

## The parish church basilica

Martyria basilicas could not serve the daily worship needs of the Christians as those were located outside the walls of the cities. They were pilgrimage sites visited on martyrs' feast days by large crowds of foreign pilgrims as well as locals who processed out of the cities to the martyrs' shrines in the countryside. Funerary banquets were also held in the martyria that commemorated the local dead but such meals were held privately and only periodically. These "churches" did not have permanent assigned clergy or a schedule of services. On Sundays, a portion of the Eucharist from the bishop's liturgy was not sent out to the martyria as it was to the churches in the city. The liturgy—or Mass—was probably held in these basilicas once in a while for the pilgrims but the weekly Eucharist and daily services for the population of the city continued to be held in the parochial *tituli* churches scattered among the urban neighborhoods. While some *tituli* churches were actual church buildings most, in Rome, were still in private homes at the start of the fourth century. The churches confiscated during the last great persecution of the church were, of course, the ones that the Edict of Milan directed be returned to the Christians in 313 at the start of the Great Peace of the Church. Most of these were no doubt modified house churches indistinguishable from the other buildings in the neighborhood.

Christian bishops, once their legal status was established and stabilized, gradually began replacing *tituli* churches with new buildings as congregations outgrew existing ones. The construction of new church buildings really did not get underway in any significant way in Rome itself until the later half of the fourth century. The architectural form the bishops selected to house the church was the civic *basilica*.

Roman civic basilicas were used for law courts, business dealings, stock and money exchanges, and audience halls for imperial civic affairs. The term *basilica* can be translated as meaning *royal house* (or *house of the king* – Greek, *basileus*)

and referred to the imperial authority by which such buildings were constructed. Basilicas varied greatly but shared a basic rectangular or shoe box form[1]. Often, rows of columns supported clerestory walls punctured with windows that bathed the interior space (*nave*) with light. The columns separated the central nave from side aisles. Some basilicas might be plain halls without side aisles. Depending on the function of the basilica and its size it might have two or three apses or maybe none.

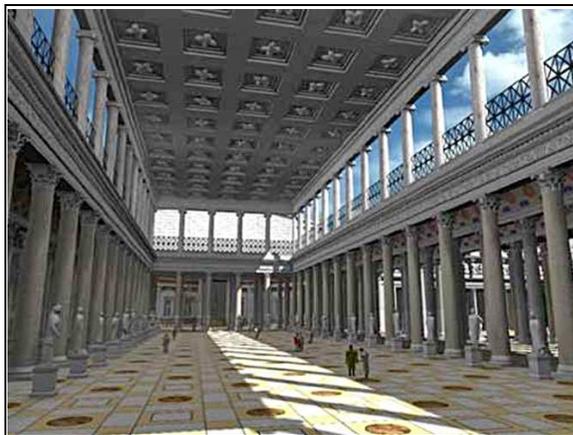
### *Hierarchical order*

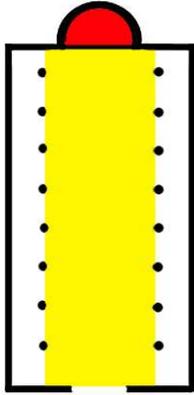
One theological concept dictated the adaptation of the civic basilica for

### 1 Roman Basilica

Computer generated reconstruction of a civic basilica with an open air clerestory.

[http://picasaweb.google.com/.../t3YWslGGFQVf1OOBwZJL\\_w](http://picasaweb.google.com/.../t3YWslGGFQVf1OOBwZJL_w)





## 2 Hierarchic Order

The red area symbolizes Christ, the Head; the yellow symbolizes the faithful, the Body.

