INTRODUCTION TO ART HISTORY I



Cerise Myers, Ellen C. Caldwell, Alice J. Taylor, Margaret Phelps & Lisa Soccio

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Cover Photograph: View of sphinxes, the first pylon, and the central east-west aisle of Temple of Amun-Re, Karnak at Luxor, Egypt. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Introduction to Art History I

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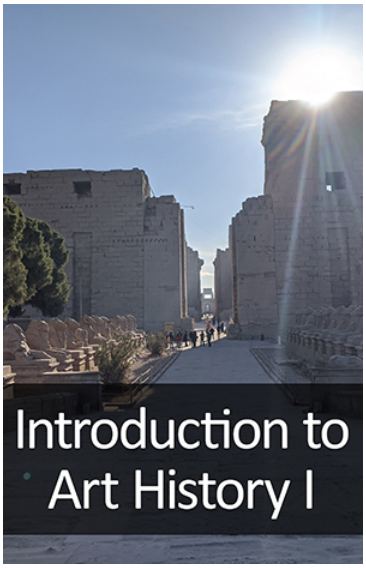
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Textbook Introduction

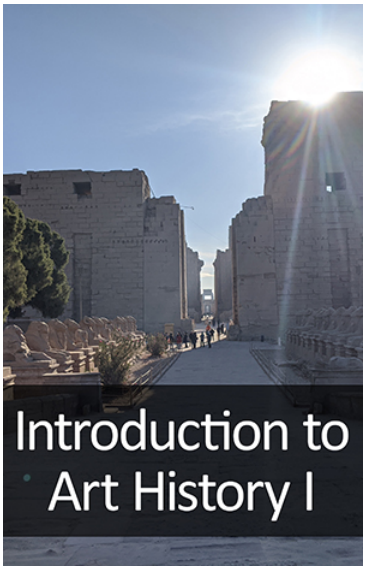
In This Chapter

1.0: Welcome
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1.0: Welcome

Welcome



This text is a labor of love, a work in progress, and a team effort—in which you are now an integral part as a reader. We want all of our students to have access to a high-quality textbook, full of accurate information and rich images, comparable to some of the most expensive textbooks, but without the high price tag.

If you are using this text, you are likely taking a course such as “Art History I” or “Survey of Western Art History,” also known as Art History 110 in the C-ID system, which is a collaboration between the California Community Colleges, California State Universities, and Universities of California to help students transfer seamlessly between the three systems of public higher education in California. This textbook stems from a collaboration between California Community College art history faculty, using Open Educational Resources (OERs) written by art historians for such organizations as SmartHistory and Boundless Art History. Other materials, including photographs and videos, come from museums and scholars around the world.

Although our main goal has been to help students succeed by providing a free online or low-cost print textbook, editing this book also gives us the opportunity to correct what we see as a problem in the textbooks used in the introductory art history survey courses that we each took as undergraduates (somewhere between 1972 and 2002). These textbooks (in their current editions) are still the standards today, and belong to a tradition in art history that appears to place Italy in the center of the art world. Lots of great developments happened in Italy, but this is not an accurate or equitable way of presenting the cultures included in a survey of art history from the earliest art through medieval art.

In addition to seeking examples from a broader geographical range and situating cultures in new milieus, we have also included comparisons to distant cultures in order to encourage critical thinking and make global connections.

Survey of Western Art History

As we mentioned above, you are likely using this text for a class called something like “Survey of Western Art History.” Titles and terms like this could use some explaining, so we will take a closer look at each of these three elements, one at a time, below: survey, art history, and Western.

Survey

First of all, the word survey is an indication that the course content is just an overview, barely scratching the surface. Entire books can be written—and often have been!—about the material covered in just one paragraph of a typical survey text. Whole courses are dedicated to material addressed in just one section of a single chapter in this textbook. Our purpose here is not to dig deeply (although we do hope some of you might be inspired to dig deeper and take more art history courses), but rather to provide an overview of art from a huge swath of history and geography.

That necessarily means limiting the cultures, objects, and themes we are able to discuss. We simply cannot cover all art, from all people, cultures, and regions during this huge span of time. Instead, we will focus on highlighting points of cultural contact and resulting artistic influences; different cultural beliefs attached to particular artistic content and production; and varied cultural uses of and investment in object types and media.

In such a large survey, chronology is also an issue to think about. Traditionally, art history surveys are usually taught in chronological order, much as this book is laid out, covering art from the Stone Age to medieval art. Sometimes this is not possible, as major cultures are contemporary to one another, like ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. However, this can be limiting, particularly in thinking of the earliest art and in making global comparisons. Sometimes we will explore art in a less linear fashion in order to encourage critical thinking outside of the confines of chronology.

Art History

You are probably familiar with the meaning of the individual words “art” and “history.” Together, though, they refer to an academic discipline that usually is first offered at the college level. It is the study of objects and structures made by humans, and what those artifacts can teach us about the cultures, beliefs, and stories of the people and groups that made them. Art historians study the people who made these objects, in addition to considering when, how (with what materials or techniques), and why they made them. They also look for patterns across time, place, cultures, and regions to identify and understand particular historical periods.

Art history as a discipline is where it is today because of developments that occurred *after* the period this course covers.

Some of these foundational events include:

- The birth of art history as a field with the publication of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, written in 1550. As the title implies, Vasari thought of the arts as a contest in which the very best artists would prove their superiority. He ranked Tuscan art as the very best (is it surprising to learn that he was Tuscan?). Remember how we mentioned that Italy appears to be the center of the art world in most traditional art historical texts? Vasari’s book helped make this so, while also launching a long line of Eurocentric art historians. His attitude towards art from other areas is indicated by his labeling German architects as “Goths.”
- Powerful people collected art and often let others see their collections so that they could admire both the art and the owner’s taste. Collectors in Italy had the advantage of living amidst the ruins of the Roman Empire. In this sense, ownership of art was a mark of prestige.
- The establishment of monetary value for art—not just for the materials used—led to the establishment of the art market, centering on the various courts of Europe. Art historians have often prized the Paris art market—first in the courts of the king and nobility, and then in the more open, public market consisting of shops, art academies, and exhibitions.
- As art, and knowledge of art, gained prestige, socially and intellectually ambitious people traveled all over Europe to experience works of art and architecture. Many rich Europeans did not consider a man’s education complete until he took a trip to Europe termed “the Grand Tour.” Women were much less likely to undertake the Tour. From English lords to Russian princes, wealthy “tourists” made months-long journeys that had to include many places in Italy (Florence, Rome, and Naples), as well as Paris, France. There, they often bought art to take home.
- Eventually, many of the private collections that the tourists visited became museums, and rulers established museums which they then filled with the best ancient Roman, Italian, and French art they could access.

These are only some of the factors that reinforced the idea that the best art came from Italy and France, and it lingers in what is called “the art historical canon”—a list of the art that is most worthy of our attention and study. Other distinctions and labels in regards to the type of artistic production also remain tied to the notion of the traditional art historical canon. In this text, we will question and critique the canon, considering the following kinds of questions: What kind of art is included in art history? Why was archaeology traditionally separated from art history and how can we include archaeological and architectural sites in the context of art history now? Why is painting or sculpture often considered “fine art” while a painted ceramic plate or weaving might be termed “craft” or “material culture”? Does the utilitarian purpose of art set limitations on whether it can be considered “art” or “craft”?

Many of these kinds of distinctions were determined by Eurocentric art historians who privileged certain types of artistic production and media over others, often reinforcing false divisions based on *who* was producing the work rather than the skill of the artists or the aesthetics of the art itself. Have you noticed that a lot of art made by women and artists outside of Europe, such as basketry, textiles, needlepoint, and ceramics, might be termed “craft” while an oil painting or sculpture is considered “fine art”? We want to level the playing field in how we approach and appreciate global artistic production, no matter the medium, artist’s identity, artist’s origin, nor the original use of the art.

Now, thankfully, art historians have expanded the canon beyond what Vasari pioneered. And there is still much work to do! In compiling this textbook, our team has two major goals:

1. Maintain all of the cultures that are required for the course.
2. Shift the way these cultures are presented to better account for their global context in the world.

As a guiding principle, we seek to present major cultures and artworks in their broader contexts. For example:

- The major commercial textbooks deal with Paleolithic art as if the only remaining traces are found in France and Spain. However, Paleolithic people around the globe made art. As such, we have included Paleolithic art found in South Africa, Namibia, and Algeria as well.
- Alexander the Great's conquests impacted not just the Greco-Roman world; and so we look at the impact of his conquests on the art of Gandhara, Afghanistan, and Egypt.



Figure **1.0.1**: Stuart McArthur, McArthur's Universal Corrective Map of the World, 1979. (Photo: TAKA@P.P.R.S, CC BY-SA 2.0) Why is this map "upside down"?

"Western"

This naturally brings us to tackling that tricky word in the middle of the course title Survey of Western Art History: Western. This word is the most challenging and problematic one. It is both relative (west of where?) and subjective (who determines what fits that label?). Traditionally, "Survey of Western Art History" classes have included art from Western Europe; the so-called "Near East" (Mesopotamia, Syria, Israel, etc.—which is given this name to distinguish it from the next general region); the so-called "Far East" (China, Korea, Japan, etc.); North America (excluding Native American art); and Egypt (but not the rest of Africa).

In other words, even though you might assume from the label that it has something to do with geography, it does not. "Western" here does not mean art from the western hemisphere (i.e., the Americas). It means the opposite of East, indicating an understanding of the world in which Europe, and later, some of its colonies, is the West; all of Asia is the East; and Africa and the Americas, with the exception of the U.S. and Canada, are the South. It is a particularly Eurocentric way of separating the world. The art historical tradition we have inherited was largely shaped by white, European, men, and that is a model that still persists.

Egypt, which is in Africa, and Mesopotamia, which is in Asia, are included in "Western" art history because of their importance to the traditions of Western Europe. Considering the list of cultures required in Art History 110, it would be easy to conclude that since the rise of the Roman Empire, the West has consisted basically of only Italy and France. We hope to help you see the flaws in this line of thinking, by highlighting broader global connections and problematizing such a relative and Eurocentric term as "Western"—all while still teaching this very "Western" survey! McArthur's Universal Corrective Map of the World, shown above, in which north is shown toward the bottom of the page and south toward the top, helps illustrate just how arbitrary—and pervasive—a "Western" framing can be.

This textbook

Because of all of the terms and problems cited above, our survey text is a little bit different. In addition to being free and online, its intent is more inclusive. It is still only scratching the surface, and we *will* still include those traditionally-covered regions and objects, from the Paleolithic through the Gothic periods, but we are trying to give a broader, more accurate perspective of the ways techniques, objects, and ideas traveled and influenced each other.

Art history has inherited a lot of traditions, some of which we will continue to point out, question, and critique as we go. Our goal is to help you gain a broad understanding of this material, while also equipping you to think carefully and critically about what you read and see—not just in this textbook, but in the rest of your college career and post-college life.

With this book, we aim to:

- Equip you with a high quality, accessible textbook that challenges all of us to think outside of the standard art historical text

- Encourage and nurture critical thinking, questioning, and expansive thinking about the function and relevance of artifacts and artistic production
- Acknowledge and explore the historiography of art history (the writing of art history or the study of art historical writing), with the hopes of offering you the tools needed to think critically about how we got where we are in the field and how to approach the discipline moving forward
- Make choices that move outside the notion of a fully representational, static, and one-dimensional art historical canon, by embracing other ideas on how to engage with or evaluate the relevance and resonance of an art object
- Reframe and encourage questioning of traditional art historical narratives not only by acknowledging their flaws, but also by embracing alternative narratives that illustrate a broader, more accurate and inclusive story of art history

Keeping your eyes open is what art history is all about. We hope that by the time you complete your course, you will be able to tell Paleolithic from Neolithic, Romanesque from Gothic, and lots more in between, but what we *really* want for you is to be a great thinker and observer—to take the time to look carefully at a work of art, to identify its formal elements, and to think about the context of its creation.

We live in a highly visual society; low estimates suggest that the average person sees about 5,000 advertisements a day! We hope to encourage you to approach all of the imagery you see in your life in a thoughtful and inquisitive manner, taking your newly cultivated skills in critical thinking and analysis into the rest of your life.

The world is a huge, strange, wonderful, and endlessly fascinating place. As we travel through the art world with this text, we hope that you will find yourself inspired to travel and experience art, physically and virtually as well.

Welcome again, readers; we are glad to have you here.

—Cerise Myers, *Textbook Project Lead and Assistant Professor of Art History at Imperial Valley College, PhD in Contemporary Art History*

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1.1: Using This Textbook

About this Book

This textbook curates the scholarship of museums and online resources like Smarthistory into a single, cohesive, easily usable, accessible, and infinitely remixable virtual "textbook" that fulfills the requirements of a traditional "Survey of Western Art I" course. At the same time, it strives to embody a more global and less Eurocentric approach to art history, including emphasizing new findings in the field and broader academic and social concerns. This textbook was specifically designed to meet the requirements established by C-ID ARTH 110, "Survey of Western Art from Prehistory Through the Middle Ages," but it is the editors' hope that it will be equally useful in any similar Survey courses, as well as Art Appreciation classes.

Structure and layout

Like most survey texts, this one is laid out mostly chronologically, with the majority of the chapters dedicated to single geographical regions/cultures. An exception comes in the Medieval chapters, which have been reconfigured from the traditional structure—one codified in the C-ID descriptor for ARTH 110—that tends to privilege exclusively European objects and themes. Instead, three extensive chapters place the art of Byzantium and the Islamic world side by side with concurrent developments in Western Europe in an attempt at a more balanced, accurate representation of the global Middle Ages.

Each chapter begins with an introduction to draw in the reader and present themes the chapter will address. This is followed by a section called "Historiography (Writing History)," which invites students to look critically at the way these histories have been told and how they have been shaped—whether by accessibility to certain objects and sites; incomplete or limited knowledge of culture, language, and/or science; and/or by individual or national politics, prevailing discourses and ideologies. They also often address information about terminology contained within the chapter. These sections are followed by a brief "Chapter Overview" that serves as the glue binding together the articles, themes, and histories covered in the upcoming chapter, as well as providing relevant historical context and important notes about the time period, regions, and cultures discussed. Within this section, an "Objects Overview" gives a bulleted list of some of the traditional and unexpected works of art and architecture explored in the chapter. The section concludes with a list of targeted learning objectives and a list of optional resources for diving deeper into the material introduced in each chapter. A comprehensive glossary is provided both as a stand-alone section and as an in-text reference tool for those reading online. Finally, throughout the chapters, we wrote original sidebars called "Global Connections" to draw readers' attention to areas of overlap and exchange within the wider global context, expanding the conversation.

Our story

The first iteration of this textbook was compiled by Cerise Myers,* and a grant from the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges' Open Educational Resources Initiative (ASCCC OERI) allowed for the assembly of a team to transform it into a more complete, diverse, and cohesive product. Our team of five art historians represents five California campuses, including College of the Desert, Imperial Valley College, West Los Angeles College, Mt. San Antonio College, and Ventura College. Together, we have decades of experience teaching face-to-face and online; we have used all of the major publisher textbooks; and we bring a variety of different specialties in art history, ranging from medieval to contemporary West African. We range from full-time professors to multi-college adjuncts, and through this collaboration—a passion project for each of us—we have devoted our skills and diverse perspectives to provide a resource that eliminates the barriers, monetary and otherwise, that have for too long stood between our students and access to high quality art history textbooks.

We are grateful to the ASCCC-OERI for their support of OERs and California Community College (CCC) students and faculty. We particularly thank Shagun Kaur and Selena Silva at the ASCCC-OERI and Delmar Larsen and Josh Halpern at LibreTexts for their ongoing insight and support. We also thank Smarthistory, Boundless Art History, and Khan Academy for the treasure trove of openly-licensed academic articles. Museums such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Getty Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have also provided generous permissions to images and/or content.

*Because of her foundational work on this text, several of her transcripts for student videos and background research help form the basis for our chapter introductions as well.

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With this textbook, we have aimed to provide a resource for students and instructors that is not only of the utmost quality, and entirely free to read online, but that can be customized to instructors' preferences. We have carefully pursued images and text that are both of the highest scholarly caliber and licensed for sharing. Most of this material is licensed under Creative Commons (CC) licenses, and we have indicated where permissions were granted specifically for this project. If you believe an image or text has been used or cited incorrectly, please reach out so that we can remedy the error immediately.

Because this is primarily a curated resource, we recommend that references to individual articles be cited using the particular article's author, either as is included in our text (i.e., "Glass, Robert. 'What is Art History and Where is it Going?' *Introduction to Art History I*, edited by Myers, et al. LibreTexts Libraries, 2022" or directly to the original source, following the article link at the bottom of each chapter page. To cite the textbook as a whole, we recommend "Myers, Cerise; Caldwell, Ellen C.; Phelps, Margaret; Soccio, Lisa; and Taylor, Alice, editors. *Introduction to Art History I* (2022). LibreTexts Libraries. (CC BY-NC-SA)"

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At the top of each **chapter page** is a box that shows that chapter's subsections along with the content covered in each. Each **subsection page** has its own Table of Contents in the upper right corner. This Table of Contents can be expanded or collapsed by clicking the plus (+) or minus (-) signs, respectively. Finally, a trail of digital "breadcrumbs" in the light blue ribbon near the top of the page (which can be expanded using the three dots or collapsed using the up arrow/caret [^]) allows for quick navigation to the parent subsection, chapter, and textbook home page.

Accessing Recommended Articles and Videos

Among the material included in each chapter are optional and recommended resources, including digital videos, interactive online materials, and additional readings. Occasionally, with media sites such as *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, readers might hit a paywall if they have already exceeded their allotted number of monthly complimentary articles. In this case, we encourage readers to check with their school or local libraries for access. Very occasionally, we recommend books/ebooks or academic journal articles that we think are important, timely, and of interest, but may not be immediately freely available online. Readers may check with their libraries, including interlibrary loan, to access those resources—and we have provided stable URLs to make searching for these resources more efficient.

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1.2: Information for Instructors

We have worked hard to write and curate a text that will work for you, whether straight off the shelf or customized as much as you would like. In many cases, we have provided more articles in a given chapter than instructors might normally assign. We did so in order to give you more quality content to choose from, but it is yours to customize as you see fit; please use what makes sense for you.

Chapter Notes

In chapters such as Chapter 4: Art of the Ancient Americas, we have included information that might not typically be covered in this survey, but that is important to our students and our state's history—and does appear in some Course Outlines of Record, or CORs. In Chapter 5: Art of the Stone Age, we purposely expanded the regions covered to discuss the importance of some of the earliest Stone Age discoveries in Africa and Indonesia. Chapters focusing on a particularly extensive history, such as 7: Ancient Egypt, or 11: The Roman Empire, are quite long, and we encourage you to pick and choose the articles that make sense to you, your teaching, and your students.

Finally, in chapters such as the three Medieval chapters (13-15), we have taken a less traditional, and more nuanced approach to address not just northern and western Europe, but also concurrent developments and exchanges to the south and east. Traditional art history surveys often separate out the art of Byzantium and Islam, but we have included them with their European neighbors in chronological chapters.

The table below demonstrates the C-ID equivalencies for all of our chapters, and a smaller, more detailed table in Chapter 13 outlines the specific content covered in the Medieval chapters.

Aligning with the C-ID

There are multiple ways to align with the C-ID and individual CORs, and instructors do not have to teach or assign everything in this textbook in order to meet those criteria. The following table shows our chapter titles and order of the book, which we have attempted to structure as effectively as possible to address the assigned content and expand worldviews.

Chapter equivalencies and alignment to the C-ID

Our Chapters	C-ID Alignment
1. Textbook Introduction	N/A
2. Intro to Art History & Art Historical Analysis	Objectives 1 and 2
3. Visual Elements & Principles of Composition	Objectives 1 and 2
4. Art of Ancient Americas	Objectives 1-3
5. Art of the Stone Age	1. Prehistoric
6. The Ancient Near East	2. Mesopotamian
7. Ancient Egypt	3. Egyptian
8. The Ancient Aegean	4. Aegean
9. Ancient Greece	5. Greek through Hellenistic
10. The Etruscans	6. Etruscan
11. The Roman Empire	7. Roman
12. Late Antiquity and the “Barbarian” West	8. Early Christian
13. Medieval I: Reorganization of the Roman World and the Birth of Islam (Early Byzantium, Migration Period, Arts of the Early Islamic World, Carolingian Art)	9. Byzantine; 10. Islamic; and 11. Early Medieval, including Carolingian and Ottonian
14. Medieval II: Contested Empires (Medieval Islam Before the Mongols, The Latin West, Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest)	9. Byzantine; 10. Islamic; 11. Early Medieval, including Carolingian and Ottonian; and 12. Romanesque
15. Medieval III: Reorganization of the East (Ilkhanid, Timurid, Mamluk, Late Byzantine, Christian East Africa)	9. Byzantine and 10. Islamic
16. Gothic and Conclusion	13. Gothic

About the Editors & Contact Information

Thank you sincerely for your interest in and adoption of this textbook. Please feel free to reach out, engage, ask content questions, or provide feedback. In particular, we would love to hear about the experiences of instructors and students using this textbook. Thank you again!

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Introduction to Art History and Art Historical Analysis

In This Chapter

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2.1: What is art history and where is it going?
2.2: Art History and World Art History
2.3: Introduction to art historical analysis

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2.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Dogon Figure and the In-Between

In the summer of 2021, the San Diego Museum of Art opened a new exhibition that starred a single object. In the center of a small gallery with its walls painted a velvety midnight blue, the wooden sculpture, protected by a clear plexiglass case, seemed to glow under the dramatic overhead lighting. Visitors spoke in whispers, intensifying the chapel-like sense of the space. And if the presentation lent the artwork a sense of mystery, the wall label did little to dispel it: the sculpture was simply titled "Standing figure holding object above head," a wooden carving by the Dogon peoples of Mali, Africa.



Figure **2.0.1**: Standing Figure Holding Object Above Head, Wood, 19th century; The San Diego Museum of Art: Gift of Valerie Franklin. www.sdmart.org. (Photo: San Diego Museum of Art, used by permission)

The figure has an elongated wooden torso; slightly-bent, similarly tubular legs; and a right arm that stretches bonelessly up to steady an object balanced atop his head. His abstracted features include a pointy beard and prominent male genitalia, but pronounced breasts add what Guest Curator Dr. Denise Rogers calls "a female element to the overall male characteristics in the figure." She adds that Dogon sculpture often visually references intersex qualities associated with *Nommo*, who, according to the museum's Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art, Dr. Ladan Akbarnia, are "eight sacred primordial ancestors of humankind." In the Dogon foundation story, she explains, one of these eight is a blacksmith, who, by stealing fire from the supreme creator, Amma, and bringing it to earth, is the source of all life here. Akbarnia writes that in Dogon culture, "Blacksmiths are revered for their power to use and transform earth, fire, and water. Their expertise in these materials enables them to produce everyday as well as ritual objects, and to oversee ritual ceremonies." These ritual objects they create are not separate from those ceremonies, nor are they simply aesthetic objects for display. As manifestations of sacred spirits, with the ability to act as what Rogers calls "a conduit between the heavenly and earthly realms," they contain immense power and are treated accordingly.

As the museum label makes clear, this figure's specific identity and purpose is unconfirmed, although Akbarnia points out that the lines carved into its torso "recall geometric patterns in scars adorning male and female Dogon sculptures" and that "raised arms are believed to channel prayer." It is unclear what the figure holds above his head; it resembles a drum or stool, but has not been definitively identified. Unlike the majority of objects in the museum's collection, which predominantly features European and American art, the sculpture's label lacks either an artist or a specific date. It was created across the globe in present-day Mali, where the Dogon "have maintained their heritage, religious traditions, and diverse languages over time," as Akbarnia puts it. However, she continues, Dogon culture "also embodies the syncretism of coexistence with and conversion to other faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, the predominant religion of Mali. (Learn more about the Islamic Great Mosque of Djenné.)

The presentation of this Dogon sculpture also introduces complex discussions around museum display practices and context, particularly in regards to African art. Historically, museums have not always labeled art from Africa correctly, nor fully. Sometimes this has to do with the provenance of the item, and a lack of information or documentation about the art before it arrived at the

museum—and it gets even more complicated if the object was originally looted, stolen, or came to the museum illegally. Other times, art has not always been researched as fully as possible before being displayed at a museum. And although this can happen with art from anywhere, there has been a problematic history of African art's being labeled as an "unknown" or by an "unknown" artist, when the artist's name or more information about the artwork could have been found. (Read Elizabeth Bigham's fascinating article about how Malian photographer Seydou Keïta was first labeled as "unknown" in a blockbuster New York show, even though his work was immediately recognizable and famous in Bamako, Mali.)

In the case of the Dogon figure, there might be living Dogon artists and people who could help to answer questions about the sculpture's identity, what the figure is holding, and more. Finally, art from outside of Europe and America is often displayed with an air of mystery in dimly lit rooms, and fully decontextualized. Context is important to all art, but it is particularly important when the objects being presented have a deeper meaning and function than aesthetic value. For instance, this Bundu/Sowei Helmet Mask would normally be worn and danced only by women, with specific music and dress to accompany it, but now hangs in a display case against the white walls of the museum, without music, function, or a person to dance it. Recently, more art historians are turning to oral history and interviews to help inform current scholarship and provide more context, while local art historians with knowledge of art from where they are from are also contributing to the field.

In all of these ways, the Dogon figure at the San Diego Museum of Art straddles locations, definitions, and even metaphysical realms, while also reminding viewers of important display practices, context, and cultural considerations. It is a physical object, yet was designed to connect to the spiritual. It is on display in an art museum as a visually appealing and intriguing sculpture, but was crafted for ritual use from which it is now separated. It is an example of the increasing globalism and multiculturalism of contemporary society—and of the challenges that continue to persist in encountering, understanding, displaying, and writing about art. As Chapter 1 suggests, and as Dr. Robert Glass further illuminates later in this chapter, art history is not straightforward. It is fundamentally about narratives, or stories—and stories have story-tellers. These stories may be incomplete, uninformed, biased, self-serving, and they may change as new information and perspectives come to light. Art historians study objects, made of and with physical material, yet imbued by their creators and viewers with deeper purpose. These objects travel, change, and take on different meanings across cultures and times. These considerations, when applied to the Dogon figure, for example, illuminate the challenges of the study of art history, as well as the value in exploring them.

Historiography (Writing History)

Because of such changing stories and understandings of history, the process of studying and examining the writing of history can never be as objective or as accurate as one might wish. Historiography refers to the writing of history, that is, how we tell stories about the past. This textbook's introduction emphasized the importance of including the historiography of art history in every chapter of this text.

Although it might seem like a complex word, historiography involves understanding why and how history—and art history—has been written, in order to better recognize constraints and cultural biases that might be present in our historical narratives. Sometimes these can be hard to see or decipher. By including these sections on historiography, this textbook aims to highlight and name some of the issues, discrepancies, and biases seen in art historical accounts of history.

Art Historical Periods and Naming

One of the things that art historians do, and a skill that you as a student of art history will practice, is identifying works of art—by title (or the name scholars have given it), medium (what it is made out of), date of creation, and art historical period. The chapters in this textbook are divided broadly by time and/or region, but within each are specific historical periods. Each chapter introduction points out when there are specific notes, issues, or discrepancies with naming that need to be highlighted.

One naming convention that you will see in this chapter, which pops up in the article "Art History & World Art History," is the idea of "Western" vs. "non-Western" art. As Chapter 1 highlighted, and as the article in this chapter reinforces, the idea of distinguishing and dividing two identities by pitting them against one another as "Western" and "non-Western" is already problematic. It is always preferable, when referring to art, to be as specific as possible in naming the culture or region precisely, rather than labeling vaguely or in terms of what it is *not*.

Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the discipline of art history and considers what art historians do, what is defined as art (or what is included in and excluded from the art historical canon), and how those ideas have changed over time. It acknowledges the subjectivity inherent in the discipline and considers the challenges of moving from a Eurocentric view of what is worth studying to one that is more global and inclusive. Finally, it addresses ways of approaching art: as a physical object (that may change over time), as a visual experience, and as a record of and window into a particular culture and time.

By the time you finish reading this chapter introducing art history and art historical analysis, you should be able to:

- Define “art” and “artifact”
- Discuss what art history is and the questions art historians ask
- Identify challenges specific to the discipline of art history
- Explain the value (and difficulty) of creating a more globally-oriented introduction to art history
- Describe different types of art historical analysis

Want to know more?

- The Art Assignment, “Why You Don’t Like Art History” [video]
- Ted-Ed, “How Art Can Help You Analyze” [video]
- Dr. Elizabeth Rodini, “A Brief History of the Art Museum”
- Dr. Jordana Moore Saggesei, "Identity Politics: From the Margins to the Mainstream"
- SFMoMA, “Fred Wilson’s Museum Interventions” [video]
- Inside Higher Ed, “Apology From Obama”
- Smarthistory, "The Reception of African Art in the West"

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2.1: What is art history and where is it going?

What is art history and where is it going?

by Dr. Robert Glass

Art history might seem like a relatively straightforward concept: “art” and “history” are subjects most of us first studied in elementary school. In practice, however, the idea of “the history of art” raises complex questions. What exactly do we mean by art, and what kind of history (or histories) should we explore? Let’s consider each term further.

Art versus artifact

The word “art” is derived from the Latin *ars*, which originally meant “skill” or “craft.” These meanings are still primary in other English words derived from *ars*, such as “artifact” (a thing made by human skill) and “artisan” (a person skilled at making things). The meanings of “art” and “artist,” however, are not so straightforward. We understand art as involving more than just skilled craftsmanship. What exactly distinguishes a work of art from an artifact, or an artist from an artisan?



Figure **2.1.1**: Peter Paul Rubens, three paintings from the 24-picture cycle Rubens painted for the Medici Gallery in the Luxembourg Palace, Paris (today in the Musée du Louvre, Paris), 1621-25. Oil on canvas. From left to right: *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de’ Medici*, *The Wedding by Proxy of Marie de’ Medici to King Henry IV*, *Arrival (or Disembarkation) of Marie de’ Medici at Marseilles*. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, via Smarthistory) These oil paintings, with their massive size and incorporation of figures from Greek mythology alongside contemporary historical events—and the fact that they're on display in the Louvre—are easily recognizable as capital-A Art.

When asked this question, students typically come up with several ideas. One is beauty. Much art is visually striking, and in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, the analysis of aesthetic qualities was indeed central in art history. During this time, art that imitated ancient Greek and Roman art (the art of classical antiquity), was considered to embody a timeless perfection. Art historians focused on the so-called fine arts—painting, sculpture, and architecture—analyzing the virtues of their forms. Over the past century and a half, however, both art and art history have evolved radically.

History: Making Sense of the Past

Like definitions of art and beauty, ideas about history have changed over time. It might seem that writing history should be straightforward—it’s all based on facts, isn’t it? In theory, yes, but the evidence surviving from the past is vast, fragmentary, and messy. Historians must make decisions about what to include and exclude, how to organize the material, and what to say about it. In doing so, they create narratives that explain the past in ways that make sense in the present. Inevitably, as the present changes, these narratives are updated, rewritten, or discarded altogether and replaced with new ones. All history, then, is subjective—as much a product of the time and place it was written as of the evidence from the past that it interprets.



Figure **2.1.2**: Left: Lysippos, *Apoxyomenos (Scraper)*, marble Roman copy after a bronze statue from c. 330 BCE. 6′ 9″ tall. Vatican Museums; Right: Kiki Smith, male figure from *Untitled*, 1990. Beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands, 6' 6" tall. (Photos: Whitney Museum of American Art, via Smarthistory) The idealized, god-like sculpture of the *Apoxyomenos*, standing boldly and confidently, contrasts sharply with Kiki's Smith's very human male figure from *Untitled*, an abased form suspended from a metal frame.

The discipline of art history developed in Europe during the colonial period (roughly the 15th to the mid-20th century), . Early art historians emphasized the European tradition, celebrating its Greek and Roman origins and the ideals of academic art. By the mid-20th century, a standard narrative for “Western art” was established that traced its development from the prehistoric, ancient, and medieval Mediterranean to modern Europe and the United States. Art from the rest of the world, labeled “non-Western art,” was typically treated only marginally and from a colonialist perspective.



Figure **2.1.3**: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba), Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, 16th century. Ivory, iron, copper, 23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Intricate sculpture like the Edo Queen Mother Pendant, often created for use in specific ritual context, was frequently displayed as simply an object of curiosity.

The immense sociocultural changes that took place in the 20th century led art historians to amend these narratives. Accounts of Western art that once featured only white males were revised to include artists of color and women. The traditional focus on painting, sculpture, and architecture was expanded to include so-called minor arts such as ceramics and textiles and contemporary media such as video and performance art. Interest in non-Western art increased, accelerating dramatically in recent years.

Today, the biggest social development facing art history is globalism. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, familiarity with different cultures and facility with diversity are essential. Art history, as the story of exceptional artifacts from a broad range of cultures, has a role to play in developing these skills. Now art historians ponder and debate how to reconcile the discipline’s European intellectual origins and its problematic colonialist legacy with contemporary multiculturalism and how to write art history in a global era.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Robert Glass, "What is art history and where is it going?," in *Smarthistory*, October 28, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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2.2: Art History and World Art History

Art history and world art history

adapted from Smarthistory



Figure **2.2.1**: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 11'6" x 25'6". Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid. (Photo via Smarthistory)
Picasso uses abstraction and dramatic diagonals to highlight the chaos and terror of war in this massive, monochromatic painting.

> *"What's visible becomes thinkable, and what's thinkable becomes doable."* *Timothy Snyder*

In 2003, when Colin Powell went to the United Nations to make a case for going to war with Iraq, U.N. officials decided to discreetly cover the tapestry reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* that graces the entrance to the Secretariat. As Maureen Dowd observed in *The New York Times*, "Mr. Powell can't very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses." The fact that it became necessary to hide Picasso's anti-war masterpiece to make a case for militarism reminds us just how much power images and objects have in the world. As Timothy Snyder, a prominent historian of the Holocaust, argues in the quote above, images communicate ideas and influence people's attitudes in consequential ways. This means that the work of art history—interpreting, contextualizing, and thinking critically about visual culture, and helping others to do so—*really matters*: not just for those involved directly with the art world, but for society at large.

A conservative discipline?

"Art history is relevant" is not how the discipline of art history is typically framed in popular discourse. Most people picture art historians as wealthy, white, intellectually conservative, and disconnected from the rest of the world. If the humanities are viewed by many critics as outdated fields with little to contribute to "productive," STEM-driven society, art history has become their poster child—as President Obama (shown in the distinctly non-traditional presidential portrait in Figure **2.2.2**) once unfortunately made clear.

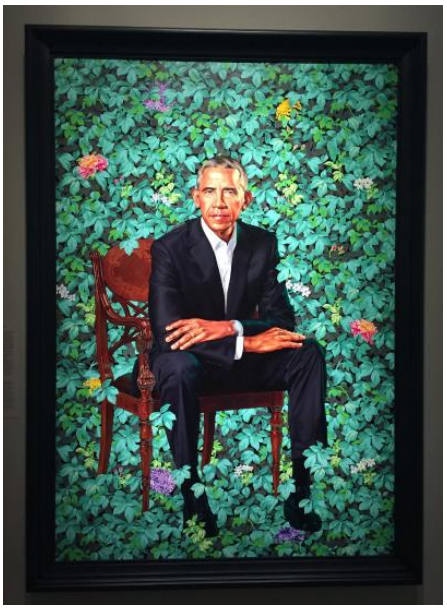


Figure **2.2.2**: Kehinde Wiley, Barack Obama, 2018. Oil on canvas, 92 1/4" x 65 13/16". National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: Adam Fagen, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Wiley painted President Obama as an approachable seated figure, looking directly at the viewer and surrounded by flora representative of important locations in his life, including the African lily for his Kenyan heritage, white jasmine for his birthplace Hawaii, and chrysanthemum for Chicago, where he established his political roots.

This representation is frustrating. Many are drawn to art history not because of being narrow-minded, but because they deeply respect objects that they study, and want to make sure they're treated with the same meticulous rigor that other types of scholars afford texts. Although texts are vitally important for understanding history, images and objects also have immense communicative power, and they deserve equally meticulous and nuanced study. It is key to put the works first, giving close attention to the conditions of their makers, making, and use. This approach doesn't stop with formal or iconographic analysis, though these are important foundations. Alongside profound respect for objects, their particular meanings, and their histories, critical theory is deeply influential. Feminist, post-structuralist, and postcolonial critiques of power, politics, and representation form the basis of much of this work. Art history is not inherently a conservative discipline, but instead is relevant, critical, and a product of its current moment—just like art itself.

Still, most introductory survey courses still lean heavily on what has been handed down to us through textbooks, departmental requirements, and the foundational art historical education of the instructors: the traditional Western canon (a list of the art that is most worthy of our attention and study). Even courses that include "global" in their titles, as many now do, required squeezing in absurdly pared-down units on "non-Western art" alongside the accepted narrative trajectory of the Western survey. Despite the "global" title, the real focus of this type of class remains clear. Heaven forbid we leave anything "important" out of the Western units! These classes, sadly, become surveys of "the West" with a smattering of "the rest." [1]

The "global" in scholarly discourse

> *How must the discipline of art history change, what are the assumptions it must relinquish, and what ideas must it embrace in order to effect a true dislocation of "center-periphery" models of cultural intellectual exchange? Aruna D'Souza and Jill Casid*

D'Souza and Casid's words call attention to the continuing presence of the "center-periphery" model within our discipline: that is, Western art, with its more or less accepted trajectory through classical Greece and Rome, the European Renaissance, and modern Europe and Anglo North America, has historically been accorded a central place within the discipline, whereas art from everywhere else remains at the margins. The center-periphery model applies not only geographically, but also in terms of the people who create art: for instance, Native American and some Spanish colonial art are clearly part of the "periphery," even though they are spatially embedded in North America. The marginalization of artists of color and women artists in all regions is also an important part of this larger problem. In addition to all this, art history itself arose as a discipline within a Western, colonial context, and this context was

key in framing even such basic methodological concepts as what constitutes a work of art. A gracefully-formed and elegantly painted ceramic jar like the one in Figure **2.2.3** may be displayed as merely "craft" rather than capital-a Art.



Figure **2.2.3**: Nampeyo (Hopi-Tewa), polychrome jar, c. 1930s. Clay and pigment, 13 x 21 cm. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Nampeyo is a prominent ceramicist, celebrated for her important work that preserved traditional Hopi-Tewa designs and introduced new technological and stylistic innovations.

Even when the center-periphery idea is used to critique the marginalization of non-European artworks and methods, the very structure of this model upholds the idea of Europe as a conceptual "center," reifying the very power relationship it seeks to deconstruct. What do we do with these legacies? Is it enough to simply add more works from underrepresented cultures to the existing canon? Or do we attempt to do away with binary concepts like "center and periphery" altogether, complicating the notion of hermetic styles, schools, or traditions? Or, should we look to radically redefine how we define and analyze "art" itself and, consequently, its many histories?

A range of prominent scholars have been working to address these questions, though the results have not been as rapidly or widely influential as many would like. However tantalizing, erudite, and enjoyable as some of these offerings may be, they almost all seem to lack a key aspect: broad, seamless employability at the basic level of the art history classroom.

The "global" problem in the classroom

Most of the globe remains at the periphery of undergraduate art history education, as recent studies have shown. This overwhelmingly Western bias does not end solely with departmental requirements; it also exists at the basic level of the introductory art history survey curriculum. The most widely-used textbooks still organize the history of art in terms of the well-developed Western canon, with other art traditions presented as holistic, geographically based addenda that reduce the span of entire continents and multiple centuries to single chapters.



Figure **2.2.4**: Alfredo Jaar, *A Logo for America*, 1987. Spectacolor animation, Times Square, New York City, 42 sec. (Photo: Jane Dickson/Public Art Fund, via Smarthistory)

Reframing the world

In 1987, the artist Alfredo Jaar provoked furor with his public artwork *A Logo for America*, an animation he designed for Times Square's Spectacolor board wherein he proclaimed that the United States is not "America." Rather, the animation posited, the term

applies to places all across the Americas—both North and South. Jaar's snappy, 15-second jab at the narcissism and cultural hegemony of the United States reminds us of the immense power that even the most seemingly simple words or concepts can have in framing global identities and power relations. Works like this push us to question the basic ways of thinking about the world that we often assume, in light of the inequitable systemic conditions that produced them, are neutral. This process of self-reflexively examining—and working to deconstruct—those conditions is commonly referred to as the work of discursive "decolonization."

Jaar's emphasis on terminology reminds us that, as we consider how to decolonize the canon in terms of the artworks we include, we also have to think carefully about the analytical tools we use to interpret and contextualize them. Our methods, formulated within a primarily Western context (both in terms of the works of art they were applied to and those who applied them), come with their own inherent biases.

Editors' Note: On Decolonizing the Canon

A canon can be defined as a rule for a standard of beauty developed for artists to follow, and as a body of works considered especially important. In art history, the "Western" canon of artworks often accorded highest status and most celebrated was formulated by white Euro/American men—and consisted of art by predominantly white, Euro/American, cisgender, men. Artistic canons, however, are not static and have been changing and expanding over time. As Dr. Mary Kelly and Dr. Ceren Özpınar argue, "The conventional 'centering' of art history in Europe and America and traditional 'Western' methodologies is increasingly unsatisfactory in the current age. Therefore, further emphasis on translocal and transnational encounters are necessary in order to tease out conditions of global exchange."

Today, many scholars are thinking about how to do that work and "decolonize" canons in various disciplines, including art history. This involves an active reconsideration and reordering of an important body of works, by first labeling colonialist or settler influences and artistic cultural legacies, and then actively resisting or recasting the canon with a different set of values, artists, and influences.

For further discussion into decolonizing art history and the canon, including how that might look for educators, please explore the following resources:

- Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price's "Decolonizing Art History" features interviews with art historians about the state of the field and efforts these professionals are making towards decolonization. Professors such as James D'Emilio explore the topic, arguing: "A decolonized art history looks beyond diversifying canons, curricula, and practitioners. It recognizes that we now study, teach, and display art with culturally specific methods whose universal claims reflect early modern and modern European hegemony."
- On *The New York Times'* "Still Processing" podcast, Wesley Morris and Daphne A. Brooks explore the strict and problematic confines of artistic canons in their episode "We're Never Going to Get that Top 40 Out of Us."
- Amber Hickey and Ana Tuazon provide a case study for decolonizing the classroom in "Decolonizing and Diversifying Are Two Different Things: A Workshop Case Study" and a zine with Decolonial Strategies for the Art History Classroom.

"Global" vs. "world"

This critique of methods is at the root of key current discussions about the use of the word "global" itself. John Onians has proposed the term "world art studies" (as opposed to "global art history") to differentiate between research that looks at the "global"—i.e. globalized, networked—contemporary world through a *traditional art historical* lens, and that which looks at the "world," looking at the longer span of historical time and geographic space, using a *variety of interdisciplinary methods*. The notion of "world" art studies has become an important point of discussion within subfields such as colonial Latin American art, precisely because it entails an interdisciplinary approach that helps to cut through inherited disciplinary boundaries around artists, styles, and periods.

Questioning, critiquing, and connecting

As Benjamin Harris, a specialist on the global contemporary art world, reminds us: "A truly 'global field of art history' would comprise an intellectual intervention premised on a critique of Western power in the world as it exists and is reproduced (and challenged) in cultural and artistic terms." I believe many art historians would agree with this statement, but putting it into practice

—especially in the Western survey, with its well-established narratives about stylistic lineage, single heroic artists as innovators, and geographical and chronological divisions—is challenging.

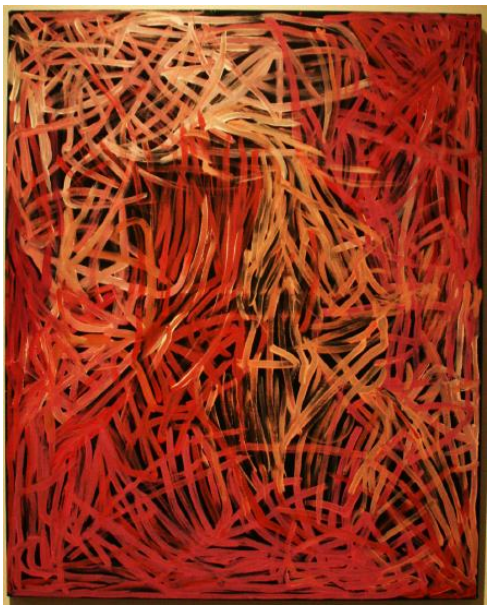


Figure **2.2.5**: Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Australian Aboriginal, Anmatyerr people), *Anooralya (Wild Yam Dreaming)*, 1995. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 59 13/16" x 48 1/16". Seattle Art Museum, Seattle. (Photo: Yvette Wohn, CC BY-NC 2.0) Learn more about Aborignal Australian artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye and how her "career runs alongside a period of tremendous change in Australia, moving from the end of a phase of colonial settlement through to a more ethical embrace of Aboriginal culture by the nation's Western population."

Whether or not it is important for students to take the Western survey at some point in their art history education, it is clear that students need a robust and current toolkit for looking at and analyzing art. It is also important to decenter the canon by looking at art through non-traditional lenses. Indigenous scholars, in particular, have been active in exploring alternative ways of analyzing and teaching about art. An example of this comes from Carmen Robertson, faculty in the Department of Indian Fine Arts at the First Nations University of Canada. As she states in an interview:

> *The first and most profound difference I find in teaching my courses is the decentering that takes place. European art is not the filter through which these courses are taught. Aboriginal values and traditions inform and direct discussions of the artwork shown in class. I embrace . . . an interdisciplinary approach [which includes] . . . connections to traditional ways, colonial adaptations and recent developments[.]*

For instance, when looking at West African Igbo art, Robertson has her students read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and then "discuss both traditional and contemporary expressions by Igbo artists, how museums display their work, and the effects of colonization on the arts."



Figure **2.2.6**: *Ikenga*, Igbo peoples, Nigeria. Wood. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) This seated figure, carved with curling ram's horns sprouting from his head, holds a knife in his right hand and a human head in his left, symbolizing its owner's power, life force, and connection to his society. Learn more about Ikenga and their connection to Achebe's novels.

Networks as critique

What these approaches have in common, besides their willingness to expand the lens of art history to include concerns such as institutional, political, and cultural power relations, is a focus on objects as *interconnected*. Scholars in Global Renaissance studies, for instance, have been pioneering ways of reframing the art production of the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific in order to question the traditional periodization and categories of style that arose in the art history of the European Renaissance. Art historian Ananda Cohen-Aponte points to the existence and necessary acknowledgement of “many Renaissances and many Baroques whose artistic fruits spilled into territories across the Americas and Asia.” [2]



Figure **2.2.7**: Folding Screen with the *Siege of Belgrade* (front) and *Hunting Scene* (reverse), Mexico, c. 1697–1701. Oil on wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 229.9 x 275.8 cm. Brooklyn Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) In the Brooklyn Museum's words, "This object tells a truly multicultural story of the Japanese and Dutch influences on Spanish artistic styles as well as being a visual representation of colonial Mexican allegiance to Spain. The folding screen as an object comes from Japan as well as the Spanish word *biombo* which is derived from the Japanese *byōbu*. The floral patterns over a black border are meant to resemble lacquerware."

The reframing of objects within global networks can itself give rise to a form of critique, since, if we look closely and rigorously, these relationships demand new, more interdisciplinary approaches in order to be fully understood. But Cohen-Aponte brings up another important point as well: if we want to truly decolonize the discourse of art history, then, we also have an obligation to make space for Indigenous scholars and scholars from the Global South to take the lead writing the history of art.

Notes:

[1] Art history’s awareness of these problems is nothing new. To name just three key (dare I say canonical?) texts: John Berger tackled these issues in his seminal 1972 series and book, *Ways of Seeing*; Edward Said’s 1978 *Orientalism* has become its own shorthand; and Hans Belting’s many writings on globalization in the art world are a touchstone for anyone who studies contemporary art.

[2] Ananda Cohen-Aponte, "Decolonizing the Global Renaissance: A View from the Andes," in *The Globalization of Renaissance Art: A Critical Review,* edited by Daniel Savoy (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 73–74.

Articles in this section:

Smarthistory, "Art history and world art history," in *Smarthistory*, January 12, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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2.3: Introduction to art historical analysis

Introduction to art historical analysis

by Dr. Robert Glass



Figure **2.3.1**: Seated Figure, Djenné peoples, Inland Niger Delta region, Mali, 13th century. Terracotta, 10 x 9 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (25.4 x 24.8 x 29.8 cm.) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum, public domain) Resting his head on his right knee, arms wrapped around his compact form, this sculpture, as the Met puts it, "simultaneously suggests the knotted tension of anxiety and the sublime absorption of deep prayer."

Why does a work of art look the way it does? Who made it and why? What does it mean? These questions and others like them lie at the heart of art historical inquiry. Art historians use various types of analysis to provide answers. These have varied over time and continue to evolve, but in general, three categories can be distinguished. In the essays and videos on Smarthistory, different types of analysis are used, often without identifying them explicitly. If you become familiar with the three categories below, you will be able to recognize them.

Art as physical object

Oil and pigments on canvas, carved marble, woven fibers, a concrete dome—most works of art and architecture are physical things. As such, a fundamental determinant of the way they look is the material of which they are made. In architecture, the word used for this is simply materials. In art, the term medium (plural: media) is also used.

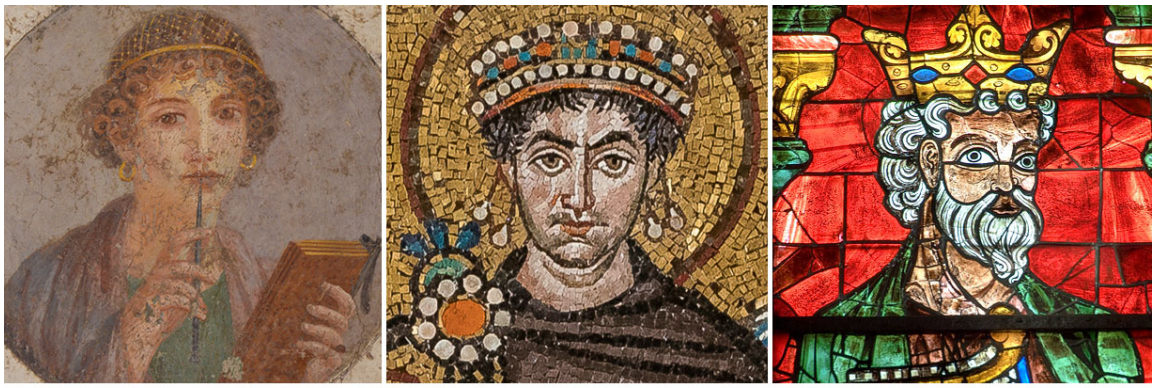


Figure **2.3.2**: Left: Woman with wax tablets and stylus, c. 50 CE. Fresco. National Archaeological Museum, Naples. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0). Center: Justinian (detail), *Justinian and Attendants*, north wall of the apse, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, c. 547. Mosaic. (Photo: Dr. Robert Glass, via Smarthistory). Right: King David (detail), north transept lancet window, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, Chartres, France, c. 1145 and 1194-c. 1220. (Photo: © Dr Stuart Whatling, via Smarthistory)

Materials have specific properties that dictate the ways they can be manipulated and the effects they can produce. For example, marble will crack under its own weight if not properly balanced and supported, which imposes limits on the sculptural forms or architectural designs that can be created with it. Fresco painting, stained glass, and mosaic are all capable of creating breathtaking images, but their visual qualities differ significantly due to the distinct physical properties and working methods of each medium. This latter aspect—the way a medium is worked or used—is called technique. Together, materials and technique determine basic visual features and the parameters within which an artist or architect must work.

Learning to recognize specific media and techniques and how they have been used historically are fundamental art historical skills. Not only do they allow you to understand the logic behind specific visual qualities, but they may also help identify when and where a work was made since certain media and techniques are characteristic of specific periods and places.

Conservation

Technological advances have led to new methods of analyzing materials and techniques. Today this research is carried out primarily by art conservators. Because art and architecture, like all physical things, are subject to the corrosive effects of time and environment, conservation science is a crucial field. Training in art conservation typically involves coursework in chemistry as well as the practice and history of art.

While the main job of conservators is preservation, their investigative techniques can also benefit art historians. Technologies such as X-radiography, ultraviolet illumination, and infrared reflectography can reveal features of an object invisible to the human eye, such as the inside of a bronze statue, changes made to a painting, or drawing under a paint surface. X-ray fluorescence can identify the pigments in paint or the composition of metals by their chemical profiles. Dendrochronology can establish the earliest date a wooden object could have been made based on tree ring growth patterns. Analysis of materials and techniques using methods such as these can help art historians answer questions about when, where, how, or by whom, a work was made.



Figure **2.3.3**: Egon Schiele, *Portrait of Wally Neuzil*, 1912. Oil on panel, 32 × 39.8 cm. Leopold Museum, Vienna, Austria. (Photo via Smarthistory) Here, the sitter leans forward, her large blue eyes slightly out of focus but still arresting, set off by the complementary orange hues of her hair and lips and drawing the viewer into closer contemplation.

Art as visual experience

Most art is visually compelling. While materials and technique determine the range of what is possible, the final appearance of a work is the product of numerous additional choices made by the artist. An artist painting a portrait of a woman in oil on canvas must decide on the size and shape of the canvas, the scale of the woman and where to place her, and the types of forms, lines, colors, and brushstrokes to use in representing the sitter and her surroundings. In a compelling work of art, myriad variables such as these and others come together to create an engaging visual experience.

Visual (formal) analysis

Art historians use visual analysis to describe and understand this experience. Often called formal analysis because it focuses on form rather than subject matter or historical context, this typically consists of two parts: description of the visual features of a work and analysis of their effects. To describe visual properties systematically, art historians rely on an established set of terms and concepts. These include characteristics such as format, scale, composition, and viewpoint; treatment of the human figure and space; and the use of form, line, color, light, and texture.

In describing visual qualities, formal analysis usually identifies certain features as contributing to the overall impression of the work. For example, a prominent linear form might suggest strength if straight and vertical, grace or sensuality if sinuous, or stability and calm if long and horizontal. Sharp contrasts in light and dark may make an image feel bold and dramatic whereas subdued lighting might suggest gentleness or intimacy. In the past, formal analysis assumed there was some elementary level of universality in the human response to visual form and tried to describe these effects. Today, the method is understood as more subjective, but still valued as a critical exercise and means of analyzing visual experience, especially in introductory art history courses.



Figure **2.3.4**: Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 3.3 x 4.25 m. Painted in Rome, exhibited at the salon of 1785. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo via Smarthistory) David's style is characterized by clean lines and clear composition that emphasize straightforward storytelling.

Style

Formal analysis is a powerful tool for appreciating art. Armed with it, you can analyze any work based simply on the experience of looking at it. But the method is also important for understanding art in its historical context. This is because the visual properties of works made by an individual artist or, more generally, by artists working in the same time and place, typically have common features. Art historians call these shared characteristics style. As James Elkins elegantly phrased it, style is "a coherence of qualities in periods or people." [1] This may include consistency in things like medium, function, and subject matter, but when art historians use the term style, they primarily mean formal characteristics. Style varies by time and place, so like medium and technique, it can be used to determine the origin of a work of art. Because of its complexity, style is a far more specific indicator than materials and technique alone. Early art historians used stylistic analysis to categorize the vast legacy of undocumented art, assigning works to cultures, artistic circles, or individual artists based on their formal qualities. Today, stylistic analysis continues to be used to establish origins when unknown works are discovered or previous attributions revised.

In addition to helping categorize individual works, style has shaped the narratives told by art historians in fundamental ways. Until the mid-20th century, most histories of art focused on tracing stylistic development and change. As a result, many of the period divisions traditionally used for Western art are based on style. Some examples are Geometric, Orientalizing, Archaic, and Classical in ancient Greece, Romanesque and Gothic in Medieval Europe, and the Early, High, and Late Renaissance. Today style is only one of many aspects of art that interest art historians, but the power of tradition has ensured that style-based period divisions and labels remain widely used. Likewise, familiarity with the style of specific periods, places, and artists is still considered fundamental art historical knowledge and often remains the focus of introductory art history textbooks and courses.

Art as cultural artifact

While understanding the physical properties and visual experience of art are important, today most art historical research focuses on the significance of works as cultural artifacts. This category of analysis is characterized by a variety of approaches, but all share the basic objective of examining art in relation to its historical context. Most often, this is the time and place in which a work was created—typically we want to know why and by whom it was made and how it originally functioned. But since works of art and architecture often survive for centuries, art historians may also study a work's cultural significance at later historical moments.



Figure **2.3.5**: Buddha Shakyamuni or Akshobhya, the Buddha of the East, Tibet, 11th-12th century. Gilt copper, 58 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory) Buddhas like this were used as objects of devotion and not just as visually pleasing art.

Subject matter / iconography



Figure **2.3.6**: Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (detail), Vatican, Rome, Italy. Fresco, 1508-12. (Photo: Kent G Becker, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Iconographical elements in this fresco include the flowing gray beard and hair of God the Father.

One of the most basic types of contextual analysis is the interpretation of subject matter. Much art is representational (i.e., it creates a likeness of something), and naturally we want to understand what is shown and why. Art historians call the subject matter of images iconography. Iconographic analysis is the interpretation of its meaning. In many cases, such as an image of the crucified Christ or seated Buddha, identifying the subject presents few problems. When the iconography is obscure or treated in an unusual way, art historians try to understand it by studying the historical context in which the image was made, typically through comparison with texts and other imagery from the time. With challenging images, scholars may disagree on which contextual materials are relevant, resulting in conflicting interpretations. For many complex or enigmatic works, the meanings of the subject matter continue to be debated and reinterpreted today.

Function

Another common aspect of art investigated through contextual analysis is function. Historically, many works of art and nearly all architecture were intended to serve some purpose beyond the aesthetic. Understanding function is crucial because it usually plays a role in determining many features, including iconography, materials, format, and aspects of style. At the most basic level, art historians analyze function by identifying types—an altarpiece, portrait, Book of Hours, tomb, palace, etc. Studying the history and use of a given type provides a context for understanding specific examples.

Analysis of function becomes more complex when the personal motivations of the people responsible for making a work are considered. For much of history, this includes not only artists but also the patrons who commissioned works and in some cases, advisors acting on the patron's behalf. When such agents can be identified, definitively or hypothetically, their motivations become potential contexts for understanding purpose and appearance.

With complex works, this can soon raise interpretive quandaries. Take, for example, Michelangelo's famous frescos on ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Are these highly original paintings best understood in relation to the function of the chapel (a key ritual site in the Vatican palace), or the concerns of the painter, Michelangelo, or of the patron, Pope Julius II, or of one or more of the Julius's advisors at the papal court? The answer is likely some combination of these, but the contextual materials relevant to each are so vast and diverse that there is no one way to interpret them.

Thinking critically

This raises a final point about analyzing the meaning of art and architecture as cultural artifacts. While art historians rely on facts as much as possible and seek to interpret works in ways that are historically plausible, we recognize that subjectivity is inescapable. As discussed in "What is art history?," we interpret the past in ways that make sense in the present. Today, art historians continue to ask traditional questions like those noted above, but they also ask new ones inspired by social developments such as feminism, globalism, multiculturalism, and identity politics.

So, as you read, watch, and listen, try to recognize the approaches being used and to think critically about them. Is the speaker or writer talking about the work as a physical object, visual experience, or cultural artifact? (Often it will be some combination.) What contexts are being used to explain meaning? Which contexts are not considered? This may leave you with as many questions as answers, but that is good. You are here not only to gain knowledge, but also to develop a curiosity about the world and the ability to think critically about it.

[1] James Elkins, "Style," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed August 15, 2017).

Articles in this chapter:

- Dr. Robert Glass, "Introduction to art historical analysis," in *Smarthistory*, October 28, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: The Visual Elements and Principles of Composition

In This Chapter

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3.1: The Visual Elements
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3.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Toolkit for Looking

A muscular man stands stiffly on an elegantly-curved boat, a long staff in his left hand. Around him, much smaller figures, some of them holding harpoons, crouch and lunge, driving their boats forward and aiming their weapons. In the background a series of repeating vertical lines suggests that they are traveling through a marsh of towering papyrus stems, and below their boats, the water teems with fish, hippopotamus, and crocodile.

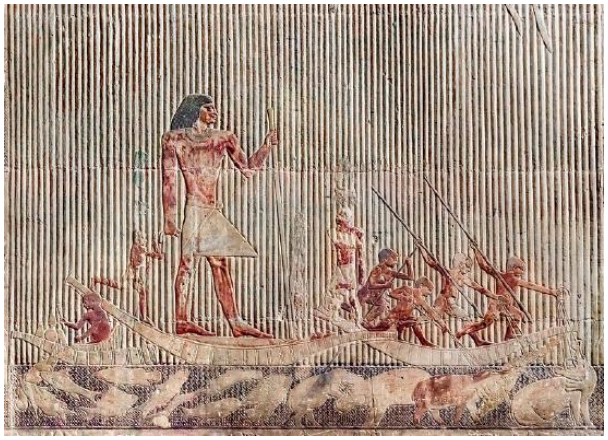


Figure 3.0.1: Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt (detail), c. 2494-2345 BCE. Old Kingdom Egypt. Painted limestone, 4' tall. Tomb of Ti, Saqqara, Egypt. (Photo: kairoinfo4u, CC BY-NC-SA)

This scene is known as "Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt," and adorns one wall of the tomb of an Egyptian official named Ti. Even without that title to give context, though, and without any knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture, there are certain elements of this scene that are immediately recognizable. This artwork is representational, meaning that it reflects things that exist in the real world, and so its content, or what it is about, is that recognizable story: the men hunting, their boats, the bountiful environment. This chapter is about giving you the tools and vocabulary to carefully look at, and describe, *any* image you see, representational or not, and without any other background or context. This applies not just to famous artworks and artifacts, but to imagery and visual culture in the world around you every day.

Formal Elements & Principles of Composition

Formal elements are things that can be recognized without other context or knowledge about the image; formal elements are separate from content, subject matter, or story. These include the visual elements discussed individually later in this chapter, such as line, shape, color, and texture. They also include the way those elements come together as a whole, or an artwork's composition—things like balance, movement, and scale. Artists can use these elements to communicate or reinforce a certain mood, meaning, or message.

Turning back to "Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt," there is plenty to notice separate from the content of the hunting scene. First, this is not a flat painting, but stands out slightly from the stone; it is a shallow relief carving, which means the image does not project out very far and does not detach from the background. It has been painted: colored using pigments in a liquid binder. Because the image included here is a photograph of the three-dimensional original object, it is the shadows cast by the artificial light that reveal its depth. The light also highlights the actual texture of the limestone surface: the pits and rough edges one would feel by touching it. This artwork contains not just actual texture, but simulated texture: lines in Ti's wig suggest individual strands of hair, which is distinct from the smoother surface of his skin or shendjet (traditional kilt-like skirt). Line is visible elsewhere, as well: in addition to the vertical lines of the background and zigzag water pattern, contour lines define the edges of every figure here, from the men and animals to the boats and weapons. There are even implied lines, which are not carved or painted, but which a viewer can still recognize, such as between the harpooners' eyes and their prey below the surface. Color is another easily-identifiable visual element—notably here, the rich reddish brown of the figures' skin.



Figure **3.0.2**: Statues of Rahotep and Nofret, 2575-25551 BCE. Old Kingdom Egypt. Painted limestone, 121-122 cm tall. Egypt Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

This color is not necessarily naturalistic, or true to optical reality (what the eyes see), but instead represents a convention, or system of representation, of Egyptian art in which color indicates a figure's gender. This is clear in the slightly later Egyptian statues of Rahotep and Nofret, in which her skin is ivory while his is a darker ochre. Coloration is just one way in which figures might be stylized, or conform to particular conventions rather than recording a strict observation of the natural world. Ti is much larger than the less-important figures around him, a convention known as hierarchical or hieratic scale. He is also shown in twisted perspective, with his head, arms, and legs in profile, while his shoulders, torso, and eye are seen head-on. Finally, his image, like those of Rahotep and Nofret, has been idealized, conforming to Egyptian standards of beauty for that time. Regardless of the subjects' actual ages or looks, their depictions here are youthful and physically fit, with regular, symmetrical features.

Individual visual elements are important, but so is the way they are organized, or the artwork's composition. Ti, as noted earlier, is much larger than the men around him, drawing the attention, or emphasis, to him. This also brings balance to the scene, as his larger figure feels similar in visual weight to the several smaller figures across from him. Ti's rigid, almost frozen posture contrasts with the energetic movement of his servants, whose nudity, in addition to their size and relative naturalism, indicate that they are nowhere near as important as Ti himself.

Historiography (Writing History)

Chapters 1 and 2 introduced the concept of historiography, and the importance of taking into account how history is written and who is writing it. Subsequent chapters will continue introducing concepts, events, and developments that shape our understanding of the objects presented and the history surrounding them.

This chapter concentrates not on a particular region or time period, as following chapters will, but instead on the language of description. Formal elements are just one way of writing about art—and frequently simply a starting point. Careful looking is the basis of recognizing the medium, historical period, and even date of an artwork. It is also essential to iconography, or the study of the meanings of particular elements, or symbols, in an artwork. (In Egypt, the hippopotami being hunted on the wall of Ti's tomb aren't just a source of food, for example, but are associated with forces of chaos, and may represent the god Seth.) As you learn more about a particular region, culture, and the way its history has been written, you will add layers of understanding to the skills of description that are our focus here.

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on vocabulary you can use to describe images, even if you do not have additional information about them. It gives you a toolkit of terms that will enable you not only to look closely at artworks, but also to understand and describe what you see. It begins with a discussion of the visual elements: line, shape and form, color, space, surface and depth, texture, and light and shadow. It concludes with the principles of composition: balance, symmetry, and emphasis; movement; proportion and scale; pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity.

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the visual elements and principles of composition, you should be able to:

- Name and identify different kinds of line in artwork
- Identify and discuss the effects of light, color, texture, and pattern in a work of art
- Use the art-historical terms shape, mass, and ground when discussing art
- Identify various techniques artists used to represent three-dimensional space in two-dimensional art
- Recognize and describe texture and pattern
- Identify basic principles of design: unity and variety, balance, emphasis and subordination, scale and proportion, and rhythm
- Identify principles of design at work in specific visual imagery
- Experiment with your art historical toolkit and vocabulary by observing and describing works of art

Want to know more?

Here are some optional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the concepts discussed in this chapter.

- Dr. Beth Harris & Dr. Steven Zucker, “How to do Visual (Formal) Analysis”
- The Getty Museum, “Elements of Art”
- The Toledo Museum “The Art of Seeing Art”
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Power: Comparisons and Connections"
- Dr. Cerise Myers, “Describing Art, Part I” [video]
- Dr. Cerise Myers, “Describing Art, Part II” [video]

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3.1: The Visual Elements

Line

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman



Figure **3.1.1**: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen*, from *The Apocalypse*, 1498. Woodcut, 38.7 x 27.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Line is the most basic visual element. Lines can be used to define shapes and figures, but also to indicate motion, emotion, and other elements.



Figure **3.1.2**: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen*, from *The Apocalypse* (detail). (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Contour lines and hatching

In a woodblock print of *The Four Horsemen* from *The Apocalypse* by Albrecht Dürer, contour lines—lines that define shapes—are used to mark the outside of all of the elements of the image.

The outline of the hat on one of the horsemen, for example, is clearly made by a few black contour lines. This simple device is so effective that it is hard to remember that there is no hat here, only a few black marks on a white page.

Note, though, that lines are also used to show shading—the shadows caused when light hits one side of an object, leaving the other in shadow. On the hat, for example, the closely spaced lines, called hatching, show that the left side of his hat is in a shadow. This also helps the hat to look more three-dimensional, giving it a sense of form.



Figure **3.1.3**: Roy Lichtenstein, *In the Car*, 1963. Oil and magna on canvas, 172.00 x 203.50 cm. National Galleries, Scotland. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein/DACS 2018. (Photo: National Galleries of Scotland, via Smarthistory)

Contour lines outline all the figures and forms in the image, creating the illusion of shading and form. In addition, there are horizontal lines in the background. While these create shading, they also help create the sense that the riders are moving rapidly from left to right. Motion lines may be familiar to you from comic strips, but they appear in all sorts of work.

Organic and inorganic (geometric) lines

In the Dürer print, we can also divide the lines into organic and inorganic (or geometric) lines (see the section on shape for more on organic and inorganic). Organic lines are loose, curving lines like those found in nature. In the Dürer print, the lines of the horses' manes and tails, the figures' hair, and the ruffled clouds are all organic. Inorganic lines are generally straight or perfectly curving lines, like those found in geometry. In this image, most of the lines are organic, but the horizontal lines in the background are inorganic.



Figure **3.1.4**: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, c. 1483-86. Oil on panel, 199 x 122 cm. Louvre Museum, Paris, France. (Photo: Louvre Museum, public domain)

Implied lines

We can also look for implied lines. These are not actually drawn, but we can connect the dots (literally or figuratively) to create the lines in our minds. Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* contains wonderful examples of implied lines.

Here, the implied lines are sight lines, which guide us throughout the image. These help us know where to look, and show us what is important in the painting. Follow the gazes of the figures as they look and point at one another. The angel in the red cape to the right looks out at us, and then points at the infant John the Baptist, at the left. He looks at the infant Jesus, who in turn looks back again at him. Above, Mary looks down at Jesus, and also gestures toward him with her hand.



Figure **3.1.5**: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, (detail with implied lines). (Photo: Louvre Museum, public domain)

Basically, once we make it into the space of the painting by meeting the gaze of the angel, we become locked in a cycle of movement between the holy figures, guided by their sight lines.

Shape and Form

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Shape builds on line and color, as it has to be made of one or both of these. Shape is the property of a two-dimensional form, usually defined by a line around it or by a change in color.

There are two main types of shapes, geometric and organic. While most works of art contain both geometric and organic shapes, looking at those that are more completely divided can serve to clarify these qualities.

Geometric shapes

Piet Mondrian is an excellent example of an artist who used geometric shapes almost exclusively. In his *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red* (1937-42), Mondrian, uses straight vertical and horizontal black lines to divide his canvas into rectangles of primary colors.

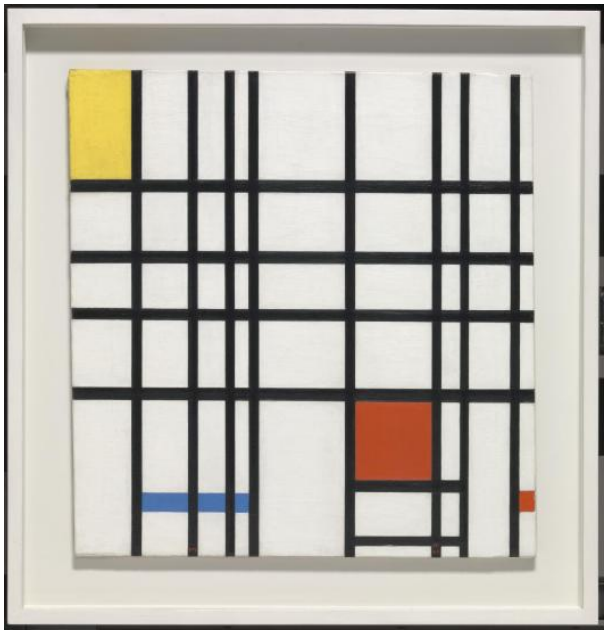


Figure **3.1.6**: Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, 1937–42. Oil on canvas, 72.7 x 69.2 cm. Tate Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Nothing here gives the impression of the natural world. On the other hand, Maori facial tattooing, known as *moko*, uses primarily organic shapes. They are still, like Mondrian's shapes, generally abstract — they do not depict any clear images — but the shapes are like those found in nature, curving, twisting, and spiraling across their wearers' faces. The edges of the lines and shapes are crisp, but the forms are curving and sensuous.



Figure **3.1.7**: Early Maori were highly skilled in Ta Moko, the process of tattooing. Location: Te Kuiti, Waikato. (Photo: James Heremaia, WorldWide licence)



Figure **3.1.8**: Cueva de las Manos, Perito Moreno, Argentina, c. 7300 BCE. Mineral pigments (iron oxides, kaolin, natrojarosite, and manganese oxide) on cave wall. (Photo: Mariano, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Editors' Note

Shape can be either positive or negative. In this photograph from the Cueva de las Manos, we can see both positive shapes (handprints created by dipping the hand in pigment and then placing it on the stone) and negative shapes (formed by applying pigment over the hand, with the resulting shape defined by the absence of pigment).

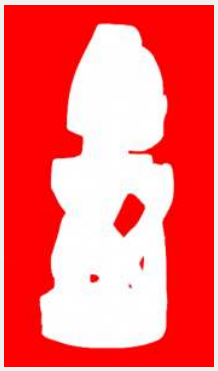


Figure **3.1.9**: Negative space in the photograph below of the Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*). (Illustration by Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

We can also speak of negative space, which refers to the area around and between the figure and ground. The illustration above shows the negative space around the Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*) as shown in the photograph below. In a painting or drawing,

artists often consider both positive and negative space in balancing their composition, as is discussed in the following chapter.

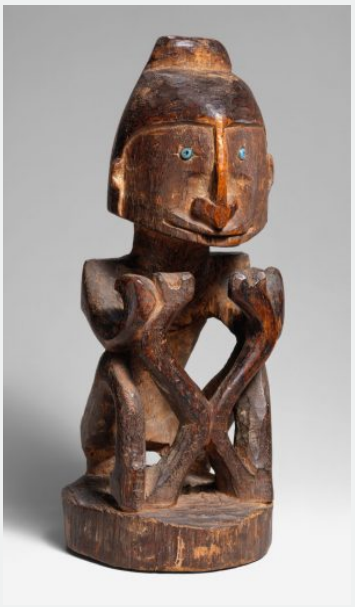


Figure **3.1.10**: Ancestor Figure (*Korwar*), Indonesia, Papua Province (Irian Jaya), Cenderawasih Bay region, in northwest New Guinea, late 19th–early 20th century. Wood and glass beads, 26 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Form

Form is actual, three-dimensional shape, though it is often used to describe the illusion of three-dimensionality, as well. Like shape, form can be geometric or organic.

A small *korwar* — a representation of an ancestor — from Irian Jaya, New Guinea, mixes these form types well. While the figure is predominantly geometric, with the head shaped like a cube and the nose an arrow pointing downward, the curving organic lines around the eyes soften this effect a bit.

Color

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Hue

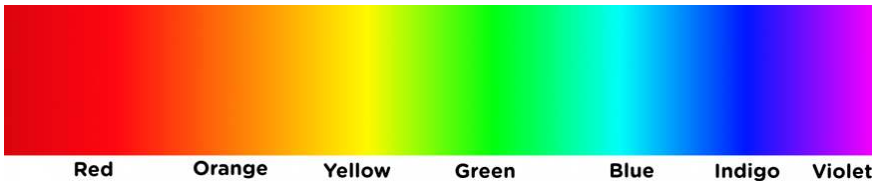


Figure **3.1.11**: Colors of the visible light spectrum. (Image: **Meganbeckett27**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Artists can use colors for many reasons other than to simply duplicate reality including setting moods and highlighting importance.

The colors of the world can be divided in different ways. When we use the term “color” casually, what we usually mean is hue. Hues appear on the visible spectrum. On the spectrum, we see the pure hues. These can be divided into primary, secondary and tertiary colors, as on this color wheel.

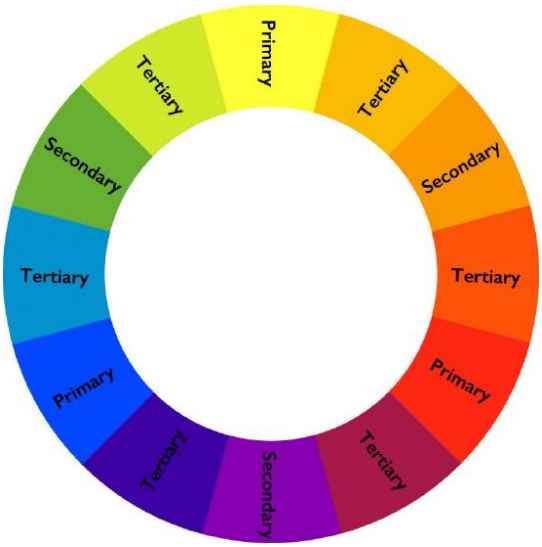


Figure **3.1.12**: Color wheel. (Image: public domain)

Primary, secondary and tertiary colors

Primary colors are, for most art media, red, yellow and blue (the exception is the additive color system, which is used in computer screens, theater lighting and the like, and has red, green, and blue as its primary colors). All the rest of the colors can be made from these.

Secondary colors are made by mixing two primary colors: Red and yellow make orange, and so on.

Tertiary colors are made by mixing a primary color with a secondary color.

Complementary and analogous colors

The colors opposite one another (like red and green or blue and orange) are complementary colors, which tend to stand out boldly next to one another. These are therefore often used for university colors and sport team logos. Colors next to one another (like red and orange or blue and green) are analogous colors, and these tend to blend together more smoothly.

Warm and cool colors

The colors on the left of this wheel are called cool colors and those to the right are warm colors. Using cool or warm colors in an image can create moods. Pierre Auguste Renoir used warm colors for his *Mother and Child*, 1886, creating a warm, cheerful, inviting scene. The oranges, pinks and yellows dominate the image.



Figure **3.1.13**: Left: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Mother and Child*, 1886. Pastel, 79.1 x 63.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Right: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Peasant Mother*, 1962. Oil on burlap, 249 x 180 cm. Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City. (© David Alfaro Siqueiros) (Photos via Smarthistory)

Diego Alfaro Siqueiros presents a similar subject in his *Peasant Mother* (1929), but through the use of cool colors, instead creates a sad, cold scene dominated by figures of blues and greens. Neither of these artists was worried about portraying the world as it really looked. Instead, they used color to inspire feelings in the viewer.

Value (tint and shade)

Color can also be considered in terms of value, which is the degree of lightness or darkness of a color. If we add white to a hue, we get a tint. If we add black, we get a shade. As we might expect, tints tend to be more cheerful—pastel colors are all tints. Shades tend to be gloomier. Indeed, our terms for moods are based on these properties, so that we say that we are lighthearted, or in a dark temper. There are many tints in the Renoir's *Mother and Child*, and many shades in Siqueiros' *Peasant Mother*.

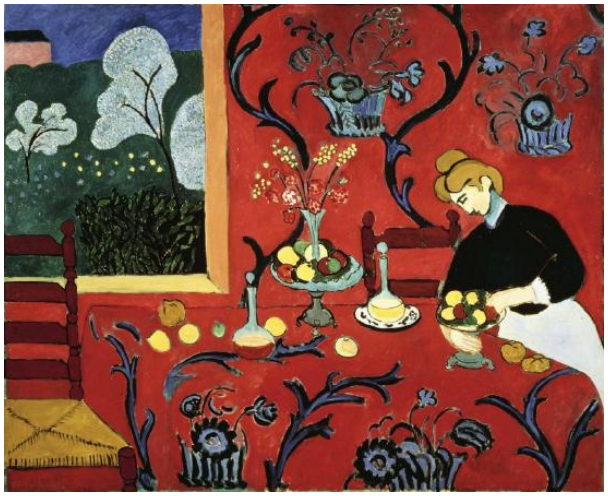


Figure **3.1.14**: Henri Matisse, *Red Room (Harmony in Red)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 180.5 x 221 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **3.1.15**: Zhou Chen, *Peach Blossom Spring*, 102.5 x 161.5 cm. Suzhou Museum, China. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Saturation

Finally, intensity or saturation is how bright or dull a color is. Henri Matisse tended to use very saturated colors, as in *Red Room (Harmony in Red)* (1908), whereas in *Peach Blossom Spring* (1533), Zhou Chen relied on a much more muted palette with very little saturation of colors.

The landscape is almost entirely in shades of brown and beige. The grey-green of the trees is low in saturation, leaving the single splash of red on the child's clothes the only moment of high saturation in the image. Therefore, we notice this tiny detail within this

large painting. The Matisse painting, on the other hand, is a blaze of colors. The vibrant red of the wall and tablecloth dominates the image, in sharp contrast with the green grass showing through the window and the blues and purples curving throughout the image.

Contrast

Contrast is the amount of variation between the highest and lowest values in a work. This is perhaps most commonly used to talk about photography, but can be applied to any work. Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Cliffs of Moher* (1989) has very low contrast. There are no dark blacks, no stark whites; everything is in very similar shades of gray.

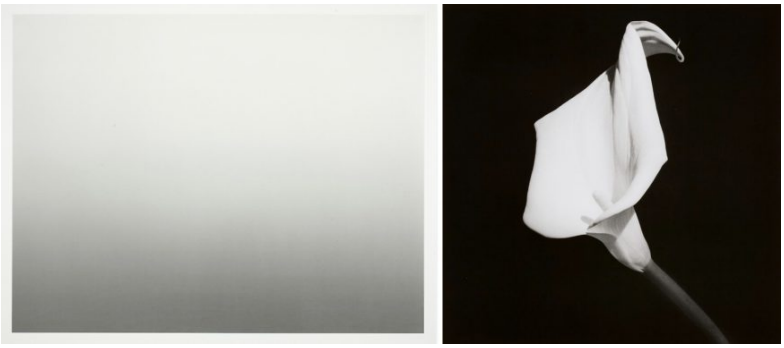


Figure **3.1.16**: Left: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Atlantic Ocean, Cliffs of Moher*, 1989. Offset lithograph, 24 x 31 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois. (© Hiroshi Sugimoto); Right: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla Lily*, 1987. Gelatin silver print, 17.94 × 17.78 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota (© Robert Mapplethorpe / The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation) (Photos via Smarthistory)



Figure **3.1.17**: Kara Walker, *Untitled (from Testimony)*, 2004. Cut black paper with pencil, pressure-sensitive tape, metal fasteners, and synthetic polymer film on paperboard, 52.7 x 38.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The low contrast conveys the soft and gentle feeling of a heavy mist over quiet water. On the other hand, Robert Mapplethorpe photograph, *Calla Lily* (1987) has much higher contrast, meaning that the difference in the whites and blacks is much greater. The effect is much sharper and crisper, making this simple flower appear grand and impressive.

Moving yet further, in Kara Walker's silhouette image, *Untitled (from Testimony)*, the contrast is absolute. We see only black and white (and here, some red).

In this case, the artist is using the power of this contrast to draw the viewer's attention to some of the problems in American race relations, and their origins in the institution of chattel slavery. Therefore, while visual elements produce visual effects, their implications can extend well beyond the purely visual.

Space

by Dr. Simon Mittman



Figure **3.1.18**: Left: Raphael, *La Donna Velata*, 1514-15. Oil on canvas, 82 x 60.5 cm. Palazzi Pitti, Florence; Right: St. John the Evangelist in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D IV, f. 209v. (Photos via Smarthistory)

A convincing illusion of space

Space is used to refer both to depth—real or represented—and also to the general surface area within a work of art. Some periods of art history show a great deal of interest in creating convincing illusions of three-dimensional space in two-dimensional media. Perhaps the most iconic (though certainly not the only) example of this is the Italian Renaissance (c. 1400-1600), when artists very deliberately worked to created convincing illusions of depth.

Look at how Raphael creates an illusion of three-dimensional form in *La Donna Velata*. Through careful variations in value, particularly in shading—the use of darker colors to create the illusion of shadows—Raphael convinces us that the woman in the painting is really there in three dimensions.

Light seems to strike her from her left, casting her right side in shadow. The folds of her voluminous sleeve are a particularly splendid example of the illusion of space. Even examining a small detail of it, it is hard to believe that there is no depth, at all, just thin layers of paint on flat canvas.



Figure **3.1.19**: Details of the sleeve, Left: Raphael, *La Donna Velata*; Right: St. John the Evangelist in the *Lindisfarne Gospels.* (Photos via Smarthistory)

For sharp contrast, we can examine a detail of a page of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* . Both images show a person in voluminous robes, looking out at us, but here, the similarities end. Raphael's figure is lit softly, creating highlights and shadows that create a sense of roundness and weight to her body and clothes. The figure of John the Evangelist from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* , on the other hand, is almost totally flat. There is virtually no shading to his body and the folds on his clothes are purely schematic patterns.

If we isolate a small detail of John's sleeve, as we did with La Donna Velata's, it is difficult to even recall that this series of lines and colors is intended to be seen as a three-dimensional form, at all.



Figure **3.1.20**: Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter*, Sistine Chapel, 1481-83. Fresco, 10 feet 10 inches x 18 feet. Vatican, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **3.1.21**: Wolf Vostell, *No: Life as a Picture—A Picture as Life* series, 1963. Photograph. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Linear and atmospheric perspective

There are various methods used by artists to create the illusion that their figures exist in three-dimensional space. Among the more effective are linear and atmospheric perspective. Another work from the Italian Renaissance will serve to demonstrate both. Pietro Perugino's *Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter*, uses both linear and atmospheric perspective to create a very convincing illusion of depth.

Linear perspective is based on the optical illusion that parallel lines seem to converge as they recede into the distance. Railroad tracks are the classic example, as in, Wolf Vostell's photograph from his *No: Life as a Picture—A Picture as Life* series from 1963. If we overlay the lines used on Perugino's painting, we can see how he used this effect. The lines are called orthogonal lines or orthogonals and they meet on the horizon line, at the vanishing point. Note that as all the orthogonals converge, the forms also get smaller.

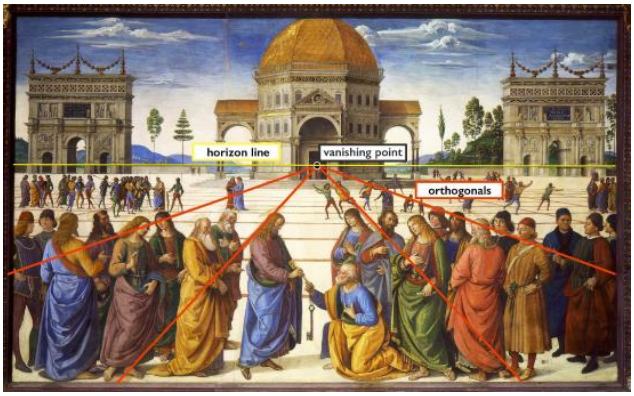


Figure **3.1.22**: Perspective diagram, Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter*. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **3.1.23**: Tobias Verhaecht, *The Clivus Scauri in Rome*. Chalk, graphite and ink on paper, 22 x 17.1 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Perugino also uses atmospheric perspective. This is based on the optical effect that makes objects in the distance appear paler, bluer, and less detailed that objects that are close to us. Returning to Perugino's painting, we can see that he has replicated this effect, carefully making the figures in the foreground (the portion of the image that appears to be closest to the viewer) bolder in color, the smaller figures in the middle ground paler, and the hills in the background (the portion of the image that appears to be in the far distance) fading off into pale blues.The tool of one-point linear perspective is very simple, and artists can use it to create a convincing illusion of depth with only a few pencil strokes and without the careful measuring and use of a straightedge, as in Tobias Verhaecht's sketch of a Roman ruin. Two- and three-point linear perspective are slightly more complicated, but operate on the same general principles and produce similar results.

An important note

It is important to note, though, that the use of various techniques to create a convincing illusion of depth does not make Raphael or Perugino "better" artists than the anonymous medieval monk who painted the page of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, nor does it make their works any "better" or more sophisticated. The illusion of depth is one of the many tools in the artist's toolbox, and it is serves some purposes very well, but it is not always the most powerful or effective way to convey an idea and, indeed, can sometimes be in direct conflict with the intentions of an artist.

Surface and Depth

by Art Institute of Chicago

What makes paintings feel as deep as the view from a window or as flat as a wall?

Online Resource: Surface and Depth

Paintings have both a literal surface and a conceptual surface called the picture plane. The picture plane can act like a transparent window, opening onto what feels like deep, three-dimensional space, or—especially in modern art—may emphasize its own flatness as a surface for paint. In a *trompe l'oeil* painting (from the French, meaning to deceive the eye), the space might not be especially deep, but the objects looks real enough to touch and may even break the picture plane. This video examines how artists can achieve these various effects of depth, and their results.



The Art Institute of Chicago, Art Explainer 2: Surface and Depth

The following works from the Art Institute of Chicago appear in this video:

- Poussin, *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*
- Harnett, *For Sunday's Dinner*
- Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray*

Texture

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Texture is the feeling of a surface, real or represented. This might refer to the roughness or smoothness of actual objects and art media, or to the illusion of these properties.



Figure **3.1.24**: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2001. Transparent color coating, stainless steel, 320 x 380 x 120 cm. (Photo: Kim, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Surface texture

Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* has a perfectly smooth, mirrored surface it is difficult to resist touching (though we must). It is this surface texture that turns these replicas of commonplace, short-lived and disposable items (balloon animals) into precious objects.

In contrast, the coarse, bristly surface of an ancient Shang Dynasty Fang-Ding—a ritual vessel used in worshipping dead ancestors—grants the work a vibrant energy, but does not invite our touch.



Figure 3.1.25: Fangding Ritual Food Vessel with Abstract Decor, Shang dynasty, China, 14th-11th century BCE. Cast bronze, 21.7 x 17.1 x 15.2 cm. Harvard Art Museums. (Photo: Harvard Art Museums, via Smarthistory)

The illusion of texture

The illusion of texture is no less important to our experience of works of art.

Dutch still life paintings are justly famous for their careful, illusionistic replication of objects. The smooth silver plates and glass goblet of Pieter Claesz's *Still Life* seem to tease us, as do the rougher cookies and breads, and the crumbly pie. The knife handle, pointing out of the image toward us, seems just beyond our grasp, and therefore makes this magnificent spread all the more tantalizing.



Figure 3.1.26: Pieter Claesz, *Still Life*, c. 1625. Oil on panel, 48 × 76.9 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Light and Shadow

by Art Institute of Chicago

Online Resource: Light and Shadow

Artists use the contrast between light and shadow to create the sense of three-dimensional form on a flat surface—and to shape viewers' perceptions. They may use light strategically to direct attention, create a particular mood, or communicate a message with an artwork. This video examines how three artists, using painting, printmaking, and installation, have used light to particular effect in their work.



Art Institute of Chicago, "Art Explainer 3: Light and Shadow"

The following works from the Art Institute of Chicago appear in this video:

- *Tanner, The Two Disciples at the Tomb*
- Kollwitz, Battlefield
- Flavin, “monument” for V. Tatlin

Articles in this chapter:

- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Line,” in *Smarthistory*, June 23, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Shape and Form,” in *Smarthistory*, July 11, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Color,” in *Smarthistory*, June 24, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Space,” in *Smarthistory*, July 9, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, “Texture,” in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Art Institute of Chicago, “Surface and Depth,” in *Smarthistory*, January 26, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Art Institute of Chicago, “Light and shadow,” in *Smarthistory*, February 7, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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3.2: Principles of Composition

Editors' Note

Elements of art, as described earlier in this chapter, include line, shape and form, color, space, surface and depth, texture, and light and shadow. Design is the way the elements that comprise an artwork fit together as a whole, its composition: how individual components might be organized, and how we can interpret the results of those organizational decisions.

Artists consider how all of these elements interact and work with (or against) one another to produce an end result. These elements can complement one another, as when an artist places cool colors together (such as green, blue, and turquoise) to create a calm feeling. Artists can also pair elements to create interesting juxtapositions, such as contrasting rough and smooth textures, for example, or by pairing complementary colors (those opposite each other on the color wheel) such as yellow and purple. The way an artist organizes the objects or formal elements in an artwork is known as its composition. A formal analysis, which involves looking carefully at an artwork's visual elements independent of its content ("story") or historical context, generally includes both discussion of individual artistic elements and how they are arranged.

Balance, symmetry, and emphasis

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Balance and symmetry

Balance is an even use of elements throughout a work of art. Symmetry is a very formal type of balance consisting of a mirroring of portions of an image. Bilateral symmetry, that is, two- sided symmetry, is the most common, in which two halves of a work of art mirror each other, as in Perugino's painting, *Christ Giving the Keys of the Kingdom to St. Peter* (Figure 3.1.20). In this painting, the symmetry gives the painting not only a sense of balance, but also a sense of calm, stability, and formality. Notice in particular the way that the building and arches in the background are painted to make the work symmetrical.



Figure **3.2.1**: Temple of Artemis, Corfu, Greece, c. 600-580 BCE. (Image via Smarthistory)

Just as the structures, themselves, are symmetrical in Perugino's painting, symmetry is also common in major works of architecture, where it lends buildings a tone of stability and power. Classical Greek temples like the Temple of Artemis at Corfu are rigidly symmetrical.

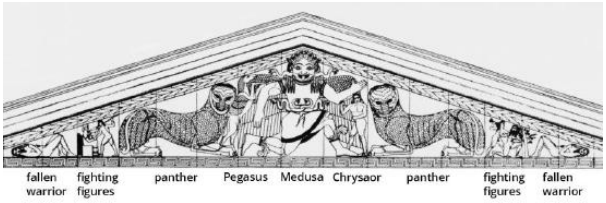


Figure **3.2.2**: Pediment detail, Temple of Artemis, Corfu, Greece, c. 600-580 BCE. (Image via Smarthistory)

In this diagram (the temple is now a ruin), even the sculpture on the façade—the front of a building—is nearly perfectly symmetrical. At the outer corners are a mirrored pair of fallen warriors, then two pairs (one now fragmentary) of fighting figures,

then two mirrored panthers, and then, in the center, Medusa, with two of her children beside her (Pegasus and Chrysaor).

Even the fearsome Gorgon in the center is presented facing directly outward at us, so that her face can be presented in hideous symmetry, with her great, bulging eyes, grimacing mouth, plaited hair, and even the snakes that emerge from the back of her head carved in perfect symmetry. This work should serve to counter the frequently made statement that symmetry makes works beautiful. While many cultures associate symmetry with beauty, and this temple as a whole might be described as such, a grotesque figure remains grotesque even when perfectly symmetrical.

Radial symmetry



Figure **3.2.3**: Garbhadhatu (Taizokai) Mandala (Womb World), mandala of Innate Reason and Original Enlightenment, Japan, Heian period (Tantric Buddhism), late 9th century. Colors on silk. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Radial symmetry is created when an image is symmetrical around a central point or axis, like a sunflower viewed head-on. Radial symmetry creates a strong sense of unity in a work of art, and is common in sacred images.

In a Shingon Tantric Buddhist World Womb Mandala, all points seem to radiate outward from the central figure of the Buddha. The numerous figures around him are bodhisattvas, individuals who have chosen out of compassion to delay their entry into Nirvana in order to help others who are suffering. It is fitting that they are shown as if emanating out of the Buddha, himself, as his enlightenment and compassion are the source and model for theirs. The image also gives a sense that the universe itself is highly ordered.



Figure **3.2.4**: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*, ancient Roman marble copy found in Pompeii of the lost bronze original, c. 450-40 BCE. Marble, 211 cm. Archaeological Museum, Naples, Italy. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

However, perfect symmetry is not necessary to create a sense of balance in an image. Asymmetrical balance is created when two sides of an image do not mirror each other, but still have approximately the same visual weight, the same amount of detail or shapes or color, and so on. The Classical Greek sculpture *Doryphoros (The Spearbearer)* by Polykleitos provides a clear example of asymmetrical balance. The figure does not stand in a symmetrical way, but overall, seems even, calm, balanced. In this case, the figure has his weight on his right leg, so this leg is tensed. The left leg is relaxed and bent. Balancing this out, the right arm hangs loosely, but the left arm is tensed. In this way, the body — which itself is symmetrical, or would be if he were posed with his feet side by side, looking straight ahead, with his arms hanging down — is balanced. This pose is called contrapposto, and is often used to give standing human figures a sense of life and animation.

Emphasis

Emphasis consists of drawing attention to one or more points in a work. This can be accomplished through any of the visual elements. In the World Womb Mandala, the Buddha is emphasized through location (he is centered in the image), color (the vivid red petals around him draw the eye), line (all of the rows of figures essentially guide the eye inward to the center through implied lines, and the lines dividing the red petals direct us inward, as well), symmetry (the radial symmetry focuses us inward to the center), and so on. In essence, we cannot help but return, again and again, to the Buddha, the focus of the image and also the focus of Buddhist devotion.

Movement

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

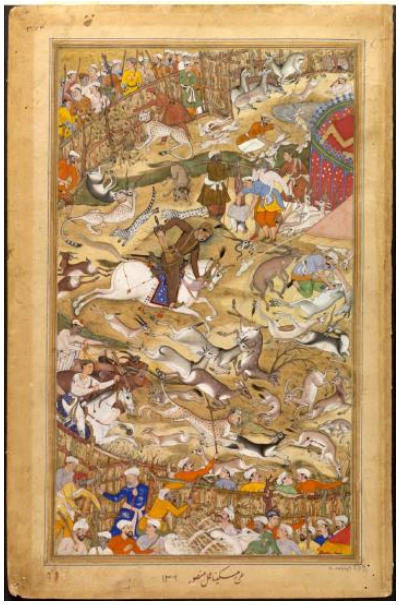


Figure **3.2.5**: Akbar on horseback, hunting animals within an enclosure, illustration from the *Akbarnama*, Mughal Empire, India, c. 1590-95. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 32.1 x 18.8 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Movement refers to a sense of motion as the eye is guided through a work of art. This can be accomplished by showing figures in motion, or simply through the visual elements.

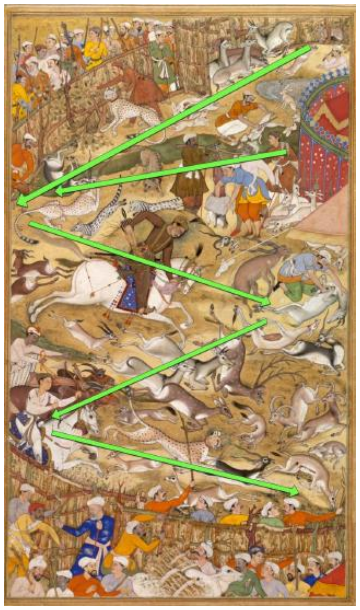


Figure **3.2.6**: Akbar on horseback, hunting animals within an enclosure, illustration from the *Akbarnama*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

An Indian illumination—that is, a painting in a handmade book—from the *Akbarnama* showing Akbar hunting in an enclosure demonstrates both types. As with the Dürer woodcut, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the rider on his horse charges rapidly from left to right across the image. The smaller animals scatter, darting in all directions and also hunting one another. Their movements create a strong sense of movement throughout the image. However, there are formal elements that intensify this.

Diagonals

Just as the horizontal lines behind the riders in the Dürer woodcut suggested their movement forward, so here, lines and colors help convey the motion of people and animals. There is a strong zigzag that brings us from top to bottom, or bottom to top.

Starting at the top-right corner, the fences form a strong diagonal, accompanied by the slash of green representing a stream. These meet at the left edge, where the momentum then follows Akbar on his large white horse, also emphasized by the line of darker earth that moves in a downward diagonal from the horse's mouth. This motion then again reverses direction, in a downward diagonal, back to the left edge, which in turn bounces back to the bottom right edge.

Our eyes therefore move throughout the image not only because the figures in it are depicted in motion, but also because of the manipulation of the visual elements.

Proportion and scale

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman

Proportion

Proportion refers to the relationship of parts of a body or form to one another and of the parts to the whole, for example, the size of the head of a figure in relation to the entire body.

Scale



Figure **3.2.7**: Altar group with Oba Akenzura I, Benin, Nigeria, eighteenth century. Brass, 63 cm. Ethnological Museum, Berlin, Germany. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Scale is the relationship of parts of an image to the image as a whole, or to something in the world outside of the image, for example, the size of the figure of a king in an image as compared to the size of the figure of his servant in the same image, or the size of a statue of the king as compared to the size of an actual person. Beginning with proportion, we can look again at *Doryphoros*. We will compare his proportions to those of an *Altar Group from Benin with Oba (King) Akenzua I and Two Attendants*.

The proportions of *Doryphoros* (Figure **3.2.4**) were laid out according to mathematical formulas in order to create an image that the sculptor believed presented the "ideal man." *Doryphoros* is about seven "heads" tall, so to speak, whereas the Akenzua is approximately two and a half "heads" tall. *Doryphoros*' limbs fit within the range of average human proportion, whereas Akenzua's legs are considerably shorter than his torso.

While their proportions are quite different, both present figures considered to be ideal by their cultures. *Doryphoros* embodies quite literally the focus on external beauty—according to the tastes of the day—that was prevalent in Classical Greece, whereas the image of Akenzua shows, with the intentional enlargement of the head, the greater importance of the intellect in the culture.

Hierarchical scale

Scale can refer to any relationship of parts to the whole, but one particular type is of great significance in many periods: hierarchical scale is scale based on relative importance. That is, the more important a figure, the larger he or she is in relation to the figures around him or her. This is quite different from the naturalistic scale found in works organized by linear perspective, like Perugino's painting.

Akenzua, for example, is considerably larger than the figures that flank him. These are not children, but adult male attendants. We are not supposed to therefore assume that Akenzua is a giant, but rather, that he is far more important than the other two men. Also note that the other two have rather different proportions: their heads are much smaller in relation to their bodies, and their arms and legs longer. This reminds us that Akenzua's proportions are absolutely deliberate, not the result of incompetence but of a conscious effort to convey a cultural meaning.

Before leaving this work, though, two more details should be mentioned. At their feet are small cats, but these are leopards—traditional symbols of the king—and so even the attendants are comparatively giant. And below the cats are fallen men, bound with their hands behind them, decapitated. The symbolism of decapitation as the ultimate, dehumanizing death highlights the importance of the scale of the head of the king who towers over them.

Pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman



Figure **3.2.8**: Vairocana Buddha, China, 16th-17th century. Bronze, 99 cm. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, California. (Photo via Smarthistory)

When an image or object is repeated throughout a work of art, or a part of a work, this is called either pattern or repetition.

Repetition and pattern

Repetition can be less structured than pattern, which is more regular. Both can work to create a sense of rhythm, as discussed below. The large base of a Ming Dynasty Chinese Bronze statue of Vairochana Buddha is composed of literally thousands of tiny bodhisattvas (enlightened beings who have chosen to stay on earth to help others achieve enlightenment), which therefore seem to serve to support Buddha figuratively, as well as visually. Their repetition is very regular, establishing a clear pattern. This is also the case in the Buddhist mandala (Figure **3.2.3**) from the 9th century. The pattern in both cases emphasizes the unity of purpose shared by these thousands of figures, each an embodiment of the ideal of compassion.

Rhythm



Figure **3.2.9**: Hypostyle hall, Great Mosque at Cordoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries. (Photo: wsifrancis, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Rhythm is the visual tempo set by repeating elements in a work of art or architecture. The arches and columns of the Great Mosque of Cordoba provide a good example. They are spaced very evenly, setting up an even tone to the building. This is then enlivened by the rhythm created by the striped pattern on the arches.

For contrast, we could look at Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*. Pollock was a fan of jazz music, and tried to capture something of its loose, syncopated rhythms. The resulting drip-paintings (they were made with the large canvases lain on the floor of his studio) have similarly loose, improvisational compositions. Despite its lack of formal structure, there is a clear rhythm running horizontally across the painting, and Pollock uses the title of the work to draw our attention to it.



Figure **3.2.10**: Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950. Enamel on canvas, 266.7 x 525.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Variety and Unity



Figure **3.2.11**: Garbhadhatu (Taizokai) Mandala (Womb World) (detail). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Variety is the use of different visual elements throughout a work, whereas unity is a feeling that all the parts of a work fit together well. These do not have to be opposites, as a work filled with variety might also have unity. The World Womb Mandala is an excellent example. Unlike the Ming Dynasty Bronze statue of Buddha, where all of the bodhisattvas are more or less identical, the many bodhisattvas on the World Womb Mandala are each individualized. At a distance, they all become one, expressing great unity, but taken one at a time, each as an object of devotional contemplation, they contain more variety than it would at first appear.

Articles in this chapter:

- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Balance, symmetry, and emphasis," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Movement," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Proportion and scale," in *Smarthistory*, July 11, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Pattern, repetition and rhythm, variety and unity," in *Smarthistory*, July 10, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Art of the Ancient Americas

In This Chapter

4.0: Chapter Introduction
4.1: North America (Mississippi/Ancient Fort, Ancestral Puebloan)
4.2: Mesoamerica (Olmec, Teotihuacan, Maya)
4.3: South America (Nasca, Paracas, Moche)

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4.0: Chapter Introduction

Editors' Note: Locating This Chapter and Ourselves

A chapter focusing on Art of the Ancient Americas is not traditionally included in a typical textbook for a “Survey of Western Art History” course (or for C-ID Art History 110). However, as editors of this text, we thought it imperative to include this chapter for a number of reasons.



Figure **4.0.1**: Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit and Unangax̂), *Never Forget.* Site-specific installation at Desert X 2021. Billboard letters (45’ tall) on desert-preserving scaffolding. Palm Springs, California. (Photo: Ted Drake, CC BY-ND 2.0). For more information about this artwork, see the Editors’ Note later in the chapter.

This book is meant for everyone, but written in particular with California Community College (CCC) students in mind. Seventy-three percent of CCCs are Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and more than 44% of the CCC student population identifies as Hispanic. Although 1.6% of California’s population identify as Native American or Alaskan Native, only 0.5% of the CCC population does. These demographics point to two important motivations to include this chapter.

First, we want to serve CCC students with this textbook. This chapter focuses on the ancient art of the Americas, meaning it looks at a sampling of ancient Indigenous cultures and art objects through 1300—first from the United States, next from Mesoamerica, and finally from South America. This content is particularly relatable and compelling to many students, especially those who may have family ties to Mexico or South America, or are Indigenous to the United States. Many CCC students want to learn about both the art of their ancestors and their place in history. In addition, California architecture, art, and visual history is also heavily influenced by Indigenous, Mexican, and South American cultures, making all California residents visually invested in understanding our personal place and stake in history.

Second, in conjunction with our Land Acknowledgement below, we would like this chapter to serve as both a call to action and as a stepping stone for centering more curriculum on our own Indigenous histories of the United States and greater North and South America. We see this chapter as a mirror of sorts, holding it up to ourselves before looking to a larger, more global past to trace and tell the history of art. As such, we would like to acknowledge and honor the art, culture, and people on whose land we and our CCC system are now on.

Northwestern University’s Land Acknowledgement reminds its students that “[i]t is important to understand the longstanding history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land acknowledgments do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation.” With this chapter, we hope to build on this reminder and to contextualize the place and home of our readers.

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the California Community Colleges' presence on land throughout the unceded territory of California, the traditional and ancestral home to nearly 200 tribal communities and nations. As Northwestern University’s land acknowledgment

reminded us above, it is important to understand and discuss the lasting *and current* legacies of colonialism and settler violence, while it is also Indigenous protocol to acknowledge the land and express gratitude to its stewards.

We also understand that acknowledgement is not enough and we hope that information in this book and in our courses helps to illuminate a more truthful account of history. We honor the Indigenous cultures of the United States and Americas by opening the book with their art and enduring artistic legacies that deeply influence our art and culture today.

To learn more, we suggest:

- Following the work of Dr. Adrienne Keene (Cherokee Nation) and artist Matika Wilbur (Tulalip and Swinomish) in their podcast All My Relations, on Keene's blog Native Appropriations, and in her Notes and Sources page for her book *Notable Native People*
- Exploring growing digital projects and archives such as Mapping Indigenous LA: Place-Making Through Digital Storytelling and Indigenous Peoples of California: Related Resources at The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley
- Learning about the Landback movement and campaign to dismantle and defund white supremacy and to return public lands to Indigenous communities
- Visiting the Native Land Digital Map and/or texting **907-312-5085** with your **city and state in the message**. You will learn whose land you are on so that you are empowered to learn more about where you reside, about who the traditional keepers of your hometowns have been, and about how you can take action and honor that relationship.

Editors' Notes: Nicholas Galanin's *Never Forget* and the Landback Movement



Figure **4.0.2**: Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit and Unangax̂), *Never Forget.* Site-specific installation at Desert X 2021, Billboard letters (45' tall) on desert-preserving scaffolding. Palm Springs, California. (Photo: Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0).

Courtesy of Desert X:

> *"For Nicholas Galanin, a Tlingit and Unangax̂ artist and musician, memory and land are inevitably entwined. The 45-foot letters of Never Forget reference the Hollywood sign, which initially spelled out HOLLYWOODLAND and was erected to promote a whites-only development. Its timing coincided with a development in Palm Springs that also connected to the film industry: Studio contracts limited actors' travel, contributing to the city's rise as playground and refuge of the stars. Meanwhile, the white settler mythology of America as the land of the free, home of the brave was promoted in the West, and the landscape was cinematized through the same lens. Never Forget asks settler landowners to participate in the work by transferring land titles and management to local Indigenous communities. The work is a call to action and a reminder that land acknowledgments become only performative when they do not explicitly support the land back movement. Not only does the work transmit a*

> *shockwave of historical correction, but also promises to do so globally through social media. Donate to the LANDBACK GoFundMe."*

In her chapter entitled "Settler Colonialism 101," scholar Adrienne Keene argues that "[t]he only way to end colonization is to go through a process of decolonization. Decolonization isn't about making things better for Indigenous people under the current structure; it's about returning land to Indigenous stewardship and revitalizing the knowledge associated with that land. Decolonization entails two words: Land Back. We don't have to know what this would look like to start working toward decolonization, but the first step is recognizing that we still live in a settler colony society."

To learn more about the Landback movement, please explore the links in this section and in the resource section following the Land Acknowledgement.

Introduction: Ghost Tracks and Kelp Highways: New Origin Stories in the U.S.

The prints are immediately recognizable: human feet, with toes dug deep into what was then squishy mud, long since hardened into stone. These are what archaeologists call "ghost tracks," because of the way brief stretches of them appear without traces on either side—and a recent set of them is causing scientists to rethink long-held beliefs about just when the first people arrived in what is today the United States.



Figure 4.0.3: Human footprints or "ghost tracks" that may be between 23,000 and 21,000 years old. Courtesy of the National Park Service and Bournemouth University (used by permission).

Human presence in the Americas is much more recent than in Africa, where our earliest ancestors originated, and Eurasia, into which they spread. The oldest art, as is discussed in the next chapter, is on those continents, not on the Americas. However, what the Americas do show is evidence not only of human ingenuity and persistence—but also of how new discoveries and scientific techniques can upend what we thought we knew about our earliest ancestors. Two recent archaeological finds have scientists questioning long-held beliefs regarding not only *who* the first people were to come to the present-day United States, but also *how long ago* they came here and *how* they arrived here—whether by land or by water.

First, in January of 2020, a group of scientists reported that they had successfully dated more than 60 so-called "ghost tracks" or human footprints left in an alkali flat in White Sands National Park, New Mexico. The results were shocking: radiocarbon dating of plant matter within and alongside the prints placed the tracks at somewhere between 21,000 to 23,000 years old. This is the earliest date yet estimated for the human occupation of North America, far predating other sites like Monte Verde, Chile from 14,500 years ago (still contested by some scientists), or Clovis, New Mexico, where Edgar B. Howard found an ancient spear tip from approximately 13,000 years ago.



Figure **4.0.4**: A Clovis projectile point, 9250-8950 BCE. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, Indiana. (Photo: The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Editors' Note

The "BCE" in the caption for Figure **4.0.4** stands for "Before the Common Era," which is the dating convention that scientists and academics use today. We are living in the 21st century CE, or the Common Era. Usually CE is only used after a date within the first century or two of the Common Era; for dates more recent than that, it is simply assumed (unlike BCE dates, which must always be indicated). Occasionally you will still encounter sources that use the older convention BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini). They are referring to the same thing as BCE and CE, but the newer conventions are religiously neutral.

The new date suggested by the White Sands ghost tracks puts humans in North America during the height of the last Ice Age and well before the ice sheets would have retreated—something previously unfathomable. A mammoth track found alongside human prints in one of the topmost layers of the geological record further indicates that the site cannot be more recent than the late Pleistocene when mammoths became extinct. Radiocarbon dating is a technology that continues to become more precise, but is still subject to recalibrations and ongoing discoveries, and additional research is needed to verify this dramatically different proposed new date of human occupation in the Americas.

Second, another exciting archaeological theory has been taking shape off the coast of California, examining not just when humans made it to this continent, but how. The shores, coves, and cliffs of the Channel Islands are growing sites of interest, particularly for underwater archaeologists who are looking into Ice Age settlements. (Learn more about the growing field of nautical archaeology in Chapter 8, too.)



Figure **4.0.5**: Aerial photograph (facing northwest) of Channel Islands National Park, with Anacapa Island in the foreground. (Photo: filippo_jean, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The most well-established theory of human occupation of North America is known as the "Clovis first" paradigm, named after the location where Howard found the first of what would be many "Clovis points," stone spear heads designed for hunting big game. According to this theory, after these first Americans crossed a land bridge from Asia to Alaska, they spread inland through the continent, hunting mammoths and other large animals. However, there is increasing evidence that the first Americans were not the Clovis big-game hunters of popular lore, but may have been seagoing wayfarers who had traveled along America's west coast by watercraft, following what Jon Erlandson calls the "kelp highway." The Monte Verde site, excavated in 1997, was estimated to be nearly 3,000 years older than any previously dated Clovis site, and surprisingly did not contain any Clovis points or signs that these were big-game hunters—but *did* contain nine different kinds of seaweed, indicating to many scientists that these settlers likely traveled from Siberia, Alaska, or the Yukon down the North and South American coastline. It is quite possible that they stopped at the Channel Islands on the way.

In fact, the origin myths and oral history of the Chumash people, who inhabited the Channel Islands for thousands of years and today live along the mainland coast, lend additional support to this theory. Maria Solares, a cultural matriarch and Chumash elder, described to a Smithsonian anthropologist in the early 20th century that "the Chumash people bloomed from a seed in the soil of the Channel Islands, planted by the Earth goddess herself. After allowing them to flourish there for thousands of years, she told some to leave, to go fill the mainland, which was then empty of people." Brian Holguin, a geochemical archaeologist who is also a member of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians and great-great-great-great-grandson of Maria Solares, and others working in the Channel Islands, have argued that before the ice melted, allowing the Clovis people to migrate south, the descendents of the very first Americans might have been living along the coastal enclaves of the Channel Islands, then a single mass called Santarosae. This history could remain buried in the seabeds below, awaiting a rediscovery.

Our earliest ancestors were travelers, survivors, and creators. Sometimes they left behind tiny, intricate, portable items, and sometimes large, sophisticated urban developments. While it is often simply luck that determines which objects have survived to allow us to piece together their stories—whether they happened to be made out of a material that lasts, whether the climate has been conducive to preservation, or even where excavation has been possible—the vagaries of discovery also include who excavates, and under what premises. (See the suggested article by Sarah E. Baires for the problematic history behind some of the early archaeological explanations for the mound builders in Ohio and Illinois, for instance.) Nevertheless, as archaeologists explore new sites, and use increasingly sensitive dating technology, our understanding of human history expands and deepens. What we see here in the Americas, where we start this exploration, can inform our understanding of other art around the world—and of the changing stories that scientific inquiry helps us to tell about our ancient human past.

Global Connections: Oral History, Art History, and Archaeology

Maria Solares' interview about Chumash origin myth and oral history reminds us of the importance of oral history and the impact it can have in (re)informing contemporary archaeology and research. Today, archaeologists and art historians are

listening more carefully to oral histories internationally in order to help validate the recollection of elders and further scientific research.

"Sometimes," Dr. Billie Lythberg writes, discussing the megalithic capital Nan Madol, "oral histories are able to explain the extraordinary feats of men in ways that present-day science cannot replicate." Nan Madol, near the island of Pohnpei in the Pacific, features massive and heavy basalt structures, built between 1200-1600 on artificial islands first constructed in 900. Exactly how the site was engineered remains unclear, but Lythberg explains that "aspects of the oral history of Nan Madol, passed down through many generations, correlate with archaeological evidence. For example, oral histories describe a series of canals cut to allow eels to enter the city from the sea." These canals appear to be key to understanding how the basalt and coral megaliths were moved into place. And in Rapa Nui, the Rapanui term *neke neke* refers to "walking without legs" and has influenced local archaeologists' newly-tested theories about how their megalithic moai were moved into place.



Figure **4.0.6**: Moai at sunrise at Ahu Tongariki, volcanic tuff and scoria, c. 1400 CE, Rapa Nui (Easter Island). (Photo: Ellen C. Caldwell, CC BY-NC 2.0)

In Keone Nunes' 1998 introduction to *Unwritten Literature of Hawai'i: The Sacred Songs of the Hula*, he argues that people "who rely solely upon the written word sometimes mistakenly believe that oral cultures have a faulty ability to pass on information, that each person responsible for the information changes the facts in retelling. In ancient Hawai'i, as in other Polynesian societies, the telling of traditions was critical to continuity with the past and to survival of the future. Therefore, Hawaiians realized that listening was equally important as speaking if the traditions were to accurately survive." Although there is a tendency in cultures that rely on written histories to underestimate the accuracy of oral histories, it is important to remember that oral traditions can be just as accurate as written history—and even more so—and have a valuable place in both understanding history, and in furthering historical research and archaeological discovery, as indicated by just the few cases above.

Historiography (Writing History)

Terminology

The American Southwest and Mesoamerica

As Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank points out, art historians traditionally "tend to separate Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, as if the peoples who lived in these areas did not interact. We now know this is misleading, and was not the case." Naming conventions and current national borders often irrationally separate cultures and spaces from one another in the present, when really, there was a tremendous amount of interaction and connection between people of present-day Mexico and the American Southwest. Kilroy-Ewbank draws attention to archaeological excavations at Pueblo Bonito that connect Chacoan life and culture to Mesoamerica, through cacao remnants found in pottery and the remains of birds native to Mexico. Through a rich network of trade, many cultures in this chapter were very much connected, despite their names or geographical locations.

Naming by Outsiders: What is okay and what is not?

In discussing Native American, First Nations, and Indigenous art, it is very important to name the culture and artist's identity, specifically providing the nation or tribe's name in the original language, when possible. With contemporary artists and figures, it is

also important to identify them as they self-identify. Terminology can be personal in this way. For instance, artist Erica Lord identifies herself as Athabascan, Iñupiaq, Finnish, Swedish, English, and Japanese, but James Luna, who was of Luiseño, Ipai, and Mexican descent, often self-identified more simply as "Luiseño Indian." Both use their art as a form of critique and exploration of perceived identity, often with a side of humor, such as in works like Luna's 1996 self-portrait *Half Indian/Half Mexican*.

Please do not be thrown off, either, by terminology as it changes and evolves. As Gregory Younging argues in *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, "[t]he process of decolonizing language surrounding Indigenous peoples is not finished; terms, names, and styles continue to evolve." It is important to be adaptive and respectful in using the appropriate terms and in keeping up with the current language.

In her 2021 introduction to *Notable Native People*, Adrienne Keene notes:

"Tribal names can be a bit tricky—there are official federally recognized names and more colloquial versions of those names, widely used (but not preferred) names given by settlers, as well as Native language names and other names that may be preferred by tribal members. Many of the names you may be familiar with, such as Sioux (for Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota) or Winnebago (for Ho-Chunk), were names given by settlers and do not come from Native languages, so many of these names are not preferred or are falling out of favor. Some settler-given names, however, like Osage, are considered acceptable and widely used. When noting the tribe(s) to which they belong, Native people may also choose to include (or not to include) their specific band or clan affiliation(s)."

In this chapter, and throughout this book, there will be a number of instances in which names of people or places are the product of outsiders—in other words, a culture or place is named by a culture outside of that group. In some cases, these names have stuck, such as "Teotihuacan," a name given by later Aztec discoverers and meaning the "Gathering Place of the Gods." Other names, however, have purposely and rightfully gone into the historical rubbish bin, such as "Anasazi"—which, as mentioned later in this chapter, is Navajo in origin and means "ancient enemy." Out of respect, the preferred name for the ancestors of the Pueblo people is either the Ancient Puebloans or Ancestral Puebloans. (This is further complicated by the fact that "Puebloan" comes from the Spanish word *pueblo*, referring to towns, communal adobe and stone buildings, and to the Indigenous people of the American Southwest who live in such dwellings.) Some contemporary tribal nations and people have decided to embrace colonial Spanish names or the label of "Indian," while some have also rejected these. Reasons for doing so are rooted in complex histories and are uniquely personal. As the *First American Art Magazine's* Style Guide notes, "many tribes in the United States use Indian in their official names for themselves, as is their right, so it is not up to outsiders to dictate." Again, it is always recommended, when possible, to use the name preferred by a culture or individual.

Translation and Transliteration

Finally, when historians address and document terms, names, and words written in different languages, they are often translated (rendering the words from one language to an approximate equivalent in another) and also transliterated (reproducing the sounds from one system of writing to another based on phonetic similarity). Because of the difficulty of replicating the sounds of one language in another alphabet, words, terms, and names are often spelled differently or with multiple variants. One example of this is the Nasca culture of Peru, presented later in this chapter. As the Dallas Museum of Art notes, "'Nazca' and 'Nasca' are commonly used interchangeably, but generally Nasca is used to refer to the period and culture that inhabited this area, while Nazca is used to describe the region, town, and river."

The incredibly complex Maya writing system, the earliest example of which dates to as early as 300 BCE, confounded scholars for centuries. It uses pictographic symbols, or glyphs, that record both entire words and individual spoken syllables. Not only could a single word be written in different ways, but the same glyph could take multiple different forms, making the script particularly challenging to decipher. As the documentary *Cracking the Maya Code* reveals, beginning to understand the written language entirely reconfigured scholars' understanding of the Maya and their history—and has allowed a new generation to reclaim a language and culture that had been systematically and often brutally repressed.

Chapter Overview

This chapter covers a huge range of art, cultures, regions, and time periods and is truly only a brief overview and sampling of art from the ancient Americas. It is not at all exhaustive, so if you are moved by the art in this chapter, please do look into taking

longer courses devoted to the Art of the Americas and Indigenous Native American Art. The chapter begins with North America, centering this book on the country and place of its origins, and then moves south to Mesoamerica and South America.

As mentioned in the opening story of this chapter, the original human occupants of these continents probably arrived from Asia sometime between 20,000 and 10,000 BCE—though maybe even further back. They spread throughout the continents, eventually developing agriculture and building urban settlements.

Objects overview

This chapter covers artwork that has inspired much later art and architecture in Mexico, Peru, and the United States. This includes art as famous as the Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde, Colorado; the Mayan architecture of Chichen Itza; and the monumental Nasca geoglyphs in Peru. This chapter addresses a wide range of architecture, earthenworks, funerary structures, portable sculpture, and ceramic vessels, including:

- the Great Serpent Mound in Southwestern Ohio, a squiggling snake made by the Adena, Hopewell, or Fort Ancient peoples
- the Ancestral Puebloans' great cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde, Colorado
- the Codex Féjervary-Mayer, a cosmogram depicting how the Mexica thought of the universe
- the many ancient ballcourts found across Mesoamerica
- the great Temple of the Feathered Serpent in Teotihuacan
- the Mayan Stele H portraying a youthful rendition of the ruler 18-Rabbit at the Great Plaza in Copan, Honduras
- Mayan painted vessels depicting rulers and nobles, which, while sometimes used for a utilitarian function on earth, always carried the ultimate purpose of accompanying the deceased to the Underworld
- the Temple of Kukulcan, famed feathered serpent, at Chichen Itza (also known as "El Castillo")
- the smiling ("Sonrientos") ceramic figurines of the Veracruz people from the Remojadas region of Mexico
- the Nasca geoglyphs, depicting monumental 300-feet wide zoomorphic representations—visible from space

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the art of the Ancient Americas, you will be able to:

- Recognize land acknowledgements and know whose land you are on
- Analyze distinctive architectural and burial structures of two Native American civilizations in North America
- Identify the characteristics of the "Mother Culture" of the Olmec and recognize them in later Mesoamerican cultures
- Recognize the distinguishing features and themes of Mayan art
- Discuss the pottery, textiles, and earthworks of early Peruvian civilization

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Ross Andersen, "The Search for America's Atlantis: Did people first come to this continent by land or by sea?," for *The Atlantic*
- Freda Kreier, "'Ghost tracks' suggest people came to the Americas earlier than once thought," for *ScienceNews*
- Clovis Culture, for SmartHistory
- Native Resource Center's Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgements
- California State University San Marcos, "Land Acknowledgement Toolkit: You're on California Indian Land, Now What? Acknowledging Relationships to Space and Place" [PDF]
- Sarah E. Baires, "White Settlers Buried the Truth About the Midwest's Mysterious Mound Cities Pioneers," for *Smithsonian Magazine*
- Olmec ceremonial ax (celt) in the form of a were-jaguar at the British Museum
- Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, "Creation Story of the Maya"
- The "Paracas Textile" at the Brooklyn Museum of Fine Arts
- Moche Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- The Ballcourts of Chichén Itzá for Google Arts & Culture
- Nova, *Cracking the Maya Code* documentary
- Jim Scott, "Ancient DNA used to track abandonment of Mesa Verde in 13th century"
- Zachary Small, "Push to Return 116,000 Native American Remains Is Long-Awaited," for *The New York Times*
- Kate Fitz Gibbon, "NAGPRA in Hawaii: Museum and Native Hawaiian Conflict

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4.1: North America (Mississippi/Ancient Fort, Ancestral Puebloan)

North America: about geography and chronological periods in Native American art



Figure **4.1.1**: Map of North America showing the regions of Native American cultures. (Image via Smarthistory)

Typically when people discuss Native American art they are referring to peoples in what is today the United States and Canada. You might sometimes see this referred to as Native North American art, even though Mexico, the Caribbean, and those countries in Central America are typically not included. These areas are commonly included in the arts of Mesoamerica (or Middle America), even though these countries are technically part of North America.

So how do we consider so many groups and of such diverse natures? We tend to treat them geographically: Eastern Woodlands (sometime divided between North and Southeast), Southwest and West (or California), Plains and Great Basin, and Northwest Coast and North (Sub-Arctic and Arctic). While this is by no means a perfect way of addressing the varied tribes and First Nations within these areas, such a map can help to reveal patterns and similarities.

Chronology

Chronology (the arrangement of events into specific time periods in order of occurrence) is tricky when discussing Native American or First Nations art. Each geographic region is assigned different names to mark time, which can be confusing to anyone learning about the images, objects, and architecture of these areas for the first time. For instance, for the ancient Eastern Woodlands, you might read about the Late Archaic (c. 3000–1000 BCE), Woodland (c. 1100 BCE–1000 CE), Mississippian (c. 900–c. 1500/1600 CE), and Fort Ancient (c. 1000–1700) periods. But if we turn to the Southwest, there are alternative terms like Basketmaker (c. 100 BCE–700 CE) and Pueblo (700–1400 CE). You might also see terms like pre- and post-Contact (before and after contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans) and Reservation Era (late nineteenth century) that are used to separate different moments in time. Some of these terms speak to the colonial legacy of Native peoples because they separate time based on interactions with foreigners. Other terms like Prehistory have fallen out of favor and are problematic since they suggest that Native peoples didn't have a history prior to European contact.

Organization

We arrange Native American and First Nations material prior to c. 1500 in a separate section which includes material about the Ancestral Puebloans, Moundbuilders, and Mississippian peoples. Those objects and buildings created after c. 1500 are in their own section, which will hopefully highlight the continuing diversity of Native groups as well as the transformations (sometimes violent ones) occurring throughout parts of North America. Artists working after 1914 (or the beginning of WWI) are located in both the Art of the Americas section, and in the modern and contemporary areas.

Terms and Issues in Native American Art

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, the Dakotas, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming—all state names derived from Native American sources. Pontiac, moose, raccoon, pecan, kayak, squash, chipmunk, Winnebago. These common words also derive from different Native words and demonstrate the influence these groups have had on the United States. Pontiac, for instance, was an 18th century Ottawa chief (also called Obwandiyag), who fought against the British in the Great Lakes region. The word "moose," first used in English in the early seventeenth century during colonization, comes from Algonquian languages.

Stereotypes



Figure **4.1.2**: "Balboa and the Indian Princess," 1906, in Frederick A., Ober, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa (New York, Harper, 1906), p. 68. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Stereotypes persist when discussing Native American arts and cultures, and sadly many people remain unaware of the complicated and fascinating histories of Native peoples and their art. Too many people still imagine a warrior or chief on horseback wearing a feathered headdress, or a beautiful young "princess" in an animal hide dress (what we now call the Indian Princess, as is imagined in Figure **4.1.2**). Popular culture and movies perpetuate these images, and homogenize the incredible diversity of Native groups across North America. There are too many different languages, cultural traditions, cosmologies, and ritual practices to adequately make broad statements about the cultures and arts of the indigenous peoples of what is now the United States and Canada.

In the past, the term "primitive" has been used to describe the art of Native tribes and First Nations. This term is deeply problematic—and reveals the distorted lens of colonialism through which these groups have been seen and misunderstood. After contact, Europeans and Euro-Americans often conceived of the Amerindian peoples of North America as noble savages (a primitive, uncivilized, and romanticized "Other"). This legacy has affected the reception and appreciation of Native arts, which is why much of it was initially collected by anthropological (rather than art) museums. Many people viewed Native objects as curiosities or as specimens of "dying" cultures—which in part explains why many objects were stolen or otherwise acquired without approval of Native peoples. Many sacred objects, for example, were removed and put on display for non-Native audiences. While much has changed, this legacy lives on, and it is important to be aware of and overcome the many stereotypes and biases that persist from prior centuries.

Repatriation

One significant step that has been taken to correct some of this colonial legacy has been NAGPRA, or the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990. This is a U.S. federal law that dictates that "human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, referred to collectively in the statute as cultural items" be returned to tribes if they can

demonstrate “lineal descent or cultural affiliation.” Many museums in the U.S. have been actively trying to repatriate items and human remains. For example, in 2011, a museum returned a wooden box drum, a hide robe, wooden masks, a headdress, a rattle, and a pipe to the Tlingít T’akdeintaan Clan of Hoonah, Alaska. These objects were purchased in 1924 for $500.

In the 19th century, many groups were violently forced from their ancestral homelands onto reservations. This is an important factor to remember when reading the essays and watching the videos in this section because the art changes—sometimes very dramatically—in response to these upheavals. You might read elsewhere that objects created after these transformations are somehow less authentic because of the influence of European or Euro-American materials and subjects on Native art. However, it is crucial that we do not view those artworks as somehow less culturally valuable simply because Native men and women responded to new and sometimes radically changed circumstances.

Many twentieth and twenty-first century artists, including Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Sioux), Alex Janvier (Chipewyan [Dene]) and Robert Davidson (Haida), don’t consider themselves to work outside of so-called “traditional arts.” In 1958, Howe even wrote a famous letter commenting on his methods when his work was denounced by Philbrook Indian Art Annual Jurors as not being “authentic” Native art:

> *Who ever said that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed. There is much more to Indian Art than pretty, stylized pictures. There was also power and strength and individualism (emotional and intellectual insight) in the old Indian paintings. Every bit in my paintings is a true, studied fact of Indian paintings. Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him? Now, even in Art, ‘You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different.” Well, I am not going to stand for it. Indian Art can compete with any Art in the world, but not as a suppressed Art…. [Oscar Howe and the Philbrook Museum of Art, 1958]*

More terms and issues

The word Indian is considered offensive to many peoples. The term derives from the Indies, and was coined after Christopher Columbus bumped into the Caribbean islands in 1492, believing, mistakenly, that he had found India. Other terms are equally problematic or generic. You might encounter many different terms to describe the peoples in North America, such as Native American, American Indian, Amerindian, Aboriginal, Native, Indigenous, First Nations, and First Peoples.

Native American is used here because people are most familiar with this term, yet we must be aware of the problems it raises. The term applies to peoples throughout the Americas, and the Native peoples of North America, from Panama to Alaska and northern Canada, are incredibly diverse. It is therefore important to represent individual cultures as much as we possibly can. The essays here use specific tribal and First Nations names so as not to homogenize or lump peoples together. On Smarthistory, the artworks listed under Native American Art are only those from the United States and Canada, while those in Mexico and Central America are located in other sections.

You might also encounter words like tribes, clans, or bands in relation to the social groups of different Native communities. The United States government refers to an Indigenous group as a “tribe,” while the Canadian government uses the term “band.” Many communities in Canada prefer the term “nation.”

Identity

In order to be legally classified as an indigenous person in the United States and Canada, an individual must be officially listed as belonging to a specific tribe or band. This issue of identity is obviously a sensitive one, and serves as a reminder of the continuing impact of colonial policy. Many contemporary artists, including James Luna (Pooyukitchum/Luiseño) and Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith (from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Nation), address the problem of who gets to decide who or what an Indian is in their work.

Luna's *Artifact Piece* (1987) and *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (1993) both confront issues of identity and stereotypes of Native peoples. In *Artifact Piece*, Luna placed himself into a glass vitrine (like the ones we often see in museums) as if he were a static artifact, a relic of the past, accompanied by personal items like pictures of his family. In *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, Luna asks his audience to come take a picture with him. He changes clothes three times. He wears a loincloth, then a loincloth with a feather and a bone breastplate, and then what we might call "street clothes." Most people choose to take a picture with him in the former two, and so Luna draws attention to the problematic idea that somehow he is less authentically Native when dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Even the naming conventions applied to peoples need to be revisited. In the past, the Navajo term "Anasazi" was used to name the ancestors of modern-day Puebloans. Today, "Ancestral Puebloans" is considered more acceptable. Likewise, "Eskimo" designated peoples in the Arctic region, but this word has fallen out of favor because it homogenizes the First Nations in this area. In general, it is always preferable to use a tribe or Nation's specific name when possible, and to do so in its own language.

Global Connections: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)

Fusing Historical Knowledge with Scientific Advances

Historically, archaeologists and art historians have been associated with and complicit in grave robbing, particularly Indigenous graves. Museums have been equally problematic in collecting and showcasing human remains, often refusing to repatriate them. A recent *New York Times* video about the process of searching for the graves of Canada's Indigenous children highlights pressing and ongoing issues facing many Indigenous communities. The grim and moving story documents how archaeologists are combining oral interviews with new technology to locate children's graves at Canada's residential boarding schools. Through interviews with elders from the Muskowekwan First Nation community who are survivors of the boarding schools, archaeologists are mapping out the school properties and using advanced ground-penetrating radar technology to scan the ground and find unmarked graves in the places specified by the elders. This validates reports that have long been acknowledged within the community, while bringing the abuses to the surface internationally and offering communities a chance to heal, grieve, and give their ancestors proper burials.

Such a fusing of oral tradition and advanced scientific technology is important to the fields of both archaeology and art history for a number of reasons. First, it underscores that this is not ancient history: ongoing contemporary issues persist around the treatment and restitution of human remains and ancestral items. Second, it reminds viewers that graves and artifacts are about real people and family members—ancestors—and not just objects. And finally, it prompts art historians to listen to and trust Native communities, particularly in the face of such violent pasts. In mixing historical knowledge held by elders with high tech advancements and archaeological tools, such research teams are forging new roads for the disciplines of art history and archaeology. Instead of digging into the earth because something might be buried there, teams are returning the decision-making power and sovereignty to local communities, allowing them to determine what is best. This approach is dramatically different from the archaeological practices described in later chapters, in which foreign teams of Europeans descended upon ancient tombs and graves with little consideration for the humans interred there.

The History and Future of NAGPRA

In 1990, the United States took a significant step in addressing human rights abuses and past archaeological violence through the collection of human remains. With the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, also known as NAGPRA, federal law now dictates that "certain Native American cultural items—human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony" be returned "to lineal descendants, Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations."

Since its passage, NAGPRA has been considered largely successful in helping to return certain treasured and sacred objects. However, there have been hiccups, both on the mainland and in Hawai'i, where "tribal affiliation" is not defined in the same way. As Zachary Small reports, "[t]he remains of more than 116,000 Native American ancestors are still held by institutions around the country, and the National Park Service says that, for nearly all of them, the institutions have not linked the remains to a particular tribe, a designation known as 'culturally affiliated' that allows Indigenous groups to reclaim the bones of their forebears."

The Biden-Harris Administration is planning to make regulatory adjustments that should speed up the repatriation process in addition to requiring museums and institutions to complete the affiliation process in identifying remains and artifacts. Secretary

of the Interior Deb Haaland, an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo and first Native American to hold a cabinet post, is leading this move and drafting the regulatory changes, in consultation with tribal and Native Hawaiian communities.

Calls for an International NAGPRA

NAGPRA is a small step in the right direction in terms of repatriating sacred objects and human remains, but it only applies to the United States. Many ancestral human remains and sacred objects still lie in museum collections internationally. The 2015 documentary *Te Kuhane O Te Tupuna (The Spirit of the Ancestors)* documents the emotional story of one Rapanui family's search for such repatriation. (Rapa Nui is a Polynesian island located in the South Pacific Ocean and is often called "Easter Island" by outsiders.) In the film, three generations travel to London and Paris in search of sacred ancestral remains and the lost moai *Hoa Haka Nana ʻia* who controversially resides in the British Museum. On this journey, they visit the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and as they survey objects from the Rapanui collection, Benedicto Tuki and his young granddaughter Mikaela Pakarati ask the curator what one unknown object is, wrapped in paper and lying amongst carved wooden figures. The curator opens it to reveal that it is a packet of human hair. Mikaela confirms that she is understanding correctly and stands in heartbreaking silence and horror with her grandpa, looking at the hair of an ancestor, now bundled in the basement of a museum 8,500 miles from home.

It is moments like these that help to both illuminate and humanize the very real need for an international NAGPRA, particularly from former colonial superpowers who often still hold an abundance of looted artifacts and human remains that remain sacred to the original owners and ancestors.

Fort Ancient Culture: Great Serpent Mound

by Dr. Katherine T. Brown



Figure **4.1.3**: Aerial view of the Great Serpent Mound, Fort Ancient Culture(?), c. 1070. Adams County, Ohio. (Photo: Eric Ewing, CC BY-SA 3.0)

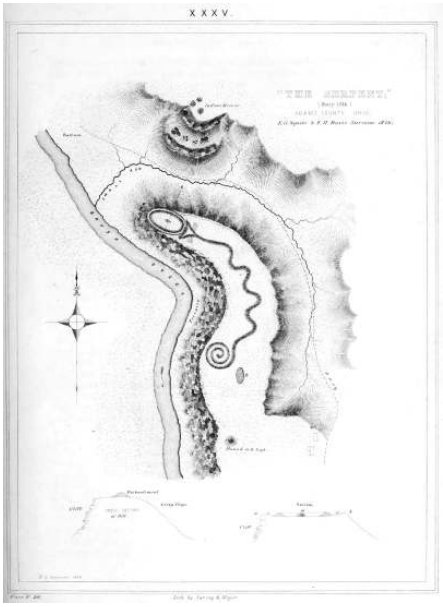


Figure 4.1.4: Ephraim George Squier and E. H. Davis, "The Serpent;" entry 1014, Adams County Ohio. Pl. XXXV, *Ancient monuments of the Mississippi Valley: comprising the results of extensive original surveys and explorations*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1848. (Image via Smarthistory)

The Great Serpent Mound in rural, southwestern Ohio is the largest serpent effigy in the world. Numerous mounds were made by the ancient Native American cultures that flourished along the fertile valleys of the Mississippi, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers a thousand years ago, though many were destroyed as farms spread across this region during the modern era. They invite us to contemplate the rich spiritual beliefs of the ancient Native American cultures that created them.

The Great Serpent Mound measures approximately 1,300 feet in length and ranges from one to three feet in height. The complex mound is both architectural and sculptural and was erected by settled peoples who cultivated maize, beans and squash and who maintained a stratified society with an organized labor force, but left no written records. Let's take a look at both aerial and close-up views that can help us understand the mound in relationship to its site and the possible intentions of its makers.

Supernatural powers?

The serpent is slightly crescent-shaped and oriented such that the head is at the east and the tail at the west, with seven winding coils in between, as can be seen in the drawing in Figure 4.1.4. The shape of the head perhaps invites the most speculation. Whereas some scholars read the oval shape as an enlarged eye, others see a hollow egg or even a frog about to be swallowed by wide, open jaws. But perhaps that lower jaw is an indication of appendages, such as small arms that might imply the creature is a lizard rather than a snake. Many native cultures in both North and Central America attributed supernatural powers to snakes or reptiles and included them in their spiritual practices. The native peoples of the Middle Ohio Valley in particular frequently created snake-shapes out of copper sheets.



Figure 4.1.5: Satelite view of the Great Serpent Mound, c. 1070. Adams County, Ohio (Photo via Smarthistory)

The mound conforms to the natural topography of the site, which is a high plateau overlooking Ohio Brush Creek. In fact, the head of the creature approaches a steep, natural cliff above the creek. The unique geologic formations suggest that a meteor struck the site approximately 250-300 million years ago, causing folded bedrock underneath the mound.

Celestial hypotheses

Aspects of both the zoomorphic form and the unusual site have associations with astronomy worthy of our consideration. The head of the serpent aligns with the summer solstice sunset, and the tail points to the winter solstice sunrise. Could this mound have been used to mark time or seasons, perhaps indicating when to plant or harvest? Likewise, it has been suggested that the curves in the body of the snake parallel lunar phases, or alternatively align with the two solstices and two equinoxes.



Figure 4.1.6: View of tail, Great Serpent Mound. (Photo: The Last Cookie, CC BY 2.0)

Some have interpreted the egg or eye shape at the head to be a representation of the sun. Perhaps even the swallowing of the sun shape could document a solar eclipse. Another theory is that the shape of the serpent imitates the constellation Draco, with the Pole Star matching the placement of the first curve in the snake's torso from the head. An alignment with the Pole Star may indicate that the mound was used to determine true north and thus served as a kind of compass.

Of note also is the fact that Halley's Comet appeared in 1066, although the tail of the comet is characteristically straight rather than curved. Perhaps the mound served in part to mark this astronomical event or a similar phenomenon, such as light from a supernova. In a more comprehensive view, the serpent mount may represent a conglomerate of all celestial knowledge known by these native peoples in a single image.

Who built it?

Determining exactly which culture designed and built the effigy mound, and when, is a matter of ongoing inquiry. A broad answer may lie in viewing the work as being designed, built, and/or refurbished over an extended period of time by several indigenous groups. The leading theory is that the Fort Ancient Culture (1000-1650 CE) is principally responsible for the mound, having erected it in c. 1070 CE. This mound-building society lived in the Ohio Valley and was influenced by the contemporary Mississippian culture (700-1550), whose urban center was located at Cahokia in Illinois. The rattlesnake was a common theme

among the Mississippian culture, and thus it is possible that the Fort Ancient Culture appropriated this symbol from them (although there is no clear reference to a rattle to identify the species as such).



Figure 4.1.7: View of the Great Serpent Mound. (Photo: Katherine T. Brown, via Smarthistory)

An alternative theory is that the Fort Ancient Culture refurbished the site c. 1070, reworking a preexisting mound built by the Adena Culture (c. 1100 BCE-200 CE) and/or the Hopewell Culture (c. 100 BCE-550 CE.). Whether the site was built by the Fort Ancient peoples, or by the earlier Adena or Hopewell Cultures, the mound is atypical. The mound contains no artifacts, and both the Fort Ancient and Adena groups typically buried objects inside their mounds. Although there are no graves found inside the Great Serpent Mound, there are burials found nearby, but none of them are the kinds of burials typical for the Fort Ancient culture and are more closely associated with Adena burial practices. Archaeological evidence does not support a burial purpose for the Great Serpent Mound.

Debate continues

Whether this impressive monument was used as a way to mark time, document a celestial event, act as a compass, serve as a guide to astrological patterns, or provide a place of worship to a supernatural snake god or goddess, we may never know with certainty. One scholar has recently suggested that the mound was a platform or base for totems or other architectural structures that are no longer extant, perhaps removed by subsequent cultures. All to say, scholarly debate continues, based on on-going archaeological evidence and geological research. But without a doubt, the mound is singular and significant in its ability to provide tangible insights into the cosmology and rituals of the ancient Americas.

Optional Online Resource: Mississippian Gorget

This neck ornament, or gorget, was found in a mound burial in Tennessee, but was carved into a coastal shell. In this *Seeing America* video, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. David Penney, Associate Director for Museum Scholarship, Exhibitions, and Public Engagement at the National Museum of the American Indian, discuss the Mississippian period, including its cities and burial traditions, as well as the imagery and iconography of this intricately-incised ornament.



Gorget, c. 1250-1350, probably Middle Mississippian Tradition, whelk shell, 10 x 2 cm (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 18/853).

Mesa Verde

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

Wanted: stunning view

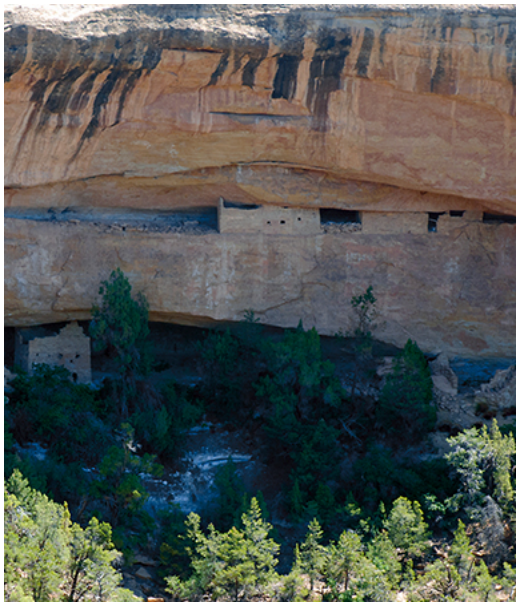


Figure **4.1.8**: Cliff dwellings, Ancestral Puebloan, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 450–1300 CE. Sandstone. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Imagine living in a home built into the side of a cliff. The Ancestral Puebloan peoples (formerly known as the Anasazi) did just that in some of the most remarkable structures still in existence today. Beginning after 1000-1100 CE, they built more than 600 structures (mostly residential but also for storage and ritual) into the cliff faces of the Four Corners region of the United States (the southwestern corner of Colorado, northwestern corner of New Mexico, northeastern corner of Arizona, and southeastern corner of Utah). The dwellings depicted here are located in what is today southwestern Colorado in the national park known as Mesa Verde ("verde" is Spanish for green and "mesa" literally means table in Spanish but here refers to the flat-topped mountains common in the southwest).

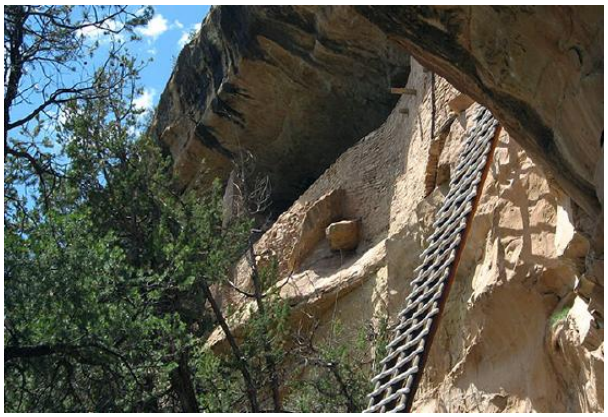


Figure **4.1.9**: Ladder to Balcony House, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. (Photo: Ken Lund, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The most famous residential sites date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Ancestral Puebloans accessed these dwellings with retractable ladders, and if you are sure footed and not afraid of heights, you can still visit some of these sites in the same way today.

To access Mesa Verde National Park, you drive up to the plateau along a winding road. People come from around the world to marvel at the natural beauty of the area (see Figure **4.1.10**) as well as the archaeological remains, making it a popular tourist destination.

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century structures made of stone, mortar, and plaster remain the most intact. We often see traces of the people who constructed these buildings, such as hand or fingerprints in many of the mortar and plaster walls.



Figure **4.1.10**: View of a canyon, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. (Photo: cfcheever, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ancestral Puebloans occupied the Mesa Verde region from about 450 CE to 1300 CE. The inhabited region encompassed a far larger geographic area than is defined now by the national park, and included other residential sites like Hovenweep National Monument and Yellow Jacket Pueblo. Not everyone lived in cliff dwellings. Yellow Jacket Pueblo was also much larger than any site at Mesa Verde. It had 600–1200 rooms, and 700 people likely lived there (see link below). In contrast, only about 125 people lived in Cliff Palace (largest of the Mesa Verde sites), but the cliff dwellings are certainly among the best-preserved buildings from this time.



Figure **4.1.11**: Cliff Palace, Ancestral Puebloan, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 450–1300 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Cliff palace

The largest of all the cliff dwellings, Cliff Palace, has about 150 rooms and more than twenty circular rooms. Due to its location, it was well protected from the elements. The buildings ranged from one to four stories, and some hit the natural stone “ceiling.” To build these structures, people used stone and mud mortar, along with wooden beams adapted to the natural clefts in the cliff face. This building technique was a shift from earlier structures in the Mesa Verde area, which, prior to 1000 CE, had been made primarily of adobe (bricks made of clay, sand and straw or sticks). These stone and mortar buildings, along with the decorative elements and objects found inside them, provide important insights into the lives of the Ancestral Puebloan people during the thirteenth century.



Figure 4.1.12: View of Cliff Palace structures, Mesa Verde. (Photo: Paul Middleton, Shadow Dancer Images, CC BY-NC 2.0)

At sites like Cliff Palace, families lived in architectural units, organized around *kivas* (circular, subterranean rooms). A kiva typically had a wood-beamed roof held up by six engaged support columns made of masonry above a shelf-like banquette. Other typical features of a kiva include a firepit (or hearth), a ventilation shaft, a deflector (a low wall designed to prevent air drawn from the ventilation shaft from reaching the fire directly), and a *sipapu*, a small hole in the floor that is ceremonial in purpose. They developed from the pithouse, also a circular, subterranean room used as a living space.

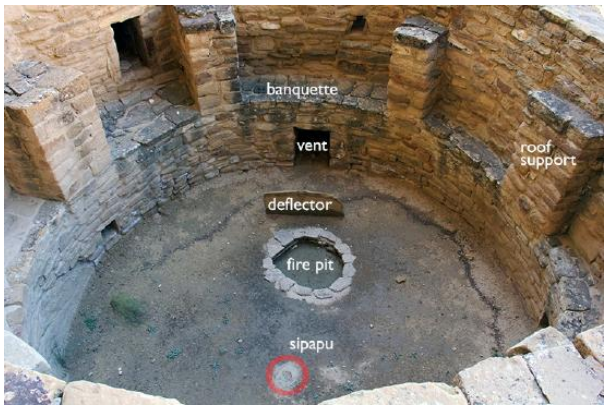


Figure 4.1.13: Kiva without a roof, Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park. Labeled with banquette, vent, deflector, fire pit, sipapu, and roof support. (Photo: Adam Lederer, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Kivas continue to be used for ceremonies today by Puebloan peoples though not those within Mesa Verde National Park. In the past, these circular spaces were likely both ceremonial and residential. If you visit Cliff Palace, you will see the kivas without their roofs (see above), but in the past they would have been covered, and the space around them would have functioned as a small plaza.

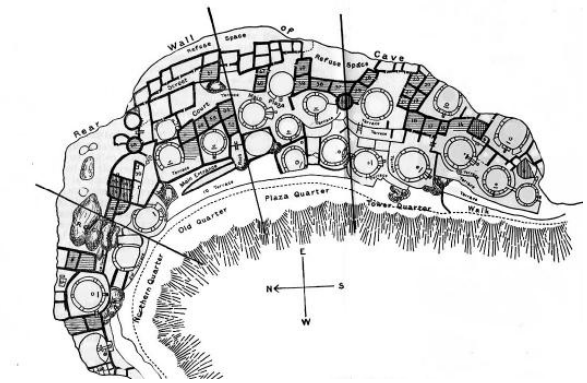


Figure 4.1.14: Cliff Palace plan with circular kivas, Mesa Verde National Park, National Park Service. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Connected rooms fanned out around these plazas, creating a housing unit. One room, typically facing onto the plaza, contained a hearth. Family members most likely gathered here. Other rooms located off the hearth were most likely storage rooms, with just

enough of an opening to squeeze your arm through a hole to grab anything you might need. Cliff Palace also features some unusual structures, including a circular tower. Archaeologists are still uncertain as to the exact use of the tower.



Figure **4.1.15**: Kiva at Spruce Tree House, Mesa Verde National Park. (Photo: Doug Kerr, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Painted murals

The builders of these structures plastered and painted murals, although what remains today is fairly fragmentary. Some murals display geometric designs, while other murals represent animals and plants.



Figure **4.1.16**: Mural 30, Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park. (Photo: National Park Service, via Smarthistory)

For example, Mural 30, on the third floor of a rectangular “tower” (more accurately a room block) at Cliff Palace, is painted red against a white wall. The mural includes geometric shapes that are thought to portray the landscape. It is similar to murals inside of other cliff dwellings including Spruce Tree House and Balcony House. Scholars have suggested that the red band at the bottom symbolizes the earth while the lighter portion of the wall symbolizes the sky. The top of the red band, then, forms a kind of horizon line that separates the two. We recognize what look like triangular peaks, perhaps mountains on the horizon line. The rectangular element in the sky might relate to clouds, rain or to the sun and moon. The dotted lines might represent cracks in the earth.



Figure **4.1.17**: Mugs found at Mesa Verde. Mesa Verde Museum. (Photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, via Smarthistory)

The creators of the murals used paint produced from clay, organic materials, and minerals. For instance, the red color came from hematite (a red ocher). Blue pigment could be turquoise or azurite, while black was often derived from charcoal. Along with the complex architecture and mural painting, the Ancestral Puebloan peoples produced black-on-white ceramics and turquoise and

shell jewelry (goods were imported from afar including shell and other types of pottery). Many of these high-quality objects and their materials demonstrate the close relationship these people had to the landscape. Notice, for example, how the geometric designs on the mugs in Figure **4.1.17**appear similar to those in Mural 30 at Cliff Palace.

Why build here?

From 500–1300 CE, Ancestral Puebloans who lived at Mesa Verde were sedentary farmers and cultivated beans, squash, and corn. Corn originally came from what is today Mexico at some point during the first millennium of the Common Era. Originally most farmers lived near their crops, but this shifted in the late 1100s when people began to live near sources of water, and often had to walk longer distances to their crops.

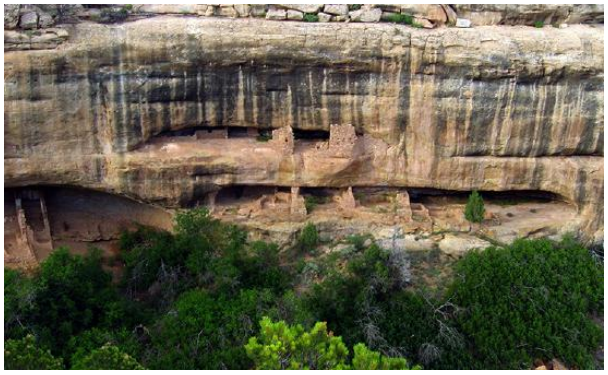


Figure **4.1.18**: New Fire House, Mesa Verde National Park. (Photo: Ken Lund, CC BY-SA 2.0)

So why move up to the cliff alcoves at all, away from water and crops? Did the cliffs provide protection from invaders? Were they defensive or were there other issues at play? Did the rock ledges, as seen in Figure **4.1.18**, have a ceremonial or spiritual significance? They certainly provide shade and protection from snow. Ultimately, we are left only with educated guesses—the exact reasons for building the cliff dwellings remain unknown to us.

Why were the cliffs abandoned?

The cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde were abandoned around 1300 CE. After all the time and effort it took to build these beautiful dwellings, why did people leave the area? Cliff Palace was built in the twelfth century, why was it abandoned less than a hundred years later? These questions have not been answered conclusively, though it is likely that the migration from this area was due to either drought, lack of resources, violence or some combination of these. We know, for instance, that droughts occurred from 1276 to 1299. These dry periods likely caused a shortage of food and may have resulted in confrontations as resources became more scarce. The cliff dwellings remain, though, as compelling examples of how the Ancestral Puebloans literally carved their existence into the rocky landscape of today's southwestern United States.

Editors' Note: Mesa Verde and the Ancestors of the Ancestral Puebloans

Although the famed cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde were abandoned, it is important to note (and to combat misinformed lore and outdated rumors of collapse) that the Ancestral Puebloans did not vanish. Today's present-day Puebloans are indeed the descendants of the Ancestral Puebloans. Recent studies have confirmed this scientifically using ancient DNA from the remains of domesticated turkeys. Studies demonstrated that the ancient Pueblo people had kept turkeys in both Mesa Verde, Colorado, and the northern Rio Grande area north of Santa Fe, New Mexico. DNA found in turkey bones at both locations definitively ties the mass exodus out of Mesa Verde to the northern Rio Grande area, currently inhabited by the Tewa Pueblo people.

Introduction to Chaco Canyon

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank



Figure 4.1.19: Fajada Butte, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Chacoan petroglyphs can be found at the base of the cliffs. (Photo: Adam Meek, CC BY 2.0)

New Mexico is known as the "land of enchantment." Among its many wonders, Chaco Canyon stands out as one of the most spectacular. Part of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Chaco Canyon is among the most impressive archaeological sites in the world, receiving tens of thousands of visitors each year. Chaco is more than just a tourist site however, it is also sacred land. Pueblo peoples like the Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni consider it a home of their ancestors.

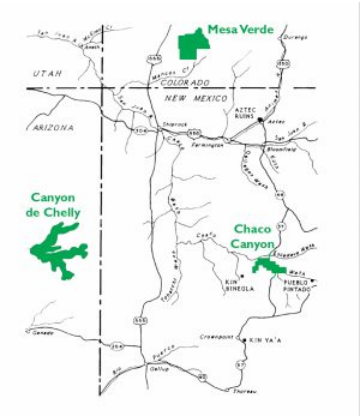


Figure 4.1.20: Map of major ancestral Puebloan sites in the Four Corners region. (Image: National Park Service)

The canyon is vast and contains an impressive number of structures—both big and small—testifying to the incredible creativity of the people who lived in the Four Corners region of the U.S. between the 9th and 12th centuries. Chaco was the urban center of a broader world, and the ancestral Puebloans who lived here engineered striking buildings, waterways, and more.



Figure 4.1.21: Petroglyphs, Chaco Canyon. (Photo: KrisNM, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Chaco is located in a high, desert region of New Mexico, where water is scarce. The remains of dams, canals, and basins suggest that Chacoans spent a considerable amount of their energy and resources on the control of water in order to grow crops, such as corn. Today, visitors have to imagine the greenery that would have filled the canyon.

Astronomical observations clearly played an important role in Chaco life, and they likely had spiritual significance. Petroglyphs found in Chaco Canyon and the surrounding area reveal an interest in lunar and solar cycles, and many buildings are oriented to align with winter and summer solstices.



Figure **4.1.22**: The great kiva at Chetro Ketl, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. (Photo: National Park Service)

Great Houses

"Downtown Chaco" features a number of "Great Houses" built of stone and wood. Most of these large complexes have Spanish names, given to them during expeditions, such as one sponsored by the U.S. army in 1849, led by Lt. James Simpson. Carabajal, Simpson's guide, was Mexican, which helps to explain some of the Spanish names. Great Houses also have Navajo names, and are described in Navajo legends. *Tsebida't'ini'ani* (Navajo for "covered hole"), *nastl'a kin* (Navajo for "house in the corner"), and *Chetro Ketl* (a name of unknown origin) all refer to one great house (shown in Figure **4.1.22**), while *Pueblo Bonito* (Spanish for "pretty village") and *tse biyaa anii-ahi* (Navajo for "leaning rock gap") refer to another.



Figure **4.1.23**: Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. (Photo: Paul Williams, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Pueblo Bonito is among the most impressive of the Great Houses. It is a massive D-shaped structure that had somewhere between 600 and 800 rooms. It was multi-storied, with some sections reaching as high as four stories. Some upper floors contained balconies.



Figure 4.1.24: Multi-storied rooms, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. (Photo: Jacqueline Poggi, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

There are many questions that we are still trying to answer about this remarkable site and the people who lived here. A Great House like Pueblo Bonito includes numerous round rooms, called kivas. This large architectural structure included three great kivas and thirty-two smaller kivas. Great kivas are far larger in scale than the others, and were possibly used to gather hundreds of people together. The smaller kivas likely functioned as ceremonial spaces, although they were likely multi-purpose rooms.



Figure 4.1.25: Doorway, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon. (Photo: Thomson20192, CC BY 2.0)

Among the many remarkable features of this building are its doorways, sometimes aligned to give the impression that you can see all the way through the building, as in Figure 4.1.25. Some doorways have a T shape, and T-shaped doors are also found at other sites across the region. Research is ongoing to determine whether the T-shaped doors suggest the influence of Chaco or if the T-shaped door was a common aesthetic feature in this area, which the Chacoans then adopted.

Recently, testing of the trees (dendroprovenance) that were used to construct these massive buildings has demonstrated that the wood came from two distinct areas more than 50 miles away: one in the San Mateo Mountains, the other the Chuska Mountains. About 240,000 trees would have been used for one of the larger Great Houses.

Chacoan Cultural Interactions

Traditionally, we tend to separate Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, as if the peoples who lived in these areas did not interact. We now know this is misleading, and was not the case.

Chacoan culture expanded far beyond the confines of Chaco Canyon. Staircases leading out of the canyon allowed people to climb the mesas and access a vast network of roads that connected places across great distances, such as Great Houses in the wider region. Aztec Ruins National Monument (not to be confused with ruins that belonged to the Aztecs of Mesoamerica) in New

Mexico is another ancestral Puebloan site with many of the same architectural features we see at Chaco, including a Great House and T-shaped doorways.



Figure **4.1.26**: Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico. (Photo: Jasperdo, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) The West Ruin Great House once included around 400 rooms and 30 kivas, and displays masonry construction styles used at both Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde. (National Park Service site brochure)

Archaeological excavations have uncovered remarkable objects that animated Chacoan life and reveal Chaco's interactions with peoples outside the Southwestern United States. More than 15,000 artifacts have been unearthed during different excavations at Pueblo Bonito alone, making it one of the best understood spaces at Chaco. Many of these objects speak to the larger Chacoan world, as well as Chaco's interactions with cultures farther away. In one storage room within Pueblo Bonito, pottery sherds had traces of cacao imported from Mesoamerica. These black-and-white cylindrical vessels were likely used for drinking cacao, similar to the brightly painted Maya vessels used for a similar purpose.



Figure **4.1.27**: Cylindrical Jar from the Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. 3 5/8" in diameter. (Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)

The remains of scarlet macaws, birds native to an area in Mexico more than 1,000 miles away, also reveal the trade networks that existed across the Mesoamerican and Southwestern world. We know from other archaeological sites in the southwest that there were attempts to breed these colorful birds, no doubt in order to use their colorful feathers as status symbols or for ceremonial purposes. A room with a thick layer of guano (bird excrement) suggests that an aviary also existed within Pueblo Bonito. Copper bells found at Chaco also come from much further south in Mexico, once again testifying to the flourishing trade networks at this time. Chaco likely acquired these materials and objects in exchange for turquoise from their own area, examples of which can be found as far south as the Yucatan Peninsula.

Current Threats to Chaco

The world of Chaco is threatened by oil drilling and fracking. After President Theodore Roosevelt passed the Antiquities Act of 1906, Chaco was one of the first sites to be made a national monument. Chaco Canyon is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The

Chacoan region extended far beyond this center, but unfortunately the Greater Chacoan Region does not fall under the protection of the National Park Service or UNESCO. Much of the Greater Chaco Region needs to be surveyed, because there are certainly many undiscovered structures, roads, and other findings that would help us learn more about this important culture. Beyond its importance as an extraordinary site of global cultural heritage, Chaco has sacred and ancestral significance for many Native Americans. Destruction of the Greater Chaco Region erases an important connection to the ancestral past of Native peoples, and to the present and future that belongs to all of us.

Articles in this section:

- Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "About geography and chronological periods in Native American art," in *Smarthistory*, September 16, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Terms and Issues in Native American Art," in *Smarthistory*, September 16, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Katherine T. Brown, "Fort Ancient Culture: Great Serpent Mound," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- David W. Penney, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution and Beth Harris, "Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget)," in *Smarthistory*, January 13, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Mesa Verde," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Introduction to Chaco Canyon," in *Smarthistory*, April 13, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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4.2: Mesoamerica (Olmec, Teotihuacan, Maya)

Defining “Pre-Columbian” and “Mesoamerica”

adapted from Dr. Maya Jiménez

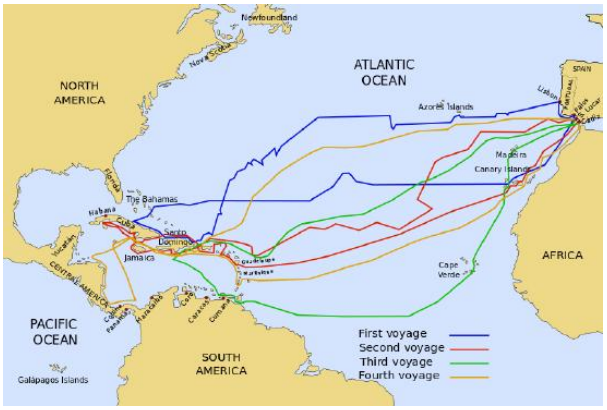


Figure **4.2.1**: The routes of the four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, 1492-1504, to the Caribbean Islands and the coast of Central America. (Map: Phirosiberia, CC BY-SA 3.0)

What does “pre-Columbian” mean?

The original inhabitants of the Americas traveled across what is now known as the Bering Strait, a passage that connected the westernmost point of North America with the easternmost point of Asia. The Western hemisphere was disconnected from Asia at the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 BCE.

In 1492, the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus arrived at the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic), mistakenly thinking he had reached Asia. Columbus’ miscalculation marked the first step in the colonization of the Americas, or what was then seen as a “New World.” Incorrectly referring to the native inhabitants of Hispaniola as “Indians” (under the assumption that he had landed in India), Columbus established the first Spanish colony of the Americas. “Pre-Columbian” thus refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus.



Figure **4.2.2**: Pyramid of the Sun, Teōtīhuacān. Teōtīhuacān reached its peak from the 1st to the mid-6th century CE. The main structures include the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, Avenue of the Dead, and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent). Teotihuacan was home to as many as 125,000 people. The name Teōtīhuacān was given by the Aztecs long after the city had been abandoned in c. 550 CE. The original name is lost. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Spanish conquistadores (conquerors) found that the “New World” was in fact not new at all, and that the indigenous people of Mesoamerica had established advanced civilizations with densely populated cities and towering architectural monuments such as at Teōtīhuacān (Figure **4.2.2**), as well as advanced writing systems.

The term pre-Columbian is complicated however. For one thing, although it refers to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the phrase does not directly reference any of the many sophisticated cultures that flourished in the Americas (think of the Aztec, Inka, or Maya, to name only a few) and instead invokes a European explorer. For this reason and because indigenous peoples flourished before and after the arrival of the Europeans, the term is often seen as flawed. Other terms such as pre-Hispanic, pre-Cortesian, or more simply, ancient Americas, are sometimes used.



Figure **4.2.3**: Cylindrical vessel with ballgame scene, Late Classic, Maya, c. 682-701 CE. Ceramic, 20.48 cm high. Dallas Museum of Art, Texas. (Photo via Smarthistory, zoomable image **here**) This vessel provides insight into Maya culture. Made for royal courts, the vessel's glyphs indicate that it was used to serve a drink made from cacao pulp and it depicts a scene from their prized ballgame.

What does "Mesoamerica" mean?

The region of Mesoamerica—which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador—consists of a diverse geographic landscape of highlands, jungles, valleys, and coastlines. Mesoamericans did not exploit technological innovations such as the wheel—though they were used in toys— and did not develop metal tools or metalworking techniques until at least until 900 CE. Instead, Mesoamerican artists are known for producing megalithic (large stone) sculpture and extremely sharp weapons from obsidian (volcanic glass). Featherwork and stonework in basalt, turquoise, and jade dominated Mesoamerican artistic production, while exceptional textiles and metallurgy flourished further south, among pre-Columbian Andean and Central American cultures, respectively.

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures shared certain characteristics such as the ritual ballgame (illustrated in the drinking vessel in Figure **4.2.3**); pyramid building; human sacrifice; maize as an agricultural staple; and deities dedicated to natural forces (i.e. rain, storm, fire). Additionally, some Mesoamerican societies developed sophisticated systems of writing, as well as an advanced understanding of astronomy (which allowed for the development of accurate and complex calendar systems, including the 260-day sacred calendar and the 365-day agricultural calendar). As a result, cities like La Venta and Chichen Itza were aligned in relation to cardinal directions and had a sacred center. The fact that many of these cultural trademarks persisted for more than 2,000 years across civilizations as distinct as the Olmec (c. 1200–400 BCE) and the Aztec (c. 1345 to 1521 CE), demonstrates the strong cultural bond of Mesoamerican cultures.



Figure **4.2.4**: El Tajín Ball Court, Classic Veracruz Culture, c. 800–1200 CE. Veracruz, Mexico. (Photo: Oscar Zorrilla Alonso, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The ballgame was played in different iterations at different times and in different places—and in fact, it is still played today in many Mesoamerican cultures. As the Metropolitan Museum of Art explains: "The game is played in modern times as well: in the

2017 Mesoamerican Ballgame Tournament, held in Teotihuacan, Mexico, the team from Belize took home the title."

It was played with a rubber ball that players hit with their elbows, hips, or knees. The ballgame was considered an important ritual in Mesoamerica and was practiced first by the Olmec and last by the Aztec. Since the rubber ball was solid and heavy, players wore protective gear to avoid injury and may have tried to score the ball through a ring, which was usually located high on the wall of the ballcourt. Numerous rubber balls and ballcourts have been discovered throughout Mesoamerica in El Tajín (Figure **4.2.4**) and Monte Albán, although the largest surviving ballcourt is located in Chichen Itza. While the ballgame was played by the elite, it was believed that the fate of the game and thus of the player was determined by the gods. As a result, the Mesoamerican ballgame held significant implications. Learn more about the ballgame here.

Mesoamerica, an introduction

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

Avocado, tomato, and chocolate. You are likely familiar with at least some of these food items. Did you know that they all originally come from Mexico, and are all based on Nahuatl words (*ahuacatl*, *tomatl*, *and chocolatl*) that were eventually adopted by the English language?

Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Nahua ethnic group that is found today in Mexico, but with deep historical roots. You might know one Nahua group: the Aztecs, more accurately called the Mexica. The Mexica were one of many Mesoamerican cultural groups that flourished in Mexico prior to the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century.



Figure **4.2.5**: Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries. (Image via Smarthistory)

Where was Mesoamerica?

Mesoamerica refers to the diverse civilizations that shared similar cultural characteristics in the geographic areas comprising the modern-day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Some of the shared cultural traits among Mesoamerican peoples included a complex pantheon of deities, architectural features, a ballgame, the 260-day calendar, trade, food (especially a reliance on maize, beans, and squash), dress, and accoutrements (such as earspools).

Some of the most well-known Mesoamerican cultures are the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, Mixtec, and Mexica (or Aztec). The geography of Mesoamerica is incredibly diverse—it includes humid tropical areas, dry deserts, high mountainous terrain, and low coastal plains. An anthropologist named Paul Kirchkoff first used the term "Mesoamerica" (meso is Greek for "middle" or "intermediate") in 1943 to designate these geographical areas as having shared cultural traits prior to the invasion of Europeans, and the term has remained.

Typically when we discuss Mesoamerican art we are referring to art made by peoples in Mexico and much of Central America. When people mention Native North American art, they are usually referring to indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada, even though these countries are technically all part of North America. More recently, archaeologists and art historians have considered connections between the Southwestern and Southeastern U.S. and Mesoamerica, an area sometimes called either the Greater Southwest or Greater Mesoamerica. Focusing on these connections demonstrates how people were in contact with one another through trade, shared beliefs, migration, or conflict. Ball courts, for instance, are found in Arizona sites such as the Pueblo Grande

of the Hohokam. It is important to remember that modern-day geographic terms—like Mesoamerica or the Southwestern U.S.—are recent designations.

This essay generalizes about Mesoamerican cultures, but keep in mind that each possessed unique qualities and cultural differences. Mesoamerica was not homogenous.

When was Mesoamerica?

Art historians and archaeologists divide Mesoamerican history into distinct periods and some of these periods are then further divided into the sub-periods—early, middle, and late.

Period	Dates	Cultures
Archaic Period	c. 3500-1500 BCE	
Pre-Classical (or Formative) Period	c. 1800 BCE-250 CE	Olmec, Teotihuacan, Tlatilco, Maya, Zapotec
Classic Period	c. 150-650 CE	Teotihuacan, Maya
Epiclassic Period	c. 650-900 CE	Maya, Toltec
Postclassic Period	c. 900-1519 CE	Toltec, Aztec (Mexica), Mixtec, Maya

Table showing the periods, approximate dates, and cultures of Mesoamerican history.

The date for the end of the Postclassic period is somewhat contested as it presumes that Mesoamerican culture largely ended with the arrival of Spaniards into the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519, though Mesoamerican culture continued under Spanish control, albeit significantly transformed.You might also encounter the term Pre-Columbian, which is a term designating indigenous cultures prior to the arrival of Columbus. It includes those in Mesoamerica, as well as in South America and the Caribbean. This term is problematic for several reasons, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

What language did people speak?

There was no single language that united the peoples of Mesoamerica. Linguists believe that Mesoamericans spoke more than 125 different languages. For instance, Maya peoples did not speak “Mayan”, but could have spoken Yucatec Maya, K’iche, or Tzotzil among many others. The Mexica belonged to the bigger Nahua ethnic group, and therefore spoke Nahuatl.



Figure 4.2.6: Map of indigenous languages in Mexico with more than 100,000 speakers. (Image via Smarthistory)

To students learning about Mesoamerica for the first time, the incredible diversity of people, languages, and even deities can be overwhelming. I recall my first Mesoamerican art history class vividly. I was intimidated by my lack of familiarity with different Mesoamerican words, languages, and cultural groups. By the end of the semester I was proud that I could differentiate between the Zapotec and Mixtec, and could spell Tlaloc. It took me a few more years to be able to spell and pronounce words like Tlacaxipehualiztli (Tla-cawsh-ee-pay-wal-eeezt-li) or Huitzilopochtli (Wheat-zil-oh-poach-lee).

Writing

Mesoamerican writing systems vary by culture. Rebus writing (writing with images) was common among many groups, like the Nahua and Mixtec. Imagine drawing an eye, a heart, and an apple. You've just used rebus writing to communicate "I love apples" to anyone familiar with these symbols. Many visual writing systems in Mesoamerica functioned similarly—although the previous example was simplified for the sake of clarity. You might encounter the phrases "writing without words" or "writing with signs" used to describe many writing systems in Mesoamerica. It is also called pictographic, ideographic, or picture writing.

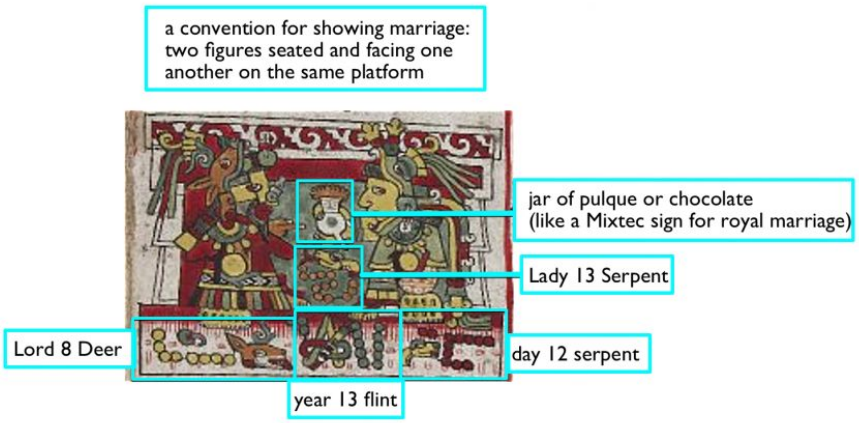


Figure **4.2.7**: Marriage between Lord 8 Deer and Lady 13 Serpent in the *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, Mixtec (or Ñudzavui), Late Postclassic period, deerskin, folio 27, c. 1450 CE. The British Museum, London, England. (Image via Smarthistory)

Only the Maya used a writing system like ours, where signs like letters designate sounds and syllables, and combined together to create words. Maya hieroglyphic writing is logographic, which means it uses a sign (think of a picture, symbol, or a letter) to communicate a syllable or a word.

The 260-day ritual calendar vs. the 365-day calendar

Other shared features among Mesoamerican peoples were the 260-day and 365-day calendars. The 260-day calendar was a ritual calendar, with 20 months of 13 days. Based on the sun, the 365-day calendar had 18 months of 20 days, with five "extra" nameless days at the end. It was the count of time used for agriculture.

Imagine both of these calendars as interlocking wheels. Every 52 years they completed a full cycle, and during this time special rituals commemorated the cycle. For example, the Mexica celebrated the New Fire Ceremony as a period of renewal. These cycles were understood as life cycles, and so reflect creation, death, and rebirth. The Maya (especially during the Classic period), also used a Long Count calendar in addition to the two already mentioned (rather than a cyclical calendar, the Long Count marked time as if along an extended line that does not repeat).

Religion and pantheon of gods

A complex pantheon of gods existed within each Mesoamerican culture. Many groups shared similar deities, although there was a great deal of variation. Deities that had important roles across Mesoamerica included a storm/rain god and a feathered serpent deity. Among the Mexica, this storm/rain god was known as Tlaloc, and the feathered serpent deity was known as Quetzalcoatl. The Maya referred to their storm/rain deity as Chaac (there are multiple spellings). The equivalent of Quetzalcoatl among different Maya groups included Kukulkan (Yucatec Maya) and Q'uq'umatz (K'iche Maya). Cocijo is the Zapotec equivalent of the storm/rain god. Many artworks exist that show these two deities with similar features. The storm/rain deity often has goggle eyes and an upturned mouth/snout. Feathered serpent deities typically showed serpent features paired with feathers.



Figure 4.2.8: Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), c. 1321-1521. 210 x 440 cm. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico. (Photo via Smarthistory)

It is difficult to generalize about Mesoamerican religious beliefs and cosmological ideas because they were so complex. Throughout Mesoamerica, there was a general belief in the universe's division along two axes: one vertical, the other horizontal. At the center, where these two axes meet, is the axis mundi, or the center (or navel) of the universe. On the horizontal plane, four directions branch off from the axis mundi. Think of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west). On the vertical plane, we generally find the world split into three major realms: the celestial, terrestrial, and underworld.

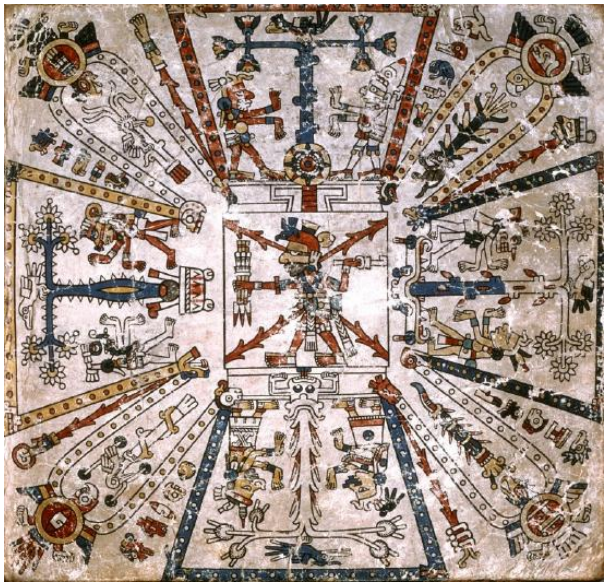


Figure 4.2.9: Codex Féjervary-Mayer, f. 1, 15th century. World Museum, Liverpool, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

One Mexica example helps to clarify this complex cosmological system. An image in the *Codex Féjervary-Mayer* displays the cosmos's horizontal axis. In the center is the deity Xiuhtecuhtli (a fire god), standing in the place of the axis mundi. Four nodes (what look almost like trapezoidal petals) branch off from his position, creating a shape called a Maltese Cross. East (top) is associated with red, south (right) with green, west (bottom) with blue, and north (left) with yellow. A specific plant and bird accompany each world direction: blue tree and quetzal (east), cacao and parrot (south), maize and blue-painted bird (west), and cactus and eagle (north). Two figures flank the plant in each arm of the cross. Together, these figures and Xiuhtecuhtli represent the Nine Lords of the Night. This cosmogram describes how the Mexica conceived of the universe.



Figure **4.2.10**: Ball Court Model, Mexico, Nayarit, c. 200 BCE–500 CE. Ceramic with slip and other pigments, 15.24 x 21.59 x 34.29 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The ballgame

Peoples across Mesoamerica, beginning with the Olmecs, played a ritual sport known as the ballgame. Ballcourts were often located in a city's sacred precinct, emphasizing the importance of the game. Solid rubber balls were passed between players (no hands allowed!), with the goal of hitting them through markers. Players wore padded garments to protect their bodies from the hard ball.

The meanings of the ballgame were many and varied. It could symbolize a range of larger cosmological ideas, including the movement of the sun through the underworld every night. War captives also played the game against members of a winning city or group, with the game symbolizing their defeat in war. Sometimes a game was even played instead of going to war.

Numerous objects display aspects of the ballgame, attesting to its significant role across Mesoamerica. We have examples of clay sculptures of ballgames occurring on courts, such as in Figure **4.2.10**. Ballplayers are also frequent subjects in Maya painted ceramic vessels and sculptures. Stone reliefs at El Tajin and Chichen Itza depict different moments of a ballgame culminating in ritual sacrifice. Painted pictorial codices, such as the Codex Borgia (Figure **4.2.11**), display I-shaped ballcourts, and stone depictions of ballgame clothing have been found. Today, people in Mexico still play a version of the ballgame.



Figure **4.2.11**: I-shaped ballcourt, *Codex Borgia*, f. 42, c. 1500. Vatican Library, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Mesoamerican societies continue to impress us with their sophistication and accomplishments, notably their artistic achievements. Our understanding continues to expand with ongoing research and archaeological excavations. Recent excavations in Mexico City, for instance, uncovered a new monumental Mexica sculpture buried with some of the most unique objects we've ever seen in Mexica art. With these discoveries, our understanding of the Mexica will no doubt grow and change.

Editors' Note

There are ballcourts closer to us here in California than El Tajin and Chichen Itza, as the tradition made its way, with variations, into North America. Here is a photograph of the reconstructed remains of a ballcourt at the Wupatki National Monument near Flagstaff, Arizona. More than 200 of these ballcourts, built between 750-1200 CE, have been discovered in Arizona, suggesting their importance for the Wupatki and their southern neighbors, who likely "borrowed and modified the ballcourt idea from earlier contact" with the native cultures of Mexico. [Wupatki National Monument signage]



Figure **4.2.12**: Ballcourt at the Wupatki National Monument, Wupatki, Arizona, c. 750-1200. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

To learn more about the Wupatki and this site, visit Wupatki at the National Park Service.

Cultures of Mesoamerica

adapted from Boundless Art History



Figure **4.2.13**: Seated Bench Figure, Serpentine, Olmec, 10th-4th century BCE. Serpentine, 11.3 x 5.7 x 5.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain) The museum writes that the figure holds a baby that resembles a supernatural "were-jaguar," suggesting possible connections to mythology and the life cycles of both humans and agriculture.

Mesoamerica was dominated by three cultures in the Pre-Classical (up to 200 CE) to Postclassic periods (circa 1580 CE): the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec. Mesoamerica is a region in the Americas that extends from central Mexico to northern Costa Rica. Three cultures dominated the pre-Columbian history of Mesoamerica: the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations.

Olmec Culture

The Olmec civilization, which flourished from 1200–400 BCE, defines the Pre- Classical period; the Olmecs are generally considered the forerunner of all Mesoamerica cultures including the Maya and Aztecs. Primarily centered in the modern states of Tabasco and Veracruz in the Gulf of Mexico, the Olmec people are known for creating an abundance of small and extraordinarily detailed jade figurines. The figurines typically exhibit complex shapes such as human figures, human-animal composites of deities and gods, and animals like cats and birds. Although we don’t know the specific purpose of these jade objects, their presence in some Olmec graves suggests they served a religious purpose in addition to being signs of wealth and goods for trade.

