

Byzantine Art and Architecture

Thesis

The development of early Christian religion had a significant impact on western art after the fall of the Roman Empire in the 4th century (AD). Through examining various works of art and architecture, it becomes evident that the period of Byzantium marked a significant transition in aesthetic conventions which had a previous focus on Roman elements. As this research entails, the period of Byzantium acted as a link between the periods of Antiquity and the Middle Ages and thus provides insight on the impact of Christianity and its prevalence in art and architecture during this vast historical period.

Sources/Limitations of Study

Primary Sources:

Adams, Laurie Schneider. *Art Across Time*. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2007.

Figures:

8.4 Early Christian sarcophagus, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, 4th century. Marble.

8.5 Plan of Old Saint Peter's basilica, Rome, 333-390.

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8.28 Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (now Istanbul), illuminated at night, completed 537.

8.29 Plan, section, and axonometric projection of Hagia Sophia.

8.30 View of the interior of Hagia Sophia after its conversion to a mosque. Colour lithograph by Louis Haghe, from an original drawing by Chevalier Caspar Fussati.

8.36 *Joseph Interpreting Dreams in Prison*, from the Vienna Genesis, early 6th century. Illuminated manuscript. Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

ARTstor

<http://library.artstor.org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/library/welcome.html>

Images:

Santa Maria Antiqua, Sarcophagus front, c. 270 A.D.

Old Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome [Reconstruction Drawing], ca. 320-327/333.

Old Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome (Illustration after a Renaissance manuscript showing view of interior prior to demolition in early 16th century), ca. 320-327/333.

Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, exterior, c. 425-450.

Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, interior, c. 425-450.

The Good Shepherd, circa 425-450 CE.

Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom): Constantinople, exterior. Anthemius of Tralles, 532-537.

Trabzon: Hagia Sophia: plan, before 1260.

Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Constantinople: interior, central space and dome. Anthemius of Tralles. 532-537.

Ionic capital and base.

Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Constantinople: detail of capital.

Secondary Resources:

Adams, Laurie Schneider. *Art Across Time*. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2007.

Beckwith, John. *The Art of Constantinople: An Introduction to Byzantine Art 330-1453*. Phaidon Press: London, 1961.

Dalton, O.M. *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*. Dover Publications: New York, 1961.

Kitzinger, Ernst, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd-7th Century*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1977.

Mathews, Thomas F. *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Literature*. The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 1971.

Nelson, Robert S. *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2004.

Rodley, Lyn. *Byzantine Art and Architecture: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994.

Van Millingen, Alexander. *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople*. Variorum Reprints: London, 1974.

Perspectives Taken

Robert S. Nelson's book, *Later Byzantine Painting*, proved to be somewhat useful in terms of its discussion on Justinian Style. Its particular inclusion of the Hagia Sophia was helpful in providing evidence of the shift in aesthetic influences following the sack of Rome in the 4th century (AD). Similarly, Ernst Kitzinger, author of *Byzantine Art in the Making*, provides some constructive information on Justinian Style (e.g., the San Vitale) in addition to providing vivid images of Early Christian sarcophagi, church interiors, mosaics, and other 3rd-7th century Byzantine artefacts.

Thomas F. Mathews book entitled, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, contributed to my discussion on Justinian Style, but would have been more useful if I had chosen to analyze the San Vitale. Despite this setback, Mathew's discussion on early basilicas was helpful in providing information concerning the Hagia Sophia. Nelson's other historical work, entitled, *Hagia Sophia 1850-1950*, dedicates a solid two hundred and fifteen pages to the church. However, the first chapter is the only part relevant to my research as the book's entirety focuses on the modern Hagia Sophia.

Dalton's findings in *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* were useful to some extent as the book focuses on Justinian Style. However, the art and archaeology that it analyzes (e.g., Maximians's ivory throne) was irrelevant to my research. Regardless of this, Dalton's inclusion of Byzantine painting and illuminated manuscripts provided a detailed discussion of the codex.

Lyn Rodley's book, *Byzantine Art and Architecture: An Introduction*, proved to be quite valuable as it provided information on three different areas that I chose to focus on: early basilicas, Justinian Style, and the codex. Aside from Laurie Schneider's *Art Across Time*, this resource made a significant contribution to my research.

Art Across Time is definitely the greatest resource used within the context of this research, particularly because it is a complete history of western art and architecture. Used as a text for art history courses in post-secondary institutions, Laurie Schneider Adams does more than just brush the surface on the history of Byzantine art and architecture. She distinctly breaks down the different aesthetic elements and cultural influences found within a wide range of Byzantine sarcophagi, basilicas, architectural floor plans, mausoleums, mosaics, manuscripts and murals, covering a period of more than 1400 years. Her findings are crucial in providing evidence of the impact that early Christian religion had on western art following the fall of the Roman Empire.