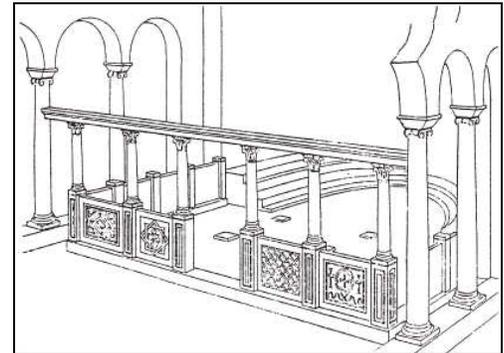
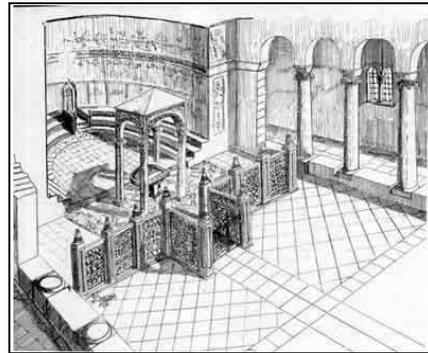
Christian worship. Beginning with St. Paul, Christians conjured the visual metaphor of the human body as a way to describe the Church; Christ as the head and the faithful as the body. The Eucharistic sacrifice that constitutes the core of Christian liturgy has always been understood as being offered by the priest and people together but the bishop or priest officiating at the altar had the unique role of standing in the place of Christ, the Head of the Body. The architectural setting for Christian worship needed to express this metaphor of the body. To accomplish it the apse and entrance of the civic basilica plan were positioned opposite each other on the short sides[2] in the church basilica plan. This rearrangement created a longitudinal orientation with the apse representing the head (Christ) and the long nave, the body (congregation).<sup>1</sup> The metaphor was further reinforced by the same direction the clergy and people faced when praying –East.

While the three aisle rectangle with apse can be considered the basic normative form of the church basilica it is really the theological concept that must be kept in mind as there are numerous variations to this basic design, some in which both the longitudinal nave as well as the apse are given over to the clergy and the congregation assigned to the side aisles. The concept of hierarchy, however, always results in a distinction among the spaces of the building according the roles played in the ceremonial by clergy and laity. In addition, the spaces within the church are not all equal in sacredness. Hierarchy applies in that respect as well.

## 3 (left) Cancellus Railing

Graphic reconstruction of a basilica on the Tsarevets hill in Veliko Tarnovo dating back to early 6th

[liternet.bg/.../nasledstvo/ikonostas\\_en.htm](http://liternet.bg/.../nasledstvo/ikonostas_en.htm)



## 4 (right) Templon

T.F. Mathews, *The Early Christian Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park P.A./London 1971) pp. 162-73; Atlas pls. 430-50

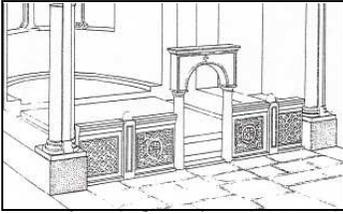
### *Indicating hierarchic spaces*

The distinction between the roles of the clergy and laity was made clear, in most church basilicas, at or near the border of the area of the altar and apse. In the civic basilica, the apse and an area extending some feet out from it was reserved for magistrates, judges, and other officials conducting whatever business was at hand. To keep the apse free of encroachment by the crowd –there were no seats-- a meter high *cancellus* (railing)[3] of marble panels sometimes separated the apse from the nave. It crossed in front of the apse at least several feet out from what is called the *chord* of the apse. This kept the crowd from coming right up to the apse and wandering into it. The cancellus of the civic basilica was kept as part of the plans for church basilicas and served the same purpose. The railing or cancellus not only controlled the crowd in the church basilicas but also served as a symbol of hierarchic distinctions as only the clergy

could pass through it. The cancellus also marked off the most sacred part of the church, where the altar was located. The area of the altar and the preserve of the clergy is called the *chancel*.

Often the cancellus could have a prominent architectural presence. It sometimes supported small columns spaced a few feet apart that, in turn, supported a continuous line of lintels or architrave. This type of cancellus barrier is called a *templon*.<sup>[4]</sup> The spaces between the columns of the templon were often hung with curtains drawn shut between liturgies. This, of course, contributed to the sense of sacredness and mystery even more.

An imposing cancellus or templon included a *fastigium*<sup>[5]</sup>, a pedimented or arched gateway over the central passage into the chancel. We will talk more about both the templon and fastigium later as we explore the theological significance of the various parts of the early Christian basilicas.



### 5 Cancellus with Fastigium

Reconstruction of a cancellus from 5th c. Olympia, Greece, by A.K. Orlandos

Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*, (Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications 1991) p47

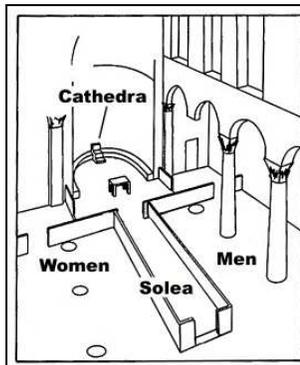
### 6 Solea

Ceremonial walkway.