Editors' Note



Figure **4.2.14**: Werejaguar Votive Axe, Olmec, 1200-400 BCE. Polished green quartz (aventurine), 29 cm tall, 13.5 cm wide. (Photo: ©The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This ceremonial axe, carved from a sizeable chunk of semiprecious green stone, takes the form of a mythical hybrid figure. The British Museum gives the following Curator's comments:

> *This massive ceremonial axe (celt) combines characteristics of the caiman and the jaguar, the most powerful predators inhabiting the rivers and forests of the tropical lowlands. The pronounced cleft in the head mimics the indentation found on the skulls of jaguars and has been compared to the human fontanelle. These clefts feature on other Olmec sculptures and in imagery in which vegetal motifs spring from similar cracks and orifices, alluding to the underground sources of fertility and life. The crossed bands glyph lightly incised on the waistband represents an entrance or opening. The combination of symbols on the axe proclaims its magical power to cleave open the portals to the underworld, reinforcing the association of "celts" with agriculture and maize - ground stone axes were indispensable for felling forest trees and clearing ground for planting. Utilitarian objects were often personified in this way so as to represent the qualities and attributes of supernatural deities. Accumulating inner soul force, they became potent objects that were handed down from one generation to the next.*

Although this comment references utilitarian objects, this object's size and material suggest that this was a ceremonial, rather than functional, axe. If you'd like to learn more about these hybrid figures in Mesoamerican art, and especially the role and significance of crocodilians in addition to jaguars, check out the open-access journal article by Richard Takkou-Neofytou, "Were-Jaguars and Crocodilians: A Need to Redefine."

The Olmec are also known for building massive stone sculptures, many of which were discovered at La Venta in the modern Mexican state of Tabasco. Made from basalt rock from the Tuxtla mountains to the north, the Olmec used this rock to create altars, stelae, and colossal heads. Each head is rendered as a distinct individual and is thought to resemble an Olmec ruler. Each ruler's personality is represented in the distinct headdresses that adorn the sculptures' heads.



Figure **4.2.15**: Colossal head, Olmec, La Venta, Mexico, 900-400 BCE. Basalt, 9’4″ high. Villhermosa Museum. (Photo: Glysiak, CC BY-SA 4.0)

These massive basalt boulders were transported from the Sierra de los Tuxtlas Mountains of Veracruz. When originally displayed in Olmec centers, the heads were arranged in lines or groups; however, the method used to transport the stone to these sites remains unclear. Given the enormous weight of the stones and the manpower required to transport them over large distances, it is probable that the colossal portraits represent powerful Olmec rulers. The colossal heads range in height from 5 to 12 feet and portray adult males wearing close-fitting caps with chin straps and large, round earspools. The fleshy faces have almond-shaped eyes, flat, broad noses, thick, protruding lips, and downturned mouths. Each face has a distinct personality, suggesting that they represent specific individuals.

The discovery of a colossal head at Tres Zapotes in the nineteenth century spurred the first archaeological investigations of Olmec culture by Matthew Stirling in 1938. Seventeen confirmed examples are traced to four sites within the Olmec heartland on the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Most colossal heads were sculpted from spherical boulders, but two from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán were recarved from massive stone thrones. An additional monument at Takalik Abaj in Guatemala is a throne that may have been carved from a colossal head. This is the only known example from outside the Olmec heartland.

Dating the monuments remains difficult because of the movement of many from their original contexts prior to archaeological investigation. Most have been dated to the Early Preclassic (or Formative) period (1500–1000 BCE) with some to the Middle Preclassic (1000–400 BCE) period. The smallest weighs six tons, while the largest is estimated to weigh 40 to 50 tons, although it was abandoned and left unfinished close to the source of its stone.

Teotihuacan

At its height, Teotihuacan was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of 200,000. It was a primary center of commerce and manufacturing. Located some 30 miles northeast of present-day Mexico City, Teotihuacan experienced a period of rapid growth early in the first millennium CE. By 200 CE, it emerged as a significant center of commerce and manufacturing, the first large city-state in the Americas. At its height between 350 and 650 CE, Teotihuacan covered nearly nine miles and had a population of about 200,000, making it one of the largest cities in the world. One reason for its dominance was its control of the market for high-quality obsidian. This volcanic stone, made into tools and vessels, was traded for luxury items such as the green feathers of the quetzal bird, used for priestly headdresses, and the spotted fur of the jaguar, used for ceremonial garments.

The people of Teotihuacan worshipped deities that were recognizably similar to those worshipped by later Mesoamerican people, including the Aztecs, who dominated central Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest. Among these are the Rain or Storm God (god of fertility, war, and sacrifice), known to the Aztecs as Tlaloc, and the Feathered Serpent, known to the Maya as Kukulcan and to the Aztecs as Quetzalcoatl.



Figure 4.2.16: Ceremonial center of the city of Teotihuacan, Mexico, Teotihuacan culture, c. 350-650 CE.: View from the Pyramid of the Moon down the Avenue of the Dead to the Ciudadela and the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. The Pyramid of the Sun is at the middle left. The avenue is over a mile long. (Photo: BrCG2007, public domain)

Editors' Note

Mesoamerican pyramids are not true pyramids with a pointed apex at top. Instead they have flat tops, often supporting a temple, and stairs on the face of the structure.

Teotihuacan's principal monuments include the Pyramid of the Sun, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the Ciudadela (Spanish for fortified city center), a vast sunken plaza surrounded by temple platforms. The city's principal religious and political center, the Ciudadela could accommodate an assembly of more than 60,000 people. Its focal point was the pyramidal Temple of the Feathered Serpent. This seven-tiered structure exhibits the talud-tablero construction that is a hallmark of the Teotihuacan architectural style. The sloping base, or talud, of each platform supports a vertical tablero, or entablature, which is surrounded by frame and filled with sculptural decoration. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent was enlarged several times, and as was characteristic of Mesoamerican pyramids, each enlargement completely enclosed the previous structure like the layers of an onion. Archaeological excavation of this temple's earlier-phase tableros and a stairway balustrade have revealed painted heads of the Feathered Serpent, the goggle-eyed Rain or Storm God, and reliefs of aquatic shells and snails. The flat, angular, abstract style, typical of Teotihuacan art, is in marked contrast to the curvilinear style of Olmec art.



Figure 4.2.17: Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the Ciudadela: Detail of pyramid, showing sculpture-filled tableros. (Photo: Arian Zwegers, CC BY 2.0)

The Decline

Sometime in the middle of the seventh century disaster struck Teotihuacan. The ceremonial center burned and the city went into a permanent decline. Nevertheless, its influence continued as other centers throughout Mesoamerica and as far south as the highlands of Guatemala borrowed and transformed its imagery over the next several centuries. The site was never entirely abandoned as it remained a legendary pilgrimage center. The much later Aztec people (c. 1300-1525 CE) revered the site as the place where they believed the gods created the sun and the moon. In fact, the name "Teotihuacan" is actually an Aztec word meaning "Gathering Place of the Gods."

Mayan Art

Mayan art includes a wide variety of objects, commissioned by rulers, that depict scenes of both elite and everyday society.

Mayan Portraiture



Figure **4.2.18**: Stele H portraying the ruler 18-Rabbit, Great Plaza at Copan, Honduras. Stone, 11′ 9″ high. Although a powerful ruler, 18-Rabbit eventually was captured and beheaded by a rival king. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

Strong cultural influences stemming from the Olmec tradition and Teotihuacan contributed to the development of the Mayan city center and the culture's Classic artistic tradition. The most sacred and majestic buildings of Mayan cities were built in enclosed, centrally located precincts. The Maya held dramatic rituals within these highly sculptured and painted environments. For example, the grand pyramids of Copan and Tikal are among the most imposing buildings the Maya erected; each contains sculpted portraits that glorified the city's rulers.

Stele H in the Great Plaza at Copan represents one of the city's foremost leaders, 18-Rabbit, who reigned from 695-738 CE. During the ruler's long reign, Copan reached its greatest physical extent and breadth of political influence. On Stele H, 18-Rabbit wears an elaborate headdress and ornamented kilt and sandals. He holds across his chest a double-headed serpent bar, symbol of the sky and of his absolute power. His features, although idealized, have the quality of a portrait likeness. The Mayan elite, like the Egyptian pharaohs, tended to have themselves portrayed as eternally youthful. The dense, deeply carved ornamental details that frame the face and figure stand almost clear of the main stone block and wrap around the sides of the stele. The stele was originally painted, with remnants of red paint visible on many stelae and buildings in Copan.



Figure 4.2.19: Costumed Figure, Maya, 7th-8th century. Ceramic, pigment, 11 1/2″ tall. The base for this figurine, which is also a whistle, was produced in a mold, with individual details added by hand. It was originally even more brightly colored, and still retains some of its color, including the “Maya blue.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

Many small clay figures from the Classic Mayan period remain in existence. These free-standing objects illustrate aspects of everyday Mayan life. As a group, they are remarkably life-like, carefully descriptive, and even comic at times. They represent a wider range of human types and activities than commonly depicted on Mayan stelae. Ball players, women weaving, older men, dwarves, supernatural beings, and amorous couples, as well as elaborately attired rulers and warriors, comprise one of the largest groups of surviving Mayan art. Many of the hollow figurines are also whistles. They were made in ceramic workshops and painted with Maya Blue, a dye unique to Mayan and Aztec artists. Small clay figures found in burial sites were made to accompany the Mayan dead on their inevitable voyage to the Underworld.

Painted Vases



Figure 4.2.20: Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants), Maya, c. 650-750 CE. Ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Maya painted vivid narrative scenes on the surfaces of cylindrical vases. A typical vase design depicts a palace scene where an enthroned Mayan ruler sits surrounded by courtiers and attendants. The figures wear simple loincloths, turbans of wrapped cloth

and feathers, and black body paint. These painted vases may have been used as drinking and food vessels for noble Maya, but their final destination was the tomb, where they accompanied the deceased to the Underworld. They likely were commissioned by the deceased before his death or by his survivors, and were occasionally sent from distant sites as funerary offerings.

Mayan Architecture: Palenque

The Maya had complex architectural programs. They built imposing pyramids, temples, palaces, and administrative structures in densely populated cities.



Figure **4.2.21**: Palace (right) and Temple of the Inscriptions, tomb-pyramid of Lord Pakal (left), Palenque, Mexico, Mayan culture, late 7th century. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

In Palenque, Mexico, a prominent city of the Classic period, the major buildings are grouped on high ground. The central group of structures includes the Palace (possibly an administrative and ceremonial center as well as a residential structure), the Temple of the Inscriptions, and two other temples. Most of the structures in the complex were commissioned by a powerful ruler, Lord Pakal, who reigned from 615 to 638 CE, and his two sons, who succeeded him.

Temple of the Inscriptions



Figure **4.2.22**: Temple of the Inscriptions (tomb pyramid of Lord Pakal), Palenque, Mexico, 7th century. (Photo: Lousanroj, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Temple of the Inscriptions is a nine-level pyramid that rises to a height of about 75 feet. The consecutive layers probably reflect the belief, current among the Aztec and Maya at the time of the Spanish conquest, that the underworld had nine levels. Priests would climb the steep stone staircase on the exterior to reach the temple on top, which recalls the kind of pole-and-thatch houses the Maya still build in parts of the Yucatan today. The roof of the temple was topped with a crest known as a roof comb, and its façade still retains much of its stucco sculpture. Inscriptions line the back wall of the outer chamber, giving the temple its name.

The Palace



Figure **4.2.23**: The Palace's Observation Tower with mansard roof, Palenque, Mexico, late Classic period. (Photo: Ricraider, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Across from the Temple of Inscriptions is the Palace, a complex of several adjacent buildings and courtyards built on a wide artificial terrace. The Palace was used by the Mayan aristocracy for bureaucratic functions, entertainment, and ritual ceremonies.

Numerous sculptures and bas-relief carvings within the Palace have been conserved. The Palace's most unusual and recognizable feature is the four-story tower known as the Observation Tower. Like many other buildings at the site, the Observation Tower exhibits a mansard roof. The Palace was equipped with numerous large baths and saunas which were supplied with fresh water by an intricate water system. An aqueduct constructed of great stone blocks with a six-foot-high vault diverts the Otulum River to flow underneath the main plaza.

Mayan Architecture: Chichen Itza

As the focus of Maya civilization shifted northward in the Post-Classic period, a northern Maya group called the Itza rose to prominence. Their principal center, Chichen Itza, (Yucatan State) Mexico, which means "at the mouth of the well of the Itza," flourished from the 9th to 13th centuries CE, eventually covering about six square miles.

El Castillo



Figure **4.2.24**: "El Castillo" (the Castle), Temple of Kukulcán, Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico, 9th-13th century. (Photo: Alastair Rae, CC BY-SA 2.0)

One of Chichen Itza's most conspicuous structures is El Castillo (Spanish for the castle), a massive nine-level pyramid in the center of a large plaza with a stairway on each side leading to a square temple on the pyramid's summit. At the spring and fall equinoxes,

the setting sun casts an undulating, serpent-like shadow on the stairways, forming bodies for the serpent heads carved at the base of the balustrades.



Figure **4.2.25**: Shadows cast on Kukulcán during Equinox at Chichen Itza. (Photo: ATSZ56, public domain)

The Great Ball Court

The Great Ball Court northwest of the Castillo is the largest and best preserved court for playing the Mesoamerican ball game, an important sport with ritual associations played by Mesoamericans since 1400 BCE. The parallel platforms flanking the main playing area are each 312 feet long. The walls of these platforms stand 26 feet high. Rings carved with intertwined feathered serpents are set high at the top of each wall at the center. At the base of the interior walls are slanted benches with sculpted panels of teams of ball players. In one panel, one of the players has been decapitated; the wound spews streams of blood in the form of wriggling snakes.



Figure **4.2.26**: The Great Ball Court, Chichen Itza, Mexico Late Classic period. 551′ x 230'. The modern version of the Mesoamerican ball game is called Ulama and is similar to racquetball. (Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0)

At one end of the Great Ball Court is the North Temple, also known as the Temple of the Bearded Man (Templo del Hombre Barbado). This small masonry building has detailed bas-relief carving on the inner walls, including a center figure with decorative carvings that resemble facial hair. Built into the east wall are the Temples of the Jaguar. The Upper Temple of the Jaguar overlooks the ball court and has an entrance guarded by two large columns carved in the familiar feathered serpent motif. At the entrance to the Lower Temple of the Jaguar is another Jaguar throne similar to the one in the inner temple of El Castillo.

Ceramics of the Veracruz

Ceramic figurines are a hallmark of Classic Veracruz art, and the Veracruz people produced a variety of small clay figures in multiple locations. The modern state of Veracruz lies along the Mexican Gulf Coast, north of the Maya lowlands and east of the highlands of central Mexico. Culturally diverse and environmentally rich, the people of Veracruz took part in dynamic interchanges between three regions that over the centuries included trade, warfare, and migration. During the middle centuries of the first millennium, the artistically gifted Veracruzanos created inventive ceramic sculpture in diverse yet related styles.

Until the early 1950s, Classic Veracruz ceramics were few, little understood, and generally without provenance (known history). Since then, the recovery of thousands of figurines and pottery pieces from sites such as Remojadas and Nopiloa (some initially

found by looters), has expanded our understanding and filled many museum shelves. Artist and art historian Miguel Covarrubias described Classic Veracruz ceramics as “powerful and expressive, endowed with a charm and sensibility unprecedented in other, more formal cultures.”

Figurines from Remojadas and Nopiloa



Figure **4.2.27**: Nopiloa (Veracruz), 3rd-8th century. Ceramic, chapopote, 6 3/4″ tall. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota. (Photo: Minneapolis Institute of Art, public domain)

Remojadas-style figurines, perhaps the most easily recognizable from this culture, are usually hand-modeled and often adorned with appliqués. Of particular note are the Sonrientes (Smiling) Figurines, with triangular-shaped heads and outstretched arms. Figurines from Nopiloa are often molded and usually less ornate, without appliqués. The Figure from Nopiloa provides scholars with an example of the clothing worn in ancient times, such as the loincloth and headdress. The flattened forehead on this smiling figure may represent the practice of intentional cranial deformation or may simply reflect an artistic convention. Many American cultures considered a flattened forehead desirable and used a variety of techniques to flatten the skulls of infants while they were still pliable.

Another smiling figure from the Remojadas region is a hollow ceramic sculpture representing an individual celebrating with music and dance. This bare-chested figure with open mouth and filed teeth stands energetically with legs spread and arms lifted as if caught in mid-motion. He wears a woven cap with geometric patterns, an elaborate skirt, circular earrings, a beaded necklace, and a bracelet. His face and body contain patterns evocative of body paint, including slight lines emanating from his lower eyelids and onto his cheeks. This sculpture evokes a festive dance or ritual accompanied by the rhythmic reverberation of the hand-held rattle and celebratory sound escaping from the figure’s open mouth.



Figure 4.2.28: “Smiling” Figure, Remojadas, Veracruz, Mexico, Late Classic Period, 7th–8th century. 45 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

In contrast to Smiling Figures from Remojadas, the mold-made ceramic figure from Nopiloa depicts a bearded, mustachioed male wearing a ballgame yoke around his waist to protect him from the hard, solid rubber ball used in play. There are cylindrical ear ornaments in his ears and beneath his arm, a baton-like object perhaps related to the local incarnation of the game. The rules and manner in which the Mesoamerican ballgame was played varied among contemporary sites and evolved through time. Surviving evidence suggests human sacrifice was a frequent outcome, but the game may also have been played for other purposes such as sport. The people of ancient Veracruz interacted with people from other Mesoamerican cultures, and this Nopiloa figure displays motifs commonly found in Mayan art. Knotted ties like those around this player’s wrist and neck connote captured prisoners in Mayan pictorial language. A motif similar to the Maya mat, a symbol of rulership, appears on the flanged headdress of the ballplayer. Like Mayan figurines of this type, the body of this figure is a whistle, a musical instrument used in ritual and ceremony.



Figure 4.2.29: Ball Player Figurine, Nopiloa, Veracruz, Mexico, 7th–10th century. 27 cm. high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

Mixtec Art

The Mixtecs were one of the most influential ethnic groups to emerge in Mesoamerica during the Post-Classic period. Never a united nation, the Mixtecs waged war and forged alliances among themselves as well as with other peoples in their vicinity. They also produced beautiful manuscripts and metal work and influenced the international artistic style used from Central Mexico to Yucatan.

During the Classic period, the Mixtecs lived in hilltop settlements of northwestern Oaxaca, a fact reflected in their name in their own language, Ñuudzahui, meaning "People of the Rain." During the Post-Classic period, the Mixtecs slowly moved into adjacent valleys and then into the great Valley of Oaxaca. This time of expansion is recorded in a large number of deerskin manuscripts called codices, only eight of which have survived. Nevertheless, these manuscripts allow us to trace Mixtec history from 1550 CE back to 940 CE, deeper in time than any other Mesoamerican culture except the Maya.

Mixtec Codices

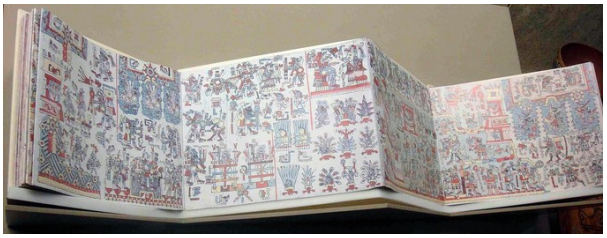


Figure **4.2.30**: Mixtec *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*. Mixtec codices were made of deerskin and folded like an accordion. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

Mixtec codices represent a type of writing classified as logographic, meaning the characters and pictures used represent complete words and ideas instead of syllables or sounds. In Mixtec, the relationships among pictorial elements denote the meaning of the text, whereas in other Mesoamerican writing the pictorial representations are not incorporated into the text. Common topics found in the codices are biographies of rulers and other influential figures, records of elite family trees, mythologies, and accounts of ceremonies.



Figure **4.2.31**: A Warrior Scene from the *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

The detail from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall depicts a group of warriors conquering a town (an event noted by the warriors' drawn weapons and the arrow piercing the hill). Above each participant's head is a glyph, or pictograph, with a dot. The glyphs below the warriors are calendrical day signs. They are also, however, the names of Mixtec nobles; among this group, a person's name was often his or her birthday.



Figure **4.2.32**: A Marriage Scene from the *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1200-1521. Deer skin with natural pigments. The British Museum, London. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Pre-Columbian Mixtec are mainly concerned with histories. They record events such as royal births, wars and battles, royal marriages, forging of alliances, pilgrimages, and death of rulers. In addition to the calendrical signs used for dating events and naming individuals, the Mixtecs used a combination of conventionalized pictures and glyphs to illustrate the type and nature of the event. One example is the wedding scene, usually shown as two individuals of opposite sex facing each other and sitting on jaguar-pelt chairs, as illustrated by a scene from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall which records the marriage of the legendary Mixtec King 8 Deer “Tiger Claw” of Tilantongo to Lady 13 Serpent in 1051 CE.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Maya Jiménez, "Defining ‘Pre-Columbian’ and ‘Mesoamerica,’" in *Smarthistory*, August 19, 2016. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Mesoamerica, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, September 12, 2017. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lumen Learning, “Mesoamerica.” (CC BY-SA)

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4.3: South America (Nasca, Paracas, Moche)

Introduction to Andean Cultures

by Dr. Sarahh Scher



Figure 4.3.1: Inka ruins, Písac, Peru. (Photo: Chensiyuan, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A land of contrasts



Figure 4.3.2: The Andes mountains. (Image: NASA, via Smarthistory)

"The Andes" can refer to the mountain range that stretches along the west coast of South America, but is also used to refer to a broader geographic area that includes the coastal deserts to the west and into the tropical jungles to the east of those mountains. This region is seen as home to a distinct cultural area—dating from around the fourth millennium BCE to the time of the Spanish conquest—and many of these cultures still persist today in various forms.

From the desert coast, the mountains rise up quickly, sometimes within 10-20 kilometers of the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the people who lived in the Andes had to adapt to varying types of climate and ecosystems. This diverse environment gave rise to a range of architectural and artistic practices.

Period and time scale	North Coast	Central Coast	South Coast	North Highlands	Central Highlands	South Highlands	Titicaca region
Formative 3500-900 BCE	Cerro Sechin Huaca Prieta			Kotosh Guitarrero			Chinchorros
Early Horizon 900-100 BCE	Cupisnique		Paracas	Chavín			Pukará
Early Intermediate Period 100 BCE-600 BCE	Moche Gallinazo		Nasca	REcuay			Tiwanaku
Middle Horizon 600-1000 CE	Sicán Moche	Wari		Wari	Wari	Wari	Tiwanaku
Late Intermediate Period 1000-1438 CE	Chimú Sicán	Chancay	Ica				
Late Horizon 1428-1532	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka

Table showing the time periods, cultures, and territories within Andean prehistory. While the table ends with the Spanish conquest of the Inka in 1532, native cultures continue in the Andes, with many changes from their pre-conquest forms.

Deserts, mountains, and farms

Though much of the Andean coast is near the Equator, its waters are cold, due to currents from the Antarctic. This cold water is rich in sea life; however, during El Niño years, warm water takes over, leading to large die-offs of fish and marine mammals, and often creating catastrophic flooding on the coast.



Figure **4.3.3**: Ocean and cliffs near the site of Pacatnamú, Peru, with the foothills of the Andes visible in the distance. (Photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher, via Smarthistory)

In normal years, the coast is very dry. The rivers that run to the coast, fed by melting snow from the Andes mountains (called the Cordillera Blanca, or White Mountains, in contrast to the Cordillera Negra, or Black Mountains to the west where snow does not fall), create areas of agricultural lands interspersed with desert. Cultures eventually learned to create canals, allowing them to irrigate more land, and irrigation remains important to farming on Peru's coast.

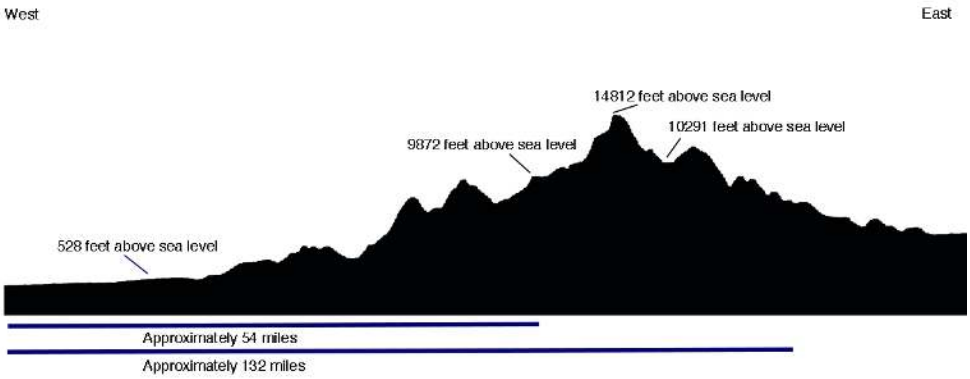


Figure **4.3.4**: Cross-section showing typical change in elevation in the Andes. (Photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher, via Smarthistory)

As the elevation climbs, different ecological zones are created, and people of the Andes used these to grow different products: maize (corn), hot peppers, potatoes, and coca all grew at different elevations. Some cultures (such as the Cupisnique and Paracas) developed on the coast, and incorporated seafood into their diet. They would trade with the cultures that lived in the highlands (such as the Recuay and the inhabitants of Chavín de Huantar) for the things they could not grow for themselves. The people in the highlands would likewise trade with the coastal peoples for dried fish and products that would not grow at their elevation, as well as exotic animals like parrots from the tropical jungles to the east.

Plants and animals



Figure **4.3.5**: Leaves of an Erythroxylum coca plant, Colombia. (Photo: Darina, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The plants and animals of the Andes provided ancient peoples with food, medicine, clothing, heat, and many other resources for daily life. As noted above, the rapid change in elevation of the Andes meant that many different foods could be grown in a compressed area. Potatoes were a staple food of the highlands, and maize and manioc were important in the lower elevations.

Coca grew in the highlands but was traded all over the Andes. The leaves of this plant, when chewed, provide a stimulant that allows people to walk for long periods at high altitude without getting tired, and it suppresses hunger. It was used by travelers in the highlands, but was also used in ritual practices to endure long nights of dancing. In modern times, people drink it as a tea to help with the symptoms of altitude sickness.



Figure **4.3.6**: Terraced hillsides at the Inka ruins of Písac, Peru. (Photo: Paulo JC Nogueira, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Farming in the steep topography of the mountains could be difficult, and an important innovation developed by the Andeans was the use of terracing. By creating terraces (essentially giant steps along the contours of a mountain) people were able to make flat, easily worked plots. The terraces were formed by creating retaining walls that were then backfilled with a thick layer of loose stones to aid drainage, and topped with soil.

The most important animals in the highlands were camelids: the wild vicuña and guanaco, and their domesticated relatives, the llama and alpaca. Alpacas have soft wool and were sheared to make textiles, and llamas can carry burdens over the difficult terrain of the mountains (an adult male llama can carry up to 100 pounds, but could not carry an adult human).



Figure **4.3.7**: Left: Alpacas, Ecuador (Photo: Philippe Lavoie, public domain); Right: Llama near Cusco, Peru (Photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher, via Smarthistory)

Both animals were also used for their meat, and their dried dung served as fuel in the high altitudes, where there was no wood to burn. Andean camelids, like their African and Asian cousins, can be very headstrong. If they are overloaded, they will sit on the ground and refuse to budge. Because of this, the ancient people of the Andes did not have domesticated animals that could carry them or pull heavy wagons, and so roads and methods of moving people and goods developed differently than in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The wheel was known, but not used for transport, because it simply would not have been useful.

Textile arts



Figure **4.3.8**: Weaving with traditionally dyed alpaca wool, Chinchero, Peru. (Photo: Rosalee Yagihara, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The ancient peoples of the Andes developed textile technology before ceramics or metallurgy. Textile fragments found at Guitarrero Cave date from c. 5780 BCE. Over the course of millennia, techniques developed from simple twining to complex woven fabrics. By the first millennium CE, Andean weavers had developed and mastered every major technique, including double-faced cloth and lace-like open weaves.

Andean textiles were first made using fibers from reeds, but quickly moved to yarn made from cotton and camelid fibers. Cotton grows on the coast, and was cultivated by ancient Andeans in several colors, including white, several shades of brown, and a soft grayish blue. In the highlands, the alpaca provided soft, strong wool in natural colors of white, brown, and black. Both cotton and wool were also dyed to create more colors: red from cochineal, blue from indigo, and other colors from plants that grew at various elevations. Alpaca wool is much easier to dye than cotton, and so it was usually preferred for coloring. The extra time and effort needed to dye fibers made the bright colors a symbol of status and wealth throughout Andean history.

Ceramics

Though ceramics were not as valuable as textiles to Andean peoples, they were important for spreading religious ideas and showing status. People used plain everyday wares for cooking and storing foods. Elites often used finely made ceramic vessels for eating and drinking, and vessels decorated with images of gods or spiritually important creatures were kept as status symbols, or given as gifts to people of lesser status to cement their social obligations to those above them.

There are a wide variety of Andean ceramic styles, but there are some basic elements that can be found throughout the region's history. Wares were mostly fired in an oxygenating atmosphere, resulting in ceramics that often had a red cast from the clay's iron content. Some cultures, such as the Sicán and Chimú, instead used kilns that deprived the clay of oxygen as it fired, resulting in a surface ranging from brown to black.



Figure **4.3.9**: Non-oxygenated ceramic feline bottle, Chimú, Peru, 12th–15th century. 28.26 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

Decoration of ceramics could be done by incising lines into the surface, creating textures by rocking seashells over the damp clay, or by painting the surface.

Some early elite ceramics were decorated after firing with a paint made from plant resin and mineral pigments. This produced a wide variety of bright colors, but the resin could not withstand being heated and so these resin-painted wares were only for display and ritual use. Most ceramics in the Andes instead were slip-painted. Slip is a liquid that is made of clay, and the color of the slip is determined by the color of the clay and its mineral content. Most slip painting was applied before firing, after the semi-dry clay had been burnished with a smooth stone to prepare the surface. The range of slip colors could vary from two (seen in Moche ceramics) to seven or more (seen in Nasca ceramics). Once fired, the burnished surface would be shiny. Ceramics, because of their durability, are one of the greatest resources for understanding ancient Andean cultures.



Figure **4.3.10**: Female figurine, Inka, 1400–1533. Silver-gold alloy, 14.9 x 3.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

Metalwork



Figure **4.3.11**: Knife (tumi) with Removable Figural Handle, Moche, 50-800 CE. Green copper with patina, 11.43 x 2.5 x 1.43 cm. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland. (Photo: Walters Art Museum, CC0)

Metalworking developed later in Andean history, with the oldest known gold artifact dating to 2100 BCE, and evidence of copper smelting from around 900–700 BCE. Gold was used for jewelry and other forms of ornamentation, as well as for making sculptural pieces. Inka figurines of silver and gold depicting humans and llamas have been recovered from high-altitude archaeological sites in Peru and Chile. Copper and bronze were also used to create jewelry and items like ceremonial knives (called *tumis*).

Architecture

The architecture of the Andes can be divided roughly between highland and coastal traditions. Coastal cultures tended to build using adobe, while highland cultures depended more on stone. However, the lowland site of Caral, which is currently the oldest complex site known in the Andes, was built mainly using stone.



Figure **4.3.12**: Caral, Peru, founded c. 2800 BCE. (Photo: Pativilcano, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Beginning with Caral in 2800 BCE, various cultures constructed monumental structures such as platforms, temples, and walled compounds. These structures were the focus of political and/or religious power, like the site of Chavín de Huantár in the highlands or the Huacas de Moche on the coast. Many of these structures have been heavily damaged by time, but some reliefs and murals used to decorate them survive.



Figure **4.3.13**: Painted adobe relief, Huaca de La Luna, Moche, Peru, 100 CE to 800 CE. (Photo: Marco Silva Navarrete, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The best-known architecture in the Andes is that of the Inka . The Inka used stone for all of their important structures, and developed a technique that helped protect the structures from earthquakes. Because of its stone construction, Inka architecture has survived more easily than the adobe architecture of the coast. Ongoing efforts by archaeologists and the Peruvian Ministry of Culture are also focused on restoring and preserving the great works of coastal architecture.



Figure **4.3.14**: Inka stone doorways, Qoricancha, Cusco. (Photo: Jean Robert Thibault, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ancient past, continuing traditions

From textiles to ceramics, metalwork, and architecture, Andean cultures produced art and architecture that responded to their natural environment and reflected their beliefs and social structures. We can learn much about these ancient traditions through the artifacts and sites that survive, as well as the many ways that these practices—such as weaving—persist today.

Nasca Geoglyphs

by Jayne Yantz



Figure **4.3.15**: Hummingbird, Nasca Geoglypph, over 300 feet in length, formed approximately 2000 years ago. (Photo: Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Located in the desert on the South Coast of Peru, the Nasca Geoglyphs are among the world's largest drawings. Also referred to as the Nasca Lines, they are more accurately called geoglyphs, which are designs formed on the earth. Geoglyphs are usually constructed from strong natural material, such as stone, and are notably large in scale.

Imagine encountering such a drawing. The hummingbird measures over 300 feet in length, and is one of the most famous Nasca Geoglyphs. Among the other celebrated geoglyphs of mammals, birds and insects are a monkey, killer whale, spider, and condor. Various plants, geometric shapes (spirals, zigzag lines and trapezoids), abstract patterns, and intersecting lines fill the desert plain, known as the Pampa, an area covering approximately 200 square miles near the foothills of the Andes. The zoomorphic geoglyphs are the oldest and most esteemed. Each appears to have been made with a single continuous line.

Today it is believed that the geoglyphs were created by the Nasca people, whose culture flourished in Peru sometime between 1-700 CE. They inhabited the river valleys of the Rio Grande de Nasca and the Ica Valley in the southern region of Peru, where they were able to farm, despite the desert environment—one of the driest regions in the world. The high Andes Mountains to the east prevent moisture from the Amazon from reaching the coast, so there is very little rainfall; water that does arrive, comes from mountain runoff.



Figure **4.3.16**: Map showing the location of the Nasca geoglyphs. (Image via Smarthistory)

The Nasca people are also famous for their polychrome pottery, which shares some of the same subjects that appear in the Nasca Geoglyphs. Remains of Nasca pottery left as offerings have been found in and near the geoglyphs, cementing the connection between the geoglyphs and the Nasca people. Because the quality of the ceramics produced in Nasca is very high, archaeologists deduce that specialists shaped and painted the pottery vessels. This suggests a society that, at its height, had a degree of wealth and a division of labor. However, the Nasca people had no writing. In cultures without writing, images often assume an increased level of importance. This may help explain why the Nasca came together to create vast images on the desert floor.



Figure **4.3.17**: Double-Spout and Bridge Vessel, Nasca, Peru, c. 100-700 CE. Polychrome ceramic, 12.07 x 10.16 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. (Photo via Smarthistory)

How were they made?

Since the Nasca geoglyphs are so large, it seems clear they were constructed by organized groups of people and that no single artist made them. The construction of the geoglyphs are thought to represent organized labor where a small group of individuals directed the design and creation of the lines, a process that may have strengthened the social unity of the community. Despite the impressive scale of the geoglyphs, these remarkable works did not require complex technology. Most geoglyphs were formed by removing weathered stones from the desert floor, stones that had developed a dark patina known as “desert varnish” on their surface. Once removed, the lighter stones below became visible, forming the famous Nasca Lines. The extracted darker stones were placed at the edges of the lines, forming a border that accented the lighter lines within. Straight lines could be created by extending cords, one on each side of the line, between two wooden stakes (some of which have been recovered) that guided workers and allowed for the creation of sight lines.

For larger geometric shapes, such as trapezoids, borders were marked and then all the stones on the interior were removed and placed along edges or heaped in piles at the edges of the geoglyph. Broken pottery has been found mixed with the piles of stones. Spirals and animal shapes were made in a similar manner. Spirals, for example, would be formed by releasing slack in a cord as workers moved around in a circular path, moving further and further from the center where the spiraling line begins. For animal forms, such as monkeys, whales, or hummingbirds, portions of the figures might be made in the same manner as the spiral in the monkey’s tail, or the image might be based on a gridded drawing or textile model that was enlarged on the desert floor where lines were staked out to create the figure.

When were they made?

The oldest of the Nasca Geoglyphs is more than 2000 years of old, but, as a group, the Nasca geoglyphs were created over several centuries, with some later lines or shapes intersecting or overlapping with previously created lines. This is just one of the unusual features of these geoglyphs. Even more curious, the drawings are best observed from the air, which is why they did not become widely known until the 1920s after the development of flight. Although it is possible to observe some of the lines from the adjacent Andean foothills or the modern mirador (viewing platform), the best way to see the lines today remains a flight in a small plane over the Pampa (lowlands). These amazing images are so large that they cannot be truly appreciated from the ground. This, of course, raises the question: for whom were the lines made? And, what was their purpose?



Figure **4.3.18**: Monkey with Spiral Tail, Nasca Geoglyph, approximately 2000 years old. (Photo: Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0)

What was their purpose and meaning?

Archaeologists are not certain of the purpose of the lines, or even of the audience for whom the lines were intended since they can only be seen clearly from the air (This is now particularly true of the older animal designs). Were they made to be seen by deities looking down from the heavens or from distant mountain tops? Perhaps the numerous theories that have been proposed will eventually be clarified as our understanding of the cultures of ancient Peru increases.

Celestial alignments?

Shortly after the geoglyphs were first investigated, researchers sought an astronomical interpretation, suggesting that the geoglyphs might be aligned with the heavens, and perhaps represented constellations or marked the solstices or planetary trajectories. While some geoglyphs seem connected to celestial events, such as marking the summer solstice (in December) when mountain waters flow to the coast, it is difficult to find celestial alignments for most of the geoglyphs. As far as we know, Andean peoples did not form pictures by connecting the stars in the night sky as we do; rather they looked at the black spaces between stars and saw shapes that they converted into their own reverse "constellations." It is important to note that these constellations do not seem to match the Nasca geoglyphs.

Deities or ceremonial walkways?

Many other reasonable theories have been proposed. Some scholars have suggested that the geoglyphs represent Nasca deities, or formed a calendar for farming, or represented ceremonial walkways. Because some of the lines do seem to direct people to Cahuachi, a Nasca religious center and pilgrimage destination, it seems possible that ancient Nasca people walked the lines. It is also possible that Nasca people ritually danced on the lines, perhaps in connection with shamanism and the use of hallucinogens. The geoglyphs, particularly the early animals which are clearly spaced apart from each other, may also have strengthened group identity and reinforced social interaction patterns as individual groups of people may each have tended or "owned" one of the geoglyphs,



Figure **4.3.19**: Spider, Nasca Geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, formed approximately 2000 years ago. (Photo: Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A discredited theory proposed that the geoglyphs are the result of alien contact. While this is sensationalist and helped to secure the popular fame of the Nasca geoglyphs, there is no evidence to support this assertion. Archaeologists and scientists have rejected this proposal and it is important to recognize the implication of this theory is that the Nasca people needed the influence of aliens peoples to create their geoglyphs. We know that the technology to manufacture the geoglyphs was available to the Nasca people and that they had a social system that was fully capable of organizing and producing large geoglyphs. We also know that the designs are consistent with other art forms native to Nasca culture.

Farming, fertility, and water?

Among the most promising recent theories, archaeologists have begun to secure a link between the geoglyphs and farming, which sustained the Nasca people. Some geoglyphs may deal with fertility for crops; others may be associated with the water needed to raise the crops. In a desert, water is the most important commodity. In Andean mythology the mountains are revered as the home of the gods. It has been suggested that the lines were intended to be visible to the gods in the mountains. Some lines also seem to point in the direction of the mountains — the origin of fresh water for the desert South Coast of Peru. Snow pack melts high in the mountains and becomes runoff and a vital source of water for the coast. In fact, ancient underground water channels are sometimes marked on the surface by Nasca geoglyphs, particularly at the points of intersection. These have been dubbed “ray centers,” spots where lines converge. Offerings have been found at these points, including conch shells. The spirals on the desert floor, in the monkey’s tail, and as independent abstract designs, may refer to the spirals found in conch shells and thus may reference water. This same shape appears in Nasca puquios —gradually descending tunnels that tap ancient subterranean aquifers and water channels. Puquios have been described as wells, and formed part of this ancient irrigation system. Puquios, found in Nasca (and elsewhere in Peru), allowed people to reach water in times of drought. Geoglyphs other than spirals may also be directly associated with water.



Figure **4.3.20**: Puquio, South Coast of Peru. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Because the Nasca Geoglyphs were made directly on the earth by rearranging stones on the desert floor, these giant images are actually quite vulnerable to damage. In time the lighter-colored stones exposed by the Nasca people may attain their own patina, making them less visible, but the designs face greater threats from vehicle and pedestrian traffic. Crossing the lines can damage their borders and make the images less distinct. Because of this, the Peruvian government has created a mirador (viewing platform) along the Pan American Highway where visitors can climb to view a few drawings without damaging the lines.

In the end, it is likely that the Nasca Geoglyphs served more than one purpose, and these purposes may have changed over the centuries, especially given that new lines often "erased" older ones by "drawing" over them. It does appear that many geoglyphs made reference to water and agricultural fertility, and were used to promote the welfare of the Nasca people. The geoglyphs were also a place where people gathered, perhaps for pilgrimage, perhaps to walk or dance on the lines in a ritual pattern. As a gathering place, the Nasca geoglyphs may additionally have turned the Pampa into a map of social divisions, where different families or clans tended different geoglyphs. Although we do not know exact details, we can surmise that the geoglyphs represent a community investment meant to serve this ancient people.

Backstory (by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee)

In January, 2018, a semi truck traveling through Peru on the Pan-American highway veered off the road and plowed through the desert. The deep ruts that it made damaged several of the Nasca lines. Though the area is clearly marked as a protected zone, according to the archeologist Johnny Isla , co-director of the Nasca-Palpa Project, cases like this "occur daily." The driver, who authorities suspect may have been trying to avoid a toll, was charged with an "attack against cultural heritage."

Human interventions like this constitute the main threat to the Nasca-Palpa area, whose geoglyphs extend across almost 300 square miles. In 2014, Greenpeace activists damaged the desert floor around the famous hummingbird geoglyph as they lay out a large protest sign meant to be seen from the air. Their action was a protest against climate change during the United Nations summit in Lima, and was not intended to damage the site; the organization has since apologized. However, the marks made by the activists' footprints have been deemed possibly "irreparable" by Luis Jaime Castillo Butters, a professor of archeology and Peru's Vice Minister for Cultural Heritage. "A bad step, a heavy step … marks the ground forever," he said . "There is no known technique to restore it the way it was."

The construction of the Pan-American highway has also increased the risks to the area, not only because of vehicles that can potentially veer off the road, but also because rains and mud can wash off of the surface and damage the lines .

Nasca-Palpa was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994. In contrast to many other at-risk heritage sites around the world, UNESCO states that

Even though there have been some impacts caused by natural and human factors, these have been minimal and the geoglyphs maintain their authenticity and express their high symbolic and historic value even today.

The most pressing need, now being discussed by Isla and others, is for better, 24-hour monitoring of the area — possibly using drone technology — so that human incursions on the site can be quickly addressed and avoided.

The Paracas Textile

by Lois Martin



Figure **4.3.21**: Nasca, Mantle (“The Paracas Textile”), found south coast, Paracas, Peru, 100-300 CE. Cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2" (148 x 62.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, New York. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, via Smarthistory)

Mummy bundles

One of the most extraordinary masterpieces of the pre-Columbian Americas is a nearly 2,000-year-old cloth from the South Coast of Peru, which has been in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art since 1938.

Despite the textile’s small size (it measures about two by five feet), it contains a vast amount of information about the people who lived in ancient Peru; and despite its great age and delicacy, its colors are brilliant, and tiny details amazingly intact. This is due to the arid environment of southern Peru along the Pacific shore, where it is so dry that organic material buried in the sand remains well preserved for hundreds or even thousands of years.



Figure **4.3.22**: Paracas National Reserve, Peru. (Photo: ilker ender, CC BY 2.0)



Figure **4.3.23**: The Paracas peninsula, Peru. (Image via Smarthistory)

In the ancient cemeteries on the Paracas Peninsula, the dead were wrapped in layers of cloth and clothing into “mummy bundles.” The largest and richest mummy bundles contained hundreds of brightly embroidered textiles, feathered costumes, and fine jewelry, interspersed with food offerings, such as beans. Early reports claimed that this cloth came from the Paracas peninsula, so it was called “THE Paracas textile,” to mark its excellence and uniqueness. Currently, scholars have revised this provenance, and now attribute the cloth to the related, but slightly later Nasca culture.

Thread by thread

Recently, the Brooklyn Museum has posted high quality, close-up views of this masterpiece online, allowing viewers to scrutinize the textile, thread by thread. Such a detailed inspection has not been possible since the piece was first made. With simple tools, the early cultures of the Andean region of South America produced textiles of astonishing virtuosity. Some extremely fine pieces, like this one, are too delicate to have served any utilitarian purpose, and so are considered ceremonial.



Figure 4.3.25: Center detail, Nasca, Mantle ("The Paracas Textile"). (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, via Smarthistory)

Like some other very fine cloths, the Brooklyn textile is finished so carefully on both sides that it is almost impossible to distinguish which is the correct side. Although the central cloth and its framing dimensional border are created by different techniques, both display perfect reversibility—except for three border figures. These three—instead of being duplicated on the back (as if flipped in mirror image), like all the others—appear in back view on one side of the cloth, thereby designating a “front” and “back” to the textile.



Figure 4.3.1: Detail of border figure 49 on the front (left) and back (right) side of the "The Paracas Textile." (Photos: Brooklyn Museum, public domain)

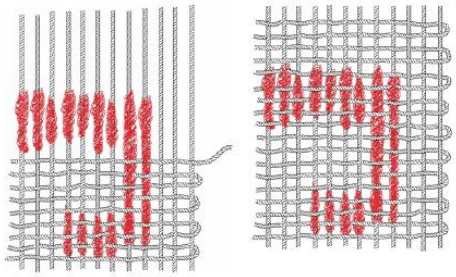


Figure 4.3.26: Warp wrapping (diagram by Lois Martin). (Image via Smarthistory)

The central cloth’s design of 32 geometric faces is created by “warp-wrapping,” a technique in which colored fleece is wound around sections of cotton warp threads before weaving.

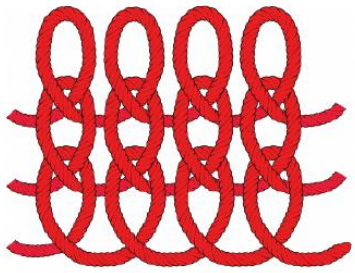


Figure **4.3.27**: Crossed looping (diagram by Lois Martin). (Image via Smarthistory)

Because the central cloth and the border have different color palettes, they may have been created at different times. The triple-layer border has colorful outer veneers of wool “crossed-looping” that envelop inner cotton cores of looping or weaving.

“Crossed-looping” resembles knitting (but is accomplished with a single needle); in areas where the threads are broken, it is possible to glimpse the underlying cotton substrates. While the cotton is off-white, the wool is dyed in jewel-bright tones. The combination of materials suggests extensive trading relationships: for while cotton was grown in coastal valleys, wool came from camelids (such as the llama, alpaca, and vicuña) that live at high altitudes in the Andes mountains.

Monstrous hybrids

On the border, a parade of 90 figures is linked together on their lower bodies, which are worked two-dimensionally against a red background.



Figure **4.3.28**: Detail of border figures (composite photo), Nasca, Mantle ("The Paracas Textile"). (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, via Smarthistory)

Each figure’s upper body and head is constructed as a separate unit, and attached to the woven strip. The upper bodies are worked in bas-relief, with some parts projecting outwards from the plane of the fabric. Tiny components (like leaves and feathers) were worked as separate pieces and then attached, giving a wonderful three-dimensionality and liveliness to the figures, especially because they mingle and overlap.

The parade is arranged in four, single-file, L-shaped lines that proceed around each corner of the cloth. A wide variety of types appear, including human, animal, and monstrous hybrids. Some figures are unique, others are twins, triplets, or even sextuplets; a few are in related groups.

Most of the animals and plants that appear can be tied to species still found on the South Coast, and many human figures wear or carry items that directly relate to the archaeological record.



Figure 4.3.33: Nazca Mouth Mask, 100-400 CE. Hammered gold, 3 x 3 3/4". Brooklyn Museum, New York. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY)

Their jewelry, for example, corresponds to specimens formed from thin sheets of gleaming gold. These include: “forehead ornaments” (shaped like a bird with outstretched wings); “hair spangles” (disk or star shapes that dangle from the wingtips of the forehead ornament); slender, feather-shaped headdress “plumes;” and “mouthmasks.” Mouthmasks hung from the nose septum, and had flaring extensions, like cat whiskers.



Figure 4.3.34: Detail with face ornament, border figure 63, Nasca, Mantle ("The Paracas Textile"). (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, public domain)

Garments

The border figures’ clothing also matches examples found archaeologically, and some bear minuscule designs that faithfully represent embroidered decorations found on life-sized garments. Some wear wrap-around dresses of a style worn by women in ancient times; others wear two-part outfits, associated with men (Figure 4.3.35). The largest and most beautifully decorated garments were mantles that draped over the shoulders, and fell to the knee. By examining stitches on actual mantles, archaeologists have determined that teams of artists worked on them, sitting side-by-side.



Figure 4.3.35: Detail of border figure 16, front (left) and back (right), Nasca, Mantle ("The Paracas Textile"). One of three figures with a front and back, this figure has painted or tattooed skin and wears a bristling mouthmask and a headdress with flower-like plumes. He carries a striped staff topped with a winged creature, and wears a tunic and loincloth. Over his shoulder hangs a boldly-patterned mantle ending in a feline. (Photos: Brooklyn Museum, public domain))

Other border details, rather than realistic, seem to be fantastic or mythological. The severed heads (sometimes called “trophy heads”) brandished by some figures, for example, sometimes sprout flourishing plants—as if to suggest themes of sacrifice and fertility. And snake-like streamers that flow from some figures do not correspond to any known object, and may indicate supernatural qualities.



Figure 4.3.36: Pampas cat and tree, border figure 3, Nasca, Mantle ("The Paracas Textile"). (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, public domain)

When they depicted clothing, Paracas and Nazca artists often added a face, or an animal body to the loose ends of fabric hanging behind a wearer. This artistic convention seems to suggest the lively movements of cloth fluttering behind a wearer, and hints that these ancient people considered cloth a precious carrier of vitality: an interpretation that seems warranted because this vibrant textile gives us such an evocative and animated glimpse into their world.

Backstory (by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee)

The Paracas Textile is only one of hundreds of similar textiles that originate from multiple burial sites on the Paracas peninsula. These burials were first identified and excavated by the renowned Peruvian archaeologist Julio Tello in the 1920s. For political reasons, Tello was forced to abandon the site in 1930, and, without a team of archaeologists to oversee the area, a period of intense looting followed. It is now believed that a great number of the Paracas textiles in international museum collections were acquired as a result of this looting, which occurred most heavily between 1931 and 1933.

A large group of these illegally acquired textiles is held by the Gothenburg Collection in the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. The objects were smuggled out of Peru by the Swedish consul in the early 1930s, and donated to the city of Gothenburg. The museum and city fully acknowledge the objects’ illicit provenance, and have been working with the Peruvian government on a plan for their systematic return. As stated on the museum website,

Large quantities of Paracas textiles were illegally exported to museums and private collections all over the world between 1931 and 1933. About a hundred of these were taken to Sweden and donated to the Ethnographic Department of Gothenburg Museum. Today, problems associated with looted artifacts and illicit trade in antiques are better acknowledged and being addressed.

Though Peru began lobbying for repatriation in 2009, Gothenburg has been somewhat slow to respond to the requests, partly due to the fragile condition of the textiles. According to the museum website, even the transport of these objects between the museum's archives and their exhibition space in Sweden—a distance of only a few kilometers—has resulted in their deterioration. Despite these concerns, a plan has been put in place to systematically return some of the textiles to Peru. The first four were delivered in 2014, and another 79 in 2017. Further works are set to be returned by 2021. The repatriated textiles are now in the possession of Peru's General Directorate of Museums of the Ministry of Culture.

The case of the Gothenburg Paracas textiles highlights the need not only for governmental and institutional agreements regarding the restitution of illegally acquired objects, but also for oversight concerning the continued stewardship and preservation of these fragile artworks.

Moche culture, an introduction

by Dr. Sarahh Scher

A Complex Culture



Figure **4.3.38**: Sculptural ceramic ceremonial vessel that represents a dog, Moche, Peru, c. 100-800 CE. 180 mm high. Museo Larco, Lima, Peru.This spotted dog is represented in several scenes of Moche art accompanying Ai Apaec, the Moche mythological hero. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Moche architects and artists raised spectacular adobe platforms and pyramids, and created exquisite ceramics and jewelry. Their art, unlike that of most Andean cultures, is naturalistic and rich in imagery, inviting us to explore their world.

The Moche culture thrived on Peru's northern coast between approximately 200 and 900 CE. Rising and falling long before the Inka, the culture left no written records, and the early Spanish colonists who chronicled the cultures of Peru found the Chimú people in what had earlier been Moche territory. The Moche are a prime example of how archaeologists and art historians use scientific methods of data collection and evaluation in understanding ancient, non-literate cultures.

In the early 20th century, there was very little scientific excavation in Peru. Many art objects that came into museums and private collections were taken from graves and had no record of their original context. Based on this limited knowledge, scholars thought that the Moche had been a unified state that held sway over a large swath of the north coast, from near the border with modern-day Ecuador in the north to the Huarmey river valley to the south (Huarmey is approximately 180 miles north of the modern capital city of Lima). This conclusion was based on the similarity of ceramic and metal artworks being found throughout the range.

Not a single unified political entity

As modern scientific archaeology began in the area, it became clear that the Moche were not a single, unified political entity. Archaeologists and art historians began to see that differences in style and iconography could be determined between areas. Architectural structures were different at different sites. In addition, carbon dating allowed scholars to understand that some styles

of pottery could be from one time frame in one river valley, while being associated with a completely different time frame in another. As more data was accumulated, hypotheses were tested and the conception of the Moche was revised and reassessed. What emerged was a vision of the Moche as politically independent groups who shared a common ideology, mythical and religious beliefs and practices, as well as a common iconography for their artwork.



Figure **4.3.39**: Moche sites (in what is today Peru), courtesy of the San José de Moro Archaeological Project. (Image via Smarthistory)

Independent areas (sometimes as large as a pair of river valleys, sometimes as small as one section of a single valley) would signal that they belonged to Moche culture by using Moche themes in their artwork, while at the same time asserting differences—in architecture, in iconographic style, and in which figures from the mythology were deemed important. In this way, separate Moche polities could express both their political independence as well as their sense of belonging to a larger cultural system. The biggest separation of Moche style and iconography splits them into northern and southern areas (see Figure **4.3.39**), which can then be subdivided into smaller, politically independent areas.



Figure **4.3.40**: Ceramic artist Walter Acosta showing a replica Moche mold. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **4.3.41**: Mold-made replicas in ceramic artist Walter Acosta's workshop, painted with slip and ready to be fired. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Southern Moche tended to be expert ceramicists—producing a large amount of fine, thin-walled vessels painted in slip. Moche artists used only three colors—cream, red-brown or red-orange, and black to decorate their ceramics. Many Moche ceramics were made using molds, and so we have many duplicate pieces. The ability to control imagery through the use of molds seems to have been important to the political elites of the Moche.

Early Moche vessels are very sculptural, depicting humans, supernatural figures, animals, and plants in a great variety. Later Moche ceramics feature complex line drawings of similar subject matter (called fineline style). The Moche often used a distinctive spout on their vessels, called a stirrup spout. It is composed of a hollow tube of clay bent into an upside-down U shape, with another tube piercing it at the apex of the curve (see images below). This spout form has ancient origins in the Andes, and it seems possible that the Moche deliberately chose this form to echo its use in during the earlier Cupisnique (1500-500 BCE) and Chavín (900-200 BCE) cultures. Fine ceramics would have been used as gifts from the highest elites to the lower elites and middle classes, helping to cement the social bonds that supported the power that the elites held. Fine ceramics have been found in households, and the pieces in graves show evidence that they had been used.



Figure **4.3.42**: Left: Fox Warrior Bottle, Moche, Peru, c. 4th-6th century CE. Ceramic, 26.7 cm; Right: Fox Warrior Bottle, Moche, Peru, 7th-8th century CE. Ceramic, 29.46 cm. Both, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Northern Moche are celebrated for their metalwork, especially the exquisite pieces found in the tombs of Sipán in the Lambayeque valley. Working in gold and silver, Moche artists were adept at hammering, soldering, and setting stones, as well as developing a process to make a copper-gold alloy appear to be solid gold—a technique known as depletion gilding. Gold, silver, semiprecious stones and Spondylus shell were used to make the elaborate regalia of the highest elites. Massive necklaces and bracelets, ear spools, headdresses, nose ornaments, and more were made by Moche artists for the great lords. While there certainly

were skilled ceramicists in the north and able metalsmiths in the south, the general division of materials between these two areas helps define some of their differences. Both areas also would have had weavers producing fine textiles, but few examples have survived.



Figure **4.3.43**: Nose Ornament with Intertwined Serpents, Moche, Peru, c. 390-450. Gold, silver, shell, 12.5 x 21.1 x 1.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

Iconography, Ideology, and Human Sacrifice

Early scholars assumed that armed conquest was the mechanism of power for the Moche state and Moche art certainly has a great deal of imagery relating to armed combat. However, it now appears that only some Moche expansion was due to military action. Other areas seem to have simply been colonized in uninhabited areas, or Moche culture was adopted by local elites who were impressed by the ideology. The imagery of combat is, in large part, related to that ideology, but not as a call to conquest. Instead, it seems that a lot of Moche combat imagery has ritual meaning. It focuses on hand-to-hand combat between two individuals, using cone-headed clubs as weapons and small shields for defense. Interestingly, this ignores what we know archaeologically about Moche warfare—which included the use of spears and darts propelled by throwing sticks, as well as slings used to propel stones with astonishing force. The Moche artwork, in other words, tells us one thing about their culture but omits other things. We can think of this as a form of propaganda—emphasizing the ritual aspects of Moche elite power rather than the more practical aspects of war. Moche art and archaeology also tell us what the point of this hand-to-hand combat was.

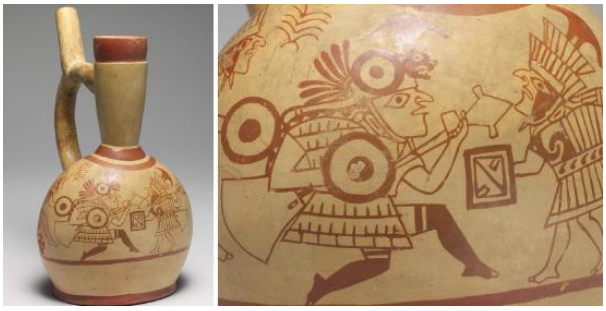


Figure **4.3.44**: Warrior Bottle, Moche, Peru, 4th-7th century. Ceramic, 28.6 x 17.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photos: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

In the art, we see victorious warriors knocking the helmet off of their foe, sometimes bloodying their nose in the process. The defeated warrior is then stripped of his armor and clothing. With a rope tied around his neck, he is led by the victor, who carries the armor and clothing in a bundle to signify his victory. The defeated warriors are eventually sacrificed in an elaborate ritual, their necks sliced and blood collected, to be drunk by figures that are dressed in the costumes of gods.



Figure **4.3.45**: Adobe mural depicting victorious warrior with captured weapons and clothing, Huaca de la Luna, Peru. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Archaeologists have uncovered three sets of sacrificed prisoners at the site of Huaca de la Luna in the Moche river valley. These large-scale sacrifices took place at different times over the course of hundreds of years. The skeletons show signs of having undergone combat, as well as having had their throats slit. These remains seem to show that what is depicted in the art was also carried out in life (at least these three times). Whether smaller-scale sacrifices related to this imagery took place is still being investigated, at Huaca de la Luna and other large Moche sites. The continued archaeological exploration and analysis of Moche artworks will help researchers to further understand this complex culture.



Figure **4.3.46**: Adobe mural depicting stripped prisoners led by ropes around their necks, Huaca El Brujo, Peru. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Optional Online Resource: Moche Portrait Head Bottle

Moche vessels, with a distinctive stirrup spout that evokes much older ceramics from the Chavin and Cupisnique cultures, were produced in large numbers by first shaping the clay in a mold and then finishing the pieces by hand. In this video, Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Sarah Scher discuss this vessel in the shape of a portrait head, and what the distinctive markings under the chin tell us about this piece and Moche culture.



Figure **4.3.47**: Portrait Head Bottle, Moche culture, Peru, 5th–6th century. Ceramic, 32.39 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Public Domain)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Sarahh Scher, "Introduction to Andean Cultures," in *Smarthistory*, October 6, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Jayne Yantz, "Nasca Geoglyphs ," in *Smarthistory*, October 1, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lois Martin, "The Paracas Textile," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Sarahh Scher, "Moche culture, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, August 27, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Art of the Stone Age

In This Chapter

5.0: Chapter Introduction
5.1: Paleolithic Art
5.2: Mesolithic Art
5.3: Neolithic Art

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5.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Early Origins in Africa

Humankind and the very earliest cultural and visual expressions originated in Africa more than two million years ago. Africa is also where we see the first and earliest physical evidence of the ability to recognize and create pictorial images. Specifically, in 1925 a pebble, approximately three million years old, and thus predating homo sapiens, was unearthed in a cave at Makapansgat in South Africa.



Figure **5.0.1**: Drawing of waterworn pebble resembling a human face, from Makapansgat, South Africa, c. 3,000,000 BCE. Reddish-brown jasperite, 2 3/8" wide. Pebble is located at the Natural History Museum, London. (Drawing: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

As you can see from the sketch of the Makapansgat pebble, it resembled a human face or skull, due to its natural wear, divots, and markings. The pebble was found along with the bones of an *Australopithecus africanus*, an early side relation in the evolutionary family of homo sapiens much like the 3.2-million-year-old ape known as "Lucy." The pebble's location in the cave, several miles from the closest place it could have been found, suggests that these early ancestors recognized the appearance of a human head, and thus picked up, kept, and transported this naturally-occurring object. The pebble, which was not intentionally formed or modified, demonstrates recognition, but not yet representation, and it is not art.

The first examples of art in the form of purposeful and conscious abstract designs, date back 73,000 years (Pre-Paleolithic) and were found at the Blombos Cave in South Africa. (Read more about examples of such early abstract art in Origins of Rock Art in Africa.) The first examples of art in the form of pictorial images date back to the Paleolithic period (40,000-30,000 BCE). One of these recently discovered pictorial images is not from Africa, where humankind originated, nor from Europe, where the most documented examples are from, but is from Sulawesi, Indonesia, and showcases the most common theme in Stone Age art: figurative depictions of animals.

This discovery, which dates back 43,900 years, is believed to be the oldest documented depiction of the animal world. Found in Leang Tedongnge cave and made with red ochre pigment, the painting depicts a sprawling and complex hunting scene including a nearly pristine depiction of a Sulawesi warty pig, a group of therianthropes (mythical beings or deities which are part human and part animal), a type of buffalo called an anoa, and the outlines of human hands—likely those of the artist(s). (Read more about this discovery at "Is this cave painting humanity's oldest story?")



Figure 5.0.2: Figurative painting of Sulawesi warty pig painting on rock panel at Leang Tedongnge in Sulawesi, Indonesia, c. 43,900 BCE. Red ochre on stone, 53.5" x 21." (Photo: Maxime Aubert, courtesy of Griffith University.)

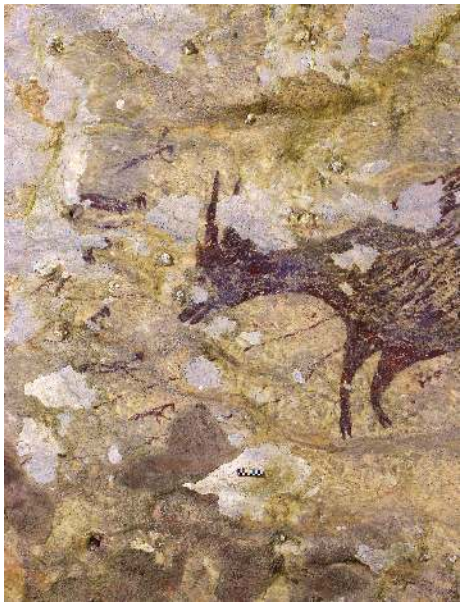


Figure 5.0.3: A section of the ancient cave art discovered in Sulawesi, Indonesia that depicts a hunting scene including a type of buffalo called an anoa, at right, facing several smaller therianthrope figures at left, c. 43,900 BCE. Red ochre on stone, approximately 15' wide. (Photo: Ratno Sardi, courtesy of Griffith University.)

Similarly, another recent discovery of ancient figurative cave paintings is in Kalimantan, Borneo. These cave paintings date back to approximately 40,000 years ago with additional phases of paintings dating back to about 20,000 years ago. There is a transition between the two phases of cave paintings, demonstrating an artistic shift from depicting the animal world to depicting the human world—something that is also seen and documented in different phases of cave paintings in Europe as well. Through these findings in Southeast Asia, archeologists are able to widen the scope and our understanding of Paleolithic art.

Additionally and perhaps most importantly, one of the many exciting things about the discoveries in Sulawesi and Kalimantan is that we as humans are continuing to learn our own history and origin stories through such findings. The fact is that before there are human records telling people's stories, the whole picture is not fully clear. But through archaeology and art history, humans continue to learn—and through such discoveries, the understanding of the human story changes too.

Historiography (Writing History)

Although humankind's origins are rooted in Africa, history has not always been written this way, nor has it acknowledged this truth. As referenced in the introduction to this textbook, art history as a discipline was invented in Europe, so although the oldest art and people are from Africa, much more documentation and research on early humans was conducted in Europe, as explored below. However, exciting new discoveries are still happening, such as with the caves in Sulawesi and Borneo.

Art Historical Periods and Naming

This chapter focuses on three art historical periods: Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. Sometimes these periods are also named for regions, as is the case for periods in the next chapter, including Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and more. As you study this material, pay attention to the distinguishing characteristics of each period, as well as which works of art and architecture fit into each.

Terminology: Problems with "Prehistoric"

The Stone Age era is sometimes generally referred to as "Prehistoric," but that term is problematic. It was first used in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, when scholars ranked cultures on a single Eurocentric continuum from "savage" to "civilized." This continuum is part of a white, European worldview that held the ideology—and justification—that so-called "savages" needed to be pacified and ruled. "Prehistory" referred to societies that had not developed writing, and the Eurocentrism of this ranking becomes clear when we realize that British archaeologists deemed China's highly-developed culture as uncivilized because their written language used characters that can represent concepts or sounds, and not an alphabetic script. Additionally, highly advanced societies that prize oral literacy and oral history over writing would not have been considered civilized either. Archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians have since recognized that to understand a culture, they have to consider it on its own terms, rather than measuring it by a yardstick from their own culture.

Stone Age Art and Eurocentrism

Since the first modern scholars to recognize the Stone Age were Europeans, it is not surprising that they found their examples in Europe. Additionally, once one archaeological site became famous, people began to recognize other sites in neighboring areas and regions.

But there are more troubling reasons for the Eurocentrism of the history of Paleolithic art:

- Early in the 20th century, when the first cave paintings were recognized as being very old, many European scholars still believed that Europe was the most advanced part of the world, so they assumed that the oldest art would be found there.
- Europeans took objects from around the world back to Europe, meaning that if you wanted to study these objects, you had to work within the European system of understanding them.
- European specialists made the problematic argument that cave paintings found in Namibia could not be Paleolithic because they were too advanced for Africans to have made. This idea is rooted in the racist belief that Africans were inferior and uncivilized and hence could not have made these cave paintings. The paintings' very naturalism suggested to Europeans that they were older than they actually were, because European tradition since the Renaissance had held naturalism—falsely—to be superior to abstraction. For a much later example of Europeans' disbelief that Africans were capable of producing naturalistic and/or highly advanced art, read about the brass Head of a Ruler from Ife, and *who* Europeans initially believed must have created it!

We will continue to see examples of Eurocentrism in art history as we move through subsequent chapters. As we discussed in the introduction to this textbook, however, our goal is to help you identify it when you see it, and to include sites and objects that help to give a more balanced and global understanding of artistic creation and cultural production in the places and time periods that we study.

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on the very earliest art during a period known generally as the Stone Age (so-named since these societies used tools made of stone). This chapter examines Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic sites and objects in Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia; considers the distinguishing features of these different eras; and explores some of the paintings and sculptures that give us a glimpse into the lives of our earliest ancestors.

Stone Age Periods

Archaeologists divide the Stone Age into three stages, based on where people got their food:

- **Paleolithic** (from the Greek for old and stone) or **Old Stone Age**: 40,000 BCE–10,000 BCE; people gather wild plants and hunt animals

- **Mesolithic** (from the Greek for middle and stone) or **Middle Stone Age**: 10,000 BCE–8,000 BCE; people begin to plant food crops and/or live with animals
- **Neolithic** (from the Greek for new and stone) or **New Stone Age**: 8,000 BCE–3,000 BCE; people farm and raise animals for food

Neolithic settlements are indicated by the remains of permanent buildings, crop storage, and domesticated animals. Paleolithic sites lack any of these, and have their own distinctive stone tools. A Mesolithic site might have just one of the Neolithic features, while clearly still having belonged to hunter-gatherers. It is also important to note that the transition to the Neolithic period did not occur at the same time everywhere.

During these periods, humans created a wide variety of diverse and representational art, from small and monumental paintings on cave walls, to portable items like necklaces made with stones and shells, to figural and sculptural forms made from clay, stone, and ivory.

Objects overview

Some of the exciting works of art that this chapter will cover detail a wide range of Stone Age media including cave paintings, sculptures, and archaeological sites, including:

- the new discoveries of the oldest cave art found in Sulawesi, Indonesia
- the Woman of Willendorf, a 25,000 year-old sculptural carving of a woman
- the Halls of Bulls in Lascaux, France (once believed to be the earliest surviving example of artistic expression)
- the Apollo 11 Cave Stones, one of the oldest examples of mobile art
- the Biblical oasis of Jericho and the pre-pottery Neolithic examples of plastered skulls made to resemble living, human heads
- Çatalhöyük, the Neolithic proto-city in Turkey
- pictorial images of a running, horned woman found in Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

In this chapter, we will explore the differences between the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic ages, using the art of these times as our lens.

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the oldest art, you should be able to:

- Identify the origins of humankind
- Explain the differences between Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic societies
- Relate those differences to what you see in Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic art and architecture
- Identify differences between the periods and relate them to a result of social and environmental changes
- Recognize earliest visual expressions that give glimpses into lives of our earliest ancestors
- Identify the role of human and animal figures in Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic art
- Discuss origins of creativity, representation, and stylistic innovation in the Paleolithic period, worldwide
- Describe the materials and techniques of art in the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods
- Recognize that much of what we know about the Stone Age is due to sheer accidents of discovery, so there is much that we still do not know about the oldest art

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Reuters, "SA Cave Pebble Outshines Treasures at British Museum"
- Encyclopedia Britannica, "Cave Painting"
- British Museum, "Facing the Past: the Jericho Skull"
- Science Advances, “Oldest Cave Art Found in Sulawesi”
- Nature, “Is this cave painting humanity’s oldest story?”
- Met Museum, "Lascaux Caves"
- Griffith University, Figurative Cave Art in Borneo [Video]

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5.1: Paleolithic Art

Paleolithic art, an introduction

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

The oldest art: ornamentation

Humans make art. We do this for many reasons and with whatever technologies are available to us. Extremely old, non-representational ornamentation has been found across Africa. The oldest firmly-dated example is a collection of 82,000 year old Nassarius snail shells found in Morocco that are pierced and covered with red ochre. Wear patterns suggest that they may have been strung beads. Nassarius shell beads found in Israel may be more than 100,000 years old and in the Blombos cave in South Africa, pierced shells and small pieces of ochre (red Haematite) etched with simple geometric patterns have been found in a 75,000-year-old layer of sediment.

The oldest representational art

The oldest known representational imagery comes from the Aurignacian culture of the Upper Paleolithic period (Paleolithic means old stone age). Archaeological discoveries across a broad swath of Europe (especially Southern France, Northern Spain, and Swabia, in Germany) include over two hundred caves with spectacular Aurignacian paintings, drawings and sculpture that are among the earliest undisputed examples of representational image-making. The oldest of these is a 2.4-inch tall female figure carved out of mammoth ivory that was found in six fragments in the Hohle Fels cave near Schelklingen in southern Germany. It dates to 35,000 BCE.

Online Resource: Lion Man

The so-called Lion Man, which combines human and animal attributes, is among the oldest art discovered and what British Museum curator Jill cook calls "the oldest known evidence for religious beliefs." Visit the British Museum Blog to read more about this remarkable sculpture and watch videos describing its discovery and how it might have been made.



Figure 5.1.1: The Lion Man, from Stadel Cave, c. 40,000-35,000 BCE. Wooly mammoth ivory, 11 5/8” high. Ulmer Museum, Ulm, Germany. (Left photo: Dagmar Hollmann, CC BY-SA 4.0; right photo: Thilo Parg, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The caves

The caves at Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc, Lascaux, Pech Merle, and Altamira contain the best known examples of pre-historic painting and drawing. Here are remarkably evocative renderings of animals and some humans that employ a complex mix of naturalism and abstraction. Archaeologists that study Paleolithic era humans, believe that the paintings discovered in 1994, in the cave at Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc in the Ardéche valley in France, are more than 30,000 years old. The images found at Lascaux and Altamira are more recent, dating to approximately 15,000 BCE. The paintings at Pech Merle date to both 25,000 and 15,000 BCE.



Figure **5.1.2**: Replica of the wall painting from the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in southern France. Original painting c. 30,000-28,000 BCE. Right rhinoceros 3'4" long. Anthropos Pavilion of the Moravian Museum, Brno, Czech Republic. (Photo: HTO, public domain)

Questions

What can we really know about the creators of these paintings and what the images originally meant? These are questions that are difficult enough when we study art made only 500 years ago. It is much more perilous to assert meaning for the art of people who shared our anatomy but had not yet developed the cultures or linguistic structures that shaped who we have become. Do the tools of art history even apply? Here is evidence of a visual language that collapses the more than 1,000 generations that separate us, but we must be cautious. This is especially so if we want to understand the people that made this art as a way to understand ourselves. The desire to speculate based on what we see and the physical evidence of the caves is wildly seductive.

Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc

The cave at Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc is over 1,000 feet in length with two large chambers. Carbon samples date the charcoal used to depict the two head-to-head Rhinoceroses (see Figure **5.1.1**) to between 30,340 and 32,410 years before 1995 when the samples were taken. The cave's drawings depict other large animals including horses, mammoths, musk ox, ibex, reindeer, aurochs, megaceros deer, panther, and owl (scholars note that these animals were not then a normal part of people's diet). Photographs show that the drawing in Figure **5.1.1** is very carefully rendered but may be misleading. We see a group of horses, rhinos and bison and we see them as a group, overlapping and skewed in scale. But the photograph distorts the way these animal figures would have been originally seen. The bright electric lights used by the photographer create a broad flat scope of vision; how different to see each animal emerge from the dark under the flickering light cast by a flame.

A word of caution

In a 2009 presentation at University of California San Diego, Dr. Randell White, Professor of Anthropology at New York University, suggested that the overlapping horses pictured in Figure **5.1.1** might represent the same horse over time, running, eating, sleeping, etc. Perhaps these are far more sophisticated representations than we have imagined. There is another drawing at Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc that cautions us against ready assumptions. It has been interpreted as depicting the thighs and genitals of a woman but there is also a drawing of a bison and a lion, and the images are nearly intertwined. In addition to the drawings, the cave is littered with the skulls and bones of cave bear and the track of a wolf. There is also a footprint thought to have been made by an eight-year-old boy.

Oldest cave art found in Sulawesi, Indonesia

by Smarthistory

A team of Griffith University archaeologists has shared in the discovery of what may be the world's oldest known cave painting, dating back to at least 45,500 years ago. To learn more, watch these optional videos below.

Uncovered in South Sulawesi (in the Maros-Pangkep caves on Indonesia) during field research conducted with Indonesia's leading archaeological research centre, Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional (ARKENAS), the cave painting consists of a figurative depiction of a Sulawesi warty pig, a wild boar that is endemic to this Indonesian island.

Optional Online Resource: Oldest Cave Art Found in Sulawesi

"The Sulawesi warty pig painting we found in the limestone cave of Leang Tedongnge is now the earliest known representational work of art in the world, as far as are aware," said Professor Adam Brumm from Griffith's Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution, co-leader of the Griffith-ARKENAS team.



Griffith University, "Oldest Cave Art Found in Sulawesi"

Optional Online Resource: Earliest Hunting Scene in Prehistoric Art

A team of archaeologists led by Griffith University has discovered a cave painting in Indonesia that is at least 44,000 years old and which portrays a group of part-human, part-animal figures – called "therianthropes" – hunting large mammals with spears or ropes, casting new light on the origin of modern human cognition.



Griffith University, "Earliest Hunting Scene in Prehistoric Art"

Woman of Willendorf

by Dr. Bryan Zygmont

Editors' Note

The author has used the title "Venus of Willendorf" throughout this essay, even after explaining that the word “Venus” is misleading here. “Woman of Willendorf” is more accurate, and is how this section is titled. The *Woman of Willendorf* is a sculpture in the round, unlike relief sculptures like the Neolithic reliefs later in this unit. In relief sculpture, the imagery does not fully emerge from the background. In contrast, freestanding sculpture, or sculpture in the round, is carved in 360 degrees, allowing the viewer to see the back as well as the front of a sculpture.



Figure **5.1.3**: Woman of Willendorf, c. 24,000-22,000 BCE. Limestone, 11.1 cm high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Can a 25,000-year-old object be a work of art?

The artifact known as the *Venus of Willendorf* dates to between 24,000-22,000 BCE, making it one of the oldest and most famous surviving works of art. But what does it mean to be a work of art?

The Oxford English Dictionary, perhaps the authority on the English language, defines the word “art” as

> *the application of skill to the arts of imitation and design, painting, engraving, sculpture, architecture; the cultivation of these in its principles, practice, and results; the skillful production of the beautiful in visible forms.*

Some of the words and phrases that stand out within this definition include “application of skill,” “imitation,” and “beautiful.” By this definition, the concept of “art” involves the use of skill to create an object that contains some appreciation of aesthetics. The object is not only made, it is made with an attempt of creating something that contains elements of beauty.

In contrast, the same Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “artifact” as, “anything made by human art and workmanship; an artificial product. In Archaeol[ogy] applied to the rude products of aboriginal workmanship as distinguished from natural remains.” Again, some key words and phrases are important: “anything made by human art,” and “rude products.” Clearly, an artifact is any object created by humankind regardless of the “skill” of its creator or the absence of “beauty.”

Artifact, then, is anything created by humankind, and art is a particular kind of artifact, a group of objects under the broad umbrella of artifact, in which beauty has been achieved through the application of skills. Think of the average plastic spoon: a uniform white color, mass produced, and unremarkable in just about every way. While it serves a function—say, for example, to stir your hot chocolate—the person who designed it likely did so without any real dedication or commitment to making this utilitarian object beautiful. You have likely never lovingly gazed at a plastic spoon and remarked, “Wow! Now that’s a beautiful spoon!” This is in contrast to a silver spoon you might purchase at Tiffany & Co. While their spoon could just as well stir cream into your morning

coffee, it was skillfully designed by a person who attempted to make it aesthetically pleasing; note the elegant bend of the handle, the gentle luster of the metal, the graceful slope of the bowl.

These terms are important to bear in mind when analyzing prehistoric art. While it is unlikely people from the Upper Paleolithic period cared to conceptualize what it meant to make art or to be an artist, it cannot be denied that the objects they created were made with skill, were often made as a way of imitating the world around them, and were made with a particular care to create something beautiful. They likely represent, for the Paleolithic peoples who created them, objects made with great competence and with a particular interest in aesthetics.

Caves and pockets

Two main types of Upper Paleolithic art have survived. The first we can classify as permanently located works found on the walls within caves. Mostly unknown prior to the final decades of the nineteenth century, many such sites have now been discovered throughout much of southern Europe and have provided historians and archaeologists new insights into humankind millennia prior to the creation of writing. The subjects of these works vary: we may observe a variety of geometric motifs, many types of flora and fauna, and the occasional human figure. They also fluctuate in size; ranging from several inches to large-scale compositions that span many feet in length.

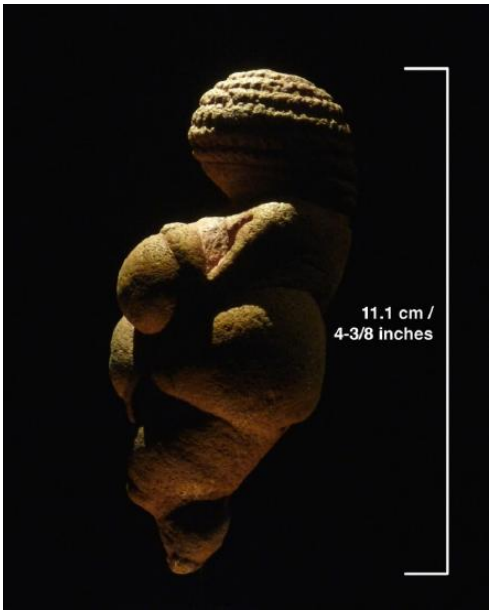


Figure **5.1.4**: Woman of Willendorf, c. 24,000-22,000 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The second category of Paleolithic art may be called portable since these works are generally of a small-scale—a logical size given the nomadic nature of Paleolithic peoples. Despite their often diminutive size, the creation of these portable objects signifies a remarkable allocation of time and effort. As such, these figurines were significant enough to take along during the nomadic wanderings of their Paleolithic creators. The *Venus of Willendorf* is a perfect example of this. Josef Szombathy, an Austro-Hungarian archaeologist, discovered this work in 1908 outside the small Austrian village of Willendorf. Although generally projected in art history classrooms to be several feet tall, this limestone figurine is petite in size. She measures just under 4½" high, and could fit comfortably in the palm of your hand. This small scale was very deliberate and allowed whoever carved (or, perhaps owned) this figurine to carry it during their nearly daily nomadic travels in search of food.

Naming and dating

Clearly, the Paleolithic sculptor who made this small figurine would never have named it the *Venus of Willendorf*. Venus was the name of the Roman goddess of love and ideal beauty. When discovered outside the Austrian village of Willendorf, scholars mistakenly assumed that this figure was likewise a goddess of love and beauty. There is absolutely no evidence though that the *Venus of Willendorf* shared a function similar to its classically inspired namesake. However incorrect the name may be, it has endured, and tells us more about those who found her than those who made her.

Dating too can be a problem, especially since Prehistoric art, by definition, has no written record. In fact, the definition of the word prehistoric is that written language did not yet exist, so the creator of the *Venus of Willendorf* could not have incised "Bob made this in the year 24,000 BCE" on the back. In addition, stone artifacts present a special problem since we are interested in the date that the stone was carved, not the date of the material itself. Despite these hurdles, art historians and archaeologist attempt to establish dates for prehistoric finds through two processes. The first is called relative dating and the second involves an examination of the stratification of an object's discovery.

Relative dating is an easily understood process that involves stylistically comparing an object whose date is uncertain to other objects whose dates have been firmly established. By correctly fitting the unknown object into this stylistic chronology, scholars can find a very general chronological date for an object. A simple example can illustrate this method. The first Chevrolet Corvette was sold during the 1953 model year, and this particular car has gone through numerous iterations up to its most recent version. If presented with pictures of the Corvette's development from every five years to establish the stylistic development from its earliest model to the most recent (for example, images from the 1953, 1958, 1963, and all the way to the current model), you would have a general idea of the changes the car underwent over time. If then given a picture of a Corvette from an unknown year, you could, on the basis of stylistic analysis, generally place it within the visual chronology of this car with some accuracy. The Corvette is a convenient example, but the same exercise could be applied to iPods, Coca-Cola bottles, suits, or any other object that changes over time.

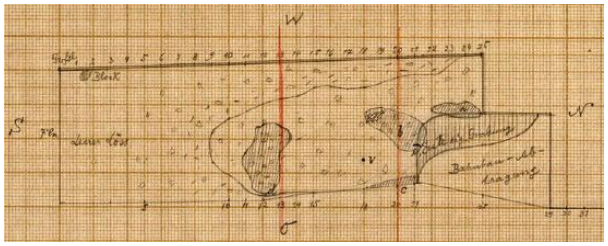


Figure **5.1.5**: Plan of the excavation at Willendorf I in 1908 with the position of the figurine. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The second way scholars date the *Venus of Willendorf* is through an analysis of where it was found. Generally, the deeper an object is recovered from the earth, the longer that object has been buried. Imagine a penny jar that has had coins added to it for hundreds of years. It is a good bet that the coins at the bottom of that jar are the oldest whereas those at the top are the newest. The same applies to Paleolithic objects. Because of the depth at which these objects are found, we can infer that they are very old indeed.

What did it mean?

In the absence of writing, art historians rely on the objects themselves to learn about ancient peoples. The form of the *Venus of Willendorf*—that is, what it looks like—may very well inform what it originally meant. The most conspicuous elements of her anatomy are those that deal with the process of reproduction and child rearing. The artist took particular care to emphasize her breasts, which some scholars suggest indicates that she is able to nurse a child. The artist also brought deliberate attention to her pubic region. Traces of a pigment—red ochre—can still be seen on parts of the figurine.



Figure **5.1.6**: Woman of Willendorf (detail). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In contrast, the sculptor placed scant attention on the non-reproductive parts of her body. This is particularly noticeable in the figure's limbs, where there is little emphasis placed on musculature or anatomical accuracy. We may infer from the small size of her feet that she was not meant to be free standing, and was either meant to be carried or placed lying down. The artist carved the figure's upper arms along her upper torso, and her lower arms are only barely visible resting upon the top of her breasts. As enigmatic as the lack of attention to her limbs is, the absence of attention to the face is even more striking. No eyes, nose, ears, or mouth remain visible. Instead, our attention is drawn to seven horizontal bands that wrap in concentric circles from the crown of her head. Some scholars have suggested her head is obscured by a knit cap pulled downward, others suggest that these forms may represent braided or beaded hair and that her face, perhaps once painted, is angled downward.

If the face was purposefully obscured, the Paleolithic sculptor may have created, not a portrait of a particular person, but rather a representation of the reproductive and child rearing aspects of a woman. In combination with the emphasis on the breasts and pubic area, it seems likely that the *Venus of Willendorf* had a function that related to fertility.

Without doubt, we can learn much more from the *Venus of Willendorf* than its diminutive size might at first suggest. We learn about relative dating and stratification. We learn that these nomadic people living almost 25,000 years ago cared about making objects beautiful. And we can learn that these Paleolithic people had an awareness of the importance of the women.

The *Venus of Willendorf* is only one example dozens of paleolithic figures we believe may have been associated with fertility. Nevertheless, it retains a place of prominence within the history of human art.

Hall of Bulls, Lascaux

by Mary Beth Looney

We are as likely to communicate using easily interpretable pictures as we are text. Portable handheld devices enable us to tell others via social media what we are doing and thinking. Approximately 15,000 years ago, we also communicated in pictures—but with no written language.



Figure **5.1.7**: Map showing the location of three well-known prehistoric cave painting sites in France and Spain. (© Google, via Smarthistory)

The cave of Lascaux, France is one of almost 350 similar sites that are known to exist—most are isolated to a region of southern France and northern Spain. Both Neanderthals (named after the site in which their bones were first discovered—the Neander Valley in Germany) and Modern Humans (early Homo Sapiens Sapiens) coexisted in this region 30,000 years ago. Life was short and very difficult; resources were scarce and the climate was very cold.

Location, location, location!

Approximately 15,000 years later in the valley of Vèzére, in southwestern France, modern humans lived and witnessed the migratory patterns of a vast range of wildlife. They discovered a cave in a tall hill overlooking the valley. Inside, an unknown number of these people drew and painted images that, once discovered in 1940, have excited the imaginations of both researchers and the general public.

After struggling through small openings and narrow passages to access the larger rooms beyond, prehistoric people discovered that the cave wall surfaces functioned as the perfect, blank "canvas" upon which to draw and paint. White calcite, roofed by nonporous rock, provides a uniquely dry place to feature art. To paint, these early artists used charcoal and ochre (a kind of pigmented, earthen material, that is soft and can be mixed with liquids, and comes in a range of colors like brown, red, yellow, and white). We find images of horses, deer, bison, elk, a few lions, a rhinoceros, and a bear—almost as an encyclopedia of the area's large prehistoric wildlife. Among these images are abstract marks—dots and lines in a variety of configurations. In one image, a humanoid figure plays a mysterious role.

How did they do it?

The animals are rendered in what has come to be called "twisted perspective," in which their bodies are depicted in profile while we see the horns from a more frontal viewpoint. The images are sometimes entirely linear—line drawn to define the animal's contour. In many other cases, the animals are described in solid and blended colors blown by mouth onto the wall. In other portions of the Lascaux cave, artists carved lines into the soft calcite surface. Some of these are infilled with color—others are not.

The cave spaces range widely in size and ease of access. The famous Hall of Bulls (below) is large enough to hold some fifty people. Other "rooms" and "halls" are extraordinarily narrow and tall.

Archaeologists have found hundreds of stone tools. They have also identified holes in some walls that may have supported tree-limb scaffolding that would have elevated an artist high enough to reach the upper surfaces. Fossilized pollen has been found; these grains were inadvertently brought into the cave by early visitors and are helping scientists understand the world outside.

Hall of Bulls

Given the large scale of many of the animal images, we can presume that the artists worked deliberately—carefully plotting out a particular form before completing outlines and adding color. Some researchers believe that "master" artists enlisted the help of assistants who mixed pigments and held animal fat lamps to illuminate the space. Alternatively, in the case of the "rooms" containing mostly engraved and overlapping forms, it seems that the pure process of drawing and repetitive re-drawing held serious (perhaps ritual) significance for the makers.

Why did they do it?



Figure 5.1.8: Left wall of the Hall of Bulls, Lascaux II (replica of the original cave, which is closed to the public), original cave c. 16,000-14,000 BCE. 11 feet 6 inches long. (Photo: ©Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, France, via Smarthistory)

Many scholars have speculated about why prehistoric people painted and engraved the walls at Lascaux and other caves like it. Perhaps the most famous theory was put forth by a priest named Henri Breuil. Breuil spent considerable time in many of the caves, meticulously recording the images in drawings when the paintings were too challenging to photograph. Relying primarily on a field of study known as ethnography, Breuil believed that the images played a role in "hunting magic." The theory suggests that the prehistoric people who used the cave may have believed that a way to overpower their prey involved creating images of it during rituals designed to ensure a successful hunt. This seems plausible when we remember that survival was entirely dependent on successful foraging and hunting, though it is also important to remember how little we actually know about these people.

Another theory suggests that the images communicate narratives (stories). While a number of the depictions can be seen to do this, one particular image in Lascaux more directly supports this theory. A bison, drawn in strong, black lines, bristles with energy, as the fur on the back of its neck stands up and the head is radically turned to face us (Figure 5.1.9).



Figure 5.1.9: Disemboweled bison and bird-headed human figure? Cave at Lascaux, c. 16,000-14,000 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A form drawn under the bison's abdomen is interpreted as internal organs, spilling out from a wound. A more crudely drawn form positioned below and to the left of the bison may represent a humanoid figure with the head of a bird. Nearby, a thin line is topped with another bird and there is also an arrow with barbs. Further below and to the far left the partial outline of a rhinoceros can be identified.

Interpreters of this image tend to agree that some sort of interaction has taken place among these animals and the bird-headed human figure—in which the bison has sustained injury either from a weapon or from the horn of the rhinoceros. Why the person in the image has the rudimentary head of a bird, and why a bird form sits atop a stick very close to him is a mystery. Some suggest that the person is a shaman—a kind of priest or healer with powers involving the ability to communicate with spirits of other worlds. Regardless, this riveting image appears to depict action and reaction, although many aspects of it are difficult to piece together.

Preservation for future study

The Caves of Lascaux are the most famous of all of the known caves in the region. In fact, their popularity has permanently endangered them. From 1940 to 1963, the numbers of visitors and their impact on the delicately balanced environment of the cave—which supported the preservation of the cave images for so long—necessitated the cave's closure to the public. A replica called Lascaux II was created about 200 yards away from the site. The original Lascaux cave is now a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Lascaux will require constant vigilance and upkeep to preserve it for future generations.

Many mysteries continue to surround Lascaux, but there is one certainty. The very human need to communicate in the form of pictures—for whatever purpose—has persisted since our earliest beginnings.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Paleolithic art, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, June 8, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Smarthistory, "Oldest cave art found in Sulawesi, Indonesia," in *Smarthistory*, January 13, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Bryan Zygmont, "*Venus of Willendorf*," in *Smarthistory*, November 21, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Mary Beth Looney, "Hall of Bulls, Lascaux," in *Smarthistory*, November 19, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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5.2: Mesolithic Art

Apollo 11 Cave Stones

by Nathalie Hager



Figure **5.2.1**: Apollo 11 Cave Stones, Namibia, c. 25,500–25,300 BCE. Quartzite. (Photo: State Museum of Namibia, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A significant discovery

Approximately 25,000 years ago, in a rock shelter in the Huns Mountains of Namibia on the southwest coast of Africa (today part of the Ai-Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park), an animal was drawn in charcoal on a hand-sized slab of stone. The stone was left behind, over time becoming buried on the floor of the cave by layers of sediment and debris until 1969 when a team led by German archaeologist W.E. Wendt excavated the rock shelter and found the first fragment (Figure **5.2.1**). Wendt named the cave "Apollo 11" upon hearing on his shortwave radio of NASA's successful space mission to the moon. It was more than three years later however, after a subsequent excavation, when Wendt discovered the matching fragment (Figure **5.2.1**, at right), that archaeologists and art historians began to understand the significance of the find.



Figure **5.2.2**: Location of the Huns Mountains of Namibia. (© Map Data Google, via Smarthistory)

Indirect dating techniques

In total seven stone fragments of brown-grey quartzite, some of them depicting traces of animal figures drawn in charcoal, ocher, and white, were found buried in a concentrated area of the cave floor less than two meters square. While it is not possible to learn the actual date of the fragments, it is possible to estimate when the rocks were buried by radiocarbon dating the archaeological layer in which they were found. Archaeologists estimate that the cave stones were buried between 25,500 and 25,300 years ago during the Middle Stone Age period in southern Africa making them, at the time of their discovery, the oldest dated art known on the African continent and among the earliest evidence of human artistic expression worldwide. What was the Middle Stone Age?

While more recent discoveries of much older human artistic endeavors have corrected our understanding (consider the 2008 discovery of a 100,000-year-old paint workshop in the Blombos Cave on the southern coast of Africa), the stones remain the oldest examples of figurative art from the African continent. Their discovery contributes to our conception of early humanity's creative attempts, before the invention of formal writing, to express their thoughts about the world around them.

The origins of art?

Genetic and fossil evidence tells us that Homo sapiens (anatomically modern humans who evolved from an earlier species of hominids) developed on the continent of Africa more than 100,000 years ago and spread throughout the world. But what we do not know—what we have only been able to assume—is that art too began in Africa. Is Africa, where humanity originated, home to the world's oldest art? If so, can we say that art began in Africa?

100,000 years of human occupation



Figure **5.2.3**: View across Fish River Canyon toward the Huns Mountains, Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, southern Namibia. (Photo: Thomas Schooch, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Apollo 11 rock shelter overlooks a dry gorge, sitting twenty meters above what was once a river that ran along the valley floor. The cave entrance is wide, about twenty-eight meters across, and the cave itself is deep: eleven meters from front to back. While today a person can stand upright only in the front section of the cave, during the Middle Stone Age, as well as in the periods before and after, the rock shelter was an active site of ongoing human settlement.

Inside the cave, above and below the layer where the Apollo 11 cave stones were found, archaeologists unearthed a sequence of cultural layers representing more than 100,000 years of human occupation. In these layers stone artifacts, typical of the Middle Stone Age period—such as blades, pointed flakes, and scraper—were found in raw materials not native to the region, signaling stone tool technology transported over long distances. Among the remnants of hearths, ostrich eggshell fragments bearing traces of red color were also found—either remnants of ornamental painting or evidence that the eggshells were used as containers for pigment.



Figure 5.2.4: Excavation site of the Apollo 11 stones, Namibia. (Photo: Jutta Vogel Stiftung, via SmartHistory)

On the cave walls, belonging to the Later Stone Age period, rock paintings were discovered depicting white and red zigzags, two handprints, three geometric images, and traces of color. And on the banks of the riverbed just upstream from the cave, engravings of a variety of animals, some with zigzag lines leading upwards, were found and dated to less than 2000 years ago.

The Apollo 11 Cave Stones

But the most well-known of the rock shelter's finds, and the most enigmatic, remain the Apollo 11 cave stones (image above). On the cleavage face of what was once a complete slab, an unidentified animal form was drawn resembling a feline in appearance but with human hind legs that were probably added later. Barely visible on the head of the animal are two slightly-curved horns likely belonging to an oryx, a large grazing antelope; on the animal's underbelly, possibly the sexual organ of a bovid.

Perhaps we have some kind of supernatural creature—a therianthrope, part human and part animal? If so, this may suggest a complex system of shamanistic belief. Taken together with the later rock paintings and the engravings, Apollo 11 becomes more than just a cave offering shelter from the elements. It becomes a site of ritual significance used by many over thousands of years.

The global origins of art

In the Middle Stone Age period in southern Africa prehistoric man was a hunter-gatherer, moving from place to place in search of food and shelter. But this modern human also drew an animal form with charcoal—a form as much imagined as it was observed. This is what makes the Apollo 11 cave stones find so interesting: the stones offer evidence that Homo sapiens in the Middle Stone Age—us, some 25,000 years ago—were not only anatomically modern, but behaviorally modern as well. That is to say, these early humans possessed the new and unique capacity for modern symbolic thought, "the human capacity," long before what was previously understood.

The cave stones are what archaeologists term *art mobilier*—small-scale prehistoric art that is moveable. But mobile art, and rock art generally, is not unique to Africa. Rock art is a global phenomenon that can be found across the World—in Europe, Asia, Australia, and North and South America. While we cannot know for certain what these early humans intended by the things that they made, by focusing on art as the product of humanity's creativity and imagination we can begin to explore where, and hypothesize why, art began.

Articles in this section:

- Nathalie Hager, "Apollo 11 Cave Stones," in *Smarthistory*, November 21, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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5.3: Neolithic Art

The Neolithic revolution

by Dr. Senta German

A settled life



Figure 5.3.1: Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, c. 3,000 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

When people think of the Neolithic era, they often think of Stonehenge, the iconic image of this early time. Dating to approximately 3,000 BCE and set on Salisbury Plain in England, it is a structure larger and more complex than anything built before it in Europe. Stonehenge is an example of the cultural advances brought about by the Neolithic revolution—the most important development in human history. The way we live today, settled in homes, close to other people in towns and cities, protected by laws, eating food grown on farms, and with leisure time to learn, explore and invent is all a result of the Neolithic revolution, which occurred approximately 11,500-5,000 years ago. The revolution which led to our way of life was the development of the technology needed to plant and harvest crops and to domesticate animals.

Before the Neolithic revolution, it's likely you would have lived with your extended family as a nomad, never staying anywhere for more than a few months, always living in temporary shelters, always searching for food and never owning anything you couldn't easily pack in a pocket or a sack. The change to the Neolithic way of life was huge and led to many of the pleasures (lots of food, friends and a comfortable home) that we still enjoy today.

Editors' Note

Each of the trilithons that form Stonehenge is comprised of three megaliths: two uprights and one balanced across the top. Post-and-lintel is a construction technique used in the Neolithic period and well beyond. It was used for both above-ground structures and underground burial chambers. Another building technique developed in the Neolithic period is the corbeled dome, as can be seen at the passage tomb at Newgrange.

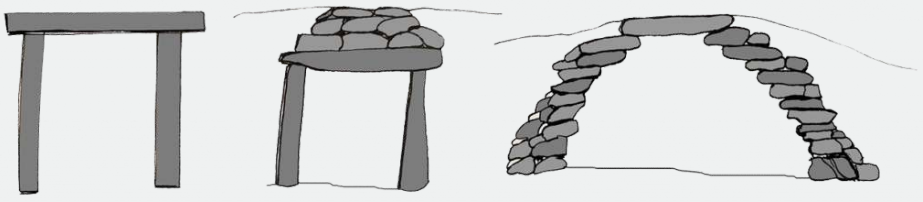


Figure 5.3.2: An illustration of Neolithic building techniques: (left) post-and-lintel; (middle) cross-section of post-and-lintel underground burial chamber; (right) cross-section of corbeled underground burial chamber. (Drawing: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY).

Neolithic art

The massive changes in the way people lived also changed the types of art they made. Neolithic sculpture became bigger, in part, because people didn't have to carry it around anymore; pottery became more widespread and was used to store food harvested from

farms. Alcohol was first produced during this period and architecture, as well as its interior and exterior decoration, first appears. In short, people settled down and began to live in one place, year after year.

It seems very unlikely that Stonehenge could have been made by earlier, Paleolithic, nomads. It would have been a waste to invest so much time and energy building a monument in a place to which they might never return or might only return infrequently. After all, the effort to build it was extraordinary. Stonehenge is approximately 320 feet in circumference and the stones which compose the outer ring weigh as much as 50 tons; the small stones, weighing as much as 6 tons, were quarried from as far away as 450 miles. The use or meaning of Stonehenge is not clear, but the design, planning and execution could have only been carried out by a culture in which authority was unquestioned. Here is a culture that was able to rally hundreds of people to perform very hard work for extended periods of time. This is another characteristic of the Neolithic era.



Figure **5.3.3**: Skulls with plaster and shell from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, 6,000-7,000 BCE, found at the Yiftah'el archaeological site in the Lower Galilee, Israel. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Plastered skulls

The Neolithic period is also important because it is when we first find good evidence for religious practice, a perpetual inspiration for the fine arts. Perhaps most fascinating are the plaster skulls found around the area of the Levant, at six sites, including Jericho. At this time in the Neolithic, c. 7000-6,000 BCE, people were often buried under the floors of homes, and in some cases their skulls were removed and covered with plaster in order to create very life-like faces, complete with shells inset for eyes and paint to imitate hair and mustaches (see Figure **5.3.3**).

The traditional interpretation of these the skulls has been that they offered a means of preserving and worshiping male ancestors. However, recent research has shown that among the sixty-one plastered skulls that have been found, there is a generous number that come from the bodies of women and children. Perhaps the skulls are not so much religious objects but rather powerful images made to aid in mourning lost loved ones.

Neolithic peoples didn't have written language, so we may never know what their creators intended. (The earliest example of writing develops in Sumer in Mesopotamia in the late 4th millennium BCE. However, there are scholars that believe that earlier proto-writing developed during the Neolithic period).

Global Connections: Jōmon Pottery and Coil Construction

Neolithic cultures around the world created pottery by hand, often using what is now called the coil construction method. Coil construction is simple in theory, but can be executed on a large and complex scale. Starting with a clay base, artists roll clay into cylindrical "snakes," or coils, then layer them on top of each other to create the walls of the vessel, which grow from the bottom up. Once the clay coils are in place, artists use slip (clay thinned with water), tools, and their hands to smooth both the inside and outside of the vessel walls.

Japan has a particularly long and impressive pottery tradition, with pottery from the Jōmon period (which coincides with the Neolithic period discussed in this chapter) dating back to about 14,500 BCE. The Japanese word Jōmon, from which this period gets its name, means "cord pattern" in Japanese. During this period, makers used the coil construction method to build vessels and then decorated the exterior with distinctive geometric patterns created by pressing cords against the clay before it was dried, hardened, and fired. Vessels were made for both utilitarian and ceremonial purposes, and it is clear from the attention paid to their decoration that aesthetic value was also important in Jōmon pottery.



Figure 5.3.4: “Flame-rimmed” deep bowl, Middle Jomon period (c. 3500–2500 BCE). Earthenware with cord-marked and incised decoration, 13" tall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Coil construction was also commonly used to build Nasca ceramics in Peru. These vessels date back to 100 BCE and are known for their extremely glossy finish, achieved by smoothing and polishing the surface of the ceramic vessels using slip made from mineral pigments. Much later, Mogollon ceramicists from the Greater Southwest region of present-day Mexico and the United States also used a similar coil and scrape construction to achieve the smooth and characteristic red-on-brown, brown, or black-on-white finish of Mimbres pottery, which is decorated with both geometric and figural designs.

Jericho

by Dr. Senta German

A natural oasis

The site of Jericho, just north of the Dead Sea and due west of the Jordan River, is one of the oldest continuously lived-in cities in the world. The reason for this may be found in its Arabic name, Ārīḥā, which means fragrant; Jericho is a natural oasis in the desert where countless fresh water springs can be found. This resource, which drew its first visitors between 10,000 and 9000 BCE, still has descendants that live there today.

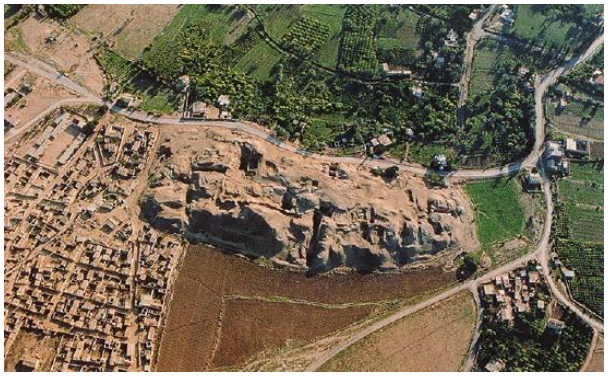


Figure 5.3.5: Aerial view of the Tell es-Sultan, archaeological site, Jericho. (Photo: Fullo88, public domain)

Biblical reference

The site of Jericho is best known for its identity in the Bible and this has drawn pilgrims and explorers to it as early as the 4th century CE; serious archaeological exploration didn’t begin until the latter half of the 19th century. What continues to draw

archaeologists to Jericho today is the hope of finding some evidence of the warrior Joshua, who led the Israelites to an unlikely victory against the Canaanites (“the walls of the city fell when Joshua and his men marched around them blowing horns” Joshua 6:1-27). Although unequivocal evidence of Joshua himself has yet to be found, what has been uncovered are some 12,000 years of human activity.

The most spectacular finds at Jericho, however, do not date to the time of Joshua, roughly the Bronze Age (3300-1200 BCE), but rather to the earliest part of the Neolithic era, before even the technology to make pottery had been discovered.



Figure **5.3.6**: Looking down at the tower at Jericho, which was built against the city's walls. (Photo: Reinhard Dietrich, public domain)

Old walls

The site of Jericho rises above the wide plain of the Jordan Valley, its height the result of layer upon layer of human habitation, a formation called a tell. The earliest visitors to the site who left remains (stone tools) came in the Mesolithic period (around 9000 BCE) but the first settlement at the site, around the Ein as-Sultan spring, dates to the early Neolithic era, and these people, who built homes, grew plants, and kept animals, were among the earliest to do such anywhere in the world. Specifically, in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A levels at Jericho (8500-7000 BCE), archaeologists found remains of a very large settlement of circular homes made with mud brick and topped with domed roofs.

As the name of this era implies, these early people at Jericho had not yet figured out how to make pottery, but they made vessels out of stone, wove cloth and for tools were trading for a particularly useful kind of stone, obsidian, from as far away as Çiftlik, in eastern Turkey. The settlement grew quickly and, for reasons unknown, the inhabitants soon constructed a substantial stone wall and exterior ditch around their town, complete with a stone tower almost eight meters high, set against the inner side of the wall (Figure **5.3.6**). Theories as to the function of this wall range from military defense to keeping out animal predators to even combating the natural rising of the level of the ground surrounding the settlement. However, regardless of its original use, here we have the first version of the walls Joshua so ably conquered some six thousand years later.

Plastered human skulls

The Pre-Pottery Neolithic A period is followed by the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (7000-5200 BCE), which was different from its predecessor in important ways. Houses in this era were uniformly rectangular and constructed with a new kind of rectangular mud bricks which were decorated with herringbone thumb impressions, and always laid lengthwise in thick mud mortar. This mortar, like a plaster, was also used to create a smooth surface on the interior walls, extending down across the floors as well. In this period there is some strong evidence for cult or religious belief at Jericho. Archaeologists discovered one uniquely large building dating to the period with unique series of plastered interior pits and basins as well as domed adjoining structures and it is thought this was for ceremonial use.



Figure **5.3.7**: Plastered human skull with shell eyes from Jericho, Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, c. 7200 BCE. The British Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Other possible evidence of cult practice was discovered in several homes of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic town, in the form of plastered human skulls which were molded over to resemble living heads. Shells were used for eyes and traces of paint revealed that skin and hair were also included in the representations. The largest group found together were nine examples, buried in the fill below the plastered floor of one house.

Jericho isn't the only site at which plastered skulls have been found in Pre-Pottery Neolithic B levels; they have also been found at Tell Ramad, Beisamoun, Kfar Hahoresh, 'Ain Ghazal and Nahal Hemar. Among the some sixty-two skulls discovered among these sites, we know that older and younger men as well as women and children are represented, which poses interesting questions as to their meaning. Were they focal points in ancestor worship, as was originally thought, or did they function as images by which deceased family members could be remembered? As we are without any written record of the belief system practiced in the Neolithic period in the area, we will never know.

OPTIONAL Online Resources: The Jericho Skull

by The British Museum

Over many years, Curator Alexandra Fletcher has formed a particularly strong bond with one of the… older people in the British Museum. In fact, she was one of the first to see his face in over 9,500 years. The Jericho Skull is arguably the oldest portrait in the British Museum—a human skull from the ancient city of Jericho which had plaster applied to it to form a type of early facial reconstruction.

The Jericho Skull is fascinating to look at, but since being discovered in 1953, archaeologists weren't able to find out much more about this man—until now. Using CT scanning, 3D printing and facial reconstruction, Alexandra and her team have finally been able to reveal the man behind the plaster.



The British Museum, "The oldest portrait in the British Museum (probably) | Curator's Corner S2 Ep 1"

Also check out The Jericho Skull by The British Museum on Sketchfab

Editors' Note:

The inhabitants of Neolithic Jericho were not the only ones to bury objects beneath the floors of their houses. In another notable Paleolithic settlement near Aman, Jordan, called 'Ain Ghazal, archaeologists unearthed two caches of buried objects. Like the Jericho skulls, they consisted of plaster applied to a supporting structure, though in this case that structure was not hard bone, but bundles of reeds. Despite their fragile material, these sculptures are much larger than other early art of the era; the largest of them is nearly three and a half feet tall (though only about four inches thick). Although abstract and with distorted proportions, the figures are immediately recognizable as human. Their most striking feature is their stylized, staring eyes, which are outlined and detailed with bitumen. Because of the absence of written records, as with all Stone Age art, we do not know why these objects were made nor how they were used. What we do know is that time, skill, and resources were invested into them, highlighting the importance of image-making for even our earliest ancestors.



Figure **5.3.8**: Figure **5.3.7**: Human figure, from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan, c. 6700-6500 BCE. Plaster over reed core, painted and inlaid with bitumen, approx. 3' tall. Jordan Archaeological Museum, Amman. (Photo: Michael Gunther, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Çatalhöyük

By Dr. Senta German

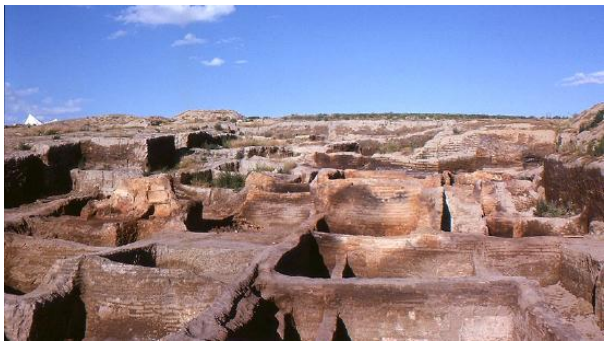


Figure **5.3.9**: Çatal Höyük after the first excavations by James Mellaart and his team. (Photo: Omar Hoftun, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Çatalhöyük or Çatal Höyük (pronounced “cha-tal hay OOK”) is not the oldest site of the Neolithic era or the largest, but it is extremely important to the beginning of art. Located near the modern city of Konya in south central Turkey, it was inhabited 9000 years ago by up to 8000 people who lived together in a large town. Çatalhöyük, across its history, witnesses the transition from exclusively hunting and gathering subsistence to increasing skill in plant and animal domestication. We might see Çatalhöyük as a

site whose history is about one of man's most important transformations: from nomad to settler. It is also a site at which we see art, both painting and sculpture, appear to play a newly important role in the lives of settled people.



Figure 5.3.10: Relief map of Turkey noting the location of Çatal Höyük. (Map: Uwe Dedering, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Çatalhöyük had no streets or foot paths; the houses were built right up against each other (Figure 5.3.9) and the people who lived in them traveled over the town's rooftops and entered their homes through holes in the roofs, climbing down a ladder. Communal ovens were built above the homes of Çatalhöyük and we can assume group activities were performed in this elevated space as well.



Figure 5.3.11: From left: A hearth, oven, and ladder cut in Building 56, South Area, Çatalhöyük. (Photo: Çatalhöyük, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Like at Jericho, the deceased were placed under the floors or platforms in houses and sometimes the skulls were removed and plastered to resemble live faces. The burials at Çatalhöyük show no significant variations, either based on wealth or gender; the only bodies which were treated differently, decorated with beads and covered with ochre, were those of children. The excavator of Çatalhöyük believes that this special concern for youths at the site may be a reflection of the society becoming more sedentary and required larger numbers of children because of increased labor, exchange and inheritance needs.



Figure 5.3.12: South Excavation Area, Çatalhöyük. (Photo: Çatalhöyük, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Art is everywhere among the remains of Çatalhöyük, geometric designs as well as representations of animals and people. Repeated lozenges and zigzags dance across smooth plaster walls, people are sculpted in clay, pairs of leopards are formed in relief facing one another at the sides of rooms, hunting parties are painted baiting a wild bull. The volume and variety of art at Çatalhöyük is immense and must be understood as a vital, functional part of the everyday lives of its ancient inhabitants.

Many figurines have been found at the site, the most famous of which illustrates a large woman seated on or between two large felines. The figurines, which illustrate both humans and animals, are made from a variety of materials but the largest proportion are quite small and made of barely fired clay. These casual figurines are found most frequently in garbage pits, but also in oven walls,

house walls, floors and left in abandoned structures. The figurines often show evidence of having been poked, scratched or broken, and it is generally believed that they functioned as wish tokens or to ward off bad spirits.

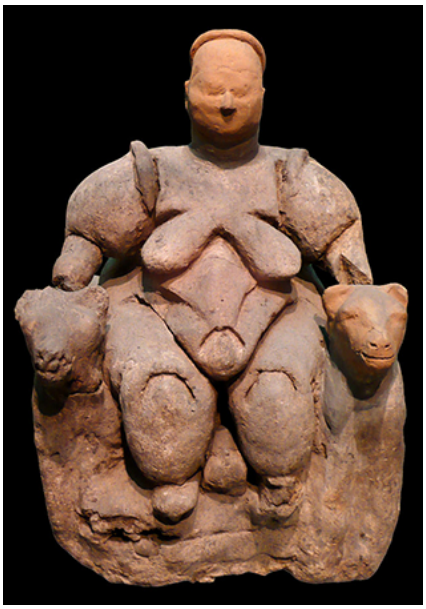


Figure **5.3.13**: Seated Woman of Çatalhöyük (head is a restoration), The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey. (Photo: Nevit Dilmen, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Nearly every house excavated at Çatalhöyük was found to contain decorations on its walls and platforms, most often in the main room of the house. Moreover, this work was constantly being renewed; the plaster of the main room of a house seems to have been redone as frequently as every month or season. Both geometric and figural images were popular in two-dimensional wall painting and the excavator of the site believes that geometric wall painting was particularly associated with adjacent buried youths. Figural paintings show the animal world alone, such as, for instance, two cranes facing each other standing behind a fox, or in interaction with people, such as a vulture pecking at a human corpse or hunting scenes. Wall reliefs are found at Çatalhöyük with some frequency, most often representing animals, such as pairs of animals facing each other and human-like creatures. These latter reliefs, alternatively thought to be bears, goddesses or regular humans, are always represented splayed, with their heads, hands and feet removed, presumably at the time the house was abandoned.



Figure **5.3.14**: Neolithic Wall Painting in Building 80, Çatalhöyük. (Photo: Çatalhöyük, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The most remarkable art found at Çatalhöyük, however, are the installations of animal remains and among these the most striking are the bull bucrania. In many houses the main room was decorated with several plastered skulls of bulls set into the walls (most common on East or West walls) or platforms, the pointed horns thrust out into the communal space. Often the bucrania would be painted ochre red. In addition to these, the remains of other animals' skulls, teeth, beaks, tusks or horns were set into the walls and platforms, plastered and painted. It would appear that the ancient residents of Çatalhöyük were only interested in taking the pointy parts of the animals back to their homes!



Figure **5.3.15**: Bull bucrania, corner installation in Building 77, Çatalhöyük. (Photo: Çatalhöyük, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

How can we possibly understand this practice of interior decoration with the remains of animals? A clue might be in the types of creatures found and represented. Most of the animals represented in the art of Çatalhöyük were not domesticated; wild animals dominate the art at the site. Interestingly, examination of bone refuse shows that the majority of the meat which was consumed was of wild animals, especially bulls. The excavator believes this selection in art and cuisine had to do with the contemporary era of increased domestication of animals and what is being celebrated are the animals which are part of the memory of the recent cultural past, when hunting was much more important for survival.

Rock Art in North Africa

by The British Museum



Figure **5.3.16**: Tuareg man looking over the landscape of the arid Tassili n'Ajjer massif. (Photo: 2013,2034.4551 ©TARA/David Coulson, via Smarthistory)

Forests of Stone

Algeria is Africa's largest country and most of it falls within the Sahara Desert. It also hosts a rich rock art concentration. Most of the sites are found in the south east of the country near its borders with Libya and Niger but there are also important concentrations in the Algerian Maghreb and in the Hoggar Mountains in the central south.

The most renowned of all these areas is the Tassili n'Ajjer (meaning "plateau of chasms") in the south east. Water and sand erosion have carved out a landscape of thin passageways, large arches, and high-pillared rocks, described as "forests of stone" by French archaeologist and ethnographer Henri Lhote. The resulting undercuts at cliff bases have created rock shelters with smooth walls ideal for painting and engraving.



Figure 5.3.17: View of section of rock shelter wall containing painting of 'La Dame Noire de Sefar' ("the Black Lady of Sefar"). Row of small stones placed in front of paintings to mark closest approach for tourists. Sefar, Ajjer Plateau, Djanet, Tassili, Algeria. (Photo: Reproduced by permission of the artist. Copyright TARA/David Coulson, via Smarthistory)

The Ajjer plateau rises to approximately 500-600 meters above the plain of Djanet, an oasis city, and capital of Djanet District, in Illizi Province, southeast Algeria. The region has been inhabited since Neolithic times, when the environment was much wetter and sustained a wider extent of flora and fauna as witnessed in the numerous rock paintings of Tassili n'Ajjer. Classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 and Biosphere Reserve in 1986, Tassili n'Ajjer covers a vast area of desert landscape in southern Algeria, stretching from the Niger and Libyan border area, north and east of Djanet, as far as Illizi and Amguid, covering an area of 72,000 sq. km.



Figure 5.3.18: Map showing location in north Africa of Tassili N'Ajjer National Park. (Imagery @2015 Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Landsat, IBCAO, U.S. Geological Survey, Map data @2015 Google, via Smarthistory)

The rock art of the Tassili region was introduced to Western eyes as a result of visits and sketches made by French legionnaires, in particular a Lt. Brenans during the 1930s. On several of his expeditions, Lt. Brenans took French archaeologist Henri Lhote who went on to revisit sites in Algeria between 1956-1970 documenting and recording the images he found. Regrettably, some previous methods of recording and/or documenting have caused damage to the vibrancy and integrity of the images.

Subject matter

More than 15,000 rock paintings and engravings, dating back as far as 12,000 years are located in this region and have made Tassili world famous for this reason. The art depicts herds of cattle and large wild animals such as giraffe and elephant, as well as human activities such as hunting and dancing. The area is especially famous for its Round Head paintings which were first described and

published by Henri Lhote in the 1950s. Thought to date from around 9,000 years old, some of these paintings are the largest found on the African continent, measuring up to 13 feet in height.

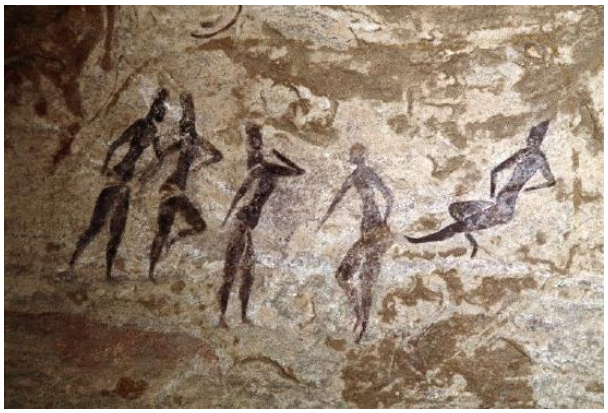


Figure 5.3.19: Painted rock art depicting five red figures, from Jabbaren, Ajjer Plateau, Djanet, Tassili, Algeria. (Photo: 2013,2034.4248 © TARA/David Coulson, via Smarthistory)

Although the styles and subjects of north African rock art vary, there are commonalities: images are most often figurative and frequently depict animals, both wild and domestic. There are also many images of human figures, sometimes with accessories such as recognizable weaponry or clothing. These may be painted (Figure 5.3.19) or engraved, with frequent occurrences of both, at times in the same context. Engravings are generally more common, although this may simply be a preservation bias due to their greater durability.

The physical context of rock art sites varies depending on geographical and topographical factors—for example, Moroccan rock engravings are often found on open rocky outcrops, while Tunisia's Djebibina rock art sites have all been found in rock shelters. Rock art in the vast and harsh environments of the Sahara is often inaccessible and hard to find, and there is probably a great deal of rock art that is yet to be seen by archaeologists; what is known has mostly been documented within the last century.

Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

by Nathalie Hager



Figure 5.3.20: Running Horned Woman, 6,000-4,000 BCE. Pigment on rock, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria. (Photo via Smarthistory)

"Discovery"

Between 1933 and 1940, camel corps officer Lieutenant Brenans of the French Foreign Legion completed a series of small sketches and hand written notes detailing his discovery of dozens of rock art sites deep within the canyons of the Tassili n'Ajjer. Tassili n'Ajjer is a difficult to access plateau in the Algerian section of the Sahara Desert near the borders of Libya and Niger in northern Africa (see map below). Brenans donated hundreds of his sketches to the Bardo Museum in Algiers, alerting the scientific

community to one of the richest rock art concentrations on Earth and prompting site visits that included fellow Frenchman and archaeologist Henri Lhote.

Lhote recognized the importance of the region and returned again and again, most notably in 1956 with a team of copyists for a 16-month expedition to map and study the rock art of the Tassili. Two years later Lhote published *A la découverte des fresques du Tassili*. The book became an instant best-seller, and today is one of the most popular texts on archaeological discovery.



Figure **5.3.21**: Sand and rocks, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria. (Photo: Akli Salah, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Lhote made African rock art famous by bringing some of the estimated 15,000 human figure and animal paintings and engravings found on the rock walls of the Tassili's many gorges and shelters it to the wider public. Yet contrary to the impression left by the title of his book, neither Lhote nor his team could lay claim to having discovered Central Saharan rock art: long before Lhote, and even before Brenans, in the late nineteenth century a number of travelers from Germany, Switzerland, and France had noted the existence of "strange" and "important" rock sculptures in Ghat, Tadrart Acacus, and Upper Tassili. But it was the Tuareg—the indigenous peoples of the region, many of whom served as guides to these early European explorers—who long knew of the paintings and engravings covering the rock faces of the Tassili.



Figure **5.3.22**: Tassili n'Ajjer is a Tamahaq name meaning "plateau" of the Ajjer people (the Kel Ajjer is group of tribes whose traditional territory was here). Much of the 1,500-2,100 meter high plateau is protected by an 80,000 square kilometer National Park. (Map via Smarthistory)

The "Horned Goddess"

Lhote published not only reproductions of the paintings and engravings he found on the rock walls of the Tassili, but also his observations. In one excerpt he reported that with a can of water and a sponge in hand he set out to investigate a "curious figure" spotted by a member of his team in an isolated rock shelter located within a compact group of mountains known as the Aouanrhet massif, the highest of all the "rock cities" on the Tassili. Lhote swabbed the wall with water to reveal a figure he called the "Horned Goddess" (Figure **5.3.20**):

> *On the damp rock surface stood out the gracious silhouette of a woman running. One of her legs, slightly flexed, just touched the ground, while the other was raised in the air as high as it would normally go. From the knees, the belt and the widely outstretched arms fell fine fringes. From either side of the head and above two horns that spread out horizontally was an extensive dotted area resembling a cloud of grain falling from a wheat field. Although the whole assemblage was skillfully and carefully composed there was something free and easy about it…*



Figure 5.3.23: Visible in this reproduction of the original rock painting are two groupings in red ochre of small human figures superimposed onto the horned goddess. (Image via Smarthistory)

The *Running Horned Woman*, the title by which the painting is commonly known today, was found in a massif so secluded and so difficult to access that Lhote's team concluded that the collection of shelters was likely a sanctuary and the female figure—"the most beautiful, the most finished and the most original"—a goddess:

> *Perhaps we have here the figure of a priestess of some agricultural religion or the picture of a goddess of such a cult who foreshadow—or is derived from—the goddess Isis, to whom, in Egypt, was attributed the discovery of agriculture.*

Lhote's suggestion that the painting's source was Egyptian was influenced by a recently published hypothesis by his mentor, the French anthropologist Henri Breuil, the then undisputed authority on prehistoric rock art who was renowned for his work on Paleolithic cave art in Europe. In an essay titled, "The White Lady of Brandberg, South-West Africa, Her Companions and Her Guards," Breuil famously claimed that a painting discovered in a small rock shelter in Namibia showed influences of Classical antiquity and was not African in origin, but possibly the work of Phoenician travelers from the Mediterranean. Lhote, equally convinced of outside influence, linked the Tassili painting's provenance with Breuil's ideas and revised the title to the 'White Lady' of Aouanrhet:

> *In other paintings found a few days later in the same massif we were able to discern, from some characteristic features, an indication of Egyptian influence. Some features are, no doubt, not very marked in our 'White Lady'; still, all the same, some details as the curve of the breasts, led us to think that the picture may have been executed at a time when Egyptian traditions were beginning to be felt in the Tassili.*

Foreign influence?

Time and scholarship would reveal that the assignment of Egyptian influence on the *Running Horned Woman* was erroneous, and Lhote the victim of a hoax: French members of his team made "copies" of Egyptionized figures, passing them off as faithful reproductions of authentic Tassili rock wall paintings. These fakes were accepted by Lhote (if indeed he knew nothing of the forgeries), and falsely sustained his belief in the possibility of foreign influence on Central Saharan rock art. Breuil's theories were likewise discredited: the myth of the "White Lady" was rejected by every archaeologist of repute, and his promotion of foreign influence viewed as racist.



Figure **5.3.24**: The Tassili plateau, hailed as “the greatest center of prehistoric art in the world”: undercuts at cliff bases have created rock shelters with smooth walls ideal for painting and engraving. The Tassili’s unique geological formations of eroded sandstone rock pillars and arches—“forests of stone”—resemble a lunar landscape. (Photo: Marina & Enrique, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Yet Breuil and Lhote were not alone in finding it hard to believe that ancient Africans discovered how to make art on their own, or to have developed artistic sensibilities. Until quite recently many Europeans maintained that art “spread” or was “taken” into Africa, and, aiming to prove this thesis, anointed many works with Classical sounding names and sought out similarities with early rock art in Europe. Although such vestiges of colonial thinking are today facing a reckoning, cases such as the “White Lady” (both of Namibia and of Tassili) remind us of the perils of imposing cultural values from the outside.

Chronology

While we have yet to learn how, and in what places, the practice of rock art began, no firm evidence has been found to show that African rock art—some ten million images across the continent—was anything other than a spontaneous initiative by early Africans. Scholars have estimated the earliest art to date to 12,000 or more years ago, yet despite the use of both direct and indirect dating techniques very few firm dates exist (“direct dating” uses measurable physical and chemical analysis, such as radiocarbon dating, while “indirect dating” primarily uses associations from the archaeological context). In the north, where rock art tends to be quite diverse, research has focused on providing detailed descriptions of the art and placing works in chronological sequence based on style and content. This ordering approach results in useful classification and dating systems, dividing the Tassili paintings and engravings into periods of concurrent and overlapping traditions (the *Running Horned Woman* is estimated to date to approximately 6,000 to 4,000 BCE—placing it within the “Round Head Period”), but offers little in the way of interpretation of the painting itself.



Figure **5.3.25**: Running Horned Woman (detail) (Photo: FJ Expeditions, via Smarthistory)

Advancing an interpretation of the *Running Horned Woman*

Who was the *Running Horned Woman*? Was she indeed a goddess, and her rock shelter some sort of sanctuary? What does the image mean? And why did the artist make it? For so long the search for meaning in rock art was considered inappropriate and unachievable—only recently have scholars endeavored to move beyond the mere description of images and styles, and, using a variety of interdisciplinary methods, make serious attempts to interpret the rock art of the Central Sahara.

Lhote recounted that the *Running Horned Woman* was found on an isolated rock whose base was hollowed out into a number of small shelters that could not have been used as dwellings. This remote location, coupled with an image of marked pictorial quality —depicting a female with two horns on her head, dots on her body probably representing scarification, and wearing such attributes of the dance as armlets and garters—suggested to him that the site, and the subject of the painting, fell outside of the everyday. More recent scholarship has supported Lhote's belief in the painting's symbolic, rather than literal, representation. As Jitka Soukopova has noted, "Hunter- gatherers were unlikely to wear horns (or other accessories on the head) and to make paintings on their whole bodies in their ordinary life." [1] . Rather, this female horned figure, her body adorned and decorated, found in one of the highest massifs in the Tassili—a region is believed to hold special status due to its elevation and unique topology—suggests ritual, rite, or ceremony.



Figure **5.3.26**: Archers, Tassili n'Ajjer. (Photo: Patrick Gruban, CC BY-SA 2.0) Such Neolithic cave art drawings as these depict figures that are slightly more visually legible than *Running Horned Woman*. In this drawing, five archers are depicted with their arrows drawn and aimed at jumping figures on the right.

But there is further work to be done to advance an interpretation of the *Running Horned Woman*. Increasingly scholars have studied rock shelter sites as a whole, rather than isolating individual depictions, and the shelter's location relative to the overall landscape and nearby water courses, in order to learn the significance of various "rock cities" in both image making and image viewing.

Archaeological data from decorated pottery, which is a dated artistic tradition, is key in suggesting that the concept of art was firmly established in the Central Sahara at the time of Tassili rock art production. Comparative studies with other rock art complexes, specifically the search for similarities in fundamental concepts in African religious beliefs, might yield the most fruitful approaches to interpretation. In other words, just as southern African rock studies have benefitted from tracing the beliefs and practices of the San people, so too may a study of Tuareg ethnography shed light on the ancient rock art sites of the Tassili.

Afterword: the threatened rock art of the Central Sahara

Tassili's rock walls were commonly sponged with water in order to enhance the reproduction of its images, either in trace, sketch, or photograph. This washing of the rock face has had a devastating effect on the art, upsetting the physical, chemical, and biological balance of the images and their rock supports. Many of the region's subsequent visitors—tourists, collectors, photographers, and the next generation of researchers—all captivated by Lhote's "discovery"—have continued the practice of moistening the paintings in order to reveal them. Today scholars report paintings that are severely faded while some have simply disappeared. In addition, others have suffered from irreversible damage caused by outright vandalism: art looted or stolen as souvenirs. In order to protect this valuable center of African rock art heritage, Tassili N'Ajjer was declared a National Park in 1972. It was classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 and a Biosphere Reserve in 1986.

[1] Jitka Soukopova, "The Earliest Rock Paintings of the Central Sahara: Approaching Interpretation," *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2011), p. 199.

OPTIONAL Online Resource: Rock Art in the Green Sahara

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/109189

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: The Ancient Near East

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6.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Stolen Vase Returns Home

The *Warka Vase* is a roughly three-foot tall, 600 pound alabaster vessel covered in detailed relief carvings, created about the same time as the Sumerians invented writing, and one of the very earliest examples of storytelling in art. Its monumental size, subject, and motifs suggest that it was a sacred and important work of art to the people of Uruk—and it was a prize of The Iraq [National] Museum's collection, right up until it was stolen.



Figure **6.0.1**: Warka Vase, c. 3500-3000 BCE. Alabaster, 105 cm high. National Museum of Iraq. (Photo: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), CC BY-SA 4.0)

The *Warka Vase* has become a symbol of museum looting, a problem that has plagued the Iraq Museum for years surrounding the prolonged armed conflicts of the Iraq War. This is a story of war and of theft, conducted by both professionals and novice looters. This is also a story of preservation, civilian rescuers, and a celebratory homecoming.

In the chaos surrounding the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fall of Baghdad in March and April of 2003, an estimated 4,000-14,000 priceless artifacts were stolen from the Iraq Museum's collection. That huge range has changed over time—and initially museum officials exaggerated the number to 170,000 in an attempt to trick looters into thinking that the vast majority of the museum's collection had already been stolen. The story of the *Warka Vase*, and what precisely happened to it, also remains shrouded in mystery.

Some of the museum thefts appeared to have been carried out by professionals, and with the assistance of museum staff; others were simply smash-and-grabs by people off the street. The *Warka Vase* itself was physically grabbed and smashed; photos from after the looting show its wooden pedestal, with the alabaster foot of the vessel still attached, toppled on the floor amidst the shattered glass of its case.

This was not a professional theft, but it remains unclear just who took it: opportunistic looters, or citizen rescuers, upset to see the museum being robbed of its priceless and important artifacts, and literally stepping in to pick up the pieces. In either case, the *Warka Vase*, with its complex imagery and recording of Sumerian religion and culture, was returned—albeit in pieces—a few weeks later during an amnesty period established to encourage the return of important stolen works. It is one of an estimated 4,000 artifacts that have since been returned to the Iraq Museum, where professional art conservationists and restoration specialists from Europe have worked alongside, and trained, local Iraqis in the museum that houses what Neela Banerjee calls "the world's most comprehensive collection of antiquities" from one of the cradles of civilization.

That collection, however, had been decimated not merely by the destructive thefts in April of 2003, but by years of more hidden looting—from within the Iraqi government and by museum officials themselves. Art has value, not just for what it can tell us about

the past, but also, as the professional and amateur looters of the Iraq Museum attest, for its monetary value on the market—whether as genuine artifacts or clever forgeries.

Art is often also closely entwined with war—whether, as with the modern Iraq War, a casualty of it, or, as we see throughout the history of art, celebrating victories. The *Head of an Akkadian Ruler*, discussed later in this chapter, was mutilated by that powerful leader's enemies. Both the Akkadian *Stele of Naram-Sin* and the Babylonian *Law Code Stele of Hammurabi* were taken, intact, as prized war booty; the former was stolen in 12th century BCE and the latter was looted and eventually rediscovered in 1901. Today, both of those stelae live in the Louvre Museum, in Paris, after being excavated by French archaeologists. For more on why so many art objects and artifacts are in the Louvre and British Museum, how they got there, and whether they should be returned, see SmartHistory's curated series of articles about repatriation—or the return of something to its country of origin: Whose Art? Museums and Repatriation.

This chapter will provide more information about the *Warka Vase*, as well as a trove of other artifacts that give great insight into the invaluable archaeological heritage of the Ancient Near East.

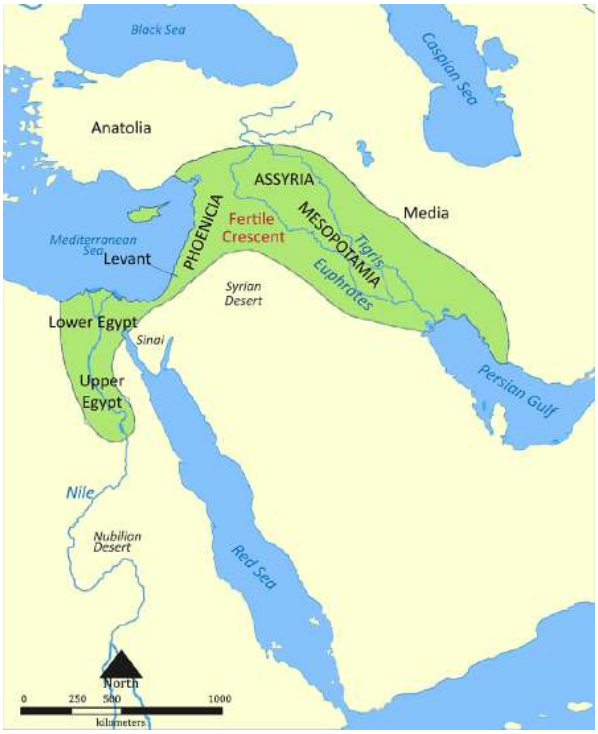


Figure **6.0.2**: Map of the Fertile Crescent. (Adapted from Nafsadh, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Historiography (Writing History)

As Dr. Senta German points out later in this chapter, the vast expanse of the "Near East" has long been part of the Western art historical canon, not only because of its proximity to Europe or "the West," but also because of the Western interest in studying, knowing, and claiming ties to the biblical "Holy Land," as they rediscovered cities mentioned in the Bible, such as Nineveh, Ur, and Babylon. In fact, European zeal for biblical archaeology of the Near East was a driving force for much of the early archaeology in this region, almost always conducted by outside European scholars before local agencies took over.

Terminology

East of What?

The large region covered in this chapter is sometimes referred to as the Ancient Near East or Middle East, because Europeans—in the so-called "West"—named these areas in relation to their own proclaimed directional location. As mentioned previously in this book, Europeans were the earliest writers of the discipline of art history, and as such, they claimed the art of the Near East as part of Western art history, distinguishing it from art of what they called "the Far East" such as China, Japan, India, etc.

The word “Mesopotamia” comes from the ancient Greek words *meso* and *potamos*, meaning “between the river.” This refers to the geographic location of the region, situated in the lush valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers now in parts of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Kuwait.

Who is civilized? What makes a civilization?

Traditionally, when scholars have studied a human society, they analyze various characteristics, criteria, and developments that help to define—and differentiate—it as a civilization. The word “civilization” derives from the Latin word *civitas*, meaning city. At its most basic definition then, civilization usually refers to a society made of cities or urban settlements.

As the chapter will later discuss, early civilizations often include settlements, made possible by the shift from a nomadic lifestyle to the domestication of animals and development of agriculture. However, as National Geographic explains, there are some historical problems with the biased and Eurocentric ways in which the designation of “civilization” was used to distinguish some cultures from others.

> *…[E]arly in the development of the term, anthropologists and others used “civilization” and “civilized society” to differentiate between societies they found culturally superior (which they were often a part of), and those they found culturally inferior (which they referred to as “savage” or “barbaric” cultures). The term “civilization” was often applied in an ethnocentric way, with “civilizations” being considered morally good and culturally advanced, and other societies being morally wrong and “backward.” This complicated history is what makes defining a civilization troublesome for scholars, and why today’s modern definition is still in flux.*

Nevertheless, most historians and anthropologists agree that there are certain components and criteria that make up a civilization. As such, this chapter will explore not only those necessary “ingredients” that lead to a civilization, but also the products that come from one.

Chapter Overview

What are the ingredients of civilization?

This chapter returns readers to the Fertile Crescent and to the Neolithic Revolution. The Fertile Crescent is called such because it is a C-shaped area, in green on the map above, formed along the rivers of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile. Water from these rivers, and naturally occurring plants and grasses, made this the ideal location for the development of agriculture. Agriculture, which refers to the growing of food—instead of just gathering it wherever it can be found—is one of the key ingredients for the birth of civilization.

In the Fertile Crescent, people began deliberately planting grains and domesticating animals, leading to a much more stable food supply than had been the case with hunting and gathering. With a stable, consistent food supply came other changes, including the specialization of labor.

Now a portion of the society, rather than everybody, can tend to growing food, while other people could take on other tasks—making buildings, creating pottery, and arranging trade, for instance. Another major development that comes about as a direct result of agriculture is also a key ingredient of civilization: the development of writing. (Read the first article to learn how the two are connected and how writing was born out of economic necessity related to agriculture.)

Along with the development of agriculture, specialization of labor, and development of writing, there are a few other ingredients—and products—of civilization. One is the creation of large-scale architecture and another is the stratification of social classes. Both of these are possible because of a well-fed society, staying in one place. You might think that the people growing the food that enabled the society to thrive might be at the top of the social hierarchy, but then, as now, they tend to remain at the bottom, along with those doing the actual labor of creating large-scale buildings and monuments. At the top, as society stratifies, are the rulers and religious leaders—who, in Mesopotamia, are often indistinguishable.

This chapter explores the differences between the varied empires and cultures of the Ancient Near East and Mesopotamia. This region saw a series of cultures coming to dominance and then being defeated and replaced by the victors—only for those victors to fall to the next group.

Beginning in Sumer, the chapter next moves to Akkad, Babylonia, Assyria, and finally ends with the Achaemenid or Early Persian Empire. It specifically considers the concept of civilization, how it developed, and what it means for the creation of art. It asks readers how this concept of civilization is intertwined with the Neolithic Revolution, discussed in the previous chapter, and it examines the artistic materials, techniques, subject matter, styles, and conventions developed in the region called the ancient Near East.

Objects Overview

Some of the works of art that this chapter will cover include a wide range of sculpture, architecture, early writing tools, and vessels, including:

- the origins of written language known as cuneiform, a wedge-shaped ancient writing system
- the *Warka Vase*, the monumental vase that gives insight into Sumerian cosmology
- the cylinder seals of the Ancient Near East, which were used as unique signatures and function as a sort of time capsule, preserving the popular aesthetics, styles, and motifs of the owner's lifetime and offering insights into commerce and religion
- the excavations of Ur, a trash dump that was turned into an elite cemetery
- the intricate, bronze life-size head of Akkadian ruler
- the royal city of Babylonia, which became the largest ancient settlement in Mesopotamia
- the Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi which includes 300 laws and is more than 4,000 years old
- the intimidating and monumental hybrid guardian figures at the gate of Sargon II
- the multi-ethnic Persian Empire and how it influenced later Greek conquest practices

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the oldest art, you should be able to:

- Describe the concept, "ingredients," and products of civilization
- Explain the importance of Sumer in the ancient Near East
- Recognize what agriculture has to do with the development of writing
- Discuss the excavation of art and architecture throughout the Near East
- Describe the artistic materials, techniques, subject matter, styles and conventions developed in the ancient Near East

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- The Getty, "Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins"
- Google Arts & Culture, "Preserving Iraq's Heritage" [Immersive articles and photographs]
- The Iraq Museum, "How to Rebuild the Iraq Museum"
- Lauren Sandler, "The Thieves of Baghdad" for The Atlantic
- Dr. Senta German, "Repatriating Artworks"
- Neela Banerjee, "Overseas: Once Looted and Forlorn, An Iraqi Symbol Revives" for The New York Times
- The British Museum, "An Introduction to Cuneiform"
- The British Museum, "The Tower of Babel" [video]
- Crash Course, "The Epic of Gilgamesh" [video]
- Amy Rebecca Gansell and Ann Shafer (eds.), Testing the Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology. Learn more about this book here to see how these art historians and archaeologists are challenging the canon of Near Eastern art and if you're interested, check your library for availability.

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6.1: Sumerian

Ancient Near East: Cradle of civilization

by Dr. Senta German

Home to some of the earliest and greatest empires, the Near East is often referred to as the cradle of civilization.



Figure **6.1.1**: Map of the Ancient Near East. (Photo: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, via Smarthistory)

The cradle of civilization

Some of the earliest complex urban centers can be found in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (early cities also arose in the Indus Valley and ancient China). The history of Mesopotamia, however, is inextricably tied to the greater region, which is comprised of the modern nations of Egypt, Sudan, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, the Gulf states and Turkey. We often refer to this region as the Near or Middle East.

What's in a name?

Why is this region named this way? What is it in the middle of or near to? It is the proximity of these countries to the West (to Europe) that led this area to be termed "the near east." Ancient Near Eastern Art has long been part of the history of Western art, but history didn't have to be written this way. It is largely because of the West's interests in the Biblical "Holy Land" that ancient Near Eastern materials have been be regarded as part of the Western canon of the history of art. An interest in finding the locations of cities mentioned in the Bible (such as Nineveh and Babylon) inspired the original English and French 19th-century archaeological expeditions to the Near East. These sites were discovered and their excavations revealed to the world a style of art which had been lost.

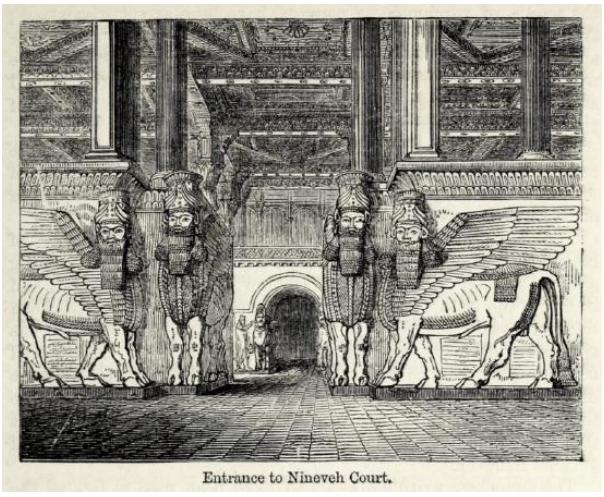


Figure **6.1.2**: Entrance to Ninevah Court, Illustration from: Sir Austen Henry Layard, *The Ninevah Court in the Crystal Palace* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1854), p. 39. (Image via Smarthistory)

The excavations inspired The Nineveh Court at the 1851 World's Fair in London (Figure **6.1.2**) and a style of decorative art and architecture called Assyrian Revival. Ancient Near Eastern art remains popular today; in 2007 a 2.25 inch high, early 3rd millennium limestone sculpture, the Guennol Lioness, was sold for 57.2 million dollars, the second most expensive piece of sculpture sold at that time.

Global Connections: The Many Births of Civilizations

Sometimes textbook surveys can be misleading in making it seem that civilization first began in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This is simply not true. In China, a number of distinct cultures developed simultaneously from around 7000 BCE until 1700 BCE. All of these cultures developed along waterways and near the coastal areas, including near the Yangtze River and the Yellow River.

And in the Indus Valley, several settlements developed around the river Indus between 2600 and 1900 BCE. Indus cities have been found and excavated in present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and they are collectively known as the Indus Valley Civilization. These archaeological sites demonstrate that the Indus Valley Civilization was highly organized and attentive to urban planning. In India, the site of Dholavira shows a sophisticated system of water management and in Pakistan, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa reveal highly efficient urban settlements. They also had a complex writing system, known as the Indus script, which has yet to be deciphered.

A complex history



Figure **6.1.3**: A fishing boat in the Euphrates Southern Iraq. (Photo: Aziz1005, CC BY 4.0)

The history of the Ancient Near East is complex and the names of rulers and locations are often difficult to read, pronounce and spell. Moreover, this is a part of the world which today remains remote from the West culturally while political tensions have impeded mutual understanding. However, once you get a handle on the general geography of the area and its history, the art reveals itself as uniquely beautiful, intimate and fascinating in its complexity.

Geography and the growth of cities

Mesopotamia remains a region of stark geographical contrasts: vast deserts rimmed by rugged mountain ranges, punctuated by lush oases. Flowing through this topography are rivers (see Figure **6.1.3**) and it was the irrigation systems that drew off the water from these rivers, specifically in southern Mesopotamia, that provided the support for the very early urban centers here.

The region lacks stone (for building), precious metals and timber. Historically, it has relied on the long-distance trade of its agricultural products to secure these materials. The large-scale irrigation systems and labor required for extensive farming was managed by a centralized authority. The early development of this authority, over large numbers of people in an urban center, is really what distinguishes Mesopotamia and gives it a special position in the history of Western culture. Here, for the first time,

thanks to ample food and a strong administrative class, the West develops a very high level of craft specialization and artistic production.

Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins

Courtesy of The Getty Museum

Ancient Mesopotamia, centered in present-day Iraq, occupies a unique place in the history of human culture. It is there, around 3400–3000 BC, that all the key elements of urban civilization first appear in one place: cities with monumental infrastructure and official bureaucracies overseeing agricultural, economic, and religious activities; the earliest known system of writing; and sophisticated architecture, arts, and technologies.

These developments were concentrated in southern Mesopotamia, where the dominant ethnic and linguistic group until about 2000 BCE was the Sumerians, famous today for their hero-king Gilgamesh of Uruk, the treasures found in the Royal Tombs at Ur, and the strikingly beautiful statues of Gudea, ruler of Lagash. By at least 2700 BC, the Sumerians lived alongside Akkadians, whose king Sargon established the first lasting Mesopotamian empire, and whose Semitic language evolved into the dialects of the Babylonians and Assyrians. It was those cultures, adapting and extending the Sumero-Akkadian heritage, that built the great cities of Babylon and Nineveh, famed for their towering ziggurats, temples, palaces, and city walls; composed evocative creation myths, epics, hymns, and poems; and laid the foundations for future mathematics and astronomy.



Figure 6.1.4: Statue of Gudea, c. 2090 BCE. Diorite, 17 3/8 x 8 1/2 x 11 5/8 in. (44 x 21.5 x 29.5 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

For some three thousand years, Mesopotamia remained the preeminent force in the Near East. In 539 BCE, however, Cyrus the Great captured Babylon and incorporated Mesopotamia into the Persian Empire. Periods of Greek and Parthian rule followed, and by about 100 CE, Mesopotamian culture had effectively come to an end.

First Writing

The earliest known writing emerged in southern Mesopotamia around 3400 BC, originating as a system of pictographs that evolved by 2600 BCE into the distinctive wedge-shaped script we call "cuneiform." It was used initially to record the Sumerian language, and from about 2400 BCE Akkadian, which split into two dialects, Assyrian and Babylonian, around 2000 BCE. Over the next two thousand years, the use of cuneiform scripts—both the Mesopotamian version and new forms adapted or invented to write some fifteen other languages—spread to Iran, Armenia, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. For much of this period, Babylonian remained the international diplomatic language between the region's "great kings." Cuneiform finally died out in the late first century CE, overtaken by the simpler alphabetic scripts of Aramaic and Greek.



Figure **6.1.5**: Cuneiform Tablet, c. 2039 BCE. Terracotta, 2 1/16 x 1 x 4 7/16 in. (5.2 x 2.6 x 11.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Louis Glover in memory of Charles T. Thurman, 74.71.5. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC-BY-2.0)

The vast majority of cuneiform writing was inscribed on clay tablets, which could also be impressed with a seal that acted like a signature. The hundreds of thousands of texts discovered by archaeologists include royal inscriptions, law codes, treaties, and literature, as well as everyday records such as receipts, contracts, letters, and incantations that reveal the intimate details of Mesopotamian social, religious, and economic life to an extent unmatched by any other ancient culture.

Extensive libraries of cuneiform texts were kept in temples and palaces, where scribes copied and recopied canonical compositions for millennia. Some kings, such as Shulgi of Ur (ruled 2094-2047 BCE) and Ashurbanipal of Assyria (ruled 668-627 BCE), claimed to read many languages and to be able to write cuneiform themselves.

First Cities

In the late fourth millennium BCE, the first settlements that clearly qualify as cities emerged in Sumer (southern Mesopotamia). Preeminent among these was Uruk (biblical Erech), which by 3000 BCE had grown into a walled city of over two square miles, with around a hundred thousand inhabitants. The economic basis of this transformative urban growth was intensive irrigation agriculture, requiring rigorous canal maintenance that was directed by the major temple estates.

The early cities of Sumer boasted monumental temples and palaces, decorated with statues of gods, kings, and worshippers. They were also centers of innovation and learning, where priests trained in sacred rituals, divination, exorcism, astronomy, and mathematics; where praise poems and mythological tales celebrating rulers and deities were studied and copied for posterity; and where law codes were created, international treaties were struck, and financial contracts were signed.

Some cities—notably Agade (location unknown), Ur, Babylon, and Nineveh— became imperial capitals that were renowned and feared throughout the ancient world. Indeed, when Alexander the Great conquered Mesopotamia in 331 BCE, Babylon was still regarded as the most spectacular of all cities.

First Kings

According to Sumerian creation myths, kingship "descended from heaven," and the gods determined the order in which cities and their rulers held sway. A bearded figure known today as the "priest-king" appears in art around 3300 BC, but it is not until about 2700 BCE that texts explicitly refer to rulers, who are titled *en* (lord), *lugal* (king, literally "great man"), or *ensi* (governor), according to local tradition. The ruler's primary obligations were to lead in battle, to ensure the favor of the gods through temple building and regular offerings, to maintain the city walls and irrigation canals for agriculture, and to enforce justice.



Figure **6.1.6**: Stele of Ushumgal and Shara-igizi-Abzu, 2900–2700 BCE. Gypsum alabaster, H 8 7/8 x W 5 3/4 x D 3 3/4." Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain) This stele features Ushumgal, a priest of the god Shara, and his daughter, who are entering into a land transaction, as recorded by the Sumerian inscription, in cuneiform, on the stone.

The Sumerians were organized as a patchwork of city-states until around 2340 BCE, when Sargon of Akkad established the first true and lasting empire—one that all later Mesopotamian kings would seek to emulate. Eras of strength and empire under the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE), the Babylonian kings Hammurabi (ruled 1792-1750 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar II (ruled 605-562 BCE), and the kings of Assyria (880-612 BC) alternated with periods of invasion by foreigners from the Iranian highlands (Guti, Kassites, Medes) and tribal nomads from the northwest (Amorites, Aramaeans)—but these too adopted and sustained Mesopotamian culture. The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE marked the end of native control of Mesopotamia and its incorporation into even larger empires ruled by the Persians, Greeks, and Parthians.

White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk

by Dr. Senta German

A gleaming temple built atop a mud-brick platform, it towered above the flat plain of Uruk.



Figure **6.1.7**: Archaeological site at Uruk (modern Warka) in Iraq. (Photo: SAC Andy Holmes (RAF)/MOD, Open Government License v1.0)

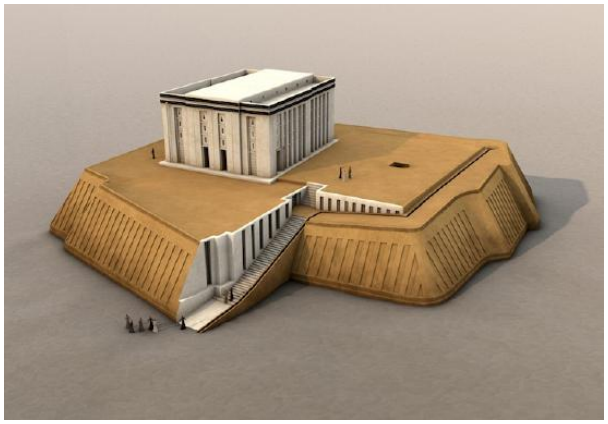


Figure **6.1.8**: Digital reconstruction of the White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk (modern Warka), c. 3517-3358 BCE. (Photo: © artefacts-berlin.de; scientific material: German Archaeological Institute, via Smarthistory)

Uruk (modern Warka in Iraq)—where city life began more than five thousand years ago and where the first writing emerged—was clearly one of the most important places in southern Mesopotamia. Within Uruk, the greatest monument was the Anu Ziggurat on which the White Temple was built. Dating to the late 4th millennium BCE (the Late Uruk Period, or Uruk III) and dedicated to the sky god Anu, this temple would have towered well above (approximately 40 feet) the flat plain of Uruk (see Figure **6.1.7**), and been visible from a great distance—even over the defensive walls of the city. A ziggurat is a built raised platform with four sloping sides—like a chopped-off pyramid. Ziggurats are made of mud-bricks—the building material of choice in the Near East, as stone is rare. Ziggurats were not only a visual focal point of the city, they were a symbolic one, as well—they were at the heart of the theocratic political system (a theocracy is a type of government where a god is recognized as the ruler, and the state officials operate on the god's behalf). So, seeing the ziggurat towering above the city, one made a visual connection to the god or goddess honored there, but also recognized that deity's political authority.



Figure **6.1.9**: Remains of the Anu Ziggurat, Uruk (modern Warka), c. 3517-3358 BCE. (Photo: Geoff Emberling, by permission, via Smarthistory) Because they were made of mud-brick, ziggurats like this one were susceptible to erosion and today lack the defintion they once had.

Excavators of the White Temple estimate that it would have taken 1500 laborers working on average ten hours per day for about five years to build the last major revetment (stone facing) of its massive underlying terrace (the open areas surrounding the White Temple at the top of the ziggurat). Although religious belief may have inspired participation in such a project, no doubt some sort of force (*corvée* labor—unpaid labor coerced by the state, or slavery) was involved as well.



Figure 6.1.10: Digital reconstruction of the two-story version of the White Temple, Uruk (modern Warka), c. 3517-3358 BCE. (© artefacts-berlin.de; scientific material: German Archaeological Institute, via Smarthistory)

The sides of the ziggurat were very broad and sloping but broken up by recessed stripes or bands from top to bottom (Figure 6.1.8), which would have made a stunning pattern in morning or afternoon sunlight. The only way up to the top of the ziggurat was via a steep stairway that led to a ramp that wrapped around the north end of the Ziggurat and brought one to the temple entrance. The flat top of the ziggurat was coated with bitumen (asphalt—a tar or pitch-like material similar to what is used for road paving) and overlaid with brick, for a firm and waterproof foundation for the White temple. The temple gets its name for the fact that it was entirely white washed inside and out, which would have given it a dazzling brightness in strong sunlight.

The White Temple

The White temple was rectangular, measuring 17.5 x 22.3 meters and, at its corners, oriented to the cardinal points. It is a typical Uruk "high temple (*Hochtempel*)" type with a tri-partite plan: a long rectangular central hall with rooms on either side (plan). The White Temple had three entrances, none of which faced the ziggurat ramp directly. Visitors would have needed to walk around the temple, appreciating its bright façade and the powerful view, and likely gained access to the interior in a "bent axis" approach (where one would have to turn 90 degrees to face the altar), a typical arrangement for Ancient Near Eastern temples.

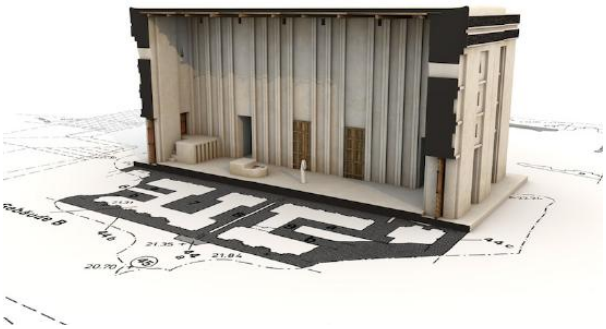


Figure 6.1.11: Section through the central hall of the "White Temple," digital reconstruction of the interior of the two-story version White Temple, Uruk (modern Warka), c. 3517-3358 BCE. (Photo: © artefacts-berlin.de; scientific material: German Archaeological Institute, via Smarthistory)

The northwest and east corner chambers of the building contained staircases (unfinished in the case of the one at the north end) (Figure 6.1.11). Chambers in the middle of the northeast room suite appear to have been equipped with wooden shelves in the walls and displayed cavities for setting in pivot stones which might imply a solid door was fitted in these spaces. The north end of the central hall had a podium accessible by means of a small staircase and an altar with a fire-stained surface (Figure 6.1.12). Very few objects were found inside the White Temple, although what has been found is very interesting. Archaeologists uncovered some 19 tablets of gypsum on the floor of the temple—all of which had cylinder seal impressions and reflected temple accounting. Also, archaeologists uncovered a foundation deposit of the bones of a leopard and a lion in the eastern corner of the Temple (foundation deposits, ritually buried objects and bones, are not uncommon in ancient architecture).



Figure 6.1.12: Interior view of the two-story version of the "White Temple," digital reconstruction of the White Temple, Uruk (modern Warka), c. 3517-3358 BCE. (Photo: © artefacts-berlin.de; scientific material: German Archaeological Institute, via Smarthistory)

To the north of the White Temple there was a broad flat terrace, at the center of which archaeologists found a huge pit with traces of fire (2.2 x 2.7m) and a loop cut from a massive boulder. Most interestingly, a system of shallow bitumen-coated conduits were discovered. These ran from the southeast and southwest of the terrace edges and entered the temple through the southeast and southwest doors. Archaeologists conjecture that liquids would have flowed from the terrace to collect in a pit in the center hall of the temple.

Warka Vase

by Dr. Senta German

One of the most precious artifacts from Sumer, the Warka Vase was looted and almost lost forever.



Figure 6.1.13: Ancient Near Eastern sites, with the borders of modern countries and modern capitals. (Map via Smarthistory)

Picturing the ruler

So many important innovations and inventions emerged in the Ancient Near East during the Uruk period (c. 4000 to 3000 BCE and named after the Sumerian city of Uruk). One of these was the use of art to illustrate the role of the ruler and his place in society. The *Warka Vase*, c. 3000 BCE, was discovered at Uruk (Warka is the modern name, Uruk the ancient name), and is probably the most famous example of this innovation. In its decoration we find an example of the cosmology of ancient Mesopotamia.



Figure **6.1.14**: Warka Vase, c. 3500-3000 BCE. Alabaster, 105 cm high. National Museum of Iraq. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The vase, made of alabaster and standing over three feet high (just about a meter) and weighing some 600 pounds (about 270 kg), was discovered in 1934 by German excavators working at Uruk in a ritual deposit (a burial undertaken as part of a ritual) in the temple of Inanna, the goddess of love, fertility, and war and the main patron of the city of Uruk. It was one of a pair of vases found in the Inanna temple complex (but the only one on which the image was still legible) together with other valuable objects.

Given the significant size of the Warka Vase, where it was found, the precious material from which it is carved and the complexity of its relief decoration, it was clearly of monumental importance, something to be admired and valued. Though known since its excavation as the Warka "Vase," that term does little to express the sacredness of this object for the people who lived in Uruk five thousand years ago.

The relief carvings on the exterior of the vase run around its circumference in four parallel bands (or registers, as art historians like to call them) and develop in complexity from the bottom to the top.



Figure **6.1.15**: Warka Vase (detail showing the bottom three registers). (Photo: Hirmer Verlag, via Smarthistory)

Beginning at the bottom, we see a pair of wavy lines from which grow neatly alternating plants that appear to be grain (probably barley) and reeds, the two most important agricultural harvests of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in southern Mesopotamia. There

is a satisfying rhythm to this alternation, and one that is echoed in the rhythm of the rams and ewes (male and female sheep) that alternate in the band above this. The sheep march to the right in tight formation, as if being herded—the method of tending this important livestock in the agrarian economy of the Uruk period.

The band above the sheep is a blank and might have featured painted decoration that has since faded away. Above this blank band, a group of nine identical men march to the left. Each holds a vessel in front of his face, and which appear to contain the products of the Mesopotamian agricultural system: fruits, grains, wine, and mead. The men are all naked and muscular and, like the sheep beneath them, are closely and evenly grouped, creating a sense of rhythmic activity. Nude figures in Ancient Near Eastern art are meant to be understood as humble and low status, so we can assume that these men are servants or slaves (the band above displays the slave owners).



Figure **6.1.16**: Drawing, top register, *Warka Vase* (reconstructing some missing areas), by Jo Wood, after M. Roaf, from *Leaving No Stones Unturned: Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt in Honor of Donald P. Hansen* (Eisenbrauns, 2001), p. 17. (Image via Smarthistory)

The top band of the vase is the largest, most complex, and least straightforward. It has suffered some damage but enough remains that the scene can be read. The center of the scene appears to depict a man and a woman who face each other. A smaller naked male stands between them holding a container of what looks like agricultural produce which he offers to the woman. The woman, identified as such by her robe and long hair, at one point had an elaborate crown on her head (this piece was broken off and repaired in antiquity).



Figure **6.1.17**: Warka Vase (detail of the top register showing a naked man offering a container to a female figure). (Photo: Hirmer Verlag, via Smarthistory)

Behind her are two reed bundles, symbols of the goddess Inanna, whom, it is assumed, the woman represents. The man she faces is nearly entirely broken off, and we are left with only the bottom of his long garment. However, men with similar robes are often found in contemporary seal stone engraving and based upon these, we can reconstruct him as a king with a long skirt, a beard and a head band. The tassels of his skirt are held by another smaller scaled man behind him, a steward or attendant to the king, who wears a short skirt.

The rest of the scene is found behind the reed bundles at the back of Inanna. There we find two horned and bearded rams (one directly behind the other, so the fact that there are two can only be seen by looking at the hooves) carrying platforms on their backs on which statues stand. The statue on the left carries the cuneiform sign for EN, the Sumerian word for chief priest. The statue on the right stands before yet another Inanna reed bundle. Behind the rams is an array of tribute gifts including two large vases which look quite a lot like the *Warka Vase* itself.



Figure 6.1.18: Warka Vase (detail of the top register showing rams carrying statues and gifts). (Photo: Hirmer Verlag, via Smarthistory)

What could this busy scene mean? The simplest way to interpret it is that a king (presumably of Uruk) is celebrating Inanna, the city's most important divine patron. A more detailed reading of the scene suggests a sacred marriage between the king, acting as the chief priest of the temple, and the goddess—each represented in person as well as in statues. Their union would guarantee for Uruk the agricultural abundance we see depicted behind the rams. The worship of Inanna by the king of Uruk dominates the decoration of the vase. The top illustrates how the cultic duties of the Mesopotamian king as chief priest of the goddess, put him in a position to be responsible for and proprietor of, the agricultural wealth of the city state.

Backstory



Figure 6.1.19: Broken-off foot of vase, tossed over, National Museum of Iraq, May 2003. (Photo: Joanne Farchakh, via Smarthistory)

The *Warka Vase*, one of the most important objects in the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad, was stolen in April 2003 with thousands of other priceless ancient artifacts when the museum was looted in the immediate aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The *Warka Vase* was returned in June of that same year after an amnesty program was created to encourage the return of looted items. *The Guardian* reported that "The United States army ignored warnings from its own civilian advisers that could have stopped the looting of priceless artifacts in Baghdad…."

Even before the invasion, looting was a growing problem, due to economic uncertainty and widespread unemployment in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. According to Dr. Neil Brodie, Senior Research Fellow on the Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa project at the University of Oxford, "In the aftermath of that war…as the country descended into chaos, between 1991 and 1994 eleven regional museums were broken into and approximately 3,000 artifacts and 484 manuscripts were stolen…." The vast majority of these have not been returned. And, as Dr. Brodie notes, the most important question may be why no concerted international action was taken to block the sale of objects looted from archaeological sites and cultural institutions during wartime.

Read more about endangered cultural heritage in the Near East in Smarthistory's ARCHES (At Risk Cultural Heritage Education Series) section.

Standing Male Worshipper (Tell Asmar)

by Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

One of a group buried in a temple almost 5,000 years ago, this statue's job was to worship Abu—forever. This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Click here to watch the video.



Figure **6.1.20**: Standing Male Worshipper (votive figure), c. 2900-2600 BCE, from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar, Iraq). Gypsum alabaster, shell, black limestone, bitumen, 11 5/8 x 5 1/8 x 3 7/8″ / 29.5 x 10 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Almost 5,000 years ago somebody carefully buried a small group of alabaster figure in the floor of a temple.

Beth: And we're looking at one of those figures now. The Metropolitan Museum of Art calls this a standing male worshipper. He was buried along with 11 other figures for a total of 12, most of them male.



Figure **6.1.21**: Standing male worshipper (detail of face and upper body). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're looking at one of the smaller figures. They range from just under a foot to almost three feet.

Beth: The temple where these were buried was in a city called Eshnunna in the northern part of ancient Mesopotamia.

Steven: What is now called Tell Asmar. The figures from Tell Asmar are widely considered to be the great expression of early dynastic Sumerian art. And we think the temple was dedicated to the god Abu.

Beth: At this time, the third millennium BCE, in this area around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, some of the earliest cities in the world emerged and writing emerged. This is a watershed in human history. The cities had administrative buildings, temples, palaces, many of which have been unearthed by archeologists.

Steven: This is the transitional period right after the Bronze Age, the tail end of the Neolithic, when civilizations are founded in the great river valleys around the world. And he's adorable.

Beth: He is adorable. His wide eyes and his sense of attentiveness are very appealing I think but of course, he wasn't meant to be looking at us. He was meant to be attentive to a statue, a sculpture of a god who was believed to be embodied in the sculpture.

Steven: In fact, we believe that the person for whom this was a kind of stand-in was also embodied in this figurine.

Beth: So an elite member of ancient Sumerian culture paid to have this sculpture made and placed before the god to be a kind of stand-in to perhaps continually owner prayers, to be continually attentive to the god.

Steven: His hands are clasped together, he stands erect, his shoulders are broad so there is a sense of frontality.

Beth: Even though he is carved on both sides he was meant to be seen from the front. Although that term "meant to be seen" is a funny one.

Steven: Well he was meant to be seen by a God. You can see that the hair is parted at the center of the scalp and comes down in wavelets or perhaps braids that spiral down and then frame the central beard which is quite formal and cascades down in a series of regular waves. His hands are clasped just below the beard. His shoulders are really broad, his upper arms very broad and then there's very fine incising at the bottom of his skirt.

Beth: But it's odd to me how cylindrical the bottom part of his body is and how flattened out the torso is.

Steven: If you look at the face carefully, you can see that the very large eyes are in fact inlaid shell and in the center, the pupils are black limestone. And you can also see that there is an incising of the eyebrows that might have originally been inlaid as well.

Beth: This is really different from Egyptian culture which emerges at the same time. In Egyptian culture, the sculptures primarily represent the pharaoh—the king—and indicate his divinity, but in the ancient Near East, we have these votive images of worshippers but not so much of the kings, at least during this early dynastic period. The figures at Tell Asmar that were unearthed are very similar. They're not meant to be portraits of a specific person but a symbol of that person.

Steven: But he does look very humble, his mouth is closed, his lips are sealed together and of course he is wonderfully attentive.

Beth: And the fact that his hands are clasped I think makes him seem more humble as well.

Steven: There are some interesting subtle choices that whoever carved this made. Look at the way that the skirt extends out and attaches itself to the forearms a bit wider than we would expect.



Figure **6.1.22**: Standing male worshipper (detail of back), Tell Asmar. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: And the torso, it's just this almost V-shape. There is a sense of geometric patterning here and not the naturalistic forms of the body.

Steven: If you look at the back of the figure you can see that there is a little cleft that's been carved in horizontally. And there's also what seems to be the indication perhaps of a tied belt that hangs down.

Beth: You understand, I think, the artist's decision not to make a naturalistic figure because a naturalistic figure before the god might give a sense of someone just visiting, just passing through, but this idea of a static, symmetrical, frontal, wide-eyed figure gives a sense of timelessness of a figure that is forever offering prayers to the god.

Cylinder seals

by Dr. Senta German

Cuneiform was used for official accounting, governmental and theological pronouncements and a wide range of correspondence. Nearly all of these documents required a formal "signature," the impression of a cylinder seal.

Signed with a cylinder seal

A cylinder seal is a small pierced object, like a long round bead, carved in reverse (intaglio) and hung on strings of fiber or leather. These often beautiful objects were ubiquitous in the Ancient Near East and remain a unique record of individuals from this era. Each seal was owned by one person and was used and held by them in particularly intimate ways, such as strung on a necklace or bracelet.

When a signature was required, the seal was taken out and rolled on the pliable clay document, leaving behind the positive impression of the reverse images carved into it. However, some seals were valued not for the impression they made, but instead, for the magic they were thought to possess or for their beauty.



Figure **6.1.23**: Cylinder Seal (with modern impression), royal worshipper before a god on a throne with bull's legs; human-headed bulls below, c. 1820-1730 BCE. Hematite, H. 0.8 in. (2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

The first use of cylinder seals in the Ancient Near East dates to earlier than the invention of cuneiform, to the Late Neolithic period (7600–6000 BCE) in Syria. However, what is most remarkable about cylinder seals is their scale and the beauty of the semi-precious stones from which they were carved. The images and inscriptions on these stones can be measured in millimeters and feature incredible detail.

The stones from which the cylinder seals were carved include agate, chalcedony, lapis lazuli, steatite, limestone, marble, quartz, serpentine, hematite and jasper; for the most distinguished there were seals of gold and silver. To study Ancient Near Eastern cylinder seals is to enter a uniquely beautiful, personal and detailed miniature universe of the remote past, but one which was directly connected to a vast array of individual actions, both mundane and momentous.



Figure 6.1.24: Cylinder Seal (with modern impression), hunting scene, c. 2250-2150 BCE. Chert, H. 1 1/8 in (2.8cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

Why cylinder seals are interesting

Art historians are particularly interested in cylinder seals for at least two reasons. First, it is believed that the images carved on seals accurately reflect the pervading artistic styles of the day and the particular region of their use. In other words, each seal is a small time capsule of what sorts of motifs and styles were popular during the lifetime of the owner. These seals, which survive in great numbers, offer important information to understand the developing artistic styles of the Ancient Near East.

The second reason why art historians are interested in cylinder seals is because of the iconography (the study of the content of a work of art). Each character, gesture and decorative element can be “read” and reflected back on the owner of the seal, revealing his or her social rank and even sometimes the name of the owner. Although the same iconography found on seals can be found on carved stelae, terracotta plaques, wall reliefs and paintings, its most complete compendium exists on the thousands of seals which have survived from antiquity.

Standard of Ur and other objects from the Royal Graves

by The British Museum

At the center of Ur, a rubbish dump grew over the centuries—it evolved into a cemetery for the elite.

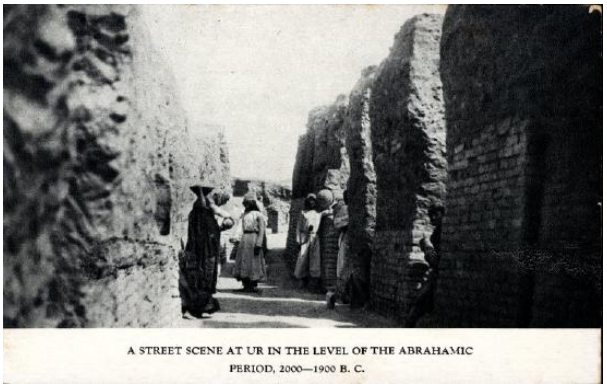


Figure 6.1.25: Postcard, printed; photograph showing archaeological excavations at Ur, with Arab workmen standing for scale in the excavated street of an early second millennium BCE residential quarter. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The city of Ur

Known today as Tell el-Muqayyar, the “Mound of Pitch,” the site was occupied from around 5000 BCE to 300 BCE. Although Ur is famous as the home of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham (Genesis 11:29-32), there is no actual proof that Tell el-Muqayyar was identical with “Ur of the Chaldees.” In antiquity the city was known as Urim.

The main excavations at Ur were undertaken from 1922-34 by a joint expedition of The British Museum and the University Museum, Pennsylvania, led by Leonard Woolley. At the center of the settlement were mud brick temples dating back to the fourth millennium BCE. At the edge of the sacred area a cemetery grew up which included burials known today as the Royal Graves. An area of ordinary people’s houses was excavated in which a number of street corners have small shrines. But the largest surviving religious buildings, dedicated to the moon god Nanna, also include one of the best preserved ziggurats, and were founded in the period 2100-1800 BCE. For some of this time Ur was the capital of an empire stretching across southern Mesopotamia. Rulers of the later Kassite and Neo-Babylonian empires continued to build and rebuild at Ur. Changes in both the flow of the River Euphrates (now some ten miles to the east) and trade routes led to the eventual abandonment of the site.

The royal graves of Ur

Close to temple buildings at the center of the city of Ur, sat a rubbish dump built up over centuries. Unable to use the area for building, the people of Ur started to bury their dead there. The cemetery was used between about 2600-2000 BCE and hundreds of burials were made in pits. Many of these contained very rich materials.

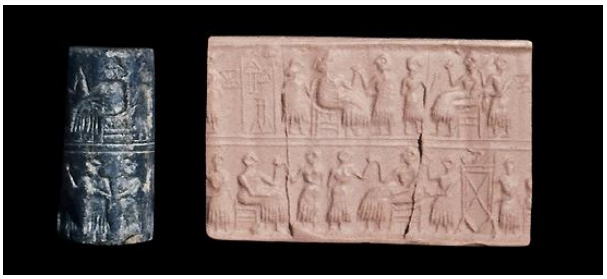


Figure **6.1.26**: Cylinder seal of Pu-abi, from Ur, c. 2600 BCE. Lapis lazuli, 4.9 x 2.6 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via SmartHistory)

In one area of the cemetery a group of sixteen graves was dated to the mid-third millennium. These large, shaft graves were distinct from the surrounding burials and consisted of a tomb, made of stone, rubble and bricks, built at the bottom of a pit. The layout of the tombs varied, some occupied the entire floor of the pit and had multiple chambers. The most complete tomb discovered belonged to a lady identified as Pu-abi from the name carved on a cylinder seal found with the burial.

The majority of graves had been robbed in antiquity but where evidence survived the main burial was surrounded by many human bodies. One grave had up to seventy-four such sacrificial victims. It is evident that elaborate ceremonies took place as the pits were filled in that included more human burials and offerings of food and objects. The excavator, Leonard Woolley thought the graves belonged to kings and queens. Another suggestion is that they belonged to the high priestesses of Ur.

The *Standard of Ur*

This object was found in one of the largest graves in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, lying in the corner of a chamber above the right shoulder of a man. Its original function is not yet understood.

Leonard Woolley, the excavator at Ur, imagined that it was carried on a pole as a standard, hence its common name. Another theory suggests that it formed the soundbox of a musical instrument.

When found, the original wooden frame for the mosaic of shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli had decayed, and the two main panels had been crushed together by the weight of the soil. The bitumen acting as glue had disintegrated and the end panels were broken. As a result, the present restoration is only a best guess as to how it originally appeared.

The main panels are known as “War” and “Peace.” “War” shows one of the earliest representations of a Sumerian army. Chariots, each pulled by four donkeys, trample enemies; infantry with cloaks carry spears; enemy soldiers are killed with axes, others are paraded naked and presented to the king who holds a spear.



Figure 6.1.27: War (detail), *The Standard of Ur*, 2600-2400 BCE. Shell, red limestone, lapis lazuli, and bitumen (original wood no longer exists), 21.59 x 49.53 x 12 cm. British Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The "Peace" panel depicts animals, fish and other goods brought in procession to a banquet. Seated figures, wearing woolen fleeces or fringed skirts, drink to the accompaniment of a musician playing a lyre. Banquet scenes such as this are common on cylinder seals of the period, such as on the seal of the "Queen" Pu-abi, also in the British Museum (Figure 6.1.26).



Figure 6.1.28: Peace (detail), *The Standard of Ur*, 2600-2400 BCE. Shell, red limestone, lapis lazuli, and bitumen (original wood no longer exists), 21.59 x 49.53 x 12 cm. British Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Queen's Lyre

Leonard Woolley discovered several lyres in the graves in the Royal Cemetery at Ur. This was one of two that he found in the grave of "Queen" Pu-abi. Along with the lyre, which stood against the pit wall, were the bodies of ten women with fine jewelry, presumed to be sacrificial victims, and numerous stone and metal vessels. One woman lay right against the lyre and, according to Woolley, the bones of her hands were placed where the strings would have been.

The wooden parts of the lyre had decayed in the soil, but Woolley poured plaster of Paris into the depression left by the vanished wood and so preserved the decoration in place. The front panels are made of lapis lazuli, shell and red limestone originally set in bitumen. The gold mask of the bull decorating the front of the sounding box had been crushed and had to be restored. While the horns are modern, the beard, hair and eyes are original and made of lapis lazuli.



Figure 6.1.29: Queen's Lyre (reconstruction), from Ur, 2600 BCE. Wooden parts, pegs and string are modern; lapis lazuli, shell and red limestone mosaic decoration, set in bitumen and the head (but not the horns) of the bull are ancient; the bull's head in front of the sound box is covered in gold; the eyes are lapis lazuli and shell and the hair and beard are lapis lazuli; panel on front depicts lion-headed eagle between gazelles, bulls with plants on hills, a bull-man between leopards and a lion attacking a bull; edges of the sound-box are decorated with inlay bands; eleven gold-headed pegs for the strings, 112.5 x 72. 7 cm (body). (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

This musical instrument was originally reconstructed as part of a unique "harp-lyre," together with a harp from the burial, now also in The British Museum. Later research showed that this was a mistake. A new reconstruction, based on excavation photographs, was made in 1971-72.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Senta German, "Ancient Near East: Cradle of civilization," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The Getty Museum, "Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins," for the Getty Museum (Reproduced by permission of the Getty Museum)
- Dr. Senta German, "White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Warka Vase," in *Smarthistory*, September 28, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "*Standing Male Worshipper* (Tell Asmar)," in *Smarthistory*, December 16, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Cylinder seals," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "*Standard of Ur* and other objects from the Royal Graves," in *Smarthistory*, December 18, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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6.2: Akkadian

Akkad, an introduction

by Dr. Senta German

Founded by the famed Sargon the Great, Akkad was a powerful military empire.

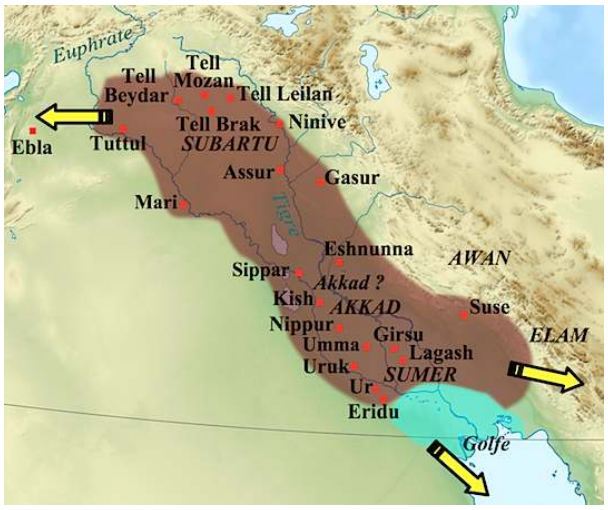


Figure **6.2.1**: Map showing the approximate extension of the Akkad empire during the reign of Naram-Sin; yellow arrows indicate the directions in which military campaigns were conducted. (Map: CC BY-SA 3.0)

Akkad

Competition between Akkad in the north and Ur in the south created two centralized regional powers at the end of the third millennium (c. 2334–2193 BCE).

This centralization was military in nature and the art of this period generally became more martial. The Akkadian Empire was begun by Sargon, a man from a lowly family who rose to power and founded the royal city of Akkad (Akkad has not yet been located, though one theory puts it under modern Baghdad).



Figure **6.2.2**: Head of an Akkadian ruler, from Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik), Iraq, c. 2250-2200 BCE. Bronze, 1’2 3/8” high. Iraqi Museum, Baghdad (looted?). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Head of an Akkadian Ruler

This image of an unidentified Akkadian ruler (some say it is Sargon, but no one knows) is one of the most beautiful and terrifying images in all of Ancient Near Eastern art Figure **6.2.2**. The life-sized bronze head shows in sharp geometric clarity, locks of hair, curled lips and a wrinkled brow. Perhaps more awesome than the powerful and somber face of this ruler is the violent attack that mutilated it in antiquity.