Perspectives Not Taken

Alexander Van Millingen's book entitled *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople* did not prove to be very useful as it did not touch on any of the architecture in which I wanted to focus on. However, the book provides some useful maps of Byzantine Constantinople as well as a chapter solely devoted to discussing the basic elements of Byzantine architecture.

John Beckwith, author of *The Art of Constantinople: An Introduction to Byzantine Art 330-1453* dedicates much of his book to ancient Byzantine artefacts and was not very helpful in regards to my research because much of the art I have focused on is found within the interior of Byzantine architecture. Unfortunately, the sections of the book that are dedicated to the interior of churches were irrelevant to the buildings in which I chose to focus on.

Argument/Discussion/Evidence

Early Christian Sarcophagi



Early Christian sarcophagus, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, 4th century. Marble.

This Early Christian sarcophagus is a prime example of how Roman imagery continued to appear in Christian architecture during the fourth century. Located in the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua at Rome, the marble sarcophagus includes both Roman and Christian elements. In addition to portraying Old and New Testament scenes, there are figures that blend both Roman and Christian meaning. For example, the first character on the left is the Old Testament figure of Jonah, who is resurfacing from the whale that consumed him. The significant aesthetic implication here is that the figure's form is based on the idealized,

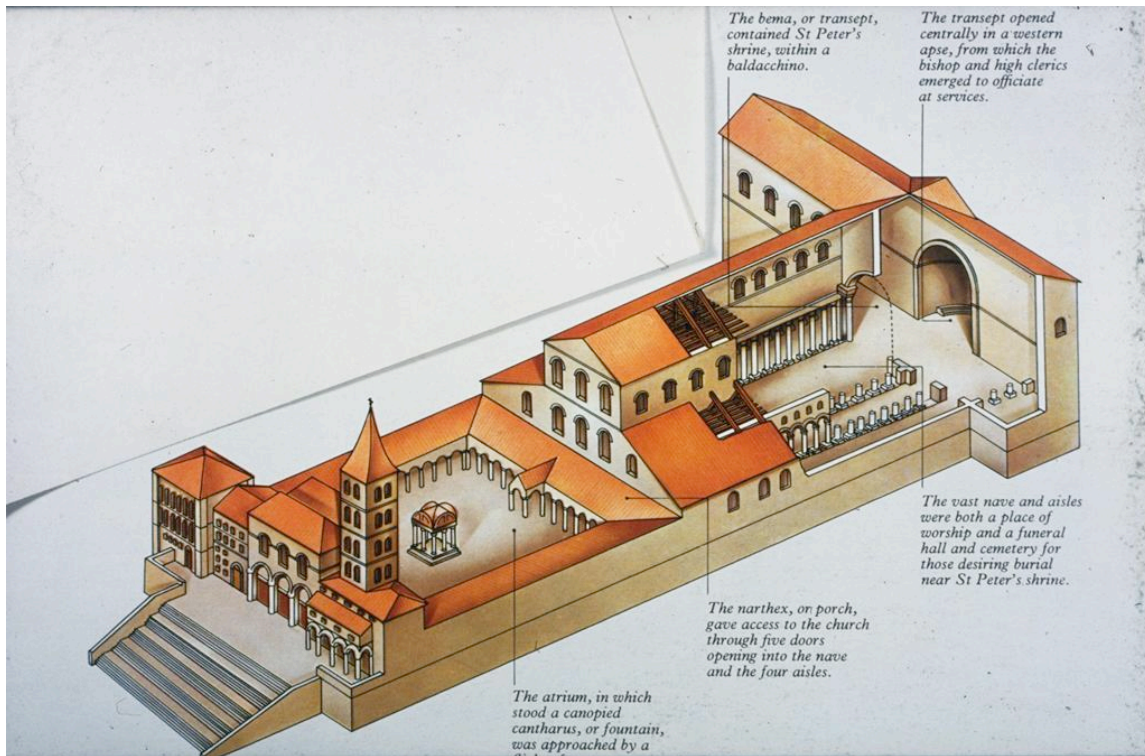
organic Classical reclining nude; an early Roman element that focused on representing objects and figures by ideal standards of beauty. The figure can also be interpreted as a preconfiguration of the Resurrection of Christ. Much like Christ was entombed for three days, Jonah spent three days inside of the whale. For early Christian viewers, such iconography could be recognized as a metaphor for the person buried in the sarcophagus.¹

