SACRED SPACES and RITUALS: EARLY CHRISTIAN ART and ARCHITECTURE
(Early Christian Basilicas and Manuscripts)
Early Christian Basilicas and Manuscripts

Online Links:

Santa Sabina – Smarthistory
Santa Pudenziana – Smarthistory
Santa Sabina – Wikipedia
Vienna Genesis – Wikipedia
Santa Sabina - Sacred Destinations
The cult of the martyrs became popular during the early Christian period and continued to increase in popularity throughout the Middle Ages. An important destination for pilgrims was the basilica of Old St. Peter’s in Rome. Built by the emperor Constantine, Old St. Peter’s was constructed at the site where the relics of the apostle Peter were believed to be entombed. Early Christian tradition describes Peter as having lived in Rome after the death of Christ, as having served the city as its bishop for twenty-five years, and as having been martyred between 64 and 67 C.E. during the reign of Nero.
Unlike Greek and Roman temples, whose main purpose was to house the statue of a god, Christian churches were designed so that crowds of believers could gather together for worship. None of the early Christian basilicas has survived in its original form, but an accurate floor plan of Old Saint Peter’s exist. The architectural design of the Christian basilica conformed to the requirements of Christian ritual and to the role of the altar, where the Mass was performed, as its focal point.
The five-aisled hall was a place of burial, and the “transept” was a place of pilgrimage: the faithful could approach and pay reverence to the memorial over the tomb of Peter. The place bore witness to the saint’s life and death and such sites came to be called **martyria** (from martyr, literally “a witness”).

According to legend, Peter was crucified in a head-downward position in the vicinity of the Vatican. Modern archaeological excavations, however, have not been able to confirm the location of Peter’s martyrdom and burial.
The Christian pilgrimage from the secular world to the church altar symbolized the soul’s progress from sin to salvation. The shrine was the focal point of St. Peter’s backed by the apse and, when seen from the entrance, framed by the arch- a very ancient architectural symbol of heaven and perhaps also recalling the triumphal arches of imperial Rome. A ciborium or canopy (also called a baldacchino), similar to those held over imperial thrones, was placed above it.

It was to St. Peter that Christ had said: “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.” He was the founder of the Christian community in Rome and its first bishop, from whom all subsequent bishops of Rome derived their authority- as popes- over not only the city but all Christendom.
St. Peter’s was also a cemetery church where Christians could bury their dead and celebrate their anniversaries. These were not necessarily the quiet, dignified ceremonies that one might imagine, for the commemorations involved banquets with plenty of eating and drinking. In the late fourth century, for example, we know that the senator Pammachius gave a feast to the poor in St. Peter’s on the anniversary of the death of his wife. Gradually, however, these activities waned and the church came to be regarded almost exclusively as a great shrine built in honor of the apostle.
According to tradition, Peter had a simple earthen grave. The site was the object of special care and veneration from the beginning; around the saint’s tomb an extensive Christian burial ground sprang up in the second and third centuries. It seems that a small funerary monument, consisting of niches, small columns, a red retaining wall, and another wall covered with pious graffiti, was built around Peter’s grave in the second century. Archaeologists could date the structure by seals on the bricks from the time of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180). In the Scavi we can stand a few feet from that early monument.
Any visitor to the churches of Rome, and to St. Peter’s Basilica in particular, is advised to descend to the Scavi, or excavation site beneath the church, to judge first-hand the tradition of Peter’s burial here. Excavations carried out beneath St. Peter’s Basilica between 1939 and 1951 uncovered first a pagan, then an increasingly Christian graveyard, and finally a semi-circle of graves surrounding a central cavity—directly below the present altar. The central grave was empty, but covered with coins and other votives from the first and second centuries.
The opulent interior of the Constantinian basilicas would have created an effective space for increasingly elaborate rituals. Influenced by the splendor of the rituals associated with the emperor, the liturgy placed emphasis on the dramatic entrances and the stages of the rituals. For example, the *introit* or entrance of the priest into the church was influenced by the *adventus* or arrival of the emperor.

