

Heaven on Earth

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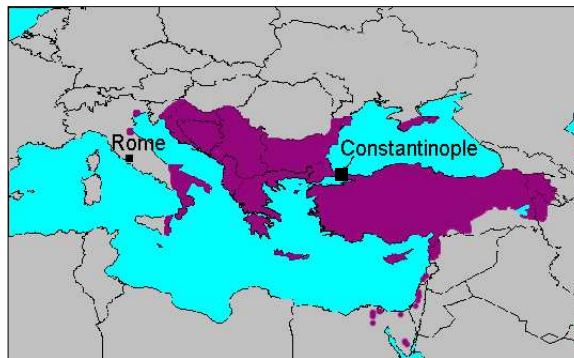
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Map of the maximum extent of the Byzantine Empire

(edited map: xeno historian .faithweb .com / europe / eu08 .html)

The Byzantine Empire expanded and contracted many times from 476, when the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire abdicated, until its demise in 1453. The map gives us some idea of the core of the Byzantine Empire's political and cultural influence.

The Eastern part of the Roman empire from the mid 5th century to the mid 15th century is referred to as the Byzantine Empire [62] but that term would not have meant anything to the people living either in the Eastern or the Western parts of the Roman Empire at the time. The residents of

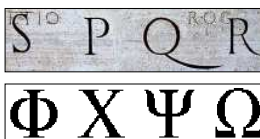


the East thought of themselves as “Romans” as much as the residents of the West did. In fact, Constantine the Great had moved the capital of the Roman Empire in 330 from “old” Rome in the West to what he called “New” Rome (*Nova Roma*) in the East. There was already a city in the

new location, Byzantium, and that is where the term *Byzantine* comes from. The name Constantinople was given to the new capital after the death of Constantine. Constantinople grew in power, cultural, and diplomatic influence while old Rome was repeatedly plundered by barbarians. By the end of the 5th century the Western Roman Empire was out of business. So it was that the citizens in the East saw themselves as simply the continuation of the Roman Empire. We call that remnant of the old empire in the east, Byzantium, in recognition of the changed political situation centered on Constantinople between 476 and 1453.

In nearly every aspect of culture the East and the West drifted farther

and farther apart after the establishment of Constantinople. By the year 800 the Byzantine Empire was predominately Greek in outlook and the West, predominately Latin [63]. Even the Christian Church drifted into two separate but parallel streams, holding most essentials in common, but adopting different



languages, rituals, and outlooks. Papal authority was at the root of the serious differences. A formal split came in April, 1054, lasting until the present day. The Church in the East became known as Orthodox and that

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Top: Latin; Bottom: Greek

64**Satellite view of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople).**

The area enclosed by the red circle indicates the old city of Constantinople. The narrow waterway connecting the top and bottom bodies of water is the Bosphorus. On the west side of the Bosphorus is Europe; Asia is on the east side. The city was renamed, Istanbul, in 1453 when it was taken over by the Ottoman Turks.



in the West as Catholic.

As Constantinople's influence grew it acted as a cultural center, drawing in artists and craftsmen from all over and then sending them back out with Byzantine images and ideas. Meanwhile, very little art of any significance was produced in the West from about the end of the 6th century through to the end of the 8th.

65**Byzantine mosaic, 6th c.**

Rich colors and patterns used in many Byzantine mosaics may have been an influence of the arts of eastern cultures. Asia was just a short boat ride across the Bosphorus.

**Influences on the arts of Byzantium**

The development of a *Byzantine* style of art was gradual making it difficult to tell just when the early Christian style ended and a separate Byzantine one began.

Byzantine art drew from several sources. From the Orient came a preference for sumptuous display with costly materials, and a passion for dazzling rich color and patterns¹ [65]. This Oriental taste for grandeur and luxury might be attributed to the geographic position of Constantinople for it faced Asia across the Bosphorus and was a crossroads of trade between the Orient and Europe [64]. Also from the Orient may have come an emphasis on the underlying meaning and significance of a subject in art rather than its naturalistic or realistic surface characteristics.² From the Greeks came a talent for clarity and logic in organization of architectural spaces and their decoration with images.³ And, from the Romans came engineering skills in constructing difficult architectural forms in stone, concrete and brick. Finally, it's likely that the imperial ceremo-

nial court in Constantinople influenced the Byzantine preference for rich, gorgeous patterns, and formal figurative images.