Old Saint Peter's Basilica

Until the early fourth century, Christians worshiped in private homes. When the Edict of Milan was issued by Constantine in 313, Christians were free to erect places of worship. As a result, Christianity was legally protected from persecution and was soon established as the official religion of the Roman Empire. With the upward increase of the Christian faith, new buildings were needed to accommodate the Christian community. Early Christian churches were distinctly different from previous Greek and Roman places of worship, particularly because the main purpose of Greek and Roman temples was to house the statue of a god. Christian churches, on the other hand, were designed to house crowds of believers who could worship together. The Roman basilica was therefore an essential influence on the Early Christian architecture of western Europe due to the basilica's spacious structural design and its ability to

¹Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art Across Time* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 271-272.

hold a significant amount of people.²



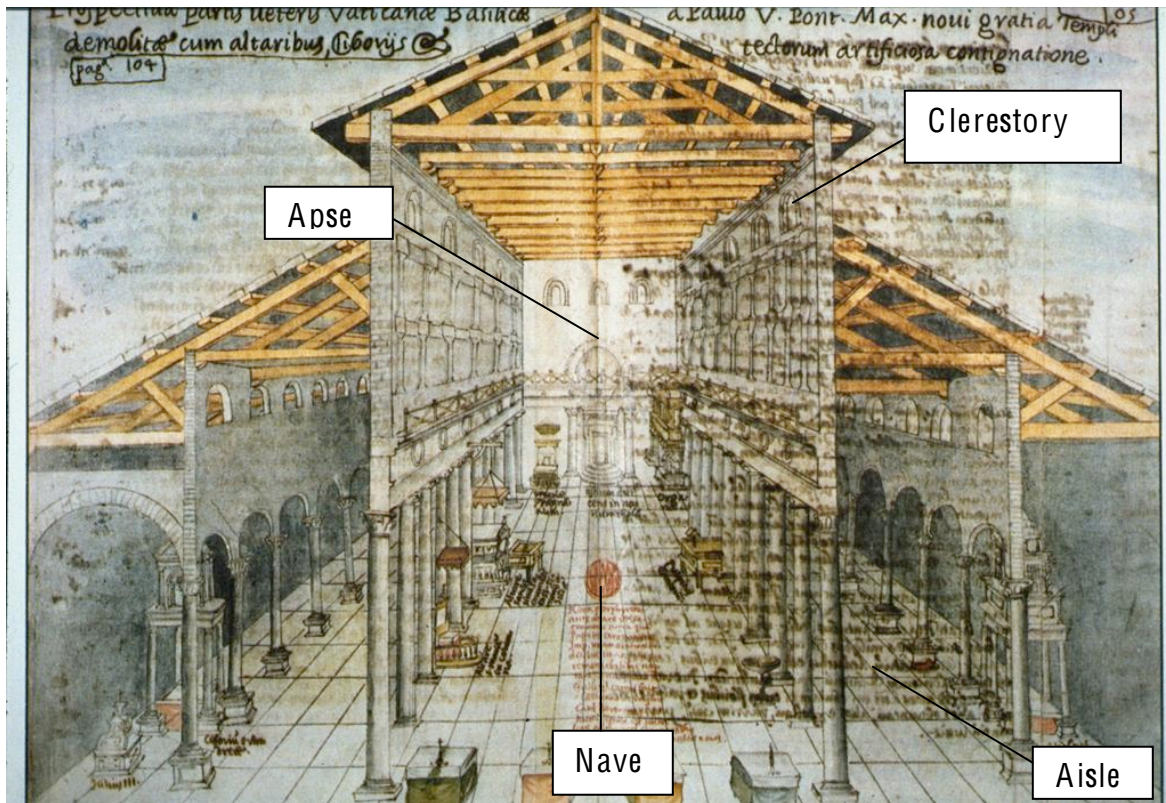
Reconstruction Drawing of Old Saint Peter's basilica, Rome, 333-390.

Although none of the Early Christian basilicas rest in their original forms, Old Saint Peter's is an accurate floor plan that has been reconstructed. The architectural design of such basilicas conformed to Christian ritual, with the altar as the focal point. Prior to 313, movable communion tables were used in Christian meeting places, but with the construction of Christian basilicas, they were replaced with a fixed altar that was visible and accessible to worshipers. The altar and the apse (see figure below) were normally located at the eastern

²Schneider Adams, 272.

end of the church, with the narthex (vestibule) located at the western entrance; these elements became standard in later churches. What is most significant about Old Saint Peter's basilica is that it was the largest Constantinian church. The location of the altar served both symbolic and practical functions, normally supporting a crucifix with the image of Christ on the Cross, facing the congregation. The symbolism here is that Christ's Crucifixion took place in the east (Jerusalem), and according to Christian belief, Christ was crucified facing the west, thus the cross on the altar typically faces the main western entrance of the church.³

³ Schneider Adams, 272-273.



