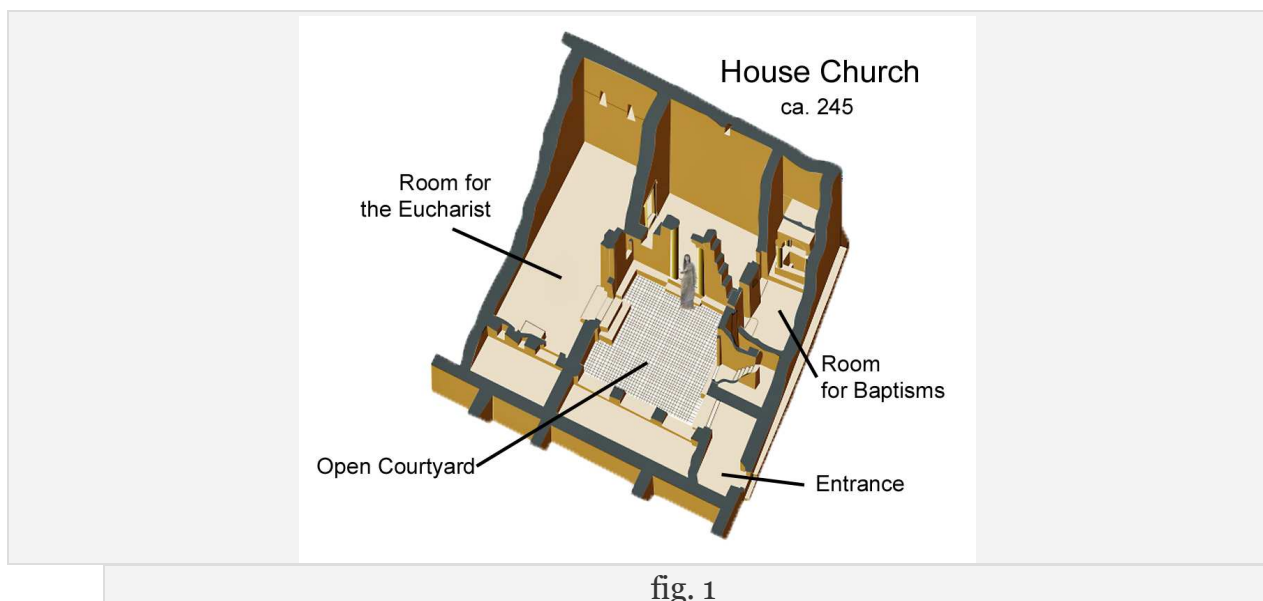**Church Architecture Styles: Period of Persecution**

During the Apostolic Age Christians continued to attend the synagogues and the Temple. The Eucharist, of course, had to be celebrated in members' homes as that could not be done at the synagogues or Temple. Like any other group in a similar situation the homes chosen for the Eucharist may have been the largest available, the most convenient, or the ones of members who volunteered to host the group.

We can probably safely assume that the liturgy itself probably looked very much like Jewish domestic worship. In fact, the Book of Acts refers to the saying of "*the* prayers" as well as "praying" so, no doubt, set Jewish prayers were part of the ritual. The 'liturgy' was probably more liturgical than we are usually led to believe as Jewish domestic and public worship was very liturgical in the first century.

At least by the middle of the third century, domestic dwellings were being purchased, or converted, for use as churches. This is the example we see in this post, at Dura Europos, a domestic building converted into a church around 245. Apparently, the entire house was used as a church center with one room used for the Eucharist and a separate one, across a courtyard, for baptism. Other rooms were used for meetings or instruction, storage, or other needs. The layout was basic and common for urban houses.

It is also known that shops or other commercial buildings were also converted into churches. A dye shop in Rome for example, in Trastevere, was transformed into a church. The 'titular' churches of Rome all started out as converted houses or partially converted houses..

The earliest *known* separate building constructed for use as a church was built in 280. But, in the case of this post, we are just looking at an example of a house church ("domus ecclesiae").

fig. 1

The house church in Dura Europos was in a military town on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in what is today, Syria.

fig. 2

fig. 3
Room for Baptisms - reconstruction at Yale University showing some of the paintings on the walls. Over the font on the back wall is a scene of the "Good Shepherd". On the right wall (bottom) we can see a scene of the "Three Mary's at the Empty Tomb". The candidate for baptism stood in the font, in water, and water was poured over him.

fig. 4
Dura Europos. Just two blocks down the wall from the church was a Jewish synagogue. The walls of the synagogue were covered with scenes from the Hebrew Scriptures.

In a series of posts we will take a look at the various historical styles of church architecture. This first in the series has little to do with style but does answer the question as to what came before Christians started building church buildings.

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For a more detailed history of the development of the earliest churches see my online *History of Christian Art* here.

Also, an interesting website on the the transformation into a church of Peter's House in Caparnaum here. That transformation, however, occurred in the 4th century and shows an actual change in the interior architecture of the house. Never-the-less you may find it interesting.

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Picture Sources

fig. 1: "Dura Europos domus ecclesiae isometric view" by Marsyas - Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dura_Europos_domus_ecclesiae_isometric_view.svg#mediaviewer/File:Dura_Europos_domus_ecclesiae_isometric_view.svg

fig. 2: edited - "DuraEuropos-Church". Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 via Wikimedia Commons - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DuraEuropos-Church.jpg#mediaviewer/File:DuraEuropos-Church.jpg

fig. 3: edited - Yale University

fig. 4: edited - "Duraeuropusmap" by Map is in the public domain. - Simon James University of Leicester, School of Archeological Studies, after MFSED-H. David realisation. First published in french in 2005.. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duraeuropusmap.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Duraeuropusmap.jpg

"History of Christian Art" by Bernard A. Dick

www.HistoryOfChristianArt.com