Figure **6.2.3**: Head of an Akkadian ruler (detail of right profile). Iraqi Museum, Baghdad (looted?). (Photo: Hans Ollermann, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Global Connections: The Lost-Wax Casting Process Worldwide

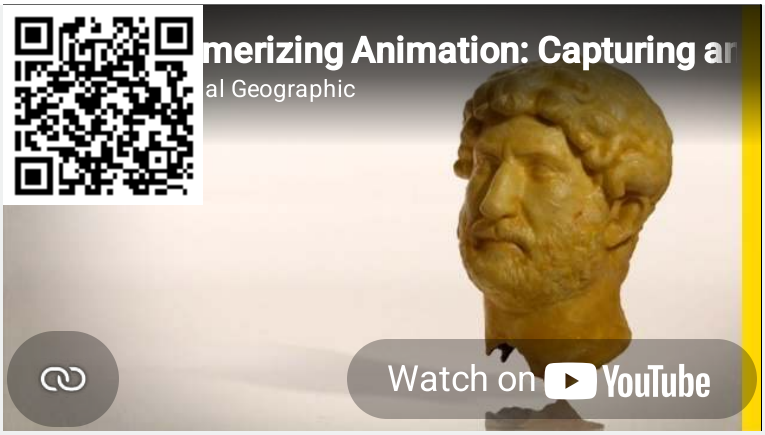
This remarkable head was produced using the labor-intensive technique of lost-wax casting, which is discussed in more detail in the chapters on Greece and the Etruscans. Instead of being made of solid metal, which would result in even heavier and more costly objects, this and other sculptures were hollow–as you can see here, due to the eyes (probably made of precious stones) having been gouged out, among other damage.

The lost-wax casting process is the oldest method of making metal sculptures, and as such, it has been used internationally in ancient societies across the world in places like Tehuantepec, Mexico and Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. Ancient Colombian artists were renowned for their metal casting techniques, often using precious gold and wax from stingless bees to model the cast desired for the final product. In *Seated Female Poporo* (c. 500-700 BCE), skilled artists created this hollowed flask using the wax method for the main body, and soldering the head, legs, and stool to the figure at the end.

The Benin kingdom (in present-day Nigeria) is also known for their exquisitely detailed bronze plaques, made using the lost-wax method, such as Equestrian Oba and Attendants (1550-1680). Combined with numerous plaques hung throughout the palace of the Oba (or ruler), the sequence of plaques visually documents and tells the story of the Oba's dynasty and royal lineage.

Online Resource: Capturing an Emperor's Face in Bronze

This video demonstrates the process for creating a bronze sculpture using the lost-wax casting method. First, the artisans use an existing model to create a plaster mold, which is then coated evenly with molten wax, creating a hollow wax version of the original. They carve fine details into this wax version, and attach wax channels called sprues before adding bronze pins to stabilize everything. The artisans then pour plaster inside and outside the hollow wax from to create a final mold. When the mold is fired, the wax melts and runs out, leaving a space supported by the bronze pins. Molten bronze, poured into the mold, fills the gap left by the bronze and results in a hollow bronze sculpture that is then finished and polished by hand.



The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. "Hadrian: An Emperor Cast in Bronze."

Ur

The kingdom of Akkad ends with internal strife and invasion by the Gutians from the Zagros mountains to the northeast. The Gutians were ousted in turn and the city of Ur, south of Uruk, became dominant. King Ur-Nammu established the third dynasty of Ur, also referred to as the Ur III period.

Victory Stele of Naram-Sin

By Smarthistory

This monument depicts the Akkadian victory over the Lullubi Mountain people. In the 12th century BCE, a thousand years after it was originally made, the Elamite king, Shutruk-Nahhunte, attacked Babylon and, according to his later inscription, the stele was taken to Susa in what is now Iran. A stele is a vertical stone monument or marker often inscribed with text or relief carving.

Online Resource: Victory Stele of Naram-Sin

This monument commemorates an important victory by Naram-Sin, great-great-grandson of Sargon. The dynamic scene emphasizes Naram-Sin's importance through his superior size, his association with the gods, and the gazes of the other figures toward him. Amidst the chaos of battle, he remains the calm, dominant, ruler. In the video below, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker discuss this monument at the Louvre Museum in Paris.



Smarthistory, "*Victory Stele of Naram Sin*"



Figure **6.2.4**: View of the *Victory Stele of Naram-Sin*, 2254-2218 BCE, on display in the Louvre. Pink limestone, 6'7" high. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **6.2.5**: Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, 2254-2218 BCE. Pink limestone, 6'7" high. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Senta German, "Akkad, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, June 8, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "*Victory Stele of Naram-Sin*," in *Smarthistory*, November 24, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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6.3: Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian

Babylonia, an introduction

by The British Museum

On the River Euphrates

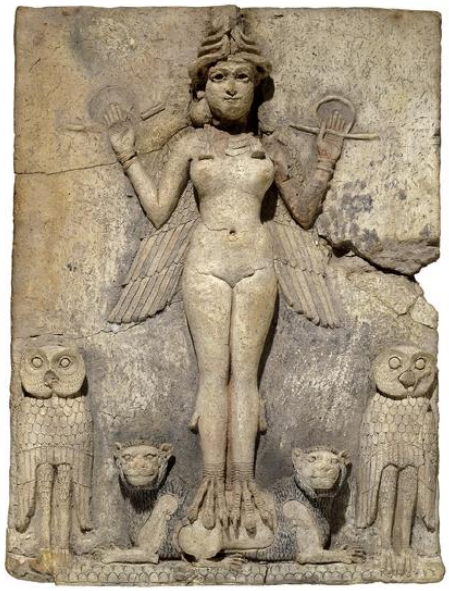


Figure **6.3.1**: The “Queen of the Night” Relief, Old Babylonian, 1800-1750 BCE. Baked straw-tempered clay, 49 x 37 x 4.8 cm. British Museum. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory) The panel, modeled in high relief, depicts a naked woman with feathered wings and legs that end in talons. She wears a horned headdress and bracelets and stands on the back of a pair of lions, flanked by a pair of owls. Her arms are bent and in her hands, raised to the level of her shoulders, she holds a rod and ring.

The city of Babylon on the River Euphrates in southern Iraq is mentioned in documents of the late third millennium BCE and first came to prominence as the royal city of King Hammurabi (about 1790-1750 BCE). He established control over many other kingdoms stretching from the Persian Gulf to Syria. The British Museum holds one of the iconic artworks of this period, the so-called “Queen of the Night” (Figure **6.3.1**). From around 1500 BCE a dynasty of Kassite kings took control in Babylon and unified southern Iraq into the kingdom of Babylonia. The Babylonian cities were the centers of great scribal learning and produced writings on divination, astrology, medicine and mathematics. The Kassite kings corresponded with the Egyptian Pharaohs as revealed by cuneiform letters found at Amarna in Egypt, now in the British Museum.

Babylonia had an uneasy relationship with its northern neighbor Assyria and opposed its military expansion. In 689 BCE, Babylon was sacked by the Assyrians but as the city was highly regarded it was restored to its former status soon after. Other Babylonian cities also flourished; scribes in the city of Sippar probably produced the famous “Map of the World” (Figure **6.3.2**).

Babylonian kings

After 612 BCE, the Babylonian kings Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II were able to claim much of the Assyrian empire and rebuilt Babylon on a grand scale. Nebuchadnezzar II rebuilt Babylon in the sixth century BCE and it became the largest ancient settlement in Mesopotamia. There were two sets of fortified walls and massive palaces and religious buildings, including the central ziggurat tower. Nebuchadnezzar is also credited with the construction of the famous “Hanging Gardens.” However, the last Babylonian king Nabonidus (555-539 BCE) was defeated by Cyrus II of Persia and the country was incorporated into the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire.



Figure **6.3.2**: Map of the World, Babylonian, probably from Sippar, southern Iraq, c. 700-500 BCE. Clay, 12.2 x 8.2 cm. British Museum. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) As the British Museum writes, this tablet "shows the world as a disc, surrounded by a ring of water called the 'Bitter River;' 'Babylon' is marked as a rectangle at the right end of the Euphrates although the city actually occupied both banks of the river during most of its history.... [S]mall circles are used to indicate cities or districts, and two of which are identified as 'Assyria' and 'Der.'"

Babylon remained an important center until the third century BCE, when Seleucia-on-the-Tigris was founded about ninety kilometers to the north-east. Under Antiochus I (281-261 BCE) the new settlement became the official Royal City and the civilian population was ordered to move there. Nonetheless a village existed on the old city site until the eleventh century CE. Babylon was excavated by Robert Koldewey between 1899 and 1917 on behalf of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft. Since 1958 the Iraq Directorate-General of Antiquities has carried out further investigations. Unfortunately, the earlier levels are inaccessible beneath the high water table. Since 2003, our attention has been drawn to new threats to the archaeology of Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq.

For two thousand years the myth of Babylon has haunted the European imagination. The Tower of Babel and the Hanging Gardens, Belshazzar’s Feast and the Fall of Babylon have inspired artists, writers, poets, philosophers and film makers.

Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi

by Dr. Senta German

Law is at the heart of modern civilization, and is often based on principles listed here nearly 4,000 years ago.

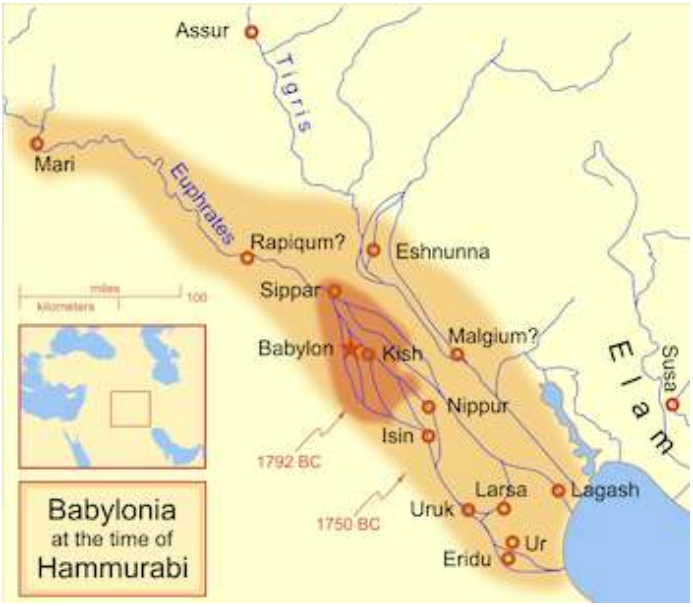


Figure **6.3.3**: Babylonia at the time of Hammurabi. (Map via Smarthistory)

Hammurabi of the city state of Babylon conquered much of northern and western Mesopotamia and by 1776 BCE, he is the most far-reaching leader of Mesopotamian history, describing himself as "the king who made the four quarters of the earth obedient." Documents show Hammurabi was a classic micro-manager, concerned with all aspects of his rule, and this is seen in his famous legal code, which survives in partial copies on this stele in the Louvre and on clay tablets (a stele is a vertical stone monument or marker often inscribed with text or with relief carving). We can also view this as a monument presenting Hammurabi as an exemplary king of justice.

What is interesting about the representation of Hammurabi on the legal code stele is that he is seen as receiving the laws from the god Shamash, who is seated, complete with thunderbolts coming from his shoulders. The emphasis here is Hammurabi's role as pious theocrat, and that the laws themselves come from the god.

Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi: A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Musee du Louvre, Paris. Click here to watch the video.

Steven: We're in the Louvre, in Paris, looking at one of their most famous objects. This is the Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi.



Figure **6.3.4**: Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi, Babylonian, 1792-1750 BCE. Basalt, 225 x 65 cm. Musee du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Its interesting to me that this is one of the most popular objects to look at here (it was made in the Babylonian Kingdom which is now in Iraq) and I think its because of our modern interest and reliance on law as the founding principles of a civilization. And this is such an ancient object, this is nearly 4,000 years old.

Steven: A stele is a tall carved object. This one is carved in relief at the top, and then below that, and on all sides, we have inscribed cuneiform (script that is used on the stele). It's written in the language of Akkadian (which is the court language of the Babylonians).

Beth: Which was used for official government decrees.

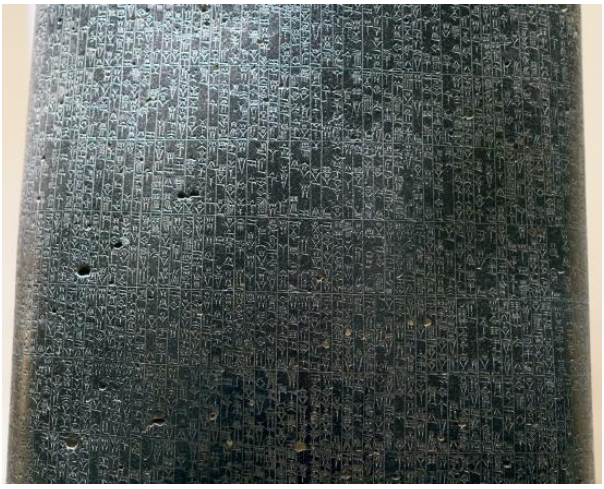


Figure **6.3.5**: Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi (detail showing columns of cuneiform). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: But that's the language. The script is cuneiform. It's divided into three parts. There's a prologue, which talks about the scene that's being represented at the top, the Investiture of Hammurabi. What we see is the king on the left, he's smaller, and he's facing the god, Shamash. This is the sun god, the god of justice.

Beth: And we can tell he's a god because of the special horned crown that he wears and the flames or light that emanate from his shoulders.

Steven: We can think of this as a kind of divine light, the way that in so much Christian imagery, we see a halo.

Beth: And we have that composite view that we often see in Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Near-Eastern art, where the shoulders are frontal but the face is represented in profile.

Steven: Shamash sits on a throne, and if you look closely you can see under his feet the representation of mountains that he rises from each day. He's giving to the king a scepter and a ring, these are signs of power. Hammurabi is demonstrating here that these are divine laws. That his authority comes from Shamash.

Beth: So we have more than 300 laws here.



Figure 6.3.6: Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi (detail shwoing Hammurabi and Shamash). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And they're very particular. Scholars believe that they weren't so much written by the king as listed from judgments that have already been meted out.

Beth: They're legal precedents, and they take the form of announcing an action and its consequences. So if you do X, Y is the consequence.

Steven: So, for example, if a man builds a house and the house falls on the owner, the builder is put to death. So there's a kind of equivalence, and this might remind us of the Biblical law of, "An eye for an eye" or a tooth for a tooth." Which is also found on the stele, and it's important and interesting to note that the stele predates that Biblical text. The last part of the text, what is often referred to as the epilogue, speaks to the posterity of the king, of the importance of his rule and the idea that he will be remembered for all time.

Beth: This is certainly not a unique stele in terms of recording laws, but it does survive largely intact. When it was discovered, it was broken only into three parts, which you can still see today.

Steven: These laws, almost 4,000 years old, tell us a tremendous amount about Babylonian culture, about what was important to them. So many of these laws deal with agricultural issues, issues of irrigation, and are clearly expressing points of tension in society.

Beth: A lot of them have to do with family life, too, and the king is, after all, responsible for the peace and prosperity and feeding of his people. And the stele is such a wonderful reminder that Mesopotamia was such an advanced culture. Here, almost 4,000 years ago, we have cities that are dependent on good crop yields, that require laws to maintain civil society. And a reminder of the debt that the world owes to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and the area that is seeing so much conflict now.

The Ishtar Gate and Neo-Babylonian art and architecture

by Dr. Senta German

"I, Nebuchadnezzar … magnificently adorned them with luxurious splendor for all mankind to behold in awe."



Figure **6.3.7**: Reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way, Babylon, c. 575 BCE. Glazed mud brick. Pergamon Museum, Berlin. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The chronology of Mesopotamia is complicated. Scholars refer to places (Sumer, for example) and peoples (the Babylonians), but also empires (Babylonia) and unfortunately for students of the Ancient Near East these organizing principles do not always agree. The result is that we might, for example, speak of the very ancient Babylonians starting in the 1800s BCE and then also the Neo-Babylonians more than a thousand years later. What came in between you ask? Well, quite a lot, but mostly the Kassites and the Assyrians.

The Assyrian Empire which had dominated the Near East came to an end at around 600 BCE due to a number of factors including military pressure by the Medes (a pastoral mountain people, again from the Zagros mountain range), the Babylonians, and possibly also civil war.

A Neo-Babylonian dynasty

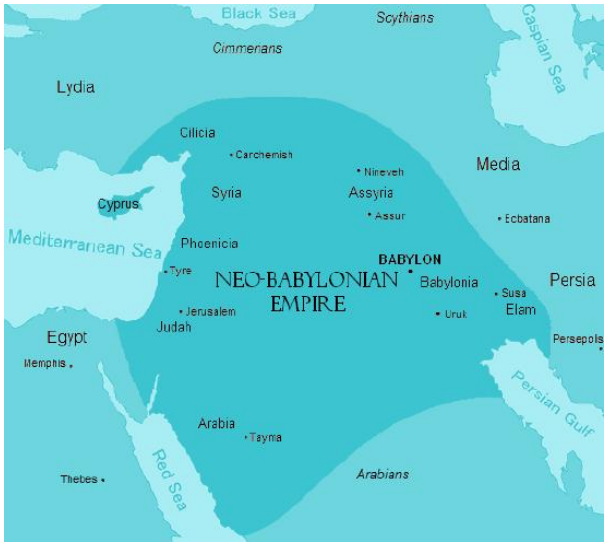


Figure **6.3.8**: Map of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. (Map via Smarthistory)

The Babylonians rose to power in the late 7th century and were heirs to the urban traditions which had long existed in southern Mesopotamia. They eventually ruled an empire as dominant in the Near East as that held by the Assyrians before them.

This period is called Neo-Babylonian (or new Babylonia) because Babylon had also risen to power earlier and became an independent city-state, most famously during the reign of King Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE).

In the art of the Neo-Babylonian Empire we see an effort to invoke the styles and iconography of the 3rd millennium rulers of Babylonia. In fact, one Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, found a statue of Sargon of Akkad, set it in a temple and provided it with regular offerings.

Architecture

The Neo-Babylonians are most famous for their architecture, notably at their capital city, Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar (604-561 BCE) largely rebuilt this ancient city including its walls and seven gates. It is also during this era that Nebuchadnezzar purportedly built the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon” for his wife because she missed the gardens of her homeland in Media (modern day Iran). Though mentioned by ancient Greek and Roman writers, the “Hanging Gardens” may, in fact, be legendary.

The Ishtar Gate (today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin) was the most elaborate of the inner city gates constructed in Babylon in antiquity (Figure **6.3.7**). The whole gate was covered in lapis lazuli glazed bricks which would have rendered the façade with a jewel-like shine. Alternating rows of lion and cattle march in a relief procession across the gleaming blue surface of the gate.

Optional Online Resource: Ishtar Gate and Processional Way

The faience decoration of the Ishtar gate, glittering in brilliant blue, green, and gold, features lions (representing Ishtar), fierce ancient bulls, or aurochs (representing Adad); and composite dragons (representing Marduk, patron god of the city). In this video, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker discuss Babylon, one of the Wonders of the Ancient World; Nebuchadnezzar, who raised the city to such glory; and the gate's inscription, which raises parallels to much more recent history.



Smarthistory, "Ishtar Gate and Processional Way"

Articles in this section:

- The British Museum, "Babylonia, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, August 29, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Law Code Stele of King Hammurabi: A CONVERSATION," on YouTube for *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "The Ishtar Gate and Neo-Babylonian art and architecture," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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6.4: Assyria

Assyria, an introduction

by Dr. Senta German

Led by aggressive warrior kings, Assyria dominated the fertile crescent for half a millennium, amassing vast wealth.



Figure **6.4.1**: Map of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its expansions. (Map via Smarthistory)

A military culture

The Assyrian empire dominated Mesopotamia and all of the Near East for the first half of the first millennium BCE, led by a series of highly ambitious and aggressive warrior kings. Assyrian society was entirely military, with men obliged to fight in the army at any time. State offices were also under the purview of the military.

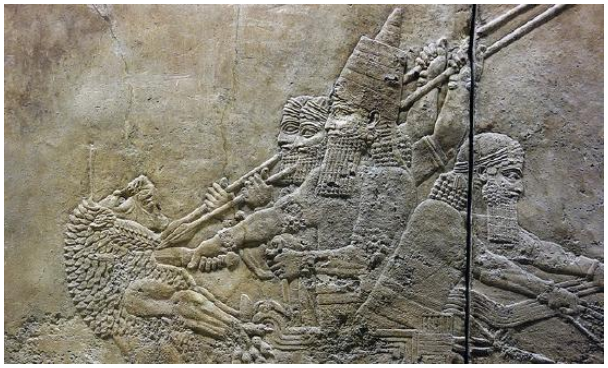


Figure **6.4.2**: Ashurbanipal slitting the throat of a lion from his chariot (detail), *Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions*, gypsum hall relief from the North Palace, Ninevah, c. 645-635 BCE, excavated by H. Rassam beginning in 1853. British Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Indeed, the culture of the Assyrians was brutal, the army seldom marching on the battlefield but rather terrorizing opponents into submission who, once conquered, were tortured, raped, beheaded, and flayed with their corpses publicly displayed. The Assyrians torched enemies' houses, salted their fields, and cut down their orchards.

Editors' Note: The Assyrian Lion Hunt

The Assyrians celebrated prowess in war, and they equated success in war with success in the hunt. In Nineveh, the palace of Ashurbanipal (whom the Greeks called Sardanapalus) is covered in images celebrating the lion hunt, and in turn the king's fearlessness and fierceness. In fact, these lion hunts were controlled ("staged," as the British Museum puts it) to make sure the king was safe and successful. Nonetheless, we see Ashurbanipal demonstrating extraordinary calm as he plunges his dagger into the throat of a lion, just inches from his own face (Figure **6.4.2**). The lion is a fearsome foe, rippling with muscle and baring his teeth in a terrifying snarl, but Ashurbanipal remains upright and unperturbed, his superior human intellect on display even as the sinews in his own arm echo the muscular power of the beast's leg.

> Today, our modern sympathies cause us to look at these scenes of carnage with sympathy for the lions, who are depicted with impressive naturalism (Figure **6.4.3**). However, it is important to remember that for the Assyrians, these scenes celebrate royal might and prowess. As the British Museum writes, "The king's power to defeat these enemies of civilization was part of his divine prerogative and the hunt had a deep religious significance. On behalf of the gods, the king was cleansing the land of dangerous and chaotic forces."

Luxurious palaces

As a result of these fierce and successful military campaigns, the Assyrians acquired massive resources from all over the Near East which made the Assyrian kings very rich. The palaces were on an entirely new scale of size and glamour; one contemporary text describes the inauguration of the palace of Kalhu, built by Assurnasirpal II (who reigned in the early 9th century), to which almost 70,000 people were invited to banquet.



Figure **6.4.3**: Lion pierced with arrows (detail), *Lion Hunts of Ashurbanipal*, c. 645 BCE, gypsum hall reliefs from Palace at Ninevah (across the Tigris from present day Mosul, Iraq). British Museum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Some of this wealth was spent on the construction of several gigantic and luxurious palaces spread throughout the region. The interior public reception rooms of Assyrian palaces were lined with large scale carved limestone reliefs which offer beautiful and terrifying images of the power and wealth of the Assyrian kings and some of the most beautiful and captivating images in all of ancient Near Eastern art.

Feats of bravery



Figure **6.4.4**: Ashurbanipal taking aim at a lion (detail), *Lion Hunts of Ashurbanipal*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Like all Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal decorated the public walls of his palace with images of himself performing great feats of bravery, strength and skill. Among these he included a lion hunt in which we see him coolly taking aim at a lion in front of his charging chariot, while his assistants fend off another lion attacking at the rear.

The destruction of Susa



Figure 6.4.5: Sacking of Susa by Ashurbanipal, North Palace, Nineveh, 647 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

One of the accomplishments Ashurbanipal was most proud of was the total destruction of the city of Susa. In the relief in Figure 6.4.5, we see Ashurbanipal's troops destroying the walls of Susa with picks and hammers while fire rages within the walls of the city.

Military victories & exploits

In the Central Palace at Nimrud, the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III illustrates his military victories and exploits, including the siege of a city in great detail.



Figure 6.4.6: Wall relief from Nimrud, the sieging of a city, likely in Mesopotamia, c. 728 BCE. British Museum. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In Figure 6.4.6 we see one soldier holding a large screen to protect two archers who are taking aim. The topography includes three different trees and a roaring river, most likely setting the scene in and around the Tigris or Euphrates rivers.

Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Musee du Louvre, Paris. Click here to watch the video.



Figure 6.4.7: Winged human-headed bull (lamassu or shedu), Neo-Assyrian Period, reign of Sargon II (721-705 BCE) Khorsabad, ancient Dur Sharrukin, Assyria, Iraq, excavated by P.-E. Boea 1843-44. Gypseous alabaster, 4.20 x 4.36 x 0.97 m. Musee du Louvre (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Ancient Mesopotamia is often credited as the cradle of civilization, that is, the place where farming and cities began. It makes it seem so peaceful, but this was anything but the case. In fact, it was really a series of civilizations that conquered each other.

Beth: We're in a room in the Louvre filled with sculpture from the Assyrians, who controlled the ancient Near East from about 1000 BCE to around 500 BCE.

Steven: And these sculptures, in particular, come from the palace of Sargon II, and were carved at the height of Assyrian civilization in the eighth century BCE.

Beth: So this is modern-day Khorsabad.

Steven: In Iraq.



Figure 6.4.8: Winged human-headed bull (detail of head and beard). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: And various Assyrian kings established palaces at different cities. So there were palaces at Nimrid and Assur before this, and after, there will be a palace at Nineveh, but these sculptures come from an excavation from modern-day Khorsabad.

Steven: The most impressive sculptures that survive are the guardian figures that protected the city's gates, and protected the gates of the citadel itself. That is the area within which were both the temple and the royal palace.

Beth: So at each of these various gates, there were guardian figures that were winged bulls with the heads of men.

Steven: We think they were called lamassu.

Beth: As figures that stood at gateways, they make sense. They're fearsome, they look powerful. They could also be an expression of the power of the Assyrian king.

Steven: They are enormous, but even they would have been dwarfed by the architecture. They would have stood between huge arches. In fact, they had some structural purpose. It's interesting to note that each of these lamassu is actually carved out of monolithic stone, that is, there are no cuts here. These are single pieces of stone, and in the ancient world, it was no small task to get these stones in place.



Figure **6.4.9**: Winged human-headed bull (detail of right profile). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Well, and apparently, there were relief carvings in the palace that depicted moving these massive lamassu into place. So it's important to remember that the lamassu were the gateway figures, but the walls of the palace were decorated with relief sculpture showing hunting scenes and other scenes indicating royal power.

Steven: This is a lamassu that was actually a guardian for the exterior gate of the city. It's in awfully good condition.

Beth: Well my favorite part is the crown. It's decorated with rosettes, and then double horns that come around toward the top center, and then on top of that, a ring of feathers.

Steven: It's really delicate for such a massive and powerful creature. The faces are extraordinary. First of all, just at the top of the forehead, you can see kind of incised wavy hair that comes just below the crown, and then you have a connected eyebrow.

Beth: And then the ears are the ears of a bull that wear earrings.

Steven: Actually quite elaborate earrings.

Beth: The whole form is so decorative.

Steven: And then there's that marvelous, complex representation of the beard. You see little ringlets on the cheeks of the face, but then as the beard comes down, you see these spirals that turn downward and then are interrupted by a series of horizontal bands.

Beth: Then the wings, too, form this lovely decorative pattern up the side of the animal, and then across its back.

Steven: In fact, across the body itself there are ringlets as well, so we get a sense of the fur of the beast. And then under the creature, and around the legs, you can see inscriptions in cuneiform.

Beth: Some of which declares the power of the king…

Steven: …and damnation for those that would threaten the king's work, that is, the citadel.

Beth: What's interesting too is that these were meant to be seen both from a frontal view and a profile view.

Steven: Well if you count up the number of legs, there's one too many. There are five.

Beth: Right, two from the front, and four from the side, but of course, one of the front legs overlaps, and so there are five legs.

Steven: What's interesting is that when you look at the creature from the side, you actually see that it's moving forward, but when you look at it from the front, those two legs are static so the beast is stationary. And think about what this means for a guardian figure at a gate. As we approach, we see it still, watching us as we move, but if we belong, if we're friendly, and were allowed to pass this gate, as we move through it, we see the animal itself move.

Beth: And then we have this combination of these decorative forms that we've been talking about with a sensitivity to the anatomy of this composite animal. His abdomen swells, and his hindquarters move back, and then we can see the veins, and muscles, and bones in his leg.

Steven: So there really is this funny relationship between the naturalistic and the imagination of this culture.

Beth: And the decorative, but all speaking to the power, the authority of the king and the fortifications of this palace, and this city.

Steven: They are incredibly impressive. It would be impossible to broach the citadel without being awestruck by the power of this civilization.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Senta German, "Assyria, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, May 14, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II," in *Smarthistory*, December 15, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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6.5: Persia

Ancient Persia, an introduction

by Senta German

The heart of ancient Persia is in what is now southwest Iran, in the region called the Fars. In the second half of the 6th century BCE, the Persians (also called the Achaemenids) created an enormous empire reaching from the Indus Valley to Northern Greece and from Central Asia to Egypt.

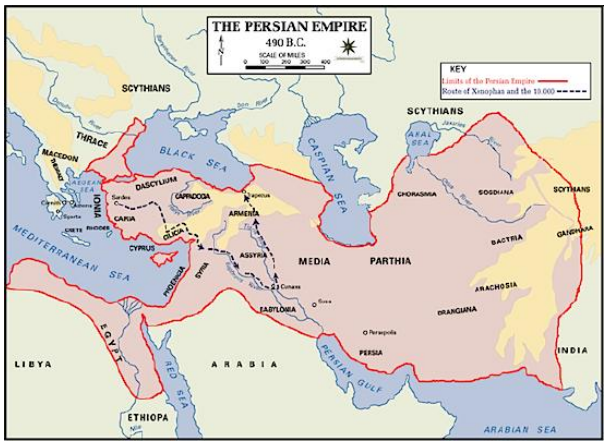


Figure **6.5.1**: The Persian Empire, 490 BCE. (Map via Smarthistory)

A tolerant empire

Although the surviving literary sources on the Persian empire were written by ancient Greeks who were the sworn enemies of the Persians and highly contemptuous of them, the Persians were in fact quite tolerant and ruled a multi-ethnic empire. Persia was the first empire known to have acknowledged the different faiths, languages and political organizations of its subjects.

This tolerance for the cultures under Persian control carried over into administration. In the lands which they conquered, the Persians continued to use indigenous languages and administrative structures. For example, the Persians accepted hieroglyphic script written on papyrus in Egypt and traditional Babylonian record keeping in cuneiform in Mesopotamia. The Persians must have been very proud of this new approach to empire as can be seen in the representation of the many different peoples in the reliefs from Persepolis, a city founded by Darius the Great in the 6th century BCE.



Figure **6.5.2**: Assyrians with Rams, Apadana, Persepolis. Assyria was one of many nations shown bringing tribute to the king. (Photo: CC BY-SA 3.0)

Conquered by Alexander the Great



Figure **6.5.3**: View of the eastern stairway and columns of the Apadana, Persepolis. (Photo: The Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, via Smarthistory)

The Persian Empire was, famously, conquered by Alexander the Great. Alexander no doubt was impressed by the Persian system of absorbing and retaining local language and traditions as he imitated this system himself in the vast lands he won in battle. Indeed, Alexander made a point of burying the last Persian emperor, Darius III, in a lavish and respectful way in the royal tombs near Persepolis. This enabled Alexander to claim title to the Persian throne and legitimize his control over the greatest empire of the Ancient Near East.

Persepolis: The Audience Hall of Darius and Xerxes

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

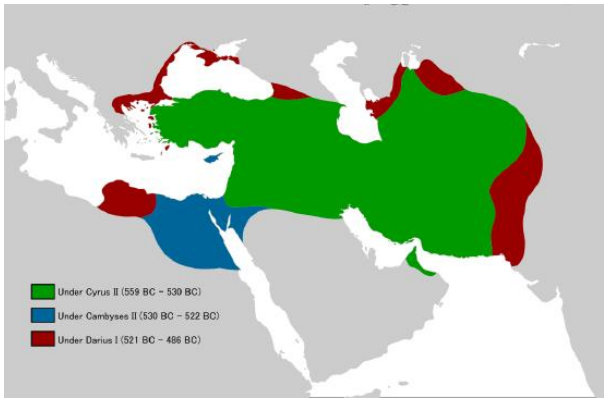


Figure **6.5.4**: Growth of the Achaemenid Empire under different kings. (Map: Ali Zifan, CC BY-SA 4.0)

By the early fifth century BCE, the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire ruled an estimated 44% of the human population of planet Earth. Through regional administrators the Persian kings controlled a vast territory which they constantly sought to expand. Famous for monumental architecture, Persian kings established numerous monumental centers, among those is Persepolis (today, in Iran). The great audience hall of the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes presents a visual microcosm of the Achaemenid empire—making clear, through sculptural decoration, that the Persian king ruled over all of the subjugated ambassadors and vassals (who are shown bringing tribute in an endless eternal procession).

Overview of the Achaemenid Empire



Figure **6.5.5**: Kylix depicting a Greek hoplite slaying a Persian inside, by the Triptolemos painter, 5th century BCE. National Museums of Scotland. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Achaemenid Empire (First Persian Empire) was an imperial state of Western Asia founded by Cyrus the Great and flourishing from c. 550-330 BCE. The empire's territory was vast, stretching from the Balkan peninsula in the west to the Indus River valley in the east. The Achaemenid Empire is notable for its strong, centralized bureaucracy that had, at its head, a king and relied upon regional satraps (regional governors).

A number of formerly independent states were made subject to the Persian Empire. These states covered a vast territory from central Asia and Afghanistan in the east to Asia Minor, Egypt, Libya, and Macedonia in the west. The Persians famously attempted to expand their empire further to include mainland Greece but they were ultimately defeated in this attempt (Figure **6.5.6**). The Persian kings are noted for their penchant for monumental art and architecture. In creating monumental centers, including Persepolis, the Persian kings employed art and architecture to craft messages that helped to reinforce their claims to power and depict, iconographically, Persian rule.

Overview of Persepolis

Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Persian empire (c. 550-330 BCE), lies some 60 km northeast of Shiraz, Iran. The earliest archaeological remains of the city date to c. 515 BCE. Persepolis, a Greek toponym meaning "city of the Persians," was known to the Persians as Pārsa and was an important city of the ancient world, renowned for its monumental art and architecture. The site was excavated by German archaeologists Ernst Herzfeld, Friedrich Krefter, and Erich Schmidt between 1931 and 1939. Its remains are striking even today, leading UNESCO to register the site as a World Heritage Site in 1979.

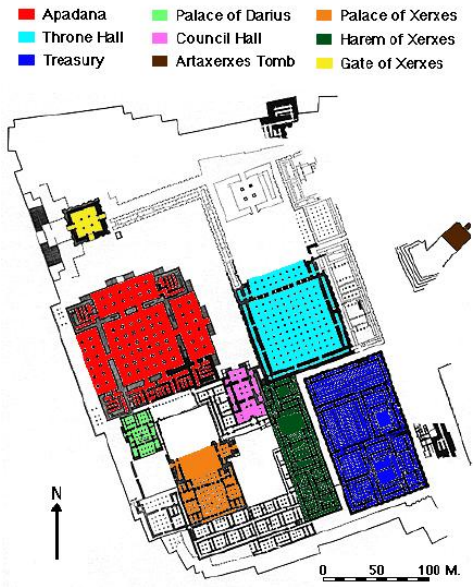


Figure **6.5.6**: Plan of Persepolis, showing the Apadana, Throne Hall, Treasury, Palace of Darius, Council Hall, Artaxerxes Tomb, Palace of Xerxes, Harem of Xerxes, and Gate of Xerxes. (Photo: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, via Smarthistory)

Persepolis was intentionally founded in the Marvdašt Plain during the later part of the sixth century BCE. It was marked as a special site by Darius the Great (reigned 522-486 BCE) in 518 BCE when he indicated the location of a "Royal Hill" that would serve as a ceremonial center and citadel for the city. This was an action on Darius' part that was similar to the earlier king Cyrus the Great who had founded the city of Pasargadae. Darius the Great directed a massive building program at Persepolis that would continue under his successors Xerxes (r. 486-466 BCE) and Artaxerxes I (r. 466-424 BCE). Persepolis would remain an important site until it was sacked, looted, and burned under Alexander the Great of Macedon in 330 BCE.



Figure **6.5.7**: View of the Persepolis site today, with the Treasury in the left foreground, Throne Hall in the right foreground, Apadana in the right background, and Palaces of Darius and Xerxes to the left of it. Marvdasht, Fars Province, Iran. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Darius' program at Persepolis including the building of a massive terraced platform covering 125,000 square meters of the promontory. This platform supported four groups of structures: residential quarters, a treasury, ceremonial palaces, and fortifications. Scholars continue to debate the purpose and nature of the site. Primary sources indicate that Darius saw himself building an important stronghold. Some scholars suggest that the site has a sacred connection to the god Mithra (Mehr), as well as links to the Nowruz, the Persian New Year's festival. More general readings see Persepolis as an important administrative and economic center of the Persian empire.



Figure 6.5.8: Bull Capital from Persepolis, Apādana, Persepolis (Fars, Iran), c. 520-465 BCE. National Museum of Iran. (Photo: s1ingshot, CC BY 2.0)

The Apādana palace is a large ceremonial building, likely an audience hall with an associated portico. The audience hall itself is hypostyle in its plan, meaning that the roof of the structure is supported by columns. Apādana is the Persian term equivalent to the Greek hypostyle (Ancient Greek: ὑπόστυλος hypóstȳlos). The footprint of the Apādana is c. 1,000 square meters; originally 72 columns, each standing to a height of 24 meters, supported the roof (only 14 columns remain standing today). The column capitals assumed the form of either twin-headed bulls (as seen in Figure 6.5.8), eagles or lions, all animals that represented royal authority and kingship.

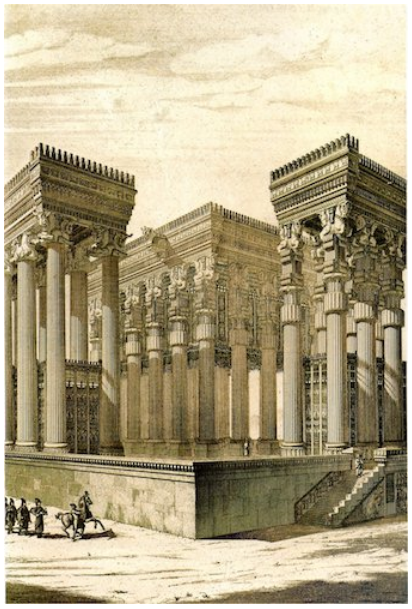


Figure 6.5.9: 19th century reconstruction of the Apādana, Persepolis (Fars, Iran) by Charles Chipiez. (Photo: Pentocelo~commonswiki, public domain).

The king of the Achaemenid Persian empire is presumed to have received guests and tribute in this soaring, imposing space. To that end a sculptural program decorates monumental stairways on the north and east. The theme of that program is one that pays tribute to the Persian king himself as it depicts representatives of 23 subject nations bearing gifts to the king.

The Apādana stairs and sculptural program

The monumental stairways that approach the Apādana from the north and the east (Figure 6.5.10) were adorned with registers of relief sculpture that depicted representatives of the twenty-three subject nations of the Persian empire bringing valuable gifts as tribute to the king. The sculptures form a processional scene, leading some scholars to conclude that the reliefs capture the scene of actual, annual tribute processions—perhaps on the occasion of the Persian New Year–that took place at Persepolis. The relief

program of the northern stairway was perhaps completed c. 500-490 BCE. The two sets of stairway reliefs mirror and complement each other. Each program has a central scene of the enthroned king flanked by his attendants and guards.



Figure **6.5.10**: East stairway, Apādana, Persepolis (Fars, Iran), c. 520-465 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Noblemen wearing elite outfits and military apparel are also present. The representatives of the twenty-three nations, each led by an attendant, bring tribute while dressed in costumes suggestive of their land of origin. Margaret Root interprets the central scenes of the enthroned king as the focal point of the overall composition, perhaps even reflecting events that took place within the Apādana itself.



Figure **6.5.11**: An Armenian tribute bearer carrying a metal vessel with Homa (griffin) handles, relief from the eastern stairs of the Apādana in Persepolis (Fars, Iran), c. 520-465 BCE. (Photo: Aryamahasattva, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The relief program of the Apādana serves to reinforce and underscore the power of the Persian king and the breadth of his dominion. The motif of subjugated peoples contributing their wealth to the empire's central authority serves to visually cement this political dominance. These processional scenes may have exerted influence beyond the Persian sphere, as some scholars have discussed the possibility that Persian relief sculpture from Persepolis may have influenced Athenian sculptors of the fifth century BCE who were tasked with creating the Ionic frieze of the Parthenon in Athens. In any case, the Apādana, both as a building and as an ideological tableau, make clear and strong statements about the authority of the Persian king and present a visually unified idea of the immense Achaemenid empire.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Senta German, "Ancient Persia, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, June 8, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Persepolis: The Audience Hall of Darius and Xerxes," in *Smarthistory*, January 24, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Ancient Egypt

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7.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: The Power of Imagery; Intimidation and Destruction

In ancient Egypt, art was not made for art's sake; it served a much higher purpose. Images depicted religious rituals and important beliefs, imbuing art with power beyond the imagery itself. Art carried consequences in both life and beyond, in the afterlife. Most well-known Egyptian art was made to aid in private ceremonies and rituals, and to accompany people to the afterlife through the architecture of rich burial complexes. Relief inscriptions in temples recorded important religious beliefs and statuary served as physical intermediaries between humans, kings, and gods.

But images could also carry power in different, more threatening ways in the world of the living. Twenty years after the 25-year reign of a female king named Hatshepsut (Figure **7.0.1**)—one of the most unprecedented and unpredictable in ancient Egypt—her male successors toppled or recarved the features of her statues, chipped away her relief portraits and hieroglyphics, and annihilated nearly all renderings of her in the historical record. Was the physical memory of this powerful female king so threatening to her successors that they had to remove her haunting menace by destroying all mentions of Hatshepsut—both verbally and visually? Was this an early example of misogyny in reaction to a woman's peaceful coronation and reign? Was Hatsheptsut later seen as a dangerous aberration to Egypt's consistent succession of male rulers? Or was something different at play?



Figure **7.0.1**: Hatshepsut, c. 1473-1458 BCE. Indurated limestone. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Postdlf, CC BY-SA 3.0) In this seated sculpture, Hatshepsut, depicted here with a feminine face and figure, wears the traditional *nemes* headdress of the ruler, but not the royal beard. Other images of her as pharaoh show her with more masculine characteristics, including the traditional beard.

The great Hatshepsut was an Egyptian king in the Eighteenth Dynasty, and through all of antiquity, she was the only woman to rise to power during a time of peace. Kara Cooney (author of a fascinating biography about Hatshepsut) explains that, grammatically, "[i]t is not precise to call Hatshepsut a queen, despite the English understanding of the word; once she took the throne, Hatshepsut could only be called a king." Cooney goes on to describe how in ancient Egyptian, the very word "queen" only existed in relation to a man (as the "woman of the king") and this was not accurate for Hatshepsut since she acted and ruled independently and without existing in relation to or service of a man.

Interestingly, the physical depictions of Hatshepsut, aesthetically and stylistically, seemed to follow or mimic these grammatical shifts in gender as well. Statuary depictions of Hatshepsut before her coronation showed her as an iconographically traditional Egyptian woman, in a dress with breasts visible. But after she became king, she was most often depicted with more of the traditional trappings of previous male kings, emphasizing masculine qualities including widening her shoulders, narrowing her hips, and erasing her breasts. However, there were also rare times when she presented herself as both male and female; sometimes statuary showed her bare breasts wearing what was considered to be masculine regalia. She also continued to go by her feminine

name (Hatshepsut means “the Foremost Noble Women”) and use “she” and “her” pronouns in contemporaneous writings, while quite purposely also using the title of king, traditionally reserved only for men.

Architecturally, her massive temple complexes in Karnak shaped and shifted royal architecture, both at the time and for decades to come. She transformed existing mud-brick structures, rebuilding them in sandstone, and adding luxurious architectural embellishments, rich materials, stunning red granite obelisks, towering statues, and massive, repetitive columns.

Nevertheless, despite her great accomplishments as king and the creative ways in which she depicted her masculine side to fit her kingly role—or perhaps because of all of this—her successors saw it as an imperative to destroy her monuments and imagery as if to obliterate her existence and history. Cooney argues,

> *Ancient civilization didn’t suffer a woman to rule, no matter how much she conformed to religious and political systems; no matter how much she ascribed her rule to the will of the gods themselves; no matter how much she changed her womanly form into masculine ideals. Her rule was perceived as a complication by later rulers—praiseworthy yet blameworthy, conservatively pious and yet audaciously innovative—nuances that the two kings who ruled after her reconciled only through the destruction of her public monuments.*

The Egyptians were detailed record keepers, and believed in the power of images. A sculpture could provide a secondary home after death, along with the mummified body, for the *ka*, or immortal spirit. Damage to a sculpture was seen as disrupting its functionality, which is why rulers’ *ka* statues were often sculpted from hard stone and with few projections, leading to both a literal and aesthetic sense of longevity and permanence. In fact, the remarkable consistency of Egyptian art itself highlights that sense of longevity and permanence, especially when it came to their god-like rulers. Sculptures of Hatshepsut as king, with the distinctive false beard, idealized features, and strong, youthful physique resemble both Narmer, Egypt’s first unifying king from about 1500 years earlier, and Tutankhamen, who reigned 200 years after Hatshepsut’s death. The aggressive purging from the record of Hatshepsut’s images as a female king may give a clue of just how important it was for Egyptian royalty to maintain that conservative tradition.

Thankfully, clues remained that are still helping scholars make sense of the remaining fragments—including a massive obelisk at the Temple of Amun-Re in Karnak that was too large to destroy, and was instead simply walled up. That the physical vestiges of Hatshepsut’s reign were seen as so threatening, infuriating, or deviant that they must be destroyed tells its own tale of Egyptian art, of royal imagery, and of the lasting power of an image.

This chapter explores the enduring importance of images and imagery in Egyptian art, particularly of styles and iconography that span thousands of years, all while retaining a fairly rigorous consistency. Part of the draw of Egyptian art now is that ancient Egyptian culture is ubiquitous—it is everywhere, whether in timeless aesthetic references, popular culture mentions, or the technology and inventions they pioneered for modern society, such as their mastery of metal and glass making or in moving water through irrigation channels and canals.

Historiography (Writing History)

Egyptology Before the Rosetta Stone

Many people have heard of the Rosetta Stone, or are at least familiar with the name, because of the present-day software company that aids in teaching foreign languages. However, the Rosetta Stone, for which the company is named, holds a very important place in history and in the discipline of Egyptology. This stone, found in 1799, helped Egyptologists and linguists to crack the code to understand hieroglyphic writing, which died out in Egypt during the fourth century CE.

The large black granodiorite rock measures about 44 inches tall and 30 inches wide and contains one royal decree inscribed onto its smoothed surface in three forms: hieroglyphic Egyptian, demotic Egyptian, and Greek. Because the rock contained three versions of the same decree, the Rosetta Stone led to the decipherment of hieroglyphics. (Read more about the dynamic languages of Ancient Egypt in “Multilingualism along the Nile.”)

The importance of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone to the field of Egyptology cannot be underestimated. Remember that before hieroglyphics were deciphered, Egyptologists were basically guessing what they meant. The deciphering of hieroglyphics changed the world's understanding of Egyptian society, as an ancient and unknown writing became suddenly understandable and translatable, contributing to a growing knowledge of ritual, history, political succession, and cultural changes recorded in temples and burial complexes throughout Egypt. Despite calls for its repatriation, the Rosetta Stone is housed in the British Museum and is one of the most prized possessions of its collection.

Egypt in the Context (and on the Continent) of Africa

Traditionally in the discipline of art history, Egypt is studied as a predecessor to Greek, Roman, and European art and culture. Indeed, Egypt played a major role in the ancient Mediterranean world, with particularly strong and influential ties to the Greeks, Romans and Assyrians. In considering it as part of a European tradition, art historians have isolated it from the study of the art of Africa, despite the fact that Egypt is located on the African continent and can be studied in relation to, in consideration of, and in context with its neighbors.

Part of this isolationist and Eurocentric approach to separating Egypt's history from that of the African continent stemmed from a racist belief that (sub-Saharan) Africans were inferior and uncivilized, and hence could not have produced such a sophisticated civilization. (Remember in Chapter 5 when European archaeologists could not believe that the cave paintings in Namibia were painted by Africans?) Separating ancient Egyptian culture from the study of African culture and civilizations therefore also helped to justify the violent and inhumane transatlantic slave trade.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars, activists, and political leaders from the African diaspora championed Pan-Africanism, a movement to politically and culturally unify people of African descent. Some of these scholars, such as Cheikh Anta Diop, also looked back to Egypt to draw connections between Egypt and the rest of the African continent, reclaiming Egyptian art as a key element and symbol of Pan-African and diasporic identity. In 2021, the Metropolitan Museum of Art curated a show entitled The African Origin of Civilization, acknowledging Diop's "visionary call to acknowledge Africa's foundational role in major cultural developments" by featuring art from both their Ancient Egyptian and Sub-Saharan African holdings together for the first time.



Figure **7.0.1**: Fred Wilson (American, born 1954). *Grey Area (Brown version)*, 1993. Pigment, plaster, and wood, Overall: 20 x 84 in. (50.8 x 213.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William K. Jacobs, Jr. and bequest of Richard J. Kempe, by exchange, 2008.6a-j. © Artist or artist's estate, courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Modernist artists, such as Sudanese painter Ibrahim El-Salahi and Ethiopian multimedia artist Skunder Boghossian, made art inspired by their heritage and national identity, drawing attention to Pan-Africanism and postcolonial movements through their visual arts. And the tradition continues. More recently, contemporary artists of the African diaspora, such as American musical artist Beyoncé, Ethiopian-American photographer Awol Erizku, Egyptian graffiti artist Zeft, and American visual artists Fred Wilson and Umar Rashid, have reclaimed and repopularized famous and iconic images of Nefertiti and other well-known Egyptian art, forcefully reclaiming and returning it back into the art historical canon of the African diaspora. (Read more about these artists in the suggested optional readings.)

Later in this chapter, an excerpt from the Brooklyn Museum's exhibit *Egypt Reborn: Art for Eternity* discusses these ideas and scholarship further. Additionally, this chapter includes the history of the ancient Nubian Kingdom of Kush in order to draw more parallels between Egypt and neighboring ancient civilizations in Africa, such as Nubia (in present-day northern Sudan and Egypt). Finally, this chapter also acknowledges the scholarship that ties important aspects of Egyptian culture, such as ancestral devotion, divine kingship, and the celebration of queen mothers, to a larger, traditional social system common among different African societies, kingdoms, and countries.

Chapter Overview

The history of ancient Egypt is marked by three major kingdoms, with bookends at either end, and a few so-called "Indeterminate periods" in between. This chapter starts with the Pre- and Early Dynastic period before diving into the Old Kingdom, which saw the creation of the Great Pyramids at Giza. Next, the chapter touches briefly on the Middle Kingdom before landing in the New Kingdom, a 500-year period known for such notable figures as Hatshepsut and Tutankhamen (or "King Tut"). During the New Kingdom, there was also a very brief, but artistically- and socially-daring blip, in religion and subsequent aesthetic style, called the Amarna period. In the first millennium BCE, Egypt's power faded. A series of foreign powers occupied Egypt, which fell under the control of Alexander the Great and eventually, following the death in 30 BCE of Egypt's last queen, Cleopatra, of Rome.

Below is a condensed timeline of the kingdoms and the final periods in ancient Egyptian history:

- Predynastic period: c. 3500 BCE
- Old Kingdom: c. 2649-2150 BCE
- Middle Kingdom: c. 2030-1640 BCE
- New Kingdom: c. 1550-1070 BCE
    - Amarna Period: c. 1350 BCE (the short 17-year period during which styles changed drastically)
- Late Period: c. 712-332 BCE (a series of foreign, including Nubian, Libyan, and Persian, rulers)
- Ptolemaic Period: c. 332-30 BCE (final rule by Greco-Romans)

This chapter begins with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt in the predynastic period, around 3500 BCE, and covers material through the end of the first century BCE. Observing the famous predynastic Palette of Narmer and the façade of the monumental Temple of Edfu, viewers see striking similarities, including the proportions and presentation of the figures and the "smiting" pose of the ruler in each. This is remarkable since the span between these objects is *3000 years*. More than a millennium separates the pyramids at Giza and the tomb of King Tut. However, one who did not know those dates might believe them to have been designed and built around the same time—because Egyptian culture, with a few exceptions, is remarkably consistent in its aesthetic style, pictorial representations, and statuary; extremely conservative in its politics; strict in its line of successors; coherent in religious beliefs and rituals; and remarkably stable over this long expanse of time. This can lead some viewers to mistakenly see the culture as static, when it is anything but. To an attentive viewer, subtle changes across the five major periods of ancient Egyptian history reveal flexibility in Egyptian culture and important differences in those periods.

This chapter also covers Ancient Nubia and the Kingdom of Kush, which spanned about 1,000 years, from 2500-1500 BCE (correlating with the Egyptian Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms). Note that by the Late and Ptolemaic Periods, there is a series of foreign leaders in Egypt, including Nubian and Greco-Romans, discussed at the end of this chapter.

Objects overview

This chapter covers some iconic works of art that you have likely seen referenced in popular media, books, movies, and television. This includes art as famous as the Great Sphinx as well as lesser-known objects such as the yet-undeciphered Meroitic stele, from the Kushite period in Nubia, c. 24 BCE. This chapter will include a wide range of burial complexes and architecture, sculpture, and vessels, including:

- the trilingual Rosetta Stone, the key to solving the puzzle of hieroglyphics
- the Narmer Palette, an intricately carved ritual object that communicates a narrative and is an early example of twisted perspective or composite view
- pyramids, from early precedents like the Stepped Pyramid of Djoser to the famed Great Pyramids of Giza and the attendant Great Sphinx
- the serene and timeless sculpture of King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen

- the Temple of Amun-Re and Hypostyle Hall at Karnak, an impressive and rich religious complex
- the great Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, including reconstructions of Hatshepsut as a sphinx and a large kneeling statue of Hatshepsut
- paintings from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, featuring colorful and engaging images of his elite lifestyle, in hopes of projecting such comforts in the afterlife
- works of art from the Amarna period, demonstrating a radical, stylistic shift, resulting from Akhenaten's changing the state religion in 1350 to a monotheistic society
- such iconic New Kingdom artifacts as the Bust of Nefertiti and Tutankhaman's tomb

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Ancient Egyptian art, you should be able to:

- Discuss the evolution of Egyptian culture and its relationship to the Nile
- Describe key characteristics of Old, Middle, and New Kingdom art, explaining how its form follows its function
- Recognize the importance of religion (polytheism or monotheism) on Egyptian art and its different kingdoms or periods
- Describe Egypt's relationship to its neighboring kingdoms and its place on the African continent
- Explore Egypt's relationship to the Mediterranean in the ancient world
- Discuss the role of consistency and stability in Egyptian political power and subsequently in its art
- Recognize and explain overriding themes and techniques in Egyptian art

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Crash Course, Ancient Egypt [video]
- The Griffith Institute, "Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation"
- Google Arts & Culture, "Preserving Egypt's Layered History" [Immersive articles and photographs]
- Google Arts & Culture, "Ancient Egypt: Mummies and Mysteries" [Immersive articles and photographs]
- Kara Cooney, "The Woman Who Would Be King" (If you like this article and now have a deeper interest in Hatshepsut, Cooney also wrote an entire book on this great pharaoh called *The Woman Who Would Be King: Hatshepsut's Rise to Power in Ancient Egypt*.)
- Dr. Allison Young, "Ibrahim El-Salahi, Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams," for Smarthistory
- Perrin Lathrop, "Pan-Africanism and Skunder Boghossian's Night Flight of Dread and Delight," for Smartistory
- Jordan McDonald, "How Nefertiti Became a Powerful Symbol in Contemporary Art" for Artnet
- Kamarla Roberts and Kenya Downs, "What Beyoncé teaches us about the African diaspora in 'Lemonade'" for PBS News Hour
- Christopher Knight, "Fred Wilson: Reading Between the Color Lines" for The Los Angeles Times
- Ellen C. Caldwell, "Histories Disembowled in Umar Rashid's *En Garde/On God*" for Riot Material
- Grégory Pierrot, "To Be the Other of the Other: An Encounter with Frohawk Two Feathers [Umar Rashid]" for ASAP Journal
- "Ancient Pyramids Around the World," for Smithsonian Magazine
- Bob Brier, "Erecting an Obelisk: A Monument of Egyptian Grandeur," for The Great Courses
- Public Art Fund, "*Awol Erizku: New Visions for Iris*"
- "Awol Erizku's New Visions for Iris," Public Art Fund's promotional video for Erizku's 2021 exhibition. [video]

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7.1: Ancient Egypt (Introduction)

Ancient Egypt, an introduction

by Dr. Amy Calvert

Egypt's impact on later cultures was immense. You could say that Egypt provided the building blocks for Greek and Roman culture, and, through them, influenced all of the Western tradition. Today, Egyptian imagery, concepts, and perspectives are found everywhere; you will find them in architectural forms, on money, and in our day to day lives. Many cosmetic surgeons, for example, use the silhouette of Queen Nefertiti (whose name means "the beautiful one has come") in their advertisements.



Figure 7.1.1: Imhotep, stepped Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, Old Kingdom, c. 2675-2625 BCE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) Imhotep's is the first name recorded for any artist in history, and his innovation here—stacking stone *mastabas* (rectangular tombs with sloped sides) into a towering structure with an underground complex—results in a royal tomb that clearly communicates the king's godlike power.

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3000 years and showed an incredible amount of continuity. That is more than 15 times the age of the United States, and consider how often our culture shifts; less than 10 years ago, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.

While today we consider the Greco-Roman period to be in the distant past, it should be noted that Cleopatra VII's reign (which ended in 30 BCE) is closer to our own time than it was to that of the construction of the pyramids of Giza. It took humans nearly 4000 years to build something—anything—taller than the Great Pyramids. Contrast that span to the modern era; we get excited when a record lasts longer than a decade.

Consistency and stability

Egypt's stability is in stark contrast to the Ancient Near East of the same period, which endured an overlapping series of cultures and upheavals with amazing regularity. The earliest royal monuments, such as the Narmer Palette carved around 3100 BCE, display identical royal costumes and poses as those seen on later rulers, even Ptolemaic kings on their temples 3000 years later.



Figure **7.1.2**: Palette of Narmer, c. 3000-2920 BCE (left) and Ramses III smiting at Medinet Habu (1160 BCE) (right). (Photo via Smarthistory) Although approximately two millennia separate these representations, both Narmer and Ramses wear the same distinctive crown and beard, and each is shown pulling back his right arm to smite the enemy clasped in his left hand.

A vast amount of Egyptian imagery, especially royal imagery that was governed by decorum (a sense of what was 'appropriate'), remained stupefyingly consistent throughout its history. This is why, especially to the untrained eye, their art appears extremely static—and in terms of symbols, gestures, and the way the body is rendered, it was. It was intentional. The Egyptians were aware of their consistency, which they viewed as stability, divine balance, and clear evidence of the correctness of their culture.

This consistency was closely related to a fundamental belief that depictions had an impact beyond the image itself—tomb scenes of the deceased receiving food, or temple scenes of the king performing perfect rituals for the gods—were functionally causing those things to occur in the divine realm. If the image of the bread loaf was omitted from the deceased's table, they had no bread in the Afterlife; if the king was depicted with the incorrect ritual implement, the ritual was incorrect and this could have dire consequences. This belief led to an active resistance to change in codified depictions.

The earliest recorded tourist graffiti on the planet came from a visitor from the time of Ramses II who left their appreciative mark at the already 1300-year-old site of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the earliest of the massive royal stone monuments. They were understandably impressed by the works of their ancestors and endeavored to continue that ancient legacy.

Geography

Egypt is a land of duality and cycles, both in topography and culture. The geography is almost entirely rugged, barren desert, except for an explosion of green that straddles either side of the Nile as it flows the length of the country (Figure **7.1.3**). The river emerges from far to the south, deep in Africa, and empties into the Mediterranean sea in the north after spreading from a single channel into a fan-shaped system, known as a delta, at its northernmost section.

The influence of this river on Egyptian culture and development cannot be overstated—without its presence, the civilization would have been entirely different. The Nile provided not only a constant source of life-giving water, but created the fertile lands that fed the growth of this unique (and uniquely resilient) culture.



Figure **7.1.3**: View from the high peak of the Theban hills showing the sharp delineation between the lush Valley and the barren desert. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Each year, fed by melting snows in the far-off headlands, the river overflowed its banks in an annual flood that covered the ground with a rich, black silt and produced incredibly fertile fields. The Egyptians referred to this as Kemet, the "black lands," and contrasted this dense, dark soil against the Deshret, the "red lands" of the sterile desert; the line between these zones was (and in most cases still is) a literal line. The visual effect is stark, appearing almost artificial in its precision.

Time–cyclical and linear

The annual inundation of the Nile was also a reliable, and measurable, cycle that helped form their concept of the passage of time. In fact, the calendar we use today is derived from one developed by the ancient Egyptians. They divided the year into 3 seasons: akhet "inundation," peret "growing/emergence." and shemw "harvest." Each season was, in turn, divided into four 30-day months. Although this annual cycle, paired with the daily solar cycle that is so evident in the desert, led to a powerful drive to see the universe in cyclical time, this idea existed simultaneously with the reality of linear time.

These two concepts—the cyclical and the linear—came to be associated with two of their primary deities: Osiris, the eternal lord of the dead, and Re, the sun god who was reborn with each dawn.

Early development: The Predynastic period

The civilization of Egypt obviously did not spring fully formed from the Nile mud; although the massive pyramids at Giza may appear to the uninitiated to have appeared out of nowhere, they were founded on thousands of years of cultural and technological development and experimentation. "Dynastic" Egypt—sometimes referred to as "Pharaonic" (after "pharaoh," the Greek title of the Egyptian kings derived from the Egyptian title *per aA*, "Great House") which was the time when the country was largely unified under a single ruler, begins around 3100 BCE.

The period before this, lasting from about 5000 BCE until unification, is referred to as Predynastic by modern scholars. Prior to this were thriving Paleolithic and Neolithic groups, stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, descended from northward migrating *homo erectus* who settled along the Nile Valley. During the Predynastic period, ceramics, figurines, mace heads, and other artifacts such as slate palettes used for grinding pigments, begin to appear, as does imagery that will become iconic during the Pharaonic era—we can see the first hints of what is to come.

Dynasties

It is important to recognize that the dynastic divisions modern scholars use were not used by the ancients themselves. These divisions were created in the first Western-style history of Egypt, written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho in the 3rd century BCE. Each of the 33 dynasties included a series of rulers usually related by kinship or the location of their seat of power. Egyptian history is also divided into larger chunks, known as "kingdoms" and "periods," to distinguish times of strength and unity from those of change, foreign rule, or disunity.

Period	Dates
Old Kingdom (the 'pyramid age')	c. 2649-2150 BCE
First Intermediate Period	c. 2150-2030 BCE
Middle Kingdom	c. 2030-1640 BCE
Second Intermediate Period (Northern Delta region ruled by Asiatics)	c. 1640-1540 BCE
New Kingdom	c. 1550-1070 BCE
Third Intermediate Period	c. 1070-713 BCE
Late Period (a series from foreign dynasties, including Nubian, Libyan and Persian rulers)	c. 712-332 BCE
Ptolemaic Period (ruled by Greco-Romans)	c. 332-30 BCE

Table showing periods and corresponding dates in ancient Egypt.

The Egyptians themselves referred to their history in relation to the ruler of the time. Years were generally recorded as the regnal dates (from the Latin *regnum*, meaning kingdom or rule) of the ruling king, so that with each new reign, the numbers began anew. Later kings recorded the names of their predecessors in vast “king-lists” on the walls of their temples and depicted themselves offering to the rulers who came before them—one of the best known examples is in the temple of Seti I at Abydos.

These lists were often condensed, with some rulers (such as the contentious and disruptive Akhenaten) and even entire dynasties omitted from the record; they are not truly history, rather they are a form of ancestor worship, a celebration of the consistency of kingship of which the current ruler was a part.

The pharaoh—not just a king



Figure **7.1.4**: Statue of Horus at the Temple of Horus, Edfu. Ptolemaic Dynasty, begun 237 BCE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Kings in Egypt were complex intermediaries that straddled the terrestrial and divine realms. They were, obviously, living humans, but upon accession to the throne, they also embodied the eternal office of kingship itself. The *ka*, or spirit, of kingship was often depicted as a separate entity standing behind the human ruler. This divine aspect of the office of kingship was what gave authority to the human ruler. The living king was associated with the god Horus, the powerful, virile falcon-headed god who was believed to bestow the throne to the first human king (Figure **7.1.4**).

Horus's immensely important father, Osiris, was the lord of the underworld. One of the original divine rulers of Egypt, this deity embodied the promise of regeneration. Cruelly murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the chaotic desert, Osiris was revived through the potent magic of his wife Isis. Through her knowledge and skill, Osiris was able to sire the miraculous Horus, who avenged his father and threw his criminal uncle off the throne to take his rightful place.

Osiris became ruler of the realm of the dead, the eternal source of regeneration in the Afterlife. Deceased kings were identified with this god, creating a cycle where the dead king fused with the divine king of the dead and his successor "defeated" death to take his place on the throne as Horus.

Egypt in Africa: What Was the Relationship between the Egyptians and Other Africans?

Many European and American universities and museums separate Egypt from the rest of Africa, presenting it either in relation to the European cultures of Greece and Rome or as an isolated phenomenon with no connections to the peoples of central and southern Africa. These "Eurocentric" or "isolationist" approaches are modern. The Greek historian Herodotus—the so-called father of history—fully acknowledged the African aspects of Egyptian civilization when he visited the Nile Valley in the fifth century BCE.



Figure **7.1.5**: Amunhotep III, c. 1390-1352 BCE. Wood, gold leaf, glass, pigment, total height: 10 3/8" (26.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 48.28. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY 2.0) This strikingly naturalistic sculpture is made of a dark wood or ebony that, given Egypt's lack of trees suitable for carving, indicates it is an imported precious material. At the same time that this material, along with the gold headdress and kilt, emphasize the pharaoh's royal status, the sculpture also portrays his aging facial features and darker brown skin tone.

It was not until the 1840s that a group of American authors, writing to justify the Atlantic slave trade, argued that the Egyptians were a separate population with no relation to other Africans. They did not believe that Africans could have produced one of the world's most sophisticated civilizations. Although prominent African-American intellectuals—including David Walker, Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. DuBois—challenged these notions, such ideas continued to dominate how Egypt was presented to the American public throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries.

Since the 1960s, western-trained Egyptologists have begun to rethink many of their assumptions about ancient Egypt. This trend is due partly to changes in American society and partly to the efforts of African and African-American scholars who continue to challenge outdated ideas. These modern scholars use the same name the ancient Egyptians used for their kingdom: "Kemet," or "Black Land." Linguists have identified similarities in grammar and vocabulary between the language of the ancient Egyptians and several contemporary African languages. Important aspects of Egyptian culture, including divine kingship and devotion to dead ancestors, are now seen as examples of traditional African approaches to social organization.

The debate over whether or when ancient Egyptian influence reached central and western Africa remains open. Some may question the very assumptions underlying a search for cultural traits specific to Africa. In any case, we continue to explore how much of

Egyptian thought and behavior survives among today's African populations.

Ancient Egyptian art

by Dr. Amy Calvert

Appreciating and understanding ancient Egyptian art

Ancient Egyptian art must be viewed from the standpoint of the ancient Egyptians to understand it. The somewhat static, usually formal, strangely abstract, and often blocky nature of much Egyptian imagery has, at times, led to unfavorable comparisons with later, and much more 'naturalistic,' Greek or Renaissance art. However, the art of the Egyptians served a vastly different purpose than that of these later cultures.

Art not meant to be seen



Figure **7.1.6**: Funerary statues of Rahotep and Nofret (detail showing both faces in profile), Old Kingdom, Fourth Dynasty, c. 2575-25551 BCE. Painted limestone with inlaid rock crystal eyes, 121 cm tall. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory) Sculptures like these, with their rigid sense of permanence, were intended to remain in the owners' tomb, not be on display.

While today we marvel at the glittering treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamun, the sublime reliefs in New Kingdom tombs, and the serene beauty of Old Kingdom statuary, it is imperative to remember that the majority of these works were never intended to be seen—that was simply not their purpose.

The function of Egyptian art

These images, whether statues or relief (Figure **7.1.7**), were designed to benefit a divine or deceased recipient. Statuary provided a place for the recipient to manifest and receive the benefit of ritual action. Most statues show a formal frontality, meaning they are arranged straight ahead, because they were designed to face the ritual being performed before them. Many statues were also originally placed in recessed niches or other architectural settings—contexts that would make frontality their expected and natural mode.



Figure **7.1.7**: Painted sunken relief of the king being embraced by a goddess, Tomb of Amenherkhepshef (QV 55) (New Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Statuary, whether divine, royal, or elite, provided a kind of conduit for the spirit (or *ka*) of that being to interact with the terrestrial realm. Divine cult statues (few of which survive) were the subject of daily rituals of clothing, anointing, and perfuming with incense and were carried in processions for special festivals so that the people could "see" them (they were almost all entirely shrouded from view, but their 'presence' was felt).

Royal and elite statuary served as intermediaries between the people and the gods. Family chapels with the statuary of a deceased forefather could serve as a sort of 'family temple.' There were festivals in honor of the dead, where the family would come and eat in the chapel, offering food for the Afterlife, flowers (symbols of rebirth), and incense (the scent of which was considered divine). Preserved letters let us know that the deceased was actively petitioned for their assistance, both in this world and the next.

What we see in museums

Generally, the works we see on display in museums were products of royal or elite workshops; these pieces fit best with our modern aesthetic and ideas of beauty. Most museum basements, however, are packed with hundreds (even thousands!) of other objects made for people of lower status—small statuary, amulets, coffins, and stelae (similar to modern tombstones) that are completely recognizable, but rarely displayed. These pieces generally show less quality in the workmanship; being oddly proportioned or poorly executed; they are less often considered 'art' in the modern sense. However, these objects served the exact same function of providing benefit to their owners (and to the same degree of effectiveness), as those made for the elite.Modes of representation for three-dimensional art



Figure **7.1.8**: Menkaure between Hathor and the personification of the nome of Thebes. Schist, 4th Dynasty. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Three-dimensional representations, while being quite formal, also aimed to reproduce the real-world—statuary of gods, royalty, and the elite was designed to convey an idealized version of that individual. Some aspects of 'naturalism' were dictated by the material. Stone statuary, for example, was quite closed—with arms held close to the sides, limited positions, a strong back pillar that provided support, and with the fill spaces left between limbs (Figure 7.1.8).

Wood and metal statuary, in contrast, was more expressive—arms could be extended and hold separate objects, spaces between the limbs were opened to create a more realistic appearance, and more positions were possible. Stone, wood, and metal statuary of elite figures, however, all served the same functions and retained the same type of formalization and frontality. Only statuettes of lower status people displayed a wide range of possible actions, and these pieces were focused on the actions, which benefited the elite owner, not the people involved.



Figure 7.1.9: Painted wooden model of the deceased overseeing the counting of cattle in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Middle Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Modes of representation for two-dimensional art

Two-dimensional art represented the world quite differently. Egyptian artists embraced the two-dimensional surface and attempted to provide the most representative aspects of each element in the scenes rather than attempting to create vistas that replicated the real world.Each object or element in a scene was rendered from its most recognizable angle and these were then grouped together to create the whole. This is why images of people show their face, waist, and limbs in profile, but eye and shoulders frontally. These scenes are complex composite images that provide complete information about the various elements, rather than ones designed from a single viewpoint, which would not be as comprehensive in the data they conveyed.

Registers



Figure 7.1.10: Chaotic fighting scene on a painted box from the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Scenes were ordered in parallel lines, known as registers. These registers separate the scene as well as provide ground lines for the figures. Scenes without registers are unusual and were generally only used to specifically evoke chaos; battle and hunting scenes will often show the prey or foreign armies without groundlines (Figure **7.1.10**). Registers were also used to convey information about the scenes—the higher up in the scene, the higher the status; overlapping figures imply that the ones underneath are further away, as are those elements that are higher within the register.

Hierarchy of scale

Difference in scale was the most commonly used method for conveying hierarchy—the larger the scale of the figures, the more important they were. Kings were often shown at the same scale as deities, but both are shown larger than the elite and far larger than the average Egyptian.

Text and image

Text accompanied almost all images. In statuary, identifying text will appear on the back pillar or base, and relief usually has captions or longer texts that complete and elaborate on the scenes. Hieroglyphs (as in Figure **7.1.12**) were often rendered as tiny works of art in themselves, even though these small pictures do not always stand for what they depict; many are instead phonetic sounds. Some, however, are logographic, meaning they stand for an object or concept.

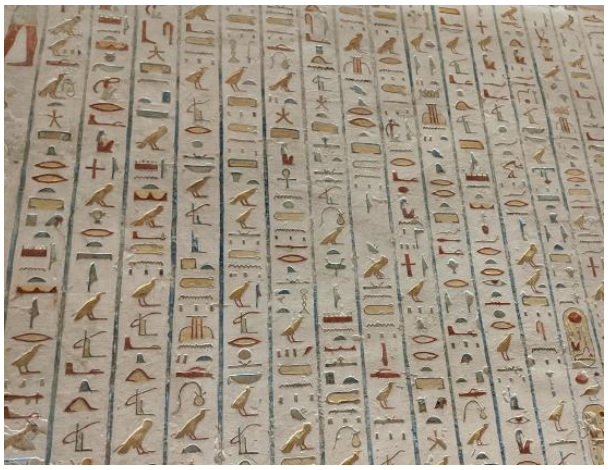


Figure **7.1.12**: Sunken relief hieroglyphs on the wall of the tomb of Ramses IV (KV 2) at the Valley of the Kings, 20th Dynasty (New Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The lines blur between text and image in many cases. For instance, the name of a figure in the text on a statue will regularly omit the determinative (an unspoken sign at the end of a word that aids identification—for example, verbs of motion are followed by a pair of walking legs, names of men end with the image of a man, names of gods with the image of a seated god, etc.) at the end of the name. In these instances, the representation itself serves this function.



Figure **7.1.11**: Highly detailed raised relief hieroglyphs on the White Chapel of Senusret I at Karnak (Middle Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

The Rosetta Stone

by The British Museum

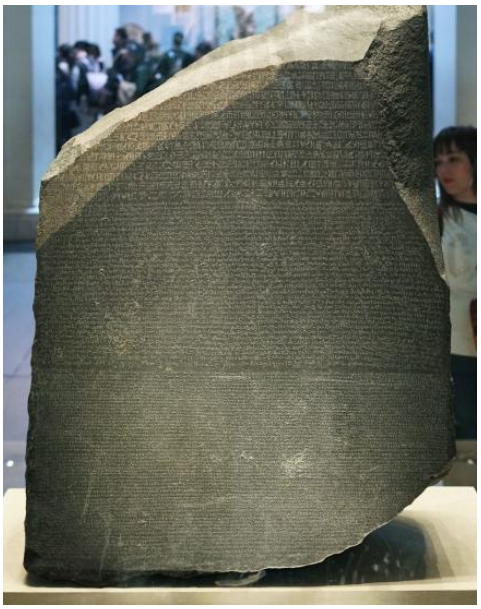


Figure **7.1.13**: The Rosetta Stone, 196 BCE, Ptolemaic Period, Egypt. Granodiorite, 112.3 x 75.7 x 28.4 cm. British Museum, London. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). The Rosetta Stone was discovered in Egypt, at Fort St Julien in el-Rashid, known as Rosetta.

The key to translating hieroglyphics

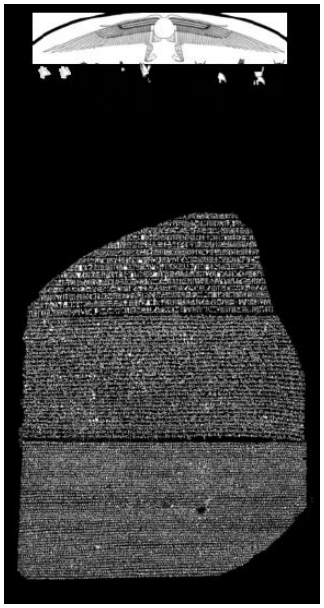


Figure **7.1.14**: A reconstruction of the stele of which the Rosetta Stone was originally a part. (A. Parrot, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Rosetta Stone is one of the most important objects in the British Museum as it holds the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs—a script made up of small pictures that was used originally in ancient Egypt for religious texts. Hieroglyphic writing died out in Egypt in the fourth century CE. Over time the knowledge of how to read hieroglyphs was lost, until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 and its subsequent decipherment.

The Stone is a tablet of black rock called granodiorite. It is part of a larger inscribed stone that would have stood some 2 meters high. The top part of the stone has broken off at an angle—in line with a band of pink granite whose crystalline structure glints a little in the light. The back of the Rosetta stone is rough, where it has been hewn into shape, but the front face is smooth and crammed with text, inscribed in three different scripts. These form three distinct bands of writing.

Three translations of the same decree



Figure **7.1.15**: The Rosetta Stone (detail). Part of grey and pink granodiorite stela bearing priestly decree concerning Ptolemy V in three blocks of text: Hieroglyphic (14 lines), Demotic (32 lines) and Greek (53 lines). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The inscriptions are three translations of the same decree, passed by a council of priests, that affirms the royal cult of the thirteen-year-old Ptolemy V on the first anniversary of his coronation. The decree is inscribed on the stone three times, in hieroglyphic (suitable for a priestly decree), demotic (the native script used for daily purposes), and Greek (the language of the administration).

The importance of this to Egyptology is immense. In the early years of the nineteenth century, scholars were able to use the Greek inscription on this stone as the key to deciphering the others.

Opposition to the Ptolemies

In previous years the family of the Ptolemies had lost control of certain parts of the country. It had taken their armies some time to put down opposition in the Delta, and parts of southern Upper Egypt, particularly Thebes, were not yet back under the government's control.

Before the Ptolemaic era (that is before about 332 BCE), decrees in hieroglyphs such as this were usually set up by the king. It shows how much things had changed from Pharaonic times that the priests, the only people who had kept the knowledge of writing hieroglyphs, were now issuing such decrees. The list of good deeds done by the king for the temples hints at the way in which the support of the priests was ensured.

The end of hieroglyphics

Soon after the end of the fourth century CE, when hieroglyphs had gone out of use, the knowledge of how to read and write them disappeared. In the early years of the nineteenth century, some 1400 years later, scholars were able to use the Greek inscription on this stone as the key to decipher them.

The discovery

Thomas Young, an English physicist, was the first to show that some of the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone wrote the sounds of a royal name, that of Ptolemy. The French scholar Jean-François Champollion then realized that hieroglyphs recorded the sound of the Egyptian language and laid the foundations of our knowledge of ancient Egyptian language and culture.

Soldiers in Napoleon's army discovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799 while digging the foundations of an addition to a fort near the town of el-Rashid (Rosetta). On Napoleon's defeat, the stone became the property of the British under the terms of the Treaty of Alexandria (1801) along with other antiquities that the French had found.

The Rosetta Stone has been exhibited in the British Museum since 1802, with only one break. Towards the end of the First World War, in 1917, when the Museum was concerned about heavy bombing in London, they moved it to safety along with other, portable, 'important' objects. The Rosetta Stone spent the next two years in a station on the Postal Tube Railway 50 feet below the ground at Holborn.



Figure **7.1.16**: The Rosetta Stone (detail with Greek). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Analyzing the Rosetta Stone

When the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799, the carved characters that covered its surface were quickly copied. Printer's ink was applied to the Stone and white paper was laid over it. When the paper was removed, it revealed an exact copy of the text—but in reverse. Since then, many copies or "facsimiles" have been made using a variety of materials. Inevitably, the surface of the Stone accumulated many layers of material left over from these activities, despite attempts to remove any residue. Once on display, the grease from many thousands of human hands eager to touch the Stone added to the problem.



Figure **7.1.17**: Left: Detail of the right side of the Rosetta Stone; Right: Detail of the Rosetta Stone with Demotic script. The Rosetta Stone. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

An opportunity for investigation and cleaning the Rosetta Stone arose when this famous object was made the centerpiece of the *Cracking Codes* exhibition at The British Museum in 1999. When work commenced to remove all but the original, ancient material, the stone was black with white lettering. As treatment progressed, the different substances uncovered were analyzed. Grease from human handling, a coating of carnauba wax from the early 1800s and printer's ink from 1799 were cleaned away using cotton wool swabs and liniment of soap, white spirit, acetone and purified water. Finally, white paint in the text, applied in 1981, which had been left in place until now as a protective coating, was removed with cotton swabs and purified water. A small square at the bottom left corner of the face of the Stone was left untouched to show the darkened wax and the white infill.

The Stone has a dark grey-pinkish tone with a pink streak running through it. Today you can see traces of a reddish brown in the text. This material was analyzed and found to be a clear mineral known as hydroxyapatite; the color may be due to iron traces. The mineral may have been applied deliberately, but there is no proof of this. This substance is not known by experts to have been used as a pigment, nor to have been used as a base for painting (a ground) in ancient Egypt.

Translation of the demotic text

[Year 9, Xandikos day 4], which is equivalent to the Egyptian month, second month of Peret, day 18, of the King "The Youth who has appeared as King in the place of his Father," the Lord of the Uraei "Whose might is great, who has established Egypt, causing it to prosper, whose heart is beneficial before the gods…" Read the rest of the Rosetta Stone translation here.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Ancient Egypt, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The Brooklyn Museum, "Egypt in Africa: What Was the Relationship between the Egyptians and Other Africans?" from *Egypt Reborn: Art for Eternity*, April 12, 2003 through October 26, 2015 (Reproduced by permission of the Brooklyn Museum)
- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Ancient Egyptian art," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "The Rosetta Stone," in *Smarthistory*, August 29, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.2: Pre-Dynastic and Early Dynastic Periods

Palette of King Narmer

by Dr. Amy Calvert



Figure **7.2.1**: Palette of King Narmer, from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, c. 3000-2920 BCE. Slate, 2′ 1″ high. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Vitally important, but difficult to interpret

Some artifacts are of such vital importance to our understanding of ancient cultures that they are truly unique and utterly irreplaceable. The gold mask of Tutankhamun was allowed to leave Egypt for display overseas; the Narmer Palette, on the other hand, is so valuable that it has never been permitted to leave the country.

Discovered among a group of sacred implements ritually buried in a deposit within an early temple of the falcon god Horus at the site of Hierakonpolis (the capital of Egypt during the pre-dynastic period), this large ceremonial object is one of the most important artifacts from the dawn of Egyptian civilization. The beautifully carved palette, 63.5 cm (more than 2 feet) in height and made of smooth grayish-green siltstone, is decorated on both faces with detailed low relief. These scenes show a king, identified by name as Narmer, and a series of ambiguous scenes that have been difficult to interpret and have resulted in a number of theories regarding their meaning.

The high quality of the workmanship, its original function as a ritual object dedicated to a god, and the complexity of the imagery clearly indicate that this was a significant object, but a satisfactory interpretation of the scenes has been elusive.

What was the palette used for?

The object itself is a monumental version of a type of daily use item commonly found in the Predynastic period—palettes were generally flat, minimally decorated stone objects used for grinding and mixing minerals for cosmetics. Dark eyeliner was an essential aspect of life in the sun-drenched region; like the dark streaks placed under the eyes of modern athletes, black cosmetic around the eyes served to reduce glare. Basic cosmetic palettes were among the typical grave goods found during this early era.

In addition to these simple, purely functional, palettes however, there were also a number of larger, far more elaborate palettes created in this period. These objects still served the function of being a ground for grinding and mixing cosmetics, but they were also carefully carved with relief sculpture. Many of the earlier palettes display animals —some real, some fantastic—while later examples, like the Narmer palette, focus on human actions. Research suggests that these decorated palettes were used in temple ceremonies, perhaps to grind or mix makeup to be ritually applied to the image of the god. Later temple ritual included elaborate daily ceremonies involving the anointing and dressing of divine images; these palettes likely indicate an early incarnation of this process.

A ceremonial object, ritually buried

The Palette of Narmer was discovered in 1898 by James Quibell and Frederick Green. It was found with a collection of other objects that had been used for ceremonial purposes and then ritually buried within the temple at Hierakonpolis.

Temple caches of this type are not uncommon. There was a great deal of focus on ritual and votive objects (offerings to the God) in temples. Every ruler, elite individual, and anyone else who could afford it, donated items to the temple to show their piety and increase their connection to the deity. After a period of time, the temple would be full of these objects and space would need to be cleared for new votive donations. However, since they had been dedicated to a temple and sanctified, the old items that needed to be cleared out could not simply be thrown away or sold. Instead, the general practice was to bury them in a pit under the temple floor. Often, these caches include objects from a range of dates and a mix of types, from royal statuary to furniture.



Figure **7.2.2**: Two Dogs Palette, Hierakonpolis, Egypt, c. 3100 BCE. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. (Photo via Smarthistory) Comparing this palette to the Palette of Narmer, the museum writes, " Both objects are decorated with felines with long snaking necks—'serpopards'–that encircle the central grinding area. Those on the Two Dog Palette lick the body of a gazelle.... On the reverse of the palette, a mixture of fabulous and real wild animals occupy the left-hand side of the scene from where they attack a range of herbivores native to North Africa. From the top, there are a pair of lions, a serpopard, a leopard, a hyena and a griffin with comb-like wings. At the bottom is a long-tailed dog-like creature wearing a belt and playing an end-blown flute. Presumably some of the imagery [which on the back of the Palette includes lions and a winged griffin] was carried to Egypt along trade routes, perhaps as seal impressions on containers, and the exotic creatures were adopted by Egypt's early kings to express their otherworldly status and power."

The "Main Deposit" at Hierakonpolis, where the Narmer Palette was discovered, contained many hundreds of objects, including a number of large relief-covered ceremonial mace-heads, ivory statuettes, carved knife handles, figurines of scorpions and other animals, stone vessels, and a second elaborately decorated palette (now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford) known as the Two Dogs Palette Figure **7.2.2**.

Editors' Note: Controlled Excavations and Grave Robbing

Archaeologists conduct controlled excavations in safe and secure ways in order to leave artifacts, sites, and unearthed items as safe as possible. Some safety measures include leaving artifacts *in situ*, or in their original place. Doing so helps scholars to gain insight and context in order to better interpret the artifact and record its findspot, or the location of where the object was first found/uncovered. Archaeologists then catalog, map, and record the item (by photograph or drawing) to document as much as possible before moving it from its findspot. New techniques and precision instruments allow today's controlled excavations to be less intrusive than digs often were in the past, when archaeologists "dug 'blind' (and dug and dug) to uncover artifacts and structures."

Today's intentional, deliberate approach, is in contrast not just to some historical excavations, but to the grave robbing that has plagued many of the cultures we have already studied. See, for example, Global Connections: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the folded-arm figurines (FAFs) of the Cyclades.

Conventions that remain the same for thousands of years

There are several reasons the Narmer Palette is considered to be of such importance. First, it is one of very few such palettes discovered in a controlled excavation. Second, there are a number of formal and iconographic characteristics appearing on the Narmer palette that remain conventional in Egyptian two-dimensional art for the following three millennia. These include the way the figures are represented, the scenes being organized in regular horizontal zones known as registers, and the use of hierarchical scale to indicate relative importance of the individuals. In addition, much of the regalia worn by the king, such as the crowns, kilts, royal beard, and bull tail, as well as other visual elements, such as the pose Narmer takes on one of the faces where he grasps an enemy by the hair and prepares to smash his skull with a mace, continue to be utilized from this time all the way through the Roman era.

What we see on the palette

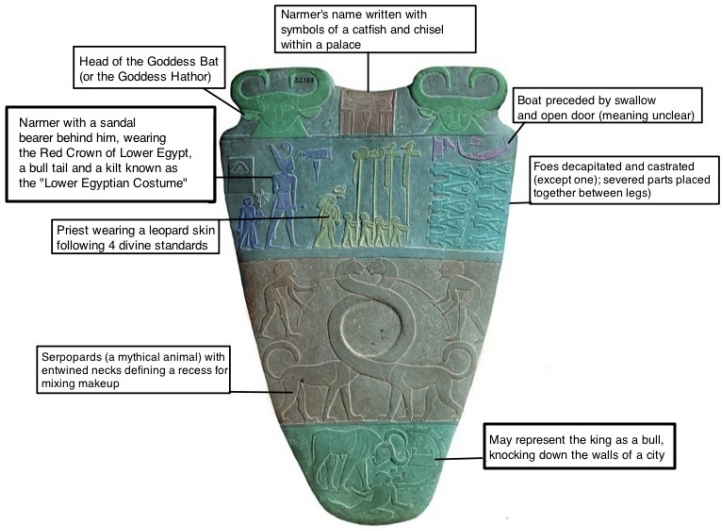


Figure **7.2.3**: Diagram of the Palette of Narmer. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The king is represented twice in human form, once on each face, followed by his sandal-bearer. He may also be represented as a powerful bull, destroying a walled city with his massive horns, in a mode that again becomes conventional—pharaoh is regularly referred to as “Strong Bull.”

In addition to the primary scenes, the palette includes a pair of fantastic creatures, known as serpopards—leopards with long, snaky necks—who are collared and controlled by a pair of attendants. Their necks entwine and define the recess where the makeup preparation took place. The lowest register on both sides include images of dead foes, while both uppermost registers display hybrid human-bull heads and the name of the king. The frontal bull heads are likely connected to a sky goddess known as Bat and are related to heaven and the horizon. The name of the king, written hieroglyphically as a catfish and a chisel, is contained within a squared element that represents a palace façade.

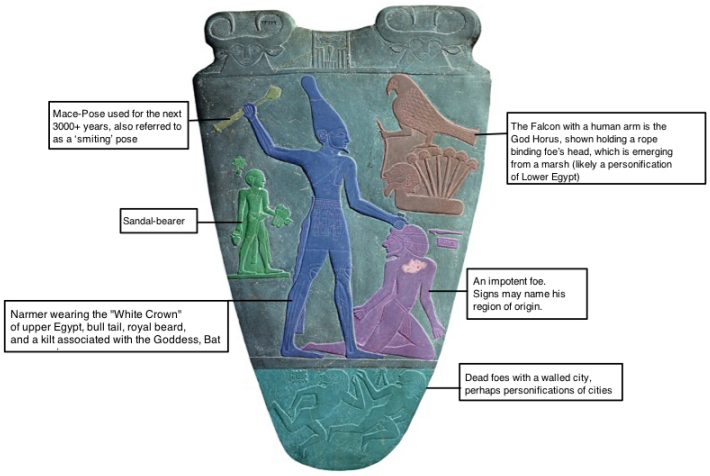


Figure **7.2.4**: Diagram of the Palette of Narmer. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Possible interpretation: unification of Upper and Lower Egypt



Figure **7.2.5**: Palette of King Narmer, (detail showing Narmer wearing the Lower Egypt crown). (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

As mentioned above, there have been a number of theories related to the scenes carved on this palette. Some have interpreted the battle scenes as a historical narrative record of the initial unification of Egypt under one ruler, supported by the general timing (as this is the period of the unification) and the fact that Narmer sports the crown connected to Upper Egypt on one face of the palette and the crown of Lower Egypt on the other—this is the first preserved example where both crowns are used by the same ruler. Other theories suggest that, rather than an actual historical representation, these scenes were purely ceremonial and related to the concept of unification in general.

Another interpretation: the sun and the king



Figure **7.2.6**: Palette of King Narmer, (detail). (Photo via Smarthistory)

More recent research on the decorative program has connected the imagery to the careful balance of order and chaos (known as *ma'at* and *isfet*) that was a fundamental element of the Egyptian idea of the cosmos. It may also be related to the daily journey of the sun god that becomes a central aspect in the Egyptian religion in the subsequent centuries.

The scene, showing Narmer wearing the Lower Egyptian Red Crown (with its distinctive curl) [see note on crowns], depicts him processing towards the decapitated bodies of his foes (Figure **7.2.5**). The two rows of prone bodies are placed below an image of a high-prowed boat preparing to pass through an open gate. This may be an early reference to the journey of the sun god in his boat. In later texts, the Red Crown is connected with bloody battles fought by the sun god just before the rosy-fingered dawn on his daily journey and this scene may well be related to this. It is interesting to note that the foes are shown as not only executed, but rendered completely impotent—their castrated penises have been placed atop their severed heads.

On the other face, Narmer wears the Upper Egyptian White Crown (which looks rather like a bowling pin) [see note on crowns] as he grasps an inert foe by the hair and prepares to crush his skull. The White Crown is related to the dazzling brilliance of the full midday sun at its zenith as well as the luminous nocturnal light of the stars and moon. By wearing both crowns, Narmer may not only be ceremonially expressing his dominance over the unified Egypt, but also the early importance of the solar cycle and the king's role in this daily process.

This fascinating object is an incredible example of early Egyptian art. The imagery preserved on this palette provides a peek ahead to the richness of both the visual aspects and religious concepts that develop in the ensuing periods. It is a vitally important artifact of extreme significance for our understanding of the development of Egyptian culture on multiple levels.

Note: the crowns of ancient Egypt

The Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the White Crown of Upper Egypt were the earliest crowns worn by the king and are closely connected with the unification of the country that sparks full-blown Egyptian civilization. The earliest representation of them being worn by the same ruler is on the Narmer Palette, signifying that the king was ruling over both areas of the country. Soon after the unification, the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty is shown wearing the two crowns simultaneously, combined into one. This crown, often referred to as the Double Crown, remains a primary crown worn by pharaoh throughout Egyptian history. The separate Red and White crowns, however, continue to be worn as well and retain their geographic connections. There are a number of Egyptian words used for these crowns (nine for the White and 11 for the Red), but the most common—*deshret* and *hedjet*—refer to the colors red and white, respectively. It is from these identifying terms that we take their modern name. Early texts make it clear that these crowns were believed to be imbued with divine power and were personified as goddesses.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Palette of King Narmer," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.3: Old Kingdom

Old Kingdom: The Great Pyramids of Giza

by Dr. Amy Calvert



Figure **7.3.1**: The Fourth Dynasty pyramids at Giza, Egypt. From left to right: Great Pyramid of Khufu, c. 2551-1528 BCE; pyramid of Khafre, c. 2520-2494 BCE; pyramid of Menkaure, c. 2490-2472 BCE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

One of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world

The last remaining of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, the great pyramids of Giza are perhaps the most famous and discussed structures in history. These massive monuments were unsurpassed in height for thousands of years after their construction and continue to amaze and enthrall us with their overwhelming mass and seemingly impossible perfection. Their exacting orientation and mind-boggling construction has elicited many theories about their origins, including unsupported suggestions that they had extra-terrestrial impetus. However, by examining the several hundred years prior to their emergence on the Giza plateau, it becomes clear that these incredible structures were the result of many experiments, some more successful than others, and represent an apogee in the development of the royal mortuary complex.



Figure **7.3.2**: Great Pyramid of Khafre. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

Three pyramids, three rulers

The three primary pyramids on the Giza plateau were built over the span of three generations by the rulers Khufu, Khafre (Figure **7.3.2**), and Menkaure. Each pyramid was part of a royal mortuary complex that also included a temple at its base and a long stone

causeway (some nearly 1 kilometer in length) leading east from the plateau to a valley temple on the edge of the floodplain (Figure **7.3.3**).

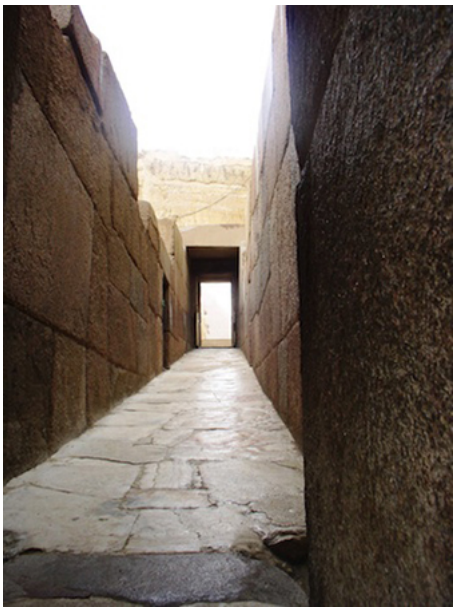


Figure **7.3.3**: View up the causeway from Khafre's valley temple towards his pyramid. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Other (smaller) pyramids, and small tombs

In addition to these major structures, several smaller pyramids belonging to queens are arranged as satellites. A major cemetery of smaller tombs, known as *mastabas* (Arabic for 'bench' in reference to their shape—flat-roofed, rectangular, with sloping sides), fills the area to the east and west of the pyramid of Khufu and were constructed in a grid-like pattern for prominent members of the court. Being buried near the pharaoh was a great honor and helped ensure a prized place in the afterlife.

A reference to the sun

The shape of the pyramid was a solar reference, perhaps intended as a solidified version of the rays of the sun. Texts talk about the sun's rays as a ramp the pharaoh mounts to climb to the sky—the earliest pyramids, such as the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara—were actually designed as a staircase. The pyramid was also clearly connected to the sacred ben-ben stone, an icon of the primeval mound that was considered the place of initial creation. The pyramid was considered a place of regeneration for the deceased ruler.

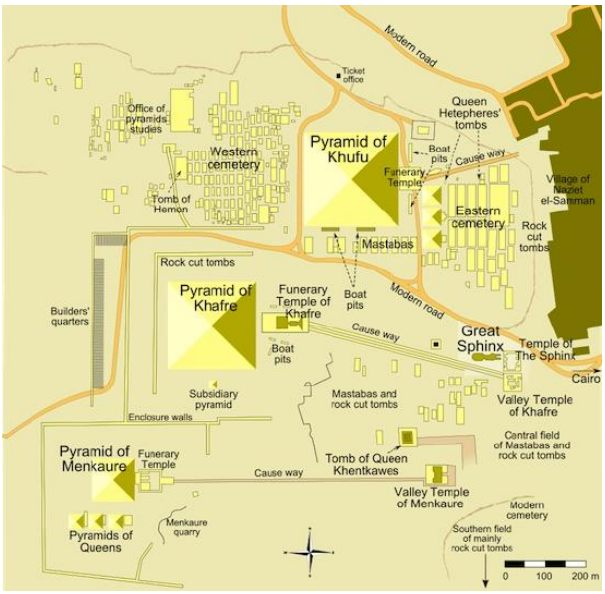


Figure **7.3.4**: Giza Pyramid Complex. (Map: MesserWoland, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Many questions remain about the construction of these massive monuments, and theories abound as to the actual methods used. The workforce needed to build these structures is also still much discussed. Discovery of a town for workers to the south of the plateau has offered some answers. It is likely that there was a permanent group of skilled craftsmen and builders who were supplemented by seasonal crews of approximately 2,000 conscripted peasants. These crews were divided into gangs of 200 men, with each group further divided into teams of 20. Experiments indicate that these groups of 20 men could haul the 2.5 ton blocks from quarry to pyramid in about 20 minutes, their path eased by a lubricated surface of wet silt. An estimated 340 stones could be moved daily from quarry to construction site, particularly when one considers that many of the blocks (such as those in the upper courses) were considerably smaller.



Figure **7.3.5**: View of Khufu's pyramid, showing the scale of the blocks. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

c. Backstory (Dr. Naraelle Hohensee)

We are used to seeing the pyramids at Giza in alluring photographs, where they appear as massive and remote monuments rising up from an open, barren desert. Visitors might be surprised to find, then, that there is a golf course and resort only a few hundred feet from the Great Pyramid, and that the burgeoning suburbs of Giza (part of the greater metropolitan area of Cairo) have expanded right up to the foot of the Sphinx. This urban encroachment and the problems that come with it—such as pollution, waste, illegal activities, and auto traffic—are now the biggest threats to these invaluable examples of global cultural heritage.



Figure 7.3.6: The Great Pyramids of Giza as seen on May 18, 2016 from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's plane as he travels from Vienna, Austria to Cairo. (Photo: U.S. Department of State, public domain) The pyramids themselves are on sandy desert that stretches out behind them, but in the foreground, urban construction crowds toward them.

The pyramids were inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, and since 1990, the organization has sponsored over a dozen missions to evaluate their status. It has supported the restoration of the Sphinx, as well as measures to curb the impact of tourism and manage the growth of the neighboring village. Still, threats to the site continue: air pollution (see Figure 7.3.7) from waste incineration contributes to the degradation of the stones, and the massive illegal quarrying of sand on the neighboring plateau has created holes large enough to be seen on Google Earth. Egypt's 2011 uprisings and their chaotic political and economic aftermath also negatively impacted tourism, one of the country's most important industries, and the number of visitors is only now beginning to rise once more.



Figure 7.3.7: Smoggy Cairo skyline from the Saladin Citadel, 2020. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

UNESCO has continually monitored these issues, but its biggest task with regard to Giza has been to advocate for the rerouting of a highway that was originally slated to cut through the desert between the pyramids and the necropolis of Saqqara to the south. The government eventually agreed to build the highway north of the pyramids. However, as the Cairo metropolitan area (the largest in Africa, with a population of over 20 million) continues to expand, planners are now proposing a multilane tunnel to be constructed underneath the Giza Plateau. UNESCO and ICOMOS are calling for in-depth studies of the project's potential impact, as well as an overall site management plan for the Giza pyramids that would include ways to halt the continued impact of illegal dumping and quarrying.

As massive as they are, the pyramids at Giza are not immutable. With the rapid growth of Cairo, they will need sufficient attention and protection if they are to remain intact as key touchstones of ancient history.

Global Connections: Moving Megaliths

Egypt's great pyramids are not the only historical sites that have caused archaeologists to wonder about how massive, multi-ton materials were moved from quarries to construction sites. The Neolithic stone circle of Stonehenge, the columns of the Greek Parthenon, the dome of the Tomb of Theodoric, the Toltec-style pyramid of Chichén Itzá's El Castillo, the colossal basalt Olmec heads from Veracruz, and the great moai of Rapa Nui were all made by societies who carved and moved massive stones.



Figure **7.3.8**: Moai at Ahu Tongariki, volcanic tuff and scoria, c. 1400 CE, Rapa Nui (Easter Island). (Photo: Ellen C. Caldwell, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Rap Nui's moai (monolithic carved human figures) were carved c. 1400 CE and each one weighed an average of 14 tons. They have long compelled archaeologists and anthropologists to study how humans transported them across the island, and recently, Rapanui oral tradition has helped to inform archaeologists to theorize and test how the moai "walked" into place. Similar environmental concerns to those in Egypt have arisen in Rapa Nui as well, though instead of the fear of urban encroachment as in Cairo, the major threats in Rapa Nui are a result of climate change and rising sea levels.

Pyramid of Khafre and the Great Sphinx

by Dr. Amy Calvert



Figure **7.3.9**: Pyramids of Khufu (left), c. 2551-2528 BCE and Khafre, c. 2520-2494 BCE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Size and appearance

The second great pyramid of Giza, that was built by Khufu's second son Khafre, has a section of outer casing that still survives at the very top (and which would have entirely covered all three of the great pyramids at Giza). Although this monument appears larger than that of his father, it is actually slightly smaller but was constructed 10 m (33 feet) higher on the plateau.

Interior

The interior is much simpler than that of Khufu's pyramid, with a single burial chamber, one small subsidiary chamber, and two passageways. The mortuary temple at the pyramid base was more complex than that of Khufu and was filled with statuary of the king–over 52 life-size or larger images originally filled the structure.

Valley temple



Figure **7.3.10**: Pillars in Valley Temple of Khafre. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Khafre's valley temple, located at the east end of the causeway leading from the pyramid base, is beautifully preserved. It was constructed of megalithic blocks sheathed with granite and floors of polished white calcite. Statue bases indicate that an additional 24 images of the pharaoh were originally located in this temple.

The Great Sphinx



Figure **7.3.11**: The Great Sphinx. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert, via Smarthistory)

Right next to the causeway leading from Khafre's valley temple to the mortuary temple sits the first truly colossal sculpture in Egyptian history: the Great Sphinx. This close association indicates that this massive depiction of a recumbent lion with the head of a king was carved for Khafre.



Figure **7.3.12**: The Great Sphinx with pyramids of Khafre (left) and Khufu (right). (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The Sphinx is carved from the bedrock of the Giza plateau, and it appears that the core blocks used to construct the king's valley temple were quarried from the layers of stone that run along the upper sides of this massive image.



Figure **7.3.13**: Khafre enthroned, from Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty, c. 2520–2494 BCE. Diorite, 5’ 6” high. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The lion was a royal symbol as well as being connected with the sun as a symbol of the horizon; the fusion of this powerful animal with the head of the pharaoh was an icon that survived and was often used throughout Egyptian history. The king’s head is on a smaller scale than the body. This appears to have been due to a defect in the stone; a weakness recognized by the sculptors who compensated by elongating the body.



Figure **7.3.14**: Khafre enthroned, from Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty, c. 2520–2494 BCE. Diorite, 5’ 6” high. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Directly in front of the Sphinx is a separate temple dedicated to the worship of its cult, but very little is known about it since there are no Old Kingdom texts that refer to the Sphinx or its temple. The temple is similar to Khafre’s mortuary temple and has granite pillars forming a colonnade around a central courtyard. However, it is unique in that it has two sanctuaries—one on the east and one on the west—likely connected to the rising and setting sun.



Figure **7.3.15**: Khafre enthroned (detail showing profile view of Khafre and Horus), from Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty, c. 2520–2494 BCE. Diorite, 5’ 6” high. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Editors' Note

Like the statue of Gudea of Lagash, *Khafre Enthroned* is made of diorite, an extremely hard stone. In fact, it’s so hard, Egyptian sculptors made their tools for carving other, softer stones, from diorite! From the material to his rigid position, everything about this sculpture suggests a calm, god-like permanence. There are few projecting pieces to break off, and you’ll notice that the king’s body doesn’t detach from his throne. Both arms are held close to his body, with the hands—one in a closed first, the other with fingers straight—sealed to his thighs. This sculpture was found in Khafre’s pyramid, and sculptures like this served not only “as a focus for worship” (see King Menkaure [Mycerinus] and queen), but as a potential resting place for the *ka*. Further emphasizing the ruler’s divine status, although invisible from the front view, is the god Horus in falcon form, his wings—when seen from the side—seeming to cradle Khafre’s head and blend into his nemes headdress.

King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen

by Dr. Amy Calvert

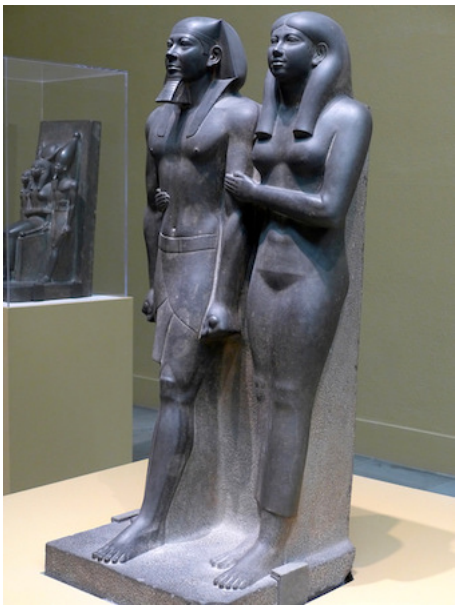


Figure **7.3.16**: King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 BCE. Greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Photo: tutincommon, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Serene ethereal beauty, raw royal power, and evidence of artistic virtuosity have rarely been simultaneously captured as well as in this breathtaking, nearly life-size statue of the pharaoh Menkaure and a queen. Smooth as silk, the meticulously finished surface of the dark stone captures the physical ideals of the time and creates a sense of eternity and immortality even today.

Undoubtedly, the most iconic structures from Ancient Egypt are the massive and enigmatic Great Pyramids that stand on a natural stone shelf, now known as the Giza plateau, on the south-western edge of modern Cairo. The three primary pyramids at Giza were constructed during the height of a period known as the Old Kingdom and served as burial places, memorials, and places of worship for a series of deceased rulers–the largest belonging to King Khufu, the middle to his son Khafre, and the smallest of the three to his son Menkaure.



Figure **7.3.17**: View of the Giza plateau, facing southwest, showing the pyramid of Khufu and behind it the pyramids of Khafre and Menkaure. The Mortuary Temple of Khufu and Funerary Temple of Khafre are visible at left, and the mastabas of the West Field at Giza to the right. (Photo: kairoinfo4u, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Pyramids are not stand-alone structures. Those at Giza formed only a part of a much larger complex that included a temple at the base of the pyramid itself, long causeways and corridors, small subsidiary pyramids, and a second temple (known as a valley temple) some distance from the pyramid. These Valley Temples were used to perpetuate the cult of the deceased king and were active places of worship for hundreds of years (sometimes much longer) after the king's death. Images of the king were placed in these temples to serve as a focus for worship—several such images have been found in these contexts, including the magnificent seated statue of Khafre, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.



Figure **7.3.18**: George Reisner and Georg Steindorff at Harvard Camp, looking east toward Khufu and Khafre pyramids, 1935. (Photo: Albert Morton Lythgoe, Giza archives, via Smarthistory)

On January 10, 1910, excavators under the direction of George Reisner, head of the joint Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Expedition to Egypt, uncovered an astonishing collection of statuary in the Valley Temple connected to the Pyramid of Menkaure. Menkaure's pyramid had been explored in the 1830s (using dynamite, no less). His carved granite sarcophagus was removed (and subsequently lost at sea), and while the Pyramid Temple at the base was in only mediocre condition; the Valley Temple, was—happily—basically ignored.Reisner had been excavating on the Giza plateau for several years at this point; his team had already explored the elite cemetery to the west of the Great Pyramid of Khufu before turning their attention to the Menkaure complex, most particularly the barely-touched Valley Temple.



Figure **7.3.19**: Four greywacke triads, Menkaure's Valley Temple, S magazines, corridor III 4, 1908. (Photo: Giza archives, via Smarthistory)

In the southwest corner of the structure, the team discovered a magnificent cache of statuary carved in a smooth-grained dark stone called greywacke or schist. There were a number of triad statues—each showing 3 figures—the king, the fundamentally important goddess Hathor, and the personification of a nome (a geographic designation, similar to the modern idea of a region, district, or county) (compare to *Menkaure between Hathor and the personification of the nome of Thebes*).



Figure 7.3.20: Menkaure flanked by Hathor (left) and nome goddess. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Hathor was worshiped in the pyramid temple complexes along with the supreme sun god Re and the god Horus, who was represented by the living king. The goddess's name is actually 'Hwt-hor', which means "The House of Horus," and she was connected to the wife of the living king and the mother of the future king. Hathor was also a fierce protector who guarded her father Re; as an "Eye of Re" (the title assigned to a group of dangerous goddesses), she could embody the intense heat of the sun and use that blazing fire to destroy his enemies

There were four complete triads, one incomplete, and at least one other in a fragmentary condition. The precise meaning of these triads is uncertain. Reisner believed that there was one for each ancient Egyptian nome, meaning there would have originally been more than thirty of them. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that there were originally 8 triads, each connected with a major site associated with the cult of Hathor. Hathor's prominence in the triads (she actually takes the central position in one of the sculptures) and her singular importance to kingship lends weight to this theory.



Figure 7.3.21: King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen. (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

In addition to the triads, Reisner's team also revealed the extraordinary dyad statue of Menkaure and a queen (Figure 7.3.21) that is breathtakingly singular.

The two figures stand side-by-side on a simple, squared base and are supported by a shared back pillar. They both face to the front, although Menkaure's head is noticeably turned to his right—this image was likely originally positioned within an architectural niche, making it appear as though they were emerging from the structure. The broad-shouldered, youthful body of the king is covered only with a traditional short pleated kilt, known as a shendjet, and his head sports the primary pharaonic insignia of the iconic striped nemes headdress (so well known from the mask of Tutankhamun) and an artificial royal beard. In his clenched fists, held straight down at his sides, Menkaure grasps ritual cloth rolls. His body is straight, strong, and eternally youthful with no signs of age. His facial features are remarkably individualized with prominent eyes, a fleshy nose, rounded cheeks, and full mouth with protruding lower lip.

Menkaure's queen provides the perfect female counterpart to his youthful masculine virility. Sensuously modeled with a beautifully proportioned body emphasized by a clinging garment, she articulates ideal mature feminine beauty. There is a sense of the individual in both faces. Neither Menkaure nor his queen are depicted in the purely idealized manner that was the norm for royal images. Instead, through the overlay of royal formality we see the depiction of a living person filling the role of pharaoh and the personal features of a particular individual in the representation of his queen.



Figure **7.3.22**: King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, (detail showing the figures' left profiles). (Photo: 1910, Giza archives, via Smarthistory)

Menkaure and his queen stride forward with their left feet—this is entirely expected for the king, as males in Egyptian sculpture almost always do so, but it is unusual for the female since they are generally depicted with feet together. They both look beyond the present and into timeless eternity, their otherworldly visage displaying no human emotion whatsoever.

The dyad was never finished—the area around the lower legs has not received a final polish, and there is no inscription. However, despite this incomplete state, the image was erected in the temple and was brightly painted—there are traces of red around the king's ears and mouth and yellow on the queen's face. The presence of paint atop the smooth, dark greywacke on a statue of the deceased king that was originally erected in his memorial temple courtyard brings an interesting suggestion—that the paint may have been intended to wear away through exposure and, over time, reveal the immortal, black-fleshed "Osiris" Menkaure.

Unusual for a pharaoh's image, the king has no protective cobra (known as a *uraeus*) perched on his brow. This notable absence has led to the suggestion that both the king's nemes and the queen's wig were originally covered in precious metal and that the cobra would have been part of that addition.

Based on comparison with other images, there is no doubt that this sculpture shows Menkaure, but the identity of the queen is a different matter. She is clearly a royal female. She stands at nearly equal height with the king and, of the two of them, she is the one who is entirely frontal. In fact, it may be that this dyad is focused on the queen as its central figure rather than Menkaure. The prominence of the royal female—at equal height and frontal—in addition to the protective gesture she extends has suggested that, rather than one of Mekaure's wives, this is actually his queen-mother. The function of the sculpture in any case was to ensure rebirth for the king in the Afterlife.

Editors' Note: Queen Mothers in Africa

The Old Kingdom statue of *King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen* depicts Menkaure with a regal woman who may be his queen-mother, emphasizing her importance as a central figure in his life, and ensuring his rebirth in the afterlife as well. Later during the Amarna Period, the tiny but heavily-textured and richly-ornamented *Portrait Head of Queen Tiye*, mother of Akhenaten, also indicates the important, goddess-like status to which he elevated her. Similar depictions and celebrations of queen-mothers are not unique to Egypt, however, and show up much later in African history in 15th-century Benin as well.

Alexander Ives Bortolot describes for the Metropolitan Museum how one historical mother (called an *iyoba*) of a king (*oba*) became a celebrated figure in both history and art:

> *The kingdom of Benin (in present-day Nigeria) was plunged into a state of turmoil at the end of the fifteenth century when the oba (king) Ozolua died and left two powerful sons to dispute succession. His son Esigie controlled Benin City, while another son, Arhuaran, was based in the equally important city of Udo about twenty miles away… Esigie ultimately defeated his brother and conquered the Igala, reestablishing the unity and military strength of the kingdom. His mother Idia received much of the credit for these victories, as her political counsel, together with her mystical powers and medicinal knowledge, were viewed as critical elements of Esigie's success on the battlefield.*
>
> *To reward and honor her, Esigie created a new position within the court called the iyoba, or queen mother, which gave her significant political privileges, including a separate residence with its own staff.*
>
> *As mother of the king, Idia and later iyobas wielded considerable power. Until recent times, the queen mother, who bore the oba's first son, had no other children and devoted her life to raising the future ruler of the kingdom, a role she was destined to play even before her own birth. Queen mothers were therefore viewed as instrumental to the protection and well-being of the oba and, by extension, the kingdom.*

View examples of such tributes to *iyobas*, or queen mothers, in Queen Mother Pendant Mask, Altar Tableau: Queen Mother and Attendants, and in Head of a Queen Mother. And explore the Yoruba tradition of Gelede that honors the spiritual powers of women elders, known as *awon iya wa*, or "our mothers."

Mummification

One of the enduringly fascinating aspects of ancient Egyptian society is the preservation of the body after death, an elaborate process known as mummification. The tradition began in the Old Kingdom, if not before, and continued for thousands of years, including the first century AD mummy of Herakleides discussed in the following video.

Online Resource: The Mummification Process

The ancient Egyptian practice of mummification was designed to preserve the body for the afterlife. The process varied by wealth and social status, but generally involved using salt to thoroughly dry the body after removing most internal organs, treating the body with aromatic oils and resins, and wrapping it with strips of linen, sometimes over amulets or other ceremonial objects. The following video details the process used to create the somewhat unusual mummy of Herakleides.



The Getty Museum, "The Mummification Process"

Seated Scribe from Saqqara: A CONVERSATION

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Musee du Louvre, Paris. **Click here to watch the video**.

Steven: We're in the Egyptian Collection in the Louvre, in Paris, and we're looking at the Seated Scribe. uis goes back to the Old Kingdom.

Beth: So this is more than 4,000, almost 5,000 years old, and what draws people to this relatively small sculpture is how lifelike it is, given how old it is.

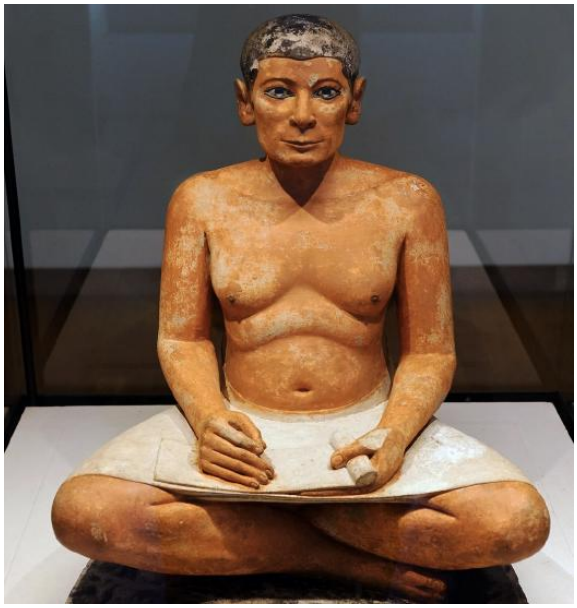


Figure **7.3.23**: Seated Scribe, c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, Egypt, c. 2620-2500 BCE. Painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara. Musee du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It's painted, which adds to its lifelike quality.

Beth: And that was not unusual for ancient Egyptian sculpture, although the amount of pigment and coloration that survives here is rather unique.

Steven: With a few exceptions, the sculpture is painted limestone. The exceptions are the nipples, which are wooden dowels, and the eyes.

Beth: The eyes are incredibly lifelike.



Figure **7.3.24**: Seated Scribe (detail of face), Saqqara. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And that's because they're made of two different types of stone: crystal, which is polished on the front, and then an organic material is added to the back that functions both as an adhesive but also to color the iris. And there's also an indentation carved to represent the pupil. All of this comes together to create a sense of alertness, a sense of awareness, a sense of intelligence, that is quite present. It collapses the 4,500 years between when the sculpture was made and today.

Beth: He's not idealized the way that we would see a figure of a pharaoh—the Egyptians considered pharaohs to be gods and would never have represented the pharaoh in this relaxed, cross-legged position and with the rolls of fat that help make him more human.

Steven: He looks so relaxed, almost like he's just exhaled.

Beth: That's true, but there is also a real formality here. He's very frontal. He's meant to be seen—pretty much exclusively—from the front and there's almost a complete symmetry to his body.

Steven: The exception being his hands. His right would have originally held a brush or a pen and his left holds a rolled piece of papyrus that he's writing on, which is interesting because it suggests the momentary even though the Egyptians are so concerned with the eternal. You said a moment ago that he's intended to be seen from the front, but that raises an interesting question: Was this sculpture meant to be seen at all?

Beth: Well, he was found in a necropolis southwest of Cairo in a place called Saqqara, an important Old Kingdom necropolis, and we don't know his exact findspot, so we don't know as much about him as we would have if we did. But you're right, this is a funerary sculpture meant for a tomb.

Steven: We would know more about him if the base on which he sits was not cut. It probably would have originally included his name and his titles.



Figure **7.3.25**: Seated Scribe (detail of hands), Saqqara. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: What's interesting is that the hieroglyph for "scribe" is quite pictographic and shows a writing instrument—a pen, a pot of water, and cakes of pigment. Scribes were very highly regarded in Egyptian culture. They were one of the very few people who could read and write. It's impossible to know how much of a portrait this is because we don't have this man in front of us, we don't know the degree to which this sculpture resembles him.

Steven: The sculpture's been carved with real delicacy. The fingers are long and elegant, the fingernails are carefully inscribed.

Beth: And he has very pronounced high cheekbones.

Steven: The only clothing he wears is a kilt, which has been painted white. His skin is a pretty rich red-brown, and the hair and the rims of his eyes are accentuated with black.

Beth: It is wonderful to have this sculpture reaching out to us from more than 4,000 years ago.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "The Great Pyramids of Giza," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Pyramid of Khafre and the Great Sphinx," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Amy Calvert, "King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "*The Seated Scribe*," in *Smarthistory*, November 25, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.4: Middle Kingdom

Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period, an introduction

by Dr. Amy Calvert

The breakdown of centralized control that characterized the First Intermediate Period brought a new sense of uncertainty to Egyptian culture, which had been so stable for centuries. The overlapping internal struggles between regional rulers in the north and south eventually ended with the Theban nomarchs defeating the rulers at Herakleopolis and bringing all of Egypt under a single king again.

The dynamic reunification of the Two Lands in ancient Egypt, in the period we call the Middle Kingdom, created new requirements for the king. No longer an aloof divine representative of the gods on earth, the king in the Middle Kingdom was expected to be more available to the people. This period also saw increased interactions with the outside world, the re-establishment of connections with Syria to the north and the establishment of forts reaching south deep into Nubia. Rich in literature (often of great knowledge and wit), this era also produced exquisite works of art. The cult of Osiris grew as did the number of Egyptians who could equip themselves for the afterlife, what we might recognize as a "middle class."



Figure 7.4.1: Map of Ancient Egypt (modified), showing Thebes in Upper Egypt and Memphis in Lower Egypt. (Original image: Jeff Dahl, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Middle Kingdom (c. 2030–1640 B.C.E.)

During the Middle Kingdom (Dynasty 11–13), many of the principles of Egyptian culture that had emerged at its outset and been codified during the Old Kingdom were adjusted and redefined. These included significant shifts in religious practices, afterlife beliefs, and the ideology of kingship.



Figure **7.4.2**: Mortuary complex of Mentuhotep (with the later mortuary complex of Hatshepsut beside it), Deir El Bahari, Egypt. (Photo: Steve F-E-Cameron, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Nebhepetra Mentuhotep II re-unified Egypt and established the Middle Kingdom, which is often considered the classical period for Egypt's politics, literature, and art. Although he ruled the unified country from the city of Memphis, as the pharaohs of the Old Kingdom had done, he built his innovative mortuary complex on the west side of the Nile at Thebes (Figure **7.4.2**). He and his successors devoted considerable attention to the Theban region, adding to the already-established shrine of the local god Amun and building the initial core for the temple at Karnak (which would subsequently be added to by nearly every following ruler for millennia). There is evidence for vastly expanded royal patronage of divine temples all over Egypt during the Middle Kingdom. This campaign not only re-solidified the connections between the king and the gods, but was also a way to stress the king's presence at key regional centers.

Twelfth Dynasty rulers focused their attention on restoring the glories of the Old Kingdom while accommodating the beliefs, innovations in style, and architectural forms that were introduced or developed at Thebes. These kings constructed a new royal residence in the Fayum region southwest of Memphis and were buried nearby in pyramids with elaborate temples. Unfortunately, due to the construction methods used and later stone mining, none survives in good condition. Unlike the solid limestone Old Kingdom pyramids, Middle Kingdom monuments of this type were built with a core of mud brick. After the outer casing stone was removed for reuse during the ancient and medieval eras, the brick cores were exposed, and have long since eroded.



Figure **7.4.3**: Statue of Senwosret III (Senusret III), 1874–1855 BCE, 12th Dynasty. Incised granite, 122 cm high, found at the Temple of Mentuhotep. The British Museum, London. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

During the middle of the Twelfth Dynasty, a fascinating shift in the way pharaoh was portrayed occurred. In texts of the period, the role of the "Good Shepherd" becomes emphasized and, around the same time, the weight of royal responsibilities becomes evident in representations of the king. This dramatic shift in style is most clearly seen in the facial features of images of Senwosret II, Senwosret III (Figure **7.4.3**), and Amenemhat III. Looking at these heavy faces, with their creased brows and drooping mouths, it is clear that profound changes had occurred.



Figure **7.4.4**: Model of a brewery, first Intermediate Period or Middle Kingdom, 2040–1991 BCE. Painted wood, 28.5 x 32.5 x 53.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, public domain)

Elite necropolises carved into cliff sides along the Nile preserve non-royal aspects of the mortuary cult in this time. Much of the iconography in the tomb scenes is similar to late Old Kingdom, but new scenes also appear, including the representations of deities, especially the god Osiris. Models with figures in lively poses performing daily activities, like brewing (Figure **7.4.4**), baking, and slaughtering cattle, were found in tombs of this era. Also during this period servant figures known as shabtis, which were designed to work for the deceased in the afterlife, began to appear. Private monuments dedicated to Osiris become prevalent and indicate a democratization of access to the divine, allowing more people the opportunity to interact with the gods.



Figure **7.4.5**: Part of the Treasure of Tod, including rectangular chests; silver vessels, ingots, and chains; and raw and worked lapis lazuli. Found under the temple of Montu at Tod and dating to the reign of Noubkaoure Amenemhat II. The Louvre Museum, Paris. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Rulers during the Middle Kingdom expanded control to the south into Nubia, building a series of mudbrick forts along the river as far south as Semna (below the Second Cataract) in order to better control the mines of gold and other valuable materials in the region, such as ebony, ostrich feathers, leopard skins, ivory, exotic animals, incense and a variety of hard stones. They also re-established trade routes to far-off Syrian cities for luxury goods such as cedar, wine, silver, and oil. There is evidence for robust trade interactions with other cultures as well: Minoan pottery sherds suggest trade with Crete and Asiatic artifacts, like large numbers of weights found in urban settings and the stunning assemblage of treasure (Figure **7.4.5**) discovered in four bronze chests under the temple of Montu at Tod, indicates connections beyond Syria-Palestine.



Figure **7.4.6**: Pectoral and Necklace of Sithathoryunet with the Name of Senwosret II, c. 1887–1878 BCE. Cloisonné with gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, turquoise, garnet, 1 ¾ x 1¼". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

This was a period of wealth and prosperity—a rich body of literature was produced, relief carvings of sublime beauty were created, bronze metalworking appears, and some of the most exceptional jewelry from the ancient world was crafted during this time. Several sets of highly-symbolic jewelry were discovered in the tombs of royal women (Figure **7.4.6**). Imagery in the jewelry, statuary, and other depictions of royal women during this period show a strong connection between them and the goddess Hathor. Both the mother and wife of Horus in various myths, Hathor was also described as the mother, wife, or daughter of the sun god Ra —both male deities that the king was closely linked with. Royal women seem to have been viewed as mortal representatives of Hathor, serving a vital function in regeneration.



Figure 7.4.7: Head of a female sphinx, c. 1876–1842 BCE, Dynasty 12, Middle Kingdom. Chlorite, 38.9 x 33.3 x 35.4 cm. Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY)

Female sphinxes (Figure 7.4.7) appeared during the Middle Kingdom, emphasizing a new connection between royal women in the fiercely protective role of the sun god's daughter, the Eye of Ra. Although in general these developments in identity didn't necessarily indicate significant changes in political status for royal women, it is interesting that the last king of the Twelfth Dynasty was the first known sole female ruler of Egypt, Nefrusobek.

By the Thirteenth Dynasty, centralized royal authority was again on the decline and control over Lower Egypt became more challenging. The ruling city of Lisht was abandoned and the kings reestablished the royal court and administrative seat in the southern city of Thebes. It would be nearly 150 years before a king would rule again over the united Two Lands.



Figure 7.4.8: Reconstructed Minoan fresco showing bull-leaping from Avaris, Egypt. Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete. (Photo: Martin Dürrschnabel, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Second Intermediate Period (c. 1640–1540 B.C.E.)

During the seventeenth century B.C.E., a group who originated in Western Asia and had blended into the local population of the delta region took control of the north of the country. Their kings were referred to as the *hekau khasut*, otherwise known as the Hyksos. These "rulers of foreign lands" established their own capital at Avaris and ruled the north, even calling themselves "Sons of Ra." Archeological evidence shows that the community of Avaris had many decidedly non-Egyptian characteristics. Differences in house layouts, pottery types, weapons and tools, and burials being integrated into the settlement, as was common in western Asia, instead of separated (as was usual for the Egyptians), all point to a largely Syrio-Palestine population.

New words entered the Egyptian vocabulary during this period, as did Near Eastern deities, like Anat, and weapons including the scimitar and horse-drawn chariot. The international nature of the site is also evident in the startlingly Minoan-style murals of bull jumping (Figure 7.4.8), although these may date slightly later. Egyptian pharaohs still ruled from the south at Thebes, and there was a series of conflicts and battles for control. Textual evidence indicates that the king at Avaris was corresponding with the Nubian king of Kush at Kerma via the Western Oasis route in an effort to ally against the Egyptians at Thebes; their messengers were intercepted and communications cut off by the pharaoh Kamose who recorded his campaigns against them in stelae erected at

Karnak temple. Eventually, Ahmose was successful in driving the Hyksos king out of the delta and re-unifying the land under a single ruler.

Middle Kingdom Egypt: Senusret III & Block Statues

By Boundless Art History

During the Middle Kingdom, relief and portrait sculpture captured subtle, individual details that reached new heights of technical perfection. Some of the finest examples of sculpture during this time was at the height of the empire under Pharaoh Senusret III.

Senusret III (also written as Senwosret III or Sesostris III) ruled from 1878–1839 BCE and was the fifth monarch of the Twelfth Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom. His military campaigns gave rise to an era of peace and economic prosperity that not only reduced the power of regional rulers, but also led to a revival in craftwork, trade, and urban development in the Egyptian kingdom. One of the few kings who were deified and honored with a cult during their own lifetime, he is considered to be perhaps the most powerful Egyptian ruler of the dynasty.



Figure **7.4.9**: Three black granite statues of the pharaoh Senusret III, seen in right profile, Twelfth Dynasty, c. 1850 BCE. British Museum. (Photo: Captmondo, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Aside from his accomplishments in architecture and war, Senusret III is known for his strikingly somber sculptures in which he appears careworn and grave. Deviating from the standard way of representing kings, Senusret III and his successor Amenemhat III had themselves portrayed as mature, aging men. This is often interpreted as a portrayal of the burden of power and kingship. The change in representation as ideological, and not something to be interpreted as the portrayal of an aging king, is shown by the fact that in one single relief, Senusret III was represented as a vigorous young man, following the centuries old tradition, *and* as a mature aging king.



Figure 7.4.10: Block-statue of Pa-Ankh-Ra, ship master, bearing a statue of Ptah, Late Period, c. 650–633 BCE. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. (Photo: Jastrow, public domain)

Another important innovation in sculpture that occurred during the Middle Kingdom was the block statue, which would continue to be popular through to the Ptolemaic age almost 2,000 years later. Block statues consist of a man squatting with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms folded on top of his knees. Often, these men are wearing a wide cloak that reduces the body of the figure to a simple block-like shape. In some cases the cloak covers the feet completely, and in others the feet are left uncovered. The head of the sculpture contains the most detail.

The sculpture pictured in Figure 7.4.11—the fact that a private woman could have a sculpture made for herself—speaks volumes for the equality of gender in ancient Egypt. The heavy tripartite wig frames the broad face and passes behind the ears, thus giving the impression of forcing them forward. They are large in keeping with the ancient Egyptian ideal of beauty; the same ideal required small breasts, and in this respect, the sculpture is no exception. Whereas the natural curve of the eyebrows dips towards the root of the nose, the artificial eyebrows in low relief are absolutely straight above the inner corners of the eyes, a feature which places the bust early in the early Twelfth Dynasty. Around 1900 BCE, these artificial eyebrows, too, began to follow the natural curve and dipped toward the nose.

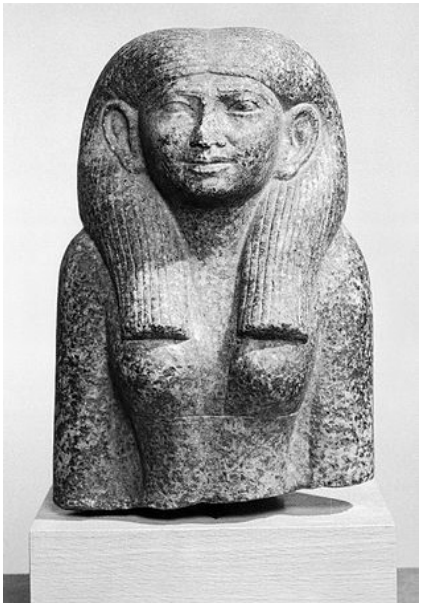


Figure **7.4.11**: Head and Torso of a Noblewoman, c. 1844-1837 BCE. Diorite, 9 x 6 1/4 x 4 1/2 in. (22.9 x 15.9 x 11.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn. (Photo: Kaitlyn153, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Amy Calvert, "Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, February 14, 2022 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Boundless Art History, "Sculpture of the Middle Kingdom" (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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7.5: New Kingdom

New Kingdom: Temple of Amun-Re and the Hypostyle Hall, Karnak

by Dr. Elizabeth Cummins



Figure **7.5.1**: View of sphinxes, the first pylon, and the central east-west aisle of Temple of Amun-Re, Karnak at Luxor, Egypt. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The massive temple complex of Karnak was the principal religious center of the god Amun-Re in Thebes during the New Kingdom (which lasted from 1550 until 1070 BCE). The complex remains one of the largest religious complexes in the world. However, Karnak was not just one temple dedicated to one god—it held not only the main precinct to the god Amun-Re—but also the precincts of the gods Mut and Montu. Compared to other temple compounds that survive from ancient Egypt, Karnak is in a poor state of preservation but it still gives scholars a wealth of information about Egyptian religion and art.



Figure **7.5.2**: Google Earth view of Karnak. (Photo via Smarthistory)

"The Most Select of Places"

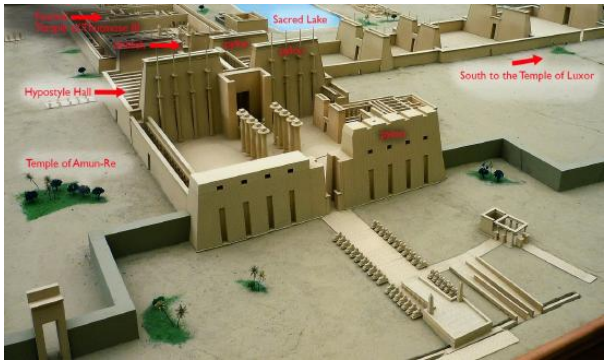


Figure **7.5.3**: Model of the Precinct of Amun-Re, Karnak. (Photo: Rémih, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The site was first developed during the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE) and was initially modest in scale but as new importance was placed on the city of Thebes, subsequent pharaohs began to place their own mark on Karnak. The main precinct alone would eventually have as many as twenty temples and chapels. [1] Karnak was known in ancient times as "The Most Select of Places" (*Ipet-isut*) and was not only the location of the cult image of Amun and a place for the god to dwell on earth but also a working

estate for the priestly community who lived on site. Additional buildings included a sacred lake, kitchens, and workshops for the production of religious accoutrements.

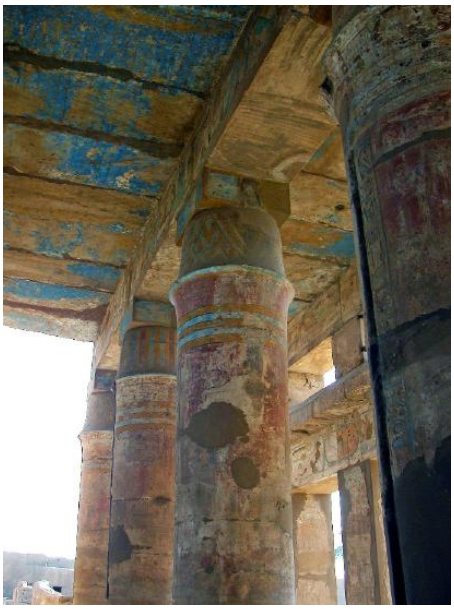


Figure **7.5.4**: “Tent pole” columns, Festival Temple of Thutmose III, Karnak, at Luxor, Egypt, c. 1479-25 BCE. Sandstone, mud brick, paint. (Photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0) These "tent pole" columns are believed to translate into stone the wooden poles that supported tents or other light structures.

The main temple of Amun-Re had two axes—one that went north/south and the other that extended east/west. The southern axis continued towards the temple of Luxor and was connected by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes.

While the sanctuary was plundered for stone in ancient times, there are still a number of unique architectural features within this vast complex. For example, the tallest obelisk in Egypt stood at Karnak and was dedicated by the female pharaoh Hatshepsut who ruled Egypt during the New Kingdom. Made of one piece of red granite, it originally had a matching obelisk that was removed by the Roman emperor Constantine and re-erected in Rome. Another unusual feature was the Festival Temple of Thutmose III, which had columns that represented tent poles, a feature this pharaoh was no doubt familiar with from his many war campaigns.

Hypostyle hall



Figure **7.5.5**: Hypostyle Hall, Temple of Amun-Re, Karnak, at Luxor, Egypt, 18th and 19th Dynasties, New Kingdom, c. 1250 BCE. Sandstone and mud brick. (Photo: Blalonde, public domain)

One of the greatest architectural marvels of Karnak is the hypostyle hall built during the Ramesside period (a hypostyle hall is a space with a roof supported by columns). The hall has 134 massive sandstone columns with the center twelve columns standing at 69 feet. Like most of the temple decoration, the hall would have been brightly painted and some of this paint still exists on the upper portions of the columns and ceiling today. With the center of the hall taller than the spaces on either side, the Egyptians allowed for clerestory lighting (a section of wall that allowed light and air into the otherwise dark space below). In fact, the earliest evidence for clerestory lighting comes from Egypt. Not many ancient Egyptians would have had access to this hall, since the further one went into the temple, the more restricted access became.



Figure **7.5.6**: Hypostyle Hall, Temple of Amun-Re, showing clerestory and lotus bud capitals. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) Without its ceiling, light now fills the space of this temple that would otherwise only have been lit by the high clerestory windows.

Temple as cosmos

Conceptually, temples in Egypt were connected to the idea of *zep tepi*, or "the first time," the beginnings of the creation of the world. The temple was a reflection of this time, when the mound of creation emerged from the primeval waters. The pylons, or gateways in the temple represent the horizon, and as one moves further into the temple, the floor rises until it reaches the sanctuary of the god, giving the impression of a rising mound, like that during creation. The temple roof represented the sky and was often decorated with stars and birds. The columns were designed with lotus, papyrus, and palm plants in order to reflect the marsh-like environment of creation. The outer areas of Karnak, which was located near the Nile River, would flood during the annual inundation—an intentional effect by the ancient designers no doubt, in order to enhance the temple's symbolism. [2]

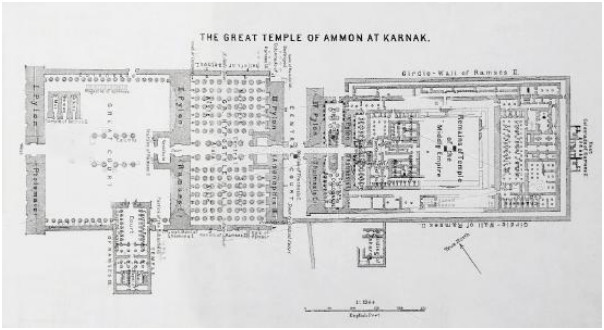


Figure **7.5.7**: Plan of the Temple of Amun-Re, Karnak. (Photo: via Smarthistory)

Notes

[1] R. Wilkinson, The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 154.
[2] R. Wilkinson, The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 77.

The Valley of the Kings

By Boundless Art History

By this time, pyramids were no longer built by kings, but they continued to build magnificent tombs. This renowned valley in Egypt is where, for a period of nearly 500 years, tombs were constructed for the Pharaohs and powerful nobles of the New Kingdom. The valley is known to contain 63 tombs and chambers, the most well known of which is the tomb of Tutankhamun

(commonly known as King Tut). Despite its small size, it is the most complete ancient Egyptian royal tomb ever found. In 1979, the Valley became a World Heritage Site, along with the rest of the Theban Necropolis .

Hatshepsut

The Temple of Hatshepsut was Hatshepsut's mortuary temple and was the first to be built in the area. The focal point of the tomb was the *Djeser-Djeseru*, a colonnaded structure of perfect harmony that predates the Parthenon by nearly one thousand years. Built into a cliff face, *Djeser-Djeseru*, or "the Sublime of Sublimes," sits atop a series of terraces that once were graced with lush gardens. Funerary goods belonging to Hatshepsut include a lioness "throne," a game board with carved lioness head, red-jasper game pieces bearing her title as pharaoh, a signet ring, and a partial shabti figurine bearing her name.



Figure **7.5.8**: Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri, Egypt, 18th Dynasty, c. 1473–1458 BCE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut: A CONVERSATION

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Click to watch the video.



Figure **7.5.9**: Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, c. 1479–1458 BCE. Granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in the section devoted to the art of Ancient Egypt. And we're looking at an enormous, granite sculpture.

Beth: This is a sculpture of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut.

Steven: We think of pharaohs, that is, ancient Egyptian kings, as male. And of course, the vast majority were. There had been a long tradition in ancient Egypt of women assuming enormous authority in the position of regent, that is as a mother or a member of the royal family who would reign until a male ruler reached the age where they could actually assume power.

Beth: Those women were very powerful but Hatshepsut is unusual. She assumes the authority of king, of pharaoh. She created a whole mythology around her kingship that described her divine birth, the way that an oracle had predicted that she would become king. She ruled Egypt for more than two decades. She commissioned a remarkable number of temples, of sculptures. She was interested in the power of art to convey royal authority.

Steven: And no building speaks to the authority of the king more than the mortuary temple.



Figure **7.5.10**: Reconstructed fragments of Hatshepsut as a sphinx, Deir el-Bahri. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0) Although this sculpture is very damaged and largely reconstructed, we can still make out the nemes headdress and royal beard.

Beth: The sculpture that we're looking at was actually made for this mortuary temple. There anywhere from six or eight or ten of these kneeling figures. There were also representations of Hatshepsut as a sphinx which lined the center of the lower courtyard of her mortuary temple (Figure **7.5.10**).

Steven: And that temple is an extraordinary place. It is built directly against this vast cliff face.

Beth: I can't think of a more dramatic environment for architecture. Those cliff are towering and their organic qualities are in such contrast to the regular order and structure of the built environment.

Steven: This is hewn right from the living rock.

Beth: And that sense of permanence, that sense of stability that is expressed by that wall of living rock is a perfect expression of the very sense of stability that we think Hatshepsut and her dynasty were trying to reassert after a period of instability. This was the beginning of the New Kingdom.



Figure **7.5.11**: Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, showing Osirian portraits of Hatshepsut (later carved with another ruler's features). (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY 2.0)

Steven: In ancient Egyptian history, we talk about three major periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom, and these periods are separated by periods we call Intermediate Periods.

Beth: These were periods of relative chaos, often when Egypt was divided in its rule or was ruled by external rulers.

Steven: The representations of kingship in ancient Egyptian art are almost two millennia old by the time we get to Hatshepsut and so what she can do is adopt those forms to show herself as king. These forms were easily recognizable. That is symmetry, its embeddedness in the stone, we see that there is no space between her arms and her torso or between her legs. There is a real sense of timelessness but there are also more specific symbols.*Beth*: The headcloth that she wears is a symbol of the king that would have originally been a cobra.*Steven*: We have the beard that we associate with kingship.

Beth: We're talking about a visual language here. And this visual language of kingship was male. In fact, there is no word for queen in the Egyptian language. The term is king's wife, or king's mother.

Steven: Her body is represented in a relatively masculine way. Her breasts are de-emphasized, for example. She has broad shoulders.

Beth: The inscriptions that were on many of these sculptures use a feminine form and so the representation itself is masculine but the identifying words, the hieroglyphs identify her as female. About 20 years after Hatshepsut died, the pharaoh she had been co-ruler with systematically destroyed all images of Hatshepsut.



Figure **7.5.12**: Hatshepsut (form chiseled away) between the god Horus and the god Thoth, painted relief, hall of the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut, Karnak temple complex, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) Where Hatshepsut's image once stood between these two deities, now there is only a chiseled-away silhouette.

Steven: That would not have been an easy matter. You wouldn't have simply toppled the sculpture. It would have shattered into so many pieces. This made of granite, incredibly hard stone. It would have been very difficult to produce and it would have been very difficult to destroy.

Beth: Well, and not only that but Hatshepsut had commissioned hundreds of images of herself. So it would have taken a long time to destroy these sculptures. This was an intentional act, but we're not really sure why this happened.

Steven: We do know that the fragments were discovered in the early twentieth-century thanks to an excavation undertaken by the Metropolitan Museum of Art which is why they are here. And what we're seeing is a series of monumental sculptures that have been put back together but some of this is guesswork. We don't know if one particular fragment goes with one sculpture versus another.

Beth: So when we look at those sculptures, we see her in a range of positions. In some, she is kneeling. In some, she is standing. In some, she is seated. In some, she is represented as a sphinx. A king only would kneel of course to a god. That really helps us place this sculpture along the processional path.

Steven: So once a year, there was a ritual involving a sculpture of a god. Now we have to remember that for Egyptians, the sculpture of the god was the embodiment of the god and temples were houses for a god. So once a year the sculpture of the primary god, Amun-Re, was taken from the temple in Thebes on the eastern side of the Nile.

Beth: And carried across the river on a ceremonial barque, on a shrine that was shaped like a boat.



Figure **7.5.13**: Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, c. 1502-1482 BCE. Red granite, 210 cm tall. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Steven: As though he were traveling literally across the Nile from the eastern side, the land of the living, toward the land of the dead, and he would be carried up this causeway toward the temple and his primary shrine in the mortuary temple at the very top center.

Beth: And that sculpture would have been spent one night in that shrine before it would have been returned across the river.

Steven: And so it makes sense then that you would have this representation of Hatshepsut on her knees making an offering, these two bowls or jars that she holds are an offering to the god because the god passed in front of these sculptures who are not just sculptures but embodiments of Hatshepsut (compare also Figure **7.5.13**).

Beth: It's interesting how the scholarship that surrounds this ruler has changed. Early in the twentieth century, for example, the destruction of the images of this ruler was associated with the idea that she was out of place, that she was a usurper, and she was seen very much in a negative light. She is seen much more sympathetically now, in the early twenty-first century.

Steven: And there were women before Hatshepsut who asserted themselves as kings, and there were a few women after her, but Hatshepsut had enormous power, enormous influence, the sculptures, the architecture that she commissioned set an important standard and inspiration for all the later work of the New Kingdom. Imagine walking past these enormous sculptures of Hatshepsut.

Beth: This is all about the procession. This is all about pageantry. This is all about expressing power as the king.

Steven: Kneeling like this is not something you can do for more than a minute or two. It's hard on the toes. It's hard on the knees. So this is a position that someone would only take very temporarily and yet there is something very eternal about the sculpture, something very permanent. This is not a figure who engages us, who is in the world, but who lives in the eternal. This is an image of a king who is also a god.

Global Connections: Monumental Mortuary Complexes

Egypt's pyramids and Hatshepsut's grand mortuary temple are not the only monumental examples of grandiose mortuary complexes in the world. The word "mausoleum" derives from the grand tomb of the Hellenistic Greek king and Persian satrap, Mausolus, built between 335 and 350 BCE. In China c. 210 BCE, the First Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi commissioned a massive tomb which famously and most impressively included approximately 8,000 terracotta warriors to accompany and protect the emperor on his way to the afterlife.

In Mexico, the Mayan Temple of the Inscriptions in Palenque (5th-8th centuries) is considered the greatest Mayan funerary pyramid and included the tomb of King Pakal. And in the United States, the Mississipiian people (among others) were famous for building burial mounds, which flourished between c. 900-1350 BCE. Monk's Mound in the city of Cahokia, Illinois, is

considered the largest indigenous earthen structure north of Mexico, measuring approximately 100 feet high and covering more than 16 acres at its base.

In India, much later from 1632-53 CE, Shah Jahan built the exquisite and exceptional Taj Mahal, also known as the "Luminous Tomb," for his favorite wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died from complications after delivering their fourteenth child.

And, in Rome today, pilgrims and tourists go under St. Peter's Basilica to visit a grave long believed to be that of the apostle Peter himself. The Roman Emperor Constantine had the altar of his fourth-century basilica placed directly over the grave, tying the building to the martyred saint. The 16th-century pope, Julius II, maintained that relationship, positioning the much larger basilica of St. Peter so that its main altar was still over the grave.

Paintings from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun

by The British Museum

The fragments from the wall painting in the tomb-chapel of Nebamun are keenly observed vignettes of Nebamun and his family enjoying both work and play. Some concern the provision of the funerary cult that was celebrated in the tomb-chapel, some show scenes of Nebamun's life as an elite official, and others show him and his family enjoying life for all eternity, as in the famous scene of the family hunting in the marshes. Together they decorated the small tomb-chapel with vibrant and engaging images of an elite lifestyle that Nebamun hoped would continue in the afterlife.

Hunting in the marshes



Figure 7.5.14: Nebamun fowling in the marshes, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, Thebes, 18th Dynasty, c. 1350 BCE. Paint on plaster, 83 x 98 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Nebamun is shown hunting birds from a small boat in the marshes of the Nile with his wife Hatshepsut and their young daughter. Such scenes had already been traditional parts of tomb-chapel decoration for hundreds of years and show the dead tomb-owner "enjoying himself and seeing beauty," as the hieroglyphic caption here says.

This is more than a simple image of recreation. Fertile marshes were seen as a place of rebirth and eroticism. Hunting animals could represent Nebamun's triumph over the forces of nature as he was reborn. The huge striding figure of Nebamun dominates the scene, forever happy and forever young, surrounded by the rich and varied life of the marsh.



Figure 7.5.15: Cat catching birds in the papyrus clump (detail), from *Nebamun fowling in the marshes*, Tomb of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

There was originally another half of the scene which showed Nebamun spearing fish. This half of the wall is lost, apart from two old photographs of small fragments of Nebamun and his young son. The painters have captured the scaly and shiny quality of the fish.

A tawny cat catches birds among the papyrus stems. Cats were family pets, but in artistic depictions like this they could also represent the Sun-god hunting the enemies of light and order. His unusual gilded eye hints at the religious meanings of this scene.

The artists have filled every space with lively details. The marsh is full of lotus flowers and Plain Tiger butterflies. They are freely and delicately painted, suggesting the pattern and texture of their wings.

Nebamun's Garden



Figure 7.5.16: Nebamun's garden, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. Paint on plaster, 64 cm high. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Nebamun's garden in the afterlife is not unlike the earthly gardens of wealthy Egyptians. The pool is full of birds and fish, and surrounded by borders of flowers and shady rows of trees. The fruit trees include sycamore-figs, date-palms and dom-palms—the dates are shown with different degrees of ripeness.



Figure **7.5.17**: Nebamun's garden (detail of fish and fowl), Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

On the right side of the pool a goddess leans out of a tree and offers fruit and drinks to Nebamun (now lost). The artists accidentally painted her skin red at first but then repainted it yellow, the correct color for a goddess' skin. On the left, a sycamore-fig tree speaks and greets Nebamun as the owner of the garden; its words are recorded in the hieroglyphs.Here the pool is shown from above, with three rows of trees arranged around its edges. The waves of the pool were painted with a darker blue pigment; much of this has been lost, like the green on the trees and bushes.

Surveying the fields



Figure **7.5.18**: Surveying the fields for Nebamun, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. Paint on plaster, 106.7 x 45.8 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Nebamun was the accountant in charge of grain at the great Temple of Amun at Karnak. This scene from his tomb-chapel shows officials inspecting fields. A farmer checks the boundary marker of the field.

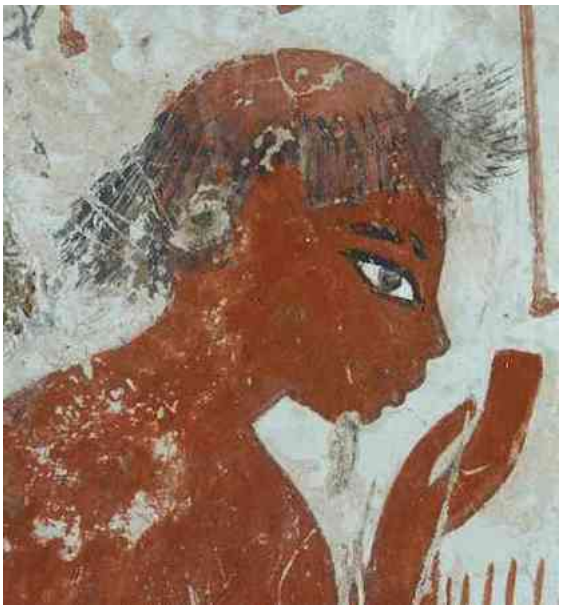


Figure 7.5.19: Old man assessing crops (detail), *Surveying the fields for Nebamun*, Tomb-chapel of Nebanum. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Nearby, two chariots for the party of officials wait under the shade of a sycamore-fig tree. Other smaller fragments from this wall are now in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, Germany and show the grain being harvested and processed.

The old farmer is shown balding, badly shaven, poorly dressed, and with a protruding navel. He is taking an oath saying: "As the Great God who is in the sky endures, the boundary-stone is exact!"

"The Chief of the Measurers of the Granary," (mostly lost) holds a rope decorated with the head of Amun's sacred ram for measuring the god's fields. After Nebamun died, the rope's head was hacked out, but later, perhaps in Tutankhamun's reign, someone clumsily restored it with mud-plaster and redrew it.

Nebamun's cattle



Figure 7.5.20: Nebamun's cattle, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. Paint on plaster, 58.5 x 10.5 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)



Figure 7.5.21: Cattle (detail), *Nebamun's cattle*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Figure 7.5.20 is a fragment of a wall that shows Nebamun inspecting flocks of geese and herds of cattle. Hieroglyphs describe the scene and record what the farmers say as they squabble in the queue. The alternating colors and patterns of cattle create a superb sense of animal movement.

The herdsman is telling the farmer in front of him in the queue:

> Come on! Get away! Don't speak in the presence of the praised one! He detests people talking… Pass on in quiet and in order… He knows all affairs, does the scribe and counter of grain of [Amun], Neb[amun].

The name of the god Amun has been hacked out in this caption where it appears in Nebamun's name and title. Shortly after Nebamun died, King Akhenaten (1352–1336 BCE) had Amun's name erased from monuments as part of his religious reforms.

Nebamun's geese



Figure 7.5.22: Nebamun's geese, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. Paint on plaster, 71 x 115.5 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Figure 7.5.22 is part of a wall showing Nebamun inspecting flocks of geese and herds of cattle. He watches as farmers drive the animals towards him; his scribes (secretaries) write down the number of animals for his records. Hieroglyphs describe the scene and record what the farmers say as they squabble in the queue.



Figure **7.5.23**: Geese (detail), *Nebamun's Geese*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)



Figure **7.5.24**: Scribe (detail), *Nebamun's geese*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

This scribe holds a palette (pen-box) under his arm and presents a roll of papyrus to Nebamun. He is well dressed and has small rolls of fat on his stomach, indicating his superior position in life. Beside him are chests for his records and a bag containing his writing equipment.

Farmers bow down and make gestures of respect towards Nebamun. The man behind them holds a stick and tells them: "Sit down and don't speak!" The farmers' geese are painted as a huge and lively gaggle, some pecking the ground and some flapping their wings.

A feast for Nebamun (top half)



Figure **7.5.25**: A feast for Nebamun, the top half of a scene from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. Paint on plaster, 88 x 119 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

An entire wall of the tomb-chapel showed a feast in honor of Nebamun. Naked serving-girls and servants wait on his friends and relatives. Married guests sit in pairs on fine chairs, while the young women turn and talk to each other. This erotic scene of relaxation and wealth is something for Nebamun to enjoy for all eternity. The richly-dressed guests are entertained by dancers and musicians, who sit on the ground playing and clapping. The words of their song in honor of Nebamun are written above them:

> The earth-god has caused
> his beauty to grow in every body…
> the channels are filled with water anew,
> and the land is flooded with love of him.

Some of the musicians look out of the paintings, showing their faces frontally. This is very unusual in Egyptian art, and gives a sense of liveliness to these lower-class women, who are less formally drawn than the wealthy guests. The young dancers are sinuously drawn and are naked apart from their jewelry.



Figure **7.5.26**: Musicians and dancers (detail), *A feast for Nebamun*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

A rack of large wine jars is decorated with grapes, vines and garlands of flowers. Many of the guests also wear garlands and smell lotus flowers. All the guests wear elaborate linen clothes. The artists have painted the cloth as if it were transparent, to show that it is very fine. These elegant sensual dresses fall in loose folds around the guests' bodies.

Men and women's skins are painted in different colors: the men are tanned and the women are paler. In one place the artists altered the drawing of these wooden stools and corrected their first sketch with white paint.

Servants bringing offerings



Figure **7.5.27**: Servants bringing offerings, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

A procession of simply-dressed servants (Figure **7.5.27**) bring offerings of food to Nebamun, including sheaves of grain and animals from the desert. Tomb-chapels were built so that people could come and make offerings in memory of the dead, and this a common scene on their walls. The border at the bottom shows that this scene was the lowest one on this wall.

One servant holds two desert hares by their ears. The animals have wonderfully textured fur and long whiskers. The superb draftsmanship and composition make this standard scene very fresh and lively.



Figure **7.5.28**: Estate worker bringing a hare from the fields (detail), *Servants bringing offerings*, Tomb-chapel of Nebamun. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The artists have even varied the servants' simple clothes. The folds of each kilt are different. With one of these kilts, the artist changed his mind and painted a different set of folds over his first version, which is visible through the white paint.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Elizabeth Cummins, "Temple of Amun-Re and the Hypostyle Hall, Karnak," in *Smarthistory*, November 27, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lumen Learning, "The Valley of the Kings," in *Boundless Art History* (CC BY-SA 2.0)
- "Mortuary Temple and Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "Paintings from the Tomb-chapel of Nebamun," in *Smarthistory*, August 29, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.6: Amarna

Editors' Note

This period, characterized by monotheism and a radically different artistic style, occurred during the New Kingdom, but it is so distinctive it has its own name: the Amarna Period. This name comes from present-day Tell el-Amarna, where Akhenaten established his new capital city, Akhetaten. The Amarna Period represents a dramatic departure: from many gods to just one (the creator Aten, "sun disk"), and from a style that had been remarkably consistent for millennia to a dramatically unique one.

The distinctiveness of this period's style is immediately visible in the iconic statuary portrait of Akhenaten (Figure **7.6.1**), one of several created for the Temple of Aten at Karnak. Unlike the rigid proportions and idealized features that had characterized other Egyptian rulers, like Menkaure, for thousands of years, Akhenaten is portrayed with a long, oval face; full and well-defined lips; and, perhaps most notably, a softly curving belly and hips. One theory proposed for this androgyny (combination of female and male characteristics) in Akhenaten's representation is that it reflects the sexlessness of Aten. What is certain is that this dramatically different style was short-lived, ending with Akhenaten's death in 1336 BCE.

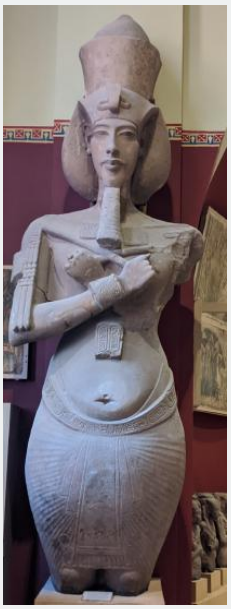


Figure **7.6.1**: Colossal statue of Akehnaten (Amenhotep IV), from the Aten temple at Karnak, Egypt. Sandstone, 12' 9 7/8". Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC-BY)

Amarna Period: Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and Three Daughters: A Conversation

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Click here to watch the video.



Figure 7.6.2: House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c. 1350 BCE. Limestone. Agyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: So around 1350 BCE, everything changed in Egyptian art.

Beth: When we think about Egyptian art, we don't think of change.

Steven: That's true. The Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom, and the transitional periods between—art is consistent for almost 3,000 years. But there is this radical break right around 1350. And it's because the ruler, Akhenaten, changes the state religion.

Beth: He changes it from the worship of the god Amun to a new god, a sun god, called Aten. So he actually changes his own name to Akhenaten, which means Aten is pleased. The key is he makes him and his wife the only representatives of Aten on earth. And so he upsets the entire priesthood of Egypt by making him and his wife the only ones with access to this new god, Aten.

Steven: And in fact, after Akhenaten dies, Egypt will return to its traditional religion. So this period is a very brief episode in Egyptian history, but it also marks a real shift in style. And this small stone plaque that we're looking at, this sunken relief carving —which would have been placed in a private domestic environment—is a perfect example of those stylistic changes.

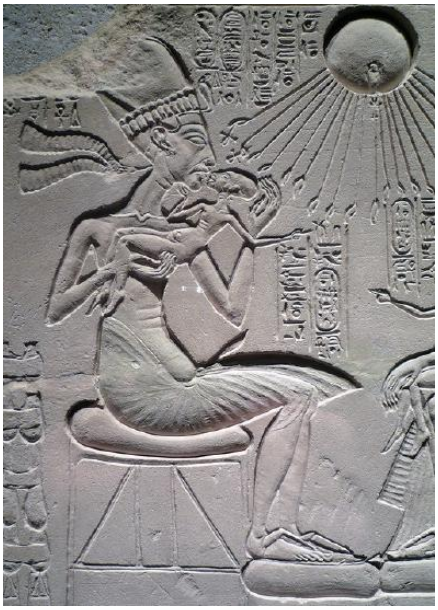


Figure 7.6.3: House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters (detail of Nefertiti). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Right. It would have been an altar in someone's home, where they would have seen Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti and their relationship to the god Aten. This has always been one of my favorite sculptures. It's so informal, compared to most Egyptian art. We really have a sense of a couple and their relationship with one another and their relationship with their children. And love and domesticity.

Steven: So let's take a close look. On the left, you have Akhenaten himself. This is the pharaoh of Egypt, the supreme ruler. You can see that he's holding his eldest daughter, and he's actually getting ready to kiss her. He seems to be holding her very tenderly, supporting her head, holding her under the thighs. She seems to be, perhaps, pointing back to her mother at the same moment.

Beth: We see Nefertiti holding another daughter on her lap, pointing back to Akhenaten, and yet a third daughter, the youngest one, on her shoulder, playing with her earring. And I think it's immediately apparent that there's something wrong with their anatomy. If we look at the children, or we look at Nefertiti or Akhenaten, we see swollen bellies, very thin arms, and elongated skulls, forms that have made historians wonder whether there was something medically wrong with Akhenaten.

Steven: In fact, we don't think that there was. We think that this is a purely stylistic break. It was meant to distinguish this new age, this new religion, from Egypt's past.

Beth: Egyptian art had been dominated by rectilinear forms. Here, Akhenaten seems to be demanding this new style dominated by curvilinear forms.

Steven: Look at the careful attention to the drapery. There is a softness throughout that is an absolute contrast to the traditions of Egyptian art. But in some ways, there are elements of traditional Egyptian sculpture.

Beth: Right. We still see a composite view of the body. A profile view of the face, but a frontal view of the eye.

Steven: Right. Or one hip is facing us. But the shoulders are squared with us. So as much of the body is exposed to us as possible, while the figures are still in profile. So let's take a look at some of the iconography here. This little panel really tells us a lot. God is present. Aten is present, here rendered as the sun disk. And from that sun–which has a small cobra in it, which signifies that this is the supreme deity, the only deity. Akhenaten was a monotheist. And this was in such contrast to the pantheon of gods that traditional Egyptian religion counted on. Here Akhenaten says, no, there is only one true god. So we can see the cobra. We can see the sun disk. And then we can see rays of light that pour down. And if you look closely, you can see hands at the ends of those rays, except for the rays that terminate right at the faces of the king and queen. And there, you see not only hands but also **ankhs**, the Egyptian sign of life. And so it's as if Aten is giving life to these two people, and these two people alone.



Figure **7.6.4**: House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters (detail of the sun disk and rays). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Those rays of light are holding those ankhs right at the noses, the breath of life for Akhenaten and Nefertiti. We can see in the throne of Nefertiti symbols of both Upper and Lower Egypt, indicating that Nefertiti is the queen of both.

Steven: Akhenaten himself is sitting on a simpler throne. It does give a sense of her importance and the fact that they would rule Egypt together.

Portrait Head of Queen Tiye (a conversation)

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This conversation was recorded between Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker in front of *Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers* at the Neues Museum, Berlin. Click here to watch the video.



Figure **7.6.5**: Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers, Egypt, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c. 1355 BCE. Yew wood, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, faience, 22.5 cm high. Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection at the Neues Museum, Berlin. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: One of the most interesting women in all of Egyptian history began her life as the daughter of a bureaucrat but would marry the pharaoh of Egypt. She would then be demoted upon his death and would simply be the queen mother. But her son would then elevate her status substantially, making her divine, making her a goddess.

DR. BETH HARRIS: So much of that history can be seen in this tiny sculpture of Queen Tiye.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: There's a clear sense of her nobility. Even though she began in a relatively modest way as a commoner, although with fairly high status, she looks out and past us here, and there's no doubt she's a queen. She's completely unapproachable.

DR. BETH HARRIS: And we may also be getting a sense here of what she looked like. There seem to be some individual characteristics. She seems to be a little bit older, we can see lines extending below her nose on either side of her cheeks. And there are some distinctive facial characteristics. So perhaps we have a little bit of a window into what she really looked like.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: The face and neck are made out of yew wood, this beautiful dark wood. The eyes are made out of ebony and alabaster. And then there's some other materials as well, gold and some of the semi-precious stone, lapis lazuli, is visible just under that headdress that seems to have been chipped away.

DR. BETH HARRIS: That's right. What we're seeing are in fact evidence of these changes in Tiye's life. Underneath the headdress that we see her in now would have been a gold headdress that signified her status as the queen, as the wife of the pharaoh. And we can also see that in the two gold clips that we see on the forehead, that are evidence of where that crown would have been worn.



Figure **7.6.6**: Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers (detail of the queen's head). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: There would have been a cobra placed there, the insignia of royalty. That was presumably removed when her husband died, and she actually fell in status to that of queen mother.

DR. BETH HARRIS: But she was so important and so smart, and her son depended on her so much that in order to have her be able to actively participate in politics, in the affairs of the royal court, he elevated her status to one of a goddess.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: And that's when this headdress would've been added. This would have been spectacular when it was first made. Now it simply looks a little bulbous, but if you look a little bit to the back right of the skull, you can just make out some brilliant blue faience beads that catch the light and really shimmer. That would've covered the entire headdress. And so she would have looked regal and almost celestial, appropriate to a goddess.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Her headdress extends upward where we see horns, a solar disk, and two feathers. Now that solar disk may refer to the religion founded by her son, Akhenaten. Akhenaten got rid of Egypt's traditional polytheistic religion and established a monotheistic religion centered around Aten, who is symbolized by the sun.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: This sculpture really does give us a sense of her importance, her power, her son's respect for her, and gives us just a little glimpse into the complexity of Egyptian life at this high station.



Figure **7.6.7**: Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers (detail showing the queen's left profile). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Model Bust of Nefertiti: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This conversation was recorded between Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker at the Neues Museum, Berlin. Click here to watch the video.



Figure **7.6.8**: Thutmose, *Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti*, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c. 1340 BCE. Limestone and plaster, 19 in. (41 cm.). Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection/Neues Museum, Berlin. (Photo via Smarthistory)

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: We're in the Neues Museum in Berlin. And we're looking at the famous bust of Nefertiti. It is a life-size, full-color image, and it's really impressive.

DR. BETH HARRIS: It's the treasure of this museum. And it's been placed in a rotunda with a large dome. She's been placed slightly higher than eye level, so we look up at her. She's fabulously beautiful.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: She's virtually the sole work of art in this very large space. Clearly, she is the focal point.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Yeah, it's quite theatrical. And unlike so many other Egyptian sculptures, she wasn't intended for a tomb. She was found in the studio of the artist who made her, Thutmose.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: We think that this sculpture was actually a model that he'd created in order to work on other sculptures of her. That is, this sculpture would function really as a three-dimensional sketch.

DR. BETH HARRIS: As a prototype.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: That's right. And there are a few reasons why that's thought. Not only was it found in his studio, but it is incomplete in a way that suggests that it was never meant to be completed. If you look, for instance, at the sockets of the eyes, that would generally be inlaid with semi-precious stones. But only one eye has any inlay in it. And in that case, it's a temporary material, even wax, and so not the kind of quality one would expect in a full-fledged sculpture for the queen.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Art historians have discovered through scientific analysis that she's made not just of painted limestone but limestone that's been covered with a very, very thin layer of plaster. And that enabled the sculptor to achieve really subtle effects modeling her face.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: But then the neck and the headdress plaster gets much thicker, and it would have been much easier to work and create that very fine detail on the plaster rather than the coarser material of the limestone core.

DR. BETH HARRIS: And that's so important where we see the lines, very subtle movement around her cheeks. What's so remarkable about the sculpture is how sensitively carved she is, how we really get a sense of skin and bone and these lovely movements around her face.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: She's tremendously elegant, but even beyond the simple elegance of the contours of her face, her high cheekbones, the shallow of her cheeks.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Her long neck.



Figure **7.6.9**: Thutmose, *Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Beautiful symmetry. A way in which line is unified throughout the entire portrait bust. For instance, follow the lines downward that are constructed by the contours of her headdress that tapers as it moves towards her chin. So her face and headdress create a perfect triangle. But that's actually continued by the lines of her neck below her chin. And it's accentuated by the lighting in this museum. But it really does create this sense of continuity from the top of the sculpture to its base.

DR. BETH HARRIS: What we're describing is a new ideal of beauty that's really different from the tradition of ancient Egyptian sculpture. And that's because Nefertiti was the wife of the pharaoh Akhenaten, who established a new religion in ancient Egypt

which was monotheistic instead of the traditional polytheistic religion. And with that, he created a new ideal of beauty that we see in the sculptures that were created during his reign.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: That's right. I think we see this sculpture really as a perfect exemplar. Nefertiti is especially interesting because we believe she did not simply function as the wife of the pharaoh. She is shown in so many portraits with the accoutrements of the ruler that we think that she actually shared power.

DR. BETH HARRIS: It's interesting, this period that we call the Amarna period of Akhenaten's reign, where we have two powerful women– his mother, Tiye, and his wife, Nefertiti.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Both represented as beautiful women, as powerful women, and giving us a kind of insight into late Egyptian culture.

Backstory, by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

In 2009, the refurbished Neues Museum in Berlin celebrated its reopening, with the bust of Nefertiti prominently displayed as one of its main attractions. The celebration coincided with one of the Egyptian government's repeated pleas for the official return of the bust to Egypt. The museum has staunchly refused to give up the sculpture, asserting that the bust was acquired legally by the German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt in 1912. Borchardt had excavated it along with several other objects from the studio of the ancient Egyptian sculptor Thutmose, and had brought his finds to Germany as part of an agreement with the Egyptian Antiquities Service. While there is no proof that Borchardt's dealings were explicitly illegal, as early as 1925, the Egyptian government began to take issue with Germany's possession of valuable antiquities. They began imposing sanctions, and the bust has been the source of tension between the two nations ever since.

This controversy relates to a general growing public awareness about the provenance—and politics—of antiquities held in European and American museums. In 2016, Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, two artists from Germany, made a bold statement about these issues by staging an event they called "NefertitiHack." They secretly mapped the sculpture using a consumer-grade 3-D scanning device, and then released the data openly under a Creative Commons license. The artists' intention was "to inspire a critical reassessment of today's conditions and to overcome the colonial notion of possession in Germany," according to their website.

Many groups have advocated for using digitally-produced replicas either as stand-ins for objects that are returned to their places of origin, or vice versa—as ways of offering highly accurate replicas in place of the originals. The sharing of data between institutions and groups who lay claim to objects has also been suggested as a way to ease tensions over restitution. Nelles and al-Badri's project is a critical statement about the growing questions around repatriation and public access to objects via 3-D models and other data, as the Neues Museum does not allow photography or publicly share its own 3-D model of the bust.

Nora al-Badri, one of the artists behind NefertitiHack, stated:

> "The head of Nefertiti represents all the other millions of stolen and looted artifacts all over the world currently happening, for example, in Syria, Iraq, and in Egypt…Archaeological artifacts as a cultural memory originate for the most part from the Global South; however, a vast number of important objects can be found in Western museums and private collections. We should face the fact that the colonial structures continue to exist today and still produce their inherent symbolic struggles."

Over a century after it was excavated, the bust of Nefertiti remains a flashpoint for institutions and the public, driving us to consider the ways in which objects and their data are acquired, displayed, and shared.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "*House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters*," in *Smarthistory*, December 6, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "*Portrait Head of Queen Tiye*," in *Smarthistory*, December 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "Thutmose, *Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti*," in *Smarthistory*, December 6, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.7: New Kingdom, resumed

Tutankhamun's tomb (innermost coffin and death mask)

by Dr. Elizabeth Cummins

Nearly lost to history



Figure **7.7.1**: Harry Burton, Howard Carter with innermost coffin of Tutankhamun, 1922. (Photo: Tutankhamun Archive, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, via Smarthistory)

Tutankhamun was only the age of nine when he became king of Egypt during the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1332–1323 BCE). His story would have been lost to history if it were not for the discovery of his tomb in 1922 by the archaeologist Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings (Figure **7.7.1**). His nearly intact tomb held a wealth of objects that give us unique insights into this period of ancient Egyptian history.

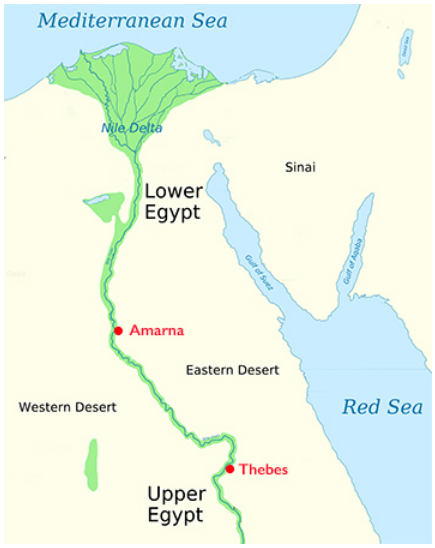


Figure **7.7.2**: Map of Ancient Egypt (modified). (Map: Original image by Jeff Dahl, via Smarthistory)

Tutankhamun ruled after the Amarna age, when the pharaoh Akhenaten, Tutankhamun's probable father, turned the religious attention of the kingdom to the worship of the god Aten, the sun disc. Akhenaten moved his capital city to the site of Akhetaten (also known as Amarna), in Middle Egypt—far from the previous pharaoh's capital. After Akhenaten's death and the rule of a short-lived pharaoh, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamen shifted the focus of the country's worship back to the god Amun and returned the religious center back to Thebes.

Tutankhamun married his half-sister, Ankhesenamun, but they did not produce an heir. This left the line of succession unclear. Tutankhamun died at the young age of eighteen, leading many scholars to speculate on the manner of his death—chariot accident, murder by blow to the head, and even a hippopotamus attack! The answer is still unclear. Tutankhamun's much-older advisor (and possible step-grandfather), Ay, married the widowed Ankhesenamun and became pharaoh.



Figure **7.7.3**: Lord Carnarvon with Carter during his initial visit to the tomb, 1922. (Photo: Keystone Press Agency Ltd., 1922, via Smarthistory)

During the early twentieth century, Howard Carter, a British Egyptologist, excavated for many years in the Valley of the Kings—a royal burial ground located on the west bank of the ancient city of Thebes. He was running out of money to support his archaeological digs when he asked for funding for one more season from his financial backer, the fifth Earl of Carnarvon. Lord Carnarvon granted him one more year—and what a year it was!

At the beginning of November 1922, Carter came upon the first of twelve steps of the entrance that led to the tomb of Tutankhamun. He quickly recovered the steps and sent a telegram to Carnarvon in England so they could open the tomb together. Carnarvon departed for Egypt immediately and on November 26, 1922, they made a hole in the entrance of the antechamber in order to look in. Carter states:

> *At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the lights, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold. [1]*

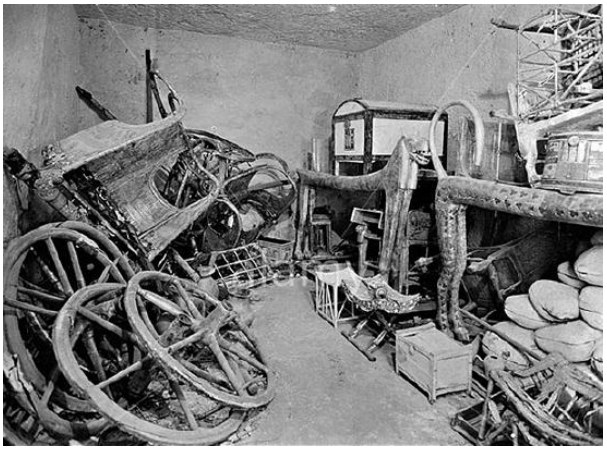


Figure **7.7.4**: Harry Burton, View of tomb interior, 1922. (Photo: Tutankhamun Archive, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, via Smarthistory)

The task of cataloging the finds was an immense undertaking for the team. Carter spent a decade systematically recording the finds and having them photographed.

The innermost coffin

Tutankhamun's sarcophagus (a box-like stone container) held not one but three coffins in which to hold the body of the king. The outer two coffins were crafted in wood and covered in gold along with many semiprecious stones, such as lapis lazuli and turquoise. The inner coffin, however, was made of solid gold. When Howard Carter first came upon this coffin, it was not the shiny golden image we see in the Egyptian museum today (Figure **7.7.5**). In his excavation notes, Carter states, it was "covered with a thick black pitch-like layer which extended from the hands down to the ankles (top image). This was obviously an anointing liquid which had been poured over the coffin during the burial ceremony and in great quantity (some two buckets full)." [2]



Figure **7.7.5**: Tutankhamun's tomb, innermost coffin, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323 BCE. Gold with inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The image of the pharaoh is that of a god. The gods were thought to have skin of gold, bones of silver, and hair of lapis lazuli—so the king is shown here in his divine form in the afterlife. He holds the crook and flail, symbols of the king's right to rule. The goddesses Nekhbet (vulture) and Wadjet (cobra), inlaid with semiprecious stones, stretch their wings across his torso. Beneath these goddesses are two more—Isis and Nephthys—etched into the gold lid.



Figure **7.7.6**: Death Mask from innermost coffin, Tutankhamun's tomb, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323 BCE. Gold with inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The death mask of Tutankhamun

The death mask (Figure **7.7.6**) is considered one of the masterpieces of Egyptian art. It originally rested directly on the shoulders of the mummy inside the innermost gold coffin. It is constructed of two sheets of gold that were hammered together and weighs 22.5 pounds (10.23 kg). Tutankhamen is depicted wearing the striped nemes headdress (the striped head-cloth typically worn by pharaohs in ancient Egypt) with the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet depicted again protecting his brow. He also wears a false beard that further connects him to the image of a god as with the inner coffin. He wears a broad collar, which ends in terminals shaped as

falcon heads. The back of the mask is covered with Spell 151b from the Book of the Dead, which the Egyptians used as a road map for the afterlife. This particular spell protects the various limbs of Tutankhamun as he moves into the underworld.

Notes

[1] Howard Carter and A. C. Mace, *The Tomb of Tut-ankh-amen* (New York City: Cooper Square Publishers. 1933), (vol. 1) pp. 95–96.

[2] N. Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), pp. 108–109.

Hunefer's Judgement in the presence of Osiris

by The British Museum

Hunefer: An ancient Egyptian official

Hunefer and his wife Nasha lived during the Nineteenth Dynasty, in around 1310 BCE. He was a "Royal Scribe" and "Scribe of Divine Offerings." He was also "Overseer of Royal Cattle," and the steward of King Sety I. These titles indicate that he held prominent administrative offices and would have been close to the king. The location of his tomb is not known, but he may have been buried at Memphis.

Hunefer's high status is reflected in the fine quality of his Book of the Dead, which was specially produced for him. This, and a Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figure, inside which the papyrus was found, are the only objects which can be ascribed to Hunefer. The papyrus of Hunefer is characterized by its good state of preservation and the large, and clear vignettes (illustrations) are beautifully drawn and painted. The vignette illustrating the "Opening of the Mouth" ritual is one of the most famous pieces of papyrus in The British Museum collection, and gives a great deal of information about this part of the funeral.

"Opening of the Mouth" ritual

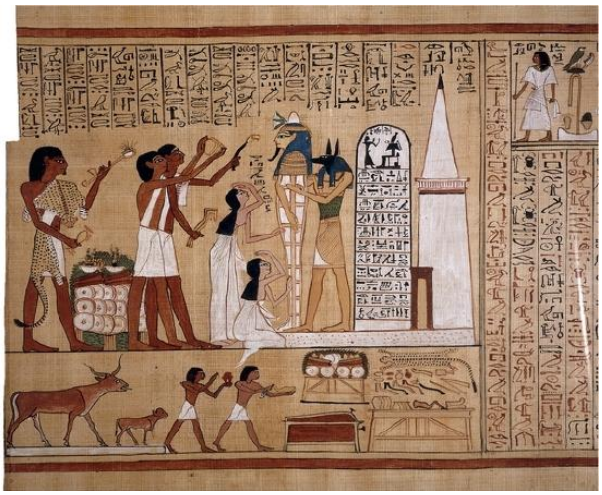


Figure **7.7.7**: "Opening of the Mouth" ritual. Page from the *Book of the Dead* of Hunefer, Thebes, Egypt, c. 1275 BCE. 45.7 x 83.4 cm (frame). (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The centerpiece of the upper scene is the mummy of Hunefer, shown supported by the god Anubis (or a priest wearing a jackal mask). Hunefer's wife and daughter mourn, and three priests perform rituals. The two priests with white sashes are carrying out the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The white building at the right is a representation of the tomb, complete with portal doorway and small pyramid. Both these features can be seen in real tombs of this date from Thebes. To the left of the tomb is a picture of the stela which would have stood to one side of the tomb entrance. Following the normal conventions of Egyptian art, it is shown much larger than normal size, in order that its content (the deceased worshipping Osiris, together with a standard offering formula) is absolutely legible.

At the right of the lower scene is a table bearing the various implements needed for the Opening of the Mouth ritual. At the left is shown a ritual, where the foreleg of a calf, cut off while the animal is alive, is offered. The animal was then sacrificed. The calf is shown together with its mother, who might be interpreted as showing signs of distress.

Hunefer’s Judgement in the presence of Osiris



Figure **7.7.8**: "Hunefer's Judgement in the present of Osiris." Page from the *Book of the Dead* of Hunefer. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The scene reads from left to right. To the left, Anubis brings Hunefer into the judgement area. Anubis is also shown supervising the judgement scales. Hunefer’s heart, represented as a pot, is being weighed against a feather, the symbol of Maat, the established order of things, in this context meaning ‘what is right’. The ancient Egyptians believed that the heart was the seat of the emotions, the intellect and the character, and thus represented the good or bad aspects of a person’s life. If the heart did not balance with the feather, then the dead person was condemned to non-existence, and consumption by the ferocious “devourer,” the strange beast shown here which is part-crocodile, part-lion, and part-hippopotamus.

However, as a papyrus devoted to ensuring Hunefer’s continued existence in the Afterlife is not likely to depict this outcome, he is shown to the right, brought into the presence of Osiris by his son Horus, having become “true of voice” or “justified.” This was a standard epithet applied to dead individuals in their texts. Osiris is shown seated under a canopy, with his sisters Isis and Nephthys. At the top, Hunefer is shown adoring a row of deities who supervise the judgement.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Elizabeth Cummins, "Tutankhamun’s tomb (innermost coffin and death mask)," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "*Hunefer’s Judgement in the presence of Osiris*," in *Smarthistory*, December 11, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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7.8: Ancient Nubia and the Kingdom of Kush

Ancient Nubia and the Kingdom of Kush, an introduction

by The British Museum

The first settlers in northern Sudan date back 300,000 years. It is home to the oldest sub-Saharan African kingdom, the kingdom of Kush (about 2500–1500 BCE). This culture produced some of the most beautiful pottery in the Nile valley, including Kerma beakers.