The culmination of the entrance as well as the focal point of the architecture was the apse. It was here that the sacraments would be performed, and it was here that the priest would proclaim the word. In Roman civic and imperial basilicas, the apse had been the seat of authority. In the civic basilicas this is where the magistrate would sit adjacent to an imperial image and dispense judgment. In the imperial basilicas, the emperor would be enthroned. These associations with authority made the apse a suitable stage for the Christian rituals. The priest would be like the magistrate proclaiming the word of a higher authority.
Mosaic of the Church of Santa Pudenziana, Rome, 401-417 CE
A late fourth century mosaic in the apse of the Roman church of Santa Pudenziana visualizes this. We see in this image a dramatic transformation in the conception of Christ from the pre-Constantinian period.

In the Santa Pudenziana mosaic, Christ is shown in the center seated on a jewel-encrusted throne. He wears a gold toga with purple trim, both colors associated with imperial authority. His right hand is extended in the ad locutio gesture conventional in imperial representations.
Holding a book in his right hand, Christ is shown proclaiming the word. This is dependent on another convention of Roman imperial art of the so-called *tradtio legis*, or the handing down of the law. A silver plate made for the Emperor Theodosius in 388 to mark the tenth anniversary of his accession to power shows the Emperor in the center handing down the scroll of the law. Notably the Emperor Theodosius is shown with a halo much like the figure of Christ.
While the halo would become a standard convention in Christian art to demarcate sacred figures, the origins of this convention can be found in imperial representations like the image of Theodosius. Behind the figure of Christ appears an elaborate city. In the center appears a hill surmounted by a jewel-encrusted Cross. This identifies the city as Jerusalem and the hill as Golgotha, but this is not the earthly city but rather the heavenly Jerusalem. This is made clear by the four figures seen hovering in the sky around the Cross. These are identifiable as the four beasts that are described as accompanying the lamb in the Book of Revelation. The winged man, the winged lion, the winged ox, and the eagle became in Christian art symbols for the Four Evangelists, but in the context of the Santa Pudenziana mosaic, they define the realm as outside earthly time and space or as the heavenly realm. Christ is thus represented as the ruler of the heavenly city. The cross has become a sign the triumph of Christ.
The language of this passage shows the unmistakable influence of the Roman emphasis on triumph. The Cross is characterized as a trophy or victory monument. Christ is conceived of as a warrior king. The order of the heavenly realm is characterized as like the Roman army divided up into legions. Both the text and mosaic reflect the transformation in the conception of Christ. These document the merging of Christianity with Roman imperial authority.

It is this aura of imperial authority that distinguishes the Santa Pudenziana mosaic from the painting of Christ and his disciples from the Catacomb of Domitilla. Christ in the catacomb painting is simply a teacher, while in the mosaic Christ has been transformed into the ruler of heaven.
Christianity underwent a fundamental transformation with its acceptance by Constantine. The imagery of Christian art before Constantine appealed to the believer's desires for personal salvation, while the dominant themes of Christian art after Constantine emphasized the authority of Christ and His church in the world. Just as Rome became Christian, Christianity and Christ took on the aura of Imperial Rome.

A dramatic example of this is presented by a mosaic of Christ in the Archeepiscopal palace in Ravenna. Here Christ is shown wearing the cuirass, or the breastplate, regularly depicted in images of Roman Emperors and generals. The staff of imperial authority has been transformed into the cross.
Santa Sabina, Rome, 422-432 CE
Basilicas—a type of building used by the ancient Romans for diverse functions including as a site for law courts, is the category of building that Constantine's architects adapted to serve as the basis for the new churches. The original Constantinian buildings are now known only in plan, but an examination of a still extant early fifth century Roman basilica, the Church of Santa Sabina, helps us to understand the essential characteristics of the early Christian basilica.
Santa Sabina was built at the top of the Aventine Hill on the site of the Temple of Juno Regina, using many of its materials. The church was an expansion of a Roman house-church (titulus) owned by a woman named Sabina. As was common in ancient Rome, the church preserved the name of the title holder by simply adding "Saint" onto her name.

