

Early Churches

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Early churches used two different design formats, which you will explore in this lesson. Specifically, you will learn about:

1. Time Period and Location: Early Churches
2. Early Churches
3. Santa Costanza
4. Old St. Peter's
5. Santa Sabina



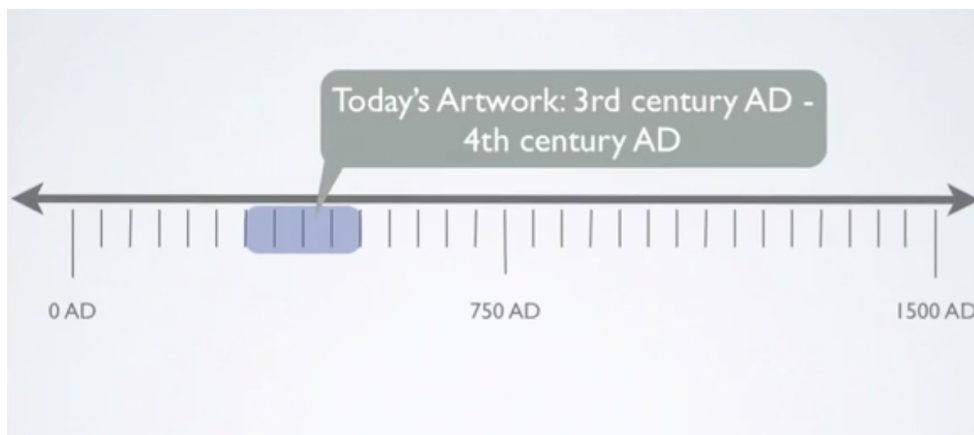
BIG IDEA

Many early Christian churches were based on the design format of the Roman basilica.

1. Time Period and Location: Early Churches

The architecture in this lesson is dated in the range of the third century CE to fourth century CE in Rome.

Below is a timeline highlighting the period covered in this lesson.



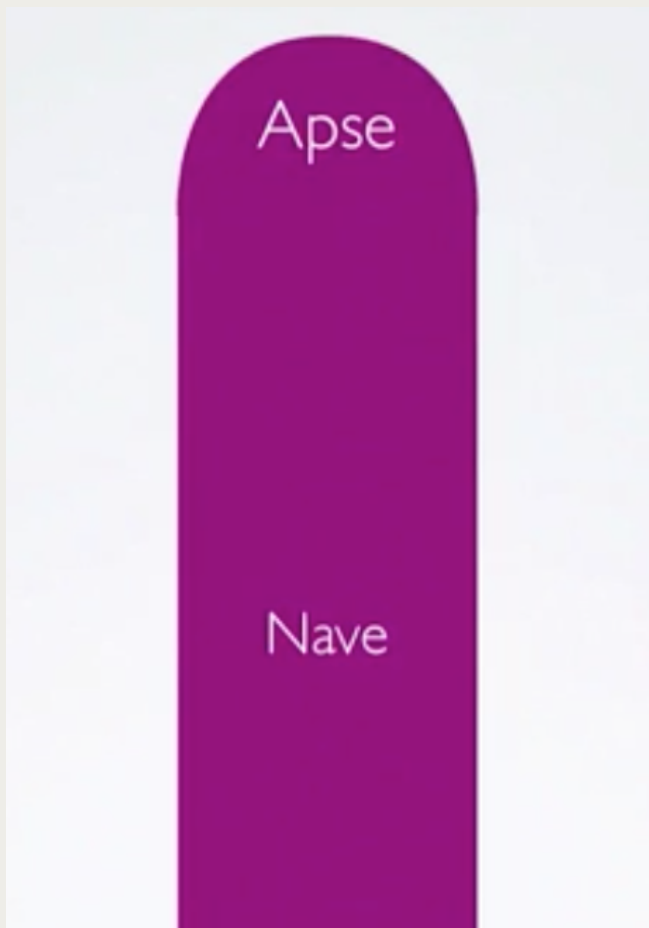
2. Early Churches

Like art, early churches are a reflection of the cultures in which they were created. Early Christians didn't necessarily have an inherent artistic style, so they drew upon what they knew or what they had been exposed to.

