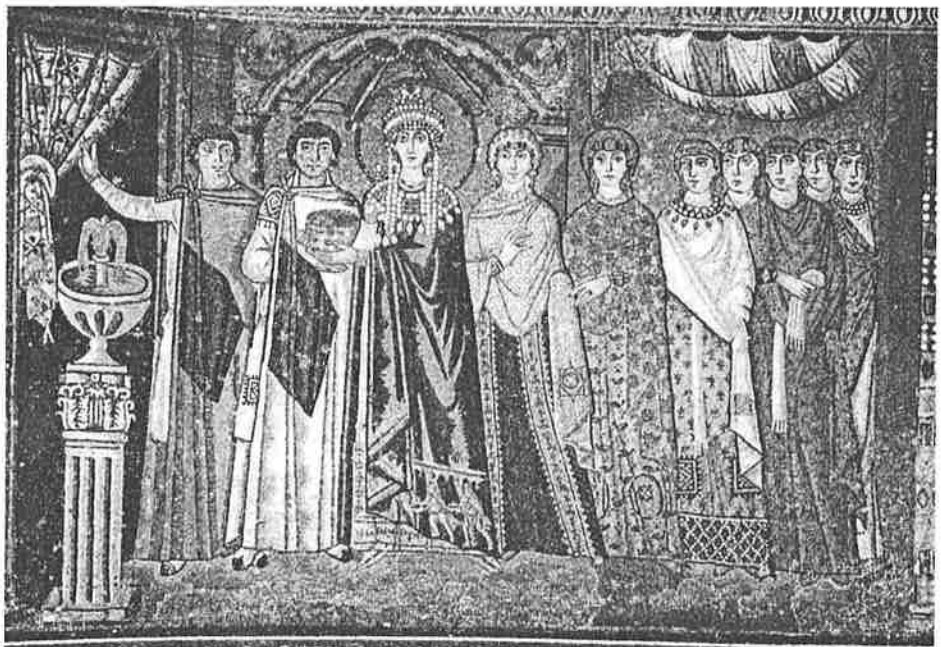
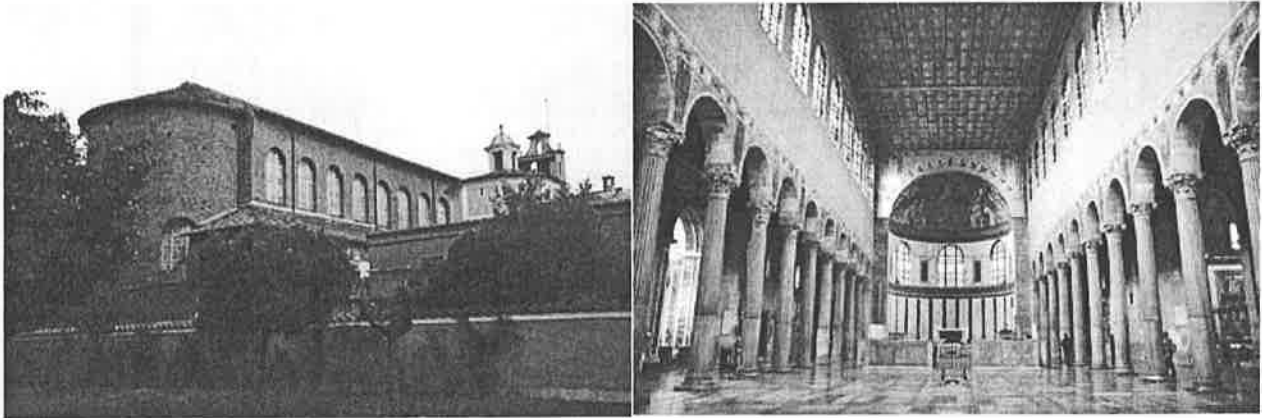


Unit 4: Post Classical Europe and Islamic Art



Unit Reading Packet #1

49. Santa Sabina. Rome, Italy. Late Antique Europe. c. 422–432 C.E. Brick and stone, wooden roof.



G14, 243
S5, 223-224
SH SH

Pins [Exterior](#) [Interior](#) [Plan](#) [Video \(no narration\)](#) [Article](#) [Article](#)

<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/santa-sabina.html>

Santa Sabina, Rome

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. 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.

This interior would have had a dramatically different effect than the classical building [See Pantheon, right]. As exemplified by the interior of the Pantheon constructed in the second century by the Emperor Hadrian, the wall in the classical building was broken up into different levels by the horizontals of the entablatures. The columns and pilasters form verticals that tie together the different levels. Although this decor does not physically support the load of the building, the effect is to visualize the weight of the building. The



thickness of the classical decor adds solidity to the building.

In marked contrast, the nave wall of Santa Sabina has little sense of weight. 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 pilgrim's 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.

Text: Dr. Allen Farber

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/rome-santa-sabina>

Built in 422 AD, **Santa Sabina** is widely considered the best example of an early Christian church in Rome. It has a similar design to the great basilica of Sant'Apollinaire Nuovo in Ravenna, which was built later. Although few of its mosaics survive, Santa Sabina is famed for its 5th-century wooden doors carved with biblical scenes. The church stands atop the Aventine Hill, providing fine views of Rome from an adjacent orange grove.

History of Santa Sabina

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 AD** 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.

Marking a development from the earlier basilica style seen at San Clemente, Santa Sabina "typifies in plan and proportion the new Roman standard basilica of the fifth century," representing "a high point of Roman church building" (Krautheimer).

A number of changes were made to the church over the years, including a restoration under Pope Leo III (795-816) and a redecoration under the archpresbyter Eugenius II in **824-27**. Eugenius added the marble furniture of the chancel (which survives) and enshrined the relics of three saints in the high altar: Alexander, Theodolus and Eventius.

In **1222**, Santa Sabina was given to the newly-created **Dominican Order**, in whose care it remains today.

A major remodeling of the interior in the Renaissance style took place under Pope Sixtus V (1585-90), which was reversed in a restoration of 1914-19. The work included reconstructing all the original windows and piecing together the marble chancel furniture from fragments found in the pavement.

What to See at Santa Sabina

The tall, spacious **nave** has 24 columns of Proconnesian marble with perfectly matched Corinthian columns and bases, which were 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.

The interior is very bright, thanks to the row of large **windows** in the clerestory plus three in the apse and five in the facade. The beautiful windows and marble **chancel furniture** (*schola cantorum, ambo* and *cathedra*) date from the 9th century and were painstakingly reconstructed from fragments in the early 20th century.

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.

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 **5th-century door** of Santa Sabina is easy to overlook, but it would be a great shame to miss it. It is at the end of the narthex beyond the entrance door to the church. Beautifully 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.

For a complete illustrated guide to this remarkable work of art, please see our separate page on the [Ancient Door of Santa Sabina](#).

References

1. Personal visit (April 17, 2008).
2. Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome: A Comprehensive Guide* (Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 169-74.
3. Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Yale University Press, 1986), 171-74.
4. *Frommer's Rome, 17th ed.*

<http://www.italyguides.it/us/roma/rome/aventine/basilica-santa-sabina.htm>

- **Basilica of Santa Sabina** -

Although the responsibility for the incident was attributed to diabolical action, in reality it was the architect Domenico Fontana, during restoration works in 1857, who accidentally broke the gravestone; its fragments were recovered and reassembled only much later.

The portico that acts as a backdrop to piazza Pietro d'Iliria is in the shelter of the long side of the Basilica; it was originally made up of black marble columns, which are now in the Vatican. Access to the church is through another portico on the side facing the square, through an atrium surrounded by ancient columns, housing some of the fragments found during excavations.

The portal of the basilica is a little jewel in cypress wood dating from the 5th century; it was restored in 1836, but only 18 of the original 28 panels have survived. They represent scenes from the New and Old Testaments, not without some retouching due to the historical juncture: in the panel depicting Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea, the face of the Pharaoh has been modified, taking on a strong resemblance to Napoleon! An evident polemical note by the restorer who does not seem to have nurtured much sympathy for Napoleon, even though he had died fifteen years earlier!

The inside of the church, with a typical layout of the early Christian basilicas, is with three naves, divided by 24 re-used columns. The imposing apse, crowned by a triumphal arch, is decorated with Christ among the apostles, a fresco by Taddeo Zuccari. The so-called "schola cantorum", at the centre of the nave, is in reality the result of the restoration by Muñoz, who in 1936 created it in the image of that of San Clemente, using plutei (decorated marble slabs) found in the church. Large windows opening in the top part of the central nave give light to the church and used to illuminate the sparkling mosaics, made on the pattern of those at Ravenna, which decorated the central nave.

http://www.dartmouth.edu/~classics/rome2005/updates/week9_10/nov16.html

The early Christian church of Santa Sabina was erected between 422 and 432 A.D. Celestine I first commissioned St. Peter of Illyria to build the edifice, but it was during the papacy of Sixtus III that the church was finished. Santa Sabina is located on the Aventine, the southernmost of Rome's seven hills, and overlooks the east bank of the Tiber River. In the fifth century, the Aventine was a residential area that many of the Christians of Rome called home.

The site of Santa Sabina was once occupied by a titulus, a structure belonging to a wealthy Christian that served as a meeting place for worshippers to congregate and carry out baptismal rites, Eucharistic rites, and religious education. These structures were simple: any exterior extravagance would draw the ire of the large number of pagans still occupying Rome. The south wall of Santa Sabina's narthex incorporated architectural elements of the preexisting titulus on the site, and the very name of the church reflects the original matron who operated the religious center.

The major predecessor of the layout of Santa Sabina is the Roman secular basilica. This structure was characterized by a massive, longitudinal nave that was intersected by two to four lateral naves and highlighted an apse at the end of the long axis. Although the Christian basilica used the same architectural features as the secular basilica, it replaced the impression of an eddy of space created by the intersection of the longitudinal nave and the lateral naves. Instead, the Christian basilica highlighted the single conclusion of the edifice: the apse.

In exterior appearance, the church of Santa Sabina is very plain: bare brickwork covers the entire structure. The narthex, a transverse entrance hall preceding the basilica, is punctuated by columns that are spolia (taken from other preexisting buildings), even though the narthex observed in modern day is

Resume
Reading

not the original narthex. There were originally three doors that connected the narthex to the basilica, but only two survive. However, the giant cypress doors that led to the central nave still exist. Eighteen rectangular panels that depict biblical scenes adorn the outer side. The first representation of the crucifixion of Jesus is found here, although Jesus is shown hanging from beams rather than a cross.

When entering the nave, one is confronted by a simple architectural arrangement that highlights the apse at the opposite end of the longitudinal axis. Two rows of twenty four Corinthian order columns (all uniform in design and all spolia) separate the central nave from two smaller side aisles. The columns support an arcade of arches, whose spandrels were decorated by opus sectile and marble designs of chalices holding the Eucharist. No traces of decoration exist above this area on the side walls of the central nave, but the space was likely filled by mosaics. One such mosaic, which establishes Celestine as the commissioner and Peter of Illyria as the builder, decorates the rear wall. These decorations exhibit the interior lavishness that characterizes early Christian churches.

Lighting emphasized these ornamentations. Three large windows occupied the apse; five were cut into the facade, and twenty six lined the side clerestory of the central nave. Framed by alabaster transoms, these windows would provide pleasing, opaque light from outdoors. At night, candles would inspire a foxtrot of flickering light on the surfaces of the mosaics and frescoes.

Santa Sabina's legacy is the persistence of the simple plan of Christian basilicas throughout the ages. This architectural simplicity was combined with elaborate interior decoration, which epitomizes the Christian belief that the human interior, the soul, is more important than the human exterior, the body.

Plan of Santa Sabina (After the Church of Santa Sabina)

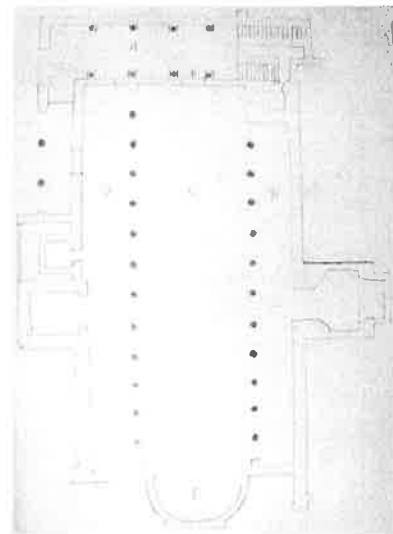
A: Narthex

B: Central doorway with original 5th century wooden doors

C: Central Nave

D: Side Aisles

E: Apse



Exterior view of the basilica of Santa Sabina.

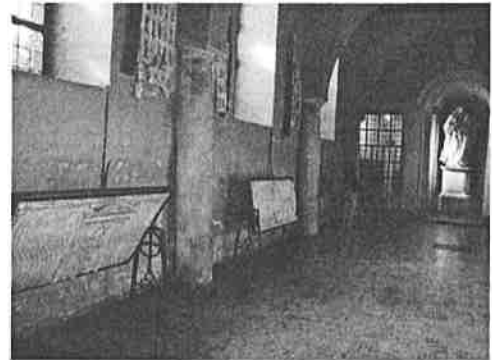
The row of clerestory windows (seven are visible in the upper left of this image) would allow light to flood into the central nave. The apse is the rounded shape on the far right of the structure and two of its large windows are visible. Note the plain exterior appearance of the basilica: there is no evidence of stucco that

would cover the simple brickwork.