The Church of Santa Sabina was founded around 425 CE by the presbyter Peter of Illyria, who recorded his name and good works in a mosaic inscription (which can still be seen). It was completed by about 432.
Like the Trier basilica, the Church of Santa Sabina has a dominant central axis that leads from the entrance to the apse, the site of the altar. This central space is known as the nave, and is flanked on either side by side aisles. The architecture is relatively simple with a wooden, truss roof. The wall of the nave is broken by clerestory windows that provide direct lighting in the nave. The wall does not contain the traditional classical orders articulated by columns and entablatures. Now plain, the walls apparently originally were decorated with mosaics.
The architect was particularly aware of the light effects in an interior space like this. The glass tiles of the mosaics would create a shimmering effect and the walls would appear to float. Light would have been understood as a symbol of divinity. Light was a symbol for Christ. The emphasis in this architecture is on the spiritual effect and not the physical. The opulent effect of the interior of the original Constantinian basilicas is brought out in a Spanish pilgrims description of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem: *The decorations are too marvelous for words. All you can see is gold, jewels and silk...You simply cannot imagine the number and sheer weight of the candles, tapers, lamps and everything else they use for the services...They are beyond description, and so is the magnificent building itself. It was built by Constantine and...was decorated with gold, mosaic, and precious marble, as much as his empire could provide.*
The tall, spacious nave has 24 columns of Proconnesian marble with perfectly matched Corinthian columns and bases, which were spoliated (reused) from the Temple of Juno. The spandrels of the closely-spaced arches have inlaid marble designs in green and purple, depicting chalices and patens to represent the Eucharist.
Top Left: Sole surviving mosaic from Santa Sabina

Sadly nearly all of the original mosaic decoration, which would have been as sumptuous as that of Ravenna's basilicas, has disappeared. The sole survivor is an important one, however: the 5th-century dedicatory inscription. The lengthy Latin text, written in gold on a blue background, is flanked by two female figures who personify the Church of the Jews and the Church of the Gentiles.

This inscription is important not only because it gives the founder's name and date of the church, but also because it expresses the doctrine of papal supremacy, which was still developing at that time.

The 16th-century fresco in the apse is one of the few later decorations allowed to stay after the restoration, since it reflects the spirit of the original apse mosaic. There are a few traces of 5th-century fresco to be found in the church, at the east end of the left aisle. The floor of the nave contains Rome's only surviving mosaic tomb, dating from around 1300.
The 5th-century door of Santa Sabina is located at the end of the narthex beyond the entrance door to the church. Carved from dark cypress wood, the ancient door contains 18 panels of narrative carvings, most depicting biblical scenes. Its frame is made of 3rd-century marble spoils.

The panels are not in their original order (it was restored in 1836) and 10 others have been lost, but the door remains a remarkable and precious survival. In particular, the Crucifixion scene is the earliest known depiction of that subject in the world.

Other subjects include Moses and the Burning Bush, the Exodus, the Ascension of Elijah, the Ascension of Christ, Christ's Post-Resurrection Appearances, and Three Miracles of Christ. There are also two intriguing panels whose subjects are not biblical and are difficult to interpret.
Old Farmer of Corycus, folio 7 verso of the Vatican Vergil, c. 400-420, tempera on parchment

Although few examples survive, illustrated books were common in public and private libraries in the ancient world. The long tradition of placing pictures in manuscripts began in pharaonic Egypt and continued in Greek and Roman times.

Illuminated books were costly to produce and involved many steps. Numerous artisans performed very specialized tasks, beginning with the curing and cutting of the animal skin. The covers could be even more sumptuous than the book itself. Many preserved covers are fashioned of gold and decorated with jewels, ivory carvings, and repoussé reliefs.
Toward the end of the first century, a new method of transmitting ‘miniature’ imagery accompanying written texts came into use. This was the codex, which was the ancestor of the modern book. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had used the papyrus scroll (rotulus) for texts and their illustrations.