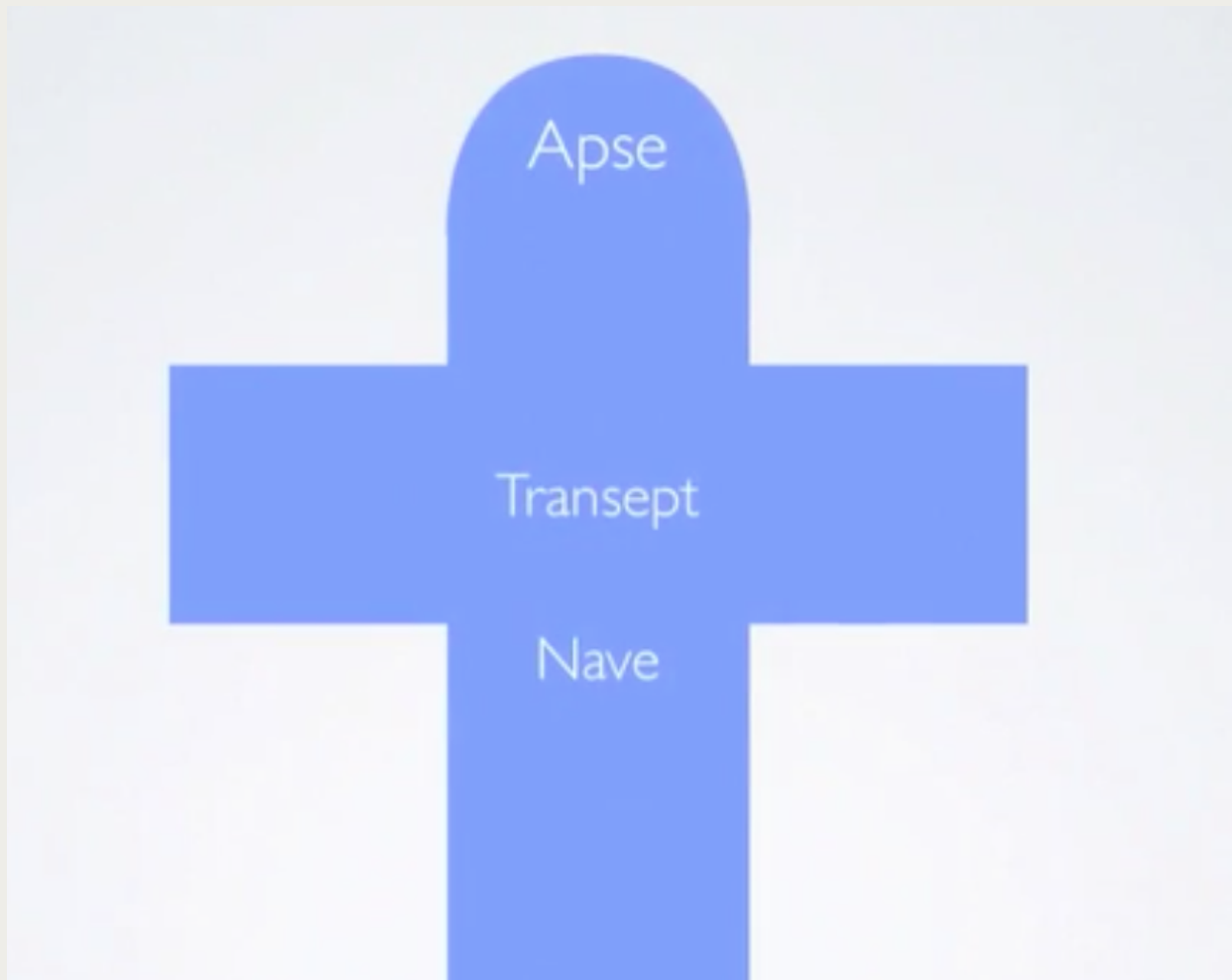
IN CONTEXT

Churches are often repurposed buildings or temples. Two main design plans for churches were used in the period explored in this lesson: the **basilica** design and the central plan. The basilica design was essentially an elongated rectangle that formed the long central **aisle** called a **nave**, terminating in an **apse**. The apse area with a triumphal arch, which originally would have been where the emperor was seated, instead became an area for the Christian altar, clergy seating, and, in many cases, the choir as well.

Here is a diagram of the basilica design:

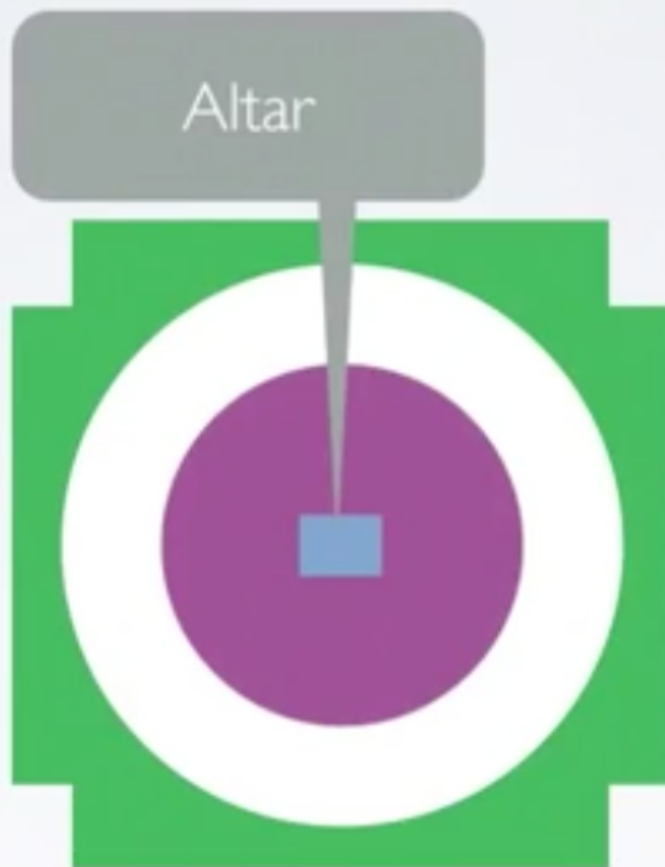


Here is a different example of the basilica style, this time with a transept, which is the crosspiece that was added to give it more of a cross shape.



A centrally planned church has no long central nave. Instead, the altar is positioned in the middle of the church and is surrounded by a circular walkway called an **ambulatory**. This style of church became more popular in the fourth and fifth centuries but was largely replaced by the basilica-style design later on. The cross shape, which originally was more of a coincidence, eventually became its own major and intentional design element in the planning of churches.

Below is a diagram of a centrally planned church. Notice the altar in the center and the surrounding walkway.



Many early churches were based on the design of the Roman basilica, which lent itself well to Christian religious ceremonies. The basilica was originally used as a meeting or audience hall, and the **cathedral** was the main church that contained the bishop's throne.



TERMS TO KNOW

Basilica

A columned meeting hall in ancient Rome; later, a church with columns.

Aisles

The walkway between the sections of seats, for example, in a theater.

Nave

A long central aisle that extends the whole length of the church.

Apse

An architectural term; a recess or semicircular space in a building, vaulted and (in a church) often used by the choir.

Ambulatory

An area for walking, usually semicircular, around the apse of a church.

Cathedral

The main church that contains the bishop's throne.

3. Santa Costanza

Not all churches were based on this basilica design, however. It was common to reclaim a temple or building to be repurposed as a church, and this was the case with Santa Costanza in Rome. Santa Costanza was originally built as a **mausoleum** for the emperor Constantine's daughter but later was converted to a church. Because of its original purpose, Santa Costanza is based on what's called a central plan.