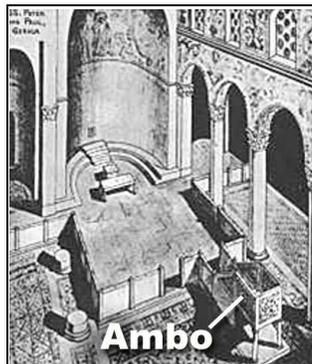
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### The solea and ambo

A hierarchic feature sometimes introduced into church designs was a ceremonial walkway (*solea*)<sup>[6]</sup> that began about halfway down the center of the nave from the entrance and extended to the chancel. It was sometimes designed in conjunction with the *bema* (raised platform) and *ambo* (pulpit)<sup>[7]</sup>. The width of the walkway varied from just a few feet in some churches to nearly half of the nave in others, doubling as a bema. It was bordered in the same way as the cancellus with panels of marble about a meter high. The purpose of the solea is rather interesting. Congregations assembled inside the church to await the arrival of the bishop and his clergy.<sup>2</sup> (In the Eastern Church, the congregation assembled outside and entered at the same time as the clergy.)



The entrance of the bishop was accompanied by the singing of psalms or litanies. He and the clergy processed down the center of the nave, onto the restricted walkway, and continued to the apse. The solea also, like the cancellus, had the very practical purpose of crowd as the fenced-off walkway kept the center free for the bishop, priests and deacons to make it to the apse unhindered.



The solea was also utilized when the scriptures were brought into the nave for readings by the lectors. For that and for addresses by the bishops and priests, the bema – a carryover from the Jewish synagogue as well as the civic basilica-- was placed near the center of the nave and enclosed by a railing of marble panels. The congregation gathered around the bema to listen to the lectors. The bema eventually evolved into --or was fused with-- the slightly higher ambo. The ambo was generally down a bit on either side of the nave, near the columns. In the Eastern churches,

### 7 Ambo

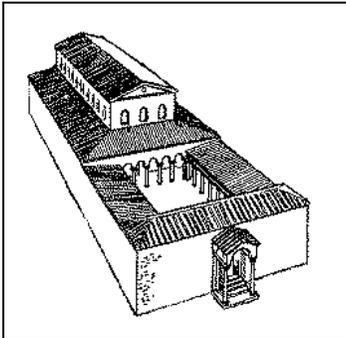
Pulpit.

the readers/lectors and chanters often stood in an enclosed space around the ambo, at floor level. Basilicas in the Western provinces rarely included an ambo as sermons were not required in the liturgy of the Latin West for several centuries.<sup>3</sup> Readings in those instances were done from the bema. In the Eastern Church the bema eventually was a term that applied to the chancel or altar area.

These interior structures, the cancellus, bema, and solea formally delineated which spaces were reserved for clergy and which spaces were more sacred.

### Variations

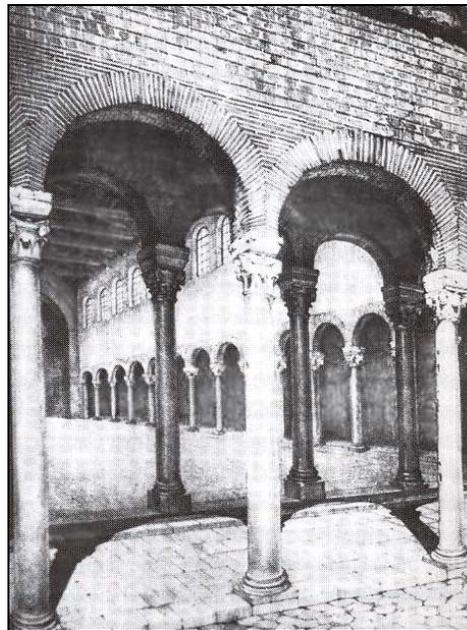
By the end of the fourth century a standard church basilica form for ordinary worship had been adopted pretty much all over the Roman Empire[8,9]. Regional variations never included a rejection of the basic plan of a long nave terminating in an apse and flanked by side aisles. Some



8 (above) *Santa Sabina*, Rome, ca. 4th c.

[anatomyofmarc.blogspot.com/.../atrium-pl.htm](http://anatomyofmarc.blogspot.com/.../atrium-pl.htm)

9 (right top) *Nave*, *Santa Sabina*, Rome, ca. 4th c.



