3 – City Guides: a constant cluster

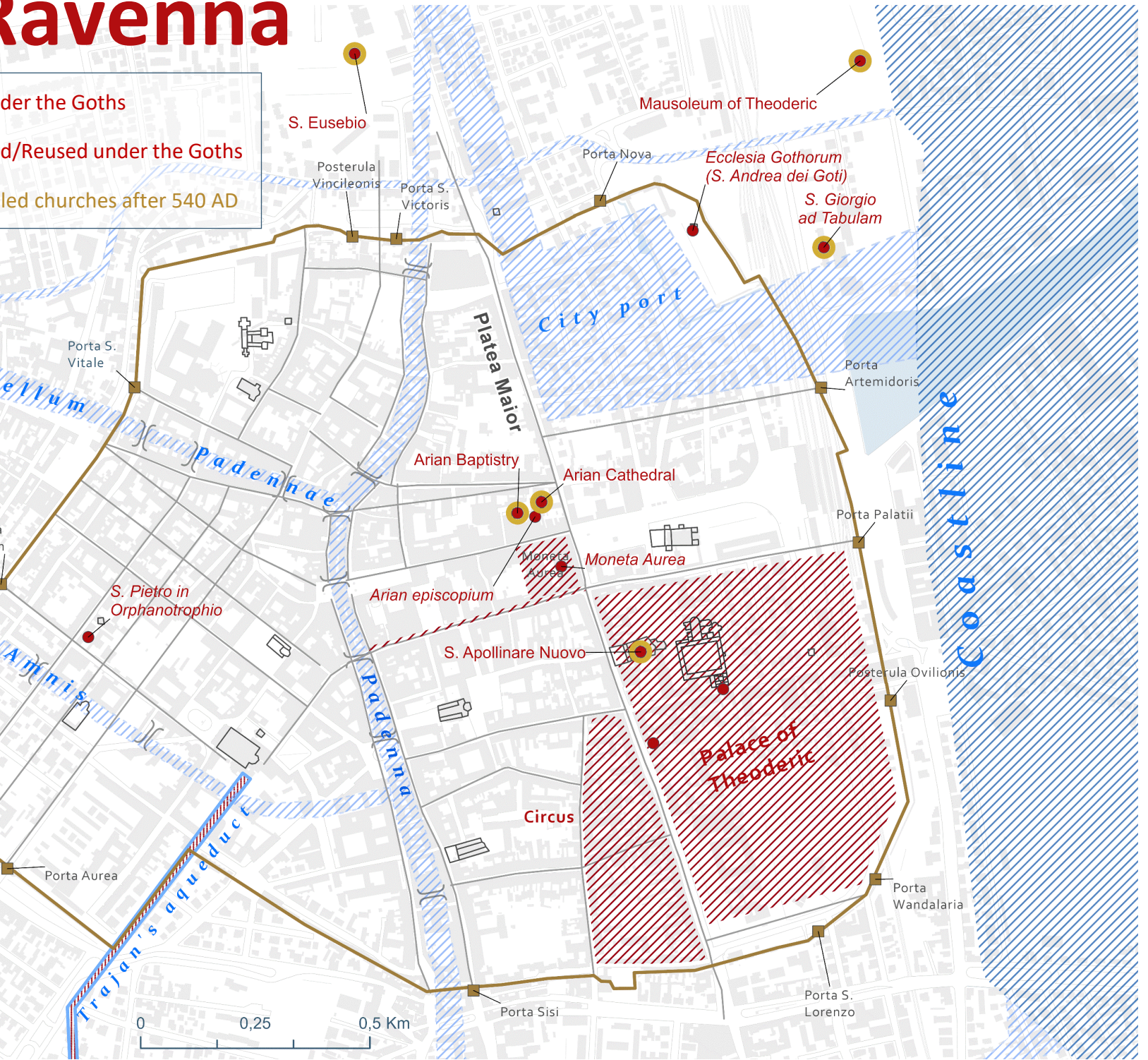
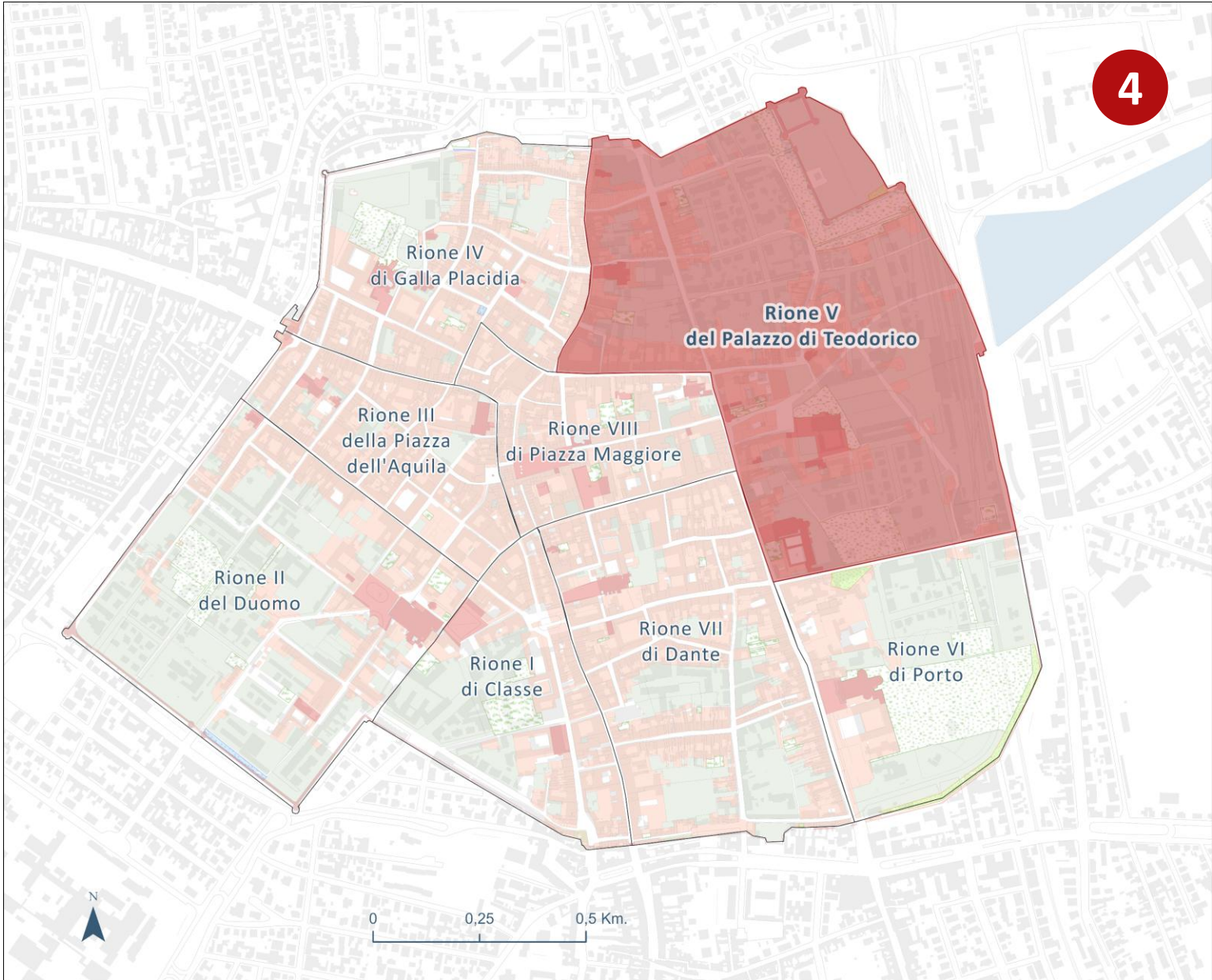
Rehabilitation reached print first, then the streets. The **city guidebooks** that began to appear in the seventeenth century – **Girolamo Fabri** (1678), **Francesco Beltrami** (1783), **Francesco Nanni** (1821), **Gaspere Ribuffi** (1869), **Corrado Ricci** (1897) – all return to the same Gothic sites: the Mausoleum, Theoderic’s Palace, the Baptistery, Sant’Apollinare Nuovo and the Arian Cathedral. **Even within itineraries that cover the whole city, the Gothic sites are never omitted.**

### The “Rotonda” in dispute

Between Fabri and Beltrami, the Mausoleum’s very identity was contested. In 1766 Count **Rinaldo Rasponi** argued that the Rotonda was a **Roman columbarium**, not Theoderic’s tomb; **Ippolito Gamba Ghiselli’s** *Memorie* (1767) refuted him point by point, defending the Gothic attribution.