Below is an interior view of Santa Costanza, which was originally constructed in 350 CE.



Santa Costanza

Converted mausoleum of Constantine's daughter

Rome, Italy

350 CE

This image is taken from the ambulatory, which is separated from the central area and altar by a colonnade of Corinthian-style columns. A **clerestory** provides light from above. Notice the windows.

The next image is of one of the surviving **mosaics** from inside Santa Costanza.



Mosaic from Santa Costanza

Originally, a Roman Bacchus motif, adapted to Christianity as symbolic of the blood and Eucharist of Christ

Rome, Italy

350 CE

Mosaic



DID YOU KNOW

The original design was a Bacchus motif with putti, or little chubby, winged spirits, harvesting grapes for wine. Bacchus was the Roman deity of wine and the grape harvest. Interestingly, in an example of syncretism, this image was kept by the Christians, who felt it was evocative of the Christian rite of Eucharist. The angels gathering grapes for wine were symbolic of the blood of Christ.



TERMS TO KNOW

Clerestory

A part of a building that rises above the roofs—basically, windows above eye level, primarily for allowing light and ventilation.

Mosaic

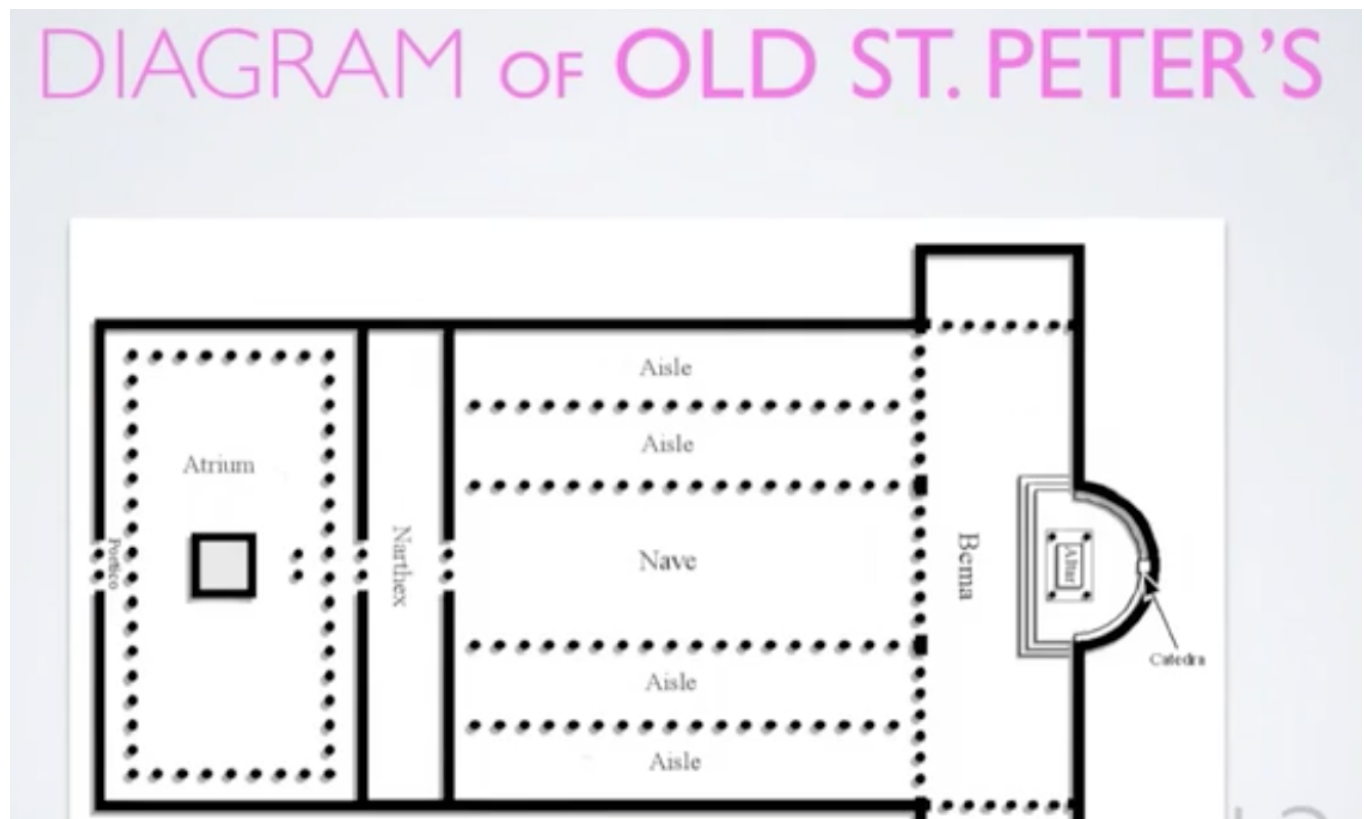
A system of patterns on a floor, wall, or ceiling constructed of small colored pieces of inlaid stone, glass, clay, or other materials.

