

# Historical Background

## Location

- The Early Christian and Byzantine architecture started in two prominent locations centered at Rome and Byzantium or Constantinople
- Early Christian architecture occurred in Rome and in areas around Rome
- Byzantine architecture was centered at Byzantium
- From the two focal points Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture spread to other areas in the European and Asian region



Location of Rome and Constantinople

Source: Unknown

# Byzantine Architecture

Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor of Rome (A.D. 306-337), founded Constantinople, as a new capital of the Empire, on the site of the Greek city of Byzantium. This historical event was, later, in a great measure, responsible for

- (1) the division of European architecture into Romanesque and Byzantine,
- (2) the formation of two Churches, the Roman and Greek, and
- (3) the division of the Empire into the Western and Eastern Empires.

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

- The Roman Empire and the Christian Religion
  - Christians met secretly in tombs and private houses
  - Gradually, however, it spread and became widely accepted in Asia minor and in Rome itself
  - By the third century, Rome had a population of 50,000 Christians
  - The religion was tolerated but it was still illegal

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

- The Roman Empire and the Christian Religion

- The third century was for the Roman Empire a period of political instability and decline

- The Empire was split into a Western and Eastern Empires

- In A.D. 313, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan making Christianity legal

- He also adopted it as a state religion and he became the first Christian emperor

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

- The Roman Empire and the Christian Religion

- The acceptance of the religion by the emperor fueled its expansion

- It also led to the early development of places of worship for the new religion

- Constantine was able to unite the Roman Empire during his reign

- He established the capital of the new empire at Byzantium, renamed Constantinople or the city of Constantine

- After his death, the Empire was again split

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

- Architecture of the Period

- With Christianity widely accepted as a state religion in Rome it was necessary for architecture to respond to the demands of the religion for worship space

- Mode of worship was the most important determinant of the form of the church

- Requirement for church design was centered on worship and burial

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

- Architecture of the Period

–The requirements include:

- A path for processional entry and exit of the clergy

- An altar area, where the clergy celebrate mass

- A space for the segregation of the clergy from the congregation during procession and communion

- Burial space

# Historical Background

## Social Characteristics & Beliefs

### •Architecture of the Period

–The basilica, consisting of a nave flanked by lower aisles and terminated by an apse, was adopted as the standard structure in Christian congregational worship

–This was not however the only form adopted

–More centralized plans which were of round, polygonal, or cruciform shapes were adopted occasionally

–Martyria were erected on sites connected with certain events in the life of Jesus and other places held to be sanctified by the sacrifice of the martyrs



# Geographical

Byzantium, renamed Constantinople after its Imperial founder, and also called " New Rome," was inaugurated as capital of the Roman Empire in A.D. 330. Like Rome in Italy it stands on seven hills, and is at the junction of the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmora, where Europe and Asia are only divided by a narrow strip of water.

# Geological

Constantine possessed no good building stone, and local Materials such as clay for bricks and rubble for concrete were employed. Other materials more monumental in character had therefore to be imported : marble was brought from the quarries in the islands and along the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean to Constantinople, which was the chief marble-working centre and supplied all parts of the Roman Empire. Byzantine architecture was further considerably influenced by the multitude of monolithic columns of such sizes as were obtainable from the different quarries. These were even introduced into the underground cisterns for the water storage of this Imperial city.

## Climatic.

The Romans adapted their methods of building to the Eastern climate of their new capital and to those conditions of life which had there already created traditional forms in art :

thus flat roofs for summer resort are combined with oriental domes, and these, with small windows often high up in otherwise unbroken walls, form the chief features of the style, and sheltering arcades surrounded the open courts.

## Religious

Constantine established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire (B.C. 323), and it followed that the chief buildings erected in Byzantium, his new capital, were churches for the new religion, and they naturally, as time went on, came under the influence of their environment and so the basilican

Early Christian type of church was merged in the domical Byzantine type which had originated farther east.

# Social

Constantine developed the policy initiated by Diocletian (A.D. 284–305) of providing adequate civil government and military protection throughout the widespread Roman Empire and showed his statesmanship in his manner of dealing with this political problem, just as he did in securing support for himself from the growing power of Christianity by establishing it as the state religion.

Within the fortifications of Constantine, the new city was laid out on Roman lines, so far as the hills and site allowed.

There was the central dividing street running through a succession of six forums of which the original Augusteum was adjoined, not only by S. Sophia, the greatest glory of early Christendom, but also by the Imperial palace, senate house, and law courts.

The **Forum** of Constantine, with his great porphyry column, was the centre of commercial life.

The **Hippodrome** held the same position in the social life of New Rome as the Colosseum and **thermae** did in Old Rome, and was indeed used for all purposes and on all occasions—for crowning of emperors, burning of martyrs, execution of criminals, and for triumphal processions—and so was truly termed the axis of the Byzantine world.