Exterior view of the clerestory windows (top) of the central nave. Below it are two Corinthian order columns that are spolia.

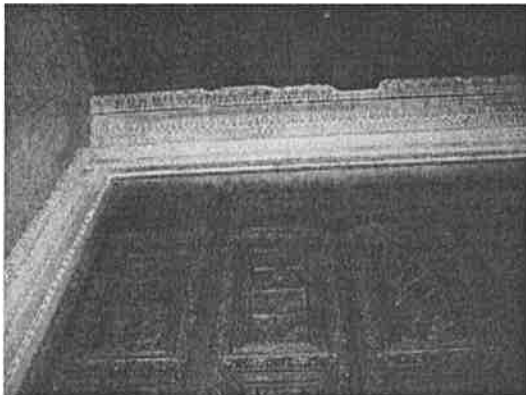
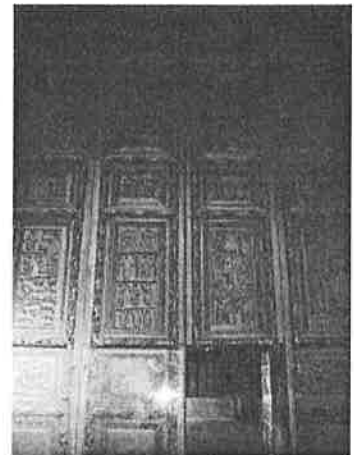


View of the narthex. Note the plain columns along the wall: these are spolia. The two rectangular alabaster panels flanking the column are originally from Roman sarcophagi, but were converted to Christian gravestones. Pagans could enter the narthex and listen to the Christian mass. →



← View of a strigilated column in the narthex. These columns are spolia and would decorate the interior of the narthex.

View of the original cypress doors that connected the narthex to the central nave. Biblical scenes of Moses, Elijah, and Christ framed in rectangular panels adorn the doors. In the top left corner is the first ever crucifixion scene. Below it is a panel depicting three stories of Christ's miracles: the conversion of water to wine, the division of fish and loaves, and the curing of a man's blindness. →



← View of the classical Roman molding of the doors. Note the crucifixion and the miracles panels in the top left corner of the door.

The central nave of Santa Sabina as viewed from the doors leading from the narthex. Note the apse in the rear, which has three large windows and stands behind the altar. Two rows of Corinthian columns direct one's attention directly to it. Also note the side aisles, which are distinctly separated from the central nave by both columns and a light differential. →

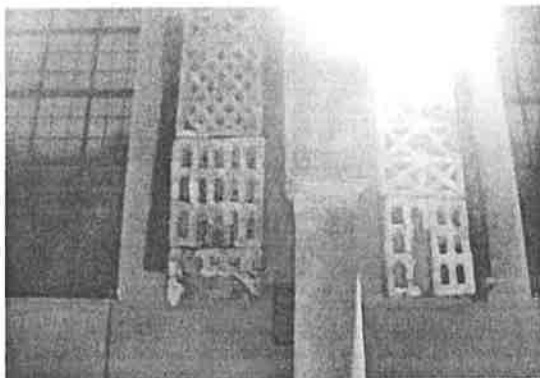


← View of a row of columns, the arcade of the central nave, and a side aisle. Note that the large clearstory windows (top right of the image) correspond exactly to the intercolumniations below.



← View of the decoration in the spandrels of the arches. Marble revetments depict the Eucharist carried by a chalice. Note also the opus sectile to the side of this image: the square blocks imitate ashlar masonry. The detail of a Corinthian capital is also visible at the bottom of the image.

→ View of the mosaic on the wall facing the apse in the central nave. The script formed by the tesserae of the mosaic reveals that Celestine I commissioned the church and Peter of Illyria, a priest of Rome, built the structure. Two figures (the right one is slightly visible) flanked this text. On the left was the representation of *ecclesia ex circumcissione*, the Hebrew church. On the right was the representation of *ecclesia ex gentibus*, the Christian church. Note also the opaque light streaming in from the five clerestory windows above the mosaic.



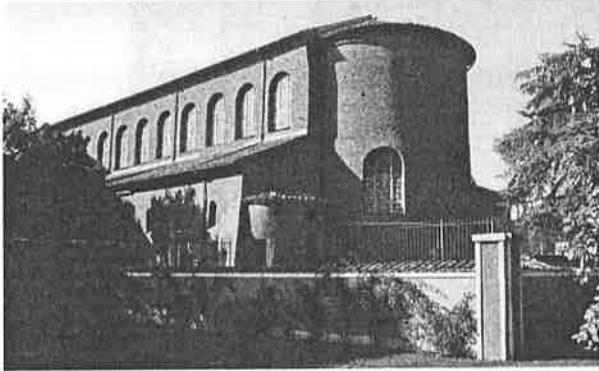
← View of stone structures hung in the modern narthex of Santa Sabina. These grid-like shapes would likely have been used in the windows of Santa Sabina.

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 13th Enhanced ed. 2011, pp. 314-315

SANTA SABINA Some idea of the character of the timber roofed interior of Old Saint Peter's can be gleaned from the interior of Santa Sabina in Rome. Santa Sabina, built

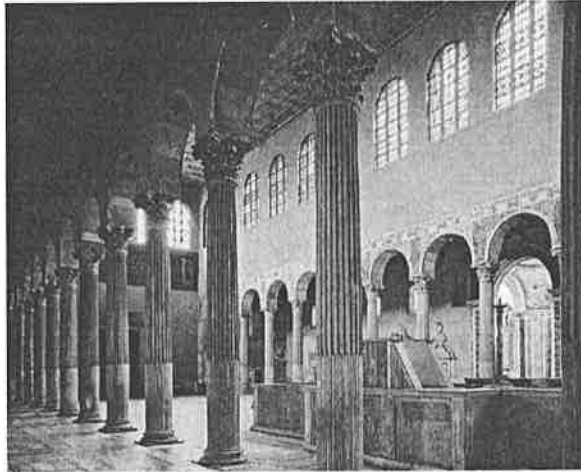
a century later, is a basilican church of much more modest proportions, but it still retains its Early Christian character. The Corinthian columns of its *nave arcade* (a series of arches supported by columns separating the nave from the aisles) produce a steady rhythm that focuses all attention on the chancel

arch and the apse, which frame the altar. In Santa Sabina, as in Old Saint Peter's, the nave is drenched with light from the *clerestory* windows piercing the thin upper wall beneath the timber roof. The same light would have illuminated the frescoes and mosaics that commonly adorned the nave and apse of Early Christian churches. Outside, Santa Sabina has plain brick walls. They closely resemble the exterior of Trier's Aula Palatina.



Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 4th edition, 2011. pp. 190 – 194.

The developing Christian community had special architectural needs. Greek temples had served as the house and treasury of the gods, forming a backdrop for ceremonies that took place at altars in the open air. In Christianity, an entire community gathered inside a building to worship. Christians also needed places or buildings for activities such as the initiation of new members, private prayer, and burials. From the age of Constantine, pagan basilicas provided the model for congregational churches, and tombs provided a model for baptisteries and martyrs' shrines.



SANTA SABINA. Old St. Peter's is gone, but the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, constructed by Bishop Peter of Illyria (a region in the Balkan Peninsula) a century later, between about 422 and 432, appears much as it did in the fifth century. The basic elements of the Early Christian basilica church are clearly visible here, inside and out: a nave lit by clerestory windows, flanked by single side aisles, and ending in a rounded apse. Santa Sabina's exterior is simple brickwork. In contrast, the church's interior displays a wealth of marble veneer and 24 fluted marble columns with Corinthian capitals reused from a second century pagan building. (Material reused from earlier buildings is known as *spolia*, Latin for spoils.) The columns support round arches, creating a nave arcade, in contrast to the straight rather than arching nave colonnade in Old St. Peter's. The spandrels above the columns and between the arches are inlaid with marble images of the chalice (wine cup) and paten (bread plate) essential equipment for the Eucharistic rite that took place at the altar. In such basilicas, the blind wall between the arcade and the clerestory typically had paintings or mosaics with biblical scenes, but here the decoration of the upper walls is lost.

50. Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well and Jacob Wrestling the Angel, from the *Vienna Genesis*.

Early Byzantine Europe. Early sixth century C.E. Illuminated manuscript (pigments on vellum), Each page 13 ½" x 9 7/8".
Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria.

G15, 269-270

G14, 248-250

S5, 245

A3, 294-296

SH

Pins [Rebecca](#) [Jacob](#)

<https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/ap-art-history/early-europe-and-colonial-americas/medieval-europe-islamic-world/a/vienna-genesis>

Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, Vienna Genesis

Essay by Dr. Nancy Ross

Caught in between

It's not hard to find inspirational quotes about the difficulty and rewards of change and transition in our lives. There is always something old that we want to hang on to and there is always something new that we want to explore.

Transitions are difficult.

The visual arts have undergone numerous changes and transitions from their prehistoric origins to the present. In Europe, artists and patrons of the ancient world loved realistic details and veracity. Medieval artists and patrons instead valued symbolism and abstraction.

The artist of the *Vienna Genesis* was caught between these two artistic value systems. Perhaps working in Syria or in Constantinople in the early 6th century, the artist likely did not know that this book would become the oldest surviving well-preserved illustrated biblical book and an excellent example of an artist caught in a moment of transition. The *Vienna Genesis* is a fragment of a Greek copy of the Book of Genesis. Books were luxury items and this book was an exceptionally fine example. It was written in silver ink on parchment that had been dyed purple, the color associated with royalty and empire. There are 24 surviving folios (pages) and they are thought to have come from a much larger book that included perhaps 192 illustrations on 96 folios, each page laid out as you can see above in the example of Rebecca and Eliezer at the well.

This story is from Genesis 24. Abraham wanted to find a wife for his son Isaac and sent his servant Eliezer to find one from among Abraham's extended family. Eliezer took ten of Abraham's camels with him and stopped at a well to give them water. Eliezer prayed to God that Isaac's future wife would assist him with watering his



camels. Rebecca arrives on the scene and assists Eliezer, who knows that she is the woman for Isaac. This story is about God intervening to ensure a sound marriage for Abraham's son.

Two episodes

The illustration of this biblical story shows two episodes, which is common in medieval art. Rebecca is shown twice, as she leaves her town to get water and then assisting Eliezer at the well with his camels. On the one hand, there are clear classical elements that recall artwork from ancient Greece and Rome. Rebecca walks by a colonnade (row of columns) that recall the details of classical architecture. Some of Eliezer's camels are shaded to emphasize that some are in the front and others in the back. The camel on the far right has one of its back legs in shadow to show a spatial relationship.



Ancient Greek and Roman, but also Early Christian

The figure that most obviously recalls the Ancient Greek and Roman world is the reclining nude next to the river (left). This figure isn't part of the story of Rebecca and Eliezer, but serves as a personification of the source of the well's water. Representations of



rivers and other bodies of water as people were common in the classical world (see below). The figure's sensuality is emphasized by her nudity and reclining pose, typical of Greek and Roman art. This stands in contrast to Rebecca's heavily draped and fully-covered body, typical of Early Christian art.

There are also elements of the illustration that recall Early Christian art, which is the earliest medieval art. The symbolic representation of the walled city, packed with rooftops and buildings that are not represented in a spatially consistent way, is typical of medieval art, as is the colonnade in miniature. Medieval artists weren't interested in realistic, consistent representations of space, but were satisfied with the more symbolic representations that we see here. The folds of the clothing are also simplified and reduced. The figures appear to be more cartoon-like than portraits of actual people.



Today, it is a struggle for us to reconcile the figures of Rebecca, who only reveals her hands and face, with the casual nude reclining by the water. This contrast is evidence of the mix of artistic models and sources that were present in the early sixth century. To the artist who illustrated this book, I'm sure that this mix of styles and approaches made perfect sense, and represented a culture in transition.

[See also Khan Academy video on Jacob Wrestling with the Angel.](#)

Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 4th edition, 2011. p. 243.

THE VIENNA GENESIS. Byzantine manuscripts were often made with very costly materials. For example, sheets of purple-dyed vellum (a fine writing surface made from calfskin) and gold and silver inks were used to produce a codex now known as the Vienna Genesis. It was probably made in Syria or Palestine, and the purple vellum indicates that it may have been created for an imperial patron (costly purple dye, made from the secretions of murex mollusks, was usually restricted to imperial use). The Vienna Genesis is written in Greek and illustrated with pictures that appear below the text at the bottom of the pages.