Old Saint Peter's Basilica (Illustration after a Renaissance manuscript showing view of interior prior to demolition in early 16th century).

One of the main Roman influences of the Early Christian basilica was the use of the apse. However, in Roman basilicas, the apse often held statues of emperors and acted as a site for legal proceedings to take place. The image of Christ as “Judge” was therefore suitable because it made reference to the Roman law courts and simultaneously to the Christian belief in a Last Judgement. Another significant feature of the Early Christian basilica was the addition of a transept; a cross arm placed at right angles to the nave. Separating the apse from the nave, the transept isolated the clergy from the main body of the church. The

term “cruciform” distinguishes basilicas with this feature, mainly because the building creates the shape of a cross through the use of the transept. A huge triumphal arch framing the altar and the apse was also a prominent feature of Early Christian basilicas. Such a feature originated from Roman architecture but was transformed from representing the Roman emperor’s triumph to that of Christ.⁴

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

The “centrally planned” round or polygonal building was another type of structure embraced by Early Christians. Often attached to a larger structure, it expanded from a central point and was surmounted by a dome. These buildings were used mainly as “martyria” (buildings over the graves of martyrs), “baptisteries” (for performing baptisms), or “mausolea” (large architectural tombs). They contained a central altar or a tomb and a cylindrical core with clerestory windows. A circular barrel-vaulted passage, or “ambulatory” (from the Latin word *ambulare*, meaning “to walk”), extended from between the central space to the exterior walls.⁵

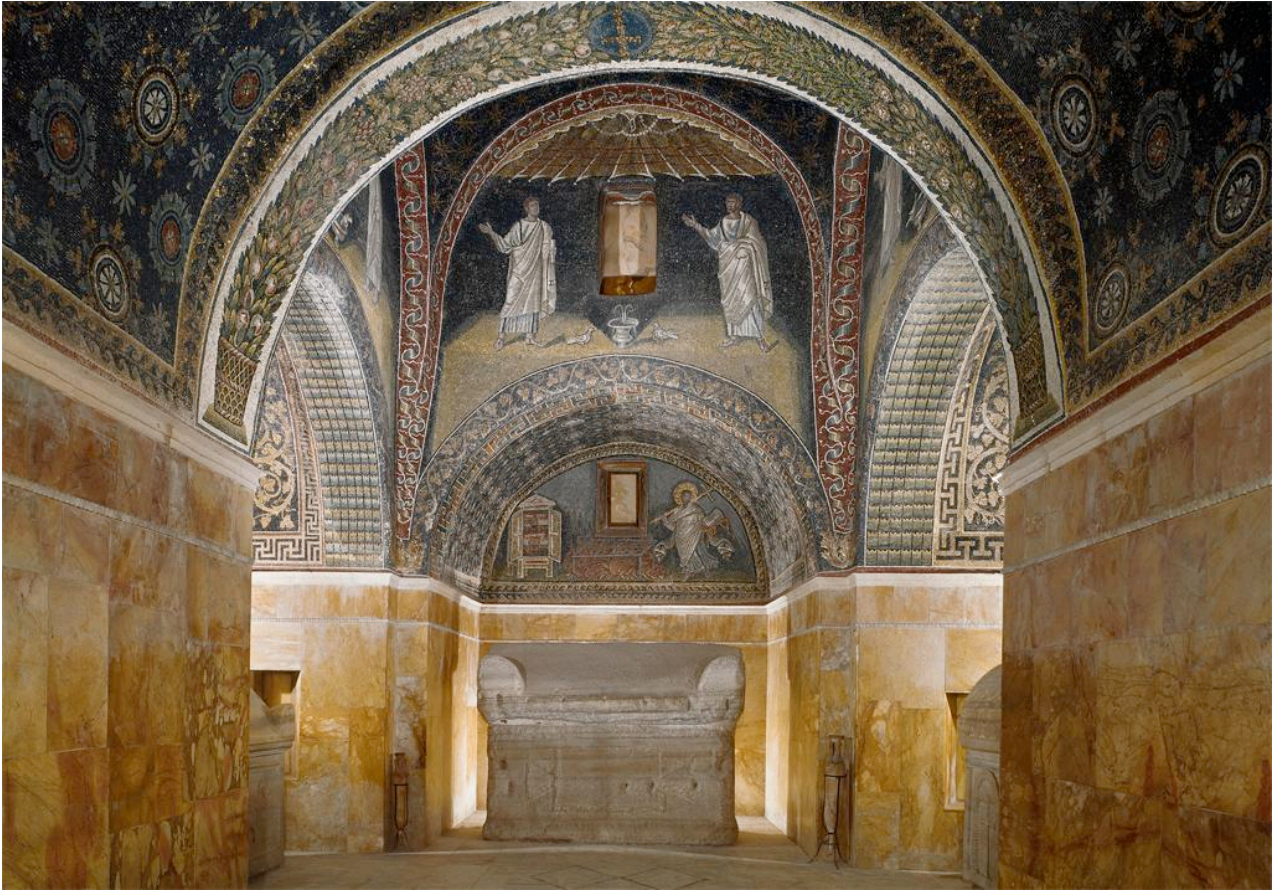
⁴Schneider Adams, 273.