Sudan was coveted for its rich natural resources particularly gold, ebony and ivory. Several objects in the British Museum collection are made of these materials. Ancient Egyptians were attracted southward seeking these resources during the Old Kingdom (about 2686–2181 BCE), which often led to conflict as Egyptian and Sudanese rulers sought to control trade.



Figure **7.8.1**: Map of Kush and Ancient Egypt, showing the Nile up to the fifth cataract, and major cities and sites of the ancient Egyptian Dynastic period, c. 3150 BCE to 30 BCE. (Map: Jeff Dahl, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Kush was the most powerful state in the Nile valley around 1700 BCE. Conflict between Egypt and Kush followed, culminating in the conquest of Kush by Thutmose I (1504–1492 BCE). In the west and south, Neolithic cultures remained as both areas were beyond the reach of the Egyptian rulers.

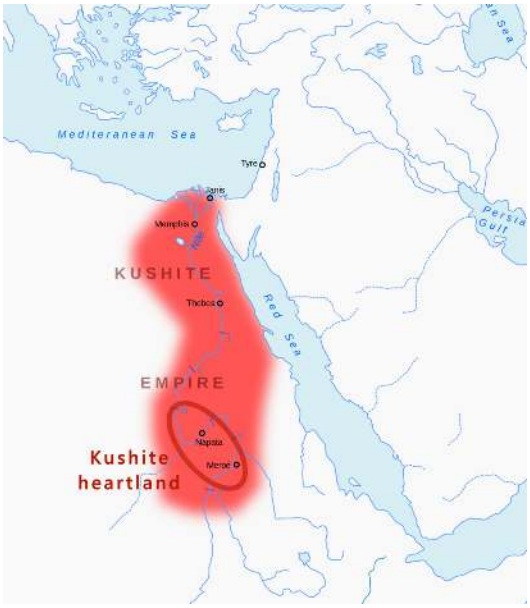


Figure **7.8.2**: Map showing Kushite heartland and Kushite Empire of the 25th dynasty, c. 700 BCE. (Map via Smarthistory)

Egypt withdrew in the eleventh century BCE and the Sudanese kings grew powerful. They invaded Egypt and ruled as Pharaohs (about 747–656 BCE). At its greatest, their empire united the Nile valley from Khartoum to the Mediterranean. King Taharqo's sphinx remains a testament to Kushite power and authority.

The Kushites were expelled from Egypt by the Assyrians, but their kingdom flourished in Sudan for another thousand years. Their monuments and art display a rich combination of Pharaonic, Greco-Roman and indigenous African traditions which may be seen in the chapel relief of Queen Shanakdhakete (Figure **7.8.18**) and *aegis* of Isis in the Museum collection.

Kerma ware pottery beaker



Figure **7.8.3**: Kerma ware pottery beaker, from Kerma, Sudan, c. 1750–1550 BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The cultures of Kerma flourished between about 2500 and 1500 BCE. Their most distinctive products were ceramics. The potters were able to produce incredibly fine vessels by hand, without using a wheel. The pot shown in Figure **7.8.3** belongs to the so-called 'Classic Kerma' phase, from around 1750 to around 1550 BCE. Classic Kerma pottery is characterized by a black top and a rich red-brown base, separated by an irregular purple-grey band. The black tops and interiors are usually extremely fine and have a distinctive metallic lustrous appearance.

Kerma remained independent during Egypt's initial forays into Sudan. This situation changed after 1500 BCE, when the Egyptians defeated the Kushites and began to administer the area via their representative, the 'Viceroy of Kush', based at Kerma.

Black polished incised ware cup



Figure 7.8.4: Black polished incised ware cup, Late C-Group Culture, from Cemetery 2 at Faras, Sudan, 1700–1500 BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The handmade pottery produced by C-Group craftsmen is highly distinctive. Although some forms are comparable to Egyptian types of the same period, others are quite different. These show a strong African influence.

This cup (Figure 7.8.4) has features characteristic of the African-influenced group known as 'polished incised ware.' The cup has a round bottom and is bowl-shaped, though it is small enough to be considered a cup. Vessels of this shape were probably designed to hold food and drink. The African influence is shown most clearly in the cup's decoration. The exterior is incised with diamonds filled in with cross hatching, perhaps derived from designs used in basket work. Other motifs include herringbone patterns and other geometric shapes of smooth and incised areas.

The incised decoration was applied to the pot before the clay was dry. The vessel was fired to leave a black or sometimes a red finish, which was highly polished. Finally, white pigment was rubbed into the incisions to make the pattern stand out. The remains of the white pigment can be seen in some areas on this cup, but most is now lost.

Sesebi and Egyptian domination



Figure 7.8.5: Perfume jar, found in a cemetery in Sesebi, southern Nubia (Sudan), 18th dynasty 13 cm. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

This beautiful vase (Figure 7.8.5) was found in a plundered part of the cemetery at Sesebi in southern Nubia. It is an excellent example of the use of faience in a color other than blue. Decoration has been added to the cream body in blue and black, in the form of two friezes of lotus petals at the base and neck, with lotus buds hanging down; the vase itself is in the shape of a lotus bud.

From around 1560 until 1070 BCE, the Egyptians took possession of all Nubian lands as far as the Fourth Cataract of the Nile. The newly won land was divided into two territories: Wawat in the north and Kush in the south. Resources were intensively exploited by the Egyptian empire. Many native inhabitants were recruited into Egyptian armies or employed as laborers on Egyptian civil and religious estates.

New towns and temples were built during the period of Egyptian domination, including Sesebi, founded during Akhenaten's reign (1352–1336 BCE). Many Nubians embraced the language, religion and forms of aesthetic expression of their overlords. This vase shows strong Egyptian influence in shape and style; to ancient Egyptians the lotus was symbolic of rebirth and new life.

A powerful Kushite dynasty emerges

The Egyptians withdrew from Sudan around 1070 BCE, and by the ninth century a second powerful Kushite dynasty had emerged there. Taking advantage of instability and political disunity in Egypt, the Kushite king Kashta extended his control to Thebes in Egypt by the mid-eighth century B.C.E. His successor Piankhi (Piye) achieved complete control of the Egyptian Nile valley by around 716 BCE. He and his three successors, Shabaqo, Taharqo and Tamwetamani, were acknowledged as the legitimate sovereigns of Egypt, forming the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Their capital was the important religious centre of Napata, near the Fourth Cataract of the Nile.

Kushite control of Egypt ended when Assyrian forces invaded between 674 and 663 BCE, but Kush remained a major power in Sudan for over a thousand years. After 300 BCE, the Kushite rulers were buried at Meroe in a fertile grassland region northeast of Khartoum. Meroe became the centre of a flourishing economy and developed commercial links with the Mediterranean world. Art and architecture displayed Egyptian influence, but archaeology also points to a growth of local traditions. A strong local element was apparent in religion, with Nubian deities such as the lion-headed Apedemak appearing alongside the Egyptian Amun, Osiris and Isis. The Kushite dynasty ended around 350 CE.

Ornamental head of a goddess, possibly Isis



Figure **7.8.6**: *Aegis of Isis*, Kushite, from Kawa, Sudan, late 3rd century BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory) The large eyes are typical of Kushite art and the piece bears a cartouche of the Kushite ruler Arnekhamani (235–218 BCE).

The term *aegis* is used in Egyptology to describe a broad collar surmounted by the head of a deity, in this case a goddess, possibly Isis (Figure **7.8.6**). Representations in temples show that these objects decorated the sacred boats in which deities were carried in procession during festivals. An *aegis* was mounted at the prow and another at the stern. The head of the deity identified the occupant of the boat and it is likely that this example came from a sacred boat of Isis.

The eyes and eyebrows of the goddess were originally inlaid. The large eyes, further emphasized by the inlay, are typical of later Kushite art. The rectangular hole in her forehead once held the *uraeus*, which identified her as a goddess. The surviving part of her head-dress consists of a vulture—the wing feathers can be seen below her ears. The vulture head-dress was originally worn by the goddess Mut, consort of Amun of Thebes, but became common for all goddesses. The rest of the head-dress for this *aegis* was cast separately and is now lost, but would have consisted of a sun disc and cow's horns. The piece bears a cartouche of the Kushite ruler Arnekhamani (reigned about 235–218 BCE), the builder of the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra.



Figure 7.8.7: Granite shabti of King Taharqa, from the pyramid of Taharqa at Nuri, Nubia, 25th Dynasty, 664 BCE. 40.6 cm high. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The early Kushite kings were buried on beds placed on stone platforms in the tombs under their pyramids. These structures were based on the pyramids of Egyptian private tombs of the New Kingdom (about 1550–1070 BCE), but the style of burial was entirely Kushite. King Taharqo (690–664 BCE) introduced more Egyptian elements to the burial, such as mummification, coffins and sarcophagi of Egyptian origin, as well as the provision of *shabti* figures such as the one in Figure 7.8.7. These figures were in the style of the Middle and New Kingdoms, the era that the Kushites considered the height of Egyptian culture. The use of stone and the rugged features of these large shabtis are characteristic of early examples.

During period of Kushite control of Egypt, the kings resided mainly at Memphis, and Kushite princesses were appointed to the religious office of 'God's Wife of Amun'. The Twenty-fifth Dynasty rulers—Piankhi, Shabaqo, Taharqo and Tamwetamani—brought much-needed stability to Egypt, which had been divided into small areas and governed by local dynasts. Art, architecture and religious learning were revived and Taharqo in particular was an active builder, constructing a number of temples in both Egypt and Nubia. However, it was during Taharqo's reign that Assyrian invasions forced the Kushites out of Egypt. Control was regained by his successor Tamwetamani (664-656 BCE) but quickly lost again.

One of the longest known monumental texts in Meroitic

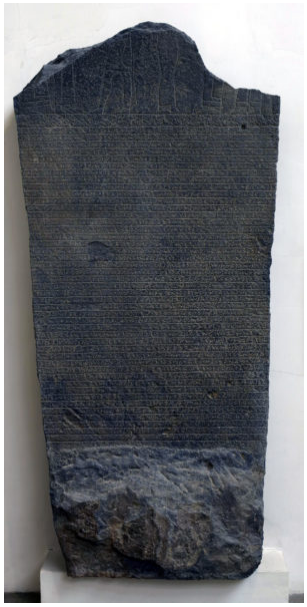


Figure 7.8.8: Meroitic stele, from Hamadab, Sudan, Kushite period, about 24 BCE. 236.5 cm high. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

This stele (Figure 7.8.8) is one of a pair found at Hamadab a few kilometers south of Meroe in Sudan, the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Kush. They stood either side of the main doorway into a temple.



Figure 7.8.9: Kushite rulers Queen Amanirenas and Prince Akinidad (detail), Meroitic stele, from Hamadab, Sudan, Kushite period, about 24 BCE. 236.5 cm high. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

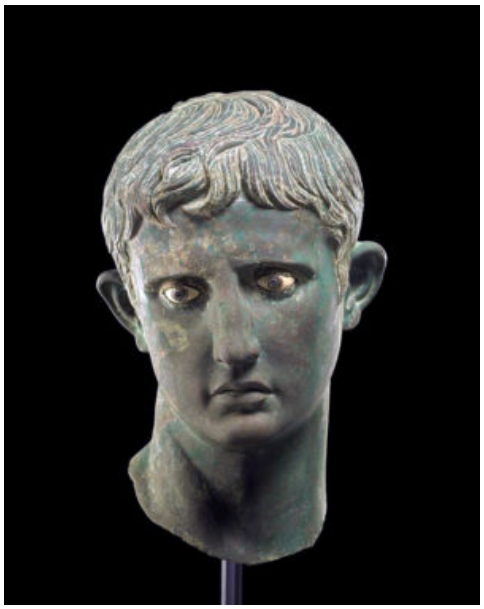
At the top of the stele (Figure 7.8.9) are the remains of a relief panel depicting the Kushite rulers Queen Amanirenas and Prince Akinidad. On the left they are shown facing a god, probably Amun, whilst on the right they are facing a goddess, probably Mut. Below this is a frieze depicting bound prisoners.



Figure **7.8.10**: Meroitic stele, from Hamadab, Sudan, Kushite period, about 24 BCE. 236.5 cm high. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

An inscription in Meroitic cursive script is carved on the lower part of the stele (Figure **7.8.10**). Meroitic was the indigenous language of the Kingdom of Kush. It is one of the few ancient languages yet to be deciphered. The alphabet consisted of 15 consonants, four vowels and four syllabic characters, but the meaning of the words is not known. In this inscription, the names of Amanirenas and Akinidad are recognizable. It is thought that Amanirenas was the Kushite ruler during the Kushite conflicts against the Romans in the late first century BCE. This inscription may commemorate a Kushite raid on Roman Egypt in 24 BCE.

A number of Roman imperial statues were taken during this raid, possibly including a bronze head of Augustus (Figure **7.8.11**) which was found in Meroë and is now held in the Museum's collection.



: Head of Augustus, from Meroë, Sudan, c. 27–25 BCE. Bronze, 46.20 x 26.5 cm. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

King Piye and the Kushite control of Egypt

by The British Museum

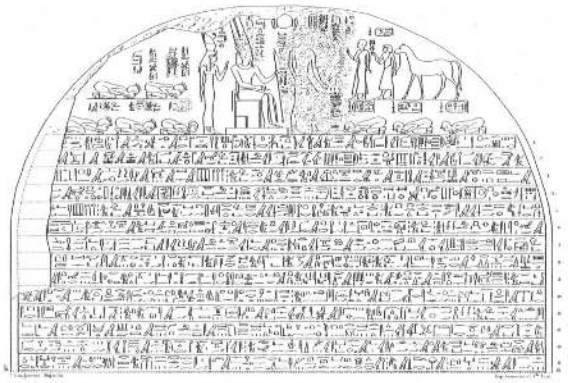


Figure 7.8.12: Drawing of the upper part of the victory stele of pharaoh Piye, found at Jebel Barkal and datable to the reign of Piye, 25th dynasty. Granite. Cairo Museum, Egypt. (Image via Smarthistory) The lunette on the top depicts Piye being tributed by various Lower Egypt rulers, and the text describes his successful invasion of Egypt.

Who was king Piye?

Piye, also called Piankhy (747–716 BCE) and Kushite ruler of the Napatan period, laid the foundations for the Twenty-fifth Dynasty of Egypt (747–656 BCE). He seized control of Upper Egypt within the first decade of his reign, and his sister Amenirdis I was adopted by Shepenwepet I as the next God's Wife of Amun, thus acquiring Theban territories previously controlled by Osorkon III. In 728 BCE, when Tefnakht, the prince of Sais, created an alliance of Delta rulers to counter the growing Nubian threat, Piye swept northwards and defeated the northern coalition. His successful campaign is described on his victory stela.



Figure 7.8.13: Pyramid K.1, at El-Kurru, south of Jebel Barkal, North Sudan, 4th century BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In 716 BCE Piye died after a reign of over thirty years. He was buried in an Egyptian style pyramid tomb at El-Kurru (Figure 7.8.13), accompanied by a number of horses, which were greatly prized by the Nubians of the Napatan period. Piye was succeeded by his brother Shabako (716–702 BCE) who re-conquered Egypt and took full pharaonic titles, establishing himself as the ruler of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty of all Egypt.

An Egyptian textile that tells of a Kushite king



Figure **7.8.14**: Textile with names of King Piye near the fringed edge, from Thebes, Egypt, 25th Dynasty, around 712 BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Vast quantities of linen were used in the daily rituals of Egyptian temples. Some of this linen was donated, often inscribed with the name of the donor. This piece of high quality linen (Figure **7.8.14**) was donated by the Kushite king Piye to a temple of Amun-Re, possibly at Karnak. A column of inscription, close to the fringed edge of the cloth, gives the king's titles and a year date, presumably the year of king Piye's reign.



Figure **7.8.15**: Textile with names of King Piye (detail), from Thebes, Egypt, 25th Dynasty, around 712 BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The year date is fragmentary. Two symbols for the number '10' survive, indicating that the date must be higher than Year 20. The most likely reading of the group is 'Year 30', but 'Year 40' has also been proposed. In either case, this is the highest known year of reign for this king.

The relatively good condition of the cloth suggests that it found its way into a tomb. Food offerings in temples were returned to the priests once the gods had magically taken what they wanted. The same was the case for other items used in everyday cult activities.

When linen cloths became too old to use, they could be given to priests for their burials, although some might have been given directly to favored officials by the king.

Objects that speak to the Kushite royal family

This hinge (Figure **7.8.16**)is of massive proportions, and probably belonged to one of the many monumental doorways of a Theban temple. Although there are extensive remains of the stone parts of these structures, little remains of the door and doorway furniture and fittings, which were often taken down and reused.



Figure **7.8.16**: Bronze door hinge bearing names of God's wives of Amun, inscribed with the names of Amenirdis I and Shepenwepet II, from Egypt, 25th–26th Dynasty, 760–650 BCE. (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The hinge is inscribed with the names of Amenirdis I and Shepenwepet II, both of whom successively held the office of God's Wife of Amun. Amenirdis was the sister of King Piye, who was the first major ruler in Egypt of the Kushite Dynasty (referred to as the Twenty-fifth Dynasty). He installed his sister in this important religious office in order to maintain control of the southern region of Egypt, administered from Thebes. The holder of the office was celibate, and the successor was adopted by the current holder. Amenirdis adopted Piye's daughter, her own niece, Shepenwepet II.

The names of the women appear in cartouches because they were considered to be the spouses of the god, and also because they were members of the Kushite royal family. The name of Piye, in the central cartouche, has been deliberately erased. This was probably done during the twenty-sixth dynasty when native Egyptian rule was restored.

King Taharqa introduced more Egyptian elements to burial

Egypt was brought partially under Kushite domination by Piye (reigned about 747–716 BCE). On his commemorative stele he claims that he was acting with the blessing of the god Amun to restore order to the country. At the time, Egypt was politically divided into small areas, governed by local dynasts who often styled themselves as kings.

It was the ambition of Piye and his successors to restore Egypt to greatness. Unfortunately, their intervention in political affairs in Palestine brought Egypt to the attention of the Assyrian empire. King Taharqa (690-664 BCE) eventually lost Egypt to the Assyrians. The country was regained only briefly by his successor Tanutamun (664–656 BCE).

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Meroitic period of the Kingdom of Kush

by The British Museum

Ancient Sudan: The Meroitic Period (about 300 BCE–350 CE)

The Meroitic period, the later phase of rule by the Kushite kings, is named after the royal burial ground at Meroe. In the third century BCE, the royal cemetery was moved there from Napata, though Meroe had long been one of the major centers of the Kushite state. This move broadly coincided with the arrival of Greek culture in Egypt, following the country's conquest by Alexander the Great. The resulting Greco-Egyptian culture rapidly influenced the Kingdom of Kush giving its later phases a distinctive character. This was in contrast to the preceding Napatan period, which was influenced by the Pharaonic culture. The

Kushite kingdom prospered, its rulers and the elite deriving wealth from control of the trade routes along the Nile valley from Central Africa to Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.

Throughout the Meroitic period Egyptian elements introduced into Kushite royal burial practices under the early Napatan kings were retained and reinterpreted. The sculpture and architecture of the period shows much influence from the Greek and the Greco-Roman world. The fine pottery decorated with geometric forms and floral and animal motifs shows a similar influence. Monumental inscriptions were traditionally written in the hieroglyphic script but, from the second century BCE onwards, the use of the native language of the Kushite Kingdom, Meroitic, became common. Although some words in Meroitic can be translated, its meaning remains largely unknown to us.

First female ruler of the Meroitic Period



Figure 7.8.18: Red sandstone relief from the pyramid chapel of Queen Shanakdakhete, from Meroe, Central Sudan, Meroitic Period, 2nd century BCE. 244 x 455.5 cm. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The royal cemetery at Meroe has given the name ‘Meroitic’ to the later stages of rule by the Kushite kings. The Meroitic script has been deciphered, but the language is still not fully understood. This wall (Figure **7.8.18**) comes from one of the small steep-sided pyramids with chapels in which the rulers were buried. It was probably that of Queen Shanakdakhete, the first female ruler. She appears here enthroned with a prince, and protected by a winged Isis. In front of her are rows of offering bearers and also scenes of rituals including the judgement of the queen before Osiris. Although the reliefs are in a style that looks Egyptian, they have their own, independently developed, characteristics.

The term ‘Kush’ or ‘Kushite’ was used long before the eighth century BCE to refer to Nubian ruling powers. But it is particularly used to describe the cultures whose first major contact with Egypt began with the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, and whose Nubian kings put an end to the fragmented state of Egypt by 715 BCE. However, Kushite rule did not last long in Egypt. In the face of Assyrian attack, the last Kushite kings, Taharqa and Tanutamun, fled to Nubia. There they and their descendants were dominant until the fourth century CE, and were buried at el-Kurru, Nuri, Gebel Barkal, and Meroe.

The spirit of a wealthy woman

The Egyptians believed that a person’s essence or soul was composed of several elements. These became separated at death. The *ba* was one of the elements of the spirit, which encompassed the personality and emotions. It stayed close to the body of the deceased and was eventually reunited with other elements, to live eternally in the Afterlife.

In Egyptian art, the *ba* is chiefly represented on funerary papyri. These representations were intended to enable the deceased’s entry into the Afterlife. In a funerary context, the *ba* in its form of a human-headed bird was retained in the Meroitic period. However, the style, the material used, and the location of representations was entirely different from earlier depictions. A stone statue like the one in Figure **7.8.19** would have been placed outside the tomb chapel of a wealthy individual, in this case a woman.



Figure 7.8.19: Sandstone *ba* statue of a woman, from Egypt, Meroitic Period, 2nd century CE. 45.8 cm high. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The reduction of the body to its essential details perhaps reflects a continental African influence. This example shows the *ba* in a female human form, wearing a long dress, but with wings instead of arms. The emphasis on the eyes is typical of later Meroitic sculpture, but the Egyptian origins of the statue can be seen in their almond shape and heavy outline.

Offering tables with Meroitic script



: Sandstone offering table of Malewitar, from Faras, Sudan, Meroitic Period, 1st–2nd centuries CE. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Meroitic offering tables tend to be roughly square in shape, with a central depression for holding liquids. Some examples, such as the one in Figure 7.8.20, bear representations of the food which would be placed on the table, while others have figured decoration. Around the outside is an inscription which names of the owner and gives his parentage.

The Meroitic language is written in two scripts, one derived from hieroglyphs and the other a more cursive form, as here. Although the sound-values of the signs are known, insufficient material for comparison, especially bilingual inscriptions or related languages that are understood, has been found to enable the language to be analyzed or translated properly. Thus names can mostly be read, but the longer inscriptions largely defy interpretation.

Fineware vessels



Figure 7.8.21: Fineware painted cups, from Faras, Sudan, Meroitic Period, 1st to 2nd century CE. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Meroitic graves often included fragile bowls, jars and cups. The fine quality of the manufacture and decoration of these vessels (Figure 7.8.21) suggests that they were the prized possessions of the deceased, who wanted to continue to enjoy them in the Afterlife.

Although the vessels themselves were of local manufacture, the designs were often inspired by the artistic traditions of other countries, such as Egypt and the Mediterranean world. Symbols such as the *ankh* were borrowed from Egypt, as were the lotus and papyrus plants. Although still recognizable, the Meroitic artists interpreted them in their own way, often producing a geometric pattern, which would be unfamiliar to their Egyptian counterparts.

Other motifs, such as animals like frogs, snakes and fantastic beasts, were drawn from the Mediterranean world. The origin of the boat design on this cup is less clear. The tall prow and stern of the vessel, and the stick figure inside is reminiscent of the decoration of Egyptian pots in the Predynastic period, three thousand years earlier. The resemblance ends here though, and is purely coincidental.

A transcultural amphora



Figure 7.8.22: Red slipped amphora decorated with vine leaves and ducks in black and white, from Faras, Sudan, Meroitic Period, 1st to 2nd centuries CE. 43 cm high. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Fineware bowls, cups and jars were often placed in Meroitic graves, to be used by the deceased in the Afterlife. Like the fragile fineware vessels, this amphora (Figure 7.8.22) is covered in a red slip upon which the painted decoration is applied in bands, using a basic palette of black, red and white. A picture of the vessel itself appears on the neck of the amphora.

The decorative motifs are derived from those of Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt, from about the third to the first century BCE. The combination of geometric, floral and animal motifs is typical of pottery of this period. It shows the influence of the Mediterranean world, which was becoming ever more pronounced as Egypt came under the domination of the Greeks, and then the Romans. The running vine leaves continued to be a popular motif into the Coptic period, appearing on pottery until the Arab conquest in the seventh century CE.

Animal motifs were common in the art of the Mediterranean world. The ducks at the base of this vessel could have been observed from local wildlife. They could also be derived from Egyptian art, in which they were frequently depicted, or copied from hieroglyphic symbols.

Articles in this section:

- The British Museum, "Meroitic period of the Kingdom of Kush," in *Smarthistory*, March 9, 2021 (© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "Ancient Nubia and the Kingdom of Kush, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, February 24, 2021 (© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "King Piye and the Kushite control of Egypt," in *Smarthistory*, March 11, 2021 (© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: The Ancient Aegean

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8.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: An Ancient Shipwreck Offers Historical Insight

In 1982, local sponge divers off the coast of Kas, Turkey, found and reported fragments from a shipwreck that appeared to be extremely old. They didn't know it at the time, but the discovery would prove to be incredibly valuable—and not just because of the ship's luxurious cargo, which included ebony, ivory, jewelry, cosmetics boxes, and gold-adorned bronze figurines, in addition to copper, tin, glass, wood, and a variety of food products (Figure **8.0.1**). The still-intact parts of the ship provided insight into the construction of ancient sailing vessels, including of the kind that might have been used in historic and legendary battles such as the Trojan War. Even more than that, the ship—which archaeologists date to sometime in the 14th century BCE, during the Bronze Age—shows a robust trade network between the cultures surrounding the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Known as the Uluburun Shipwreck, after the rocky Cape of Ulu Burun, where it sank without capsizing, the ship was excavated in 1984. Tens of thousands of dives brought up more than 17 tons of artifacts and valuable cargo, finished goods and raw materials from a variety of different regions. Archaeologists believe that the ship was on its way to Greece or western Turkey, carrying cargo from Syria, and with a stop in Cyprus (as evidenced by the copper ingots).



Figure **8.0.1**: Jewelry from the Uluburun shipwreck, late 14th century BCE. 1. gold disk-shaped pendant 2. gold falcon pendant 3. gold goddess pendant 4. faience beads 5. rock crystal beads 6. agate beads 7. faience beads 8. ostrich eggshell beads 9. silver bracelets 10. gold scrap 11. gold chalice 12. accreted mass of tiny faience beads 13. silver scrap. Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, Bodrum, Turkey. (Photo: Georges Jansoone [Jojan], CC BY-SA 3.0)

Thinking about the cross-cultural mix of international cargo on board, this sunken ship is also quite literally a cultural time capsule, capturing a distinct moment in time and helping to paint an interconnected history that is often overlooked and overshadowed by simplified historical timelines. As John Noble Wilford points out, this shipwreck occurred "approximately when Tutakhamen sat on the throne of Egypt, Troy flourished in Asia Minor and a brisk seagoing trade was conducted out of Syrian and Canaanite, or early Phoenician, ports." The mix of artifacts aboard this vessel help to physically illustrate not only the overlapping cultures that existed contemporaneously, but also the ways in which these people could have interacted and traded.

This intersecting timeline is an especially important reminder for textbooks such as this one, because the course material does not move strictly chronologically. Within regions like the Ancient Near East or Egypt, the chapters generally move through the material from oldest to most recent—discussing the Palette of Narmer before the death mask of Tutankhamun, for instance). However, across regions, there is an overlap that is extremely important to point out. For instance, the *Warka Vase* is older than the Palette of King Narmer, but the Stele of Hammurabi is newer. The Snake Goddess in this chapter is newer than the Great Sphinx and older than Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions or the Ishtar Gate. The Met Museum's online Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History is helpful in visually illuminating such intersecting occurrences.

Among the cargo on board the Uluburun Shipwreck were almonds, figs, grapes, and olives. The lands around the Aegean sea are rich and fertile, complemented by a particularly pleasant climate. With plentiful food, game, and seafood, the population flourished, and along with it large architectural complexes as well as smaller art objects, often celebrating the beauty of the land and sea. The Greek mainland and the Aegean islands, including Crete, exchanged raw goods, finished products, and ideas, among themselves and with their neighbors to the south and east.

Global Connections: The Growing Field of Nautical Archaeology

The burgeoning field of nautical archaeology has helped to make great advances for the larger field of archaeology, in just the past sixty years. In 1960, Dr. George F. Bass began pioneering nautical or maritime archaeology, focusing specifically on careful and scientific processes for underwater excavations. In 1972, Bass helped to found The Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA), a non-profit research organization responsible for overseeing the study and preservation of important shipwreck sites such as the Uluburun shipwreck, discussed in the introduction, and the Phoenician shipwreck at Bajo de la Campana, Spain. Just four years later, INA teamed up with Texas A&M University to establish the first Nautical Archaeology Program for graduate students pursuing an M.S. in Maritime Archaeology and Conservation or a Ph.D. in Anthropology.



Figure **8.0.2**: A diver explores a shipwreck on the sea floor. (Photo: Dwi Sumaiyyah Makmur, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Sunken ships and buried treasures help historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and art historians to learn much about cultural connections made via international coastal trade routes. The excavation of the Byzantine Serçe Limanı Shipwreck (dated c. 1025 CE) offers great insight into cross-cultural artistic interaction in the Middle Byzantine period. And projects such as the Battle of Bạch Đằng Research Project aim to recreate maps of the cultural landscape associated with Vietnamese battles and warships lost in 1288 CE. The importance of this growing field is not to be underestimated.

Historiography (Writing History)

Obscure Genealogies, Thefts, and Forgeries

The first section of this chapter deals with the enigmatic white marble sculpture found in the Cycladic islands. Many of these islands, such as Delos, play a role in later Greek history and mythology, so archaeologists, art historians, and Greeks naturally thought of this prehistoric Cycladic sculpture as early Greek sculpture—although there is no evidence that the people who made or used it spoke any form of Greek. Nonetheless, since they were seen as predecessors to the highly-prized Greek art discussed in the following chapter, these sculptures were accorded particular significance. The fact that they were white marble, like classical Greek sculpture celebrated at the time,e added to their prestige and art market value. As this chapter and the next point out, however, neither these Cycladic sculptures, nor the later Greek ones, were originally white.

The clean lines and abstraction of these Cycladic sculptures became even more valuable as modern artists such as Constantin Brancusi and Amedeo Modigliani adapted them. The folded-arm figurines, or FAFs, were particularly attractive to 20th-century collectors—and unfortunately resulted in some unethical and truly destructive behavior, from robbing graves to creating fakes. For this reason, especially with these FAFs, it is very important to know the object's provenance: where it came from, who found it, and what collections it has belonged to since then. Read more about authenticating these sculptures and displaying them at the Getty Museum in the additional suggested readings.

Mythic Inspiration

A legacy of myths and legends plays a particularly interesting role in this chapter. The names of heroes and monsters appear in geographical features (like “Aegean” itself), regions (like “Minoan”), and architectural terms (like “Cyclopean” masonry or “labyrinth”). Some of these myths come from Homer—the famed blind poet who, at least according to tradition, composed two epics around 750 BCE—though Homer’s stories and even many of his phrases are much older. The *Iliad* immortalizes the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, and the *Odyssey* describes the hero Odysseus’ adventure-filled journey back home. These two epics have been considered the first great works of “Western” literature, as Homer celebrated larger-than-life heroes of a bygone, golden era.

Until the late 19th century, Homer’s tales were believed to be entirely made up. After all, they involve the direct intervention of deities like Athena and Poseidon, and monsters like the six-headed sea monster Scylla and the one-eyed giant Polyphemus. The names of places and people were thought to be simply evidence of Homer’s impressive imagination. However, a few Europeans, including the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, were convinced that these tales held at least a seed of historical accuracy. Schliemann used the texts to guide his excavations, and in 1876 he did find the site of ancient Troy, and later rich treasure at Mycenae. Unfortunately, he was not a trained archaeologist, and in his haste to locate the archaeological layer of the Troy of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he actually blasted—literally—right through it, though he did discover impressive objects much older than Homer’s Troy.

Contentious Restorations

The second portion of this chapter, focusing on Minoan art, highlights and foregrounds an important conversation about restoration, preservation, conservation, the role of archaeologists, and the ethics to which they are bound. Because of problematic and intrusive construction at Minoan sites such as Knossos, there are works covered in this chapter that have been “restored” to the extent that viewers cannot actually know what they looked like originally. Neither the Minoan *Snake Goddess’s* head nor her right arm is original, and the famous Bull-Leaping fresco is a collection of fragments that may not even have been originally located in the same room. Nevertheless, Knossos offers valuable historical reminders and possibly fodder for heated debates about the process of uncovering and preserving history.

Chapter Overview

Three Regions: Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean

The chapter considers three cultures, divided by region: Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean. Cycladic art is the art of the Cyclades, the small islands in the Aegean Sea that circle the island of Delos. You might recognize the Greek root, *cycl-*, from words also having to do with circles—such as bicycle, motorcycle, and cyclone. Minoan art is the art of Crete. The word Minoan comes from the mythical king of Crete named Minos. Finally, art of the Greek mainland is called Helladic, after its ancient—and modern—name, Hellas. Late Helladic art is called Mycenaean, after one of its important locations, ancient Mycenae.

Objects Overview

This chapter covers well-known works of art—some known precisely because of their controversial and even inaccurate restoration. The works in this chapter also give insight into the Aegean island cultures which were both peaceful and war-like, depending on time and circumstance. This chapter includes a wide range of metallurgy, architecture, sculpture, and vessels, including:

- small-scale Cycladic marble sculptures of people and animals
- the Minoan Palace at Knossos, which not only demonstrates architectural advancements such as the corbeled arch, but also tells the tale of contentious, controversial, and damaging restoration
- the Bull-leaping fresco, whose figures nod to an early example of fluid representations of gender
- the Hagia Triada Sarcophagus, the only Minoan sarcophagus which is fully painted
- fabulously detailed and playful Minoan Marine-Style pottery such as the Octopus Vase from Palaikastro
- the citadel site of Mycenae, which offers insight into a culture prone to war and in need of protection
- Mycenaean metallurgy, including fine examples of gold, silver, and bronze objects
- Mycenaean ceramic vessels, which varied in style and were popularly traded around the Mediterranean and found as far afield as Egypt, Asia Minor, and Spain

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Ancient Aegaean art, you should be able to:

- Differentiate between the art and architecture of Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean cultures
- Identify visual aspects of Minoan art, architecture, and society
- Describe important Mycenaean architectural achievements and their cultural context
- Discuss the relationship between Minoan and Mycenaean art and culture
- Evaluate the role and ethics of archaeology, restoration, preservation, and conservation

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Mark Cartwright, Uluburun Shipwreck, for World History Encyclopedia
- John Noble Wilford, Treasure of Artifacts Found in 3,400-Year-Old Shipwreck, for *The New York Times*
- The Challenges of Underwater Excavation, for Google Arts & Culture
- *Met Museum's online Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*
- Suzanne Muchnic, "Getty Conservators Are On the Case : Art: The museum staff painstakingly determines the authenticity of Cycladic art before it is installed," for *Los Angeles Times*
- Terracotta Krater at the Met Museum
- Matt Kaplan/TedEd, "The Scientific Origins of the Minotaur"
- Getty Museum (search their Cycladic objects)
- Homer's *The Odyssey*

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8.1: Cycladic

Cycladic Art

By Boundless Art History

The Cyclades are a group of Greek islands in the Aegean Sea that encircle the island of Delos. The islands were known for their white marble, mined during the Greek Bronze Age and throughout Classical history.



Figure **8.1.1**: Map of the Cyclades islands. (Image: Pitichinaccio, public domain)

Their geographical location placed them, like the island of Crete, in the center of trade between Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, and the Near East. The indigenous civilization on the Cyclades reached its high point during the Bronze Age. The islands were later occupied by the Minoans, Mycenaeans, and later the Greeks.

Cycladic Sculptures

Cycladic art is best known for its small-scale, marble figurines. From the late fourth millennium BCE to the early second millennium BCE, Cycladic sculptures went through a series of stylistic shifts, with their bodily forms varying from geometric to organic. The purpose of these figurines is unknown, although all that have been discovered were located in graves. While it is clear that they were regularly used in funerary practices, their precise function remains a mystery.

Some are found in graves completely intact, others are found broken into pieces, others show signs of being used during the lifetime of the deceased, but some graves do not contain the figurines. Furthermore, the figurines were buried equally between men and women. The male and female forms do not seem to be identified with a specific gender during burial. These figures are based in simple geometric shapes.

Editors' Note

The clean lines and modern-seeming abstraction of these Cycladic sculptures, especially the folded-arm figurines, or FAFs, made them very attractive to collectors—and unfortunately resulted in some unethical and truly destructive behavior, from robbing graves to creating fakes. For this reason, especially with these FAFs, it's very important to know the object's provenance: where it came from, who found it, and what collections it has belonged to since then. Read more about authenticating these sculptures and displaying them at the Getty Museum in this *Los Angeles Times* article.



Figure **8.1.2**: Cycladic female figure, Cyclades, Greece. c. 2500 BCE. Marble, 16.3 x 4.2 x 1.4 in (41.5 cm x 10.7 cm x 3.7 cm). (Photo: Walters Art Museum, public domain)

The abstract female figures all follow the same mold. Each is a carved statuette of a nude woman with her arms crossed over her abdomen. The bodies are roughly triangular and the feet are kept together. The head of the women is an inverted triangle with a rounded chin and the nose of the figurine protrudes from the center.

Each figure has modeled breasts, and incised lines draw attention to the pubic region with a triangle. The swollen bellies on some figurines might indicate pregnancy or symbolic fertility. The incised lines also provide small details, such as toes on the feet, and to delineate the arms from each other and the stomach.

Their flat back and inability to stand on their carved feet suggest that these figures were meant to lie down. While today they are featureless and remain the stark white of the marble, traces of paint allow us to know that they were once colored. Paint would have been applied on the face to demarcate the eyes, mouth, and hair. Dots were used to decorate the figures with bracelets and necklaces.



Figure 8.1.3: A Cycladic male figure with the harp, Santorini, Greece. c. 2500 BCE. Marble, 13.5 x 5.7 x 10.9 cm. Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Germany. (Photo: Smial, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Male figures are also found in Cycladic grave sites. These figures differ from the females, as the male typically sits on a chair and plays a musical instrument, such as the pipes or a harp. Harp players, like the one in Figure 8.1.3, play the frame harp, a Near Eastern ancestor of the modern harp.

The figures, their chairs, and instruments are all carved into elegant, cylindrical shapes. Like the female figures, the shape of the male figure is reliant on geometric shapes and flat planes. The incised lines provide details (such as toes), and paint added distinctive features to the now-blank faces.

Other Cycladic Figures

While reclining female and seated male figurines are the most common Cycladic sculptures discovered, other forms were produced, such as animals and abstracted humanoid forms. Examples include the terracotta figurines of bovine animals (possibly oxen or bulls) that date to 2200–2000 BCE (Figure 8.1.4), and small, flat sculptures that resemble female figures shaped like violins Figure 8.1.5; these date to the Grotta–Pelos culture, also known as Early Cycladic I (c. 3300–2700 BCE). Like other Cycladic sculptures discovered to date, the purposes of these figurines remain unknown.



Figure 8.1.4: Terracotta bovine figurines, possibly oxen or bulls, Akrotiri excavation artifacts, Santorini, Cyclades, Greece, 2200–2000 BCE. Museum of Cycladic Culture, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Wikipeder, public domain)



Figure 8.1.5: Violin-shaped female figurines, Early Cycladic I period, Grotta-Pelos culture, c. 3300–2700 BCE. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Xuan Che, CC BY 2.0) These flat, abstracted figurines of the female body provide one example of how its representation evolved in Cycladic art.

Articles in this section:

- Lumen Learning, "Cycladic Sculptures," for *Boundless Art History* (CC BY-SA)

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8.2: Minoan

Minoan Art: The Palace at Knossos (Crete)

by Dr. Senta German



Figure **8.2.1**: The archaeological site at Knossos, with walls of large stone in the foreground and restored rooms in the background, Crete. (Photo: Jebulon, public domain)

Restoration versus conservation

What happens to an archaeological site after the archaeologist's work is completed? Should the site (or parts of it) be restored to what we believe (based on evidence) it once looked like? Or should the site be protected through conservation and left as is? A visit to an unrestored archaeological site can be uninspiring—even the most lavish ancient sites can appear to be piles of unorganized stones framed by broken columns and other fragments. And while modern conservation principles insist on the reversibility of any treatment (in case better treatments are discovered in the future), in the past, conservators didn't have the resources or science that is available today.

Knossos



Figure **8.2.2**: Sir Arthur Evans, 1911. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The archaeological site of Knossos (on the island of Crete)—traditionally called a palace—is the second most popular tourist attraction in all of Greece (after the Acropolis in Athens), hosting hundreds of thousands of tourists a year. But its primary attraction is not so much the authentic Bronze Age remains (which are more than three thousand years old) but rather the extensive early 20th century restorations installed by the site's excavator, Sir Arthur Evans (Figure **8.2.2**), in the early twentieth century.

Archaeological restorations offer important information about the history of a site and Knossos doesn't disappoint—one can see the earliest throne room in Europe, walk through the monumental Northern entrance to the palace, marvel at colorful wall paintings

and enjoy the elegance of a queen's apartments. All these spaces, however, are the result of extensive, contentious and, in some cases, damaging restoration. Knossos asks us to consider how we can preserve an archaeological site, while at the same time providing a valuable, educational experience for visitors that nonetheless remains true to the remains.

Considering Evans' reconstructions

The Evans restoration at Knossos are important for several reasons:

1. If Evans hadn't worked to preserve and restore so much of Knossos beginning in 1901, it would have undoubtedly been largely lost.
2. The restoration of the site undertaken by Evans, with its elegantly painted Throne Room (Figure **8.2.3**) makes very real our historical understanding, originally revealed by Homer, of the power and prestige of the kings of Crete.
3. The beautiful, although sometimes inaccurate, restorations of architecture and wall paintings by Evans evoke the elegance and skill of Minoan architects and painters.

These are the undeniable benefits of Evans's restorations and among the aspects of a visit to Knossos that everyone values. It is the smooth corniced walls, bright paintings, and whole passages stepped with balustrades at Knossos that the postcards, camera snaps, and human memory preserve, and that has translated into important support for the site—intellectually, politically, and financially.



Figure **8.2.3**: Throne Room, Knossos. The reconstructed wall paintings feature palm motifs and griffins flanking a high-backed stone seat. (Photo: Olaf Bausch, CC BY 3.0)

At the same time, the Evans restorations are problematic. In some cases, what is restored does not accurately reflect what was found. Instead, a grander, and more complete, experience is presented. For example, when you visit Knossos, because of the way it is reconstructed, it is very easy to believe that all that was ever found there was a Late Bronze Age palace.



Figure **8.2.4**: Throne Room excavation at Knossos, a black and white photograph showing workers from the title page of a brochure appealing for support issued by the Cretan Exploration Fund, 1900. The stone seat and bench to the right of it are just beginning to emerge. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Evans's restoration of the Throne Room (and much else at the site) privileges the Late Bronze Age period of its history. The typical visitor likely won't grasp that the Throne Room dates to the *latest* phase of Knossos—the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, though the site was occupied nearly continuously from the Neolithic to the Roman era (from the 8th millennium BCE to at least the 5th century CE).



Figure **8.2.5**: Contemporary view of Knossos looking southwest from the Monumental North Entrance. The bright red columns of a partially reconstructed portico, along with a vibrant fresco fragment, contrast with the natural stone of the ruins around them. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The power of Evans's interpretation and reconstruction of the site as purely Minoan—the product of the indigenous culture of that island—is very much still with us despite the fact that much has changed about how art historians and archaeologists understand the different periods of construction at Knossos. Today, much of its final plan and form, which Evans reconstructed (including the Throne Room and most of the frescos), are understood as being of Mycenaean construction (not Minoan). Although this information is noted in texts mounted at the site, it is too often overlooked by visitors.

What is archaeological restoration?

When archaeological remains are revealed through excavation, they are often delicate and cannot survive long unprotected. Some archaeologists backfill their trenches (refill the excavated holes with the material that was removed) to help preserve remains. In other instances, architecture, graves, or the impressions left from ephemeral building materials (such as wood) are sometimes left exposed, and when this happens some sort of conservation should occur. By definition, any sort of conservation is restoration when the modern materials are layered on the ancient and made to look harmonious in form, color and/or texture. As a result, restorations are sometimes nearly indistinguishable from authentic materials, and this is where things get tricky—such as the situation at Knossos.

Before making an archaeological restoration, three essential issues must be examined:

1. **What specific point in a site or monument's history will be the subject of the restoration?** Many (most!) archaeological sites reflect a long occupation or use, and within that timeframe things change, are repaired, or rebuilt. What era of the site will be privileged by the restoration—and in turn, which eras of the site's history will become harder to see and understand?
2. **How will future changes in the interpretation and knowledge about a site or monument be accommodated by restorations?** Archaeological interpretations of sites evolve all the time, often through new discoveries elsewhere. Restorations, in order to remain accurate, need to take into account potential new scholarship that can change the history or meaning of a site or monument.
3. **Lastly and most importantly, restorations must be non-destructive and reversible**. The first role of restoration is conservation. Therefore, the original remains must be entirely safe and not harmed in any way by restoration methods and materials. The reversibility of restorations not only has to do with the accommodation of changes in interpretation made above, but also with the need to leave the way open for less invasive, more gentle restoration methods in the future.

Restoration at Knossos

Aside from some gaps (for instance, during the First World War) Evans excavated at the site of Knossos each year from 1900 to 1930. Restoration of the architectural finds began almost immediately and can be divided into three phases, each characterized by

the architect Evans hired to do the work. These three men, Theodore Fyfe, Christian Doll, and Piet De Jong, each had very different restoration philosophies.

Phase 1: Theodore Fyfe

From 1901 to 1904, a young architect by the name of Theodore Fyfe was charged with the restorations at Knossos. It is likely that Evans hired him because the winter of 1900/01 had damaged the newly exposed Throne Room—the most important space excavated during that first season at the site.

Fyfe's work at Knossos can be characterized by two things. First of all, he was devoted to the concept of minimal intervention. Second, when intervention was necessary, he made great efforts to use materials authentic to the Bronze Age structure (wood, limestone, rubble masonry) and even to use Bronze Age construction techniques, which he was able to glean from his onsite work. Clearly Fyfe was highly concerned about the truthfulness of his interventions and reconstructions; the only exception to this was his construction of modern-style pitched roofs to protect the Throne Room and the Shrine of the Double Axes.

Phase 2: Christian Doll

The second phase of restoration work at Knossos dates from 1905 to 1910, and was directed by Christian Doll. The first conservation work to which Doll had to attend to in 1905 was that of Fyfe's. Essentially, Fyfe's zeal to use authentic materials resulted in failure: he neglected in many cases to treat timbers before their use and he tended to use softwoods rather than hardwoods (all of which lead to rot). Also, rain was a destructive force in the winters, especially when it ran through newly exposed parts of the site. Doll's first and most important project was to stabilize and reconstruct the Grand Staircase to its original four story height. This was an extremely difficult job as the exact nature of the ancient design eluded both him and Fyfe, so a certain amount of improvisation was needed. And, because the weight of the structure was so great, Doll used iron girders (imported from England at great expense) covered in cement to make them look like ancient wooden beams.

Doll's approach to conservation was still anchored in preserving the excavated remains. However, Doll was no fan of the authentic materials used by Fyfe, as he saw how they had failed to preserve the many areas where they had been employed. Instead, Doll constructed structural systems based on techniques used in London at the time. Moreover, he employed contemporary architectural materials, such as the iron girders mentioned above, as well as concrete (the first use of this material at Knossos).

Phase 3: Piet De Jong



Figure **8.2.6**: Piet de Jong, reconstruction of the "Dolphin Fresco," Queen's Megaron, Knossos. Graceful blue dolphins swim among smaller red, orange, and blue fish, all framed by spiky, stylized coral. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The third phase of conservation work was executed over a longer period of time, from 1922 to 1952, by Piet De Jong. The vast majority of what Knossos looks like today, with large passages of reconstructed walls and rooms, is his work.

Three main elements characterize De Jong's work at Knossos. The most prominent was his use of iron reinforced concrete. In the twelve years between Doll's and De Jong's work, the use of reinforced concrete had grown in popularity because of its speedy construction, its relative cheapness, and its ability to be molded into nearly any shape. It was also thought to be nearly indestructible.

Another essential characteristic of De Jong's work at Knossos was his use of reinforced concrete to construct parts of the palace beyond what had been found—some passages were based on archaeological evidence, some were not (the bases of these reconstructions came from Evans himself).

De Jong often did not merely end walls at the height of their discovery but would either finish them off with a flat roof and cornice, often decorated with double white horns (what some contemporary wall paintings of Bronze Age houses looked like), or would leave the top edge of walls with irregular stones, evoking a picturesque, antique view (Figure **8.2.7**). When a complete vision of ancient Knossos could not be reconstituted, a romantic one was built instead.



Figure **8.2.7**: South Propylaeum, Knossos, showing a wall topped with the double white "horns of consecration." (Photo: Stegop, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The reconstruction of the interior decoration of the throne room was executed during this period and similarly exhibits a combination of the truthful reflection of archaeological remains and Evans's creativity.

Lastly, an important characteristic of De Jong's restorations was the placement of reproductions of wall paintings (see Figure **8.2.6**) around his newly built spaces. Some paintings were placed very close to their findspots and therefore aimed at a more authentic reconstruction, while other paintings were reconstructed at some distance from where they had been discovered.

The question remains: why did Evans encourage De Jong's radical approach to conservation, especially after two more conservative predecessors? Several reasons are at play, no doubt. The first, and possibly the most important, is the condition of Knossos after almost eight years of abandonment during the First World War. Aside from the wild overgrowth of weeds, there was much weather-related and other damage. However, the parts of the site that had been roofed (such as the Throne Room and the Shrine of the Double Axes) and sections that were more intact (such as the Grand Staircase), were in excellent shape and this no doubt convinced Evans of the importance of aggressive conservation work. Second, the iron-reinforced concrete which De Jong proposed to use was inexpensive and could be employed quickly. Third, Evans, in a masterful anticipation of the desires of future tourism, aimed to make a site that would vividly conjure the culture he had discovered, as much evocative and picturesque as historically accurate.

Conservation at Knossos after Evans

It is only fair to reflect upon the restorations of Knossos within their historical framework. The aims, methods, and materials used in restoration at the site over a period of some sixty years changed, reflecting a long list of crises, constraints, theories, and desires. Perhaps most significant, however, was Evans's overriding conviction that the conservation of Knossos was an obligation born out of its great antiquity and unique importance. He knew this from his own Edwardian education, British colonial outlook, and his twenty-four year directorship of the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford. Evans was keenly aware of how intimately connected the teaching of Knossos's history was with how it was presented on site. He made Knossos into a museum and a showcase for the newly discovered Aegean Bronze Age chapter of ancient history and the earliest example of cultural tourism, today a mainstay of public historical education—not to mention local economies. Evans did it first at Knossos.

Conservation at Knossos has continued since De Jong's work, although with new challenges. The most recent conservation work on the site has been focused largely on repairing Evans's reconstructions. Despite a belief that reinforced concrete would last indefinitely, it has proven to be susceptible to the wet Cretan winters, crumbling and allowing for rust on the interior ironwork. In other areas the reinforced concrete proved to be structurally unsound.



Figure 8.2.8: Visitors to Knossos, 2016. (Photo: Neil Howard, CC BY-NC 2.0)

In addition, the steady increase of tourist traffic since the 1950s has meant growing stress on both the original architecture of Knossos as well as its reconstructions. Sustained foot fall, increasing weight load as well as touching and sitting, is increasingly destructive. To combat this, the Greek Archaeological Service, under the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, has closed off large sections of Knossos and generally restricted circulation on the site. In the 1990s it conducted extensive conservation of both ancient and modern structures as well as building new corrugated plastic roofing. At present the Service is working on a visitor management plan for the site and the Greek government has applied to UNESCO for World Heritage Status for Knossos as well as four other Minoan palatial sites which would afford much needed support for ongoing conservation efforts.

Bull-leaping fresco from the palace of Knossos

by Dr. Senta German



Figure 8.2.9: Bull-leaping fresco from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed), c. 1400 BCE. Fresco, 78 cm high. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo: Jebulon, CC0 1.0)

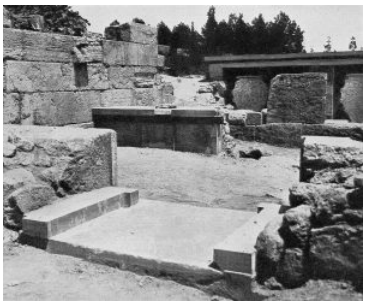


Figure **8.2.10**: The Court of the Stone Spout, where the pieces of the fresco were found, from Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos* (London, 1930), p. 270. (Photo: Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg, via Smarthistory)

Taking the bull by the horns

Bull sports—including leaping over them, fighting them, running from them, or riding them—have been practiced all around the globe for millennia. Perhaps the best-loved ancient illustration of this, called the Bull-leaping or Toreador fresco, comes from the site of Knossos on the island of Crete. The wall painting, as it is now reconstructed, shows three people leaping over a bull: one person at its front, another over its back, and a third at its rear.

The image is a composite of at least seven panels, each .78 meters (about 2.5 feet) high. Fragments of this extensive wall painting were found very badly damaged in the fill above the walls in the Court of the Stone Spout, on the east side of the Central Court at Knossos. The fact that the paintings were found in fill indicates that this wall painting was destroyed as part of a renovation. The pottery which was found together with the fragments gives us its date, likely LM II (around 1400 BCE).

Reconstructed but still incomplete



Figure **8.2.11**: Bull-leaping fresco from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed). (Photo: Andy Montgomery, CC BY-SA 2.0) This angled view from the left corner of the mural shows more clearly the fragments of the original frescoes against the areas of Émile Gilliéron's restoration.

When Sir Arthur Evans, the first archaeologist to work at Knossos, found the fragments, he recognized them as illustrating an early example of bull sports, and he was eager to create a complete image that he could share with the world. He hired a well-known archaeological restorer, Émile Gilliéron, to create the image we know today from the largest bits of the seven panels. Unfortunately, it is impossible to reconstruct all of the original panels and to get a sense of the painting at all, we are left with Gilliéron's reconstruction.

Visual gymnastics

What we see is a freeze-frame of a very fast moving scene. The central image of the fresco as reconstructed is a bull charging with such force that its front and back legs are in midair. In front of the bull is a person grasping its horns, seemingly about to vault over it. The next person is in mid-vault, upside down, over the back of the bull, and the final person is facing the rear of the animal, arms out, apparently just having dismounted—"sticking the landing," as they say in gymnastics.



Figure **8.2.12**: Bull-leaping fresco (detail of the far left figure grasping the horns of the bull) from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed). (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)



Figure **8.2.13**: Bull-leaping fresco (detail of the far right figure "sticking the landing") from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed). (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The people on either side of the bull, as reconstructed, bear markers of both male and female gender: they are painted white, which indicates a female figure according to ancient Egyptian gender-color conventions, which we know the Minoans also used. But both characters wear merely a loincloth, which is male dress. The hairstyle (curls at the top with locks falling down the back) is not uncommon in representations of both youthful males and females. Many interpretations of this gender crossing are possible, but there is little evidence to support one over another, unfortunately. At the very least, we can say that the representation of gender in the Late Aegean Bronze Age was fluid.

The person at the center of the action, vaulting over the bull's back, is painted brown, which indicates male gender according to ancient Egyptian gender-color conventions, and this makes sense considering his loincloth. It is interesting to note that the muscles of all three of the bull leapers, at their thighs and chests, have been very delicately articulated, accentuating their athletic build.

The background of the scene is blue, white, or yellow monochrome, and indicate no architectural context for the activity. Moreover, the seven panels and Gilliéron's composite reconstruction all show a border of painted richly variegated stones overlapping in patches. So, it seems we are meant to see these scenes as abstracted action within frames, not part of a wider visual field or narrative.

A rite of passage?

The most interesting question about the bull leaping paintings from Knossos is what they might mean. We cannot understand the whole bull-leaping cycle in detail as it is so fragmentary, but we know that it covered a lot of wall space and a considerable amount of resources must have been expended to create it.

As mentioned above, many cultures across space and time have engaged in bull sports, and they all have a few things in common. First, these sports are life-threatening. To race, dance with, leap over, or kill a bull might very well get you killed. Second, these activities are usually performed before a crowd: they are a civic event, publicly presented and recorded in memory. Third, those who participate in these bull activities are often youths at an age when they are passing from childhood into adulthood and the achievement of the bull sport contributes to that passage. Anthropologists refer this sort of activity as a "rite of passage," which, when witnessed by one's community, establishes the participant as an adult.



Figure **8.2.14**: Bull-leaping fresco (detail of the middle figure vaulting over the bull's back) from the east wing of the palace of Knossos (reconstructed). (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Therefore, we might surmise that the bull leaping scenes from Knossos refer to such a rite of passage ceremony. Many have identified the Central Court (Theatral area) just beyond the west façade of the palace at Knossos as locations where bull-leaping ceremonies might have taken place. We may never know the exact meaning of these paintings, but they continue to resonate with us today—not only because of their beauty and dynamism, but because they represent an activity that is still an important part of many cultures around the world.

Global Connections: Bull Iconography

At the palace of Knossos, the Bull-leaping fresco as well as the eleven bull's head rhytons offer scholars insight into Minoan culture, while also underscoring the importance of the bull to Minoan culture. But bull iconography is common among other cultures as well, as bulls have been a key part of many societies for numerous reasons, including animal sacrifices, bull-related sports, and domesticated farming.

The Neolithic settlement at Çatalhöyük, for instance, includes many bull bucrania. One of the finest treasures of the Royal Graves at Ur is the so-called Queen's Lyre, a musical instrument with a sculpted bull's head lavishly decorated in gold and lapis lazuli. An ancient Roman architectural relief from the mid-first century CE shows a decorated bull being readied for sacrifice, a regular ritual that was part of the Roman state religion; bucrania adorn Augustus' Ara Pacis. To Hindus, the bull is a sacred animal; specifically, the bull called Nandi is often worshiped and associated with the god Shiva.

Bull iconography is not reserved for ancient times, either. In 1994, New Zealand artist Michael Tuffery constructed a life-sized bull from discarded tin cans of corned beef in order to address health and environmental concerns in the Pacific. Tuffery, who traces his heritage to the Pacific islands of Samoa, Rarotonga and Tahiti, created his work *Pisupo Lua Afe (Corned Beef 2000)* to engage in a conversation about food sovereignty. As Dr. Billie Lythberg notes, "Tuffery is interested in the introduction of cattle to New Zealand and the Pacific Islands and how they impact negatively on the plants, landscapes and waterways of these countries, as well as how industrialized approaches to farming disrupt traditional food production." Much like contemporary artist El Anatsui, who is also known for repurposing boldly colored tin cans and bottle caps, Tuffery appropriates a pop aesthetic to challenge viewers to think more deeply about the negative effects of industrialization and our fragile ecosystems.

Minoan Woman or Goddess from the Palace of Knossos ("La Parisienne")

by Dr. Senta German



Figure 8.2.15: Woman or goddess (“La Parisienne”) from the Camp-Stool fresco, Knossos. (Photo via Smarthistory)

“Parisian” from ancient Crete

This image of a young woman with a bright dress and curly hair is among the best known images in Minoan art. It is also one of the few representations of Minoan people rendered in color and detail, and it is a beautiful example of Minoan wall painting. Shortly after it was first discovered by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, it was seen by Edmond Pottier, a famous art historian of Greek pottery, who likened her charming look to the contemporary women of Paris. She has been known as “La Parisienne” ever since.

The sacred knot



Figure 8.2.16: Woman or goddess (“La Parisienne”) from the Camp-Stool fresco, detail showing her profile and the "sacred knot." (Photo via Smarthistory)

Only La Parisienne’s head and upper body are preserved. Her hair is black and curly, with one curl springing down onto her forehead and others cascading down her neck and upper back. Her skin is white, which is in imitation of the ancient Egyptian color convention (women painted white, men brown), and her large, darkly outlined eye also reminds us of Egyptian style, but her bright red lips are unique. She wears an elaborately woven blue and red striped dress, with a blue banded edge attached with red flecked loops. Tied to the back of the dress is a “sacred knot,” as Evans first called it. This is a loop of long cloth tied with another loop at the nape of the neck, leaving a length of the cloth trailing down the back.

This is one of only two representations of a woman actually wearing a sacred knot, although the knots themselves are found on seals, painted on pottery, in other frescos, and rendered in ivory or faience. This knot is thought to designate the wearer as a holy person, so this Minoan woman may be a priestess.



Figure **8.2.17**: The western wing of the palace at Knossos. (Photo: tedbassman, CC BY 2.0)

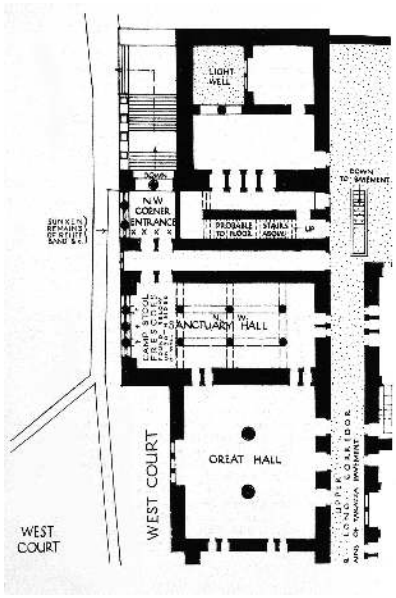


Figure **8.2.18**: Sir Arthur Evans, Arthur J., upper plan of the northwest palace area, Knossos, from *The Palace of Minos* (London, 1935), page 380. (Photo: Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg, via Smarthistory)

Found in fragments

The wall painting of which La Parisienne is a part was discovered heavily damaged and fallen from an upper story in the western wing of Knossos (see Figure **8.2.17** and the site plan in Figure **8.2.18**). It was painted in buon fresco (on wet plaster) as most Minoan wall paintings were, and given its archaeological context is likely one of the last painted works of the palace, dating to LM III (around 1350 BCE). Specifically, this fragment was part of a two tiered scene that is about a half-meter (about 1.5 feet) wide, called the Camp Stool fresco (shown in Figure **8.2.19** as a reconstruction). Featured on both the top and bottom panels are pairs of men and women in profile sitting and standing and holding up elegant vessels. La Parisienne comes from one of the female pairs.



Figure 8.2.19: The Camp Stool fresco (reconstruction), Knossos. (Photo via Smarthistory)

It has been suggested that the part of the palace of Knossos from which this painted scene fell was used for ceremonies and feasting; if this is true, subject matter depicting toasts being made would fit in nicely. Whatever her original meaning, La Parisienne is an enduring testament to the skill of Minoan fresco painters.

Hagia Triada Sarcophagus

by Dr. Senta German



Figure 8.2.20: The Hagia Triada sarcophagus on display in a room of the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo: C messier, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A coffin for royalty?



Figure 8.2.21: Hagia Triada sarcophagus front, c. 1400 BCE. Limestone and fresco, 1.375 x .45 x .985 m. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Many images of Minoan rituals are fragmentary and therefore difficult to interpret. There are very few complete, narrative-style representations of religious topics, and the Hagia Triada (also sometimes spelled “Agia Triada”) is the best among them. This sarcophagus was found in 1903 by the Italian archaeologist Roberto Paribeni in Tomb 4 of the hilltop cemetery north of the site of

Hagia Triada, a large and wealthy ancient Minoan settlement in south central Crete. Tomb 4 was a family tomb containing the sarcophagus, constructed of limestone, and another large ceramic coffin. The tomb was disturbed in antiquity, but some small burial goods were left behind by the looters: a carved stone bowl, a triton shell, and a fragment of a female terracotta figurine. These remaining grave goods and the elaborate nature of the Hagia Triada sarcophagus has led to the identification of Tomb 4 as that of royalty.

A story in fresco



Figure 8.2.22: Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail of three figures facing left, the woman on the left pouring a libation). (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Hagia Triada sarcophagus is the only Minoan sarcophagus known to be entirely painted. It was created using fresco, like contemporaneous wall painting, and illustrates a complex narrative scene, apparently of burial and sacrifice. The object itself is substantial, measuring 1.375 meters (about 4.5 feet) long, .45 meters (about 1.5 feet) wide and .985 meters (about 3 feet) high.

One of the long sides is the most complete and shows a funeral procession of offering bearers and a libation ceremony that features seven figures—two women and five men. From the far left (Figure 8.2.22), we see a female in profile facing left, dressed in an elaborate hide skirt and open short-sleeved shirt, holding a vessel in both hands while pouring the contents into a larger vessel which is resting on a stone platform between two poles. The poles are set on richly-veined stone bases and are topped with double axes surmounted by birds. Behind the woman pouring is another woman, and behind her, a man. The second woman, who is elaborately robed and wears a crown of lilies, carries on her shoulders a pole that supports two vessels identical to the one being used for pouring by the first female. The man behind her plays a lyre and is also elaborately robed.



Figure 8.2.23: Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail of three bare-chested men holding bovine statues). (Photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0)

The next three people from the left (Figure 8.2.23) are young men, each bare-chested and wearing a hide skirt. The first two hold bovine statues, one spotted brown, one black; the third man holds a model of a boat. These three men are in composite profile, with shoulders frontal but legs and head in profile, a common Egyptian painting convention. They are also set against a blue background, which is different from the rest of the scene on this side of the sarcophagus. Another man faces these three. He has no feet and looks posed like a sculpture, and it is thought this represents the deceased person. He wears a long hide robe with gold trim.

Between the three men and the deceased is a set of three steps, perhaps an altar, which has some damage at the top. There is a tree above the altar, and it is possible (based on other images of similar altars) that it is supposed to be growing out from the altar itself. Behind the deceased is another structure, elaborately painted with running spirals and inlaid with veined stone. This is thought to be the tomb of the deceased.



Figure **8.2.24**: Hagia Triada sarcophagus rear. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Offerings and altars



Figure **8.2.25**: Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail of two women, a man, and a trussed bull on a table). (Photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0)

On the opposite side of the sarcophagus, there are another seven figures—six female and one male. Beginning again from the left (Figure **8.2.24**), we are met with a large patch of damage which only leaves the legs and feet of two pairs of women, all with elaborate long robes, moving to the right.

A fifth female figure, fully visible, leads them, also well-dressed and wearing a lily crown Figure **8.2.25**. She is in full profile, with yellow hair, her arms stretched down towards to the ground. She and the four women behind her are all set in a bright yellow background. Moving to the left, the background color changes to white and against this is a male double-flute player wearing a short blue robe and long curls. He stands behind an offering table on which lies a trussed bull on its side, facing the viewer. Red streaks of blood can be seen coming from the bull's neck and pouring into a vessel that sits at the foot of the table. Beneath the table are two small goats, possibly awaiting a similar fate.

To the right of this large altar the background color changes to blue; a woman stands before another low altar wearing a hide skirt. This altar is decorated with a red and white running spiral design and on top sits a shallow grey bowl, possibly silver, above which floats in the field a painted beaked pitcher and a two-handled bowl with what appears to be round fruit—possibly all offerings. To the right of this altar is another pole, this one set in a red and white checked base, with a double axe and bird at the top. Lastly, in the field is an architectural structure, also with red and white running spirals and four pairs of horns on top and from which grows a great green tree.



Figure 8.2.26: Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail of the short side, showing two scenes, stacked). (Photo via Smarthistory)

One of the short sides of the Hagia Triada sarcophagus (Figure 8.2.26) has two scenes situated one on top of the other, while the opposite short side has only one scene. On the side with two scenes, the top one is almost entirely lost from damage but enough remains to indicate a procession of men in short pointed kilts of richly woven textiles. Beneath this scene is a horse-drawn chariot with an ox-hide carriage in which two women ride, both dressed in elaborate robes and one holding a whip.

On the other short side (Figure 8.2.27) there is a griffin–drawn chariot with another pair of women riding in an ox-hide carriage also richly dressed and wearing pointed hats. The griffins are multicolored and spread their wings, as if in flight; above them flies a bird in profile, moving in the opposite direction.



Figure 8.2.27: Hagia Triada sarcophagus (detail of the short side with a griffin-drawn chariot) (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Surrounding all five of these scenes on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus are framing elements: rows of rosettes, bands of colors to imitate richly veined stone, running spirals with central rosettes, and colorful striped bands. It is colorfully painted from top to bottom.

Simple story, complex questions

In some ways what we see on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus is simple to understand: women and men in elite dress are busy making sacrifices and preparing the deceased for burial before his tomb. However, looking more deeply, many questions remain. How is it to be read? Is there a prescribed order to the images? What does the change in background color mean? Who exactly are these people—are they all priestesses and priests? Are they mythological characters? Who was the deceased? Was this a special sort of burial, or did everybody get this treatment? These are questions that have yet to be answered with confidence.

Octopus Vase

by Dr. Senta German



Figure **8.2.28**: Octopus vase from Palaikastro, c. 1500 BCE. 27 cm high. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ceramics for the wealthy

One of the most important aspects of Minoan culture was its ceramics. Pottery today may not seem particularly interesting or important, but in the second millennium BCE, it was a high art form and its manufacture was often closely associated with centers of power. Much like the production of porcelain for European royal houses in the 18th century, the production of pottery on Crete tells us about elite tastes, how the powerful met and shared meals, and with whom they traded.



Figure **8.2.29**: Octopus vase from Palaikastro (detail showing the octopus' face and the circular base of one of two wheel-thrown halves). (Photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0)

This vase, found at Palaikastro, a wealthy site on the far eastern coast of Crete, is the perfect example of elite Minoan ceramic manufacture. It is 27 cm (about 10.5 inches) high, wheel-made, hand-painted, and meant to hold a valuable liquid—perhaps oil of some kind. Its shape is somewhat unusual, constructed by slipping together, while still leather hard (clay that is not quite dry), two shallow plates which had been made on a fast spinning potter's wheel and with highly refined clay. The circular bases of these shallow plates are still visible in the center of both sides of the flask. A spout and stirrup-style handles (which would allow the user to carefully control the flow of the liquid out of the container) were added by hand, as well as a base, to facilitate the standing upright of the vessel.

Inspired by the sea

Lastly, the Marine Style decoration would have been added. Using dark slip on the surface of the clay, the Minoan painter of this vessel filled the center with a charming octopus, swimming diagonally, with tentacles extended out to the full perimeter of the flask and wide eyes that stare out at the viewer with an almost cartoon-like friendliness. Around this creature's limbs we find sea urchins, coral, and triton shells; no empty space is left unfilled, lending a sense of writhing energy to the overall composition.



Figure **8.2.30**: Mycenaean imitation of Minoan Marine ware, Tomb 2, Argive Prosymna, 15th century BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Marine-Style pottery, of which this vessel is a prime example, is regarded as the pinnacle of Minoan palatial pottery production, specifically of the LM I period (around 1400 BCE). Those who believe "hands" (that is, specific artists) can be identified in the painting of Bronze Age pottery have identified this vessel as the work of the Marine Style Master, who worked at the site of Palaikastro. The era of Marine Style pottery coincided with a period during which the Minoans' trade networks spanned widely across the Mediterranean, from Crete to Cyprus, the Levant, mainland Greece, and Egypt. Some have connected this seafaring skill to the popularity of Marine Style pottery. The style was imitated by potters on the Greek mainland as well as the islands of Melos, and Aegina, but none could match the charm and grace of the Minoan inventors of the style.

Snake Goddess

by Dr. Senta German



Figure 8.2.31: Snake Goddess from the palace at Knossos, c. 1600 BCE. Faience, 29.5 cm high. (Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)

An enticing mystery

It has been said that the image of the Snake Goddess, discovered by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos on Crete, is one of the most frequently reproduced sculptures from antiquity. Whether or not this is true, it is certainly the case that she is a powerful and evocative image. What she meant to the Minoans who made her, however, is not very well understood.

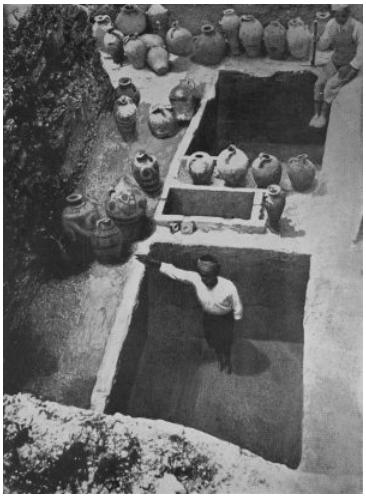


Figure 8.2.32: Excavation of the temple repositories, from Sir Arthur Evans, *The Neolithic and Early and Middle Minoan Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 465. (Universitäts-Bibliothek Heidelberg, via Smarthistory)

The “Temple Repositories”

Evans found the sculpture of the Snake Goddess in a secondary exploration of the complex he called a “palace” at Knossos. After digging out the entire western wing, he decided to check under the paving stones. Most covered nothing but earth, but just south of the Throne Room, he discovered two stone-lined pits containing a wide variety of precious things, mostly broken: scraps of gold, ivory, faience (the largest deposit of faience on Crete), stone inlay, unworked horn, ceramic vessels, seal stones, sealings, shells, the vertebrae of large fish, and the broken pieces of at least three figurines, of which the Snake Goddess was one.



Figure 8.2.33: Drawing of the Snake Goddess prior to restoration by Evans, from Angelo Mosso, *The Palaces of Crete and Their Builders* (London: Unwin, 1907), p. 137. (Image: University of Toronto Libraries, via Smarthistory)

Because of the fragmentary nature of these valuable objects, Evans assumed what he had found were damaged pieces that had been cleaned out from a temple. He named the pits the "Temple Repositories" and immediately set upon the reconstruction of as much as he could, with special interest in the figurines, which he assumed were of goddesses.

The hat and the cat

The Snake Goddess, as originally excavated (Figure 8.2.33), lacked a head and half of her left arm. The complete right arm held a short wavy striped stick, which Evans interpreted as a snake. This was, in some measure, to match the other nearly complete figurine found in the Temple Repositories, which clearly had snakes slithering up both of her arms (Figure 8.2.34, at left). The restoration of the Snake Goddess was done by the Danish artist Halvor Bagge together with Evans. Their contribution to the figurine was the creation of a matching arm and stripy snake, the head of the goddess, and the placement of the hat and cat (separate faience pieces found in the Temple Repositories) on her head.



Figure 8.2.34: Two Snake Goddesses from the palace of Knossos, c. 1600 BCE. Faience, 34.2 cm and 29.5 cm high. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo: Jill_Ion, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Figure **8.2.35**: Snake Goddess from the palace at Knossos (detail showing the added head, crown, and feline figure). (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)

In her restored state, the Snake Goddess is 29.5 cm (about 11.5 inches) high, a youthful woman wearing a full skirt made of seven flounced layers of multicolored cloth. This is likely not a representation of striped cloth, but rather flounces made from multiple colorful bands of cloth, the weaving of which was a Minoan specialty. Over the skirt she wears a front and back apron decorated with a geometric diamond design. The top of the skirt and apron has a wide, vertically-striped band that wraps tightly around the figure's waist. On top, she wears a short-sleeved, striped shirt tied with an elaborate knot at the waist, with a low-cut front that exposes her large, bare breasts. The Snake Goddess's head, restored by Bagge and Evans, stares straight forward, topped by the spherical object that Bagge and Evans believed would make a good crown, and, finally, a small sitting cat. Her long black hair hangs down her back and curls down around her breasts.

Really a goddess?

The Snake Goddess is a provocative image, but its restoration and interpretation are problematic. The crown and cat have no parallel in any image of a Bronze Age woman, so these should be discounted. The interpretation of this figure as a goddess is also difficult, since there is no evidence of what a Minoan goddess might have looked like. Many images of elite Minoan women, perhaps priestesses, look very much like this figurine. If it is the action of snake-wrangling that makes her a goddess, this is also a problem. The image of a woman taming one or more snakes is entirely unique to the Temple Repositories. Therefore, if she is a snake goddess, she is not a particularly popular one.

Certainly, Evans was interested in finding a goddess at Knossos. Even before he excavated at the site, he had argued that there was a great mother goddess who was worshiped in the pre-Classical Greek world. With the Snake Goddess, Evans found—or fashioned—what he had anticipated. Its authenticity and meaning, however, leave many questions today.

Harvester Vase

by Dr. Senta German



Figure 8.2.36: Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada, c. 1550-1500 BCE. Black steatite, diameter 4.5 inches. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Small but powerful

Found at Hagia Triada, an elite site associated with Minoan palaces and dating to the Neopalatial period, (1600-1450 BCE) the Harvester Vase displays a detailed and fascinating scene of men marching and singing in what appears to be a harvest celebration. Although it is not a grand artistic monument, this small vessel (about 4.5 inches in diameter), communicates a grace and vitality typical of Aegean Bronze Age art.

Imitating an eggshell



Figure 8.2.37: Ostrich egg rhyton from the tholos tomb at Dendra, Greece, Mycenaean, 15th-14th c. BCE. Ostrich egg, silver, gold, and copper National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Schuppi, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Harvester Vase is actually not a vase but rather a rhyton, a ritual vessel used for pouring liquids. It has a hole at the top and would have had a hole at the bottom before it was damaged. It is made of black steatite and is shaped to look like a similar vessel made of an even more valuable material: an ostrich egg shell. Ostrich egg rhyta were some of the most luxurious and exotic ritual goods in the Aegean Bronze Age. This type of object was made by drilling holes at either end of an ostrich egg (imported from Egypt), drawing out the contents, and affixing a decorative rim on the top and at the bottom. However, what the Harvester Vase lacks in imported luxury, it makes up for in sheer sculptural power.



Figure **8.2.38**: Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail showing the men matching in pairs). (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A rhythmic procession



Figure **8.2.39**: Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail showing one man looking behind him). (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The miniature scene, carved in relief, illustrates some twenty-seven men in a procession. Most of these men are depicted in pairs, legs stepping high and right arms bent at the elbow, hands held close to the chest, and wearing identical costumes: loincloths, flat caps, carrying bags or pads on the left thigh, and on the left shoulder, a pole with a short curved blade and a three pronged fork. These men are all young, slim, and muscular, with angular faces turned up to the sky. Their paired, lock-step procession evokes marching or rhythmic movement. There is one exception to this rhythm: near the back of the group, one man turns to look behind him, perhaps because, it would appear, another has fallen just at his back.



Figure **8.2.40**: Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail of the group's leader in a scallop-patterned robe). (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0)

This marching group is led by an apparently older man, wearing long shaggy hair and a fringed robe with a scallop pattern (Figure **8.2.40**). He carries a long staff, crooked at the bottom and tapering at the top. In the middle of the group of men behind him is another single figure, a man who looks perhaps not as young and lean as those in the group, who is shaking a *sistrum* (a musical instrument used in religious rituals). These were common in ancient Egypt as well as in ancient Greece and Rome; examples have been found on Bronze Age Crete as well. This man appears to be shouting or singing with his mouth wide open and he is followed close behind by a rank of four men who also have wide open mouths and wear cloaks around their shoulders.



Figure **8.2.41**: Harvester Vase from Hagia Triada (detail of man shaking a *sistrum*). (Photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Reaping or sowing?

As the name of this vessel indicates, it is generally thought that its decoration refers to harvesting, the key evidence being the long implement each of the younger men is carrying over his shoulder. What is not clear is exactly what the implement is. If it is a winnowing fork, these men are harvesting, collecting mature cereal crops; they will use the fork to separate the grain from its husk. If the implement is a hoe, festooned with branches, then the men are off to plant seeds—perhaps to be found in each of the men's bags. Which it is—harvesting or planting—we may never know, but what is clear is the masculine, communal, and celebratory nature of the activity depicted on this beautiful vessel.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Senta German, "Restoration versus conservation: the Palace at Knossos (Crete)," in *Smarthistory*, July 11, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Bull-leaping fresco from the palace of Knossos," in *Smarthistory*, August 15, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Minoan woman or goddess from the palace of Knossos ("La Parisienne")," in *Smarthistory*, August 14, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Hagia Triada sarcophagus," in *Smarthistory*, August 17, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Octopus vase," in *Smarthistory*, August 15, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Snake Goddess," in *Smarthistory*, August 15, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Senta German, "Harvester Vase," in *Smarthistory*, August 16, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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8.3: Mycenaean

Mycenaean Art & Architecture

By Boundless Art History

Mycenaean Architecture

Mycenaean culture can be summarized by its architecture, whose remains demonstrate the Mycenaeans' war-like culture and the dominance of citadel sites ruled by a single ruler. The Mycenaeans populated Greece and built citadels on high, rocky outcroppings that provided natural fortification and overlooked the plains used for farming and raising livestock. The citadels vary from city to city but each share common attributes, including building techniques and architectural features.

Building Techniques

The walls of Mycenaean citadel sites were often built with ashlar and massive stone blocks. The blocks were considered too large to be moved by humans and were believed by ancient Greeks to have been erected by the Cyclopes—one-eyed giants. Due to this ancient belief, the use of large, roughly cut, ashlar blocks in building is referred to as Cyclopean masonry. The thick Cyclopean walls reflect a need for protection and self-defense since these walls often encircled the citadel site and the acropolis on which the site was located.

Corbel Arch

The Mycenaeans also relied on new techniques of building to create supportive archways and vaults. A typical post and lintel structure is not strong enough to support the heavy structures built above it. Therefore, a corbeled (or corbel) arch is employed over doorways to relieve the weight on the lintel.

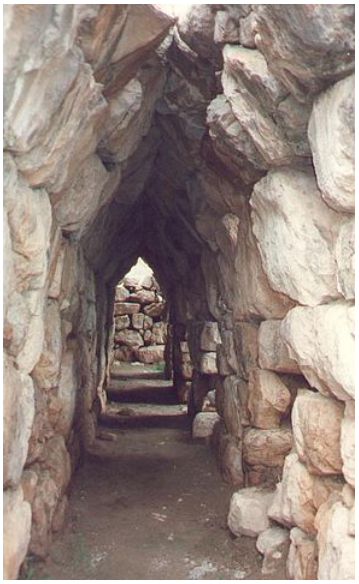


Figure **8.3.1**: Corbeled vault, Tiryns, Greece. (Photo: Napoleon Vier, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The corbel arch is constructed by offsetting successive courses of stone (or brick) at the springline of the walls so that they project towards the archway's center from each supporting side, until the courses meet at the apex of the archway (often, the last gap is bridged with a flat stone). The corbel arch was often used by the Mycenaeans in conjunction with a relieving triangle, which was a triangular block of stone that fit into the recess of the corbeled arch and helped to redistribute weight from the lintel to the supporting walls.

Citadel Sites

Mycenaean citadel sites were centered around the megaron, a reception area for the king. The megaron was a rectangular hall, fronted by an open, two-columned porch. It contained a more or less central open hearth, which was vented though an oculus in the

roof above it and surrounded by four columns. The architectural plan of the megaron became the basic shape of Greek temples, demonstrating the cultural shift as the gods of ancient Greece took the place of the Mycenaean rulers.

Citadel sites were protected from invasion through natural and man-made fortification. In addition to thick walls, the sites were protected by controlled access. Entrance to the site was through one or two large gates, and the pathway into the main part of the citadel was often controlled by more gates or narrow passageways. Since citadels had to protect the area's people in times of warfare, the sites were equipped for sieges. Deep water wells, storage rooms, and open space for livestock and additional citizens allowed a city to access basic needs while being protected during times of war.

Mycenae

The citadel site of Mycenae was the center of Mycenaean culture. It overlooks the Argos plain on the Peloponnesian peninsula, and according to Greek mythology was the home to King Agamemnon.

The site's megaron sits on the highest part of the acropolis and is reached through a large staircase. Inside the walls are various rooms for administration and storage along with palace quarters, living spaces, and temples. A large grave site, known as Grave Circle A, is also built within the walls.

The main approach to the citadel is through the Lion Gate, a Cyclopean-walled entrance way. The gate is 20 feet wide, which is large enough for citizens and wagons to pass through, but its size and the walls on either side create a tunneling effect that makes it difficult for an invading army to penetrate.



Figure **8.3.2**: Lion Gate, Mycenae, Greece, circa 1300–1250 BCE. Limestone. (Photo: Andreas Trepte, CC BY-SA 2.5) The Lion Gate is famous for its use of the relieving arch, a corbeled arch that leaves an opening and lightens the weight carried by the lintel.

The gate is famous for its use of the relieving arch, a corbeled arch that leaves an opening and lightens the weight carried by the lintel. The Lion Gate received its name from its decorated relieving triangle of lions one either side of a single column. This composition of lions or another feline animal flanking a single object is known as a heraldic composition. The lions represent cultural influences from the Ancient Near East. Their heads are turned to face outwards and confront those who enter the gate.



Figure **8.3.3**: Treasury of Atreus, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1300–1250 BCE. (Photo: Ken Russell Salvador, CC BY 2.0) The Treasury of Atreus and others tombs like it are demonstrations of corbeled vaulting that covers an expansive open space.

Mycenae is also home to a subterranean beehive-shaped tomb (also known as a tholos tomb) that was located outside the citadel walls. The tomb is known today as the Treasury of Atreus (Figure **8.3.3**), due to the wealth of grave goods found there.

This tomb and others like it are demonstrations of corbeled vaulting that covers an expansive open space. The vault is 44 feet high and 48 feet in diameter. The tombs are entered through a narrow passageway known as a dromos and a post-and-lintel doorway topped by a relieving triangle.

Tiyrns

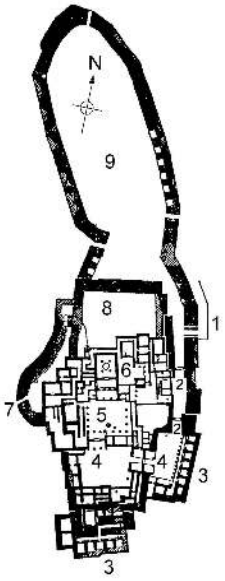


Figure **8.3.4**: Drawing of the ground plan of the citadel of Tiryns, Greece, circa 1400–1200 BCE. This plan shows the sloping access road [1], fortress gates [2], casemates [3], storage [4], central palace square [5], house ("Megaron") and adjoining buildings [6], exit gate [7], middle ward [8] and lower castle, [9]. (Image: Napoleon Viere, GNU free documentation license)

The citadel site of Tiryns, another example of Mycenaean fortification, was a hill fort that has been occupied over the course of 7000 years. It reached its height between 1400 and 1200 BCE, when it was one of the most important centers of the Mycenaean world. Its most notable features were its palace, its Cyclopean tunnels, its walls, and its tightly controlled access to the megaron (Figure **8.3.5**) and main rooms of the citadel.

Just a few gates provide access to the hill but only one path leads to the main site. This path is narrow and protected by a series of gates that could be opened and closed to trap invaders. The central megaron is easy to locate, and it is surrounded by various palatial and administrative rooms. The megaron is accessed through a courtyard that is decorated on three sides with a colonnade.

The famous megaron has a large reception hall, the main room of which had a throne placed against the right wall and a central hearth bordered by four wooden columns that served as supports for the roof. It was laid out around a circular hearth surrounded by

four columns. Although individual citadel sites varied to a degree, their overall uniformity allows us to compare design elements easily. For example, the hearth of the megaron at the citadel of Pylos provides an idea of how its counterpart at Tiryns appears.



Figure **8.3.5**: Megaron hearth at the citadel of Pylos, Greece. (Photo: YukioSanjo, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Mycenaean Metallurgy

The Mycenaeans were masterful metalworkers, as their gold, silver, and bronze daggers, drinking cups, and other objects demonstrate.

Grave Circle A at Mycenae

Grave Circle A is a set of graves from the sixteenth century BCE located at Mycenae. The grave circle was originally located outside the walls of the city but was later encompassed inside the walls of the citadel when the city's walls were enlarged during the thirteenth century BCE. The grave circle is surrounded by a second wall and only has one entrance. Inside are six tombs for nineteen bodies that were buried inside shaft graves. The shaft graves were deep, narrow shafts dug into the ground. The body would be placed inside a stone coffin and placed at the bottom of the grave along with grave goods. The graves were often marked by a mound of earth above them and grave stele.

The grave site was excavated by Heinrich Schliemann in 1876, who excavated ancient sites such as Mycenae and Troy based on the writings of Homer and was determined to find archaeological remains that aligned with observations discussed in the Iliad and the Odyssey. The archaeological methods of the nineteenth century were different than those of the twenty-first century and Schliemann's desire to discover remains that aligned with mythologies and Homeric stories did not seem as unusual as it does today. Upon excavating the tombs, Schliemann declared that he found the remains of Agamemnon and many of his followers.

Grave Circle B

An additional grave circle, Grave Circle B, is also located at Mycenae, although this one was never incorporated into the citadel site. The two grave circles were elite burial grounds for the ruling dynasty. The graves were filled with precious items made from expensive material, including gold, silver, and bronze.

The amount of gold, silver, and previous materials in these tombs not only depict the wealth of the ruling class of the Mycenae but also demonstrates the talent and artistry of Mycenaean metalworking. Reoccurring themes and motifs underline the culture's propensity for war and the cross-cultural connections that the Mycenaeans established with other Mediterranean cultures through trade, including the Minoans, Egyptians, and even the Orientalizing style of the Ancient Near East

Gold Death Masks

Repoussé death masks were found in many of the tombs. The death masks were created from thin sheets of gold, through a careful method of metalworking to create a low relief.

These objects are fragile, carefully crafted, and laid over the face of the dead. Schliemann called the most famous of the death masks the Mask of Agamemnon, under the assumption that this was the burial site of the Homeric king. The mask depicts a man with a triangular face, bushy eyebrows, a narrow nose, pursed lips, a mustache, and stylized ears.



Figure 8.3.6: *Mask of Agamemnon*, from Shaft Grave V, Grave Circle A, Mycenae, c.1550-1500 BCE. Gold, 12 in (35 cm). National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Xuan Che, CC BY 2.0)

This mask is an impressive and beautiful specimen but looks quite different from other death masks found at the site. The faces on other death masks (such as in Figure 8.3.7) are rounder; the eyes are more bulbous; and at least one bears a hint of a smile. None of the other figures has a mustache or even the hint of beard.

In fact, the mustache looks distinctly nineteenth century and is comparable to the mustache that Schliemann himself had. The artistic quality between the Mask of Agamemnon and the others seems dramatically different. Despite these differences, the Mask of Agamemnon has inserted itself into the story of Mycenaean art.



Figure 8.3.7: Gold mask from Grave Circle A at Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600-1100 BCE. (Photo: Xuan Che, CC BY 2.0)

Bronze Daggers

Decorative bronze daggers found in the grave shafts suggest there were multicultural influences on Mycenaean artists. These ceremonial daggers were made of bronze and inlaid in silver, gold, and niello with scenes that were clearly influenced from foreign cultures.

Two daggers that were excavated depict scenes of hunts, which suggest an Ancient Near East influence. One of these scenes depicts lions hunting prey, while the other scene depicts a lion hunt (Figure **8.3.8**). The portrayal of the figures in the lion hunt scene draws distinctly from the style of figures found in Minoan painting. These figures have narrow waists, broad shoulders, and large, muscular thighs.

The scene between the hunters and the lions is dramatic and full of energy, another Minoan influence. Another dagger depicts the influence of Minoan painting and imagery through the depiction of marine life, and Egyptian influences are seen on a dagger filled with lotus and papyrus reeds along with fowl.



Figure **8.3.8**: Mycenaean hunting dagger with a scene of a lion hunt, Grave Circle A, at Mycenae, Greece, c. 16th century BCE. Bronze with gold, silver, and niello inlay. (Photo: Alexikoua, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Gold and Silver Drinking Cups



Figure **8.3.10**: Rhyton in the shape of a bull's head, Mycenae acropolis, 16th century BCE. Bronze, inlaid semi-precious stones, and gold. National Archaeological Museum of Athens, N 384. (Photo: Zde, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A variety of gold and silver drinking cups have also been found in these grave shafts. These include a rhyton in the shape of a bull's head, with golden horns and a decorative, stylized gold flower, made from silver repoussé (Figure **8.3.10**). Other cups include the golden Cup of Nestor (Figure **8.3.9**), a large two-handle cup that Schliemann attributed to the legendary Mycenaean hero Nestor, a Trojan War veteran who plays a peripheral role in *The Odyssey*.



Figure **8.3.9**: Gold Cup of Nestor, Grave Circle A, Grave Shaft IV, at Mycenae, Greece, c. 1600–1500 BCE. (Photo: Anamnesis, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A silver rhyton called the Silver Siege Rhyton was likely used for ritual libations. The Silver Siege Rhyton is unique for its depiction of a siege. The scene is only preserved on a portion of the rhyton, but a landscape of trees and a fortress wall are clearly recognizable. The figures in the scene appear to be in various positions, some men fight each other. An archer crouches with his bow and arrow, while others throw rocks down from the wall at the invaders.

Mycenaean Ceramics

The Mycenaeans created numerous ceramic vessels of various types and decorated them in a variety of styles. These vessels were popular outside of Greece, and were often exported and traded around the Mediterranean and have been found in Egypt, Italy, Asia Minor, and Spain.

Two of the main production centers were the Mycenaean cities at Athens and Corinth. The products of the two centers were distinguishable by their color and decoration. Corinthian clay was a pale yellow and tended to feature painted scenes based on nature, while the Athenian potters decorated their vessels with a rich red and preferred geometric designs.

Vessels

The most popular types of vessels included kraters—large, open-mouth jars to mix wine and water—pitchers, and stirrup jars, which are so named for the handles that came above the top of the vessel. Mycenaean vessels usually had a pale, off-white background and were painted in a single color, either red, brown, or black.

Popular motifs include abstract geometric designs, animals, marine life, or narrative scenes. The presence of nature scenes, especially of marine life and of bulls, seems to suggest a Minoan influence on the style and motifs painted on the Mycenaean pots.

Vessels served the purposes of storage, processing, and transfer. There are a few different classes of pottery, generally separated into two main sections: utilitarian and elite.

1. Utilitarian pottery is sometimes decorated, made for functional domestic use, and constitutes the bulk of the pottery made.
2. Elite pottery is finely made and elaborately decorated with great regard for detail. This form of pottery is generally made for holding precious liquids and for decoration.

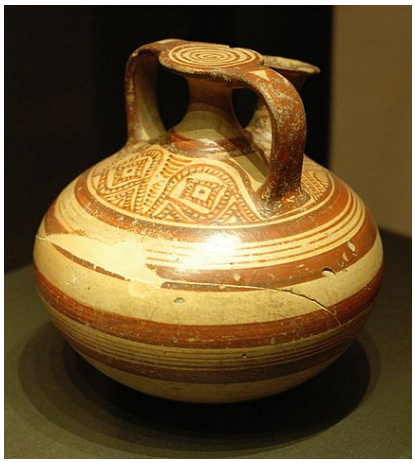


Figure 8.3.11: Mycenaean stirrup jar, c. 1350 BCE. Terracotta. (Photo: Jastrow, public domain)

Stirrup Jars

Stirrup jars, mainly used for storing liquids such as oil and wine, could have been economically valuable in Mycenaean households. The arrangement of common features suggests that a stopper is used to secure the contents and the contents are what make the jar a valuable household item.

The disc holes and third handle may have been used to secure a tag to the vessel, suggesting it had commercial importance and resale value. The locations where stirrup jars have been found reflect the fact that the popularity of this vessel type spread quickly throughout the Aegean, and the use of the stirrup jar to identify a specific commodity became important.

Warrior Vase

The Warrior Vase (c. 1200 BCE) is a bell krater that depicts a woman bidding farewell to a group of warriors. The scene is simple and lacks a background.

The men all carry round shields and spears and wear helmets. Attached to their spears are knapsacks, which suggest that they must travel long distances to battle. On one side, the soldiers wear helmets ornamented with horns. The soldiers on the other side wear hedgehog-style helmets. A single woman stands to the left with her arm raised and a group of identically dressed and heavily armed men is marching off to the right.

There is no way to tell which woman is waving goodbye, as all the figures are generic and none specifically interacts with her, nor do they interact with each other. The figures are stocky and lack the sinuous lines of the painted Minoan figures.



Figure 8.3.12: Warrior Vase, large krater with armored men departing for battle, Mycenae acropolis, 12th century BCE. Full armor includes helmet, cuirass, greaves, shield, spear. Carrying supplies hanging from spears. Mycenaean Pictorial Style, from the "House of the Warrior Krater." (Photo: Sharon Mollerus, CC BY 2.0)

Furthermore, while the men all face right with wide stances and appear to move in that direction, their flat feet and twisted perspective bodies inhibit any potential for movement. Instead the figures remain static and upright. The imagery depicts a simple narrative that in the warrior culture of the Mycenaeans must have often been reenacted.

Many scholars observe that the style of the figures and the handles of this thirteenth century BCE vase are very similar to eighth century BCE pottery. Similar spearmen are also depicted in eighth century BCE pottery which introduces a curious 500 year gap in styles.

Other sculpture

There are few examples of large-scale, freestanding sculptures from the Mycenaeans. A painted plaster head of a female—perhaps depicting a priestess, goddess, or sphinx —is one of the few examples of large-scale sculpture.

The head is painted white, suggesting that it depicts a female. A red band wraps around her head with bits of hair underneath. The eyes and eyebrows are outlined in blue, the lips are red, and red circles surrounded by small red dots are on her checks and chin.



Figure **8.3.13**: Female head of a priestess, goddess, or sphinx, Mycenae, Greece, c. 1300-1250 BCE. Painted plaster. (Photo: Marsyas, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Articles in this section:

- Lumen Learning, "Mycenaean Art," in *Boundless Art History* (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Ancient Greece

In This Chapter

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9.1: Introduction- The Ancient Greeks and Their Gods
9.2: Geometric, Proto-Archaic, and Archaic
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9.5: Late Classical and Hellenistic

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9.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Stolen Sculptures and Defiant Architecture, An Ongoing Call for Repatriation

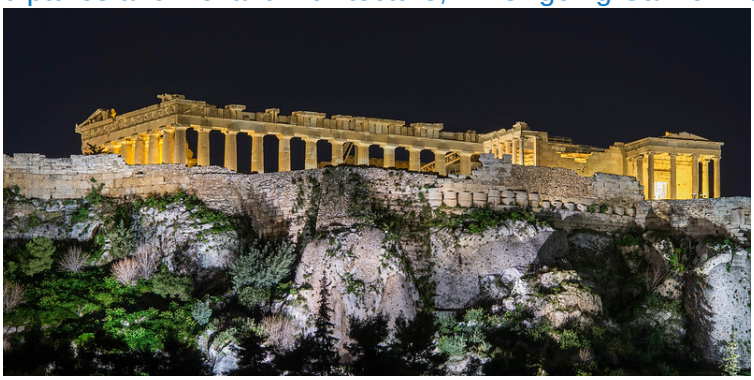


Figure 9.0.1: View of the Parthenon at night, 447-432 BCE. (Photo: Marty CZ, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Soaring above the modern city of Athens on the Acropolis, or "high city," the Parthenon, a magnificent temple to the goddess Athena, is striking even as a ruin, with towering columns supporting an entablature and pediments once filled with sculpture (see Figure 9.0.1). Although it is more than 2500 years old, its ruined state is not primarily due to its age, but to an event that happened just a few hundred years ago. In 1687, Ottoman forces occupying Greece used the Parthenon as an ammunition depot—and when a mortar from the opposing Venetian army hit the roof, the resulting explosion caused extensive structural damage. More damage was done—in the name of preservation and with dubious permission—when, between 1801 and 1803, a team led by the Englishman Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin, removed about 247 feet of the Parthenon's surviving frieze, 15 metopes, a caryatid from the Erechtheion, and fragments from the temple to Athena Nike.

Today, those Parthenon Marbles (also formerly called the "Elgin Marbles"), purchased from Elgin by the British Parliament, live in the British Museum in London—and the Greeks want them back. Repatriation, or the return of something to its homeland, is a recurring theme in this book; readers might recall, for example, the Rosetta Stone. Greece formally requested repatriation of the marbles beginning in 1983, and the debate over where they should properly live has become even more pronounced in recent years, largely based on three factors: a growing international awareness of and conversation about looted art and repatriation; the Acropolis Museum's new building; and a recent recommendation from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles.

Greece built and opened the Acropolis Museum in 1874 to house some of the first excavations of the Acropolis, and overhauled and refurbished it after World War II. In 2000, the Museum took a radical turn, opening an architectural competition and inviting design submissions for an entirely new museum structure. With the winning submission from architects Bernard Tschumi and his Greek collaborator Michael Photiades, Greece invested in an elaborate building design and stunning displays that highlight both the works from the Acropolis and the view of the Acropolis itself. With this architectural marvel, they also took a defiant stand against the British Museum.



Figure 9.0.2: Interior of Acropolis Museum highlights the window-paned wall facing the Acropolis and Parthenon. (Photo: Phanatic, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The new Acropolis Museum, which opened in June of 2009, is bold both in its sleek and modern design (a contrast to the Classical style of the Greeks and one borrowed for other grand museum facades like those of the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and in the way it dramatically takes up space at the base of the Acropolis, as if asserting itself and its importance to the city. From inside, viewers' gazes are directed both up and down to highlight Greece's rich past: the clean lines of the building's architecture frame a staggering panoramic view of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, while a reinforced glass floor allows visitors to view archaeological remains lying beneath the museum. In an interior exhibit, steel beams reconstruct the pediment, supporting floating sculptural fragments and highlighting the vacant spaces where the missing Parthenon Marbles would be, reminding viewers that there are indeed missing pieces to this puzzle that are meant to be filled in (see Figure **9.0.3**). They quite purposely highlight an incomplete story, and point to the answer at the British Museum. The Acropolis Museum's state-of-the-art facilities firmly defy the early British Museum's claim that London could preserve the art better than Athens could. Seemingly forced and defensive phrasing about "requests," "discussions," and "positions" on the British Museum website speaks to this too.

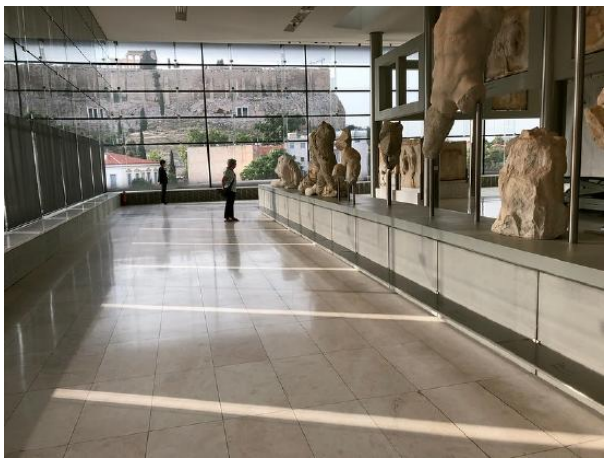


Figure **9.0.3**: Interior of Acropolis Museum showing missing spaces where missing marbles should be. (Photo: Jim Forest, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In October of 2021, the Greek Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, reported that UNESCO called on the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles. Mendoni reported that the "committee urgently calls on the United Kingdom to review its position and enter into a discussion with Greece, recognizing that the issue is of an intergovernmental nature—in contrast to claims from the British side that it is a matter for the British Museum—and mainly that Greece has a valid and legal claim to demand the return of the sculptures to their place of birth." For its part, the British Museum has stood firmly in its stance: defending itself that the Parthenon Marbles were obtained legally and rejecting UNESCO's call to reconsider its position and return them.

Despite this, the art world is seeing shifting ground in discussions and action around worldwide calls for repatriation and restitution, restoring a work to its rightful owner. Recently repatriated items include the Gilgamesh tablet returned to Iraq, two lintels to Thailand, a ceremonial shrunken head to Ecuador, a looted statue to India, and a tattooed Maori skull returned to New Zealand. Along with the cultural artifacts and artworks physically being repatriated, there are also increased global conversations about the ethical imperative to return such works and there are now museum committees dedicated to shifting business as usual at these institutions. In studying and tracking the movement of such collections, art historians continue to trace the story of art, as it moves from artist, to collector, to museum, and perhaps, eventually, back home.

Optional Online Resource: Who Owns the Parthenon Sculptures?

Ancient Greeks made them, Ottomans captured them, Venetians blew them up, and the British took them away. In this video, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Harris address the naturalism and energy that makes the Parthenon sculptures so remarkable—and so highly desirable. They trace the sculptures' complicated journey from the site of their creation, in Athens, to their current location in the British Museum, and the ongoing debate about where these sculptures best belong.



Smarthistory, "Who Owns the Pathenon Sculptures?"

Historiography (Writing History)

Roman Replicas of Greek Originals

Many of the sculptures discussed in this chapter are actually Roman copies of now-lost Greek originals. In fact, very few ancient bronze sculptures survived the passage of time: they were lost, stolen, or melted down to reuse the precious metal. Marble replicas —sometimes made centuries after the original—are often the only evidence of the vanished original. The differences between bronze and marble can also be seen in the copies: marble cannot support its own weight the way bronze can, so struts (often creatively disguised as a tree branch) were incorporated as support.

As the Roman Empire expanded its borders in 200 BCE, many Roman generals began admiring Greek culture and collecting Greek art, thus increasing demand for similar art at home. Roman artists began adopting Greek aesthetic principles and mythological subjects, often copying famous Greek statues, and sometimes only appropriating or adapting certain elements. Artists made plaster molds of famed Greek works that could be shipped across the Roman Empire to be replicated in bronze or marble.

Roman demand for Greek art steadily increased, and by the second century CE, the Roman Empire was filled with Greek-inspired statuary, whether in homes, public spaces, theaters, or bathhouses. Often works made during the Roman period, from 200 BCE to 300 CE, replicated works that were made as long ago as 500 years earlier in Greece. Copies may be considered less valuable than originals today, but Romans did not make this distinction. They admired emulation—the attempt to improve on something by copying it. Roman artists employed great skill in adapting Greek art, made not only with different materials, but also to different scales. In many cases, Roman copies are the reason people today can appreciate long-lost Greek works.

The Greek Pantheon: A Collection of Gods

The word pantheon comes from the Greek roots *pan* (all) and *theos* (god), and refers to a culture's collection of gods. Many figures from the Greek pantheon are familiar to us today, such as Zeus, god of the sky and king of the Olympians, often depicted with a big white beard and holding a thunderbolt. He had several notable children with his primary wife, Hera, including Hephaistos and Ares, and fathered plenty more children with other goddesses, among them Athena, Apollo, Artemis, and Hermes. Others still, like the hero Herakles, he conceived with a human woman.



Figure **9.0.4**: Zeus (or Poseidon?), c. 460-450 BCE. Bronze, 6'10" high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens. (Photo: dynamosquito, CC BY-SA 2.0) A bronze head of the god Zeus or Poseidon gazes into the distance, shown with curly hair and a full beard.

These classic mythological tales include stories of drama, anger, passion, rape, unrequited love, trickery, greed, infidelity, and revenge (a kind of modern day reality show). It is said that the Greeks made men of their gods, and gods of their men. The Greek gods were not aloof, remote, and perfect; instead they were very human, constantly scheming and fighting, sometimes going up against one other to protect their own chosen humans, as Athena defended the Athenians and Odysseus on his journeys. In Classical Greek art, humans—youthful, well-muscled, beautiful—resemble gods themselves. Because the stories of these gods were part of Greek religion and so widely known, they come up often in Greek art, particularly in sculpture. (Learn more about Greek mythology in E. M. Berens' *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece and Rome* or by exploring the Theoi Project on Greek Mythology.)

Terminology

The "Orientalizing Period" and Orientalism

This chapter and the following chapter on Etruscan art discuss the "Orientalizing period," which more recently has been renamed the Proto-Archaic period. The former term is an outdated and situational term that art historians used to reference the stylistic influence of Greece's neighbors to the east (or "Orient"), particularly the Egyptians (who actually lived to the south) and Assyrians. But, as discussed in past chapters, this centers Greece, and more largely Western Europe, as the protagonist of history, central to all that occurs around them. In Marian H. Feldman's *The Oxford Handbook of the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean*, she notes that the "Orientalizing period should be understood as a construct of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship that was structured around a false dichotomy between the Orient (the East) and the West."

Today, the terms Oriental, Orientalizing, and Orientalism carry their own definitions and weight, and thus, they should be used carefully and intentionally. In 1978, Edward Said published the foundational text *Orientalism*, in which he critiqued the European construction of "the Orient." He argued that Orientalism was a European political ideology based on misrepresentations, stereotypes, and the European imagination. Said asserted that through such negative constructions and inaccurate generalizations, Europeans not only separated the "east" from the "west" (again, whose east and whose west?), but also rationalized subjugation and colonial rule over people outside of themselves in the so-called "east." (Read more about Orientalism and how art historians such as Linda Nochlin have applied this theory to art history.)

Chapter Overview

Many people think of Athens, more than ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, as the birthplace of Western civilization. Athens, named for Athena, the warrior goddess who sprang fully-formed, and fully armed, from the head of her father. The capital of Greece, Athens is also home of the Acropolis and within it the Parthenon, a marble temple to Athena Parthenos (Athena the virgin). It is also the birthplace of democracy—meaning rule by the *dēmos*, or the people.

In 776 BCE, separate states, united by their shared Greek language, held their first joint athletic games at Olympia—the forerunner of today's Olympic games. From that point forward, they regarded themselves as members of the community known as Hellas, with their shared Greek language as a symbol of their joint identity. (To the Greeks, all non-Greek speakers were "barbarians,"

pejoratively named as such because their language sounded like “bar bar bar” to the Greeks.) The Athenians built the Parthenon a few centuries later to embody the idea of civilization and Greek triumph.

The study of Ancient Greece is often divided into different periods or ages in order to help distinguish major changes and distinct times in their long history. The following periods show the approximate date ranges explored in each subsection of this chapter:

- Geometric (c. 900 to 700 BCE)
- Archaic (c. 600-480 BCE)
- Early Classical (c. 480-450 BCE)
- High Classical (c. 450-400 BCE)
- Late Classical (c. 400-300 BCE)
- Hellenistic (c. 323-31 BCE)

This chapter starts by briefly discussing the Geometric, Proto-Archaic, and Archaic periods before diving into the Classical period of Greek art (including the Early, High, and Late periods), and ending with the particularly dramatic and cosmopolitan Hellenistic period.

Objects overview

This chapter covers famous works of art that readers have likely seen referenced many times, including high relief sculptures and architecture from the Acropolis and the Nike of Samothrace (or “Winged Victory”). This chapter will include a wide range of ancient temples, statues, and vessels, including:

- an intricately decorated sculpture of a centaur from a tomb in the cemetery of Toumba—a work so grand that it disproved the belief that Greece went through a “Dark Age” period
- the grand Dipylon Amphora, a terrific example of late Geometric Greek pottery
- the *Statue of a Woman (or Lady of Auxerre)* which acts as a predecessor to the beginning of Greek sculptural history
- pottery featuring African figures and a discussion of their meaning in Classical Greek art
- *Kritios Boy* from 480 BCE, a sculpture that illuminates the transition between the Archaic Kouros and naturalistic movement of Classical Greek sculptural traditions
- the Acropolis, featuring historically significant buildings such as the Erechtheion with its caryatids (or female-figured columns), the Propylaea, and the Temple of Athena Nike, among others
- the Parthenon, planned by the famed architects Iktinos and Kallikrates in 432 BCE
- the Tomb of the Diver in high Classical Style
- the Altar of Zeus, commissioned by King Eumenes II with naturalistic “dying Gaul” sculptures inside to commemorate victory over the Gauls, new migrants to Asia Minor

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the art of Ancient Greece, you should be able to:

- Define repatriation and restitution as it pertains to art history and museum collections
- Explain the diverse cultural influences on Greek artistic development
- Identify architectural elements invented and popularized by the Greeks
- Connect the philosophy and religion of the ancient Greeks to their values in art and architecture
- Discuss the representation of the human form through different periods of Greek art
- Describe the impact of Greek art on neighboring cultures

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Athens Bureau, “UNESCO calls on UK to return Parthenon Marbles to Greece,” in *Greek City Times*.
- Tessa Solomon, “How Did the Parthenon Marbles End Up in the British Museum?,” for *ArtNews*.
- "Bronze Casting Using the Lost-Wax Technique" Video
- Crash Course, Greek & Roman Mythology Video
- Making Greek Vases Video
- The British Museum, "Egyptian Blue on the Parthenon Sculptures," for Smarthistory
- Dr. Rachel Kousser, "Destruction, Memory, and Monuments: The Many Lives of the Parthenon," for Smarthistory

- Greece: Take a tour of modern day Greece and learn how its history shaped its present, on Google Arts & Culture
- Parthenon, on Google Arts & Culture
- Ancient Greek Art An expedition to discover Ancient Greek Art and Architecture from around the world, on Google Arts & Culture
- Explore the Acropolis Museum in Athens Greece, on Google Arts & Culture
- Sicily: Culture and Conquest, on Google Arts & Culture Sicily
- Cynthia Colburn and Ella Gonzalez, "How to Teach Art History in the Age of #MeToo," for *Hyperallergic*

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9.1: Introduction- The Ancient Greeks and Their Gods

Introduction to ancient Greek art

by Dr. Renee M. Gondek

A shared language, religion, and culture



Figure 9.1.1: Athanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his Sons*, early first century CE. Marble, 7' 10 1/2″ high. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ancient Greece can feel strangely familiar. From the exploits of Achilles and Odysseus, to the treatises of Aristotle, from the exacting measurements of the Parthenon to the rhythmic chaos of the *Laocoön* (Figure 9.1.1), ancient Greek culture has shaped our world. Thanks largely to notable archaeological sites, well-known literary sources, and the impact of Hollywood (*Clash of the Titans*, for example), this civilization is embedded in our collective consciousness—prompting visions of epic battles, erudite philosophers, gleaming white temples, and limbless nudes (we now know the sculptures—even the ones that decorated temples like the Parthenon—were brightly painted, and, of course, the fact that the figures are often missing limbs is the result of the ravages of time).

Dispersed around the Mediterranean and divided into self-governing units called *poleis* or city-states, the ancient Greeks were united by a shared language, religion, and culture. Strengthening these bonds further were the so-called "Panhellenic" sanctuaries and festivals that embraced "all Greeks" and encouraged interaction, competition, and exchange (for example the Olympics, which were held at the Panhellenic sanctuary at Olympia). Although popular modern understanding of the ancient Greek world is based on the classical art of fifth century BCE Athens, it is important to recognize that Greek civilization was vast and did not develop overnight.



Figure 9.1.2: Map of the Ancient Greek World. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Dark Ages (c. 1100–c. 800 BCE) to the Orientalizing Period (c. 700–600 BCE)

Following the collapse of the Mycenaean citadels of the late Bronze Age, the Greek mainland was traditionally thought to enter a "Dark Age" that lasted from c. 1100 until c. 800 BCE. Not only did the complex socio-cultural system of the Mycenaeans

disappear, but also its numerous achievements (i.e., metalworking, large-scale construction, writing). The discovery and continuous excavation of a site known as Lefkandi, however, drastically alters this impression. Located just north of Athens, Lefkandi has yielded an immense apsidal structure (almost fifty meters long), a massive network of graves, and two heroic burials replete with gold objects and valuable horse sacrifices. One of the most interesting artifacts, ritually buried in two separate graves, is a centaur figurine (see Figure **9.1.3**). At fourteen inches high, the terracotta creature is composed of a equine (horse) torso made on a potter's wheel and hand-formed human limbs and features. Alluding to mythology and perhaps a particular story, this centaur embodies the cultural richness of this period.



Figure **9.1.3**: Centaur, c. 900 BCE. Terracotta, 14" high. The head was found in tomb 1 and the body was found in tomb 3 in the cemetery of Toumba, Lefkandi, Greece. (Detail of head photo: Dan Diffendale, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **9.1.4**: Late Geometric Attic spouted krater (vessel for mixing water and wine), possibly from Thebes, c. 730 BCE. 30.5 cm high. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo: Egisto Sani, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Similar in its adoption of narrative elements is a vase-painting likely from Thebes dating to c. 730 BCE (see Figure **9.1.4**). Fully ensconced in the Geometric Period (c. 800-700 BCE), the imagery on the vase reflects other eighth-century artifacts, such as the *Dipylon Amphora*, with its geometric patterning and silhouetted human forms. Though simplistic, the overall scene on this vase seems to record a story. A man and woman stand beside a ship outfitted with tiers of rowers. Grasping at the stern and lifting one leg into the hull, the man turns back towards the female and takes her by the wrist. Is the couple Theseus and Ariadne? Is this an abduction? Perhaps Paris and Helen? Or, is the man bidding farewell to the woman and embarking on a journey as had Odysseus and Penelope? The answer is unattainable.

In the Orientalizing Period (700-600 BCE), alongside Near Eastern motifs and animal processions, craftsmen produced more nuanced figural forms and intelligible illustrations. For example, terracotta painted plaques from the Temple of Apollo at Thermon (c. 625 BCE) are some of the earliest evidence for architectural decoration in Iron Age Greece. Once ornamenting the surface of this Doric temple (most likely as metopes), the extant panels have preserved various imagery. On one plaque (see Figure **9.1.5**), a male youth strides towards the right and carries a significant attribute under his right arm—the severed head of the Gorgon Medusa (her face is visible between the right hand and right hip of the striding figure). Not only is the painter successful here in relaying a particular story, but also the figure of Perseus shows great advancement from the previous century. The limbs are fleshy, the facial features are recognizable, and the hat and winged boots appropriately equip the hero for fast travel.

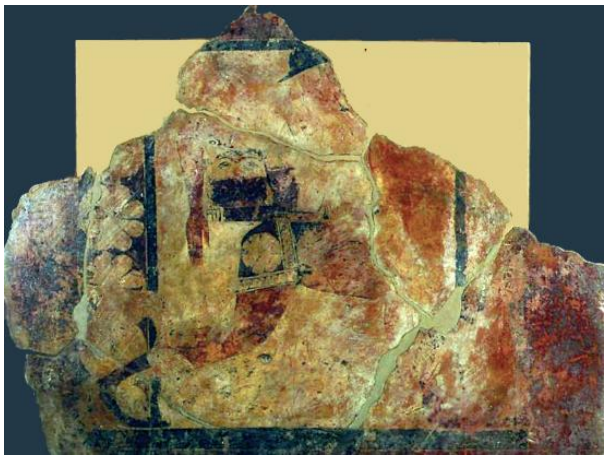


Figure **9.1.5**: Fragment showing Perseus with the head of Medusa likely from a metope from the Temple of Apollo at Thermon, c. 630 BCE. Painted terracotta, 87.8 cm high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Archaic Period (c. 600-480/479 BCE)

While Greek artisans continued to develop their individual crafts, storytelling ability, and more realistic portrayals of human figures throughout the Archaic Period, the city of Athens witnessed the rise and fall of tyrants and the introduction of democracy by the statesman Kleisthenes in the years 508 and 507 BCE.



Figure **9.1.6**: Left: *Anavysos (Kroisos) Kouros*, c. 530 BCE. Marble, 6′ 4″ high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Right: Aristion of Paros, *Phrasikleia Kore*, c. 550-540 BCE. Parian marble with traces of pigment, 211 cm high. National Arch eological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Asaf Braverman, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Visually, the period is known for large-scale marble kouros (male youth) and kore (female youth) sculptures (see Figure **9.1.6**). Showing the influence of ancient Egyptian sculpture (compare Menkaure and Queen from Ancient Egypt), the kouros stands rigidly with both arms extended at the side and one leg advanced. Frequently employed as grave markers, these sculptural types displayed unabashed nudity, highlighting their complicated hairstyles and abstracted musculature (see Figure **9.1.6**, left). The kore, on the other hand, was never nude. Not only was her form draped in layers of fabric, but she was also ornamented with jewelry and adorned with a crown. Though some have been discovered in funerary contexts, like *Phrasiklea* (see Figure **9.1.6**, right), a vast majority were found on the Acropolis in Athens. Ritualistically buried following desecration of this sanctuary by the Persians in 480 and 479 BCE, dozens of korai were unearthed alongside other dedicatory artifacts. While the identities of these figures have been hotly debated in recent times, most agree that they were originally intended as votive offerings to the goddess Athena.

The Classical Period (480/479-323 BCE)

Though experimentation in realistic movement began before the end of the Archaic Period, it was not until the Classical Period that two- and three-dimensional forms achieved proportions and postures that were naturalistic. The "Early Classical Period" (480/479-450 BCE, also known as the "Severe Style") was a period of transition when some sculptural work displayed archaizing holdovers. As can be seen in the Kritios Boy, c. 480 BCE, the "Severe Style" features realistic anatomy, serious expressions, pouty lips, and thick eyelids. For painters, the development of perspective and multiple ground lines enriched compositions, as can be seen on the Niobid Painter's vase in the Louvre (see Figure **9.1.7**).



Figure **9.1.7**: Niobid Painter, Niobid Krater, Attic red-figure calyx-krater, c. 460-50 BCE. 54 x 56 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo via Smarthistory)

During the "High Classical Period" (450-400 BCE), there was great artistic success: from the innovative structures on the Acropolis to Polykleitos' visual and cerebral manifestation of idealization in his sculpture of a young man holding a spear, the *Doryphoros* or "Canon" (see Figure **9.1.8**). Concurrently, however, Athens, Sparta, and their mutual allies were embroiled in the Peloponnesian War, a bitter conflict that lasted for several decades and ended in 404 BCE. Despite continued military activity throughout the "Late Classical Period" (400-323 BCE), artistic production and development continued apace. In addition to a new figural aesthetic in the fourth century known for its longer torsos and limbs, and smaller heads (for example, the *Apoxyomenos*), the first female nude was produced. Known as the *Aphrodite of Knidos*, c. 350 BCE, the sculpture pivots at the shoulders and hips into an S-Curve and stands with her right hand over her genitals in a pudica (or modest Venus) pose. Exhibited in a circular temple and visible from all sides, the *Aphrodite of Knidos* became one of the most celebrated sculptures in all of antiquity.



Figure **9.1.8**: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros* (*Spear-Bearer*) or *The Canon*, c. 450-40 BCE, ancient Roman marble copy found in Pompeii of the lost bronze original. 211 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Hellenistic Period and Beyond (323 BCE-31 BCE)

Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the Greeks and their influence stretched as far east as modern India. While some pieces intentionally mimicked the Classical style of the previous period such as Eutychides' *Tyche of Antioche* (Louvre), other artists were more interested in capturing motion and emotion. For example, on the Great Altar of Zeus from Pergamon expressions of agony and a confused mass of limbs convey a newfound interest in drama (see Figure **9.1.9**).



Figure **9.1.9**: Athena defeats Alkyoneus (detail), The Pergamon Altar, c. 200-150 BCE. Marble, 35.64 x 33.4 meters. Pergamon Museum, Berlin. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Architecturally, the scale of structures vastly increased, as can be seen with the Temple of Apollo at Didyma, and some complexes even terraced their surrounding landscape in order to create spectacular vistas as can be seem at the Sanctuary of Asklepios on Kos. Upon the defeat of Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, the Ptolemaic dynasty that ruled Egypt and, simultaneously, the Hellenistic Period came to a close. With the Roman admiration of and predilection for Greek art and culture, however, Classical aesthetics and teachings continued to endure from antiquity to the modern era.

Greek architectural orders

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

An architectural order describes a style of building. In classical architecture each order is readily identifiable by means of its proportions and profiles, as well as by various aesthetic details. The style of column employed serves as a useful index of the style itself, so identifying the order of the column will then, in turn, situate the order employed in the structure as a whole. The classical

orders—described by the labels Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian—do not merely serve as descriptors for the remains of ancient buildings, but as an index to the architectural and aesthetic development of Greek architecture itself.

The Doric order

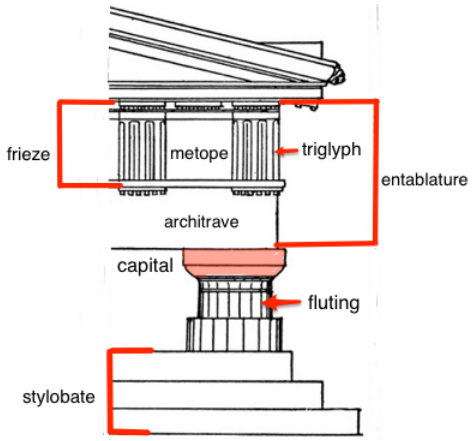


Figure **9.1.10**: Diagram of the Doric order, indicating frieze, metope, triglyph, architrave, entablature, capital, fluting, and stylobate. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Doric order is the earliest of the three Classical orders of architecture and represents an important moment in Mediterranean architecture when monumental construction made the transition from impermanent materials, such as wood, to permanent materials, namely stone. The Doric order is characterized by a plain, unadorned column capital and a column that rests directly on the stylobate of the temple without a base. The Doric entablature includes a frieze composed of trigylphs, or vertical plaques with three divisions, and metopes, square spaces for either painted or sculpted decoration (see Figure **9.1.10**). The columns are fluted and are of sturdy, if not stocky, proportions.



Figure **9.1.11**: Iktinos and Kallikrates, The Parthenon, 447-432 BCE. Acropolis, Athens, Greece. (Photo via Smarhistory)

The Doric order emerged on the Greek mainland during the course of the late seventh century BCE and remained the predominant order for Greek temple construction through the early fifth century BCE, although notable buildings of the Classical period—especially the canonical Parthenon in Athens—still employ it. By 575 BCE the order may be properly identified, with some of the earliest surviving elements being the metope plaques from the Temple of Apollo at Thermon. Other early, but fragmentary, examples include the sanctuary of Hera at Argos, votive capitals from the island of Aegina, as well as early Doric capitals that were a part of the Temple of Athena Pronaia at Delphi in central Greece. The Doric order finds perhaps its fullest expression in the Parthenon (c. 447-432 BCE) at Athens designed by Iktinos and Kallikrates (see Figure **9.1.11**).



Figure 9.1.12: Ionic capital, north porch of the Erechtheion, 421-407 BCE. Marble, Acropolis, Athens, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

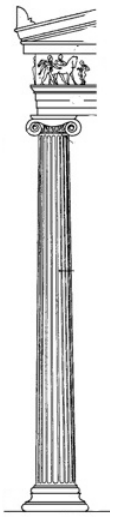


Figure 9.1.13: Drawing of a column showing the Ionic order. (Photo via Smarthistory)

As its names suggests, the Ionic Order originated in Ionia, a coastal region of central Anatolia (today Turkey) where a number of ancient Greek settlements were located. Volutes (scroll-like ornaments) characterize the Ionic capital and a base supports the column, unlike the Doric order (see Figures **9.1.12** and **9.1.13**). The Ionic order developed in Ionia during the mid-sixth century BCE and had been transmitted to mainland Greece by the fifth century BCE. Among the earliest examples of the Ionic capital is the inscribed votive column from Naxos, dating to the end of the seventh century BCE.

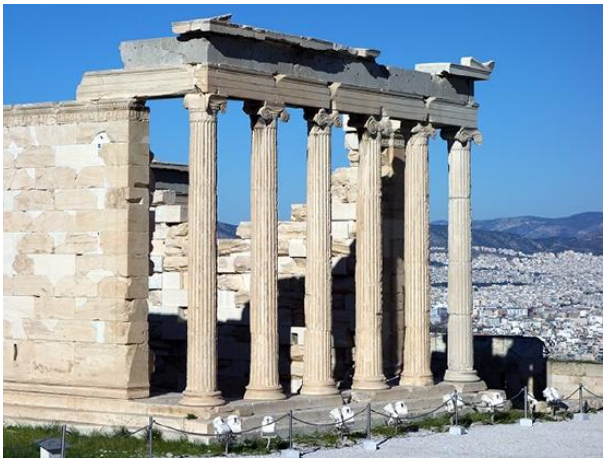


Figure 9.1.14: North porch of the Erechtheion, 421-407 BCE. Marble, Acropolis, Athens, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The monumental temple dedicated to Hera on the island of Samos, built by the architect Rhoikos, c. 570-560 BCE, was the first of the great Ionic buildings, although it was destroyed by earthquake in short order. The sixth century BCE Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, a wonder of the ancient world, was also an Ionic design. In Athens the Ionic order influences some elements of the Parthenon (447-432 BCE), notably the Ionic frieze that encircles the cella of the temple. Ionic columns are also employed in the interior of the monumental gateway to the Acropolis known as the Propylaia (c. 437-432 BCE). The Ionic was promoted to an exterior order in the construction of the Erechtheion (c. 421-405 BCE) on the Athenian Acropolis (see Figure **9.1.14**).The Ionic order is notable for its graceful proportions, giving a more slender and elegant profile than the Doric order. The ancient Roman architect Vitruvius compared the Doric module to a sturdy, male body, while the Ionic was possessed of more graceful, feminine proportions. The Ionic order incorporates a running frieze of continuous sculptural relief, as opposed to the Doric frieze composed of triglyphs and metopes.

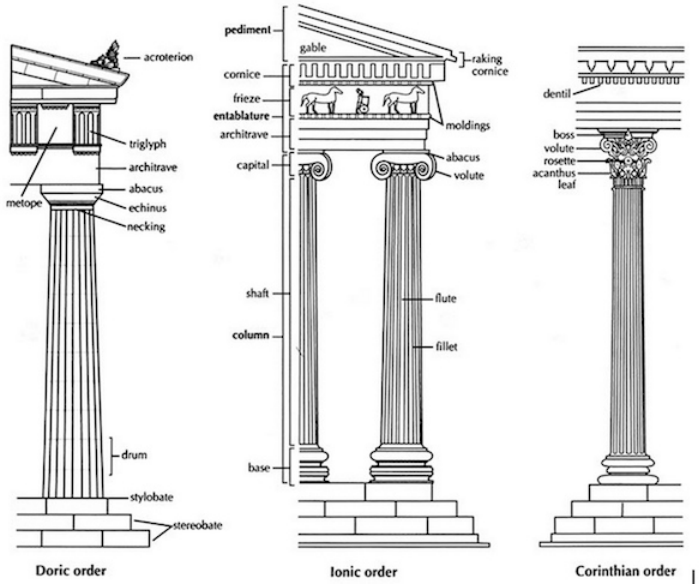


Figure **9.1.15**: The Greek orders. (Photo via Smarthistory) This illustration shows the similarities and differences found in Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders.

The Corinthian order



Figure **9.1.16**: Corinthian capital. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Corinthian order is both the latest and the most elaborate of the Classical orders of architecture. The order was employed in both Greek and Roman architecture, with minor variations, and gave rise, in turn, to the Composite order. As the name suggests, the origins of the order were connected in antiquity with the Greek city-state of Corinth where, according to the architectural writer Vitruvius, the sculptor Callimachus drew a set of acanthus leaves surrounding a votive basket (Vitr. 4.1.9-10). In archaeological terms the earliest known Corinthian capital comes from the Temple of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae and dates to c. 427 BCE.



Figure **9.1.17**: Acanthus leaf. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The defining element of the Corinthian order is its elaborate, carved capital, which incorporates even more vegetal elements than the Ionic order does (see Figure **9.1.16**). The stylized, carved leaves of an acanthus plant grow around the capital, generally terminating just below the abacus (see Figure **9.1.17**). The Romans favored the Corinthian order, perhaps due to its slender properties. The order is employed in numerous notable Roman architectural monuments, including the Temple of Mars Ultor and the Pantheon in Rome, and the Maison Carrée in Nîmes.

Legacy of the Greek architectural canon

The canonical Greek architectural orders have exerted influence on architects and their imaginations for thousands of years. While Greek architecture played a key role in inspiring the Romans, its legacy also stretches far beyond antiquity. When James "Athenian" Stuart and Nicholas Revett visited Greece during the period from 1748 to 1755 and subsequently published *The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece* (1762) in London, the Neoclassical revolution was underway. Captivated by Stuart and Revett's measured drawings and engravings, Europe suddenly demanded Greek forms. Architects the likes of Robert Adam drove the Neoclassical movement, creating buildings like Kedleston Hall, an English country house in Kedleston, Derbyshire. Neoclassicism even jumped the Atlantic Ocean to North America, spreading the rich heritage of Classical architecture even further—and making the Greek architectural orders not only extremely influential, but eternal.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Renee M. Gondek, "Introduction to ancient Greek art," in *Smarthistory*, August 14, 2016
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Greek architectural orders," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015

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9.2: Geometric, Proto-Archaic, and Archaic

Dipylon Amphora: A Conversation

by Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris



Figure **9.2.1**: Dipylon Amphora, c. 755-750 BCE. Ceramic, 160 cm. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As tall as a person, this pot is covered with geometric patterns and early figural representations. This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Click to watch the video.

Steven: We're in the National Archeological Museum in Athens looking at the Dipylon Vase.

Beth: The so-called Dipylon Vase because it was found near what would later become the Dipylon Gate in Athens and a cemetery right near there.

Steven: So this is a gigantic, ceramic pot. It's an anaphora. But it would have been used as a grave marker in antiquity and it's big. It's five feet one inch tall.

Beth: Yeah, it's almost as tall as I am. It's unusual in that we see figures. We see a narrative scene and this is something that we see emerging more and more in the late geometric period. And geometric is such an obvious name for the style of this vase.

Steven: Well look at the vase, it's covered from its foot all the way to the lip of its mouth with sharp-edged geometric patterns. I see meanders, I see diamonds, I see triangles. This is a pot coming out of that ancient tradition which really avoided empty space.

Beth: We do see black bands around the base where the neck meets the body and at the very lip of the vase. So we do have some black bands designating the separate parts of the vase.



Figure **9.2.2**: (Detail) Dipylon Amphora. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: But the most interesting part is the fact that we have emerging here representations of animals and even of people. As you said we only see that at the end of the geometric period.

Beth: On the neck of the vase we see deer grazing.

Steven: Below that we see what are either goats or gazelles perhaps or some people have said deer as well.

Beth: Lying down or seated.

Steven: But notice in both cases with the deer and with the goats, it's really a repeated motif so that it is a continuation of that pattern that is so much a part even of the non-figurative areas of the pot.

Beth: It's true in the bodies of the animals are reduced to geometric shapes, each one is exactly identical to the one before and the one after and they're almost easy to miss as animal figures.

Steven: Because they are so much a part of the pattern of the pot.

Beth: Exactly.

Steven: But in the main phrase at the shoulder of the pot, almost at its widest point.

Beth: Right where the handles meet the body.

Steven: We see a number of mourning figures on either side of the body of a dead woman.

Beth: Now we know it's a woman because she is wearing a skirt and different genders were identified in that way and she's lying on a funeral bier with a shroud held above her.

Steven: You see figures pulling at their hair, this is a symbol of mourning. Some people have even interpreted the little M-shaped patterns falling between the figures as tears.

Beth: Look at how the artist has avoided leaving any space blank. Even between those M-shapes, he's painted little star shapes to fill in the blank spaces.

Steven: Below the dead woman we can see perhaps the family. We see larger figures on their knees and then we see smaller figures, perhaps the children.



Figure **9.2.3**: (Detail) Dipylon Amphora. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The bodies are upside down triangles. The legs are lozenges. Everything is very reduced and the figures are all rendered as black silhouettes. Now the Greeks had a very specific way of firing pots to get the red ground and the black figures above it.

Steven: So this is not glaze in the modern sense, instead this is slipware. So slip is fine particles of clay that are suspended in water and then painted on the surface of the pot. Now this was very difficult because when you painted on that slip it was the same color as the dry clay before it was fired. But then it was the next step that was important.

Beth: It was fired in a kiln at about 900 degrees.

Steven: That's Celsius.

Beth: It was fired in a way where oxygen was withdrawn from the kiln. This causes the entire pot to turn black.

Steven: The kiln was then allowed to cool somewhat and then oxygen was allowed back into the kiln and then what happens is, the parts of the vase that are not painted return to their warm, red color and only the parts that were painted remain black. And so you can imagine how difficult this was to control in the ancient world before thermometers.

Beth: It really is an amazing testament to the skill of Greek potters.

Steven: Well the person who actually fashioned this pot produced it on a wheel but had to produce it in sections and then fit these sections together seamlessly.

Beth: This is a great example of late geometric Greek pottery.

Exekias, Attic Black Figure Amphora with Ajax and Achilles Playing a Game: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

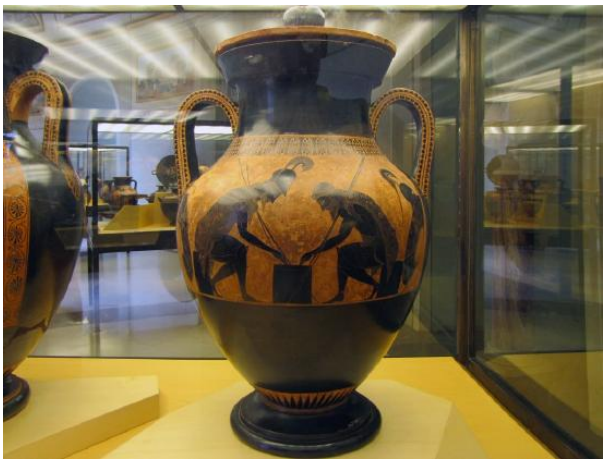


Figure **9.2.4**: Exekias (potter and painter), Attic black figure amphora with Ajax and Achilles playing a game, c. 540-530 BCE. 61.1 cm high, found Vulci. Gregorian Etruscan Museum, Vatican City, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Achilles and Ajax, heroes of the Trojan War, break from battle to play a friendly game that hints at a tragic future. This is a transcript of a conversation conducted at the Etruscan Museum, Vatican, Rome. .

Steven: We're in the Etruscan Museum in the Vatican Museums in Rome and we're looking at my favorite pot in the entire world.

Beth: I can see why it's your favorite pot. It seems to almost glow.

Steven: The thing that makes it so fabulous is we have these two heroes and we have a very simple image, but it's giving us so much information.

Beth: The heroes are Achilles on the left and Ajax on the right, two of the great Greek heroes featured in Homer's Iliad and Exekias, the potter, who signed only two pots as the potter and the painter, has identified these two figures by including their names above them, but he's also telling us what's happening between the two: Achilles on the left is saying the word "four."

Steven: You can see "tesara."Beth: And on the right, we see Ajax, saying "three."

Steven: "Tri."

Beth: We know immediately that Achilles is winning the game that they're playing.

Steven: But this is, of course, a metaphor for the way that this myth will unfold.



Figure **9.2.5**: Exekias, Attic black figure amphora, detail with Ajax, c. 540-530 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: On either side we see their shields. Achilles still has his helmet on, although Ajax has taken his off. So: a moment of relaxation between battles.

Steven: They're on the battlefield of Troy, but Exekias has given us even more information than this, not simply the rolls of the dice, but in a larger sense, their fate. Look at the way, for example, that while both figures are hunched over and clearly focused on the game at hand–and remember, these two men are really close friends, so there's an intimacy here, brotherhood—nevertheless,

Achilles, who has the higher roll, is holding his spears loosely. You can see the way the points are actually separating. At the bottom, you can see from the lines, they're not as parallel. But look at the figure on the right, Ajax, whose spears are held in a more parallel way, so that we know that he's actually clenching with his fist, he's tense.

Beth: I even sense a little bit of that tension in his brow.

Steven: That's right. If you look at the brow really closely, you can see that Achilles has a single incised line to represent his eyebrow, but Ajax has a double line and it is a subtle clue that perhaps there's a little bit of tension there. One other detail that can be easily seen, although it's really subtle: look at the feet of both figures. Achilles, again, is relaxed. His heel is on the ground line, but Ajax, his heel is picked up ever so slightly, so you can see just a little bit of light underneath it, which means his calf is engaged, those muscles are tense, his body is tense.

Beth: He's also a little bit more hunched over. His head is a little bit lower than that of his friend Achilles. That does seem to mean something wider than just this board game.



Figure **9.2.6**: Exekias, Attic black figure amphora, detail with Ajax, c. 540-530 BCE. (Photo: StevenZucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Anybody who was looking at this pot in the ancient world would have known the story of Ajax and Achilles that Homer tells, as you said, in the Iliad. Achilles is a great hero. In fact, as a child, his mother dipped him in the river Styx, which had the magical quality of making him invincible. It's just that she held him by his heel, so his heel was not protected and ultimately, he would be killed by an arrow that hits him there.

Beth: Hence the term that we use often of someone's Achilles heel, that is, their vulnerable spot.

Steven: Nevertheless, Achilles will die a great hero. Ajax will have a more complicated fate. He will outlive Achilles, and he will carry his great friend off the battlefield, but ultimately, he'll be in a battle for Achilles' armor.

Beth: Achilles had very special armor, which had been made by the god Hephaestus, the god of the forge.

Steven: Two people would want that armor, and they would both give speeches to convince judges as to who should get the armor, but Ajax, although he was much closer to Achilles, would lose the contest, have a bad moment where he slayed a bunch of Greeks, and ultimately, would kill himself on his own sword. Humiliation at the end of his life.

Beth: It's really interesting to think about this as an ancient Greek viewer who knows that whole story and what will unfold for both of these heroes, but the story is one thing and the way that Exekias, the potter, has represented this moment and these two figures with so much nobility, with such fine detail in the shape of a vase, which is so elegant, is something else.

Steven: Exekias really was the great master of Attic black-figure vase painting. These are black figures, they are silhouettes. If you look closely, the decorative forms is mostly incised with a needle.

Beth: And the black surface is like paint, but it's not quite paint.

Steven: This is slipware. Now, the Greeks didn't have the technology to get kiln ovens hot enough to vitrify, that is to create true glazes, the way ceramics do now. What they would do instead is they would take very fine particles of clay, suspend them in water, and use those as a kind of paint. Depending on the amount of oxygen that they allowed into a kiln, they could turn it black or red.

They would paint the surface with this slip and then they would burnish it. That is, they would take a very smooth surface, imagine the back of a spoon, and they would rub it back and forth so you get this surface that is really glossy and it almost looks like glaze.

Beth: When I look closely at the decorative borders on the handles or the decorative border just above the frieze of figures, I can see beautiful detail and the almost three-dimensional form of the slip is almost raised in areas, so it catches the light.

Steven: The Greeks did often use a syringe to paint the finest lines onto the surface, so one could imagine almost decorating a cake. You have a kind of syringe and you have the icing and it leaves a kind of bead that is raised against the surface and at a much finer level, that's what we're seeing here.

Beth: So Exekias is a master. His pots stand out in so many ways in their shape, in the painting, in the detail, in the drama that he was able to convey.

Steven: Certainly the Etruscans thought that was the case, because they must have spent a good deal of money importing this pot from Greece, across the Mediterranean, all the way to the Italian peninsula where they lived. So many of the great pots from ancient Greece are actually buried in Etruscan tombs. They were imported. The Greeks did a tremendous business exporting such pots, but Exekias was one of the great masters.

Sculpture in the Archaic Period

By Lumen Learning



Figure **9.2.7**: Kouros, from Attica ("New York Kouros"), possibly Anavysos, Greece, ca. 600 BCE. Marble, 6' 1/2" high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Anagoria, CC BY 3.0)

Sculpture in the Archaic Period developed rapidly from its early influences, becoming more natural and showing a developing understanding of the body, specifically the musculature and the skin. Close examination of the style's development allows for precise dating.

Most statues were commissioned as memorials and votive offerings or as grave markers, replacing the vast amphora (two-handled, narrow-necked jars used for wine and oils) and kraters (wide-mouthed vessels) of the previous periods, yet still typically painted in vivid colors.

Kouroi

Kouroi statues (singular, kouros), depicting idealized, nude male youths, were first seen during this period (see Figure **9.2.7**). Carved in the round , often from marble, kouroi are thought to be associated with Apollo; many were found at his shrines and some even depict him. Emulating the statues of Egyptian pharaohs, the figure strides forward on flat feet, arms held stiffly at its side with

fists clenched. However, there are some importance differences: kouroi are nude, mostly without identifying attributes and are free-standing.

Early kouroi figures share similarities with Geometric and Orientalizing sculpture, despite their larger scale. For instance, their hair is stylized and patterned, either held back with a headband or under a cap. The New York Kouros strikes a rigid stance and his facial features are blank and expressionless. The body is slightly molded and the musculature is reliant on incised lines.



Figure **9.2.8**: Kroisos, from Anavysos, Greece, ca. 530 BCE. Marble, 6' 4" high. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Tetraktys, CC BY-SA 3.0)

As kouroi figures developed, they began to lose their Egyptian rigidity and became increasingly naturalistic. The kouros figure of Kroisos, an Athenian youth killed in battle, still depicts a young man with an idealized body (see Figure **9.2.8**). This time though, the body's form shows realistic modeling.

The muscles of the legs, abdomen, chest and arms appear to actually exist and seem to function and work together. Kroisos's hair, while still stylized, falls naturally over his neck and onto his back, unlike that of the New York Kouros, which falls down stiffly and in a single sheet. The reddish appearance of his hair reminds the viewer that these sculptures were once painted.

Archaic Smile

Kroisos's face also appears more naturalistic when compared to the earlier New York Kouros. His cheeks are round and his chin bulbous; however, his smile seems out of place. This is typical of this period and is known as the Archaic smile. It appears to have been added to infuse the sculpture with a sense of being alive and to add a sense of realism.

Kore

A kore (plural korai) sculpture depicts a female youth (see Figure **9.2.9**). Whereas kouroi depict athletic, nude young men, the female korai are fully-clothed, in the idealized image of decorous women. Unlike men—whose bodies were perceived as public, belonging to the state—women's bodies were deemed private and belonged to their fathers (if unmarried) or husbands.

However, they also have Archaic smiles, with arms either at their sides or with an arm extended, holding an offering. The figures are stiff and retain more block-like characteristics than their male counterparts. Their hair is also stylized, depicted in long strands or braids that cascade down the back or over the shoulder.

The Peplos Kore (c. 530 BCE) depicts a young woman wearing a peplos, a heavy wool garment that drapes over the whole body, obscuring most of it. A slight indentation between the legs, a division between her torso and legs, and the protrusion of her breasts merely hint at the form of the body underneath.



Figure 9.2.9: Acropolis Kore, c. 520–510 BCE: Wearing a chiton and himation. Marble. Athens, Greece. (Photo: Tetraktys, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Remnants of paint on her dress tell us that it was painted yellow with details in blue and red that may have included images of animals. The presence of animals on her dress may indicate that she is the image of a goddess, perhaps Artemis, but she may also just be a nameless maiden.

Later korai figures also show stylistic development, although the bodies are still overshadowed by their clothing. The example of a Kore (520–510 BCE) from the Athenian Acropolis shows a bit more shape in the body, such as defined hips instead of a dramatic belted waistline, although the primary focus of the kore is on the clothing and the drapery. This kore figure wears a chiton (a woolen tunic), a himation (a lightweight undergarment), and a mantle (a cloak). Her facial features are still generic and blank, and she has an Archaic smile. Even with the finer clothes and additional adornments such as jewelry, the figure depicts the idealized Greek female, fully clothed and demure.

Pedimental Sculpture: The Temple of Artemis at Corfu

This sculpture, initially designed to fit into the space of the pediment, underwent dramatic changes during the Archaic period, seen later at Aegina. The west pediment at the Temple of Artemis at Corfu depicts not the goddess of the hunt, but the Gorgon Medusa with her children; Pegasus, a winged horse; and Chrysaor, a giant wielding a golden sword surrounded by heraldic lions (see Figure 9.2.10).

Medusa faces outwards in a challenging position, believed to be apotropaic (warding off evil). Additional scenes include Zeus fighting a Titan, and the slaying of Priam, the king of Troy, by Neoptolemos. These figures are scaled down in order to fit into the shrinking space provided in the pediment.

Pedimental Sculpture: The Temple of Aphaia at Aegina



Figure **9.2.10**: The Gorgon as depicted on the western pediment from the Artemis Temple of Corfu, on display at the Archaeological Museum of Corfu, Greece. (Photo: Dr. K, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Sculpted approximately one century later, the pedimental sculptures on the Temple of Aphaia at Aegina gradually grew more naturalistic than their predecessors at Corfu (see Figure **9.2.11**). The dying warrior on the west pediment (c. 490 BCE) is a prime example of Archaic sculpture. The male warrior is depicted nude, with a muscular body that shows the Greeks' understanding of the musculature of the human body. His hair remains stylized with round, geometric curls and textured patterns.

However, despite the naturalistic characteristics of the body, the body does not seem to react to its environment or circumstances. The warrior props himself up with an arm, and his whole body is tense, despite the fact that he has been struck by an arrow in his chest. His face, with its Archaic smile, and his posture conflict with the reality that he is dying.

Aegina: Transition between Styles



Figure **9.2.11**: Dying warrior, from the west pediment of the Temple of Aphaia, Aegina, Greece, c. 500–490 BCE. Marble, 5' 2 1/2" long. Glyptothek, Munich. (Photo: Bibi Saint-Pol, public domain)

The dying warrior on the east pediment (c. 480 BCE) marks a transition to the new Classical style (see Figure **9.2.12**). Although he bears a slight Archaic smile, this warrior actually reacts to his circumstances. Nearly every part of him appears to be dying.



Figure 9.2.12: Dying warrior, from the east pediment of the Temple of Aphaia, Aegina, Greece, c. 480 BCE. Marble, 6' 1" long. Glyptothek, Munich. (Photo: Petropoxy, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Instead of propping himself up on an arm, his body responds to the gravity pulling on his dying body, hanging from his shield and attempting to support himself with his other arm. He also attempts to hold himself up with his legs, but one leg has fallen over the pediment's edge and protrudes into the viewer's space. His muscles are contracted and limp, depending on which ones they are, and they seem to strain under the weight of the man as he dies.

Statue of a woman (*Lady of Auxerre*): A Conversation

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Figure 9.2.13: Statue of a woman, known as the "*Lady of Auxerre*," Daedalic style, Crete(?), c. 640-630 BCE. Limestone, 75 cm high. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Click to watch the video.

Steven: We're in the Louvre, in Paris, and we're looking at a small, free-standing sculpture—a figure that's often known as the Lady of Auxerre.

Beth: This is a Greek figure, likely from the island of Crete, but she was found, hence her title, in the French city of Auxerre, in the basement of a municipal museum. So we really don't know about her findspot (the location where the object was originally excavated).

Steven: There's some conjecture that she may have come originally from a cemetery in Crete, which would mean that she was a funerary sculpture, but we're not sure. It's possible that she was a votive figure, that is, a figure that was meant to honor the gods. And some scholars have even suggested that she might be a goddess herself.

Beth: This period, in the seventh century, is referred to as the Daedalic. And that name comes from the legendary sculptor Daedalus, who was said to be from the island of Crete.

Steven: This is a stylistic period that comes before the Archaic and parallels the Orientalizing style in ceramic decoration.

Beth: And in so many ways, she really does seem to prefigure the Archaic figures that we call kore: freestanding female figures that were sometimes representations of goddesses, sometimes votive figures (offerings to the gods)… This columnar (resembling a column) female figure who is very frontally oriented.

Steven: And abstracted. Her head is flattened, the face is relatively flat, the eyes are almond shaped.



Figure **9.2.14**: Detail, Statue of a woman, known as the "*Lady of Auxerre*." (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: "Flattened" is a good word here, because the front of her body appears flattened–although we do see her breasts—and even her hair has a flattened effect on either side of her face, and the top of her head also seems flattened.

Steven: But these are not unique characteristics to this sculpture. This is consistent with other sculptures of this period and of this area.

Beth: This is carved out of limestone. We're used to seeing Greek sculptures as white marble, but we now know that these sculptures were generally brightly painted.

Steven: One of the most delicate aspects is the incising (lines cut into the stone). And we can see it most obviously in the square patterns in the front of her dress, but you can also make it out in the wrap that she wears around her shoulders and that move down one side of her arm.

Beth: And you can also make it out in the very wide belt that she wears and even in that collar underneath the shawl. What strikes me is that this is a very idealized figure; this is not meant to be a portrait of the deceased person whose grave this may have marked. This is a figure shown, very much like later Greek figures in the Archaic and Classical period, at the prime of life. She is beautiful, she's young, she looks strong and healthy. Her waist is very narrow… She's very feminine.

Steven: And the corners of her mouth are upturned in an expression that is sometimes referred to as the "Archaic smile," even though this is before the Archaic period. Some art historians have conjectured that this may be an expression of well-being, of happiness, or perhaps a kind of transcendence. She feels so formal. Her feet are together.



Figure 9.2.15: Statue of a woman, known as the "*Lady of Auxerre*," Daedalic style, Crete(?), c. 640-630 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: That hand, in front…the other hand, that seems almost glued to the side of her body. But, unlike, earlier Egyptian figures, she's freed from the stone. We have space between her body and her arms, which is an important part of this very early Greek tradition, which we'll see in Archaic Greek art. And despite all the abstraction in her body that we just talked about, there's something very lifelike about her, especially in her face. And I think that would have been even more true when she was painted; if we imagine the pink of her lips, or painted pupils in her eyes, or her hair painted brown…

Steven: One of the reasons that a figure like this fascinates art historians is because we know what happens next. She stands at the beginning of this long history of Greek sculpture, which reaches levels of brilliance that we've admired for thousands of years after. We're seeing an early figure here, but one that, with all of the hindsight that we have, offers extraordinary promise.

Black Figures in Classical Greek Art

by Dr. Sarah Derbew. This essay first appeared in *the Iris* (CC BY 4.0).



Figure **9.2.16**: Pitcher (*Oinochoe*) in the Form of the Head of an African, about 510 B.C.E., attributed to Class B bis: Class of Louvre H 62. Terracotta, 8 7/16 inches high. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. (Photo: Getty Villa, no copyright in the United States)

In ancient Greece, men often escaped their daily grind to socialize at a symposium, or formalized drinking party. In the symposium, revelers indulged in numerous leisure activities centered around the consumption of wine. Among the variety of ceramic vessels that were used, pitchers of many shapes and sizes enabled wine pourers to fill the drinkers' cups. [1] One example is this oinochoe, a type of wine jug, now on display in the new Athenian vases gallery at the Getty Villa (see Figures **9.2.16** and **9.2.17**).

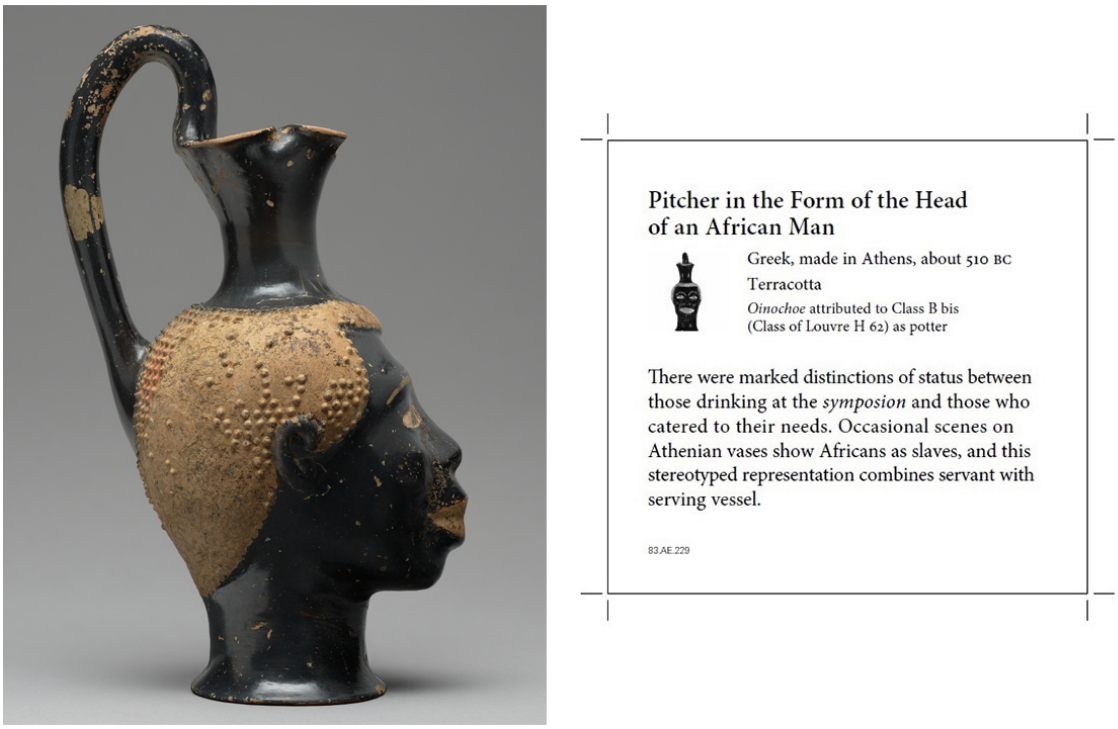


Figure **9.2.17**: Pitcher (*Oinochoe*) in the Form of the Head of an African, with the label that accompanies it in Athenian Vases (Gallery 103) at the Getty Villa. (Photo: Getty Villa, no copyright in the United States)

Label text: "Pitcher in the Form of the Head of an African Man. Greek, made in Athens, about 510 BCE. Terracotta. *Oinochoe* attributed to Class B bis (Class of Louvre H 62) as potter. There were marked distinctions of status between those drinking at the *symposion* and thoes who catered to their needs. Occasional scenes on Athenian vases show Africans as slaves, and this stereotyped representation combines servant with serving vessel."

This head-shaped wine pitcher invites numerous questions. The first is, quite simply, how to describe it. How can curators responsibly and comprehensively create a label for this pitcher? Is this face best characterized as “black,” “African,” or “black-glazed”?

The term “black” is unsuitable, because it transports our modern color politics into antiquity; the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has permanently mangled any attempt to use this color objectively.

The geographical marker “African” initially seems like a sound alternative. Unlike the historical weight of “black,” using the name of a continent seems to sidestep the retrojection of slavery’s violent history. It also presents a utopian description that unites fifty-four countries and millions of people into a collective entity. To use the word “African” for this pitcher, however, is to irresponsibly project contemporary concerns onto the past. The notion of “Africa” was vague at the time of production of this vessel, around 500 B.C.E.; the Greek term for the region, “Libya,” referred generally to the northern and northeast regions of the continent. “Aithiopian” was another popular term used to describe people with black skin; the etymology of Aithiopia highlights this relationship: *aithō* (I blaze) + *ops* (face).

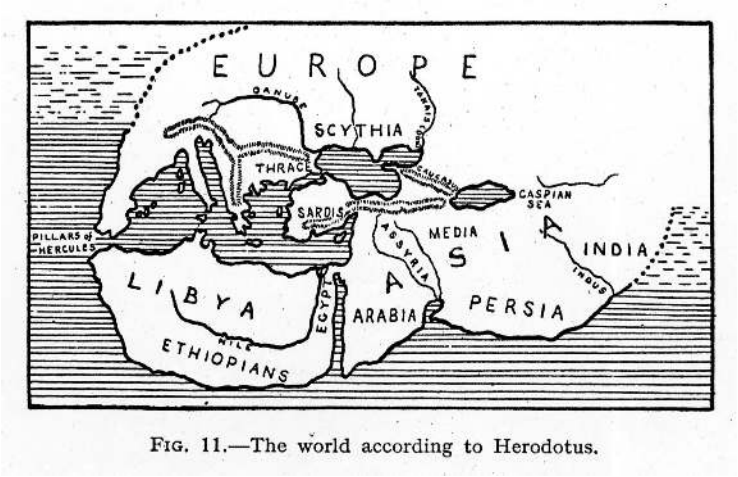


FIG. 11.—The world according to Herodotus.

Figure 9.2.18: Map of the World According to Herodotus, Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0)

What about our third option to describe this vessel, "black-glazed"? This term softens modern racial thinking by enabling a focus on material composition; the description recognizes color but does not subscribe to any color-based hierarchy. Although it is naïve to imagine that the black-glazed face, paired with full lips and a broad nose, does not evoke comparison with real people, I would argue that "black-glazed" is preferable because it extends beyond its modern politicized counterpart, "Black."[2] The hyphen emphasizes its artificial status; the label reflects artistic license rather than historical prejudices.

Now let us contextualize the description of this pitcher. The Getty Villa's label tells us that "occasional scenes on Athenian vases show Africans as slaves, and this stereotyped representation combines servant and serving vessel." Art historian François Lissarrague also interprets the black-glazed faces on other drinking cups and pitchers as servants in the symposium. [3]



Figure 9.2.19: High-Handled Drinking Cup (*Kantharos*) in the Form of Two Heads, about 510–480 B.C.E., the London Class. Terracotta, 7 9/16 inches high. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund. (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, public domain) A drinking cup is composed of two faces, looking out in opposite directions, one with a burnt umber-glazed face and one with a black-glazed face.

Some literary evidence supports this claim; one of the character sketches in the late fourth century B.C.E. Theophrastus' *Characters* describes a black person as an exotic servant for a petty man.[4] But other ancient Greek texts contradict this characterization; Homeric epics describe black people as semi-divine creatures whose country was a relaxing oasis for the gods.[5] Furthermore, visual references on ancient Greek vases depict black people in numerous roles: political allies, musicians, religious worshippers, soldiers, and servants. [6]



Figure 9.2.20: Attic White-ground *Alabastron*; Unknown; Athens, Greece; about 480 B.C.; terracotta; 14.5 cm, J. Paul Getty Museum. (Getty Museum, no copyright in the United States) On this vessel, a figure with dark brown skin is depicted from a profile-view on a painted white-background.

It is dangerous to fold selective history into the discussion without any reflective comments about the speculative work at play here. Although it is plausible that *some* black people were slaves in the fifth century B.C.E., there is no sure sign that this was the case in all situations.

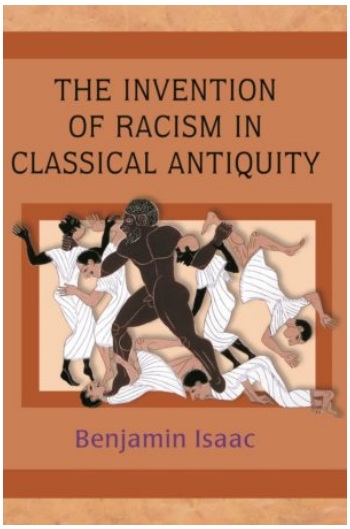


Figure 9.2.21: Cover of Benjamin Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, 2004

The need for careful treatment of black people in ancient Greek art extends beyond this pitcher. On the cover of Roman historian Benjamin Isaac's 2004 book *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, a troubling scene encourages anachronistic interpretations.

Here, we are confronted with a depiction of a violent encounter between a man and six other men. The person in the middle of the scene looms large and distinct; his upright pose and stark nakedness stand in sharp contrast to the clothed people in contorted positions around him. There are other visual clues that suggest his dominance. All of the men who come into contact with him either writhe under his feet or are firmly in his grasp. They are no match for his strength; he plows through them without hesitation.

Perhaps in collaboration with Isaac, Princeton University Press (the publishers of this book) chose this image as a cover for an important contribution to the discussion of racism in antiquity. This artistic rendition is based on a modern illustration of a sixth-century B.C.E. black-figure *hydria*, or water jar (see Figure 9.2.21). [7]

The impressive vase in Figure 9.2.22 can be seen at the Getty Center in the exhibition Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World. It depicts Herakles as he resists Egyptians' attempts to sacrifice him under the orders of the Egyptian king Bousiris. According to ancient Greek mythology, Bousiris received a prophecy that stipulated the sacrifice of a foreigner in order to stop a drought that was destroying his city. When Herakles entered Egypt, Bousiris tried to slaughter him, but the Greek hero fought back and eventually escaped.



Figure 9.2.22: Water Jar with Herakles and Bousiris, about 510 B.C.E., Greek. Clay, 17 15/16 inches high × 15 11/16 inches diameter. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Although the visual similarities between the cover in Figure 9.2.21 and the water vessel in Figure 9.2.22 are striking, the ancient image allows for a more sophisticated approach to skin color than the book cover's partial rendering of the scene. On the vase, black skin is capacious and flexible; it is not limited to those near Herakles. The crouching Egyptian priest on the left of the altar, as well as the Egyptian with raised hands to the right of the altar, have black skin. The black lines framing the scene and the black patterned designs on opposite sides of the scene also destabilize any quick interpretation of this color in antiquity. Skin color is only one element of this scene; the main theme appears to be the inverted violence that has occurred. The fear of the nine men is palpable; one has even climbed on top of the altar meant for Herakles. To add a final twist, Herakles' skin tone on this jar is dark red. [8] Herakles' blackness, as it appears today, is due to the worn state of the jar's surface.



Figure 9.2.23: Water Jar with Herakles and Bousiris, detail, about 510 B.C.E., Greek. Clay, 17 15/16 inches high × 15 11/16 inches diameter. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo: © 'KHM-Museumsverband,' via Smarthistory)

There are numerous examples of this sacrificial scene on ancient Greek pottery. Another depiction portrays Herakles as a figure whose skin color does *not* differ from those around him .



Figure 9.2.24: Pan Painter, *Pelike* with Herakles and Bousiris, about 470 B.C.E., terracotta. National Archaeological Museum, Athens. (Photo: Marsyas, CC BY-SA 2.5)

On the fifth-century B.C.E.greece storage jar in Figure 9.2.24, Herakles (on the left of the altar) again uses his sheer strength to punish the Egyptians. But there is a different awareness of color dynamics at play on this jar. Rather than a depiction of Herakles with black skin, blackness dominates the background of this vessel. Herakles' black hair and black beard set him apart from the bald and clean-shaven Egyptians. This does not mean, however, that his chromatic appearance is particularly important in this scene. Instead, blackness literally fades into the background. It offers a visual palette for a powerful scene rather than a reflection of color-based power dynamics. Herakles' lion-skin cloak and club are more helpful indicators of his identity. [9] In addition, the physiognomy of Herakles marks him as distinct from the Egyptians; his long nose and thin lips stand in contrast to their broad noses and full lips.

Altogether, it is undeniable that the image on Isaac's cover reproduces an ancient representation of Herakles. But the cover art is also eerily reminiscent of contemporary discourse about Blackness. In particular, it suggests a dangerous connection between violence and the (modern) Black male body. This cover misleads anyone interested in ancient discussions of black skin because the contents of this book do not adequately address this topic. This omission encourages viewers and readers to assume that this image is an accurate representation of black people in Greek antiquity. Barring the caption on the back of the book, the image is presented without any context; people who judge books by their covers will jump to inaccurate conclusions. The permanently violent coding of black skin color is incorrect and irresponsible; there are no historical roots tracing this presumed innate threat.

In sum, museum and academic scholars are key players in the fight for contextualized and equitable perspectives of black people in antiquity; they curate exhibits and write books that greatly influence vast audiences. Preconceived notions of Black people are seared into our country's collective consciousness; without an overhaul of the "black=slaves in perpetuity" trope, damaging stereotypes become ossified as facts for future generations. This brief examination has revealed ancient Greek art to be an expansive landscape. Ancient Greece's visual heritage included representations of black people that nimbly provoked and cut across hierarchies. Objects like the sixth-century B.C.E. head-shaped pitcher and water jar discussed above were not part of any chromatic hierarchy because such categories had yet to be codified. Instead, they existed within their own historical and artistic context.

Notes:

1. Various types of head-shaped vessels were produced around this time; see this example in the form of a woman's head in the Getty Villa collection.
2. I use "Black" to refer to the contemporary, socially constructed group of people, and "black" to designate people who are described as having black skin in ancient Greek literature and art.

3. François Lissarrague, “Athenian Image of the Foreigner,” translated by Antonia Nevill. In Thomas Harrison, ed., *Greeks and Barbarians* (Routledge Press, 2002): 108–9.
4. Theophrastus, 21.4.2.
5. *Iliad* 1.423, *Odyssey*, 1.22-23.
6. For more examples, see Frank Snowden Jr. “Aithiopes,” in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Volume I: Aara-Aphlad (Artemis Publishers, 1981): 415-18.
7. For a clearer rendition of the colors on this jar, see Perseus Digital Library.
8. Jaap M. Hemelrijk, *Caeretan Hydriae* (Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1984): 52-54.
9. Herakles killed and skinned a lion during the first of his Twelve Labors (feats he completed to atone for his madness-induced murder of his family)

Global Connections: The Politics of Painted Vessels

Just as Dr. Sarah Derbew introduces the complexity of Black and African figures depicted in Classical Greek vessels and art, other cultures globally have also documented cultural interactions and political hierarchies through complex imagery painted on their drinking vessels. In Politics and History on a Maya Vase, Dr. Cara Grace Tremain discusses the importance of Mayan visual communication via serving vessels. In one particularly exquisite example from c. 650-750 CE called *Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants)*, Tremain points out the ways in which the scenes on this vessel reinforced Mayan political rule through imagery that showcased the Mayan royal court. On this vessel, the ruler is emphasized, sitting on his raised throne in the center and flanked by attendants who sit beside him and serve him from beneath. Such intricate vessels were reserved for the elite and used during communal feasts, which Tremain notes were not simply celebrations but were also political events that helped to unify and bolster relationships between different Maya city-states. These vessels were also gifted and traded, thus visually enforcing the importance of the ruler and Mayan royal court through aesthetically desirable finery.

Optional Video Resource: Tiny Timeline: Archaic Greece in a Global Context

In just over one minute, this video situates the Archaic Greek objects from this chapter among artworks from other cultures around the world. The Lady of Auxerre and New York Kouros, for example, come after the Assyrian *Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions* and before the Zhou Dynasty inner coffin from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng.



Smarthistory, "Tiny Timeline: Archaic Greece in a Global Context"

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "*Dipylon Amphora*," in *Smarthistory*, December 14, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Exekias, Attic black figure amphora with Ajax and Achilles playing a game," in *Smarthistory*, December 9, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Boundless Art History, “Sculpture in the Archaic Period.” (CC BY-SA)
- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "*Lady of Auxerre*," in *Smarthistory*, December 14, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)

- Dr. Sarah Derbew, "Black Figures in Classical Greek Art," in *Smarthistory*, June 27, 2020. (CC BY-NC-SA)

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9.3: Early Classical

The Greek Early Classical Period

By Boundless Art History

Architecture & Sculpture

Temple of Zeus at Olympia

The Temple of Zeus at Olympia is a colossal ruined temple in the center of the Greek capital Athens that was dedicated to Zeus, king of the Olympian gods (see Figure 9.3.1). Its plan is similar to that of the Temple of Aphaia at Aegina.

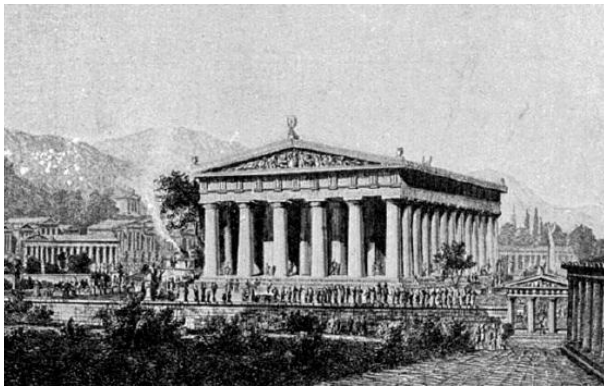


Figure 9.3.1: Temple of Zeus at Olympia, Wilhelm Lübke's illustration of the Temple as it might have appeared in the fifth century BCE. (Photo: public domain)

It is hexastyle, with six columns across the front and back and 13 down each side. It has two columns directly connected to the walls of the temple, known as in antis, in front of both the entranceway (pronaos) and the inner shrine (opisthodomos). Like the Temple of Aphaia, there are two, two-story colonnades of seven columns on each side of the inner sanctuary (naos).The pedimental figures are depicted in the developing Classical style with naturalistic yet overly muscular bodies. Most of the figures are shown with the expressionless faces of the Severe style.

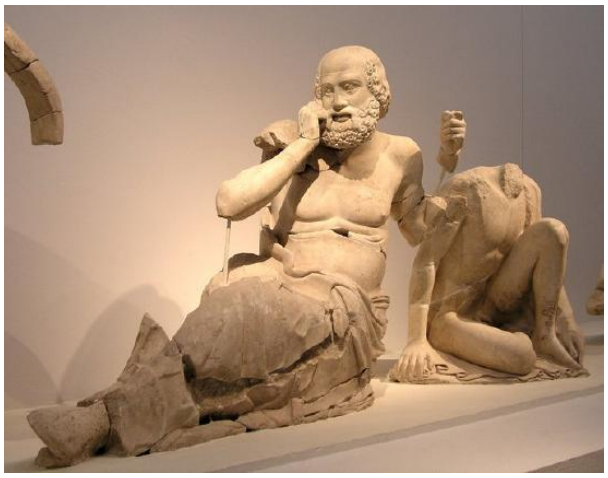


Figure 9.3.2: Seer from the east pediment of the Temple of Zeus, c. 470–455 BCE. Marble. Olympia, Greece. (Photo: Angela Monika Arnold, CC BY 3.0)

The figures on the east pediment await the start of a chariot race, and the whole composition is still and static (see Figure 9.3.2). A seer, however, watches it in horror as he foresees the death of Oenomaus. This level of emotion would never be present in Archaic statues and it breaks the Early Classical Severe style, allowing the viewer to sense the forbidding events about to happen. The level of emotion on the seer's face would never be present in Archaic statues and it breaks the Early Classical Severe style, allowing the viewer to sense the forbidding events about to happen.

Unlike the static composition of the eastern pediment, the Centauromachy (see Figure **9.3.3**) on the western pediment depicts movement that radiates out from its center. The centaurs, fighting men, and abducted women struggle and fight against each other, creating tension in another example of an early portrayal of emotion. Most figures are depicted in the Severe style. However, some, including a centaur, have facial features that reflect their wrath and anger.



Figure **9.3.3**: Centauromachy, west pediment, Temple of Zeus, c. 460 BCE. Marble. Olympia, Greece. (Photo: Joanbanjo, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The twelve metopes over the pronaos and opisthodomos depict scenes from the twelve labors of Herakles (see Figure **9.3.4**). Like the development in pedimental sculpture, the reliefs on the metopes display the Early Classical understanding of the body. Herakles' body is strong and idealized, yet it has a level of naturalism and plasticity that increases the liveliness of the reliefs.

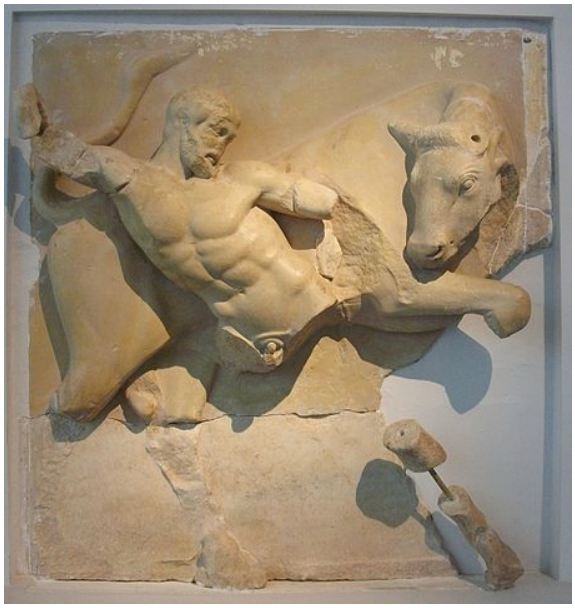


Figure **9.3.4**: Herakles and the Cretan Bull, Temple of Zeus, c. 460 BCE. Marble. Olympia, Greece. (Photo: Joanbanjo, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The scenes depict varying types of compositions. Some are static with two or three figures standing rigidly, while others, such as Herakles and the Cretan Bull, convey a sense of liveliness through their diagonal composition and overlapping bodies.

Editors' Note: Sexual Violence in Greek Art

Many classical works of Greek art highlight tales from Greek mythology. Although many of these stories are highly dramatic, heroic, and even humorous at times, they can also be scary and damaging, as they include grim scenes of treachery, rape, and sexual assault. In many textual sources it is clear that rape was normalized; if anyone was to be blamed, it was the woman.

Violence against women is often depicted in artwork across the Western art historical canon, but professors and textbooks alike often gloss over the content in favor of a discussion solely of the works' formal qualities.

In Cynthia Colburn and Ella Gonzalez's article How to Teach Ancient Art in the Age of #MeToo, they explore the necessary and nuanced ways that students and faculty can approach such imagery. They argue that "[i]n the wake of the #MeToo movement, it is crucial to reassess the way we teach and write about art historically important works that portray violence against women—violence spanning millennia when viewed through the lens of art history—in order to reinvigorate the role played by art history in contemporary social movements."



Figure **9.3.5**: Detail from *Centauromachy* (from the pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia), c. 460 BCE, marble, at the Archaeological Museum of Olympia, Greece. (Photo: Sp!ros, CC BY-NC 2.0)

For instance, when analyzing works that are covered in this chapter such as *Centauromachy* (from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia; see Figure **9.3.5**) and *Ludovisi Gaul* (also known as *Gaul Killing Himself and His Wife;* Figure 9.5.11, it is not only important to consider the medium used, the exquisite lines, the radiating moments of movement, or the other visual elements that make these works stand out. It is also key to dive into the subject of the stories—including abduction, rape, and domestic violence. When viewing these works, educators and students can discuss the stories and subject sociologically too, considering the following: What does showcasing art and stories like this do for a society, both then and now? How does this type of content illuminate cultural values systems, both then and now? How does normalizing such violence against women damage viewers seeing it, both then and now? Through such conversations and discussions, the field of art history can grow, while complicating the very subject of the work depicted.

Kritios Boy: A Conversation

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Acropolis in Athens. Watch the video here.

Steven: We're in the new Acropolis museum, in Athens, looking at the Kritios Boy.

Beth: We're in the very late archaic period. Some call this the severe style. We might even call this early classical.

Steven: It's really this transition between the late archaic and the early classical. The sculpture is such a great embodiment of that.



Figure **9.3.6**: Kritios Boy, c. 480 BCE. Marble, 3' 10" high. Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Marsyas, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Beth: It allows us to see the transition between the archaic kouros, and the much more naturalistic, movement-filled figures that we find on the Parthenon, for example, on the frieze or in the metopes.

Steven: This sculpture was probably broken originally when the Persians invaded Athens and desecrated the Acropolis. This was a huge blow to the Greeks, and when they finally recovered this territory, they took the sculptures that had been destroyed, and they buried them. So it's ironic that the reason that these sculptures are preserved is in part because they were destroyed, but to make the story even more complicated, before the Greeks had been defeated by the Persians, they had an earlier victory at Marathon.

Beth: Where an overwhelming force of Persians was defeated.

Steven: That first victory by the Greeks, over the Persians, is important to understand, in relationship to the sculpture, because some art historians have suggested that the new-found naturalism that we see in the sculpture is a result of the new sense of self; the new sense of self-determination, that came in the wake of the victory over the Persians.

Beth: And a sense of Athens as the leader among the Greek city-states, who united against the Persians.

Steven: So like the earlier kouros figures, this is marble; it's a standing nude; he's relatively still, although there is this potential for movement.

Beth: With the kouros figures, we had a figure that was both standing still and moving simultaneously, but we have incipient movement. Movement about to take place. We have a sense of process, and I think it's that unfolding of time, that makes this figure seem so much a part of our world, instead of the timeless world of the kouros.

Steven: The kouros figures were depicted as stick figures. There were mechanical joints, that were suggested, but did not really exist.

Beth: Didn't really work.

Steven: That's right. There was no way for those figures to actually move, whereas this figure, the much more naturalistic renderings of the volumes of the body; the understanding of the musculature; the understanding of the bone structure; and especially the transitions from one part of the body to the next, make the potential for movement believable.

Beth: Although we don't see the feet, and the right side, we don't see the calf, there is a sense that this figure is standing in a pose that art historians call contrapposto. That is, his weight is shifted onto one leg, and here's the important part; as a result, other things happen within the body, so that one shift in one part of the body affects the rest of the body, so the body acts in unison.

Steven: We can see that very clearly with the knees. The weight-bearing knee is higher than the free-leg knee, and that's because that knee droops down a little bit. The axis of the hips are no longer aligned. The weight-bearing leg has a hip that juts upward, into the torso, where the free leg, the hip hands down.

Beth: The shoulder above the weight-bearing leg actually drops down slightly, and that compresses the torso in between. His lifelikeness is carried into the head, which shifts a little bit, so we don't have that strict frontality that we saw in the kouroi. The symmetry of the body is broken. In actuality human beings are never symmetrical, right? Our bodies move and shift.

Steven: That's why the kouroi seem so artificial.

Beth: Exactly; they seem transcendent and timeless, but because the Kritios Boy is asymmetrical, we have a sense of his engagement with the world. Gone is that archaic smile, that seems to transcend reality, but one of the really interesting things about the Kritios Boy is, if we look from the side, we see an arch in his back, and there's a sense that he's moving forward, and holding himself back at the same time. He's a bit of a tease.

Steven: He's in a very relaxed pose.

Beth: We should mention that the Greeks had started to make bronze sculptures just before this, and bronze allowed artists to create sculptures with limbs more separated from the torso, or limbs lifted into space.

Steven: And you can see why that could be tricky in marble. In fact this figure has lost its leg, and it's lost its arms. On his left hip you can still see a fragment of the strut or bridge that would have helped support the arm that would have been next to it. That also lets us know that the arm really was at his sides, very much like a traditional kouros.

Beth: We see the desire on the part of the Greeks, on the part of this artist, to create a sculpture that's more open, where the limbs and the torso are more separated from one another, but in marble that's really hard to do.

Steven: One more point about the interest in bronze. Unlike so much marble sculpture, here we have eyes that have been hollowed out. They would have been inset, probably, with glass paste eyes, that would have been very lifelike, and that's a technique that was commonly used in bronze. In traditional marble sculptures, you actually have the eye as part of the solid piece of marble, and they would have just been painted. There is this interesting reference to the technique of bronze casting, even here in a marble sculpture, and I should mention that the reason we call the Kritios Boy is because the Kritios sculptor was an important sculptor in bronze at this time, of which this is very stylistically similar.

In the entire body, we've moved away from the linear representation of symbols of the body, and we now have these smooth, beautiful, volumes, that represent this Greek ideal of the athletic male youth.

Beth: That represented the peak of human achievement, and also the qualities of the divine.

Riace Warriors

by Dr. Jeffrey Becker



Figure **9.3.7**: Head and torso (detail), Statue A, from the sea off Riace, Italy, c. 460-450 BCE (?). Bronze, 198 cm high. Museo Archaeologico Nazionale Reggio Calabria, Italy. (Photo: Luca Galli, CC BY 2.0)

The *Riace Warriors* (also referred to as the *Riace bronzes* or *Bronzi di Riace*) are two life-size Greek bronze statues of naked, bearded warriors. The statues were discovered by Stefano Mariottini in the Mediterranean Sea just off the coast of Riace Marina, Italy, on August 16, 1972 (see Figure **9.3.8**). The statues are currently housed in the Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia in the Italian city of Reggio Calabria. The statues are commonly referred to as "Statue A" and "Statue B" and were originally cast using the lost-wax technique (see Figure **9.3.7**).



Figure **9.3.8**: The discovery of the *Riace bronze* statues in 1972. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Statue A



Figure **9.3.9**: Statue A (foreground) and Statue B (background), from the sea off Riace, Italy, c. 460-450 BCE (?). Bronze, Statue A, 198 cm high, Statue B, 197 cm high. Museo Archaeologico Nazionale Reggio Calabria, Italy. (Photo: Robert and Talbot Trudeau, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Statue A stands 198 centimeters tall and depicts the younger of the two warriors. His body exhibits a strong contrapposto stance, with the head turned to his right. Attached elements have been lost – most likely a shield and a spear; his now-lost helmet atop his head may have been crowned by a wreath. The warrior is bearded, with applied copper detail for the lips and the nipples. Inset eyes also survive for Statue A. The hair and beard have been worked in an elaborate fashion, with exquisite curls and ringlets.

Statue B

Statue B depicts an older warrior and stands 197 centimeters tall. A now-missing helmet likely was perched atop his head. Like Statue A, Statue B is bearded and in a contrapposto stance, although the feet of Statue B and set more closely together than those of Statue A.

Severe style

The Severe or Early Classical style describes the trends in Greek sculpture between c. 490 and 450 BCE. Artistically this stylistic phase represents a transition from the rather austere and static Archaic style of the sixth century BCE to the more idealized Classical style. The Severe style is marked by an increased interest in the use of bronze as a medium as well as an increase in the characterization of the sculpture, among other features.