The story of **REBECCA AT THE WELL** (Genesis 24) appears here in a single composition, but the painter clinging to the continuous narrative tradition that had characterized the illustration of scrolls combines events that take place at different times in the story within a single narrative space. Rebecca, the heroine, appears at the left walking away from the walled city of Nahor with a large jug on her shoulder, going to fetch water. A colonnaded road leads toward a spring, personified by a reclining pagan water nymph who holds a flowing jar. In the foreground, Rebecca appears again. Her jug now full, she encounters a thirsty camel driver and offers him water to drink. Since he is Abraham's servant, Eliezer, in search of a bride for Abraham's son Isaac, Rebecca's generosity results in her marriage to Isaac. The lifelike poses and rounded, full-bodied figures of this narrative scene conform to the conventions of traditional Roman painting. The sumptuous purple of the background and the glittering metallic letters of the text situate the book within the world of the privileged and powerful in Byzantine society.

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 13th Enhanced ed. 2011, p. 242.

VIENNA GENESIS The oldest well-preserved painted manuscript containing biblical scenes is the early sixth-century *Vienna Genesis*, so called because of its present location. The book is sumptuous. The pages are fine calfskin dyed with rich purple, the same dye used to give imperial cloth its distinctive color. The scribe used silver ink for the Greek text (see "Medieval Manuscript Illumination").

Folio 7 (FIG. 11-20) of the *Vienna Genesis* illustrates the story of Rebecca and Eliezer (Gen. 24:15–61). When Isaac, Abraham's son, was 40 years old, his parents sent their servant Eliezer to find a wife for him. Eliezer chose Rebecca, because when he stopped at a well, she was the first woman to draw water for him and his camels. The manuscript painter presented two episodes of the story within a single frame. In the first episode, at the left, Rebecca leaves the city of Nahor to fetch water from the well. In the second episode, she offers water to Eliezer and his camels, while one of them already laps water from the well. The artist painted Nahor as a walled city seen from above, like the cityscapes in the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaics (FIG. 11-14) and innumerable earlier Roman representations of cities in painting and relief sculpture. Rebecca walks to the well along the colonnaded avenue of a Roman city. A seminude female personification of a spring is the source of the well water. These are further reminders of the persistence of classical motifs and stylistic modes in Early Christian art. Contemporaneous with, but radically different from, the mosaic panels (FIG. 11-17) of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the *Vienna Genesis* incorporates many anecdotal details, such as the drinking camel and Rebecca bracing herself with her raised left foot on the rim of the well as she tips up her jug for Eliezer. Nonetheless, the figures are seen against a blank landscape except for the miniature city and the road to the well. As at Ravenna, everything necessary for bare narrative is present and nothing else.

Medieval Manuscript Illumination

Rare as medieval books are, they are far more numerous than their ancient predecessors. An important invention during the Early Empire was the *codex*, which greatly aided the dissemination of manuscripts as well as their preservation. A codex is much like a modern book, composed of separate leaves (*folios*) enclosed

within a cover and bound together at one side. The new format superseded the long manuscript scroll (*rotulus*) of the Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans. Much more durable *vellum* (calfskin) and *parchment* (lambskin), which provided better surfaces for painting, also replaced the comparatively brittle *papyrus* used for ancient scrolls. As a result, luxuriousness of ornament became increasingly typical of sacred books in the Middle Ages, and at times the material beauty of the pages with their illustrations overwhelms the spiritual beauty of the text. Art historians refer to the luxurious painted books produced before the invention of the printing press as *illuminated manuscripts*, from the Latin *illuminare*, meaning "to adorn, ornament, or brighten." The oldest preserved examples date to the fifth and sixth centuries.

Illuminated books were costly to produce and involved many steps. Numerous artisans performed very specialized tasks, beginning with the curing and cutting (and sometimes the dyeing) of the animal skin, followed by the sketching of lines to guide the scribe and to set aside spaces for illumination, the lettering of the text, the addition of paintings, and finally the binding of the pages and attachment of covers, buckles, and clasps. The covers could be even more sumptuous than the book itself. Many covers survive that are fashioned of gold and decorated with jewels, ivory carvings, and repoussé reliefs.

THE VIENNA GENESIS. The oldest illustrated Bible manuscripts discovered thus far appear to date from the early sixth century, except for one fragment of five leaves related to the *Vatican Vergil* that is probably a hundred or so years earlier. They, too, contain echoes of the Hellenistic-Roman style, which has been adapted to religious narrative but often has a Near Eastern flavor that at times recalls the Dura-Europos murals (see fig. 8-2). The most important example, the *Vienna Genesis*, nearly abandons the classical style of the *Vatican Vergil*. This Greek translation of the first book of the Bible has a richness similar to the mosaics we have seen. It is written in silver (now turned black) on purple vellum and decorated with brilliantly colored miniatures. (Since Roman times, purple was the royal color reserved for the imperial court.) Our page (fig. 8-20) shows a number of scenes from the story of Jacob. (In the center foreground, for example, we see him wrestling with the angel, then receiving the angel's blessing.) Hence the picture does not show a single event but a whole sequence. The scenes take becomes progression in time. This method, known as continuous narration, goes back as far as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Its appearance in miniatures such as this may reflect earlier illustrations made for books in roll rather than book form. The picture certainly looks like a frieze turned back upon itself.

For manuscript illustration, continuous narrative makes the most economical use of space. The painter can pack a maximum of scenes into a small area. The artist thought of the picture as a running account to be read like lines of text, rather than as a window that required a frame. The painted forms are placed directly on the purple background that holds the text, making the entire page a unified field.

Janson, H. W. and Anthony F. Janson. *History of Art: The Western Tradition*. 6th ed. 2004

Hartt, Frederick. *Art: A History of Painting Sculpture Architecture*. 4th ed. 1993, p. 330 – 332.

The earliest preserved Christian illuminated manuscripts seem to have been made for the imperial court. In contrast to the utilitarian character of classical books, this group of codices is written in letters of gold or silver on parchment dyed imperial purple. The finest of them is a sixth-century fragment of the Book of Genesis, now in Vienna; in reality it is a picture book, for the illustrations appear at the bottom of each leaf with just enough text to explain them written above. These little narratives move along at a lively pace on the foreground plane, like scenes on an imperial column without any enclosing frame or any divisions between the separate incidents, on a continuous strip of ground. No more background is represented than exactly what the story requires....we see only the little figures themselves, shimmering in fresh and lovely colors against the parchment, which becomes by suggestion a kind of purple air. Doubtless by direction, the artist has added an element here and there.

52. Hagia Sophia. Constantinople (Istanbul).

Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. 532–537 C.E. Brick and ceramic elements with stone and mosaic veneer.

G15, 256-257, 265-267

G14, 258-263

S5, 234-237

A3, 288-292

GW, 282

SH

Pins [Exterior](#) [Interior from list](#) [Alternate interior](#) [Alternate interior](#) [Plan](#) [Section](#) [Video](#) [Video](#)



Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 4th edition, 2011. p. 243.

HAGIA SOPHIA. In Constantinople, Justinian and Theodora embarked on a spectacular campaign of building and renovation, but little now remains of their architectural projects or of the old imperial capital itself. The church of Hagia Sophia, meaning Holy Wisdom, is a spectacular exception. It replaced a fourth-century church destroyed when crowds, spurred on by Justinian's foes during the devastating urban Nika Revolt in 532, set the old church on fire and cornered the emperor within his palace. Empress Theodora, a brilliant, politically shrewd woman, is said to have goaded Justinian, who was plotting an escape, not to flee the city, saying "Purple makes a fine shroud," meaning that she would rather remain and die an empress (purple was the royal color) than retreat and preserve her life. Taking up her words as a battle cry, Justinian led the imperial forces in crushing the rebels and restoring order, reputedly slaughtering 30,000 of his subjects in the process.

To design a new church that embodied imperial power and Christian glory, Justinian chose two scholar-theoreticians, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. Anthemius was a specialist in geometry and optics, and Isidorus a specialist in physics who had also studied vaulting. They developed an audacious and awe-inspiring design, executed by builders who had refined their masonry techniques building the towers and domed rooms that were part of the city's defenses. So when Justinian ordered the construction of domed churches, and especially Hagia Sophia, master masons with a trained and experienced workforce stood ready to give permanent form to his architects' dreams.

The new Hagia Sophia was not constructed by the miraculous intervention of angels, as was rumored, but by mortal builders in only five years (532-537). Procopius of Caesarea, who chronicled Justinian's reign, claimed poetically that Hagia Sophia's gigantic dome seemed to hang suspended on a golden chain from heaven. Legend has it that Justinian himself, aware that architecture can be a potent symbol of earthly power, compared his accomplishment with that of the legendary builder of the First Temple in Jerusalem, saying "Solomon, I have outdone you."

Hagia Sophia is an innovative hybrid of longitudinal and central architectural planning. The building is clearly dominated by the hovering form of its gigantic dome. But flanking **conches** (semidomes) extend the central space into a longitudinal nave that expands outward from the central dome to connect with the narthex on one

end and the halfdome of the sanctuary apse on the other. This processional core, called the **naos** in Byzantine architecture, is flanked by side aisles and **galleries** above them overlooking the naos.

Since its idiosyncratic mixture of basilica and rotunda precludes a ring of masonry underneath the dome to provide support around its circumference (as in the Pantheon), the main dome of Hagia Sophia rests instead on four **pendentives** (triangular curving vault sections) that connect the base of the dome with the huge supporting piers at the four corners of the square area beneath it. And since these piers are essentially submerged back into the darkness of the aisles, rather than expressed within the main space itself, the dome seems to float mysteriously over a void. The miraculous, weightless effect was reinforced by the light-reflecting gold mosaic that covered the surfaces of dome and pendentives alike, as well as the band of 40 windows that perforate the base of the dome right where it meets its support. This daring move challenges architectural logic by seeming to weaken the integrity of the masonry at the very place where it needs to be strong, but the windows created the circle of light that helps the dome appear to hover, and a reinforcement of buttressing on the exterior made the solution sound as well as shimmering. The origin of the dome on pendentives is obscure, but its large-scale use at Hagia Sophia was totally unprecedented and represents one of the boldest experiments in the history of architecture. It was to become the preferred method of supporting domes in Byzantine architecture.



The architects and builders of Hagia Sophia clearly stretched building materials to their physical limits, denying the physicality of the building in order to emphasize its spirituality. In fact, when the first dome fell in 558, it did so because a pier and pendentive shifted and because the dome was too shallow and exerted too much outward force at its base, not because the windows weakened the support. Confident of their revised technical methods, the architects designed a steeper dome that raised the summit 20 feet higher. They also added exterior buttressing. Although repairs had to be made in 869, 989, and 1346, the church has since withstood numerous earthquakes.

The liturgy used in Hagia Sophia in the sixth century has been lost, but it presumably resembled the rites described in detail for the church in the Middle Byzantine period. The celebration of the Mass took place behind a screen at Hagia Sophia, a crimson curtain embroidered in gold, in later churches an iconostasis, a wall hung with devotional paintings called **icons** (from the Greek *eikon*, meaning image). The emperor was the only layperson permitted to enter the sanctuary; men stood in the aisles and women in the galleries. Processions of

clergy moved in a circular path from the sanctuary into the nave and back five or six times during the ritual. The focus of the congregation was on the iconostasis and the dome rather than the altar and apse. This upward focus reflects the interests of Byzantine philosophers, who viewed meditation as a way to rise from the material world to a spiritual state. Worshipers standing on the church floor must have felt just such a spiritual uplift as they gazed at the mosaics of saints, angels, and, in the golden central dome, heaven itself.

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 13th Enhanced ed. 2011, pp. 314-315

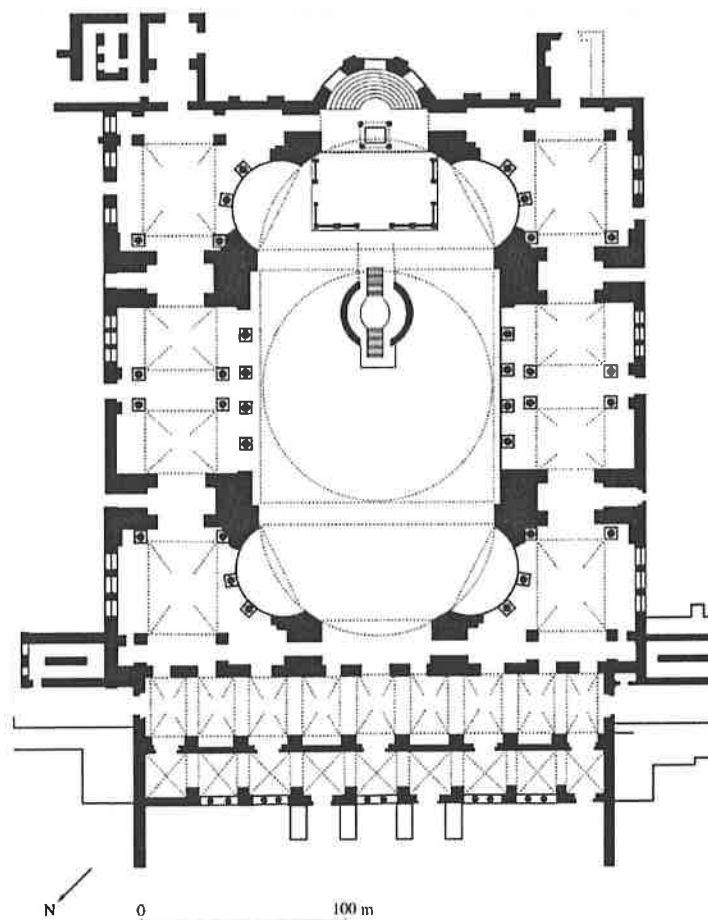
HAGIA SOPHIA The most important monument of Early Byzantine art is Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople. Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus, a mathematician and a physicist—neither man an architect in the modern sense of the word—designed and built the church for Justinian between 532 and 537. They began work immediately after fire destroyed an earlier church on the site during the Nika riot in January 532. Justinian intended the new church to rival all other churches ever built and even to surpass in scale and magnificence the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. The result was Byzantium's grandest building and one of the supreme accomplishments of world architecture.

