

# Early Christian Art and Architecture

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Early Christian art and architecture has a relationship with Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire.

This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: Early Christian Art and Architecture
2. Early Christianity
3. Catacombs
4. Synagogue at Dura-Europos



## BIG IDEA

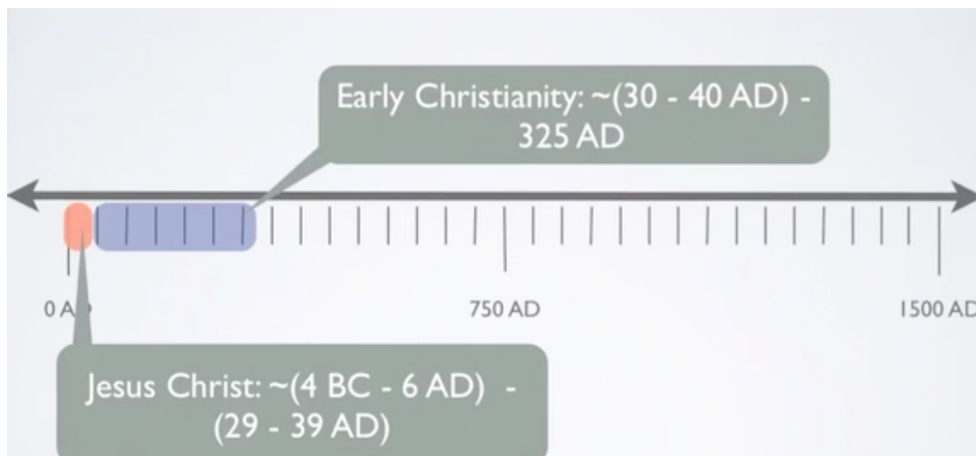
Early Christian art reflects its close ties to Judaism, and its architecture reflects the need for secrecy.

## 1. Time Period and Location: Early Christian Art and Architecture

In this lesson, you will explore the following two periods of time:

- The historical lifespan of Jesus Christ
- Early Christianity

One of the most striking aspects of early Christian art is the fact that there are no works that we can identify as uniquely Christian and not belonging to another religion (Judaism or a monotheistic cult) until approximately 200 CE. There are multiple reasons for this. First, Christianity may not have emerged as a religion that distinguished itself from other cults and religions until this time. Second, one of the ways that Christians distinguished themselves from other religions was by not worshiping a cult statue. This practice meant that there were no sculptures of Jesus or of God that would have designated a space or an object as uniquely Christian. Lastly, it is possible that early Christians did not achieve mainstream acceptance and include wealthy people among their members until this time. Without the money to pay for commissions, artists could not produce murals, sculptures, and other artistic objects.



## 2. Early Christianity



### DID YOU KNOW

Remember, Christianity at this time wasn't a formal religion. In fact, there were many religious sects, and it was considered more of a Jewish cult at this time.

Eventually, the Roman government took notice of these Christians, and the Roman persecution of them began during the first century CE. It didn't officially end until the fourth century CE, but tolerance for Christians was beginning to show as early as the second century CE.

Christianity had close ties to ancient Rome and Judaism. The Christian religion even became the official religion of Rome during the fourth century CE, thanks in large part to the emperor Constantine. However, until this time, being a Christian was a risky proposition. Due to this, early Christian architecture that predates the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire can be seen to reflect this need for secrecy.

The Roman Empire persecuted Christians from the first to the fourth century CE, when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. He believed that his victory over Maxentius in 312 was due to the blessings of the Christian god and converted in thanks. Before his conversion, there were many reasons why the Romans persecuted Christians. Although the Roman Empire had an official policy of absorbing the religions of the regions it had conquered, there were limits. Roman religion involved the public worship of deified emperors, which was thought to bring prosperity to the empire. Romans were suspicious of religions that worshipped at night and in private, as if they had something to hide. They associated Christianity with occult practices, since Christians claimed to drink the blood and eat the flesh of Christ. In addition, Christians refused to capitulate to the worship of the Roman gods. This put them at odds with Roman leaders.

## 3. Catacombs

The earliest examples of Christian art were murals found in **catacombs**, which are essentially subterranean cemeteries located outside of city walls. Only the emperor could be buried inside city walls. Wealthier families had tombs that were above ground, while less affluent families carved out burial chambers in the ground

outside of the city, in catacombs. The rooms, or **cubicula**, were set off of the major hallways. The bodies of the dead were placed on shelves within these rooms.

## IN CONTEXT

The use of catacombs to bury the dead isn't unique to Christians. The catacombs of Rome were constructed in large part by necessity. Land within the city was in short supply, and only the emperor was allowed to be buried inside city walls. Usually, a confraternity, or group of Christians, would purchase a plot of land with the intention of digging catacombs for burial. These could extend as far as five levels downward. If they purchased a plot of land nearby, they would dig a passageway linking the catacombs. The catacombs were not secret locations, and they were not places where early Christians worshipped in secrecy. High humidity, poor lighting, and the stench of rotting corpses would have presented challenges for worshippers.