⁵Schneider Adams, 276.



Exterior of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, c. 425-426.

Galla Placidia at Ravenna is a common example of a centrally planned church from the Early Christian period. Built on the coast of Italy, it was named after the daughter of Emperor Theodosius I who was abducted by Alaric the Goth in 410 when his army defeated Rome. After marrying the Goth king Ataulf, who died in 415, she returned home to her Christian family in Constantinople. She remained empress for twenty-five years (425 to 450) after her son Valerian III was proclaimed emperor.⁶



Interior of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia showing niche with two apostles (above) and the Saint Lawrence mosaic (below), Ravenna, c. 425-426.

This niche mosaic displays great evidence of Roman influence. Two apostles are shown wearing togas, raising their right hands in the manner of Roman senators. However, Schneider Adams gives no reason as to why they are portrayed this way, nor does Rodley in discussing these mosaics. Rodley's information is relatively useless as she chooses not to deconstruct the elements of the mosaics. Rather, she focuses on how some individuals identify the building as a martyrium for relics of Saint Lawrence, although it was more so intended to

⁶Schneider Adams, 277.

be the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, for whom Saint Lawrence might have had some special significance.⁷



Christ as the Good Shepherd, the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, c. 425-426. Mosaic.

What is significant about the Galla Placidia is that it is one of the earliest

⁷Lyn Rodley, *Byzantine Art and Architecture: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

churches to still have its mural mosaics intact. According to Kitzinger, the representation of the Good Shepherd, located in the “lunette” (the semicircular wall surface) over the entrance door carries a heavy symbolic message: “the figure’s royal garb, halo and cross sceptre make it evident at first glance that this is no ordinary guardian of sheep – the picture preserves much of the character of a bucolic scene in the Hellenistic tradition”.⁸ Agreeably, this can be viewed through the shepherd’s complicated torsion of arms and legs, which Schneider Adams regards to be “contrapposto” – a stance of the human body in which one leg bears the weight, while the other is relaxed, creating an asymmetry in the hip-shoulder axis.⁹ In addition, the horizon is rather low, and the trees and rocks are outlined against a light blue sky, creating much space. The rocks in the foreground solidify the depth of the mosaic, creating the illusion of a horizontal floor beneath the figure, reminiscent of late Hellenistic and Roman panel painters.¹⁰ Furthermore, the landscape setting and the intricate details of the sheep (i.e. the shading and cast shadows) also contribute to the continuation of Hellenistic “naturalism”, a style of art seeking to represent objects as they actually appear in nature.¹¹

Although both Kitzinger and Schneider Adams have identified multiple elements that contribute to the Hellenistic influence portrayed within the mosaic,

⁸ Ernst Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd-7th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977) 53.

⁹ Schneider Adams, G-2.

¹⁰ Kitzinger, 53.

¹¹ Schneider Adams, 278.

it is interesting to note that Kitzinger refers to the mosaic as The Good Shepherd, and makes no indication that the key figure is Christ, whereas Schneider Adams blatantly reveals the subject of the mosaic to be Christ as the Good Shepherd. Did Kitzinger take a personal approach on his interpretation of the mosaic or did the title of the mosaic simply change over time? The difference between the two publication dates can contribute to this theory considering Kitzinger's work was published in 1977 and Schneider Adam's was published in 2007.