Interpretation and chronology



Figure **9.3.10**: Statue A, from the sea off Riace, Italy, c. 460-450 BCE (?). Bronze, 198 cm high. Museo Archaeologico Nazionale Reggio Calabria, Italy. (Photo: Luca Galli, CC BY 2.0)

The chronology of the Riace warriors has been a matter of scholarly contention since their discovery. In essence there are two schools of thought—one holds that the warriors are fifth century BCE originals that were created between 460 and 420 BCE, while another holds that the statues were produced later and consciously imitate Early Classical sculpture. Those that support the earlier chronology argue that Statue A is the earlier of the two pieces. Those scholars also make a connection between the warriors and the workshops of famous ancient sculptors. For instance, some scholars suggest that the sculptor Myron crafted Statue A, while Alkamenes created Statue B. Additionally, those who support the earlier chronology point to the Severe Style as a clear indication of an Early Classical date for these two masterpieces.

The art historian B. S. Ridgway presents a dissenting view, contending that the statues should not be assigned to the fifth century B.C.E., arguing instead that they were most likely produced together after 100 BCE. Ridgway feels that the statues indicate an interest in Early Classical iconography during the Hellenistic period.

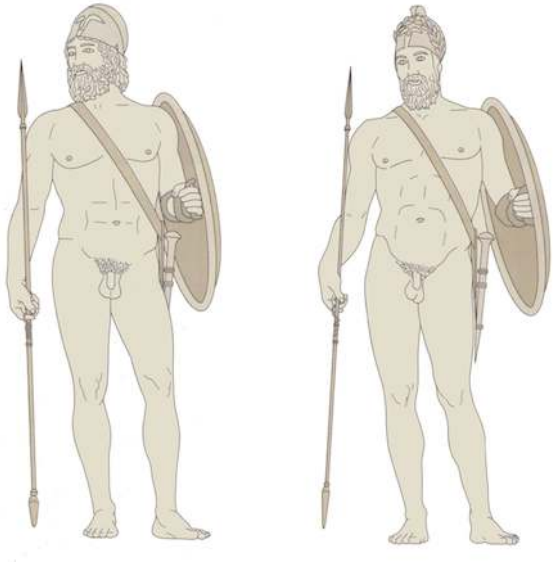


Figure **9.3.11**: A conjectural restored view of the two warriors. (Photo: Leomonaci121198, public domain)

In terms of identifications, there has been speculation that the two statues represent Tydeus (Statue A) and Amphiaraus (Statue B), two warriors from Aeschylus' tragic play, *Seven Against Thebes*--about Polyneices after the fall of his father, King Oedipus, and may have been part of a monumental sculptural composition. A group from Argos described by Pausanias, the Greek traveler and writer, is often cited in connection to this conjecture: "A little farther on is a sanctuary of the Seasons. On coming back from here you see statues of Polyneices, the son of Oedipus, and of all the chieftains who with him were killed in battle at the wall of Thebes…" (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2.20.5).

The statues have lead dowels installed in their feet, indicating that they were originally mounted on a base and installed as part of some sculptural group or other. The art historian Carol Mattusch argues that not only were they found together, but that they were originally installed—and perhaps produced—together in antiquity.

Articles in this section:

- Boundless Art History, "The Greek Early Classical Period." (CC BY-SA)
- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "*Kritios Boy*," in *Smarthistory*, December 13, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "*Riace Warriors*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)

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9.4: High Classical

Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

For the ancient Greeks, the human body was perfect. Explore this example of the mathematical source of ideal beauty.



Figure **9.4.1**: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)* or *Canon*, Roman marble copy of a Greek bronze, c. 450-440 BCE. Museo Archaeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy. (Photo: Following Hadrian, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Roman copies of ancient Greek art

When we study ancient Greek art, so often we are really looking at ancient Roman art, or at least their copies of ancient Greek sculpture (or paintings and architecture for that matter).

Basically, just about every Roman wanted ancient Greek art. For the Romans, Greek culture symbolized a desirable way of life—of leisure, the arts, luxury and learning.

The popularity of ancient Greek art for the Romans

Greek art became the rage when Roman generals began conquering Greek cities (beginning in 211 BCE), and returned triumphantly to Rome not with the usual booty of gold and silver coins, but with works of art. This work so impressed the Roman elite that studios were set up to meet the growing demand for copies destined for the villas of wealthy Romans. The *Doryphoros* was one of the most sought after, and most copied, Greek sculptures.

Bronze versus marble

For the most part, the Greeks created their free-standing sculpture in bronze, but because bronze is valuable and can be melted down and reused, sculpture was often recast into weapons. This is why so few ancient Greek bronze originals survive, and why we often have to look at ancient Roman copies in marble (of varying quality) to try to understand what the Greeks achieved.

Why sculptures are often incomplete or reconstructed

To make matter worse, Roman marble sculptures were buried for centuries, and very often we recover only fragments of a sculpture that have to be reassembled. This is the reason you will often see that sculptures in museums include an arm or hand that are modern recreations, or that ancient sculptures are simply displayed incomplete.

The Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer) in the Naples museum (Figure **9.4.1**) is a Roman copy of a lost Greek original that we think was found, largely intact, in the provincial Roman city of Pompeii.* Recent scholarship suggests that the *Doryphoros* sculpture in the Naples museum may not have been found in a Palestra at Pompeii. See Warren G. Moon, ed., *Polykleitos, The Doryphoros and*

Tradition , University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. Recent scholarship suggests that the *Doryphoros* sculpture in the Naples museum may not have been found in a Palestra at Pompeii. See Warren G. Moon, ed., *Polykleitos, The Doryphoros and Tradition*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.]

The canon

The idea of a canon, a rule for a standard of beauty developed for artists to follow, was not new to the ancient Greeks. The ancient Egyptians also developed a canon. Centuries later, during the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci investigated the ideal proportions of the human body with his *Vitruvian Man*.

Polykleitos's idea of relating beauty to ratio was later summarized by Galen, writing in the second century,

Beauty consists in the proportions, not of the elements, but of the parts, that is to say, of finger to finger, and of all the fingers to the palm and the wrist, and of these to the forearm, and of the forearm to the upper arm, and of all the other parts to each other.

* Recent scholarship suggests that the *Doryphoros* sculpture in the Naples museum may not have been found in a Palestra at Pompeii. See Warren G. Moon, ed., *Polykleitos, The Doryphoros and Tradition*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Watch a video of Dr. Beth Harris & Dr. Steven Zucker discussing the *Doryphoros.*

The Athenian Acropolis

By Boundless Art History

Editors' Notes

The Parthenon, one of the best-known buildings of the Athenian Acropolis, will be discussed in the following sections.

The study of Classical-era architecture is dominated by the study of the construction of the Athenian Acropolis and the development of the Athenian agora (see Figures **9.4.2** and **9.4.3**). The Acropolis is an ancient citadel located on a high, rocky outcrop above and at the center of the city of Athens. It contains the remains of several ancient buildings of great architectural and historic significance.

The word acropolis comes from the Greek words άκρο (akron, meaning edge or extremity) and πόλη (polis, meaning city). Although there are many other acropolises in Greece, the significance of the Acropolis of Athens is such that it is commonly known as The Acropolis without qualification.



Figure **9.4.2**: The Acropolis at Athens: The Acropolis has played an important role in the city of Athens from the time the area was first inhabited. (Photo: Christophe Meneboeuf, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Acropolis has played a significant role in the city from the time that the area was first inhabited during the Neolithic era. While there is evidence that the hill was inhabited as far back as the fourth millennium BCE, in the High Classical Period it was Pericles (c. 495–429 BCE) who coordinated the construction of the site's most important buildings, including the Parthenon, the Propylaea, the Erechtheion, and the temple of Athena Nike.

The buildings on the Acropolis were constructed in the Doric and Ionic orders, with dramatic reliefs adorning many of their pediments, friezes, and metopes.

In recent centuries, its architecture has influenced the design of many public buildings in the Western hemisphere.

Early History

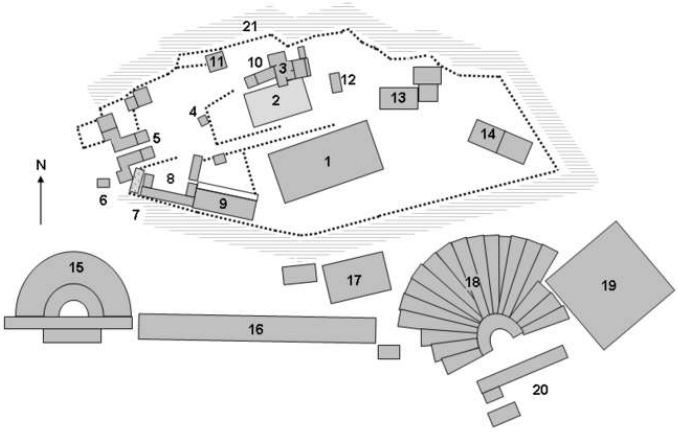


Figure **9.4.3**: Plan of the Acropolis: Plan of the Acropolis and surrounding area. The buildings include: (1) Parthenon (2) Old Temple of Athena (3) Erechtheum (4) Statue of Athena Promachos (5) Propylaea (6) Temple of Athena Nike (7) Eleusinion (8) Sanctuary of Artemi Artemis Brauronia or Brauroneion (9) Chalkotheke (10) Pandroseion (11) Arrephorion (12) Altar of Athena (13) Sanctuary of Zeus Polieus (14) Sanctuary of Pandion (15) Odeon of Herodes Atticus (16) Stoa of Eumenes (17) Sanctuary of Asclepius or Asclepieion (18) Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus (19) Odeon of Pericles (20) Temenos of Dionysus Eleuthereus (21) Aglaureion. (Image: Madmedea, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Archaeological evidence shows that the acropolis was once home to a Mycenaean citadel. The citadel's Cyclopean walls defended the Acropolis for centuries, and still remains today. The Acropolis was continually inhabited, even through the Greek Dark Ages when Mycenaean civilization fell.

It is during the Geometric period that the Acropolis shifted from being the home of a king to being a sanctuary site dedicated to the goddess Athena, whom the people of Athens considered their patron. The Archaic -era Acropolis saw the first stone temple dedicated to Athena, known as the Hekatompedon (Greek for hundred-footed).

This building was built from limestone around 570 to 550 BCE and was a hundred feet long. It has the original home of the olive-wood statue of Athena Polias, known as the Palladium, that was believed to have come from Troy.

In the early fifth century the Persians invaded Greece, and the city of Athens—along with the Acropolis—was destroyed, looted, and burnt to the ground in 480 BCE. Later the Athenians, before the final battle at Plataea, swore an oath that if they won the battle—that if Athena once more protected her city—then the Athenian citizens would leave the Acropolis as it is, destroyed, as a monument to the war. The Athenians did indeed win the war, and the Acropolis was left in ruins for thirty years.

Periclean Revival

It was immediately following the Persian war that the Athenian general and statesman Pericles funded an extensive building program on the Athenian Acropolis. Despite the vow to leave the Acropolis in a state of ruin, the site was rebuilt, incorporating all the remaining old materials into the spaces of the new site.

The building program began in 447 BCE and was completed by 415 BCE. It employed the most famous architects and artists of the age and its sculpture and buildings were designed to complement and be in dialog with one another.

The Propylaea



Figure 9.4.4: The Propylaea: The Propylaea as it stands today. Acropolis, Athens, Greece. c. 437–432 BCE. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Mnesicles designed the Propylaea (437–432 BCE), the monumental gateway to the Acropolis. It funneled all traffic to the Acropolis onto one gently sloped ramp. The Propylaea created a massive screen wall that was impressive and protective as well as welcoming (see Figure 9.4.4).

It was designed to appear symmetrical but, in reality, was not. This illusion was created by a colonnade of paired columns that wrapped around the gateway. The southern wing incorporated the original Cyclopean walls from the Mycenaean citadel. This space was truncated but served as dining area for feasting after a sacrifice.

The northern wing was much larger. It was a pinacoteca , where large panel paintings were hung for public viewing. The order of the Propylaea and its columns are Doric, and its decoration is simple—there are no reliefs in the metopes and pediment.

Upon entering the Acropolis from the Propylaea, visitors were greeted by a colossal bronze statue of Athena Promachos (c. 456 BCE), designed by Phidias. Accounts and a few coins minted with images of the statue allow us to conclude that the bronze statue portrayed a fearsome image of a helmeted Athena striding forward, with her shield at her side and her spear raised high, ready to strike.

The Erechtheion



Figure 9.4.5: The Erechtheion: A view from the southwest. Acropolis, Athens, Greece. c. 421–405 BCE. (Photo: MM, public domain)

The Erechtheion (421–406 BCE), designed by Mnesicles, is an ancient Greek temple on the north side of the Acropolis (see Figure 9.4.5). Scholars believe the temple was built in honor of the legendary king Erechtheus.It was built on the site of the Hekatompedon and over the megaron of the Mycenaean citadel. The odd design of the temple results from the site's topography and the temple's incorporation of numerous ancient sites.

The temple housed the Palladium, the ancient olive-wood statue of Athena. It was also believed to be the site of the contest between Athena and Poseidon, and so displayed an olive tree, a salt-water well, and the marks from Poseidon's trident to the faithful.

Shrines to the mythical kings of Athens, Cecrops and Erechteus—who gives the temple its name—were also found within the Erechtheion. Because of its mythic significance and its religious relics, the Erechtheion was the ending site of the Panathenaic festival, when the peplos on the olive-wood statue of Athena was annually replaced with new clothing with due pomp and ritual.



Figure **9.4.6**: The porch of the Erechtheion: The porch of the Erechtheion is held up by the caryatids. Acropolis, Athens, Greece. c. 421–405 BCE. (Photo: Thermos, CC BY-SA 2.5)

A porch on the south side of the Erechtheion is known as the Porch of the Caryatids, or the Porch of the Maidens. Six, towering, sculpted women (caryatids) support the entablature (see Figure **9.4.6**). The women replace the columns, yet look columnar themselves. Their drapery, especially over their weight-bearing leg, is long and linear, creating a parallel to the fluting on an Ionic column.

Although they stand in similar poses, each statue has its own stance, facial features, hair, and drapery. They carry egg-and-dart capitals on their heads, much as women throughout history have carried baskets. Between their heads and this capital is a sculpted cushion, which gives the appearance of softening the load of the weight of the building.

The sculpted columnar form of the caryatids is named after the women of the town of Kayrai, a small town near and allied to Sparta. At one point during the Persian Wars the town betrayed Athens to the Persians. In retaliation, the Athenians sacked their city, killing the men and enslaving the women and children. Thus, the caryatids depicted on the Acropolis are symbolic representations of the full power of Athenian authority over Greece and the punishment of traitors.

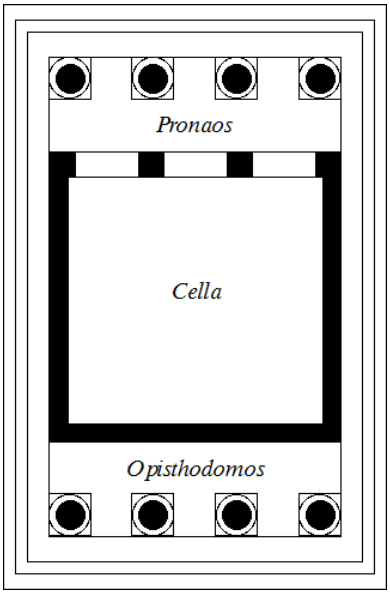


Figure **9.4.7**: Plan of the Temple of Athena Nike, showing the pronaos, cella, and opisthodomos. (José-Manuel Benito, public domain)

Temple of Athena Nike on the Athenian Acropolis

by Katarzyna Minollari



Figure 9.4.8: Temple of Athena Nike, Acropolis, Athens, Greece, 421-05 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The temple of Athena Nike (Athena as a goddess of victory) is the smallest temple at the Acropolis in Athens, placed at its southwest corner, at the edge of a high cliff (see Figures **9.4.7**, **9.4.8**, **9.4.10**, and **9.4.11**. Its construction was completed in the year 420 BCE, during the so called High Classical Period, according to the design of Kallikrates (the same architect who was responsible for the construction of the Parthenon). The temple by Kallikrates replaced an earlier small temple, which got completely destroyed during the Persian wars.

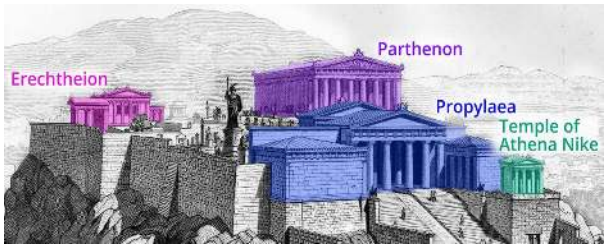


Figure 9.4.9: Reconstruction diagram of the Athenian Acropolis, showing (from right to left/near to far) the Temple of Athena Nike in green, the Propylaea in blue, the Parthenon in purple, and the Erechtheion in pink. (Image via Smarthistory)

The spot, highly vulnerable to attack but also well placed for defense, was very appropriate for the worship of the goddess of victory. There is some archaeological evidence, that the location was used for religious rituals already in Mycenaean age (Mycenaean was a period of early Greek history, roughly from 1600 to 1100 BCE). Mycenaeans also raised the first defensive bastion on the spot; its fragments are preserved in the temple's basement.



Figure **9.4.10**: Temple of Athena Nike, Acropolis, Athens, Greece, 421-05 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An Ionic gem

The temple of Athena Nike, built in Ionic order of beautiful white Pentelic marble, has columns at the front and back but not on the sides of the cella; this kind of floor plan is called an amphiprostyle. Because of the small size of the structure, there are only four columns on each side. The columns are monolithic, which means that each one of them was made of a single block of stone (instead of horizontal drums, as it is in the case of the Parthenon).



Figure **9.4.11**: Temple of Athena Nike, 421-05 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This small and elegant structure is sometimes called the pearl of the Acropolis, since it was designed and decorated with great care. For example, interestingly, its side columns have volutes both in the front and at the side, in order to create a pleasant view from any viewpoint (see Figure **9.4.11**). The Greeks considered their temples as a kind of monumental sculpture, which was supposed to be viewed from all sides and experienced in connection to its surroundings. The Romans later had a different concept—for them, the frontal view was most important (for example, the Roman Temple of Portunus).

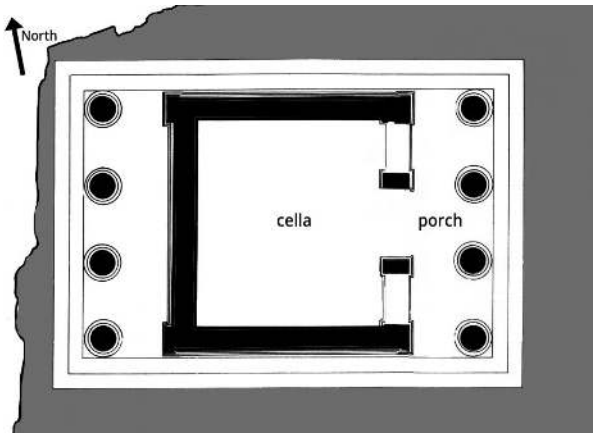


Figure **9.4.12**: Amphiprostyle plan of the Temple of Athena Nike. (Image via Smarthistory)

Another interesting detail is that the columns of the temple of Athena Nike are not as slender as those of many other Ionic buildings. Usually the proportions between the width and the height of an Ionic column was 1:9 or even 1:11. Here the proportion is 1:7—and the reason for that choice might have been the intention to create a harmonious whole with other buildings nearby. The temple of Athena Nike stands just next to the Propylaea (see Figure **9.4.13**), a heavy, monumental gateway to the Acropolis, built in the Doric order. To visually counteract this massive structure, the architect may have decided to widen the columns, otherwise the building might feel out of place, and too delicate in contrast to the neighboring architectural mass of the Propylaea. We know that the ancient Greeks were very aware of mathematical ratios while constructing architecture or creating statues, feeling that the key to beauty lies in correct proportion.



Figure **9.4.13**: Mnesikles, The Propylaea, Acropolis, Athens, Greece, 437-32 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Victory

The temple of Athena Nike, as with all Greek temples, was considered a home of the deity, represented in its statue, and was not a place where regular people would enter (see Figure **9.4.14**). The believers would simply perform rituals in front of the temple, where a small altar was placed, and could take a glimpse of the sculpted figure of the goddess through the space between the columns. The privilege of entering the temple was reserved for the priestesses, who held a respected position in Greek society. As the name suggests, the temple housed the statue of Athena Nike, a symbol of victory. It probably had a connection to the victory of the Greeks against the Persians around half a century earlier. Nike usually had wings, but in this case we know that the statue had no wings, hence it was called Athena *Apteros* (without wings). The ancient Greek writer Pausanias later explained that the statue of Athena had no wings, so that she could never leave Athens.



Figure **9.4.14**: Temple of Athena Nike, 421-05 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The history of this architectural monument has been quite tumultuous. In the 5th century CE the temple was converted into a Christian church, then in the 17th century it was completely dismantled by the Ottoman Turks who needed its material to build fortifications. The temple was later reconstructed after Greece regained independence in 1832. In the 1930s the building was restored again. Very recently, new concerns about the structure's integrity prompted a new conservation project. First, a team of specialists completely dismantled the temple. Each of its parts was examined and mended, and eventually the entire building was reassembled using the original pieces, with some fill wherever it was needed. These additions can be easily recognized since they are of a lighter color than the original marble.



Figure **9.4.15**: *Nike Adjusting Her Sandal* (detail), south side of the parapet of the Temple of Athena Nike, c. 410 BCE. Marble, 3′ 6″ high. Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The temple of Athena Nike featured beautiful sculptural decoration, including a typical continuous Ionic frieze, which on the eastern side represented a gathering of gods. On the southern wall, the sculptor decided to show a battle between Greeks and Persians, and on the remaining sides, battles between Greeks and other warriors. Sculptures on the pediments, almost entirely lost, most probably depicted the Gigantomachy and Amazonomachy. Best known are reliefs from the outside of the stone parapet that surrounded the temple at the cliff's edge. These represented Nike in different poses and could be admired by people climbing the stairs to the Acropolis. Most famous of these is the *Nike Adjusting Her Sandal* (see Figure **9.4.15**) which presents the goddess in a simple, everyday gesture, perhaps adjusting her sandal (or maybe taking it off) as she prepares to enter the sacred precinct. Whatever she is doing, the relief is still charming in its elegance and simplicity. Both *Nike Adjusting Her Sandal* and parts of the frieze can be admired today at the Acropolis Museum.

The Parthenon, Athens: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Acropolis in Athens. Watch the video here.



Figure 9.4.16: Iktinos and Kallikrates, Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, 447-432 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're looking at the Parthenon. This is a huge marble temple to the goddess Athena.

Beth: We're on the top of a rocky outcropping in the city of Athens very high up overlooking the city, overlooking the Aegean Sea.

Steven: Athens was just one of many Greek city-states and almost everyone had an acropolis. That is, had a fortified hill within its city because these were warring states.

Beth: In the fifth century, Athens was the most powerful city-state and that's the period that the Parthenon dates to.

Steven: This precinct became a sacred one rather than a defensive one. This building has had a tremendous influence not only because it becomes the symbol of the birth of democracy, but also because of its extraordinary architectural refinement. The period when this was built in the fifth century is considered the High Classical moment and for so much of Western history, we have measured our later achievements against this perfection.

Beth: It's hard not to recognize so many buildings in the West. There's certainly an association especially to buildings in Washington D.C. and that's not a coincidence.

Steven: Because this is the birthplace of democracy—a limited democracy, but democracy nevertheless.

Beth: There was a series of reforms in the fifth century in Athens that allowed more and more people to participate in the government.

Steven: We think that the city of Athens had between 300,000 and 400,000 inhabitants, and only about 50,000 were actually considered citizens. If you were a woman, obviously, if you were a slave you were not participating in this democratic experiment.

Beth: This is a very limited idea of democracy.

Steven: This building is dedicated to Athena and, in fact, the city itself is named after her and of course there's a myth. Two gods vying for the honor of being the patron of this city. Those two gods are Poseidon and Athena. Poseidon is the god of the sea and Athena has many aspects. She's the goddess of wisdom, she is associated with war. A kind of intelligence about creating and making things. Both of these gods gave the people of this city a gift and then they had to choose. Poseidon strikes a rock and from it springs forth the saltwater of the sea. This had to do with the gift of naval superiority.

Beth: Athena offered, in contrast, an olive tree. The idea of the land of prosperity, of peace. The Athenians chose Athena's gift. There actually is a site here on the acropolis where the Athenians believed you could see the mark of the trident from Poseidon where he struck the ground and also the tree that Athena offered.

Steven: Actually the modern Greeks have replanted an olive tree in that space. Let's talk about the building. It is really what we think of when we think of a Greek temple but the style is specific. This is a Doric temple.

Beth: Although it has Ionic elements which we'll get to.

Steven: The Doric features are really easy to identify. You have massive columns with shallow broad flutes, the vertical lines. Those columns go down directly into the floor of the temple which is called the stylobate and at the top, the capitals are very simple. There's a little flare that rises up to a simple rectangular block called an abacus. Just above that are triglyphs and metopes.

Beth: It's important to say that this building was covered with sculpture. There was sculpture in the metopes, there was sculpture in the pediments and in an unprecedented way a frieze that ran all the way around four sides of the building just inside this outer row of columns that we see. Now, this is an Ionic feature. Art historians talk about how this building combines Doric elements with Ionic elements.



Figure **9.4.17**: Iktinos and Kallikrates, Parthenon (view of double colonnade, east facade), 447-432 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: In fact, there were four Ionic columns inside the west end of the temple.

Beth: When the citizens of Athens walked up the sacred way perhaps for religious procession or festival. They encountered the west end and they walked around it either on the north or south sides to the east and the entrance. Right above the entrance in the sculptures of the pediment, they could see the story of Athena and Poseidon vying to be the patron of the city of Athens. On the frieze just inside they saw themselves perhaps at least in one interpretation involved in the Panathenaic Procession, the religious procession in honor of the goddess Athena. This was a building that you walked up to, you walked around and inside was this gigantic sculpture of Athena.

Steven: These were all sculptures that we believe were overseen by the great sculptor Phidias and one of my favorite parts are the metopes. Carved with scenes that showed the Greeks battling various enemies either directly or metaphorically. The Greeks battling the Amazons, the Greeks against the Trojans, the Lapiths against the Centaurs, and the Gigantomachy. The Greek gods against the Titans.

Beth: All of these battles signified the ascendancy of Greece and of the Athenians of their triumphs. Civilization over barbarism, rational thought over chaos.

Steven: You've just hit on the very meaning of this building. This is not the first temple to Athena on this site. Just a little bit to the right as we look at the east end there was an older temple to Athena that was destroyed when the Persians invaded. This was a devastating blow to the Athenians.

Beth: One really can't overstate the importance of the Persian War for the Athenian mindset that created the Parthenon. Athens was invaded and beyond that, the Persians sacked the Acropolis, sacked the sacred site, the temples. Destroyed the buildings.

Steven: They burned them down. In fact, the Athenians took a vow that they would never remove the ruins of the old temple to Athena.

Beth: So they would remember it forever.

Steven: But a generation later they did.

Beth: They did, well there was a piece that was established with the Persians and some historians think that that allowed them to renege that vow and Pericles, the leader of Athens embarked on this enormous, very expensive building campaign.

Steven: Historians believe that he was able to fund that because the Athenians had become the leaders of what is called the Delian League. An association of Greek city-states that paid a kind of tax to help protect Greece against Persia but Pericles dipped into that treasury and built this building.

Beth: This alliance of Greek city-states, their treasure, their tax money, their tribute was originally located in Delos hence the Delian League, but Pericles managed to have that treasure moved here to Athens and actually housed in the Acropolis. The

sculpture of Athena herself which was made of gold and ivory Phidias said if we need money we can melt down the enormous amount of gold that decorates this sculpture of Athena.

Steven: Since that sculpture doesn't exist any longer we know somebody did that. We need to imagine this building not pristine and white but rather brightly colored and also a building that was used. This was a storehouse. It was the treasury and so we have to imagine that it was absolutely full of valuable stuff.

Beth: In fact, we have records that give us some idea of what was stored here. We think about temples or churches or mosques as places where you go in to worship. That's not how Greek religion work. There usually was an altar on the outside where sacrifices were made and the temple was the house of the god or goddess, but with the Parthenon art historians and archeologists have not been able to locate an altar outside so we've wondered what was this building? One answer is it was a treasury.

Steven: It also functions symbolically. It is up on this hill. It commands this extraordinary view from all parts of the city, and so it was a symbol of both the city's wealth and power.

Beth: It's a gift to Athena. When you make a gift to your patron goddess you want visitors to be awed by the image of the goddess that was inside and of her home.

Steven: This isn't any goddess. This is the goddess of wisdom so the ability of man to understand our world and its rules mathematically, and then to express them in a structure like this is absolutely appropriate.

Beth: Iktinos is a supreme mathematician. I mean we know that the Greeks even in the archaic period before this were concerned with ideal proportions.

Steven: Pythagoras.



Figure **9.4.18**: Alan LeQuire, Recreation of Phidias' Athena Parthenos. 1990. Centennial Park, Nashville. (Photo: Tyler Bell, CC BY 2.0)

Beth: Or the sculptor Polykleitos and his sculpture of the Doryphoros searching for perfect proportions and harmony and using mathematics as the basis for thinking that through.

Steven: We have that here.

Beth: To an unbelievable degree.

Steven: What's extraordinary is that its perfection is an illusion based on a series of subtle distortions that actually correct for the imperfections of our sight. That is, the Greeks recognize that human perception was itself yawed and that they needed to adjust for it in order to give the visual impression of perfection. Their mathematics and their building skills were precise enough to be able to pull this off.

Beth: Every stone was cut to fit precisely.

Steven: When we look at this building we assume it's rectilinear, it's full of right angles, and in fact, there's hardly a right angle in this building.

Beth: There's another interpretation of these tiny deviations that these deviations give the building a sense of dynamism. The sense of the organic that otherwise, it would seem static and lifeless. The Greeks had used this idea that art historians call *entasis* before in other buildings- slight adjustments. For example, columns bulge toward the center. This is not new but the degree to which it's used here and the subtlety in the way it's used is unprecedented.

Steven: For instance, in those Doric columns you can see that there's a taper and you assume that it's a straight line but the Greeks wanted ever so slight a sense of the organic. That the weight of the building was being expressed in the bulge, the entasis of the column about a third of the way from the bosom. In this case, every single column bulges only 11/16th of an inch the entire length of that column. The way that the Greeks pulled this off is they would bring column drums up to the site. They would carefully carve the base and the top and then they would carve in between.

Beth: We see this slight deviation in the columns but we also see it not only vertically but also horizontally in the building.



Figure **9.4.19**: Iktinos and Kalikrates, Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, 447-432 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: That's right. You assume that the stylobate, the floor of the temple, is flat but it's not. Rainwater would run off it because the edges are lower than the center.

Beth: But only very, very slightly lower.

Steven: Across the long side of the temple the center rises only 4 3/8 of an inch and on the short side of the temple on the east and the west side the center rises only by 2 3/8 inches. What happens is it cracks. Our eye would naturally see a straight line seem as if it rises up at the corners a little bit so it seems to us to be perfectly flat. The columns are all leaning in a little bit.

Beth: You would expect the columns to be equidistant from one another but in fact, the columns on the edges are slightly closer to one another than the columns in the center of each side.

Steven: Architectural historians have hypothesized that the reason for this is because the column at the edge is in the sense an orphan. It doesn't have anything past it. Therefore, it would seem to be less substantial. If we could make that column a little bit closer to the one next to it it might compensate and it would have an even sense of density across the building.

Beth: Placing of the columns closer together on the edges create a problem in the levels above. One of the rules of the Doric Order is that there had to be a triglyph right above the center of a column or in between each column.

Steven: They also wanted the triglyphs to be at the very edge so one triglyph would abut against another triglyph at the corner of the building. If in fact, you're placing your columns closer together you can actually solve for that problem, you can avoid the stretch of the metope in between those triglyphs that would result, but because the columns are placed so close together they had the opposite problem which is to say that the metopes at the ends of the building would be too slender. What Phidias has done in concert with Iktinos and Kallikrates the architects is to create sculptural metopes that are widest in the center just like the spaces between the columns and actually the metopes themselves gradually become thinner as you move to the edges so that you can't really even perceive the change without measuring.



Figure 9.4.20: Phidias, Parthenon, detail of the east pediment sculpture with visitors, British Museum, London. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: The general proportions of the building can be expressed mathematically as X = Y x 2 + 1. Across the front, we see eight columns and along the sides 17 columns. That ratio also governs the spacing between the columns and its relationship to the diameter of a column. Math is everywhere.

Steven: If we look at the plan of the structure we see the exterior colonnade on all four sides. On the east and west end, it's actually a double colonnade and on the long sides, inside the columns a solid a solid masonry wall. You can enter rooms on the east-west only. The west has a smaller room with the four Ionic columns within it but the east room was larger and held the monumental sculpture of Athena. It's interesting. The system that was used to create a vault that was high enough to enclose a sculpture that was almost 40 feet high was unique. There was a U shape of interior columns at two storys. They were Doric and they surrounded the goddess. The sculpture is now lost but the building is almost lost as well. Here we come to one of the great tragedies of western architecture. This building survived into the seventeenth century and was in pretty good shape for 2000 years and it's only in the modern era that it became a ruin.

Beth: First it was as we know an ancient Greek temple for Athena then it became a Greek Orthodox church then a Roman catholic church and then a mosque In a war between the Ottomans who were in control of Greece at this moment in history in the seventeenth century and the Venetians. The Venetians attacked the Parthenon, the Ottomans used the Parthenon to hold ammunition, gunpowder. Gunpowder exploded from the inside, basically ripping the guts out of the Parthenon.

Steven: Then to add insult to injury in the eighteenth century, Lord Elgin received permission from the Turkish government to take sculptures that had already fallen off the temple and bring them back to England. The lion's share of the great sculptures by Phidias are now in London (see Figure 9.4.20). Greece recently has built a museum just down the hill from the Acropolis specifically intended to house these sculptures should the British ever release them.

Beth: Some have argued that Elgin saved the sculptures that would have been further damaged had he not removed them, but what to do about the future is uncertain.

Steven: At least one theory states that this building was paid for by plundered treasury from the Delian League so there's a long history of contested ownership.



Figure **9.4.21**: Iktinos and Kalikrates, Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, 447-432 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: As we stand here very high up on the Acropolis overlooking the Aegean Sea, islands beyond and mountains on this glorious day, I can't help but imagine standing inside the Parthenon between those columns, which we can't do today.

Steven: The site is undergoing tremendous restoration. There are cranes, the scaffolding to maintain the ruin and not let it fall into worst disrepair.

Beth: But if we could stand there what would it feel like?

Steven: There is this beautiful balance between the theoretical and the physical. The Greeks thought about mathematics as the way that we could understand the divine and here it is in our world.

Beth: There's something about the Parthenon that is both an offering to Athena, the protector of Athens, but also something that's a monument to human beings, to the Athenians, to their brilliance, and by extension, I suppose, in the modern era, human spirit generally.

The Parthenon, Athens

by The British Museum



Figure **9.4.22**: *Iris*, from the west pediment of the Parthenon, Athens, Greece, c. 438-432 BCE. Marble, 135 cm high. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Athens and democracy

By around 500 BCE, ‘rule by the people,’ or democracy, had emerged in the city of Athens. Following the defeat of a Persian invasion in 480-479 BCE, mainland Greece and Athens in particular entered into a golden age. In drama and philosophy, literature, art and architecture Athens was second to none. The city’s empire stretched from the western Mediterranean to the Black Sea, creating enormous wealth. This paid for one of the biggest public building projects ever seen in Greece, which included the Parthenon.

The temple known as the Parthenon was built on the Acropolis of Athens between 447 and 438 BCE. It was part of a vast building program masterminded by the Athenian statesman Perikles. Inside the temple stood a colossal statue representing Athena, patron goddess of the city. The statue, which no longer exists, was made of gold and ivory and was the work of the celebrated sculptor Pheidias.

Parthenon sculptures

The building itself was decorated with marble sculptures representing scenes from Athenian cult and mythology. There are three categories of architectural sculpture. The frieze (carved in low relief) ran high up around all four sides of the building inside the colonnades. The metopes (carved in high relief) were placed at the same level as the frieze above the architrave surmounting the columns on the outside of the temple. The pediment sculptures (carved in the round) filled the triangular gables at each end (see Figure **9.4.22** *Iris* as an exaple of such a pediment sculpture).

Although the building was to undergo a number of changes, it remained largely intact until the seventeenth century. The early Christians turned the temple into a church, adding an apse at the east end. It was probably at this time that the sculptures representing the birth of Athena were removed from the centre of the east pediment and many of the metopes were defaced. The Parthenon served as a church until Athens was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century, when it became a mosque. In 1687, during the Venetian siege of the Acropolis, the defending Turks were using the Parthenon as a store for gunpowder, which was ignited by the Venetian bombardment. The explosion blew out the heart of the building, destroying the roof and parts of the walls and the colonnade.

The Venetians succeeded in capturing the Acropolis, but held it for less than a year. Further damage was done in an attempt to remove sculptures from the west pediment, when the lifting tackle broke and the sculptures fell and were smashed. Many of the sculptures that were destroyed in 1687, are now known only from drawings made in 1674, by an artist probably to be identified as Jacques Carrey.



Figure **9.4.23**: Marble metope from the Parthenon, c. 447-438 BCE. 172 cm tall. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Marble metope from the Parthenon

The sculpted decoration of the Parthenon included ninety-two metopes showing scenes of mythical battle (see Figure **9.4.23**). Those on the south flank of the temple included a series featuring human Lapiths in mortal combat with Centaurs. The Centaurs were part-man and part-horse, thus having a civil and a savage side to their nature. The Lapiths, a neighboring Greek tribe, made the mistake of giving the Centaurs wine at the marriage feast of their king, Peirithoos. The Centaurs attempted to rape the women, with their leader Eurytion trying to carry off the bride. A general battle ensued, with the Lapiths finally victorious.

Here a young Lapith holds a Centaur from behind with one hand, while preparing to deliver a blow with the other. The composition is perfectly balanced, with the protagonists pulling in opposite directions, around a central space filled by the cascading folds of the Lapith's cloak.



Figure **9.4.24**: Horsemen from the west frieze of the Parthenon, c. 438-432 BCE. 100 cm tall. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Fragment from the frieze

This block was placed near the corner of the west frieze of the Parthenon, where it turned onto the north. The horsemen have been moving at some speed, but are now reining back so as not to appear to ride off the edge of the frieze (see Figure **9.4.24**). The horseman in front twists around to look back at his companion, and raises a hand (now missing) to his head. This gesture, repeated elsewhere in the frieze, is perhaps a signal. Although mounted riders can be seen here, much of the west frieze features horsemen getting ready for the cavalcade proper, shown on the long north and south sides of the temple.



Figure **9.4.25**: Figures of three goddesses from the east pediment of the Parthenon, c. 438-432 BCE. 233 cm long. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Pediment sculpture

The east pediment of the Parthenon showed the birth of goddess Athena from the head of her father Zeus. The sculptures that represented the actual scene are lost. Zeus was probably shown seated, while Athena was striding away from him fully grown and armed.

Only some of the figures ranged on either side of the lost central group survive. They include these three goddesses, who were seated to the right of centre (see Figure **9.4.25**). From left to right, their posture varies in order to accommodate the slope of the

pediment that originally framed them. They are remarkable for their naturalistic rendering of anatomy blended with a harmonious representation of complex draperies.

The figure on the left is on the point of rising and tucks her right foot in to lever herself up. To the right another figure cradles a companion reclining luxuriously in her lap. They are perhaps, from left to right, Hestia, goddess of the hearth and home, Dione, and her daughter Aphrodite. However, another suggestion is that the two figures on the right are the personification of the Sea, Thalassa, in the lap of the Earth, Gaia.

Painting in the Greek High Classical Period

by Boundless Art History

The Classical Era was a 200-year period in Greek culture that lasted from the fifth through fourth centuries BCE. This Classical period, following the Archaic period and succeeded by the Hellenistic period, had a powerful influence on the Roman Empire and greatly influenced the foundations of the Western Civilization. Much of modern Western politics and artistic thought, such as architecture, scientific thought, literature, and philosophy, derives from this period of Greek history.

Panel Painting

Panel painting is the painting on flat panels of wood, either a single large piece or several joined together. Because of their organic nature many panel paintings no longer exist. Panel paintings were usually done in encaustic or tempera and were displayed in the interior of public buildings, such as in the pinacoteca of the Propylaea of the Athenian Acropolis.

The earliest known panel paintings are the Pitsa Panels that date to the Archaic period between 540 and 530 BCE; however, panel painting continued throughout the Classical Period (see Figure **9.4.26**).

The painter Apollodorus was considered by the Greeks and Romans to be one of the best painters of the Early Classical period, although none of his work survived. He is credited for the use of creating shadows by a technique known as skiagraphia. The technique layers crosshatching and contour liners to add perspective to the scene and is similar to the Renaissance technique of chiaroscuro.



Figure **9.4.26**: Pitsa Panels: These are the earliest known panel paintings, and date to the Archaic period between 540 and 530 BCE. (Photo: Schuppi, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Tomb Painting

Tomb painting was another popular method of painting, which due to its fragile nature has often not survived. However, a few examples do remain, including the 480 BCE Tomb of the Diver and the wall paintings from the royal Macedonian tombs in Vergina that date to the mid-fourth century BCE. A comparison between the paintings demonstrate how painting followed sculptural development in regards to the rendering of the human body.

The Tomb of the Diver is from a small necropolis in Paestum, Italy, which was then the Greek colony of Poseidonia, and dates from the beginning of the Classical period (see Figure **9.4.27**). The tomb depicts a symposium scene on its walls and an image of diver on the inside of the covering slab.

The images are painted in true fresco with a limestone mortar. The scene of the diver is simple image with a small landscape of trees, water, and the diver's platform. The diver is nude and his body is simply defined through the use of line and color. The bodies of the men at the symposium more accurately demonstrate an Archaic reliance on line to model the form of the body and the draping of their clothing.



Figure 9.4.27: Tomb of the Diver: This is the symposium-scene fresco painted on the Tomb of the Diver. (Photo: Velvet, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Compared to the wall paintings from the tombs at Vergina, the Early Classical tomb painting is static and rather Archaic. The frescos from Vergina depict figures in a full-painted version of the High Classical style.



Figure 9.4.28: Man on a Chariot: The frescos from Vergina depict figures in a full-painted version of the High Classical style. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

For example, there is an image believed to depict King Philip II on a chariot pulled by two horses (see Figure 9.4.28). The fresco is poorly preserved but one is able to see on Philip's horse the modeling of the animals produced by the color shading and a suggestion of perspective when looking at the chariot. The artist relies on the shades and hues of his paints to create depth and a life-like feeling in the painting.

One of the quintessential wall paintings at Vergina is Hades Abducting Persephone. The painted scene appears similar to the Late Classical sculptural style and the dynamic, emotion-filled composition seems to predict the style of Hellenistic sculpture.



Figure 9.4.29: Hades Abducting Persephone: One of the quintessential wall paintings at Vergina is a scene of Hades abducting Persephone. (Image: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

The scene depicts Hades on his chariot, grasping on to Persephone's nude torso as the pair ride away (see Figure 9.4.29). The colors are faded and faint, but the bright red drapery worn by Persephone is still easily identifiable. Lines and shading emphasize its folds.

The style appears almost impressionistic, especially when examining Persephone's face and hair. Persephone and Hades create a tension filled chiastic composition, as Hades races to the left, against the pull of Persephone's outward, desperate reach to the right.

Alexander the Great

Alexander III of Macedonia (356–323 BCE), better known as Alexander the Great, very carefully controlled and crafted his portraiture. In order to maintain control and stability in his empire, he had to ensure that his people recognized him and his authority.

Because of this, Alexander's portrait was set when he was very young, most likely in his teens, and it never varied throughout his life. To further control his portrait types, Alexander hired artists in different media such as painting, sculpture, and gem cutting to design and promote the portrait style of the medium. In this way, Alexander used art and artisans for their propagandistic value to support and provide a face and legitimacy to his rule.

Alexander Mosaic

The Alexander Mosaic is a Roman floor mosaic from approximately 100 BCE that was excavated from the House of the Faun in Pompeii. The mosaic depicts the Battle of Issus that occurred between the troops of Alexander the Great and King Darius III of Persia. The mosaic is believed to be a copy of a large-scale panel painting by Aristides of Thebes, or a fresco by the Philoxenos of Eretria from the late fourth century BCE (see Figure 9.4.30).



Figure **9.4.30**: Philoxenos of Eretria, *Battle of Issus*, c. 310 BCE. Roman copy (Alexander Mosaic) from the House of the Faun, Pompeii, Italy, late second or early first century BCE. Tessera mosaic, approx. 8' 10" x 16' 9". Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. (Photo: Magrippa, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The mosaic is remarkable. It depicts a keen sense of detail, dramatically unfolds the drama of the battle, and demonstrates the use of perspective and foreshortening . The two main characters of the battle are easily distinguishable and this portrait of Alexander may be one of his most recognizable. He wears a breastplate and an aegis , and his hair is characteristically tousled. He rides into battle on his horse, Bucephalo, leading his troops. Alexander's gaze remains focused on Darius and he appears calm and in control, despite the hectic battle happening around him.

Darius III, on the other hand, commands the battle in desperation from his chariot, as his charioteer removes them from battle. His horses flee under the whip of the charioteer and Darius leans outward, stretching out a hand having just thrown a spear. His body position contradicts the motion of his chariot, creating tension between himself and his flight.

Other details in the mosaic include the expressions of the soldiers and the horses, such as a collapsed horse and his rider in the center of the battle, to a terrified fallen Persian, whose expression is reflected on his shield.

The shading and play of light in the mosaic, reflects the use of light and shadow in the original painting to create a realistic, three-dimensional space . Horses and soldiers are shown in multiple perspectives from profile, to three quarter, to frontal, and one horse even faces the audience with his rump. The careful shading within the mosaic tesserae models the characters to give the figures mass and volume.



Figure **9.4.31**: Philoxenos of Eretria, *Battle of Issus* (detail showing Alexander), ca. 310 BCE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Public domain)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015.
- Boundless Art History, "The Athenian Acropolis." (CC BY-SA)
- Katarzyna Minollari, "Temple of Athena Nike on the Athenian Acropolis," in *Smarthistory*, September 11, 2016.
- The British Museum, "The Parthenon, Athens," in *Smarthistory*, December 14, 2015.
- Boundless Art History, "Painting in the Greek High Classical Period." (CC BY-SA)

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9.5: Late Classical and Hellenistic

Editors' Note: From High Classical to Late Classical and Hellenistic

In 404 BCE, the formerly-mighty Athens lost the Peloponnesian War to their long-time rivals the Spartans, ending Athens' status as the leading power in Greece. The city-states continued to battle amongst themselves until a larger, external threat forced them to band together for self-defense: King Philip II of Macedonia. Despite this unification, however, in 338 BCE the Greeks were soundly defeated at the Battle of Chaeronea—a battle joined by Philip's 18-year old son Alexander, today more commonly known as Alexander the Great.

The political instability and strife, as well as the disillusionment of being conquered by a foreign power, are reflected in the art of the fourth century BCE. Whereas art of the High Classical period had tended to be serene and idealized, Late Classical art reflected a more human and individualized approach in its depiction of not just actual humans, like Lysippos' *Apoxyomenos (Scraper)*, but also heroes/demigods like Lysippos' *Weary Herakles* and deities like Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos*.



Figure **9.5.1**: Lysippos, Apoxyomenos (Scraper). Roman copy after a Greek bronze, ca. 330 BCE. Marble, 6'9" high. Musei Vaticani, Rome. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Apoxyomenos shows a young athlete in the very human act of cleaning himself, using a tool called a strigil to scrape away the oil he has applied, and with it dirt and sweat (see Figure **9.5.1**). Compared to Polykleitos' perfectly balanced and frontally-oriented *Doryphoros*, Lysippos' *Apoxyomenos* not only shows a different canon of proportions--with a smaller head and slimmer build, but extends dynamically into space. For more on the sculpture, watch Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker discuss *Apoxyomenos* at the Vatican Museum (see Figure **9.5.2**).



Figure 9.5.2: Lysippos, *Apoxyomenos (Scraper)*. Roman copy after a Greek bronze, ca. 330 BCE. Marble, 6'9" high. Musei Vaticani, Rome. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). Right: Polykleitos, *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*. Roman copy after a Greek bronze, 450-40 BCE.Marble, 6'11" high. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* also shows a familiar, everyday act—although this time the subject preparing to step into her bath is the goddess of love and beauty (see Figure **9.5.3**). With her robe held lightly in her left hand and her right hand in front of her body in a gesture of modesty, Aphrodite's stance shows the familiar contrapposto as well as an S-curve that characterized many of Praxiteles' sculptures. Naked depictions of male figures were common, but before the Late Classical period, sculptures of women—and especially goddesses—were not naked. *Aphrodite*, with her nakedness, humanity, and sensuality, caused a sensation that is documented in many contemporary literary sources.



Figure 9.5.3: Praxitales, *Aphrodite of Knidos*. Roman copy after a Greek sculpture. Marble, ca. 350-340 BCE. Marble, 6'8" high. Musei Vaticani, Rome. (Photo: F. Tronchin, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The humanized, non-idealized depiction of figures would reach its greatest extent in art of the Hellenistic period, which focused on emotion and drama, often intensified by compositions that were not balanced and perfected like High Classical sculpture, but that instead extended and even spiraled into space. As Greece became more cosmopolitan in the wake of Alexander the Great's expansion of his empire, and came into contact with those from different places/cultures, the diversity in the people depicted would increase even more.

The Farnese Hercules: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Weary from his labors, Hercules leans on his club, with hints of his heroic trials hidden in plain sight. This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Naples Archaeological Museum. Click to watch the video.



Figure **9.5.4**: Lysippos, *Farnese Hercules*, 4th century BCE; later Roman copy by Glycon. Archaeological Museum, Naples, Italy. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Dr. Zucker: We're in Naples at the Archaeological Museum, looking at one of the most famous sculptures from all of antiquity.

Dr. Harris: It was discovered in the Renaissance during archaeological excavations in Rome of the Baths of Caracalla.

Dr. Zucker: This is the so-called Farnese Hercules and it gets that name because it was excavated by the Farnese family. They had been looking for building materials to take from ancient sites to build a new palace, but what they found in the Baths were an extraordinary array of ancient sculptures.

Dr. Harris: We can reconstruct the original site for this colossal sculpture. There were mosaic floors, walls made of different colored marble. It was an incredibly luxurious bathing complex, used by thousands of Romans every day and it was decorated with hundreds of sculptures, many of them colossal, like this one.

Dr. Zucker: These were really complex structures, these bathing facilities. There were the baths themselves. Some were cold, some were hot. There were rooms for transition from one temperature to another. There were places where one could exercise and this sculpture makes perfect sense in this environment. This is a place where you would go to work out, where you would go to exercise. You could look at this wildly muscular figure and have a bit of a goal.

Dr. Harris: Many of the sculptures that were found in the Baths of Caracalla were not the typical, ideal, athletic copies of Greek sculptures that we think of, but they were especially bulky, like the Hercules that we see here.

Dr. Zucker: We know that some successful Greek athletes would sometimes dedicate sculptures to Hercules in a way thanking him for their successes.

Dr. Harris: He was a symbol of strength and heroism.

Dr. Zucker: You can see that here, but there's also irony in Lysippos' treatment, because even as we see this wildly powerful figure, this incredible musculature, we also see a figure that is exhausted.

Dr. Harris: He really is. He leans almost his full weight on a club that's propped up under his arm, so you're right, there is an irony between the brute strength of his articulated muscles and the languorousness of his pose.

Dr. Zucker: Look at the way in which that abdomen is articulated. Look at the strength of his right shoulder, of his right upper arm. It's really massive.

Dr. Harris: He thrusts his right hip out, so that he can fully lean his weight on his left side.

Dr. Zucker: There is this marvelous contrapposto, although the legs seem to be somewhat reversed, but I love the way his torso slouches over as he leans and there's this overemphasized turn of that torso.

Dr. Harris: But the club doesn't look like a very secure support.

Dr. Zucker: No, the whole thing is slightly precarious.

Dr. Harris: It seems as if Lysippos and Glycon, who copied Lysippos' sculpture and there are more than 80 copies of sculptures of the weary Hercules that have survived, but it does seem as though he's calling our attention to Hercules' hands and Hercules is famous as a hero who became a god and who these amazing exploits, the 12 labors of Hercules. I'm noticing the open left hand and the way that the right hand is brought behind his back, so we really want to move around the sculpture to see what's in his right hand.



Figure 9.5.5: Lysippos, *Farnese Hercules* (detail), 4th century BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Zucker: That's right. The artist has set us up so that we absolutely want to walk around. The left hand is not original, that's been lost. So what we're seeing is a plaster reconstruction, but the right hand is original and if you walk around the sculpture, you actually see that he's holding the apples that he would have gotten from one of those labors, the labor the apples of the Hesperides. This is all part of the legend of Heracles. Heracles was the original Greek figure and the Romans would call him Hercules. What happened was this brute of a man, in a fit, killed his children. The gods of Mount Olympus punished him by putting this man, Heracles, who was the son of a god and of a human, therefore a hero. They made him subservient to a king and he had to perform whatever deeds this king asked of him for 12 years. This was his punishment. The king asked of him tremendously difficult tasks. The first of which was the killing of the Nemean lion. If you look carefully, just draped over the club, you can see the pelt of that lion that he had slayed. This sculpture is actually referring to two of those labors.

Dr. Harris: One of the things that seems a little strange as we look up at him is how small his head is. This is something that Lysippos, the Greek sculptor–

Dr. Zucker: The original sculptor–

Dr. Harris: That this was based on, was known for, was changing the cannon of proportions that existed during the Classical period in Greece in the fifth century where there was more of a sense of harmony and balance between the parts of the body. Lysippos created a new set of proportions, where the figure was taller, the head was smaller, and they gave the figure a new sense of elegance.

Dr. Zucker: Elegance and also height. Here, it's married, of course, with this increased bulk. The other thing that Lysippos is so well known for, which you mentioned earlier, is the way in which he begins to break out of the more restricted space that Classical figures had generally occupied, so that by extending, for instance, that left hand, by moving that right hand behind his back, he really does invite us to understand this sculpture in the round, as opposed to seeing it as a frontal object. The thing that strikes me most, though, about this sculpture, is the way in which we can understand his feeling of exhaustion and the way that's contrasted against the potential energy and power of that body.

Dr. Harris: The things that we're talking about, the new cannon of proportions, the way that we're asked to move around the sculpture, not only do I want to walk behind it to see what's in his right hand, but I also want to walk to the place where he is looking down to, so we can look up at his face and see the expression, the sense of empathy we have for him. These are all things that are typical of the Hellenistic period of ancient Greek art that this copy was based on.

Dr. Zucker: Clearly, something that the Romans really appreciated.

Editors' Note

Dr. Harris refers to this sculpture as being from the Hellenistic period, but most art historians consider it to be Late Classical.

Hellenistic Sculpture

By Boundless Art History

Altar of Zeus



Figure **9.5.6**: Altar of Zeus, Bergama, Turkey, c. 175 BCE: The altar is a U-shaped Ionic building built on a high platform with central steps leading to the top. (Photo: Lestat, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The great Altar of Zeus, now housed in Germany, was commissioned in the first half of the second century BCE during the reign of King Eumenes II to commemorate his victory over the Gauls, who were migrating into Asia Minor.

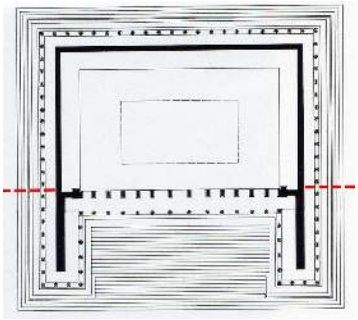


Figure **9.5.7**: Plan of the Altar of Zeus. (Image: Wolfgang Radt, public domain)

The altar is a U-shaped Ionic building built on a high platform with central steps leading to the top (see Figures **9.5.6** and **9.5.7**). It faced east, was located near the theater of Pergamon, and commanded an outstanding view of the region. The altar is known for its grand design and for its frieze depicting the Gigantomachy—it wraps 370 feet around the base of the altar.

The Gigantomachy

The Gigantomachy depicts the Olympian gods fighting against their predecessors the Giants (Titans), the children of the goddess Gaia (see Figure **9.5.8**). The frieze is known for its incredibly high relief, in which the figures are barely restrained by the wall, and for its deep drilling of lines with details to create dramatic shadows.



Figure **9.5.8**: Nereus, Doris, a Giant, and Oceanus: Located on the north frieze of the Altar of Zeus, c. 175 BCE. The high relief and deep drilling of the figures also increases the liveliness and naturalism of the scene. (Photo: Claus Ableiter, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The high relief and deep drilling of the figures also increases the liveliness and naturalism of the scene. The figures are rendered with high plasticity. The texture of their skin, drapery, and scales add another level of naturalism. Furthermore, as the frieze follows the stairs, the limbs of the figures begin to spill out of their frame and onto the stairs, physically breaking into the space of the viewer . The style and high drama of the scenes is often referred to as the Hellenistic Baroque for its exaggerated motion, emphasis on details, and the liveliness of the characters.

The most famous scene on the frieze depicts Athena fighting the giant Alkyoneus (see Figure **9.5.9**). She grabs his head and pulls it back while Gaia emerges from the ground to plead for her son's life and a winged Nike reaches over to crown Athena.



Figure **9.5.9**: Athena and Alkyoneos: Located on the east frieze of the Altar of Zeus, c. 175 BCE. The entire composition is depicted in a chiastic shape, and the scene is filled with the tension and emotion that are key features in Hellenistic sculpture. (Photo: Gryffindor, public domain)

Athena's drapery swirls around her with deep folds and her whole body is nearly removed from the frieze. The figures are depicted with the heightened emotion commonly found on Hellenistic statues. Alkyoneus's face strains in pain and Gaia's eyes, which are all that remain of her face, are full of terror and sorrow at the death of her son.

The entire composition is depicted in a chiastic shape. Athena stretches out to grasps Alkoyneus's head, the two figures pull at each other in opposite directions. Meanwhile, the figure of Nike moves diagonally towards Athena, showing their convergence in a moment of victory. The diagonal line created by Gaia mimics the shape of her son, connecting the two figures through line and pathos. The scene is filled with the tension and emotion that are key features in Hellenistic sculpture.



Figure 9.5.10: Epigonos (?), *Dying Gaul*. Roman marble copy of a bronze original of c. 230-220 BCE. 3' 1/2" high. Museo Capitolino, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Anthony Majanlahti, CC BY 2.0)

A group of statues depicting dying Gauls, the defeated enemies of the Attalids, were situated inside the Altar of Zeus (see Figure 9.5.10). The original set of statues is believed to have been cast in bronze by the court sculptor Epigonus in 230-220 BCE. Now only marble Roman copies of the figures remain.

Like the figures on the frieze and other Hellenistic sculptures, the figures are depicted with lifelike details and a high level of naturalism. They are also depicted in the common motif of barbarians. The men are nude and wear Celtic torcs [necklaces indicating status]. Their hair is shaggy and disheveled. The figures are positioned in dramatic compositions and are shown dying heroically, which turns them into worthy adversaries, increasing the perception of power of the Attalid dynasty. All three figures in the group are depicted in a Hellenistic manner. To fully appreciate the statues, it is best to walk around them. Their pain, nobility, and death are evident from all angles.

One Gaul is depicted lying down, supporting himself over his shield and a discarded trumpet. He furrows his brow as he looks downward at his bleeding chest wound as he prepares himself for death. His muscles are large and strong, signifying his strength as a warrior and implying the strength of the one who struck him down.



Figure 9.5.11: *Ludovisi Gaul*: This is a Roman marble copy of the Greek bronze original by Epigonos, c. 230-220 BCE, in Pergamon, Turkey. (Photo: Jastrow, public domain)

Two other figures complete the group. One figure depicts a Gallic chief committing suicide after he has killed his own wife (see Figure 9.5.11). Also known as the *Ludovisi Gaul*, this sculpture group displays another heroic and noble deed of the foes, for typically women and children of the defeated would be murdered to avoid them from being captured and sold as slaves by the victors. The chief holds his fallen wife by the arm as he plunges his sword into his chest, where blood is already exiting the wound. [See the earlier Editors' Note about Sexual Violence in Greek Art for a refresher about such violent depictions.]

Hellenistic sculpture continues the trend of increasing naturalism seen in the stylistic development of Greek art. During this time, the rules of Classical art were pushed and abandoned in favor of new themes, genres, drama, and pathos that were never explored by previous Greek artists.

Furthermore, the Greek artists added a new level of naturalism to their figures by adding an elasticity to their form and expressions, both facial and physical. These figures interact with their audience in a new theatrical manner by eliciting an emotional reaction from their view—this is known as pathos.

Nike of Samothrace

One of the most iconic statues of the period, the *Nike of Samothrace*, also known as the *Winged Victory*, c. 190 BCE, commemorates a naval victory (see Figure 9.5.12). This Parian marble statue depicts Nike, now armless and headless, alighting onto the prow of the ship. The prow is visible beneath her feet, and the scene is filled with theatricality and naturalism as the statue reacts to her surroundings.

Nike's feet, legs, and body thrust forward in contradiction to her drapery and wings that stream backwards. Her clothing whips around her from the wind and her wings lift upwards. This depiction provides the impression that she has just landed and that this is the precise moment that she is settling onto the ship's prow.



Figure 9.5.12: Nike of Samothrace, also known as the *Winged Victory*. Samothrace, Greece, c. 190 BCE. Marble, 8' 1" high. Musee du Louvre, Paris, France. This marble statue commemorates a naval victory. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, public domain)

In addition to the sculpting, the figure was most likely set within a fountain, creating a theatrical setting where both the imagery and the auditory effect of the fountain would create a striking image of action and triumph.



Figure **9.5.13**: Alexandros of Antioch-on-the-Meander, *Aphrodite (Venus de Milo)*, from Melos, Greece, c. 150-125 BCE. Marble, 6' 7" high. Musee du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: Shawn Lipowski, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Venus de Milo

Also known as the *Aphrodite of Melos* (c. 150-125 BCE), this sculpture by Alexandros of Antioch, is another well-known icon of the Hellenistic period (see Figure **9.5.13**). Today the goddess's arms are missing. It has been suggested that one arm clutched at her slipping drapery while the other arm held out an apple, an allusion to the Judgment of Paris and the abduction of Helen.

Originally, like all Greek sculptures, the statue would have been painted and adorned with metal jewelry, which is evident from the attachment holes. This image is in some ways similar to Praxiteles' Late Classical sculpture *Aphrodite of Knidos* (fourth century BCE), but it is considered to be more erotic than its earlier counterpart.

For instance, while she is covered below the waist, Aphrodite makes little attempt to cover herself. She appears to be teasing and ignoring her viewer, instead of accosting him and making eye contact.

Altered States

While the Nike of Samothrace exudes a sense of drama and the Venus de Milo a new level of feminine sexuality, other Greek sculptors explored new states of being. Instead of reproducing images of the ideal Greek male or female, as was favored during the Classical period, sculptors began to depict images of the old, tired, sleeping, and drunk—none of which are ideal representations of a man or woman.

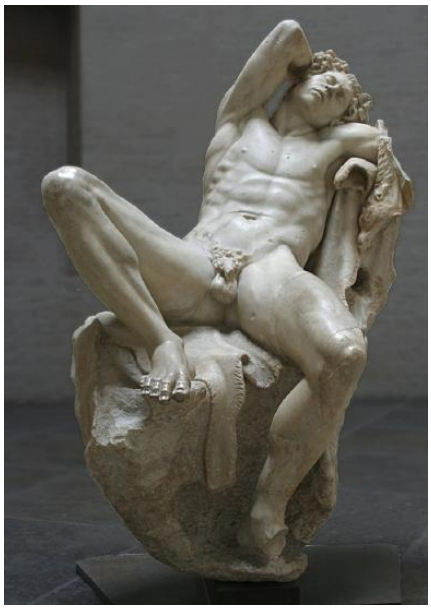


Figure **9.5.14**: Barberini Faun: This is a Roman marble copy of the Greek bronze original, c. 220 BCE. Glyptothek, Munich, Germany. (Photo: MatthiasKabel, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The *Barberini Faun*, also known as the *Sleeping Satyr* (c. 220 BCE), depicts an effeminate figure, most likely a satyr, drunk and passed out on a rock. His body splays across the rock face without regard to modesty (see Figure **9.5.14**).

He appears to have fallen to sleep in the midst of a drunken revelry and he sleeps restlessly, his brow is knotted, face worried, and his limbs are tense and stiff. Unlike earlier depicts of nude men, but in a similar manner to the Venus de Milo, the *Barberini Faun* seems to exude sexuality.



Figure **9.5.15**: Drunken Old Woman: This is a Roman marble copy of the Greek bronze original by Myron, c. 200–180 BCE. Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Tetraktys, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Drunken Old Woman

Images of drunkenness were also created of women, which can be seen in a statue attributed to the Hellenistic artist Myron of a drunken beggar woman (see Figure **9.5.15**). This woman sits on the floor with her arms and legs wrapped around a large jug and a hand gripping the jug's neck.

Grape vines decorating the top of the jug make it clear that it holds wine. The woman's face, instead of being expressionless, is turned upward and she appears to be calling out, possibly to passersby. Not only is she intoxicated, but she is old: deep wrinkles line her face, her eyes are sunken, and her bones stick out through her skin.

Seated Boxer



Figure **9.5.16**: Apollonius, *Boxer at Rest* (or *The Seated Boxer*), from the Baths of Constantine, Quirinal Hill, Rome, Italy, c. 100 BCE. Bronze, 4'2" high. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, public domain)

Another image of the old and weary is a bronze statue of a seated boxer (see Figure **9.5.16**). While the image of an athlete is a common theme in Greek art, this bronze presents a Hellenistic twist.

He is old and tired, much like the Late Classical image of a Weary Herakles. However, unlike Herakles, the boxer is depicted beaten and exhausted from his pursuit. His face is swollen, lip spilt, and ears cauliflowered. This is not an image of a heroic, young athlete but rather an old, defeated man many years past his prime.

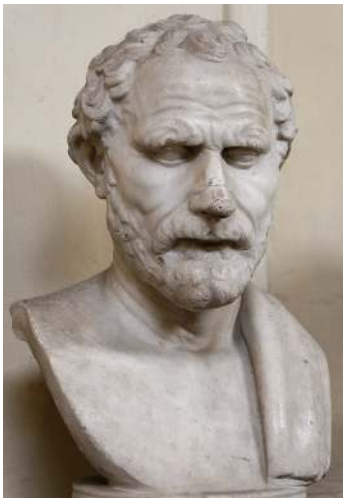


Figure **9.5.17**: Demosthenes: This is a Roman copy of the Greek, bronze, original portrait bust by Polyeuktos. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, CC BY 2.5)

Portraiture

Individual portraits, instead of idealization, also became popular during the Hellenistic period. A portrait of Demosthenes by Polyeuktos, 280 BCE, is not an idealization of the Athenian statesman and orator (see Figure **9.5.17**). Instead, the statue takes notes

of Demosthenes's characteristic features, including his overbite, furrowed brow, stooped shoulders, and old, loose skin.

Even portrait busts, often copied from Polyeuktos' famed statue, depict the weariness and sorrow of a man despairing the conquest of Philip II and end of Athenian democracy.

Roman Patronage

The Greek peninsula fell to Roman power in 146 BCE. Greece was a key province of the Roman Empire, and the Roman's interest in Greek culture helped to circulate Greek art around the empire, especially in Italy, during the Hellenistic period and into the Imperial period of Roman hegemony.

Greek sculptors were in high demand throughout the remaining territories of the Alexander's empire and then throughout the Roman Empire. Famous Greek statues were copied and replicated for wealthy Roman patricians and Greek artists were commissioned for large-scale sculptures in the Hellenistic style.

Originally cast in bronze, many Greek sculptures that we have today survive only as marble Roman copies. Some of the most famous colossal marble groups were sculpted in the Hellenistic style for wealthy Roman patrons and for the imperial court. Despite their Roman audience, these were purposely created in the Greek style and continued to display the drama, tension, and pathos of Hellenistic art.

Laocoön and His Sons



Figure **9.5.18**: Athanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his Sons*, early first century CE. Marble, 7' 10 1/2″ high. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, public domain)

Laocoön was a Trojan priest of Poseidon who warned the Trojans, "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts," when the Greeks left a large wooden horse at the gates of Troy. Athena or Poseidon (depending on the story's version), upset by his vain warning to his people, sent two sea serpents to torture and kill the priest and his two sons.



Figure **9.5.19**: Laocoön and His Sons: This detail of Laocoön's face shows the carving and detail, the attention to the musculature of the body, and the deep drilling that are all characteristic elements of the Hellenistic style. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, CC BY 3.0)

Similar to other examples of Hellenistic sculpture, *Laocoön and His Sons* depicts a chiastic scene filled with drama, tension, and pathos (see Figures **9.5.18** and **9.5.29**). The figures writhe as they are caught in the coils of the serpents. The faces of the three men are filled with agony and toil, which is reflected in the tension and strain of their muscles. Laocoön stretches out in a long diagonal from his right arm to his left as he attempts to free himself.His sons are also entangled by the serpents, and their faces react to their

doom with confusion and despair. The carving and detail, the attention to the musculature of the body, and the deep drilling, seen in Laocoön's hair and beard, are all characteristic elements of the Hellenistic style.

Farnese Bull



Figure **9.5.20**: Farnese Bull: This marble statue, c. 200–180 BCE, was sculpted by Apollonius and Tauriscus of Tralles, Rhodes. National Archaeological Museum of Naples. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The *Farnese Bull* (c. 200–180 BCE), named for the patrician Roman family who owned the statue in the Italian Renaissance, is believed to have been created for the collection of Asinius Pollio, a Roman patrician (see Figure **9.5.20**). Pliny the Elder attributes the statue to the artists and brothers Apolllonius and Tauriscus of Trallles, Rhodes.The colossal marble statue, carved from a single block of marble, depicts the myth of Dirce, the wife of the King of Thebes, who was tied to a bull by the sons of Antiope to punish her for mistreating their mother. The composition is large and dramatic, and demands the viewer to encircle it in order to view and appreciate the narrative and pathos from all angles. The various angles reveal different expressions, from the terror of Dirce, to the determination of Antiope's sons, to the savagery of the bull.

Global Connections: Greco-Buddhist Style

Sculptural Buddhas made in the Gandharan region (located in the area between present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) in the Kushan dynasty are often described as having a "Greco-Roman" or "Greco-Buddhist" aesthetic. As compared to the Buddhas produced during the same time in Mathura (a northern Indian city), they are less stylized, with more naturalistic facial features, proportions, and drapery (see Figure **9.5.21**). The European scholars who applied the Greco-Buddhist label to the Gandharan Buddhas believed that this hybrid style was the result of a cultural syncretism between Classical Greek and Buddhist cultures, which came into close contact during the thousand years following Alexander the Great's 4th century conquests.

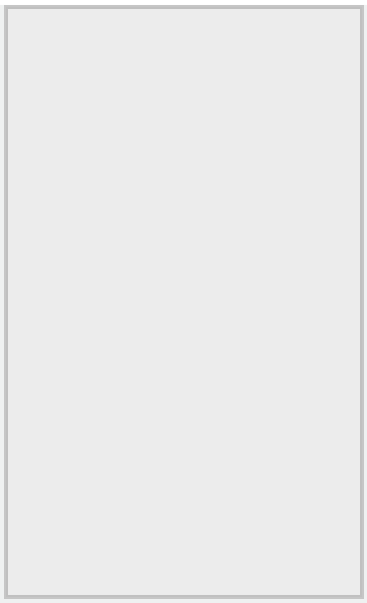


Figure **9.5.21**: Buddha from Gandhara, c. 2nd–3rd century C.E., Gandhara, schist (Tokyo National Museum, photo: public domain)

Gandhara itself was positioned, as the British Museum puts it, "at the 'crossroads of Asia,'" and "has always been an ancient transit zone," one "certainly well known to the Greeks in the fifth century BCE." They continue, "As a result of the various cultures that either settled or moved along these trade routes, [Gandharan] sculptures have taken on a distinctive style, combining Graeco-Roman, Indian, Chinese, and Central Asian influences." This hybrid style is evident in the graceful and elegant Gandharan Head of the Buddha, which pairs stylized, almost geometric eyebrows and hair with a more naturalistic nose, mouth, and the distinctive inward-gazing, heavy-lidded eyes.

Other scholars, however, have contested the "Greco-Buddhist" label, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of, and approach to, the style. In his paper for Journal of Art Historiography, Michael Falser interrogates the construction of the term "Graeco-Buddhist Style of Gandhara." Put simply, Falser would like the Gandharan style to be understood by and studied for its own merits. He argues that conceiving of this style as a Eurasian hybrid, rather than its own unique style, stems from a problematic art historical trend of assigning essentializing labels such as "Classical Greek" or "Buddhist." Instead of considering the Gandharan artists as being influenced by Classical ones, Falser champions a "nationalist appropriation" of the style. He encourages art historians to consider decolonial approaches to understanding the Gandharan aesthetics and artistic innovation as a distinct and "valid cultural heritage of the nation states of Pakistan and Afghanistan."

Article in this section:

- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Lysippos, *Farnese Hercules*," in *Smarthistory*, December 9, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Boundless Art History, "The Hellenistic Period." (CC BY SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: The Etruscans

In This Chapter

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10.1: Early Etruscans
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10.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Technological Keys to (Re)Discovery

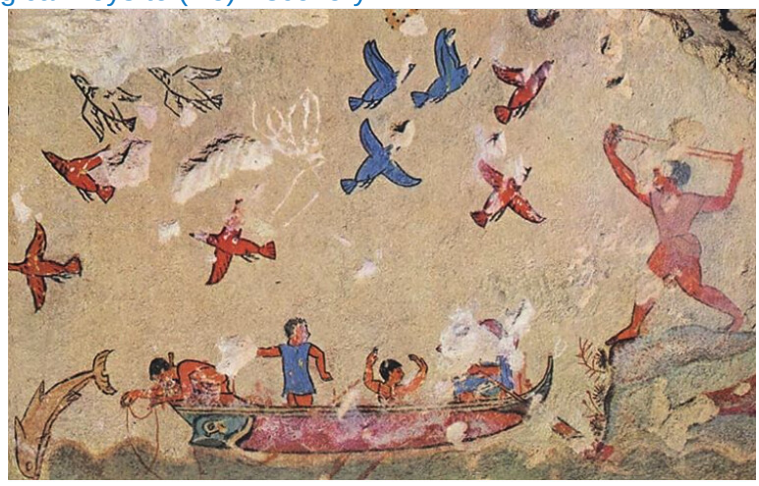


Figure **10.0.1**: Detail from the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing, 6th century BCE, wall painting in Tarquinia, Italy. (Photo: tutincommon, CC BY-NC 2.0) This ancient Etruscan fresco depicts a colorful scene of people on a boat fishing and people on land hunting for birds.

Mysterious. Curious. Puzzling. Enigmatic. These are all words often used to describe the Ancient Etruscans, whose distinctive language and culture caused the Greek historian Herodotus to theorize, as far back as 500 BCE, that they were migrants from Anatolia. Although they ruled much of present-day Italy long before the Roman Empire dominated the region, the Etruscans are relatively lesser-known to the general public—in large part because much of their culture is still veiled to historians as well. The Etruscans greatly influenced Rome (and some of Rome's first kings were Etruscan speakers), but despite this, historians do not yet know as much about the Etruscans as they do about other nearby cultures. With new technological advances, however, that is starting to change. Researchers are using different technologies to examine remnants of Etruscan culture, in order to help shed light on this obscured history.

Using something called multi-illumination hyperspectral extraction (MHX), scientists have recently been able to reveal not only faded colors used in Etruscan frescoes and murals, but even long-hidden figures. The technique combines dozens of images using different bands of light, such as ultraviolet and infrared, and then processes all of these together to provide unique insights and color analyses into the works. In a wall mural known as the *Tomb of the Monkey*, all that could be seen with the naked eye was a blur of paint that had changed color over time, but MHX revealed a person carrying an object. It is possible that using this technology on more Etruscan art will lead to further insight into understanding their art and culture.

Other scientific advances have been made in the form of DNA research in the area, proving that the Etruscans were *not* mysterious migrants coming from distant lands, but in fact were genetically the same as their Latin neighbors. A team of geneticists, linguists, and archaeologists studied DNA taken from skeletons in Etruscan tombs and found that "the Etruscans were descended in part from Stone Age farmers who lived in Europe beginning around 6000 BCE." Like their neighbors, the article continues, "by 1600 BCE the Etruscans seem to have absorbed an influx of new arrivals tracing their ancestry back to the open grasslands, or steppes, of modern-day Russia and Ukraine." However, instead of the migrants' new culture dominating, it seems that they acculturated to the *Etruscan* way of life. As historian and study co-author Michael McCormick asserts, "Almost everywhere else, these new people and new languages triumphed, along with their culture…Here, that didn't happen: The old culture maintained itself and thrived." As historians and scientists help shed light on the so-called "mysteries" of the Etruscans, their enduring appeal remains—and deepens.

Historiography (Writing History)

An Undeciphered Language and Buried History

Etruria, the land of the Etruscans, was in central Italy, between the Arno and Tiber rivers. Today, that region is called Tuscany, which echoes the name of those former inhabitants. The Tyrrhenian Sea also references them, via the name the Greeks called them-

-Tyrrhenoi, though they called themselves Rasenna.

They had a written language; their script is Greek-derived, and in turn, it influenced Latin. However, Etruscan is unrelated to other Indo-European languages and remains largely undeciphered, partly because the Romans suppressed the Etruscan language (and built over most of their architectural sites and ruins). That means that historians know significantly less about the Etruscans than they do about either the Greeks or the Romans—though art historians tend to remain interested in the Etruscans *because* of their relationships with Greece and with Rome. What is known most about the Etruscans comes from the many buried objects that they left behind, particularly in tombs. In addition to unique Etruscan art found in burials, there were also Greek objects, giving us insight into their relationship with Greece too. And many of their urban architectural developments, such as roads, water diversion channels, and sewage systems, serve as influential predecessors to Rome's notable urban planning feats.

Chapter Overview

Although the Etruscans are less familiar to many than the Greeks and Romans, this culture provides a sort of bridge between the two, because the Etruscans valued Greek culture and in turn strongly influenced Roman culture. However, Etruscan art is not an imitation of Greek art, but is its own distinct and fascinating product. This chapter is divided into two basic sections: Early Etruscan Art and Later Etruscan Art. The former is further divided into two periods that echo ones recently covered in Greece: Proto-Archaic and Archaic. Although the period names are the same in Greek and Etruscan art, Etruscan art has its own separate and distinctive character.

This chapter covers a range of art from the ancient Etruscans. Given that much of the bustling Etruscan cities and settlements were built upon time and time again, many of the remnants of their culture remain buried under layers of additional cultures.

Objects overview

This chapter includes a wide range of tombs and burial complexes—all of which act as time capsules offering insight into Ancient Etruscan culture, rituals, and beliefs—in addition to masterful terracotta sculptures, jewelry, and vessels, including:

- a now-famous, intricate gold relief fibula from Regolini Galassi's tomb in Cerveteri from mid-seventh century BCE
- large-scale terracotta figures like *Aplu (Apollo of Veii)*, which graced temple rooftops, creating a theater in the sky
- the lively and expressive terracotta *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*
- Tomb of the Reliefs decorated in painted stucco
- Chimera of Arezzo, made with the lost-wax process and more recently judged as a forgery of Etruscan art
- Aule Metele (Arringatore) from Cortona, Italy

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Ancient Etruscan art, you should be able to:

- Identify works of Etruscan art and examine the possible origins of Etruscan art and culture
- Differentiate between Etruscan and Greek art and architecture
- Describe ways in which Etruscan art influenced Roman art
- Compare the social and funerary customs of the Etruscans with those of other cultures

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- David Kindy, "Where Did the Etruscans Come From?" for *Smithsonian Magazine*.
- Andrew Curry, "They may have founded Rome, then vanished. New work sheds light on the mysterious Etruscans," for *Science Magazine*.
- "The origin and legacy of the Etruscans through a 2000-year archeogenomic time transect," for *Science Advances*.
- Owen Jarus, "Hidden Scenes in ancient Etruscan Paintings Revealed," for LiveScience
- Etruscanning 3D blog, "A Mysterious Fibula"
- Google Maps, Cerveteri Necropolis (check out Street View)
- Etruscanning Project blog and video tour
- Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia (formerly Cornetto) on Google Arts & Culture
- Boundless Art History, "Early Etruscan Art" and "Later Etruscan Art"

- Timothy John Burbery, "Dinosaur bones became griffins, volcanic eruptions were gods fighting – geomythology looks to ancient stories for hints of scientific truth," in *The Conversation*
- Adrienne Mayor and Michael Heaney, "Griffins and Arimaspeans," in *Folklore*

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10.1: Early Etruscans

The Etruscans, an introduction

by Dr. Laurel Taylor



Figure **10.1.1**: Map of Etruscan civilization, 750-500 BCE. (Image by NormanEinstein, based on a map from *The National Geographic Magazine*, vol.173, No.6 [June 1988], CC BY-SA 3.0)

Before the small village of Rome became “Rome” with a capital R (to paraphrase D.H. Lawrence), a brilliant civilization once controlled almost the entire peninsula we now call Italy. This was the Etruscan civilization, a vanished culture whose achievements set the stage not only for the development of ancient Roman art and culture but for the Italian Renaissance as well.

Though you may not have heard of them, the Etruscans were the first “superpower” of the Western Mediterranean who, alongside the Greeks, developed the earliest true cities in Europe. They were so successful, in fact, that the most important cities in modern Tuscany (Florence, Pisa, and Siena, to name a few) were first established by the Etruscans and have been continuously inhabited since then.

Yet the labels “mysterious” or “enigmatic” are often attached to the Etruscans since none of their own histories or literature survives. This is particularly ironic as it was the Etruscans who were responsible for teaching the Romans the alphabet and for spreading literacy throughout the Italian peninsula.

The influence on ancient Rome

Etruscan influence on ancient Roman culture was profound. It was from the Etruscans that the Romans inherited many of their own cultural and artistic traditions, from the spectacle of gladiatorial combat, to hydraulic engineering, temple design, and religious ritual, among many other things. In fact, hundreds of years after the Etruscans had been conquered by the Romans and absorbed into their empire, the Romans still maintained an Etruscan priesthood in Rome (which they thought necessary to consult when under attack from invading “barbarians”).

We even derive our very common word “person’” from the Etruscan mythological figure Phersu—the frightful, masked figure you see in this Early Etruscan tomb painting who would engage his victims in a dreadful “game” of blood letting in order to appease the soul of the deceased (see Figure 10.1.2). This was considered the original gladiatorial games, according to the Romans!



Figure **10.1.2**: Phersu and his victim, Tomb of the Augurs, Tarquinia, late 6th century BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **10.1.3**: Etruscan hut urn, c. 800 BCE. Impasto, Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Etruscan art and the afterlife

Early on the Etruscans developed a vibrant artistic and architectural culture, one that was often in dialogue with other Mediterranean civilizations. Trading of the many natural mineral resources found in Tuscany, the center of ancient Etruria, caused them to bump up against Greeks, Phoenicians and Egyptians in the Mediterranean. With these other Mediterranean cultures, they exchanged goods, ideas and, often, a shared artistic vocabulary.

Unlike with the Greeks, however, the majority of our knowledge about Etruscan art comes largely from their burials. (Since most Etruscan cities are still inhabited, they hide their Etruscan art and architecture under Roman, Medieval and Renaissance layers). Fortunately, though, the Etruscans cared very much about equipping their dead with everything necessary for the afterlife—from lively tomb paintings to sculpture to pottery that they could use in the next world.

From their extensive cemeteries, we can look at the “world of the dead” and begin to understand some about the “world of the living.” During the early phases of Etruscan civilization, they conceived of the afterlife in terms of life as they knew it. When someone died, he or she would be cremated and provided with another ‘home’ for the afterlife.

This type of hut urn (see Figure 10.1.3), made of an unrefined clay known as impasto, would be used to house the cremated remains of the deceased. Not coincidentally, it shows us in miniature form what a typical Etruscan house would have looked like in Iron Age Etruria (900-750 BCE)—oval with a timber roof and a smoke hole for an internal hearth.

More opulent tombs

Later on, houses for the dead became much more elaborate. During the Orientalizing period (750-575 BCE), when the Etruscans began to trade their natural resources with other Mediterranean cultures and became staggeringly wealthy as a result, their tombs became more and more opulent.

The well-known Regolini-Galassi tomb from the city of Cerveteri [discussed in more detail below] shows how this new wealth transformed the modest hut to an extravagant house for the dead. Built for a woman clearly of high rank, the massive stone tomb contains a long corridor with lateral, oval rooms leading to a main chamber.

A stroll through the Etruscan rooms in the Vatican museum where the tomb artifacts are now housed presents a mind-boggling view of the enormous wealth of the period. Found near the woman were objects of various precious materials intended for personal adornment in the afterlife—a gold pectoral, gold bracelets, a gold brooch (or fibula) of outsized proportions, among other objects—as well as silver and bronze vessels and numerous other grave goods and furniture.



Figure **10.1.4**: Bronze bed and carriage, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, c. 650 BCE, Cerveteri. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A bronze bed

Of course, this important woman might also need her four-wheeled bronze-sheathed carriage in the afterlife (see Figure 10.1.4) as well as an incense burner, jewelry of amber and ivory, and, touchingly, her bronze bed around which thirty-three figurines, all in various gestures of mourning, were arranged.

Though later periods in Etruscan history are not characterized by such wealth, the Etruscans were, nevertheless, extremely powerful and influential and left a lasting imprint on the city of Rome and other parts of Italy.

The Regolini-Galassi tomb and the Parade Fibula

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Figure **10.1.5**: Three Lions (detail), Large Parade Fibula (rear chamber, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, Cerveteri), 670-650 BCE. Gold, 29.2 cm long. Gregorian Etruscan Museum of the Vatican Museums. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The interconnectedness of the ancient Mediterranean world

The material culture of the Mediterranean basin in the seventh century BCE affords us a glimpse of a dynamic and increasingly interconnected world. This Proto-Archaic phase of the Mediterranean world (also sometimes still referred to as the “Orientalizing” period) offers evidence of techniques—and possibly even artists and makers themselves—transmitted and transported from one region to another. Funereal architecture and associated material objects deposited in tombs, often referred to as “grave goods,” provide important indications about contemporary customs, materials, and monuments and serve as revealing indicators of the priorities and preferences of a culture.



Figure **10.1.6**: Large Parade Fibula, Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, from the main tomb in the lower chamber, 675-650 BCE. Gold: embossed, punched, cut, and granulated. Gregorian Etruscan Museum of the Vatican Museums. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An Etruscan tomb

In 1836 an Etruscan tomb located in the Sorbo necropolis of ancient Caere (now Cerveteri, Italy) was opened and its contents revealed. The tomb was of the tumulus-type, meaning a tomb covered with a mound of earth, and was of the sort used by the members of the social elite of the Etruscan culture. The seventh-century BCE tomb had remained intact and undisturbed since antiquity (a fortuitous circumstance since such tombs are frequently discovered in a disturbed or looted state).



Figure **10.1.7**: Detail, Large Parade Fibula, Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, 675-650 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The funereal objects—now in the Gregorian Etruscan Museum of the Vatican Museums—demonstrate how objects and materials can communicate messages about a person's social or economic status. The the assemblage of objects in the Regolini-Galassi tomb represents a broad geographic range and an aesthetic that indicates the influence of the ancient Near East. This is especially evident in metal-working techniques used to produce objects in the tomb and, in the broader landscape of funereal culture, objects either imported from the Near East or manufactured by Near Eastern craftspeople for elite consumption, such as their use as grave goods. Social elites not only desired to own and display such objects but also used them to reinforce their status and that of their family. The conspicuous deposition of these objects in the tomb would indicate to viewers or onlookers that not only was the deceased an important person but also that her surviving family members were important people in the community. In this way, the objects themselves facilitate a conversation about wealth and status among the Etruscans.



Figure **10.1.8**: Corbelled vault, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, Cerveteri, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The architecture of the tomb and its context

The explorers of the tomb—General Vincenzo Galassi, a military officer, and Alessandro Regolini, the archpriest of Cerveteri—discovered that the tomb's primary occupant was an adult female and that, judging both by the tomb architecture and the grave goods, she would have numbered among the social elite of ancient Caere.

The tomb is monumental in scale and was partially carved from the tuff bedrock of Caere. The tomb is approached by a short, narrow dromos and is composed of a 37-meter long corridor off of which two side chambers open. A corbelled vault covers the dromos. The exterior of the tomb was covered by an initial mound of earth known as a tumulus that measured some 46 meters in diameter; a second tumulus covered the tomb in the sixth century B.C.E. when additional tombs were added.

Once built, the tomb was stocked with grave goods to accompany the descendants; no fewer than 327 objects have been recorded. Many of these objects were manufactured of precious metals, including a significant quantity of gold. The tomb's side chambers were used, respectively, for storage and the burial of a cremated male. The closed chamber at the end of the lateral corridor contained the principal burial, that of an elite female, and the majority of the grave goods (no. 1 to 226 in Pareti's documentation). Some of the grave objects are inscribed *mi larthia*, meaning "I am the property of Larth." This suggests that Larth, being a male, is the father of the deceased woman. Additional epigraphic evidence has led to the identification of the woman herself as one Larthia Velthurus. The parade fibula was found associated with this female burial, although precise documentation of the findspot is unclear since the tomb's opening predates modern archaeology. The conventional date for the tomb and its contents is c. 675 to 650 BCE, although some scholars will move the date forward to the 640s BCE.

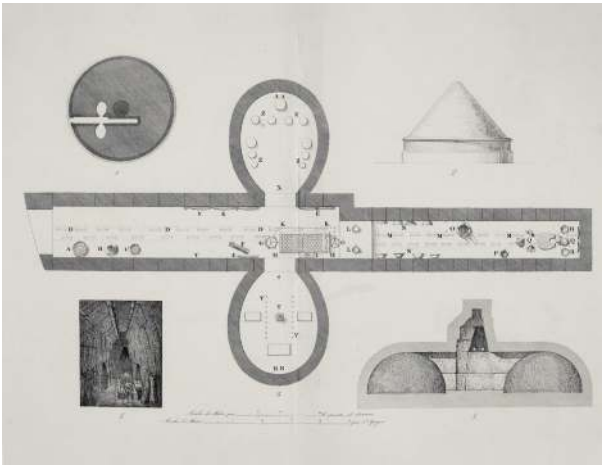


Figure **10.1.9**: Regolini-Galassi Tomb plan. (Photo: Vatican Museums via Smarthistory)

The so-called Parade Fibula and its design

The so-called parade fibula itself measures 31.5 cm high by 24.4 cm thick; the disc ranges in thickness from 0.11 to 0.19 mm. The fibula weighs 173 grams (6.1024 ounces). While a normal-sized fibula would have functioned as a pin to fasten garments together (much like a modern safety pin operates), the functionality of this example, given its size and splendor, has long been debated. It is possible that this example was prepared especially as a grave offering for the deceased female.

Scholars have debated the function of the parade fibula since the tomb's discovery. Various theories have been proposed, including that the fibula could have been displayed as a sort of headdress (and so not a fibula at all?), including one that imagines it positioned atop the face and forehead of the decedent. Most interpretations pair the fibula with the so-called gold pectoral from the same tomb that similarly demonstrates the influence of Near Eastern metal-working techniques and geometric patterns.

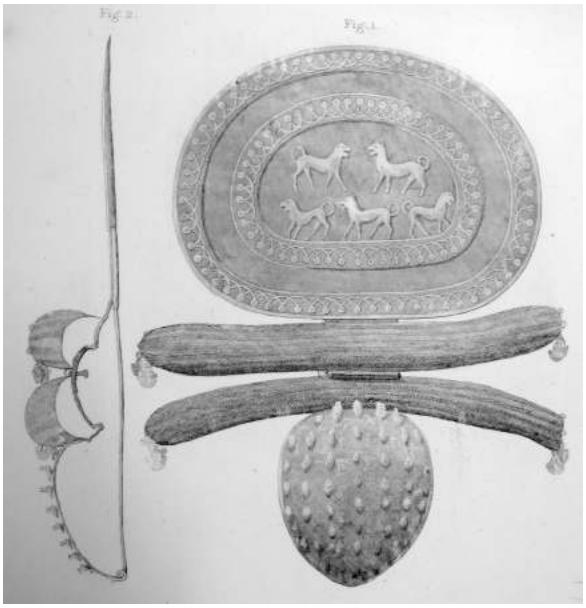


Figure **10.1.10**: Profile (left) and front view (right) of the Regolini-Galassi disc fibula by Luigi Canina (1846). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Three elements make up the so-called parade fibula. These are, from bottom to top, an oval-shaped, arched element, a flat semi-circular disc, and a pair of transverse, hollow cylinders that are attached to the other elements by a hinge. A long pin is attached to the back of the fibula.

Decorative techniques



Figure **10.1.11**: Detail, Large Parade Fibula, Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, 675-650 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 10.1.12: Fibula decorated with zigzag lines and incised labyrinths (Proto-Etruscan), c. 825–775 BCE. Gold, 7.4 cm. (© The Trustees of the British Museum via Smarthistory)

The techniques that were used to decorate the surface of the fibula are indicative of artistic trends and technologies originating in the ancient Near East that were overspreading the Mediterranean basin. These techniques—granulation, filigree, and repoussé —all originated in the east, with granulation appearing in tombs at Ur in Mesopotamia by c. 2500 BCE. The granulation technique is attested in Etruria beginning in the middle of the eighth century BCE.

The decorative motifs that reference the afterlife, including the presence of the Egyptian goddess Hathor seem to confirm the fibula's funeral function. Hathor is visible on the terminus of the lower element of the fibula. Although the Regolini-Galassi parade fibula is unique, it finds comparison with other contemporary disc fibulae such as the one in the collection of The British Museum.



Figure 10.1.13: Five lions (detail), Detail, Large Parade Fibula, Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, 675-650 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A group of five lions occupies the center of the semicircular disc of the fibula. These lions were made by the use of stamps and then attached to the disc of the fibula. A border achieved with the granulation technique frames the lions. The surface of the horizontal tubular elements are covered with granulation, while the lower ovoid element includes patterns like a frieze of griffins that indicates the influence of the ancient Near East. The composition of the iconography of the fibula stresses elite themes and status, since an item of foreign manufacture that reinforces royal icons reinforces the status and activities of social elites and the behaviors they used to maintain their position. Ritual themes are important as well and, overall, the group of grave goods represents the outlook of Mediterranean social elites of the Proto-Archaic period.

A world increasingly connected

The iconographic motifs--the griffins and lions--of the parade fibula speaks to the influence of the ancient Near East and possibly even to manufacture by artisans from Syro-Palestine.

Taken as part of the larger assemblage of artifacts, the fibula speaks volumes about the needs of Etruscan elites in the seventh century BCE. These elites felt it necessary to communicate and reinforce their own socio-economic status by accumulating and displaying certain types of objects that matched their apparent status. Not only were many of these objects crafted from intrinsically valuable materials like gold they also had the appeal of being examples of imported and exotic items. Similar items likely were to be found in the homes and tombs of the social peers of the occupants of the Regolini-Galassi tomb, as proto-archaic elites jockeyed

for position and used objects and materials acquired by means of long-distance supply chains to signal their primacy and relevance in a world that was increasingly interlinked and moving ever more quickly.

Global Connections: Geomythology and the Griffin

Repeated rows of gilded griffin silhouettes decorate the ornate Etruscan Regolini-Galassi tomb and the Parade Fibula. The griffin, a mythological creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the back body of a lion (or predatory mammal), is often depicted in Etruscan art. Griffins are believed to have originated in Mesopotamia, but these legendary creatures are also found in Chinese, Scythian (nomadic Siberia people from the first millennium BCE), Greek, Cretian, and of course Etruscan art as well.



Figure 10.1.14: Frieze of griffins (detail), Large Parade Fibula, Cerveteri, Regolini-Galassi Tomb, 675-650 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Figures of griffins parade endlessly around this fibula.

Scholars in the field of geomythology have studied depictions of griffins in order to see whether there might be a connection between archaeological remains from dinosaurs and the mythic legends of griffins. Geomythology is a field of study that examines legends and myths in order to try to extract scientific truths. As Timothy John Burbery explains, "geomythology focuses on tales that may record, however dimly, occurrences like volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and earthquakes, as well as their aftereffects, such as the exposures of strange-looking bones. These events appear to have been, in some cases, so traumatic or wonder-inducing that they may have inspired preliterate peoples to 'explain' them through fables." Although geomythology is not a precise science, it is an interdisciplinary fusing of humanities and science in order to help tie myths and legends to grounded geological events. (This approach also includes the study of oral traditions and oral mythologies, as discussed in Chapter 4.)

In her book *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times*, historian Adrienne Mayor theorizes that early Scythian gold miners must have unearthed skeletons of Protoceratops and that misattribution of these bones, as well as descriptions of such mythic beasts, must have moved along trade routes verbally and visually. She argues that similar dinosaur skeletons, including the Turanoceratops and Sinoceratops, were also excavated in Central Asia, likely leading to the Chinese interpretation and visual depiction of griffins as well. Mayor asserts that such skeletal remains likely impacted the ways in which different cultures presented the griffin with slightly different physical features: Etruscans and Greeks often presented them with distinct feathers around their necks and elongated ears, likely an interpretation of the Sinoceratops; Chinese artists often depicted them with two large holes in their necks, likely because of the Ceratops neck shields.

Whether or not griffins are the product of early civilizations unearthing dinosaur bones may still be up for historical, archaeological, and geomythical debate. However, what is clear from the repetition of this mythological creature across time and cultures is that the stories, descriptions, and visual depictions of griffins spread on trade routes—along with gold, spices, and other goods—and connected disparate cultures aesthetically.

Temple of Minerva and the sculpture of Apollo (Veii)

by Dr. Laurel Taylor

Forget what you know about Greek and Roman architectural orders—Etruscans had their own unique style.

Etruscan temples have largely vanished

Among the early Etruscans, the worship of the Gods and Goddesses did not take place in or around monumental temples as it did in early Greece or in the Ancient Near East, but rather, in nature. Early Etruscans created ritual spaces in groves and enclosures open to the sky with sacred boundaries carefully marked through ritual ceremony.



Figure **10.1.15**: Reconstruction of an Etruscan Temple of the 6th century according to Vitruvius. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Around 600 BCE, however, the desire to create monumental structures for the gods spread throughout Etruria, most likely as a result of Greek influence. While the desire to create temples for the gods may have been inspired by contact with Greek culture, Etruscan religious architecture was markedly different in material and design (see Figure 10.1.15). These colorful and ornate structures typically had stone foundations but their wood, mud-brick and terracotta superstructures suffered far more from exposure to the elements. Greek temples still survive today in parts of Greece and southern Italy since they were constructed of stone and marble but Etruscan temples were built with mostly ephemeral materials and have largely vanished.

How do we know what they looked like?

Despite the comparatively short-lived nature of Etruscan religious structures, Etruscan temple design had a huge impact on Renaissance architecture and one can see echoes of Etruscan, or 'Tuscan,' columns (Doric columns with bases) in many buildings of the Renaissance and later in Italy. But if the temples weren't around during the 15th and 16th centuries, how did Renaissance builders know what they looked like and, for that matter, how do we know what they looked like?

Fortunately, an ancient Roman architect by the name of Vitruvius wrote about Etruscan temples in his book *De architectura* in the late first century BCE. In his treatise on ancient architecture, Vitruvius described the key elements of Etruscan temples and it was his description that inspired Renaissance architects to return to the roots of Tuscan design and allows archaeologists and art historians today to recreate the appearance of these buildings.

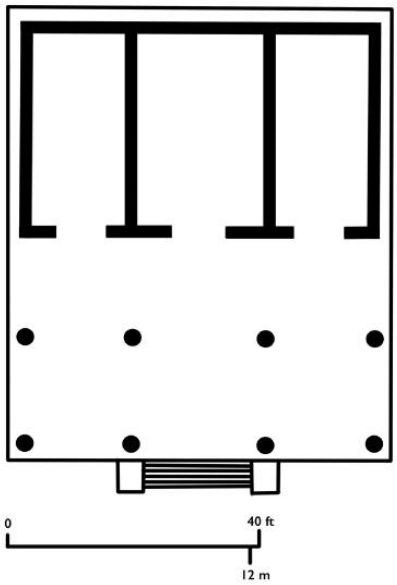


Figure **10.1.16**: Typical Etruscan temple plan. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Archaeological evidence for the Temple of Minerva

The archaeological evidence that does remain from many Etruscan temples largely confirms Vitruvius's description. One of the best explored and known of these is the Portonaccio Temple dedicated to the goddess Minerva (Roman=Minerva/Greek=Athena) at the city of Veii about 18 km north of Rome. The tufa-block foundations of the Portonaccio temple still remain and their nearly square footprint reflects Vitruvius's description of a floor plan with proportions that are 5:6, just a bit deeper than wide.

The temple is also roughly divided into two parts—a deep front porch with widely-spaced Tuscan columns and a back portion divided into three separate rooms. Known as a triple cella, this three room configuration seems to reflect a divine triad associated with the temple, perhaps Menrva as well as Tinia (Jupiter/Zeus) and Uni (Juno/Hera).

In addition to their internal organization and materials, what also made Etruscan temples noticeably distinct from Greek ones was a high podium and frontal entrance. Approaching the Parthenon with its low rising stepped entrance and encircling forest of columns would have been a very different experience from approaching an Etruscan temple high off the ground with a single, defined entrance.

Sculpture

Perhaps most interesting about the Portonaccio temple is the abundant terracotta sculpture that still remains, the volume and quality of which is without parallel in Etruria. In addition to many terracotta architectural elements (masks, antefixes, decorative details), a series of over life-size terracotta sculptures have also been discovered in association with the temple. Originally placed on the ridge of temple roof, these figures seem to be Etruscan assimilations of Greek gods, set up as a tableau to enact some mythic event.



Figure **10.1.17**: Apulu (Apollo of Veii), from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 BCE. Painted terracotta, 5' 11" high. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The most famous and well-preserved of these is the *Apulu (Apollo of Veii)*, a dynamic, striding masterpiece of large scale terracotta sculpture and likely a central figure in the rooftop narrative (see Figure 10.1.17). His counterpart may have been the less well-preserved figure of Hercle (Hercules) with whom he struggled in an epic contest over the Golden Hind, an enormous deer sacred to Apollo's twin sister Artemis. Other figures discovered with these suggest an audience watching the action. Whatever the myth may have been, it was a completely Etruscan innovation to use sculpture in this way, placed at the peak of the temple roof—creating what must have been an impressive tableau against the backdrop of the sky.



Figure **10.1.18**: Detail, *Apulu (Apollo of Veii)*, from the roof of the Portonaccio Temple, Veii, Italy, c. 510-500 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An artist by the name of Vulca?

Since Etruscan art is almost entirely anonymous it is impossible to know who may have contributed to such innovative display strategies. We may, however, know the name of the artist associated with the workshop that produced the terracotta sculpture. Centuries after these pieces were created, the Roman writer Pliny recorded that in the late 6th century BCE, an Etruscan artist by the name of Vulca was summoned from Veii to Rome to decorate the most important temple there, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The technical knowledge required to produce terracotta sculpture at such a large scale was considerable and it may just have been the master sculptor Vulca whose skill at the Portonaccio temple earned him not only a prestigious commission in Rome but a place in the history books as well.

Sarcophagus of the Spouses (Rome)

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

The intimacy of this clay sculpture is unprecedented in the ancient world. What can it tell us about Etruscan culture?



Figure **10.1.19**: Sarcophagus of the Spouses, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, c. 520 BCE. Painted terracotta, 3' 9.5" x 6' 7." Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia in Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* is an anthropoid--meaning it is human-shaped, painted terracotta sarcophagus found in the ancient Etruscan city of Caere, now Cerveteri, Italy. The sarcophagus, which would have originally contained cremated human remains, was discovered during the course of archaeological excavations in the Banditaccia necropolis of ancient Caere during the nineteenth century and is now in Rome. The sarcophagus is quite similar to another terracotta sarcophagus from Caere depicting a man and woman that is presently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris; these two sarcophagi are contemporary to one another and are perhaps the products of the same artistic workshop (see Figure 10.1.19).



Figure **10.1.20**: Upper bodies (detail), *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, c. 520 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

An archaic couple



Figure **10.1.21**: Feet and shoes (detail), *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, c. 520 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The sarcophagus depicts a reclining man and woman on its lid. The pair rests on highly stylized cushions, just as they would have done at an actual banquet. The body of the sarcophagus is styled so as to resemble a kline (dining couch). Both figures have highly stylized hair, in each case plaited with the stylized braids hanging rather stiffly at the sides of the neck. In the female's case the plaits are arranged so as to hang down in front of each shoulder. The female wears a soft cap atop her head; she also wears shoes with pointed toes that are characteristically Etruscan. The male's braids hang neatly at the back, splayed across the upper back and shoulders. The male's beard and the hair atop his head is quite abstracted without any interior detail. Both figures have elongated proportions that are at home in the archaic period in the Mediterranean.

A banquet

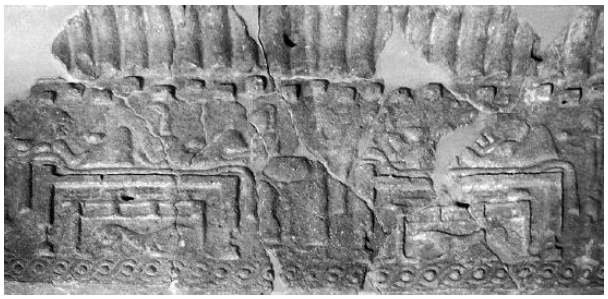


Figure **10.1.22**: Banquet Plaque (detail) from Poggio Civitate, early 6th century BCE. Terracotta. Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate Museo Archeologico, Murlo, Italy. (Photo: sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The S*arcophagus of the Spouses* has been interpreted as belonging to a banqueting scene, with the couple reclining together on a single dining couch while eating and drinking. This situates the inspiration for the sarcophagus squarely in the convivial (social) sphere and, as we are often reminded, conviviality was central to Etruscan mortuary rituals. Etruscan funerary art—including painted tombs—often depicts scenes of revelry, perhaps as a reminder of the funeral banquet that would send the deceased off to the afterlife or perhaps to reflect the notion of perpetual conviviality in said afterlife. Whatever the case, banquets provide a great deal of iconographic fodder for Etruscan artists. In the case of the sarcophagus it is also important to note that at Etruscan banquets, men and women reclined and ate together, a circumstance that was quite different from other Mediterranean cultures, especially the Greeks. We see multiple instances of mixed gender banquets across a wide chronological range, leading us to conclude that this was common practice in Etruria. The terracotta plaque from Poggio Civitate, Murlo (above), for instance, that is roughly contemporary to the sarcophagus of the spouses shows a close iconographic parallel for this custom. This cultural custom generated some resentment—even animus—on the part of Greek and Latin authors in antiquity who saw this Etruscan practice not just as different, but took it as offensive behavior. Women enjoyed a different and more privileged status in Etruscan society than did their Greek and Roman counterparts.

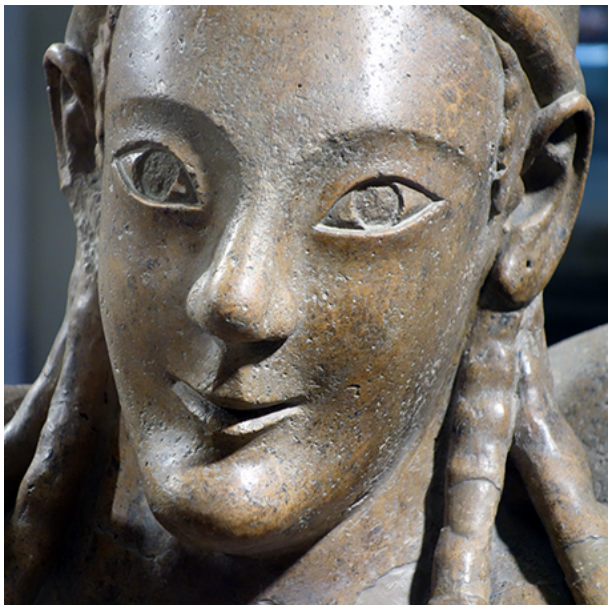


Figure **10.1.23**: Female's face (detail), *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, c. 520 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Technical achievement

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* is a masterwork of terracotta sculpture. Painted terracotta sculpture played a key role in the visual culture of archaic Etruria. Terracotta artwork was the standard for decorating the superstructure of Etruscan temples and the coroplastic (terracotta) workshops producing these sculptures often displayed a high level of technical achievement. This is due, in part, to the fact that ready sources of marble were unknown in archaic Italy. Even though contemporary Greeks produced masterworks in marble during the sixth century BCE, terracotta statuary such as this sarcophagus itself counts as a masterwork and would have been an elite commission. Contemporary Greek colonists in Italy also produced high level terracotta statuary, as exemplified by the seated statue of Zeus from Poseidonia--later renamed Paestum--that dates c. 530 BCE.

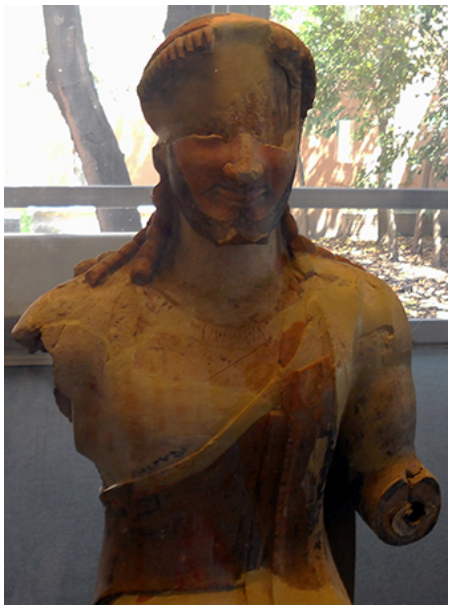


Figure **10.1.24**: Seated statue of Zeus from Poseidonia (Paestum) c. 530 BCE. Terracotta. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Paestum, Italy. (Photo: Dave & Margie Hill, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Etruscan culture

In the case of the Caeretan sarcophagus, it is an especially challenging commission. Given its size, it would have been fired in multiple pieces. The composition of the reclining figures shows awareness of Mediterranean stylistic norms in that their

physiognomy reflects an Ionian influence (Ionia was a region in present-day Turkey, that was a Greek colony)—the rounded, serene faces and the treatment of hairstyles would have fit in with contemporary Greek styles. However, the posing of the figures, the angular joints of the limbs, and their extended fingers and toes reflect local practice in Etruria. In short, the artist and his workshop are aware of global trends while also catering to a local audience. While we cannot identify the original owner of the sarcophagus, it is clear that the person(s) commissioning it would have been a member of the Caeretan elite.

The *Sarcophagus of the Spouses* as an object conveys a great deal of information about Etruscan culture and its customs. The convivial theme of the sarcophagus reflects the funeral customs of Etruscan society and the elite nature of the object itself provides important information about the ways in which funerary custom could reinforce the identity and standing of aristocrats among the community of the living.



Figure **10.1.25**: Male's face (detail), *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*, found in the Banditaccia necropolis, Cerveteri, c. 520 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Tomb of the Reliefs

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

All signs point to a party: cushions, drinking equipment, and armor hung on the wall … but a party in a tomb?



Figure **10.1.26**: Tomb of the Reliefs, Necropolis of Banditaccia, Cerveteri, Italy, late 4th or early 3rd century BCE. (Photo: Roberto Ferrari, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The banquet is over, the dining equipment is stowed, and the warriors sleep on in this Etruscan dining room, yet the evocative signs of a lively scene draw the viewer into the ancient world. These evocations of an Etruscan banquet—from the cushions to the drinking equipment to the armor hung on pegs on the walls—are situated firmly in the funereal sphere, one that is replete with reminders not only of life but also of death. In tomb interiors we find some of our most important and compelling evidence for an understanding of the first millennium BCE world of the Etruscans.



Figure **10.1.27**: Entrance (dromos),*Tomb of the Reliefs*, Necropolis of Banditaccia, Cerveteri, Italy, late 4th or early 3rd century BCE. (Sergio D'Afflitto, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The *Tomb of the Reliefs* (Italian: *Tomba dei Rilievi*) is a late fourth or early third century BCE rock-cut tomb (*hypogeum*) located in the Banditaccia necropolis of the ancient Etruscan city-state of Caere in Italy (see Figure 10.1.27). The tomb takes its name from a series of painted stucco reliefs that cover the walls and piers of the tomb chamber itself. Unlike some of its neighbors that are covered mounds of earth (tumulus-type tombs), the *Tomb of the Reliefs* is of the rock-cut type and was excavated at a considerable depth in the bedrock, approached by a steep dromos (entranceway). This elite tomb once accommodated several dozen burials and is located, likely not by accident, close to an important tumulus-type tomb from the earlier Orientalizing period.

Inside the tomb

The plan of the tomb is roughly quadrangular. The entire tomb and all of its features have been carved from the bedrock (a type of volcanic mudstone known as tufa). The central block of the room, supported by two piers, is flanked by a series of niches for burials that have been styled to resemble the dining couches (*klinai*) of the ancient world. Decorative pilasters with volute, or scroll-shaped, capitals separate the niches one from the other (see Figure 10.1.28).

The tomb's bas relief, or low relief, decoration consists of carved bedrock features that have been stuccoed and painted. The decorative schema evokes the interior of an aristocratic house that is prepared to host a banquet or drinking party. The provisions for banqueters include cups and strainers hanging from pegs. The soldiers' armor—shields, helmets, greaves (protective armor for the lower leg)—has been stowed by hanging it from pegs. The pilasters are also decorated, with the items depicted including a range of tools and implements as well as the depiction of a small carnivore, perhaps a weasel.

Beneath the central niche of the rear wall we find an allusion to the afterlife. There, under the side table we find, in relief, the hellhound Cerberus and an anguiped (serpents for legs) demon—perhaps the Etruscan god Charun who conducted the souls of the departed to the afterlife? This central niche, equipped with footstool, may have been intended for the male and female heads of the family.

The Matunas family is identified as the owner by way of an inscribed cippus (a small pillar). The inscription reads "Vel Metunas, (son) of Laris, who this tomb built." A locked strongbox included in the relief may be meant to represent the container for storing the records of the family's deeds (*res gestae*).



Figure **10.1.28**: Detail of central niche on rear wall, *Tomb of the Reliefs*, Necropolis of Banditaccia, Cerveteri, Italy, late 4th or early 3rd century BCE. (Roberto Ferrari, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The *Tomb of the Reliefs* is unusual in the corpus of Etruscan tombs, both for its richness and for its decorative scheme. The Matunas family, among the elite of Caere, make a fairly strong statement, by means of funerary display, about their familial status and accomplishments, even at a time when the cultural autonomy of the Etruscans—and of Caere itself—had already begun to wane. The funeral banquet remains an important and vibrant theme for Etruscan funerary art throughout the course of the Etruscan civilization. This convivial and festive rendering demonstrates to us that the funeral banquet not only sent the deceased off to the afterlife but also reinforced ties and status reminders among the community of the living.

Tomb of the Triclinium

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Figure **10.1.29**: Map of Etruscan civilization, 750-500 BCE. (Image by NormanEinstein, based on a map from *The National Geographic Magazine*, vol.173, No.6 [June 1988], CC BY-SA 3.0)

Elaborate funerary rituals

Funerary contexts constitute the most abundant archaeological evidence for the Etruscan civilization. The elite members of Etruscan society participated in elaborate funerary rituals that varied and changed according to both geography and time.

The city of Tarquinia (known in antiquity as *Tarquinii* or *Tarch(u)na*), one of the most powerful and prominent Etruscan centers, is known for its painted chamber tombs. The *Tomb of the Triclinium* belongs to this group and its wall paintings reveal important information about not only Etruscan funeral culture but also about the society of the living (see Figures 10.1.30).

An advanced Iron Age culture, the Etruscans amassed wealth based on Italy's natural resources (particularly metal and mineral ores) that they exchanged through medium- and long-range trade networks.



Figure **10.1.30**: *Tomb of the Triclinium*, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 470 BCE. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Tomb of the Triclinium

The *Tomb of the Triclinium* (Italian: *Tomba del Triclinio*) is the name given to an Etruscan chamber tomb dating c. 470 BCE and located in the Monterozzi necropolis of Tarquinia, Italy. Chamber tombs are subterranean rock-cut chambers accessed by an approach way (*dromos*) in many cases. The tombs are intended to contain not only the remains of the deceased but also various grave goods or offerings deposited along with the deceased. The *Tomb of the Triclinium* is composed of a single chamber with wall decorations painted in fresco. Discovered in 1830, the tomb takes its name from the three-couch dining room of the ancient Greco-Roman Mediterranean, known as the triclinium.

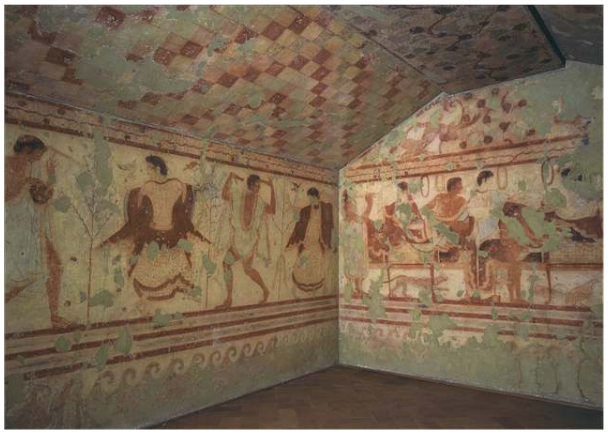


Figure **10.1.31**: *Tomb of the Triclinium*, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 470 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A banquet

The rear wall of the tomb carries the main scene, one of banqueters enjoying a dinner party (see Figure 10.1.31). It is possible to draw stylistic comparisons between this painted scene that includes figures reclining on dining couches (*klinai*) and the contemporary fifth century BCE Attic pottery that the Etruscans imported from Greece. The original fresco is only partially preserved; although it is likely that there were originally three couches, each hosting a pair of reclining diners, one male and one female. Two attendants—one male, one female—attend to the needs of the diners. The diners are dressed in bright and sumptuous robes, befitting their presumed elite status. Beneath the couches we can observe a large cat, as well as a large rooster and another bird.



Figure **10.1.32**: Barbiton player on the left wall (detail), *Tomb of the Triclinium*, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 470 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Scenes of dancers occupy the flanking left and right walls. The left wall scene contains four dancers—three female and one male—and a male musician playing the barbiton, an ancient stringed instrument similar to the lyre (see Figures 10.1.32 and 10.1.33).

Common painterly conventions of gender typing are employed—the skin of females is light in color while male skin is tinted a darker tone of orange-brown. The dancers and musicians, together with the feasting, suggest the overall convivial tone of the Etruscan funeral. In keeping with ancient Mediterranean customs, funerals were often accompanied by games, as famously represented by the funeral games of the Trojan Anchises as described in book 5 of Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. In the *Tomb of the Triclinium* we may have an allusion to games as the walls flanking the tomb's entrance bear scenes of youths dismounting horses, variously described as being either apobates, meaning participants in an equestrian combat sport, or the Dioscuri--mythological twins.



Figure **10.1.33**: Two dancers on the right wall (detail), *Tomb of the Triclinium*, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 470 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The tomb's ceiling is painted in a checkered scheme of alternating colors, perhaps meant to evoke the temporary fabric tents that were erected near the tomb for the actual celebration of the funeral banquet.

The actual paintings were removed from the tomb in 1949 and are conserved in the Museo Nazionale in Tarquinia. As their state of preservation has deteriorated, watercolors made at the time of discovery have proven very important for the study of the tomb.

Interpretation

The convivial theme of the *Tomb of the Triclinium* might seem surprising in a funereal context, but it is important to note that the Etruscan funeral rites were not somber but festive, with the aim of sharing a final meal with the deceased as the latter transitioned to the afterlife. This ritual feasting served several purposes in social terms. At its most basic level the funeral banquet marked the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead; the banquet that accompanied the burial marked this transition and ritually included the spirit of the deceased, as a portion of the meal, along with the appropriate dishes and utensils for eating and drinking, would then be deposited in the tomb. Another purpose of the funeral meal, games, and other activities was to reinforce the socio-economic position of the deceased person and his/her family: a way to remind the community of the living of the importance and standing of these people and thus tangibly reinforce their position in contemporary society. This would include, where appropriate, visual reminders of socio-political status, including indications of wealth and civic achievements, notably public offices held by the deceased.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Laurel Taylor, "The Etruscans, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "The Regolini-Galassi tomb and the Parade Fibula," in *Smarthistory*, June 7, 2021. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Laurel Taylor, "Temple of Minerva and the sculpture of Apollo (Veii)," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "*Sarcophagus of the Spouses* (Rome)," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Tomb of the Triclinium," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)

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10.2: Later Etruscans

Later Etruscan Sculpture & Painting

By Boundless Art History

Etruscan Bronze Sculptures

During its Classical period, from 480 to 300 BCE, Etruscan art was known for its hollow cast bronze sculptures and smaller utilitarian objects. Objects such as mirrors and cistae were engraved or incised with rich imagery that was made noticeable by a white substance inserted into the outlines and contour lines.

The Etruscan sculptures of human subjects range from naturalistic to exaggerated, almost modernist, forms, and the mythical creatures from the Greek and Eastern traditions found their way into their subject matter. In total, Etruscan sculpture incorporates a variety of cultural styles and motifs, including Orientalizing, Archaic, and Classical.

Very few Etruscan bronze sculptures survived because they were melted down in the following centuries to be used for other purposes.

Lost-Wax Casting

Also known by its French name, *cire perdue*, lost-wax casting is the oldest method of producing metal sculptures. Although any material that can be liquified and subsequently solidified can be cast, metal is the most common. Of all metals, bronze is the most commonly cast.

In lost-wax casting, the sculptor begins by making a clay mold of the intended sculpture, coats it in wax, and applies an outer layer of plaster to it, fastening metal rods to hold the shell in place and wax rods to vent the mold. Intense heat is then applied, causing the wax to melt and flow out of the mold. This step leaves open channels into which molten metal is poured.

When the metal has cooled and hardened, the mold is broken, the sculpture is removed, and the holes left from the pins and rods are filled and smoothed. Finally, the sculpture is polished and ready for display. Because the mold must be destroyed, sculptors use the lost-wax method to produce one-of-a-kind sculptures.

Chimera of Arezzo

The bronze statue of the Chimera, discovered in the city of Arezzo in 1553, has recently been judged as a forgery (see Figure 10.2.1). The reasoning rests more on the fact that there are no comparable existing Etruscan sculptures than on scientific testing.

An inscription on the right foreleg marks the bronze as a votive offering to the supreme Etruscan god, Tinia (comparable to Roman Jupiter). The sculpture depicts the Chimera, a mythical beast with the body and head of a lion, a serpent for a tail, and with a goat's head in the middle of its back. The beast plagued the area of Lycia until it was slain by the hero Bellerophon.

The serpent tail was not discovered with the statue; the current tail is an eighteenth century restoration.



Figure **10.2.1**: *Chimera of Arezzo*, c. 400 BCE. Bronze, 129 cm in length. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence, Italy. The bronze statue demonstrates Etruscan artistic techniques and how the liveliness seen in Etruscan terracotta sculpture is transmitted into the bronze medium. (Photo: sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The bronze statue demonstrates Etruscan artistic techniques and how the liveliness seen in Etruscan terracotta sculpture is transmitted into the bronze medium. The figure is well modeled and expressive—from its tense muscles, ready pose, and roaring face of the lion and goat. The beast's ribs are clearly visible and a wound on its rump bleeds. The lion's posture—he crouches and looks up—suggests that there may have been an additional figure of Bellerophon to create a votive group. The figure's face and mane is stylized and the patterning is reminiscent of Near Eastern depictions of lions.

Etruscan Art under Rome

In 509 BCE, the Etruscan kings of Rome were expelled from the city, and the Roman Republic was established. By the fourth century BCE, Rome was beginning to expand across the Italian peninsula, and the first Etruscan city to fall was Veii in 396 BCE.

Over the following centuries, Etruria was involved in Roman wars, and Etruscan territory was fully conquered by the Romans by the beginning of the first century BCE. While Roman culture drew from its Etruscan roots, borrowing and adapting Etruscan customs, Etruscan society was also influenced by Roman culture.

During this period, art begin to adopt a Roman style and display the permeation of Roman culture and values into Etruscan society. The threat of invasion also led to the common presence of violence, especially in funerary images.

Funerary Art and Sarcophagi

Funerary art, both in tomb paintings and on carved sarcophagi, underwent a noticeable change in subject matter during the Roman period. The figures of Charun and Vanth, demons of the underworld, were depicted with increasing regularity (see Figure 10.2.2).

Both figures are often depicted with wings, while Charun is often depicted with blue skin to signify putrefying flesh. They also carry torches, used to light the way to the underworld, or sometimes keys to open the door to the underworld, which underline the figures' role as guides between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the tomb paintings in Tarquinia, the figures of Charun and Vanth can be seen painted in front of or around doorways.



Figure **10.2.2**: Charun and Vanth: Charun guards the gate to the Underworld, while Vanth guides the deceased to the gate in this fresco from the third century BCE. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

While Charun's name is likely a derivative of the Greek underworld ferryman Charon, Vanth appears to be uniquely Etruscan. Due to Charun's menacing associations, theories have attempted to associate Vanth with the avenging Greek Furies. However, her role as a benevolent guide conflicts with this suggestion.

Regardless of Vanth's exact role and origins, the appearance of a less-than-joyous afterlife and menacing figures in Etruscan funerary art does not emerge until after the beginning of the Roman incursions into Etruscan territory. Perhaps Vanth is a gentler apotropaic figure, offering the reassurance of an ally in the afterlife to counteract the trials faced in the face of impending cultural collapse and absorption.

The Sarcophagus of Lars Pulena

Charun and Vanth also appear on stone and terracotta sarcophagi. Charun is also sometimes depicted with a hammer. On the *Sarcophagus of Lars Pulena*, two figures of Charun--with hammers but without wings, are depicted on either side of a central figure, most likely Lars Pulena, swinging their hammers at his head. The violent image might have been used as an apotropaic device to ward off evil (see Figure 10.2.3).

However, in comparison to earlier funerary images, the level of violence seems to mimic the new level of violence in Etruscan society from Roman forces and influence. Two winged representations of Vanth also appear on the sarcophagus, at either end of the frieze .

The lid of the sarcophagus depicts a portrait of the deceased. The man lies alone, wearing a somber expression, unlike the earlier terracotta *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*.

His face is wrinkled and reflects a Roman republican portrait style, which equates age with wisdom and leadership capabilities. He has a pot belly, signifying his wealth, good life, and robust eating, and he holds a scroll across his lap that is inscribed with a list of his accomplishments.



Figure **10.2.3**: Sarcophagus of Lars Pulena. Stone and terracotta. The sculpture reflects a Roman republican portrait style, which equates age with wisdom and leadership capabilities. Figures of Charon and Vanth are also on the frieze. (Photo: Robin Iversen Rönnlund, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Smaller cinerary urns assumed the shapes of sarcophagi during this period (see Figure 10.2.4). These urns are topped with images of the deceased lying across the lid, often in Roman dress, with relief-carved scenes of battle, violence, or Charun and Vanth.

The woman who reclines atop the urn wears attire more akin to that of a Roman matron than to the woman on the *Sarcophagus of the Spouses*. Unlike the Etruscans, who buried their dead in tombs designed to mimic the appearance and comforts of private homes, the Romans practiced cremation and stored the ashes of their deceased in cinerary urns. This shift in Etruscan culture demonstrates the adoption of Roman funerary practices.



Figure **10.2.4**: Terracotta cinerary urn, 2nd century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Global Connections: Funerary Burial Items and Grave Goods

Historically, burials and tombs have offered great historical insight to archaeologists and art historians, though as mentioned in Chapter 4 (link to <<Global Connections: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act>>), archaeological norms are changing in regards to preserving the sanctity of graves and returning sacred items to ancestors. Just as the Etruscan tombs help to illuminate their local history, many cultures worldwide also have customs and beliefs tied to mourning, death, and burials. People often make or commission finery to bury with important rulers and with their loved ones. Also known as “grave goods,” these items vary across cultures and geographies and are often intrinsically tied to both local spiritual beliefs and the

person buried. The Moche Royal Tombs of Sipan, excavated by Peruvian archaeologist Walter Alva, included exquisite gold- and turquoise-laden jewelry, accessories, and figurines—all dating from different periods from about 300-700 BCE.

In China, numerous elaborate tomb structures speak to the importance of burying leaders, rulers, and loved ones with intricate grave goods. The tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng State, discovered undisturbed in 1978, was carefully excavated to reveal more than 15,000 items, from musical instruments such as chime bells, to massive bronze vessels, to objects and serving dishes made of gold and jade, to lacquered coffins—all from the late 5th century BCE.

The rich Byzantine history of wearable art and jewelry extends to the burials of their deceased in elaborately decorated clothing, with woven designs and detailed borders. This clothing has been best preserved in late antique burials in Egypt, where the dry climate helped to preserve even the fabrics from the fifth century. Such finery has indicated to historians that by this time in Byzantine history, even families with moderate means dedicated their money to providing deceased loved ones with ornately decorated coats and clothing.

Bucchero

by **DR. JEFFREY A. BECKER**



Figure **10.2.5**: Terracotta kantharos (vase), 7th century BCE. 18.39 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain) This drinking vase serves as a illustrative example of bucchero. Notice the elongated duel handles and the incised decoration carved on the sides, depicting animals.

Bucchero, a distinctly black, burnished ceramic ware, is often considered the signature ceramic fabric of the Etruscans, an indigenous, pre-Roman people of the Italian peninsula. The term bucchero derives from the Spanish term *búcaro* (Portuguese: *pucaro*), meaning either a ceramic jar or a type of aromatic clay. The main period of bucchero production and use stretches from the seventh to the fifth centuries BCE. A tableware made mostly for elite consumption, bucchero pottery occupies a key position in our understanding of Etruscan material culture.

Manufacture

Bucchero's distinctive black color results from its manufacturing process. The pottery is fired in a reducing atmosphere, meaning the amount of oxygen in the kiln's firing chamber is restricted, resulting in the dark color. The oxygen-starved atmosphere of the kiln causes the iron oxide in the clay to give up its oxygen molecules, making the pottery darken in color. The fact that pottery was burnished (polished by rubbing) before firing creates the high, almost metallic, sheen. This lustrous, black finish is a hallmark of bucchero pottery. Another hallmark is the fine surface of the pottery, which results from the finely levigated (ground) clay used to make bucchero.



Figure **10.2.6**: Terracotta column-krater (bowl for mixing wine and water), c. 560-500 BCE. 16 1/8" high, 13 9/16" diameter. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain) This is another example of bucchero ware, in the form of a large column-krater, which would have been used for mixing wine and water. It features detalied relief figures imprinted along the top columned edge of the vessel.

Bucchero wares may draw their inspiration from metalware vessels, particularly those crafted of silver, that would have been used as elite tablewares. The design of early bucchero ware seems to evoke the lines and crispness of metallic vessels; additionally early decorative patterns that rely on incision and rouletting (roller-stamping) also evoke metalliform design tendencies.

Forerunners of Etruscan bucchero



Figure **10.2.7**: Terracotta kyathos (single-handled cup), Late Villanova, 7th century BCE. Buccheroid impasto, 4 9/16" high without handle, 8 11/16" with handle, 11" diameter of mouth. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

Impasto (a rough unrefined clay) ceramics produced by the Villanovan culture--the earliest Iron Age culture of central and northern Italy--were forerunners of Etruscan bucchero forms. Also called buccheroid impasto, they were the product of a kiln environment that allows for a preliminary phase of oxidation but then only a partial reduction, yielding a surface finish that ranges from dark brown to black, but with a section that remains fairly light in color. The kyathos in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Figure 10.2.7) provides a good example; the quality of potting is high overall. This impasto ware was thrown on the wheel, has a highly burnished surface, but has a less refined fabric (material) than later examples of true bucchero.

Bucchero types

Archaeologists have discovered bucchero in Etruria and Latium (modern Tuscany and northern Lazio) in central Italy; it is often frequently found in funereal contexts. Bucchero was also exported, in some cases, as examples have been found in southern France,

the Aegean, North Africa, and Egypt.



Figure **10.2.8**: Terracotta trefoil oinochoe (jug), c. 625-600 BCE. Bucchero sottile, 11 3/16" high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain) The Met Museum notes artistic influences that might have inspired this unique example of bucchero, noting, "Both the shape and decoration of this bucchero sottile (light bucchero) jug are derived from Greek, especially Corinthian, prototypes."

The production of bucchero is typically divided into three artistic phases. These are distinguishable on the basis of the quality and thickness of the fabric. The phases are: “thin-walled bucchero” (*bucchero sottile*), produced c. 675 to 626 BCE, “transitional,” produced c. 625 to 575 BCE, and “heavy bucchero” (*bucchero pesante*), produced from c. 575 to the beginning of the fifth century BCE.



Figure **10.2.9**: Terracotta kantharos (drinking cup), c. 650-600 BCE. Bucchero sottile, 12" high without handles, 10 1/4" diameter. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain) The Met explains that this is a dramatic example of bucchero katharos, noting, "The tall, flaring handles with struts and notched decoration indicate the influence of metallic prototypes. Impressed designs resembling fans, made with a comb-like device, are typical of this period."

The earliest bucchero has been discovered in tombs at Caere (just northwest of Rome). Its extremely thin-walled construction and sharp features echo metallic prototypes. Decoration on the earliest examples is usually in the form of geometric incision, including chevrons and other linear motifs (see Figure 10.2.9). Roller stamp methods would later replace the incision.



Figure **10.2.10**: Bucchero hydria (water ware jug), c. 550-500 BCE. Terracotta, 60.5 cm high. British Museum, London, England. (Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

By the sixth century BCE, a “heavy” type of the ceramic had replaced the thin-walled bucchero. A hydria, or vessel used to carry water, in the British Museum (see Figure 10.2.10) is another example of the “heavy” bucchero of the sixth century BCE. This vessel has a series of female appliqué heads as well as other ornamentation. A tendency of the “heavy” type also included the use of mold-made techniques to create relief decoration.



Figure **10.2.11**: Terracotta vase in the shape of a cockerel, c. 650-600 BCE. Bucchero, 4 1/16" high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

A number of surviving bucchero examples carry incised inscriptions. A bucchero vessel currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Figure 10.2.11) provides an example of an abecedarium (the letters of the alphabet) inscribed on a ceramic vessel. This vase, in the form of a cockerel, dates to the second half of the seventh century B.C.E. has the 26 letters of the Etruscan alphabet inscribed around its belly (see Figure 10.2.12)—the vase combines practicality (it may have been used as an inkwell) with a touch of whimsy. It demonstrates the penchant of Etruscan potters for incision and the plastic modeling of ceramic forms.



Figure **10.2.12**: Alphabet (detail), Terracotta vase in the shape of a cockerel, c. 650-600 BCE. (Photo: public domain)

Interpretation

Bucchero pottery represents a key source of information about the Etruscan civilization. Used by elites at banquets, bucchero demonstrates the tendencies of elite consumption among the Etruscans. The elite display at the banqueting table helped to reinforce social rank and to allow elites to advertise the achievements and status of themselves and their families.

Aule Metele (Arringatore)

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

An Etruscan in Roman clothing, this figure is a masterwork—made as Etruscan culture was slipping away (see Figure 10.2.13). The image, status, and stature of the magistrate in the course of performing the duties of his office commands respect—and no pose is more riveting than that of the orator.



Figure **10.2.13**: Aule Metele (Arringatore), from Cortona, Italy, early 1st century BCE. Bronze, 67" high. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence, Italy. (Photo: corneliagraco, CC BY 2.0)

L'Arringatore ("The Orator") is a hollow-cast bronze statue that was recovered from Lake Trasimeno in 1566. The statue is an important example of bronze sculpture in later first millennium B.C.E. Italy and indicates the gradual Romanization of Etruscan art.

The statue

The life-size statue depicts a draped adult male, standing with his right arm outstretched. The figure adopts a frontal pose with a slight contrapposto stance (contrapposto refers to the figure shifting his weight onto his right leg). Based on the inscription on the statue, the figure is identified as Aulus Metellus (or Aule Metele in Etruscan). He is clearly a magistrate and his posture seems to be that of the orator who is in the process of addressing the crowd. He wears a tunic over which is draped a toga—the formal attire of the magistrate. The toga is wrapped around the body, leaving the right arm free. On his feet are the high boots that were commonly worn by Roman senators. His expression and slightly opened mouth make him a compelling figure. The statue was originally erected by the community in honor of Aulus Metellus.

The inscription



Figure **10.2.14**: Inscription (detail), *Aule Metele (Arringatore)*, from Cortona, Italy, early 1st century BCE. (Photo: corneliagraco, CC BY 2.0)

The lower hem of the short toga carries an Etruscan inscription: "*auleśi meteliś ve[luś] vesial clenśi / cen flereś tece sanśl tenine / tu θineś χisvlicś*" which can be interpreted as reading, "To (or from) Auli Meteli, the son of Vel and Vesi, Tenine (?) set up this statue as a votive offering to Sans, by deliberation of the people" (*TLE* 651; *CIE* 4196; see Figure 10.2.14).

Interpretation

The statue of Aulus Metellus offers us a glimpse of the changing socio-political landscape of the Italian peninsula during the latter first millennium BCE—a period in which sweeping change brought on by the hegemonic fortunes of Rome and its booming population, signaled profound and lasting change for other Italic peoples, including the Etruscans. As Rome's territory expanded during the fifth through first centuries BCE, her neighbors were gradually absorbed into the sphere of Roman cultural, economic, and political influence. Some groups, of course, resisted in one way or another, while others gladly "joined up" through political and military treaties and through adopting a Roman lifestyle. This process of acculturation–or Romanization, to use a term that is considered outmoded by some scholars—means that cultural heterogeneity becomes less visible in the archaeological record, replaced instead by a more homogeneous cultural model. These were the fortunes of the Etruscans—as the autonomy of the various Etruscan states eroded, the Etruscans themselves elected to adopt the trappings of a Roman culture that was, in turn, indicative of wider, pan-Mediterranean dynamics. Etruscan art, politics, and even language gradually slipped away.

Thus *L'Arringatore* is one of our latest surviving examples of a sculptural masterwork that still demonstrates the traits of an Etruscan workshop, all the while packaged for an increasingly Roman world. The statue clearly wears the short *toga exigua*, a kind of narrow toga, and senatorial boots that come from the Roman sphere. He is posed as an orator—highlighting his political career as both Etruscan and Roman aristocrats did. His haircut is in keeping with those of Roman aristocrats and his face may betray some evidence of the verism, or truthfulness, popular among Roman elites of the late Republic. The statue still carries an inscription in Etruscan, though, and the working of the bronze is in keeping with the tendencies of Etruscan craftsmanship. Surely the historical Aulus Metellus witnessed a world that was changing rapidly and this statue that carries his inscribed name still bears silent witness to the patterns and dynamics of socio-cultural change in the Roman Mediterranean.

Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia (from UNESCO/NHK)

by UNESCO and Nippon Hoso Kyokai

Doors to the afterlife, Etruscan tombs were happily decorated. But as war increased, that began to change.

Online Resource: Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia (from UNESCO/NHK)

These two large Etruscan cemeteries reflect different types of burial practices from the 9th to the 1st century BCE, and bear witness to the achievements of Etruscan culture, which over nine centuries developed the earliest urban civilization in the northern Mediterranean. Some of the tombs are monumental, cut in rock and topped by impressive tumuli (burial mounds). Many feature carvings on their walls; others have wall paintings of outstanding quality. The necropolis near Cerveteri, known

as Banditaccia, contains thousands of tombs organized in a city-like plan, with streets, small squares and neighborhoods. The site contains very different types of tombs: trenches cut in rock; tumuli; and some, also carved in rock, in the shape of huts or houses with a wealth of structural details. These provide the only surviving evidence of Etruscan residential architecture. The necropolis of Tarquinia, also known as Monterozzi, contains 6,000 graves cut in the rock. It is famous for its 200 painted tombs, the earliest of which date from the 7th century BCE.



Video from UNESCO / Nippon Hoso Kyokai

Articles in this section:

- Boundless Art History. “Later Etruscan Art.”CC BY SA
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Bucchero," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- UNESCO and Nippon Hoso Kyokai, "Etruscan Necropolises of Cerveteri and Tarquinia (from UNESCO/NHK)," in *Smarthistory*, December 21, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: The Roman Empire

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11.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Fleeting Work in the Eternal City



Figure **11.0.1**: Triumphs and Laments by William Kentridge, 2016, Tiber River, Rome, Italy (Photo: Bruno, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Fifty-five monumental drawings parade along 500 yards of the concrete embankment of the Tiber River in Rome, etched into the very grime and refuse of the city (see Figure 11.1). Using imagery from Rome's history—spanning from its founding to the present and including iconic artworks as well as pop culture—South African artist William Kentridge's 2016 mural *Triumphs and Laments* celebrates Rome, the Eternal City, in its complex and layered glory. With playful symbolism and artistic allusions, it illustrates Rome's origin myth, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, popular culture, and political figures and ideologies of years past—all carefully presented on a public frieze that is meant to vanish.

Many of the figures Kentridge includes are drawn directly from the ancient Roman art in this chapter, including the Winged Victory from the Column of Trajan (113 CE); an equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius (c. 173-76 CE); and imagery from ancient architecture such as the Arch of Septimius Severus (203 CE), the Column of Marcus Aurelius (180 CE), the Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus (260 CE), and the Arch of Titus (81 CE). The figure of the She-Wolf, modeled after a famous bronze sculpture in the Capitoline Museum, alludes to Rome's origin myth, in which she suckles the abandoned twins Romulus and Remus (see Figure 11.2). Both the She-Wolf and the Winged Victory reappear throughout the procession, depicted in various stages of decomposition, as if to call to mind the many ancient ruins that Rome is built upon. Although many references celebrate Rome's rich history, many others critique Italy's politics, including recurring references to immigration and refugees seeking shelter, along with the violent legacy of fascism and colonialism.

Much of Rome's history is learned from its ruins—so too with Kentridge's work, as he presents fragments of Rome's history in random, rather than chronological, order. As Ellen C. Caldwell observed, "Kentridge moves viewers through his mural much like someone moving through the great city of Rome does—fluidly through time and space, art and history, ancient and modern. The city's runners, cyclists, and pedestrians walk with, against, and past the mural as a living part of the city." Kentridge's work is an apt metaphor for the complex, layered, and nuanced history of Rome, as both a city with many pasts and many histories, and a very contemporary living and breathing place.



Figure **11.0.2**: Detail of runners in front of Capitoline She-Wolf, depicted in *Triumphs and Laments* by William Kentridge, Tiber River, Rome, Italy, 2016. (Photo: Luca Di Ciaccio, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The medium of the mural also references this layered and even organic history: through a process called "reverse graffiti," Kentridge and his team applied power washers to stencils of his enlarged drawings, removing the grime in the negative spaces around the figures. The resulting "paint" that details the figures marching along the river is the naturally-occurring moss and human-generated pollution chronicling centuries of human presence. There is a push and pull between the layers of history. Time, age, and erasure all interact on the banks of the Tiber, symbolically recounting Rome's history.

The well-known saying states that history is written by the victors—but history is also shaped, morphed, and retold in different ways, at different times, by different parties. Just as Hatshepsut's male predecessors aimed to smash all images of her, the Roman phenomenon of *damnatio memoriae* meant that, as Dr. Francesca Tronchin notes, when the Roman government "condemned the memory of a person who was seen as a tyrant, traitor, or other sort of enemy to the state[, the] images of such condemned figures would be destroyed, their names erased from inscriptions…. Coins bearing the image of an emperor who had his memory damned would be recalled or cancelled."

In some ways, Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments* does the opposite: it recollects both the tragedies and victories of Rome's history, while also resurrecting the erased. Indeed, Kentridge's is but one of many artistic voices who have paid tribute to the Eternal City, and his will soon be erased by time, as the grime of the city once more covers the banks of the Tiber, making his work fleeting and temporary. His visual representation of Rome commemorates not only the city's rich history, but also the human and cultural capacity to remember or forget. It is about history's history: how it is recorded, remembered, and celebrated. It is also about the other side of history's history: how some histories are neglected, ignored, forgotten, and unwritten. As the title suggests, it is about Rome's triumphs and laments, and it is indeed a reflection on how those collective stories are shared and remembered. In a city built upon ruins and founded on myth, this is a fitting tribute to the complexity of Rome's layered, rich, and multifaceted history.

Historiography (Writing History)

Multicultural Synthesis: A Roman Tradition

Part of Rome's great success was the way in which they expanded their territories, allowing the people of the conquered areas to carry on their original traditions and religions as long as they abided by Roman rules and laws. Because of this, Rome is a fascinating model of multicultural synthesis, taking inspiration from neighboring cultures, exerting influences on others, and emulating or even appropriating different systems—whether in the form of urban planning and engineering, or in architectural, sculptural, and ideological forms.

Roman Imitation

The Roman pantheon, or group of gods, is largely adapted from Greek models, and similarly contains lots of familiar names. Venus is the Romans' version of the Greeks' goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite. Her father, Zeus, becomes Jupiter, and several other planets today bear the names of Roman gods, including Mercury, Saturn, and Neptune (the Romans' name for Poseidon).

Similarly, Rome borrowed from Greek and Etruscan temple architecture. Like the Etruscan temples, Roman columns often support a deep porch, or portico—and like Greek temples, the columns are fluted and sometimes extend the whole way around the

perimeter of the temple. The Romans have also borrowed three orders, or architectural systems, from the Greeks, using Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian capitals to top and decorate their columns. As discussed in the earlier chapter on Greece, the Romans were great fans of Greek sculpture and often made their own replicas of Greece's most famed statuary.

Roman Innovation

Although the Romans were generally smitten with Greek architecture, art, and culture, they were never content simply to copy—instead they emulated and improved. This is especially true with Roman architecture, urban planning, and engineering. Greek temple architecture was not designed or constructed for going inside, but one of Rome's overarching architectural contributions was designing interior space and shaping architecture for humans to occupy.

Although the legacy of the Roman Empire is often seen through physical ruins, many lasting Roman innovations are still used worldwide today. The names for months of the year come directly from the Romans. Heads of rulers are depicted on coins. Systems of government, including the Republic and Senate, are still in use by name and function. The Roman Empire produced a vast network of paved highways linking Europe, Africa, and parts of the Middle East, many of which form the foundation of modern roads. Romans developed the first urban sanitation systems and plumbing, built the first aqueducts, invented the hypocaust or interior heating system, and advanced engineering and architectural developments through their revolutionary use and application of concrete. Concrete is a mixture of lime mortar, sand, small pebbles, and water that can be poured into brick stone walls or wooden molds of practically any shape, and when it is dried, it functions like stone—but is often lighter, always cheaper, and much more easily created than quarrying and shaping actual stone.

One of the ways Romans revolutionized both architecture and concrete was through their extensive use of the arch. The Romans did not invent the true arch, but they did use it in new and innovative ways. Some of the architecture discussed so far, such as the Temple of Amen-Re at Karnak and the Greek Parthenon, depends on post-and-lintel construction. This is limited, because lintels, especially stone ones, can only be so wide before they break—they are also extremely heavy, which means that a lot of posts are required to support the roof. An arch opens up that space both by adding height and also by spanning larger spaces.

An arch is composed of identical wedge-shaped stones, called voussoirs. The keystone is the voussoir at the top of the arch, which holds everything in place without even having to use glue or mortar. As long as the arch is supported on the sides, it is very strong, stable, and can bear a lot of weight. Arches placed side by side are called an arcade and such construction was used in the Pont-du-Gard, an aqueduct, in Nimes, today in France (see Figure 11.3). Aqueducts like this one transported water from the mountains into Roman cities, combining architectural innovation with a keen aesthetic sense in these gracefully stacked arches.



Figure **11.0.3**: Pont du Gard, Nimes, France, 16 BCE. (Photo: Benh LIEU SONG, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Arches can also be stacked front to back into a tunnel known as a vault. Buttressing is required to support the sides against the lateral thrust of the arch. With concrete, the Romans could cross a barrel vault with another barrel vault, creating a groin vault and opening up interior space even more. They could even stack multiple vaults on top of one another, leaving the open ends of the vaults as a high row of windows—a clerestory, as seen for the first time in Egypt. This is called a fenestrated groin vault. Unlike at the Temple of Amen-Re, a dark, mystical temple whose admission was highly restricted, fenestrated groin vaults and other Roman architectural innovations were designed to create lighter, open spaces of human occupation and habitation.

Finally, in addition to placing arches side by side in an arcade, and back to front in a vault, Romans also spun the arch on its axis to create this final Roman engineering innovation, a true dome. A coffered concrete dome, such as that of the Pantheon, was the most open architectural structure at that time, a wide space unimpeded by any columns or other supports.

Chapter Overview

The Founding of Rome and Birth of an Empire

Just as the Roman Empire is sprawling in its geography, it also has a densely packed history, from its founding, to its transition from a monarchy to a Republic, to its three stages of empire: Early, High/Middle, and Late (also called Late Antique).

According to legend, Rome was founded by Romulus, who as an infant was abandoned, along with his twin brother Remus, and raised by a she-wolf. Romulus eventually killed his brother and became the first king of this city on seven hills, which bears his name. Kings ruled right up until the Romans kicked out the last Etruscan King, Tarquinius Superbus, and established the Republic, with a new form of constitutional government.

This includes the establishment of a governing body, known as the Senate, comprised of a council of elders. The elders of the Senate would advise two elected consuls. Two, to keep each other's power in check, and so that one could stay at home in Rome while the other was out waging the war that kept the Republic expanding. A third position was added as needed: a dictator, who would step in under extraordinary circumstances for a very defined and limited task, such as leading the army in a particular crisis. These positions were drawn first exclusively from patrician families, wealthy landowners. Later, they were opened to plebians, which included small farmers and merchants.

The Republic unofficially ends on the Ides of March in 44 BCE, when Julius Caesar is murdered on the Senate floor, ushering in a bloody period of civil war, which ends with Octavian and the beginning of the Roman Empire. During the Early Empire, Augustus ushers in a 200-year period of peace known as the Pax Romana. Then, during the High/Middle Empire and under Trajan, the Roman Empire vastly expands to include the Mediterranean, Britain, the Near East, and much of Europe. Finally, during the third century CE, the strength of the Roman Empire begins to falter, and eventually falls—a period discussed in the following chapter.

Objects overview

This chapter includes a wide range of architectural and engineering innovations as well as sculptural developments, paintings, and mosaics—many of which reflect the magnitude of the rise and strength of the Roman Empire, while others document the Empire's birth or its subsequent decline. Such works range from smaller celebratory arches to large-scale civic buildings, including:

- the Capitoline She-wolf, an impressive hollow-cast bronze sculpture made in the round, visually documenting Rome's origin story (with disputed dates ranging from 5th century BCE to medieval)
- House of Diane in Ostia, a typical multi-story Roman apartment or insula from the 2nd century
- the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia from the 2nd century BCE and in modern-day Palestrina, which used concrete on a terraced hill in distinctly Roman ways, creating a unique experiential relationship for pilgrims visiting the sanctuary
- the Temple of Portunus (or the Temple of Fortuna Virilis) from 75 BCE, a Roman Republic temple which incorporates several design elements from Greek and Etruscan architectural traditions
- Maison Careé from 4-7 CE, a well-preserved example of a Roman temple located in modern day Nimes, France
- the Head of a Roman Patrician from Otricoli from 75-50 BCE, whose style illustrates the Roman veristic or hyperrealistic tradition of portraying age, imperfections, and wrinkles, sign of lived wisdom and earned respect
- Augustus of Primaporta from 20 BCE, an example of how Romans imbued power and ideology into their political sculptural traditions
- the Ara Pacis Augustae from 9 BCE, an altar that, unlike previous monuments of war, instead celebrated and championed peace through the mythological and historical reliefs that wrap its facade
- the Flavian Amphitheater (more often known simply as the Colosseum) from 70-80 CE, an engineering feat that was built in only 10 years, held 50-80,000 people, and continues to influence modern stadiums
- the Markets of Trajan, designed and built by the famed Roman architects Apollodorus and Damascus in 112 CE to house a multilevel market complex and urban center
- the Pantheon from c. 125 CE, featuring a coffered concrete dome and exquisite architectural and aesthetic detail in both the exterior and interior
- the Roman Arch of Septimus Severus from 203 CE, commemorating and emphasizing the continuity of Severus' rule

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Ancient Roman art, you should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the innovations of Roman architecture and how these innovations contributed to the expanse of the Roman Empire
- Compare Roman with Greek and Etruscan art and architecture
- Analyze the political nature of Roman art and architecture, particularly as it communicates ideas of power for the emperor and empire
- Explain changes in Roman art and architecture as a result of expansion of the Roman Empire and the incorporation of the conquered cultures

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- Beckett Mufson, "Reverse Graffiti" Reveals Rome's History, for *Vice*
- "Triumphs and Laments: A Procession Across Time"—An Interview with William Kentridge, via *Art21*
- Eternal Tiber, Triumphs and Laments Guide
- Francesca Tronchin, *Damnatio memoriae*—Roman sanctions against memory, for Smarthistory
- CrashCourse, The Roman Empire...or Republic
- Domus Aurea Virtual Reality Tour
- *Gladiator* Colosseum Highlights
- Isis Davis-Marks, The Tunnels Beneath Rome's Colosseum Are Open to the Public for the First Time, for *Smithsonian Magazine*
- Pantheon images and 360° view (scroll to bottom)
- Massimo Osanna, Virtual tour of new excavations of Pompeii in Regio V
- Rick Steves, Pompeii, Italy: Window on Ancient Rome
- Rick Steves, Rome: Ancient Glory
- A Virtual Tour of Hadrian's Villa
- Roman Engineering via Google Arts & Culture
- Masterpieces of Ancient Roman Art, via Google Arts & Culture
- Muses in the Lab: Conserving a Roman Sarcophagus, via Google Arts & Culture
- Bettina Ann Bergmann, Roman Frescoes from Boscoreale, for the Met Museum
- The Year One: Ancient Art East and West, for the Met Museum
- Video walk-through of the House of Caecilius Iucundus, for Lund University
- Julie Jaskol, Keeping Warm the Roman Way, for the Getty Museum
- Sara E. Cole, Marie Svoboda, Yousra Rebbani, Meet the Portrait of Herakleides (learn more about the Getty's mummified Roman), for the Getty Museum
- Investigating Herakleides: A Portrait Mummy from Roman Egypt, for Google Arts & Culture

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11.1: Introduction

The Romans

By Boundless Art History

Foundation Myths

The Romans relied on two sets of myths to explain their origins: the first story tells the tale of Romulus and Remus, while the second tells the story of Aeneas and the Trojans, who survived the sack of Troy by the Greeks. Oddly, both stories relate the founding of Rome and the origins of its people to brutal murders.

Romulus killed his twin brother, Remus, in a fit of rage, and Aeneas slaughtered his rival Turnus in combat. Roman historians used these mythical episodes as the reason for Rome's own bloody history and periods of civil war. While foundation myths are the most common vehicle through which we learn about the origins of Rome and the Roman people, the actual history is often overlooked.

The Historical Record

Archaeological evidence shows that the area that eventually became Rome has been inhabited continuously for the past 14,000 years. The historical record provides evidence of habitation on and fortification of the Palatine Hill during the eighth century BCE, which supports the date of April 21, 753 BCE, as the date that ancient historians applied to the founding of Rome in association with a festival to Pales, the goddess of shepherds. Given the importance of agriculture to pre-Roman tribes, as well as most ancestors of civilization, it is logical that the Romans would link the celebration of their founding as a city to an agrarian goddess.

Romulus, whose name is believed to be the namesake of Rome, is credited for Rome's founding. He is also credited with establishing the period of monarchical rule. Six kings ruled after him until 509 BCE, when the people rebelled against the last king, Tarquinius Superbus, and established the Republic. Throughout its history, the people—including plebeians, patricians, and senators—were wary of giving one person too much power and feared the tyranny of a king.

Pre-Roman Tribes

The villages that would eventually merge to become Rome were descended from the Italic tribes. The Italic tribes spread throughout the present-day countries of Italy and Sicily. Archaeological evidence and ancient writings provide very little information on how—or whether—pre-Roman tribes across the Italian peninsula interacted.

What is known is that they all belonged to the Indo-European linguistic family, which gave rise to the Romance (Latin-derived) and Germanic languages. What follows is a brief history of two of the eight main tribes that contributed to the founding of Rome: the Latins and the Sabines. A third culture, the Etruscans, was discussed in Chapter 10.

The Latins

The Latins inhabited the Alban Hills since the second millennium BCE. According to archaeological remains, the Latins were primarily farmers and pastoralists. Approximately at the end of the first millennium BCE, they moved into the valleys and along the Tiber River, which provided better land for agriculture.

Although divided from an early stage into communities that mutated into several independent, and often warring, city-states, the Latins and their neighbors maintained close culturo-religious relations until they were definitively united politically under Rome. These included common festivals and religious sanctuaries.

The Latins appear to have become culturally differentiated from the surrounding Italic tribes from about 1000 BCE onward. From this time, the Latins' material culture shares more in common with the Iron Age Villanovan culture found in Etruria and the Po valley than with their former Osco-Umbrian neighbors.

The Latins thus shared a similar material culture as the Etruscans. However, archaeologists have discerned among the Latins a variant of Villanovan, dubbed the Latial culture.

The most distinctive feature of Latial culture were cinerary urns in the shape of huts (see Figure 11.1.1). They represent the typical, single-room abodes of the area's peasants, which were made from simple, readily available materials: wattle-and-daub walls and straw roofs supported by wooden posts. The huts remained the main form of Latin housing until the mid-seventh century BCE.



Figure 11.1.1: Cinerary urn: This Villanovan urn likely replicates the form that pre-Roman Latin huts assumed before the mid-seventh century BCE. Impasto, 8 11/16" x 9 1/16" x 11". Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland. (Photo: Walters Art Museum, public domain)

The Sabines

The Sabines originally inhabited the Apennines and eventually relocated to Latium before the founding of Rome. The Sabines divided into two populations just after the founding of Rome. The division, however it came about, is not legendary.

The population closer to Rome transplanted itself to the new city and united with the pre-existing citizenry to start a new heritage that descended from the Sabines but was also Latinized. The second population remained a mountain tribal state, finally fighting against Rome for its independence along with all the other Italic tribes. After losing, it became assimilated into the Roman Republic.

There is little record of the Sabine language. However, there are some glosses by ancient commentators, and one or two inscriptions have been tentatively identified as Sabine. There are also personal names in use on Latin inscriptions from the Sabine territories, but these are given in Latin form. The existing scholarship classifies Sabine as a member of the Umbrian group of Italic languages and identifies approximately 100 words that are either likely Sabine or that possess Sabine origin.



Figure 11.1.2: Pre-Roman tribes: Map showing the locations of the tribes who settled Rome. (Map: JBW, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Seven Hills

Before Rome was founded as a city, its people existed in separate settlements atop its famous Seven Hills:

1. The Aventine Hill

2. The Caelian Hill
3. The Capitoline Hill
4. The Esquiline Hill
5. The Palatine Hill
6. The Quirinal Hill
7. The Viminal Hill

Over time, each tribe either united with or was absorbed into the Roman culture.

The Quirinal Hill

Recent studies suggest that the Quirinal Hill was very important to the ancient Romans and their immediate ancestors. It was here that the Sabines originally resided. Its three peaks were united with the three peaks of the Esquiline, as well as villages on the Caelian Hill and Suburra.

Tombs from the eighth to the seventh century BCE that confirm a likely presence of a Sabine settlement area were discovered on the Quirinal Hill. Some authors consider it possible that the cult of the Capitoline Triad (Jove, Minerva, Juno) could have been celebrated here well before it became associated with the Capitoline Hill. The sanctuary of Flora, an Osco-Sabine goddess, was also at this location. Titus Livius (better known as Livy) writes that the Quirinal Hill, along with the Viminal Hill, became part of Rome in the sixth century BCE.

The Palatine Hill

According to Livy, the Palatine Hill, located at the center of the ancient city, became the home of the original Romans after the Sabines and the Albans moved into the Roman lowlands. Due to its historical and legendary significance, the Palatine Hill became the home of many Roman elites during the Republic and emperors during the Empire.

It was also the site of a temple to Apollo built by Emperor Augustus and the pastoral (and possibly pre-Roman) festival of Lupercalia, which was observed on February 13 through 15 to avert evil spirits, purify the city, and release health and fertility.

Festivals for the Septimontium (meaning of the Seven Hills) on December 11 were previously considered to be related to the foundation of Rome. However, because April 21 is the agreed-upon date of the city's founding, it has recently been argued that Septimontium celebrated the first federations among the Seven Hills. A similar federation was celebrated by the Latins at Cave or Monte Cavo.

Social Structure

Life in ancient Rome centered around the capital city with its fora, temples, theaters, baths, gymnasia, brothels, and other forms of culture and entertainment. Private housing ranged from elegant urban palaces and country villas for the social elites to crowded insulae (apartment buildings) for the majority of the population.

The large urban population required an endless supply of food, which was a complex logistical task. Area farms provided produce, while animal-derived products were considered luxuries. The aqueducts brought water to urban centers, and wine and oil were imported from Hispania (Spain and Portugal), Gaul (France and Belgium), and Africa.

Highly efficient technology allowed for frequent commerce among the provinces. While the population within the city of Rome might have exceeded one million, most Romans lived in rural areas, each with an average population of 10,000 inhabitants.

Roman society consisted of patricians, equites (equestrians, or knights), plebeians, and slaves. All categories except slaves enjoyed the status of citizenship.

In the beginning of the Roman republic, plebeians could neither intermarry with patricians or hold elite status, but this changed by the Late Republic, when the plebeian-born Octavian rose to elite status and eventually became the first emperor. Over time, legislation was passed to protect the lives and health of slaves.

Although many prostitutes were slaves, for instance, the bill of sale for some slaves stipulated that they could not be used for commercial prostitution. Slaves could become freedmen—and thus citizens—if their owners freed them or if they purchased their freedom by paying their owners. Free-born women were considered citizens, although they could neither vote nor hold political office.

Pater Familias

Within the household, the pater familias was the seat of authority, possessing power over his wife, the other women who bore his sons, his children, his nephews, his slaves, and the freedmen to whom he granted freedom. His power extended to the point of disposing of his dependents and their good, as well as having them put to death if he chose. Figure **11.1.3** shows a peaceful moment of familial unity.

In private and public life, Romans were guided by the *mos maiorum*, an unwritten code from which the ancient Romans derived their social norms that affected all aspects of life in ancient Rome.



Figure **11.1.3**: Roman family: Relief of a Roman family with the child in the middle, the father on the left, and the mother on the right. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Agnete, CC BY 3.0)

Government

Over the course of its history, Rome existed as a kingdom (hereditary monarchy), a republic (in which leaders were elected), and an empire (a kingdom encompassing a wider swath of territory). From the establishment of the city in 753 BCE to the fall of the empire in 476 CE, the Senate was a fixture in the political culture of Rome, although the power it exerted did not remain constant.

During the days of the kingdom, it was little more than an advisory council to the king. Over the course of the Republic, the Senate reached the height of its power, with old-age becoming a symbol of prestige, as only elders could serve as senators. (Figure **11.1.4** shows an artist's rendering of the Roman Senate in the first century BCE). However the late Republic witnessed the beginning of its decline. After Augustus ended the Republic to form the Empire, the Senate lost much of its power, and with the reforms of Diocletian in the third century CE, it became irrelevant.

As Rome grew as a global power, its government was subdivided into colonial and municipal levels. Colonies were modeled closely on the Roman constitution, with roles being defined for magistrates, council, and assemblies. Colonists enjoyed full Roman citizenship and were thus extensions of Rome itself.

The second most prestigious class of cities was the municipium (a town or city). Municipia were originally communities of non-citizens among Rome's Italic allies. Later, Roman citizenship was awarded to all Italy, with the result that a municipium was effectively now a community of citizens. The category was also used in the provinces to describe cities that used Roman law but were not colonies.

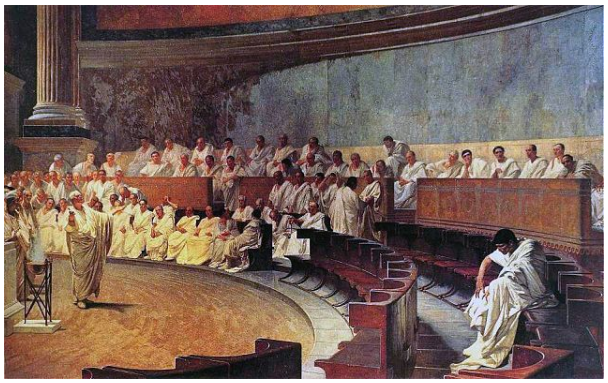


Figure **11.1.4**: The Roman Senate: A nineteenth-century fresco in the Palazzo Madama in Rome, depicting a sitting of the Roman Senate in which the senator Cicero attacks the senator Catiline. Cesare Maccari, *Cicero Denounces Catiline*, 1889. (Photo: Wikimedia, public domain)

Religion

The Roman people considered themselves to be very religious. Religious beliefs and practices helped establish stability and social order among the Romans during the reign of Romulus and the period of the legendary kings. Some of the highest religious offices, such as the Pontifex Maximus, the head of the state's religion—which eventually became one of the titles of the emperor—were sought-after political positions.

Women who became Vestal Virgins served the goddess of the hearth, Vesta, and received a high degree of autonomy within the state, including rights that other women would never receive.

The Roman pantheon corresponded to the Etruscan and Greek deities. Jupiter was considered the most powerful and important of all the Gods.

In nearly every Roman city, a central temple known as the Capitolia that was dedicated to the supreme triad of deities: Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva (Zeus, Hera, and Athena). Small household gods, known as Lares, were also popular.

Each family claimed their own set of personal gods and lararium, or shines to the Lares, are found not only in houses but also at street corners, on roads, or for a city neighborhood.



Figure **11.1.5**: Lararium: A fresco and stucco lararium from the House of the Vettii, Pompeii. (Photo: Patricio.lorente, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Roman religious practice often centered around prayers, vows, oaths, and sacrifice. Many Romans looked to the gods for protection and would complete a promise sacrifice or offering as thanks when their wishes were fulfilled. The Romans were not exclusive in their religious practices and easily participated in numerous rituals for different gods. Furthermore, the Romans readily absorbed foreign gods and cults into their pantheon. The Capitoline Triad was composed of the important gods Juno, Jupiter, and Minerva, who often shared a temple, known as the Capitolia, in the center of a Roman City (see Figure 11.1.6).



Figure **11.1.6**: Capitoline Triad (Juno, Jupiter, and Minerva). Marble. Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, Palestrina, Italy. (Photo: Camelia.boban, CC BY-SA 3.0)

With the rise of imperial rule, the emperors were considered gods, and temples were built to many emperors upon their death. Their family members could also be deified, and the household gods of the emperor's family were also incorporated into Roman worship.

Capitoline She-wolf

by Dr. Jaclyn Neel

Rome's eternal symbol?

If one could choose any animal to become one's mother, how many people would choose a wolf? Wolves are not known to be the gentlest of animals, and in the ancient world, when many people made their living as shepherds, wolves could pose a significant threat. But for reasons we do not understand, the Romans chose a wolf as their symbol. According to Roman mythology, the city's twin founders Romulus and Remus were abandoned on the banks of the Tiber River when they were infants. A she-wolf saved their lives by letting them suckle. The image of this miracle quickly became a symbol of the city of Rome, appearing on coinage in the third century BCE (see Figure 10.1.7) and continuing to appear on public monuments from trash-cans to lampposts in the city even to this day. But the most famous image of the she-wolf and twins may not be ancient at all—at least not entirely.



Figure 11.1.7: Silver coin (didramma) from the "Romano-campana" series, Herakles and the wolf suckling the twins, 265 BCE. Capitoline Museum, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Description

The *Capitoline She-wolf* (Italian: *Lupa capitolina*) takes its name from its location—the statue is housed in the Capitoline Museums in Rome (see Figure 11.1.8). The *She-wolf* statue is a fully worked bronze composition that is intended for 360 degree viewing. In other words the viewer can get an equally good view from all directions: there is no "correct" point of view. The *She-wolf* is depicted standing in a stationary pose. The body is out of proportion, because its neck is much too long for its face and flanks. The incised details of the neck show thick, s-curled fur which ends with unnatural beads around the face and behind the forelegs. The wolf's body is leaner in front than in the rear: its ribs are visible, as are the muscles of its forelegs, while in the back the musculature is less detailed, suggesting less tone. Its head curves in towards its tail; the ears curve back. The children themselves have a more dynamic posture: one sits with his feet splaying to either side, while the other kneels beside him. Both face upwards. They, too, are lean, with no trace of baby fat.



Figure 11.1.8: Capitoline She-Wolf, 5th century BCE (or medieval). Bronze, 75 cm. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Hollow-cast bronze: a refresher

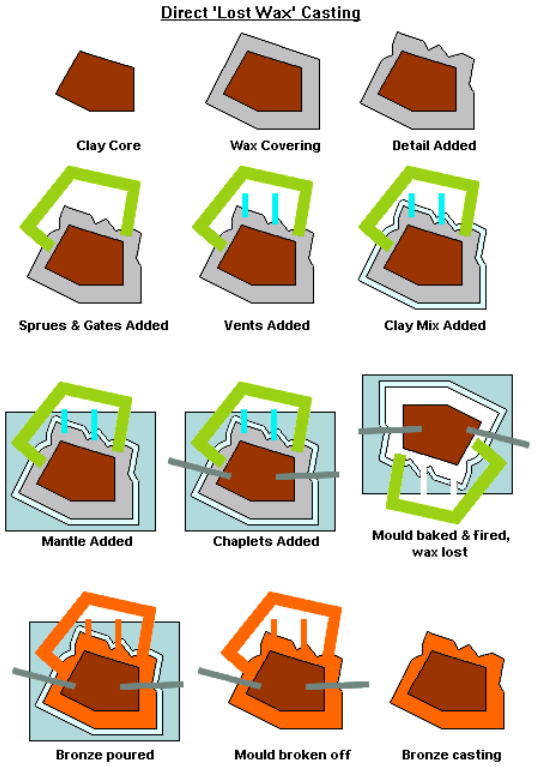


Figure **11.1.9**: Diagram of direct lost-wax casting. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The *She-wolf* is a hollow-cast bronze statue that is just under life-sized. Hollow casting is one of the many ways that metal sculptures were made in the ancient world. It was the typical method for large-scale bronze statues.

In antiquity, hollow casting (also known as "lost-wax casting") could be a lengthy procedure (see Figure 11.1.9). A large sculpture was made in many smaller pieces, and these were joined as the last step of the process. A sculptor first made a model of the statue in a less-valuable medium, such as clay. They then coated the model with a second model, which was made in multiple pieces so it could be removed. Once removed, the second model was coated in wax and another layer of clay. The second and third models were then attached to each other and fired, leaving a hollow space as the wax melted. Molten metal was poured in to replace the wax, and the molds were (at last) removed only when the metal had cooled and set. In the case of large statues, the pieces were soldered together and polished as a final step.

But although the *She-wolf* is hollow-cast, it is not made of multiple pieces. This has raised significant questions about whether the wolf is ancient at all.

Questions of chronology

While it was known for some time that the twins are Renaissance additions to the sculpture, it was not until 2006 that the chronology of the *She-wolf* itself was challenged. Long believed to date to fifth century BCE Etruria (Etruscan culture), the *She-wolf's* date is now debated. If ancient, the original sculpture probably would not have depicted Rome's she-wolf. We do know that Romans engaged in regional trade that led them to acquire art objects from surrounding areas, including Etruria (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.45). But in the fifth century BCE, Rome was still a fairly small city, and possibly had not yet begun using the she-wolf and twins as its symbol. Other Etruscan artifacts, like the *Lupa of Fiesole* (see Figure 11.1.10) have a lone wolf as part of a hunt or ritual, and it is more likely that a fifth century BCE Etruscan object would relate to Etruscan culture, rather than Roman culture.



Figure **11.1.10**: Capitoline She-Wolf, 5th century BCE (or medieval). (Photo via Smarthistory)

But new laboratory analysis suggests that the *She-wolf* is not ancient and was made in the Middle Ages, specifically the twelfth century CE. Questions about the authenticity of the *She-wolf* were first raised when the statue was restored in the late 1990s. At that time, conservators realized that the casting technique used to make it is not the same as the hollow casting technique used on other large-scale bronze sculptures. Instead of using multiple molds, as described above, the *She-wolf* is made as a single piece. Proponents of this view argue that the wolf is more similar stylistically to medieval bronzes. Proponents of the Etruscan date claim that the few surviving Etruscan large-scale bronze statues are stylistically similar to the *She-wolf*.

The claim that the *She-wolf* is medieval has generated a lot of controversy in Italy and among scholars of ancient Rome. Several respected researchers have publicly disputed the new findings and maintain the *She-wolf's* Etruscan provenance. Physical and chemical testing on the bronze has been inconclusive about the date. The Capitoline Museums admit both possibilities in the object's description.

Conclusion

Although the debate continues with regard to the date of the *Capitoline She-wolf*, either interpretation offers interesting points for analysis. The only definitive testimony suggests that materials used in casting the wolf came from both Sardinia and Rome. If the work is from the fifth century BCE, we can use that evidence to analyze trade patterns in Italy. Remembering that the wolf was originally cast without the twins—no matter what date we assign to the wolf sculpture—we can try to imagine the original significance of the statue.



Figure **11.1.11**: Lupa of Fiesole, 4th-2nd centuries BCE. Bronze. Museo Civico Archeologico, Fiesole, Italy. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

On the other hand, if the wolf is medieval, what was its original function? We should not think that a medieval wolf is any less valuable just because it is more recent in its date of manufacture. In fact, a pastiche *Capitoline She-wolf* might be an even better symbol of Rome: a Renaissance addition to a medieval statue that recreates the ancient symbol of the eternal city.

An introduction to ancient Roman architecture

by Dr. Jessica Leay Ambler

Roman architecture was unlike anything that had come before. The Persians, Egyptians, Greeks and Etruscans all had monumental architecture. The grandeur of their buildings, though, was largely external. Buildings were designed to be impressive when viewed from outside because their architects all had to rely on building in a post-and-lintel system, which means that they used two upright posts, like columns, with a horizontal block, known as a lintel, laid flat across the top. A good example is this ancient Greek Temple in Paestum, Italy (see Figure 11.1.12).



Figure **11.1.12**: An example of post and lintel architecture: Hera II, Paestum, Italy, c. 460 BCE. Tufa, 24.26 x 59.98 m. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Since lintels are heavy, the interior spaces of buildings could only be limited in size. Much of the interior space had to be devoted to supporting heavy loads.



Figure **11.1.13**: Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Interior of the Pantheon*, c. 1734. Oil on canvas, 128 x 99 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Photo: public domain)

Roman architecture differed fundamentally from this tradition because of the discovery, experimentation and exploitation of concrete, arches and vaulting (a good example of this is the Pantheon, c. 125 CE). Thanks to these innovations, from the first century CE Romans were able to create interior spaces that had previously been unheard of. Romans became increasingly concerned with shaping interior space rather than filling it with structural supports. As a result, the inside of Roman buildings were as impressive as their exteriors. The Pantheon's interior coffered dome and oculus is a grand example of such interior architectural innovation (see Figure 11.1.13).

Materials, methods and innovations

Long before concrete made its appearance on the building scene in Rome, the Romans utilized a volcanic stone native to Italy called tufa to construct their buildings. Although tufa never went out of use, travertine began to be utilized in the late 2nd century BCE because it was more durable. Also, its off-white color made it an acceptable substitute for marble.



Figure **11.1.14**: Temple of Portunus (formerly known as, Fortuna Virilis), Rome, Italy, c. 120-80 BCE. Travertine and tufa, stuccoed to look like Greek marble. (Photo via Smarthistory) The Temple of Portunus is a nice example of the Roman use of travertine and tufa as a substitute for marble.

Marble was slow to catch on in Rome during the Republican period since it was seen as an extravagance, but after the reign of Augustus (31 BCE-14 CE), marble became quite fashionable. Augustus had famously claimed in his funerary inscription, known as the *Res Gestae*, that he "found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble" referring to his ambitious building campaigns.

Roman concrete (*opus caementicium*) was developed early in the 2nd century BCE. The use of mortar as a bonding agent in ashlar masonry wasn't new in the ancient world; mortar was a combination of sand, lime and water in proper proportions. The major contribution the Romans made to the mortar recipe was the introduction of volcanic Italian sand (also known as "pozzolana"). The Roman builders who used pozzolana rather than ordinary sand noticed that their mortar was incredibly strong and durable. It also had the ability to set underwater. Brick and tile were commonly plastered over the concrete since it was not considered very pretty on its own, but concrete's structural possibilities were far more important. The invention of *opus caementicium* initiated the Roman architectural revolution, allowing for builders to be much more creative with their designs. Since concrete takes the shape of the mold or frame it is poured into, buildings began to take on ever more fluid and creative shapes.

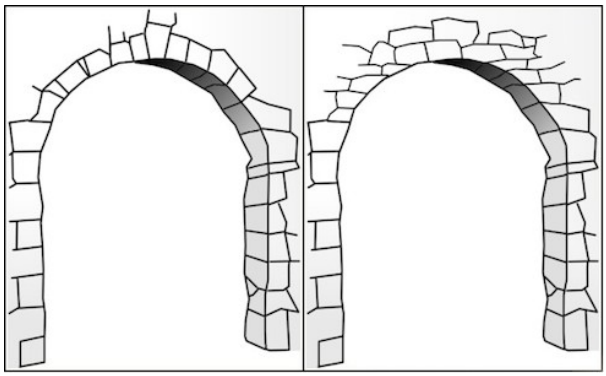


Figure **11.1.15**: True arch (left) and corbeled arch (right). (Photo: Anton~commonswiki, CC BY-SA 2.5)

The Romans also exploited the opportunities afforded to architects by the innovation of the true arch--as opposed to a corbelled arch where stones are laid so that they move slightly in toward the center as they move higher (see Figure 11.1.15). A true arch is composed of wedge-shaped blocks, typically of a durable stone called voussoirs, with a keystone in the center holding them into place. In a true arch, weight is transferred from one voussoir down to the next, from the top of the arch to ground level, creating a

sturdy building tool. True arches can span greater distances than a simple post-and-lintel. The use of concrete, combined with the employment of true arches allowed for vaults and domes to be built, creating expansive and breathtaking interior spaces.

Roman architects

We don't know much about Roman architects. Few individual architects are known to us because the dedicatory inscriptions, which appear on finished buildings, usually commemorated the person who commissioned and paid for the structure. We do know that architects came from all walks of life, from freedmen all the way up to the Emperor Hadrian, and they were responsible for all aspects of building on a project. The architect would design the building and act as engineer; he would serve as contractor and supervisor and would attempt to keep the project within budget.

Building types



Figure **11.1.16**: Forum, Pompeii, looking toward Mt. Vesuvius, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **11.1.17**: House of Diana, Ostia, Italy, late 2nd century CE. (Photo: Sebastià Giralt, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Roman cities were typically focused on the forum--a large open plaza, surrounded by important buildings--which was the civic, religious and economic heart of the city (see Figure 11.1.16). It was in the city's forum that major temples, such as a Capitoline temple, dedicated to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, were located, as well as other important shrines. Also useful in the forum plan were the basilica (a law court), and other official meeting places for the town council, such as a curia building. Quite often the city's meat, fish and vegetable markets sprang up around the bustling forum. Surrounding the forum, lining the city's streets, framing gateways, and marking crossings stood the connective architecture of the city: the porticoes, colonnades, arches and fountains that beautified a Roman city and welcomed weary travelers to town. Pompeii, Italy is an excellent example of a city with a well preserved forum.



Figure **11.1.18**: The tomb of Eurysaces the Baker, Rome, Italy, c. 50-20 BCE. (Photo: Jeremy Cherfas, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Romans had a wide range of housing. The wealthy could own a house (*domus*) in the city as well as a country farmhouse (*villa*), while the less fortunate lived in multi-story apartment buildings called *insulae*. The House of Diana in Ostia, Rome's port city, from the late 2nd century CE is a great example of an insula (see Figure 11.1.17). Even in death, the Romans found the need to construct grand buildings to commemorate and house their remains, like Eurysaces the Baker, whose elaborate tomb still stands near the Porta Maggiore in Rome.



Figure **11.1.19**: Aqueduct (reconstruction). Aqueducts supplied Rome with clean water brought from sources far from the city. In this view, we see an aqueduct carried on piers passing through a built-up neighborhood. Elements of the model © 2008 The Regents of the University of California, © 2011 Université de Caen Basse-Normandie, © 2012 Frischer Consulting. All rights reserved. (Photo: © 2012 Bernard Frischer, via Smarthistory)

The Romans built aqueducts throughout their domain and introduced water into the cities they built and occupied, increasing sanitary conditions (see Figure 11.1.19). A ready supply of water also allowed bath houses to become standard features of Roman cities, from Timgad, Algeria to Bath, England. A healthy Roman lifestyle also included trips to the gymnasium. Quite often, in the Imperial period, grand gymnasium-bath complexes were built and funded by the state, such as the Baths of Caracalla which included running tracks, gardens and libraries.



Figure **11.1.20**: Arch of Titus (foreground) with the Colosseum in the background, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) This view of the Colosseum in Rome offers a grand example of traditional architectural components of a Roman city.

Entertainment varied greatly to suit all tastes in Rome, necessitating the erection of many types of structures. There were Greek style theaters for plays as well as smaller, more intimate odeon buildings, like the one in Pompeii, which were specifically designed for musical performances. The Romans also built amphitheaters—elliptical, enclosed spaces such as the Colloseum—which were used for gladiatorial combats or battles between men and animals. The Romans also built a circus in many of their cities. The circuses, such as the one in Lepcis Magna, Libya, were venues for residents to watch chariot racing.

The Romans continued to perfect their bridge building and road laying skills as well, allowing them to cross rivers and gullies and traverse great distances in order to expand their empire and better supervise it. From the bridge in Alcántara, Spain to the paved roads in Petra, Jordan, the Romans moved messages, money and troops efficiently.

Republican period

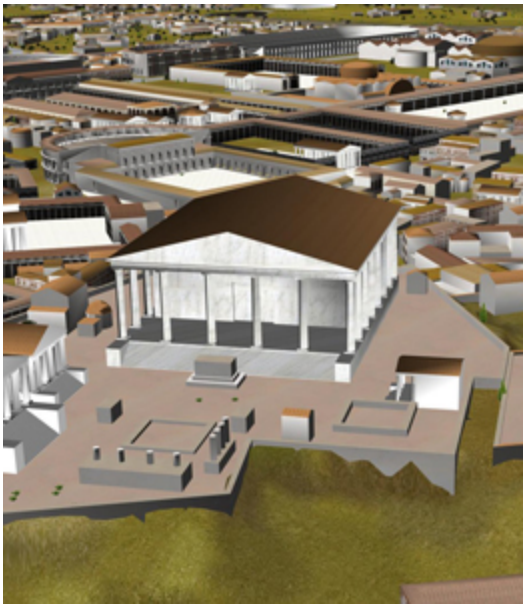


Figure **11.1.21**: Reconstruction of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Capitoline Hill, Rome, Italy. (Image: Dr. Bernard Frischer, via Smarthistory)

Republican Roman architecture was influenced by the Etruscans who were the early kings of Rome; the Etruscans were in turn influenced by Greek architecture. The Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, begun in the late 6th century BCE, bears all the hallmarks of Etruscan architecture (see Figure 11.1.21). The temple was erected from local tufa on a high podium and what is most characteristic is its frontality. The porch is very deep and the visitor is meant to approach from only one access point, rather than walk all the way around, as was common in Greek temples. Also, the presence of three cellas, or cult rooms, was also unique. The Temple of Jupiter would remain influential in temple design for much of the Republican period.



