The Period of Recognition AD 313—476

Surely one of the most important events in history must be the so called Edict of Milan (313), a concordat really, between Constantine in the western half of the empire and his co-emperor in the east, Licinius, that recognized all existing religions in the Roman Empire at the time, most especially Christianity, and extended to all of them the freedom of open, public practice. Equally important, subsequently, was Constantine’s private, yet imperial, patronage of the Christian church. Also, sixty years later, in 390, the emperor Theodosius would declare Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and followers of the ancient pagan rites, criminals. The pagans were soon subjected to the same repression as Christians had been, save violent persecution. The persecuted had become the persecutors. Within another hundred years (in 476) the political empire in the west would collapse and the Christian church would become the sole unifying cultural force among a collection of barbarian kingdoms. Christianity would go on to dominate the society of western Europe for the next thousand years. Thus the three sources from which modern Europe sprang were tapped: Greece, Rome, and Christianity.

Constantine’s Christianity

Constantine attributed his defeat of rival Maxentius for the emperorship of the Roman Empire in the west to the God of the Christians. He had had a dream or vision in which his mother’s Christian God told him that he would be victorious if he marched his army under the Christian symbol of the chi rho, the monogram for the name of Jesus Christ. He did so. It was a stunning victory at the Milvian Bridge[63] on the outskirts of Rome when Constantine’s smaller force caught Maxentius’ army in a defile and drove many of them, including Maxentius, into the Tiber River. The military action that day in 311 would later be compared to a type of Christian baptism of the empire —the old pagan empire dying in the waters of the Tiber and rising to a new Christian life under Constantine.

While Constantine’s victory at the bridge would seem to portend a sudden reversal in Christian fortunes, Constantine, as early as 306, had already exhibited toleration for Christians in his area of governance as one of the four Tetrarchs governing the empire at the time. The “edict”
further granted Christians throughout the empire restoration of all property seized during Diocletian's persecution. But, in the year 320, Licinius reneged on the religious freedom promised by the edict and began yet another persecution of the Christians in the eastern half of the empire. This was a challenge to Constantine in the west and it resulted in a great civil war in 324. Licinius represented the ancient pagan faith of the past while Constantine’s armies marched under the standard of the Christian cross. With his victories over Licinius’ forces, Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

Constantine’s devotion to the Christian God was sincere throughout his life even though his baptism didn’t take place until he was on his death bed, in 337. Most would argue, however, that his understanding of Christianity was somewhat shallow and based mostly upon political opportunism. His infatuation with the cult of Sol Invictus as well as Christianity also calls into question the depth of his theological understanding. His grasp of moral behavior as guided by the Christian faith is questionable as well, as he had his son, Crispus, and wife, Fausta, killed on the same day in 326 —Fausta, at the urging of Constantine’s mother, Helena [64]. Not much is known for certain of this whole affair and there are some who would argue that the executions were unavoidable under Roman law. One historian claims Fausta had accused Crispus of attempting to rape her, a treasonous act. But Helena learned that Fausta had schemed the accusation so as to secure the succession for Fausta’s own sons (Crispus was not one of hers), also a treasonous act. Even so, throughout his tenure as ruler in the west and, then, as sole emperor, Constantine supported the Church financially, built fabulous basilicas for the Christians to use for worship, granted the same privileges to clergy as were granted to civil magistrates (exemption from taxes, the wearing of special insignia, etc), and appointed Christians to powerful positions in the government. It is just that his motives are still a topic of debate among historians.

Constantine’s basilicas

Christians in and around the city of Rome worshiped in two types of locations. Previously, in chapter one, we referred to the faithful gathered in hall-like structures above the catacombs to commemorate their dead, both as part of the Eucharist and as part of traditional funerary banquets. These cemetery churches were all outside the walls of Rome. We also referred, in chapter one, to the second type of worship location for the Christians of Rome, the house-churches or *titular*, within the city walls. As we mentioned there, there were twenty-five such churches recorded in Rome in the early fourth century. Twelve are still in use today but are
The walls of Rome are an important reference point as the senatorial class within the city walls was staunchly conservative and pagan in practice. Constantine’s pro-Christian policies met with strong resistance from this powerful group and so he reserved his material patronage of Christians to areas outside the walls to avoid conflict with his obligation as emperor to protect the ancient pagan religion. It was the churches of the cemeteries, therefore, that were the first to benefit from the benevolence of Constantine.