Hagia Sophia's dimensions are formidable for any structure not built of steel. In plan, it is about 270 feet long and 240 feet wide. The dome is 108 feet in diameter, and its crown rises some 180 feet above the pavement. (The first dome collapsed in 558. Its replacement required repair in the 9th and 14th centuries. The present dome is greater in height and more stable than the original.) In scale, Hagia Sophia rivals the architectural wonders of Rome: the Pantheon, the Baths of Caracalla, and the Basilica of Constantine.

In exterior view, the great dome dominates the structure, but the building's present external aspects are much changed from their original appearance. Huge buttresses were added to the Justinianic design, and after the Ottoman conquest of 1453, when Hagia Sophia became a mosque, the Turks constructed four towering minarets. The building, secularized in the 20th century, is now a museum.

The characteristic Byzantine plainness and unpretentiousness of the exterior (which in this case also disguise the massive scale) scarcely prepare visitors for the building's interior. A poet and member of Justinian's court, Paul the Silentiary (an usher responsible for maintaining silence in the palace), vividly described the original magnificence of Hagia Sophia's interior:

Who . . . shall sing the marble meadows gathered upon the mighty walls and spreading pavement. . . .
[There is stone] from the green flanks of Carystus [and] the speckled Phrygian stone, sometimes rosy mixed with white, sometimes gleaming with purple and silver flowers. There is a wealth of porphyry



stone, too, besprinkled with little bright stars. . . You may see the bright green stone of Laconia and the glittering marble with wavy veins found in the deep gullies of the Iasian peaks, exhibiting slanting streaks of blood-red and livid white; the pale yellow with swirling red from the Lydian headland; the glittering crocus-like golden stone [of Libya]; . . . glittering [Celtic] black [with] here and there an abundance of milk; the pale onyx with glint of precious metal; and [Thessalian marble] in parts vivid green not unlike emerald. . . It has spots resembling snow next to flashes of black so that in one stone various beauties mingle.¹

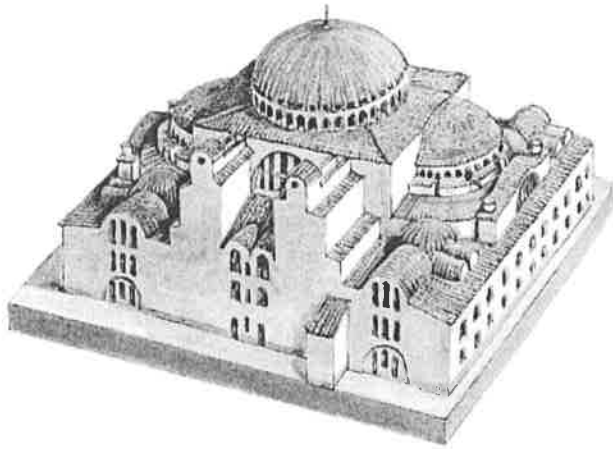
The feature that distinguishes Hagia Sophia from equally lavish Roman buildings such as the Pantheon is the special mystical quality of the light that floods the interior. The soaring canopy-like dome that dominates the inside as well as the outside of the church rides on a halo of light from windows in the dome's base. Visitors to Hagia Sophia from Justinian's time to today have been struck by the light within the church and its effect on the human spirit. The 40 windows at the base of the dome create the illusion that the dome is resting on the light that pours through them. Procopius, who wrote at the emperor's request a treatise on his ambitious building program, observed that the dome looked as if it were suspended by "a golden chain from Heaven." Said he: "You might say that the space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated within, so great an abundance of light bathes this shrine all around."²

Paul the Silentiary compared the dome to "the firmament which rests on air" and described the vaulting as covered with "gilded tesserae from which a glittering stream of golden rays pours abundantly and strikes men's eyes with irresistible force. It is as if one were gazing at the midday sun in spring."³ Thus, Hagia Sophia has a vastness of space shot through with light, and a central dome that appears to be supported by the light it admits. Light is the mystical element—light that glitters in the mosaics, shines forth from the marble-clad walls and floors, and pervades and defines spaces that, in themselves, seem to escape definition. Light seems to dissolve material substance and transform it into an abstract spiritual vision. Pseudo-Dionysius, perhaps the most influential mystic philosopher of the age, wrote in *The Divine Names*: "Light comes from the Good and . . . light is the visual image of God."⁴

PENDENTIVES To achieve this illusion of a floating "dome of Heaven," Justinian's architects used *pendentives* to transfer the weight from the great dome to the piers beneath, rather than to the walls. With pendentives, not only could the space beneath the dome be unobstructed but scores of windows also could puncture the walls themselves. Pendentives created the impression of a dome suspended above, not held up by, walls. Experts today can explain the technical virtuosity of Anthemius and Isidorus, but it remained a mystery to their contemporaries. Procopius communicated the sense of wonderment experienced by those who entered Justinian's great church: "No matter how much they concentrate their attention on this and that, and examine everything with contracted eyebrows, they are unable to understand the craftsmanship and always depart from there amazed by the perplexing spectacle."⁵

By placing a hemispherical dome on a square base instead of on a circular base, as in the Pantheon, Anthemius and Isidorus succeeded in fusing two previously independent and seemingly mutually exclusive architectural traditions: the vertically oriented central plan building and the longitudinally oriented basilica. Hagia Sophia is, in essence, a domed basilica—a uniquely successful conclusion to several centuries of experimentation in Christian church architecture. However, the thrusts of the pendentive construction at Hagia Sophia made external buttresses necessary, as well as huge internal northern and southern wall piers and eastern and western half-domes. The semidomes' thrusts descend, in turn, into still smaller half-domes surmounting columned exedrae that give a curving flow to the design.

Wilkins, David G., Bernard Schultz, Kathryn M. Linduff. *Art Past Art Present*, 6th ed. 2009. pp. 164-165.



Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus, architects. Reconstruction of the exterior, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Istanbul (Constantinople), Turkey, 532-37. The building is 270' (82 m) in length, covers almost 1.5 acres (6,070 sq m), and the great central dome, 108' in diameter (33m), crowns at a height of more than 185' (56.4m). Commissioned by the Byzantine emperor Justinian. Because of the many later additions, this reconstruction drawing provides an idea of the original exterior of the church.

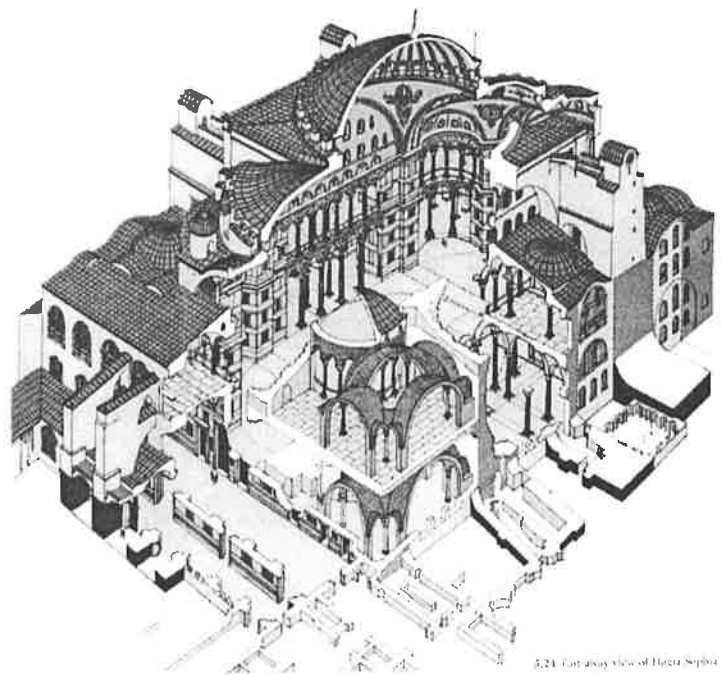
Hagia Sophia served as the palace chapel for the Byzantine emperors and was the site of their coronations. After the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453. Hagia Sophia was converted to an Islamic mosque. Towering minarets, from which the faithful were called to prayer, were added to the exterior, while on the interior the Christian mosaics were covered and eight huge discs with sayings from the Koran and names of Muslim prophets were added.

Byzantine Architecture: Hagia Sophia

The interior of Hagia Sophia offers a dramatic interplay of two crucial architectural elements: space and light. On entering, many visitors find the enormous interior space astonishing and the dome, supported by four gigantic but largely hidden piers, seems to float over us because of the row of windows at its base. Originally, this effect of a light-filled interior was even more intense, for the windows at the base of the dome were decreased when the dome had to be rebuilt after from earthquakes in 558, 989, and 1346. The powerful physical and spiritual experience of the church was recorded by Procopius, the court historian to Justinian writing shortly after the church was completed:

“The sun's light and its shining rays fill the church. One would say that the space is not lit by the sun without, but that the source of light is to be found within, such is the abundance of light.... So light is the construction, the dome seems not to rest on a solid structure, but to cover the space with a sphere of gold suspended in the sky.... The scintillations of the light forbid the spectator's gaze to linger on the details; each one attracts the eye and leads it on to the next. The circular motion of one's gaze reproduces itself to infinity.... The spirit rises toward God and floats in the air, certain that He is not far away, but loves to stay close to those whom He has chosen.”

This remarkable synthesis of light and architectural form was conceived by Anthemius of Tralles, an artist and scientist, and Isidorus of Miletus, an architect and engineer. During a brief, six-week



3.24 Fantasy View of Hagia Sophia

period, they evolved a new architectural plan that combined the longitudinal orientation of the basilica with the central plan. Unlike Roman architects, who preferred to support a dome on a drum, Anthemius and Isidorus raised the central dome on pendentives, curving triangular segments that provide the transition from the square plan of the supporting piers to the circular base of the dome, and flanked it with semi-or half-domes. The huge piers reduced the load bearing function of the walls, allowing for large amounts of window space (such nonsupporting walls are known as screen walls). That Hagia Sophia was completed in five years demonstrates the importance of the building in Justinian's plans. It is reported that at its dedication in 537, the emperor compared his accomplishment to that of Solomon, builder of the Temple in Jerusalem, when he proclaimed, "Solomon, I have outdone thee!"

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/byzantine1/constantinople-east/a/hagia-sophia-istanbul>
A Symbol of Byzantium Essay by Dr. William Allen

The great church of the Byzantine capital Constantinople (Istanbul) took its current structural form under the direction of the Emperor Justinian I. The church was dedicated in 537, amid great ceremony and the pride of the emperor (who was sometimes said to have seen the completed building in a dream). The daring engineering feats of the building are well known. Numerous medieval travelers praise the size and embellishment of the church. Tales abound of miracles associated with the church. Hagia Sophia is the symbol of Byzantium in the same way that the Parthenon embodies Classical Greece or the Eiffel Tower typifies Paris.

Each of those structures express values and beliefs: perfect proportion, industrial confidence, a unique spirituality. By overall impression and attention to detail, the builders of Hagia Sophia left the world a mystical building. The fabric of the building denies that it can stand by its construction alone. Hagia Sophia's being seems to cry out for another-worldly explanation of why it stands because much within the building seems dematerialized, an impression that must have been very real in the perception of the medieval faithful. The dematerialization can be seen in as small a detail as a column capital or in the building's dominant feature, its dome.

Let us start with a look at a column capital

The capital is a derivative of the Classical Ionic order via the variations of the Roman composite capital and Byzantine invention. Shrunken volutes appear at the corners decorative detailing runs the circuit of lower regions of the capital. The column capital does important work, providing transition from what it supports to the round column beneath. What we see here is decoration that makes the capital appear light, even insubstantial. The whole appears more as filigree work than as robust stone capable of supporting enormous weight to the column.

Compare the Hagia Sophia capital with a Classical Greek Ionic capital, this one from the Greek Erechtheum on the Acropolis, Athens. The capital has abundant decoration but the treatment does not diminish the work performed by the capital. The lines between the two spirals dip, suggesting the weight carried while the spirals seem to show a pent-up energy that pushes the capital up to meet the entablature,



the weight it holds. The capital is a working member and its design expresses the working in an elegant way.