Byzantine architectural innovations

A distinctive church architecture developed in the Byzantine period

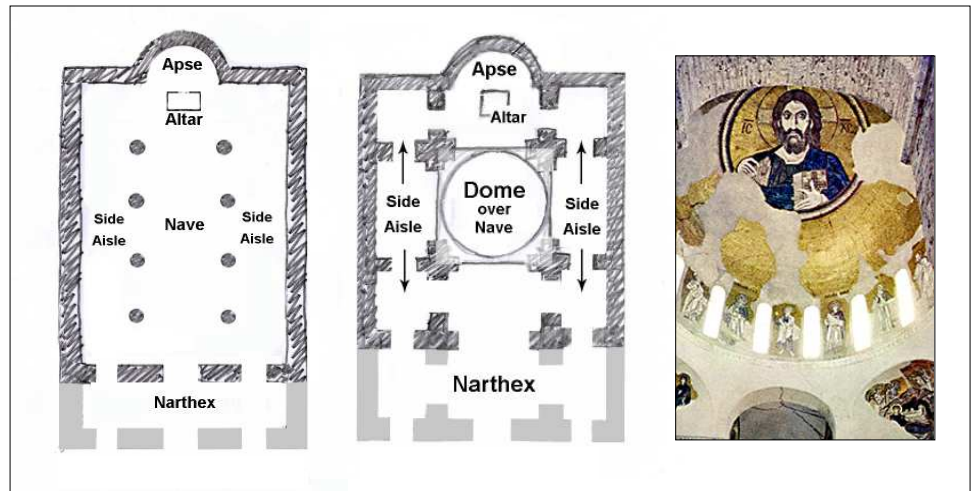
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Left: a 'Roman' (Western, Latin) basilica. **Right:** a Byzantine (Eastern, Greek) church/basilica.



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Left: ground plan of a traditional 'Roman' (Western, Latin) church/basilica. **Center:** ground plan of a Byzantine (Eastern, Greek) church/basilica. **Right:** image of the 'Pantokrator' in the apex of a Byzantine church dome.



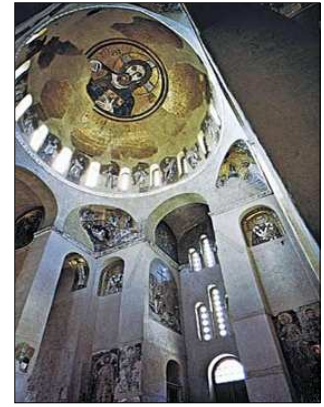
which highlighted some of the differences between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. The Roman basilica had been adopted all over the Roman Empire—in both the East and West—for use as Christian churches but beginning in the 6th century a proportionally taller and less rectangular structure dominated by a central dome became the clear favorite for use in Orthodox church buildings in the East [66, 67].

In a traditional Roman basilica church plan one's attention is immediately drawn to the altar by the long rectangular nave that is bordered by the illusion of receding rows of columns, arches and spaces, and that ends in the singular design of the apse [68 Left]. But in the Byzantine Orthodox church building the flow toward the altar is interrupted by a soaring dome over a square nave (*naos*). Everything under the dome is seemingly united under a suspended canopy of heaven. And, with a large image of the *Pantokrator* (Christ, Divine Ruler of the Universe) [68 Right] in the apex of the dome, one has the feeling that an oculus has

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Left: Latin Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Rome.
Right: Greek Orthodox church at the Daphni Monastery, Athens, Greece.

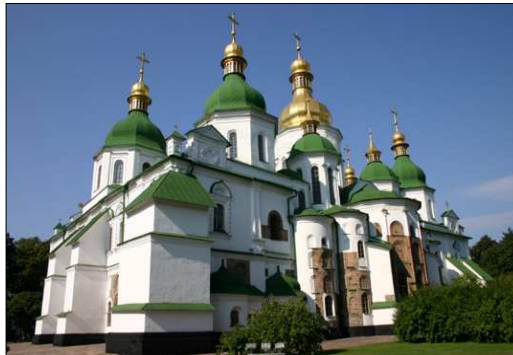
Western or 'Latin' style basilicas have a strong visual pull to the altar area whereas in Eastern or 'Greek' Byzantine churches that pull is compromised by a centralized dome over the nave (*naos*)



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Left: Kiev Cathedral.
Right: Saint Basil's in Moscow.