All of the cemetery churches outside of the city had been constructed to venerate or consecrate the burial grounds of those faithful who had “gone before us marked with the sign of faith.” They also became memorial shrines to the saints — martyrs, especially — buried there [66, 67]. In addition to places for worship and funerary banquets, these churches became covered cemeteries themselves. Under the floors were the tombs of those wishing to “sleep” near the saints. Constantine’s enlargement of these original structures involved construction on top of, or next to, the original sites. With the increased numbers of pilgrims to the martyrs’ tombs in the catacombs, the relics of the saints were transferred from the catacombs below to the altars above. Constantine’s basilicas were built to accommodate the crowds and protect the relics. The style of basilica adopted by the imperial architects for all this is called the martyrium and sometimes included an ambulatory [67] aisle that ran around the altar/tomb allowing the pilgrims an orderly approach to the altar and tomb to venerate the remains or shrine of the saint. The corresponding shape at the altar end of the basilica was round and is generally understood as an outgrowth of the large tombs [68] that had been popular in the pagan culture. These had been square, polygonal or circular — but also tall — structures. Especially at the time of Pope Saint Damasus (366-384) the funerary Christian basilicas became extremely popular shrines and centers of pilgrimage for the faithful from all over the empire. This same pope, as paganism waned, had many relics of the saints transferred to new basilicas being constructed within the city walls. Thus began the early and venerable liturgical tradition of associating the Christian church building with the “tomb” of Christ, in
the sense that the saints had died “in Christ” and their relics lie beneath the altar.

The martyria built by Constantine included the basilica of St. Sebastian (where both Peter’s and Paul’s bodies had been buried together for awhile); the basilica of St. Agnes, which is near the round mausoleum that was Constantine’s daughter’s tomb (now the church of St. Costanza); and, the basilica of St. Lawrence (330), now lost to us. The basilica of St. Lawrence was one of those churches that functioned as a covered cemetery and funerary banquet hall. It had a large longitudinal space bordered by side aisles, and a projecting apse in a kind of “U” shape or “hairpin” plan [66, 67]. The floor was lined with graves and flat gravestones upon which the faithful could gather for agape meals as well as the Eucharist.

The long domination of the visual arts by Christianity in western Europe between the beginning of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century actually started, appropriately, with Constantine’s construction of a martyrium over the tomb of St. Peter (begun 317-322) [69]. Peter had been the first leader of the apostles and, in AD 64, was crucified in Caligula’s and Nero’s circus [77], just next door to where he was laid to rest. The location is outside the city of Rome, across the Tiber river on a hill known as the Mons Vaticanus. Constantine had the Vatican hillside excavated and landscaped so as not to disturb Peter’s bones and in order to center the altar of the church over his tomb [70, 71]. The church was built in the style of a large Roman martyria basilica according to a plan that a good many churches in subsequent centuries throughout Europe and elsewhere would imitate, especially those wish-
The continuous transept feature of the basilica was somewhat novel element included to help handle the hundreds of pilgrims who visited the tomb of Peter every day. The transept architectural concept was not totally new, however, as such a feature was known to be used previously in both public secular basilicas and in private homes or villas of the wealthy. The basilica-like rooms of private houses sometimes made use of transepts so as to provide more room near the apse for the 'dominus'—the head of the house—to parade before and preside over his dependents, the children or business clients he supported. The view in the illustration is from the south end of the transept looking north, perpendicular to the apse end of the nave.

Illustration (without labels) by Robert Ousterhout School of Architecture University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign <http://www2.arch.uiuc.edu/courses/arch311/1C/const.html>

The memorial constructed in Constantine’s basilica enclosed nearly all of the original troparion.

