

Early Christian Art and Architecture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Early Christian art and architecture has a relationship with Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire. This lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

Early Christian art reflects its close ties to Judaism, and its architecture reflects the need for secrecy.

1. Time Period and Location: Early Christian Art and Architecture

In this lesson you will explore the following two periods of time:

- The historical lifespan of Jesus Christ
- Early Christianity

The historical lifespan of Jesus Christ was an important period. Zero AD is commonly associated with the birth of Christ; however, 0 AD marks a single moment in time and was either a best estimate or a miscalculation. Depending on the Gospel in the Bible, the birth of Christ actually falls within a range from 4 BC, which corresponds to the death of Herod the Great, to 6 AD, which corresponds to the census of Quirinius, who was the Roman head of Syria.

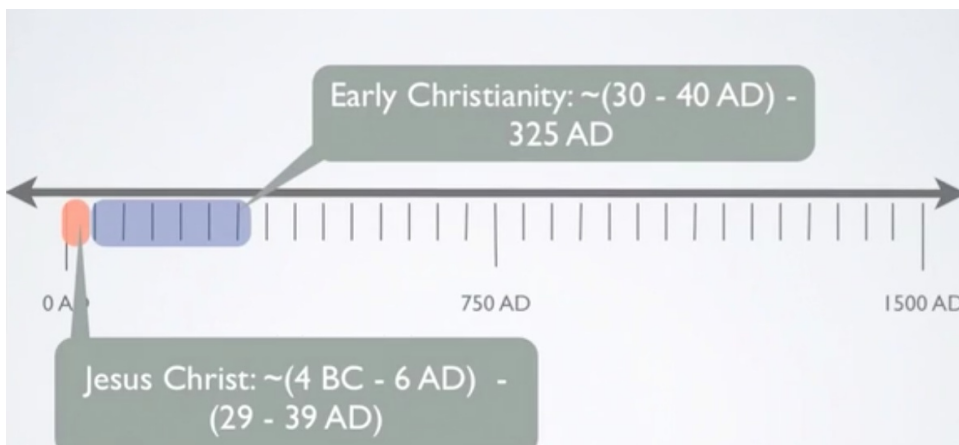


DID YOU KNOW

The reason the census comes into play is that it is often the reason given for Joseph and Mary, who are the parents of Jesus, to be traveling to Joseph's homeland of Bethlehem from their new home of Nazareth.

The second time period covered in this lesson is referred to as early Christianity, and it ranges from sometime after Jesus' historical death to the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD, when Christian leaders got together under the Emperor Constantine and made the first group effort to organize Christianity into a formal religion.

The timeline below highlights the two periods covered in this lesson.



The origins of Christianity are in the Middle East, within and around the modern-day borders of Israel. This region is considered extremely important to the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Due to its religious and historical significance, it has been fought over since antiquity, and the borders have changed countless times.

The map below shows the region covered in this lesson.



On the above map, modern-day Israel is shown in red. To the east is the modern-day country of Jordan. The ancient and biblical cities of Jericho, which is not pictured, and Bethlehem, the city of Jesus' birth and ancestral home to his father, Joseph, are located in an area called the West Bank. This area is the present-day home of the largest population of Palestinian Arabs. Nazareth in northern Israel is where Jesus was thought to have grown up. Jerusalem is very important in the history of all three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). For Christians, Jerusalem is of particular importance because of its association with the crucifixion of Jesus.

2. Early Christianity

The Christian movement began with the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. “Christian” means “relating to Christ.” As influential as the figure of Christ is historically and religiously, his ministry only lasted around three years according to the Gospels, which are the scriptural accounts of his life and comprise part of the New Testament in the Christian Bible.



THINK ABOUT IT

Jesus was eventually executed by the Romans when he was around the age of 33. Christianity really began as a movement well after his death. It’s important to note that Jesus himself was Jewish, not Christian.

The spread of Christianity wasn’t only due to one individual, however, but is largely credited to one of his apostles, named Paul. Eventually, the Christian movement spread outside of the Middle East. It took hold in many places within the Roman Empire, including Rome itself.



DID YOU KNOW

Remember, Christianity at this time wasn’t a formal religion. In fact, there were many Christian sects, and it was considered more of a Jewish cult at this time.