Mausoleum

A tomb or building containing tombs.

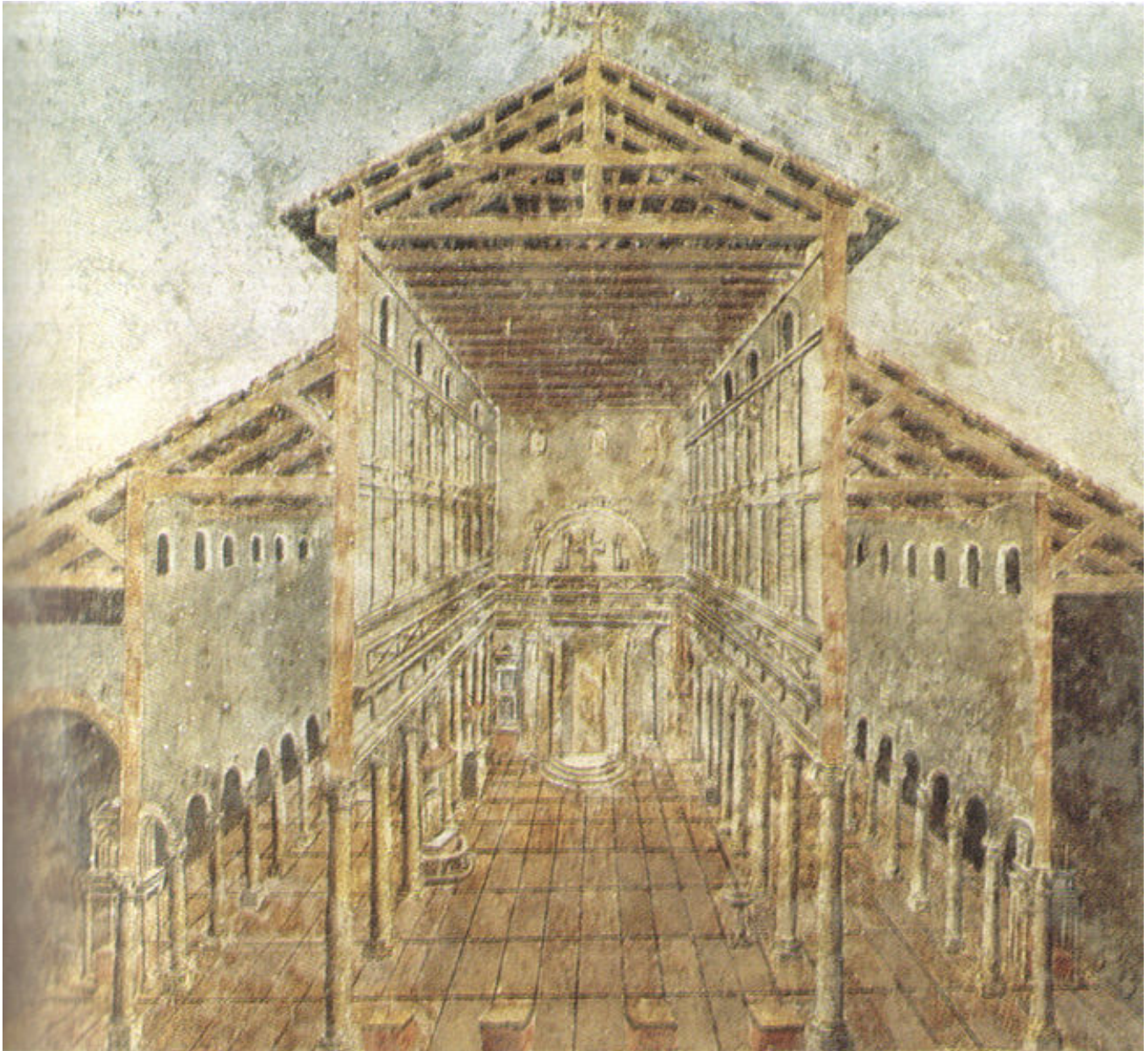
4. Old St. Peter's

The basilica style can be seen in several other churches, including Old Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, diagrammed below.



The term “old” is to distinguish it from the newer Saint Peter’s, built centuries later. If you look closely, you can see the rectangular basilica design with its central nave and auxiliary aisles, the cross shape, and the apse. It was originally constructed in 360 CE.

Nothing from Old Saint Peter’s Basilica survives. It was deconstructed, and a new church, the new St. Peter’s Basilica, was built in its place. However, this fresco of Old Saint Peter’s provides a nice cross-section of what the fourth-century building looked like:



Old Saint Peter's Basilica

4th century

Fresco

Notice the colonnade and rounded arcade, which is that row of arches, as well as the tiered roof and resulting clerestory at the very top. In many ways, the basilica of Old Saint Peter's evokes many of the design elements of Egyptian temples from centuries earlier. It's no wonder, though, given that the Romans themselves were inspired by the stylistic conventions of ancient Egypt.

5. Santa Sabina

This image is of the basilica-style fifth-century church of Santa Sabina in Rome:



Santa Sabina

Rome, Italy

422–432 CE

At first glance, it could be mistaken for the basilica at Trier, Germany, which has a very similar design, as well as an exterior brick construction. However, the interior features very familiar design elements. The central nave and side aisles are separated by a Corinthian-style colonnade that you can see here:



Interior of Santa Sabina

Rome, Italy

422–432 CE

Note the rounded arcade that supports the structure, with the clerestory above.

Here is an image of the apse of Santa Sabina:



Apse and triumphal arch of Santa Sabina
Rome. Italy



SUMMARY

Two main design formats were used in early churches. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of early churches**.

Churches are often repurposed buildings or temples, and this was no different in **early churches**. Two main design plans for churches were used in the time period explored in this lesson: the basilica design and the central plan.

Finally, you explored the following examples of architecture from early churches:

- **Santa Costanza**
- **Old St. Peter's**
- **Santa Sabina**

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



TERMS TO KNOW

Aisles

The walkway between the sections of seats, for example, in a theater.

Ambulatory

An area for walking, usually semicircular, around the apse of a church.

Apse

An architectural term; a recess or semicircular space in a building, vaulted and (in a church) often used by the choir.

Basilica

A columned meeting hall in ancient Rome; later, a church with columns.

Cathedral

The main church that contains the bishop's throne.

Clerestory

A part of a building that rises above the roofs—basically, windows above eye level, primarily for allowing light and ventilation.

Mausoleum

A tomb or building containing tombs.

Mosaic

A system of patterns on a floor, wall, or ceiling constructed of small colored pieces of inlaid stone, glass, clay, or other materials.

Nave

A long central aisle that extends the whole length of the church.