The relationship between the two is similar to the evolution of the antique to the medieval seen in the mosaics of San Vitale. A capital fragment on the grounds of Hagia Sophia illustrates the carving technique. The stone is deeply drilled, creating shadows behind the vegetative decoration. The capital surface appears thin. The capital contradicts its task rather than expressing it.

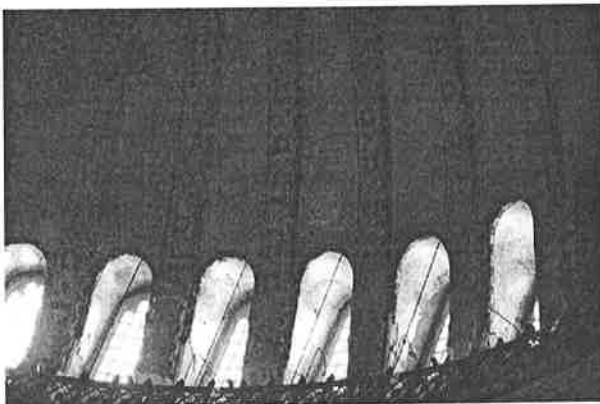
This deep carving appears throughout Hagia Sophia's capitals, spandrels, and entablatures. Everywhere we look stone visually denying its ability to do the work that it must do. The important point is that the decoration suggests that something other than sound building technique must be at work in holding up the building.

A golden dome suspended from heaven

We know that the faithful attributed the structural success of Hagia Sophia to divine intervention. Nothing is more illustrative of the attitude than descriptions of the dome of Hagia Sophia. Procopius, biographer of the Emperor Justinian and author of a book on the buildings of Justinian is the first to assert that the dome hovered over the building by divine intervention.

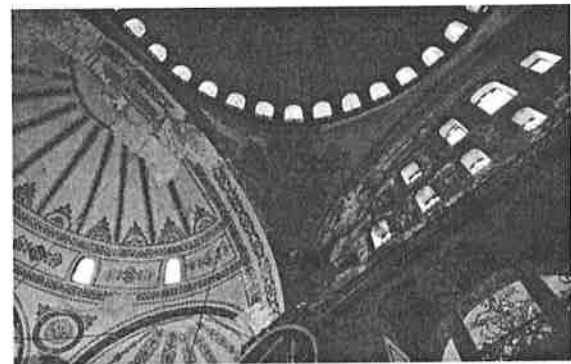
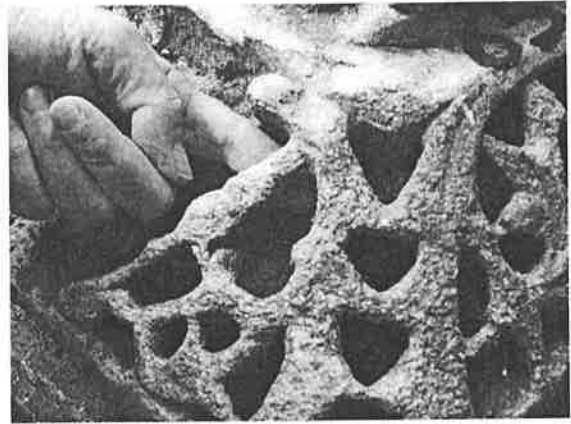
"...the huge spherical dome [makes] the structure exceptionally beautiful. Yet it seems not to rest upon solid masonry, but to cover the space with its golden dome suspended from Heaven." (from "The Buildings" by Procopius, Loeb Classical Library, 1940, online at the University of Chicago Penelope project)

The description became part of the lore of the great church and is repeated again and again over the centuries. A look at the base of the dome helps explain the descriptions.



The windows at the bottom of the dome are closely spaced, visually asserting that the base of the dome is insubstantial and hardly touching the building itself. The building planners did more than squeeze the windows together, they also lined the jambs or sides of the windows with gold mosaic. As light hits the gold it bounces around the openings and eats away at the structure and makes room for the imagination to see a floating dome.

It would be difficult not to accept the fabric as consciously constructed to present a building that is dematerialized by common constructional expectation. Perception outweighs clinical explanation. To the faithful of Constantinople and its visitors, the building used divine intervention to do what otherwise would appear to be impossible. Perception supplies its own explanation: the dome is suspended from heaven by an invisible chain.



Advice from an angel?

An old story about Hagia Sophia, a story that comes down in several versions, is a pointed explanation of the miracle of the church. So goes the story: A youngster was among the craftsmen doing the construction. Realizing a problem with continuing work, the crew left the church to seek help (some versions say they sought help from the Imperial Palace). The youngster was left to guard the tools while the workmen were away. A figure appeared inside the building and told the boy the solution to the problem and told the boy to go to the workmen with the solution. Reassuring the boy that he, the figure, would stay and guard the tools until the boy returned, the boy set off. The solution that the boy delivered was so ingenious that the assembled problem solvers realized that the mysterious figure was no ordinary man but a divine presence, likely an angel. The boy was sent away and was never allowed to return to the capital. Thus the divine presence had to remain inside the great church by virtue of his promise and presumably is still there. Any doubt about the steadfastness of Hagia Sophia could hardly stand in the face of the fact that a divine guardian watches over the church.*

Damage and repairs

Hagia Sophia sits astride an earthquake fault. The building was severely damaged by three quakes during its early history. Extensive repairs were required. Despite the repairs, one assumes that the city saw the survival of the church, amid city rubble, as yet another indication of divine guardianship of the church.

Extensive repair and restoration are ongoing in the modern period. We likely pride ourselves on the ability of modern engineering to compensate for daring 6th Century building technique. Both ages have their belief systems and we are understandably certain of the rightness of our modern approach to care of the great monument. But we must also know that we would be lesser if we did not contemplate with some admiration the structural belief system of the Byzantine Age.

*Helen C. Evans, Ph.D., "Byzantium Revisited: The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia in the Twentieth Century," *Fourth Annual Pallas Lecture* (University of Michigan, 2006).

The following excerpts were compiled by Douglas Darracott, Plano West Senior High School, Plano, TX. Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus. Hagia Sophia (Istanbul), 532-537

1. A bema is a dais for clergy in the apse of an Early Christian church... In Eastern churches it is the space beyond the iconostasis, and in large churches is in three parts, each with an apse: the altar in the middle, the prothesis on the north, and the diaconicon on the south" (Murray and Murray 51).

2. "St. Sophia defined the symbolic center of the city. To be overawed, any visitor must go inside... This was less as a place of private contemplation than as the arena for the public and state adoration of God. Few viewers would understand anything about its engineering achievement and how the dome was actually supported by piers and buttresses. What mattered was the conviction that God was inside the church. If all its parts symbolized the events of the New Testament, then it became both a way of memorizing that history and believing that it was mystically re-enacted in the course of the church year. In the later Byzantine church this idea of the decoration as memory and re-enactment is smoothly conveyed through figurative cycles. The surprise that has been felt in Justinian's church of St. Sophia is its total lack of figurative mosaics. Instead, St. Sophia evokes the presence of God by endlessly repeated images of the cross in the gold mosaics of the vaults. The solution is simple and unifying, not unlike the later Islamic mosque with non-figurative ornament and the divine words of the Koran... The decision at St. Sophia might have been purely practical, to speed the execution or because the architectural surfaces were felt to be unsuitably high for imagery" (Cormack 39-40).

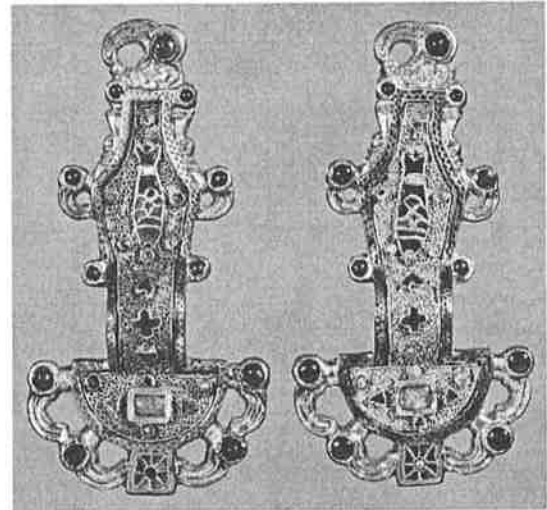
53. Merovingian looped fibula. Early medieval Europe. Mid-sixth century C.E. Silver gilt worked in filigree, with inlays of garnets and other stones.

G14, 309
(Merovingian jewelry, S5, 231-232)

SH

Pins [Image](#)

<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/fibulae.html>

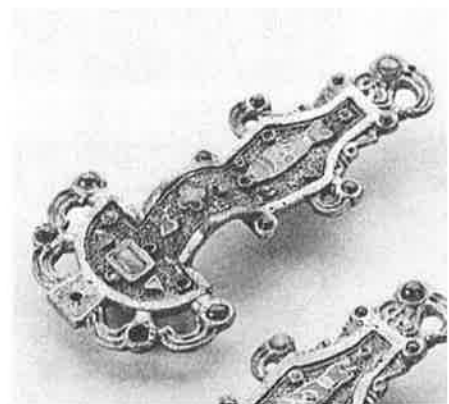


Fibulae

Fibulae (singular: fibula) are brooches that were made popular by Roman military campaigns. They all consist of a body, a pin, and a catch. Ornate fibulae became all the rage in the early middle ages, and are one of the most commonly found objects in barbarian* grave sites. Grave goods like fibulae provide the most concrete cultural information about barbarians, due to the sparse amount of written documentation about them. The diverse ethnic groups were constantly borrowing from one another, while putting their own spin on things. ...

Merovingian (Frankish) Looped Fibulae, mid-6th century, silver gilt worked in filigree with inlaid garnet and other stones (Musée des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)

This pair of Frankish fibulae is a great example of cloisonné, a technique that was popular in barbarian art. This technique is characterized by inlaid semi-precious stones. In fact, the word cloisonné literally means "partitioned" in French. The artisan would solder wires onto a metal base and fill the areas those wires created with stones (to be distinguished with cloisonné enamel, which has colored enamel baked *within* these partitions). This example also shows a popular motif in barbarian art of the middle ages: eagles! The eagle, originally a pagan symbol of the sun, was used by Imperial Rome, and would later become an emblem to St. John. The end of these fibulae are in the shape of Eagle heads, and little fish are shown on the main body of the brooches. Garnets were used to decorate the eyes of the eagles, and a wide range of gems were used to decorate the rest of the fibulae. These stunning pieces demonstrate the proficiency of barbarian metal workers during the middle ages. ... While both examples are fibulae and had the same functional purpose, the way in which they were decorated differed because of the culture producing them.



After all, when commissioning such expensive objects, the owners are going to want an object that resonates with their identity. For such a widespread object as the fibula, it is normal for similar groups to have similar artistic styles, and for more diverse groups to have less in common. These extraordinary examples of fibulae are proof of the diverse and distinct cultures living within larger empires and kingdoms, a social situation that was common during the middle ages.

*The word "barbarian" did not originally carry the same connotations as it does today. It comes from

the Greek word "barbaros," meaning "foreign." So for our purposes "barbarian" will be used here as a blanket term for non-Roman, nomadic, and illiterate groups traveling throughout Europe during the middle ages. The cultural exchange that occurred in Europe after antiquity can be seen through artwork, among other things; Romans borrowed from "Barbarian" aesthetic, and vice versa.

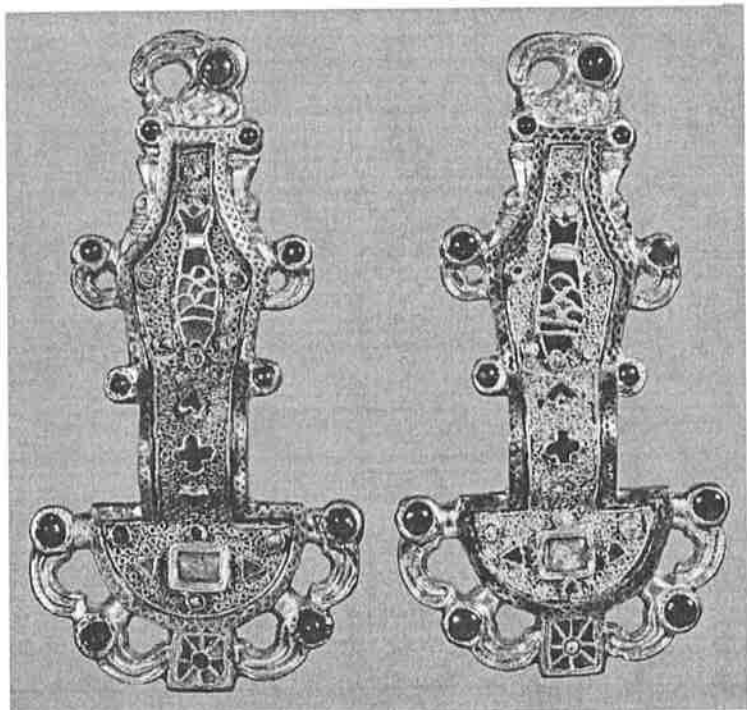
Text by Rebecca Mir

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 14th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2013.