Eventually the Roman government took notice of these Christians, and the Roman persecution of them began during the first century AD. It didn’t officially end until the fourth century AD, but tolerance for Christians was beginning to show as early as the second century AD.

Christianity has close ties to ancient Rome and Judaism. The Christian religion even became the official religion of Rome during the fourth century AD, thanks in large part to the Emperor Constantine. However, until this time, being a Christian was a risky proposition. Due to this, early Christian architecture that predates the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire can be seen to reflect this need for secrecy.

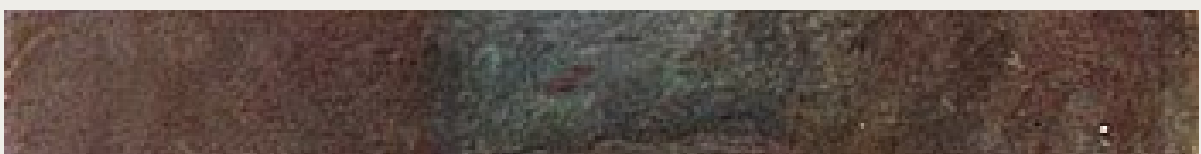
3. Catacombs

Catacombs are essentially subterranean cemeteries. The rooms, or **cubicula**, were set off of the major hallways. The bodies of the dead were placed within these rooms.

IN CONTEXT

The use of catacombs to bury the dead isn’t unique to Christians. The catacombs of Rome were constructed in large part by necessity. Land within the city was in short supply. The secrecy of the location of catacombs allowed the early Christians a place to worship safely, as they were sacred ground and the Romans usually refrained from persecuting Christians there.

Here is an image of an artist’s depiction of what the catacombs looked like.





A Procession in the Catacomb of Callixtus by Alberto Pisa

1905

Painting

The Christian catacombs in Rome originated in the second century AD. Because they weren't buried in the traditional sense of the word, exposed human remains were not uncommon.

Here is a picture of the catacombs as they actually are, lit up with a floodlight. This is from the second century AD. Notice the exposed human remains.



Christian Catacombs

2nd century AD

Rome, Italy

This last image, below, shows the use of wall space as a place to create important religious imagery, typically inspired by stories from the sacred texts associated with Christianity.



Christian Catacombs
2nd-3rd centuries AD
Rome, Italy



DID YOU KNOW

There wasn't an official split from Judaism until the fourth century. Even though the rift between Christianity and Judaism was widening, early Christians still borrowed traditions and religious history from Judaism. The first five books of the Christian Old Testament are still equivalent to the Torah of Judaism.



TERMS TO KNOW

Catacombs

An underground cemetery with tunnels and rooms with burial chambers

Cubicula

Burial chambers in a catacomb

4. Synagogue at Dura-Europos

Dura-Europos was a Roman city located in modern-day Syria. Interestingly, this city was apparently rather

tolerant of practicing Christians and Jews, given that there are above-ground examples of an early **synagogue**, as well as the earliest known example of a Christian house-church. While these two structures were not physically connected, they are positioned rather close to each other in the city.