Fabbrica of St. Peter

The baldacchino was connected to the front edges of the apse. Curtains veiled the apse from sight.

Fabbrica of St. Peter

The original basilica of St. Peter’s (it was demolished and a larger church built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) was intended, like all the other martyria, as a shrine or memorial to the martyr buried there—in this case, St. Peter. A memorial had marked Peter’s grave since the middle of the second century. A new memorial [73] was constructed around the original one (a confession). In order to accommodate the large crowds of pilgrims wishing to get close to the tomb, a nave or hall perpendicular to the central nave and side aisles, ran across the width of the basilica just in front of the apse, extending slightly beyond the width of the building on both sides. The memorial was actually in the apse side of this space, right in front of the apse. This continuous transept [72] feature became a common element in many of the larger churches throughout Europe and the Near East. That the resulting ground plan looked like a cross (T plan) [75] was coincidental and was not at all a factor in its use. Gregory Nazianzen, in 380, was the first to observe the resemblance to a cross in such plans which is about the same period of time when the unambiguous cross was coming into its own as a Christian symbol. For reasons that we looked at in chapter one, the cross shape/symbol was not explicitly depicted prior to the fifth century. The accidental cross shape resulting in the use of transepts in church plans would eventually be seized upon and its symbolic power exploited in subsequent periods of church architecture.

Like the other martyria, the nave of the original St. Peter’s was once paved with graves and functioned as a funerary banquet hall. It seems that the original St. Peter’s (completed ca. 360) had seven altars and could hold over 14,000 people. Twenty-two marble columns (spoils from earlier pagan temples) separated the side aisles from the central nave. The church proper was 350 feet long, 215 feet wide, and covered by a roof that is estimated to have been 100-125 feet off the ground; higher than some gothic cathedrals. A large baldacchino/ciborium (canopy) [73, 74], supported by four twisted columns, covered
the memorial. Two additional columns on either side of the baldichino joined the canopy to the sides of the front of the apse. Curtains were suspended between these columns and concealed the interior of the apse. The continuous transept running perpendicular to the nave looks like a cross in the ground plan. It was, however, an unintentional association having been constructed solely for the purpose of adding more space for pilgrims to maneuver near Peter’s tomb.

All the basilica churches—and nearly all the secular Roman basilicas—had open timber ceilings. Most basilica churches had an enclosed courtyard—an atrium—immediately in front of the main doors [65, 79]. St. Peter’s was no different. Its atrium was completed in 390 and was known as “the Garden of Paradise.” In the center stood a fountain used for washing before entering the church. Those people who had not yet been baptized received their instruction in the atrium, under the covered archways surrounding the open yard. St. Peter’s also had a fairly large propylaeum [65] or entrance gate, completed in the sixth century, on the front side of the atrium, facing the street.

Some claim that the original model for St. Peter’s was drawn from the biblical description of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. Both appear to have the same basic scheme and proportions in plan and elevation, and

75 Ground Plan of Old St. Peter’s Basilica

The original St. Peter’s basilica is often referred to as “Constantine’s Church.” The continuous transept running perpendicular to the nave looks like a cross in the ground plan. It was, however, an unintentional association having been constructed solely for the purpose of adding more space for pilgrims to maneuver near Peter’s tomb.

76 The Nave and Apsae of Constantine’s St. Peter’s Basilica

Looking down the nave toward the apse and memorial/shrine. Funerary banquet were often held in the nave and side aisles. Under the floors were the tombs of people wishing to be buried near the apostle. Like nearly all the other basilicas sponsored by Constantine—and contrary to what became long standing tradition—Saint Peter’s was an occidented church, the apse was in the west. Also, the ceilings in these basilicas were open timbered. Notice, too, that the columns here support an entablature and not arches, as in St. Paul’s Outside the Walls.

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<www2.arch.uc.edu/courses/arch311/I-C/const.html>
the enumeration of architectural elements —columns, doors, windows—and structural details including masses and spaces, are similar. Symbolic reference based on numerology and metrological relationships did, in fact, have a venerable tradition and did become a major aspect of the art and architecture of the middle ages.