Figure **11.1.22**: Model of the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, National Archeological Museum of Palestrina, Italy. (Photo: MM, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Drawing on such deep and rich traditions didn't mean that Roman architects were unwilling to try new things. In the late Republican period, architects began to experiment with concrete, testing its capability to see how the material might allow them to build on a grand scale.

The Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in modern day Palestrina is comprised of two complexes, an upper and a lower one (see Figure 11.1.22). The upper complex is built into a hillside and terraced, much like a Hellenistic sanctuary, with ramps and stairs

leading from the terraces to the small theater and tholos temple at the pinnacle. The entire compound is intricately woven together to manipulate the visitor's experience of sight, daylight and the approach to the sanctuary itself. No longer dependent on post-and-lintel architecture, the builders utilized concrete to make a vast system of covered ramps, large terraces, shops and barrel vaults.

Imperial period



Figure **11.1.23**: Severus and Celer, octagon room, Domus Aurea, Rome, c. 64-68 CE. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **11.1.24**: Apollodorus of Damascus, Markets of Trajan, Rome, c. 106-12 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Emperor Nero began building his infamous Domus Aurea, or Golden House, after a great fire swept through Rome in 64 CE and destroyed much of the downtown area (see Figure 11.1.23). The destruction allowed Nero to take over valuable real estate for his own building project; a vast new villa. Although the choice was not in the public interest, Nero's desire to live in grand fashion did spur on the architectural revolution in Rome. The architects, Severus and Celer, are known (thanks to the Roman historian Tacitus), and they built a grand palace, complete with courtyards, dining rooms, colonnades and fountains. They also used concrete extensively, including barrel vaults and domes throughout the complex. What makes the Golden House unique in Roman architecture is that Severus and Celer were using concrete in new and exciting ways; rather than utilizing the material for just its structural purposes, the architects began to experiment with concrete in aesthetic modes, for instance, to make expansive domed spaces.

Nero may have started a new trend for bigger and better concrete architecture, but Roman architects, and the emperors who supported them, took that trend and pushed it to its greatest potential. Vespasian's Colosseum, the Markets of Trajan (Figure 11.1.24), the Baths of Caracalla and the Basilica of Maxentius are just a few of the most impressive structures to come out of the architectural revolution in Rome. Roman architecture was not entirely comprised of concrete, however. Some buildings, which were made from marble, hearkened back to the sober, Classical beauty of Greek architecture, like the Forum of Trajan. Concrete structures and marble buildings stood side by side in Rome, demonstrating that the Romans appreciated the architectural history of the Mediterranean just as much as they did their own innovation. Ultimately, Roman architecture is overwhelmingly a success story of experimentation and the desire to achieve something new.

Article in this section:

- Boundless Art History, “The Romans.” (CC BY SA)
- Dr. Jaclyn Neel, "*Capitoline She-wolf*," in *Smarthistory*, January 22, 2016. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jessica Leay Ambler, "An introduction to ancient Roman architecture," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)

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11.2: Republic

Temple of Portunus, Rome

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

The Temple of Portunus is a well preserved late second or early first century BCE rectangular temple in Rome, Italy (see Figure 11.2.1 and Figure 11.2.2). Its dedication to the God Portunus—a divinity associated with livestock, keys, and harbors—is fitting given the building's topographical position near the ancient river harbor of the city of Rome.



Figure 11.2.1: Temple of Portunus (formerly known as Fortuna Virilis), Rome, Italy, c. 120-80 BCE. Travertine, tufa, and stucco. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 11.2.2: Temple of Portunus, Rome, Italy, c. 120-80 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The city of Rome during its Republican phase was characterized, in part, by monumental architectural dedications made by leading, elite citizens, often in connection with key political or military accomplishments. Temples were a particularly popular choice in this category given their visibility and their utility for public events both sacred and secular.



Figure 11.2.3: Temple attributed to Herakles Victor, Forum Boarium, Rome, Italy, late 2nd century BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Temple of Portunus is located adjacent to a circular temple of the Corinthian order, now attributed to Herakles Victor (see Figure 11.2.3). The assignation of the Temple of Portunus has been debated by scholars, with some referring to the temple as

belonging to Fortuna Virilis (an aspect of the God Fortuna). This is now a minority view. The festival in honor of Portunus (the Portunalia) was celebrated on 17 August.

The Temple's plan and construction

The temple has a rectangular footprint, measuring roughly 10.5 x 19 meters (36 x 62 Roman feet). Its plan may be referred to as pseudoperipteral, instead of a having a free-standing colonnade, or row of columns, on all four sides, the temple instead only has free-standing columns on its façade with engaged columns on its flanks and rear (see Figure **11.2.4**).

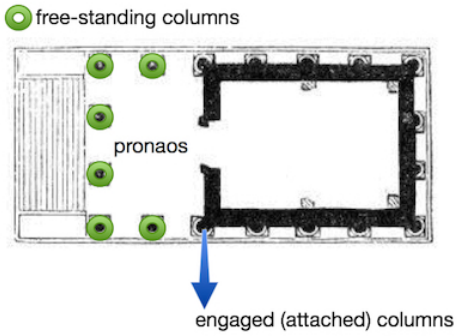


Figure **11.2.4**: Plan, Temple of Portunus, Rome, Italy, c. 120-80 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The pronaos (porch) of the temple supports an Ionic colonnade measuring four columns across by two columns deep, with the columns carved from travertine. The Ionic order can be most easily seen in the scroll-shaped (volute) capitals. There are five engaged columns on each side, and four across the back (see Figure **11.2.5**).

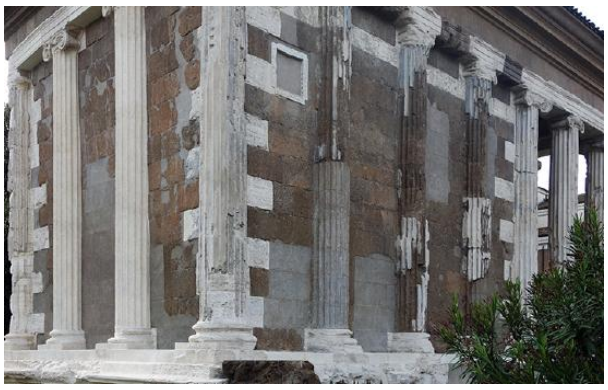


Figure **11.2.5**: Engaged columns, Temple of Portunus, Rome, Italy, c. 120-80 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Overall the building has a composite structure, with both travertine and tufa being used for the superstructure (tufa is a type of stone consisting of consolidated volcanic ash, and travertine is a form of limestone). A stucco coating would have been applied to the tufa, giving it an appearance closer to that of the travertine.

The temple's design incorporates elements from several architectural traditions. From the Italic tradition it takes its high podium--one ascends stairs to enter the pronaos, and strong frontality. From Hellenistic architecture comes the Ionic order columns, the engaged pilasters and columns. The use of permanent building materials such as stone, as opposed to the Italic custom of superstructures in wood, terracotta, and mudbrick, also reflects changing practices. The temple itself represents the changing realities and shifting cultural landscape of the Mediterranean world at the close of the first millennium B.C.E.

The Temple of Portunus resides on the Forum Boarium, a public space that was the site of the primary harbor of Rome. While the temple of Portunus is a bit smaller than other temples in the Forum Boarium and the adjacent Forum Holitorium, it fits into a general typology of Late Republican temple building.



Figure 11.2.6: Temple of the Sibyl, Tivoli, Italy, c. 150-125 BCE. (Photo: LPLT, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Temple of Portunus finds perhaps its closest contemporary parallel in the Temple of the Sibyl at Tibur, modern Tivoli, which dates c. 150-125 BCE (see Figure 11.2.6). The temple type embodied by the Temple of Portunus may also be found in Iulio-Claudian temple buildings such as the Maison Carrée at Nîmes in southern France.

Preservation and current state

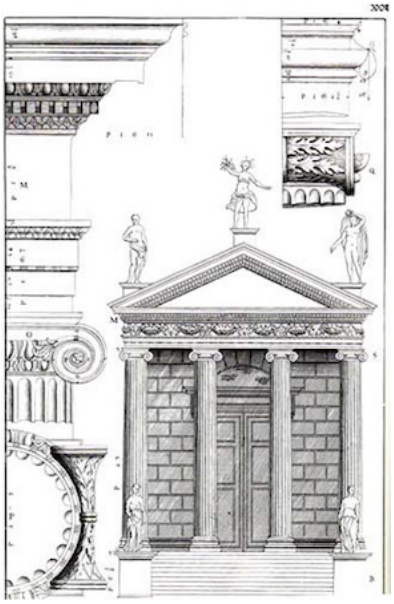


Figure 11.2.7: Andrea Palladio, Temple of Fortuna Virilis, engraving from *The Four Books of Architecture*, London, Isaac Ware, 1738. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Temple of Portunus is obviously in an excellent state of preservation. In 872 CE the ancient temple was re-dedicated as a Christian shrine sacred to Santa Maria Egyziaca (Saint Mary of Egypt), leading to the preservation of the structure. The architecture has inspired many artists and architects over the centuries, including Andrea Palladio who studied the structure in the sixteenth century (see Palladio's engraving of the building in Figure 11.2.7).

Neo-Classical architects were inspired by the form of the Temple of Portunus and it led to the construction of the Temple of Harmony, a folly in Somerset, England, dating to 1767 (see Figure 11.2.8).



Figure **11.2.8**: The Temple of Harmony, Halswell House, Somserset, England, 1767. (Photo: Stronoch, CC0 1.0)

The Temple of Portunus is important not only for its well preserved architecture and the inspiration that architecture has fostered, but also as a reminder of what the built landscape of Rome was once like—dotted with temples large and small that became foci of a great deal of activity in the life of the city. Those temples that survive are reminders of that vibrancy as well as of the architectural traditions of the Romans themselves.

Backstory

By Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

The Temple of Portunus was put on the World Monuments Watch list in 2006. Overseen by the World Monuments Fund, this list highlights "cultural heritage sites around the world that are at risk from the forces of nature or the impact of social, political, and economic change," providing them with "an opportunity to attract visibility, raise public awareness, foster local engagement in their protection, leverage new resources for conservation, advance innovation, and demonstrate effective solutions."

Together with the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma and grants from private funders, the World Monuments Fund sponsored a restoration of the Temple of Portunus beginning in 2000. The temple had been partially restored and conservation measures put in place in the 1920s, but the activities undertaken in the last two decades utilized the latest technologies to complete a full restoration of the interior and exterior of the building. This included the cleaning and conservation of the frescoes, replacement of the roof (incorporating ancient roof tiles), anti-seismic measures, and the cleaning and restoration of the pediment, columns, and exterior walls. The newly-restored temple opened to the public in 2014.

The Temple of Portunus is one of the best-preserved examples of Roman Republican architecture, and efforts like those of the World Monuments Fund are ensuring that it continues to survive intact.

Maison Carrée

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

This well-preserved building in modern-day France is a textbook example of a Vitruvian temple.



Figure 11.2.9: Maison Carrée, Colonia Nemausus (modern Nîmes, France), c. 4-7 CE. (Photo: Danichou, public domain)

The so-called Maison Carrée or "square house" is an ancient Roman temple located in Nîmes in southern France (see Figure 11.2.9). Nîmes was founded as a Roman colony (*Colonia Nemausus*) during the first century BCE. The Maison Carrée is an extremely well preserved ancient Roman building and represents a nearly textbook example of a Roman temple as described by the architectural writer Vitruvius.

Design and Plan

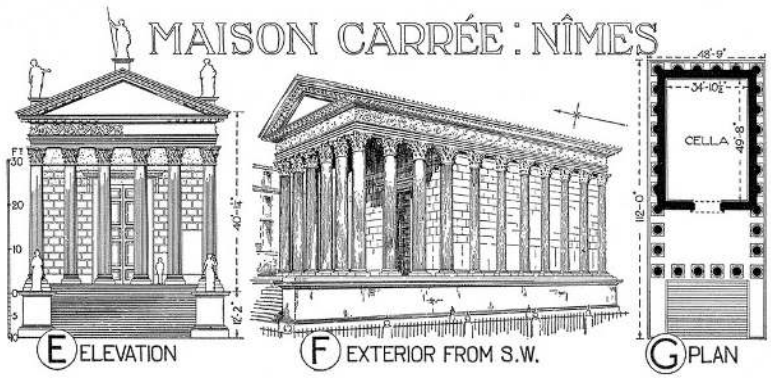


Figure 11.2.10: Plan and elevation of the Maison Carrée, c. 4-7 CE. (Photo: Penn State University Library, CC BY-NC 2.0) Details in the plan and elevation illustrate some of Maison Carrée's key features, such as the deep porch, frontal orientation, and high podium.

The frontal temple is a classic example of the Tuscan style temple as described by Vitruvius, who wrote *On Architecture* in the first century BCE. This means that the building has a single cella or cult room, a deep porch, a frontal, axial orientation, and sits atop a high podium (see Figure 11.2.10). The podium of the Maison Carrée rises to a height of 2.85 meters; the footprint of the temple measures 26.42 by 13.54 meters at the base.

The building is executed in the Corinthian order, which is easily identified by the acanthus leaf motifs on the capital (see Figure 11.2.11), and is hexastyle in its plan meaning it has six columns across the façade; twenty engaged columns line the flanks, yielding a pseudoperipteral arrangement—the front columns are free-standing but the columns on the sides and back are engaged, that is, attached to the wall.

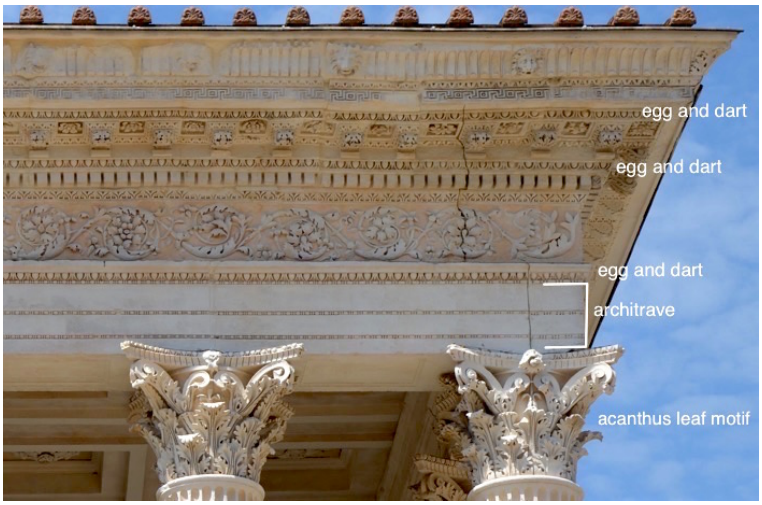


Figure **11.2.11**: Photograph of the right front corner of the Maison Carrée, labeling three instances of egg-and-dart trim above the architrave and the acanthus leaf motif on the Corinthian capitals. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The temple has a very deep pronaos, or porch. The superstructure is decorated with egg-and-dart motifs (see Figure **11.2.12**), with the architrave divided into three zones. The deep porch which puts an emphasis on the temple front and the pseudoperipteral arrangement clearly differentiate this from an ancient Greek temple.

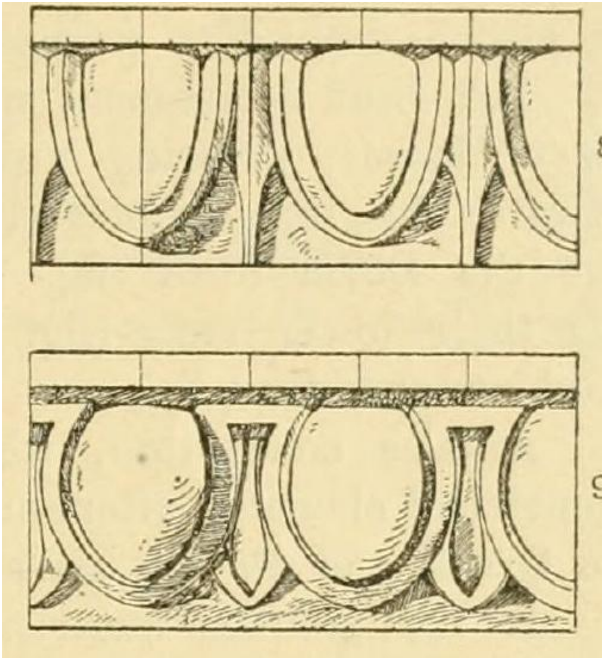


Figure **11.2.12**: Examples of Greek (upper illustration) and Campana (lower illustration) egg-and-dart motifs. (Image: *Handbook of Ornament*, public domain)

The temple once carried a dedicatory inscription that was removed in the Middle Ages. Following the reconstruction of the inscription in 1758, scholars believe that the dedication of the building honored Augustus' grandsons and intended heirs, Caius and Lucius Caesar. The dedicatory inscription read, in translation, "To Gaius Caesar, son of Augustus, Consul; to Lucius Caesar, son of Augustus, Consul designate; to the princes of youth" (CIL XII, 3156). While not especially common within Italy during the time of the Iulio-Claudians, the worship of the emperor and the imperial family was more commonplace in the provinces of the Roman empire.



Figure **11.2.13**: Temple of Augustus and Livia, Vienne, France, late first century BCE. (Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The late first century BCE Temple of Augustus and Livia in located in Vienne, France (an ancient settlement of the Allobroges that received a Roman colony) is very similar in plan to the Maison Carrée (see Figure **11.2.13**). This temple was originally dedicated to Augustus alone, but in 41 CE the emperor Claudius re-dedicated the building to include Livia, his grandmother (and the wife of Augustus). Taken together these temples show us not only well preserved examples of early Imperial architecture but they also show the degree to which local elites would invest in monumental construction in order to celebrate the emperor and his family members. Just as honorific temples at Rome were sponsored by elites, construction in the provinces also often relied on elite members of the community to fill the role of artistic patron.

Head of a Roman Patrician

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

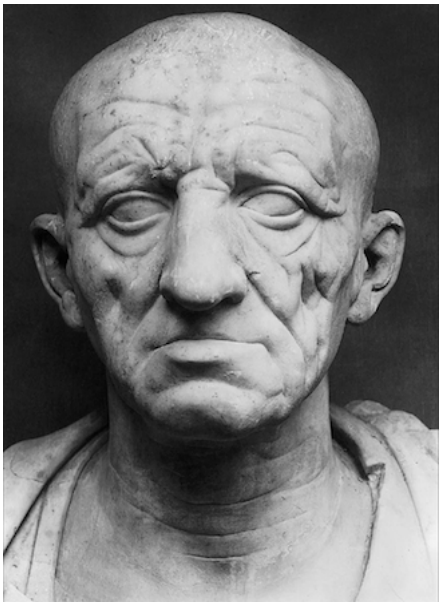


Figure **11.2.14**: Head of a Roman Patrician from Otricoli, c. 75-50 BCE. Marble, Palazzo Torlonia, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Seemingly wrinkled and toothless, with sagging jowls, the face of a Roman aristocrat stares at us across the ages. In the aesthetic parlance of the Late Roman Republic, the physical traits of this portrait image are meant to convey seriousness of mind (*gravitas*) and the virtue (*virtus*) of a public career by demonstrating the way in which the subject literally wears the marks of his endeavors. While this representational strategy might seem unusual in the post-modern world, in the waning days of the Roman Republic it was an effective means of competing in an ever more complex socio-political arena.

The portrait

The portrait head featured in Figure **11.2.14**, now housed in the Palazzo Torlonia in Rome, Italy, comes from Otricoli (ancient Ocriculum) and dates to the middle of the first century BCE. The name of the individual depicted is now unknown, but the portrait is a powerful representation of a male aristocrat with a hooked nose and strong cheekbones. The figure is frontal without any hint of dynamism or emotion—this sets the portrait apart from some of its near contemporaries. The portrait head is characterized by deep wrinkles, a furrowed brow, and generally an appearance of sagging, sunken skin—all indicative of the veristic style of Roman portraiture.

Verism

Verism can be defined as a sort of hyperrealism in sculpture where the naturally occurring features of the subject are exaggerated, often to the point of absurdity. In the case of Roman Republican portraiture, middle age males adopt veristic tendencies in their portraiture to such an extent that they appear to be extremely aged and care worn. This stylistic tendency is influenced both by the tradition of ancestral imagines as well as a deep-seated respect for family, tradition, and ancestry. The imagines were essentially death masks of notable ancestors that were kept and displayed by the family. In the case of aristocratic families these wax masks were used at subsequent funerals so that an actor might portray the deceased ancestors in a sort of familial parade (Polybius History 6.53.54). The ancestor cult, in turn, influenced a deep connection to family. For Late Republican politicians without any famous ancestors (a group famously known as ‘new men’ or ‘homines novi’) the need was even more acute—and verism rode to the rescue. The adoption of such an austere and wizened visage was a tactic to lend familial gravitas to families who had none—and thus (hopefully) increase the chances of the aristocrat’s success in both politics and business. This jockeying for position very much characterized the scene at Rome in the waning days of the Roman Republic and the Otricoli head is a reminder that one’s public image played a major role in what was a turbulent time in Roman history.

Portraiture of the Roman Republic

By Boundless Art History

Roman portraiture during the Republic is identified by its considerable realism, known as veristic portraiture. Verism refers to a hyper-realistic portrayal of the subject’s facial characteristics. The style originated from Hellenistic Greece; however, its use in the Roman Republic is due to Roman values , customs, and political life.



Figure **11.2.15**: Portrait of a Roman General, from the Sanctuary of Hercules, Tivoli, Italy, ca. 75-50 BCE. Marble, 6’ 2” high. Museo Nazionale Romano-Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta, CC BY-SA 4.0)

As with other forms of Roman art, portraiture borrowed certain details from Greek art but adapted these to their own needs. Veristic images often show their male subjects with receding hairlines, deep winkles, and even with warts. While the faces of the portraits often display incredible detail and likeness, the subjects’ bodies are idealized and do not correspond to the age shown in the face.

This photo in Figure **11.2.15** shows the statue, *Portrait of a Roman General*. He wears a toga that shows his bare chest and idealized abdominal muscles. He stands with one leg bent and hidden under the toga.

Figure **11.2.16** shows the *Bust of an Old Man*. His face is realistic and life like with deep wrinkles in his forehead, crow's feet wrinkles around his eyes, and deep lines around his mouth.

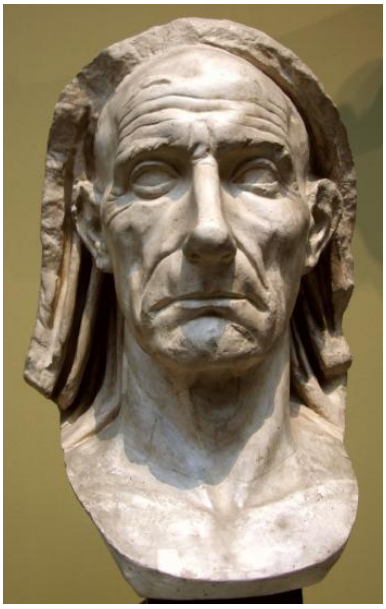


Figure **11.2.16**: Head of old man in a coverlet. Marble. Mid-1st century BCE. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo: shakko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The popularity and usefulness of verism appears to derive from the need to have a recognizable image. Veristic portrait busts provided a means of reminding people of distinguished ancestors or of displaying one's power, wisdom, experience, and authority. Statues were often erected of generals and elected officials in public forums—and a veristic image ensured that a passerby would recognize the person when they actually saw them.

The Late Republic

The use of veristic portraiture began to diminish in the first century BCE. During this time, civil wars threatened the empire, and individual men began to gain more power. The portraits of Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar, two political rivals who were also the most powerful generals in the Republic, began to change the style of the portraits and their use.

The portraits of Pompey are not fully idealized, nor were they created in the same veristic style of Republican senators (see Figure 11.2.17). Pompey borrowed a specific parting and curl of his hair from Alexander the Great . This similarity served to link Pompey visually with the likeness of Alexander and to remind people that he possessed similar characteristics and qualities.



Figure **11.2.17**: Pompey the Great. Marble, 1st century BCE. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Denmark. (Photo: Gunnar Bach Pedersen, public domain)

The portraits of Julius Caesar are more veristic than those of Pompey. Despite staying closer to stylistic convention, Caesar was the first man to mint coins with his own likeness printed on them. In the decades prior to this, it had become increasingly common to place an illustrious ancestor on a coin, but putting a living person—especially oneself—on a coin departed from Roman propriety (see Figure 11.2.18). By circulating coins issued with his image, Caesar directly showed the people that they were indebted to him for their own prosperity and therefore should support his political pursuits.



Figure **11.2.18**: Julius Caesar portrait: A portrait of Julius Caesar on a denarius. On the reverse side stands Venus Victix holding a winged Victory. (Photo: Classical Numismatic Group, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Temple of Portunus, Rome," in *Smarthistory*, January 21, 2021. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Maison Carrée," in *Smarthistory*, March 8, 2016. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "*Head of a Roman Patrician*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Boundless Art History, "The Republic." (CC BY SA)

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11.3: Early Empire

Augustus of Primaporta

by Julia Fischer

Augustus and the power of images



Figure **11.3.1**: Augustus of Primaporta, 1st century CE. Marble, 2.03 meters high. Vatican Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Today, politicians think very carefully about how they will be photographed. Think about all the campaign commercials and print ads we are bombarded with every election season. These images tell us a lot about the candidate, including what they stand for and what agendas they are promoting. Similarly, Roman art was closely intertwined with politics and propaganda. This is especially true with portraits of Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire; Augustus invoked the power of imagery to communicate his ideology.

Augustus of Primaporta

One of Augustus' most famous portraits is the so-called *Augustus of Primaporta* of 20 BCE (see Figure **11.3.1**). The sculpture gets its name from the town in Italy where it was found in 1863. At first glance this statue might appear to simply resemble a portrait of Augustus as an orator and general, but this sculpture also communicates a good deal about the emperor's power and ideology. In fact, in this portrait Augustus shows himself as a great military victor and a staunch supporter of Roman religion. The statue also foretells the 200 year period of peace that Augustus initiated, called the Pax Romana.

Recalling the Golden Age of ancient Greece

In this marble freestanding sculpture, Augustus stands in a contrapposto pose, a relaxed pose where one leg bears weight. The emperor wears military regalia and his right arm is outstretched, demonstrating that the emperor is addressing his troops. We immediately sense the emperor's power as the leader of the army and a military conqueror.



Figure **11.3.2**: Doryphoros *(Spear Bearer)*, Roman copy after an original by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos from c. 450-440 BCE. Marble, 6'6" high. Archaeological Museum, Naples, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Delving further into the composition of the *Primaporta* statue, a distinct resemblance to Polykleitos' *Doryphoros*, a Classical Greek sculpture of the fifth century BCE, is apparent (see Figure **11.3.2**). Both have a similar contrapposto stance and both are idealized. That is to say that both Augustus and the Spear-Bearer are portrayed as youthful and flawless individuals: they are perfect. The Romans often modeled their art on Greek predecessors. This is significant because Augustus is essentially depicting himself with the perfect body of a Greek athlete: he is youthful and virile, despite the fact that he was middle-aged at the time of the sculpture's commissioning. Furthermore, by modeling the *Primaporta* statue on such an iconic Greek sculpture created during the height of Athens' influence and power, Augustus connects himself to the Golden Age of that previous civilization.

The cupid and dolphin

So far the message of the *Augustus of Primaporta* is clear: he is an excellent orator and military victor with the youthful and perfect body of a Greek athlete. Is that all there is to this sculpture? Definitely not! The sculpture contains even more symbolism. First, at Augustus' right leg is cupid figure riding a dolphin (see Figure **11.3.3**).



Figure **11.3.3**: Cupid on a dolphin (detail), *Augustus of Primaporta*, 1st century CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The dolphin became a symbol of Augustus' great naval victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, a conquest that made Augustus the sole ruler of the Empire. The cupid astride the dolphin sends another message too: that Augustus is descended from the gods. Cupid is the son of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. Julius Caesar, the adoptive father of Augustus, claimed to be descended from Venus and therefore Augustus also shared this connection to the gods.



Figure **11.3.4**: Detail of the breastplate, *Augustus of Primaporta*, 1st century CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Finally, Augustus is wearing a cuirass, or breastplate, that is covered with figures that communicate additional propagandistic messages (see Figures **11.3.4**, (see Figure **11.3.4**, **11.3.5**), and **11.3.6**). Scholars debate over the identification over each of these figures, but the basic meaning is clear: Augustus has the gods on his side, he is an international military victor, and he is the bringer of the Pax Romana, a peace that encompasses all the lands of the Roman Empire.

In the central zone of the cuirass are two figures, a Roman and a Parthian. On the right, the enemy Parthian returns military standards. This is a direct reference to an international diplomatic victory of Augustus in 20 BCE, when these standards were finally returned to Rome after a previous battle.



Figure **11.3.5**: Detail of Sol and Caelus on the breastplate, *Augustus of Primaporta*, 1st century CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Surrounding this central zone are gods and personifications. At the top are Sol and Caelus, the sun and sky gods respectively. On the sides of the breastplate are female personifications of countries conquered by Augustus. These gods and personifications refer to the Pax Romana. The message is that the sun is going to shine on all regions of the Roman Empire, bringing peace and prosperity to all citizens. And of course, Augustus is the one who is responsible for this abundance throughout the Empire.



Figure **11.3.6**: Detail of Tellus on the breastplate, *Augustus of Primaporta*, 1st century CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beneath the female personifications are Apollo and Diana, two major deities in the Roman pantheon; clearly Augustus is favored by these important deities and their appearance here demonstrates that the emperor supports traditional Roman religion. At the very bottom of the cuirass is Tellus, the earth goddess, who cradles two babies and holds a cornucopia. Tellus is an additional allusion to the Pax Romana as she is a symbol of fertility with her healthy babies and overflowing horn of plenty.

Not simply a portrait

Augustus of Primaporta is one of the ways that the ancients used art for propagandistic purposes. Overall, this statue is not simply a portrait of the emperor, it expresses Augustus' connection to the past, his role as a military victor, his connection to the gods, and his role as the bringer of the Roman Peace.

Ara Pacis Augustae

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Figure **11.3.7**: Ara Pacis Augustae (Altar of Augustan Peace), 9 BCE. Ara Pacis Museum, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Roman state religion in microcosm

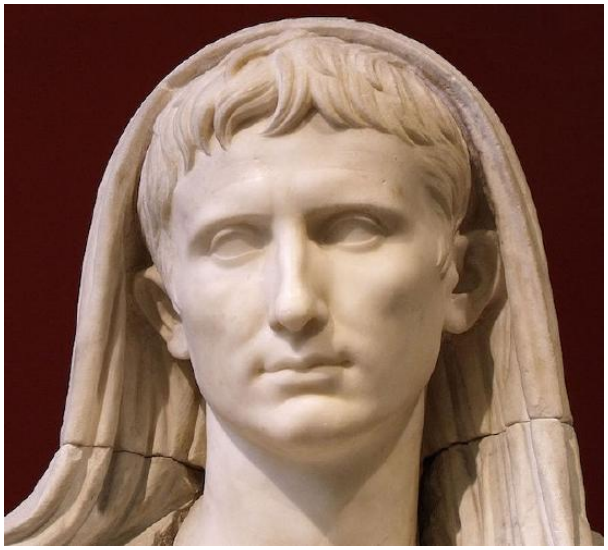


Figure **11.3.8**: Portrait of Augustus as Pontifex Maximus from the Via Labicana, after 12 BCE. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Alphanidon, CC BY-SA 3.0) This sculptural portrait depicts an idealized and youthful emperor Augustus as Pontifex Maximus, or "the greatest priest."

The festivities of the Roman state religion were steeped in tradition and ritual symbolism. Sacred offerings to the gods, consultations with priests and diviners, ritual formulae, communal feasting—were all practices aimed at fostering and maintaining social cohesion and communicating authority. It could perhaps be argued that the Ara Pacis Augustae—the Altar of Augustan Peace

—represents in luxurious, stately microcosm the practices of the Roman state religion in a way that is simultaneously elegant and pragmatic (see Figure **11.3.7**).

Vowed on July 4, 13 BCE, and dedicated on January 30, 9 BCE, the monument stood proudly in the Campus Martius, a level area between several of Rome's hills and the Tiber River in Rome. It was adjacent to architectural complexes that cultivated and proudly displayed messages about the power, legitimacy, and suitability of their patron—the emperor Augustus. Now excavated, restored, and reassembled in a sleek modern pavilion designed by architect Richard Meier (2006), the Ara Pacis continues to inspire and challenge us as we think about ancient Rome.

Augustus himself discusses the Ara Pacis in his epigraphical memoir, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* ("Deeds of the Divine Augustus") that was promulgated upon his death in 14 CE. Augustus states "When I returned to Rome from Spain and Gaul, having successfully accomplished deeds in those provinces … the senate voted to consecrate the altar of August Peace in the Campus Martius … on which it ordered the magistrates and priests and Vestal virgins to offer annual sacrifices" (Aug. RG 12).

An open-air altar for sacrifice

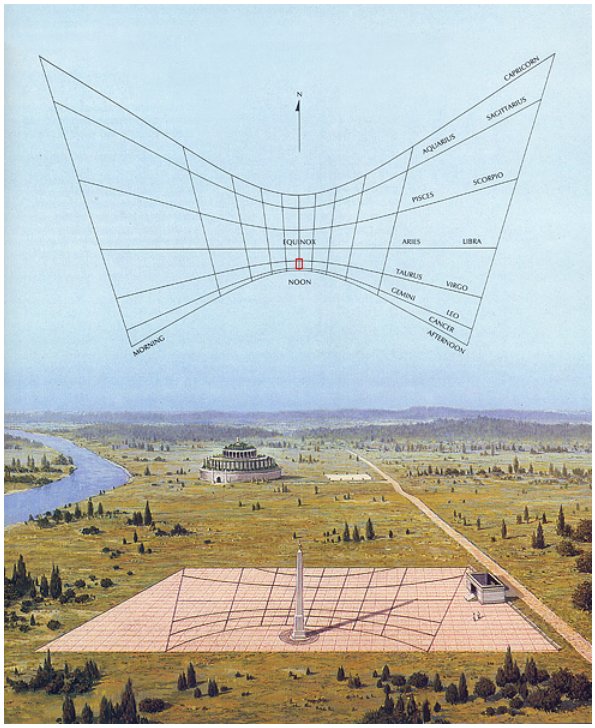


Figure **11.3.9**: Illustration showing the likely original placement of the Ara Pacis Augustae (far right) in proximity to the Horologium Augusti (sundial) and the Mausoleum of Augustus in the background. (Image via Smarthistory)

The Ara Pacis is, at its simplest, an open-air altar for blood sacrifice associated with the Roman state religion. The ritual slaughtering and offering of animals in Roman religion was routine, and such rites usually took place outdoors. The placement of the Ara Pacis in the Campus Martius, or "Field of Mars," along the Via Lata--now the Via del Corso, situated it close to other key Augustan monuments, notably the Horologium Augusti (a giant sundial) and the Mausoleum of Augustus (see Figure **11.3.9**).

The significance of the topographical placement would have been quite evident to ancient Romans. This complex of Augustan monuments made a clear statement about Augustus' physical transformation of Rome's urban landscape. The dedication to a rather abstract notion of peace (*pax*) is significant in that Augustus advertises the fact that he has restored peace to the Roman state after a long period of internal and external turmoil.

The altar (*ara*) itself sits within a monumental stone screen that has been elaborated with bas relief (low relief) sculpture, with the panels combining to form a programmatic mytho-historical narrative about Augustus and his administration, as well as about Rome's deep roots. The altar enclosure is roughly square while the altar itself sits atop a raised podium that is accessible via a narrow stairway.

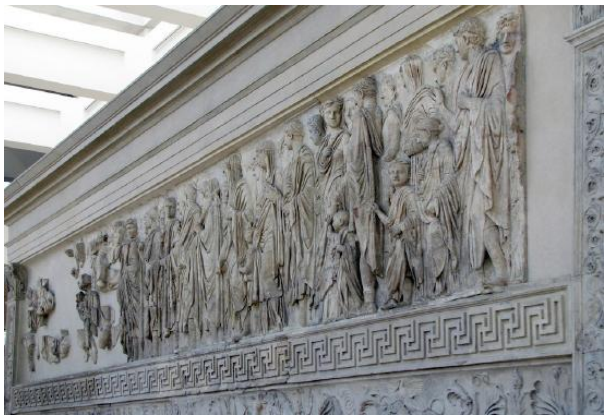


Figure 11.3.10: Processional scene (south side), Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Processional scenes occupy the north and south flanks of the altar screen (see Figure 11.3.10). The solemn figures, all properly clad for a rite of the state religion, proceed in the direction of the altar itself, ready to participate in the ritual. The figures all advance toward the west. The occasion depicted would seem to be a celebration of the peace (Pax) that Augustus had restored to the Roman empire. In addition four main groups of people are evident in the processions: (1) the lictors (the official bodyguards of magistrates), (2) priests from the major collegia of Rome (see Figure 11.3.11), (3) members of the Imperial household, including women and children, and (4) attendants. There has been a good deal of scholarly discussion focused on two of three non-Roman children who are depicted.



Figure 11.3.11: A member of the Priestly college (association) of *Septemviri epulones*, carries an incense box, processional scene (north side), Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The north processional frieze, made up of priests and members of the Imperial household, is comprised of 46 figures. The priestly colleges (religious associations) represented include the *Septemviri epulones* (“seven men for sacrificial banquets”—they arranged public feasts connected to sacred holidays), whose members here carry an incense box (see Figure 11.3.11), and the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* (“fifteen men to perform sacred actions”— their main duty was to guard and consult the Sibylline books (oracular texts) at the request of the Senate). Members of the imperial family, including Octavia Minor, follow behind.

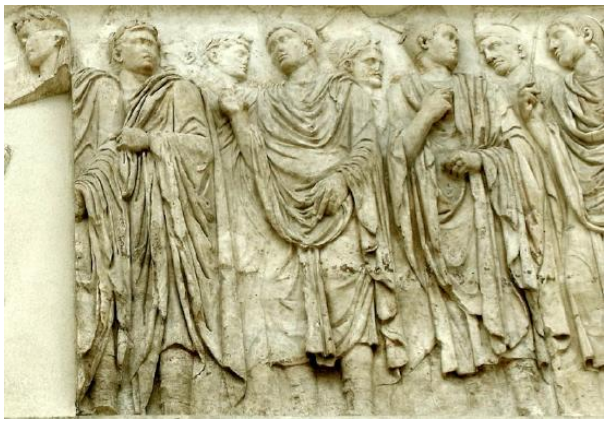


Figure **11.3.12**: Augustus (far left) and members of the imperial household (south side), Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A good deal of modern restoration has been undertaken on the north wall, with many heads heavily restored or replaced. The south wall of the exterior screen depicts Augustus and his immediate family. The identification of the individual figures has been the source of a great deal of scholarly debate. Depicted in Figure **11.3.12** and Figure Figure **11.3.13** are Augustus (damaged, he appears at the far left of Figure **11.3.12**) and Marcus Agrippa (friend, son-in-law, and lieutenant to Augustus, he appears, hooded, in Figure **11.3.13**), along with other members of the imperial house. All of those present are dressed in ceremonial garb appropriate for the state sacrifice. The presence of state priests known as flamens (*flamines*) further indicate the solemnity of the occasion.



Figure **11.3.13**: Processional scene (south side) with Agrippa (hooded), Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A running, vegetal frieze runs parallel to the processional friezes on the lower register. This vegetal frieze emphasizes the fertility and abundance of the lands, a clear benefit of living in a time of peace.

Mythological panels

Accompanying the processional friezes are four mythological panels that adorn the altar screen on its shorter sides. Each of these panels depicts a distinct scene:

- a scene of a bearded male making sacrifice (Figure **11.3.14**)
- a scene of seated female goddess amid the fertility of Italy (also in Figure **11.3.14**)
- a fragmentary scene with Romulus and Remus in the Lupercal grotto (where these two mythic founders of Rome were suckled by a she-wolf)
- and a fragmentary panel showing Roma (the personification of Rome) as a seated goddess.



Figure 11.3.14: Sacrifice Panel, Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Since the early twentieth century, the mainstream interpretation of the sacrifice panel (see Figure **11.3.14**) has been that the scene depicts the Trojan hero Aeneas arriving in Italy and making a sacrifice to Juno. A recent re-interpretation offered by Paul Rehak argues instead that the bearded man is not Aeneas, but Numa Pompilius, Rome's second king. In Rehak's theory, Numa, renowned as a peaceful ruler and the founder of Roman religion, provides a counterbalance to the warlike Romulus on the opposite panel.



Figure **11.3.15**: Tellus (or Pax) Panel, Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The better preserved panel of the east wall depicts a seated female figure (see Figure **11.3.15**) who has been variously interpreted as Tellus (the Earth), Italia (Italy), Pax (Peace), as well as Venus. The panel depicts a scene of human fertility and natural abundance. Two babies sit on the lap of the seated female, tugging at her drapery. Surrounding the central female is the natural abundance of the lands and flanking her are the personifications of the land and sea breezes. In all, whether the goddess is taken as Tellus or Pax, the theme stressed is the harmony and abundance of Italy, a theme central to Augustus' message of a restored peaceful state for the Roman people—the Pax Romana.

The Altar

In Figure **11.3.16**, the altar itself sits within the sculpted precinct wall. It is framed by sculpted architectural mouldings with crouching gryphons surmounted by volutes flanking the altar. The altar was the functional portion of the monument, the place where blood sacrifice and/or burnt offerings would be presented to the gods.



Figure **11.3.16**: View to the altar, Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Implications and interpretation

The implications of the Ara Pacis are far reaching. Originally located along the Via Lata (now Rome's Via del Corso), the altar is part of a monumental architectural makeover of Rome's Campus Martius carried out by Augustus and his family. Initially the makeover had a dynastic tone, with the Mausoleum of Augustus near the river. The dedication of the Horologium (sundial) of Augustus and the Ara Pacis, the Augustan makeover served as a potent, visual reminder of Augustus' success to the people of Rome. The choice to celebrate peace and the attendant prosperity in some ways breaks with the tradition of explicitly triumphal monuments that advertise success in war and victories won on the battlefield. By championing peace—at least in the guise of public monuments—Augustus promoted a powerful and effective campaign of political message making.

Rediscovery

The first fragments of the Ara Pacis emerged in 1568 beneath Rome's Palazzo Chigi near the basilica of San Lorenzo in Lucina. These initial fragments came to be dispersed among various museums, including the Villa Medici, the Vatican Museums, the Louvre, and the Uffizi. It was not until 1859 that further fragments of the Ara Pacis emerged. The German art historian Friedrich von Duhn of the University of Heidelberg is credited with the discovery that the fragments corresponded to the altar mentioned in Augustus' Res Gestae. Although von Duhn reached this conclusion by 1881, excavations were not resumed until 1903, at which time the total number of recovered fragments reached 53, after which the excavation was again halted due to difficult conditions. Work at the site began again in February 1937 when advanced technology was used to freeze approximately 70 cubic meters of soil to allow for the extraction of the remaining fragments. This excavation was mandated by the order of the Italian government of Benito Mussolini and his planned jubilee in 1938 that was designed to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of Augustus' birth.

Mussolini and Augustus



Figure **11.3.17**: Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo, Ara Pacis Pavillion, 1938. (Photo: Indeciso42, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The revival of the glory of ancient Rome was central to the propaganda of the Fascist regime in Italy during the 1930s. Benito Mussolini himself cultivated a connection with the personage of Augustus and claimed his actions were aimed at furthering the continuity of the Roman Empire. Art, architecture, and iconography played a key role in this propagandistic "revival". Following

the 1937 retrieval of additional fragments of the altar, Mussolini directed architect Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo to construct an enclosure for the restored altar adjacent to the ruins of the Mausoleum of Augustus near the Tiber river, creating a key complex for Fascist propaganda (see Figure **11.3.17**). Newly built Fascist palaces, bearing Fascist propaganda, flank the space dubbed "Piazza Augusto Imperatore" ("Plaza of the emperor Augustus"). The famous *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* ("Deeds of the Divine Augustus") was re-created on the wall of the altar's pavilion. The concomitant effect was meant to lead the viewer to associate Mussolini's accomplishments with those of Augustus himself.

The Ara Pacis and Richard Meier



Figure **11.3.18**: Richard Meier and Partners, Ara Pacis Museum, Rome, 2006. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The firm of architect Richard Meier was engaged to design and execute a new and improved pavilion to house the Ara Pacis and to integrate the altar with a planned pedestrian area surrounding the adjacent Mausoleum of Augustus (see Figure **11.3.18**).

Between 1995 and the dedication of the new pavilion in 2006 Meier crafted the modernist pavilion that capitalizes on glass curtain walls granting visitors views of the Tiber river and the mausoleum while they perambulate in the museum space focused on the altar itself. The Meier pavilion has not been well-received, with some critics immediately panning it and some Italian politicians declaring that it should be dismantled. The museum has also been the victim of targeted vandalism.

Enduring monumentality

The Ara Pacis Augustae continues both to engage us and to incite controversy. As a monument that is the product of a carefully constructed ideological program, it is highly charged with socio-cultural energy that speaks to us about the ordering of the Roman world and its society—the very Roman universe.

Augustus had a strong interest in reshaping the Roman world (with him as its sole leader) but he had to be cautious about how radical those changes seemed to the Roman populace. While he defeated enemies, both foreign and domestic, he was concerned about being perceived as too authoritarian–he did not wish to be labeled as a king (*rex*) for fear that this would be too much for the Roman people to accept. So, the Augustan scheme involved a declaration that Rome's republican government had been "restored" by Augustus and he styled himself as the leading citizen of the republic (*princeps*). These political and ideological motives then influence and guide the creation of his program of monumental art and architecture. These monumental forms, of which the Ara Pacis is a prime example, served to both create and reinforce these Augustan messages.

The story of the Ara Pacis becomes even more complicated since it is an artifact that then was placed in the service of ideas in the modern age. This results in its identity becoming a hybridized mixture of Classicism, Fascism, and modernism—all difficult to interpret in a postmodern reality. It is important to remember that the sculptural reliefs were created in the first place to be easily legible so that the viewer could understand the messages of Augustus and his circle without the need to read elaborate texts. Augustus pioneered the use of such ideological messages that relied on clear iconography to get their message across. A great deal was at stake for Augustus and it seems, by virtue of history, that the political choices he made proved prudent. The messages of the Pax Romana, of a restored state, and of Augustus as a leading republican citizen, are all part of an effective and carefully constructed veneer.

Roman wall painting styles

by Dr. Jessica Leah Ambler

Mount Vesuvius buried Pompeii two millennia ago—creating a time capsule of the evolution of Roman painting.



Figure **11.3.19**: Example of a Fourth Style painting, before 79 CE. Fresco. Pompeii, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Why Pompeii?

Paintings from antiquity rarely survive—paint, after all, is a much less durable medium than stone or bronze sculpture. But it is thanks to the ancient Roman city of Pompeii that we can trace the history of Roman wall painting. The entire city was buried in volcanic ash in 79 CE when the volcano at Mount Vesuvius erupted, thus preserving the rich colors in the paintings in the houses and monuments there for thousands of years until their rediscovery. These paintings represent an uninterrupted sequence of two centuries of evidence (see Figure **11.3.19**). And it is thanks to August Mau, a nineteenth-century German scholar, that we have a classification of four styles of Pompeian wall painting.



Figure **11.3.20**: View of Mount Vesuvius from Pompeii, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA-2.0)

The four styles that Mau observed in Pompeii were not unique to the city and can be observed elsewhere, like Rome and even in the provinces, but Pompeii and the surrounding cities buried by Vesuvius contain the largest continuous source of evidence for the period. The Roman wall paintings in Pompeii that Mau categorized were true frescoes (or buon fresco), meaning that pigment was applied to wet plaster, fixing the pigment to the wall. Despite this durable technique, painting is still a fragile medium and, once exposed to light and air, can fade significantly, so the paintings discovered in Pompeii were a rare find indeed.



Figure **11.3.21**: Example of First Style painting, House of Sallust, 2nd century BCE. Pompeii, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In the paintings that survived in Pompeii, Mau saw four distinct styles. The first two were popular in the Republican period (which ended in 27 BCE) and grew out of Greek artistic trends (Rome had recently conquered Greece). The second two styles became fashionable in the Imperial period. His chronological description of stylistic progression has since been challenged by scholars, but they generally confirm the logic of Mau's approach, with some refinements and theoretical additions. Beyond tracking how the styles evolved out of one another, Mau's categorizations focused on how the artist divided up the wall and used paint, color, image and form—either to embrace or counteract—the flat surface of the wall.



Figure **11.3.22**: Example of First Style painting, House of the Faun, Pompeii, built 2nd century, BCE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

First Pompeian Style

Mau called the First Style the "Incrustation Style" and believed that its origins lay in the Hellenistic period—in the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria. The First Style is characterized by colorful, patchwork walls of brightly painted faux-marble. Each rectangle of painted "marble" was connected by stucco moldings that added a three-dimensional effect (see Figures **11.3.21** and **11.3.22**). In temples and other official buildings, the Romans used costly imported marbles in a variety of colors to decorate the walls.



Figure 11.3.23: Detail of faux marble, Villa of the Mysteries, before 79 CE. Fresco, just outside the walls of Pompeii on the Road to Herculaneum (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ordinary Romans could not afford such expense, so they decorated their homes with painted imitations of the luxurious yellow, purple and pink marbles (see Figure Runaway argument for \eatSpaces?). Painters became so skilled at imitating certain marbles that the large, rectangular slabs were rendered on the wall marbled and veined, just like real pieces of stone. Great examples of the First Pompeian Style can be found in the House of the Faun and the House of Sallust, both of which can still be visited in Pompeii.

Second Pompeian style

The Second style, which Mau called the "Architectural Style," was first seen in Pompeii around 80 BCE (although it developed earlier in Rome) and was in vogue until the end of the first century BCE. The Second Pompeian Style developed out of the First Style and incorporated elements of the First, such as faux marble blocks along the base of walls.



Figure 11.3.24: Example of Second Style painting, cubiculum (bedroom), Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, 50–40 BCE. Fresco, 265.4 x 334 x 583.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Met Museum, public domain)

While the First Style embraced the flatness of the wall, the Second Style attempted to trick the viewer into believing that they were looking through a window by painting illusionistic images (see Figures 11.3.24, 11.3.25, and 11.3.26). As Mau's name for the Second Style implies, architectural elements drive the paintings, creating fantastic images filled with columns, buildings and stoas.



Figure 11.3.25: Detail, xample of Second Style painting, cubiculum (bedroom), Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, 50–40 BCE. Fresco, 265.4 x 334 x 583.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Met Museum, public domain)

In one of the most famous examples of the Second Style, P. Fannius Synistor's bedroom (now reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), the artist utilizes multiple vanishing points (see Figure 11.3.25). This technique shifts the perspective throughout the room, from balconies to fountains and along colonnades into the far distance, but the visitor's eye moves continuously throughout the room, barely able to register that he or she has remained contained within a small room.



Figure 11.3.26: Example of Second Style painting, view of the Dionysiac frieze, Villa of the Mysteries, before 79 CE. Fresco, 15 x 22 feet, just outside the walls of Pompeii on the Road to Herculaneum. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA-2.0)

The Dionysian paintings from Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries are also included in the Second Style because of their illusionistic aspects. The figures are examples of megalographia, a Greek term referring to life-size paintings. The fact that the figures are the same size as viewers entering the room, as well as the way the painted figures sit in front of the columns dividing the space, are meant to suggest that the action taking place is surrounding the viewer.

Third Pompeian Style

The Third Style, or Mau's "Ornate Style," came about in the early 1st century CE and was popular until about 50 CE. The Third Style embraced the flat surface of the wall through the use of broad, monochromatic planes of color, such as black or dark red, punctuated by minute, intricate details (see Figures 11.3.27 and 11.3.28).



Figure 11.3.27: Example of Third Style painting, panel with candelabrum, Villa Agrippa Postumus, Boscotrecase, last decade of the 1st century BCE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Met Museum, public domain)

The Third Style was still architectural but rather than implementing plausible architectural elements that viewers would see in their everyday world (and that would function in an engineering sense), the Third Style incorporated fantastic and stylized columns and pediments that could only exist in the imagined space of a painted wall. The Roman architect Vitruvius was certainly not a fan of Third Style painting, and he criticized the paintings for representing monstrosities rather than real things, "for instance, reeds are put in the place of columns, fluted appendages with curly leaves and volutes, instead of pediments, candelabra supporting representations of shrines, and on top of their pediments numerous tender stalks and volutes growing up from the roots and having human figures senselessly seated upon them…" (Vitr.De arch.VII.5.3) The center of walls often feature very small vignettes, such as sacro-idyllic landscapes, which are bucolic scenes of the countryside featuring livestock, shepherds, temples, shrines and rolling hills.



Figure 11.3.28: Detail with Egyptian motif, panel with candelabrum, Villa Agrippa Postumus, Boscotrecase, last decade of the 1st century BCE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Met Museum, public domain)

The Third Style also saw the introduction of Egyptian themes and imagery, including scenes of the Nile as well as Egyptian deities and motifs.

Fourth Pompeian Style

The Fourth Style, what Mau calls the "Intricate Style," became popular in the mid-first century CE and is seen in Pompeii until the city's destruction in 79 CE (see Figure 11.3.29). It can be best described as a combination of the three styles that came before. Faux marble blocks along the base of the walls, as in the First Style, frame the naturalistic architectural scenes from the Second Style, which in turn combine with the large flat planes of color and slender architectural details from the Third Style. The Fourth Style also incorporates central panel pictures, although on a much larger scale than in the third style and with a much wider range of

themes, incorporating mythological, genre, landscape and still life images. In describing what we now call the Fourth Style, Pliny the Elder said that it was developed by a rather eccentric, albeit talented, painter named Famulus who decorated Nero's famous Golden Palace. (Pl.NH XXXV.120) Some of the best examples of Fourth Style painting come from the House of the Vettii which can also be visited in Pompeii today.



Figure **11.3.29**: Example of Fourth Style painting, Ixion Room, House of the Vetii, 1st century CE. Pompeii, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA-2.0)

Post-Pompeian painting: What happens next?

August Mau takes us as far as Pompeii and the paintings found there, but what about Roman painting after 79 CE? The Romans did continue to paint their homes and monumental architecture, but there isn't a Fifth or Sixth Style, and later Roman painting has been called a pastiche of what came before, simply combining elements of earlier styles. The Christian catacombs provide an excellent record of painting in Late Antiquity, combining Roman techniques and Christian subject matter in unique ways.

Portrait of Vespasian

by The British Museum



Figure **11.3.30**: Head from a marble statue of Vespasian, from Carthage, northern Africa, 70-80 CE. Marble, 45 cm high. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

In ancient Rome, official portraits were an extremely important way for emperors to reach out to their subjects, and their public image was defined by them. As hundreds of surviving imperial statues show, there were only three ways in which the emperor could officially be represented: in the battle dress of a general; in a toga, the Roman state civilian costume; or nude, likened to a god. These styles powerfully and effectively evoked the emperor's role as commander-in-chief, magistrate or priest, and finally as the ultimate embodiment of divine providence.

Portrait of the emperor: A soldier and a wit



Figure **11.3.31**: Relief depicting a triumphal procession into Rome with loot from the temple in Jerusalem, panel in the passageway, Arch of Titus, Via Sacra, Rome, Italy, c. 81 CE. Marble, 6'-7" high. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This naturalistic portrait of the emperor Vespasian (reigned 69-79 CE) clearly shows the lined complexion of this battle-hardened emperor, and also the curious 'strained expression' which the Roman writer Suetonius said he had at all times (see Figure **11.3.30**). The loss of the nose is characteristic of the damage often suffered by ancient statues, either through deliberate mutilation or through falling or being toppled from their base.

Vespasian was born in the Roman town of Reate (Rieti), about forty miles (sixty-five kilometers) north-west of Rome in the Sabine Hills. Vespasian distinguished himself in military campaigns in Britain and later became a trusted aide of the emperor Nero. Together with one of his sons, Titus, Vespasian conquered Judaea in 75 CE and celebrated with a magnificent triumphal procession through Rome. Part of the event, in particular the displaying of the seven-branched candlestick or "Menorah" from the Temple at Jerusalem, is shown on the Arch of Titus, in Rome (see Figure **11.3.31**). The proceeds from the conquest of Judaea provided funds for the building of the Colosseum and other famous buildings in Rome.

Vespasian was known for his wit as well as his military skills. When, during one of his attempts to boost the treasury, Vespasian raised a tax on public urinals. Titus complained that this was below imperial dignity. Vespasian is said to have held out a handful of coins from the new tax and said "Now, do these smell any different?" Even on his death bed Vespasian's wit did not desert him. He was perhaps parodying the idea of the deification of emperors, when he said "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god."

Roman portrait sculptures

Portrait sculptures are one of the great legacies of Roman art. Busts and statues portraying men, women and children from most ranks of society were set up in houses, tombs and public buildings throughout the Roman Empire. Sculptures of emperors and magistrates were often thought to embody personal authority, whereas many of the portraits representing private citizens were intended as memorials to the dead.

Colosseum (Flavian Amphitheater):A CONVERSATION

By Valentina Follo, Dr. Beth: Harris, and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Colosseum in Rome between Beth: Harris, Steven Zucker, and Valentina Follo (courtesy of Context Travel). Watch the video here.



Figure **11.3.32**: Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum), 70-80 CE. Rome, Italy. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Valentina: Imagine how beautiful it must have been, this square with all these monumental arches, carved with travertine, and all the statues, and beautiful fountains spilling out water, reflecting the light on the travertine.

Beth: So we might think about this more like the way we think today about Lincoln Center.

Valentina: Exactly.

Beth: With fountains in the middle and gleaming stone.

Steven: Should we start out by talking a little bit about the structure and how it was built?

Valentina: You have to imagine the Colosseum as a gigantic donut. The inside is the arena. “Arena” originally in Latin meant sand. On the floor where gladiators were fighting, they used sand to absorb blood and body fluids, like a gigantic cat litter box. Between different fights, they could simply clean very easily. The original name of this building was not “Colosseum.” “Colosseum” is a nickname given later, not because it was a colossal monument, but because it was located in the proximity of a colossal statue, originally of Nero, that was part of the decoration of his house. And so with time, the nickname was given by this proximity. Originally, it was actually a Flavian Amphitheater. And this is something very typical, even if you think about American monuments. You have the Lincoln Center. You have the Rockefeller Center. They are connected to the name of the family that paid for the building. The Flavian family paid for the building of the Colosseum. Flavian Amphitheater is just a technical name for the shape. It simply means, in Greek, “a double theater.”



Figure **11.3.33**: Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum) and Arch of Titus to the left, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Isriya Paireepairit, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Steven: The original Greek theaters were actually semicircles with a flat end by the stage. And so this is really just fusing those two together.

Valentina: By using arches and concrete, Romans were able to build an amphitheater, even a double theater, with seats on a flat surface. The engineering behind it is absolutely astonishing considering that it was only built in 10 years. The Colosseum could hold between 50,000 and 80,000 people. If you look at the actual top part of each of the ground-floor arches, you see a Roman number. They are very dark and dilapidated. You can see a 23, and then there’s a 24, and there is a 25. They’re progressive. And

this number would have been written on the ticket and given to the people. It's like a modern stadium. You would have an assigned seat.

Beth: A gate number.

Valentina: Also, the seat, because it was extremely important for the Romans. And the seats were assigned according to their status. So you had the most important people close to the arena, and the least important—being the women—on the top floor. You have three stories of arches, and then another story, a fourth floor, with windows. So it's closed with small windows inside it. And if you look at these arches, the arches are framed by columns. At the bosom part, you have what's called Tuscanic. It's similar to Doric, but it's more a local, Italic style.

Steven: It's even a little simpler than Doric, it seems.

Valentina: Yeah, it's also the base. Doric columns do not have a base, while Tuscanic columns do have a base.

Steven: And they're not fluted, as well.

Valentina: No. Then you go to the Ionic columns on the second story. The Ionic columns, actually, were considered the most feminine of the columns. Their proportions were more, slender with the volutes on the top.

Steven: And the women sat higher, as well.

Valentina: Exactly. On the top floor, you've got the Corinthian. They are based on the acanthus plant. And it's indigenous in Rome. You can find it in many gardens. It's very nice with these green leaves. And so it's an imitation of a piece of stone covered with leaves of grass. Inside of each of the arches on the second and third floor, there would be a statue. On the top floor, there would have been probably bronze shields, alternating the windows. Again, we imagine the Colosseum as a donut. The outside circle was done with blocks of travertine. The inside of the donut was done with a core of concrete.

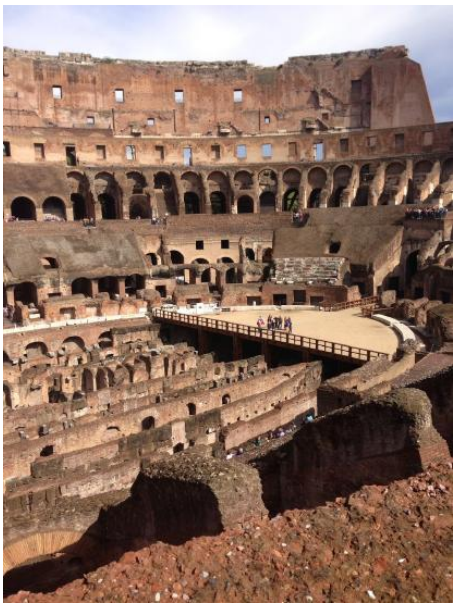


Figure **11.3.34**: Interior, Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum), 70-80 CE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Steven: The Romans had really perfected concrete, and really were the first to use it as this real structural material. That was critical for their ability to create structures of this size. Also something like the Pantheon.

Valentina: The development of concrete was crucial for two main reasons. The first one is if you work with cut stone—marble, travertine, even tufa stone—you need specialized workers because you need to know how to cut the stone. If you cut it the wrong way, the stone will crumble into your hands. With concrete, it made it possible for unspecialized workers to produce something more sturdy. At the same time, it's less expensive. To quarry blocks of marble is not cheap. Concrete could be assembled everywhere. You just need a little mortar and few pieces of stone to make aggregate and water. So it's very easy, but at the same time, it's more elastic. With concrete, you get a sort of elasticity and then you can mold space. Because it's something liquid, you can simply mold it the way you want it.

Beth: And so the idea would be to take a wooden framework that framed out the space that you wanted, and then to pour concrete into that wooden mold.

Valentina: Exactly. And then it would be covered with the decoration. It could be bricks, stucco, whatever you wanted.

Steven: So it really allowed for far more monumental structures, and that would then be economically, and physically, feasible.

Valentina: And less expensive and quick. 10 years to build the Colosseum is quite an accomplishment because they used mostly concrete.

Beth: Also thinking about architecture in a new way, in terms of shaping an interior space.

Valentina: Particularly the interior because if you look at Greek architecture, the inside of a Greek temple is quite narrow. If you think about the Pantheon, you are in this amazing sphere. That's why they really invented it—they are molding not the outside, but inside, to be able to produce a vault that could permit a space free of standing columns in the middle to support the roof.

Beth: Moving away from post-and-lintel architecture to an interior space.

Steven: Which really, in a sense, almost doubled the architectural vocabulary and created an advancement over a system that had existed for thousands of years.

Valentina: Romans employed concrete on such a scale that permitted them to build wherever they wanted. They were not forced by space. Greeks could not build a theater wherever they wanted. They needed a slope. So what if you were living in a city without slopes? No theater for you, right? Romans were able to create a theater, or an amphitheater, or a circus, or a bath complex wherever they wanted.

Steven: It's true that the Greeks seemed to use natural features in a more passive way, whereas the Romans seemed to shape the landscape much more aggressively. You talked about the fact that there had been a lake here. Let's drain the lake. We're putting a building here. Nature becomes in the service of man rather than vice versa.



Figure **11.3.35**: Interior, Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum), 70-80 CE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Valentina: That's actually a very good point. The fact is that they wanted to be able to shape their space.

Beth: It's the idea of urban planning—you could build a city the way you wanted to, and not just be subject to the landscape that was there.



Figure 11.3.36: Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum), with the Arch of Constantine visible in the background, 70-80 CE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Steven: But I think there's this really important way in which the Romans were thinking of themselves as powers in the landscape, having that sort of dominance. It seems to me that the Romans shaped, in a way, that speaks that notion of their own inherent strength.

Valentina: What was different about Roman society—they were not racist in the sense they were looking at the color of your skin—it was a multicultural society. There were Romans from Africa, Romans from Turkey, Romans from Germany. What made it different was if were you a citizen or not. If you were not a citizen, you were nobody. But if you were a citizen, then the color of your skin was not important.

Steven: But there were fine distinctions, even within citizenship?

Valentina: Of course, there were social classes. An interesting aspect was that you could move along the social scale. While for Greeks, you could not even acquire citizenship. It was extremely rare to obtain citizenship. For the Romans, even a slave could become first a free man. And then his children will become a full citizen of Rome. It's like America, if you think about America, like second-generation immigrants. It's the same idea. They realized that just being able to move and being able to give people a chance in life could make all the difference in the economy.

The Forum and Markets of Trajan

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker

An emperor worth celebrating



Figure **11.3.37**: Marble bust of Trajan, c. 108-117 CE. 68.5 cm high. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo: Chris Stroup, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) This veristic sculptural bust of Trajan shows a more truthful depiction of Trajan, with a furrowed brow, large nose, and aged facial features.

Marcus Ulpius Traianus, now commonly referred to as Trajan, reigned as Rome's emperor from 98 until 117 CE. A military man, Trajan was born of mixed stock—part Italic, part Hispanic—into the *gens Ulpia* (the Ulpian family) in the Roman province of Hispania Baetica (modern Spain) and enjoyed a career that catapulted him to the heights of popularity, earning him an enduring reputation as a "good emperor."

Trajan was the first in a line of adoptive emperors that concluded with Marcus Aurelius. These emperors were chosen for the "job" based not on bloodlines, but on their suitability for rule; most of them were raised with this role in mind from their youth. This period is often regarded as the height of the Roman empire's prosperity and stability. The ancient Romans were so fond of Trajan that they officially bestowed upon him the epithetical title *optimus princeps* or "the best first-citizen." It is safe to say that the Romans felt Trajan was well worth celebrating—and celebrate him they did. A massive architectural complex—referred to as the Forum of Trajan (Latin: *Forum Traiani* or, less commonly, *Forum Ulpium*) was devoted to Trajan's career and, in particular, his great military successes in his wars against Dacia (now Romania).

Unique under the heavens

The Forum of Trajan was the final, and largest, of Rome's complex of so-called "Imperial fora"—dubbed by at least one ancient writer as "a construction unique under the heavens" (Amm. Marc. 16.10.15). *Fora* is the Latin plural of *forum*—meaning a public, urban square for civic and ritual business. A series of Imperial fora, beginning with Iulius Caesar, had been built adjacent to the earlier Roman Forum by a series of emperors. The Forum of Trajan was inaugurated in 112 CE, although construction may not have been complete, and was designed by the famed architect Apollodorus of Damascus.



Figure **11.3.38**: View from the Markets of Trajan of the remains of the eastern exedra and the eastern portico of the main square of the Forum of Trajan, looking toward the Basilica Ulpia (in the upper left). (Photo: MM, CC BY-SA 3.0)

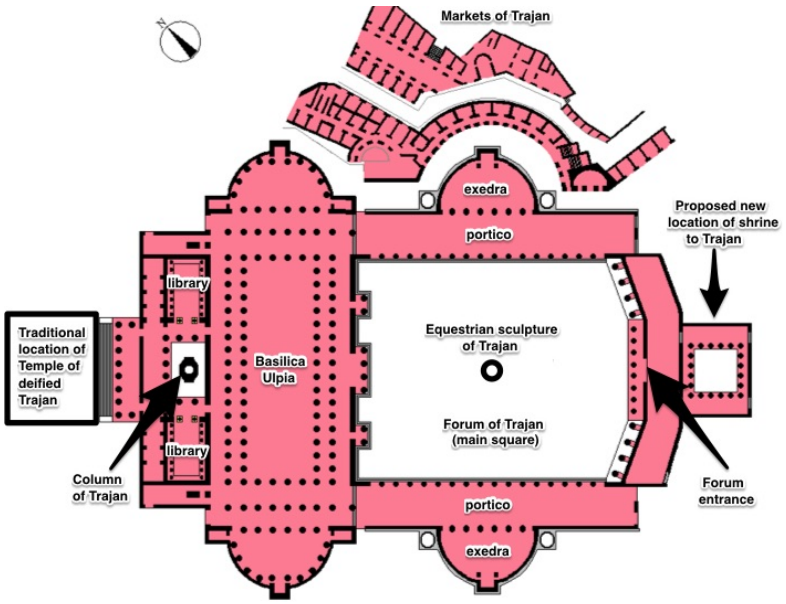


Figure **11.3.39**: Plan of the Forum of Trajan. Note that the traditional site of the temple of the deified Trajan is shown, but is replaced by a shrine located at the southern side of the forum's main square (following R. Meneghini). (Image: Cristiano64, CC BY-SA 3.0, annotated by Smarthistory)

The Forum of Trajan is elegant—it is rife with signs of top-level architecture and decoration. All of the structures, save the two libraries (which were built of brick), were built of stone. There is a great deal of exotic, imported marble and many statues, including gilded examples. The forum was composed of a main square (measuring c. 200 x 120 meters) that was flanked by porticoes (an extended, roofed colonnade), as well as by exedrae (semicircular, recessed spaces) on the eastern (see Figure **11.3.39**) and western sides.

A contested element of the reconstruction of the forum complex is a temple dedicated to the deified Trajan (the deceased emperor had been declared a god). Traditional reconstructions place this temple behind the column, although a recent reconstruction favored by Dr. Roberto Meneghini does not agree with this conjecture, instead preferring to place a shrine to the deified Trajan at the southern end of the forum abutting the retaining wall of the neighboring Forum of Augustus. Scholars continue to debate the nature and position of this temple.



Figure **11.3.40**: Remains of the Basilica Ulpia, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The main structure at the center of the forum complex is the massive Basilica Ulpia, and beside that stood two libraries that flanked the Column of Trajan, an honorific monument bearing an elaborate program of sculpted relief.

Paved in white marble: The forum square (*Area Fori*)

The main square of the forum was once a vast space, screened by architecture on all sides and paved in white marble. Several rows of trees, and perhaps rows of statues, ran parallel to the porticoes. Entry to the forum square was from the south, by way of a triumphal arch surmounted by a statue of Trajan riding in a triumphal chariot. Although the arch itself is no longer extant, it is depicted on a coin issued c. 112-115 C.E. (see Figure **11.3.41**).



Figure **11.3.41**: Gold coin (aureus) struck at Rome c. 112-115 CE. (19 mm, 7.13 g, 7h). The legend reads “IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS VI P P (“To the emperor Trajan Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, Pontifex Maximus, [holder of] tribunician power, in his sixth consulship, father of his country.” The coins depicts a laureate Trajan (draped, and cuirassed bust right) seen from behind on the observe side. On the reverse the Arcus Traiani of the Forum of Trajan is seen. This is presented as a hexastyle building facade, crowned by a frontal chariot drawn by six horses. Three figures stand to the left and right, while four statues occupy niches in the arches below. The reverse legend reads “FORVM TRAIAN[A]” (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **11.3.42**: Captured Dacian, 106-112. Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The forum square (116 x 95 meters) has an overriding martial theme, reminding viewers and visitors that the forum was constructed from the proceeds (*manubiae*) of Trajan's successful military campaigns against the Dacians (101–102, 105–106 C.E.). The porticoes were decorated with statuary and military standards (official emblems of the legions), as described by the ancient author Aulus Gellius: "All along the roof of the colonnades of the forum of Trajan gilded statues of horses and representations of military standards are placed, and underneath is written *Ex manubiis* [from the spoils of war] …" (*Attic Nights* 13.25.1).

The decorative program also included statues of captured Dacian prisoners (see Figure **11.3.42**) and, it seems, statues of notable Roman statesmen and generals that were set in the intercolumnar spaces of the porticoes.



Figure **11.3.43**: Silver coin, Denarius (19mm, 3.35 g, 7h), struck 112-114/115 CE IMP TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS VI P P, laureate bust right, drapery on far shoulder S P Q R OPTIMO PRINCIPI, equestrian statue of Trajan facing left, holding spear and sword (or small Victory). (Photo: Cristiano64, CC BY-SA 2.5)

At the center of the Forum square stood a bronze equestrian statue of Trajan, the Equus Traiani. While the statue itself does not survive, the occasion of a visit to Rome by Constantius II (in 357 C.E.) preserves a mention of the famous equestrian: "So he [Constantius II] abandoned all hope of attempting anything like it, and declared that he would and could imitate simply Trajan's horse, which stands in the middle of the court with the emperor on its back." (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.15) We also see the equestrian statue depicted on a silver denarius struck at Rome c. 112-114/5 CE (see Figure **11.3.43**).



Figure 11.3.44: Remains of the Basilica Ulpia in the foreground, and the Column of Trajan in the middle ground. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As an architectural type, the basilica is uniquely Roman and served various civic and juridical purposes. The habit of planners from the first century BCE onwards had been to prefer to use the basilica as a framing device, so as to have it communicate with the flanks of a forum square. We see this in many cases, although with some variation. In the case of the Forum of Trajan the massive and monumental Basilica Ulpia is constructed at the northern edge of the open courtyard (see Figure 11.3.44). It thus serves to bisect the complex, with the portico-lined courtyard lying to its east and the libraries and the Column of Trajan to its west.

The basilica is massive—its overall length is some 169 meters and the interior nave is 25 meters wide. It is apsidal at both ends, with a raised central floor, and the main hall has a double surround of columns (96 in total) that were probably of white or yellow marble, in the Corinthian order. The basilica was also famous in antiquity for its gilded bronze roof tiles, as commented on by Pausanias, who remarked that the building was "worth seeing not only for its general beauty but especially for its roof made of bronze" (Description of Greece 5.12.6; see Figure 11.3.45).



Figure 11.3.45: Artist's view of exterior elevation (J. Gaudet, 1867). (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Markets of Trajan (dedicated c. 110 CE)



Figure 11.3.46: Apollodorus of Damascus, The Markets of Trajan, 112 CE. The Militia Tower is visible in the center, rising above the markets. (Photo: Vašek Vinklát, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Adjacent to the Forum of Trajan is a separate architectural complex attributed to Trajan that is commonly referred to as the Markets of Trajan. This multi-level commercial complex was built against the flank of the Quirinal Hill which had to be excavated for the purpose. The complex of the markets takes its planning cue from the eastern hemicycle of the Forum of Trajan (see Figure 11.3.46). The ruins of the markets today preserve 170 rooms and the complex covers a space of approximately 110 by 150 meters; its walls stood to 35 meters above the level of the pavement of the Forum of Trajan. The original extension is hard to ascertain, based in part upon subsequent re-use and construction in the Medieval period (and later). The archaeologist Corrado Ricci (1858-1934) cleared the ruins in the twentieth century, but the markets themselves have received comparatively less attention than the adjacent forum.



Figure 11.3.47: Apollodorus of Damascus, The Markets of Trajan, 112 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) The function of the markets was mercantile—indeed the markets may have been designed to relocate shops (tabernae) and offices that were displaced by the Trajanic building project. The ground floor offices (at the forum level) were likely occupied by cashiers of the imperial treasury (arcarii caesariani), while upper level rooms may been leased out or used by imperial officials associated with the grain dole (annona).



Figure 11.3.48: Apollodorus of Damascus, The Markets of Trajan (Market Hall), 112 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

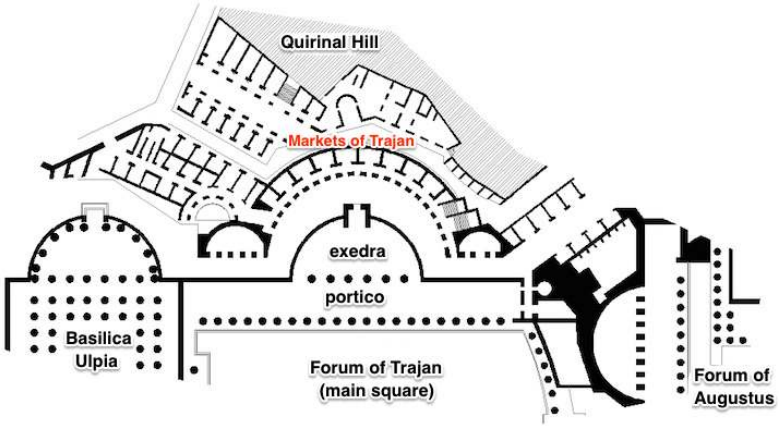


Figure 11.3.49: Plan of the Markets of Trajan (in relation to the Forum of Trajan). (Image: 3coma14, public domain; annotated by Smarthistory)

The great, vaulted market hall (see Figure 11.3.49) is an ambitious and brilliant design—just as with the rest of the complex, reflecting the skills of the designer/architect who executed the project. The medieval Militia Tower (Torre delle Milizie) (12th century) and the now-demolished convent of Santa Caterina a Magnanapoli utilized portions of the structure of the market's buildings.

The architect – Apollodorus of Damascus



Figure 11.3.50: Portrait considered to be that of Apollodorus of Damascus. Munich Glyptothek, Germany. (Photo: Gun Powder Ma, CC BY-SA 3.0) This sculptural portrait depicts the great builder and architect Apollodorus of Damascus with a thick wavy beard and head of curled, stylized hair.

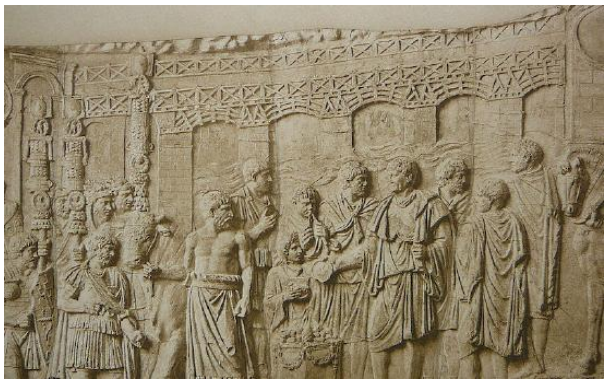


Figure **11.3.51**: Relief from the Column of Trajan, completed 113 CE, showing the bridge in the background and in the foreground Trajan is shown sacrificing by the Danube river. Carrara marble, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Gun Powder Ma, public domain)

Apollodorus of Damascus was a military engineer and architect who was active during the first quarter of the second century CE. He accompanied the emperor Trajan on his campaigns in Dacia and is famous for building a bridge across the Danube river that was both described by ancient authors and depicted in art. The relief from the Column of Trajan depicts the bridge in the background (see Figure **11.3.52**). Built c. 105 CE, the segmental arch bridge was the first across the lower Danube and allowed Roman soldiers to cross the river easily (see Figure **11.3.51**). Apollodorus, who is described as "the master-builder of the whole work" is credited with the project (Procopius, *Buildings*, 4.6.11-14; tr. H.B. Dewing). Upon return from the Dacian Wars, Apollodorus is thought to have been the architect behind the project that produced the Forum and Column of Trajan, as well as the adjacent markets. A textual tradition is preserved by Cassius Dio that has Apollodorus running afoul of (and being executed by) Hadrian, Trajan's successor, although it is unclear whether credence should be given to this story (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 69.4; tr. Cary).

Significance of the "construction unique under the heavens"

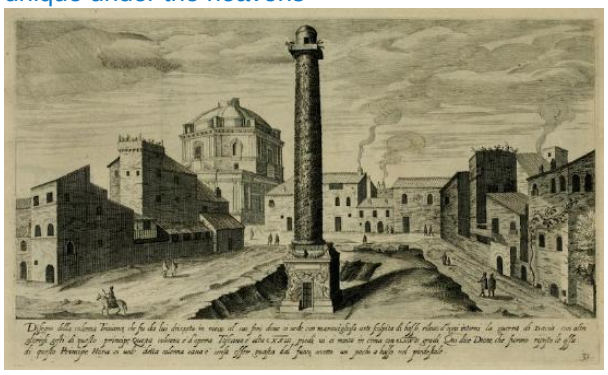


Figure **11.3.52**: Vestigi delle antichita di Roma, Tiuoli, Pozzuolo et altri luochi, 1606 (Ægidio Sadeler engravings of reduced copies of Du Pérac's *Vestigi dell'antichità di Roma*). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands. (Photo: Getty Research Institute, public domain, CC0 1.0)

The Forum of Trajan earned a great deal of praise in antiquity—and it has been the focus of scholarly study perhaps since 1536 when Pope Paul III ordered the first clearing of the area around the base of the Column of Trajan (see Figure **11.3.52**). Paul III would then protect the column itself in 1546 by appointing a caretaker to look after it. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw various artists and architects produce renderings and plans of the forum and its monuments. Among the most famous of these are those of Dosio (c. 1569) and Etiénne Du Pérac (1575). In terms of public architecture in Imperial Rome, the Forum of Trajan complex is a crowning achievement in its vast monumentality. The execution of its sophisticated and elegant design surpassed all of its predecessors in the complex of forum spaces in the city. The value of vast public spaces in the city of Rome cannot be underestimated. For the average city dwellers accustomed to narrow, dim, crowded streets the soaring, the gleaming open space of the forum, bounded by elaborate architecture and sculpture, would have had a powerful psychological effect. The fact that the monuments glorified a revered leader also served to create and reinforce important ideological messages among the Romans. Overall the role of public architecture in the Roman city, and the Roman consciousness, is an important reminder of the ways in which Romans used built space to establish and perpetuate messages about identity and ideology.

The enduring ruins, in this case cleared initially by the excavations sponsored by the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, stand as strong, and stark, reminders of these Roman realities. Modern viewers still extract and reinforce ideas about identity based on looking at and visiting the ruins. Even with these ruins we still come away with an idea about Trajan's greatness and his martial accomplishments. We might, then, judge the architectural program to be a great success—so successful that a great many of our own public monuments still operate on the basis of conventions established in antiquity.

Articles in this section:

- Julia Fischer, "*Augustus of Primaporta*," in *Smarthistory*, November 6, 2020.
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "Ara Pacis Augustae," in *Smarthistory*, October 4, 2020/.
- Dr. Jessica Leay Ambler, "Roman wall painting styles," in *Smarthistory*, June 8, 2018.
- The British Museum, "Portrait of Vespasian," in *Smarthistory*, March 2, 2017.
- Dr. Bernard Frischer and Dr. Steven Zucker, "The Colosseum," in *Smarthistory*, July 19, 2020.
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "The Forum and Markets of Trajan," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015.

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11.4: High/Middle Empire

Editors' Note

During the approximately 100 years between the reign of Trajan and the assassination of the last Antonine emperor, Comodus (98-192 CE), the Roman Empire reached its greatest geographical extent. Despite ongoing fighting at its borders, the Empire's citizens largely continued to experience the peace and prosperity of the Pax Romana, leading to this period being called not just the Middle, but the High Empire.

The "CE" used in the date above stands for Common Era, which distinguishes it from dates marked BCE (Before the Common Era). The standard convention used by most historians is to include CE as part of the date reference for any works up to 150-200 years into the Common Era. For dates after that, the CE is generally dropped, and any dates without a CE or BCE reference are generally understood to be from the Common Era.

The Pantheon (Rome)

by Dr. Paul A. Ranogajec

The eighth wonder of the ancient world



Figure **11.4.1**: The Pantheon, Rome, Italy, c. 125 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Pantheon in Rome is a true architectural wonder. Described as the “sphinx of the Campus Martius”—referring to enigmas presented by its appearance and history, and to the location in Rome where it was built—to visit it today is to be almost transported back to the Roman Empire itself. The Roman Pantheon probably doesn’t make popular shortlists of the world’s architectural icons, but it should: it is one of the most imitated buildings in history (see Figure **11.4.1**). For a good example, look at the library Thomas Jefferson designed for the University of Virginia.

Although the Pantheon’s importance is undeniable, there is a lot that is unknown. With new evidence and fresh interpretations coming to light in recent years, questions once thought settled have been reopened. Most textbooks and websites confidently date the building to the Emperor Hadrian’s reign and describe its purpose as a temple to all the gods (from the Greek, pan = all, theos = gods), but some scholars now argue that these details are wrong and that our knowledge of other aspects of the building’s origin, construction, and meaning is less certain than we had thought.

Whose Pantheon?—the problem of the inscription

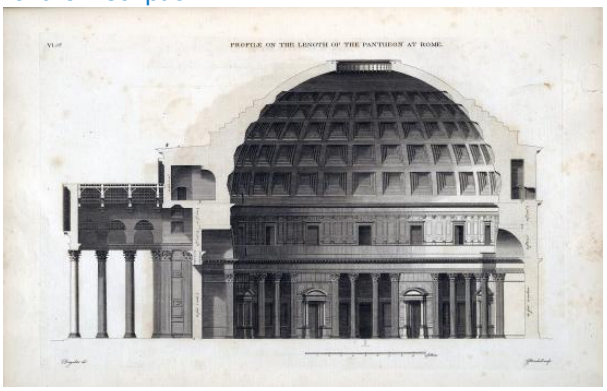


Figure **11.4.2**: Pantheon Elevation. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Archaeologists and art historians value inscriptions on ancient monuments because these can provide information about patronage, dating, and purpose that is otherwise difficult to come by. In the case of the Pantheon, however, the inscription on the frieze—in raised bronze letters (modern replacements)—easily deceives, as it did for many centuries. It identifies, in abbreviated Latin, the Roman general and consul (the highest elected official of the Roman Republic) Marcus Agrippa (who lived in the first century BCE) as the patron: "M[arcus] Agrippa L[ucii] F[ilius] Co[n]s[ul] Tertium Fecit" ("Marcus Agrippa, son of Lucius, thrice Consul, built this"). The inscription was taken at face value until 1892, when a well-documented interpretation of stamped bricks found in and around the building showed that the Pantheon standing today was a rebuilding of an earlier structure, and that it was a product of Emperor Hadrian's (who ruled from 117-138 CE) patronage, built between about 118 and 128. Thus, Agrippa could not have been the patron of the present building. Why, then, is his name so prominent?

The conventional understanding of the Pantheon

A traditional rectangular temple, first built by Agrippa

The conventional understanding of the Pantheon's genesis, which held from 1892 until very recently, goes something like this. Agrippa built the original Pantheon in honor of his and Augustus' military victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE—one of the defining moments in the establishment of the Roman Empire--Augustus would go on to become the first Emperor of Rome. It was thought that Agrippa's Pantheon had been small and conventional: a Greek-style temple, rectangular in plan. Written sources suggest the building was damaged by fire around 80 CE and restored to some unknown extent under the orders of Emperor Domitian, who ruled 81-96 CE.



Figure **11.4.3**: The Pantheon, c. 125 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

When the building was more substantially damaged by fire again in 110 CE, the Emperor Trajan decided to rebuild it, but only partial groundwork was carried out before his death. Trajan's successor, Hadrian—a great patron of architecture and revered as one of the most effective Roman emperors—conceived and possibly even designed the new building with the help of dedicated architects. It was to be a triumphant display of his will and beneficence. He was thought to have abandoned the idea of simply reconstructing Agrippa's temple, deciding instead to create a much larger and more impressive structure. And, in an act of pious humility meant to put him in the favor of the gods and to honor his illustrious predecessors, Hadrian installed the false inscription

attributing the new building to the long-dead Agrippa. See rich details in the Pantheon's elevation plan (Figure **11.4.2**), the photographic details of the Corinthian columns (Figure **11.4.3**), Giovanni Paolo Panini's painting capturing the interior splendor of the Pantheon (Figure **11.4.4**), and the floor plan (Figure **11.4.5**).

New evidence—Agrippa's temple was not rectangular at all

Today, we know that many parts of this story are either unlikely or demonstrably false. It is now clear from archaeological studies that Agrippa's original building was not a small rectangular temple, but contained the distinctive hallmarks of the current building: a portico with tall columns and pediment and a rotunda (circular hall) behind it, in similar dimensions to the current building.



Figure **11.4.4**: Giovanni Paolo Panini, *Interior of the Pantheon, Rome*, c. 1734. Oil on canvas, 128 x 99 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Photo: public domain)

And the temple may be Trajan's (not Hadrian's)

More startling, a reconsideration of the evidence of the bricks used in the building's construction—some of which were stamped with identifying marks that can be used to establish the date of manufacture—shows that almost all of them date from the 110s, during the time of Trajan. Instead of the great triumph of Hadrianic design, the Pantheon should more rightly be seen as the final architectural glory of the Emperor Trajan's reign: substantially designed and rebuilt beginning around 114, with some preparatory work on the building site perhaps starting right after the fire of 110, and finished under Hadrian sometime between 125 and 128.

Lise Hetland, the archaeologist who first made this argument in 2007--building on an earlier attribution to Trajan by Wolf-Dieter Heilmeyer, writes that the long-standing effort to make the physical evidence fit a dating entirely within Hadrian's time shows "the illogicality of the sometimes almost surgically clear-cut presentation of Roman buildings according to the sequence of emperors." The case of the Pantheon confirms a general art-historical lesson: style categories and historical periodizations (in other words, our understanding of the style of architecture during a particular emperor's reign) should be seen as conveniences—subordinate to the priority of evidence.

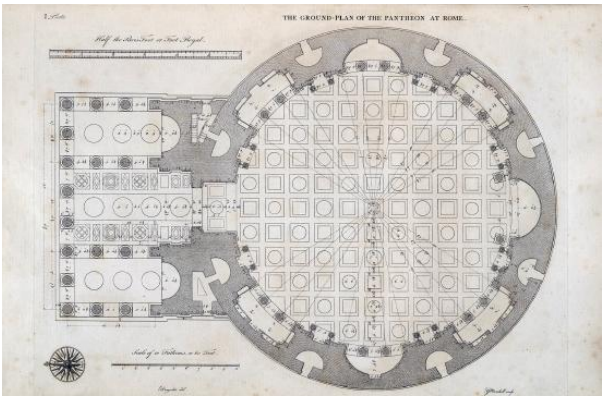


Figure 11.4.5: Pantheon Plan. (Photo via Smarthistory)

What was it—a temple? A dynastic sanctuary?

It is now an open question whether the building was ever a temple to all the gods, as its traditional name has long suggested to interpreters. Pantheon, or Pantheum in Latin, was more of a nickname than a formal title. One of the major written sources about the building's origin is the Roman History by Cassius Dio, a late second- to early third-century historian who was twice Roman consul. His account, written a century after the Pantheon was completed, must be taken skeptically. However, he provides important evidence about the building's purpose. He wrote,

"He [Agrippa] completed the building called the Pantheon. It has this name, perhaps because it received among the images which decorated it the statues of many gods, including Mars and Venus; but my own opinion of the name is that, because of its vaulted roof, it resembles the heavens. Agrippa, for his part, wished to place a statue of Augustus there also and to bestow upon him the honor of having the structure named after him; but when Augustus wouldn't accept either honor, he [Agrippa] placed in the temple itself a statue of the former [Julius] Caesar and in the ante-room statues of Augustus and himself. This was done not out of any rivalry or ambition on Agrippa's part to make himself equal to Augustus, but from his hearty loyalty to him and his constant zeal for the public good."



Figure 11.4.6: Reconstruction by the Institute for Digital Media Arts Lab at Ball State University, interior of the Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 CE. (Project Director: John Filwalk, Project Advisors: Dr. Robert Hannah and Dr. Bernard Frischer) (Photo via Smarthistory)

A number of scholars have now suggested that the original Pantheon was not a temple in the usual sense of a god's dwelling place. Instead, it may have been intended as a dynastic sanctuary, part of a ruler cult emerging around Augustus, with the original dedication being to Julius Caesar, the progenitor of the family line of Augustus and Agrippa and a revered ancestor who had been the first Roman deified by the Senate. Adding to the plausibility of this view is the fact that the site had sacred associations—

tradition stating that it was the location of the apotheosis, or raising up to the heavens, of Romulus, Rome's mythic founder. Even more, the Pantheon was also aligned on axis, across a long stretch of open fields called the Campus Martius, with Augustus' mausoleum, completed just a few years before the Pantheon. Agrippa's building, then, was redolent with suggestions of the alliance of the gods and the rulers of Rome during a time when new religious ideas about ruler cults were taking shape.

The dome and the divine authority of the emperors

By the fourth century CE, when the historian Ammianus Marcellinus mentioned the Pantheon in his history of imperial Rome, statues of the Roman emperors occupied the rotunda's niches. In Agrippa's Pantheon these spaces had been filled by statues of the gods (see Figure **11.4.6**). We also know that Hadrian held court in the Pantheon. Whatever its original purposes, the Pantheon by the time of Trajan and Hadrian was primarily associated with the power of the emperors and their divine authority.

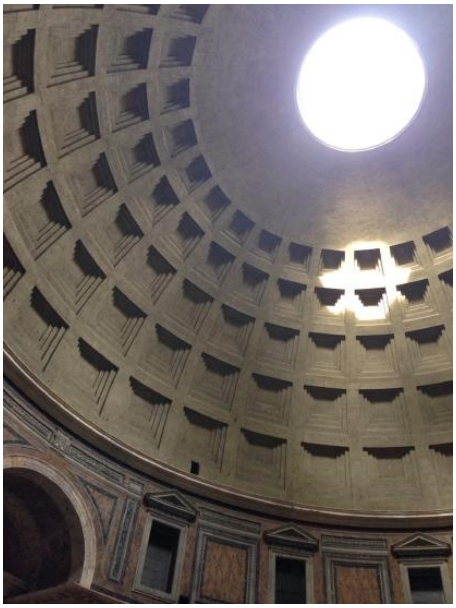


Figure **11.4.7**: Pantheon dome, c. 125 CE. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The symbolism of the great dome adds weight to this interpretation. The dome's coffers, or inset panels, are divided into 28 sections, equaling the number of large columns below. 28 is a "perfect number," a whole number whose summed factors equal it (thus, 1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14 = 28). Only four perfect numbers were known in antiquity (6, 28, 496, and 8128) and they were sometimes held—for instance, by Pythagoras and his followers—to have mystical, religious meaning in connection with the cosmos. Additionally, the oculus, or open window at the top of the dome was the interior's only source of direct light (see Figures **11.4.7** and **11.4.11**). The sunbeam streaming through the oculus traced an ever-changing daily path across the wall and floor of the rotunda. Perhaps, then, the sunbeam marked solar and lunar events, or simply time. The idea fits nicely with Dio's understanding of the dome as the canopy of the heavens and, by extension, of the rotunda itself as a microcosm of the Roman world beneath the starry heavens, with the emperor presiding over it all, ensuring the right order of the world.

How was it designed and built?



Figure **11.4.8**: The Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 CE. Image labeled with pediment, second pediment, intermediate block, frieze, domed rotunda, and portico. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Pantheon's basic design is simple and powerful. A portico with free-standing columns is attached to a domed rotunda. In between, to help transition between the rectilinear portico and the round rotunda is an element generally described in English as the intermediate block. This piece is itself interesting for the fact that visible on its face above the portico's pediment is another shallow pediment. This may be evidence that the portico was intended to be taller than it is (50 Roman feet instead of the actual 40 feet). Perhaps the taller columns, presumably ordered from a quarry in Egypt, never made it to the building site (for reasons unknown), necessitating the substitution of smaller columns, thus reducing the height of the portico (see Figure **11.4.8**).



Figure **11.4.9**: Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 CE. (Photo: Darren Puttock, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The Pantheon's great interior spectacle—its enormous scale, the geometric clarity of the circle-in-square pavement pattern and the dome's half-sphere, and the moving disc of light—is all the more breathtaking for the way one moves from the bustling square (piazza, in Italian) outside into the grandeur inside (see Figure **11.4.9**).

One approaches the Pantheon through the portico with its tall, monolithic Corinthian columns of Egyptian granite. Originally, the approach would have been framed and directed by the long walls of a courtyard or forecourt in front of the building, and a set of stairs, now submerged under the piazza, leading up to the portico as shown in the recreation in Figure **11.4.10**). Walking beneath the giant columns, the outside light starts to dim. As you pass through the enormous portal with its bronze doors, you enter the rotunda, where your eyes are swept up toward the oculus.



Figure **11.4.10**: Reconstruction by the Institute for Digital Media Arts Lab at Ball State University, interior of the Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 CE. (Project Director: John Filwalk, Project Advisors: Dr. Robert Hannah and Dr. Bernard Frischer) (Photo via Smarthistory)

The structure itself is an important example of advanced Roman engineering. Its walls are made from brick-faced concrete—an innovation widely used in Rome's major buildings and infrastructure, such as aqueducts—and are lightened with relieving arches and vaults built into the wall mass. The concrete easily allowed for spaces to be carved out of the wall's thickness—for instance, the alcoves around the rotunda's perimeter and the large apse directly across from the entrance (where Hadrian would have sat to hold court). Further, the concrete of the dome is graded into six layers with a mixture of scoria, a low-density, lightweight volcanic rock, at the top. From top to bottom, the structure of the Pantheon was fine-tuned to be structurally efficient and to allow flexibility of design.



Figure **11.4.11**: Pantheon, Rome, c. 125 CE. (Photo: Peter, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Who designed the Pantheon?

We do not know who designed the Pantheon, but Apollodorus of Damascus, Trajan's favorite builder, is a likely candidate—or, perhaps, someone closely associated with Apollodorus. He had designed Trajan's Forum and at least two other major projects in Rome, probably making him the person in the capital city with the deepest knowledge about complex architecture and engineering in the 110s. On that basis, and with some stylistic and design similarities between the Pantheon and his known projects, Apollodorus' authorship of the building is a significant possibility.

When it was believed that Hadrian had fully overseen the Pantheon's design, doubt was cast on the possibility of Apollodorus' role because, according to Dio, Hadrian had banished and then executed the architect for having spoken ill of the emperor's talents. Many historians now doubt Dio's account. Although the evidence is circumstantial, a number of obstacles to Apollodorus' authorship have been removed by the recent developments in our understanding of the Pantheon's genesis. In the end, however, we cannot say for certain who designed the Pantheon.

Why Has It Survived?

We know very little about what happened to the Pantheon between the time of Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century and the early seventh century—a period when the city of Rome's importance faded and the Roman Empire disintegrated. This was presumably the time when much of the Pantheon's surroundings—the forecourt and all adjacent buildings—fell into serious disrepair and were demolished and replaced. How and why the Pantheon emerged from those difficult centuries is hard to say. The Liber Pontificalis—a medieval manuscript containing not-always-reliable biographies of the popes—tells us that in the 7th century Pope Boniface IV "asked the [Byzantine] emperor Phocas for the temple called the Pantheon, and in it he made the church of the ever-virgin Holy Mary and all the martyrs." There is continuing debate about when the Christian consecration of the Pantheon happened; today, the balance of evidence points to May 13, 613. In later centuries, the building was known as Sanctae Mariae Rotundae (Saint Mary of the Rotunda). Whatever the precise date of its consecration, the fact that the Pantheon became a church—specifically, a station church, where the pope would hold special masses during Lent, the period leading up to Easter—meant that it was in continuous use, ensuring its survival.



Figure **11.4.12**: Sanctae Mariae Rotundae. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Yet, like other ancient remains in Rome, the Pantheon was for centuries a source of materials for new buildings and other purposes—including the making of cannons and weapons. In addition to the loss of original finishings, sculpture, and all of its bronze elements, many other changes were made to the building from the fourth century to today. Among the most important: the three easternmost columns of the portico were replaced in the seventeenth century after having been damaged and braced by a brick wall centuries earlier; doors and steps leading down into the portico were erected after the grade of the surrounding piazza had risen over time; inside the rotunda, columns made from imperial red porphyry—a rare, expensive stone from Egypt—were replaced with granite versions; and roof tiles and other elements were periodically removed or replaced. Despite all the losses and alterations, and all the unanswered and difficult questions, the Pantheon is an unrivaled artifact of Roman antiquity (see Figure **11.4.12**).

Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius

by Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker



Figure **11.4.13**: Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius, c. 173-76 CE. Gilded bronze. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy. The original location of the sculpture is unknown. Beginning in the 8th century, it was located near the Lateran Palace, until it was placed in the center of the Piazza del Campidoglio in 1538 by Michelangelo. The original statue is now indoors for purposes of conservation (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In ancient Rome equestrian statues of emperors would not have been uncommon sights in the city—late antique sources suggest that at least 22 of these "great horses" (equi magni) were to be seen—as they were official devices for honoring the emperor for singular military and civic achievements. The statues themselves were, in turn, copied in other media, including coins, for even wider distribution.



Figure **11.4.14**: Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius, c. 173-76 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Few examples of these equestrian statues survive from antiquity, however, making the *Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* a singular artifact of Roman antiquity, one that has borne quiet witness to the ebb and flow of the city of Rome for nearly 1,900 years (see Figures **11.4.13** and **11.4.14**). A gilded bronze monument of the 170s CE that was originally dedicated to the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, referred to commonly as Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180 CE), the statue is an important object not only for the study of official Roman portraiture, but also for the consideration of monumental dedications. Further, the use of the statue in the Medieval, Renaissance, modern, and post-modern city of Rome has important implications for the connectivity that exists between the past and the present.

Description

The statue is an over life-size depiction of the emperor elegantly mounted atop his horse while participating in a public ritual or ceremony; the statue stands approximately 4.24 meters tall. A gilded bronze statue, the piece was originally cast using the lost-wax technique, with horse and rider cast in multiple pieces and then soldered together after casting.

The horse

The emperor's horse is a magnificent example of dynamism captured in the sculptural medium. The horse, caught in motion, raises its right foreleg at the knee while planting its left foreleg on the ground, its motion checked by the application of reins, which the emperor originally held in his left hand. The horse's body—in particular its musculature—has been modeled very carefully by the artist, resulting in a powerful rendering. In keeping with the motion of the horse's body, its head turns to its right, with its mouth opened slightly. The horse wears a harness, some elements of which have not survived. The horse is saddled with a Persian-style saddlecloth of several layers, as opposed to a rigid saddle. It should be noted that the horse is an important and expressive element of the overall composition.

The horseman



Figure **11.4.15**: Horse and rider (detail), *Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius*, c. 173-76 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The horseman sits astride the steed, with his left hand guiding the reins and his right arm raised to shoulder level, the hand outstretched.

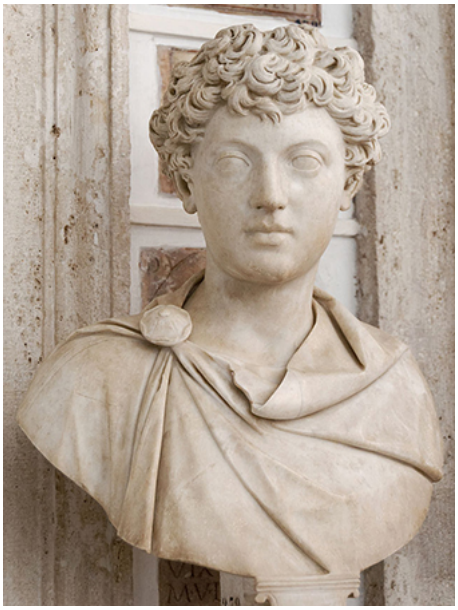


Figure **11.4.16**: Marcus Aurelius, type I portrait, ca. 140 CE. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

There are approximately 110 known portraits of Marcus Aurelius and these have been grouped into four typological groupings. The first two types belong to the emperor's youth, before he assumed the duties of the principate (see Figure **11.4.16**).

In the Roman world it was standard practice to create official portrait types of high-ranking officials, such as emperors that would then circulate in various media, notably sculpture in the round and coin portraits. These portrait types are vital in several respects, especially for determining the chronology of monuments and coins, since the portrait types can usually be placed in a fairly accurate and legible chronological order.

The interpretation of these portraits relies on various key elements, especially the reading of hairstyle and the examination of facial physiognomy. In the case of the equestrian statue, the portrait typology offers the best means of assigning an approximate date to the object since it does not otherwise offer another means of dating. The earliest portrait of Marcus Aurelius dates to c. 140 CE and is best represented by the Capitoline Galleria 28 type, where the youth wears a cloak fastened at the shoulder (*paludamentum*); this portrait was widely circulated, with approximately 25 known copies (see Figure **11.4.16**).



Figure **11.4.17**: Marcus Aurelius, type II portrait, c. 147 CE. Antiquarium of the Palatine, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The second portrait type was made when Marcus was in his late 20s, c. 147 CE, and shows a still youthful type, although Marcus now has light facial hair (see Figure **11.4.17**).

Marcus Aurelius became emperor in 161 C.E., when he was forty years of age; this was the occasion for the creation of his third and most important portrait type. This mature type [not pictured] shows the emperor fully bearded with a full head of tightly curled, voluminous hair; he retains the characteristic oval-shaped face and heavy eyelids from his earlier portraits. His coiffure forms a distinctive arc over his forehead. This third type is known from approximately 50 copies.



Figure **11.4.18**: Marcus Aurelius, type IV, 170-180 CE. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The emperor's fourth portrait type (see Figure **11.4.18**), created between 170 and 180 CE, retains most of the features of the third type, but shows the emperor slightly more advanced in age with a very full beard that is divided in the center at the chin, showing parallel locks of hair.

The statue of the horseman is carefully composed by the artist and depicts a figure that is simultaneously dynamic and a bit passive and removed, by virtue of his facial expression (see Figure **11.4.19**). The locks of hair are curly and compact and distributed evenly; the beard is also curly, covering the cheeks and upper lip, and is worn longer at the chin. The pose of the body shows the rider's head turned slightly to his right, in the direction of his outstretched right arm. The left hand originally held the reins (no longer preserved) between the index and middle fingers, with the palm facing upwards. Scholars continue to debate whether he originally held some attached figure or object in the palm of the left hand; possible suggestions have included a scepter, a globe, a statue of victory—but there is no clear indication of any attachment point for such an object. On the left hand the rider does wear the senatorial ring.

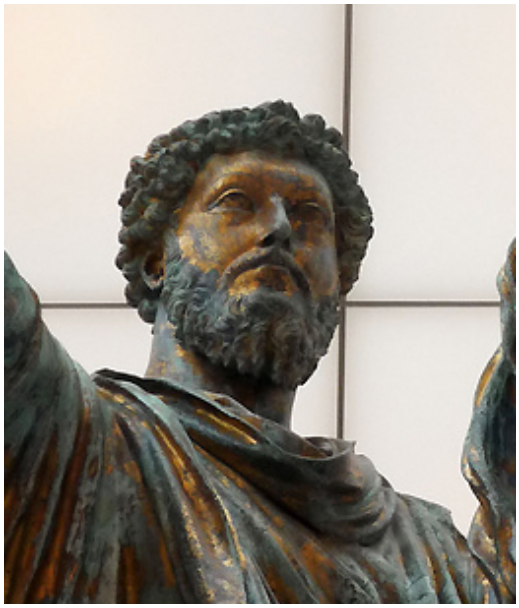


Figure **11.4.19**: Portrait head (detail), *Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius*, c. 173-76 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The rider is clad in civic garb, including a short-sleeved tunic that is gathered at the waist by a knotted belt (*cingulum*). Over the tunic the rider wears a cloak (*paludamentum*) that is clasped at the right shoulder. On his feet Marcus Aurelius wears the senatorial boots of the patrician class, known as *calcei patricii*.

Interpretation and chronology

The interpretation and chronology of the equestrian statue must rely on the statue itself, as no ancient literary testimony or other evidence survives to aid in the interpretation. It is obvious that the statue is part of an elaborate public monument, no doubt commissioned to mark an important occasion in the emperor's reign. With that said, however, it must also be noted that scholars continue to debate its precise dating, the occasion for its creation, and its likely original location in the city of Rome.

Starting with the portrait typology it is possible to determine a range of likely dates for the statue's creation. The portrait is clearly an adult type of the emperor, meaning the statue must have been created after 161 CE, the year of Marcus Aurelius' accession and the creation of his third portrait type. This provides a terminus post quem (the limit after which) for the equestrian statue. Art historians have debated whether the portrait head most resembles the Type III or the Type IV portrait. Recent scholarly thinking, based on the work of Klaus Fittschen, holds that the equestrian portrait represents a unique variant of the standard Type III portrait, created as an improvisation by the artist who was commissioned to create the equestrian statue. In the end the precise chronology of the portrait head—and indeed the typology—remains a matter of scholarly debate.



Figure **11.4.20**: Relief from honorary monument to Marcus Aurelius, 176-180 CE. Marble, 350 cm. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The pose of the horseman is also helpful. The emperor stretches his right hand outward, the palm facing toward the ground; a pose that could be interpreted as the posture of *adlocutio*, indicating that the emperor is about to speak. However, more likely in this case we may read it as the gesture of clemency (*clementia*), offered to a vanquished enemy, or of *restitutio pacis*, the "restoration of peace." Richard Brilliant has noted that since the emperor appears in civic garb as opposed to the general's armor, the overall impression of the statue is one of peace rather than of the immediate post-war celebration of military victory. Some art historians reconstruct a now-missing barbarian on the right side of the horse, as seen in a surviving panel relief sculpture that originally belonged to a now-lost triumphal arch dedicated to Marcus Aurelius (see Figure **11.4.20**). We know that Marcus Aurelius celebrated a triumph in 176 CE for his victories over German and Sarmatian tribes, leading some to suggest that year as the occasion for the creation of the equestrian monument.

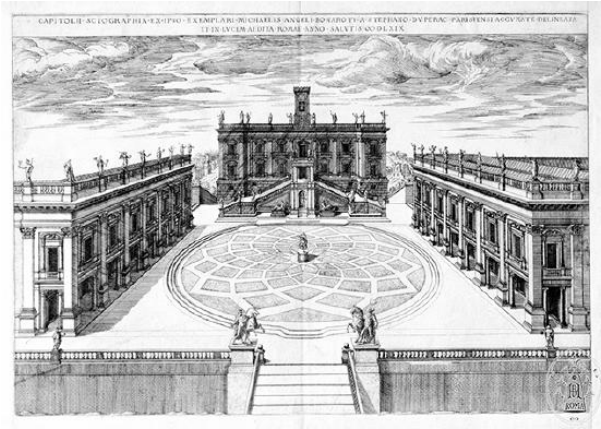


Figure 11.4.21: Étienne Dupérac, Michelangelo`s Design for the Campidoglio, 1569. Engraving. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The original location of the equestrian monument also remains debated, with some supporting a location on the Caelian Hill near the barracks of the imperial cavalry (*equites singulares*), while others favor the Campus Martius (a low-lying alluvial plain of the Tiber River) as a possible location. A text known as the *Liber Pontificalis* that dates to the middle of the tenth century CE mentions the equestrian monument, referring to it as "*caballus Constantini*" or the "horse of Constantine." According to the text, the urban prefect of Rome was condemned following an uprising against Pope John XII and, as punishment, was hung by the hair from the equestrian monument. At this time the equestrian statue was located in the Lateran quarter of the city of Rome near the Lateran Palace, where it may have been since at least the eighth century CE. Popular theories at the time held that the bearded emperor was in fact Constantine I, thus sparing the statue from being melted down.

In 1538 the statue was relocated from the Lateran quarter to the Capitoline Hill to become the centerpiece for Michelangelo's new design for the Campidoglio (a piazza, or public square, at the top of the Capitoline hill). The statue was set atop a pedestal at the center of an intricately designed piazza flanked by three palazzi (see Figure 11.4.21). It became the centerpiece of the main piazza of secular Rome and, as such, an icon of the city, a role that its still retains. The equestrian statue still plays a role as an official symbol of the city of Rome, even being incorporated into the reverse image of the Italian version of the € 0.50 coin (see Figure 11.4.22). The statue itself remained where Michelangelo positioned it until it was moved indoors in 1981 for conservation reasons; a high-tech copy of the original was placed on the pedestal. The ancient statue is now housed within the Musei Capitolini where it can be visited and viewed today.



Figure 11.4.22: Reverse of Italian € 0.50 coin. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is an enduring monument, one that links the city's many phases, ancient and modern. It has borne witness to the city's imperial glory, post-imperial decline, its Renaissance resurgence, and even its quotidian experience in the twenty-first century. In so doing it reminds us about the role of public art in creating and reinforcing cultural identity as it relates to specific events and locations. In the ancient world the equestrian statue would have evoked powerful memories from the viewer, not only reinforcing the identity and appearance of the emperor but also calling to mind the key events, achievements, and celebrations of his administration. The statue is, like the city, eternal, as reflected by the Romanesco poet Giuseppe Belli who reflects in his sonnet Campidojjo (1830) that the gilded statue is directly linked to the long sweep of Rome's history.

Global Connections: Rome's Adaptive Grid System

At its height, the Roman Empire controlled territory from what is today Spain to Syria, Africa to England, all with a single government headquartered in the city of Rome. Across their expanding territory, the Romans built with remarkable

consistency. This remained true even as they allowed conquered people to retain their own traditions and religion—as long as they also paid their taxes and paid homage to the state religion, in which the emperor was a god. Just as they borrowed architectural traditions from the Greeks, Romans also borrowed urban planning systems from them. Specifically, Rome adopted the Hippodamian grid plan for their colonial cities and castra (singular castrum), or military encampments. Named after Hippodamus, a 5th century Greek philosopher and urban planner from Miletus, the plan is based upon rigidly geometric urban planning using straight streets that cross at right angles and form regular city blocks, rather than unplanned, curved, and organic city layouts (see Figure **11.4.23**). Two main streets, one running north-south and one east-west, usually met at a forum or public square in the central part of town. Other recognizable, staple Roman structures and spaces were also part of the city plan, including theaters, markets, baths, and temples.

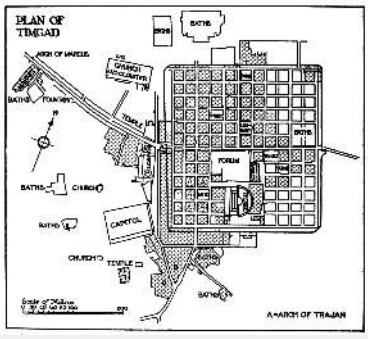


Figure **11.4.23**: Plan of Timgad from *Haverfield's Ancient Town Planning* (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Wellcome Images, CC BY 4.0)

This city plan was important to Roman authority and control as they grew their colonies, both near and far, establishing an orderly and regularized system of organization. The standardized city plan, which disregards topography, or the natural forms and features of a land's surface, could be disseminated easily, built from a precise model, and implemented almost anywhere. The imposed plan acted as a physical metaphor for the colonizers' authority over a place and people, exerting order and control over geographical space, while also imposing cultural norms and values in the form of public buildings, markets, and ritual spaces. Protective strategies were often also included in the city's design so that natural defenses were incorporated into the perimeter of the city. As more of these colonial cities were implemented, their familiarity and interchangeability meant that any arriving Roman traveler or soldier would immediately know where to find everything—contributing to even greater and more successful expansion. Roman colonial cities that used Hippodamian plans include Ephesus, Turkey (founded as a Roman colony in 27 BCE) and Timgad, Algeria (c. 100 BCE; (see Figure **11.4.24**). From Spain to Jordan, and many places in between, the imprint of the Roman Empire can still be seen.



Figure **11.4.24**: Ancient Roman City of Timgad, established c. 100 CE (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Riad ber, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Because of Rome's colonial success, many other later colonizers such as Spain and Great Britain adopted similar strategies when expanding their own territories and planning new cities. During the Spanish colonization of the Americas, King Phillip II established laws and ordinances in 1573 to guide the planning and construction of colonial cities, requiring that principal streets meet centrally at a plaza. In 1836, British naval officer William Light implemented a complex, but similar grid-plan in Adelaide, South Australia, influenced by earlier Hippodamian plans and those of King Phillip II.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Paul A. Ranogajec, "The Pantheon (Rome)," in *Smarthistory*, December 11, 2015.
- Dr. Jeffrey A. Becker, "*Equestrian Sculpture of Marcus Aurelius*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015.

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11.5: Late Empire

Late Empire & Decline of the Roman Empire

By Lumen Learning

The Severan Dynasty was the last stable period of imperial reign over the Roman Empire until that of Constantine. The assassination of Commodus in 192 CE once again plunged the Roman Empire into a year of civil war. Five generals succeeded one another until the fifth, Septimius Severus, consolidated power and managed to reign over Rome until his death from illness, 19 years later in 211 CE. He established the Severan Dynasty that reigned until 235 CE, overseen by five different emperors. Unfortunately for Rome, the economy and the bureaucratic and administrative power of the Emperor and the Senate were declining during this time. The five Severan emperors faced great difficulties maintaining control over the empire. Their troubles demonstrate the importance of this pivotal period that ultimately led to Rome's decline.

Septimius Severus

To strengthen his claim as emperor, Septimius Severus declared himself to be the secret son of Marcus Aurelius and even had his portrait fashioned in a similar manner to him. Like Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus wore his beard thick and curly in the style of Greek philosophers. His portraits show him as old, but fit and without the winkles of wisdom seen in Republican veristic portraiture.

Triumphal Arches of Septimius Severus

Two triumphal arches commissioned by Septimius Severus still stand today: the first at the northwest entrance to the Roman forum, and the second on the main road leading into the city of Leptis Magna, the Roman colony in modern Libya where Septimius Severus was born. Both were erected in 203 CE and commemorate the emperor's victory over the Parthians.

The Roman Arch of Septimius Severus recalls the triumphal arch of Augustus, also erected to honor his own victory over the Parthians. Like Augustus' arch, that of Septimius is a triple arch—the only surviving one in Rome (see Figure **11.5.1**).



Figure **11.5.1**: The Roman Arch of Septimius Severus: This arch visually recalls the triumphal arches of the past that stood in the Roman Forum and expresses the continuity of Septimius Severus' imperial rule and the momentum of the empire. (Photo: Haephestus, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Decorative panels depict scenes of conquest echoing the military scenes on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. These, however, depart from the Classical style, stylistically resembling more the figures on the Column of Marcus Aurelius. The figures on the panels are carved in high relief, and each shows multiple scenes.

Small friezes recounting the triumphal procession also frame the panels. Other decorative elements include winged victories in the spandrels and two sets of four columns, one on each side, that frame the archways.

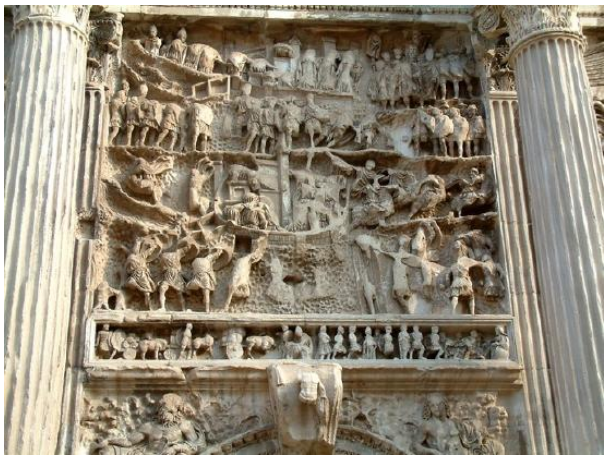


Figure **11.5.2**: The Arch of Septimius Severus: Detail of a panel relief, frames by two fluted Corinthian columns. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

The columns are free-standing, decorative additions to the arch. On the pedestal of each are reliefs of Romans leading captive Parthians away. This arch visually recalls the triumphal arches of the past that stood in the Roman Forum and expresses the continuity of Septimius Severus' imperial rule and the momentum of the empire (see Figure **11.5.2**).

Baths of Caracalla

Caracalla was one of the last emperors of the century who had the time, resources, and power to build in the city of Rome. His longest-lasting contribution is a large bath complex that stands to the southeast of Rome's center. It covered over 33 acres and could hold over 1,600 bathers at a time. Bathing was an important part of Roman daily life, and the baths were a place for leisure, business, socializing, exercising, learning, and illicit affairs. These baths not only held the traditional bathing pools but also exercise courts, changing rooms, and Greek and Latin libraries. A *mithraeum* has also been found on the site.

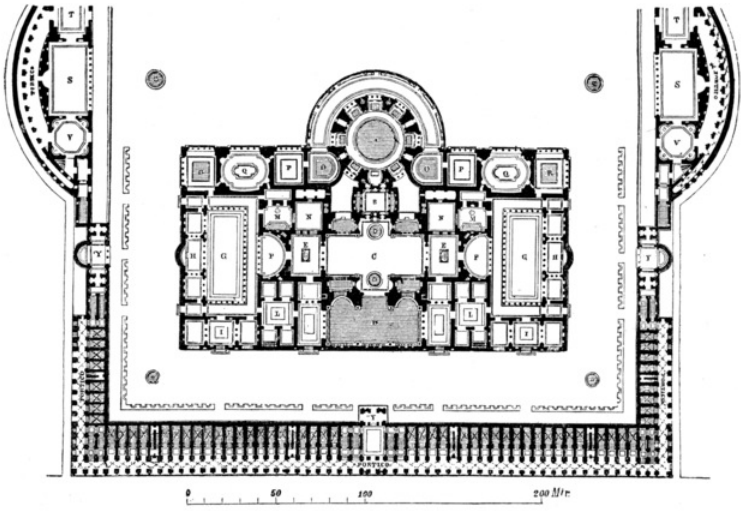


Figure **11.5.3**: Diagram of the vast complex of the Baths of Caracalla. It shows the main entrance, the great court, and the baths themselves, consisting of a central frigidarium (cold room) under three groin vaults, a double pool tepidarium, and a caldarium (hot room), as well as two palaestras (gyms where wrestling and boxing were practiced). The north end of the bath building contained a natatio or swimming pool. (Image: Rainer Zenz, public domain)

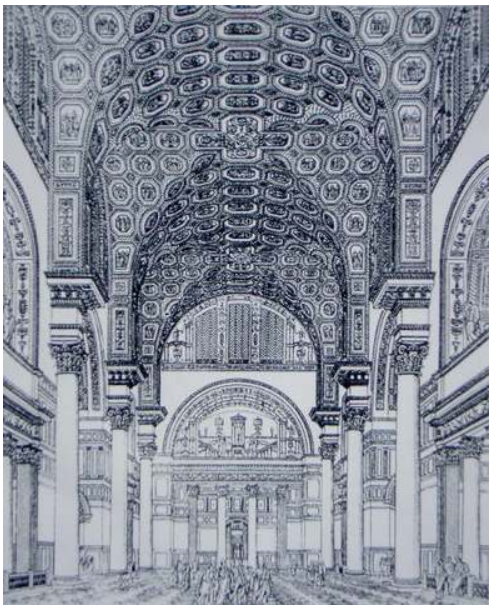


Figure 11.5.4: Baths of Caracalla: This artist's reconstruction drawing shows a groin-vaulted interior, Composite columns, and decorative panels on the ceiling. Human figures have been added for scale. (Photo: DieBuche, public domain)

Architecturally, the Baths of Caracalla demonstrate the impressive mastery of Roman building and the importance of concrete and the vaulting systems developed by the Romans to create large and impressive buildings with ceilings that span great distances. The building was lavishly decorated with marble veneer, fanciful mosaics, and monumental Greek marble statues (see the vast floorplan for the Baths of Caracalla in Figure 11.5.3 and the reconstruction drawing in Figure 11.5.4.

Quirinal Hill Serapeum

In 212, Caracalla erected a temple, called a Serapeum, on Quirinal Hill dedicated to the Egyptian god Serapis, a human-headed deity who shared Greek and Egyptian attributes. This Serapeum was, by most surviving accounts, the most sumptuous and architectonically ambitious of those built on the hill (see Figure 11.5.5).

The temple covered over three acres. It was composed by a long courtyard, surrounded by a colonnade, and by the ritual area, where statues and obelisks were erected. Designed to impress its visitors, the temple boasted columns nearly 70 feet tall and over six feet in diameter, sitting atop a marble stairway that connected the base of the hill to the sanctuary.

The ruins of the Serapeum show a mixture of brick and concrete with a regular use of the round arch. Symbolically, the temple signified the diversity that the Roman pantheon had reached by the third century.



Figure 11.5.5: Ruins of Caracalla's Serapeum on the Quirinal Hill: The ruins of the Serapeum show a mixture of brick and concrete with a regular use of the round arch. (Photo: JoEhSJ, public domain)

Sculpture during the Decline of the Roman Empire

The Dominate Period, when warring generals controlled Rome, was a time marked by insecurity, anxiety, and a rapid succession of emperors.

After Caracalla

Emperor Caracalla was assassinated while campaigning against the Parthians in 217 CE. He was quickly succeeded by a member of his personal guard, Macrinus, who ruled for less than a year before his own death. Elagabalus, the grandson of Julia Domna's sister, and his cousin Alexander Severus were the last in the Severan line. Both men managed to maintain control of Rome, and Alexander Severus was even able to improve the economic condition of the empire. Following Alexander's death at the hands of his own soldiers, Rome plunged into a long period of uneasy, rapid successions referred to as the Crisis of the Third Century, a crisis that lasted for fifty years.

Soldier Emperors

The first 26 emperors of this period were generals who either proclaimed themselves or were officially acknowledged as the emperor. Their reigns lasted from a couple of months to a couple of years. The fact that they were all generals in the Roman army underscores the military insecurity of the empire at this time.

Instead of protecting the border or trade routes, legions of soldiers were often fighting each other in support of one emperor or another. Since Roman power was still centered in Rome, the only building project that succeeded through this period was the building and maintaining of the city's Aurelian Wall, under the emperor Aurelian (r. 270–275 CE).

The portraits of Trajan Decius (r. 249–251 CE) and Trebonianus Gallus (r. 252–253 CE) serve to illustrate the instability of the period and the need for soldier-emperors to assert power to maintain some semblance of control.

Trajan Decius

Trajan Decius's portrait at first seems to take its artistic style from Republican veristic portraiture, but a closer look reveals something else. Instead of depicting a hyper-realistic portrait of an old and wise man, this portrait reveals the anxiety and nervousness of the emperor. His brow is furrowed with worry and wrinkles, and his eyes and mouth impart a feeling of fear and anguish (see Figure 11.5.6).



Figure **11.5.6**: Trajanus Decius: Instead of depicting a hyper-realistic portrait of an old and wise man, this portrait reveals the anxiety and nervousness of the emperor. (Photo: Leoboudv, public domain)

Trebonianus Gallus

The portrait of his successor, Trebonianus Gallus takes a different style, relying on old sculpture and narrative conventions to depict the emperor as a contemporary hero. This larger-than-life bronze statue depicts a muscled, nude man with his right arm raised in a gesture of speech. He seems to be in *adlocutio* pose, addressing the troops or perhaps the people of Rome (see Figure **11.5.7**). His head is notably smaller than his torso and disproportional to his body. This places emphasis on his bulk and reminds the viewer of the emperor's power and the stability he hoped to create.



Figure **11.5.7**: Trebonianus Gallus. In this full-length standing nude statue, the body is large, bulky, and muscular. The head is disproportionately small. (Photo: Katie Chao, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Late Antique Art: The Ludovisi Sarcophagus



Figure **11.5.8**: Battle of Romans and Barbarians (Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus). Marble, ca 250-260 CE. Museo Nazionale Romano di Palazzo Altemps. (Photo: Jastrow, public domain)

Sculpture during this period demonstrates the style and design of Late Antique art that was initially developed during the late second century CE from plebeian models. The emergence of the style corresponds with the social, political, and economic upheaval of the empire that began during the reign of Commodus. This style removes Classical conventions of realism. It pushes its characters into the foreground and almost entirely removes the background.

In the scenes shown on the Ludovisi Sarcophagus, the undercutting of the deep relief exhibits virtuosic and very time-consuming drill work that conveys chaos and a sense of weary, open-ended victory. It differs from earlier battle scenes on sarcophagi in which more shallowly carved figures are less convoluted and intertwined (see Figure **11.5.8**). Unlike earlier Roman depictions of warfare, this scene does not differentiate the general by his attire or engagement in battle. Rather, he is only slightly larger than the figures around him.

From the late second century, Roman art increasingly depicted battles as chaotic, packed, single-plane scenes that emphasize dehumanized barbarians who are subjected mercilessly to Roman military might, at a time when in fact the Roman Empire was undergoing constant invasions from external threats that led to the fall of the empire in the West. Although armed, the barbarian warriors, usually identified as Goths, are depicted as helpless to defend themselves.

After the Soldier Emperors

The Crisis of the Third Century continued after the reign of the Soldier Emperors as the title of emperor was auctioned off to the highest bidder by the Praetorian Guard and various men, not always generals, from around the empire seized power for brief periods of time. This process continued until the reign of Diocletian, beginning in 284 CE.

Portrait of Galerius

Galerius served in the Tetrarchy from 293 to 311 CE, beginning his career as the Caesar of the West (293–305) under Diocletian, and eventually rising to Augustus of the West (305–311) after Diocletian's retirement. During his reign he campaigned, aided by Diocletian, against the Sassanid (Neo-Persian) Empire, and sacked their capital in 299. He also campaigned across the Danube against the Carpi (in present-day eastern Romania), and defeated them in 297 and 300. He opposed Christianity and oversaw the carrying out of the Diocletianic Persecution, which rescinded the rights of Christians and ordered that they comply with traditional Roman religious practices. However, toward the end of his reign in 311, he issued an edict of toleration.



Figure **11.5.9**: Portrait Bust of Galerius: This bust from the emperor's palace features a face that is largely naturalistic with large expressive eyes and eyebrows, similar to those on the group portrait of the Tetrarchs, that lean toward abstraction. (Photo: Marsyas, CC BY 3.0)

A porphyry bust of Galerius (c. 300 CE) shows the direction that portraiture was taking in the fourth century. This bust from the emperor's palace features a face that is largely naturalistic with large expressive eyes and eyebrows, similar to those on the group portrait of the Tetrarchs, that lean toward abstraction (see Figure **11.5.9**). These attributes follow those of other sculptures of the Late Antique style and foreshadow the increasingly geometric form that facial features would assume in imperial portraiture and sculpture in general.

Constantine

Diocletian and his co-emperor Maximian abdicated power on May 1, 305 CE. However, over the course of the next five years, Maximian made several attempts to regain his title, and then committed suicide in 310. In the meantime, power passed to Maximian's son Maxentius and Constantine, the son of a third co-emperor, Constantius.

Unfortunately for Diocletian's legacy and the stability created by the Tetrarchy, a power struggle between the two heirs erupted a year after the former Augustus' abdication. When Constantius died on July 25, 306, his father's troops proclaimed Constantine as Augustus in Eboracum (York, England). In Rome, the favorite was Maxentius, who seized the title of emperor on October 28, 306. Galerius, ruler of the Eastern provinces and the senior emperor in the Empire, recognized Constantine's claim and treated Maxentius as a usurper. Galerius, however, recognized Constantine as holding only the lesser imperial rank of Caesar.

Despite a mutiny against Galerius' co-emperor Severus in 307, and Galerius's subsequent failure to take Rome, Constantine managed to avoid conflict for most of this period. However, by 312, Constantine and Maxentius were engaged in open hostilities, culminating in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, in which Constantine emerged victorious. Although he attributed this victory to the aid of the Christian god, he did not convert to Christianity until he was on his deathbed. The following year, however, he enacted the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity and allowed its followers to begin building churches. With the Christian community growing in number and in influence, legalizing Christianity was, for Constantine, a pragmatic move.

Following a rebellion from Licinius, his own co-emperor in 324 CE, Constantine eventually had his former colleague executed and consolidated power under a single ruler. As the sole emperor of an empire with new-found stability, Constantine was able to patronize large building projects in Rome. However, despite his attention to that city, he moved the capital of the empire east to the newly founded city of Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

Rome after Constantine

Following Constantine's founding of a New Rome at Constantinople, the prominence and importance of the city of Rome diminished. The empire was then divided into east and west. The more prosperous eastern half of the empire continued to thrive,

mainly due to its connection to important trade routes, while the western half of the empire fell apart.

While Byzantium controlled Italy and the city Rome at times over the next several centuries, for the most part the Western Roman Empire, due to being less urban and less prosperous, was difficult to protect. Indeed, the city of Rome was sacked multiple times by invading armies, including the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, over the next century. The multiple sackings of Rome resulted in the raiding of the marble, facades, décor, and columns from the monuments and buildings of the city. Parts of ancient Rome, especially the Republican Forum, returned once again to the cow pastures that they originally were at the time of the city's founding, as floods from the Tiber washed them over in debris and sediment.

Constantinople

Constantine laid out a new square at the center of old Byzantium, naming it the Augustaeum. The new senate-house was housed in a basilica on the east side. On the south side of the great square was erected the Great Palace of the Emperor with its imposing entrance and its ceremonial suite known as the Palace of Daphne. Nearby was the vast Hippodrome for chariot races, seating over 80,000 spectators, and the famed Baths of Zeuxippus. At the western entrance to the Augustaeum was the Milion, a vaulted monument from which distances were measured across the Eastern Roman Empire.

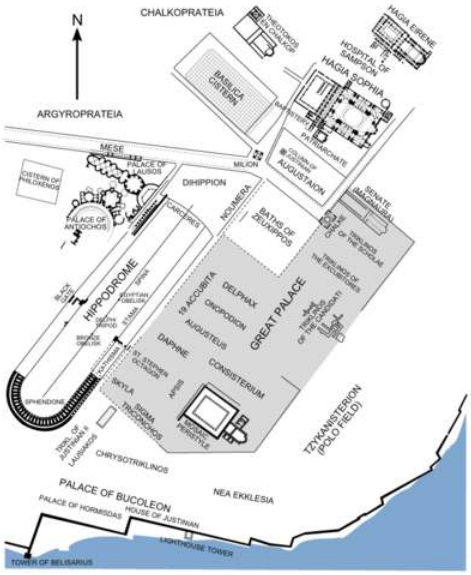


Figure 11.5.10: The Imperial district of Constantinople: Present-day Istanbul, Turkey. (Image: Cplakidas, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Mese, a great street lined with colonnades, led from the Augustaeum. As it descended the First Hill of the city and climbed the Second Hill, it passed the Praetorium or law-court. Then it passed through the oval Forum of Constantine where there was a second Senate house and a high column with a statue of Constantine in the guise of Helios, crowned with a halo of seven rays and looking toward the rising sun. From there the Mese passed on and through the Forum Tauri and then the Forum Bovis, and finally up the Seventh Hill (or Xerolophus) and through to the Golden Gate in the Constantinian Wall (see Figure 11.5.10).

Global Connections: Rome, Egypt, and the Classical World

A temple dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis in Southern Italy. Egyptian rulers depicted as both pharaohs and Greek kings. Mummies bearing Roman-style portraits. Although the textbook addresses Egypt, Greece, and Rome separately, there was considerable influence and exchange between these groups around the Mediterranean. It was not simply art objects that moved between empires, as Luigi Prada describes in "Multilingualism Along the Nile," but also linguistic traditions, religious beliefs, and political ideologies that converged, resulting in a synthesis of rich cultural traditions.

The following article from the Getty Museum further explores such lasting artistic and cultural connections between the ancient Mediterranean world and Egypt.

Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World

Courtesy of the Getty Museum

Egypt was the oldest and most imposing civilization of the ancient world, renowned for its invention of writing, its monumental pyramids and temples, and its knowledge of history, astronomy, mathematics, magic, and medicine. Through this cultural prestige, as well as trade and diplomacy, Egypt exerted considerable influence on neighboring cultures throughout the Mediterranean, and was in turn affected by them. This exhibition explores the rich history of interconnections between Egypt, Greece and Rome over a span of more than two thousand years, from the Bronze Age to the Roman Imperial period.

Trade and gift exchange are the most visible features of early contacts in the centuries after 2000 BC, when Egyptian pharaohs sent stone vessels and other luxury goods to Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece, in return for silver bullion and scented oils in finely decorated pottery. Minoan artists even journeyed to Egypt to decorate a royal palace with Minoan-style frescoes. In the late seventh century BC, the Greeks were given permission by the pharaoh to establish a trading colony in the Nile Delta. The beginnings of monumental marble sculpture and architecture in Greece at this time manifest the clear impact of Egypt on the development of Greek art.

All previous interaction was overshadowed by Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC, ushering in nearly three centuries of Greek rule under the dynasty founded by his general Ptolemy. The subsequent mixing of Greek and Egyptian populations produced a diverse culture that embraced both local and foreign religious practices and artistic styles. After the Romans defeated the last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra, in 31–30 BC, they absorbed Egypt into their empire as its richest province. Classical art had a strong effect on Egypt during this period, notably in funerary portraiture; and a fascination with all things Egyptian quickly spread throughout the Roman empire.

Download the exhibition object checklist

Egypt and the Aegean in the Bronze Age (2000–1100BC)



Figure **11.5.11**: Earrings with Dogs from the Aegina Treasure, probably Minoan, 1750–1550 BCE. Gold. The British Museum, London. (Photo: Einsamer Schütze, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Minoan civilization—named after the legendary king Minos—flourished on the island of Crete in 2000–1450 BCE. At a number of cities, including Knossos and Phaistos, newly constructed palaces were the center of religious rituals, artists' workshops, and commerce. Minoan seafarers made their way to Egypt, trading silver, scented oil, and pottery for raw materials and luxury items that they brought back home. Some Egyptian objects appear to have reached Crete as royal gifts. These exchanges inspired both Egyptian and Minoan craftsmen to fashion imitations of each other's wares, and mutual influence extended to religion and medicine (see Figure **11.5.11**).

At the same time, the first Greek-speaking people were establishing kingdoms in mainland Greece, notably at Mycenae. Skilled in warfare, the Mycenaeans became the dominant power in the Aegean in 1500–1200 BC, taking control of Crete around 1450 BCE. They continued to trade with Egypt and offered their service as soldiers in the Egyptian army.

Waves of immigration and violent conflict throughout the eastern Mediterranean brought an end to the palace cultures of Greece, Anatolia (present-day Turkey), and much of the Levant (present-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel) soon after 1200 BCE. Egypt, however, was able to resist invaders and survived the turbulent collapse that affected the rest of the region.

The Greeks Return to Egypt (700–332 BC)



Figure **11.5.12**: Apis Bull with a Greek Inscription, Egyptian, 500–450 BCE. Bronze. The British Museum, London. (Photo: Carolyn Whitson, CC BY-SA 4.0) The Greek inscription on this Egyptian bull demonstrates the ways in which contact between Greece and Egypt impacted their art and cutlural production.

Contact between Greece and Egypt diminished following the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms at the end of the Bronze Age (1200–1100 BC), but Greeks started returning to Egypt in the seventh century BCE. As before, they came as merchants and soldiers, and the Egyptian pharaohs, finding their services beneficial, allowed them to settle. Greek traders from Ionia (present-day western Turkey) and the islands of Rhodes and Aegina established an important colony at Naukratis, in the western Nile Delta. Although the Egyptians discouraged close relations with settlers, some Greeks rose to high positions in the royal court. The pharaoh Amasis II (ruled 570–527 BC) in particular was an admirer of the Greeks and married a Greek princess from the Greek city of Cyrene.

Greek artists were greatly inspired by the art and architecture they encountered in Egypt. Craftsmen in Naukratis and on the Greek islands learned to imitate Egyptian bronze figurines, faience vessels, and other small luxury objects, which were appreciated for their technical sophistication and exoticism. Sculptors in Greece began to create figural statues modeled on monumental Egyptian types, starting a process of invention and experimentation that would last centuries.



Figure **11.5.13**: Plaque of a Queen or Goddess (perhaps Cleopatra IV), Egyptian, 305-30 BCE. Gold-plated repousse silver, 15 3/4 × 9 × 1." Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 44.120. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY)

In 332 BC the Macedonian king Alexander the Great seized Egypt as part of his campaign to conquer the Persian Empire. After Alexander's untimely death in 323 BC, control of Egypt passed to his general Ptolemy, who proclaimed himself king in 305 BC and established a dynasty that ruled for nearly three centuries, with fifteen successive monarchs each taking the same name. The Ptolemies maintained many of the existing political and religious institutions they found in Egypt but created a hybrid Greco-Egyptian culture. The new capital called Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast, became the largest and wealthiest city of the Hellenistic Greek world, as well as a major center of learning.

The Ptolemies were famously extravagant and spared no expense in promoting themselves and their dynastic aspirations. Their portraits were disseminated through stone sculpture, gold and silver coins, and precious gems and cameos. Marble statues portrayed them as Greek kings and queens with individualized features, while dark stone figures and reliefs represented them as Egyptian pharaohs making offerings to local gods (see Figure **11.5.13**).



Figure **11.5.14**: Gold finger ring, Ptolemaic, 3rd century BCE. Gold and lapiz lazuli, 1.80cm diameter (inner). The British Museum, London. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Beginning around 2600 BC, Egyptian priests and high officials were honored with portrait statues displayed in temples and tombs.

A number of these works are strikingly naturalistic. While some might reflect actual appearances, many employ conventional mannerisms—such as corpulence, high cheekbones, pronounced eye sockets, and pursed lips—to impart a lifelike countenance. During Egypt's Late Period (664–332 BC), sculptors conveyed individuality through irregularly shaped skulls, detailed eyes and ears, wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, furrowed brows, sagging flesh, and even scars and warts (see Figure **11.5.14**). After the Greek conquest of Egypt, artists continued to produce vivid portraits in this tradition but sometimes added features showing contemporary Hellenistic influence.

Egypt and the Roman Empire (30 BC-300 CE)

The Roman general Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) brought Egypt under Roman rule with the defeat of Cleopatra VII and Marc Antony in 31–30 BCE. Like the Ptolemies before them, the Roman emperors often presented themselves as Egyptian pharaohs to the local people. The populace was now a mix of Egyptians and Greeks, many of whom were bilingual. They venerated gods of both cultures, and their religious and funerary art reflects this complex blend of ethnicities and influences.

The Romans marveled at the wealth, ancient traditions, and mysterious religion of the newly acquired land. Emperors brought obelisks and stone statues from Egypt to Rome to demonstrate their power as conquerors. Roman sculptures, paintings, mosaics, and luxury objects evoking Egyptian subjects and landscapes became immensely fashionable as decoration for villas. Deities such as Isis and Serapis gained popularity beyond Egypt and found worshippers throughout the Roman Empire.



Figure 11.5.15: Mummy of Herakleides, Romano-Egyptian, AD 120–140, tempera and gilding on wood; pigment and gilding on linen. (Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, public domain) With its naturalistic tempera portrait and traditional Egyptian mummification techniques, this mummy displays the ways that Roman and Egyptian cultures interacted with and influenced one another, including in funerary traditions.

Egypt and Southern Italy



Figure 11.5.16: Obelisk Honoring Emperor Domitian and the Goddess Isis, Romano-Egyptian, 88–89 CE, found in Benevento, Italy. Granite. Museo del Sannio, Benevento. (Photo: Phil Tizzani, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Many works of art with Egyptian subjects have been found at Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabiae, and other sites around the Bay of Naples that were buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Private villas were decorated with frescoes that evoked the people, landscape, and religion of Egypt. Statuettes and ritual implements discovered in some houses indicate that their occupants embraced the worship of Egyptian deities.

The cult of Isis enjoyed great popularity in southern Italy, and sanctuaries dedicated to the goddess proliferated throughout the region. A prominent temple of Isis in Pompeii contained Roman statues and wall paintings with Egyptian themes, as well as works imported from Egypt. During the reign of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), a large temple of Isis was established in the important city of Beneventum (present-day Benevento), northeast of Naples. It was ornamented with numerous sculptures carved from Egyptian stones, including two granite obelisks commemorating the ruler and the goddess (see Figure 11.5.16).

Egypt and Rome



Figure **11.5.17**: Cameo glass flask, Roman, 25 BCE—25 CE. The Getty Museum, Los Angeles. (Photo: The Getty, public domain) This Roman flask depicts cameo figures in side-profile, Egyptianizing style.

Egyptian works of art reached Rome as early as the third century BC, first as royal gifts from the Ptolemies and then to satisfy wealthy Romans desiring exotic decoration for their homes. After the conquest of Egypt in 30 BC, the emperor Augustus brought back many spoils from the region as symbols of imperial triumph. Newly established temples in Rome dedicated to the deities Isis and Serapis displayed statues imported from Egypt as well as sculptures made in Italy in Egyptianizing style. Fascination with the recently annexed land encouraged the production of all manner of evocative images. Nilotic landscapes appeared on the frescoed walls of luxurious Roman villas; Egyptian motifs adorned furniture, silverware, and glass vessels; and sculpted Egyptian deities, crocodiles, and hippopotami populated private gardens.

Egyptianizing Sculpture from Hadrian's Villa



Figure **11.5.18**: Antinous as Osiris. Marble, 29 3/4" tall. Louvre Museum, Paris. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, C BY 2.5)

During the Roman emperor Hadrian's visit to Egypt in AD 130–131, his companion Antinous tragically drowned in the Nile River. The grieving ruler memorialized his young lover by founding the city of Antinoopolis near the site of his death. He also established a Roman cult in which Antinous was honored as a semidivine hero and equated with Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld.

Hadrian's lavish imperial villa at Tivoli, northeast of Rome, was decorated with numerous statues of Antinous in Egyptian costume, as well as many other sculptures with Egyptian imagery (see Figure **11.5.18**). The enormous complex was designed to

> evoke the ruler's wide-ranging travels throughout the Roman Empire. A terraced garden with a long pool was named Canopus after the site near Alexandria in Egypt, and a sanctuary that may have been dedicated to Antinous contained an obelisk in his memory.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Late Antiquity

In This Chapter

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12.1: Late Antiquity and the Dissolution of the Roman Empire
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12.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: The Roman Empire under Pressure

At opposite ends of the outer reaches of the Roman Empire, two accidental time capsules were buried, not to be rediscovered for centuries. The first, in what is today Syria, was an entire section of the town of Dura-Europos (see Figure **12.0.1**). The second, approximately 3,000 miles away in what is today England, was a stash of ornate silver tableware. Both locations were at the borders of an empire that was under pressure: Dura-Europos from the massive Sassanian Persian army to the east, and Mildenhall, England, about a century later, from raiding northern tribes. Eventually, the Roman Empire would shrink and fragment under the repeated attacks from all sides, but before that, the style and techniques of the Classical world would both persist and morph as the empire incorporated citizens from other cultures and religions. Dura-Europos and the Mildenhall Treasure both show not only the persistent influence of Classical Rome, but also an increasing number of different belief systems and traditions within the vast empire.



Figure **12.0.1**: Excavated ruins at Dura-Europos, with the Euphrates River in the background, 2006. (Photo: Ilario Di Nardo, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A Buried Street

Dura-Europos was a Roman garrison town on the Euphrates River. In 256 CE, preparing to defend the city against the Sassanian Persian army, the Romans reinforced its western wall by burying the street at its base, including temples, homes, a mithraeum, a Jewish synagogue and a Christian house-church. Even with its newly-fortified wall, however, Dura-Europos was no match for the Sassanian siege. Soon after taking Dura-Europos, the Persians abandoned it and shifting sand and mud buried it. When it was excavated in the 20th century, archaeologists discovered evidence of a remarkably cosmopolitan and pluralistic society, documented in art from brilliantly-preserved frescoes to sculptures. A Jewish house of worship, or synagogue, was decorated in scenes from Jewish scriptures, in which figures wear Roman togas as well as Persian-style trousers. In a relief carving in a nearby Mithraeum, a place to worship the Persian deity Mithras, Mithras appears in his usual dress—the shirred trousers, long sleeves, flaring tunic and (probably) the floppy Phrigian hat seen on Persian rulers, while other figures wear Roman garb (see Figure **12.0.2**). And on the same street, a Christian house-church featured a tank for baptism, underneath a painting of a figure holding an animal across his shoulders: Christ as the Good Shepherd (a motif borrowed from Classical depictions of Apollo).



Figure **12.0.2**: Cult relief of Mithras slaying the bull (tauroctony), 170-71 CE. Limestone, 29 15/16 × 41 3/4 in. Yale University Art Gallery. (Photo: Yale Art Gallery, public domain)

A Buried Treasure

Across the Roman Empire, in fifth-century Britain, Classically-inspired figures graced the intricately decorated silver tableware of the Mildenhall Treasure, buried by a rich Roman who clearly intended to return for it once the raiding Celts and Picts had been subdued. Instead, a farmer plowing his field found it in 1942. The treasure included dozens of cups, spoons, and elaborately detailed plates. One particularly striking platter (known as the "Great Dish"), measuring nearly two feet wide and weighing more than 18 pounds, features deities and figures from Classical mythology, skillfully wrought in elegant repoussé (see Figure **12.0.3**). As Dr. Diane Reilly writes later in this chapter, despite this blatantly pagan imagery, the owner might have been Christian, as three silver spoons refer to Christ with Greek letters: chi and rho, the first two letters of "Christos" (Christ); and alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and a reference to "the Lord" calling himself the "alpha and omega."The figures on the Great Dish have elegant proportions, but like those portrayed in the Dura-Europos synagogue frescoes, lack the carefully-observed naturalism of Classical Greek and Roman sculpture and painting.



Figure **12.0.3**: Pieces of the Mildenhall Treasure, including the Great Dish at the far right, on display at the British Museum. (Photo: Estel, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Both Dura-Europos and the Mildenhall Treasure show an empire undergoing change and shaped by powerful influences: the neighbors pressing at its increasingly-thinly-stretched borders, the exchange of ideas between a culturally vast/divergent empire, and the rising influence of Christianity and other mystery religions.

Historiography (Writing History)

The Role of Christianity

Among the religions active in Late Antiquity, Christianity is often given special attention, to the extent of treating the whole period as Early Christian. Since so much of European art history has focused on Christian art, its roots have seemed particularly important. Remember, however, that Christianity was *only one* among many of the non-Greco-Roman religions found in Late Antiquity. Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, adaptations of Egyptian cults, and Judaism all have left artistic traces as interesting as the art of Christianity before its official recognition.

Although migrations of new peoples into the Roman Empire profoundly affected Late Antique culture, the art of these peoples can also be considered medieval, as important contributions to the art of Western European Christians, who adopted elements of their non-Roman predecessors. The next chapter, on Early Medieval art, will include art by the Vikings, Saxons, and Lombards, looking at how so-called "barbarian" and "pagan" art forms shaped Christian sculpture and manuscript illumination.

Terminology

Late Antiquity

Calling this period Late Antiquity stresses that while many norms of Greco-Roman culture persisted, something new was replacing them. In a blockbuster exhibition, the Metropolitan Museum called this period "The Age of Spirituality," acknowledging the increased role of the mystery religions, including Christianity. Many objects and buildings show an increased interest in the ethereal, often denying the physical human body or even the structure of buildings. Often people look like expanses of drapery from which heads, hands, and feet protrude. Buildings feature seemingly impossible vaults, or expanses of flat wall that look impossibly thin. Even images that evoke Classical naturalism, like the Symmachi diptych panel discussed later in this chapter, ignore basic rules of Classical representation, as where the woman's back foot breaks the frame of the image.

Periodization

These stylistic and cultural changes rarely took place in a linear manner; some seem sudden, some gradual, and some sporadic. There are no exact dates for Late Antiquity. This chapter deals with developments in the Roman Empire between the end of the Severan dynasty in 230 CE and the relocation of the East Roman capital to Constantinople in 333 CE, but extends later into western Europe during the more gradual establishment of Christianity there. Some would classify parts of this as Late Roman; others as "Early Medieval." Late Antique spans both categories.

Chapter Overview

This chapter examines art of Late Antiquity, centuries when the Roman Empire underwent massive changes, especially as it was increasingly beset by neighbors Romans called "barbarians". This pejorative term comes from the Greek word, *barbaros*, which itself derives from what foreign languages sounded like to Greeks: "bar-bar-bar".

Romans had long scorned these "barbarian" neighbors, enjoying depictions of them enslaved or dying (such as the Dying Gauls discussed in Chapter 9, found in Rome). Roman armies fought to conquer—or at least beat back—waves of these "barbarians." In the Gallic wars (58-50 BCE), Julius Caesar fought Celts and Germanic tribes; by the fourth century the Romans were fighting against waves of Germanic peoples who were being pushed west into Roman territory by other groups to the east. Among those Germanic peoples were the Vandals and the Goths. However, Roman soldiers sent to protect the borders settled there, married, and adopted the dress, weaponry, and gods of these neighbors. As the empire recruited local men into the Roman army, their armies came to be composed of Germanic tribesmen; Goths battled Roman Vandals for control of Roman cities. A former Roman officer, the Visigoth Aleric, led his troops in the sack of the city of Rome itself in 410 CE.

The Roman Empire underwent massive changes during the third through fifth centuries. In an attempt to restore stability, the Emperor Diocletian divided the empire between four rulers and into two halves: east and west. Known as the tetrarchy, from the Greek word meaning the "rule of four," this four-ruler plan worked well while Diocletian was alive, but often failed after his death. After a civil war, the Emperor Constantine emerged as the single ruler of a united, if diminished, Roman Empire, and moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium in the east, calling it "New Rome."

An eastern/western split persists even today in the understanding of the late Roman and medieval Christian world. The eastern half spoke Greek, and is now called the Byzantine Empire (a modern term—they called themselves Romans). In particular, Constantine favored the previously-persecuted religion of Christianity, which became one of the major drivers of the art featured in this chapter

and in the rest of the textbook. In the west, Latin was the language of the church and of some elites, but local languages predominated in a patchwork of small bands, kingdoms, or governments as they vied for supremacy, while missionaries and monks spread Christianity.

One of the characteristics of Late Antiquity is the sheer variety of works of art created during a time that saw the Roman Empire nearly fall apart amidst the struggle to create new ways of organizing communities. In terms of style, art of Late Antiquity is eclectic, and the types of objects included in this chapter range from silver and ivory works intended to connect to Hellenistic civilizations to blocky yet expressive images of emperors. The Greco-Roman Classical style often appears alongside an expressive style more concerned with geometry than with human anatomy, sometimes even on the same monument, such as the Arch of Constantine.

Objects overview

This chapter explores how very different societies adapted Greco-Roman traditions, with purposes as different as worshiping Mithras or Christ, celebrating the power of the emperor, and recalling the Greek god of wine, Bacchus, at a lavish dinner party. This chapter covers archaeological sites and well-preserved buildings as well as luxury portable objects, including:

- the Mildenhall Treasure, luxurious household objects buried for safekeeping in the face of barbarian raids on Roman Britain
- the Dura-Europos Synagogue and Christian house church, preserved because they were used to buttress the walls of a Roman city
- Diocletian's Palace at Split, where the emperor deployed every technique of Roman architecture to create a secure retirement home well away from the city of Rome
- the Tetrarchy, a portrait of four men sharing imperial power, so abstract that none of them can be securely identified
- the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, one of the earliest high-quality objects clearly made for a Christian
- the Symmachi Diptych, an ivory panel with both Classical and anti-naturalistic elements
- the Basilica Nova and the Colossus of Constantine, an expression of imperial power designed to be overwhelming
- the Aula Palatina in Trier, a secular example of the basilican plan Constantine introduced for churches

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Late Antique art, you should be able to:

- Identify Classical and non-Classical elements in the art of Late Antiquity
- Describe different styles of art and cultures covered in art of Late Antiquity
- Discuss the impact of Constantine's patronage on the spread of Christian art and architecture

Want to Know More?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- The catalog for the Metropolitan Museum's comprehensive exhibition on Late Antique art, *The Age of Spirituality*
- Yale University Art Gallery's immersive site "Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity"
- Carly Silver, "Dura-Europos: Crossroad of Culture," for *Archaeology*
- Mildenhall Treasure at the Mildenhall Museum
- The Mildenhall Great Dish at the British Museum
- Crash Course, "Christianity from Judaism to Constantine" [video]
- Steven Fine, "Writing a History of Jewish Architecture" for Smarthistory

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12.1: Late Antiquity and the Dissolution of the Roman Empire

Classicism and the Early Middle Ages

by Dr. Diana Reilly



Figure **12.1.1**: The Mildenhall Treasure, fourth century CE, the British Museum, London, England. (Photo: Estel, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In 1942 a farmer plowing a field in the East of England unearthed a substantial hoard of Roman silver dating from the fourth century, C.E. This became known as the "Mildenhall Treasure," named for the nearby town. Its original owner may have buried his collection of banqueting vessels when the Roman administration left England in 410 C.E., hoping that he could later retrieve it. Among the spoons, bowls, dishes, and ladles is a two-foot wide silver platter weighing almost eighteen pounds, with classical motifs borrowed from antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome). However, though the platter depicts the gods Neptune and Bacchus, the owner was likely a follower of Christianity—a newly-sanctioned religion that was not yet the dominant belief system in Europe. This confluence of classical and Christian concepts is typical of the early middle ages. Because of the political and social upheavals happening in Europe at this time, the art of this period comprises a wide range of styles and themes that often blend classical elements with new and different ones.

A "decline"?

The transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages is often perceived as having been marked by a sharp break in beliefs and artistic style. This change was, in the past, characterized by scholars as a "decline." According to this narrative, the chaotic and unstable atmosphere of the Roman Empire in the later third century led many of its inhabitants to embrace new, minority religions imported from the empire's edges. Some of these were messianic religions that promised members an afterlife more pleasant than their current, increasingly difficult existences. At the same time, the economic struggles of the Late Roman Empire undermined investment in the artists' workshops where the naturalism of classical Roman art had been taught to generations of artists. Lacking the traditional training, means, and patrons who valued classicism, artists during this period often worked in a more static, two-dimensional style that emphasized ideas and symbols over naturalistic illusionism. The abandonment of naturalistic style also coincided, it seemed, with the rise of a new majority religion, Christianity, that rejected materiality and traditional forms of beauty in favor of simplicity and self-denial.



Figure **12.1.2**: Two reliefs from the Arch of Constantine: left: roundel showing Sacrifice to Apollo, c. 117-138 CE; right: Detail, Distribution of Largesse, 312-315. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Two stone reliefs installed on the Arch of Constantine demonstrate this supposed "decline." The reused roundel with a sacrifice to Apollo (see Figure **12.1.2** on left) originally carved for a monument to the Emperor Trajan between 117 and 138 (when the Roman empire was more stable), displays many key characteristics of classicism: varied depth of relief, carefully delineated drapery folds, and figures shifting in space. By contrast, in the panel depicting the emperor distributing largesse (see Figure **12.1.2** on right), commissioned in the Late Empire between 312 and 315, the figures seem almost comically disproportionate, with enormous heads and hands, and draperies indicated by drilled lines.



Figure **12.1.3**: Funerary procession, Amiternum Tomb, c. 50-1 BCE. (Museum, Aquila) (Photo: Erin Taylor, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The problem with the idea of a "decline" is that it ignores the many, often contradictory, currents of art and experience that existed in the late antique world. Romans had long sought to incorporate newly conquered and colonized populations by appropriating local religious beliefs and artistic traditions, in the process creating new, localized versions of Roman art that were sometimes less naturalistic. Even artists working in the capital, Rome, could choose to employ either naturalism or a more symbolic visual shorthand, depending on who made the art and who consumed it—as in the Amiternum Tomb (see Figure **12.1.3**), which was made during the first century, when classicism was the most prominent style. Instead of displaying a classical attention to composition, the artist has arrayed stocky figures of a variety of sizes in a seemingly haphazard way—going against the current artistic trends of the day.

Classicism survives



Figure **12.1.4**: Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, 359 CE. Marble. Treasury, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. (Photo: sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

If works like the Amiternum Tomb help complicate the idea of an artistic decline, do they perhaps simply demonstrate variances in artists' and patrons' tastes? Some have argued that Emperor Constantine (who decriminalized Christianity in Rome in the early fourth century), and by extension the increasingly Christian populace, were, because of their beliefs, drawn to a non-classical style that denied naturalism in favor of a more symbolic set of forms. But surviving artworks commissioned by wealthy Romans show that, like their pagan peers, many Christians often still preferred a classicizing style—even if the subjects portrayed were new. For instance, in the middle of the fourth century the body of Junius Bassus, a Roman prefect, or high official, was buried in an elaborate marble sarcophagus.

Since he was a Christian convert, Junius's sarcophagus was covered with narrative and symbolic scenes from the Christian bible, all rendered in a classicizing style (see Figure **12.1.4**) . The standing apostles are wrapped in Roman togas and the youthful Christ sits on a sella curulis, the animal-headed and -footed chair of the governing classes. Unlike most classical works, here the hands and heads of the figures are a little too large, but the artist was clearly attempting to employ the stylistic language of classicism to transmit Christian content.



Figure **12.1.5**: The Symmachi Panel, unknown maker, Rome, Italy, about 400 CE. Carved elephant ivory. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

These aesthetic departures from strict classicism were not limited to Christian-sponsored art: the same tendencies are apparent in objects that were commissioned by avowed pagans around the same time. This ivory panel was commissioned to celebrate a marriage between members of two Roman patrician (noble) families, the Nicomachi and Symmachi (see Figure **12.1.5**). A female figure with an oversized head and hands stands next to an altar, while a comparatively tiny servant stands behind it. The woman's back leg projects in front of the surrounding frame, while her front leg, counterintuitively, stands on the ground within it, breaking the rules of naturalism. Based on the artworks that survive, we know that both pagan and Christian patrons found these kinds of contradictions in space and proportion acceptable.



Figure **12.1.6**: The Mildenhall Great Dish, 4th century CE. Silver, 60.5 cm diameter. The British Museum, London. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

There were also a diversity of themes preferred amongst patrons of different religions. Artworks from this time sometimes combine overtly pagan content with classicizing style, but for use by Christians. The so-called "Great Dish" found in the Mildenhall treasure is a shining example of such artistic combinations. Concentric rings of repoussé and engraved decoration celebrate the classical themes of the ocean and Bacchic revelry. The hair and beard of the Roman god Neptune in the center of the dish (Figure **12.1.7**) radiate dolphins and seaweed. Around him nymphs ride sea creatures.



Figure **12.1.7**: The Mildenhall Great Dish (detail of central motif showing Neptune ringed by marine and mythological figures), 4th century CE. The British Museum, London. (Photo: Ian, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In the outer band Bacchus (the god of wine), Hercules, Pan and throngs of satyrs and maenads holding Bacchic thistle-headed staffs and a shepherd's crook twist and turn, draperies swirling, dancing with wine-induced abandon.



Figure 12.1.8: Spoons from the Mildenhall Treasure, 4th century CE. Silver. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

While this dish's classicizing style and subject matter are undeniable, we known that its owner was likely Christian, as spoons from his dinnerware set (see Figure 12.1.8) include the Christian symbols of the Chi-Rho and Alpha and Omega. Despite his Christianity, the owner likely felt perfectly comfortable displaying the platter with its exuberant dancing nudes on his sideboard for the admiration of his guests.

Rather than demonstrating a "decline" or a sharp break in artistic themes and styles, Roman artworks of the early middle ages display as much diversity and blending as the empire itself.

Decline of the Roman Empire

by Lumen Learning

The Tetrarchy

Emperor Diocletian institutionalized the Tetrarchy, a co-rule that re-established stability in the empire for the period of Diocletian's reign. Diocletian, a military general from the cavalry, was declared emperor by his legion in 284 CE. He re-established stability in the empire and paved the way for fourth-century political and social developments. Diocletian achieved stability by establishing the Tetrarchy, Greek for rule by four. The Tetrarchy consisted of four emperors who reigned over two halves of the empire. Each pair of emperors was given control over either the eastern or western portion of the empire. Of the pair, one was given the title Caesar (a junior emperor) and the other Augustus (the senior emperor). This allowed Diocletian and his fellow emperors to organize the administration of the provinces, separate military and civic command, and restore authority throughout the realm. They further solidified their commitment to each other and communal rule by marrying into each other's families.

Portraits of the Tetrarchs

Imperial portraiture of the Tetrarchs depicts the four emperors together and looking nearly identical. The portraiture symbolizes the concept of co-rule and cohesiveness instead of the power of the individual. The idea of the Tetrarchy, which is apparent in their portraits, is based on the ideal of four men working together to establish peace and stability throughout the empire.

The medium of the famous porphyry sculpture of the Tetrarchs, originally from the city of Constantinople, represents the permanence of the emperors. Furthermore, the two pairs of rulers—a Caesar and an Augustus with arms around each other— form a solid, stable block that reinforces the stability the Tetrarchy brought to the Roman Empire.
Stylistically, this portrait of the Tetrarchs is done in Late Antique style, which uses a distinct squat, formless bodies, square heads, and stylized clothing clearly seen in all four men. The Tetrarchs have almost no body.



Figure 12.1.9: Portrait of the Tetrarchs, from Constantinople, c. 305 CE. Porphyry, 4’3″ high. St Mark’s Basilica, Venice, Italy. (Photo: Nino Barbieri, CC BY-SA 3.0)

As opposed to Classical sculptures, which acknowledge the body beneath the attire, the clothes of the Tetrarchs form their bodies into chunky rectangles. Details such as the cuirass (breastplate), skirt, armor, and cloak are highly stylized and based on simple shapes and the repetition of lines. Despite the culmination of this artistic style, the rendering of the Tetrarchs in this manner seems to fit the connotations of Tetrarch rule and need for stability throughout the empire.

The Arch of Constantine



Figure 12.1.10: Arch of Constantine (north side), Rome, Italy, 312-315 BCE. (Photo: David Jones, CC BY 2.0)

The Arch of Constantine demonstrates the continuance of the newly-adopted artistic style for imperial sculpture. This arch was erected between the Colosseum and Palatine Hill, the home of the imperial palace. It stands over the triumphal route before it enters the Republican Forum. This forms a dialog with the Arch of Titus at the top, overlooking the Forum, and the Arch of Septimius Severus, which, in turn, stands at the other end of the Forum before the Via Sacra heads uphill to the Capitolium. The Senate commissioned the triumphal arch in honor of Constantine’s victory over Maxentius. It is a triple arch and its iconography represents Constantine’s supreme power and the stability and peace his reign brought to Rome.

The Arch of Constantine is especially noted for its use of spolia: architectural and decorative elements removed from one monument for use on another. Those from the monuments of Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius—all considered good emperors of the Pax Romana—were reused as decoration. Trajanic panels that depict the emperor on horseback defeating barbarian soldiers adorn the interior of the central arch. The original face was reworked to take the likeness of Constantine. Eight roundels, or relief discs, adorn the space just above the two smaller side arches. These are Hadrianic and depict images of hunting and sacrifice. The

final set of spolia includes eight panel reliefs on the arch's attic, from the era of Marcus Aurelius, depicting the dual identities of the emperor, as both a military and a civic leader. The incorporation of these elements symbolize Constantine's legitimacy and his status as one of the good emperors.

The rest of the arch is decorated using Late Antique styles. The proximity of different artistic styles, under four different emperors, highlights the stylistic variations and artistic developments that occurred, both in the second century CE, as well as their differences to the Late Antique style. Besides the decorative elements in the spandrels, a Constantinian frieze runs around the arch, between the tops of the small arches and the bottoms of the roundels. The frieze in Figure \(\PageIndex{11}\ highlights the artistic style of the period and chronologically depicts Constantine's rise to power. Unlike previous examples of Late Antique art, the bodies in this frieze are completely schematic and defined only by stiff, rigid clothes. In one scene, featuring Constantine distributing gifts, the emperor is centrally depicted and raised above his supporters on a throne.



Figure **12.1.11**: Arch of Constantine (detail, north side), Rome, Italy, 312-315 BCE. This detail shows Constantine distributing gifts from his throne down to his supporters. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

Basilica Nova and the Colossus of Constantine

When Constantine and Maxentius clashed at the Milvian Bridge, Maxentius was in the middle of building a grand basilica. It was eventually renamed the Basilica Nova, and was located near the Roman Forum. The basilica consisted of one side aisle on either side of a central nave (see Figure **12.1.12**).

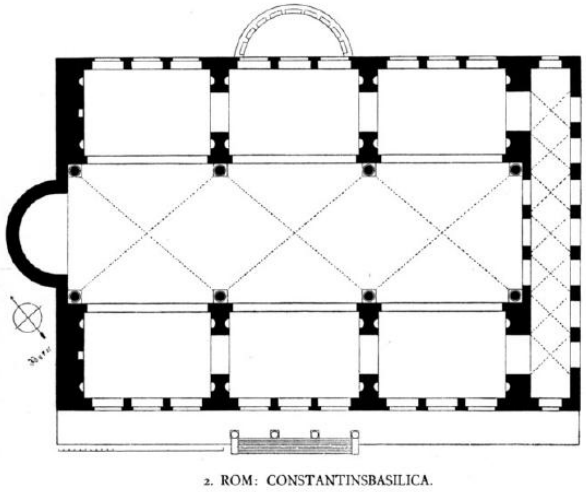


Figure **12.1.12**: The ground plan of the Basilica Nova in Rome, Italy, 306-312 CE. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

When Constantine took over and completed the grand building, it was 300 feet long, 215 feet wide, and stood 115 feet tall down the nave. Concrete walls 15 feet thick supported the basilica's massive scale and expansive vaults (see Figure **12.1.13**). It was lavishly decorated with marble veneer and stucco. The southern end of the basilica was flanked by a porch, with an apse at the northern end.



Figure **12.1.13**: The Basilica Nova as it looks today in Rome. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

The apse of the Basilica Nova was the location of the Colossus of Constantine. The colossus in Figure **12.1.14** was built from many parts. The head, arms, hands, legs, and feet were carved from marble, while the body was built with a brick core and wooden framework and then gilded.



Figure **12.1.14**: Colossus of Constantine, from Basilica Nova, Rome, c. 315-330 CE. Marble. Capitoline Museums. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

Only parts of the Colossus remain, including the head that is over eight feet tall and 6.5 feet long. It shows a portrait of an individual with clearly defined features: a hooked nose, prominent jaw, and large eyes that look upwards. Like the porphyry bust of Galerius, Constantine's portrait combines naturalism in his nose, mouth, and chin with a growing sense of abstraction in his eyes and geometric hairstyle.

He also held an orb and, possibly, a scepter, and one hand points upwards towards the heavens. Both the immensity of the scale and his depiction as Jupiter (seated, heroic, and semi-nude) inspire a feeling of awe and overwhelming power and authority.

The basilica was a common Roman building and functioned as a multipurpose space for law courts, senate meetings, and business transactions. The form was appropriated for Christian worship and most churches, even today, still maintain this basic shape.

Diocletian's Palace at Split

Diocletian abdicated power in 305 CE and left the Tetrarchy to his co-emperors and Severus, the newly inaugurated general. Diocletian then retired to his boyhood palace in Dalmatia.

The palace's remains became the center of the modern city of Spilt in Croatia. Diocletian's palace was built as a fortress, demonstrating that despite Diocletian's success as emperor, he still required security living in a hostile Roman environment. Despite the stylistic changes in sculpture, Diocletian's palace serves as a reminder that the style of Roman architecture continued to be based on Classical models and forms.



Figure 12.1.15: Diocletian's Palace: An artist's reconstruction of the original structure. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

In addition to its numerous round arches and Classical columns, the palace also contains a vestibule with a domed ceiling that has an oculus somewhat reminiscent of the Pantheon in Rome (see Figure 12.1.16). The palace was set up in a similar fashion to a castrum and contained courts, libraries, and other features found in imperial villas. It was constructed from local materials including limestone, marble, and brick. Some material for decoration was imported: Egyptian granite columns, fine marble for revetments, and some capitals produced in workshops in the Proconnesos (present-day Marmara Island off the coast of Turkey).



Figure 12.1.16: Vestibule: Note the domed ceiling with a wide oculus in Diocletian's Palace, in Split, Croatia, c. 305 CE. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

The southern wall, which was the only unfortified part of the palace, was practically built on the waterfront and appeared to rise out of the Adriatic Sea. Diocletian's palace demonstrates the Roman use of vaults in the substructure and the use of columns, peristyles, and entablatures to create monumental spaces. For example, the central court of the palace, known as the Peristyle, demonstrates the stylistic and monumental use of these architectural elements. Furthermore, the central court was sunken and a flight of stairs enclosed the court and led up to the decorative Peristyle and surrounding rooms (see Figure 12.1.17). This increased the feeling of monumentality while emphasizing Diocletian's imperial power, as members of the court had to stand several steps below the entrances to the temples, mausoleum, and court rooms.



Figure **12.1.17**: The Peristyle at Diocletian's Palace: The arcuated pediment is a rare feature in Roman architecture. Resting on four Composite columns, the pediment contains a round arch that rises into its base toward its apex. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

A main feature of the Peristyle is the portico that marks the entrance to Diocletian's private apartments. Following the format of a traditional Roman temple to a degree, the portico rests atop a raised platform. Behind it rests a marble-faced brick wall with three entrances: an archway flanked by a rectangular portal on each side. Perhaps its most unique feature is the arcuated pediment that sits atop the temple facade. Resting on four Composite columns, the pediment contains a round arch that rises into its base toward its apex. An arcade supported by Composite columns stands to either side of the facade.

The northern half of the palace, divided in two parts by the cardo leading from the northern gate to the Peristyle, is not as well preserved as the rest of the palace. Scholars posit that each part was a residential complex that housed soldiers, servants, and possibly some other facilities. Both parts were apparently surrounded by streets. Leading to the perimeter walls there were rectangular buildings that were possibly storage magazines.

While the architectural aspects of the palace follow Roman traditions, several decorative choices hail from Egypt. Diocletian adorned his new home with numerous 3500-year-old granite sphinxes, originating from the site of Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III (see Figure **12.1.18**). Only three have survived the centuries. One is still on the Peristyle, the second sits headless in front of Jupiter's temple, and a third is in the city museum.



Figure **12.1.18**: Sphinx from the tomb of Thutmose III: Diocletian adorned his new home with numerous 3500-year-old granite sphinxes, originating from the site of Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III. (Photo via Lumen Learning)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Diane Reilly, "Classicism and the Early Middle Ages," in Smarthistory, June 12, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Lumen Learning, "Decline of the Roman Empire," Lumen Learning (CC BY 4.0)

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12.2: Christian Art Before Constantine

Christianity, an introduction

by Dr. Beth Harris, Dr. Nancy Ross and Dr. Steven Zucker

How little we know



Figure 12.2.1: The Good Shepherd, The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy, 425 CE. Mosaic. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) In this mosaic, Jesus is depicted as the "Good Shepherd" in the center, surrounded by sheep representing his followers for whom he cares. Such imagery blended existing Roman and Christian symbolism.

Almost nothing is known about Jesus beyond biblical accounts, although we do know quite a bit more about the cultural and political context in which he lived—for example, Jerusalem in the first century. What follows is an introductory historical summary of Christianity. It hardly needs stating that there are many interpretations and disagreements among historians.

Jesus v. Rome

The biblical Jesus, described in the Gospels as the son of a carpenter, was a Jew and a champion of the underdog. He rebelled against the occupying Roman government in what was then Palestine (at this point the Roman Empire stretched across the Mediterranean). He was crucified for upsetting the social order and challenging the authority of the Romans and their local Jewish leaders. The Romans crucified Jesus, a typical method of execution—especially for those accused of crimes against the government.

Jesus' followers claim that after three days he rose from the grave and later ascended into heaven. His original followers, known as disciples or apostles, traveled great distances and spread Jesus' message. His life is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which are found in the New Testament. "Christ" means messiah or savior (this belief in a savior is a traditional part of Jewish theology).

Old and New Testaments

Early on, there were many ways that Christianity was practiced and understood, and it wasn't until the 2nd century that Christianity began to be understood as a religion distinct from Judaism (it's helpful to remember that Judaism itself had many different sects). Christians were sometimes severely persecuted by the Romans. In the early 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine experienced a miraculous conversion and made it legally acceptable to be a Christian. Less than a hundred years later, the Roman Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official state religion.

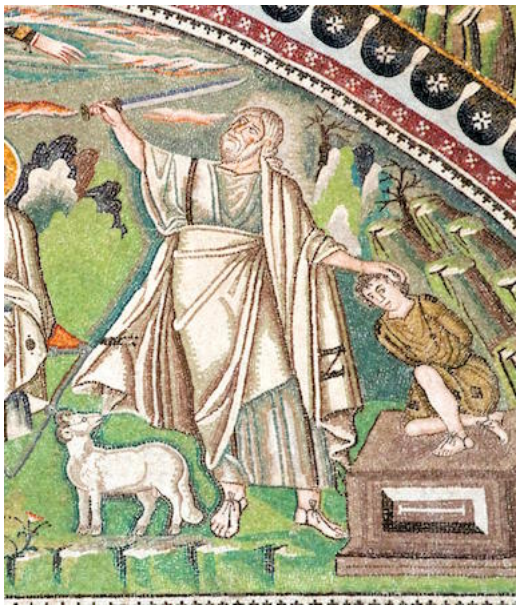


Figure **12.2.2**: Sacrifice of Isaac, San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, early 6th century. Mosaic. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) This portion of the mosaic illustrates a story from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (Genesis 22:1-19) in which God has told Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac, here shown bound and kneeling while Abraham lifts his sword. At the last moment, an angel (visible as a disembodied hand) halts the would-be murder.

The first Christians were Jews (whose bible we refer to as the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible). But soon pagans too converted to this new religion. Christians saw the predictions of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible come to fulfillment in the life of Jesus Christ—hence the "Bible" of the Christians includes both the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament) and the New Testament.

In addition to the fulfillment of prophecy, Christians saw parallels between the events of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. These parallels, or foreshadowings, are called typology. One example would be Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and the later sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We often see these comparisons in Christian art offered as a revelation of God's plan for the salvation of mankind.

Different Christianities

Unlike Greek and Roman religions (there was both an official "state" religion as well as other cults), Christianity emphasized belief and a personal relationship with God. The doctrines, or main teachings, of Christianity were determined in a series of councils in the early Christian period, such as the Council of Nicea in 325. This resulted in a common statement of belief known as the Nicene Creed, which is still used by some churches today.

Nevertheless, there is great diversity in Christian belief and practice. This was true even in the early days of Christianity, when, for example, Arians (who believed that the three parts of the Holy Trinity were not equal) and Donatists (who held that priests who had renounced their Christian faith during periods of persecution could not administer the sacraments), were considered heretics (someone who goes against official teaching). Today there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians who belong to a multitude of sects.

The two dominant early branches of Christianity were the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, rooted in Western and Eastern Europe respectively. Protestantism (and its different forms) emerged only later, at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Before that there was essentially just one church in Western Europe—what we would call the Roman Catholic church today (to differentiate it from other forms of Christianity in the West such as Lutheranism, Methodism etc.). Christianity spread throughout the world. In the 16th century, the Jesuits (a Catholic order), sent missionaries to Asia, North and South America, and Africa often in concert with Europe's colonial expansion.



Figure **12.2.3**: Masaccio, *Holy Trinity with the Virgin and Saint John* (detail), c. 1427. Fresco, 667 x 317 cm. Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) This fresco depicts the three members of the Holy Trinity: Jesus on the cross; God the Father behind him; and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a white dove, between them. Jesus' mother, the Virgin Mary, and his disciple John kneel at the base of the cross.

Christianity holds that God has a three-part nature—that God is a trinity (God the father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ)* and that it was Jesus' death on the cross—his sacrifice—that allowed for human beings to have the possibility of eternal life in heaven. In Christian theology, Christ is seen as the second Adam, and Mary (Jesus' mother) is seen as the second Eve. The idea here is that where Adam and Eve caused original sin, and were expelled from paradise (the Garden of Eden), Mary and Christ made it possible for human beings to have eternal life in paradise (heaven), through Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Christian practice centers on the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is sometimes referred to as Communion. Christians eat bread and drink wine to remember Christ's sacrifice for the sins of humankind. Christ himself initiated this practice at the Last Supper. Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believe that the bread and wine literally transform into the body and blood of Christ, whereas Protestants and other Christians see the Eucharist as symbolic reminder and re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice.

Christians demonstrate their faith by engaging in good (charitable) works (works of art—like the frescoes by Giotto in the Arena Chapel—were often created as good works). They often engage in rituals, or sacraments, such as partaking of the Eucharist or being baptized. Traditional Christian churches have a hierarchical structure of clergy. Devout men and women sometimes become nuns or monks and may separate themselves from the world and live a cloistered life devoted to prayer in a monastery.

*There are also nontrinitian Christians.

Early Christianity, an introduction

by Dr. Allen Farber

Key events



Figure 12.2.4: Colossal statue of Constantine the Great, 4th century. Capitoline Museum, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Jean-Christophe BENOIST, CC BY 2.5)

Two important moments played a critical role in the development of early Christianity:

1. The decision of the Apostle Paul to spread Christianity beyond the Jewish communities of Palestine into the Greco-Roman world
2. When the Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and became its patron at the beginning of the fourth century (Constantine is pictured in Figure 12.2.4 in a fragment of the colossal statue.)

The creation and nature of Christian art were directly impacted by these moments.

The spread of Christianity

As implicit in the names of his Epistles, Paul spread Christianity to the Greek and Roman cities of the ancient Mediterranean world. In cities like Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Rome, Paul encountered the religious and cultural experience of the Greco Roman world. This encounter played a major role in the formation of Christianity.



Figure 12.2.5: The Tomb of St. John the Apostle, from the Basilica of St. John, 6th century, Ephesus, near modern day Selçuk, Turkey. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain) Ephesus was one of the cities in the Roman world to which the apostle Paul spread Christianity.



Figure **12.2.6**: Rotunda of Galerius, later a Christian church, and afterwards a mosque. Today it is known as the Church of the Rotunda, 4th century CE, Thessaloniki, Greece. (Photo: George M. Groutas, CC BY 2.0) Thessaloniki was another one of the cities in the Roman world to which the apostle Paul spread Christianity.

Christianity as a mystery cult

Christianity in its first three centuries was one of a large number of mystery religions that flourished in the Roman world. Religion in the Roman world was divided between the public, inclusive cults of civic religions and the secretive, exclusive mystery cults. The emphasis in the civic cults was on customary practices, especially sacrifices. Since the early history of the polis or city state in Greek culture, the public cults played an important role in defining civic identity.



Figure **12.2.7**: Arch of Titus and Colosseum, late 1st century CE. Rome, Italy. (Photo: Marco Verch, CC BY-2.0) At the heart of Roman culture and civic identity, the city of Rome--featuring architectural feats such as the Colosseum and the Arch of Titus--was a bustling urban center for its citizens.

As it expanded and assimilated more people, Rome continued to use the public religious experience to define the identity of its citizens. The polytheism of the Romans allowed the assimilation of the gods of the people it had conquered.

Thus, when the Emperor Hadrian created the Pantheon in the early second century, the building's dedication to all the gods signified the Roman ambition of bringing cosmos or order to the gods, just as new and foreign societies were brought into political order through the spread of Roman imperial authority (see Figure **12.2.8**). The order of Roman authority on earth is a reflection of the divine cosmos.



Figure 12.2.8: Pantheon, completed 126 CE. Rome, Italy. (Photo: Mr. G's Travels, CC BY-NC-SA-2.0)

For most adherents of mystery cults, there was no contradiction in participating in both the public cults and a mystery cult. The different religious experiences appealed to different aspects of life. In contrast to the civic identity which was at the focus of the public cults, the mystery religions appealed to the participant's concerns for personal salvation. The mystery cults focused on a central mystery that would only be known by those who had become initiated into the teachings of the cult.

Monotheism

These are characteristics Christianity shares with numerous other mystery cults. In early Christianity emphasis was placed on baptism, which marked the initiation of the convert into the mysteries of the faith. The Christian emphasis on the belief in salvation and an afterlife is consistent with the other mystery cults. The monotheism of Christianity, though, was a crucial difference from the other cults. The refusal of the early Christians to participate in the civic cults due to their monotheistic beliefs lead to their persecution. Christians were seen as anti-social.

Early Christian art

by Dr. Allen Farber

The beginnings of an identifiable Christian art can be traced to the end of the second century and the beginning of the third century. Considering the Old Testament prohibitions against graven images, it is important to consider why Christian art developed in the first place. The use of images will be a continuing issue in the history of Christianity. The best explanation for the emergence of Christian art in the early church is due to the important role images played in Greco-Roman culture.



Figure 12.2.9: Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, 359 CE. Marble. Treasury of Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)

As Christianity gained converts, these new Christians had been brought up on the value of images in their previous cultural experience and they wanted to continue this in their Christian experience. For example, there was a change in burial practices in the Roman world away from cremation to inhumation. Outside the city walls of Rome, adjacent to major roads, catacombs were dug into the ground to bury the dead. Families would have chambers or cubicula dug to bury their members. Wealthy Romans would

also have sarcophagi or marble tombs carved for their burial. The Christian converts wanted the same things. Christian catacombs were dug frequently adjacent to non-Christian ones, and sarcophagi with Christian imagery were apparently popular with the richer Christians.

Junius Bassus, a Roman *praefectus urbi* or high ranking government administrator, died in 359 CE. Scholars believe that he converted to Christianity shortly before his death accounting for the inclusion of Christ and scenes from the Bible (see Figure 12.2.9).

Themes of death and resurrection

A striking aspect of the Christian art of the third century is the absence of the imagery that will dominate later Christian art. We do not find in this early period images of the Nativity, Crucifixion, or Resurrection of Christ, for example. This absence of direct images of the life of Christ is best explained by the status of Christianity as a mystery religion. The story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection would be part of the secrets of the cult.