Its pages were flat sheets of parchment (lambskin) and of relatively sturdy vellum (calfskin). They were bound together on one side and covered like a book, which made the codex easier to preserve than the rotulus. It was also possible to illustrate (or illuminate) the pages with richer colors.
Among the earliest codices to illustrate scenes from the Bible is the *Vienna Genesis* (its name is derived from its current location, the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna). Originally, the codex had ninety-six folios, of which twenty-four survive; these have forty-eight miniature illustrations.

Each sheet is purple, which points to an imperial patron, while the gold and silver script is characteristically Byzantine. Most of the page contains text, relegating the images to the bottom. Usually there is more than one event depicted on a page. The narrative is continuous, without frames or dividers between scenes, and it has been suggested that such narratives are related to the continuous spiral scenes on Trajan’s Column.
The illustration of the story of Rebecca at the Well (Genesis 24) shown here appears to be a single scene, but it actually mimics the continuous narrative of a scroll. Events that take place at different times in the story follow in succession.

Rebecca, the heroine of the story, appears at the left walking away from the walled city of Nahor with a large jug on her shoulder to fetch water. She walks along a miniature colonnaded road toward a spring personified by a reclining pagan water nymph with a flowing jar.

In the foreground, Rebecca, her jug now full, encounters a thirsty camel driver and offers him water to drink. Unknown to her, he is Abraham’s servant Eliezer in search of a bride for Abraham’s son Isaac. Her generosity leads to marriage with Isaac.
Although the realistic poses and rounded, full-bodied figures in this painting reflect an earlier Roman painting tradition, the unnatural purple of the background and the glittering silver ink of the text act to remove the scene from the mundane world.

In the Vienna Genesis book there are no captions or inscriptions: each page must be read and viewed entire if its arts is to be understood. But in this case the viewer had to do more. There are elements in some of the images that are not found in the biblical text, such as the presence of Joseph’s wife in the scene of blessing. These suggest that the artist, or possibly some adviser, knew of stories and legends elaborating on the Bible, some of which derive ultimately from Jewish writings. Was the viewer also supposed to know this non-biblical material? Although this question cannot be answered, the issues it raises are intriguing.
The *Rossano Gospels* is a purple manuscript preserved in the treasury of the cathedral of Rossano in southern Italy (it is not known how or when it got there). Its images are gathered as frontispieces. Most characteristic are the scenes from the life of Christ, which occupy the upper part of the page. These are observed from below by gesticulating figures holding scrolls on which texts are written.

These books are generally referred to as “purple codices”, which is misleading if we imagine that this describes a particular color of parchment, for the *purpura* dye can produce a wide range of intense tones between a deep blue and a deep red (when not faded by prolonged exposure to light). The pages of these books never equate with our modern notion of the single color “purple”.

*Christ Before Pilate*, folio 8 verso of the *Rossano Gospels*, early sixth century, tempera on purple vellum
The subject presented here is that of Jesus before Pilate, who asks the Jews to choose between Jesus and Barabbas. “In the fashion of continuous narrative, the story’s separate episodes appear in the same frame, but without repeating any of the protagonists. The figures are on two levels separated by a simple ground line.

In the upper level, Pilate presides over the tribunal. He sits on an elevated dais, following a long-established pattern in Roman art. The people form an arch around Pilate and demand the death of Jesus, while a court scribe records the proceedings.

Jesus (here a bearded adult, as soon became the norm for medieval and later depictions of Christ) and the bound Barabbas appear in the lower level. The painter explicitly labeled Barabbas to avoid any possible confusion so that the picture would be as readable as the text. The haloed Christ and Pilate on his magistrate’s dais, flanked by painted imperial portraits, needed no further identification.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

What was the original function of a Roman basilica and why was its form adapted for Christian worship? Discuss how buildings like this promoted Constantine’s rule.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

These two folios belong to two of the earliest Christian manuscripts known. Discuss how they belong to an already thriving manuscript tradition. What role did they play in Christian worship?