The Romans paid the same attention to the water supply of their new capital as of their old capital, for water was brought by aqueducts and stored in enormous underground **cisterns** with roofs upheld by countless columns.

# PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Byzantine buildings which emerged in W.Europe reflected the climate in which they evolved-

From sub tropical sunshine and high temperatures of the East to the duller, colder conditions of the North and West.

- Low pitched and even flat roofs with few small windows and thick walls to reduce daytime effects of the sun

- Larger windows and more steeply pitched roofs to combat rain and snow.

## CULTURE

Byzantine Empire followed a similar pattern to that of Rome with much the same institutions.

- The forums lost their status as a place of public assembly as general public no longer took any part in the Government.
- Public baths still important
- Chariot races in hippodromes replaced bloody contests in amphitheatre
- Icons of divine persons in church buildings were forbidden by Leo III (AD 717-41)
- In AD843 icons were restored though only representations were those on a flat surface in paint or mosaic. These were never sculptural as their counterparts in the West

## RESOURCES

Increasing Christianisation – resulted patronage passed more and more to the Church- which acquired large holdings of land and other wealth by gifts.

- Straitened circumstances – seen in the widespread use of salvaged marble columns

- Edicts of 334 and 337 seeking to make good shortages of skilled architects and craftsmen

- Plans of buildings sent from one place to another when suitable architects were not available

- Theoretical background in the mechanical sciences for leading practitioners in the building including – suggesting a substantial increase in professional expertise at the highest level.

It was these men with such background who were chosen by Justinian for his major commission of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

- Large scale production of finished marble elements from the quarries of the Proconessian islands in the Marmara

- However from 6<sup>th</sup> Century onwards – again saw a decline in resources – churches which were rebuilt were often reduced in size and made from what could be salvaged from what could be salvaged from earlier building .

- Long pieces of timber scarce as a result of clearing of forested areas.



# BUILDING TECHNIQUES AND PROCESS

- Due to scarce resources this period is not notable for major developments in techniques
- Commonest new buildings were a variant on the much older basilica- an aisled rectangular hall with usually a timber hall
- Ashlar stonework notwithstanding walls were now constructed of brick throughout their thickness.
- Roman concrete was replaced by fine ashlar in heavily loaded piers
- Roman forms of pier, vault and buttress were also used.
- Ninth or Tenth Century saw the first use of the flying buttress of the type that was to become so characteristic of Gothic Architecture

# ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

Constantine's formal recognition of Christianity did not signal the end of large scale secular building.

-In Rome Constantine was responsible not only for the completion of the Basilica Nova begun by Maxentius for the last large Imperial baths and for several other project of the kind undertaken by previous emperors.

-New forms were however created in the new buildings for the church – places of worship, memorial structures and baptisteries that the only new forms were created.

-The first Christians already had the synagogue as their place of worship and believing in an imminent end to the world, felt no need of anything more.

-When this expectation receded and the number of believers grew they severed their ties with the Jews and met for prayer and for their central act of worship- which gradually developed into the formalised liturgy of the eucharist in whatever room could be made available to them by members of the group.

-They buried their just as most of their pagan contemporaries did and like them also, met for commemorative meals at the cemeteries.

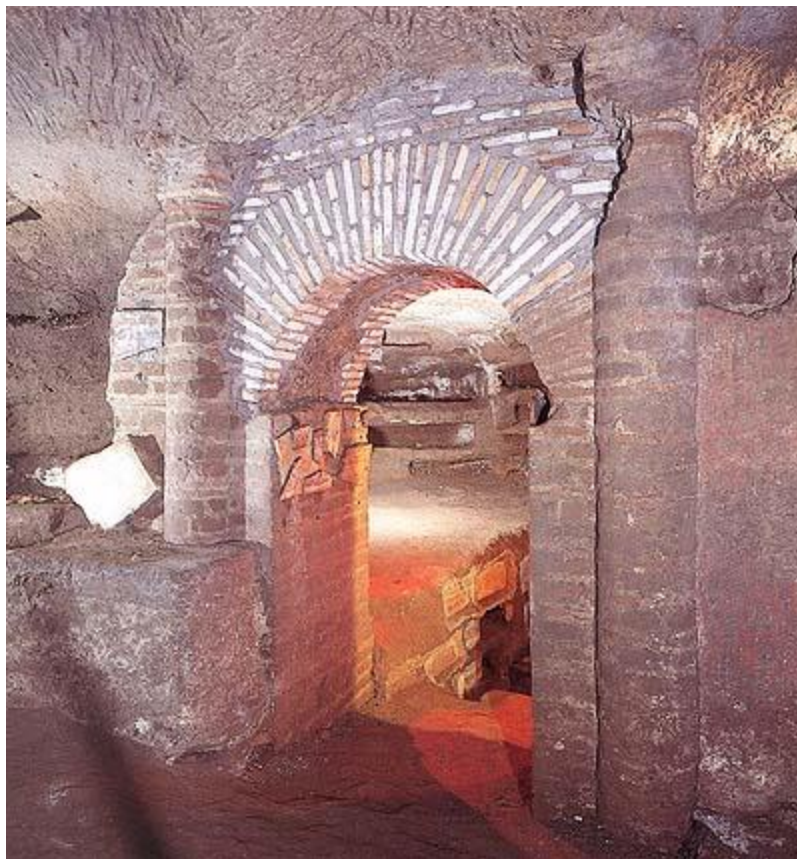
-In Rome and in a few other places, these cemeteries were mostly underground Catacombs