That old St. Peter’s was built over the actual tomb of St. Peter was never questioned until the Protestant Reformation. Since there was no biblical reference to St. Peter ever having been in Rome, the Protestants—ever devoted to the bible “alone”—disputed that he was ever even in Rome much less buried there. Excavations conducted during the 1940s and 50s discovered, twenty-two feet beneath the high altar of the current basilica, a second century tropaion (martyr’s memorial)[71] identified as belonging to St. Peter.¹⁶ (Numerous second century graffiti scratching left by pilgrims appear on the “red wall” of the memorial. “Peter is here” is one of them.). The tropaion is in a first century pagan-Christian cemetery, next to the place where the circus, Peter’s site of crucifixion, was located.

Constantine intended that St. Peter’s shrine basilica be larger and more splendid than any other religious building.¹⁷ He certainly did accomplish that goal. It also became, architecturally speaking, the most influential Christian church design. By the 15th century, however, it had fallen into ruin and was torn down and replaced by the even more splendid “new” St. Peter’s basilica which is capped by a dome designed by the incomparable Michelangelo.

It is interesting that St. Paul did not get a large martyrium basilica until much later than Peter. Constantine initially built only a small basilica over Paul’s tomb¹⁸ even though, at the time, Paul was as well thought of as Peter. Peter and Paul were considered of equal importance and the “see” of Rome was deferred to by the rest of the church because it was the city where both had been martyred. Yet, an appropriate basilica of
equal status for Paul was not begun until about 385 [78]. It was modeled after St. Peter’s basilica, with five aisles. An immense fire in 1823 destroyed that church, or most of it. It was rebuilt as much as possible like the original and is the only one of the original martyria (reconstructed, of course) still standing and provides us with a pretty good idea of what the original St. Peter’s would have felt like. There are a couple of differences between the two: St. Peter’s was an occidented plan (the apse was in the west) while St. Paul’s is an oriented plan (apse is in the east); St. Paul’s transept is higher and extends only very slightly beyond the width of the basilica; and, the columns separating the central nave from the side aisles in St. Paul’s supports arches [78] whereas they supported an entablature/architrave (flat lintels) in St. Peter’s [76]. The altar and ciborium in St. Paul’s are at the end of the nave rather than directly in front of—in the cord of—the apse. 19

As impressive as the martyria were, however, none of them was the first Christian basilica built by Constantine. That distinction goes to San Giovanni in Laterno (Saint John Lateran). The Lateran church was actually a refitted secular use basilica that had been attached to the ancient palace of the Lateran family and had been used—as secular basilicas often were—as an audience hall. 20 The complex had been confiscated by the emperor Nero 21 and eventually came to be part of Constantine’s holdings. He donated the palace to the pope to be used as his residence and the basilica hall to be used as the principal church or cathedral for the see of Rome. The refurbishment was completed in 318 with the basilica consecrated to “the Savior.”

The Lateran is, technically, not a martyrium although it claims to possess the heads of Sts. Peter and Paul (the two apostles are represented by effigies in the strange and awkward jail-cell ciborium over the main altar). Like the other martyria, however, it was in a section of Rome outside the jurisdiction of the conservative pagan Roman Senate. It was smaller than St. Peter’s, a mere 250 feet long and 180 feet wide. But, like St. Peter’s, it has five aisles, including the central nave. The apse alone extends 60 feet.

78 (above and right) St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, begun in 385 and completed ca. 440-450.

About the same size as Old St. Peter’s but with an oriented apse (in the east) and nave columns which support arches. The façade pediment is decorated in mosaic.

<blog.bibleplaces.com/2006/12/st-pauls-sarcoph...>

79 Ciborium over the High Altar of San Giovanni in Laterno

The “Lateran” is the mother church of all Roman Catholic churches and the cathedral church of Rome. It was originally an audience hall—much smaller—used by the Lateran family and, later, the emperor Nero, before being given to the pope by Constantine. It is attached to the Lateran Palace which was used by the popes for their residence before moving to the Vatican many centuries later.
Even today, the Lateran, not Saint Peter’s, is the cathedral church of Rome—the pope’s church—and the mother church of all Roman Catholic churches. It also holds the honor of having been the first church built after the legalization of Christianity.