The murals found in early Christian catacombs are very simple in terms of style. If a family could afford to have some decorations painted on the walls of the catacomb, they might choose something simple, like a dove, or some people with their arms raised in the orant gesture of prayer. Over time, this imagery grew more complex and included easily recognizable stories from the Bible.

Here is an image of an artist's depiction of what the catacombs looked like.



Alberto Pisa

*A Procession in the Catacomb of Callixtus*

1905

Painting

The Christian catacombs in Rome originated in the second century CE. Because they weren't buried in the traditional sense of the word, exposed human remains were not uncommon.

Here is a picture of the catacombs as they actually are, lit up with a floodlight. This is from the second century CE. Notice the exposed human remains.



Christian catacombs

Rome, Italy

2nd century CE

This last image, below, shows the use of wall space as a place to create important religious imagery, typically inspired by stories from the sacred texts associated with Christianity.





**Christian catacombs**

**Rome, Italy**

**2nd–3rd centuries CE**



#### **DID YOU KNOW**

There wasn't an official split from Judaism until the fourth century. Even though the rift between Christianity and Judaism was widening, early Christians still borrowed traditions and religious history from Judaism. The first five books of the Christian Old Testament are still equivalent to the Torah of Judaism.



#### **TERMS TO KNOW**

##### **Catacombs**

An underground cemetery with tunnels and rooms with burial chambers.

##### **Cubicula**

Burial chambers in a catacomb.

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## 4. Synagogue at Dura-Europos

Dura-Europos was a Roman city located in modern-day Syria that was probably founded after the death of Alexander the Great by one of his successors. The Greeks called the town Europos, and the Romans called it Dura. The town was captured by Trajan in 115 but returned to Parthian (what was left of the Persian Empire) shortly thereafter. In 165, the Romans retook the city, and it became a military outpost after that. The city has been referred to as the “Pompeii of the desert” because of the remains of more than a dozen cult buildings belonging to several different religions that have been found there.

Interestingly, this city was apparently rather tolerant of practicing Christians and Jews, given that there are above-ground examples of an early **synagogue**, as well as the earliest known example of a Christian house-church. While these two structures were not physically connected, they are positioned rather close to each other in the city.

The murals from the synagogue at Dura-Europos are unusual because of the fact that imagery was largely forbidden within Judaism, making this the only example of Jewish religious imagery from antiquity. They depict stories from the Old Testament in no particular order. One argument for why they exist at this particular site is that many different cults and religions coexisted here. Murals probably served a didactic, or educational, function, but they may also have been persuasive.

The murals were done in egg tempera and are striking for their level of preservation. The city of Dura-Europos fell in 256 when it was besieged by Sasanians. The people of the city filled in the synagogue with sand, preserving it until it was rediscovered in 1932.





### Synagogue at Dura-Europos

Syria

3rd century CE

The images on the walls of the synagogue are notable for their similarity to the Christian imagery that can be found on the catacombs under the city of Rome. Both sets of imagery depict important scenes or stories from the Tanakh, or Jewish Bible.

The first image from the synagogue, pictured below, is of the baby Moses being picked out of the river in Egypt.





Moses found in the river, from the synagogue at Dura-Europos

Syria

3rd century CE

This next image is of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea to escape the army of the Pharaoh Ramses II.





Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, from the synagogue at Dura-Europos

Syria

3rd century CE



#### DID YOU KNOW

The **orant figure** is a figure of a person that is gesticulating in a particular way. It's the traditional gesture of prayer, where the elbows are close to the body and the arms are sort of outstretched. Below is an example of Noah in the pose of an orant figure.



Noah praying in the Ark, from a Roman catacomb

Rome, Italy

3rd century CE



TERMS TO KNOW

## Synagogue

A Jewish house of worship.

## Orant Figures

Image of a person in the early Christian position of prayer, with arms outstretched.



### SUMMARY

Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire all had an impact on early Christian art and architecture. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of early Christian art and architecture**.

**Early Christianity** began with the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and while his ministry only lasted around 3 years, according to the Gospels, Christianity really began as a movement after Jesus's death.

Finally, you learned about **catacombs** and the **synagogue at Dura-Europos**. Catacombs, or subterranean cemeteries, were used to bury the dead but also were used as secret locations for early Christians to worship safely. The synagogue at Dura-Europos was a Jewish house of worship located within the city of Dura-Europos, a Roman city located in modern-day Syria.

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



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Catacombs

An underground cemetery with tunnels and rooms with burial chambers.

#### Cubicula

Burial chambers in a catacomb.

#### Orant figures

Image of a person in the early Christian position of prayer, with arms outstretched.

#### Synagogue

A Jewish house of worship.