-But the catacombs being underground had no special significance since this was mainly a result of the high price of land and favourable circumstance that there was an easily tunnelled rock just below the surface which permitted burials one above the other down to considerable depths.

-Simple structures were built nearby to accommodate those sharing meals

-Thus the commonest form of the early church was a rectangular hall, timber roofed, usually with one or two aisles to each side of the central nave and with an apse at one end facing the principal entrances at the other.

# Catacomb of Priscilla



-Corresponding roughly to the sacred enclosure in front of the temple and to the atrium of a typical early Roman house was a courtyard which was also referred to as an atrium and frequently had a fountain in the centre.

-One or more semicircular rows of seats were set against the wall of the apse for the clergy, with a raised throne in the centre for the bishop.

-An open screen in front of them marked off a sanctuary from the rest of the nave and within this area was set the altar.

-To give the altar greater emphasis and dignity, it was usually surrounded by four or more columns and surmounted by a canopy known as baldachino or ciborium

-Thus the impression given by the interior would have been one great richness.

-Looking down the length of the nave, one sees long rows of marble columns, sometimes carrying flat entablatures and sometimes rows of arches.

-Above these and between the clerestorey windows the walls may be faced with marble or sometimes with mosaics made up from small tesserae of coloured glass.

-There may be further iridescent mosaics on the “triumphal arch” which terminates the nave proper and the semidome of the apse which opens into it.

-These mosaics if surviving from the early period will mostly be narrative scenes from the Bible or single figures seen against stylised landscapes or plain gold grounds.

-There is a likelihood of a coffered and richly gilded ceiling to the nave

-Flooring may have been paved in grey-white or black marble inlaid with geometric patterns of coloured marbles.

-In place of marble , mosaic such as those uncovered at Aquileia and Jerash would have been used

-The furnishing , such as the altar and its ciborium and the screen around the sanctuary would doubtless have been richly gilded and even studded with jewels.



## COMPARISON TO THE EARLIER ROMAN BUILDINGS

The main way in which they fell short of the earlier Roman buildings was that the columns, capitals and similar features were frequently reused from earlier buildings, with little regard to close matching

- But such idiosyncrasies imparted a greater liveliness to interiors than they might otherwise have possessed.

- Arches were used more frequently to span between the columns of a colonnade.

- Flat entablatures however were not deliberately abandoned. They were replaced by arches wherever there was a shortage of architrave blocks of the necessary size.

## VARIATIONS IN CHARACTER

In Syria due to the prevailing live tradition of cutting stone there was more emphasis on carved decoration.

- In Anatolia and Armenia stone vaulting in place of timber roofing
- Variations also developed to cater to the specific needs of liturgy which evolved differently throughout the empire involving matters such as the provision of entrances, internal barriers and secondary spaces

## FUNCTIONS OF BAPTISTERY AND THE CHURCH PLANS

The requirements of the baptistery were simple – a central font into which those to be baptised could descend and sufficient space around it for officiating clergy.

For this purpose a simple circular, octagonal, or other centralised plan was the obvious and almost universal choice.

Wherever the structure was large enough to warrant it, there was an ambulatory around the central space. There was usually a central dome, which might be decorated with a representation in mosaic of Christ's baptism.

## CHURCH FORMS ACCOMODATING CEMETERIES

A related group of new buildings might be referred to generally as memorial structures. Many, but not all were martyria in the strict sense of structures built over martyrs tombs. One of the earliest and most important was the Constantine church of S.Peter's in Rome, built over what was believed to be the saint's tomb.

## STRUCTURES ASSOCIATED WITH CHRIST IN THE HOLY LAND

The memorial structures erected on the principal sites in the Holy Land associated with Christ's birth, death and resurrection etc.,. Eg. Church of S.Simeon Stylites built around his column at Kalat Siman. The forms of these buildings were widely varied because apart from their purely commemorative role they usually served also some of the functions of the normal community church in providing for throngs of pilgrims and in serving as covered cemeteries for those who wished to be buried alongside the saints.