While not directly representing these central Christian images, the theme of death and resurrection was represented through a series of images, many of which were derived from the Old Testament that echoed the themes. For example, the story of Jonah—being swallowed by a great fish and then after spending three days and three nights in the belly of the beast is vomited out on dry ground—was seen by early Christians as an anticipation or prefiguration of the story of Christ's own death and resurrection. Images of Jonah, along with those of Daniel in the Lion's Den, the Three Hebrews in the Firey Furnace, Moses Striking the Rock, among others, are widely popular in the Christian art of the third century, both in paintings and on sarcophagi.

All of these can be seen to allegorically allude to the principal narratives of the life of Christ. The common subject of salvation echoes the major emphasis in the mystery religions on personal salvation. The appearance of these subjects frequently adjacent to each other in the catacombs and sarcophagi can be read as a visual litany: save me Lord as you have saved Jonah from the belly of the great fish, save me Lord as you have saved the Hebrews in the desert, save me Lord as you have saved Daniel in the Lion's den, etc.

One can imagine that early Christians—who were rallying around the nascent religious authority of the Church against the regular threats of persecution by imperial authority—would find great meaning in the story of Moses of striking the rock to provide water for the Israelites fleeing the authority of the Pharaoh on their exodus to the Promised Land.

Christianity's canonical texts and the New Testament

One of the major differences between Christianity and the public cults was the central role faith plays in Christianity and the importance of orthodox beliefs. The history of the early Church is marked by the struggle to establish a canonical set of texts and the establishment of orthodox doctrine.

Questions about the nature of the Trinity and Christ would continue to challenge religious authority. Within the civic cults there were no central texts and there were no orthodox doctrinal positions. The emphasis was on maintaining customary traditions. One accepted the existence of the gods, but there was no emphasis on belief in the gods.

The Christian emphasis on orthodox doctrine has its closest parallels in the Greek and Roman world to the role of philosophy. Schools of philosophy centered around the teachings or doctrines of a particular teacher. The schools of philosophy proposed specific conceptions of reality. Ancient philosophy was influential in the formation of Christian theology. For example, the opening of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God…," is unmistakably based on the idea of the "logos" going back to the philosophy of Heraclitus (ca. 535 – 475 BCE). Christian apologists like Justin Martyr writing in the second century understood Christ as the Logos or the Word of God who served as an intermediary between God and the World.



Figure 12.2.10: Christ and the Apostles, Catacombs of Domitilla, Rome, Italy, 4th century CE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

An early representation of Christ found in the Catacomb of Domitilla shows the figure of Christ flanked by a group of his disciples or students (see Figure 12.2.10). Those experienced with later Christian imagery might mistake this for an image of the Last Supper, but instead this image does not tell any story. It conveys rather the idea that Christ is the true teacher.

Christ draped in classical garb holds a scroll in his left hand while his right hand is outstretched in the so-called *ad locutio* gesture, or the gesture of the orator. The dress, scroll, and gesture all establish the authority of Christ, who is placed in the center of his disciples. Christ is thus treated like the philosopher surrounded by his students or disciples.



Figure 12.2.11: Comparably, an early representation of the apostle Paul (left), identifiable with his characteristic pointed beard and high forehead, is based on the convention of the philosopher, as exemplified by a Roman copy of a late fourth century BCE portrait of the fifth century BCE playwright Sophocles (right). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Global Connections: Transitional Style in Early Manuscripts

Books circulate easily because they are small and portable. Monks and nuns in monasteries often copied and illustrated Bibles, linking classical traditions such as classical manuscripts, which have been lost, and later illuminated manuscripts. As Dr. Nancy Ross notes, the artist who made the Vienna Genesis seems to be working between two systems and styles—one stemming from the ancient world and valuing naturalistic details and one stemming from a medieval preference for "valued symbolism and abstraction." The book was believed to have been made in Syria or Constantinople, making the Vienna Genesis not only a luxury item, and a bit of a time capsule capturing this transitional time, but also a real global commodity due to the ways in which the artist integrated multiple styles in the visual representations.

The story of Rebecca and Eliezer comes from Genesis, and as Ross summarizes, is a story "about God intervening to ensure a sound marriage for Abraham's son." The artist employs a continuous narrative, showing two consecutive scenes simultaneously. Here, the artist suggests time passing by including Rebecca twice in the story, in the same pink dress (see Figure 12.2.12). In just this one image from the codex, which is estimated to have originally included 192 illustrations, the artist includes stylistic details that not only nod to classical architecture and sculptural poses, but embrace Early Christian art, with its emphasis on symbolism over a preoccupation with accurate or detailed spatial representation.

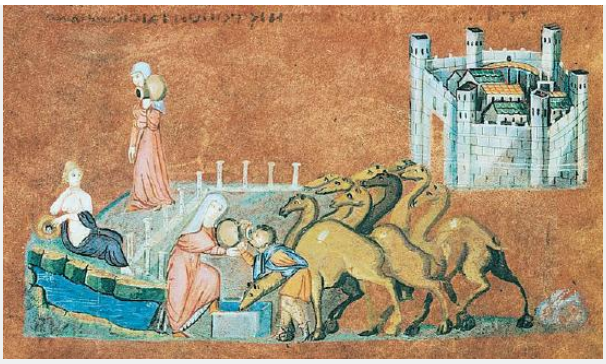


Figure 12.2.12: Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, folio 7 recto from the Vienna Genesis, early 6th century. Tempera, gold and silver on purple vellum, 31.75 x 23.5 cm. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Dura-Europos

The origins of Byzantine Architecture: Buildings for a Minority Religion

by Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout

Officially Byzantine architecture begins with Constantine, but the seeds for its development were sown at least a century before the Edict of Milan granted toleration to Christianity in 313 CE. Although limited physical evidence survives, a combination of archaeology and texts may help us to understand the formation of an architecture in service of the new religion.

The *domus ecclesiae*, or house-church, most often represented an adaptation of an existing Late Antique residence to include a meeting hall and perhaps a baptistery. Most examples are known from texts; while there are significant remains in Rome, where they were known as *tituli*, most early sites of Christian worship were subsequently rebuilt and enlarged to give them a suitably public character, thus destroying much of the physical evidence.

Synagogues and *mithraia* from the period are considerably better preserved. A notable exception is the Christian House at Dura-Europos in Syria, built c. 200 on a typical courtyard plan. Modified c. 230, two rooms were joined to form a longitudinal meeting hall; another was provided with a *piscina* (a basin for water) to function as a baptistery for Christian initiation (see Figure 12.2.13 to see a reconstruction of the Baptistery).

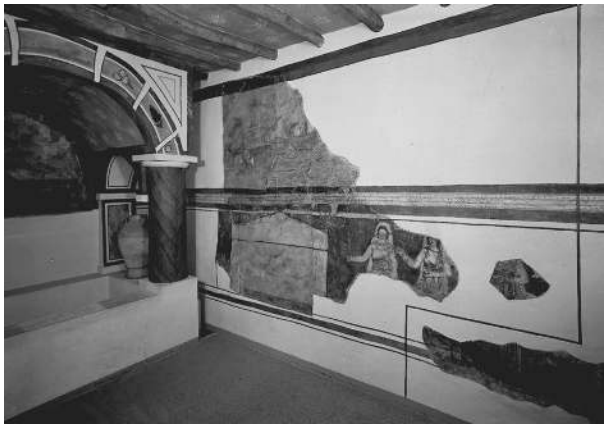


Figure 12.2.13: Baptistery reconstruction, house church, Dura-Europos. (Photo: Yale University Art Gallery, via Smarthistory)

Dura-Europos

Dura-Europos, a border city between the Romans and the Parthians, was the site of an early Jewish synagogue dated by an Aramaic inscription to 244 CE. It is also the site of Christian churches and *mithraea*, this city's location between empires made it an optimal spot for cultural and religious diversity.

The synagogue is the best preserved of the many imperial Roman-era synagogues that have been uncovered by archaeologists. It contains a forecourt and house of assembly with frescoed walls depicting people and animals, as well as a Torah shrine in the western wall facing Jerusalem.



Figure **12.2.14**: Remains of the synagogue at Dura-Europos: This is the best preserved ancient synagogue to be uncovered by archaeologists. (Photo: heretiq, CC BY-SA 2.5)

The synagogue paintings, the earliest continuous surviving biblical narrative cycle, are conserved at Damascus, together with the complete Roman horse armor. Because of the paintings adorning the walls, the synagogue was at first mistaken for a Greek temple. The synagogue was preserved, ironically, when it was filled with earth to strengthen the city's fortifications against a Sassanian assault in 256 CE.

The preserved frescoes include scenes such as the Sacrifice of Isaac and other Genesis stories, Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law, Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, scenes from the Book of Esther (see Figure **12.2.15**), and many others. The Hand of God motif is used to represent divine intervention or approval in several paintings. Scholars cannot agree on the subjects of some scenes, because of damage, or the lack of comparative examples; some think the paintings were used as an instructional display to educate and teach the history and laws of the religion.



Figure **12.2.15**: Scenes from the Book of Esther in the synagogue of Dura-Europos, Syria, c. 245–256 CE. Tempera on plaster. Reconstruction in National Museum, Damascus. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

Others think that this synagogue was painted in order to compete with the many other religions being practiced in Dura-Europos. The new (and considerably smaller) Christian church (Dura-Europos church) appears to have opened shortly before the surviving paintings were begun in the synagogue. The discovery of the synagogue helps to dispel narrow interpretations of Judaism's historical prohibition of visual images.

Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus

by Dr. Allen Farber



Figure 12.2.16: Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, found under the floor of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, Italy, c. 275 CE. White veined marble. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Early Christian and Roman (pagan) art

This third century sarcophagus from the Church of Santa Maria was undoubtedly made to serve as the tomb of a relatively prosperous third century Christian. As we will see in Figure 12.2.17, Early Christian art borrowed many forms from pagan art.

The male philosopher type that we see in the center of the Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus (see Figure 12.2.16) is easily identifiable with the same type in another third century sarcophagus (see Figure 12.2.17), but in this case a non-Christian one.

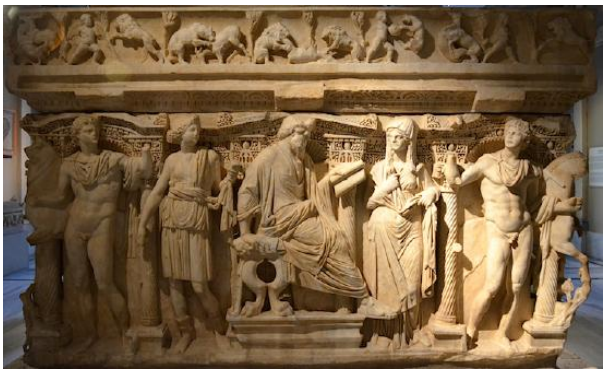


Figure 12.2.17: Asiatic sarcophagus from Sidamara, c. 250 CE. Istanbul Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, Turkey. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The female figure beside him in the Santa Maria Antiqua sarcophagus who holds her arms outstretched combines two different conventions. The outstretched hands in Early Christian art represent the so-called "orant" or praying figure (see Figure 12.2.18). This is the same gesture found in the catacomb paintings of Jonah being vomited from the great fish, the Hebrews in the Furnace, and Daniel in the Lions den.



Figure 12.2.18: Left to right: Orant from the Sarcophagus of Sabinus, c. 310-20 (Vatican Museums); Orant from the Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, c. 270, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome; Orant from the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, fresco, late 2nd century through the 4th century CE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The juxtaposition of this female figure with the philosopher figure associates her with the convention of the muse in ancient Greek and Roman art (as a source of inspiration for the philosopher). This convention is illustrated in a later sixth century miniature showing the figure of Dioscorides, an ancient Greek physician, pharmacologist, and botanist (see Figure **12.2.19**).



Figure **12.2.19**: Illustration of Dioscorides, illuminated manuscript, late 6th century CE. (Photo via Smarthistory)

On the left side of the sarcophagus (see Figure **12.2.20**), Jonah is represented sleeping under the ivy after being vomited from the great fish. The pose of the reclining Jonah with his arm over his head is based on the mythological figure of Endymion, whose wish to sleep for ever—and thus become ageless and immortal—explains the popularity of this subject on non-Christian sarcophagi (see the detail from a Roman sarcophagus in Figure **12.2.21**).



Figure **12.2.20**: Jonah (detail), Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, c. 275 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **12.2.21**: Endymion (detail), Marble sarcophagus with the myth of Selene and Endymion (detail), Roman, early 3rd century CE. Marble, 28 1/2 inches (72.39 cm) high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Another popular Early Christian image appears on the *Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus* (see Figure **12.2.22**, right), known as the Good Shepherd. While echoing the New Testament parable of the Good Shepherd and the Psalms of David, the motif had clear parallels in Greek and Roman art, going back at least to Archaic Greek art, as exemplified by the so-called *Moschophoros*, or calf-bearer, from the early sixth century BCE (see Figure **12.2.22**, left). On the far right of the *Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus*, we see an image of the Baptism of Christ. The inclusion of this relatively rare representation of Christ probably refers to the importance of the sacrament of Baptism, which signified death and rebirth into a new Christian life.



Figure **12.2.22**: Left: *Moschophoros (Calf Bearer)*, c. 560 BCE. Marble, restored height 5'5". Acropolis Museum, Athens. (Photo: Marsyas, CC BY-SA 2.5) Right: Good Shepherd and Baptism (detail), Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, c. 275 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A curious detail about the male and female figures at the center of the *Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus* is that their faces are unfinished (see Figure **12.2.23**). This suggests that this tomb was not made with a specific patron in mind. Rather, it was fabricated on a speculative basis, with the expectation that a patron would buy it and have his—and presumably his wife's—likenesses added. If this is true, it says a lot about the nature of the art industry and the status of Christianity at this period. To produce a sarcophagus like this meant a serious commitment on the part of the maker. The expense of the stone and the time taken to carve it were considerable. A craftsman would not have made a commitment like this without a sense of certainty that someone would purchase it.



Figure **12.2.23**: Orant and Seated figure (detail), Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus, c. 275 CE. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Beth Harris, Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Nancy Ross, "Christianity, an introduction," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Allen Farber, "Early Christianity, an introduction," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Allen Farber, "Early Christian art," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout, "The origins of Byzantine architecture," in Smarthistory, June 8, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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12.3: Christian Art and Architecture After Constantine

Early Christian art and architecture after Constantine

by Dr. Allen Farber

By the beginning of the fourth century Christianity was a growing mystery religion in the cities of the Roman world. It was attracting converts from different social levels. Christian theology and art was enriched through the cultural interaction with the Greco-Roman world. But Christianity would be radically transformed through the actions of a single man.

Rome becomes Christian and Constantine builds churches



Figure **12.3.1**: The Colossus of Constantine, c. 312-15. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory) Remnants of the Colossus statue of Constantine lean against the wall and stand on pediments at the Musei Capitolini in Rome.

In 312, the Emperor Constantine defeated his principal rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Accounts of the battle describe how Constantine saw a sign in the heavens portending his victory. Eusebius, Constantine's principal biographer, describes the sign as the Chi Rho, the first two letters in the Greek spelling of the name Christos.

After that victory Constantine became the principal patron of Christianity. In 313 he issued the Edict of Milan which granted religious toleration. Although Christianity would not become the official religion of Rome until the end of the fourth century, Constantine's imperial sanction of Christianity transformed its status and nature. Neither imperial Rome or Christianity would be the same after this moment. Rome would become Christian, and Christianity would take on the aura of imperial Rome.

The transformation of Christianity is dramatically evident in a comparison between the architecture of the pre-Constantinian church and that of the Constantinian and post-Constantinian church. During the pre-Constantinian period, there was not much that distinguished the Christian churches from typical domestic architecture. A striking example of this is presented by a Christian community house, from the Syrian town of Dura-Europos. Here a typical home has been adapted to the needs of the congregation. A wall was taken down to combine two rooms: this was undoubtedly the room for services. It is significant that the most elaborate aspect of the house is the room designed as a baptistry. This reflects the importance of the sacrament of Baptism to initiate new members into the mysteries of the faith. Otherwise this building would not stand out from the other houses. This domestic architecture obviously would not meet the needs of Constantine's architects.

Emperors for centuries had been responsible for the construction of temples throughout the Roman Empire. We have already observed the role of the public cults in defining one's civic identity, and Emperors understood the construction of temples as testament to their pietas, or respect for the customary religious practices and traditions. So it was natural for Constantine to want to construct edifices in honor of Christianity. He built churches in Rome including the Church of St. Peter (see a rendering of Old St. Peter's Basilica in Figure **12.3.2**), he built churches in the Holy Land, most notably the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and he built churches in his newly-constructed capital of Constantinople.

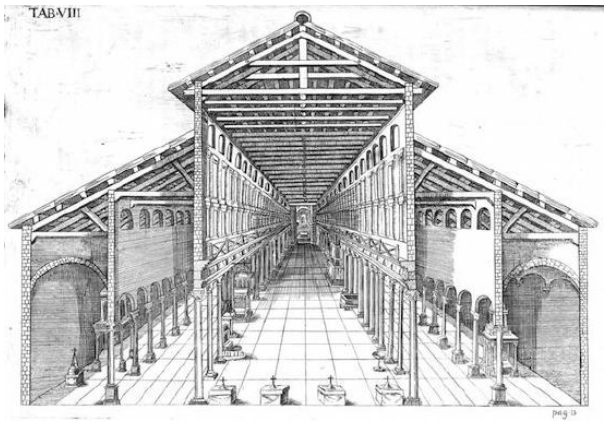


Figure **12.3.2**: Old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, from: Giovanni Ciampini, *De sacris aedificiis a Constantino Magno constructis: synopsis historica*, 1693, p. 33. (Image via Smarthistory)

The basilica



Figure **12.3.3**: Reconstruction of the interior of the Basilica Ulpia. (Image via Smarthistory)

In creating these churches, Constantine and his architects confronted a major challenge: what should be the physical form of the church? Clearly the traditional form of the Roman temple would be inappropriate both from associations with pagan cults but also from the difference in function. Temples served as treasuries and dwellings for the cult; sacrifices occurred on outdoor altars with the temple as a backdrop. This meant that Roman temple architecture was largely an architecture of the exterior. Since Christianity was a mystery religion that demanded initiation to participate in religious practices, Christian architecture put greater emphasis on the interior. The Christian churches needed large interior spaces to house the growing congregations and to mark the clear separation of the faithful from the unfaithful. At the same time, the new Christian churches needed to be visually meaningful. The buildings needed to convey the new authority of Christianity. These factors were instrumental in the formulation during the Constantinian period of an architectural form that would become the core of Christian architecture to our own time: the Christian Basilica.



Figure **12.3.4**: Aula Palatina, Trier, early 4th century CE. (photo: Beth M527, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The basilica was not a new architectural form. The Romans had been building basilicas in their cities and as part of palace complexes for centuries. A particularly lavish one was the so-called Basilica Ulpia constructed as part of the Forum of the Emperor Trajan in the early second century (see Figure **12.3.3**). Basilicas had diverse functions but essentially they served as formal public meeting places. One of the major functions of the basilicas was as a site for law courts. These were housed in an architectural form known as the apse. In the Basilica Ulpia, these semi-circular forms project from either end of the building, but in some cases, the apses would project off of the length of the building. The magistrate who served as the representative of the authority of the Emperor would sit in a formal throne in the apse and issue his judgments. This function gave an aura of political authority to the basilicas.

The basilica at Trier (Aula Palatina)

Basilicas also served as audience halls as a part of imperial palaces. A well-preserved example is found in the northern German town of Trier. Constantine built a basilica as part of a palace complex in Trier which served as his northern capital (see Figure **12.3.4**). Although a fairly simple architectural form and now stripped of its original interior decoration, the basilica must have been an imposing stage for the emperor. Imagine the emperor dressed in imperial regalia marching up the central axis as he makes his dramatic *adventus* or entrance along with other members of his court. This space would have humbled an emissary who approached the enthroned emperor seated in the apse.

Editors' Note

The wide central aisle is called a nave, from the Latin word for ship. Indeed, the rafters of a ceiling like Old St. Peter's, as shown in Figure **12.3.2**, would look like the ribs of an inverted ship hull. Both Old St. Peter's Basilica and the Aula Palatina have a longitudinal plan, meaning they're arranged along a single central axis, here culminating at the altar. This is intentionally different from the central plan of pagan temples like the Pantheon.

Global Connections: Aksum, One of the Earliest Christian States

Aksum was a prosperous cosmopolitan trading hub and early Christian state, located in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea on the northeastern side of the African continent. This trading empire had a port city, Adulis, and connections to trade routes through the Red Sea, the Nile, and into the Indian Ocean. This kingdom was active between the first through eighth centuries, developing large-scale architecture and urban centers, both of which were greatly impacted by hybrid cultural influences from Arabic, Hellenic, and African empires and cultures, such as Egypt, Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean.



Figure **12.3.5**: Ruins of Aksum in present-day Matara, Eritrea. (Photo: Clay Gilliland, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In the first century CE, an Alexandria-based trader documented Aksum's thriving and expanding reputation in international trade in his book Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Although lesser known to historians now, Aksum held great power and influence, particularly during the fourth and fifth centuries, considered the height of its power. Beyond its recognition as a bustling urban center and reputation for international commerce, Aksum is also known for its monumental monolithic stelae, its association with the Ark of the Covenant, its unique coinage, and its complex written script, Ge'ez.

Between 330-340, Aksum King Ezana converted to Christianity, making Aksum one of the earliest Christian states. To mark Aksum's transition from a polytheist state to a Christian one (and to emphasize the importance of this conversion), King Ezana replaced existing imagery on his coins with a Christian cross. Aksumite coins were believed to be intended for international trade, reinforced by the Greek inscriptions on some and Ge'ez inscriptions on others.

As the British Museum asserts, "Aksum provides a counterpoint to the Greek and Roman worlds, and is an interesting example of a sub-Saharan civilization flourishing towards the end of the period of the great Mediterranean empires. It provides a link between the trading systems of the Mediterranean and the Asiatic world, and shows the extent of international commerce at that time… It was arguably as advanced as the Western European societies of the time."

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Allen Farber, "Early Christian art and architecture after Constantine," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

13: Medieval I- Reorganization of the Roman World and the Birth of Islam

In This Chapter

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13.1: Early Byzantium
13.2: The Migration Period
13.3: The Early Islamic World
13.4: Carolingian Art

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13.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: A Gothic, Roman, Heretic King



Figure **13.0.1**: Mausoleum of Thedoric, 520. Ravenna, Italy. (Photo: José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Mausoleum of Theodoric in Ravenna, Italy, looks a little bit like a tiny fortress, a uselessly-short watchtower, or even a not-very-aerodynamic spaceship. Its first floor, built of massive stone blocks, features ten flat slides, each with a rounded, Roman-style arch, and the upper level is a slightly narrower cylinder, decorated with rectangular niches capped by lunettes that echo the arches below. The stone for the building was quarried in Istria, across the Adriatic Sea in what is today Croatia, and each stone was expertly carved to fit together perfectly, without mortar. A rather flat dome with twelve radiating "loops" slightly overhangs the cylinder, capping the hulking building like a giant crown. Remarkably, this dome is not concrete, like the one the Romans used to span the Pantheon four centuries earlier, nor like the ones used in mausolea across the empire through Late Antiquity. Instead, the dome of the Mausoleum of Theodoric is a monolith, carved from a single, gigantic stone. Exactly how the builders managed to place the stone—weighing hundreds of tons—atop the second story remains a mystery.

Another mystery is why Theodoric would do such a thing. Many presume that the garnet cloisonné used in the Sutton Hoo ship burial, discussed later in this chapter, was a labor-intensive substitute for cloisonné enamel, but Theodoric's builders knew how to make concrete domes. Was he evoking northern burial traditions? Referencing stone-carving techniques and mausolea in Syria and Asia Minor? Or simply displaying his power by creating something a Byzantine emperor could not have done?

Theodoric was from one of those northern "barbarian" tribes, the Ostrogoths, that had become part of the Roman empire at its far reaches. He had been educated, however, in Constantinople, the capital of the eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire and heir to Rome's artistic and intellectual traditions. In 489, the Byzantine Emperor, Zeno, sent Theodoric, then a commander in the Byzantine army, to take Italy. By 493, Theodoric ruled the Italian peninsula and beyond—and although he professed allegiance to the Byzantine emperors, he minted a coin on which he called himself King Theodoric. His mustache may be northern, but putting his likeness on a coin evokes the Roman Emperors and other great conquerors (Figure **13.0.2**.



Figure **13.0.2**: Coin depicting Flavius Theodoricus (Theodoric the Great), c. 493-526. Palazzo Massimo, Rome. (Photo: unknown author, CC BY-3.0)

Theodoric's building program in Ravenna, which had been the capital of the western Roman Empire since 401, was grand and ambitious—though generally more traditional than his monumental mausoleum. In typical Byzantine style, the church now called Sant'Apollinare Nuovo had a plain brick exterior but inside was filled with glittering mosaics. One of these shows Theodoric's (since destroyed, but at the time neighboring) palace, which melds Classical features, like an arcade of Corinthian columns supporting rounded Roman arches, with Christian symbolism like the Greek cross and guardian angels (themselves modeled on nikes). At another of Theodoric's church complexes, also in Ravenna, only the baptistery survives. It too is built of brick, and has a concrete—not monolithic—dome, that features an internal ceiling mosaic depicting Jesus' own baptism.



Figure **13.0.3**: Ceiling mosaic showing the baptism of Jesus by Saint John the Baptist, c. 500. Ceiling of the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy. Mosaic. (Petar Milošević, CC BY-SA-4.0)

The scene includes not just Jesus and John the Baptist, but also a muscular older man with flowing white hair and a beard, symbolizing the river itself, and drawn directly from earlier Classical models, such as the Mosaic of Oceanos and Tethys from Gaziantep, Turkey (Figure **13.0.4**).

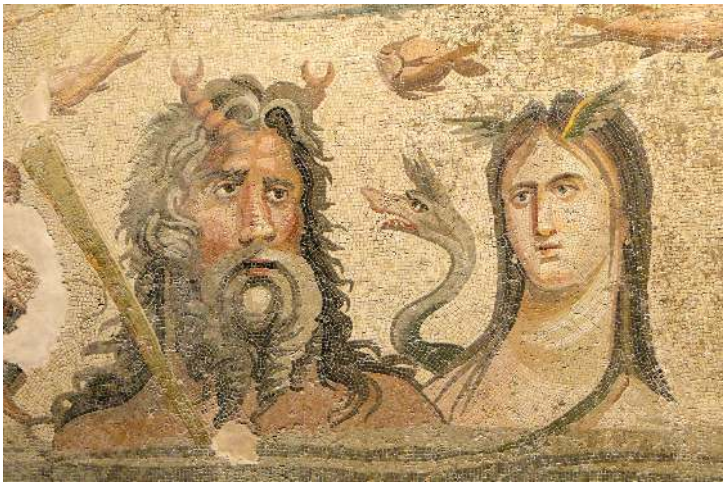


Figure **13.0.4**: Mosaic of Oceanos and Tethys, c. 2nd-3rd century. Mosaic. Zeugma Mosaic Museum, Gaziantep, Turkey. (Photo: Adam Jones, CC BY-SA-2.0)

This building is known as the Arian Baptistery, named after the branch of Christianity to which Theodoric—like many northerners after their conversion to Christianity—adhered. As the previous chapter mentioned, Arianism, which held that since God fathered Christ, Christ was the younger of the two,had been declared heretical at the Council of Nicea. This is one of several times in the early middle ages when Christians declared each other heretics over their explanations of the status of Christ. Most ended with the elimination of the heresy (too often, by eliminating the heretics themselves), but a break that still exists followed the Council of Chalcedon in 451, where the assembled bishops pondered how Christ could be both man and god, and decided that these two natures (human and divine) must each exist in pure form, unmixed, in Christ. Distant Christians, some at war with Persians, were not able to attend the council, and the Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches were among those which ultimately rejected its formulation, adhering to the older idea that the

divine and human are mixed in Christ. These churches still remain independent of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Fortunately, neither side calls the other heretics these days.



Figure **13.0.5**: Theodoric's Palace, c. 500. Mosaic. Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. (Photo: José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Theodoric's Arian heresy—and Theodoric himself—were deliberately erased when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian regained full control of Ravenna from the northerners. The church that Theodoric had dedicated to Christ was rededicated to an anti-Arian bishop, and depictions of Theodoric and his retinue were erased, similar to depictions of the much earlier Egyptian Pharaoh Hatshepsut. A close look at the columns of Theodoric's palace show the only remaining trace: ghostly hands against the marble columns, with only fluttering curtains now inhabiting each arch. Theodoric's bones, interred in his mausoleum, were scattered. The mausoleum itself remains, however, and both it and Theodoric himself reflect some of the indeterminacy, overlapping identities, and cross-cultural exchange that characterize this period.

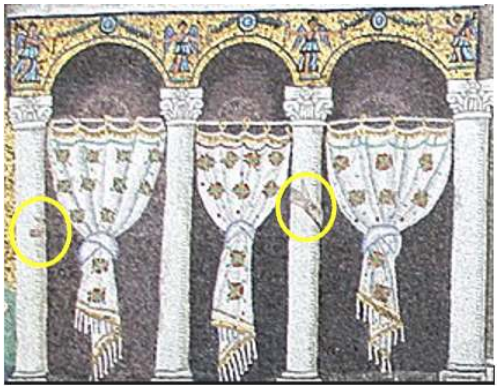


Figure **13.0.6**: Theodoric's Palace (detail showing disembodied hands), c. 500. Mosaic. Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. (Photo: José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Historiography (Writing History)

Terminology: Medieval

Theodoric would certainly not have thought of himself as living in the "Middle Ages," nor would anyone alive at the time. In fact, the label medieval, or Middle Ages, was given by later Renaissance thinkers, who saw their own age as a glorious rebirth, or flowering of Classical art and culture that had lain dormant in western Europe since the fall of the Western Roman Empire. For them, the thousand years between the fall of Rome and their own rediscovery of scientific observation, philosophy, humanism, and arts, were not just "Middle," but even "Dark" Ages full of violence, superstition, disease, and illiteracy. Scholars no longer consider this period to be just a "middle," but instead see it brimming with its own skillful, imaginative, and even fanciful art. Nonetheless, they do still use the term medieval to refer to this particular historical period. During the medieval period, Christianity and Islam became the ruling religions of Europe, North Africa, the Near East, and much of Asia. This period is also marked by armed conflict between Christianity and Islam, between Christianity and Judaism, and between Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Hinduism.

Desegregating the Middle Ages

Surveys and handbooks of art history, like this one, are usually arranged chronologically. Earlier cultures come first, followed by those that arose later. This textbook, like most, has separate chapters on the roughly contemporary civilizations of the ancient Near East and Egypt. Then civilizations parade by in reasonable order: Aegean, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman. The problem of fully contemporaneous cultures reappears, however, in the Middle Ages. Most textbooks use the following order of topics: "Early Christian, Byzantine, Islamic,

Early Medieval (including Carolingian and Ottonian), Romanesque, and Gothic," despite the fact that this has been considered a problematic approach for some time.

As Robert Nelson noted in 1996, this sequence creates "a conceptual break between Byzantium/Islam and Western Europe." This break means that Byzantium and Islam are effectively removed from the narrative and appear out of time prior to the true Middle Ages, thus shifting the narrative and timeline to move smoothly in a "Western" framework. Major surveys in the United States have even classified Byzantium with Greece and Rome, as "antiquity." Some surveys place Islam in a separate section of "non-Western" or "non-European" art, despite both the substantial geographical overlap between the medieval Islamic world and the ancient Near East, as well as the Roman Empire, and despite the pejorative connotations of categorizing a culture by what it is not (i.e., "non-Western").

By segregating Byzantium and the Islamic lands from the medieval narrative, historians of medieval art gave themselves permission to consider these cultures irrelevant. This "othering" of Byzantium and Islam has roots in the origins of the field of art history, in which German-speaking scholars called the middle ages "the German world" and its art "German styles." To break with this nationalistic and Orientalist understanding of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, this textbook treats the Middle Ages chronologically, dividing the period into Early, Middle, and Later Medieval and addressing not just northern and western Europe, but concurrent developments and exchanges to the south and east.

The table below indicates how this and the following chapters will address this material. The textbook also concludes with Chapter 16, which addresses the Gothic period, which occurs in the late medieval period in western Europe.

Content in Chapters 13-15

Chapter	13	14	15
Title	Medieval I: The Reorganization of the Roman World & the Rise of Islam	Medieval II: Contested Empires, Christian and Islamic	Medieval III: Reorganization of the East
Dates	333-843	843-1260	1260-1453
Material covered	• Early Byzantium ◦ Introduction/the lives of Jesus and Mary ◦ Manuscripts and ivory miniatures • The Migration Period ◦ Anglo-Saxon ◦ Vikings ◦ Insular • The Early Islamic World ◦ Introduction to Islam ◦ Mosque architecture ◦ Umayyad ◦ Abbasid ◦ The Islamic West • Carolingian	• Fractured Islam ◦ Fatimid ◦ Seljuk ◦ Ghaznavid ◦ The Islamic West, cont. • The Latin West ◦ Vikings, cont. ◦ Ottonian ◦ Pilgrimage ◦ Romanesque • Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest ◦ Icons, frescoes, and mosaics ◦ Macedonian Renaissance ◦ Medieval Nubian Kingdoms ◦ Kievan Rus' ◦ Norman Sicily	• Ilkhanid • Timurid • Mamluk • Late Byzantine • Christian East Africa

Nationalism and Orientalism

As noted in discussions of other periods, the way the story of the Middle Ages has been told often reflects less on the objects and cultures themselves than on scholars' own biases and preconceptions. Historiographies in earlier chapters have noted the tendency of early archaeologists to focus either on the Biblical or Classical world, or on what was close at hand. This encouraged narratives that linked past cultures to modern nations.

Nationalism

By the early 19th century, Englishmen were self-identifying as Anglo-Saxons, a cultural group last dominant in 1066 CE. By declaring this (false) identity, they claimed the British Empire to be Anglo-Saxon, denying any agency to the Celtic Britons of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, much less to colonial subjects in North America and Asia. In light of England's disagreements with France—over North American colonies, the French Revolution, and Napoleon—it also disassociated the English from the French-speaking Normans, who

conquered Anglo-Saxon England. This Anglo-Saxon identity has also been used to nefarious ends in the United States, in order to craft an imaginary and exclusionary vision of white America.

Probably the most insidious use of this kind of archaeology and myth-creation was in Nazi Germany. Building on the scholarship of German-speaking universities, the Nazis used archaeology of the Migration Period to claim territory on the theory that it had belonged to their Germanic ancestors rather than the Slavic peoples who were their actual neighbors in Poland and Czechoslovakia, among other countries. A theory advanced by Polish-Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski held that European culture was the result of the clash between the Classical and "IndoGermanic," which supposedly arose with the Aryan invasion of India and spread westward through Persia and the Caucasus, gradually developing into the strong, heroic culture of the German-speaking warlords who opposed the Romans. Despite completing extensive fieldwork in the Caucasus, Jordan, and Syria, Strzygowski rejected the idea of Islamic contributions to the art he studied, and proposed that Gothic architecture originated in Christian Armenia. "Aryan," and especially "Caucasian," have been widely used in the United States, alongside "Anglo-Saxon," to differentiate a supposed white, northern European race from others. The Nazis embraced Strzygiowski's view of a heroic, white Germanic European culture.

Orientalism

European diplomats, collectors, and scholars imagined that the vast and varied cultures of Asia, the Near East, North Africa, and Islam comprised a single, stereotyped, world they called the "Orient." This conception of the "Orient" was invented by Europeans—imagining cultures outside of themselves as outliers to mainstream European culture—and as decadent, dangerous, exotic, and foreign. As the Arab American National Museum explains, "'Orientalism' is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates, and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous." However, contrary to this flawed thinking, the biggest and most influential cities of the early medieval world were Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Turkey; Damascus, Syria; and Baghdad, Iraq. They preserved much of the literature and intellectual traditions of the Classical world—which would later be "rediscovered" during the Italian Renaissance. Intellectual centers of the Islamic world also saw major scientific and technical developments throughout the Middle Ages.

Chapter Overview

Introduction to the Early Middle Ages

Although scholars may disagree on exactly what to consider "Early Medieval," it is clear that the period (the early fourth through the ninth centuries) includes four roughly contemporary and deeply-linked cultures and periods, divided by languages, religions, and geography:

1. early Byzantium
2. the various tribes and kingdoms the Romans classed as "barbarian," often referred to as the cultures of the Migration Period
3. early Islam (beginning in the 7th century)
4. the Carolingian Renaissance (beginning in the late 8th century)

The material in this chapter could have been arranged in a number of ways, including by artistic medium. Under that organizational structure, a section on manuscripts would introduce the two texts most commonly produced in the Middle Ages: the Christian Bible, especially the Gospels, and the Islamic Qur'an. A section on architecture would compare buildings derived from Roman basilicas and ones with centralized plans. And a discussion on sculpture would examine how in the Early Middle Ages, sculpture in the round was rare, replaced by reliefs in ivory, wood, metal or stucco. Instead, this chapter moves between the four cultures temporally (as outlined above and introduced below), inviting readers to recognize similarities and differences between them.

Early Byzantium (333-843)

The name Byzantium comes from Byzantion, the small Greek town which the Emperor Constantine rebuilt and renamed after himself, making Constantinople into the new, eastern, capital of the Roman Empire. During this Early Byzantine period, the Empire transitioned into a fully Christian, mostly Greek-speaking realm. It is worth noting that, unlike the Latin church to the west, the Byzantine church did not expect converts to use Greek; the Bible was translated into Armenian, Coptic, and many other languages, which were used in Christian liturgies. Roman architectural traditions continued in churches of ambitious size using impressive vaulting systems. In 726, the institution of iconoclasm, which ruled that images should not be used in Christian contexts, shook the Byzantine world. Until 843, the imperial court supported first iconoclasts, then their opponents, then iconoclasts again. With imperial support, iconoclasts destroyed a great deal of Early Byzantine imagery, but enough survived in remote areas, in secular settings, and in illuminated manuscripts to demonstrate its unique characteristics, which adapted Late Antique styles to painting, mosaics, and relief sculpture.

The Migration Period

By establishing his capital on the eastern edge of Europe, on the west bank of the Bosphorus, Constantine contributed to the dissolution of Roman power on the other side of the continent. Another factor in the decline of Roman power was the mass movement of various peoples westward out of central Asia and across Europe from the fourth through the sixth century, often called the Migration Period. It overlaps with the end of Late Antiquity as well as the Early Middle Ages. Most of the newcomers moved as groups of warriors. Thus the Goths, including Theodoric, came to rule Italy in the fifth and sixth centuries, while another group of Goths took Spain. For this chapter, the main example is Britain. As seen in the last chapter, as Roman power in Britain waned, raids by the Celtic peoples the Romans had conquered led to the burial of the Mildenhall Treasure. But soon other peoples migrated across the North Sea. From what is now the Netherlands and Germany came peoples including the Angles and the Saxons, who began to coalesce into various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the fifth century; in 927 these united into a kingdom called England. All across Europe, small linguistic and cultural groups moved in search of land and power. A massive reorganization of what had been the Roman Empire west of the Balkans, as well as of the lands that had been the Romans' northern neighbors, took place during the Migration Period.

The Rise of Islam and the Umayyad Dynasty (661- 750)

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity before it, is a monotheistic religion, and adopts many of the scriptures, prophets, and tenets of those forebearers. Adherents to Islam, known as Muslims, believe that over a period of 23 years, starting in 610, the angel Gabriel delivered the word of God (his final message) to the Prophet Muhammad, then a merchant living in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. These were God's final messages to mankind and Muhammad recited those revelations. After Muhammad's death, Islamic scholars gathered the revelations into the holy text known as the Qur'an. The Umayyad dynasty (661- 750) supported this editorial project, as well as the development of the first mosques built for large congregations. Islam spread with remarkable speed, and by 719, Muslim leaders had conquered the Middle East, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Persia. Muslim occupation of the Holy Land, home to sites sacred to Muslims as well as to Christians and Jews, was an ongoing source of conflict with the Byzantine Empire. The Roman and Byzantine Empires' centuries-long struggle with Persian empires was over, replaced by a new neighbor with a formidable culture that made steady inroads into imperial territory, while adapting Roman and Byzantine forms to a new religion and new social structures.

The Carolingian Renaissance (751-843)

The Carolingian Empire takes its name from Carolus Magnus: in Latin, Charles the Great, and in French, Charlemagne. Originally the king of the Franks, Charlemagne united what is now France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Slovenia, and northern Italy under his rule—the first time Western Europe had been so united since before the fall of the Western Roman Empire. With the support of the pope, Charlemagne called this reunited realm the Roman Empire and sought to revive Roman traditions in governance, law, architecture, and the figural arts. The Carolingian Empire was divided in 843, coinciding with the end of Iconoclasm, although its influence continued into the late tenth century.

Objects Overview

This chapter covers a range of objects and buildings, from portable luxury and status items like intricate jewelry and elaborate, handcrafted books—to houses of worship for Christian and Muslim populations. In many, we see a combination of Classical influence, religious significance, and local artistic traditions. Perhaps the most striking are:

- the Vienna Genesis, a luxury manuscript illustrated in an illusionistic, Hellenistic style
- an ivory panel of the Archangel Michael, mixing a convincing body with ethereal space
- Hagia Sophia, a building that seemed miraculous when it was built
- San Vitale, a centralized church sparkling with marble revetments and mosaics, including portraits of its patrons, Justinian and Theodora
- the icon of the Virgin and Child with Saints George and Theodore, one of a handful of early Byzantine icons to survive iconoclasm
- the Sutton Hoo Purse Cover, incorporating precisely cut gems and gold
- the Oseberg Ship Burial, preserving masterful Viking wood carving
- the Lindisfarne Gospel, incorporating Anglo-Saxon and Celtic motifs into Christian art
- an exquisite folio from a Qur'an, annotated to demonstrate the principles that governed its design
- the Great Mosque of Damascus, which adapts Byzantine forms to support Islamic communal prayer
- the Dome of the Rock, using Byzantine forms to proclaim the power of Islam
- Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel, adapting Roman and Byzantine ideas to reinforce the ruler's legitimacy
- Carolingian Evangelist Portraits, an attempt to revive and rival Roman painting

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the art of the early medieval period, you will be able to:

- Contrast the use of animals as decorative motifs in the arts of early Islam and the Migration period
- Compare early Byzantine and early Islamic mosaics
- Discuss the persistence of Migration period styles in the *Book of Kells* or the *Lindisfarne Gospels*
- Compare the representation of the human body in Byzantine ivories and manuscript illuminations
- Compare the representation of the ruler in the Justinian mosaic at San Vitale and the caliph from Khirbet al-Mafjar
- Explain the relationship of the Prophet Muhammad's house in Medina to the hypostyle mosque (e.g., at Kairouan or Cordoba)
- Identify the actions and people portrayed in major scenes from the life of Christ
- Discuss the role of the name of Christ in the Chi-Rho page in the Book of Kells

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition*, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- "Central Asian Metalwork in China," by Boris I. Marshak, in *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200–750 A.D*
- San Vitale and the *Justinian Mosaic*, for Smarthistory
- Dress styles in the Mosaics of San Vitale, for Smarthistory
- Orientalism, for Khan Academy
- What is Orientalism?, in "Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes" for the Arab American National Museum, April 2011
- James M. Harland, Race, Racism and the Middle Ages essay series for Public Medievalist
- Helen Young, Where Do the "White Middle Ages" Come From?, for Public Medievalist
- Sutton Hoo, for Google Arts & Culture
- The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, for Google Arts & Culture
- The Dome of the Rock, for Google Arts & Culture
- Hagia Sophia, for Google Arts & Culture
- The Christian Bible (British Library Sacred Texts), for the British LibraryWalters Museum
- Erica C D Hunter, Translations of the Bible in Eastern Christianity, for the British Library
- Basilica of San Vitale, for Google Arts & Culture
- Thelma K. Thomas, "The Honorific Mantle as Furnishing for the Household Memory Theater in Late Antiquity: A Case Study from the Monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit," in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019)
- Scot McKendrick, The Christian Bible, for the British Library

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13.1: Early Byzantium

About the chronological periods of the Byzantine Empire

by Dr. Evan Freeman

This essay is intended to introduce the periods of Byzantine history, with attention to developments in art and architecture.

Editors' Note

Since this book divides the Byzantine Empire into three chronological slices and presents each with contemporaneous medieval cultures, it divides this article in three segments. Middle Byzantium will appear alongside Ottonian and Romanesque Europe and the Islamic world up to the Mongol invasions. Late Byzantium will appear alongside the Crusades and the rise of Islamic hegemony from the Adriatic east through India.



Figure **13.1.1**: The Colossus of Constantine, c. 312–15. Palazzo dei Conservatori, Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) When he moved his capital to Constantinople, Constantine left behind a massive statue of himself in Rome's Basilica Nova as a reminder of his presence.

From Rome to Constantinople

In 313, the Roman Empire legalized Christianity, beginning a process that would eventually dismantle its centuries-old pagan tradition. Not long after, emperor Constantine (Figure **13.1.1**) transferred the empire's capital from Rome to the ancient Greek city of Byzantion (modern Istanbul). Constantine renamed the new capital city "Constantinople" ("the city of Constantine") after himself and dedicated it in the year 330. With these events, the Byzantine Empire was born—or was it?



Figure **13.1.2**: Map with Rome and Constantinople. (Map via Smarthistory)

The term "Byzantine Empire" is a bit of a misnomer. The Byzantines understood their empire to be a continuation of the ancient Roman Empire and referred to themselves as "Romans." The use of the term "Byzantine" only became widespread in Europe after Constantinople finally fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. For this reason, some scholars refer to Byzantium as the "Eastern Roman Empire."

Byzantine History

The history of Byzantium is remarkably long. If we reckon the history of the Eastern Roman Empire from the dedication of Constantinople in 330 until its fall to the Ottomans in 1453, the empire endured for some 1,123 years.

Scholars typically divide Byzantine history into three major periods: *Early Byzantium*, *Middle Byzantium*, and *Late Byzantium*. But it is important to note that these historical designations are the invention of modern scholars rather than the Byzantines themselves. Nevertheless, these periods can be helpful for marking significant events, contextualizing art and architecture, and understanding larger cultural trends in Byzantium's history.

Early Byzantium: c. 330–843

Scholars often disagree about the parameters of the Early Byzantine period. On the one hand, this period saw a continuation of Roman society and culture—so, is it really correct to say it began in 330? On the other, the empire's acceptance of Christianity and geographical shift to the east inaugurated a new era.



Figure **13.1.3**: Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna (Italy), c. 533–49 (apse mosaic, 6th century, triumphal arch mosaics, likely c. 7th–12th centuries) (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Following Constantine's embrace of Christianity, the church enjoyed imperial patronage, constructing monumental churches in centers such as Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. In the west, the empire faced numerous attacks by Germanic nomads from the north, and Rome was sacked by the Goths in 410 and by the Vandals in 455. The city of Ravenna in northeastern Italy rose to prominence in the 5th and 6th centuries when it functioned as an imperial capital for the western half of the empire. Several churches adorned with opulent mosaics, such as San Vitale and the nearby Sant'Apollinare in Classe (Figure **13.1.3**), testify to the importance of Ravenna during this time.

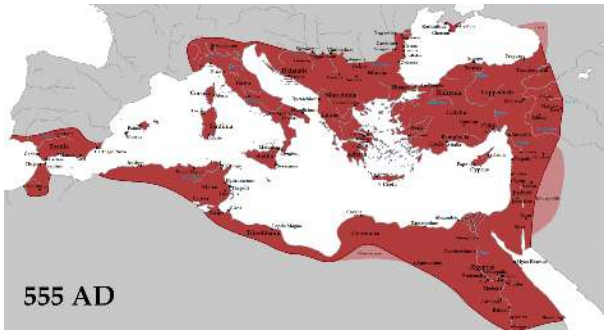


Figure **13.1.4**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Justinian I, c. 555. (Map: Tataryn, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Under the sixth-century emperor Justinian I, who reigned 527–565, the Byzantine Empire expanded to its largest geographical area: encompassing the Balkans to the north, Egypt and other parts of north Africa to the south, Anatolia (what is now Turkey) and the Levant (including including modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan) to the east, and Italy and the southern Iberian Peninsula (now Spain and Portugal) to the west. Many of Byzantium's greatest architectural monuments, such as the innovative domed basilica of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, were also built during Justinian's reign.

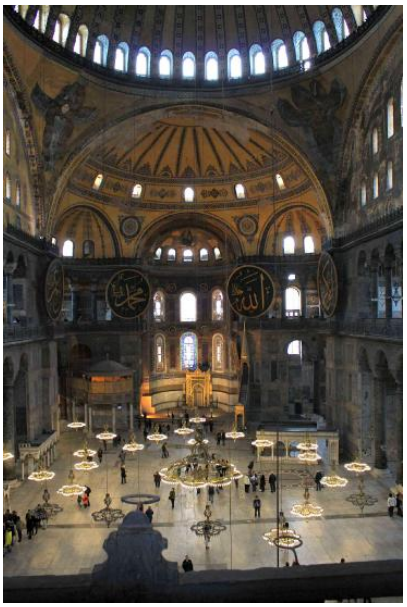


Figure **13.1.5**: Isidore of Miletus & Anthemius of Tralles, Hagia Sophia (interior view), Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey, 532–37. (Photo: Vyacheslav Bukharov, CC BY SA-4.0)

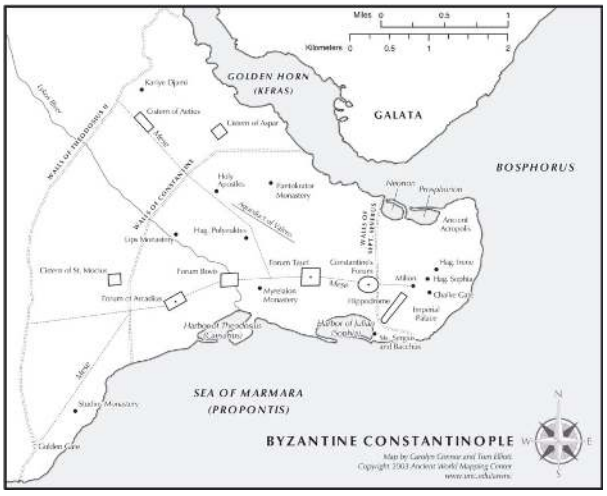


Figure **13.1.6**: Map of Byzantine Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey. (Map: Carolyn Connor and Tom Elliot, Ancient World Mapping Center, CC BY-NC 3.0)

Following the example of Rome, Constantinople featured a number of outdoor public spaces—including major streets, *fora*, as well as a hippodrome (a course for horse or chariot racing with public seating)—in which emperors and church officials often participated in showy public ceremonies such as processions.

Christian monasticism, which began to thrive in the 4th century, received imperial patronage at sites like Mount Sinai in Egypt.



Figure 13.1.7: Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt. (Photo: Joonas Plaan, CC BY 2.0) In the desert at the foot of the mountain where the prophet Moses was said to have received the Ten Commandments, this remote site had long drawn pilgrims and those seeking to live in devotion, away from the distractions of more populated places.

Yet the mid-7th century began what some scholars call the “dark ages” or the “transitional period” in Byzantine history. Following the rise of Islam in Arabia and subsequent attacks by Arab invaders, Byzantium lost substantial territories, including Syria and Egypt, as well as the symbolically important city of Jerusalem with its sacred pilgrimage sites. The empire experienced a decline in trade and an economic downturn.

Against this backdrop, and perhaps fueled by anxieties about the fate of the empire, the so-called “Iconoclastic Controversy” erupted in Constantinople in the 8th and 9th centuries. Church leaders and emperors debated the use of religious images that depicted Christ and the saints, some honoring them as holy images, or “icons,” and others condemning them as idols (like the images of deities in ancient Rome) and apparently destroying some. Finally, in 843, Church and imperial authorities definitively affirmed the use of religious images and ended the Iconoclastic Controversy, an event subsequently celebrated by the Byzantines as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy.”

Cross-cultural artistic interaction in the Early Byzantine period

by Dr. Alicia Walker

The mosaic depicting the sixth-century empress Theodora and her retinue in the church of San Vitale (Ravenna, Italy) shows the empress’s attendants dressed in multicolored, luminous garments with repeating patterns indicative of woven silk.



Figure 13.1.8: Theodora mosaic, San Vitale, Ravenna, 540s. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Although rendered in mosaic, a medium in which Byzantine craftsmen held unrivaled expertise, the image depicts Byzantine courtiers as consumers of an intercultural market of luxury goods. At the time this mosaic was executed, the empire had not yet mastered sericulture (the cultivation of silkworms), which required special conditions to raise mulberry bushes, the sole source of food for the silk moth (*bombyx mori*). Both the raw material of silk and the cloth woven from it were imported at great expense from points east, especially China, which held a virtual monopoly in silk cultivation and processing. Women of the court were

among the few members of Early Byzantine society who could afford this lavish material, which demonstrated not only wealth but also privileged access to circuits of trade. Similarities among Sasanian, Early Byzantine, and early Islamic textiles indicate that silk weavings across these cultures shared not only material characteristics but also iconographic, stylistic, and technical features. The interconnectedness of Byzantium with other societies through trade, diplomacy, and military conflict had direct bearing on the development of Byzantine art and architecture, and Byzantium also impacted the formation of other late antique and medieval artistic traditions.

In the early fourth century, when Constantine I was named emperor, the Roman-Byzantine Empire extended throughout Afro-Eurasia (the landmasses and interconnected societies of Africa, Europe, and Asia), from Britain in the northwest to Syria in the East and across the coast of North Africa in the south.



Figure **13.1.9**: Map showing the extent of the Roman-Byzantine Empire at the apex of Constantine I's rule in the early fourth century, when it stretched from Britain in the northwest to Egypt in the southeast. (Map: Sameer abdul wajid, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Roman-Byzantine Empire participated in extensive trade and diplomatic contacts with a wide range of societies, such that the period has been characterized as one of "incipient globalization." [1] In the fourth to fifth centuries, Northern Eurasian migratory groups vanquished the western provinces of the Roman Empire, even sacking Rome itself. [This is part of the Migration Period discussed later in this chapter.] Early modern European historians overinterpreted the late antique and medieval eras as a "Dark Ages," focusing on breakdowns in long distance communication and supposed declines in cultural achievement in Western Europe while ignoring the vital, cosmopolitan cultures of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. During this period, the eastern Roman-Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, weathered centuries of periodic geo-political instability, socio-religious change, and economic crisis, all the while maintaining and further developing commercial and diplomatic contacts across late antique and early medieval Afro-Eurasia.

A sense of the convergence of military might, cultural identity, and exotic goods is conveyed by the so-called Barberini Ivory, discussed later in this chapter.

The triumphant emperor on horseback at center receives blessings from Christ, above, and a gesture of subservience from Ge (the personification of Earth) below. Yet the image also asserts the emperor's dominion through the depiction of conquered peoples. A cowering figure behind and to the left wears the quintessential costume associated with depictions of late antique "Persians" (that is, Sasanians): leggings, a knee-length tunic, and a pointed cap. He touches the emperor's standard submissively. Below, foreign peoples (Persians, Indians) in their distinctive dress bear tribute for the emperor, including a diadem, exotic animals, and an elephant tusk. The latter detail inflects the viewer's appreciation of the polyptych itself, which is fabricated from ivory that was likely traded via Aksum, a Christian kingdom (located at the intersection of modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen) that was a major actor in trade between the Mediterranean, Africa, and India. In the Early Byzantine era, ivory was sourced from India and Africa, where elephants were indigenous. The Barberini polyptych, therefore, embodies in its very materiality the ideals of universal might and intercultural control of precious resources conveyed in its iconography.

Silk textiles, like those worn by Theodora's attendants in the mosaic at San Vitale (Figure **13.1.9**), were among the foreign goods most coveted by the Early Byzantine elite. Desire for silk, spices, precious stones, and other luxury commodities anchored Constantinople as the western terminus of the so-called Silk Roads.



Figure **13.1.10**: Map showing Constantinople (upper left corner) in the network of trade routes that made up the Silk Roads, adapted from Françoise Demange, *Glass, Gilding, and Grand Design: Art of Sasanian Iran (224–642)* (New York: Asia Society, 2007). (Map: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **13.1.11**: Bowl excavated at Sutton Hoo, Early Byzantine, 6th-early 7th century. Silver, 21.5 cm diameter. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Objects and raw materials—as well as artistic ideas and forms—traveled back and forth along these routes by land and sea from Europe and Africa to the eastern edges of Asia. Early Byzantine silks, glass, and coins have been discovered in graves and treasuries from Britain to China—and even in Japan. Sixth- or seventh-century Byzantine silver vessels with control stamps discovered in the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at the site of Sutton Hoo (Suffolk, England) bespeak the westward circulation of Byzantine objects in this period. Rosette motifs on these bowls (Figure **13.1.11**) may have been interpreted by Anglo-Saxon viewers as a sacred tree motif, thereby bridging Christian and pagan Anglo-Saxon iconographic traditions. [2]



Figure **13.1.12**: Ewer of Zenobius, Avar or Byzantine, 700s. Silver and partial-gilt, c. 23 x 13 cm, 652g. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Early Byzantine efforts to secure the borders of the Empire sometimes involved alliances with foreign peoples. For example, the Arab-Christian kingdom of the Ghassanids was a client state of the Early Byzantine Empire. In the sixth and seventh centuries, they assisted in defending the Roman-Byzantine Empire against Sasanian and Muslim adversaries. Similarly, the nomadic Avars, who originated in the Eurasian Steppe, were allies of the Early Byzantine Empire. They received substantial gifts in the form of Byzantine coins and precious objects (and engaged in raids to obtain additional booty). The Avars were skilled metalworkers and also produced their own works of art in imitation of Byzantine models. The so-called Ewer of Zenobius (Figure **13.1.12** is a silver vessel inscribed in Greek around its neck. It may have been fabricated in a Byzantine workshop and then gifted to an Avar leader or it may have been produced (or altered) by Avar craftsmen who emulated Byzantine artistic techniques, control stamps, and/or inscriptions.



Figure **13.1.13**: Detail of the base of the Ewer of Zenobius showing monograms that represent imperial Byzantine control stamps for silver, Avar or Byzantine, 700s. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

As the Byzantines lost their eastern territories to encroaching Islamic armies in the seventh century, the Muslim political and military elite inherited Roman-Byzantine visual and material culture in the lands they conquered. This is especially apparent in the

desert villas constructed in regions settled by the first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyads (see Figure **13.1.14**). The extensive wall painting program in an early eighth-century bath house at the Umayyad residence of Qusayr ‘Amra (in modern Jordan) employed a rich array of Roman-Byzantine iconography, including astronomical imagery, portraits of Byzantine and other early medieval rulers, hunting scenes, and depictions of bathers.



Figure **13.1.14**: Floor painting (fresco) of Ge or Gaia, from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Syria, now in the National Museum in Damascus, 727. (Photo: Daniel Waugh, via Smarthistory)

The famed early Islamic shrine known as the Dome of the Rock was modeled after Early Byzantine commemorative structures and is decorated in an elaborate program of mosaics and marble revetment that in part emulates Byzantine models and may even have been created by Byzantine craftsmen.



Figure **13.1.15**: Interior view of the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra), Umayyad, patron the Caliph Abd al-Malik, Jerusalem, 691–92. Stone masonry, wooden roof, decorated with glazed ceramic tile, mosaics, and gilt aluminum and bronze dome, with multiple renovations. (Photo: Virtutepetens, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Although it is common today to associate global networks with the modern period, intercultural connections were also a vital part of ancient, late antique, and medieval experience in Afro-Eurasia. The Byzantine Empire communicated with diverse cultures and societies, and the art, architecture, and material culture of Byzantium and its neighbors attest eloquently to this interconnected reality.

Notes:

[1] Anthea Harris, ed., *Incipient Globalization?: Long-distance Contacts in the Sixth Century* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007).

[2] Michael Bintley, “The Byzantine Silver Bowls in the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial and Tree-Worship in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 21 (2011): 34–45.

The *Vienna Genesis*

by Dr. Diane Reilly



Figure **13.1.16**: The fall of man and God's covenant with Noah, from the *Vienna Genesis*, folio 3 recto, early 6th century. Tempera, gold and silver on purple vellum, 31.75 x 23.5 cm. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Wealthy Christian families living in the Byzantine world may have aspired to own a new kind of luxury object: the illustrated codex (see)Figure **13.1.16**. Before the invention of printing, all texts were written or carved by hand. In the ancient world, manuscripts (texts written by hand) were found on a variety of portable surfaces. In the ancient Near East scribes wrote on clay tablets. In ancient Egypt and the ancient Greek and Roman world, information could be stored temporarily on wooden tablets coated with wax. A more lasting solution was to use scrolls made of papyrus (Figure **13.1.17**): fibrous reeds that were dried in overlapping layers and then polished with a stone to create a smooth surface. Authors of papyrus scrolls usually divided their work into sections based on how much text could be held on a single scroll, leading to the concept of "chapters."



Figure **13.1.17**: Scripture interpreted by Philo of Alexandria, Egypt, 3rd century CE. Papyrus manuscript fragment, 20.3 x 30.5 cm. (Photo: Bodleian Library, Oxford, via Smarthistory)

New materials, new possibilities

All of these materials preserved texts for the few literate members of the population, but the limitations of the materials themselves made it difficult to add illustrations to the text. Papyrus scrolls were rolled for storage and then unrolled when read, causing paint to flake off. Text was scratched into the surface of a wax or clay tablet with a stylus, so only basic shapes could be created. Some time in the first or second century, however, the parchment codex (Figure **13.1.18**), a more durable and flexible means of preserving and transporting text, began to replace wax tablets and papyrus scrolls. The new popularity of the codex coincided with the spread of Christianity, which required the use of texts for both the training of initiates and ritual practices.



Figure **13.1.18**: *Acts of the Apostles*, Glazier Codex, 5th century. Parchment. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum, via Smarthistory)

The codex form allowed readers to find a discrete section of text quickly and to carry large amounts of text with them, which was useful for priests who traveled from place to place to serve communities of Christians. It was also essential for a religion that relied on text to establish the details of belief and set standards of conduct for its members. The vast majority of these codices were not decorated in any way, but some contained illustrations done with tempera paint that pictured events described in the text, interpreted these events, or even added visual content not found in the text.



Figure **13.1.19**: Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, folio 7 recto from the *Vienna Genesis*, early 6th century. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A luxurious codex

The Early Byzantine *Vienna Genesis* gives us a taste of what manuscripts made for a wealthy patron, likely a member of the imperial family, might have looked like. Genesis—the first book of the Christian Old Testament—described the origin of the world and the story of the earliest humans, including their first encounters with God.

The *Vienna Genesis* manuscript, now only partially preserved, was a very luxurious but idiosyncratic copy of a Greek translation of the original Hebrew. The heavily abbreviated text is written on purple-dyed parchment with silver ink that has now eaten through the parchment surface in many places. These materials would have been appropriate to an imperial patron, although we have no way of knowing who that was. The *Vienna Genesis* may have been a luxury item intended for display, or it may have provided a synopsis of exciting stories from scripture to be read for edification or diversion by a wealthy Christian.

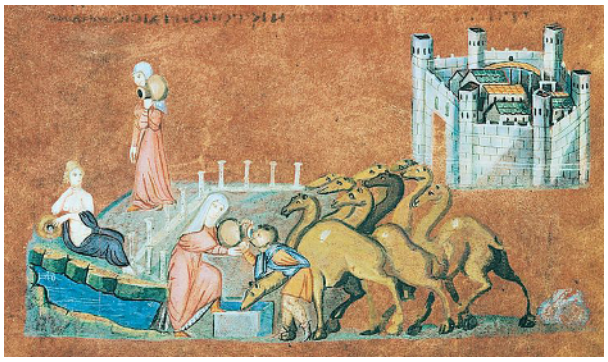


Figure 13.1.20: Detail of the painting at the bottom of the page. Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well, folio 7 recto from the *Vienna Genesis*, early 6th century. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Telling a story

The top half of each page of the *Vienna Genesis* is filled with text, while the bottom half contains a fully colored painting depicting some part of the Genesis story. In the scene depicted, Eliezer, a servant of the prophet Abraham, has arrived at a city in Mesopotamia in search of a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. The artist has used continuous narration, an artistic device popular with medieval artists but invented in the ancient world, wherein successive scenes are portrayed together in a single illustration, to suggest that the events illustrated happened in quick succession. In the upper right hand of the image a miniature walled city indicates that Eliezer has arrived at his destination. Rebecca, a kinswoman of Abraham, is shown twice. First, she walks down a path lined on one side with tiny spikes that symbolize a colonnaded street. Rebecca approaches a reclining, semi-nude woman who allows an overturned pot to drain into the river below. This is a personification of the river that feeds the well to the right, where Eliezer waits. Rebecca is shown a second time offering Eliezer and his camels a drink, a sign from God that she is to be Isaac's wife.



Figure 13.1.21: Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well (Detail showing the personification of the river as a semi-nude woman), , folio 7 recto from the *Vienna Genesis*, early 6th century. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Ancient themes, new techniques

The personification of the river reveals the image's classical heritage, as does the use of modeling and white overpainting which lend naturalism to the garment folds and the swelling flanks of the camels.

The *Vienna Genesis* combines pictorial techniques familiar from the ancient world with content appropriate to a Christian audience, which is typical of Byzantine art. Though many of the details of this manuscript's production and ownership have been lost, it

remains an example of how artists combined ancient modes of expression with the most current materials and forms to create luxurious objects for wealthy patrons.

An Angel in Ivory: Classicism and Christianity: A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This conversation was recorded between Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker at the British Museum in London. Click here to watch the video.

Steven: We found a relatively quiet corner of the British Museum, which is not an easy thing to do.

Beth: We're looking at a Byzantine ivory that dates to the sixth century.



Figure **13.1.22**: Byzantine panel with archangel, probably from Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), c. 525-50. Ivory. The British Library, London, England. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And so, it's a small miracle that it's come down to us through history, because a moveable object like this is so easily destroyed.

Beth: And in fact, part of this was lost. This was originally part of a diptych. In other words, it was attached by hinges to another ivory panel with which it was related.

Steven: The thing that strikes a modern viewer first is the fact that this is an enormous piece of ivory. This came from the tusk of an elephant, and of course, right now in the 21st century, we're in a race to save elephants. And so, we look at this object with a different eye than we might in a previous historical moment.

Beth: But in fact, ivory carvings were common in the ancient Roman world and in the Byzantine world.

Steven: And ivory was treasured because of its smooth texture, because of its relatively hard but carvable surface. And ivory, especially at this scale, was a luxury object that was imported from Africa, from Asia, or sometimes it was the tusks of walruses or even of mammoths that had been uncovered.

Beth: This is one of the largest ivories to come down to us from the Byzantine period.

Steven: The frame is filled with the large figure of an angel, probably the Archangel Michael. He stands at the top of a stair under an elaborately carved arch, holding in his right hand an orb with a cross on it. And in the left, he holds a staff or a scepter.

Beth: We can tell that he's an angel because he has these beautiful, long wings. And that orb is a symbol of power. An orb is a sphere which might remind us of the sphere of the Earth, and on top of that, the cross. So this idea of the triumph of Christianity.

Steven: And this is one of the reasons that art historians believe that the other panel would likely have depicted the Emperor Justinian. Justinian was among the most powerful Byzantine emperors. And it's possible that this ivory was carved to commemorate his ascension to the throne.



Figure **13.1.23**: Byzantine panel with archangel (detail of the archangel's face). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Beneath the arch, a wreath of victory, and inside that wreath, the cross. So it's this interesting moment where the Roman Empire has moved east. It's lost much of its territory in the west, although Justinian does reconquer much of it. But this interesting blending of ancient Roman art traditions with the new Christianity of the Roman Empire, of the Byzantine Empire.

Steven: It's important not to flatten history and to remember how much time elapses between eras. Here we have the Byzantine looking back to the ancient Roman, and before that, to the ancient Greek. The classical era in ancient Greece began a thousand years before this panel was carved. And we see the echo of ancient Rome in the very way that the figure is represented and especially in the way that the drapery hangs over that body. This is a style of representation that is looking back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

Beth: That drapery reminds us of so many ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. The way that it clings to the body. We see the forms of the legs. We get a sense of where the hips are. The shoulders. We're drawn to that drapery and those lovely folds. Look closely at his left arm and the drape that hangs down and how you can see a shadow underneath it that gives us a sense of how deeply carved that is. I mean, this is so beautifully carved. This ivory really rewards close looking. The lovely fluting on the columns, the Corinthian capitals, which are so finely carved to really see those acanthus leaves, the little volutes at the top, and that lovely garland or ribbon that crosses the arch.

Steven: And the rosettes that fill the space on either side of the arch.

Beth: This was probably one of the most skilled craftsmen in the workshop of the emperor in Constantinople.



Figure **13.1.24**: Byzantine panel with archangel (detail of the archangel's feet on the stairs). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: But for all of its classicism, that is, its references back to ancient Greece, to ancient Rome, we can't look at this panel and not be reminded that this is Byzantine. The artist is willing to play fast and loose with space. The figure seems not to stand on the stairs so much as to float above and in front of those stairs. The scepter is held by a figure that stands seemingly at the top step, and

yet the scepter stands outside of the arch. And so the artist, like the figure, is no longer trapped by the naturalistic conventions of the classical world.

Beth: There are several translations of this inscription. The one that seems to be most commonly used is, "Receive this suppliant despite his sinfulness." So the person on the other side of the diptych is being welcomed by the angel that we see here into the court of heaven.

Steven: And so what we're seeing here is likely a commemoration of the ascension of an important figure to the throne, possibly Justinian, a Christian, but a Christian who is heir to the great Roman tradition.

Beth: And here we see the classicism of the Roman Empire in this Byzantine ivory likely made in Constantinople, today Istanbul, but which we are looking at here in the British museum.

The Emperor Triumphant (*Barberini Ivory*): A Conversation

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Editors' Note

This artwork is called *The Barberini Ivory* because it became part of the collection of Cardinal Francesco Barberini in the early 17th century. It is also referred to as *The Emperor Triumphant* and as *Justinian as World Conqueror*.

This is a transcript of a conversation held at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Click here to watch the video.



Figure **13.1.25**: The Emperor Triumphant (Barberini Ivory), mid-6th century. Ivory, inlay, 34.2 x 26.8 x 2.8 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the Musee du Louvre in Paris looking at a very large panel of ivory that is Byzantine and we date to the early 6th century.

Beth: These Byzantine ivories of this early date are very rare. There's another one in the British Museum. This one shows an emperor on horseback in the central panel with four panels on the four sides, one of which is lost.

Steven: What's remarkable to me is just how deeply carved and how energized the central panel is. There's been tremendous care in representing not only fine details but also alternations between areas of deep carving and broad smooth areas, for instance of the

horse's body. This is so clearly an illustration of this moment of transition between the classical tradition and the Byzantine as we will come to know it. Should we start at the top?

Beth: Sure, we've got Christ in a medallion in the center with angels on either side. He makes a gesture of blessing and around him is a symbol of the sun, of the moon, and a star.

Steven: He holds a scepter with a cross and looks directly out at us. You can see that he's been rendered not with the traditional long, thin face with a beard, but he's young, he's beardless and his hair is curly, which is very reminiscent of the classical tradition.



Figure **13.1.26**: Detail, *The Emperor Triumphant (Barberini Ivory)* (detail of the top half of the panel), mid-6th century. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Those two angels are very reminiscent of Nike figures, of figures of victory that we would see in Ancient Roman carving.

Steven: Although the drapery has been simplified and is now rendered by cuts rather than fully formed folds. And below this dynamic image of the emperor riding in on a horse toward us, an emperor who is a Christian. We can see him holding the reins as he turns the horse, planting his lance down on the ground. Look at the round forms of the horse's breast, or the leg that comes out and the way that the rein pulls the horse's head back in. There seems to be such a sensitivity to creating a sense of volume, to establishing space for this foreshortened horse to occupy.

Beth: Art historians believe that the fineness of this carving indicates that this was made in a workshop in Constantinople in the capital of what we think of as the Byzantine Empire, but really was then the Roman Empire.

Steven: Now we don't know who this imperial figure is, in fact we're really just guessing that it is an imperial figure. But we feel like we're on fairly firm grounds because of the fineness of the carving.

Beth: All the iconography is imperial. We have a Nike figure, a figure of victory presenting the emperor with a palm branch, a symbol of victory.

Steven: We guess that in her right hand she would've originally been holding a crown to place on his head.

Beth: As in so many other images of Roman emperors, nearby is the figure of a vanquished foe.

Steven: Look how that smaller figure behind the horse is represented. He's wearing a Phrygian cap which was a symbol of the other, it was a symbol of the barbarian. He's wearing pants, he's wearing closed shoes. All of these things were symbols of the barbarian.

Beth: Barbarian here means foreigner, someone outside of the Roman Empire.



Figure **13.1.27**: Detail, *The Emperor Triumphant (Barberini Ivory)* (detail of the bottom half of the panel, showing the personification of the earth holding the emperor's foot), mid-6th century. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Now under the horse we see a female figure. She's quite classicizing in the way that her drape has fallen off one shoulder. She holds in the folds of her drapery, fruits. So she becomes a symbol of plenty. Art historians think she represents perhaps conquered lands or the bounty of the earth.

Beth: We could see her as a personification of the earth submitting to the emperor by holding the underside of his foot.

Steven: If you look closely at the central panel you'll see that there are areas where there would have been small gems or pearls. We can see the gem for instance between the eyes of the horse. But you can also see that there would have been many others that would have decorated the horse's body.

Beth: So that central panel is in such high relief. Look at the drapery flying back behind the emperor. There's a real sense of energy here that's contrasted with the figure of, we think, a general, or at least a very high level officer who's presenting the emperor with a statue representing victory.

Steven: So that general is represented in much shallower relief and we can see that he's in a truncated architectural space. resides on earth, under god in heaven.

Icons, an introduction

by Dr. Evan Freeman

What is an icon?

In our time, we often refer to celebrities as cultural icons, pop icons, and fashion icons. Rebels are sometimes labeled iconoclasts. Icons are also the little images that populate the screens of our computers, phones, and tablets, which we click to open files and apps.



Figure **13.1.28**: Icon of Christ, Thessaloniki, late 14th century. Egg tempera on wood, 157 x 105 x 5 cm. Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The word "icon" comes from the Greek *eikōn*, so, "icon" simply means image. In the Eastern Roman "Byzantine" Empire and other lands that shared Byzantium's Orthodox Christian faith, "holy icons" were images of sacred figures and events.

When art historians talk about icons today, they often mean portraits of holy figures painted on wood panels with encaustic or egg tempera, like the tempera icon of Christ from fourteenth-century Thessaloniki (Figure **13.1.28**). But the Byzantines used the term icon more broadly, as this statement made by Church authorities in 787 CE shows:

> *Holy icons—made of colors, pebbles, or any other material that is fit—may be set in the holy churches of God, on holy utensils and vestments, on walls and boards, in houses and in streets. These may be icons of our Lord and God the Savior Jesus Christ, or of our pure Lady the holy Theotokos, or of honorable angels, or of any saint or holy man.*
> *(Council of Nicaea II, 787 CE)*



Figure **13.1.29**: The Byzantines created icons in virtually every available medium. Left to right: heliotrope (bloodstone) cameo icon of Christ, 10th century, Byzantine (The British Museum); ivory icon with the Koimesis (Dormition of the Virgin), late 10th century, Constantinople (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); miniature mosaic icon of the Virgin and Child, early 14th century, Constantinople (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). (Photo via Smarthistory)

In Byzantium, icons were painted, but they were also carved in stone and ivory and fashioned from mosaics, metals, and enamels—virtually any medium available to artists.

Icons could be monumental or miniature. They were located in a variety of religious and non-religious settings, including as decoration on functional objects like the Eucharistic chalice in Figure **13.1.30**.



Figure **13.1.30**: Chalice decorated with icons of holy figures, Attarouthi, Syria, 500-650. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Museum, public domain)

And icons could depict a wide range of sacred subjects, such as Christ (Figure **13.1.31**), the saints, and events from the Bible or the lives of saints.



Figure **13.1.31**: Mosaic icon of Christ above the entrance to the 11th-century church at Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, Greece. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Iconoclasm and the "Triumph of Orthodoxy"

Christians initially disagreed over whether religious images were good or bad. Texts from as early as the second and third century describe some Christians using religious images, which they illuminated and adorned with garlands, but these practices were not universal or standardized. Church authorities often criticized these practices, which reminded them of customs associated with pagan Greece and Rome, where images of gods and emperors were widely venerated.



Figure **13.1.32**: Iconoclasts whitewashing an icon of Christ, miniature in the Theodore Psalter (Add MS 19352, fol. 27v), Constantinople, 1066. The British Library, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

By the eighth and ninth centuries, icons were increasingly popular, and arguments about religious images boiled over in what is called the "Iconoclastic Controversy." The so-called "iconoclasts" (literally, "breakers of images;" see Figure **13.1.32**) opposed icons, arguing that God was transcendent and could not be depicted in art. The iconoclasts feared that Christians praying before icons were worshipping inanimate objects.

On the other hand, the "iconophiles" (literally "lovers of images"), also known as "iconodules" (literally "servants of images"), defended icons, arguing that since Jesus, the Son of God, was born with a visible human body, he could be depicted in images. The iconophiles maintained that rather than worshipping inanimate objects, they honored icons as a means of honoring the holy figures represented in icons.

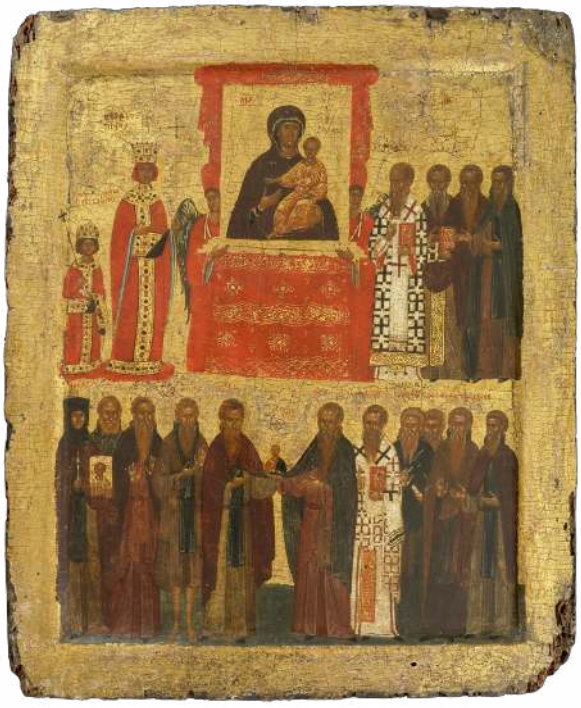


Figure **13.1.33**: Imperial and church authorities affirm the use of images in this *Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy*, Constantinople, c. 1400. Tempera on wood, 39 x 31 x 5.3 cm. The British Library, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Imperial and Church authorities in favor of icons gathered at a council in the city of Nicaea in 787 to try to resolve the controversy, but it was not until 843 that the Church definitively affirmed the use of images, ending the Iconoclastic Controversy in what

became known as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." To this day, icons continue to play important roles in the faith and worship of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is heir to the religious tradition of Byzantium.

In addition to affirming Christian images, the 787 Council of Nicaea II and subsequent 843 Triumph of Orthodoxy also enshrined devotional practices associated with icons. Christians should bow before and kiss icons, light candles and lamps, and burn incense before them. All of these acts of devotion directed at images were intended to pass to the holy figures represented. As a modern analogy, we might consider the ways many people frame and hang photos of loved ones in their homes, sometimes even embracing or kissing such images.

Editors' Note

This is an excerpt from a longer article, which continues after this point.

San Vitale, Ravenna: A Conversation

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This conversation was recorded between Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker in Ravenna, Italy. Click here to watch the video.

Steven: We're in the Italian city of Ravenna, standing outside of the Church of San Vitale. This is a really important 6th century church. It's just really old.

Beth: And it's unusual in that it's a centrally planned church. That means its focus is on its center instead of a basilica, which has a long, or longitudinal, axis.



Figure 13.1.34: Exterior of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, consecrated 547. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Right. When we think about a church, we generally think about a building that's shaped like a cross. And it has that long hallway, the nave. This doesn't have that. Instead, it's got an ambulatory, or an aisle that surrounds its central space. In this particular case, on the east side of the church, there's also an extension with an apse at the end.

Beth: Looking at the outside of San Vitale, we see that it has eight sides. So it's an octagon. And within that octagon is a smaller octagon that rises higher.

Steven: The exterior of the church is brick. Those bricks were taken from ancient Roman buildings and reused here in the 6th century. The walls are pierced with lots of windows. And that's especially important because the interior is covered with some of the most magnificent mosaics that survive from the early Medieval period.

Beth: And of course, you'd want that light glistening on the gold and beautifully colored mosaics. Let's go inside and have a look.

Steven: We've walked into the church. And the center towers over us.

Beth: And yet these apse-like shapes that are supported by columns undulates and moves around us.

Steven: There are massive piers that help support the building. But there's also a real delicacy. Look, for instance, at the way that the columns are doubled, that is, stacking of one set of columns above the next.

Beth: And they move in and out back into the space of the ambulatory on the ground floor and then up into the gallery above.

Steven: But the real gem in this Church can be seen on the east end. Let's walk over there. The eastern end of San Vitale is completely covered in dense mosaic.

Beth: These tiny pieces of glass and glass sandwiching gold that reflect the light.

Steven: We're walking up towards the apse now, the semicircular space. There are three large windows. And just about that, a large apse mosaic.



Figure **13.1.35**: Apse mosaic of Christ between two angels, Saint Vitalis, and Bishop Ecclesius. San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: And in the center, we see Christ dressed royally in purple sitting on an orb, the orb of the Earth, of the universe. Below flow the four rivers of paradise. And on either side of him, an angel.

Steven: Christ is holding the book of the apocalypse with the seven seals visible. And in his right hand, he's handing a crown to San Vitalis, who was adopted as the primary martyr of this city.

Beth: And on the other side, we see Ecclesius, who founded and sponsored the building of this church. And we see him handing the church to the angel beside Christ. Every surface here in the apse is covered with imagery, with figures, with decorative patterning.

Steven: The only surfaces that really are stone are of a very decorative marble, cut to pair and create wonderful abstract designs. It is this lush, glorious space here in this city that's distant, perhaps, from the capital of the empire, but that speaks to its importance.

Beth: Right above the altar, we see an image of the Lamb of God. And the Lamb of God refers to Christ. He's wearing a halo, this idea of Christ as the sacrificial lamb, sacrificed for the redemption of mankind.

Steven: The lamb is surrounded by a wreath of victory, in this case, the idea of the triumph of Christianity itself. And that wreath is held in place by four angels who stand on globes that refer to the globe upon which Christ in the apse sits.

Beth: And then we see Christ again, but this time bearded, older, in the archway at the beginning of the chancel.

Steven: Right. The triumphal arch has Christ in the center. It's really a kind of bust-length portrait. And his body is surrounded by a mandorla, kind of rainbow-colored halo. And then, moving down the arch on either side are 14 figures, including the apostles.

Steven: The two most important mosaics in San Vitale flank the apse.

Beth: And those show the emperor Justinian and his empress Theodora. Now, Justinian and Theodora never actually came to Ravenna.

Steven: And they're in the mosaics, we think, to reassert their control over the city.

Beth: For much of the 400s, Ravenna was under the control of a Goth, Theodoric, and Theodoric was an Arian, that is, he didn't follow the orthodoxy, the orthodox doctrines of the church.

Steven: And basically, the Arians believed that Christ was the creation of God the Father and therefore was subordinate in the hierarchy of the Trinity.

Beth: Christ was a co-equal with God the Father the way he is in orthodox Christian belief. And so Justinian, the emperor in Constantinople in the early 500s, sends his general, Belisarius, to conquer Italy, to reconquer Ravenna, and reestablish orthodox Christian belief here in Ravenna.

Steven: And the Arian belief was suppressed. And so what we're seeing here is the reassertion of Eastern imperial control. That is, Justinian is in Constantinople in the east, and he is saying, I'm in charge even here in Ravenna, in Italy.

Beth: Spiritual power goes hand in hand with political power, with the power of the emperor.



Figure **13.1.36**: Justinian and his attendants, San Vitale. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We see Justinian in the center wearing purple, the color that is associated with the throne. And he's surrounded by his court. But there are also religious figures representing the church and there are soldiers, three centers of power-- the church, the emperor, and the military.

Beth: We can see that some of the figures are treated more individualistically than others. Justinian, Maximian are more individualized. And it's possible that people at the time would have looked up and recognized the other figures who are lost to us today. But the figures from the army are much more anonymous.

Steven: Justinian, the emperor, authority, is divine. You can see a halo around his head. And he holds a bowl associated with the Eucharist, which he is handing in the direction of Christ in the apse.

Beth: Right. This is a bowl that would have contained the bread for the sacrament of the Eucharist. He's in the center of the composition. He's frontal. But really, all of the figures in this mosaic are frontal.

Steven: They are schematic, abstracted. This is the Medieval. We've left the Classical tradition of naturalism behind.

Beth: And so if we look closely at the figures, we can see that there's no real concern for accurate proportions. Their feet don't really seem to carry the weight of their bodies. They seem to float in an eternal space and not in an earthly space. Next to Justinian, we see the bishop, Maximian, with his name above him, although that was added later. And beside him, other clergymen.

Steven: Maximian holds a beautiful jeweled cross. And he wears the same purple that the emperor wears, associating him with the power of the emperor in Constantinople.

Beth: The figures next to him hold a jeweled book of the Gospels. And the figure at the far right holds an incense burner. What we're seeing here is the emperor leading a procession for the enactment of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Steven: And in fact, the Eucharist would have been performed in the sanctuary. The figures stand in front of a field of gold, which is very much a Byzantine tradition.

Beth: And when we say Byzantine, we're referring to the capital of the empire, which is Constantinople.

Steven: Which we now call Istanbul. You'll notice that the tesserae, that is, these small pieces of colored glass, many of them with gold leaf that is actually fused almost like a sandwich in between two pieces of clear glass, are set into the wall at angles so that the light reflects off them in a way that is complicated and beautiful and creates a sense of the liveliness of the surface. And that would have been especially true when it was illuminated by candles and by lanterns. Let's walk around to the other side and take a look at the panel devoted to Theodora, Justinian's wife (Figure **13.1.9**). To the right of the apse windows, we see the panel of Theodora, the empress. And it mirrors the panel with Justinian.

Beth: So we have an idea that Theodora, Justinian's empress, ruled as co-equal to Justinian, that she was a very powerful woman, even though she was reputedly of lower class, that she was an entertainer apparently.

Steven: There are some colorful descriptions of her past. She's wearing incredibly elaborate clothing and jewelry with rubies, with emeralds, with sapphires, and very large pearls. And in back of her head, just like Justinian, is a halo, which speaks not to her own divinity, but to the divine origin of her authority.

Beth: Like Justinian, who's carrying a bowl that held the bread for the Eucharist, Theodora is carrying the chalice for the wine for the Eucharist. And like Justinian, too, she's surrounded by attendants that symbolize the imperial court. A curtain is raised as though she is about to take part in a ceremony related to the Eucharist.

Steven: I'm really taken by the elaborate Byzantine costume.

Beth: Well, there's a sense of trying to bring the richness of the imperial court in Constantinople here to Ravenna.

The lives of Christ and the Virgin in Byzantine art

by Dr. Evan Freeman

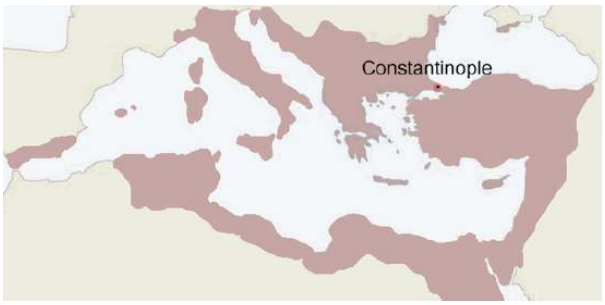


Figure 13.1.37: The Byzantine Empire under the Emperor Justinian, c. 550. (Map via Smarthistory)

The Byzantine Empire spanned more than a millennium and penetrated geographic regions far from the capital of Constantinople. As a result, Byzantine art includes works created from the fourth century to the fifteenth century and from such diverse regions as Greece, the Italian peninsula, the eastern edge of the Slavic world, the Middle East, and North Africa. So what is Byzantine art and what do we mean when we use this term?

Events from the lives of Jesus Christ and his mother, the Virgin Mary, were among the most frequently depicted subjects in Byzantine art. Many of these events were recorded in the four Gospels in the Christian Bible, but others were also inspired by non-biblical texts, such as the "Protoevangelion of James," which were nevertheless read by the Byzantines. The Byzantines commemorated these events as church feasts according to the liturgical calendar each year (as does the Eastern Orthodox Church today, which is heir to Byzantium's religious tradition).

Depictions of these events appeared in a wide range of media, on different scales, and in public and private settings. It would be inaccurate to imply that these scenes were always the same; they varied depending on the circumstances of their production as well as the periods in which they were made. Acknowledging the risk of oversimplifying an artistic tradition that endured for more than a millennium, this essay nevertheless seeks to introduce the stories and common features in Byzantine depictions of the lives of Christ and the Virgin.

Editors' Note

This same imagery was used in Western European Christendom, usually later; there are many examples in Renaissance and Baroque art, for example. Most of the examples included here were created after the end of Iconoclasm.



Figure **13.1.38**: Birth of the Virgin fresco, King's Church, Studenica Monastery, Serbia, c. 1314. (Photo: Blago, CC BY-NC-SA 3.0)

The Birth of the Virgin

Drawn from non-biblical accounts such as the "Protoevangelion of James," the Birth of the Virgin is commemorated as a Church feast on September 8. Anna, the Virgin's mother, lies on a bed. Midwives bathe the newborn Mary. Other women bustle about, attending to Anna. Joachim, the Virgin's father, sometimes appears as well. At Studenica Monastery in Serbia, Joachim stands beside the Virgin as she lies in a cradle after her bath in the lower right. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.39**: Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, Chora Monastery, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1315–1321. Mosaic. (Photo: byzantologist, via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple

The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple is based on non-biblical texts and is commemorated on November 21. The Virgin Mary is a child. She processes with her parents, Joachim and Anna, along with several candle-bearing maidens, toward the Jewish temple. Joachim and Anna offer the Virgin to God and the priest Zacharias receives her into the temple. As the narrative continues, Mary dwells within the temple, where an angel feeds her bread. The earliest examples of this image date to the tenth century. The hymnography for the feast emphasizes that the Virgin herself became a temple by allowing God to dwell in her when she conceived Christ. At the Chora Monastery, the procession to the temple takes a circular form to accommodate the vault where it appears. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.40**: Annunciation mosaic, Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Mark L. Darby, all rights reserved, via Smarthistory)

The Annunciation

The Annunciation (Greek: *Evangelismos*) is recorded in Luke 1:26–38 and commemorated on March 25. Simple compositions, such as the mosaic found at Daphni, show the archangel Gabriel approaching the Virgin Mary to announce that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that she will conceive the Son of God, Jesus. Other images show the Spirit descending as a dove on a ray of light. Artists sometimes include additional details from a non-biblical text known as the "Protoevangelion of James." The Virgin may hold scarlet thread to weave a veil for the temple or appear near a well where she is drawing water when the angel approaches.



Figure **13.1.41**: Nativity of Christ miniature in the Menologion of Basil II, c. 1000. The Vatican Library, Rome, Italy. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

The Nativity of Christ

The Nativity of Christ depicts the birth of Jesus. It is drawn primarily from Matthew 1:18–2:12 and Luke 2:1–20 and is commemorated on December 25. The newborn Christ appears in a manger (a feeding trough for animals) near an ox and ass. The Virgin sits or reclines near Christ, but Joseph is usually relegated to the periphery (appearing in the lower left corner in the miniature from the Menologion of Basil II) to minimize his role in the Christ's birth (emphasizing Mary's virginity). The narrative continues with one or two midwives bathing Christ. Angels announce the good news to shepherds. The star that guided the Magi from the east shines down on the Christ child. (view annotated image)



Figure 13.1.42: The Presentation in the Temple, Byzantium, 15th century. Tempera on wood, gold ground, 44.5 x 42.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple

The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple (Greek: *Hypapantē*) is described in Luke 2:22–38 and commemorated on February 2. Mary and Joseph enter the Jewish temple to sacrifice two birds and offer Jesus to the Lord, in accordance with the Jewish law. They encounter the prophet Simeon (shown taking the Christ child in his arms in this image from The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the prophetess Anna, who identify Christ as the Messiah. The temple is often visualized as a Christian church, indicated by a Christian altar and other church furniture. (view annotated image)



Figure 13.1.43: Baptism of Christ, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, 11th century. Mosaic. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Baptism of Christ

The Baptism of Christ (sometimes called “Theophany” or “Epiphany”) is recounted in Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22, and is commemorated by the Eastern Orthodox Church on January 6. John the Baptist, or “Forerunner,” baptizes Christ in the Jordan River, while attending angels stand nearby. The Holy Spirit descends on Christ in the form of a dove, while the words of God the Father identifying Jesus as his Son are represented by a hand blessing from the heavens. An ax appears with a tree, referencing the Baptist’s ominous words, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). Sometimes, as at Hosios Loukas Monastery, the Jordan River is personified as a human figure in the water, corresponding with its personification in the hymnography for the feast. A cross also

appears in the water at Hosios Loukas as a reference to the cross and column at the pilgrimage site associated with this event in Palestine, as described by a sixth-century pilgrim named Theodosius. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.44**: Icon of the Transfiguration, Constantinople, beginning of the 13th century. Mosaic, 52 x 36 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Transfiguration

The Transfiguration is described in Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28–36 and is commemorated on August 6. Jesus ascends a mountain (which tradition identifies as Mount Tabor) with Peter, James, and John (three of his disciples) and is transformed so that he shines with divine light. This light often appears as rays and a mandorla (an almond- or circle-shaped halo of light), as seen in the mosaic icon at the Louvre. Moses and Elijah—two figures representing the law and the prophets from the Hebrew Bible—appear on either side of Christ. Early examples of this motif are found at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai and Sant'Apollinare in Classe. (view annotated image)

The Passion

The Passion ("suffering") refers to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and the period leading up to it. It is commemorated annually during Holy Week, whose dates vary from year to year based on the lunar cycle.



Figure 13.1.45: The Raising of Lazarus, fragment of a templon beam, Mount Athos, 12th century. Tempera on wood, 21.5 x 24 cm. Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Raising of Lazarus

The Raising of Lazarus (a friend of Christ's) from the dead is recorded in John 11:38-44. The Eastern Orthodox Church commemorates this miracle of Christ on the Saturday before Palm Sunday. Christ, trailed by the Apostles, calls forth the shrouded Lazarus from the tomb, as seen in the templon beam fragment in Athens. Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, kneel at Christ's feet. Additional figures open the tomb and free Lazarus from his grave clothes. One bystander usually holds his nose because of the stink of Lazarus's decomposing body. (view annotated image)



Figure 13.1.46: Center Panel of a triptych icon with the Entry into Jerusalem, Constantinople, 10th century. Ivory, 18.4 x 14.7 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany. (Photo: Andreas Praefcke, CC0 1.0)

The Entry into Jerusalem

The Entry into Jerusalem is recounted in Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:29-40, and John 12:12-19 and is commemorated on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Pascha (Easter). Jesus rides into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. A crowd

hails him, throwing cloaks and palms on the road before him. Children often climb among the palm trees, as in the Berlin ivory. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.47**: Last Supper, Panagia Phorbiotissa, Asinou, Cyprus, 1105/6. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Last Supper

The Last Supper, "Mystical Supper," or just "Supper" (Greek: *Deipnos*), represents the meal that Christ shared with his disciplines before his crucifixion, which is recorded in Matthew 26:20-29, Mark 14:17-25, Luke 22:14-23, and I Corinthians 11:23-26, and is commemorated on Holy Thursday (known as "Maundy Thursday" in the Latin church). Judas reaches to dip his food in a bowl, which Christ identifies as a sign of betrayal. The table frequently takes the form of a late-antique, C-shaped "sigma" table as at the church of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, Cyprus. Often, a large fish appears on the table, which may illustrate the ancient Christian use of the Greek word for "fish" (*ichthys*) as an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The Last Supper is typically interpreted as the first celebration of the Eucharist. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.48**: Foot washing mosaic, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, 11th century. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Washing of the Feet

The Washing of the Feet occurred during the Last Supper, according to John 13:2-15. In the Gospel account, Peter resists letting Jesus wash his feet. But Christ explains: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example" (John 13:14-15). The mosaic at Hosios Loukas Monastery shows Christ in the act of washing Peter's feet. (view annotated image)

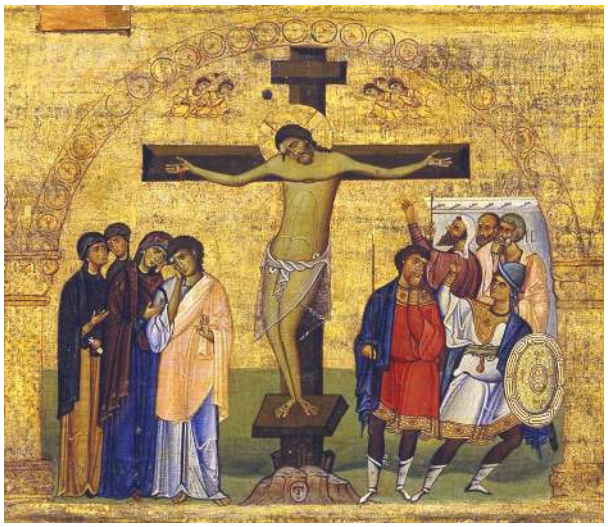


Figure **13.1.49**: Crucifixion from templon beam with twelve feast scenes, Cyprus or Sinai, 12th century. Tempera and gold over fine textile ground on panel, 44.1 x 118.3 x 3.1 cm. The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Crucifixion

The Crucifixion depicts Christ's death on the cross, described Matthew 27:32-56, Mark 15:21-41, Luke 23:26-49, John 19:16-37, and commemorated on Holy Friday (known as "Good Friday" in the west) during Holy Week. Simpler representations of the scene include the Virgin and John the Evangelist, illustrating John's account. The sun and moon or angels appear in the sky above. More complex compositions, such as that found on a templon beam at Sinai, incorporate other women who followed Christ as well as Roman soldiers, such as Saint Longinus who converted to Christianity. John recounts how one of the soldiers pierced Christ with a spear, spilling blood and water from his side (John 19:34-35). The event unfolds at Golgotha, the "Place of the Skull," outside of the city walls of Jerusalem (which sometimes appear in the background). Some depictions of this scene include a skull at the foot of the cross, which tradition identifies as the skull of Adam (the first man), reflecting the Christian belief that Christ is the "New Adam" as savior of humankind. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.50**: Deposition fresco, Saint Panteleimon, Gorno Nerezi, North Macedonia, 1164. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Deposition from the Cross

The Deposition from the Cross depicts Christ's body being removed from the cross after his crucifixion. As at the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, the composition often includes the Virgin and John the Evangelist (who were present at Christ's crucifixion), as well as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two followers of Jesus. It is based on Gospel accounts that describe Joseph of Arimathea burying Christ's body in Joseph's own tomb (Matthew 27:57-61, Mark 15:42-47, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38-42). (view annotated image)



Figure 13.1.51: Threnos fresco, Saint Panteleimon, Gorno Nerezi, North Macedonia, 1164. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Lamentation

The Lamentation, or *Threnos*, depicts Christ's mother and other followers mourning over Christ's dead body following the crucifixion. As at the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, the Lamentation often includes John the Evangelist (who was present at the Crucifixion), as well as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two followers of Jesus who helped remove his body from the cross and bury him. (view annotated image)



Figure 13.1.52: Myrrh-bearing women at the empty tomb, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, 6th century. Mosaic. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Resurrection

The Resurrection of Christ from the dead occurred on the third day after his crucifixion according to New Testament accounts, and is celebrated each year on Pascha (Easter). The Gospels describe women who followed Jesus as the first witnesses to Christ's resurrection: Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 23:55-24:12; John 20:1-18. Early Christian art depicts the myrrh-bearing women bringing spices to anoint Christ's body but discovering that the tomb is empty. An angel tells them that Christ has risen from the dead. At Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the empty tomb is envisioned as a rotunda, likely a reference to the Roman emperor Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre that marked the site of Christ's resurrection in Jerusalem.



Figure 13.1.53: Anastasis fresco, Chora Monastery, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1315–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Anastasis*

The *Anastasis* (Greek for “resurrection”), also known as the “Harrowing of Hades” or “Harrowing of Hell,” became a standard resurrection composition from the eighth century onward. Based largely on non-biblical sources, the scene shows Christ descending into Hades (the underworld)—sometimes carrying his cross as an instrument of salvation—to raise the dead from their tombs. Locks and hinges lie broken underfoot as Christ tramples the broken gates of the underworld that once imprisoned the dead. In some images, Christ also tramples the personified figure of Hades, who represents death. At the Chora Monastery, Christ reaches with both hands to raise Adam and Eve (the first humans) from their tombs. Righteous figures from the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament—usually David, Solomon, and John the Baptist—stand nearby. The image corresponded with the chief hymn of Pascha (Easter): “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!” (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.54**: The Incredulity of Thomas, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia, 11th century. Mosaic. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Incredulity of Thomas

The Incredulity of Thomas appears in John 20:24-29, and is commemorated in the Eastern Orthodox Church the Sunday after Pascha (Easter). When some of the disciples claim to have encountered the risen Christ, the Apostle Thomas expresses doubt, stating: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). A week later, Jesus appears and invites Thomas to touch his wounds: the moment depicted in this mosaic at Hosios Loukas Monastery. Thomas exclaims: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.55**: Ascension miniature, Nicaea or Nicomedia (modern Turkey), late 13th century. Tempera and gold leaf. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California. (Photo: Getty Museum, public domain)

The Ascension

The Ascension of Christ into heaven, following his resurrection from the dead, is described in Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:9-12 and is commemorated on the Thursday that falls forty days after Pascha (Easter). The iconography derives from pre-Christian imperial apotheosis scenes (for example, on the Arch of Titus in Rome). Christ appears within a mandorla and is borne heavenward by angels, as seen in the miniature from the Getty Museum. The Virgin and Apostles stand on earth below. The ascension often appeared in church vaults, corresponding with the Byzantine interpretation of the church as a microcosm with the vaults representing the heavens. (view annotated image)

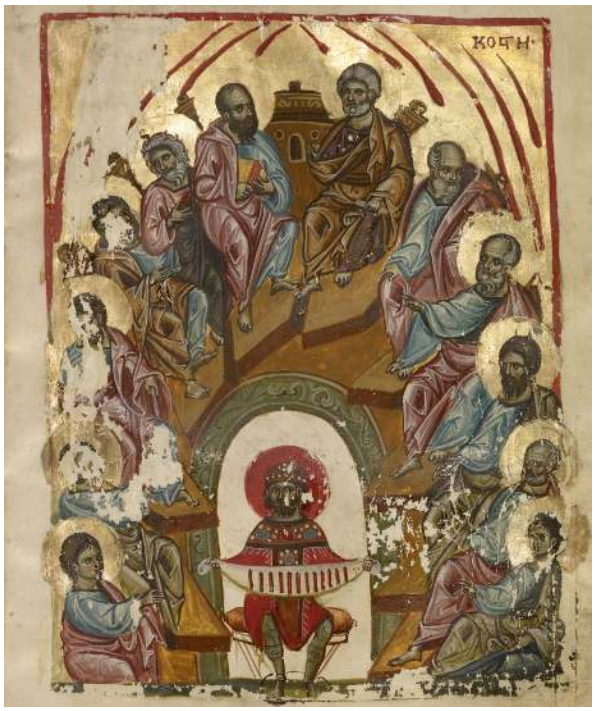


Figure 13.1.56: Pentecost miniature, Nicaea or Nicomedia (modern Turkey), late 13th century. Tempera and gold leaf. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California. (Photo: Getty Museum, public domain)

Pentecost

Pentecost (literally "the fiftieth day") depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles as described in Acts 2 and is commemorated fifty days after Pascha (Easter). The Holy Spirit takes the form of tongues of fire. Sometimes the Virgin appears with the Apostles, although she is not present in the biblical account. In Acts, the Holy Spirit inspires the Apostles to preach the crucified and risen Christ in different languages so that all can understand. In artistic representations of the event, figures representing different "tribes" and "tongues," or a single figure personifying the entire "cosmos," (seen in this miniature from the Getty) receive the Apostles' words. Sometimes, the "prepared throne" (*Hetoimasia*) is included as the source from which the flames descend. (view annotated image)



Figure **13.1.57**: Icon with the Koimesis, probably made in Constantinople, late 10th century. Ivory, 18.6 x 14.8 x 1.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

The Dormition

The Dormition (Greek: *Koimēsis*, literally "falling asleep") represents the death of the Virgin Mary, described in non-biblical texts and commemorated on August 15. The Virgin lies on her funeral bier surrounded by the Apostles. Christ stands behind the Virgin, receiving her soul, which takes the form of a swaddled infant. Later icons sometimes include additional details such as the Apostles miraculously borne to the scene on clouds and the gates of heaven opening to receive the Virgin. Tenth-century ivories from Constantinople like this one are among the earliest depictions of the Dormition. (view annotated image)

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Evan Freeman, "About the chronological periods of the Byzantine Empire," in *Smarthistory*, September 22, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Alicia Walker, "Cross-cultural artistic interaction in the Early Byzantine period," in *Smarthistory*, July 30, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Diane Reilly, "The *Vienna Genesis*," in *Smarthistory*, April 18, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Ivory Panel with Archangel," in *Smarthistory*, October 20, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "*The Emperor Triumphant (Barberini Ivory)*," in *Smarthistory*, October 1, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Icons, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, December 3, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. William Allen, "*Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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13.2: The Migration Period

Fibulae

by Rebecca Mir



Figure **13.2.1**: Crossbow Brooch (detail), made in Rome or Constantinople, c. 430. Gold, 11.9 x 5.5 x 4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Medieval jewelry

Fibulae (singular: fibula) are brooches that were made popular by Roman soldiers, who wore them to hold a cloak or cape in place. Bow fibulae all consist of a body, a pin, and a catch — like safety pins. As a historian of the medieval period writes,

> *A German archaeologist, Herbert Kuhn, first called the bow fibula an early medieval artifact par excellence. Textbooks and art history studies use it to illustrate sections dedicated to the Dark Ages. There are probably thousands and hundreds of thousands of bow fibulae in European museum collections. A still greater number of specimens come out of archaeological excavations and their incredible diversity defies any attempts to establish unequivocal typologies. [1]*



Figure **13.2.2**: Attendants wearing fibulae, Emperor Justinian Mosaic (detail), San Vitale, Ravenna, c. 546-56. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ornate fibulae (Figure 13.2.3) became all the rage in the early middle ages (c. 500 – 800), and are one of the most commonly found objects in barbarian grave sites. The word “barbarian” comes from the Greek word *barbaros*, meaning “foreign,” so it is often used as a blanket term for the non-Roman groups who migrated into western Europe in the early middle ages (such as the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, and Lombards). This was the time when Europe was becoming Christianized and the Roman Empire split apart. The Roman Empire ceased to exist in the west, but continued in the east as the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

This period is also sometimes referred to as the Migration Period. Sparse written documentation of these people survives, so grave goods like fibulae provide the most concrete cultural information available.



Figure 13.2.3: Three views of Crossbow Brooch, c. 430. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Byzantine fibula



Figure 13.2.4: Crossbow Brooch (detail with floral motif emerging from what may be an acanthus leaves), c. 430. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

This gold fibula was made in Rome or Constantinople in the 5th century and is called a crossbow fibula because of its resemblance to the weapon. Unscrewing the left knob at the end of this “crossbow” would release the pin.

This intricate object is typical of the Byzantine/Roman fibulae style. The detailed incising on the body is called pierced openwork. At the top we see a cross, and below that, on either side, floral scrolls that appear to grow out of acanthus leaves and may symbolize paradise and the promise of salvation. In addition, the circular form around the cross is a victory wreath, which, in the Christian tradition, symbolizes victory over death (resurrection). One art historian has remarked that the brooch “evokes one of the

most interesting epochs in antiquity, a period marked by the subtle, often elusive transition from Late Roman to Early Byzantine art." [2]

Lombardic Fibula

The Lombardic fibula (Figure **13.2.5**) found in Kranj (modern day Slovenia) provides a good comparison, because it is a stylized variation of the crossbow fibula. It features at one end a semi-circle from which radiate nine rectangular incised forms topped with spheres (this type of fibula is called "radiate-headed" or "digitated"). It is gilded and inlaid with niello, a black metal alloy. The incisions are hatched lines—a popular decoration technique in Lombardic fibulae.



Figure **13.2.5**: Lombard silver bow fibula, found in Kranj, mid-6th century CE. Gilded silver, with inlaid niello and engraved decoration, length 11.3 cm. National Museum, Slovenia. (Photo: Internet archive, via Smarthistory)

The Lombards (or Langobards, from the Latin Langobardi) are thought to be of Germanic origin, although their background is still contested. They established their kingdom in Italy in 558 and were defeated by Charlemagne , king of the Franks, in 774.

Over the centuries the Lombards assimilated into Roman culture, adopting Christianity, and left their own administrative legal procedures behind. This piece shows the adoption of the crossbow fibula style, but with a small Lombardic "twist." According to one historian, "everything points to the conclusion that 'Slavic' bow fibulae were not simply symbols of social status or gender, but badges of power. This was the power of those able to establish long-distance relations and thus to yield influence." [3]

Frankish fibulae



Figure **13.2.6**: Merovingian (Frankish) Looped Fibulae, mid-6th century. Silver gilt worked in filigree with inlaid garnet and other stones. Musée des Antiquities Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This pair of Merovingian fibulae (Figure **13.2.6**) is a good example of cloisonné, a technique that was popular in barbarian art. This technique is characterized by inlaid semi-precious stones. The word cloisonné literally means "partitioned" in French. The artisan would solder wires onto a metal base and fill the areas created with polished stones (this is different from 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 was a symbol of the Roman empire and was adopted at this time because it still carried connotations of status and power. The top end of these fibulae are in the shape of eagle heads and a series of similarly stylized eagle heads can be seen creating the loops on the opposite end of each pin and on the sides. A small fish decorates the main body of each of the brooches. Garnets were used for the eyes of the eagles, and a wide range of gems were used in the rest of the fibulae. These stunning objects demonstrate the remarkable skill of barbarian metal workers during the early middle ages.

Visigothic fibulae



Figure **13.2.7**: Eagle Fibulae, found at Tierra de Barros (Badajoz, southwest Spain), 6th century. Sheet gold over bronze inlaid with garnets, amythysts, and colored glass, 14.2 x 7.1 x 3.2 cm. (Photo: The Walters Art Museum, CC0 1.0)

This pair of Visigothic fibulae (Figure **13.2.7**) in the form of eagles provide another good example of barbarian metalwork and cloisonné. They are decorated with garnets, amethyst, and colored glass and were found at a Visigothic grave site in Spain. They likely would have fastened a cloak at the shoulders and pendants may have hung from the loops at the bottom.

Notes

[1] Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700* (Cambridge University Press, reissue edition, 2007), p. 247.

[2] Barbara Deppert-Lippitz, "A Late Antique Crossbow Fibula in The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 35, p. 41.

[3] Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archaeology of the Lower Danube Region, c. 500–700* (Cambridge University Press, reissue edition, 2007), p. 274.

Decoding Anglo-Saxon art

by The British Museum



Figure 13.2.8: Silver-gilt square-headed brooch from Grave 22, Chessell Down, Isle of Wight, Early Anglo-Saxon, early 6th century. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

One of the most enjoyable things about working with the British Museum's Anglo-Saxon collection is having the opportunity to study the intricate designs of the many brooches, buckles, and other pieces of decorative metalwork. This is because in Anglo-Saxon art there is always more than meets the eye.

A love of riddles

The objects invite careful contemplation, and you can find yourself spending hours puzzling over their designs, finding new beasts and images. The dense animal patterns that cover many Anglo-Saxon objects are not just pretty decoration; they have multi-layered symbolic meanings and tell stories. Anglo-Saxons, who had a love of riddles and puzzles of all kinds, would have been able to 'read' the stories embedded in the decoration. But for us it is trickier as we are not fluent in the language of Anglo-Saxon art.

Style I

Anglo-Saxon art went through many changes between the 5th and 11th centuries, but puzzles and story-telling remained central. The early art style of the Anglo-Saxon period is known as Style I and was popular in the late 5th and 6th centuries. It is characterized by what seems to be a dizzying jumble of animal limbs and face masks, which has led some scholars to describe the style as an "animal salad." Close scrutiny shows that Style I is not as abstract as first appears, and through carefully following the decoration in stages we can unpick the details and begin to get a sense for what the design might mean.

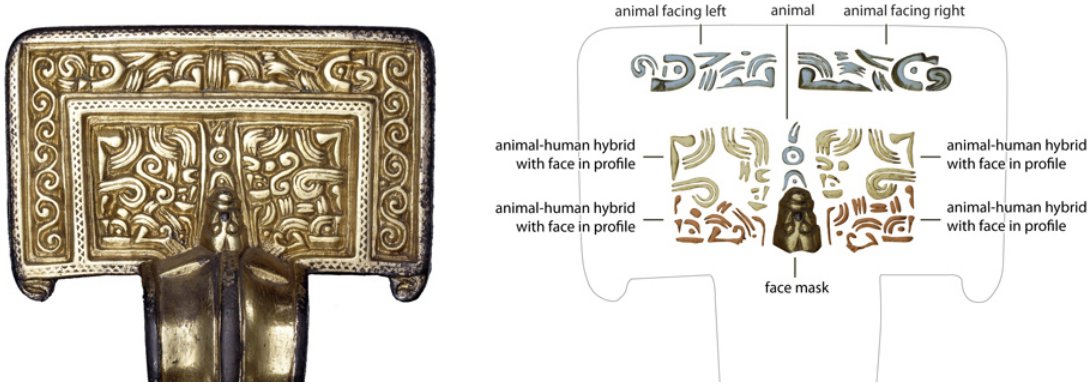


Figure 13.2.9: Decoding the square-headed brooch (top). (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

One of the most exquisite examples of Style I animal art is a silver-gilt square-headed brooch from a female grave on the Isle of Wight (Figure 13.2.8). Its surface is covered with at least 24 different beasts: a mix of birds' heads, human masks, animals and hybrids (Figure 13.2.9). Some of them are quite clear, like the faces in the circular lobes projecting from the bottom of the brooch

(Figure 13.2.10). Others are harder to spot, such as the faces in profile that only emerge when the brooch is turned upside-down. Some of the images can be read in multiple ways, and this ambiguity is central to Style I art.

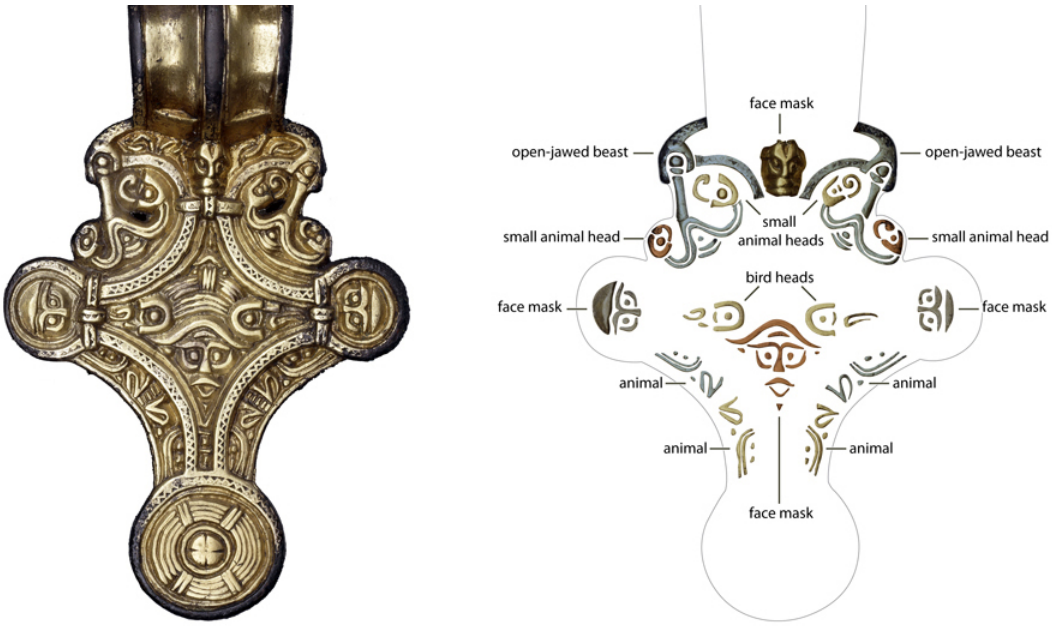


Figure 13.2.10: Decoding the square-headed brooch (bottom). (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Once we have identified the creatures on the brooch, we can begin to decode its meaning. In the lozenge-shaped field at the foot of the brooch is a bearded face with a helmet underneath two birds that may represent the Germanic god Woden/Odin with his two companion ravens (Figure 13.2.11). The image of a god alongside other powerful animals may have offered symbolic protection to the wearer like a talisman or amulet.



Figure 13.2.11: Turning the brooch upside-down reveals four heads in profile on the rectangular head of the brooch, highlighted here in purple. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

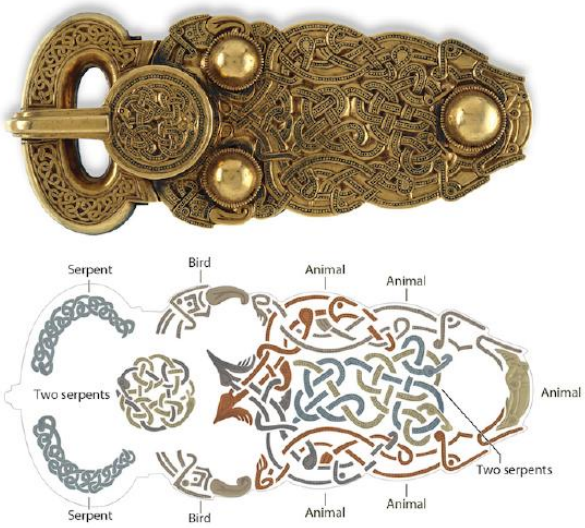


Figure **13.2.12**: Decoding the great gold buckle from Sutton Hoo. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Style II

Style I was superseded by Style II in the late 6th century. This later style has more fluid and graceful animals, but these still writhe and interlace together and require patient untangling. The great gold buckle from Sutton Hoo is decorated in this style. From the thicket of interlace that fills the buckle's surface 13 different animals emerge (Figure **13.2.12**). These animals are easier to spot: the ring-and-dot eyes, the birds' hooked beaks, and the four-toed feet of the animals are good starting points. At the tip of the buckle, two animals grip a small dog-like creature in their jaws and on the circular plate, two snakes intertwine and bite their own bodies. Such designs reveal the importance of the natural world, and it is likely that different animals were thought to hold different properties and characteristics that could be transferred to the objects they decorated. The fearsome snakes, with their shape-shifting qualities, demand respect and confer authority, and were suitable symbols for a buckle that adorned a high-status man, or even an Anglo-Saxon king.

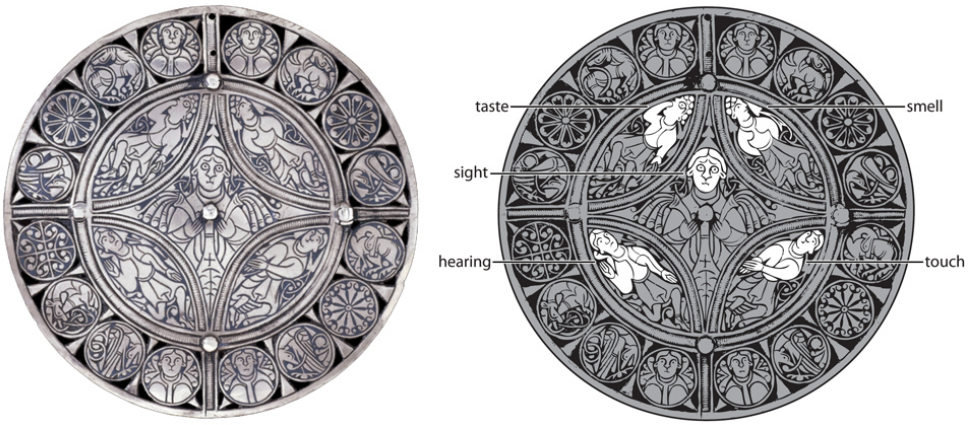


Figure **13.2.13**: The five senses on the Fuller Brooch. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Rosie Weetch, curator and Craig Williams, illustrator, British Museum

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The Sutton Hoo purse lid

by The British Museum



Figure **13.2.14**: Purse lid from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, early 7th century. Gold, garnet and millefiori, 19 x 8.3 cm (excluding hinges). British Museum, London, England. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Purse lid from the Sutton Hoo ship burial

Wealth, and its public display, was probably used to establish status in early Anglo-Saxon society much as it is today. The purse lid from Sutton Hoo is the richest of its kind yet found.



Figure **13.2.15**: Sutton Hoo shoulder-clasps (Early Anglo-Saxon), late 6th-early 7th century. Gold, millefiori, and garnet, 5.4 x 12.7 x .5 cm. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The lid was made to cover a leather pouch containing gold coins. It hung by three hinged straps from the waist belt, and was fastened by a gold buckle. The lid had totally decayed but was probably made of whalebone—a precious material in early Anglo-Saxon England. Seven gold, garnet cloisonné and millefiori glass plaques were set into it. These are made with a combination of very large garnets and small ones, deliberately used to pick out details of the imagery. This combination could link the purse-lid and the fine shoulder clasps (Figure **13.2.15**), which were also found in the ship burial, to the workshop of a single master-craftsman. It is possible that he made the entire suite of gold and garnet fittings discovered in Mound 1 as a single commission.



Figure **13.2.16**: Decorative plaques (detail), Purse lid from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, early 7th century. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The plaques include twinned images of a bird-of-prey swooping on a duck-like bird and a man standing heroically between two beasts. These images must have had deep significance for the Anglo-Saxons, but it is impossible for us to interpret them. The fierce creatures are perhaps a powerful evocation of strength and courage, qualities that a successful leader of men must possess. Strikingly similar images of a man between beasts are known from Scandinavia.

Global Connections: The Decorative Art of Cloissonné

Cloisonné is a technique in which artists use metal strips (often gold) to define a pattern or imagery on an object's surface, creating areas (cloisons) that can then be filled—like the spaces in a coloring book—with glass, enamel (powdered glass paste that fuses when heated in a kiln), or even actual gems, as is the case in the Sutton Hoo purse cover. The shiny gold borders remain visible, separating the colors and giving the object a rich, sumptuous, appearance.

The opulent materials, labor-intensive process, and the intricate detail cloisonné can produce meant that it was often chosen during the Middle Ages to decorate especially precious metalwork, architecture, and even fabric. The Coronation Mantle, discussed in the next chapter, pairs Islamic and Christian visual forms and Arabic calligraphy, and is embellished not only with jewels, gold, gems, and filigree, but also cloisonné enamel. Although the robe is sometimes misidentified as being Charlemagne's, the Kufic inscription on the robe itself gives a much later date, and it was most likely made for the Norman ruler Roger II. The Fieschi Morgan cross reliquary (early 9th century, Constantinople) is another intricate Byzantine example of enamel worked in cloisonné.



Figure **13.2.17**: Pectoral and Necklace of Sithathoryunet with the Name of Senwosret II, c. 1887–1878 BCE. Cloisonné with gold, carnelian, lapis lazuli, turquoise, garnet, 1 ¾ x 1¼". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Cloisonné, however, was not new to the Early Medieval Period; the pectoral in Figure **13.2.17**, from Middle Kingdom Egypt, was created around 1880 BCE and, like the purse cover, uses shaped, semi-precious stones (including garnet, as well as turquoise, carnelian, and lapis lazuli) rather than enamel. The cloisonné enamel process was first developed in the Near East and spread to Byzantine and Islamic art; to China via the Silk Road; and to Russia, Ukraine, Japan, Korea, and beyond. China is now famous for its fine cloisonné artwork, such as this Ming dynasty incense burner (15th-16th century). Later, Japanese artist Kaji Tsunekichi (1803-1883) is credited with championing a renaissance in Japanese cloisonné manufacturing throughout the Nagoya region in the 19th century.

The Vikings

By Boundless Art History (excerpted)

Editors' Note

The materials in this article date to the early ninth century, yet make a useful comparison to the Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo a century earlier. Like the Saxon art of Sutton Hoo, the Viking art of the Oseberg ship burial links to later Christian art in the same part of the world. Chapter 14 follows the Vikings into their Christian era.



Figure 13.2.18: Osberg Ship Head Post: Animal head post found in the Oseberg ship. Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway. The exact function of the head post is unknown. (Photo: public domain)

Of Scandinavian descent, Norsemen are often called Vikings after their trading locations on the Norwegian shoreline. Known as pre-Christian traders and pirates, Vikings used their great ships to invade European coasts, harbors, and river settlements on a seasonal basis. They created fast and seaworthy longships that served not only as warring and trading vessels, but also as media for artistic expression and individual design.

The great ships of the Vikings contain some of the major artworks left from this time. For instance, the Oseberg Bow demonstrates the Norse mastery of decorative wood carving and intricate inlay of metal. Likewise, the ship head post (Figure 13.2.18)—representing a roaring beast—is five inches high with complicated surface ornamentation in the form of interwoven animals that twist and turn.

Other examples of artistic design on Norse ships include the “King” or “Chieftain” vessels designated for the wealthier classes. Chieftain ships were distinguishable by the design of the bow of their vessel with designs such as bulls, dolphins, gold lions, drakes spewing fire out of their nose, human beings cast in gold and silver, and other unidentifiable animals cast in bronze metal. Typically, the sides of these vessels were decorated using bright colors and wood-carvings.

A Ship Burial

The Oseberg ship (Norwegian: Osebergskipet) is a well-preserved Viking ship discovered in a large burial mound at the Oseberg farm near Tønsberg in Vestfold County, Norway. This ship is widely celebrated as one of the finest artistic and archaeological finds to have survived the Viking Age.



Figure 13.2.19: The Oseberg Ship: The Oseberg ship. Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway. (Photo: Arnejohs, public domain)

The Oseberg burial mound contained numerous grave goods and the remains of two female human skeletons. The ship's interment into its burial mound dates from 834 CE, but parts of the ship date from around 800 CE, and scholars believe that ship itself is older. The bow and stern of the ship are elaborately decorated with complex woodcarvings in the characteristic "gripping beast" style, also known as the Oseberg style (Figure 13.2.20). This style's primary features are the paws that grip the borders around it, neighboring beasts, or parts of its own body. Although the Osberg style distinguishes early Viking art from previous trends, it is no longer generally accepted as an independent style. Although seaworthy, the ship is relatively frail. It is thought to have been used only for coastal voyages.



Figure 13.2.20: Oseberg Ship: This detail from the Oseberg ship demonstrates the elaborate woodcarving designs used as ornamentation on the bow and front of the ship. (Photo: Karamell, CC BY-SA 2.5)

The skeletons of two women were found in the Oseberg burial mound. One may have been sacrificed to accompany the other in death. Regardless, the opulence of the burial rite and the grave goods suggests that this was a burial of very high status. For instance, one woman wore a very fine red wool dress of fabric woven in a lozenge twill pattern (a luxury commodity) and a fine white linen veil in a gauze weave. The other wore a plainer blue wool dress with a wool veil, showing some stratification in their social status. Neither woman wore anything entirely made of silk, although small silk strips were appliqued onto a tunic worn under the red dress.



Figure 13.2.21: “Buddha Bucket”: The so-called “Buddha bucket” (Buddha-bøtte), brass and cloisonné enamel ornament of a bucket (pail) handle in the shape of a figure sitting with crossed legs. (Photo: Thorguds, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The grave had been disturbed in antiquity and many precious metals that were initially buried with Oseberg ship went missing. Nevertheless, many everyday items and artifacts were found during the early 20th-century excavations of the site. These included four elaborately decorated sleighs, a four-wheel wooden cart, bedposts, wooden chests, and other richly decorated items. For instance, the so-called “Buddha bucket” is a well-known object from the Oseberg site that features a brass and cloisonné enamel ornament of a bucket (pail) handle in the shape of a figure sitting with crossed legs. The bucket itself is made from yew wood held together with brass strips, and the handle is attached to two anthropomorphic figures often compared to depictions of the Buddha in lotus posture (although any connection to Buddhism is uncertain). Archaeologists also found more mundane items, such as agricultural and household tools, and a series of textiles that included woolen garments, imported silks, and narrow tapestries. The Oseberg burial is one of the few sources of Viking-age textiles, and the wooden cart is the only complete Viking-age cart found so far.

The Lindisfarne Gospels

by Dr. Kathleen Doyle at the British Library and Louisa Woodville

A medieval monk takes up a quill pen, fashioned from a goose feather, and dips it into a rich, black ink made from soot. Seated on a wooden chair in the scriptorium of Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of Northumberland in England, he stares hard at the words from a manuscript made in Italy. This book is his exemplar, the codex (a bound book, made from sheets of paper or parchment) from which he is to copy the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.



Figure 13.2.22: Lindisfarne Gospels, St. Matthew (detail), second initial Page, f.29, early 8th century. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

For about the next six years, he will copy this Latin. He will illuminate the gospel text with a weave of fantastic images—snakes that twist themselves into knots or birds, their curvaceous and overlapping forms creating the illusion of a third dimension into which a viewer can lose him or herself in meditative contemplation (Figure **13.2.22**).



Figure **13.2.23**: Lindisfarne Gospels, John's cross-carpet page, folio 210v. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

The book is a spectacular example of Insular or Hiberno-Saxon art—works produced in the British Isles between 500-900 CE, a time of devastating invasions and political upheavals. Monks read from it during rituals at their Lindisfarne Priory on Holy Island, a Christian community that safeguarded the shrine of St Cuthbert, a bishop who died in 687 and whose relics were thought to have curative and miracle-working powers.

A Northumbrian monk, very likely the bishop Eadfrith, illuminated the codex in the early 8th century. Two-hundred and fifty-nine written and recorded leaves include full-page portraits of each evangelist; highly ornamental cross "carpet pages," each of which features a large cross set against a background of ordered and yet teeming ornamentation (Figure **13.2.23**); and the Gospels themselves, each introduced by an historiated initial. The codex also includes sixteen pages of canon tables set in arcades. Here correlating passages from each evangelist are set side-by-side, enabling a reader to compare narrations.

In 635 C.E. Christian monks from the Scottish island of Iona built a priory in Lindisfarne. More than a hundred and fifty years later, in 793, Vikings from the north attacked and pillaged the monastery, but survivors managed to transport the Gospels safely to Durham, a town on the Northumbrian coast about 75 miles west of its original location.

We glean this information from the manuscript itself, thanks to Aldred, a 10th-century priest from a priory at Durham. Aldred's colophon—an inscription that relays information about the book's production—informs us that Eadfrith, a bishop of Lindisfarne in 698 who died in 721, created the manuscript to honor God and St. Cuthbert. Aldred also inscribed a vernacular translation between the lines of the Latin text, creating the earliest known Gospels written in a form of English.



Figure **13.2.24**: Lindisfarne Gospels, St. Matthew, cross-carpet page, f.26v (detail showing the spiral motifs at the center of the cross and snake-like creatures). (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

Matthew's cross-carpet page exemplifies Eadfrith's exuberance and genius. A mesmerizing series of repetitive knots and spirals is dominated by a centrally-located cross. One can imagine devout monks losing themselves in the swirls and eddies of color during meditative contemplation of its patterns.

Compositionally, Eadfrith stacked wine-glass shapes horizontally and vertically against his intricate weave of knots. On closer inspection many of these knots reveal themselves as snake-like creatures curling in and around tubular forms, mouths clamping down on their bodies. Chameleon-like, their bodies change colors: sapphire blue here, verdigris green there, and sandy gold in between. The sanctity of the cross, outlined in red with arms outstretched and pressing against the page edges, stabilizes the background's gyrating activity and turns the repetitive energy into a meditative force.



Figure **13.2.25**: Lindisfarne Gospels, St. Luke, incipit page, f.139, with detail showing creatures within the letter *u*. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

Likewise, Luke's incipit (incipit: it begins) page (Figure **13.2.25**) teems with animal life, spiraled forms, and swirling vortexes. In many cases Eadfrith's characteristic knots reveal themselves as snakes that move stealthily along the confines of a letter's boundaries.

Blue pin-wheeled shapes rotate in repetitive circles, caught in the vortex of a large Q that forms Luke's opening sentence—Quoniam quidem multi conati sunt ordinare narrationem. (Translation: As many have taken it in hand to set forth in order.)

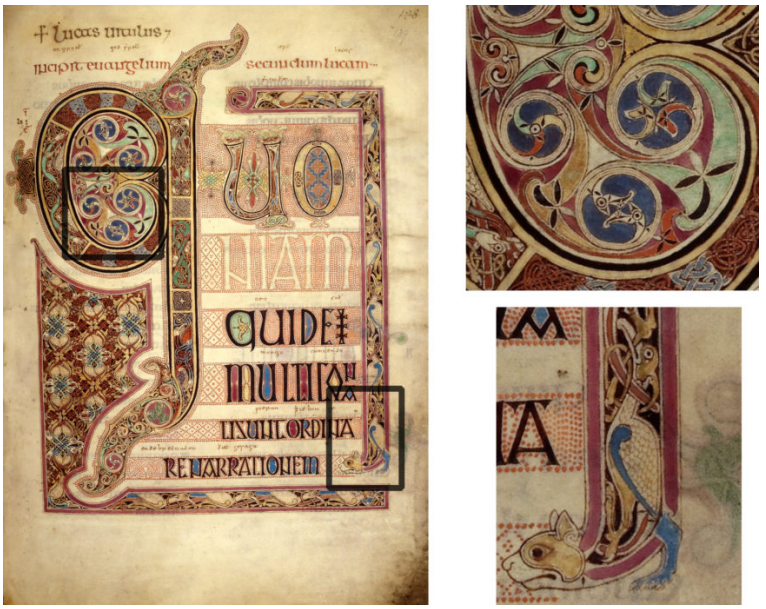


Figure 13.2.26: Lindisfarne Gospels, St. Luke, incipit page, f.139, with detail showing birds and a cat. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

Birds also abound. One knot enclosed in a tall rectangle on the far right unravels into a blue heron's chest shaped like a large comma. Eadfrith repeats this shape vertically down the column, cleverly twisting the comma into a cat's forepaw at the bottom. The feline, who has just consumed the eight birds that stretch vertically up from its head, presses off this appendage acrobatically to turn its body 90 degrees; it ends up staring at the words RENARRATIONEM (part of the phrase *-re narrationem*).

Eadfrith also has added a host of tiny red dots that envelop words, except when they don't—the letters "NIAM" of "*quoniam*" are composed of the vellum itself, the negative space now asserting itself as four letters.

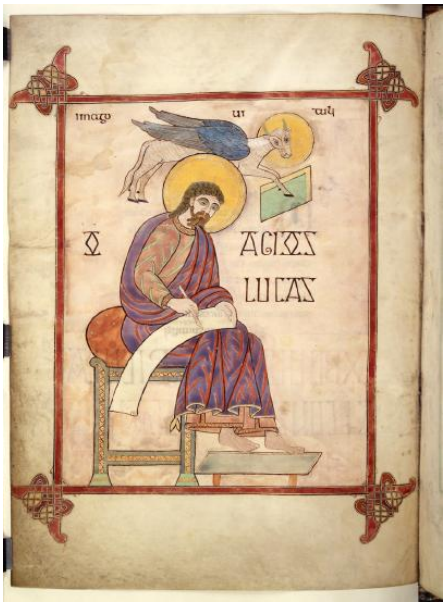


Figure 13.2.27: Lindesfarne Gospels, St. Luke, portrait page, 137v. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

Luke's incipit page is in marked contrast to his straightforward portrait page (Figure 13.2.27). Here Eadfrith seats the curly-haired, bearded evangelist on a red-cushioned stool against an unornamented background. Luke holds a quill in his right hand, poised to write words on a scroll unfurling from his lap. His feet hover above a tray supported by red legs. He wears a purple robe streaked with red, one that we can easily imagine on a late fourth or fifth century Roman philosopher. The gold halo behind Luke's head

indicates his divinity. Above his halo flies a blue-winged calf, its two eyes turned toward the viewer with its body in profile. The bovine clasps a green parallelogram between two forelegs, a reference to the Gospel.

According to the historian Bede from the nearby monastery in Monkwearmouth (d. 735), this calf, or ox, symbolizes Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Bede assigns symbols for the other three evangelists as well, which Eadfrith duly includes in their respective portraits: Matthew's is a man, suggesting the human aspect of Christ; Mark's the lion, symbolizing the triumphant and divine Christ of the Resurrection; and John's the eagle, referring to Christ's second coming.



Figure **13.2.28**: Lindisfarne Gospels, John's cross-carpet page, folio 210v, with a detail of a striped bird. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

A dense interplay of stacked birds teem underneath the crosses of the carpet page that opens John's Gospel. One bird, situated in the upper left-hand quadrant, has blue-and-pink stripes in contrast to others that sport registers of feathers. Stripes had a negative association to the medieval mind, appearing chaotic and disordered. The insane wore stripes, as did prostitutes, criminals, jugglers, sorcerers, and hangmen. Might Eadfrith be warning his viewers that evil lurks hidden in the most unlikely of places? Or was Eadfrith himself practicing humility in avoiding perfection?

All in all, the variety and splendor of the Lindisfarne Gospels are such that even in reproduction, its images astound. Artistic expression and inspired execution make this codex a high point of early medieval art.

For more: check out high-resolution images of many illuminations from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* at the British Library.

Online Resource: "Making Manuscripts" video

An illuminated manuscript is a book written and decorated completely by hand. Illuminated manuscripts were among the most precious objects produced in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, primarily in monasteries and courts. Society's rulers —emperors, kings, dukes, cardinals, and bishops—commissioned the most splendid manuscripts. This video outlines the process of making one, from preparing the animal skins that form the pages to binding it and producing a heavy cover.



The Book of Kells

by Trinity College, Dublin



Figure 13.2.29: Chi Rho carpet page, Folio 34r of the Book of Kells. Tempera on vellum, 1'1" x 9 1/2". Trinity College Library, Dublin. (Photo: public domain)

What is the Book of Kells?

The Book of Kells (Trinity College Dublin MS 58) contains the four Gospels in Latin based on the Vulgate text which St Jerome completed in 384AD, intermixed with readings from the earlier Old Latin translation. The Gospel texts are prefaced by other texts, including "canon tables", or concordances of Gospel passages common to two or more of the evangelists; summaries of the gospel narratives (Breves causae); and prefaces characterizing the evangelists (Argumenta).

The book is written on vellum (prepared calfskin) in a bold and expert version of the script known as "insular majuscule." It contains 340 folios, now measuring approximately 330 x 255 mm; they were severely trimmed, and their edges gilded, in the course of rebinding in the 19th century.

Where and when was the Book of Kells written?

The date and place of origin of the Book of Kells have attracted a great deal of scholarly controversy. The majority academic opinion now tends to attribute it to the scriptorium of Iona (Argyllshire), but conflicting claims have located it in Northumbria or in Pictland in eastern Scotland. A monastery founded around 561 by St Colum Cille on Iona, an island off Mull in western Scotland, became the principal house of a large monastic confederation. In 806, following a Viking raid on the island which left 68 of the community dead, the Columban monks took refuge in a new monastery at Kells, County Meath, and for many years the two monasteries were governed as a single community. It must have been close to the year 800 that the Book of Kells was written, although there is no way of knowing if the book was produced wholly at Iona or at Kells, or partially at each location.

Why is the Book of Kells famous?

The manuscript's celebrity derives largely from the impact of its lavish decoration, the extent and artistry of which is incomparable. Abstract decoration and images of plant, animal and human ornament punctuate the text with the aim of glorifying Jesus' life and message, and keeping his attributes and symbols constantly in the eye of the reader.

There are full pages of decoration for the canon tables; symbols of the evangelists Matthew (the Man), Mark (the Lion), Luke (the Calf) and John (the Eagle); the opening words of the Gospels; the Virgin and Child; a portrait of Christ; complex narrative scenes, the earliest to survive in gospel manuscripts, representing the arrest of Christ and his temptation by the Devil. The Chi Rho page

(folio 34r), introducing Matthew's account of the nativity, is the single most famous page in medieval art. There are portraits of Matthew and John, but no portrait of Mark or Luke survives. These were probably executed, like other major pages of the manuscript, on single leaves and they are presumed to have become detached over time and lost. In all, around 30 folios went missing in the medieval and early modern periods.



Figure 13.2.30: The four Evangelists (clockwise from top left, Matthew, Mark, John, Luke), Folio 27v of the Book of Kells. Tempera on vellum, 1'1" x 9 1/2". Trinity College Library, Dublin. (Photo: public domain)

How many artists produced the Book of Kells?

Three artists seem to have produced the major decorated pages. One of them, whose work can be seen on the Chi Rho page, was capable of ornament of such extraordinary fineness and delicacy that his skills have been likened to those of a goldsmith. Four major scribes copied the text. Each displayed characteristics and stylistic traits while working within a scriptorium style. One, for example, was responsible only for text, and was in the habit of leaving the decoration of letters at the beginning of verses to an artist; while another scribe, who may have been the last in date, tended to use bright colours—red, purple, yellow—for the text, and to fill blank spaces with the unnecessary repetition of certain passages. The extent to which there was an identity between scribe and artist is among the key unanswered questions about the manuscript.

What pigments did the Book of Kells artists use?

A range of pigments was employed, including blue made from indigo or woad, native to northern Europe. Recent research in the Library of Trinity College Dublin has indicated that blue from lapis lazuli was probably not used in the manuscript as had previously been thought. Orpiment (yellow arsenic sulphide) was used to produce a vibrant yellow pigment. Red came from red lead or from organic sources which are difficult at present to identify. A copper green, reacting with damp, was responsible for perforating the vellum on a number of folios. The artists employed a technique of adding as many as three pigments on top of a base layer.

How was the Book of Kells used in the Middle Ages?

The transcription of the text was remarkably careless, in many cases due to eye-skip, with letters and whole words omitted. Text already copied on one page (folio 218v) was repeated on folio 219r, with the words on 218v elegantly expunged by the addition of red crosses. Such carelessness, taken together with the sumptuousness of the book, have led to the conclusion that it was designed for ceremonial use on special liturgical occasions such as Easter rather than for daily services.

The history of the Book of Kells

The Book of Kells seldom comes to view in the historical record. The Annals of Ulster, describing it as "the chief treasure of the western world", record that it was stolen in 1006 for its ornamental cumdach (shrine). It remained at Kells throughout the Middle

Ages, venerated as the great gospel book of St Colum Cille, a relic of the saint, as indicated by a poem added in the 15th century to folio 289v. In the late 11th and 12th centuries, blank pages and spaces on folios 5v-7v and 27r were used to record property transactions relating to the monastery at Kells. In 1090, it was reported by the Annals of Tigernach, that relics of Colum Cille were brought to Kells from Donegal. These relics included 'the two gospels', one of them probably the Book of Kells, the other perhaps the Book of Durrow. Following the rebellion of 1641, the church at Kells lay in ruins, and around 1653 the book was sent to Dublin by the governor of Kells, Charles Lambert, Earl of Cavan, in the interests of its safety. A few years later it reached Trinity College, the single constituent college of the University of Dublin, through the agency of Henry Jones, a former scoutmaster general to Cromwell's army in Ireland and Vice-Chancellor of the University, when he became Bishop of Meath in 1661. It has been on display in the Old Library at Trinity College from the mid 19th century, and now attracts in excess of 500,000 visitors a year. Since 1953 it has been bound in four volumes. Two volumes can normally be seen, one opened to display a major decorated page, and one to show two pages of script.

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13.3: The Early Islamic World

Introduction to Islam

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis



Figure **13.3.1**: Great Mosque, 706-715. Damascus, Syria. (Photo: G. Lewis via Smarthistory) Built under the Umayyad dynasty, this Islamic house of worship was designed to accommodate the large crowds of the growing faith.

Origins and the life of Muhammad the Prophet

Islam, Judaism and Christianity are three of the world's great monotheistic faiths. They share many of the same holy sites, such as Jerusalem, and prophets, such as Abraham. Collectively, scholars refer to these three religions as the Abrahamic faiths, since Abraham and his family played vital roles in the formation of these religions.

Islam was founded by Muhammad (c. 570-632 CE), a merchant from the city of Mecca, now in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Mecca was a well-established trading city. The Kaaba (in Mecca) is the focus of pilgrimage for Muslims.

The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, provides very little detail about Muhammad's life; however, the hadiths, or sayings of the Prophet, which were largely compiled in the centuries following Muhammad's death, provide a larger narrative for the events in his life. Muhammad was born in 570 CE in Mecca, and his early life was unremarkable. He married a wealthy widow named Khadija. Around 610 CE, Muhammad had his first religious experience, where he was instructed to recite by the Angel Gabriel. After a period of introspection and self-doubt, Muhammad accepted his role as God's prophet and began to preach word of the one God, or Allah in Arabic. His first convert was his wife.

Muhammad's divine recitations form the Qur'an; unlike the Bible or Hindu epics, it is organized into verses, known as *ayat*. During one of his many visions, in 621 CE, Muhammad was taken on the famous Night Journey by the Angel Gabriel, traveling from Mecca to the farthest mosque in Jerusalem, from where he ascended into heaven. The site of his ascension is believed to be the stone around which the Dome of the Rock was built. Eventually in 622, Muhammad and his followers fled Mecca for the city of Yathrib, which is known as Medina today, where his community was welcomed. This event is known as the hijra, or emigration. 622, the year of the hijra (A.H.), marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, which is still in use today.

Between 625-630 CE, there were a series of battles fought between the Meccans and Muhammad and the new Muslim community. Eventually, Muhammad was victorious and reentered Mecca in 630.

One of Muhammad's first actions was to purge the Kaaba of all of its idols (before this, the Kaaba was a major site of pilgrimage for the polytheistic religious traditions of the Arabian Peninsula and contained numerous idols of pagan gods). The Kaaba is believed to have been built by Abraham (or Ibrahim as he is known in Arabic) and his son, Ishmael. The Arabs claim descent from Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. The Kaaba then became the most important center for pilgrimage in Islam.

In 632, Muhammad died in Medina. Muslims believe that he was the final in a line of prophets, which included Moses, Abraham, and Jesus.

After Muhammad's death

The century following Muhammad's death was dominated by military conquest and expansion. Muhammad was succeeded by the four "rightly-guided" Caliphs (khalifa or successor in Arabic): Abu Bakr (632-34 CE), Umar (634-44 CE), Uthman (644-56 CE), and Ali (656-661 CE). The Qur'an is believed to have been codified during Uthman's reign. The final caliph, Ali, was married to Fatima, Muhammad's daughter and was murdered in 661. The death of Ali is a very important event; his followers, who believed that he should have succeeded Muhammad directly, became known as the Shi'a, meaning the followers of Ali. Today, the Shi'ite community is composed of several different branches, and there are large Shi'a populations in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. The Sunnis, who do not hold that Ali should have directly succeeded Muhammad, compose the largest branch of Islam; their adherents can be found across North Africa, the Middle East, as well as in Asia and Europe.

During the seventh and early eighth centuries, the Arab armies conquered large swaths of territory in the Middle East, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Central Asia, despite on-going civil wars in Arabia and the Middle East. Eventually, the Umayyad Dynasty emerged as the rulers, with Abd al-Malik completing the Dome of the Rock, one of the earliest surviving Islamic monuments, in 691/2 CE. The Umayyads reigned until 749/50 CE, when they were overthrown, and the Abbasid Dynasty assumed the Caliphate and ruled large sections of the Islamic world. However, with the Abbasid Revolution, no one ruler would ever again control all of the Islamic lands.

The Qur'an

by Dr. Mustafa Shah (excerpted)

When was the Qur'an written down?

According to Muslim literary sources, when the Prophet passed away in 632 the Qur'an did not formally exist as a fixed text but was "written down on palm-leaf stalks, scattered parchments, shoulder blades, limestone and memorised in the hearts of men." During the rule of one of Muhammad's later successors, the caliph Uthman (r. 644–656), a standardised copy of the Qur'an was compiled and distributed to the main centres of the Islamic Empire. Although the caliph's original codices have not survived, his introduction of a fixed text is recognised as one of his enduring achievements. One of the oldest copies of the Qur'an, which is dated to the 8th century, is held in the British Library; it includes over two-thirds of the complete text (Figure **13.3.2**).



Figure **13.3.2**: The Ma'il Qur'an, 700-799. Ink on vellum. British Library, London. (Photo: British Library, public domain)

Due to the fact that written Arabic was not fully developed, the earliest Qur'an manuscripts were transcribed in what is termed a *scriptio defectiva*. The script lacked a system for the annotation of long and short vowels, and diacritics were used only

occasionally to identify individual letters. In later manuscripts scholars developed notations to represent short vowels in the form of carefully placed red dots. These were eventually replaced by small vowel markings in the shape of diminutive characters and strokes (Figure **13.3.3**).



Figure **13.3.3**: An early Kufic Qur'an, c. 850. Manuscript. British Library, London (Photo: British Library, public domain)

Despite these improvements to help readers, the oral transmission of the Qur'an retained its primacy. The fact that formal daily prayers, in which the recitation of the Qur'an is central, are performed in Arabic underlines the devotional value of the recitation of the text; even the word Qur'an is actually derived from the Arabic verb "to recite." The requisite practice of committing the whole text to memory has an extended history, and still forms an integral part of the curriculum followed in seminaries throughout the Islamic world. The preservation and study of the Qur'an led to the flourishing of literary traditions of learning, including grammar, philology and even poetry, as scholars used insights from such scholarship to interpret the Qur'an....

Themes and contents of the Qur'an

The Qur'an comprises 6,236 verses (*ayahs*) which are divided into 114 chapters or surahs, each of which takes its name from a prominent event, theme or topic relevant to the chapter. Hence, the first chapter of the Qur'an is referred to as "The Opening" (*al-Fatihah*) (Figure **13.3.4**, Figure **13.3.5**), while chapter twenty-six, "The Poets" (*al-Shuʿaraʾ*), derives its name from a reference to the conduct of ancient poets with which the chapter concludes.

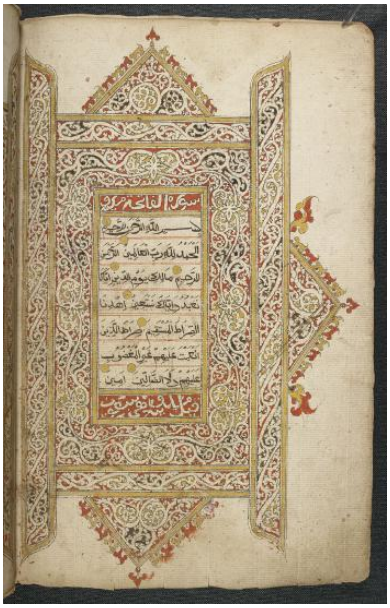


Figure **13.3.4**: Qur'an manuscript from Aceh showing Surat al-Fatihah, early 19th century. Ink on paper. British Library, London. (Photo: British Library, public domain)

Each chapter (with the exception of chapter nine) is preceded by an introductory formula, 'In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful', referred to as the *basmalah*.

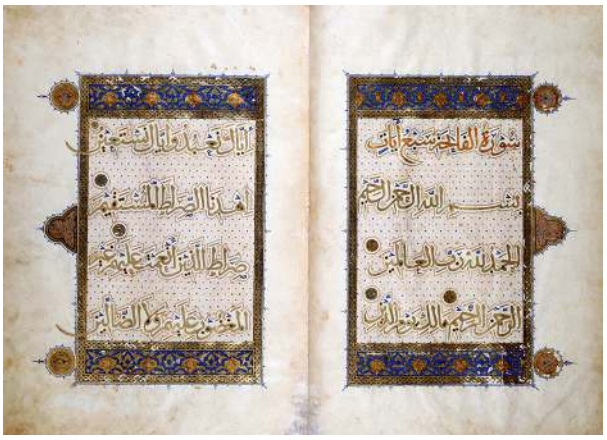


Figure **13.3.5**: Muhammad ibn al-Wahid [calligrapher], Abu Bakr, known as Sandal [master illuminator], Sultan Baybars' Qur'an showing the whole of 'the Opening' (al-Fatihah), 1304. British Library, London. (Photo: British Library, public domain)

The traditional view is that the Qur'an's contents were revealed piecemeal. Revelation identified with the early Meccan years focussed primarily on the accentuation of God's unity and transcendence, a theme encapsulated in the following chapter:

> *Say God is One; He is Eternal;*
> *He was not begotten nor does he beget;*
> *and he has no peer or equal (Q. 112.1–4)*

The language of the Meccan verses is composed in a form of eloquent prose which is concise and rhythmic, employing an intricate range of figurative expressions and rhetorical devices. In terms of content, theological and ethical themes are intertwined. Early Qur'anic revelation includes declarations about the omnipotence and omniscience of God, the resurrection of the dead, the impending Day of Judgement and rewards and punishment in the hereafter. The theme of personal morality and piety is also promoted, while polytheism and idolatry are condemned. Also connected with revelation of this period are the so-called "disjointed letters" of the Qur'an. This designation is due to the fact that twenty-nine of the Qur'an's chapters open with either a single letter of the Arabic alphabet or a combination of these letters, which are recognized as individual verses; indeed, a number of chapters are actually named after these letters. The chapter shown in Figure **13.3.6** begins with the letters T.S.M. (Ṭā Sīn Mīm). The precise meaning of these individual letters remains a mystery as the commentary tradition that developed around the study of the Qur'an seemingly offers no decisive clues as to their actual import.



Figure **13.3.6**: Spanish Qur'an from the 13th century. British Library, London. (Photo: British Library, public domain)

The imposition of a detailed system of ritual practices and laws occurs in the post-*Hijrah* period. Set times for prayer, fasting, the giving of alms, and the performance of pilgrimage were made obligatory by the Qur'an at Medina. A range of legal measures was introduced, including rules for inheritance and dietary guidelines, the proscription of usury, laws on marriage and divorce and a penal code. Religious polemics with Jews and Christians are also a feature of Qur'anic revelation of this later period.

What does the Qur'an say about Christianity and Judaism?

In the Qur'an, Muhammad is designated as being the final prophet sent to mankind and is hailed as being one of a distinguished line of divinely appointed messengers who were sent to proclaim the message of God's unity. It states:

> *Indeed, those who believe, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who acknowledge God and the Last Day and perform good works – will be granted their rewards with their Lord. Fear shall not affect them, nor shall they grieve (Q. 2.62)*

Confirming the shared spiritual heritage with Judaism and Christianity, the tribulations and triumphs of biblical personalities are also portrayed in the narratives of the Qur'an. Teachings on Jesus emphasize his human nature, although the Qur'an upholds the notion of his immaculate conception and the miracles he performed. However, it rejects the claim that Jesus was the Son of God and also the concept of the divine Trinity; the Qur'an also denies the Crucifixion. Jesus is lauded as a prophet to the Children of Israel, and his mother Mary is held in great esteem, even having a chapter of the Qur'an named after her. It is significant to note that in deference to the sacred status of their revealed scripture, the Qur'an describes Jews and Christians as being "the People of the Book."



Figure **13.3.7**: Murad [scribe], Qur'an manuscript from Daghistan, 1778. Manuscript. British Library, London. (Photo: British Library, public domain) From the museum: "The Islamic manuscript culture of the Daghistani cultural region, centred on the republic of Dagestan in Russia, is hardly known. The most immediately striking feature of Daghistani manuscript illumination is the bright palette of red, yellow, green, purple and brown, which contrasts strongly with the predominantly blue and gold colours of the Ottoman and Indo-Persianate manuscript traditions to the south. A greater understanding and awareness of Daghistani manuscripts can help to illustrate the tremendous variety encountered in book cultures across the Islamic world."

This essay originally appeared in Discovering Sacred Texts at the British Library (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Arts of the Islamic world

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis



Figure **13.3.8**: Taj Mahal, Agra, India. (Photo: David Castor, public domain)

What is Islamic Art?

The Dome of the Rock, the Taj Mahal (Figure **13.3.8**), a Mina'i ware bowl, a silk carpet, a Qur'an; all of these are examples of Islamic Art. But what is Islamic Art?

Islamic Art is a modern concept, created by art historians in the nineteenth century to categorize and study the material first produced under the Islamic peoples that emerged from Arabia in the seventh century.

Today Islamic Art describes all of the arts that were produced in the lands where Islam was the dominant religion or the religion of those who ruled. Unlike the terms Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist art, which refer only to religious art of these faiths, Islamic art is not used merely to describe religious art or architecture, but applies to all art forms produced in the Islamic World.

Thus, Islamic Art refers not only to works created by Muslim artists, artisans, and architects or for Muslim patrons. It encompasses the works created by Muslim artists for a patron of any faith, including Christians, Jews, or Hindus, and the works created by Jews, Christians, and others, living in Islamic lands, for patrons, Muslim and otherwise.

One of the most famous monuments of Islamic Art is the Taj Mahal, a royal mausoleum, located in Agra, India. Hinduism is majority religion in India; however, because Muslim rulers, most famously the Mughals, dominated large areas of modern-day India for centuries, India has a vast range of Islamic art and architecture. The Great Mosque of Xian, China (Figure **13.3.9**), is one of the oldest and best preserved mosques in China. First constructed in 742 CE, the mosque's current form dates to the fifteenth century CE and follows the plan and architecture of a contemporary Buddhist temple. In fact, much Islamic art and architecture was —and still is—created through a synthesis of local traditions and more global ideas.

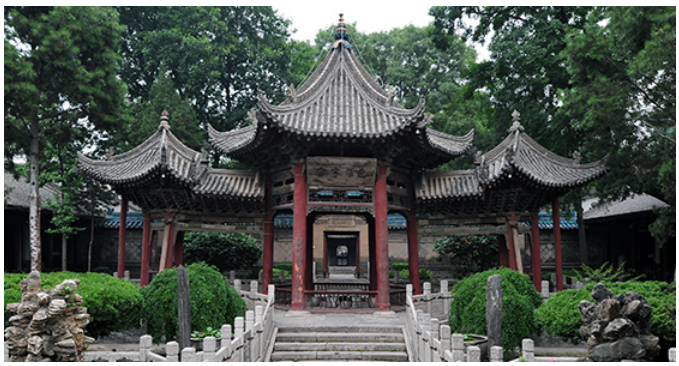


Figure **13.3.9**: View of the Great Mosque of Xi'an, China. (Photo: chensiyuan, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Islamic Art is not a monolithic style or movement; it spans 1,300 years of history and has incredible geographic diversity—Islamic empires and dynasties controlled territory from Spain to western China at various points in history. However, few if any of these various countries or Muslim empires would have referred to their art as Islamic. An artisan in Damascus thought of his work as Syrian or Damascene—not as Islamic.

As a result of thinking about the problems of calling such art Islamic, certain scholars and major museums, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have decided to omit the term Islamic when they renamed their new galleries of Islamic art. Instead, they are called "Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia," thereby stressing the regional styles and individual cultures. Thus, when using the phrase, Islamic Art, one should know that it is a useful, but artificial, concept.

In some ways, Islamic Art is a bit like referring to the Italian Renaissance. During the Renaissance, there was no unified Italy; it was a land of independent city-states. No one would have thought of one's self as an Italian, or of the art they produced as Italian, rather one conceived of one's self as a Roman, a Florentine, or a Venetian. Each city developed a highly local, remarkable style. At the same time, there are certain underlying themes or similarities that unify the art and architecture of these cities and allow scholars to speak of an Italian Renaissance.

Themes

Similarly, there are themes and types of objects that link the arts of the Islamic World together. Calligraphy is a very important art form in the Islamic World. The Qur'an, written in elegant scripts, represents Allah's (or God's) divine word, which Muhammad received directly from Allah during his visions. Quranic verses, executed in calligraphy, are found on many different forms of art and architecture. Likewise, poetry can be found on everything from ceramic bowls to the walls of houses. Calligraphy's omnipresence underscores the value that is placed on language, specifically Arabic.

Geometric and vegetative motifs are very popular throughout the lands where Islam was once or still is a major religion and cultural force, appearing in the private palaces of buildings such as the Alhambra (in Spain) as well as in the detailed metal work of Safavid Iran. Likewise, certain building types appear throughout the Muslim world: mosques with their minarets (Figure **13.3.10** and Figure **13.3.11**), mausolea, gardens, and madrasas (religious schools) are all common. However, their forms vary greatly.



Figure **13.3.10**: View of the minarets of the Blue Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey. (Photo via Smarthistory)

One of the most common misconceptions about the art of the Islamic World is that it is aniconic; that is, the art does not contain representations of humans or animals. Religious art and architecture, almost from the earliest examples, such as the Dome of the Rock, the Aqsa Mosque (both in Jerusalem), and the Great Mosque of Damascus, built under the Umayyad rulers, did not include human figures and animals. However, the private residences of sovereigns, such as Qasr 'Amra or Khirbat Mafjar, were filled with vast figurative paintings, mosaics, and sculpture.



Figure **13.3.11**: Minarets of Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, Egypt. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The study of the arts of the Islamic World has also lagged behind other fields in Art History. There are several reasons for this. First, many scholars are not familiar with Arabic or Farsi (the dominant language in Iran). Calligraphy, particularly Arabic calligraphy, as noted above, is a major art form and appears on almost all types of architecture and arts. Second, the art forms and objects prized in the Islamic world do not correspond to those traditionally valued by art historians and collectors in the Western world. The so-called decorative arts—carpets, ceramics, metalwork, and books—are types of art that Western scholars have traditionally valued less than painting and sculpture. However, the last fifty years has seen a flourishing of scholarship on the arts of the Islamic World.

Arts of the Islamic World

Here, we have decided to use the phrase "Arts of the Islamic World" to emphasize the art that was created in a world where Islam was a dominant religion or a major cultural force, but was not necessarily religious art. Often when the word "Islamic" is used today, it is used to describe something religious; thus using the phrase, Islamic Art, potentially implies, mistakenly, that all of this art is religious in nature. The phrase, "Arts of the Islamic World," also acknowledges that not all of the work produced in the "Islamic World" was for Muslims or was created by Muslims.

Arts of the Islamic world: The early period

by Glenna Barlow

The caliphates

The umbrella term "Islamic art" casts a pretty big shadow, covering several continents and more than a dozen centuries. So to make sense of it, we first have to first break it down into parts. One way is by medium—say, ceramics or architecture—but this method of categorization would entail looking at works that span three continents. Geography is another means of organization, but modern political boundaries rarely match the borders of past Islamic states.

A common solution is to consider instead, the historical caliphates (the states ruled by those who claimed legitimate Islamic rule) or dynasties. Though these distinctions are helpful, it is important to bear in mind that these are not discrete groups that produced one particular style of artwork. Artists throughout the centuries have been affected by the exchange of goods and ideas and have been influenced by one another.

Umayyad (661-750)

Four leaders, known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs, continued the spread of Islam immediately following the death of the Prophet. It was following the death of the fourth caliph that Mu'awiya seized power and established the Umayyad caliphate, the first Islamic

dynasty. During this period, Damascus became the capital and the empire expanded West and East.

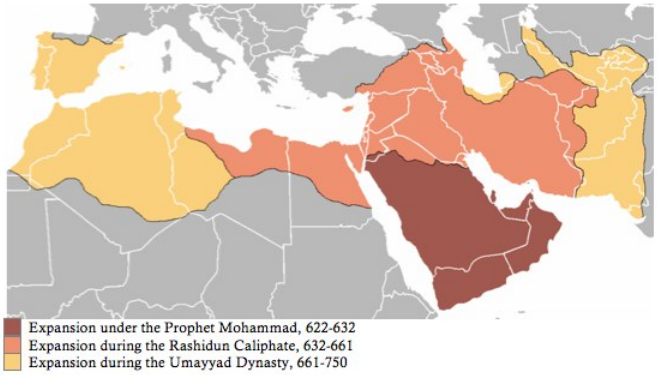


Figure **13.3.12**: Map indicating the phases of expansion under the Prophet Mohammad, the Rashidun caliphate, and the Umayyad Dynasty. (Image via Smarthistory)

The first years following the death of Muhammad were, of course, formative for the religion and its artwork. The immediate needs of the religion included places to worship (mosques) and holy books (Korans) to convey the word of God. So, naturally, many of the first artistic projects included ornamented mosques where the faithful could gather and Korans with beautiful calligraphy.

Because Islam was still a very new religion, it had no artistic vocabulary of its own, and its earliest work was heavily influenced by older styles in the region. Chief among these sources were the Coptic tradition of present-day Egypt and Syria, with its scrolling vines and geometric motifs, Sassanian metalwork and crafts from what is now Iraq with their rhythmic, sometimes abstracted qualities, and naturalistic Byzantine mosaics depicting animals and plants (Figure **13.3.13**).

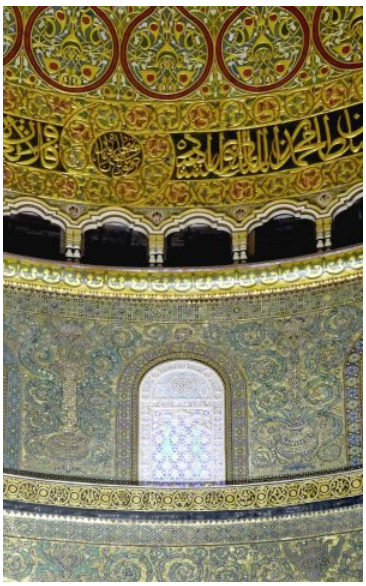


Figure **13.3.13**: Base of the dome, Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 687. (Photo: Virtutepetens, CC BY-SA 4.0)

These elements can be seen in the earliest significant work from the Umayyad period, the most important of which is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. This stunning monument incorporates Coptic, Sassanian, and Byzantine elements in its decorative program and remains a masterpiece of Islamic architecture to this day.

Remarkably, just one generation after the religion's inception, Islamic civilization had produced a magnificent, if singular, monument. While the Dome of the Rock is considered an influential work, it bears little resemblance to the multitude of mosques created throughout the rest of the caliphate. It is important to point out that the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque. A more common plan, based on the house of the Prophet, was used for the vast majority of mosques throughout the Arab peninsula and the Maghreb. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is the Great Mosque of Córdoba (784-786) in Spain, which, like the Dome of the Rock, demonstrates an integration of the styles of the existing culture in which it was created.

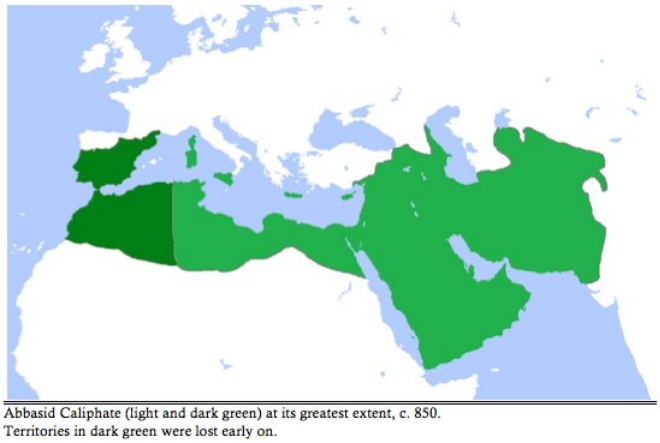


Figure **13.3.14**: Territory of the Abbasid Caliphate at its greatest extent (green), c. 850. (Map via Smarthistory)

The Abbasid revolution in the mid-eighth century ended the Umayyad dynasty, resulted in the massacre of the Umayyad caliphs (a single caliph escaped to Spain, prolonging Umayyad work after dynasty) and established the Abbasid dynasty in 750. The new caliphate shifted its attention eastward and established cultural and commercial capitals at Baghdad and Samarra.



Figure **13.3.15**: Bowl, c. 9th century. Lusterware, 28.5 cm diameter, 8cm height. Abbasid Caliphate. British Museum, London. (Photo: British Museum via Smarthistory)

The Umayyad dynasty produced little of what we would consider decorative arts (like pottery, glass, metalwork), but under the Abbasid dynasty production of decorative stone, wood and ceramic objects flourished. Artisans in Samarra developed a new method for carving surfaces that allowed for curved, vegetal forms (called arabesques) which became widely adopted. There were also developments in ceramic decoration. The use of luster painting (which gives ceramic ware a metallic sheen; see Figure **13.3.15**) became popular in surrounding regions and was extensively used on tile for centuries. Overall, the Abbasid epoch was an important transitional period that disseminated styles and techniques to distant Islamic lands.

The Abbasid empire weakened with the establishment and growing power of semi-autonomous dynasties throughout the region, until Baghdad was finally overthrown in 1258. This dissolution signified not only the end of a dynasty, but marked the last time that the Arab-Muslim empire would be united as one entity.

Folio from a Qur'an

by Alex Brey



Figure **13.3.16**: Qu'ran fragment, MS M. 712, fols 19v-20r, in Arabic, possibly Iraq, before 911. Vellum, 23 x 32 cm. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

The Qur'an: From recitation to book

The Qur'an is the sacred text of Islam, consisting of the divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic. Over the course of the first century and a half of Islam, the form of the manuscript was adapted to suit the dignity and splendor of this divine revelation. However, the word Qur'an, which means "recitation," suggests that manuscripts were of secondary importance to oral tradition. In fact, the 114 *suras* (or chapters) of the Qur'an were compiled into a textual format, organized from longest to shortest, only after the death of Muhammad, although scholars still debate exactly when this might have occurred.

This two-page spread (or bifolium) of a Qur'an manuscript, which contains the beginning of *Surat Al-'Ankabut* (The Spider), is now in the collection of The Morgan Library and Museum in New York (Figure **13.3.16**). Other folios that appear to be from the same Qur'an survive in the Chester Beatty Library (Dublin), the Topkapı Palace Museum and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art (Istanbul), and the National Museum of Syria (Damascus). One page includes an inscription, which states that ʿAbd al-Munʿim Ibn Aḥmad donated the Qur'an to the Great Mosque of Damascus in 298 A.H. (July, 911 CE), although we do not know where or how long before this donation the manuscript was produced.

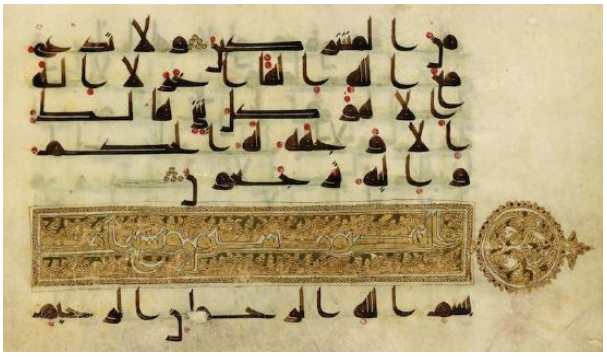


Figure **13.3.17**: Qur'an fragment (detail showing folio 20r), MS M.712, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

A roadmap for readers

The main text of the *mushaf* (pronounced muss-hoff), as manuscripts of the Qur'an are known, is written in brown ink. Arabic, the language of the divine word of Islam, is read from right to left. Several consonants share the same basic letterform, and these are usually distinguished from each other by lines or dots placed above or below the letter. Short vowels such as a, u, and i, are not normally written in Arabic, but in order to avoid misreadings of such an important text it quickly became standard to include vowels in the Qur'an. In this manuscript, these short vowels are marked with red circles positioned above, next to, or below the consonants, depending on the vowel.

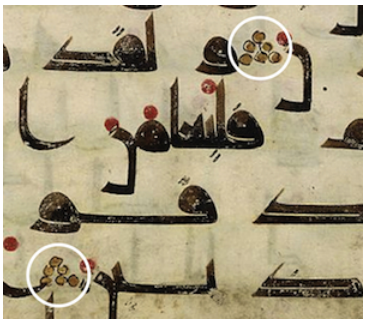


Figure 13.3.18: Sura, Qur'an fragment (detail showing dots that distinguish between letter forms and indicate vowels and the five gold circles at the end of each verse), MS M.712, fol. 20r, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

The text of each sura is further divided into verses by triangles made up of 5 gold circles located at the end of each verse (Figure 13.3.18).

The title of each sura is written in gold ink, and surrounded by a rectangle, filled here with an undulating golden vine (Figure 13.3.19). Combined with a rounded palmette extending into the margin of the folio, it allows readers to quickly locate the beginning of each sura.

Because figural imagery such as human or animal forms was considered inappropriate for the ornamentation of sacred monuments and objects, artists relied on vegetal and geometric motifs when they decorated mosques and sacred manuscripts. Vines and palmettes like the ones that surround the sura heading here appear alone in sacred contexts, but they also accompanied animal and human forms in the secular decoration of palaces and textiles.



Figure 13.3.19: Sura title, Qur'an fragment (detail with the sura title in a gold rectangle and rounded palmette), MS M.712, fol. 20r, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

Planning the proportions of the page

The art of producing a mushaf began well before a pen was ever dipped into ink. The dimensions of each page were calculated before the parchment was cut, and the text was carefully situated relative to the edges of the pages. Each page of costly parchment (or vellum) in this Qur'an is larger than a standard sheet of printer paper, and contains only nine lines of calligraphy. These materials suggest both the dignity of the sacred text and the wealth of its patron, who was probably a member of the aristocratic elite.

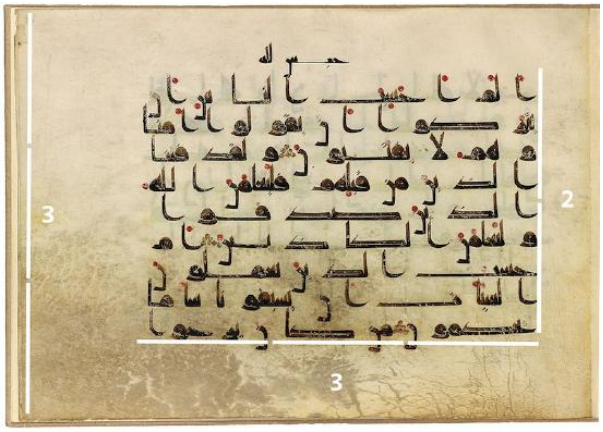


Figure 13.3.20: Diagram of proportions, showing a 2:3 ratio. Single folio, Qur'an fragment, MS M.712, fol. 19v, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

In addition to the high quality and large quantity of materials used, the deliberate geometric planning of the page conveys the importance of the text that it contains. As in many of the mushafs produced between 750 and 1000 CE, the pages of this manuscript are wider than they are tall.

The text-block of this manuscript (Figure **13.3.20**) has a height-to-width ratio of 2:3, and the width of the text-block is approximately equal to the height of the page. The height of each line of text was derived from the first letter of the alphabet, *alif*, which was in turn derived from the width of the nib of the reed pen used by the calligraphers to write the text.



Figure **13.3.21**: Interlines, Single folio, Qur'an fragment (detail), MS M.712, fol. 19v, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

Each line was further divided into a set number of "interlines," which were used to determine the heights of various parts of individual letters. There is no ruling on the parchment, however, so scribes probably placed each sheet of the semi-transparent parchment on a board marked with horizontal guidelines as they wrote. Memorizing and producing the proportions of each pen stroke, however, must have been part of the training of every scribe.



Figure **13.3.22**: Kufic script in folio from a Qur'an, probably made in Tunisia, Qairawan, c. 900-950 CE. Gold leaf, silver and ink on parchment with indigo, 28.5 x 37.5 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California. (Photo: public domain)

Kufic script and the specialization of scribes

Writing in the tenth century CE, the Abbasid court secretary Ibn Durustuyah noted that letters of the alphabet were written differently by Qur'anic scribes, professional secretaries, and other copyists. The calligraphic style used by these early scribes of the Qur'an is known today as Kufic. Only two or three of the more than 1300 fragments and manuscripts written in Kufic that survive contain non-Qur'anic content.

Kufic is not so much a single type of handwriting as it is a family of 17 related styles based on common principles, including a preference for strokes of relatively uniform thickness, short straight vertical lines and long horizontal lines, and a straight, horizontal baseline.

Various types of kufic were popular from the seventh century CE until the late tenth century CE. Scribes used a wide reed pen dipped in ink to write. In some letters the angle of the pen was adjusted as the scribe wrote in order to maintain an even thickness throughout the entire letterform, but in others the angle could be held constant in order to produce both very thick and very thin lines. Although letters and even entire words at first appear to consist of a single stroke of the pen, in fact individual letters were often formed using multiple strokes.



Figure **13.3.23**: Qur'an fragment (detail showing the regular and precise Kufic calligraphy), MS M.712, fos. 19v, before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

The regularity and precision of the penmanship in the fragment from The Morgan Library (Figure **13.3.23**) reveals the skill of the scribes who produced it. Each of them deliberately imitated a single style in order to produce a unified finished product.

Scribes also had some freedom in composing a page. They could emphasize individual words and balance the widths of lines of different length by elongating certain letters horizontally (a technique known as *mashq*). They could also adjust spacing between words and letters, and even split words between two lines, in order to balance positive and negative space across the page.



Figure **13.3.24**: Graphic showing negative space within (above) and between (below) words. Qu'ran fragment (detail), before 911. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: The Morgan Library and Museum via Smarthistory)

In this *mushaf*, the spaces between non-connecting characters within a word are as wide as the spaces that separate different words (sometimes even wider!). For readers unfamiliar with the text, it is therefore difficult to figure out which letters should be grouped together to form words. This deliberate obfuscation would have slowed down readers, and it suggests that anyone who read aloud from these manuscripts had probably already memorized the text of the Qur'an and used the lavish manuscript only as a kind of mnemonic device.

The Kaaba

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay Lewis

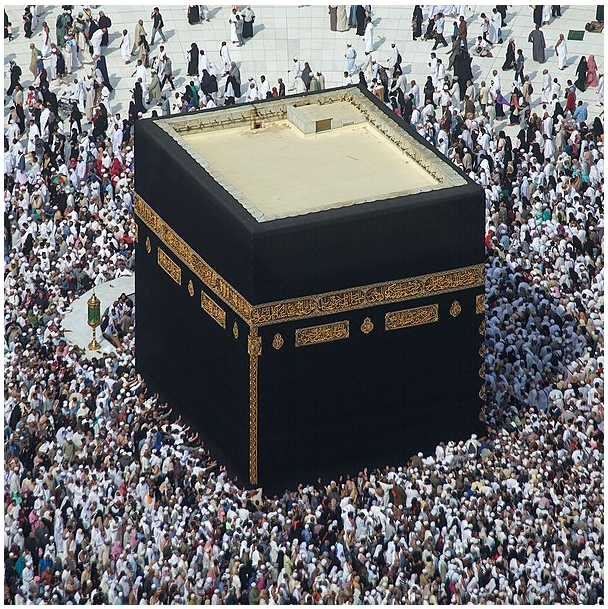


Figure 13.3.25: The Kaaba, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, pre-Islamic monument, multiple renovations, rededicated by Muhammad in 631-32 CE. Granite masonry, covered with silk curtain and calligraphy in gold and silver-wrapped thread. (Photo: Muhammad Mahdi Karim, GNU Free Documentation GNU 1.2 only, via Smarthistory)

Prayer and pilgrimage

Pilgrimage to a holy site is a core principle of almost all faiths. The Kaaba, meaning cube in Arabic, is a square building, elegantly draped in a silk and cotton veil. Located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, it is the holiest shrine in Islam.

In Islam, Muslims pray five times a day and after 624 CE, these prayers were directed towards Mecca and the Kaaba rather than Jerusalem; this direction (or qibla in Arabic), is marked in all mosques and enables the faithful to know in what direction they should pray. The Qur'an established the direction of prayer.

All Muslims aspire to undertake the hajj, or the annual pilgrimage, to the Kaaba once in their life if they are able. Prayer five times a day and the hajj are two of the five pillars of Islam, the most fundamental principles of the faith.

Upon arriving in Mecca, pilgrims gather in the courtyard of the Masjid al-Haram around the Kaaba. They then circumambulate (tawaf in Arabic) or walk around the Kaaba, during which they hope to kiss and touch the Black Stone (al-Hajar al-Aswad), embedded in the eastern corner of the Kaaba.



Figure 13.3.26: From left to right, increasingly closer views of the eastern corner of the Kaaba with the embedded Black Stone, al-Hajar al-Aswad. (Photos: Saudi Arabia General Presidency of the Grand Mosque and the Prophet's Mosque, via Smarthistory)

The history and form of the Kaaba

The Kaaba was a sanctuary in pre-Islamic times. Muslims believe that Abraham (known as Ibrahim in the Islamic tradition), and his son, Ismail, constructed the Kaaba. Tradition holds that it was originally a simple unroofed rectangular structure. The Quraysh tribe, who ruled Mecca, rebuilt the pre-Islamic Kaaba in c. 608 CE with alternating courses of masonry and wood. A door was raised above ground level to protect the shrine from intruders and flood waters.

Muhammad was driven out of Mecca in 620 CE to Yathrib, which is now known as Medina. Upon his return to Mecca in 629/30 CE, the shrine became the focal point for Muslim worship and pilgrimage. The pre-Islamic Kaaba housed the Black Stone and statues of pagan gods. Muhammad reportedly cleansed the Kaaba of idols upon his victorious return to Mecca, returning the shrine to the monotheism of Ibrahim. The Black Stone is believed to have been given to Ibrahim by the angel Gabriel and is revered by Muslims. Muhammad made a final pilgrimage in 632 CE, the year of his death, and thereby established the rites of pilgrimage.

Modifications

The Kaaba has been modified extensively throughout its history. The area around the Kaaba was expanded in order to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims by the second caliph, ‘Umar (ruled 634-44). The Caliph ‘Uthman (ruled 644-56) built the colonnades around the open plaza where the Kaaba stands and incorporated other important monuments into the sanctuary.

During the civil war between the caliph Abd al-Malik and Ibn Zubayr who controlled Mecca, the Kaaba was set on fire in 683 CE. Reportedly, the Black Stone broke into three pieces and Ibn Zubayr reassembled it with silver. He rebuilt the Kaaba in wood and stone, following Ibrahim’s original dimensions and also paved the space around the Kaaba. After regaining control of Mecca, Abd al-Malik restored the part of the building that Muhammad is thought to have designed. None of these renovations can be confirmed through study of the building or archaeological evidence; these changes are only outlined in later literary sources.By the seventh century, the Kaaba was covered with *kiswa*, a black cloth that is replaced annually during the hajj.

Under the early Abbasid Caliphs (750-1250), the mosque around the Kaaba was expanded and modified several times. According to travel writers, such as the Ibn Jubayr, who saw the Kaaba in 1183, it retained the eighth century Abbasid form for several centuries. From 1269-1517, the Mamluks of Egypt controlled the Hijaz, the highlands in western Arabia where Mecca is located. Sultan Qaitbay (ruled 1468-96) built a madrasa (a religious school) against one side of the mosque. Under the Ottoman sultans, Süleyman I (ruled 1520-1566) and Selim II (ruled 1566-74), the complex was heavily renovated. In 1631, the Kaaba and the surrounding mosque were entirely rebuilt after floods had demolished them in the previous year. This mosque, which is what exists today, is composed of a large open space with colonnades on four sides and with seven minarets, the largest number of any mosque in the world. At the center of this large plaza sits the Kaaba, as well as many other holy buildings and monuments.

The last major modifications were carried out in the 1950s by the government of Saudi Arabia to accommodate the increasingly large number of pilgrims who come on the hajj. Today the mosque covers almost forty acres.



Figure **13.3.27**: The Kaaba with surrounding colonnades and minarets, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, pre-Islamic monument, multiple renovations, rededicated by Muhammad in 631–32 CE. (Photo: marviikad, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The Kaaba today

Today, the Kaaba is a cubical structure, unlike almost any other religious structure. It is fifteen meters tall and ten and a half meters on each side; its corners roughly align with the cardinal directions. The door of the Kaaba is now made of solid gold; it was added in 1982. The *kiswa*, a large cloth that covers the Kaaba, which used to be sent from Egypt with the hajj caravan, today is made in Saudi Arabia. Until the advent of modern transportation, all pilgrims undertook the often dangerous hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca in a large caravan across the desert, leaving from Damascus, Cairo, or other major cities in Arabia, Yemen or Iraq.