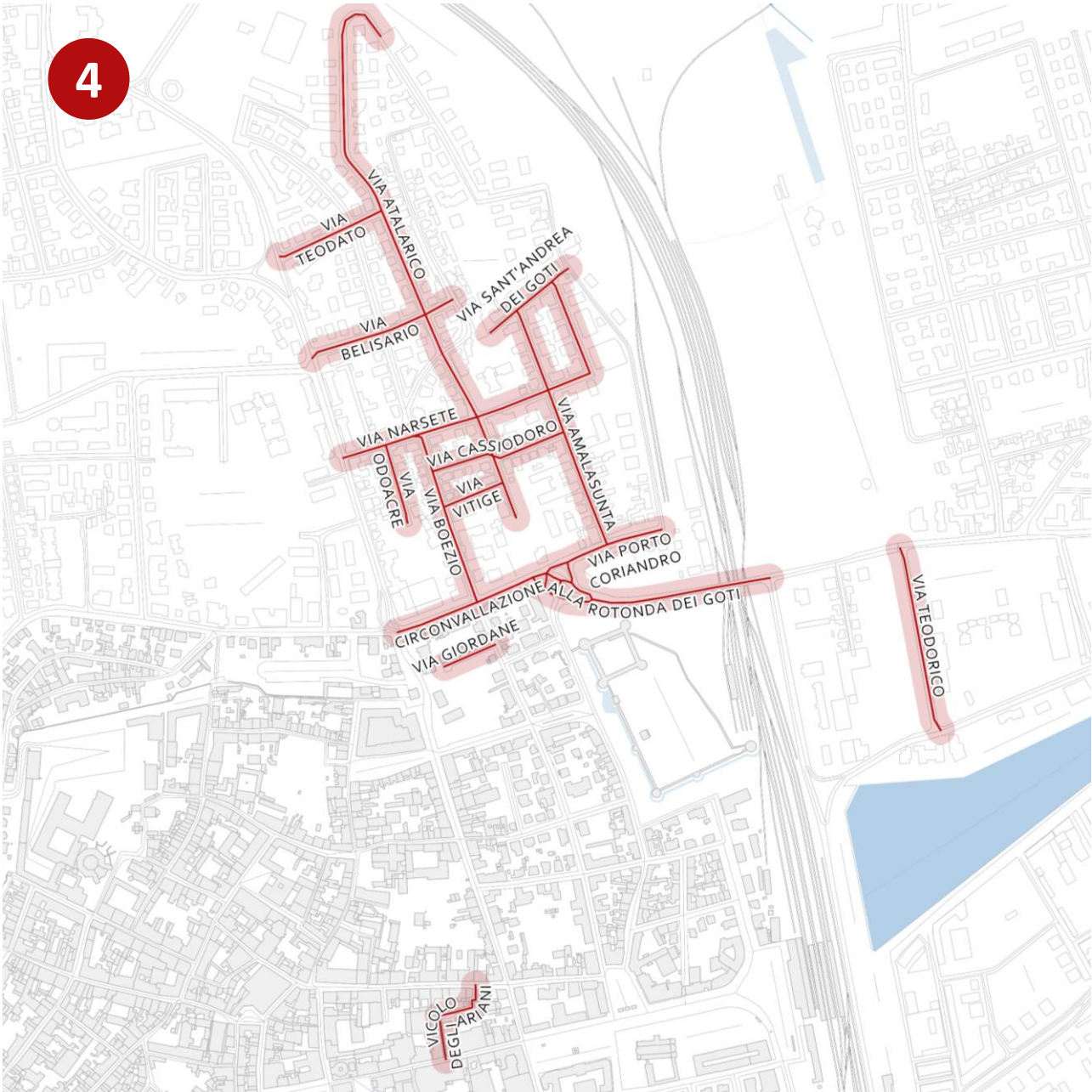
## 4 – Naming the Goths, 1797–1966

During the **Napoleonic period** (1797–1881), Ravenna’s district system named the north-eastern quarter ‘**Rione V del Palazzo di Teodorico**’, officially acknowledging the district of the Gothic king. However, the **1882** street-naming reform erased this designation, replacing it with a single new alleyway named **Vicolo degli Ariani**, which was attached to the nearby baptistery. It was not until **1942–1966** that names from the Gothic Age returned, with a cluster of streets — **Amalasunta, Teodato, Atalarico, Vitige, Boezio, Odoacre, Belisario, Narsete, Giordane** and **Teodorico** — appearing north-east of the walled town, near the Rocca Brancaleone. This shift is significant: nineteenth-century naming identified a place, whereas twentieth-century naming commemorated individuals in a district with no topographic link to the Gothic monuments it evokes.



### Erasure and Survival: the Ecclesia Gothorum

Ravenna’s last standing Arian church, the **Ecclesia Gothorum** (S. Andrea dei Goti), was demolished in **1457** to make way for the Venetian fortress, **Rocca Brancaleone**. Its rubble was reused in the fortress’s foundations. Some of its **capitals**, which are carved with **Theoderic’s monogram**, can still be seen today in the portico of the **Palazzo Comunale** — the Gothic king’s mark is still visible in the city’s seat of government.

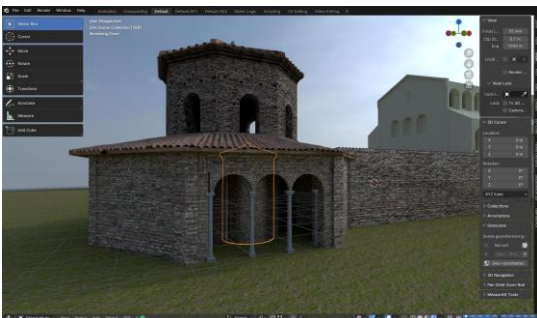