Examples of Russian variation on the Byzantine style. These style domes are sometimes referred to as "onion domes." The usual reason given for the unique form is that it sheds snow before it can become too deep and too heavy a burden for the dome.



opened in the sky and Christ is peering down on his followers [67 **Right**]. The liturgy unfolding at the altar is less obvious as something performed in time on a stage and, instead, takes on a sense of being timeless, efficacious, and beautiful no matter who may be paying particular attention at any given moment.

While most Byzantine churches were built with centralized domes some traditional basilica types continued to be built here and there. Usually a dome—smaller than a centralized dome—was at least built over the altar immediately in front of the apse or, alternatively, in the apse. In addition, as Orthodoxy spread into other lands local designs and building methods and materials created variations in the Byzantine style, most notably in the shapes of the domes and in the number used on any particular building [69].

Why the Byzantine preference for domes?

Domes had been in wide use throughout the Roman Empire for some time. It was certainly nothing new. One of the greatest domes ever built, that of the Roman Pantheon in Rome, was constructed about 200 years before Christianity was legalized. Both Roman and Christian *mausolea* often had domes covering circular buildings. So, why had the dome not been much used in church construction up to this point?

It's more difficult raising a dome, of course, especially if the space to be covered is large and/or square or rectangular. In addition, the larger

the dome the thicker the supporting wall needs to be. The wall supporting the huge dome of the *Pantheon* is 22 feet thick. And, how does one transition a square space to a circular dome and have the whole structure stand up as well as look good?

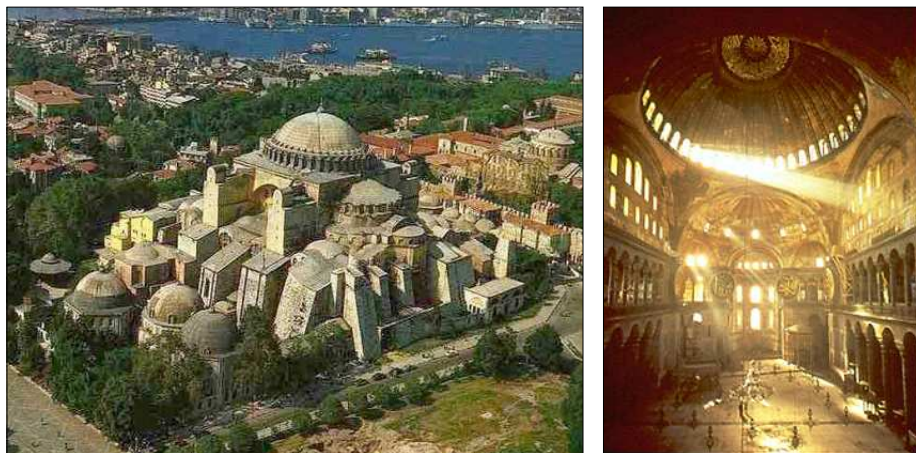
One building did accomplish that feat and it became the model for Byzantine architecture, beautifully expressing the Eastern Orthodox Church's vision and emphasis of the divine and transcendent in Christianity. The church, appropriately named Hagia Sophia [69] (*Holy Wisdom*, a name 4th century theologians gave the Second Person of the Trin-

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Left: Exterior of Hagia Sophia.

Right: Interior view. (Interior photo of Hagia Sophia) <www.ecfs.org/.../earX_arch_int_hagia_sophia2.jpg>

The photo of the exterior has been edited by eliminating minarets that were built at the four corners when the church was converted to a mosque.