10 *Reconstruction of facade, narthex, and nave*, *San Vitale*, Rome, ca. 401-17

Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 170

naves might be elongated or, conversely, stunted but were always easily identifiable. Here and there centralized plans based on the circle, octagon, or square would appear but those always remained exceptional. We will discuss the centralized plans later in this section. A *narthex* or entry hall transitioned the exterior and interior space in the standard plan[10]. Sometimes two halls served this purpose: an *exonarthex* or colonnaded outer porch gave way to a colonnaded *esonarthex* or interior transverse aisle[10]. It was also always preferable that the entire complex be preceded by an atrium if the site would allow for one. Finally, after Constantine, churches were constructed on an East-West axis: facade or entrance side on the West end and the apse on the Eastern end. Previously, the apse might be in the East, West or North depending on local custom and dictates of the site. Symbolically, by placing the apse in the East the church assembles to worship in anticipation of the “second coming”

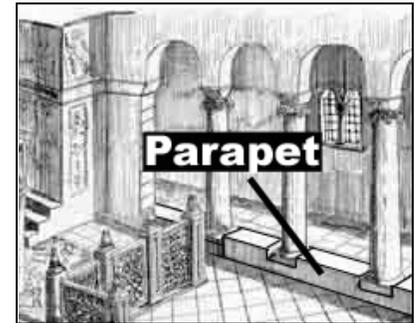
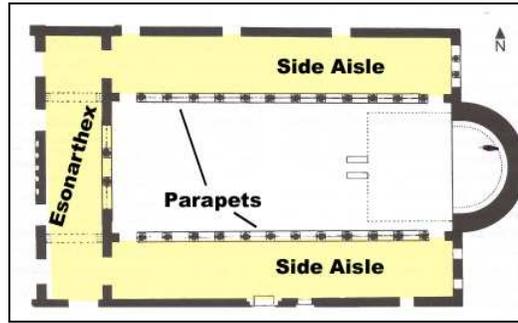
when Christ will approach out of the Eastern sky.

While the spaces remained essentially the same, liturgies sometimes unfolded differently between the Eastern and Western churches with spaces within the basilica utilized in different ways. Clergy in the West were pretty much assigned the areas of the apse and chancel; the congre-



**11 detail of Nave Mosaic toward the East, S. Apollinare Nuovo, ca. 500**

Curtains in this mosaic are shown hung between columns in the imperial palace. Curtains were similarly hung between nave columns in some church basilicas.



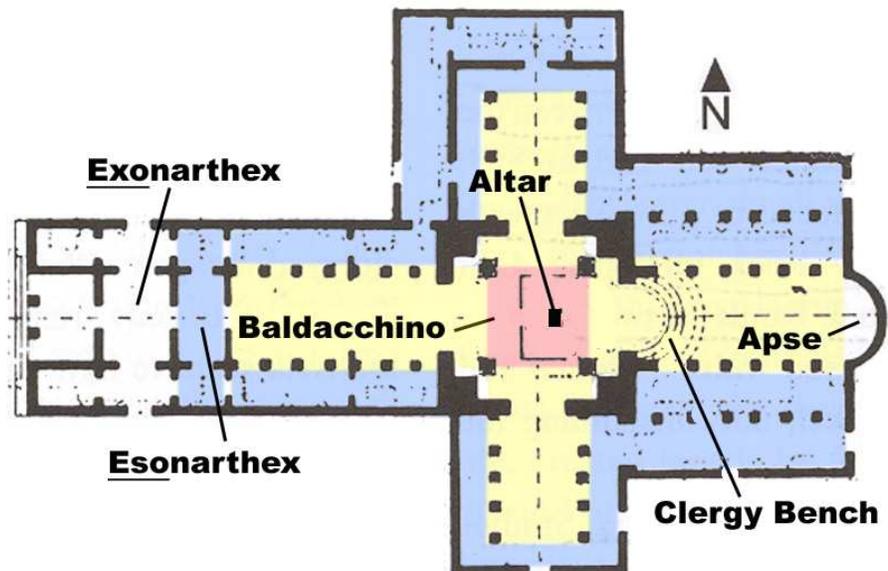
gation occupied the nave and side aisles. In some localities of the East the clergy extended its area of activity forward to include the nave; the congregation occupied the side aisles (men on the right and women on the left).<sup>4</sup> In addition, *parapets* ( a short barrier perhaps one to two feet high with a similar width) filled the space between the columns that separated the nave from the side aisles. To step over a parapet would be awkward and difficult and so they were meant to restrict movement into the nave from the sides.[12,13] The barrier nature of the parapets was reinforced by curtains suspended between the columns and gathered at the center, or tied to the columns[11]. The congregation, participating from the side aisles would catch only glimpses of the ritual action taking place in the nave. The chancel and altar were also screened from full view by a templon that might also be hung with curtains. This arrangement brought out the significance of two high points in the liturgy when Christ reveals himself: first, in the gospel reading which takes place in the nave and, second, in the consecration which takes place on the altar