The Basilica of Hagia Sophia

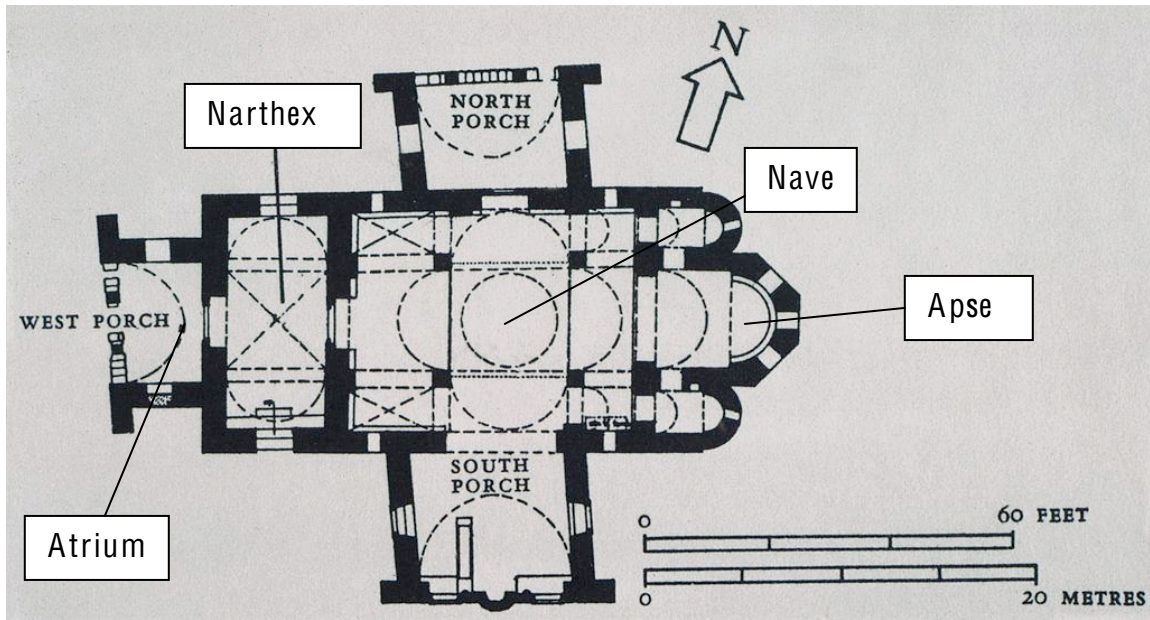


Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (now Istanbul), completed 537.

Referred to as the architectural masterpiece of Justinian's reign is the

basilica of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (now Istanbul). The name is Greek for “Holy (hagia) Wisdom (Sophia)”. Following a revolt in 532, Justinian commissioned two Greek mathematicians, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletus to plan Hagia Sophia as part of a widespread rebuilding campaign. Influenced by the work of Archimedes (one of the leading Greek scientists in classical antiquity), Anthemius and Isidore were particularly interested in the geometry of circles, parabolas, and curved architectural surfaces. By combining elements of the basilica with enormous rising vaults, they managed to establish the biggest domed space to date in the West. The central dome is positioned above four arches at right angles and supported by four huge piers. It should be noted that the four tall, slender towers, called minarets, were added when the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, resulting in the basilica’s conversion into a mosque. As for the Christian mosaics in the interior, many of them were concealed and replaced with Islamic decorations.¹²