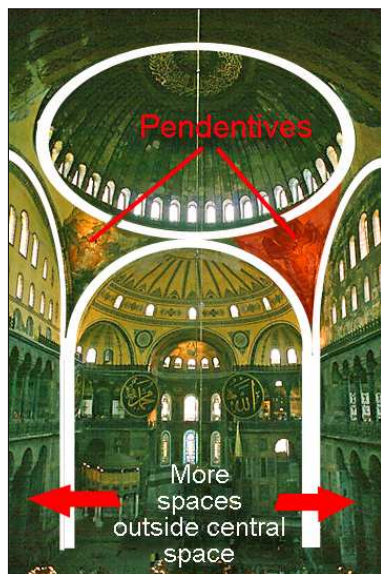


ity), was a church in Constantinople ordered rebuilt, after a fire, by Emperor Justinian. The name for the church—Holy Wisdom—draws attention to the divinity of Christ and the interior of the church fully expresses that emphasis with a soaring transcendent feeling instilled in the worshipper by the huge but seemingly weightless dome. Contributing to the feeling of weightlessness are 40 equally spaced windows that punctuate the base of the dome. The streams of light entering the windows make the dome appear to float above the rest of the building [69 Right]. The ribs between the windows rise to the apex of the dome further pulling our vision upward and contributing to the sense of weightlessness. Colorful marbles of white, green, yellow, and blue cover the walls to above head height and, at one time, golden mosaics covered the upper walls, the dome and the apse. The visual and emotional effect was as if heaven had descended and enveloped the worshipper. Russian ambassadors, in the 6th century, were spellbound when they experienced the Byzantine liturgy celebrated in Hagia Sophia: “...we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men.” They saw things “transcending human intelligence.”⁴

The architects of Hagia Sophia solved the practical problem of covering a square space with a round dome⁵ by utilizing an architectural element called a *pendentive* [70]. Pendentives transition the weight and shape of the dome to the top of four massive piers, one at each corner of

Interior of Hagia Sophia showing pendentive system.

Since the weight of the dome was directed—for the most part—to four huge piers at the corners of the square ground space, the walls under the arches could be opened up allowing for the expansion of the interior space outwards. Puncture by 40 windows at its base, the dome of Hagia Sophia appears to float above the central space. The structural engineering of the church allows for an interior that is remarkably airy and luminous for such a mammoth building.



the square space below. The triangular shaped pendentives are formed by four large round arches that spring from the tops of the piers and touch the base of the dome at the mid-way points between—but much higher than—the piers. One advantage of a domed structure that utilizes pendentives rather than a thick round wall for support is the ability to extend the interior space of the building outward from under the dome through the four arches.

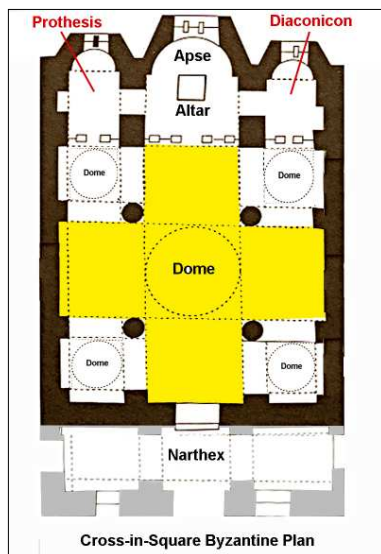
The structure of Hagia Sophia is a little more complicated than our description—it makes use of half domes and squinches as well—but our brief explanation is sufficient to our understanding of the Byzantine church style and its relationship to the Orthodox emphasis on transcendence.

Hagia Sophia was the seat of the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople and the church where Byzantine emperors were crowned. Justinian had thirty churches constructed in Constantinople and four were based on or related to the design of Hagia Sophia. It became famous, of course, and the domed centrally planned style of church architecture caught on and thrived throughout the Byzantine empire.

One popular variation on the domed, centrally planned, Byzantine church was the *quincunx* (the *cross-in-square*) [71] plan. It divides the floor space into nine square or rectangular spaces (*bays*). The center square (the *nave* or *naos*) is covered by a dome. The square spaces in the corners are also domed, or *groin vaulted* [71, 72, 73]. The four arms of the rectangular spaces extending out from the central square form a cross and are *barrel vaulted* [72].