**12 (top middle) plan, Church of the Acheiropoietos, ca. 450-70**

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 100

**13 (top right) Parapet**

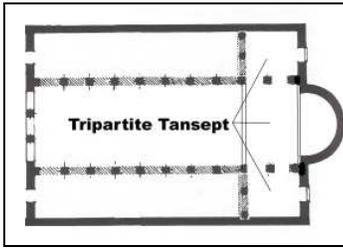
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**14 Cross Transept Basilica, St. John, Ephesus, ca. 450**

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 106

in the chancel.<sup>5</sup> The experience was one of a veiled view of the appearances of Christ and reflected a general belief that the Mass or Eucharist should be experienced but not completely understood.<sup>6</sup>

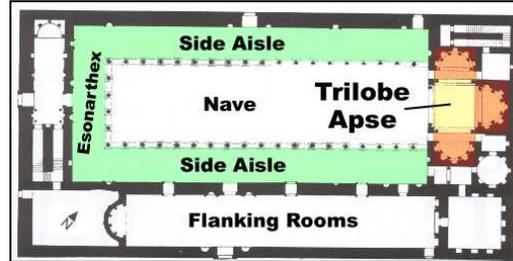
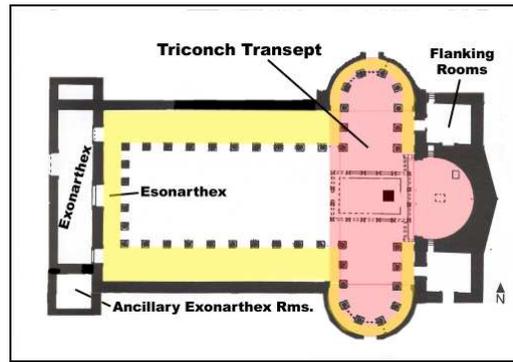


15 *Tripartite Transept*

16 *Triconch Transept, Her-mopolis Cathedral, ca. 430-40*

17 *Trilobe Apse, Deir-el-Abiad, ca. 440*

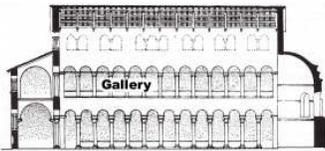
Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 114



### Transepts

About the only major variation in the standard basilica itself was the inclusion, mostly in the Eastern provinces of the Empire, of transepts inserted between the nave, side aisles, and the apse. The martyrion church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople no doubt inspired these cruciform churches. Continuous transepts like that in St. Peter's basilica in Rome were not repeated in the West until about 800, but in Greece, the Balkans, Asia Minor, and Egypt two types of transepts were frequently used. The *cross transept*[14] plan contin-

ued the colonnaded side aisles around the transept side wings and the *tripartite transept*[15] "screened" the central bay from the two arms by arcades. Variations included *triconch transepts*[16], in use in Egypt, and are strongly reminiscent of triconch mausolea. In these the ends of the transepts form *exedra* or apses in imitation of the main apse; itself springing directly from the transept. Perhaps derived from the triconch transepts are *trilobe apses*[17], also Egyptian, in which the apse is laid out in triconch fashion. The center conch was reserved for the bishop's throne. The left one served the preparation of the bread and wine and then the guarding of the reserved Eucharist; the right one for storing the liturgical books.



18 *Elevation Plan, Gallery, Church of the Acheiropoietos, ca. 450-70*

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 114

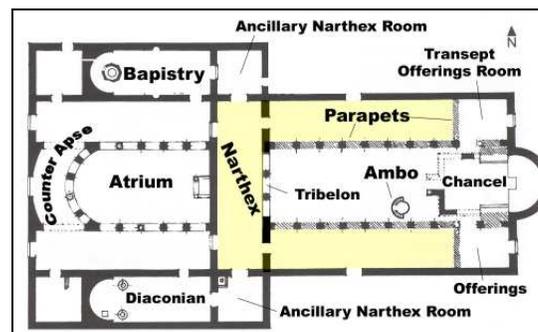
### Galleries

Basilicas in and around Constantinople --Constantine's "New Rome" in the East-- often had galleries[18] over the side and transept aisles. These were added initially to churches in Constantinople and came to be the reserve of the imperial court and emperor's family. The galleries may also have been added in some basilicas to offset the loss of space available for the congregation when the nave was given over to the clergy.