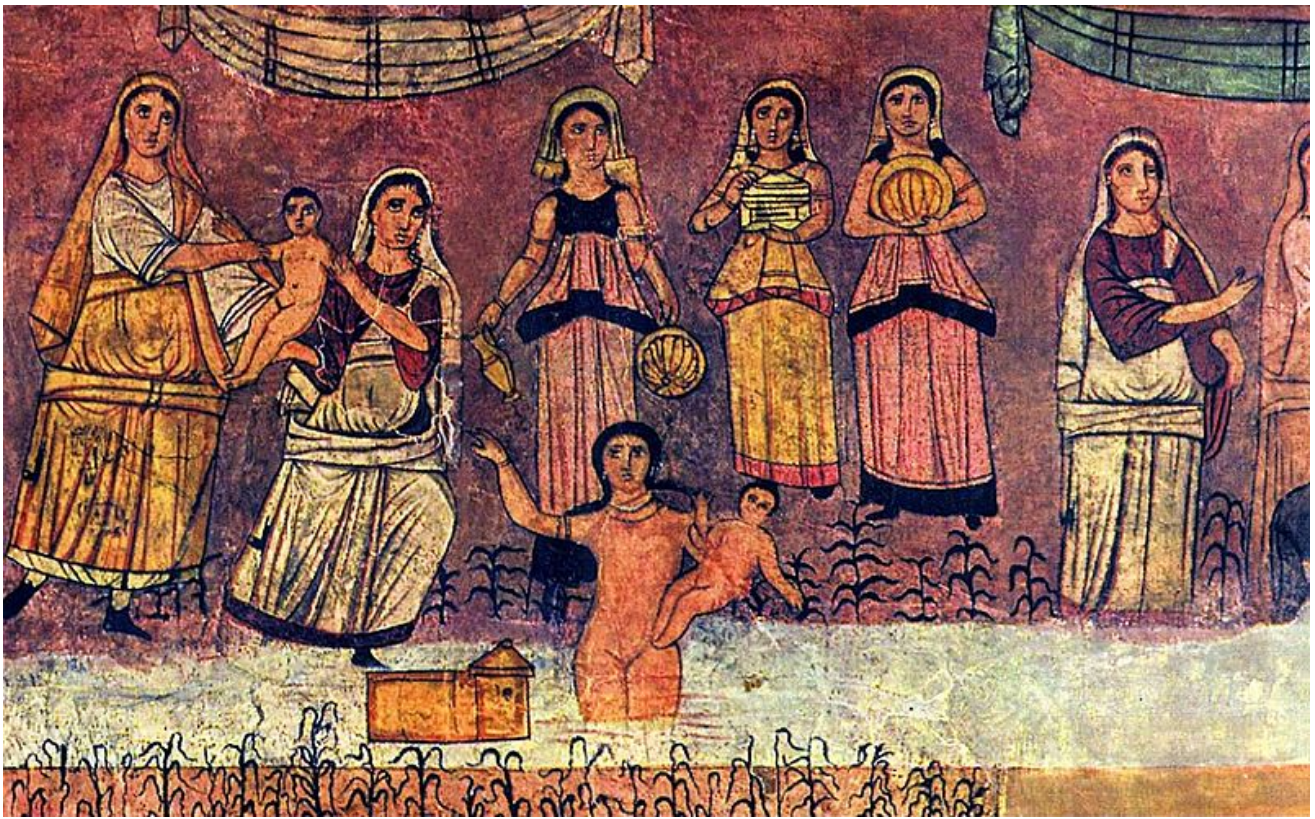
Synagogue at Duras-Europos

3rd century AD

Syria

The images on the walls of the synagogue are notable for their similarity to the Christian imagery that can be found on the catacombs under the city of Rome. Both sets of imagery depict important scenes or stories from the Tanakh, or Jewish Bible.

The first image from the synagogue, pictured below, is of the baby Moses being picked out of the river in Egypt.



Moses Found in the River from the synagogue at Dura-Europos

3rd century AD

Syria

This next image is of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea to escape the army of the Pharaoh Ramses II.



Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea from the synagogue at Dura-Europos

3rd century AD

Syria



DID YOU KNOW

The **orant figure** is a figure of a person that is gesticulating in a particular way. It's the traditional gesture of prayer, where the elbows are close to the body and the arms are sort of outstretched. Below is an example of Noah in the pose of an orant figure.





Noah praying in the Ark from a Roman catacomb

3rd century AD

Rome, Italy



TERMS TO KNOW

Synagogue

A Jewish house of worship

Orant Figures

Image of a person in the early Christian position of prayer, with arms outstretched



SUMMARY

Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire all had an impact on early Christian art and architecture. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of early Christian art and architecture**.

Early Christianity began with the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, and while his ministry only lasted around three years, according to the Gospels, Christianity really began as a movement

after Jesus' death.

Finally, you learned about **catacombs** and the **Synagogue at Dura-Europos**. Catacombs, or subterranean cemeteries, were used to bury the dead, but also were used as secret locations for early Christians to worship safely. The Synagogue at Dura-Europos was a Jewish house of worship located within the city of Dura-Europos, a Roman city located in modern-day Syria.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Catacombs

An underground cemetery with tunnels and rooms with burial chambers.

Cubicula

Burial chambers in a catacomb.

Orant figures

Image of a person in the early Christian position of prayer, with arms outstretched.

Synagogue

A Jewish house of worship.