Merovingian Fibulae

Most characteristic, perhaps of the prestige adornments of the early medieval period was the fibula, a decorative pin the Romans wore (and the Etruscans before them). Men and women alike used fibulae to fasten their garments. Made of bronze, silver, or gold, these pins often featured profuse decoration, sometimes incorporating inlaid precious or semi-precious stones. The pair of fibulae illustrated here formed part of a find of jewelry of the mid-sixth century, when Merovingian kings (r. 482 – 751) ruled large parts of what is now France. The pins, probably once the proud possession of a wealthy Merovingian woman, accompanied their owner into the afterlife. They resemble, in general form, the roughly contemporaneous but plain fibulae used to fasten the outer garments of some of the attendants flanking the Byzantine emperor Justinian in the apse mosaic of San Vitale in Ravenna. (Note how much more elaborate is the emperor's clasp. In Rome, Byzantium, and early medieval Europe alike, these fibulae were emblems of office and of prestige.)

Covering almost the entire surface of each of the Merovingian fibulae are decorative patterns adjusted carefully to the basic shape of the object. They thus describe and amplify the fibula's form and structure, becoming an organic part of the pin itself. Often the early medieval metalworkers so successfully integrated zoomorphic elements into this type of highly disciplined, abstract decorative design that the animal forms became almost unrecognizable. For example, the fibulae in Fig. 11-2 incorporate a fish just below the center of each pin. The looped forms around the edges are stylized eagles' heads with red garnets forming the eyes.



54. Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George.

Early Byzantine Europe. Sixth or early seventh century C.E. Encaustic on wood, 27" x 18 7/8".
Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt.

G15, 270-272; G14, 268-270

S5, 246-248

A3, 296

GW, 550

SH

Pins Image Article

<http://teachmiddleeast.lib.uchicago.edu/foundations/middle-east-exporter-of-religion/image-resource-bank/image-10.html>

Byzantine Icon of Virgin and Child, c. 600 CE

Fred M. Donner Professor of Near Eastern History, Univ. of Chicago

Many of the first Christians belonged to the Greek-speaking communities clustered around the eastern Mediterranean.

The four Gospels and the other books of the New Testament were written in Greek, and in the following centuries,

sophisticated liturgical and theological writings were produced in Greek. This Greek-speaking form of Christianity became the official faith of the Byzantine Empire, or Later Roman Empire, in the east.

Constantinople (modern Istanbul) was the seat of the Greek patriarch and the capital of the Byzantine empire, which, until the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE, controlled the whole eastern Mediterranean world from Greece to Egypt. The Byzantines were fervent believers in the value of

representational art to depict scenes from the Gospels and Old Testament; their churches were often decorated with figural mosaics and especially with icons, which served to educate and inspire the faithful. This icon from St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai, dated to about 600 CE, shows the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus flanked by Saints George and Theodore, with angels in the background. Its style is typical of Late Antique art, combining Hellenistic-Roman and Eastern features

Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 4th edition, 2011. p. 244-245.

ICONS AND ICONOCLASM

Christians in the Byzantine world prayed to Christ, Mary, and the saints while looking at images of them on independent painted panels known as icons. Church doctrine toward the veneration of icons was ambivalent. Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, has always been uneasy with the power of religious images. But key figures of the Eastern Church, such as Basil the Great of Cappadocia (c. 329-379) and John of Damascus (c. 675-749), distinguished between idolatry the worship of images and the veneration of an idea or holy person depicted in a work of art. Icons were thus accepted as aids to meditation and prayer, as intermediaries between worshipers and the holy personages they depicted. Honor showed to the image was believed to transfer directly to its spiritual prototype. Icons were often displayed in Byzantine churches on a screen separating the congregation from the sanctuary called the **iconostasis**.

Surviving early icons are rare, but a few precious examples were preserved in the Monastery of St.

Catherine on Mount Sinai, among them the **VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH SAINTS AND ANGELS**. As

Theotokos (Greek for bearer of God), Jesus earthly mother was viewed as the powerful, ever-forgiving



intercessor, appealing to her divine son for mercy on behalf of repentant worshipers. She was also called the Seat of Wisdom, and many images of the Virgin and Child, like this one, show her holding Jesus on her lap in a way that suggests that she represents the throne of Solomon. Virgin and Child are flanked here by Christian warrior-saints Theodore (left) and George (right) both legendary figures said to have slain dragons, representing the triumph of the Church over the evil serpent of paganism.

Angels behind them twist upward to look heavenward. The artist has painted the Christ Child, the Virgin, and the angels in an illusionistic Roman manner that renders them lifelike and three dimensional in appearance. But the warrior-saints are more stylized. The artist barely hints at bodily form beneath the richly patterned textiles of their cloaks, and their tense faces are frozen in frontal stares of gripping intensity. In the eighth century, the veneration of icons sparked a major controversy in the Eastern Church, and in 726 Emperor Leo III launched a campaign of **iconoclasm** (image breaking), banning the use of icons in Christian worship and ordering the destruction of devotional pictures. Only a few early icons survived in isolated places like Mount Sinai, which was no longer a part of the Byzantine Empire at this time. But the iconoclasm did not last. In 843, Empress Theodora, widow of Theophilus, last of the iconoclastic emperors, reversed her husband's policy, and icons would play an increasingly important role as the history of Byzantine art developed.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/byzantine1/constantinople-east/a/virgin-theotokos-and-child-between-saints-theodore-and-george>

Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George Text by Dr. William Allen **At Mount Sinai Monastery**

One of thousands of important Byzantine images, books, and documents preserved at St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai (Egypt) is the remarkable encaustic icon painting of the Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George ("Icon" is Greek for "image" or "painting" and encaustic is a painting technique that uses wax as a medium to carry the color).

The icon shows the Virgin and Child flanked by two soldier saints, St. Theodore to the left and St. George at the right. Above these are two angels who gaze upward to the hand of God, from which light emanates, falling on the Virgin.

Selectively classicizing

The painter selectively used the classicizing style inherited from Rome. The faces are modeled; we see the same convincing modeling in the heads of the angels (note the muscles of the necks) and the ease with which the heads turn almost three-quarters.

The space appears compressed, almost flat, at our first encounter. Yet we find spatial recession, first in the throne of the Virgin where we glimpse part of the right side and a shadow cast by the throne; we also see a receding armrest as well as a projecting footrest. The Virgin, with a slight twist of her body, sits comfortably on the throne, leaning her body left toward the edge of the throne. The child sits on her ample lap as the mother supports him with both hands. We see the left knee of the Virgin beneath convincing drapery whose folds fall between her legs.

At the top of the painting an architectural member turns and recedes at the heads of the angels. The architecture helps to create and close off the space around the holy scene.

The composition displays a spatial ambiguity that places the scene in a world that operates differently from our world, reminiscent of the spatial ambiguity of the earlier *Ivory panel with Archangel*. The ambiguity allows the scene to partake of the viewer's world but also separates the scene from the normal world.

New in our icon is what we might call a "hierarchy of bodies." Theodore and George stand erect, feet on the ground, and gaze directly at the viewer with large, passive eyes. While looking at us they show no recognition of the viewer and appear ready to receive something from us. The saints are slightly animated by the lifting of a heel by each as though they slowly step toward us.

The Virgin averts her gaze and does not make eye contact with the viewer. The ethereal angels concentrate on the hand above. The light tones of the angels and especially the slightly transparent rendering of their halos give the two an otherworldly appearance.

Byzantine panel with archangel, Ivory leaf from diptych, ca. 525-50, 16.8 x 5.6 x 0.35 in./42.8 x 14.3 x 0.9 cm, probably from Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey), (British Museum, London)



Visual movement upward, toward the hand of God

This supremely composed picture gives us an unmistakable sense of visual movement inward and upward, from the saints to the Virgin and from the Virgin upward past the angels to the hand of God.

The passive saints seem to stand ready to receive the veneration of the viewer and pass it inward and upward until it reaches the most sacred realm depicted in the picture.



We can describe the differing appearances as saints who seem to inhabit a world close to our own (they alone have a ground line), the Virgin and Child who are elevated and look beyond us, and the angels who reside near the hand of God transcend our space. As the eye moves upward we pass through zones: the saints, standing on ground and therefore closest to us, and then upward and more ethereal until we reach the holiest zone, that of the hand of God. These zones of holiness suggest a cosmos of the world, earth and real people, through the Virgin, heavenly angels, and finally the hand of God. The viewer who stands before the scene make this cosmos complete, from "our earth" to heaven.

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 13th Enhanced ed. 2011, p. 254-255.

ICONS Gospel books such as the *Rabbula Gospels* played an important role in monastic religious life. So, too, did *icons*, which also figured prominently in private devotion (see "Icons and Iconoclasm," page 326). Unfortunately, few early icons survive. Some of the finest early examples come from Saint Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai. The one illustrated here was painted in encaustic on wood, continuing a tradition of panel painting in Egypt that, as true of so much else in the Byzantine world, has roots in the Roman Empire. In a composition reminiscent of the portrait of Anicia Juliana in the *Vienna Dioskorides*, the Sinai icon painter represented the enthroned Theotokos and Child with Saints Theodore and George. The two guardian saints intercede with the Virgin on the viewer's behalf. Behind them, two

angels gaze upward to a shaft of light where the hand of God appears. The foreground figures are strictly frontal and have a solemn demeanor. Background details are few and suppressed. The forward plane of the picture dominates. Space is squeezed out. Traces of the Greco-Roman illusionism noted in the Anicia Juliana portrait remain in the Virgin's rather personalized features, in her sideways glance, and in the posing of the angels' heads. But the painter rendered the saints' bodies in the new Byzantine manner.

Honour, Hugh & John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, 4th edition, 1995. p. 291.

The distinction between an image that was an aid to thought or prayer and one that was in itself an object of veneration was somewhat blurred in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries. Small portable pictures of Christ, the Virgin and Child or the saints, nowadays called icons from a Greek word which originally signified a much wider variety of 'likenesses' or 'images') were increasingly demanded throughout the Byzantine world. They had a stronger emotional appeal than the intellectually conceived symbols and doctrinal allegories of earlier Christian art. In 692 this move away from symbolism was officially sanctioned by the Trullan Council of the Church, which ordained that 'the human figure of Christ our God, the lamb, who took on the sins of the world, be set up even in the images instead of the ancient lamb. Through this figure we realize the height of the humiliation of God the Word and are led to remember His life in the flesh, His suffering and His saving death and the redemption ensuing from it for the world.' To achieve this aim painters reverted to a more naturalistic style, as in a panel painting of the Virgin and Child flanked by two saints and two angels with the hand of God reaching down from the top (7,45). The heads of the two angels are foreshortened with the skill of a Hellenistic painter, the Virgin and Child have substance and weight, the two saints, especially the lean St. Theodore on the left, might almost be portraits of ascetics. The picture is composed hierarchically, but the figures staring straight at the spectator seem to have been intended as more than aids to meditation. They invite a face-to-face meeting with the holy persons depicted. And devotion was paid to such icons as if they were themselves holy relics. This example is among the few to escape the fury of the Iconoclasts, which broke loose in the early eighth century against the, as they thought, idolatrous tendencies such icons were arousing.

An edict issued by the Emperor Leo III in 730 ordered the destruction of all images that showed Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints or angels in human form. It brought into the open a smoldering conflict which raged for the next 113 years between Iconoclasts (image-breakers) and, as they styled their opponents, Iconodules (venerators of images) throughout the Byzantine Empire. (The edict was repudiated by the Pope in Rome and by Western Christendom.) No controversy about works of art has ever aroused such violent passions, polarizing sentiments on other religious, political, social and economic issues as well. Any Iconodule discovered harboring an icon could be punished by flogging, branding, mutilation or blinding. Religious images survived openly only in those parts of the earlier Byzantine empire that had been overrun by 'barbarians' – the word is poignant in this context.

Hartt, Frederick. *Art, A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 4th edition, 1993. p. 330.

A contrast between abstraction in the statement of form and naturalism in the rendition of light similar to what we saw in the *Transfiguration* mosaic appears in a picture in encaustic, probably dating from the sixth century, which is at once one of the oldest-known Christian panel paintings and one of the earliest surviving examples of that favorite among all themes in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, the *Virgin and Child Enthroned*. The Virgin and Child are shown royally enthroned between the warrior-

saints Theodore (bearded) and George, dressed as officers of the imperial guard. Behind the throne two angels look up to an arc of blue, representing the heavens, in which appears the Hand of God (the typical method of showing God the Father in Early Christian art), from which a band of white light descends toward the figures on the throne. The Virgin appears in an almost exactly frontal pose, and the Christ Child extends his right hand in teaching while his left holds a scroll, very nearly as in the work of the Italian painter Cimabue, who was brought up in the Byzantine tradition, some seven centuries later. The saints stand as rigidly and frontally as the imperial attendants at Ravenna, and the four gold halos are so aligned that they can be read, together with the Hand of God, as a cross. Even though the principal figures are so locked within this pattern that they can move only their eyes, the play of light is unexpectedly rich and the brushwork free. Variations in flesh tones, the dark circles under Mary's eyes, and the shimmer of the damasks are beautifully represented. As in the *Transfiguration*, then, illusionist vision and technique survive in the rendering of the play of light, while the grouping of the figures has been subjected to new laws of symbolic rather than naturalistic arrangement.