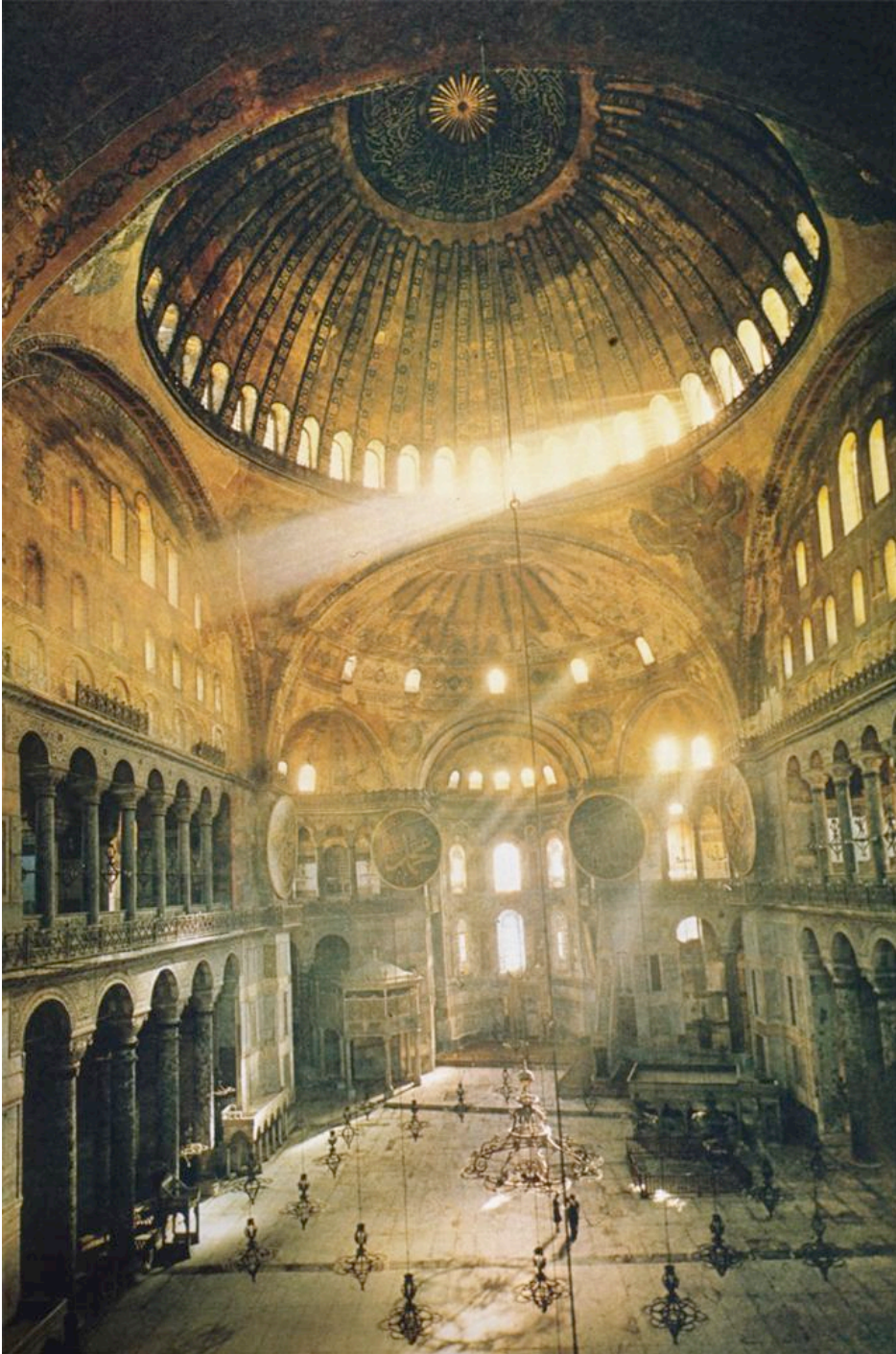
¹²Schneider Adams, 288.



Plan of Hagia Sophia.

The dome of Hagia Sophia differs greatly from Roman building domes particularly because it rests on pendentives, not drums. Pendentives are made up of four triangular segments that have concave sides. Their appearance of suspension gives them their name (from the Latin word *pendere*, meaning “to hang”). In addition to providing the transition from a square or polygonal plan to the round base of a dome or intervening drum, they allow the architect to design larger and lighter domes. Hagia Sophia gives precedence to the use of pendentives on a wide scale, not to mention that pendentives are viewed as the principal Byzantine contribution to monumental architecture.¹³

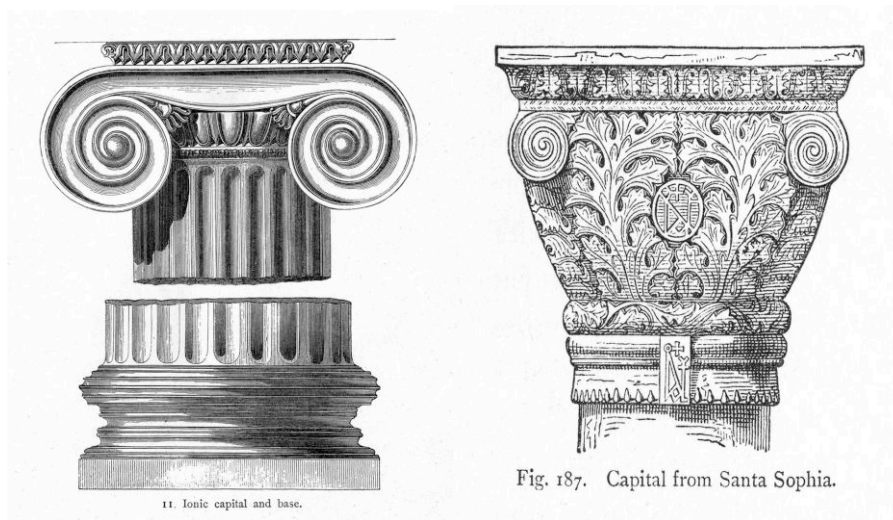
¹³Schneider Adams, 288.



Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Constantinople: interior, central space and dome. Anthemius of Tralles. 532-537.