The quincunx plan almost always incorporates three apses: the central apse behind the altar and an apse—often slightly smaller—on each side of the altar apse. One side apse indicates the space used for preparation of

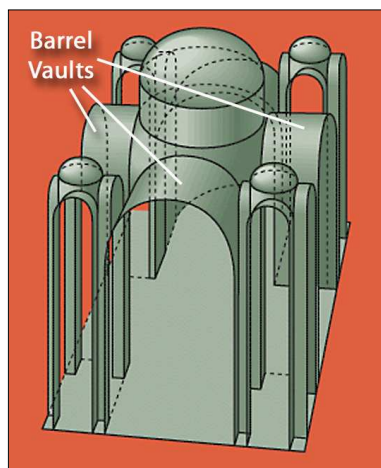
Ground plan of a quincunx (cross-in-square) Byzantine church.



Elevation plan of a quincunx church.

"quincunx." *Online Art. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 8 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/art-448>>.

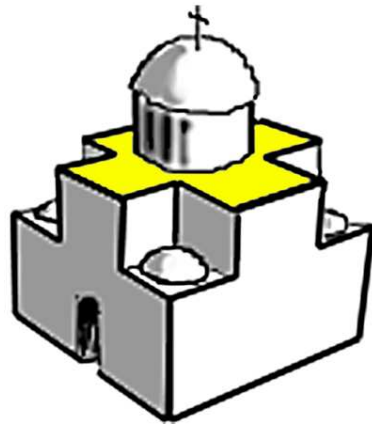
The 'arms' of the cross were normally 'barrel' vaulted (the ceiling is curved like a half side of a horizontal barrel). The spaces at the corners bordered by the arms could be covered by small domes or by 'groin' vaults—intersecting barrel vaults.



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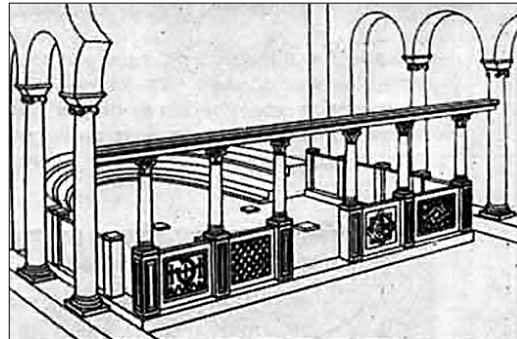
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Elevation drawing of a quincunx church.



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Drawing of a templon.



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Templon in Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome.

[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Santa Maria ...](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Santa_Maria_...) (15:01, 20 October 2007)



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A contemporary iconostasis screen.



the bread and wine used in the Eucharistic liturgy and is called the *prothesis*. The other is called the *diaconicon* [71] and is where the clergy vest and otherwise prepare for the liturgy (a *sacristy*).

In nearly all churches of the Byzantine Empire the space occupied by the altar, prothesis and diaconicon was separated from the rest of the church by the *templon*,⁶ a low wall upon which stand columns that support a long beam [74, 75]. An entrance in the center of the templon, in front of the altar, was usually closed with a curtain when there was no service. Curtains might also be suspended between the columns. In the 14th century this screen became known as the *iconostasis screen* [76] in Orthodox churches, the spaces between the columns filled with icons painted on wooden panels. The iconostasis screen has a central door—the *royal door*—and doors to the right and left called *deacon doors*. Symbolically, the templon/iconostasis screen marks the border between the heavenly and the terrestrial and serves a similar function as that of the veil that concealed the *Holy of Holies* in the Old Testament Temple in Jerusalem. It also symbolizes the Incarnation, the union of heaven and earth in the person of Jesus Christ.⁷

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¹ N.H. Baynes, H.St.L.B. Moss (ed.), *Byzantium, An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1948), Artopos Online Cultural Center, 12:44 September 28, 2007,

<<http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/diel.html>>

² Frederick B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages – an Historical Survey A.D. 200-1500*, 3rd Edition Revised, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 1980), 119

³ Artz 119

⁴ Artz 124

⁵ Actually, Hagia Sophia is related to a type of domed building somewhat common in Asia Minor since the 5th century but because of its great size and grandeur it seems original. –N. H. Baynes (cited in Artz, above)

⁶ Most churches in both the East and West made use of templons even if there were no separate pothesis or diaconon but it often evolved into an altar rail in Catholic and some Protestant churches [77] while developing into the iconostasis screen in Orthodox churches.

⁷ John Yiannias, *Orthodox Art and Architecture*, (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America) 2005, 10:50 October 16, 2007, <<http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8025.asp>>

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