DeWitte, Debra J., Ralph M. Larmann, M. Kathryn Shields, *Gateways to Art*, 2012. p. 550.

Iconoclasm: Destruction of Religious Images

Icons, or religious images, are designed to create a state of meditation, in which the artworks are studied for long periods, inspiring worship. Iconoclasm, or the destruction of religious images, shows the power art can have, and the fear its power can generate. The Byzantine Empire's iconoclastic controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries was provoked by divisions among Christians over the interpretation of the Bible's Second Commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below, You shall not bow down to them or worship them." Some Christians took this commandment to mean that icons, which might inspire too much worship, should be prohibited.

A study of the icon *Virgin and Child Surrounded by Saints* can help us understand why the iconoclasts were so concerned that Christians might confuse worship of an image with worship of the holy figures themselves. In the icon, Mary initially attracts our attention because she sits in the center, wearing a dark purple gown (the imperial color), and presents Christ, who sits on her lap. The bearded St. Theodore and the beardless St. George stand slightly in front of the Virgin's throne. The saints are closest to us because they are human and therefore most like us. A hierarchy is thus created as we "enter" the picture through them and become closer to Mary, who is herself an intercessor for Christ. The two figures behind the enthroned Mary are angels looking up at heaven. Their gaze reminds Christian believers that the figures in the icon will bring them closer to the heavens above.



Iconoclasts believed that the faithful were worshiping icons of religious figures rather than worshiping Mary and Jesus directly. This fundamental disagreement led to the destruction of thousands of Byzantine icons, including almost all portrayals of Christ and Mary. Most of the surviving icons from before the ninth century are in St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they were protected by their location in the Egyptian desert. Iconoclasm has occurred many times in the history of humankind, whenever people passionately believe that certain art has gained too much influence and power.

The following excerpts were compiled by Douglas Darracott, Plano West Senior High School, Plano, TX.

1. "Most early icons were destroyed in the eighth century as a reaction to the veneration of images known as **iconoclasm**, making those that have survived especially precious" (Stokstad, *Art History* 322). This icon from the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, Mary, "as Theotokos, was viewed as the powerful, ever-forgiving intercessor, or go-between, appealing to her Divine Son for mercy on behalf of repentant worshipers. She was also called the Seat of Wisdom, and many images of the Virgin and Child, like this one, show her holding Jesus on her lap in a way that suggests that she represents the throne of Solomon. The Christian warrior-saints Theodore (left) and George (right)- both legendary figures said to have slain dragons, representing the triumph of the Church over the 'evil serpent' of paganism- stand at each side, while angels behind them look heavenward" (322).
2. "Here it is the military saints... who through their frontal gaze make contact with the viewer. In contrast, the Theotokos turns her eyes away, while the condition of the paint surface makes the direction of the Christ Child's gaze uncertain. The two angels behind turn their heads and look up towards heaven, from which a hand of God blesses the central pair" (Lowden 99). "This icon... is worthy of our attention because it is the earliest representation we have of the Madonna and Child. The motif itself was probably taken from the cult of Isis, which was popular in Egypt at the time of the Faiyum portraits. The regal Christ child probably evolved from images of the infant Dionysos. We note the stiff formality of the pose. To the Byzantines the Madonna was the regal mother, or bearer, of God (Theotokos), while Jesus is no mere infant but God in human form (Logos). Only later did she acquire the gentle maternal presence of the Virgin that is so familiar in Latin art" (Janson 237).
3. "Typical of early icons,... their heads are too massive for their doll-like bodies. Behind them are two angels who come closest to Roman art, although their lumpy features show that classicism is no longer a living tradition. Clearly these figures are quotations from different sources, so that the painting marks an early stage in the development of icons. Yet it is typical of the conservative icon tradition that the artist has tried to remain faithful to his sources, in order to preserve the likenesses of these holy figures" (237). "The faithful regarded these devotional images as sacred; indeed, some icons were thought to have supernatural and miraculous powers. The idea of the icon as epiphany or 'appearance' was linked to the belief that the image (usually of Mary) was the tangible confirmation of the Blessed Virgin's miraculous appearance. The anonymity of icon painters and the formulaic quality of the image from generation to generation reflects the unique nature of the icon as an archetypal image" (Fiero, *Medieval Europe* 34).

Works Cited:

- Fiero, Gloria K. *The Humanistic Tradition, Book 2: Medieval Europe and the World Beyond*, 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002.
- Janson, H. W. and Anthony F. *History of Art*, 6th ed., rev. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004.
- Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999.

55. Lindisfarne Gospels: St. Matthew, cross-carpet page; St. Luke portrait page; St. Luke incipit page. Early medieval (Hiberno Saxon) Europe. c. 700 C.E. Illuminated manuscript (ink, pigments, and gold on vellum).

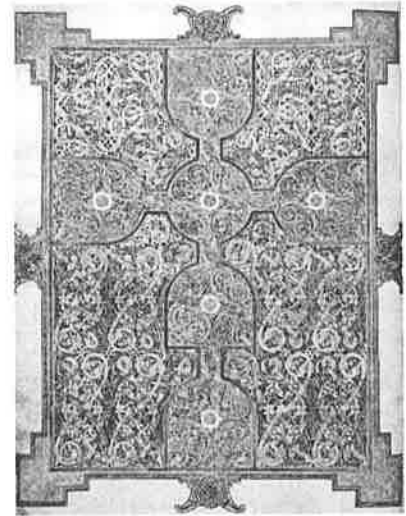
G14, 312-315, 318

S5, xxx, 436-437

GW, 320-32

SH and SH

Pins [Cross-Carpet](#) [St. Luke portrait](#) [St. Luke incipit](#) [Article](#) [Video](#)



<http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/sacredbooks/religiousbooks/christian/lindisfarnegos/lindisfarnegospels.html>

Lindisfarne Gospels

This fascinating book was created by an artist monk living in Northumbria in the early 700s. It is an amazing example of the strength of Christian belief during one of the most turbulent periods of British History. Costly in time and materials, superb in design, the manuscript is among our greatest artistic and religious treasures. It was made and used at Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, a major religious community that housed the shrine of St Cuthbert, who died in 687.

Do we know who made this manuscript?

Medieval manuscripts were usually produced by a team of scribes and illustrators. However, the entire Lindisfarne Gospels was created by one man, believed to be an artist monk called Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne between 698 and 721.



Eadfrith's amazing skill can be seen in the opening pages of each gospel. In each, a painting of the gospel's Evangelist is followed by an intricately woven 'carpet' page - so called because of its resemblance to a beautifully woven carpet. Next is the 'incipit' page - an opening page in which the first letters of the gospels are illustrated with interlacing and spiral patterns strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon jewelry and enamel work.

Eadfrith used an exceptionally wide range of colors, using animal, vegetable and mineral pigments. In some places, the manuscript remains partly unfinished, suggesting Eadfrith's cherished work was ended prematurely by his death in 721.

Why is it important?

The manuscript is an astonishingly beautiful work of art, displaying a unique combination of artistic styles reflecting a crucial period in England's history.

Christianity first came to Britain under the Romans, but subsequent waves of invasion by non-Christian Saxons, Angles and, Vikings drove the faith to the fringes of the British Isles. The country was gradually

re-converted from 597, after St Augustine arrived from Rome to convert the pagan 'Angles into angels'. Religious differences between the indigenous 'Celtic' Church and the new 'Roman' Church were settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664. In the manuscript, native Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements blend with Roman, Coptic and Eastern traditions to create an artistic vision of the cultural melting pot of Northumbria in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The Lindisfarne Gospels, and others like it, helped define the growing sense of 'Englishness' - a spirit of consolidated by the Venerable Bede, the historian monk, in his 'History of the English Church and People', completed in 731.

What is the black lettering between the lines?

Because the Christian faith was spread by the Roman Empire, its sacred texts and rituals were written and performed in Latin, a language understood by educated people across Europe. Catholic services were still held in Latin until the middle of the twentieth century.

Like most medieval Christian manuscripts, the Lindisfarne Gospels were written in Latin. However, around 970, when it was owned by the Minister of Chester-le-Street, Aldred, the Provost, added an Anglo-Saxon translation in red ink beneath the original Latin. This is the oldest surviving version of the gospels in any form of English - another indication of the manuscript's importance in the growth of England's national identity.

What is a gospel?

The gospels recount the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings. Several gospels had been written by disciples of Jesus during the centuries following his death, but only four were authorized by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 for inclusion in the Christian Bible. These four were attributed to St Matthew, St Mark, St Luke and St John, known as the four Evangelists.

Taken from: The Lindisfarne Gospels: Gospel of St Luke the Evangelist

Author / Creator: Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne

Date: late 7th or early 8th century

Copyright: By permission of the British Library

Shelfmark: Cotton Nero D. IV

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/lindisfarne.html>

Lindisfarne Gospels

This legacy of an artist monk living in Northumbria in the early eighth century is a precious testament to the tenacity of Christian belief during one of the most turbulent periods of British history. Costly in time and materials, superb in design, the manuscript is among our greatest artistic and religious treasures. It was made and used at Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, a major religious community that housed the shrine of St Cuthbert, who died in 687.

[🔍 Enlarged image](#) [🔍 Zoomable high-resolution image](#)

The Lindisfarne Gospels: Gospel of St Matthew the Evangelist, initial page. Lindisfarne, late 7th or early 8th century British Library Cotton MS Nero D.IV, Copyright © The British Library Board



What is a gospel?

A gospel recounts the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings, which form the foundations of the Christian faith. He lived in Israel during the Roman occupation of the country. His mission to reform what he saw as corruption in the Jewish faith caused conflict with the religious hierarchy and led to his execution by the Roman authorities. After his death and subsequent reports of his rising from the dead, followers of Christ - meaning 'the anointed one' - developed his teachings into a new faith, independent of Judaism but keeping much of its scriptures.

Several gospels had been written by disciples of Jesus during the centuries following his death, but only four were authorized by the Council of Nicaea in 325 for inclusion in the Christian Bible. These four were attributed to St Matthew, St Mark, St Luke and St John, known as the four Evangelists. This page shows the first words of the 'Gospel of St Luke'.

Do we know who made this manuscript?

Medieval manuscripts were usually produced by a team of scribes and illustrators. However, the entire Lindisfarne Gospels is the work of one man, giving it a particularly coherent sense of design. According to a note added at the end of the manuscript less than a century after its making, that artist was a monk called Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne between 698 and 721.

His superb skill is evident in the opening pages of each gospel. A painting of the gospel's Evangelist is followed by an intricately patterned 'carpet' page. Next is the 'incipit' page, that is, an opening page in which the first letters of the gospels are greatly elaborated with interlacing and spiral patterns strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon jeweler and enamel work.

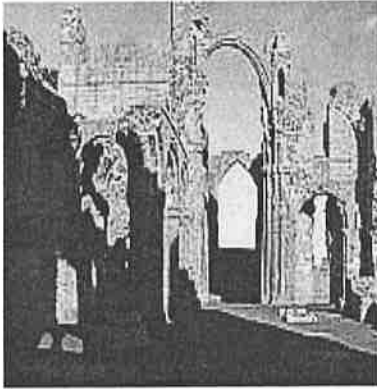
Eadfrith employed an exceptionally wide range of colors, using animal, vegetable and mineral pigments. It was an enormous act of faith. In some places the manuscript remains partly unfinished, suggesting Eadfrith's cherished work was ended prematurely by his death in 721.

Why is it important?

Apart from its intrinsic value as a remarkable survival of an ancient and astonishingly beautiful work of art, the manuscript displays a unique combination of artistic styles that reflects a crucial period in England's history.

Christianity first came to Britain under the Romans, but subsequent waves of invasion by non-Christian Saxons, Angles, and Vikings drove the faith to the fringes of the British Isles. The country was gradually re-converted from 597, after St Augustine arrived from Rome to convert the pagan "Angles into angels". Religious differences between the indigenous 'Celtic' Church and the new 'Roman' Church were settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664. In the manuscript, native Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements blend with Roman, Coptic and Eastern traditions to create a sublimely unified artistic vision of the cultural melting pot of Northumbria in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The Lindisfarne Gospels, and others like it, helped define the growing sense of 'Englishness' - a spirit of consolidated by the Venerable Bede, the historian monk, in his 'History of the English Church and People', completed in 731.



The ruins of Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, off the coast of north-east England

What is the black lettering between the lines?

Because the Christian faith was spread by the Roman Empire, its sacred texts and rituals were written and performed in Latin, a language understood by educated people across Europe. Catholic services were still in Latin until the middle of the 20th century.