19 *Nea-Anchialos, Basilica A, ca. 470*

This basilica in Thessaly is not a cathedral but does include a number of aspects of some fifth century churches: cross transept, parapets, diaconian or offering room, narthex rooms, attached baptistry, counter apse, and a tribelon.

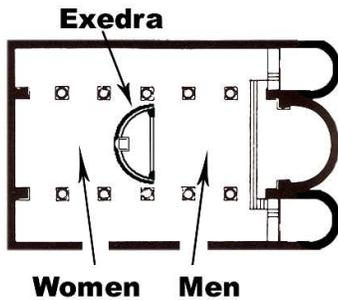
Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 122



### Auxiliary rooms

Other than the occasional use of transepts, variations in the standard basilica were not significant although ground plans might appear complicated. Auxiliary needs of the liturgy were served by separate rooms flanking the apse and/or rooms at the ends of the side aisles or either end of the narthex.[19] In the Eastern provinces, the peo-

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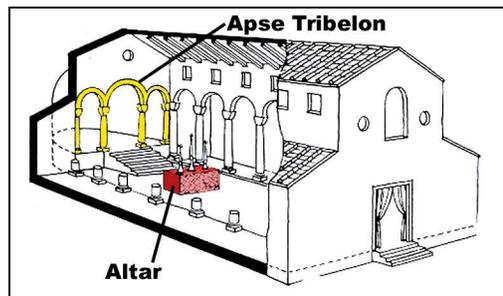
20 Nave Exedra, ca. 418

ple dropped off their offering of bread for use in the liturgy on their way into church at the *diaconicon*[19] which was usually one of the rooms situated at the ends of the narthex. The preparation (*prothesis*) of the bread took place in that room which also served as the room in which the gospel book was stored. Vestments and other items needed for the liturgy were also kept in the diaconicon. Sometimes a *skeuophylakion* (separate building) near the front of the church served this purpose. In the Western provinces the people dropped off their bread offering at one of the rooms flanking the apse, at the end of a side aisle, or at one or both of the transepts. The deacons in both the Eastern and Western rites took charge of receiving and selecting some for consecration. Baptisteries --found only at cathedral churches-- were sometimes attached to the main building and sometimes separate. The *consignatorium* --a room associated with the sacrament of confirmation--was usually an attached room, sometimes flanking a side aisle.

Some flanking transept rooms, like those in the Near Eastern hinterlands, were martyrs' chapels containing shrines and reliquaries. Syria also had a unique tradition that included an exedra (clergy bench) situated in the nave facing the chancel and apse.[20]<sup>7</sup> Two entrances were on one side of the building so that men and women could enter separately and proceed to their places without mixing: men to the front of the exedra and women, behind.

21 Apse Tribelon and Nave Altar, African basilica, reconstruction of mosaic from Tabarka, ca.400

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 190



#### Incidental variations

There were numerous minor local variations. The size and shape of the chancel and how far it might extend down the nave was dependent on local liturgical custom. North African churches often placed the altar down toward the center of the nave.[21]<sup>8</sup> Sometimes the chancel was preceded by a solea, sometimes not. As sermons were generally not required in the West until the



eight century many basilicas in those provinces did not have an ambo. A clergy bench (*synthronon*)[23] with a throne for the bishop lined the back wall of the apse in most basilicas in the West but in the East it could be in the nave. African coastal churches made use of a *tribelon* archway between the apse and the nave.[21,22]



22 Apse Tribelon, Tabarka mosaic, ca. 400

<[www.tunisie.com/mosaiques/mosaic49.htm](http://www.tunisie.com/mosaiques/mosaic49.htm)>

23 Synthronon, Agh. Nicholas, 4th c.

<[rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/.../ParosParos.htm](http://rolfgross.dreamhosters.com/.../ParosParos.htm)>

#### Masonry

Near Eastern and North African basilicas are made of large blocks of stone[24, 25] and exhibit a heavy, almost ponderous, appearance with squat columns and small windows. The exteriors often exhibit a powerful



**24 Lashlar Blocks, Binbirkilise, Church no. 1, ca. 600**

This masonry technique was characteristic of architecture in Palestine and Jordan as well as other

**25 Qalb Lozeh, ca. 450**

[www.mithatravel.biz/.../progsy/prog14j.htm](http://www.mithatravel.biz/.../progsy/prog14j.htm)

**26 Theodosian Walls, Constantinople, ca. 400**

Walls of mortared rubble faced with bands of stones and brick. Common in the Aegean region.