Constantine’s basilicas in the Holy Land

A basilica church that was equal to St. Peter’s influence on the development of Christian church architecture was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (the Anastasis—Resurrection) [81] in Jerusalem, begun in 326. Constantine was interested in identifying those places in Palestine important in the life of Jesus Christ and in erecting over them appropriately edifying basilicas or shrines. This was a somewhat formidable task as there were few Christians then living in Judea or Galilee. Locating the sites or locations was not particularly difficult, however. The location of Christ’s tomb, for example, was apparently well known even though pagan temples had been built over the site. Although Jews and Christians had long before abandoned Jerusalem, collective cultural memory insured that the locations were remembered. Constantine’s mother, Helena, was even able to locate the cross Christ had been crucified on along with a part of the placard that listed his crime: “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews”. The cross had been dumped, along with the placard into a depression in the ground just a few paces from the tomb. The rock hilltop of Golgotha was discovered by accident and accounts for why the site of the crucifixion is located in such a strange position within the
The martyrium complex. In both the case of the tomb, and Golgotha, the surrounding hillsides were cut away leaving only the tomb, and a part of the rock outcrop where Christ had hung on the cross. The martyrium of the Holy Sepulcher was not particularly large—it was only 120 feet long—but it was richly decorated and the overall shape of the basilica and rotunda surrounding the tomb influenced much subsequent Christian church architecture.

A large architectural memorial encased the actual tomb of Christ (the Edicule) at the site. The memorial occupied the center of a great rotunda, or round space, and was defined by twelve huge columns arranged about 25 feet from around the sides of the memorial. To the outside of the columns, an ambulatory (circular walkway) separated the columns from the round wall surrounding the entire structure. This part of the martyrium complex was apparently covered by a timbered dome. The rotunda of the tomb was separated from the apse of the basilica by an atrium. The basilica had five aisles and was preceded at the front by another atrium and a propylaeum facing the street.

The Constantinian basilica of the Nativity, in Bethlehem (begun in 317), had a unique octagonal form at the apse end of the building. It had a four meter wide octagonal opening in the floor as well that allowed pilgrims to view the grotto below. The roof over this portion of the
building may have been a pyramidal structure with an opening to the sky at the peak (an oculus). The basilica proper was five aisled with an atrium attached at the front. The octagonal form is reminiscent of the rotunda at the martyrium of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the “hairpin” ends of the martyria in Rome. This basilica, however, was constructed before the church of the Holy Sepulcher.

The architectural form of the Christian martyria churches sponsored by Constantine both in Rome and in the Holy Land would influence all subsequent church construction both in terms of architectural form and theological understanding. The association of the church building with the tomb of Christ, either directly or indirectly through the relics of the martyrs and saints, was firmly established with the construction of the preeminent basilicas of St. Peter’s at Rome and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Even the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was constructed employing the same architectural form as the martyría—although an octagonal rather than round form—to focus attention on the grotto of the birth of Jesus. The use of ambulatories and round, octagonal, or square forms at the apse end of a basilica or church became the established style especially if the church was meant to serve the purpose of a shrine either of a saint or to house other relics, such as the veil of the Virgin, the crib of the nativity, or the chains that bound Peter while he was imprisoned. We will find as we continue our survey through history that St. Peter’s and the Holy Sepulcher will be the models for church architecture down to the period of the Protestant Reformation, and even continuing after that, until very recently, in the Roman Catholic tradition.

But a style appeared that was slightly different. A style that maintained the theological meaning of the tomb of Christ and his saints but which was simpler, less grand both in adornment and size, and which was meant to serve less the needs of visiting pilgrims and more the needs of the local community or neighborhood. These churches have their origin in the titulus churches of Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries and it is to those that we now turn our attention.

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