## 5 – 1996: inscription on the World Heritage List

**Eight** Ravenna monuments are inscribed as a single serial property, **Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna** — Arian and Gothic foundations included. **Three were built under Ostrogothic rule**; only two still carry that memory in their name, and both names were fixed in the nineteenth century. Four of the six cultural criteria were applied. Criterion (vi), covering association with events, traditions and beliefs, was not: **the Arian past falls outside the recognised value.**

## 6 – 2013: ArianInPiazza Exhibition

In July 2013 the Department of Cultural Heritage of the University of Bologna staged **ArianInPiazza**, a five-day open-air multimedia exhibition in the Piazzetta degli Ariani. Virtual reconstructions, QR-linked information and a short documentary projected onto the walls of the square itself returned the site's Gothic and Arian phase to public view. The project’s own premise was that World Heritage status had **isolated the Baptistry from the complex** it belongs to, leaving it and the adjoining basilica to be read as unrelated buildings. **The aim was to make them legible again as one space.**



Ravenna, the Arian Baptistery before the 1899 restoration. Architettura sacra - Battisteri - Oratori - Loggette (negativo), Luigi Ricci, post 1866 - (?) 1882, n. 0800649302, Ministero Dei Beni E Delle Attività Culturali E Del Turismo - Sabap Ra, Catalogo dei Beni Culturali.

Virtual reconstruction by the author, produced for the ArianInPiazza project (2013), Department of Cultural Heritage, University of Bologna (Ravenna Campus). The author took part in ArianInPiazza as a research fellow.

ArianInPiazza, Piazzetta degli Ariani, Ravenna, July 2013; source: [https://arianinpiazza.unibo.it/index.php/ra\\_mostra/](https://arianinpiazza.unibo.it/index.php/ra_mostra/), accessed 7 September 2026.

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