**27 Apse of Santa Sabina, Rome, 422-32**

Marble revetment.



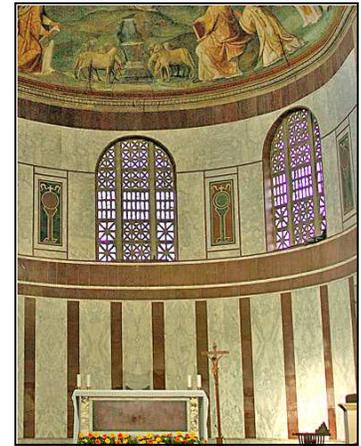
**28 Mosaic Flooring, ca. 500**

Mosaic floors were common in the Aegean coastlands and in areas influenced by Aegean church architecture such as Northern Italy.



feeling with blocky masses of geometric forms. Doors and windows are defined by strong bold frames. In many areas where there were no forests, the ceilings were vaulted in stone. Walls in the area of Constantinople and the coast of Asia Minor are often made of mortared rubble finished off with brick and stone bands[26] or, sometimes, mortared rubble faced with bands of small stones or brick.

The columns and capitals of the nave and aisles in Western church



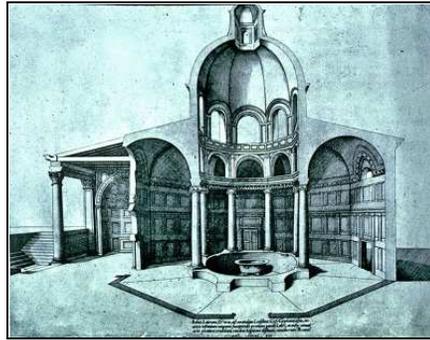
basilicas were almost always spoils from older buildings, sometimes very carefully chosen for matching details, sometimes not. Ceilings in Western basilicas were open timbered; the roof pitched and covered with clay tiles. The half domed ceiling of the apse was usually concrete or brick or both, with marble revetment at least on the bottom half of the interior wall[27]. Those in North African and Near Eastern churches were made of cut stone. Fresco or mosaic covered the half dome's interior ceiling. Generally there were windows in the apse walls; they might number anything from one in the center to a horizontal bank of several[27]. The floors in the West were paved with flat flagstone and usually consisted of graves –even in the cities-- in imitation of the martyria. Floors in many of the Eastern churches especially in the Aegean coastlands were mosaic stone or marble laid out in beautiful patterns and decorative figurative imagery. [28]

### *Baptisteries*

Baptisteries throughout the Empire were traditionally separate from the church building and were octagonal in shape, the font occupying a

**27 Baptistery of St. John  
Lateran, Rome, 330**

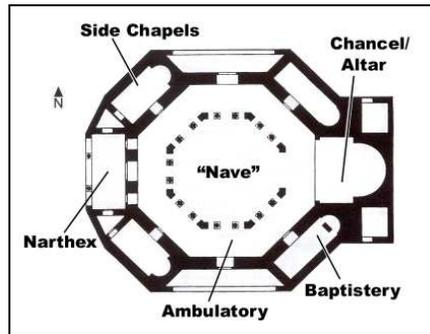
[campus.beimont.edu/.../ECArchThree.html](http://campus.beimont.edu/.../ECArchThree.html)



central space. An colonnaded ambulatory with a lower roof surrounded the nave.[27] The similarity to the shape of the mausoleum is obvious and deliberate as—in baptism—the candidate dies to sin in the water of the font and rises again to a life in Christ. The octagonal shape is symbolic of regeneration and resurrection as the universe as a whole began its existence on the eighth day of creation, and Christ rose from the dead on the eighth day after the commencement of his passion.<sup>9</sup>