At the floor level of Hagia Sophia, five arches connect the side aisles with

the nave. Large columns with intricately patterned capitals support these arches, reflecting the persistence of Classical elements (see above figure). However, aside from Schenider Adams' connection between a diagram of an Ionic capital, and the architrave and the detail of arcade spandrels and capital in the Hagia Sophia (see figures below), Nelson and Mathews fail to even mention it in their works which is interesting considering their dedication to writing about the building.



Comparison of Ionic capital and base with capital from Hagia Sophia.

Nelson draws particular focus on Procopius' reactions to the building and how its elements, including the double storied line of columns on the north and south give the impression of "a single and most extraordinary harmony that does not permit the spectator to linger much over details, even if each aspect attracts

the eye and draws it on irresistibly to itself".¹⁴ Mathews is more concerned with establishing an interpretation of the original elements of the Old Hagia Sophia, drawing out many plans to make reference to, in addition to debating which direction the main entrances originally faced (east vs. west).

The Codex

At the end of the first century, a new method of communicating "miniature" imagery within written texts was introduced. Referred to as the "codex" - the ancestor of the modern book - this method was viewed as a more practical approach to writing texts than the papyrus scroll (*rotulus*) that was previously used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.¹⁵ On average, the *rotulus* measured ten to eleven yards in length when unrolled. In contrast, the codex was composed of flat sheets of durable parchment or vellum which were bound together on one side and covered like a book, thus making the codex easier to maintain than the *rotulus*.¹⁶ Significantly, the pages were illustrated with much richer colours, and they contribute greatly to Byzantine art because they attest to Christian influence, particularly how the "icon", Greek for "picture" began to be applied to mainly religious images portraying divine figures or Christian narratives.¹⁷

¹⁴Robert S Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 18.

¹⁵O.M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961) 442.

¹⁶Schneider Adams, 294.



Joseph Interpreting Dreams in Prison, from the Vienna Genesis, early 6th century. Illuminated manuscript. Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

¹⁷Rodley, 52.

The Vienna Genesis is one of the earliest codices to illustrate scenes from the Bible. The original codex encompassed ninety-six folios, twenty-four of which presently survive at the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Forty-eight miniature illustrations adorn the twenty-four surviving folios. The majority of the pages contain text, while the bottom sections depict images. The above figure portrays an event in the story of Joseph from Genesis.¹⁸ Joseph appears to be imprisoned, and to his right, Potiphar's wife talks with a guard, "her modest attire distinguishing her lust for Joseph".¹⁹ Inside the prison, the pharaoh's butler and baker (to the left and right of Joseph) are dismal because they have no one to interpret their dreams. The butler explains to Joseph how he has dreamt about a vine that has three branches which sprout into blossoms and grapes, and how he pressed the grapes into the pharaoh's cup. In hearing this, Joseph foresees that, in three days, the pharaoh will free the butler from prison so he can resume his former duties. The baker reports that he dreamt he was carrying three white baskets on his head, one of which (the top basket) was filled with bakemeats for the pharaoh. He further explains how the bakemeats were eaten by birds. In light of this, Joseph predicts that in three days, the pharaoh will hang the baker from a tree and that birds will eat his flesh. According to the Bible, both interpretations came true; the butler was rehired and the baker was hanged.²⁰ In identifying a particular Bible story, this illuminated manuscript exemplifies the early Christian

¹⁸Schneider Adams, 294.

¹⁹Schneider Adams, 294.

²⁰Schneider Adams, 294.

influence that was largely applied to both art and architecture in the early 6th century.

Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society or Education

This research is relative and significant for contemporary society and education because it offers the reader heavy insight pertaining to an historical period that is often neglected not only in classrooms, but in society as well. Over a millennium of vast, fascinating years of history fall within the context of Byzantium, involving areas of Western Europe, North Africa, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia Minor, Anatolia, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. So why study Byzantium? As an educator? As a student? As society? The study of Byzantium allows us to delve into an area of history that we would otherwise know nothing about. Due to the lack of resources and further neglect of research completed by academic scholars, the studying of such a foreign history helps us to realize that we can leap into any unknown area of study and gain an immense knowledge of the subject, in addition to acquiring a profound learning experience that we can continue to build on in our future(s). Such an opportunity allows us to become less hesitant and fearful of our lack of knowledge, and in doing research, provides us with the confidence of knowing how to acquire materials and resources to better familiarize ourselves with.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through researching a wide variety of art and architecture within the historical context of Byzantium, it becomes evident that there was a major transition in aesthetic influences following the fall of Rome in the 4th century. With a new focus on Christianity, the prior Roman elements found within art and architecture became less prominent as they began to coalesce with more Christian orthodox conventions, in addition to Greek Hellenistic influences as well.