

Seeing Medieval History Through Artists' Eyes

Class 1: Constantine the Great's Conversion to Christianity

October 25, 2022

Introduction to course

- Whence the notion of the “Dark Ages,” “Middle Ages,” “Gothic”?

The historical significance of Constantine the Great, d. 337 AD

- Battle of Milvian Bridge 312 / Edict of Milan 313
- Council of Nicaea 325
- “New Rome” at Constantinople 330



Transforming Roman art and architecture from pagan to Christian

- Basilica of Constantine, Trier, Germany, 310
- Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine (Basilica Nova), Rome, 305-312
- Arch of Constantine, Rome, 315
- Old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, c. 324: *martyrium; basilica; Latin cross plan: nave, apse, transept, clerestory.*
- S. Constanza (mausoleum of Constantine's daughter), c. 350 AD: *central plan*
- Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem: *martyrium and basilica*
- Paintings in catacomb of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus, 3rd-4th c.; catacomb of Domitilla, 4th c.
- Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, d. 359

Constantine's Legacy in New Rome: Constantinople and the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire

- Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Emperor Justinian I, 532-537
 - Mosaic with Constantine and Justinian offering gifts to the Virgin and Child
- Central plan architecture in Greece: Daphni Monastery & Hosios Loukas Monastery, 11th c.

Combatting heresy and establishing canonical Christian beliefs

- Council of Nicaea 325 – Christ, Son of God, “of one substance with the Father”
 - Apse mosaic in Santa Pudenziana, c. 400; San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th c.
- Council of Ephesus 431 – Mary “Theotokos,” Mother of God
 - Virgin and Child statue (12th c.); Virgin “Theotokos” at Hosios Loukas, Greece

Seeing Constantine's Legacy in Ravenna's mosaics

- Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, 425-450
- S. Apollinare in Classe, 549
- San Vitale, 527-548

Suggested reading (see also art history videos at [Khan Academy](#) and [Smart History](#) websites)

- Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000 (10th anniversary revised edition), 2013 – or anything by this brilliant scholar of Late Antiquity
- Jas Elsner, Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph, Oxford and New York, 1998
- Andre Grabar, The Beginnings of Christian Art, 200-395 ([Arts of Mankind](#) series; 9), London, 1967
- Richard Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, 1965, 2nd ed. 1981
- H.P. L'Orange, Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire, Princeton, 1967
- John Lowden, Early Christian & Byzantine Art, London, 1997