**28 Centralized Plan, Church of the Theotokos, Mount Garizim, ca. 484**

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 157



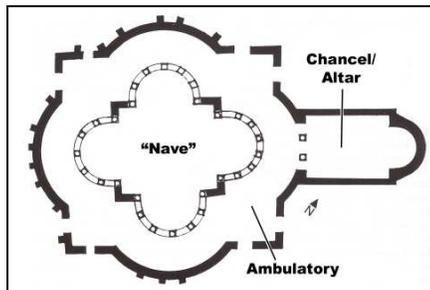
**Centralized churches**

Church plans based on a circle or polygon are so exceptional that they are almost always associated with a special situation. In fact, they are often found at shrine sites. One immediately thinks of the octagonal end of the Basilica of the Nativity in Palestine which covers the grotto of Christ’s birth or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. These forms are associated with mausolea and therefore appropriate as a martyr’s shrine. Cruciform churches are often discussed along with centralized forms when considering exceptions to the standard basilica plans. More than likely they were designed in imitation of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, a mausoleum. The cruciform plan is sometimes combined with round forms or square forms as we see in the Church of Santo Stefano in Rome[30].

**29 Centralized Plan, Seleucia-Pieria, ca. late 5th c.**

Similar to the church of San Lorenzo in Milan

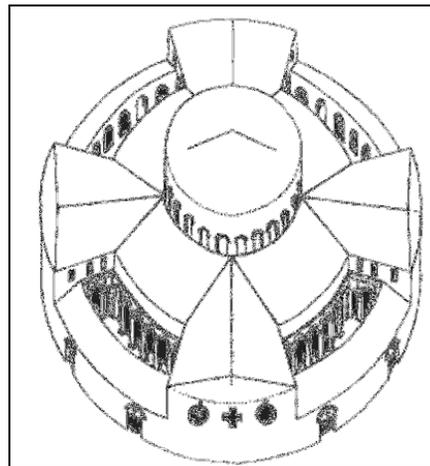
Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 138



**30 Sto. Stefano, Rome, 468-83, original lines**

Cruciform w as sometimes combined with circular or square plans.

[campus.beimont.edu/.../ECArchThree.html](http://campus.beimont.edu/.../ECArchThree.html)



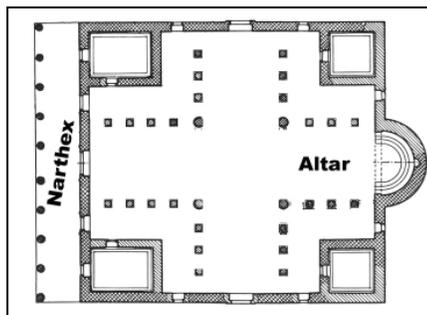
Churches designed in the round are problematic. There is a certain liturgical awkwardness associated with the placement of the altar in the center. The bishop or priest can face in only one

direction at a time and so three quarters of the congregation are always “off to the side” at any given moment. In addition, the round or polygonal plan is not conducive to straight processional linear movements — either physically or symbolically. The problem for Christian theological expression and symbolism is significant. Chancels and altars therefore are often situated in an apse on the edge of the circle or polygon, opposite the main entrance.[28,29] The chancel sometimes extends out from

**31 Cross in Square Plan,  
Church of the Prophets, Apos-  
tles, and Martyrs, Gerasa, ca.  
465.**

This form will become, in the Byzantine Empire, a standard church design.

Edited illustration based on: Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p 158



the apse interrupting the flow of the ambulatory by a cancellus. In this way a longitudinal direction is forced upon the centralized form. Round or polygonal plans never seriously challenged the standard basilica form in the West. Eastern churches however did develop a cross in square plan that retained the longitudinal solution to centralized

plans by placing a projecting apse on one side, and usually the entrance opposite it.[31]

In the next section we will look at the influence of imperial court ceremonies on church design and interpretations that drew comparisons of Christian liturgy and church design with the Jerusalem Temple and liturgies of the Old Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> Slattery, Bishop Edward, *Ad Orientem*, (Eastern Oklahoma Catholic 2, Diocese of Tulsa, Tulsa, 2009) p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*, (Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1996) p. 77

<sup>3</sup> Richard Krautheimer with Slobodan Curcic, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (Revised)*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986) p. 168

<sup>4</sup> Krautheimer 101

<sup>5</sup> Krautheimer 102

<sup>6</sup> Krautheimer 102

<sup>7</sup> Krautheimer 142

<sup>8</sup> Krautheimer 188

<sup>9</sup> Krautheimer 95