Like most medieval Christian manuscripts, the Lindisfarne Gospels was written in Latin. However, around 970, when it was owned by the Minster of Chester-le-Street, Aldred, the Provost, added an Anglo-Saxon translation in red ink beneath the original Latin. This is the oldest surviving version of the gospels in any form of English - another indication of the manuscript's importance in the growth of England's national identity.

How did the manuscript come to the British Library?

Sir Robert Cotton donated this in 1753, along with the rest of his collection, to the new British Museum Library, which became the British Library in 1973.

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/lindisfarne/overview.html>

The Lindisfarne Gospels is one of the world's greatest books.

It was probably made between 680 and 720, in the island monastery of Lindisfarne. It is the work of a very gifted artist who merged words and images to create a beautiful, enduring symbol of faith.

The monastery at Lindisfarne was founded by Irish monks in 635. It lies off the coast of the former Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria (NE England). Although remote, it was certainly not cut off culturally. The Lindisfarne Gospels reflect many influences: native British, Celtic, Germanic, Roman, Early Christian, Byzantine, North African and Middle Eastern.

This was a time of great change. Britain was a land of many cultures, with an emerging national identity and vigorous new forms of learning, literature and art. The Lindisfarne Gospels was a stunning creation of this new 'insular' (or island) culture.

The Lindisfarne Gospels is certainly a book of its time - a fusion of the beliefs, politics and challenges of the day. But it is also timeless. It offers us clues to the past and inspiration for the future.

Text

The book contains the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: the four Evangelists. Recounting the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Gospels are the core of Christian belief as contained in the Christian Bible.

The Lindisfarne Gospels is written in Latin, using the Vulgate version made by St Jerome, who died in about 420.

It also contains the oldest surviving translation of the Gospels into the English language. In around 950-960 Aldred, a member of the Community of St Cuthbert, added his Old English translation between the lines of Latin.

The book opens with a decorative 'carpet page', followed by St Jerome's Prefaces (letters explaining his translation and describing the Evangelists) and the Canon Tables.

Each Gospel is introduced by preliminary matter (authorship, content and instructions for readings on particular holy days). It opens with a portrait of the Evangelist, a carpet page and an 'incipit' (or beginning) page, with the first words elaborately ornamented.

Canon Tables

The system of Canon Tables is a concordance device invented to indicate which passages are shared in which Gospels. It shows, for example, whether and where a particular passage in Matthew's Gospel also appears in Mark, Luke and John.

The presentation of the Canon Tables recalls the chancel arch of a church. The references correspond to those written in the margins of the book next to the Gospel passages.

Decoration

The opening words of each Gospel, the Incipits, are in highly-decorated scripts.

The story of Christ's birth in each Gospel is also introduced by a great Chi-rho page - the first letters of 'Christos' in Greek, a Christian symbol.

These painted labyrinths are masterpieces of sacred calligraphy: an art form portraying and celebrating the Divine without using human figures or forms.

The distinctive display script takes elements from many different cultures. There are Roman capitals, Greek characters and angular letters recalling Germanic runes. Large decorated initials mark important passages in the text. They are filled with interlaced birds and beasts - creation of the word of God - and with a maze-like vortex of Celtic spiral-work recalling water, air and fire.

Carpet Pages

The decorated pages at the beginning of each Gospel are known as Carpet Pages because they look like oriental rugs. This may have been intentional. St Bede writes that prayer mats were known in Northumbria at this time, as well as in eastern Christian and Islamic lands. They are also found in early Coptic (Christian Egyptian) manuscripts. Prayer mats help prepare worshippers for prayer. They also help prepare them before they move onto holy ground. In the Lindisfarne Gospels the carpet pages play a similar role, preparing the reader for the Gospel message.

Each carpet page contains a different form of cross, stressing the different church traditions and their ecumenical relationship. They also recall contemporary metalwork, symbolizing the Crux Gemmata, the jeweled cross which represented the Christ of the Second Coming.

Evangelists

The four writers of the Gospels are called the Evangelists. Each tells his own version of the life of Christ.

The miniature portraits of Matthew, Mark and Luke show them writing. John looks straight ahead at the reader, holding his scroll. Mark and John are shown as young men because they symbolize the divine immortal Christ. Matthew and Luke are older and bearded, Byzantine-style, because they represent Christ's mortal nature.

In Anglo-Saxon times people liked and expected symbolism in art. Their view was: 'why convey one meaning when it was possible to convey several?' Contemporary commentators such as Bede tell how the Evangelists were interpreted. Each Gospel had a different character and was represented by a different symbol.

Matthew was the man, representing the human Christ: God, made man. Mark was the lion, symbolizing the triumphant Christ of the Resurrection, the God of Eternal Life. Luke was the calf, the sacrificial victim of the Crucifixion. John was the eagle, who flew directly to the throne of God for inspiration. He symbolizes Christ's Second Coming.

St Cuthbert

Bishop Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (634-687) came from the Northumbrian middle classes. Although he spent long periods as a hermit, he was a very popular man and noted healer of plague-victims. In 685 King Eadfrith persuaded Cuthbert to become Bishop of Lindisfarne, an estate which had grown rich under his royal patronage. When Cuthbert died two years later the monastic community started a cult in his name.

We know from the cults of St Wilfred, St Columba and St Brigid that a major cult would have required a beautiful Gospel Book. The Lindisfarne Gospels was probably begun as the major icon for the cult of Cuthbert.

By Aldred's day, the community had relocated to Chester-le-Street and Durham. His final inscription or 'colophon' added in the mid tenth century says the work was undertaken 'for God and St Cuthbert'.

Makers

Before 1200, most books were made by teams of monks or nuns. Unusually, the consistency and continuity of the work in the Lindisfarne Gospels point to its being made by just one person.

We do not know for certain who that was. However it was probably a senior member of a monastic community: a bishop, abbot or abbess. Certainly he (or possibly she) was a great artist, calligrapher and technical innovator. Some evidence suggests that the work may have been done in Jarrow or Ireland, but perhaps the best clue comes from Aldred. When he added his translation 250 years later, Aldred also added a 'colophon': an inscription on the final page. He gives the following names:

- Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne (698-721) as the artist-scribe
- His successor, Bishop Aethilwold of Lindisfarne (c.721-740), as the binder
- Billfrith the 'anchorite' or hermit as the metalworker who adorned the original binding (now replaced by a 19th-century binding).

Art and design

The Lindisfarne Gospels is a glowing example of a new style of 'insular' (meaning 'from the British Isles') art. The artist-scribe used other Gospel Books as models for his text but devised his own ambitious decorative style that fused different styles:

- Interlace or knotwork
- Fretwork, step or key patterns from Graeco-Roman art
- Celtic La Tène, a curvaceous organic style of art that used abstract patterns and stylized animal and human forms.

He was an innovator in other ways too.

Rather than using scrap pieces, he planned his designs on the backs of the actual vellum used in the book. Compass and divider marks, following the rules of sacred geometry, are still visible on the backs of the carpet pages.

He added details freehand with a lead point rather than the usual hard point, an implement like an early pencil, 300 years ahead of its time.

He drew on the back in reverse, and back-lit it to view the design from the correct side of the vellum.

Chemistry

The artist must have been a skilled chemist. Using a handful of local materials he developed an extensive color palette including:

- Purples, crimsons and blues from plant extracts such as woad, lichens and folium (turnsole)
- Yellow from orpiment (trisulphide of arsenic)
- Red/orange from toasted lead
- Green from verdigris, made by suspending copper over vinegar, or by a blue-yellow mix (vergaut)
- White from chalk, crushed seashell or eggshell
- Black from carbon.

Pigments were mixed with adhesive beaten egg-white (glair). Ink was made from oak-galls and iron salts to an extremely good recipe. Some fine details were added in gold-leaf and powdered gold ink.

The Lindisfarne Gospels uses surprisingly few materials, making its technical achievement all the more remarkable.

Background to 700

During the fourth century Christianity had become the official religion of the ancient Roman Empire, which stretched from Italy to Britain and Germany, to North Africa, Turkey, Palestine and Syria.

In the fifth century the Empire collapsed. Pagan people raided, invaded, settled and formed new kingdoms: the Ostrogoths and Lombards in Italy; the Franks in Gaul; the Visigoths in Spain and Portugal, and the Anglo-Saxons in England.

The Eastern Empire continued under the Byzantine emperors based in Constantinople. Rome remained a focus as the seat of the Pope, head of the western Church.

During the seventh century, conquests carried Islam to the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, where Christianity and Judaism continued to be tolerated.

Other ancient religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism - were established further east, spread and interacted.

Anglo-Saxon world

In England the Anglo-Saxons ruled and mixed with the local populations and were gradually converted to Christianity. What did they know of the world?

More people travelled more than we might imagine and water was a highway. They inherited some knowledge of geography and natural history from Rome. Bede and others knew that the earth was round.

In Europe trade flourished in northern towns such as Dorestadt, Riga, London, Southampton and Ipswich. Monasteries and courts also served as distribution centers for imports and manufactured goods. Exotic items from distant parts were greatly prized and brought some knowledge of other cultures. Few people had experience beyond the Middle East, even though that was linked to the Orient by the Silk Road.

Across the world, in eighth-century China they could make paper and porcelain (not to reach Europe until the 12th century) and they were using wood block techniques for printing. Moveable type was not to reach Europe until the 15th century.

The arts of poetry and music flourished in Britain as it did in Japan. The oral tradition of epic verse was strong, with both secular and religious themes. From this period comes the story of Beowulf and the eighth-century Dream of the Rood.

Meaning - to the maker

Writing and painting sacred texts were seen by monks as acts of meditation, during which the scribe might glimpse the divine. It was a high calling but very hard work.

Imagine what it must have been like to undertake the eye-straining, back-aching task of making the Lindisfarne Gospels by hand, in a hut on an island in the wild North Sea.

It would have been cold and tiring. Monks attended eight church services every day and night, displayed humility by manual labor, prayed and studied. If the artist-scribe was Bishop Eadfrith, he would have carried a heavy administrative burden as well. The Lindisfarne Gospels would have taken him at least five years to complete.

When it was finished it was a book to see and be seen. But it was also the maker's personal 'opus dei' - a work for God.

Meaning - to Christianity

The Lindisfarne Gospels was a sacred item in its own right and a cult focus. Like other sacred books it was seen as a focus for miracles.

Although the original binding has been lost it is likely that it would have been adorned with treasure bindings or kept in shrines. It would have been seen on the altars of Lindisfarne, Chester-le-Street and

Durham and used during important services. Ordinary people would see it from a suitable distance as pilgrims to the shrine. They believed that such relics could heal body and soul. Glimpsing its mysteriously lit pages or covers could change their lives. It symbolized hope and a foretaste of a more beautiful life to come.

Meaning - to society

Christianity helped to transform Anglo-Saxon society, but also preserved its traditions.

The Lindisfarne Gospels displays a vision of Christianity that was inclusive, welcoming to all. It wanted to emphasize a new culture that stretched from Britain and Ireland to the farthest shores of the Mediterranean and which was related to other faith traditions.

You could tell a Pict, a Copt, a Frank, an Angle or a Saxon by their appearance. Dress and jewelry could signal identity, belief and status in well-recognized ways. We do the same today.

Visual references in the Lindisfarne Gospels would have been widely understood. Bringing them together in one book brought a sense of cohesion and identity to a new Christian nation. It was also a reflection of what was happening socially and politically as many cultures contributed to an emergent 'England'.

Meaning - today

The Lindisfarne Gospels is considered to be one of the greatest masterpieces of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic art. It is remarkable for its intricate designs, glowing colors and consummate workmanship. But we also see its amazing survival - intact - over the centuries as a greatly respected link with the beginnings of Christianity in the West. Scholars have taken a keen interest in this volume over the years and many Christians continue to see the work as a holy relic and cult object. Even without faith, many people see such witnesses to the past as valuable clues to their identities.

How can we understand what motivated Cuthbert and Eadfrith? Today we still celebrate people who embody beliefs, such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We also respect movements and charities to help those in need. Cuthbert stood for something similar - providing aid, hope and working for social justice. For him feeding the body was not enough. What mattered was feeding the spirit and achieving unity with all Creation.

The Lindisfarne Gospels remains an eloquent testimony to such aspirations.

<http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=fdbcc772-3e21-468d-8ca1-9c192f0f939c&type=book>

The following excerpts were compiled by Douglas Darracott, Plano West Senior High School, Plano, TX

The Lindisfarne Gospels

The Lindisfarne Gospels, one of the most magnificent manuscripts of the early Middle Ages, was written and decorated at the end of the 7th century by the monk Eadfrith, who became Bishop of Lindisfarne in 698 and died in 721. Its original leather binding, long since lost, was made by Ethelwald, who succeeded Eadfrith as bishop, and was decorated with jewels and precious metals later in the 8th century by Billfrith the Anchorite. The Latin text of the Gospels is translated word by word in an Old English gloss, the earliest surviving example of the Gospel text in any form of the English language, it was added between the lines in the mid 10th century by Aldred, Provost of Chester-le-Street. Today the manuscript