The numerous changes to the Kaaba and its associated mosque serve as good reminder of how often buildings, even sacred ones, were renovated and remodeled either due to damage or to the changing needs of the community.

Only Muslims may visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina today.

Introduction to mosque architecture

by Kendra Weisbin



Figure **13.3.28**: King Abdullah I Mosque, Amman, Jordan, built 1982-1989. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) This mosque features a patterned dome, largely in turquoise tile, flanked by two matching minarets.

From Indonesia to the United Kingdom, the mosque in its many forms is the quintessential Islamic building. The mosque, masjid in Arabic, is the Muslim gathering place for prayer. Masjid simply means “place of prostration.” Though most of the five daily prayers prescribed in Islam can take place anywhere, all men are required to gather together at the mosque for the Friday noon prayer.

Mosques are also used throughout the week for prayer, study, or simply as a place for rest and reflection. The main mosque of a city, used for the Friday communal prayer, is called a jami masjid, literally meaning “Friday mosque,” but it is also sometimes called a congregational mosque in English. The style, layout, and decoration of a mosque can tell us a lot about Islam in general, but also about the period and region in which the mosque was constructed.

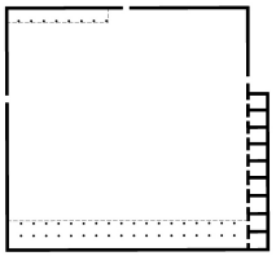


Figure **13.3.29**: Diagram reconstruction of the Prophet’s House, Medina, Saudi Arabia. (Image via Smarthistory)

The home of the Prophet Muhammad is considered the first mosque. His house, in Medina in modern-day Saudi Arabia, was a typical 7th-century Arabian style house, with a large courtyard surrounded by long rooms supported by columns. This style of mosque came to be known as a hypostyle mosque, meaning “many columns.” Most mosques built in Arab lands utilized this style for centuries.

Common features

The architecture of a mosque is shaped most strongly by the regional traditions of the time and place where it was built. As a result, style, layout, and decoration can vary greatly. Nevertheless, because of the common function of the mosque as a place of congregational prayer, certain architectural features appear in mosques all over the world.

Sahn (courtyard)

The most fundamental necessity of congregational mosque architecture is that it be able to hold the entire male population of a city or town (women are welcome to attend Friday prayers, but not required to do so). To that end congregational mosques must have a large prayer hall. In many mosques this is adjoined to an open courtyard, called a sahn. Within the courtyard one often finds a fountain, its waters both a welcome respite in hot lands, and important for the ablutions (ritual cleansing) done before prayer.



Figure **13.3.30**: Courtyard, Mosque of Muhammad Ali, Cairo, Egypt. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) The arches of the stone structure over the fountain mirrors the colonnades that border the courtyard.

Mihrab (niche)



Figure **13.3.31**: Mihrab and minbar (pulpit), Mosque of Muhammad Ali, Cairo, Egypt. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY) The mihrab and surrounding walls are covered in richly-veined marble revetment, as is the minbar, a pulpit accessed by a flight of attached stairs.

Another essential element of a mosque's architecture is a mihrab—a niche in the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, towards which all Muslims pray. Mecca is the city in which the Prophet Muhammad was born, and the home of the most important Islamic site, the Kaaba. The direction of Mecca is called the qibla, and so the wall in which the mihrab is set is called the qibla wall. No matter where a mosque is, its mihrab indicates the direction of Mecca (or as near that direction as science and geography were able to place it). Therefore, a mihrab in India will be to the west, while a one in Egypt will be to the east. A mihrab is usually a relatively shallow niche, as in the example from Egypt, above.

Minaret (tower)

One of the most visible aspects of mosque architecture is the minaret, a tower adjacent or attached to a mosque, from which the call to prayer is announced.

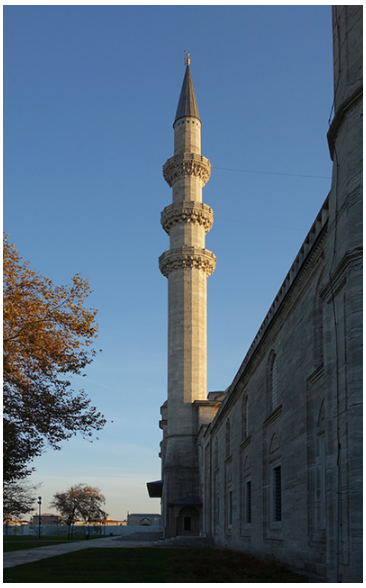


Figure 13.3.32: Mimar Sinan, Minaret, Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, 1558. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Minarets take many different forms—from the famous spiral minaret of Samarra, to the tall, pencil minarets of Ottoman Turkey (Figure 13.3.32). Not solely functional in nature, the minaret serves as a powerful visual reminder of the presence of Islam.

Qubba (dome)



Figure 13.3.33: Sedefkâr Mehmed Ağa, Dome, Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque), Istanbul, Turkey, completed 1617. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Most mosques also feature one or more domes, called *qubba* in Arabic. While not a ritual requirement like the mihrab, a dome does possess significance within the mosque—as a symbolic representation of the vault of heaven. The interior decoration of a dome often emphasizes this symbolism, using intricate geometric, stellate, or vegetal motifs to create breathtaking patterns meant to awe and inspire. Some mosque types incorporate multiple domes into their architecture (as does the Blue Mosque in Figure 13.3.10 and Figure 13.3.33), while others only feature one. In mosques with only a single dome, it is invariably found surmounting the qibla wall, the holiest section of the mosque. The Great Mosque of Kairouan, in Tunisia (not pictured) has three domes: one atop the minaret, one above the entrance to the prayer hall, and one above the qibla wall.

Because it is the directional focus of prayer, the qibla wall, with its mihrab and minbar, is often the most ornately decorated area of a mosque. The rich decoration of the qibla wall is apparent in this image of the mihrab and minbar of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, Egypt (Figure 13.3.31).



Figure **13.3.34**: Mosque lamp, Egypt or Syria, 14th century. Blown glass, enamel, gilding, 31.8 x 23.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain) The museum writes, "One of the conventions of Mamluk mosque lamp decoration was to execute one inscription band in blue and the other in reserve against a blue ground. On this lamp, the neck and foot repeat the phrase al-'alim ("The Wise"), punctuated by an as yet unassigned emblem, while the body bears a formulaic dedicatory inscription but no name."

There are other decorative elements common to most mosques. For instance, a large calligraphic frieze or a cartouche with a prominent inscription often appears above the mihrab. In most cases the calligraphic inscriptions are quotations from the Qur'an, and often include the date of the building's dedication and the name of the patron. Another important feature of mosque decoration are hanging lamps, also visible in the photograph of the Sultan Hasan mosque (Figure **13.3.31**). Light is an essential feature for mosques, since the first and last daily prayers occur before the sun rises and after the sun sets. Before electricity, mosques were illuminated with oil lamps. Hundreds of such lamps hung inside a mosque would create a glittering spectacle, with soft light emanating from each, highlighting the calligraphy and other decorations on the lamps' surfaces. Although not a permanent part of a mosque building, lamps, along with other furnishings like carpets, formed a significant—though ephemeral—aspect of mosque architecture.

Mosque patronage

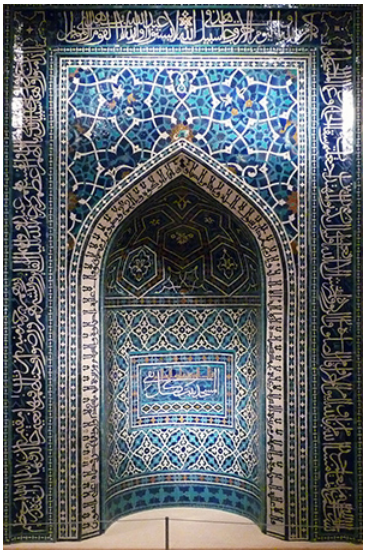


Figure **13.3.35**: Mihrab, Madrasa Imami, Isfahan, Iran, just after the Ilkhanid period, 1354–55. Polychrome glazed tiles, 343.1 x 288.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Most historical mosques are not stand-alone buildings. Many incorporated charitable institutions like soup kitchens, hospitals, and schools. Some mosque patrons also chose to include their own mausoleum as part of their mosque complex. The endowment of

charitable institutions is an important aspect of Islamic culture, due in part to the third pillar of Islam, which calls for Muslims to donate a portion of their income to the poor.

The commissioning of a mosque would be seen as a pious act on the part of a ruler or other wealthy patron, and the names of patrons are usually included in the calligraphic decoration of mosques. Such inscriptions also often praise the piety and generosity of the patron. For instance, the mihrab now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure **13.3.35**), bears the inscription:

And he [the Prophet], blessings and peace be upon him, said: "Whoever builds a mosque for God, even the size of a sand-grouse nest, based on piety, [God will build for him a palace in Paradise]."

The patronage of mosques was not only a charitable act therefore, but also, like architectural patronage in all cultures, an opportunity for self-promotion. The social services attached the mosques of the Ottoman sultans are some of the most extensive of their type. In Ottoman Turkey the complex surrounding a mosque is called a kulliye. The kulliye of the Mosque of Sultan Suleyman, in Istanbul, is a fine example of this phenomenon, comprising a soup kitchen, a hospital, several schools, public baths, and a caravanserai (similar to a hostel for travelers). The complex also includes two mausoleums for Sultan Suleyman and his family members.

Hypostyle Mosque Architecture

The Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia, is an archetypal example of the hypostyle mosque. The mosque was built in the ninth century by Ziyadat Allah, the third ruler of the Aghlabid dynasty, an offshoot of the Abbasid Empire. It is a large, rectangular stone mosque with a hypostyle (supported by columns) hall and a large inner sahn (courtyard). The three-tiered minaret is in a style known as the Syrian bell-tower, and may have originally been based on the form of ancient Roman lighthouses. The interior of the mosque features the forest of columns that has come to define the hypostyle type.



Figure **13.3.36**: Sahn and minaret, Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia, c. 836-75. (Photo: Andrew Watson, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The mosque was built on a former Byzantine site, and the architects repurposed older materials, such as the columns—a decision that was both practical and a powerful assertion of the Islamic conquest of Byzantine lands. Many early mosques like this one made use of older architectural materials (called spolia), in a similarly symbolic way.



Figure **13.3.37**: Ancient capitals (spolia), Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia. (Photo: Jaume Ollé, CC BY 2.5)

On right hand side of mosque's mihrab is the maqsura, a special area reserved for the ruler found in some, but not all, mosques. This mosque's maqsura is the earliest extant example, and its minbar (pulpit) is the earliest dated minbar known to scholars. Both

are carved from teak wood that was imported from Southeast Asia. This prized wood was shipped from Thailand to Baghdad where it was carved, then carried on camel back from Iraq to Tunisia, in a remarkable display of medieval global commerce.

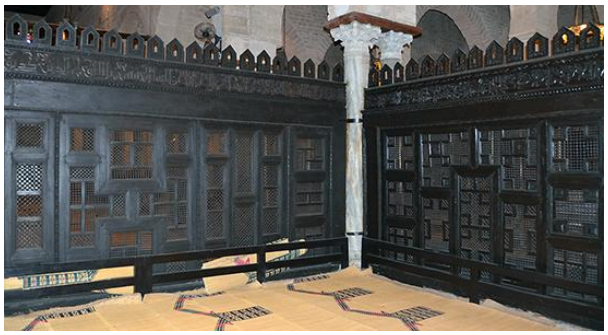


Figure **13.3.38**: Maqsura, Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia. (Photo: Prof. Richard Mortel, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The hypostyle plan was used widely in Islamic lands prior to the introduction of the four-iwan plan in the twelfth century. The hypostyle plan's characteristic forest of columns was used in different mosques to great effect. One of the most famous examples is the Great Mosque of Cordoba, which uses bi-color, two-tier arches that emphasize the almost dizzying optical effect of the hypostyle hall.



Figure **13.3.39**: Interior of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, Spain, 8th-10th centuries. (Photo: Timor Espallargas, CC BY-SA 2.5)

The Umayyads, an introduction

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

The Dome of the Rock. The Great Mosque in Damascus. The Great Mosque in Córdoba. These remarkable architectural and artistic achievements are associated with the Umayyads, "first" dynasty of the Islamic World.

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, there was a series of four rulers, known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and, lastly, Muhammad's son-in-law, 'Ali.

While the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam dispute the order of succession (specifically whether 'Ali should have rightfully been Muhammad's first successor), 'Ali's assassination marked a crossroad for early Muslims and resulted a series of civic wars (or fitnas).



Figure 13.3.40: View of the Courtyard of the Great Mosque of Damascus, Syria. (Photo: Eric Shin, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Mu‘awiya and ‘Abd al-Malik

Mu‘awiya, then governor of Syria under ‘Ali, seized power after ‘Ali’s death. After a number of victories, Mu‘awiya emerged as the sole ruler of the Muslim world. He consolidated the early Muslim conquests in the Middle East and expanded the empire. Mu‘awiya established his capital at Damascus, shifting his power base north of Mecca and Medina in the Arab heartland. Mu‘awiya also instituted political and bureaucratic systems that allowed for the effective rule of the nascent Islamic empire and the expansion of the economy.



Figure 13.3.41: Map showing Damascus, Medina, and Mecca. (Image via Smarthistory)

Mu‘awiya’s death in 680 resulted another wave of civil and religious wars, during which the Umayyads lost control of Mecca and Medina. Mu‘awiya’s son, ‘Abd al-Malik, eventually emerged victorious. Like the Roman emperors before him and his Byzantine contemporaries, ‘Abd al-Malik saw architecture and art as a means to express his authority and to provide the new religion of Islam with a powerful visual language that could convey the theology, values, and ideas of Islam to both Muslims and those who had been conquered.

‘Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, which employed inscriptions, gold and blue mosaics, and innovative architecture to create one of the world’s most exceptional buildings. Adjacent to the Dome of the Rock, he also erected a permanent mosque (replacing an earlier temporary mosque), known as the Aqsa mosque. It is the third holiest mosque in the Islamic world after those at Mecca and Medina.



Figure 13.3.42: Al-Aqsa Mosque, Temple Mount, Jerusalem. (Photo: Andrew Shiva, CC BY-SA 4.0)

During ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, Arabic took hold as the language of bureaucracy and of the elite. The stability afforded by his reign also meant that trade flourished, as goods and people moved with ease within the boundaries of the Islamic world. ‘Abd al-Malik

also undertook public works, constructing roads, canals, and dams.

Coinage Reform



Figure **13.3.43**: Alloy Coin, Standing caliph type, reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (pre-697 CE), minted in Homs (Syria). (Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

‘Abd al-Malik also radically reformed coinage. Until 697 CE, Islamic coinage deployed figural imagery, which was modeled on Byzantine and Sasanian coins. These coins included images, such as the standing caliph type (Figure **13.3.43**, and were accompanied by Arabic inscriptions (or, in the case of coins minted in Iran, Pahlavi, or Middle Persian inscriptions).

However, after 697 CE, coins were minted with religious inscriptions in Arabic, the date, and the mint’s location (see Figure **13.3.44**. Since coins circulated widely, the coins helped articulate the new faith and political authority to both Muslims and the peoples that they had conquered. The uniform coinage also facilitated trade, as there was now a single currency with standardized iconography and denominations.



Figure **13.3.44**: Gold dinar of caliph Abd al-Malik, (pre-697 CE), minted in Homs (Syria). (Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The inscription on the obverse (on the left in Figure **13.3.44**) announces the creed of Muslims, the central inscription reads: There is no God but God, He is alone, He has no associate. The marginal inscription reads: Muhammad is the Messenger of God. He sent him with Guidance and the true religion that he might overcome all [religions even though the polytheists hate it]. Translation: British Museum. ‘Abd al-Malik was succeeded by his son, al-Walid I, who built the Great Mosque in Damascus (see photo near top of page)—another of the most important surviving monuments from the early Islamic period. Built using the tax revenue of Syria for seven years, the Great Mosque proclaimed the achievements of Islam in architectural and artistic form.

“Desert Castles”

al-Walid was succeeded by a series of male relatives who ruled until 749 CE. Their main artistic and architectural achievement was the construction of what scholars have traditionally called the “Desert Castles.” These “castles” are better described as imperial or aristocratic residences that took the form of hunting lodges, rural residences, and urban palaces. Like the Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus, these residences expressed the authority and status of the Umayyad rulers; however, they use a distinctively secular architectural language.



Figure 13.3.45: The exterior of the bathhouse, Qusayr ‘Amra, Jordan. (Photo: Otto Nieminen/Manar al-Athar, via Smarthistory)

These residences included audience halls, baths, and mosques, as well as extensive grounds. The residences were richly decorated with figural mosaics, paintings, and sculpture, which helped to create a luxurious environment for feasting, hunting, and the recitation of poetry and other courtly pursuits. These famous residences include Qusayr ‘Amra, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Mshatta, and others.

Built by al-Walid II, Qusayr ‘Amra (in Jordan) is composed of an audience hall and bath complex with rich wall paintings. Khirbat al-Mafjar, located outside Jericho in the West Bank, has rich floor mosaics, including deer and a lion under a tree, as well as an extensive program of figurative sculpture. A statue of the caliph, standing on a base decorated with lions (a symbol of royal power) greeted visitors (Figure 13.3.46), a clear articulation of authority and power. While the form of the standing caliph was no longer on Islamic coins, the image was still potent.



Figure 13.3.46: Statue of a standing caliph originally displayed above the main entrance to Khirbet al-Mafjar .(Photo: Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar via Smarthistory)

The frieze from Mshatta (Figure 13.3.46), an unfinished residence in Jordan, is now in the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin. These residences are particularly important, as they confirm that since the inception of Islamic art figurative representation has been an important aspect of Islamic Art. However, figurative art is almost always used in the secular realm, while religious art is aniconic (without the representation of human figures).



Figure **13.3.46**: Mshatta façade detail, c. 743-44. Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin, Germany. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The glory of the Umayyads was not to last; almost all of the Umayyad princes were massacred in 749 by their rivals, the Abbasids, in what scholars call the "Abbasid Revolution."

The only Umayyad prince to survive was 'Abd al-Rahman I, and he escaped to found his own dynasty in Spain. Rooted in the Syrian traditions of his forefathers (and supported by Syrian immigrants), he established an alternative caliphate to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad.

In 786, he founded the Great Mosque in Córdoba. Although little of his original foundation survives, the later modifications and decoration, particularly the use of mosaics on the domes of mihrab and maqsura, were a clear evocation of the glorious Syrian past.

Global Connections: International Coinage

When Theodoric minted a coin on which he declared himself king, he also conveyed his understanding not only of the important iconographic tradition of Roman emperors and coinage, but also of northern aesthetic traditions in his depiction on the coin. And when Abd al-Malik radically transformed Islamic coins in 697, moving away from figural depictions to calligraphic religious inscriptions, he understood both the power of monetary circulation and the importance of recognizable and repeated messages on pocket-size coins. International coins and currency across the world offer historians great insight into the political, social, and cultural events of the times during which the coins were made and minted.

In western and central Asia, the Sasanians (also known as *Eranshahr*, the Empire of the Iranians) were the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty. As Dr. Betty Hensellek observes, Sasanian rulers depicted themselves on the front of the coin and placed important iconography on the back, all while emphasizing the king as central not only to the Sasanians, but also to world cosmology. Coins and their images circulate, and in large kingdoms and empires such as those of Aksum, Rome, and the Sasanian Empire, these coins circulated widely because of trade routes. Hensellek notes that archaeologists have found Sasanian coins far afield—"across Eurasia, from Chinese tombs to Scandinavian hoards. Islamic dynasties furthermore used Sasanian coin imagery as a prototype until eventually transitioning to wholly calligraphic imagery."

This idea of using earlier coins as prototypes was common. In the fifth century, after the Huns invaded former Sasanian territories, they copied the designs of coins from the people they conquered. As the British Museum explains, the Silver dinar of the Alchon Huns appropriates imagery that would be familiar to the people in the conquered lands. Flame-like plumes emanating from the back of the ruler portrayed on the silver dinar (possibly the Hun ruler Khingila), were thought to depict a common flame motif that Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian people would understand and interpret as the king's divine right to rule (think of the much-older image of Shamash on the Law Code Stele of Hammurabi).



Figure **13.3.48**: Alchon Huns coin imitating Sasanian king Shahpur II, c. 400-440 CE. Silver. (Photo: CNG Coins, CC BY-SA-3.0)

Earlier in this chapter, Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay underscores the importance of coinage circulation as integral to the dissemination of religious and political beliefs, along with the standardization of currency. She notes that the Arabic inscriptions on Abd al-Malik's coins "also facilitated trade, as there was now a single currency with standardized iconography and denominations." Similarly, much later in the seventeenth century, The United Dutch East India Company issued official coins for trade in its colonies, again emphasizing the importance of a unified, standardized, and recognized coinage and currency.

The Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra)

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis



Figure **13.3.49**: The Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra), Jerusalem, Umayyad, 691-2. Stone masonry, wooden roof, decorated with glazed ceramic tile, mosaics, and gilt aluminum and bronze dome, with multiple renovations, patron the Caliph Abd al-Malik. (Photo: Brian Jeffery Beggerly, CC BY 2.0)

> *The Dome of the Rock is a building of extraordinary beauty, solidity, elegance, and singularity of shape… Both outside and inside, the decoration is so magnificent and the workmanship so surpassing as to defy description. The greater part is covered with gold so that the eyes of one who gazes on its beauties are dazzled by its brilliance, now glowing like a mass of light, now flashing like lightning. —Ibn Battuta (14th century travel writer)*

A glorious mystery

One of the most iconic images of the Middle East is undoubtedly the Dome of the Rock shimmering in the setting sun of Jerusalem. Sitting atop the Haram al-Sharif, the highest point in old Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock's golden-color Dome and Turkish Faience tiles dominate the cityscape of Old Jerusalem and in the 7th century served as a testament to the power of the new faith of Islam. The Dome of the Rock is one of the earliest surviving buildings from the Islamic world. This remarkable building is not a mosque, as is commonly assumed, and scholars still debate its original function and meaning.

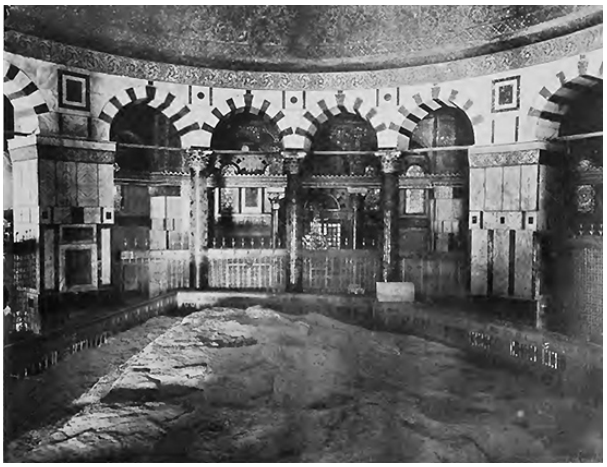


Figure 13.3.50: Interior of the Dome of the Rock. (Photo: Robert Smythe Hitchens, public domain, via Smarthistory)

Between the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632 and 691/2, when the Dome of the Rock was completed, there was intermittent warfare in Arabia and Holy Land around Jerusalem. The first Arab armies who emerged from the Arabian peninsula were focused on conquering and establishing an empire—not building.

Thus, the Dome of the Rock was one of the first Islamic buildings ever constructed. It was built between 685 and 691/2 by Abd al-Malik, probably the most important Umayyad caliph, as a religious focal point for his supporters, while he was fighting a civil war against Ibn Zubayr. When Abd al-Malik began construction on the Dome of the Rock, he did not have control of the Kaaba, the holiest shrine in Islam, which is located in Mecca.

The Dome is located on the Haram al-Sharif, an enormous open-air platform that now houses Al-Aqsa mosque, madrasas and several other religious buildings. Few places are as holy for Christians, Jews and Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif. It is the Temple Mount, the site of the Jewish second temple, which the Roman Emperor Titus destroyed in 70 CE while subduing the Jewish revolt; a Roman temple was later built on the site. The Temple Mount was abandoned in Late Antiquity.

The Rock in the Dome of the Rock

At the center of the Dome of the Rock sits a large rock, which is believed to be the location where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Ismail (Isaac in the Judeo/Christian tradition). Today, Muslims believe that the Rock commemorates the night journey of Muhammad. One night the Angel Gabriel came to Muhammad while he slept near the Kaaba in Mecca and took him to al-Masjid al-Aqsa (the farthest mosque) in Jerusalem. From the Rock, Muhammad journeyed to heaven, where he met other prophets, such as Moses and Christ, witnessed paradise and hell and finally saw God enthroned and circumambulated by angels.

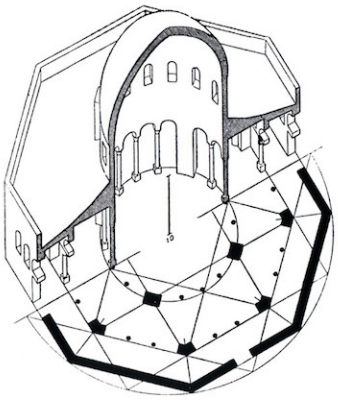


Figure 13.3.51: K.A.C. Creswell, Sectional axonometric view through dome. (Image: ©Creswell Archive, Ashmolean Museum, courtesy of Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, via Smarthistory)

The Rock is enclosed by two ambulatories (in this case the aisles that circle the rock) and an octagonal exterior wall. The central colonnade (row of columns) was composed of four piers and twelve columns supporting a rounded drum that transitions into the

two-layered dome more than 20 meters in diameter.

The colonnades are clad in marble on their lower registers, and their upper registers are adorned with exceptional mosaics. The ethereal interior atmosphere is a result of light that pours in from grilled windows located in the drum and exterior walls. Golden mosaics depicting jewels shimmer in this glittering light. Byzantine and Sassanian crowns in the midst of vegetal motifs are also visible.

The Byzantine Empire stood to the North and to the West of the new Islamic Empire until 1453, when its capital, Constantinople, fell to the Ottoman Turks. To the East, the old Sasanian Empire of Persia imploded under pressure from the Arabs, but nevertheless provided winged crown motifs that can be found in the Dome of the Rock.

Mosaics

Wall and ceiling mosaics became very popular in Late Antiquity and adorn many Byzantine churches, including San Vitale in Ravenna and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Thus, the use of mosaics reflects an artistic tie to the world of Late Antiquity. Late Antiquity is a period from about 300-800, when the Classical world dissolves and the Medieval period emerges.



Figure 13.3.52: Mosaic detail from the Dome of the Rock, showing geometric, vegetal, and gem motifs. (Photo: public domain, via Smarthistory)

The mosaics in the Dome of the Rock contain no human figures or animals. While Islam does not prohibit the use of figurative art per se, it seems that in religious buildings, this proscription was upheld. Instead, we see vegetative scrolls and motifs, as well as vessels and winged crowns, which were worn by Sasanian kings. Thus, the iconography of the Dome of the Rock also includes the other major pre-Islamic civilization of the region, the Sasanian Empire, which the Arab armies had defeated.

A reference to burial places

The building enclosing the Rock also seems to take its form from the imperial mausolea (the burial places) of Roman emperors, such as Augustus or Hadrian. Its circular form and Dome also reference the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The circular Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem was built to enclose the tomb of Christ. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Dome of the Rock have domes that are almost identical in size; this suggests that the elevated position of the Dome of the Rock and the comparable size of its dome was a way that Muslims in the late 8th century proclaimed the superiority of their newly formed faith over Christians.

The inscription

The Dome of the Rock also contains an inscription, 240 meters long, that includes some of the earliest surviving examples of verses from the Qur‘an—in an architectural context or otherwise. The bismillah (in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate), the phrase that starts each verse of the Qu’ran, and the shahada, the Islamic confession of faith, which states that there is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet, are also included in the inscription. The inscription also refers to Mary and

Christ and proclaim that Christ was not divine but a prophet. Thus the inscription also proclaims some of the core values of the newly formed religion of Islam.

Below the Rock is a small chamber, whose purpose is not fully understood even to this day. For those who are fortunate enough to be able to enter the Dome of the Rock, the experience is moving, regardless of one's faith.

The Great Mosque of Damascus

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis



Figure **13.3.53**: Distant view of the Great Mosque of Damascus, Syria. (Photo: Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0)

To understand the importance of the Great Mosque of Damascus, built by the Umayyad caliph, al-Walid II between 708 and 715 CE, we need to look into the recesses of time. Damascus is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, with archaeological remains dating from as early as 9000 BCE, and sacred spaces have been central to the Old City of Damascus ever since. As early as the 9th century BCE, a temple was built to Hadad-Ramman, the Semitic god of storm and rain. Though the exact form and shape of this temple is unknown, a bas-relief with a sphinx, believed to come from this temple, was reused in the northern wall of the city's Great Mosque.

From Zeus to Saul

Alexander the Great marched through Syria on his way to Persia and India and while he likely passed through Damascus, it was his successors—the Ptolemies and the Selecuids—who would shape Syria. Until 63 BCE, Damascus would remain under the political control and cultural influence of these Greek dynasties. While almost nothing survives archaeologically from this period, Greek became the dominant language and the culture became Hellenized (influenced by Greek culture). At this time, the temple of Hadad was converted into a Temple of Zeus-Hadad. Zeus was a natural choice for assimilation; he ruled the Greek pantheon and was associated with weather and, of course, thunder bolts. Many Greek (and later Roman) gods were combined with local gods across the lands controlled by the Greeks and then the Romans. This allowed the conquering culture to integrate their new subjects into their religion, while also accepting local traditions—thus helping to make new foreign masters more agreeable to subjugated locals. The Zeus-Hadad temple dominated the Greek city and was connected by a main thoroughfare to the new agora, or market area, located to the east. At the center of a temenos, an enclosed and sacred precinct, stood the temple to Zeus-Hadad, which had a cella (the room in which a statue of the god stood).



Figure **13.3.54**: Map showing the city of Damascus relative to Greece and Egypt. (Map ©Google, via Smarthistory)

After the Greeks came the invading Roman armies (led by Pompey in 63 BCE). Under Herod the Great (the local pro-Roman ruler), the city of Damascus was transformed. Herod built a theater whose remains can still be seen in the basement and ground floor of a house called Bayt al- 'Aqqad (now the Danish Institute). The temple was modified at this time when two concentric walls

were added to enclose the precinct (or *peribolos*) of the temple and two monumental gates, or propylaea, were added on the western and eastern ends of the precinct which now measured 117,000 square feet. At its center was the temple with a cella for the worship of Jupiter-Hadad. It was now a truly monumental temple. The western gate was refurbished and embellished under the Roman Severan dynasty (193–235 CE), additions that remain visible today.

Although the great temple to Jupiter marked the spiritual heart of the city for several centuries, just as it was completed, a new cult to a single God was developing: Christianity. Saul, or Paul as he is known after his conversion, is said to have converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1–2; 9.5–6). Blinded by a light, he was led to the home of a Jew named Judas on Straight Street, the *decumanus* or main east-west street in Damascus. Ananias had a vision that told him to go and care for Paul and when he touched Paul at Judas' house, the scales fell from Paul's eyes and he could see.



Figure **13.3.55**: View of the exterior of the Great Mosque of Damascus in 2008. (Photo: Ghaylam, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Unsurprisingly, once Christianity was widely adopted in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, the temple to Jupiter was once again converted, this time into a cathedral dedicated to John the Baptist. This church is attributed to the Emperor Theodosius in 391 CE. The exact location of the church is unknown, but it is thought to have been located in the western part of the temenos. It was probably one of the largest churches in the Christian world and served as a major center of Christianity until 636 CE. when the city was once again conquered, this time by Muslim Arabs. Damascus was a key city, as it provided access to the sea and to the desert. When it was clear that the city was going to fall, the defeated Christians and conquering Muslims negotiated the city's surrender. The Muslims agreed to respect the lives, property and churches of the Christians. Christians retained control of their cathedral, although Muslim worshippers reportedly used the southern wall of the compound when they prayed towards Mecca.



Figure **13.3.56**: View of the the prayer hall from the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Damascus (treasury at right). (Photo: Erik Shin, CC BY-NC 2.0)

al-Walid's mosque

When Damascus became the capital of the Umayyad dynasty, the early 8th century caliph al-Walid envisioned a beautiful mosque at the heart of his new capital city, one that would rival any of the great religious buildings of the Christian world. The growing population of Muslims also required a large congregational mosque (a congregational mosque is a mosque where the community of believers, originally only men, would come to worship and hear a sermon on Fridays—it was typically the most important mosque

in a city or in a neighborhood of a large city). The Great Mosque of Damascus was commissioned in 708 CE and was completed in 714/15 CE. It was paid for with the state tax revenue raised over the course of seven years, a prodigious sum of money. The result of this investment was an architectural tour de force where mosaics and marbles created a truly awe-inspiring space. The Great Mosque of Damascus is one of the earliest surviving congregational mosques in the world. The mosque's location and organization were directly influenced by the temples and the church that preceded it. It was built into the Roman temple wall and it reuses older building materials (called spolia by archaeologists) in its walls, including a beam with a Greek inscription that was originally part of the church.



Figure 13.3.57: Courtyard fountain and the dome of the clock in the distance, Great Mosque of Damascus. (Photo: Thom May, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The complex is composed of a prayer hall and a large open courtyard with a fountain for ablutions (washing) before prayer. Before the civil war that began in 2011, the courtyard of the mosque functioned as a social space for Damascenes, where families and friends could meet and talk while children chased each other through the colonnade, and where tourists once snapped photographs. It was a wonderful place of peace in a busy city. The courtyard contains an elevated treasury and a structure know as the "Dome of the Clock," whose purpose is not fully understood. There are tower-like minarets at the corners of the mosque and courtyard; the southern minarets are built on the Roman-Byzantine corner towers and are probably the earliest minarets in Syria. Again, the earlier structures directly influenced the present form.



Figure 13.3.58: Prayer hall, Great Mosque of Damascus with the shrine of Saint John the Baptist in the center. (Photo: Seier+Seier, CC BY 2.0)

From the courtyard, one would enter the prayer hall. The prayer hall takes its form from Christian basilicas (which are in turn derived from ancient Roman law courts). However, there is no apse towards which one would pray. Rather the faithful pray facing the qibla wall. The qibla wall has a niche (mihrab), which focuses the faithful in their prayers. In line with the mihrab of the Great Mosque is a massive dome and a transept to accommodate a large number of worshippers. The façade of the transept facing the courtyard is decorated on the exterior with rich mosaics.



Figure **13.3.59**: Mosaic, Great Mosque of Damascus, 8th century. (Photo: american rugbier, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Although a fire in the 1890s badly damaged the courtyard and interior, much of the rich mosaic program, which dates primarily to the early 8th century, has survived. The mosaics are aniconic (non-figurative). Islamic religious art lacks figures, and so this is an early example of this tradition. The mosaics are a beautiful mix of trees, landscapes, and uninhabited architecture, rendered in stunning gold, greens, and blues. Later sources note that there were inscriptions and mosaics in the prayer hall, like the Umayyad mosque in Medina, but these have not survived.

Mediterranean influences

The architecture and the plants depicted in the mosaics have clear origins in the artistic traditions of the Mediterranean. Acanthus-like scrolls of greenery can be seen. Not only are they similar to those found in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, but similar motifs can be seen in the sculpture of the ancient Roman Ara Pacis.



Figure **13.3.60**: Arches with acanthus motif in mosaic, Great Mosque of Damascus. (Photo: Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

There are other strong connections to the visual traditions of the Mediterranean world—to Ptolemaic architecture in Egypt, to the architecture of the Treasury at Petra, and the wall paintings of Pompeii. By using these well-established architectural and artistic forms, the Umayyads were coopting and transforming the artistic traditions of earlier, once dominant religions and empires. The use of such media and imagery allowed the new faith to assert its supremacy. The mosaics and architecture of the Great Mosque signaled this new prominence to an audience that was still predominantly Christian, that Islam was as powerful a religion as Christianity. The subject of the mosaics remains debated to this day, with scholars arguing that the mosaics either represent heaven, based on an interpretation of Quranic verse, or the local landscape (including the Barada River).

Scholars traditionally attributed the creation of these mosaics to artisans from Constantinople because a twelfth-century text claimed that the Byzantine emperor had sent mosaicists to Damascus. However, recent scholarship has challenged this as the text

that made this claim was written from a Christian perspective and is much later than the mosaics. Scholars now think that the mosaics were either created by local artisans, or possibly by Egyptian artisans (since Egypt also has a long tradition of decorating domes with mosaics).

The influence of the mosque and its artistry can be seen as far as a way as Cordoba, Spain, where the 8th century Umayyad ruler, Abd al-Rahman (the only survivor of a massive family assassination that sparked the Abbasid Revolution), had fled. The mihrab and the dome above in the Great Mosque of Cordoba was decorated in blue, green and gold mosaics, evoking his lost Syrian homeland.

The Umayyad mosque of Damascus is truly one of the great mosques of the early Islamic world and it is remains one of the world's most important monuments. Unlike many of Syria's historic buildings and archaeological sites, the mosque has survived the Syrian Civil War relatively unscathed and hopefully, will one day again welcome Syrians and tourists alike.

The Vibrant Visual Cultures of the Islamic West, an Introduction

by Dr. Sabahat Adil

The Strait of Gibraltar, a narrow waterway that runs between Spain and Portugal to the north and Morocco to the south, separates Europe from Africa (see map below). Although water divides the two continents, the strait has served as a bridge—and has encouraged lively exchange and dynamic interaction throughout the region. We tend to think of bridges as physical structures that help to guide people over an obstacle such as a body of water, but by looking at the history of the region, especially in terms of art and architecture, we can see that the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea actually served to unify, and were instrumental in shaping the people, cultures, and histories of adjacent regions on two continents.

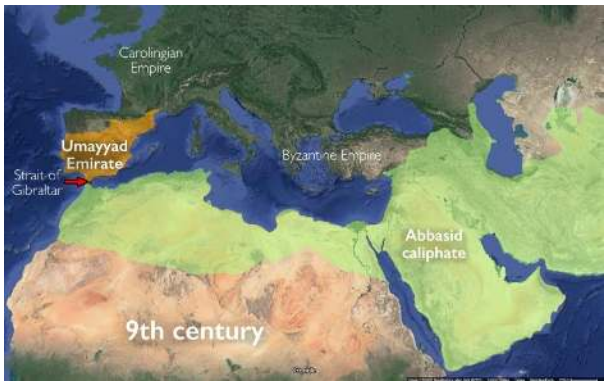


Figure **13.3.61**: Map of the Mediterranean and west Asia in the 9th century. (Map via Smarthistory)

This essay provides an overview of the art and architecture of the Islamic West, a term that refers to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal today) when it was under Islamic rule, and what is today Morocco in northwest Africa. Not only will we look at art and architecture that was produced by Muslims, but we will also explore striking examples of visual culture from Iberia's Jewish and Christian communities, work that highlights the rich diversity and multiculturalism of medieval Iberia. Examples drawn from different dynasties demonstrate the remarkable degree of cultural exchange and interaction that flourished there.

Constructing an Islamic Identity

The victory of Muslim forces against the Visigoths at the Battle of Guadalete in 711 marked a new era in the history of the Iberian Peninsula. In the centuries that followed, the Islamic presence in the Iberian Peninsula, particularly its southern reaches, increased considerably.



Figure **13.3.62**: Map of the Islamic West with important cities. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

In 755, the Umayyad dynasty was reestablished on the Iberian Peninsula (when the last surviving member of the family fled west after the triumph of the Abbasid caliphate). Although it predates the Umayyads, the city of Córdoba (in what is now southern Spain) developed rapidly under the dynasty as one of its capital cities. Both Córdoba and its surroundings boast incredible monuments that shed light on the visual cultures of early Islamic Iberia, a period when the Islamic presence in the region was rapidly growing, and there was an effort to establish a coherent and shared sense of identity in this new land.



Figure **13.3.63**: Aerial view of the Great Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba, Córdoba, Spain, begun 786; cathedral in the center added 16th century. (Photo: Toni Castillo Quero, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in the city's urban center and Madinat al-Zahra, a palatial complex outside of the city in the countryside, are two important sites of early Islamic Iberia. While the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba is more frequently discussed, Madinat al-Zahra is worth considering in detail. It does not always get the same attention as other monuments in and around the city because it lies mostly in ruins and has been the subject of ongoing archaeological excavations.



Figure **13.3.64**: Aerial view of Madinat al-Zahra, mid 10th century, Córdoba, Spain. (Photo: David Abián, CC BY-SA 3.0 ES)

Madinat al-Zahra

Madinat al-Zahra serves as a great example of monumental art and architecture in al-Andalus (the term used to refer to the parts of Iberia under Islamic rule). Its components reflect connections and continuity with both the Roman and Visigothic heritage in this area, as well as the Islamic and Byzantine heritage of the eastern Mediterranean. Madinat al-Zahra was built by the 10th-century ruler Abd al-Rahman III who proclaimed an Umayyad caliphate in Iberia. Although Abd al-Rahman III began the construction of the palatial complex, his successor al-Hakam II continued to modify and add to it.

The palace complex consists of numerous buildings, including reception halls, mosques, homes, kitchens, and more, constructed over an expansive terraced landscape. The highest terrace was reserved for the caliph, his family, and members of the royal administration. The second terrace featured gardens, pools, and orchards. The third and lowest layer was the most public-facing and inclusive, featuring mosques, markets, military quarters, and more.



Figure **13.3.65**: Salón Rico, Madinat al-Zahra, Córdoba, Spain. (Photo: Zarateman, CC BY-SA 3.0 ES)

One of the highlights of Madinat al-Zahra was the Salón Rico, which was centrally located on the second terrace. It was a reception room for the caliph to meet and entertain foreign political delegations. The room is structured by two rows of horseshoe arches, three aisles, and an ornamental wall at one end. The marble used in much of the complex, including Salón Rico, was sourced from the Estremoz quarries in Portugal. The style of the components in this space, such as the use of acanthus leaves on the capitals, point to a reliance on Late Antique visual traditions.



Figure **13.3.66**: Horseshoe arches at the North Gate, Madinat al-Zahra, Córdoba, Spain. (Photo: Jeroen van Luin, CC BY 2.0)

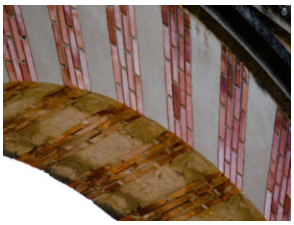


Figure **13.3.67**: Voussoirs, detail of the horseshoe arches at the North Gate, Madinat al-Zahra, Córdoba, Spain. (Photo: Francisco Jesus Ibañez, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Horseshoe arches, which appear widely throughout the Iberian Peninsula, are thought to have been developed under the Visigoths, while the alternating colored stones on the arches can be found in Umayyad architecture on the eastern side of the Mediterranean at sites such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The alternating red-and-white voussoirs on the horseshoe arches are a striking feature at Madinat al-Zahra, and they can also be found on the arches at the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba and elsewhere.



Figure **13.3.68**: Capital from Madinat al-Zahra, Córdoba, Spain. Archaeological Museum, Madinat al-Zahra. (Photo: Ángel M. Felicísimo, CC BY 2.0)

Vegetal patterns found on column capitals at Madinat al-Zahra (Figure **13.3.68**) are reminiscent of the artistic heritage of Islamic art and architecture of the eastern Mediterranean as well, particularly in Syria, when it was under the rule of the Umayyads.

These various elements demonstrate the extent to which the visual heritage of early Islamic Iberia was a conglomeration of elements drawn from a variety of distinct places and eras. Ultimately, Madinat al-Zahra was destroyed during a revolt in the early eleventh century, a time when Umayyad power had waned.



Figure **13.3.69**: Pyxis of al-Mughira, possibly from Madinat al-Zahra, Córdoba, Spain, AH 357/968 CE. Carved ivory with traces of jade, 16 x 11.8 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Portable art objects, including a number of ivory containers, express the luxurious aspects of life under the Umayyads as well as the connections that the Iberian Umayyads maintained with their heritage in the eastern Mediterranean. These containers, which are often highly ornamented with vegetal decoration and Arabic calligraphy, are called pyxides (plural), and they would have held anything from perfumes to relics (Figure **13.3.69**).



Figure **13.3.70**: Panel from a rectangular box, made in Spain, probably Córdoba, 10th–early 11th century. Ivory with traces of pigment, 10.8 x 20.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: public domain)

A panel of a pyxis (Figure **13.3.70**), made out of a solid piece of elephant ivory, is intricately carved and would have required a skilled set of craftspeople and painstaking effort to design and produce. Many of these containers still exist, along with other similar luxury goods from medieval Iberia, so there was clearly a market for such work, one that crossed identity lines. The

prevalence of luxuries such as the pyxis, demonstrates how art traveled widely beyond religious and political lines. Pyxides were coveted by people outside of the Islamic context. The pyxides that were produced under the Muslims were valued and often taken as booty. They were presented and became reliquaries in Christian contexts.

The Great Mosque of Córdoba

by Dr. Shadieh Mirmobiny



Figure **13.3.71**: Aerial view of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, Córdoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries. (Photo: Ulamm, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Known locally as *Mezquita-Catedral*, the Great Mosque of Córdoba is one of the oldest structures still standing from the time Muslims ruled Al-Andalus (Muslim Iberia including most of Spain, Portugal, and a small section of Southern France) in the late 8th century. Córdoba is a two hour train ride south of Madrid, and draws visitors from all over the world.

Temple/church/mosque/church

The buildings on this site are as complex as the extraordinarily rich history they illustrate. Historians believe that there had first been a temple to the Roman god, Janus, on this site. The temple was converted into a church by invading Visigoths who seized Córdoba in 572. Next, the church was converted into a mosque and then completely rebuilt by the descendants of the exiled Umayyads—the first Islamic dynasty who had originally ruled from their capital Damascus (in present-day Syria) from 661 until 750.

A new capital

Following the overthrow of his family (the Umayyads) in Damascus by the incoming Abbasids, Prince Abd al-Rahman I escaped to southern Spain. Once there, he established control over almost all of the Iberian Peninsula and attempted to recreate the grandeur of Damascus in his new capital, Córdoba. He sponsored elaborate building programs, promoted agriculture, and even imported fruit trees and other plants from his former home. Orange trees still stand in the courtyard of the Mosque of Córdoba, a beautiful, if bittersweet reminder of the Umayyad exile.



Figure **13.3.72**: Hypostyle hall, Great Mosque at Cordoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries. (Photo: wsifrancis, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The hypostyle hall

The building itself was expanded over two hundred years. It is comprised of a large hypostyle prayer hall, a courtyard with a fountain in the middle, an orange grove, a covered walkway circling the courtyard, and a minaret (a tower used to call the faithful to prayer) that is now encased in a squared, tapered bell tower. The expansive prayer hall seems magnified by its repeated geometry. It is built with recycled ancient Roman columns from which sprout a striking combination of two-tiered, symmetrical arches, formed of stone and red brick.



Figure **13.3.73**: Mihrab, Great Mosque at Córdoba, Spain (Photo: jamesdale10, CC BY 2.0)

The mihrab

The focal point in the prayer hall is the famous horseshoe arched mihrab or prayer niche. A mihrab is used in a mosque to identify the wall that faces Mecca—the birth place of Islam in what is now Saudi Arabia. This is practical as Muslims face toward Mecca during their daily prayers. The mihrab in the Great Mosque of Córdoba is framed by an exquisitely decorated arch behind which is an unusually large space, the size of a small room. Gold tesserae (small pieces of glass with gold and color backing) create a dazzling combination of dark blues, reddish browns, yellows and golds that form intricate calligraphic bands and vegetal motifs that adorn the arch.

The horseshoe arch

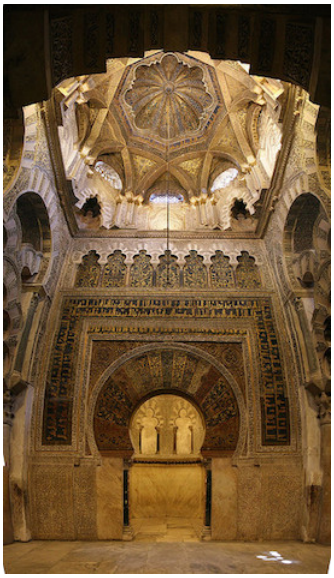


Figure **13.3.74**: Mihrab and dome above the maqsura, Great Mosque at Cordoba, Spain. (Photo: bongo vongo, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The horseshoe-style arch was common in the architecture of the Visigoths, the people that ruled this area after the Roman empire collapsed and before the Umayyads arrived. The horseshoe arch eventually spread across North Africa from Morocco to Egypt and is an easily identified characteristic of Western Islamic architecture (though there are some early examples in the East as well).

The dome

In front of the mihrab, above the maqsura, is an equally dazzling dome. It is built of crisscrossing ribs that create pointed arches all lavishly covered with gold mosaic in a radial pattern. This astonishing building technique anticipates later Gothic rib vaulting, though on a more modest scale.

The Great Mosque of Córdoba is a prime example of the Muslim world's ability to brilliantly develop architectural styles based on pre-existing regional traditions. Here is an extraordinary combination of the familiar and the innovative, a formal stylistic vocabulary that can be recognized as "Islamic" even today.

Articles in this section

- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "Introduction to Islam," in Smarthistory, June 30, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Mustafa Shah, "The Qur'an," in Smarthistory, September 12, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "Arts of the Islamic world," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Glenna Barlow, "Arts of the Islamic world: The early period," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Alex Brey, "Folio from a Qur'an," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "The Kaaba," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Kendra Weisbin, "Introduction to mosque architecture," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Kendra Weisbin, "Common types of mosque architecture," in Smarthistory (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Shadieh Mirmobiny, "The Great Mosque of Córdoba," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "The Umayyads, an introduction," in Smarthistory, September 8, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "The Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra)," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay, "The Great Mosque of Damascus," in Smarthistory, May 15, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Sabahat Adil, "The vibrant visual cultures of the Islamic West, an introduction," in Smarthistory, January 7, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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13.4: Carolingian Art

Editors' Note

As noted earlier in this chapter, the transition from the Roman Empire to the Byzantine Empire was so incremental that scholars disagree about dating it. Indeed, the Byzantines considered themselves Roman. Islam took over much of the Byzantine Empire in little more than a century. It was not until Charlemagne that Latin Christianity had a ruler who styled himself as a rival to these powers. The chapter closes with an introduction to the art and architecture Charlemagne and his successors used to claim they were reviving the Roman Empire as heirs to Constantine and Justinian, and as a bulwark against Islam.

Carolingian art, an introduction

by Dr. Nancy Ross

Charlemagne, King of the Franks and later Holy Roman Emperor, instigated a cultural revival known as the Carolingian Renaissance. This revival used Constantine's Christian empire as its model, which flourished between 306 and 337. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity and left behind an impressive legacy of military strength and artistic patronage.

Charlemagne saw himself as the new Constantine and instigated this revival by writing his *Admonitio generalis* (789) and *Epistola de litteris colendis* (c. 794-797). In the *Admonitio generalis*, Charlemagne legislates church reform, which he believes will make his subjects more moral and in the *Epistola de litteris colendis*, a letter to Abbot Baugulf of Fulda, he outlines his intentions for cultural reform. Most importantly, he invited the greatest scholars from all over Europe to come to court and give advice for his renewal of politics, church, art and literature.



Figure **13.4.1**: Odo of Metz, Palatine Chapel interior, Aachen, Germany, 805. (Photo: Holly Hayes, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Carolingian art survives in manuscripts, sculpture, architecture and other religious artifacts produced during the period 780-900. These artists worked exclusively for the emperor, members of his court, and the bishops and abbots associated with the court. Geographically, the revival extended through present-day France, Switzerland, Germany and Austria.

Charlemagne commissioned the architect Odo of Metz to construct a palace and chapel in Aachen, Germany. The chapel was consecrated in 805 and is known as the Palatine Chapel. This space served as the seat of Charlemagne's power and still houses his throne today.

The Palatine Chapel is octagonal with a dome, recalling the shape of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy (completed in 548), but was built with barrel and groin vaults, which are distinctively late Roman methods of construction. The chapel is perhaps the best surviving example of Carolingian architecture and probably influenced the design of later European palace chapels.

Charlemagne had his own scriptorium, or center for copying and illuminating manuscripts, at Aachen. Under the direction of Alcuin of York, this scriptorium produced a new script known as Carolingian miniscule. Prior to this development, writing styles or scripts in Europe were localized and difficult to read. A book written in one part of Europe could not be easily read in another, even when the scribe and reader were both fluent in Latin. Knowledge of Carolingian miniscule spread from Aachen was universally

adopted, allowing for clearer written communication within Charlemagne's empire. Carolingian miniscule was the most widely used script in Europe for about 400 years.

Figurative art from this period is easy to recognize. Unlike the flat, two-dimensional work of Early Christian and Early Byzantine artists, Carolingian artists sought to restore the third dimension. They used classical drawings as their models and tried to create more convincing illusions of space.



Figure **13.4.2**: St. Mark from the *Godescalc Gospel Lectionary*, folio 1v., c. 781-83. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This development is evident in tracing author portraits in illuminated manuscripts. The *Godescalc Gospel Lectionary*, commissioned by Charlemagne and his wife Hildegard, was made circa 781-83 during his reign as King of the Franks and before the beginning of the Carolingian Renaissance. In the portrait of St. Mark, the artist employs typical Early Byzantine artistic conventions. The face is heavily modeled in brown, the drapery folds fall in stylized patterns and there is little or no shading. The seated position of the evangelist would be difficult to reproduce in real life, as there are spatial inconsistencies. The left leg is shown in profile and the other leg is show straight on. This author portrait is typical of its time.

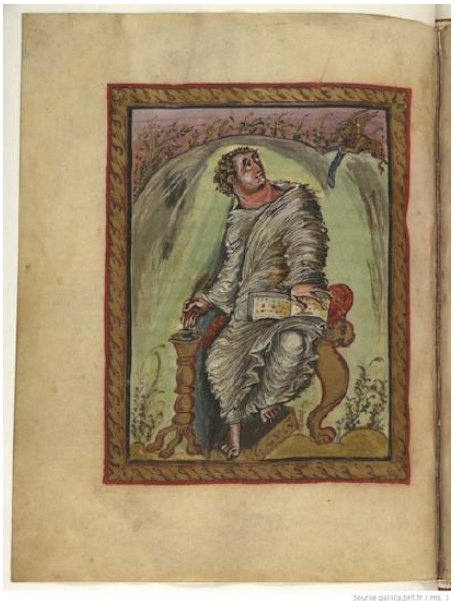


Figure **13.4.3**: St. Mark from the *Ebbo Gospels*, folio 18v., c. 816-35. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The *Ebbo Gospels* were made c. 816-35 in the Benedictine Abbey of Hautvillers for Ebbo, Archbishop of Rheims. The author portrait of St. Mark is characteristic of Carolingian art and the Carolingian Renaissance. The artist used distinctive frenzied lines to create the illusion of the evangelist's body shape and position. The footstool sits at an awkward unrealistic angle, but there are numerous attempts by the artist to show the body as a three-dimensional object in space. The right leg is tucked under the chair and the artist tries to show his viewer, through the use of curved lines and shading, that the leg has form. There is shading and consistency of perspective. The evangelist sitting on the chair strikes a believable pose.

Charlemagne, like Constantine before him, left behind an almost mythic legacy. The Carolingian Renaissance marked the last great effort to revive classical culture before the Late Middle Ages. Charlemagne's empire was led by his successors until the late ninth century. In early tenth century, the Ottonians rose to power and espoused different artistic ideals.

Palatine Chapel, Aachen

by Dr. Jennifer Freeman

Carolingian art and the classical revival

The Palatine Chapel at Aachen is the most well-known and best-preserved Carolingian building. It is also an excellent example of the classical revival style that characterized the architecture of Charlemagne's reign. The exact dates of the chapel's construction are unclear, but we do know that this palace chapel was dedicated to Christ and the Virgin Mary by Pope Leo III in a ceremony in 805, five years after Leo promoted Charlemagne from king to Holy Roman Emperor. The dedication took place about twenty years after Charlemagne moved the capital of the Frankish kingdom from Ravenna, in what is now Italy, to Aachen, in what is now Germany.



Figure **13.4.4**: Map showing the cities of Aachen and Ravenna along with present-day national borders. (Map via Smarthistory)

In the construction of his chapel, Charlemagne made several strategic choices that linked his building to the legacies of ancient Rome and the fourth-century emperor Constantine. The Emperor Constantine was important because he was the first Christian emperor of Rome. The location for the new building was selected because it was an historic Roman site with hot springs that were used for bathing. The materials used for the chapel also invoked Rome; among them were columns and marble stones that Pope Hadrian permitted Charlemagne to transfer from Rome and Ravenna to Aachen around the year 798. A relic of the cloak of St. Martin was installed in the church at its consecration—the choice of a fourth-century Roman soldier who had a vision of Jesus after sharing his cloak with a beggar was another way to reinforce the link of Charlemagne's rule with Rome.

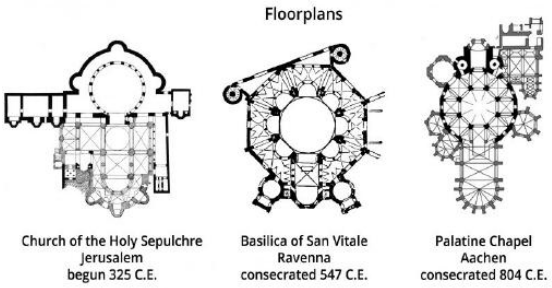


Figure **13.4.5**: Comparison of floorplans between the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, begun 325 CE; Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, consecrated 547 CE; and the Palatine Chapel, Aachen, consecrated 804 CE. (Image via Smarthistory)

Two important models (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and San Vitale in Ravenna)

The chapel's classical style also referenced its Roman imperial lineage, particularly in its imitation of two significant Christian buildings: the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and San Vitale in Ravenna. The Holy Sepulchre's building program was started in 325 CE by Constantine's mother, Saint Helena, and completed in 335. The centralized plan and surrounding ambulatory and upper gallery is echoed in the plan of the Palatine Chapel. However, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is composed of two main buildings —in addition to the rotunda that covers the tomb is a similar structure over the traditionally-accepted location of the crucifixion. The Holy Sepulchre may also have been the inspiration for the lion-head knockers of the chapel's bronze doors (Figure **13.4.6**).



Figure **13.4.6**: Detail of door, Palatine Chapel, Aachen. (photo: Bojin, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Because it didn't receive extensive additions like the Holy Sepulchre, the San Vitale Chapel at Ravenna is probably the best comparison for what the Palatine Chapel would have looked like before its Gothic renovations. San Vitale is a small octagonal church, with a centralized plan and a two-story ambulatory (Figure **13.4.7**).



Figure **13.4.7**: View with ambulatory, gallery, chancel, and apse, San Vitale, Ravenna, begun in 526 or 527 under Ostrogothic rule, consecrated in 547 and completed 548; mosaics date between 546 and 556. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The octagonal plan of the Palatine Chapel (see plans in Figure **13.4.5**) not only recalled that of its two most significant models, but also participated in the tradition of early Christian mausoleums and baptisteries, where the eight sides were understood to be symbolic of regeneration—referencing Christ's resurrection eight days after Palm Sunday. Its original dome was also based on

classical models and bore an apocalyptic mosaic program, consisting of the *agnus dei*, or Lamb of God (which is, symbolically, Jesus Christ), surrounded by the tetramorph (symbols of the four Gospel writers) and the twenty-four elders described in Revelation 4:4. The *agnus dei* image was later obstructed by the installation of a chandelier.



Figure **13.4.8**: Palatine Chapel interior. (Photo: Velvet, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The octagonal centralized plan of the Palatine Chapel is unique among Carolingian chapels; this may have been because, unlike a longitudinal plan which created a sense of processional direction toward the apse and altar, a centralized plan did not place special emphasis on the altar (and therefore may not have been as effective liturgically for the purpose of a chapel). That said, it does seem to have established an association of Charlemagne with Christ; some scholars believe that Charlemagne's marble throne (Figure **13.4.9**) was originally located in the center of the octagon on the first floor, that is, directly below the image of the *agnus dei*, thereby creating a kind of visual link between the emperor and the Christ.

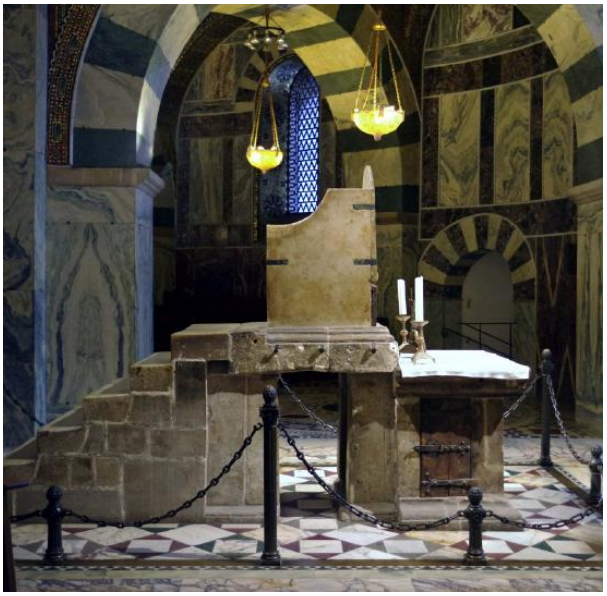


Figure **13.4.9**: Charlemagne's throne, Palatine Chapel, Aachen. (Photo: Berthold Werner, CC BY-SA 3.0)

By presenting his capital at Aachen as a new Rome and himself as a new Constantine through the careful appropriation of late antique artwork and architecture, Charlemagne was not simply making a positive assertion about himself as ruler; he was also implicitly contrasting his reign with that of the Eastern Empire (the Byzantines), a negative stance that was also expressed around

the same time in the *Opus Caroli Regis contra Synodum* (i.e., "The Work of King Charles against the Synod"), a detailed response to the Second Council of Nicaea , written on his behalf by Theodulf of Orléans.

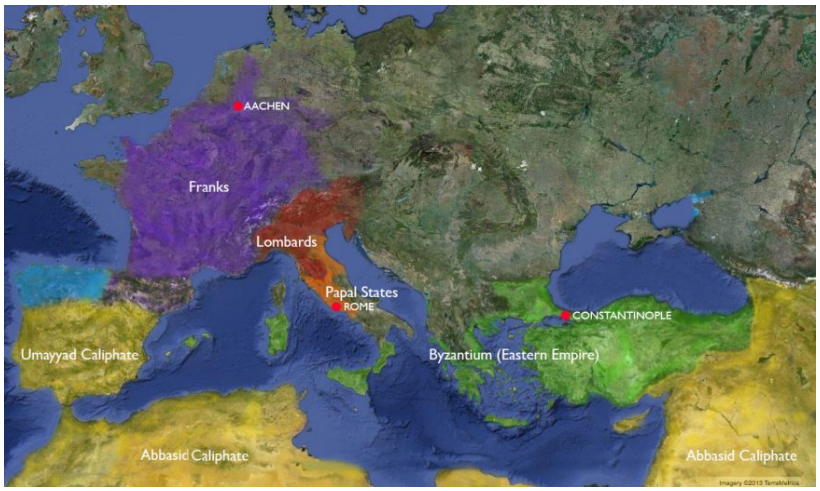


Figure 13.4.10: Europe before 774, showing the cities of Aachen, Rome, and Constantinople, along with the territories of the Umayyad Caliphate, Abbasid Caliphate, Franks, Lombards, Papal States, and Byzantium. (Map via Smarthistory)

Charlemagne's body was interred in the Palatine Chapel after his death in 814. The building would continue to be used for coronation ceremonies for another 700 years—well into the sixteenth century.

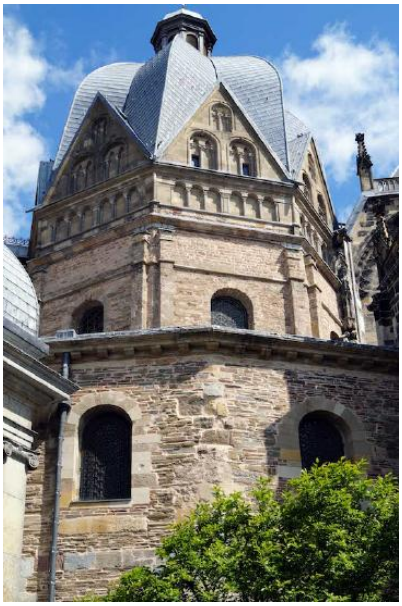


Figure 13.4.11: Palatine Chapel exterior, Aachen, consecrated 805, Carolingian structure visible (lower two stories). (Photo: CaS2000, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Major additions to the chapel began in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, significantly changing the building's profile and footprint with exterior chapels. After several fires in the seventeenth century, the dome was rebuilt and heightened.

Matthew in the Coronation Gospels and Ebbo Gospels

by Dr. Jennifer Freeman

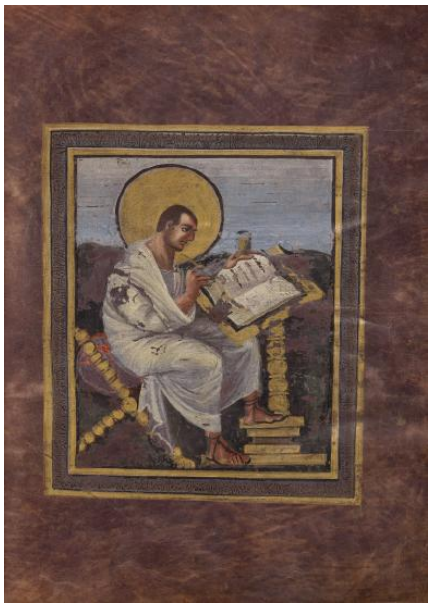


Figure **13.4.12**: Saint Matthew, folio 15 recto of the *Coronation Gospels* (Gospel Book of Charlemagne), from Aachen, Germany, c. 800-810. Ink and tempera on vellum. Kaiserliche Schatzkammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo via Smarthistory)

According to legend, the Vienna *Coronation Gospels* (c. 795) were discovered in Charlemagne's tomb within the Palatine Chapel in the year 1000 by Otto III; the emperor had apparently been buried enthroned, that is, sitting up, with the Gospels in his lap. A gospel book is a book containing the books of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, who each offer their story of Christ's life and death.

The manuscript is clearly a luxury object, written in gold ink on purple-dyed vellum. Characteristic of the Carolingian Renaissance, the artists of the Coronation Gospels were interested in the revival of classical styles, which effectively linked Charlemagne's rule to that of the 4th century ancient Roman emperor Constantine. The classical style is evident in the poses and clothing of the four evangelists, or Gospel writers, who recall images of ancient Roman philosophers (for example, this one from The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Charlemagne probably had this Gospel book made before he was crowned emperor. It is such an impressive book that it was used in imperial coronation services from about the twelfth to the sixteenth century.

Following the creation of the *Coronation Gospels*, the Ebbo Gospels (c. 816-35) are most famous for their distinctive style in contrast to contemporary Carolingian illuminated manuscripts. The *Ebbo Gospels* were made for Ebbo the Archbishop of Rheims, which was one of the major sites for manuscript production at the time.



Figure **13.4.13**: Saint Matthew, folio 18 verso of the *Ebbo Gospels* (Gospel Book of the Archbishop of Reims) from Hautvillers, France, c. 816-35. Ink and tempera on vellum, 10 1/4 x 8 1/4". Bibliothèque Municipale, Épernay. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Although the author portraits in the *Ebbo Gospels* (images of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are consistent with the elements of classical revival (e.g., modeling of figures to make them appear three-dimensional, gradation of the sky, the architecture and furnishings), the style in which the images of the *Ebbo Gospels* are executed is a notable departure. The brushwork of the author

portraits can be described as energetic, expressionistic, even frenzied. The artist remains attentive to the use of highlighting and shadow to create three-dimensional forms, but does so with textured rather than smooth modeling, which creates an effect of movement.



Figure 13.4.14: Comparison of Saint Matthew from the *Coronation Gospels* (left) with Saint Matthew from the *Ebbo Gospels* (right). (Photo via Smarthistory)

This energy is conveyed not only in the brushwork, but also in the composition itself. In the *Ebbo Gospels*, Matthew is hunched over as if frantically writing on his (still blank) codex, while Matthew's posture in the *Coronation Gospels* is more upright and relaxed; his pen grazes his chin, as if he is pausing in thought.

The furniture of the two portraits is very similar in appearance—though the seat in the Coronation Gospels seems to be a folding chair, while that of the Ebbo is a more-sturdy stool. However, the posture of the Coronation Matthew is stable in contrast to that of Ebbo. For example, his right foot rests on the frame of the miniature and his left is flat on the base of his book stand. This miniature is composed of several 45- and 90-degree angles that create a sense of stability and balance. In contrast, the lines in the *Ebbo Gospels'* Matthew are dynamic and lack the same sense of equilibrium. For instance, Matthew's right foot in particular is positioned on the steep, almost vertical, angle of his footrest. Furthermore the book stand is tipped at such a drastic angle that it seems his book will slide right into the viewer's lap. The energy is also expressed in Matthew's face, which is drawn up in a furrowed brow. While the Coronation Matthew seems to take a peaceful moment of reflection, the Ebbo Matthew appears to be in anguish over his writing (Figure 13.4.15), which is directed by his evangelist symbol, the winged man, who instructs him from the upper right hand corner of the image.

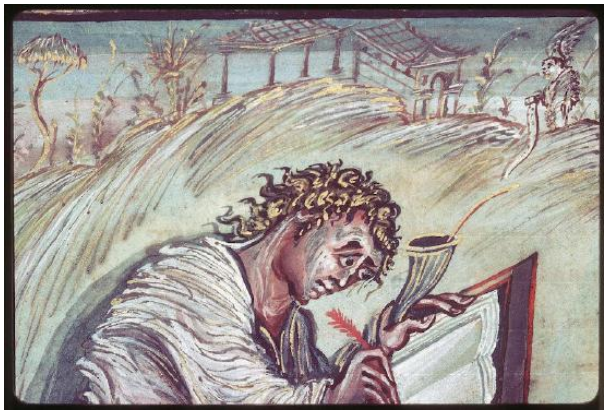


Figure 13.4.15: Saint Matthew from the *Ebbo Gospels* (detail of Matthew's head and hands). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Lastly, it should be noted that the *Ebbo Gospels* bear some similarities to the infamous *Utrecht Psalter* (Figure 13.4.16), which was also made in Rheims at the Benedictine abbey of Hautvillers around the same time (a psalter is a volume containing the Biblical Book of Psalms, often with other devotional material bound in). The images of the *Utrecht Psalter* are unpainted drawings in brown ink, which are also clearly meant to invoke the style of Late Antiquity. While the sketchy character of the *Utrecht Psalter* is not quite as dramatic as that of the *Ebbo Gospels*, the similarity in style can be seen especially in the classical architecture and the rendering of the winged man at the top of the evangelist's portrait.



Figure **13.4.16**: Psalm 44, detail of folio 25 recto of the *Utrecht Psalter*, from Hautviller (near Reims), France, c. 820-835. University Library, Utrecht. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Lindau Gospels Cover

By Dr. Nancy Ross and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is a conversation between Dr. Nancy Ross and Dr. Steven Zucker at the Morgan Library in New York. Click here to watch the video.

Steven: We're in the Morgan Library in New York. We're looking at one of its real treasures. This is the Lindau Gospel cover.

Nancy: This is old.



Figure **13.4.17**: Jeweled upper cover of the Lindau Gospels, c. 880, Court School of Charles the Bald (possibly made in the Royal Abbey of St. Denis). Gold and gems, 350 x 275 mm. Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: It is. It's really old. This is from the 9th century. That is from the 800s. This was a moment when there was an attempt to reestablish the kind of empire that the Romans had once known under Charlemagne.

Nancy: Charlemagne was looking to Constatine as his model and was trying to recreate the empire of Constantine, and also to try and recreate the artistic styles that were present in that early Christian period.

Steven: It's interesting that Constantine, a great Roman emperor, but also the first emperor to have legalized, or had decriminalized Christianity. It's a really interesting choice by Charlemagne to focus on that particular emperor, because he's so much a bridge between the power of the older pagan Roman empire and the new Christian world.

Nancy: That's correct.

Steven: We don't usually think of the cover as the work of art itself.



Figure **13.4.18**: Detail, jeweled upper cover of the Lindau Gospels, c. 880. (Photo: Dr. Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Nancy: That's right. Really, there are so very few Medieval book covers that survive, so when we get a good one like this it is really something that is very special. What we're looking at is the cover of the Lindau Gospels. A Gospel book contains Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, together with some extra material. It might have a calendar or a litany on the inside. Clearly all of the emphasis here is on the outside. We see an image of the crucifixion. It's a very Carolingian representation that follows the Triumphant Christ.

Steven: Later representations of Christ on the cross see his body responding to gravity. We might see a real sense of pain. But here, we don't.

Nancy: No, not at all. We see an emphasis of the divine nature of Christ; the Christ who is God who doesn't suffer. The only sense of suffering that we can see is a little bit of blood dripping from the hands. Other than that, he is tall and proud and in no way responding to the pain he is suffering.

Steven: We call this Carolingian. It comes from the workshop of Charlemagne, actually. This was probably made for Charlemagne's grandson, Charles the Bold. Especially in the representation in gold of the cloth, you can really get a sense of the way that these artists were looking back to the Classical tradition.



Figure **13.4.19**: Detail, jeweled upper cover of the Lindau Gospels, c. 880. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Nancy: That's correct. They're looking back to the Classical tradition and, of course, Classical art is really concerned with drapery and drapery folds and artists are trying at this time, in the Carolingian period, to revive that style and they're trying to look at Classical models, at earlier Classical models, and emulate that in their art. I think we can especially see that in these bottom two figures that are mourning Christ.

Steven: This idea of reviving the Classical tradition is not just the system of representation. It has to do with reforming language, setting down a set of common laws.

Nancy: That's correct. There's political reform that's going on at this time. There is education reform and there is also church reform that's happening to try and standardize and modernize the church and society at this time.

Steven: This is an unbelievably glorious object. Look at the amount of gold, the amount of jewels. It is almost architectural.

Nancy: Scooting down, we can see all of the arches that help to make up the shape of the cross as though the cross itself is like a building. If we think to later church plans, this is the kind of shape of a church building that we would expect to see.



Figure **13.4.20**: Detail showing arches supporting the cross, jeweled upper cover of the Lindau Gospels, c. 880. (Morgan Library and Museum, New York) (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Ah, so the kind of basilica structure?

Nancy: Absolutely. With a long nave and a transept.

Steven: It's not only a representation, then, of Christ on the cross, but it actually has a deeper symbolic meaning.

Nancy: Absolutely. The jewels are very sumptuous and there are pearls and other sparkly things that make this appear very attractive.

Steven: I see emeralds and I see rubies.

Nancy: All in this wonderful gold setting. What we want to see is that those have particular reference to the heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. In chapters 21, 22, there is a lot of description of the gates in the city. And effectively how to get to Heaven, how to arrive in the heavenly Jerusalem. This book takes you there. This book leads you to salvation.

Steven: This is a very precious object, obviously. It's just a tour de force of the jeweler's art. It's using a technique which is called repoussé, which is to say that the sculptural figures, Christ and the other mourning figures that surround Christ, are actually hammered from the inside to create that positive image.

Nancy: If we look at the figure of Christ, artists have really tried to bring out that Classicism; that we don't have strange muscles appearing and that the artist has tried to smooth over the body of Christ in a way that is very un-Medieval.

Steven: So, this is a stepping back from the abstraction of the human body that had been so pervasive in the years before the Carolingian revival. This is an attempt, then, to look back. It's interesting to think what kinds of sources would these artisans have had available to them from ancient Rome, from ancient Greece.

Nancy: Well, they would have had books and drawings hidden away in monastic libraries. They would have had drawings from earlier versions of illustrated Gospel books. So they're looking back in their libraries to these earlier Christian books which retain more of a flavor of pagan drawing and pagan illustration from the Classical world.

Steven: It's just such a marvelous illustration of the complex relationship which the Medieval Christians had with the Classical tradition that had come before them.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Nancy Ross, "Carolingian art, an introduction," in Smarthistory, July 6, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman, "Palatine Chapel, Aachen," in Smarthistory, September 15, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman, "Matthew in the Coronation Gospels and Ebbo Gospels," in Smarthistory, September 15, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Nancy Ross and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Lindau Gospels cover," in Smarthistory, December 10, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

14: Medieval II- Contested Empires

In This Chapter

- 14.0: Chapter Introduction
- 14.1: Medieval Islam Before the Mongols
- 14.2: The Latin West
- 14.3: Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest

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14.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Christian Images on an Islamic Vessel?



Figure **14.0.1**: Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century (domed side). Brass, silver inlay, 45.2 x 36.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, usage conditions apply, via Smarthistory)

In the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery, there is an object simply called "Canteen." With its rounded body and narrow neck framed by looped handles, its silhouette is remarkably like a modern canteen—at least from the front. From the side, its shape is more unusual: domed on one side, and flat on the other, with a well-like depression in the center. Its shape is not the only unusual thing about it, though. Made from hammered brass and covered in elaborate silver inlay decoration, the Canteen weighs more than 10 pounds, empty—not exactly a practical travel flask. The decorations, which combine apparently Christian imagery with Arabic calligraphy and secular scenes, further deepen the mystery of the object's purpose, patron, and usage.



Figure **14.0.2**: Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century (profile view). Brass, silver inlay, 45.2 x 36.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, usage conditions apply)

The central image on the domed side, contained within a round, meander-like border, features a woman seated on an elaborate throne, holding a child on her lap. Especially since both have halos—the latter with a cross—they are recognizable as the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Surrounding it, other rondels contain scenes from the life of Jesus, such as the Nativity, Presentation at the Temple, and Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. However, other imagery on the Canteen is distinctly more secular: men on a lively hunt with their birds and dogs, and scenes of princely pleasures, as seen around the Islamic world and in Norman Sicily. Inscriptions in Arabic calligraphy bestow wishes upon the owner for wealth, safety, and good fortune. On the flat side of the Canteen, the outer ring of decoration features standing figures who resemble Christian saints. At their feet, silver horsemen circle an opening, wielding lances, swords, and crossbows.



Figure **14.0.3**: Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century (domed side, detail). Brass, silver inlay, 45.2 x 36.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, usage conditions apply)

The Canteen was probably made in Mosul, Syria, between 1202 and 1250, when Muslims of the Ayyubid dynasty ruled the town. Because it was made under Muslim rule, it fits the definition of Islamic art, even though it features imagery used by Christians. The same is true of manuscripts made for the Syriac Christians who lived under the same rule. This overlap—between Christian and Islamic art, between geographical regions, and between sacred and secular imagery—characterizes much of the art of this period.

One reason for this hybrid aesthetic is travel: pilgrimage continued to draw the faithful to various sacred sites, the most prized of which for Christians were in the so-called Holy Lands, the parts of the Middle East where Jesus was born, had his ministry, and died. The shape of the Canteen is similar to (much smaller) “pilgrim flasks,” vessels used to transport holy liquids from revered sites on these pilgrimage journeys, and one theory is that the Canteen was made as a souvenir to commemorate the wealthy owner’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

The Holy Lands were not only sacred to Christians, however, but also to Jews and Muslims; recall that the Islamic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem occupies the site of Solomon’s Temple, one of the holiest sites in Judaism as well as an important site in the life of Jesus. The desire by Christians in the Latin West to “reclaim” the Holy Lands from the Muslims led to a series of so-called holy wars known as the Crusades, beginning in the late 11th century. The Christians were ultimately unsuccessful in holding control of Jerusalem long-term, and along the way, they killed many Jews, fellow Christians, and Muslims. Nonetheless, from this idea of holy war emerges the figure of the Christian knight, a warrior defending not his liege lord or chieftain, but the very glory of God. Another theory holds that the Canteen was made not for a pilgrim, but a Crusader, for whom a “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem was a primary goal.

As discussed in the last chapter, there is significant overlap between the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Mary and Jesus, featured on the Canteen, are holy figures who are revered in the Qu’ran. It is important to remember that *sacred* Islamic art, as distinct from *secular* art of the Islamic world, rarely ever depicts animate beings (people or animals), considering that to be idolatry. The prohibition on depicting animate beings in sacred Islamic art does *not* extend to secular objects, nor to figurative representations of inanimate objects such as plants or buildings; recall the vine and jewel motifs that, along with calligraphic and geometric elements, decorate the interior of the Dome of the Rock.



Figure 14.0.4: Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century (flat side). Brass, silver inlay, 45.2 x 36.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, usage conditions apply)

On the flat side of the Canteen, nine figures on horseback ring the central depression. They carry lances or crossbows, and sit astride heavily-draped horses. Earlier scholars identified these as Crusaders, which is in keeping with the ostensibly Christian imagery elsewhere on the Canteen. More recently, however, David Nicolle, a historian of medieval warfare, has argued that these images instead accurately illustrate equipment and techniques used by the Ayyubids—in keeping with the Arabic inscriptions on the canteen. For art historians Heather Ecker and Teresa Fitzherbert, regardless of which group is portrayed, the figures "suggest the ideals of the warrior saints venerated by crusaders and Muslims alike as supporters in the ongoing battle of good against evil and the quest for salvation." Nuha Khoury has pointed out that an Islamic text popular during the Crusades, called *The Merits of Jerusalem*, has Jesus seeking Ayyubid help in ridding his city of Crusaders. She proposes that the Canteen and related objects with imagery perhaps derived from Christian Syriac sources can be read as part of the counter-Crusade that united Christians and Muslims of the Holy Land. Throughout this chapter, there will be numerous examples of art that visually documents the influence various groups have on one another, as their cultures come into contact—sometimes violently, but often peaceably, as well.



Figure 14.0.1: Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century (detail, band around domes side). Brass, silver inlay, 45.2 x 36.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: National Museum of Asian Art, usage conditions apply)

Global Connections: Canteens

An object very much like the canteen that opens this chapter must have made its way to China, where it inspired another impractically large canteen—this one made in porcelain. The connections between the Islamic world and China, via the Silk Road, were particularly strong. This porcelain canteen visually displays the hybrid connections and cross-cultural influences between China and the Islamic world on multiple fronts.



Figure **14.0.5**: Canteen, Ming dynasty, early 15th century, Jingdezhen ware, porcelain with cobalt pigment under colorless glaze, China, Jiangxi province, Jingdezhen, 46.9 × 41.8 × 21.3 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Photo: Freer Gallery of Art, usage conditions apply)

As the National Museum of Asian Art describes, the eight-pointed star featured in the center of the porcelain canteen is a symbol often used in Islamic art, here appropriated for aesthetic purposes. And although the shape, size, and design of the canteen was likely copied from a canteen such as the Freer canteen, discussed earlier, the museum writes that "the technique used to create this canteen reflects its origin in China. The material of white porcelain decorated with cobalt (blue) designs was a Chinese invention. The heavy weight of the canteen seems to suggest that it was made for decorative or ornamental purpose rather than for actually carrying water. It may have been hung on the wall or placed on a flat surface in a wealthy patron's residence."

Historiography (Writing History)

As discussed in the last chapter, there are many possible ways to approach the art of the Middle Ages, and history does not naturally fall into distinct chapters. Art history survey texts often address the art of Byzantium and of Islam separately, which has the tendency to privilege the cultures of northern and western Europe over their neighbors. This textbook instead treats the Middle Ages chronologically, dividing the period into Early, Middle, and Later Medieval and addressing not just northern and western Europe, but concurrent developments and exchanges to the south and east. This, the second of these three chapters, addresses art of the Middle Byzantine Empire, Abbasid Caliphate, Ottonian and Romanesque periods, as well as art of the Crusades. An effort has been made to balance the attention given to each of these separate but interconnected cultures.

As a reminder, this is the way the three Medieval chapters are broken down:

Content in Chapters 13-15

Chapter	13	14	15
Title	Medieval I: The Reorganization of the Roman World & the Rise of Islam	Medieval II: Contested Empires, Christian and Islamic	Medieval III: Reorganization of the East
Dates	333-843	843-1260	1260-1453
Material covered	• Early Byzantium ◦ Introduction/the lives of Jesus and Mary ◦ Manuscripts and ivory miniatures • The Migration Period ◦ Anglo-Saxon ◦ Vikings ◦ Insular • The Early Islamic World ◦ Introduction to Islam ◦ Mosque architecture ◦ Umayyad ◦ Abbasid ◦ The Islamic West • Carolingian	• Fractured Islam ◦ Fatimid ◦ Seljuk ◦ Ghaznavid ◦ The Islamic West, cont. • The Latin West ◦ Vikings, cont. ◦ Ottonian ◦ Pilgrimage ◦ Romanesque • Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest ◦ Icons, frescoes, and mosaics ◦ Macedonian Renaissance ◦ Medieval Nubian Kingdoms ◦ Kievan Rus' ◦ Norman Sicily	• Ilkhanid • Timurid • Mamluk • Late Byzantine • Christian East Africa

Islamic Iconoclasm?

It is sometimes mistakenly claimed that Islam does not allow for images of people, or entirely lacks a tradition of figurative imagery. Although art in *sacred* contexts, such as Qur'ans and mosques, rarely ever contains images of animate beings (people or animals), secular art of the Islamic world abounds with those representations. Readers have already encountered the statue of a caliph at Khirbet al-Mafjar and figures riding and climbing in ivories from Muslim palaces in Spain. Other examples of figural imagery include the earliest Umayyad coins featuring images of the rulers, illustrations of humans and animals in early Arabic manuscripts, and Abbasid lusterware depicting people. As Christiane Gruber explains: "The Koran does not prohibit figural imagery. Rather, it castigates the worship of idols." Episodes of iconoclasm have occurred in both Islam and Christianity, and efforts to eliminate images of particular persons have an older history, including Roman *damnatio memoriae* and the attempt to erase Hatshepshut from Egyptian history.

Terminology

Saxon, in this chapter, refers to a group of people living in what is now Germany rather than to Saxons discussed in Chapter 13. Both groups originated in the same area of northern Germany.

Ottonian refers to the kingdom established by Otto I in 936 and recognized by the pope in 962 as the Holy Roman Empire.

In this chapter, you will also read about pilgrims and pilgrimages, referring to people going on religious journeys, often to religious sites in distant cities. The journey itself, often long and arduous, contributes to the traveler's personal and spiritual growth. As explored above, the Freer Canteen could have been an elaborate vessel made to both commemorate a pilgrimage and enable the owner to return home with holy liquids from a sacred site.

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents objects and buildings made across a vast terrain, spanning as far apart from one another as the British Isles and Afghanistan; Spain and Iran; and Egypt and Norway. Religious and linguistic differences are as broad as the rift in geography. The Islamic world stretched from what is now Spain to India, including the east coast of Africa in addition to the south coast of the Mediterranean and, at times, major islands like Sicily. The Christian world was also large, reaching from Iceland to Ethiopia. In both the Christian and Islamic world of this period, political and sectarian divisions are easier to define than they were in the Early Middle Ages.

Islamic Divisions

As soon as Islam spread out of Arabia, it attracted multi-lingual adherents, but it is not until the Abbasid dynasty that other languages—especially Farsi, the language of Persia—began to be used in government and literature, though never for the Qur'an. Major political and sectarian rifts appeared. The Umayyad dynasty, deposed by the Abbasidss in most of the Islamic world, survived in Spain. Both were Sunni Muslims. The Fatimids in Egypt were the first powerful Shiite rulers.

Christian Divisions

In the Christian sphere, Europe west of the Adriatic used Latin as the language of the church and, often, of the law. The Latin church recognized the Pope as its leader.The Bible and the liturgy had been translated into Latin in the Early Middle Ages, and the church insisted on its use, rather than that of any of the many local languages. In contrast, the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire always accepted local languages for religious use. Copts, Syrian Christians, Armenians, Georgians, and others continued to use their own languages and alphabets. Some Christians living under Muslim rule began to use Arabic for their Christian texts. The spread of new alphabets and new translations continued as missionaries devised alphabets for Slavic languages in the ninth century. Patriarchs led the church, coming together to resolve issues, although in practice close connections with the imperial court gave the Patriarch of Constantinople more power. Divisions dating back to the fifth century divided Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, and some Syrian Christians from the Orthodox church. By the eleventh century, the Latin and Greek churches were firmly opposed to one another's beliefs about the Pope. In 1204, Crusaders captured Constantinople.

Christian Eras

Products of the Byzantine Empire from 843 (when iconoclasm ended) to 1260 (when the Crusader occupation of Constantinople ended) are generally classed as Middle Byzantine. This was a period of relative stability, during which Byzantine influence extended among Slavic people to the north and west, embracing them in a worldview in which Christianity was the conduit for connections with the Greco-Roman world, especially in art. These dates roughly bracket a period of expansion and confidence in the Latin West, as the Vikings adopted Christianity (becoming the Norse in Scandinavia and the Normans elsewhere), Otto and his descendants organized into a new Holy Roman Empire, pilgrimage flourished in England and what is now France and northwest Spain, and armies formed into crusades to reconquer lands held by Islam.

Islamic Diversity

A fruitful fragmentation of Islamic rule characterizes roughly the same period in the Islamic world. With the Abbasid overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty in 750, ethnic, philosophical, and linguistic diversity expanded in Muslim lands. Instead of the predominantly Arab Umayyad elites, Abbasid elites included local populations in Egypt and Syria. They moved their capital east, creating the city of Baghdad, a city of libraries where scholars merged Arab thought with the cultural traditions of Greece, India, and Persia. What is now Spain and Portugal remained under Umayyad control, and other Islamic states arose in central Asia. Islamic Turkmen migrated out of central Asia, adopting Persian as their administrative language and eventually ruling much of what had been the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire under what was called the Sultanate of Rum (Rome). This Golden Age of Islam ended in 1258, when Mongol armies sacked Baghdad. What appeared then as an unmitigated disaster for Islam had a very different effect starting in 1305, when the Mongols in Islamic and neighboring lands chose Islam as their religion.

Objects Overview

This chapter deals with cultures who are both in communication and conflict with one another, all striving to present themselves as the most powerful, the most learned, and the most godly. Christians used religious imagery to reinforce and spread the tenets of the faith. Ornate reliquaries encrusted with precious materials, stone sculpture on church facades, massive and glittering mosaics, and portable icons, all broadcasted the power and message of Christianity—in competition, and sometimes dialog, with its powerful rival, Islam. For its part, Islam continued to spread rapidly within and beyond the Middle East, with leaders constructing massive mosques and madrassas. The city of Baghdad, capital of the Abbassid caliphate, became the largest city in the world, a center of scholarship and study as well as of luxury. Items discussed in this chapter include:

- Four Psalters showing very different ways of relating the Hebrew Psalms to Christianity: The Paris, Khludov, Eadwine and Melisende Psalters.
- Probably the most admired palace of the Middle Ages, the Alhambra, and decorations from three very different palaces: Roger of Sicily’s Palatine Chapel, a Seljuk palace, and one in Afghanistan.
- Churches and mosques with inventive carvings both inside and out in Durham, England; Toledo, Spain; Hosios Loukas, Greece
- Magnificent mosaics in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople and in monastic churches at Daphni and Chios; The Great Mosque of Isfahan, Iran; and the Norman churches of Sicily
- Frescoes in St. Clement, Catalonia; St. Panteleimon, Nerezi, North Macedonia

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the significance of Baghdad and Arab interest in pre-Islamic learning
- Give examples of architectural traditions and connections in Islamic art and architecture from across North Africa, the Middle East, and the Al-Andalus
- Compare how the hypostyle and four-iwan mosques, Castillian synagogues, and Romanesque pilgrimage churches accommodated their respective congregations' needs
- Identify the parts of a Romanesque portal and compare differences in representation between the tympana of Conques and Moissac
- Compare the styles and content of the Utrecht, Edwine, and Paris Psalters
- Outline Byzantine arguments for and against the use of religious images
- Compare a depiction of the emperor in a Middle Byzantine mosaic to the one in San Vitale
- Describe how Middle Byzantine art represents Christ and/or figures of authority

Want to Know More?

- Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, Durham Cathedral, for Smarthistory
- Sr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, Theotokos mosaic, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, for Smarthistory
- Sarah J Biggs, Twelfth-Century Girl Power, for Medieval Manuscripts Blog
- Melissa Salpietra, Physics of Stone Arches, for PBS NOVA (interactive arch-building; requires Flash)
- Dr. Ariel Fein, The Cappella Palatina, for Smarthistory
- The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261, for the Met Museum
- Matthieu Aikins, How One Looted Artifact Tells the Story of Modern Afghanistan, for *The New York Times* (listen to or read the story using the link)
- Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout, Middle Byzantine church architecture, for Smarthistory
- Alex Duval Smith, Timbuktu's Djinguereber mosque: a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 5, for *The Guardian*
- Jerrilynn Denise Dodds (ed.), Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain, for the Met Museum

- The Norman Sicily Project, Resources for the Study of the Norman State in Sicily, 1061-1194
- Once Upon a Time in the Alhambra: The Thousand and One Stories of the Red Castle, for Google Arts & Culture
- Christiane Gruber, The Koran does not Forbid Images of the Prophet, for *Newsweek*
- Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, A Taste for Textiles: Designing Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid Interiors, for Dumbarton Oaks
- The Great Mosque of Isfahan, for MIT's Archnet
- The Utrecht Psalter, with explanations of the imagery, for Utrecht University
- Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout, Regional variations in Middle Byzantine Architecture, for Smarthistory

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14.1: Medieval Islam Before the Mongols

Arts of the Islamic world: The medieval period

by Glenna Barlow

For many, the Muslim world in the medieval period (900-1300) means the crusades. While this era was marked, in part, by military struggle, it is also overwhelmingly a period of peaceable exchanges of goods and ideas between West and East. Both the Christian and Islamic civilizations underwent great transformations and internal struggles during these years. In the Islamic world, dynasties fractured and began to develop distinctive styles of art. For the first time, disparate Islamic states existed at the same time. And although the Abbasid caliphate did not fully dissolve until 1258, other dynasties began to form, even before its end.

Fatimid (909-1171)



Figure **14.1.1**: The Fatimid Caliphate at its peak, c. 969. (Map via Smarthistory)

In the tenth century, the Fatimid dynasty emerged and posed a threat to the rule of the Abbasids. The Fatimid rulers, part of the Shi'ia faction, took their name from Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, from whom they claimed to be descended. The Sunnis, on the other hand, had previously pledged their alliance to Mu'awiya, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. At the height of their power, the Fatimids claimed lands from present-day Algeria to Syria. They conquered Egypt in 969 and founded the city of Cairo as their capital.

The Fatimid rulers expanded the power of the caliph and emphasized the importance of palace architecture. Mosques too were commissioned by royalty and every aspect of their decoration was of the highest caliber, from expertly-carved wooden minbars (where the spiritual leader guides prayers inside the mosque) to handcrafted metal lamps.

The wealth of the Fatimid court led to a general bourgeoning of the craft trade even outside of the religious context. Centers near Cairo became well known for ceramics, glass, metal, wood, and especially for lucrative textile production. The style of ornament developed as well, and artisans began to experiment with different forms of abstracted vegetal ornament and human figures.

This period is often called the Islamic renaissance, for its booming trade in decorative objects as well as the high quality of its artwork.

Saljuq (1040-1157/1081-1307)



Figure **14.1.2**: The Saljuq Empire in 1092. (Map via Smarthistory)

The Saljuq rulers were of Central Asian Turkic origin. Once they assumed power after 1040, the Seljuqs introduced Islam to places it had not been heretofore. The Seljuqs of Rum (referring to Rome) ruled much of Anatolia, what is now Turkey (between 1040 and 1157), while the Seljuqs of present-day Iran controlled the rest of the empire (from 1081 to 1307).

The Saljuqs of Iran were great supporters of education and the arts and they founded a number of important madrasas (schools) during their brief reign. The congregational mosques they erected began using a four-iwan plan: these incorporate four immense doorways (iwans) in the center of each wall of a courtyard.



Figure **14.1.3**: Mihrab (prayer niche), Konya, Turkey, c. 1270. Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany. (Image via Smarthistory) Observe the intricate and detailed craftsmanship here in this mihrab.

The art of the Anatolian Saljuqs looks quite different, perhaps explaining why it is often labeled as a distinct sultanate. The inhabitants of this newly conquered land in Anatolia included members of various religions (largely Buddhists and Shamen), other heritages, and the Byzantine and Armenian Christian traditions. Saljuq projects often drew from these existing indigenous traditions—just as had been the case with the earliest Islamic buildings. Building materials included stone, brick, and wood, and there existed a widespread representation of animals and figures (some human) that had all but disappeared from architecture elsewhere in Islamic-ruled lands. The craftsmen here made great strides in the area of woodcarving, combining the elaborate scrolling and geometric forms typical of the Arabic aesthetic with wood, a medium indigenous to Turkey—and rarer in the desert climate of the Middle East.

Mamluk (1250-1517)

The name ‘Mamluk’, like many names, was given by later historians. The word itself means ‘owned’ in Arabic. It refers to the Turkic slaves who served as soldiers for the Ayyubid sultanate before revolting and rising to power. The Mamluks ruled over key lands in the Middle East, including Mecca and Medina. Their capital at Cairo became the artistic and economic center of the Islamic world at this time.



Figure **14.1.4**: Mosque lamp, Syria, 13th-14th century. Brooklyn Museum, New York. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY 3.0)

The period saw a great production of art and architecture, particularly those commissioned by the reigning sultans. Patronizing the arts and creating monumental structures was a way for leaders to display their wealth and make their power visible within the landscape of the city. The Mamluks constructed countless mosques, madrasas and mausolea that were lavishly furnished and decorated. Mamluk decorative objects, particularly glasswork, became renowned throughout the Mediterranean (see this mosque lamp in Figure **14.1.4**, for instance). The empire benefited from the trade of these goods economically and culturally, as Mamluk craftsmen began to incorporate elements gleaned from contact with other groups. The growing prevalence of trade with China and exposure to Chinese goods, for instance, led to the Mamluk production of blue and white ceramics, an imitation of porcelain typical of the Far East.

The Mamluk sultanate was generally prosperous, in part supported by pilgrims to Mecca and Medina as well as a flourishing textile market, but in 1517 the Mamluk sultanate was overtaken and absorbed into the growing Ottoman empire.

Arts of the Abbasid Caliphate

by Dr. Beatrice Leal

The Abbasid period started with a revolution. Caliphs of the earlier Umayyad dynasty had ruled for almost a hundred years after they assumed power in 661 (after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE), and over this time discontent gradually built up against them, both from rival elites and from large sections of the general population. After three years of open fighting the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, was assassinated in 750. This is when the Abbasid caliphate began.

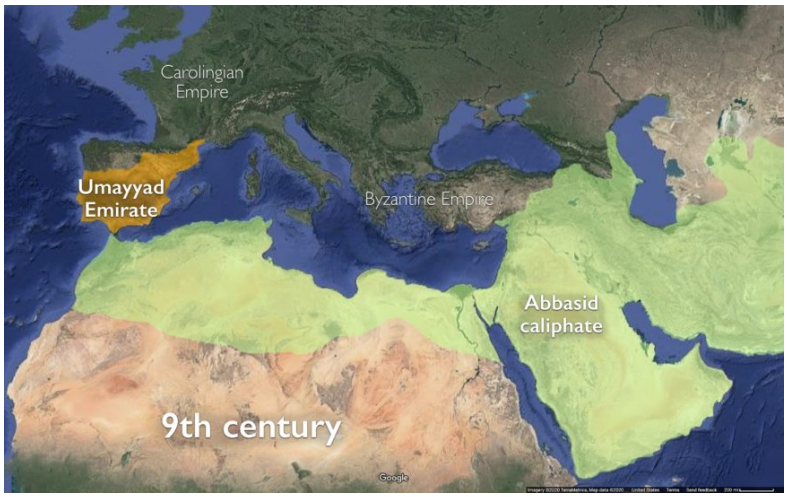


Figure **14.1.5**: Map of the Mediterranean and west Asia in the 9th century. (Map via Smarthistory)

The end of the Abbasid era is harder to define. Though territory and power were lost to various competing dynasties from the late 10th century, there were still rulers calling themselves Abbasid caliphs in the 1200s. This essay will focus on the high point of their

power—the late 8th to 10th centuries—and will look at three aspects: cities, technologies, and books.



Figure **14.1.6**: A map of the Abbasid Caliphate around 850 CE, with cities circled in red that are discussed in this essay. (Map: Cattette, CC BY 4.0)

Cities

After the revolt in 750, the Abbasids moved the capital from Damascus in Syria, where the Umayyads had been based, to Kufa in Iraq. Then, in 762 the caliph al-Mansur founded a new imperial city on the banks of the Tigris—*Madinat al-Salam* or the City of Peace, also known as Baghdad.

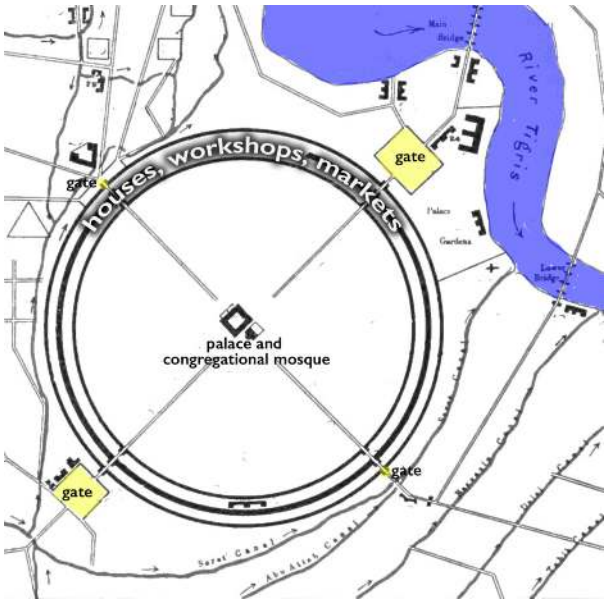


Figure **14.1.7**: Round City of Baghdad in the time of Mansur, Abbasid caliphate, adapted from Guy Le Strange, *Baghdad During the Abbasid Caliphate from Contemporary Arabic and Persian Sources*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Map II, 1900. (Image: public domain, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.1.8**: Aerial view of Gur. (Image: © Google, via Smarthistory)

The city was carefully planned to express perfection and order, as a display of the qualities of the new regime; it was circular in plan, with four main gates, one at each compass point, similar to the 3rd-century Sasanian city of Gur, whose outlines can still be seen in the fields around Firuzabad in Iran. The center of Baghdad was left largely open around the palace and congregational mosque, while the houses, workshops, and markets were arranged in a ring inside the walls.



Figure **14.1.9**: Khem Karan, view of the Siege of Baghdad in 1258, folio from an illuminated manuscript of the History of Genghis Khan, Lahore, Punjab province, Pakistan, 1596. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 34.9 x 22.5 cm. Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri. (Photo: Saint Louis Art Museum, public domain) The Siege of Baghdad in 1258 is pictured on this illuminated manuscript page.

No remains of the round city have survived, partly due to the siege and assault on the city by the Ilkhanid Mongol army in 1258 (see Figure **14.1.9**), and partly due to the construction of the modern city on top of the older structures, but we know something of its appearance from medieval descriptions. Some were written by authors born in Baghdad, such as al-Ya'qubi and al-Katib al-Baghdadi, and some by those who had moved there, attracted by the facilities for scholars, such as al-Jahiz, who reported that:

> *I have seen the great cities . . . in the districts of Syria, in Bilad al-Rum and in other provinces, but I have never seen a city of greater height, more perfect circularity, more endowed with superior merits or possessing more spacious gates or more perfect defenses than the [Baghdad] . . . of Abu Jafar al-Mansur.Description by al-Jahiz, reported in the Ta'rikh Baghdad (History of Baghdad) by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi [1]*

Among the treasures in the palace was an automata in the shape of a tree made of gold and silver, whose branches would move as if swaying in the wind, while the model birds sitting on them would sing. [2] One of the aims of such luxury was to advertise the wealth and strength of the Abbasid caliphate to rival powers, such as the Byzantine Empire based in Constantinople—and in this the patrons were successful. After hearing an ambassador's report of the palace and its furnishings, the mid-9th-century, Byzantine

emperor Theophilus was so impressed that he commissioned one intended to imitate it, although the site is not known with certainty today.



Figure **14.1.10**: Baghdad Gate, Raqqa, Syria. (Photo: Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Another early Abbasid project was the twin city of Raqqa-Rafiqa in Syria (see Figure **14.1.10**). Raqqa had existed for centuries, and in 770 al-Mansur ordered the construction of a new and more defensible settlement, Rafiqa, less than half a mile away, as part of a larger project of creating fortified sites near the border with Byzantium. The new part of the town, Rafiqa (Raqqa and Rafiqa eventually merged as one urban center) was given a substantial wall of brick, nearly three miles long, with monumental entrance gates.

In the 780s caliph Harun al-Rashid chose Raqqa-Rafiqa as his capital, and the architecture of the twinned towns took on a more elegant aspect, with enhanced decorative as well as defensive features. Archaeologists have discovered more than twenty palaces, mostly outside the walled enclosure, dating to the reigns of Harun and his son al-Mu'tasim.



Figure **14.1.11**: Capital with Leaves, carved in relief, made in Syria, probably Raqqa, late 8th century. Alabaster, gypsum, 28.6 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

The capital shown in Figure **14.1.11** comes from one of these palaces. It has a stylized version of an acanthus-leaf design that had been popular throughout late antiquity; in this reimagined form, the leaves also form abstract patterns. Other pieces of carved stone and molded stucco were found with similar designs, showing that the decor of the late 8th-century palaces was carefully coordinated by skilled artisans.



Figure **14.1.12**: Great Mosque of Samarra, 9th century, Iraq. (Photo: Taisir Mahdi, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Samarra, founded by the caliph al-Mu'tasim in 836, was different from either of the earlier sites. Although it was the size of a city, covering more than twenty square miles, it was devoted to the Abbasid court, with palaces, pavilions, mosques, monumental avenues, barracks, gardens, pools, and three horse-racing tracks. There were also areas of more modest housing, but the heart of Samarra was ceremonial (see Figure **14.1.12**). Despite the huge outlay of resources, the site was fully occupied for less than sixty years. The 860s saw significant political instability at Samarra caused by competing military factions in the caliphal guard, and at the death of caliph al-Mu'tamid in 892, the court moved back to Baghdad.



Figure **14.1.13**: Wall painting, detail of two heads, Abbasid caliphate, Dar al-Khilafa, Samarra, Iraq, 9th century. Plaster and pigment. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The fragments of painting shown in Figure **14.1.13** come from the Dar al-Khilafa, the largest of the palaces. Its walls were covered with a mixture of figural frescos, stucco reliefs, ceramic tiles, and marble panels, and some of the floors were tiled with glass (see Figure **14.1.14**). These buildings were showcases of all the precious materials that the patrons possessed (some local, others acquired from afar), and all the arts of the skilled workers they could command.



Figure **14.1.14**: Tile fragments, Abbasid caliphate, excavated in Samarra, Iraq, 9th century. Millefiori glass. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Technologies

The grandeur of Samarra drew on the expertise of craftspeople from across the Islamic world, who had been invited or conscripted to the caliphal workshops. Raqqa-Rafiqa also had industrial areas, especially for the production of glass and ceramics. Artisans around the Abbasid courts developed new methods of production, for instance inventing recipes for glass which used plant-ash instead of natron salt, so that production was no longer restricted to areas with natural deposits of the salt.



Figure **14.1.15**: Bowl, Abbasid caliphate, Iraq, 9th-10th century. Tin-glazed earthenware with designs painted in cobalt blue, 21.5 cm diameter. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Potters experimented with glazes, some of them trying to imitate the precious porcelain vessels from China, which were imported to the caliphate in increasing quantities from the early 9th century, along sea trade routes via Indonesia and India. The Abbasid potters did not have the materials needed to produce porcelain, but succeeded in inventing a white tin-based glaze, as on the bowl shown in Figure **14.1.15**. They also developed iridescent luster glazes, a technique that would go on to change ceramic production not only in the Middle East but also in medieval Europe. Although they would have been valued, lusterware plates and bowls were probably not restricted to the very rich, and were made in large quantities for sale in urban markets.



Figure **14.1.16**: Panel in the 'Beveled Style,' Samarra, Iraq, 9th–10th centuries. Stucco. Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Germany. (Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Smarthistory)

Artisans working in various materials in this period developed a new aesthetic of swirling patterns, known today as the beveled style. It was first used in the palaces of Samarra, particularly for stucco wall coverings, and it was also often used for carved wood and stone (see Figure **14.1.16**).



Figure **14.1.17**: Bowl decorated in the 'Beveled Style,' made in present-day Uzbekistan, Samarqand, 10th century. Earthenware, white slip with polychrome slip decoration under transparent glaze, 26.7 cm diameter. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The bowl shown in Figure **14.1.17** is painted with a two-dimensional variant. It was made in the 10th century in Samarkand, modern Uzbekistan, which was part of the Abbasid caliphate at that time. Samarkand was also the site of the first Islamic mill for paper-making, another technology which, like porcelain, originated in China, and which changed the face of book production as paper replaced parchment and papyrus over the following centuries.

Books

Before the Islamic conquests, large parts of the caliphate belonged to the Byzantine Empire, where Greek was the dominant language, and although the language of government was changed to Arabic in the early 8th century, Greek continued to be widely spoken and written. Many Muslim patrons took an interest in classical literature—continuing a long history of interaction between Arabic and Greco-Roman cultures—and if not bilingual themselves, they commissioned translations. The trend started in the Umayyad period, for example caliph Hisham is said to have enjoyed Arabic translations of tales of Alexander the Great. Under the Abbasids there was an even greater interest in the classics, and works of philosophy, mythology, astronomy, medicine, and others were translated.



Figure **14.1.18**: Yahya ibn Mahmoud al-Wasiti, "Scholars in library of the House of Wisdom," Al-Makamat lil-Hariri, 1237. Codex Parisinus Arabus 5847, fol. 5v; Bibliothequè nationale de France. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The library known as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad (*bayt al-hikmah*, destroyed during the Mongol siege in 1258) was a major center for this project, and there scholars from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds produced Arabic editions of Syriac, Aramiac, Hebrew, Pahlavi, and Sanskrit texts. The image in Figure **14.1.18** shows an idealized version of the library, with scholars engaged in debate below—their hand gestures show that it is a lively discussion—and the collected works of the institution piled up above them.



Figure **14.1.19**: The illustration shows a doctor making a medicine from honey, with a patient drinking the result at top-left. “Preparing Medicine from Honey”, from a Dispersed Manuscript of an Arabic Translation of *De Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, dated A.H. 621/1224 CE. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 31.4 x 22.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

The image in Figure **14.1.19** comes from one of the many works translated in medieval Baghdad. It is an Arabic version of a 1st-century CE Greek medical work by Dioscorides, now generally known by its Latin name, *De Materia Medica*. The translation was first made in the 9th century by two Christian scholars, Stephanos ibn Basilos and Hunayn ibn Ishaq, and this specific manuscript was made in the 13th century, also in Baghdad. The illustration in Figure **14.1.19** shows a doctor making a medicine from honey, with a patient drinking the resulting medicine at top-left.

Abbasid scholarship was not limited to copying earlier works; for instance astronomers working for caliph al-Ma'mun in the 830s calculated the circumference of the earth, improving on ancient measurements, and established accurate figures for the phenomenon known as the precession of the equinoxes.



Figure **14.1.20**: Amajur Qur'an, before 9th century CE (264 AH). Pigment and ink on parchment, 12.3 x 18.9 cm. MS Add.1116, Cambridge University Library, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

There were also developments in the format of Qur'anic manuscripts. Great emphasis was placed on the beautiful proportions of calligraphy, and a new form of script became popular; it is sometimes called Kufic, after the city of Kufa, but it was widely used across the Abbasid caliphate. Symbols for marking verses or groups of verses became more common during the 9th and 10th centuries, usually circular designs ornamented with loops, swirls or petals, and in more expensive manuscripts they were illuminated in gold, as in Figure **14.1.20**.

The Qur'an shown Figure **14.1.20** was made for Amajur, Abbasid governor of Damascus in the 870s, and he donated it to a mosque in the city of Tyre in Lebanon. The script does not include all the diacritical marks used in written Arabic today, and along with the elegantly stylized letter shapes and the gilded verse marker, the effect is to make this a work of visual art just as much as a piece of text.

Artistic legacies

The artistic legacies of the Abbasid caliphate are varied. Some of the monuments described in this essay were short lived; impressive as they were, the palaces of Samarra barely lasted for two generations. But many visual and technological innovations of the period, from lusterware ceramics to "Kufic" script to the engagement with classical scientific literature, continued to be significant components of Islamic culture—and influences on surrounding cultures—for centuries to come.

Notes:

[1] Description by the author al-Jahiz (776–869) reported in the *Ta'rikh Baghdad* (*History of Baghdad*) by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (1002–71); quoted in Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of 'Abbasid Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 167.

[2] Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Ta'rikh Baghdad* (*History of Baghdad*); quoted in Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 159).

The Vibrant Visual Cultures of the Islamic West, continued

by Dr. Sahahat Adil

Competing Identities

After the fall of the Umayyads of al-Andalus, Iberia saw the rise of Taifa/Party Kingdoms. These kingdoms arose in the eleventh century in the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Umayyad state in Córdoba. These rival kingdoms were independently governed city-states and often competed with one another militarily and in terms of cultural production. One of these city-states was located in Saragossa, and its palace is a stunning example of the artistic developments of Islamic visual culture on the Iberian Peninsula.



Figure 14.1.21: North portico, La Aljafería, Saragossa, Spain. (Photo: EmDee, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Smarthistory)



Figure 14.1.22: Detail of *yesería*, La Aljafería, Saragossa, Spain. (Photo: Luis Rogelio HM, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Smarthistory)

The Aljafería Palace has numerous arches, much like the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba and Madinat al-Zahra, but the decorative elements are striking and represent a notable departure from earlier centuries (see Figures 14.1.21 and 14.1.22). For example, stucco, which is known as *yesería*, appears as complex vegetal and floral motifs. Stucco was less commonly found in the visual culture of the Umayyads of the Islamic West, though the motifs themselves were commonplace.

Stucco decoration was also an integral part of the artistic toolkit of the Mudéjar populations (Muslims living under Christian rule on the Iberian Peninsula), and these decorations reached their pinnacle under the Nasrids. Many examples of these stucco decorations can also be found at the Alhambra.

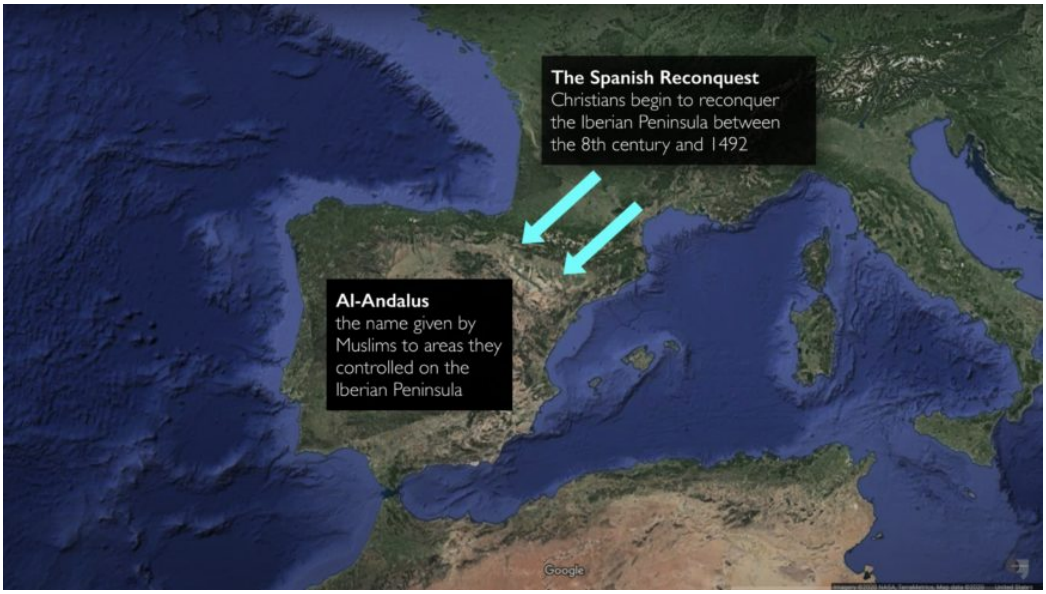


Figure 14.1.23: Spanish (Christian) reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from Muslim control. (Image via Smarthistory)

Despite the early strength of Islamic rule on the Iberian Peninsula, the declaration of a caliphate, the tolerance of limited multiculturalism—within a religious and social hierarchy—and the pressure of the Reconquista from the Catholic north led to a reversal of fortune for the Muslims of al-Andalus.



Figure **14.1.24**: Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Granada, Spain, 1354-1391. (Photo: JQuesada jua, CC BY-SA 3.0 ES, via Smarthistory)

Before the Reconquista was completed in 1492, two powerful dynasties emerged in Morocco that served as a countervailing force against the military pressure exerted by Christians in the north. The Almoravids and the Almohads, each eventually conquered parts of the Iberian Peninsula and delayed the Christian reconquest. The visual cultures of these dynasties, each originating in Morocco, are worth keeping in mind since they both constructed architectural monuments in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula—creating a cohesive architectural heritage spanning the Strait of Gibraltar.



Figure **14.1.25**: Minaret of the Tin Mal Mosque, Morocco. (Photo: Migeo53, CC BY-SA 4.0)

One Almohad monument worth considering is a mosque called Tin Mal, situated in the High Atlas Mountains. The minaret of the mosque is striking, as it takes a quadrangular form as opposed to a rounded one, echoing other minarets and towers erected by the Almohad dynasty.



Figure **14.1.26**: Tin Mal Mosque, Morocco. (Photo: Alexander Leisser, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Although the interior features vegetal patterns, the exterior façade of the mosque is generally devoid of decorative features, reflecting the sobriety of many monuments produced by the Almohads due to their ideological notions of religious and social purification.



Figure **14.1.27**: Tower/Minaret (Giralda), Seville Cathedral, Seville, Spain. (Photo: Howard Lifshitz, CC BY 2.0, via Smarthistory)

Two minarets, La Giralda in Seville (part of the Great Mosque of Seville under the Almohads) and the tower of the Qutubiyya Mosque (also spelled Koutoubiya) in Marrakesh, were both constructed under the Almohads. Both are tall rectangular towers strikingly similar to their counterpart at Tin Mal. The surface decoration found on La Giralda is intricate and worth observing, particularly because much of it has survived since the original construction.

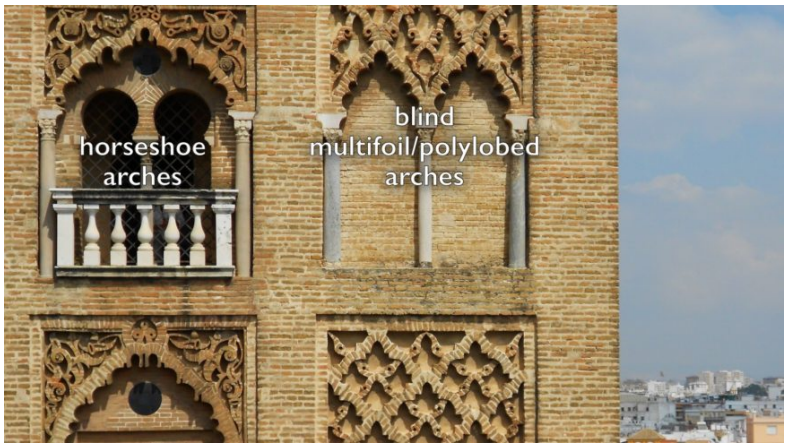


Figure **14.1.28**: Multifoil/polylobed arches, Tower (Giralda), Seville Cathedral, Seville, Spain. (Photo: Naroa, CC BY-NC 2.0)

This surface poses a striking visual contrast between smooth and uninterrupted stone in much of the lower part of the tower and blind multifoil/polylobed arches as well as horseshoe arches, some of which are set on marble columns. Meanwhile, the minaret of the Qutubiyya features similar components, including the blind arches.



Figure **14.1.29**: Qutubiyya (Koutoubiya) Mosque, Marrakesh, Morocco. (Photo: Daniel Csörföly, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Both of these minarets reflect the continuity in visual culture across the Strait of Gibraltar. At the same time, they also reflect the subsequent histories of each region. While La Giralda was converted into a bell tower for Seville's cathedral after the Reconquest, the tower at the Qutubiyya Mosque in Marrakesh remains a minaret for a vibrant central mosque to this day. While bells toll from La Giralda, the Islamic call to prayer can be heard from the Qutubiyya's minaret. While time and historical circumstance has altered the function of one of these towers, their shared visual heritage remains unmistakable.



Figure **14.1.30**: Ten-dinar coin, 1248–66. Numismatic Museum of the al-Maghreb Bank, Rabat, Morocco. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Almohad coins, also known as *masmudia*, are another important art form of medieval Iberia. Like pyxides, they were desirable outside of their Islamic context and also circulated in Christian-controlled northern Iberia, likely for reasons of prestige. A ten-dinar coin made in Morocco was modified so that it could be worn as jewelry (see Figure **14.1.30**). One side of the coin features the Islamic declaration of faith (*basmala*) as well as the name of the prince under whom the coin was issued and that of his father, while the other side of the coin states the names of important Almohad leaders.

The use of a simple square, containing and surrounded by calligraphy, and minimal additional embellishment align with the strict religious outlook and vision of the Almohads. The Almohads tried to streamline the practice of Islam on the Iberian Peninsula, and their political actions, texts, and visual culture testify to this fact.



Figure **14.1.31**: Horseshoe-arched colonnade, San Miguel de Escalada, Spain, 10th century. (Photo: David Perez, CC BY 3.0)

Locating Religious Diversity

In addition to the many Muslims who lived in the Iberian Peninsula after its conquest in the early eighth century, Christians and Jews made important contributions to the development of the art and architecture of the Peninsula. San Miguel de Escalada, a Christian monastery in northern Iberia, was constructed in the tenth century by monks who fled Córdoba after the Islamic conquest of the city (see Figure **14.1.31**). Although San Miguel de Escalada was constructed in a region controlled by Christians, it is considered Mozarabic because the monks responsible for its reconstruction had come from Córdoba. Elements of the monastery clearly reflect aspects of the Islamic art of al-Andalus, even though this was explicitly constructed as a Christian religious space. For example, the monastery's interior and exterior feature rows of horseshoe arches, much like those at Madinat al-Zahra. Yet its interior structure features elements such as an apse and a nave, which are central components of Christian church architecture in the Iberian Peninsula and more broadly. Many of the columns found on this site are Roman spolia, which demonstrates the incorporation of earlier visual heritage.



Figure 14.1.32: Textile fragment from the Tomb of Don Felipe, second half 13th century, from Palencia, Spain, silk, linen, metal-wrapped thread; taqueté, 5 1/8" x 8 1/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Artistic patronage could transcend religious and/or cultural lines. A textile fragment found buried in a tomb of Don Felipe Infante (who died in 1274 and was son of Ferdinand II and brother of Alfonso X, both thirteenth-century Christian kings of Castile) features floral patterns such as rosettes and Arabic writing in a calligraphic script known as kufic. Like the coin discussed earlier, this textile fragment demonstrates how artistic styles and language were valued across religious and cultural lines, even during, and maybe as a result of, socio-political tensions.



Figure 14.1.33: Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue, Toledo, Spain, c. 1360. (Photo: Antonio.velez, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Jewish communities were also integral to the diverse culture of al-Andalus. The Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (renamed Santa María la Blanca when it was converted into a church) and the synagogue of El Tránsito in the city of Toledo both demonstrate this diversity beautifully. While the former was constructed in the twelfth century during the Almohad era, the latter was constructed in the fourteenth century after the Reconquista had already brought Toledo under the rule of Catholics, in this case under Peter of Castile, who was known as Peter the Cruel.



Figure **14.1.34**: Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (now Santa María la Blanca), Toledo, Spain, first built 1180. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Both synagogues feature stucco, which was now a prominent building and decorative material in architectural structures throughout the region, regardless of religious or cultural affiliation. They also consist of multiple naves divided by arches. The Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (now more commonly known by the church's name) was built by Mudéjar craftsmen, who used *yesería* decoration heavily. Like many mosques, synagogues were also often converted to churches after the Reconquista.

The Castilian synagogues (such as Santa María la Blanca) of the thirteenth century tend to be similar to mosques architecturally. Jews who left al-Andalus and moved north likely brought these building traditions with them. This synagogue has five naves, and the central nave is slightly wider than the other four. A unique feature of the synagogue was likely the Hekhál—also known as the Torah ark to house the scrolls of the Torah—which is unfortunately no longer extant. In contrast, El Tránsito follows a distinct pattern of organization, featuring a large open space rather than space divided by naves. This synagogue combines elements from both Islamic and Christian artistic traditions, such as vegetal patterns from the former and a coat of arms from the latter (this coat of arms was attributed to the Halevi family, an important Jewish family of Iberia).

In spite of the rich legacy of Jews on the Iberian Peninsula, their prospects turned grim as the centuries progressed with political enactments, forced conversions, and massacres characterizing the Jewish experience in Iberia in the fourteenth century.



Figure **14.1.35**: Alhambra, Granada, Spain. (Photo: Ajay Suresh, CC BY 2.0)

Visual Culture in an Era of Constriction

The Nasrids were the last Islamic dynasty in al-Andalus. While the Alhambra is the most well-known structure of this dynasty, domestic spaces of a less public nature reveal how people, just below the highest social classes, lived their day-to-day lives. Daily routines can be imagined in a wholly different way through these somewhat more modest domestic spaces.



Figure **14.1.36**: Zafra House in the Albaycín neighborhood, Granada, Spain. (Photo: Øyvind Holmstad, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Albaycín neighborhood in Granada, which overlooks the Alhambra, demonstrates how elite classes in al-Andalus lived. In particular, the Zafra House in Albaycín has a central courtyard that is surrounded by rooms and consists of three floors. Each side of the patio on the ground floor has a portico, and each portico has marble columns and capitals with arches. In addition to the ground floor, there are two additional galleries above the porticos on the ground floor that span the same length as the porticos. This layered internal space is revealed to visitors upon entry without the slightest hint of this complexity revealed from the external façade. This outward homogeneity, in a way, maintained a heightened sense of privacy about how individuals carried on their daily lives. The external plainness, in contrast with the internal complexity in terms of organization, is an element of domestic architecture from many other parts of the Islamic world and demonstrates the extent of architectural continuities across geographies that were inspired by a shared religious tradition and social ethos.

The Nasrids ruled during a period of increasing constriction for the Muslims and Jews of Iberia. By the thirteenth century, when the Nasrids came to power in southern Iberia, the borders of al-Andalus looked very different from the early centuries when Islamic power extended into the northernmost reaches of the Iberian Peninsula. The Reconquista had been driving southward, strengthened by alliances among Catholic monarchs as well as the support of the papacy in light of the broader framework of the Crusades. During the Nasrids' rule, all that remained of al-Andalus was the Kingdom of Granada. Not only did the Reconquista take lands that had been under Islamic rule for hundreds of years, but it also sought to suppress non-Catholic identities through inquisitorial tribunals (first established in 1487 under Ferdinand and Isabel), political decrees, and violence, which were directed towards Muslims, Jews, and anyone outside the fold of mainstream Catholicism (as defined by Spain's religious and political leadership and also, more broadly, the papacy in Rome under the backdrop of the Crusades).



Figure 14.1.37: Deep dish, made in probably Manises, Valencia, Spain,c. 1430. Tin-glazed earthenware, 6 x 45.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Despite these socio-political constraints, visual culture continued to prosper. Lusterware, a type of pottery that earns its name from its lustrous sheen, was common at this time. Artists who produce lusterware finish their pieces with the application of metallic glazes, a technique refined in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. The oxidation of these glazes results in a gorgeous iridescence. A deep dish from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shows a palm tree in the middle of the plate with Arabic calligraphy surrounding it. Lusterware was exported throughout Iberia and abroad. People continued to value what they could see, hold, and have, despite political dynamics. Moriscos were actively involved in the production of lusterware on the Iberian Peninsula, and evidence of lusterware from Iberia in the Americas speaks to the movement of exiled populations across the Atlantic.

These buildings and works of art demonstrate a remarkable degree of cultural exchange and interaction that flourished in the western Mediterranean in the medieval era. Political realities seldom matched up with the patronage and production of art and architecture. Exchange and interaction did not stop on the coasts of Europe or Africa either, but rather flourished across the Strait of Gibraltar, a bridge that has long served to connect people, ideas, and objects. Even in contemporary times, artists and artisans continue to produce art inspired by the historical art of Islamic Iberia.

At the same time, the rich history of Iberia demonstrates that it was also equally complex and dark. While many individuals of Jewish background, for example, rose to high professional positions, complete and utter equality was an unrealized aspiration, given the value placed on religious hierarchy and stratification as articulated by the Pact of Umar (an early Islamic document). In its time, al-Andalus posed an example of the possibilities of religious tolerance, diversity, and coexistence, but it also showcased its limitations.

The Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm (the Church of Santa Cruz), Toledo

by DR. Razan Francis



Figure 14.1.38: Southwest façade, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, Toledo, Spain, 999-1000. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY 2.0)



Figure 14.1.39: Location of the mosque and gateway of Bāb al-Mardūm (Puerta Mayordomo). (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

On the northern fringes of Toledo, Spain, the small Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm tells a compelling story about the city's medieval period and its transition from Muslim to Christian hands. The mosque is located adjacent to one of Toledo's oldest city gates—Bāb al-Mardūm (Puerta Mayordomo)—which once gave access from the north to the city (today's neighborhood of San Nicolás). The mosque is one of the few surviving structures from the Islamic period in al-Andalus. Its later conversion to a church, at a time of Christian-Muslim conflict, illustrates how Toledo's visual culture transcended the religious differences of its Jewish, Christian, and Muslim residents.

Toledo: brief background

Muslims invaded the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal today) in 711 CE, and ruled Toledo until its takeover in 1085 by the Christian army of the king of Castile, Alfonso VI. Prior to the Muslim conquest of the city, Toledo had been the capital of the Visigothic kingdom since the fifth century; before that it was under Roman rule. The Muslim conquest of the city was part of an unprecedented expansion of the Umayyad caliphate, centered in Damascus (Syria), which in 711 reached the land of Sindh (southeastern Pakistan today) in the East, and North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula in the West. After the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids in 750, a survivor of the Umayyad dynasty—'Abd al Rahman I—escaped and reached the Iberian Peninsula. There, he established at Córdoba a Muslim state (emirate), later declared a caliphate in 929. The Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm was built in the last years of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus (which fell in 1031), when Toledo was the center of its northern dominions.



Figure **14.1.40**: Inscription, Southwest façade, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999-1000. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY 2.0)

Inscription, patron, and builder

Importantly, the mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm was one of many private institutions erected by elite, wealthy Muslims—unlike large congregational, or Friday, mosques that were commissioned by the state. It probably functioned as a small oratory that also promoted learning, and received local and visiting scholars and students. In the Islamic world, a mosque functioned both as a place for worship as well as learning; scholars often sat in a designated space in the mosque, where students could find them.

Before entering this small mosque, a visitor would have seen a Kufic inscription on the upper frieze of its southwest façade. The inscription informs the viewer about the mosque's patron, builder, and year of completion before they even enter the space:

> *In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful, Aḥmad ibn Ḥadīdī caused this mosque to be built, with his own funds, hoping through this to receive eternal compensation from God. It was completed with the aid of God, under the direction of the architect Musa ibn 'Alī, and of Sa'āda, concluding in [the month of] Muharram of the year three hundred and ninety [999/1000].*

As the Andalusī historians Ibn Bassām (d. 1147) and Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1347) report, the patron, Ibn Ḥadīdī belonged to one of Toledo's most influential families; they served as judges and ministers under Toledo's rulers (the Dh'ul-Nūnids).

Plan, spatial arrangement, and façades



Figure **14.1.41**: Cut out of the domes of the *maqsura* of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (created by D. Antonio Almagro Gorbea, via Smarthistory)

Despite its small size, the mosque introduces a tight geometric plan and a novel spatial arrangement. The use of bricks to sculpt the façade through creating multiple brick planes, as if it is made of layers, is also a novelty. Once inside the space, it almost seems as if the architect converted the *maqsura* of the Great Mosque in Córdoba into a freestanding mosque (see Figure **14.1.41**).



Figure **14.1.42**: Plan (showing the nine domes on the bottom), section, and column details of the of Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, c. 1858. Drawing by Domingo Martinez Aparici in *Monumentos Arquitectónicos de España*, Madrid: Imprenta y Calcografía Nacional, 1856–1881. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The mosque comprises a stone foundation of rubblework that forms a base to its brick walls. Square in plan (8 x 8 meters; Figure **14.1.42**), it consists of nine equal square bays, demarcated by four central marble columns. The columns and their capitals are spolia, taken from a now-destroyed Toledan Visigothic church. The horseshoe arcades render this small oratory a miniature hypostyle hall.

This is certainly not the first incident where Muslims reappropriated spolia—in fact, we could look at the the 110 Visigothic and Roman marble columns used in the first phase of the Great Mosque of Córdoba or the Roman tombstones inserted at the base of the minaret of Seville's Great Mosque (now the Giralda of Seville Cathedral). Building with spolia speeded construction. Such incorporation, profusely practiced worldwide, may have symbolized acceptance of past authority and established continuity with the local heritage by preserving spolia's sacredness and charged history in the new architectural settings.

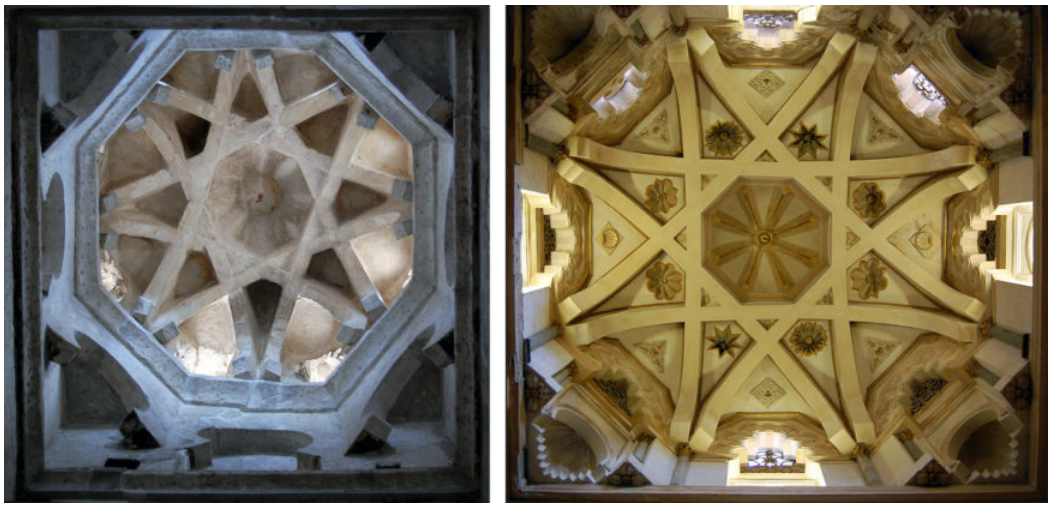


Figure **14.1.43**: Left: One of the domes, interior, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999-1000 (Photo: Manuel de Corselas, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Smarthistory); right: left dome, maqsura, Great Mosque of Cordoba (Photo: Manuel de Corselas, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Smarthistory)

Adding to the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm's richness, each of the nine square bays is surmounted by a soaring ribbed dome of a different vaulting design, evoking those covering the *maqsura* of the Great Mosque of Córdoba (see Figure **14.1.43**). Just as in the *maqsura* of Córdoba's Great Mosque, where this type of vaulting first appeared on the peninsula almost fifty years earlier (960s

CE), each square bay carries a multi-tiered set of lobed arches that rises high, and is surmounted by a dome of interlacing ribs. While only three such domes cover the *maqsura*, those of Bāb al-Mardūm replicate these three, and introduce six novel designs that nearly exhaust the whole potential of such vaulting. The most common design creates, through squinches, an octagonal base over the square bay. From this octagonal base, two sets of ribs rise either from the middle or the corner of the octagon, and extend to another, opposite side of the octagon. From this spatial interlacing of the ribs, a central, smaller geometric polygon is created, and is usually carved in the shape of a scalloped miniature dome. Showing remains of paint, the mosque's domes may have once been polychromatic (many colored).

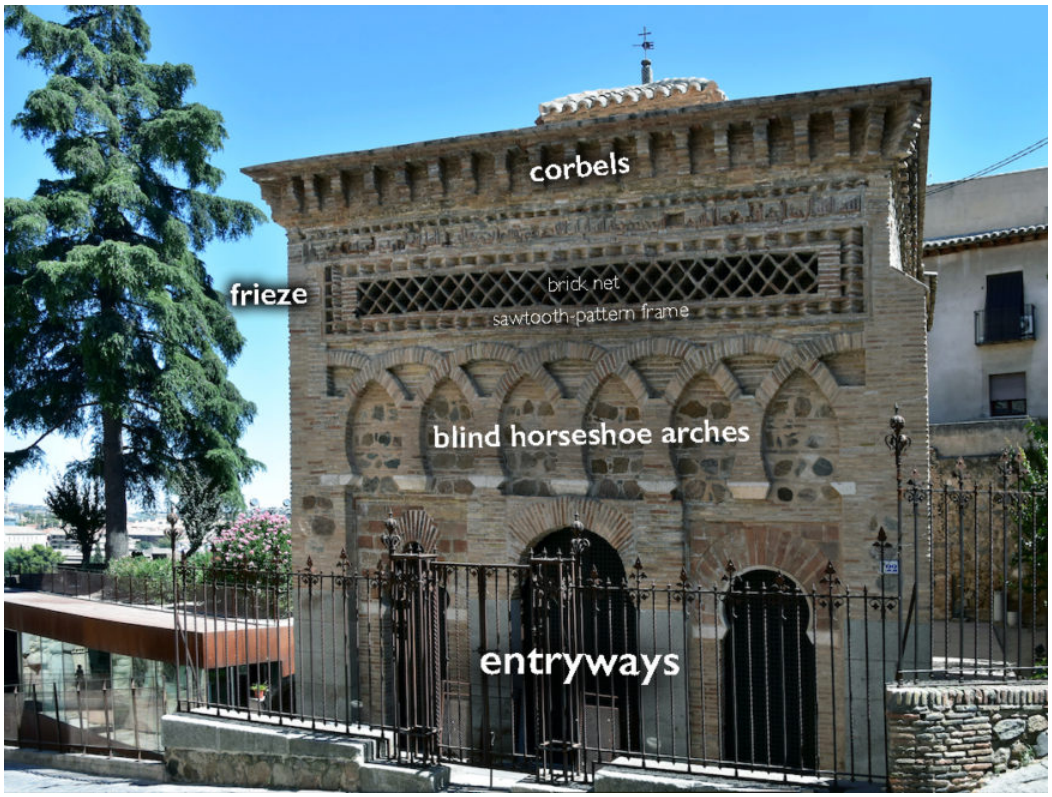


Figure **14.1.44**: Southwest façade, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999-1000. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY 2.0)

The mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm once stood as a pavilion-like structure open on three sides (now closed in), except for the mihrab on the southeast wall, where the mihrab niche facing Mecca used to be. The exterior facades are enlivened by the use of bricks in different thicknesses to subtly create recessed and projecting planes. The main southwest façade, overlooking the street has three different arched entryways: horseshoe, right; semicircular, center; and lobed, left (see Figure **14.1.44**). On top of these doors, a series of blind horseshoe arches project and interlace in a similar fashion to the interior screens marking the mihrab aisle and the maqsura of the Great Mosque of Córdoba.



Figure **14.1.45**: Detail of the sawtooth-frame, brick net, and corbels, southwest façade, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999-1000. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY 2.0)

Above these blind arches, brick units laid in an angle create a sawtooth-pattern frame that inscribes a diamond-like perforated brick net. This frieze is surmounted by the dedicatory inscription (see Figure **14.1.45**), whose angular letters are also created by laying the bricks in both horizontal and vertical alignments. Even the series of corbels that hold the roof, on top of the inscription, are produced by stacking and recessing the bricks.



Figure **14.1.46**: Diagram showing the transept and apse which were added later (after 1186) after conversion to a church, and the features of the northwest façade of the mosque. Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999-1000. (Photo: Richard Mortel, CC BY 2.0)

As one moves around the mosque, the northwest façade features, on its lower level, three recessed horseshoe arched entryways, each framed by a rounded semicircular arch (see Figure **14.1.46**).



Figure 14.1.47: Left: horseshoe window with alternating voussoirs framed by trilobed windows, northwest façade, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, 999/1000 C.E. (Photo: Ecelan, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Smarthistory); right: double arcades with alternating voussoirs, hypostyle hall, Great Mosque at Córdoba, Spain, begun 786 and enlarged during the 9th and 10th centuries (Photo: Michal Osmenda, CC BY 2.0, via Smarthistory)

The upper level consists of six horseshoe windows of alternating voussoirs of red brick and greyish stone, framed by projecting trilobed arches (see Figure 14.1.47). This use recalls, albeit on a smaller scale, the alternating brick and stone voussoirs of the interior double arcades of the Great Mosque of Córdoba. The mosque is a powerful demonstration of decorative brickwork. Its architectural reference to the visual expressions of the Great Mosque of Córdoba certainly reflected Ibn Ḥadīdī's prominence and his elevated status.

Conversion into the Church of Santa Cruz

When Alfonso VI seized Toledo from the Muslims in 1085, and made it the capital of the kingdom of Castile, Toledo's congregational mosque was almost immediately converted into a church (later destroyed to become a cathedral). While the congregational mosque stood at the center of the city, around which the city's markets and institutions were formed, the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, was on the city's edge.

For almost a hundred years after the conquest, the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm continued to serve the now much smaller Muslim community. Shifting the Muslim place of worship from the city's center to its periphery minimized Muslim visibility in the city, as the congregational mosque had constituted the place for Muslims' social gathering and the starting point of processions (such as funerals) to the different parts of the city.

In 1183, the mosque was given to the Order of the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem (also known as Hospitalers), a military religious order, founded in Jerusalem in the 11th century that came to Spain to fight Muslims. In 1186 the mosque was consecrated as a Christian chapel and dedicated to the Holy Cross (Santa Cruz), which was when, as most historians agree, the architectural conversion of the mosque took place (see Figure 14.1.48).

The conversion from mosque to church was easy due to the architectural adaptability of mosques—in al-Andalus, they were, after all, hypostyle structures (having a roof supported by several rows of pillars) with no images offensive to Christianity (the depiction of animate beings is prohibited in Islamic religious spaces). Conversion often only entailed a change to an East-West orientation and a "cleansing" ritual. Politically and theologically, conversion signaled Christianity as the new religious authority. Moreover, as most mosques either stood on the site of an earlier Visigothic church or were themselves converted churches, their (re)conversion into churches was seen as a legitimate act that returned a monument to its original Christian state. However, ecclesiastical and royal figures also admired mosques (and Islamic palaces) for their artistic refinement.



Figure **14.1.48**: Interior of the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, after it was transformed. The raised, semi-circular apse in the background was added after 1187. The original mosque dates to 999-1000. (Photo: José Luis Filpo Cabana, CC BY 3.0, via Smarthistory)

The conversion of Bāb al-Mardūm to a church entailed changing the mosque's orientation by introducing a shallow transept and semicircular apse, which was needed for the altar (see Figure **14.1.49**). Finally, fresco paintings were added to the interior.

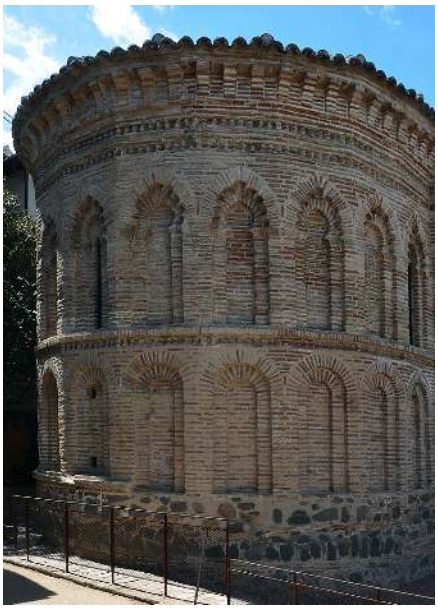


Figure **14.1.49**: Exterior of the apse, Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm, with late 12th century additions. (Photo: Jesusccastillo, CC BY 4.0, via Smarthistory)

Although the new addition has fewer openings, featuring mainly blind arcades, it could be considered a variation on the corresponding architectural elements of the earlier mosque. It seemingly continues the same brick construction technique to texture the façades. On its lower part, a semicircular blind arcade of recessed planes wraps around the apse area, while on the upper level, a multi-lobed pointed blind arcade frames a recessed keel-shaped arcade. The transept (crossing) portion, situated between the earlier mosque and the new apse, slightly projects almost at wall's width, signaling a rupture between the old and new, so as to remind the viewer of the existence of two phases: before and after the conquest.



Figure **14.1.50**: Christ Pantokrator in the apse of Interior of the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm after it was transformed. The apse in the background was added after 1187. The original mosque dates to 999-1000. The painted red-and-black inscription surrounding the apse area reads *al-yumn wa-l-iqbāl*, although it is fragmentary in sections today. (Photo: José Luis Filpo Cabana, CC BY 4.0, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.1.51**: Tiraz of woven linen and silk with Arabic inscription of *al-yumn wa-l-iqbāl*, Fatimid, from a tomb at al-Azam near Asyut (Upper Egypt), 12th century. 52 x 40 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

On the interior of the apse's semicircular dome, the Christ as Pantokrator (Christ in Majesty) is depicted on a background of blue skies and stars, surrounded by the symbols of the four Evangelists, of which only Mark and John survive (see Figure **14.1.50**). The apse's lower horseshoe niches once held images depicting saints. The arch leading to the apse area is decorated on the outside with a painted cursive (*naskh*) Arabic inscription in red and black, featuring the phrase, "*al-yumn wa-l-iqbāl*" (prosperity and good fortune). This phrase commonly appeared in contemporary Islamic architecture and circulated on luxury portable objects produced in Spain, and on tenth-century textiles made in Fatimid Egypt (see Figure **14.1.51**).

The image of Christ Pantokrator, one of the most best-known depictions of Christ, showcases the power of Christianity and the Church. This message of power—and the triumph of Christianity over Islam—is further conveyed by the Latin inscription on the lower register of the apse from Matthew 25:34: "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'"

Given the military nature of the Order of Saint John, and its activity in the crusade against Muslims, one would expect the mosque to have been destroyed. Preserving the mosque may have symbolized triumph and served as a visual manifestation of a trophy or spoil of war. Yet, analyzing the architectural conversion solely from such a triumphalist standpoint overlooks other aspects specific to Toledo's history and building tradition.

A note on the term Mudéjar

The converted building has often been labeled "mudéjar," a scholarly term denoting the incorporation of the same architectural elements that were used in the original mosque and in other Andalusī buildings. The so-called mudéjar elements that the mosque displays are its construction in brick, the rigorous use of horseshoe and lobed arches, and its Arabic inscriptions. In other locales, "mudéjar" elements included geometric and vegetal decorative motifs (often executed in stucco), geometric glazed tiles or wooden ceilings, interlacing arches, or ribbed domes.

The term mudéjar is problematic though because, among other things, its original meaning signified Muslims living under Christian rule. The word mudéjar comes from *mudajjan*, which in Arabic could mean "one permitted to stay" / "one left behind," or "subjugated"/ "domesticated"/ "tamed." The term's use in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe certain aspects of art and architecture suggested that adopting the architectural and artistic elements of the foe (the Muslims) by Christian patrons or in Christian-ruled territories paralleled the Christian reacquisition of the land from Muslims. It also associated the art and architecture produced in Toledo, and in al-Andalus more generally, with the predominant religion of Islam, and implied that the building workforce in the lands newly conquered by Christians was and continued to be Muslim (mudéjar). However, in a city like Toledo, where Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together for almost five centuries before the Christian reconquest, it is difficult to attribute an architectural style only to Muslims. Rather, it is more reasonable to think that it expressed the identity of all city inhabitants. Consequently, we should not assume that those who executed the new additions to the Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm were Muslims, as the builders also may have been Christians or Jews.



Figure **14.1.52**: Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue, Toledo, Spain, c. 1360. (Photo: Antonio.velez, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Smarthistory)

It is true that the mural program and the new orientation of the church came to assert the Christian faith, especially when figurative art was prohibited in a mosque, but the display of the Arabic inscriptions may allude to a shared culture, language, and taste. After all, Arabic was spoken by members of the city's three religious groups and was, certainly at this time, not perceived as foreign. Numerous surviving architectural works and objects from the medieval period include multiple languages and testify that Arabic was not the 'property' of Muslims. Take for example the Hebrew and Arabic woven into the walls of Toledo's mid-fourteenth century Synagogue of Samuel Halevi Abulafia (see Figure **14.1.52**); the bi-lingual Christian tombstones from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Toledo; or the Latin, Castilian, Arabic, and Hebrew marble epitaphs of King Fernando III's tomb (c. 1252) in Seville Cathedral. Of course, the interpretation of the use of Arabic varies based on the specific context.

The Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm—and its conversion into the Church of Santa Cruz—is an example that embodies the multi-religious reality of medieval Spain, where architecture and art were informed by the cultural complexity of such a dynamic setting.

Medieval synagogues in Toledo, Spain

by Dr. Diane Reilly



Figure **14.1.53**: View of Toledo, Spain with the Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue at the center and the Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes in the background. (Photo: Yildori, CC BY-SA 3.0)

By the time the first surviving synagogues were built in Spain, Jews had lived there for more than a thousand years. The first Jews likely arrived on the Iberian peninsula among the Roman conquerors and colonizers who flowed there in the first century CE. Jews were persecuted by Christians during the Late Antique period (beginning in the 4th century), but when Muslim rule was established in 711, the legal and economic status of Jews improved. Often well integrated into the governments and economies of the cities in Muslim Al-Andalus, many Jews spoke Arabic and wore the same clothes as their Muslim neighbors.

Although population estimates for pre-modern periods are notoriously unreliable, one scholar has estimated that the Jewish population of Spain grew to be larger than the Jewish populations of every other part of the medieval world combined. Given the size and wealth of the Spanish Jewish communities of Al-Andalus, we can be certain that they built many synagogues in the quarters of the cities where they lived, but none survive from before the south of Spain was reconquered by northern, Christian rulers. Spain's most remarkable medieval synagogues are found in former Islamic capitals, but they were built after these cities were again governed by Christians.



Figure **14.1.54**: Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (now Santa María la Blanca), Toledo, Spain, first built 1180. (Photo: Benjamín Núñez González, CC BY-SA 3.0)

By the late Middle Ages, there were at least eleven synagogues in the city of Toledo in central Spain (see Figure **14.1.53**). Two of these—the Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue (Figure **14.1.52**) and the Ibn Shoshan synagogue (Figure **14.1.54**)—stand only a few blocks apart in the old Jewish quarter. Both synagogues display a style inspired by the Islamic buildings that surrounded them, sometimes called *Mudéjar*. This style was used by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish patrons and builders living in parts of Spain formerly governed by Muslims. The earlier Muslim builders had themselves borrowed from the cultures that preceded their arrival

by including details that had been popular with Romans and Late Antique Christians in Spain, such as reused columns, Corinthian capitals and horseshoe arches.

A twelfth-century synagogue for Toledo's Jewish community



Figure **14.1.55**: Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (now Santa María la Blanca), Toledo, Spain, first built 1180. (Photo: José Luis Filpo Cabana, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Ibn Shoshan Synagogue was likely first built around 1180, and was probably renovated by a member of the Spanish royal court in the thirteenth century before it was converted into a church (renamed Santa María la Blanca) in 1411 (see Figure **14.1.55**). The bimah, Torah ark, and seats for the congregation were destroyed when the building was converted into a church. All that remains from the synagogue is the architecture.



Figure **14.1.56**: Detail of capital in Ibn Shoshan Synagogue (now Santa María la Blanca), Toledo, Spain, first built 1180. (Photo: Harvey Barrison, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The interior is divided into five aisles by four rows of stout octagonal piers (see Figure **14.1.56**). The piers carry rows of capitals decorated with stucco pinecones and volutes, surmounted by giant horseshoe arches.

Above the arches are layers of low-relief stucco tendrils and roundels, scallop shells, geometric interlacing, and rows of blind arches with multiple lobes (called poly-lobed arches), a wealth of surface decoration that recalls the type found in earlier Spanish buildings like the Great Mosque at Cordoba.

We know this wasn't simply a local Toledan style, but one popular in other parts of Spain, because the Jewish community to the north in Segovia built a very similar synagogue, now destroyed, at almost the same time.

A private synagogue for a royal advisor



Figure **14.1.57**: Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue (now El Transito de Nuestra Señora), Toledo, Spain, c. 1360. (Photo: Olivier Lévy, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Almost two hundred years later, around 1360, a new synagogue was built in a different but related style by Samuel Halevi Abulafia (Figures **14.1.52** and **14.1.57**), treasurer and advisor to the Spanish King Pedro I of Castile. Unlike the Ibn Shoshan synagogue, this one was private, and attached to Halevi's palace, although it would have been a significant monument in the neighborhood given its height.

Instead of being divided into aisles by rows of arches, the Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue (later known as the church of El Transito de Nuestra Señora) is dominated by a soaring, open hall that is oriented towards a triple-arched Torah niche. The upper parts of the interior walls and the wall surrounding the Torah niche are blanketed with low-relief stucco decoration.

Right underneath the decorative wooden ceiling are ranks of colonnettes supporting poly-lobed arches that hug the wall, very similar to those at the Ibn Shoshan synagogue nearby. Below these are geometrically organized patterns of leaves, flowers, scallop shells, and interlacing tendrils, as well as the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Castile, a three-turreted castle (see Figure **14.1.58**). A wealth of Hebrew and Arabic inscriptions praise King Pedro, the building's architect, Don Meir Abdeil, and the royal treasurer and patron of the synagogue, Samuel Halevi, who is described as "prince among the princes of the tribe of Levi." Inscriptions also quote literary and religious texts, including the Bible and the Qur'an.



Figure **14.1.58**: Wall reliefs and colonnettes, Samuel Halevi Abulafia synagogue, Toledo, Spain, c. 1360. (Photo: Windwhistler, CC0 1.0)

This was the same style that King Pedro (who was Catholic) favored in his own palace architecture, making it a decorative language common to the Muslim, Christian and Jewish elites. Samuel may have wanted to celebrate his own integration into the power center of the kingdom by imitating its court style, but unfortunately his success was short-lived. Soon after the synagogue was completed, Pedro had him arrested, tortured, and executed.

Though the Jewish population in Spain was increasingly persecuted and finally in 1492, officially banished (unless they converted to Christianity), these synagogue structures attest to their long presence, and to the close interconnections between Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cultures in medieval Spain.

The Alhambra

by Dr. Shadieh Mirmobiny



Figure **14.1.59**: The Alhambra, Spain. (Photo: Mirari Erdoiza, CC BY-NC 3.0, via Smarthistory)

The Alhambra in Granada, Spain, is distinct among Medieval palaces for its sophisticated planning, complex decorative programs, and its many enchanting gardens and fountains (see Figure **14.1.59**). Its intimate spaces are built at a human scale that visitors find elegant and inviting.

The Alhambra, an abbreviation of the Arabic: Qal'at al-Hamra, or red fort, was built by the Nasrid Dynasty (1232-1492)—the last Muslims to rule in Spain. Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr (known as Muhammad I) founded the Nasrid Dynasty and secured this region in 1237. He began construction of his court complex, the Alhambra, on Sabika hill the following year (see Figure **14.1.60**).

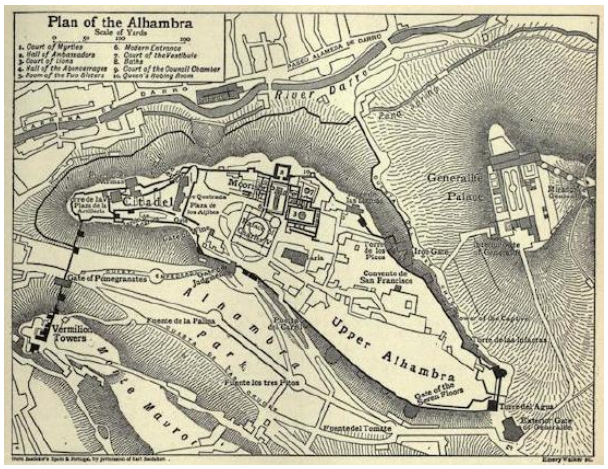


Figure **14.1.60**: Plan of the Alhambra and Generalife. (Photo: Lilange, public domain)

1,730 meters (1 mile) of walls and thirty towers of varying size enclose this city within a city. Access was restricted to four main gates. The Alhambra's nearly 26 acres include structures with three distinct purposes, a residence for the ruler and close family, the citadel, Alcazaba—barracks for the elite guard who were responsible for the safety of the complex, and an area called medina (or city), near the Puerta del Vino (Wine Gate), where court officials lived and worked.

The different parts of the complex are connected by paths, gardens and gates but each part of the complex could be blocked in the event of a threat. The exquisitely detailed structures with their highly ornate interior spaces and patios contrast with the plain walls of the fortress exterior.

Three palaces



Figure **14.1.61**: Tilework, El Mexuar. (Photo: MCAD Library, CC BY 2.0)

The Alhambra's most celebrated structures are the three original royal palaces. These are the Comares Palace, the Palace of the Lions, and the Partal Palace, each of which was built during 14th century. A large fourth palace was later begun by the Christian ruler, Carlos V.

El Mexuar is an audience chamber near the Comares tower at the northern edge of the complex. It was built by Ismail I as a throne room, but became a reception and meeting hall when the palaces were expanded in the 1330s. The room has complex geometric tile dadoes (lower wall panels distinct from the area above) and carved stucco panels that give it a formality suitable for receiving dignitaries (see Figure **14.1.61**).

The Comares Palace

Behind El Mexuar stands the formal and elaborate Comares façade set back from a courtyard and fountain (see Figure **14.1.62**). The façade is built on a raised three-stepped platform that might have served as a kind of outdoor stage for the ruler. The carved stucco façade was once painted in brilliant colors, though only traces remain.

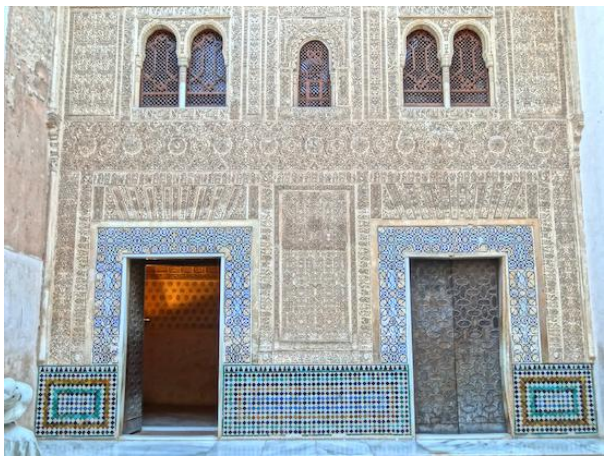


Figure **14.1.62**: Comares Palace façade. (Photo: Jeff and Neda Fields, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

A dark winding passage beyond the Comares façade leads to a covered patio surrounding a large courtyard with a pool, now known as the Court of the Myrtles (see Figure **14.1.63**). This was the focal point of the Comares Palace.

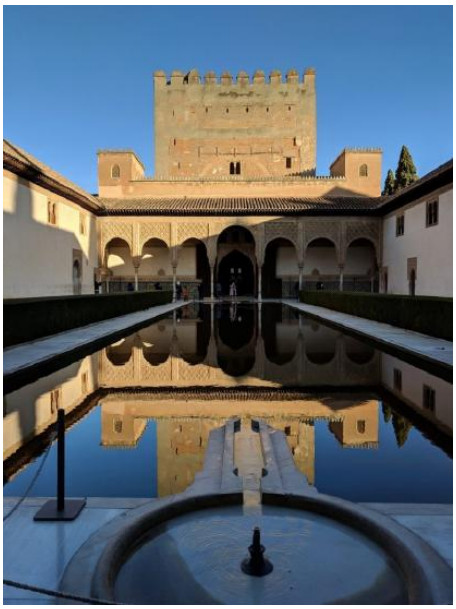


Figure **14.1.63**: Court of the Myrtles. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The Alhambra's largest tower, the Comares Tower, contains the Salón de Comares (Hall of the Ambassadors), a throne room built by Yusuf I (1333-1354). This room exhibits the most diverse decorative and architectural arts contained in the Alhambra.



Figure **14.1.64**: Hall of the Ambassadors, Alhambra. (Photo: Jeff and Neda Fields, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The double arched windows illuminate the room and provide breathtaking views. Additional light is provided by arched grille (lattice) windows set high in the walls. At eye level, the walls are lavishly decorated with tiles laid in intricate geometric patterns. The remaining surfaces are covered with intricately carved stucco motifs organized in bands and panels of curvilinear patterns and calligraphy (see Figure **14.1.3**).

Palace of the Lions

The Palacio de los Leones (Palace of the Lions) stands next to the Comares Palace but should be considered an independent building. The two structures were connected after Granada fell to the Christians.



Figure **14.1.65**: Court of the Lions, Alhambra. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

Muhammad V built the Palace of the Lions' most celebrated feature in the 14th century, a fountain with a complex hydraulic system consisting of a marble basin on the backs of twelve carved stone lions situated at the intersection of two water channels that form a cross in the rectilinear courtyard (see Figure **14.1.65**). An arched covered patio encircles the courtyard and displays fine stucco carvings held up by a series of slender columns. Two decorative pavilions protrude into the courtyard on an East–West axis (at the narrow sides of the courtyard), accentuating the royal spaces behind them.



Figure **14.1.66**: Muqarnas Chamber, Alhambra. (Photo: Vaughan Williams, CC BY 2.0)

To the West, the Sala de los Mocárabes (Muqarnas Chamber), may have functioned as an antechamber and was near the original entrance to the palace (see Figures **14.1.66** and **14.1.67**). It takes its name from the intricately carved system of brackets called "muqarnas" that hold up the vaulted ceiling.

Across the courtyard, to the East, is the Sala de los Reyes (Hall of the Kings), an elongated space divided into sections using a series of arches leading up to a vaulted muqarnas ceiling; the room has multiple alcoves, some with an unobstructed view of the courtyard, but with no known function.

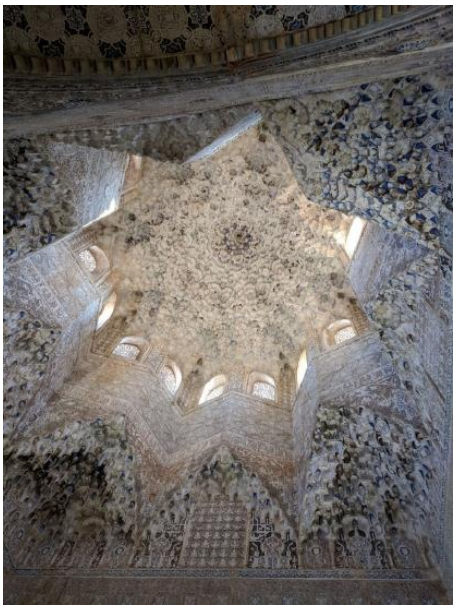


Figure **14.1.67**: Muqarnas ceiling, Hall of the Kings, Alhambra. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

This room contains paintings on the ceiling representing courtly life. The images were first painted on tanned sheepskins, in the tradition of miniature painting. They use brilliant colors and fine details and are attached to the ceiling rather than painted on it.

There are two other halls in the Palace of the Lions on the northern and southern ends; they are the Sala de las Dos Hermanas (the Hall of the Two Sisters) and the Hall of Abencerrajas (Hall of the Ambassadors). Both were residential apartments with rooms on the second floor. Each also have a large domed room sumptuously decorated with carved and painted stucco in muqarnas forms with elaborate and varying star motifs.

The Partal Palace

The Palacio del Partal (Partal Palace) was built in the early 14th century and is also known as del Pórtico (Portico Palace) because of the portico formed by a five-arched arcade at one end of a large pool. It is one of the oldest palace structures in the Alhambra complex.

Generalife



Figure **14.1.68**: Court of the Long Pond, Generalife. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The Nasrid rulers did not limit themselves to building within the wall of the Alhambra. One of the best preserved Nasrid estates, just beyond the walls, is called Generalife (from the Arabic, Jannat al-arifa). The word jannat means paradise and by association, garden, or a place of cultivation which Generalife has in abundance. Its water channels, fountains and greenery can be understood in relation to passage 2:25 in the Koran, "…gardens, underneath which running waters flow…."

In one of the most spectacular Generalife gardens, a long narrow patio is ornamented with a water channel and two rows of water fountains (see Figure **14.1.68**). Generalife also contains a palace built in the same decorative manner as those within the Alhambra but its elaborate vegetable and ornamental gardens made this lush complex a welcome retreat for the rulers of Granada.

Interior and exterior re-imagined



Figure **14.1.69**: Generalife gardens. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

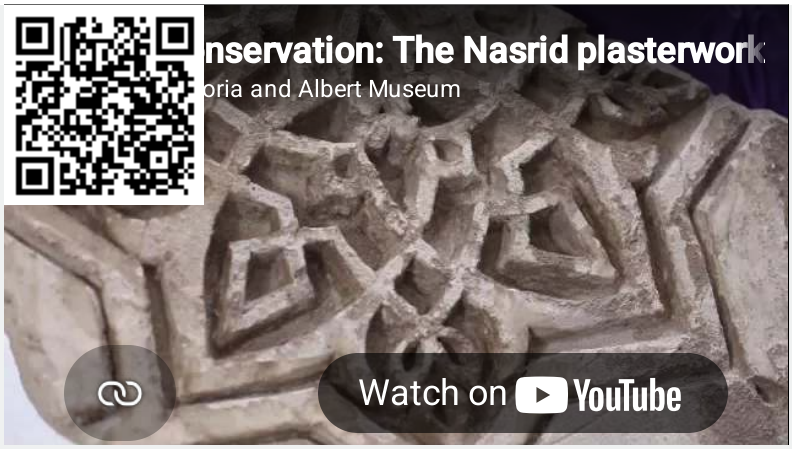
To be sure, gardens and water fountains, canals, and pools are a recurring theme in construction across the Muslim dominion. Water is both practical and beautiful in architecture and in this respect the Alhambra and Generalife are no exception (see Figure **14.1.69**). But the Nasrid rulers of Granada made water integral. They brought the sound, sight and cooling qualities of water into close proximity, in gardens, courtyards, marble canals, and even directly indoors.

The Alhambra's architecture shares many characteristics with other examples of Islamic architecture, but is singular in the way it complicates the relationship between interior and exterior. Its buildings feature shaded patios and covered walkways that pass from well-lit interior spaces onto shaded courtyards and sun-filled gardens all enlivened by the reflection of water and intricately carved stucco decoration.

More profoundly however, this is a place to reflect. Given the beauty, care and detail found at the Alhambra, it is tempting to imagine that the Nasrids planned to remain here forever; it is ironic then to see throughout the complex in the carved stucco, the words, "…no conqueror, but God" left by those that had once conquered Granada, and would themselves be conquered. It is a testament to the Alhambra that the Catholic monarchs who besieged and ultimately took the city left this complex largely intact.

Optional Online Resource: Nasrid Plasterwork at the V&A

The Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London has an extensive collection of plasterwork from Granada—some of it original from the Alhambra, and some of it 19th century copies. In this video, Victor Borges, Senior Sculpture Conservator at the V&A, discusses the V&A collection and the new discoveries that have shed light on the the differences in materials and paint used in this sculptures, and what that tells us about why and how they were created and where they came from.



Victoria and Albert Museum, "Conservation: The Nasrid plasterwork collection at the V&A"

Dado Panel, Courtyard of the Royal Palace of Mas'ud III

by Elizabeth Kurtulik Mercuri



Figure **14.1.70**: Dado Panel from the Courtyard of the Royal Palace of Mas'ud III of Ghazni, 1112. Marble, 28 1/8 x 12 13/16 x 3 1/2″. Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Brooklyn Museum, CC BY 3.0)

The dado panel from the Courtyard of the Royal Palace of Mas'ud III is a fine example of the artistic preferences of the Ghaznavid dynasty, which ruled the Indian subcontinent from 977 to 1186 (see Figure **14.1.70**). A dado panel is a two to three foot lower part of a wall, typically decorated in a variety of media. This dado panel formed part of a larger dado, found within the courtyard of the Palace of Mas'ud III, just south of Kabul, Afghanistan, and it is currently located in the Brooklyn Museum's Arts of the Islamic World collection. Although the panel was not found in-situ, it closely resembles other panels found within the palace's courtyard.

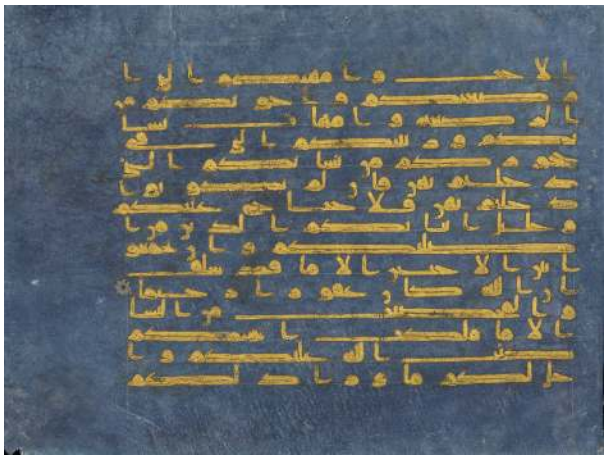


Figure 14.1.71: Kufic script in folio from a Qur'an, probably made in Tunisia, Qairawan, c. 900–950. Gold leaf, silver and ink on parchment with indigo, 28.5 x 37.5 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California. (Photo: LACMA, public domain)



Figure 14.1.72: Dado panel with three registers. (Image via Smarthistory)

The panel can be broken up into three registers (see Figure 14.1.72). The top register contains a Kufic inscription, which would have been part of a continuous inscription that encircled the entire courtyard across the tops of multiple adjacent panels. Kufic script is a style of writing Arabic popular from the seventh century CE until the late tenth century CE, as seen in the page from the Qur'an in Figure 14.1.71). The central register of the dado panel is a large sequence of trefoil (tri-lobed leaf) elements with a vegetal motif, and the bottom register consists of two scrolls interlaced with each other. The panel would have been painted blue and red as well as gilded. It shows signs of wear, with markings and discoloration, most likely from exposure to various elements over time.

Uncovering a palace

The Ghaznavids were of Turkish origin, and they preferred a fusion of Iranian and Arab stylistic influences, along with a strong interest in Persian art and poetry. Their capital, Ghazni lay on an important trade route, resulting in influences from around the region. The Palace of Mas'ud III provides the best evidence for the social, cultural and artistic nature of the Ghaznavid Dynasty. The construction date is unknown but it was completed towards the end of the dynasty. It was built of a combination of baked and unbaked brick with pressed clay. It sits on a quadrangular plan organized around a central courtyard with four iwans.



Figure **14.1.73**: Minaret constructed near Royal Palace of Mas'ud III of Ghazni, Afghanistan, 12th century. (Photo: R Prazeres, public domain)

The two excavations that were carried out between 1957 and 1966 produced a number of finds, including a long dado frieze in the courtyard. About forty-four panels were found in-situ and about four hundred dado fragments were also recovered. It is believed that there were about five hundred panels in all. They are made of marble, which came from a marble quarry found near Ghazni. The Ghaznavids used a large amount of marble throughout the city, during a time where brick and stucco were favored for décor purposes. The influence of the city of Baghdad, which was also built up heavily with marble by the Abbasids possibly explains the popularity of the medium at this time. Ghazni has only recently attracted scholars with the discovery of a great-stylized minaret, also dating to Mas'ud III's reign (see Figure **14.1.73**).

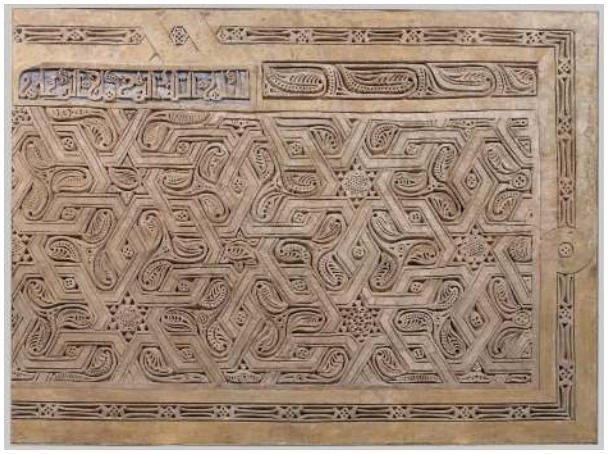


Figure **14.1.74**: Dado Panel with inscription in upper left corner, Iran, 10th century. Stucco, carved, with some cast plaster elements, 68 5/8 x 92 3/4″. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Persian poetry

Although the Kufic inscription on this panel has not been translated, translations of other sections of the frieze contain a Persian poem that praised the Ghaznavid rulers. There is no author or written text to accompany the work, but scholars believe that the poet was someone associated with court life who probably wrote the poem for this specific purpose. This particular inscription, from the twelfth century, is one of the oldest uses of Persian in place of Arabic. It is likely that the inscription was commissioned in conjunction with the completion of the building, a practice that is also seen in Sicily and Alhambra. In Persia, it was common practice to adorn sacred and secular buildings with inscriptions (see the example from Iran, Figure **14.1.74**)).

Part of a larger whole

The dado panel from the Brooklyn Museum is part of a much larger work of art and a representation of the very essence of the Ghaznavid Dynasty. It is evident that the Ghazavids were deviating from the artistic and architectural norms of the time with the construction of the palace dado frieze. Not only did they follow the Abbasids' use of marble for decorative purposes, but they also used Persian within the dado inscription, which was unique at the time. The use of the inscription on the dado as a commemorative display to honor the leaders of the dynasty and mark the construction of the building was also unusual. The use of Persian terms in place of Arab letters might have been a result of their expanding empire, of the dynasty's influential origins, or of an appreciation for Persian literature. The dado panel at the Brooklyn Museum is a rare work of art from a period of creative nonconformity, and it is representative of the Ghaznavids' signature artistic style.

[Smarthistory] Editor's note

The panel discussed above entered the Brooklyn Museum in 1986 as a gift. It was very likely excavated during a legal Italian-led archaeological campaign at Ghazni that began in the 1950s and that was abandoned when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. While some well-documented objects from this excavation were exported with the permission of the Afghan Government, many thousands of works of art have been smuggled from this war-ravaged nation. It is imperative that museums investigate objects in their collections that were exported from source nations after the ratification of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and before the museum's own internal controls were strengthened—objects such as this dado panel from the Courtyard of the Royal Palace of Mas'ud III. For more, see Matthieu Aikins's article in *The New York Times*, "How One Looted Artifact Tells the Story of Modern Afghanistan" (March 8, 2021).

Gold pendant with inset enamel decoration

by The British Museum



Figure **14.1.75**: Pendant, Fatimid dynasty, 11th century. Gold with inset enamel decoration, 3 x 2.5 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

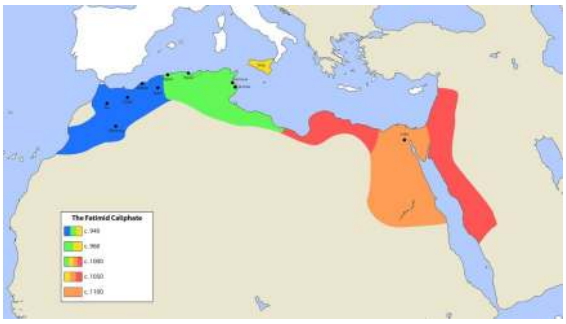


Figure 14.1.76: Map of the Fatimid Empire (Image: Askelaadden, CC BY-SA 4.0, Smarthistory)

This crescent-shaped gold pendant may originally have been hung with strings of pearls, from the three loops along the bottom (see Figure 14.1.75). It is decorated with delicate bands of fine gold filigree around a small cloisonné enamel inset depicting two confronted birds and a central tree. The crescent shape is typical of jewelry produced in the Islamic world.

The Fatimid goldsmiths may have been inspired to use cloisonné enamel-work by imitating contemporary enameled gold jewelry from Byzantium. Such jewelry could have been imported, sent as diplomatic gifts from the Byzantine emperors, or made by Byzantine craftsmen who had moved to Fatimid Egypt. However, there is evidence that the Fatimid goldsmiths did not produce these enamel insets themselves, but rather bought them ready-made—perhaps as imports from Byzantium, or from Byzantine craftsmen living in Egypt.



Figure 14.1.77: Pendant, Fatimid dynasty, 11th century. Gold with inset enamel decoration, 3 x 2.5 cm. (Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

The Fatimid dynasty was famous for its extraordinary treasury, stocked with riches and rarities from around the world. Some of these treasures were diplomatic gifts from other rulers, and included fine pieces of jewelry (see Figure 14.1.77): in 1046, the Fatimid caliph received a huge gift from the Emperor of Byzantium, during the course of negotiations to renew an armistice between the two great powers. The gift was carried on the backs of two hundred mules wearing fine saddle-cloths, and included a hundred gold vessels with enamel inlay, as well as a thousand different types of fine brocade, gold-decorated girdles, and gold-embroidered turbans. Two hundred Muslim prisoners of war were also returned home. A contemporary Fatimid courtier recorded that “No former Byzantine emperor had ever offered a similar gift to any of the previous caliphs of Islam from time immemorial to the present time.”

The Great Mosque (or Masjid-e Jameh) of Isfahan

by Dr. Radha Dalal



Figure **14.1.78**: Courtyard, The Great Mosque or Masjid-e Jameh of Isfahan, Iran. (Photo: reibai, CC BY 2.0)

Most cities with sizable Muslim populations possess a primary congregational mosque. Diverse in design and dimensions, they can illustrate the style of the period or geographic region, the choices of the patron, and the expertise of the architect. Congregational mosques are often expanded in conjunction with the growth and needs of the *umma*, or Muslim community; however, it is uncommon for such expansion and modification to continue over a span of a thousand years. The Great Mosque of Isfahan in Iran is unique in this regard and thus enjoys a special place in the history of Islamic architecture (see Figure **14.1.78**). Its present configuration is the sum of building and decorating activities carried out from the 8th through the 20th centuries. It is an architectural documentary, visually embodying the political exigencies and aesthetic tastes of the great Islamic empires of Persia.



Figure **14.1.79**: Street view of the Grand Bazaar of Isfahan with the Great Mosque dome in the distance. (Photo: Saif Alnuweiri, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Another distinctive aspect of the mosque is its urban integration. Positioned at the center of the old city, the mosque shares walls with other buildings abutting its perimeter (see Figure **14.1.79**). Due to its immense size and its numerous entrances (all except one inaccessible now), it formed a pedestrian hub, connecting the arterial network of paths crisscrossing the city. Far from being an insular sacred monument, the mosque facilitated public mobility and commercial activity thus transcending its principal function as a place for prayer alone.

The mosque's core structure dates primarily from the 11th century when the Seljuq Turks established Isfahan as their capital. Additions and alterations were made during Il-Khanid, Timurid, Safavid, and Qajar rule. An earlier mosque with a single inner courtyard already existed on the current location. Under the reign of Malik Shah I (ruled 1072-1092) and his immediate successors, the mosque grew to its current four-iwan design. Indeed, the Great Mosque of Isfahan is considered the prototype for future four-iwan mosques (an iwan is a vaulted space that opens on one side to a courtyard).

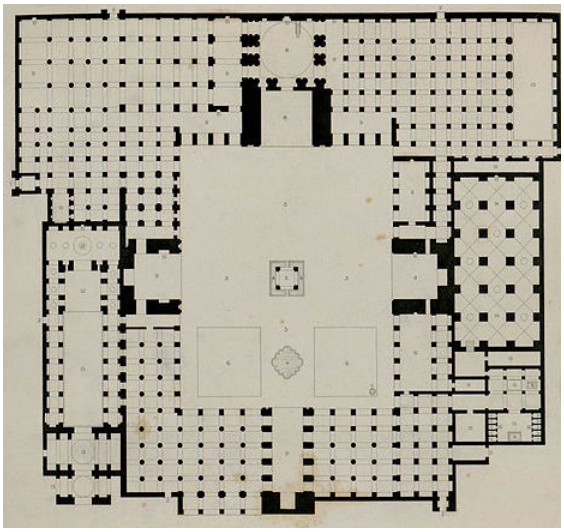


Figure 14.1.80: Plan of the mosque from *Monuments modernes de la Perse mesurés, dessinés et décrits*, éd. Morel, 1867. (Image via Smarthistory)

Linking the four iwans at the center is a large courtyard open to the air, which provides a tranquil space from the hustle and bustle of the city (see plan of the mosque in Figure 14.1.80). Brick piers and columns support the roofing system and allow prayer halls to extend away from this central courtyard on each side. Aerial photographs of the building provide an interesting view; the mosque's roof has the appearance of "bubble wrap" formed through the panoply of unusual but charming domes crowning its hypostyle interior.



Figure 14.1.81: Great Mosque, Isfahan. (Photo: ©2014 DigitalGlobe, map data ©2014 Google, via Smarthistory)

This simplicity of the earth-colored exterior belies the complexity of its internal decor. Dome soffits (undersides) are crafted in varied geometric designs and often include an oculus, a circular opening to the sky. Vaults, sometimes ribbed, offer lighting and ventilation to an otherwise dark space. Creative arrangement of bricks, intricate motifs in stucco, and sumptuous tile-work (later additions) harmonize the interior while simultaneously delighting the viewer at every turn. In this manner, movement within the mosque becomes a journey of discovery and a stroll across time.

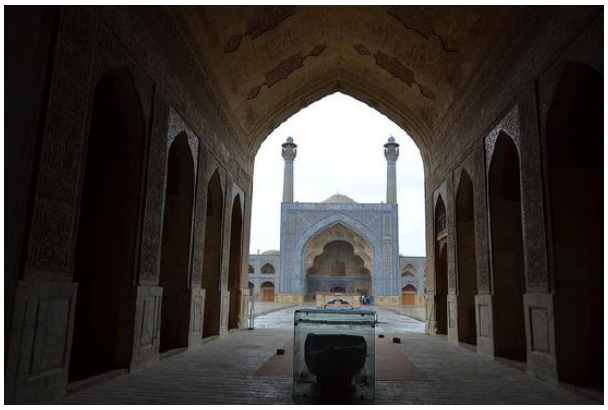


Figure **14.1.82**: View of the south iwan from the prayer hall. (Photo: Alan Cordova, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Given its sprawling expanse, one can imagine how difficult it would be to locate the correct direction for prayer. The qibla iwan on the southern side of the courtyard solves this conundrum. It is the only one flanked by two cylindrical minarets and also serves as the entrance to one of two large, domed chambers within the mosque (see Figure **14.1.82**). Similar to its three counterparts, this iwan sports colorful tile decoration and muqarnas or traditional Islamic cusped niches (see Figure **14.1.83**). The domed interior was reserved for the use of the ruler and gives access to the main mihrab of the mosque.

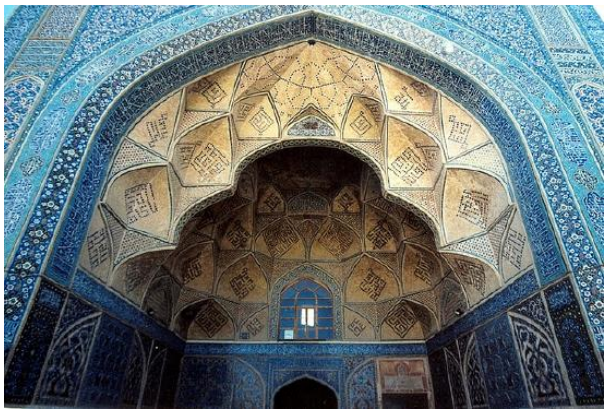


Figure **14.1.83**: Muqarnas, south iwan. (Photo: Fulvio Spada, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The second domed room lies on a longitudinal axis right across the double-arcaded courtyard. This opposite placement and varied decoration underscores the political enmity between the respective patrons; each dome vies for primacy through its position and architectural articulation. Nizam al-Mulk, vizier to Malik Shah I, commissioned the qibla dome in 1086. But a year later, he fell out of favor with the ruler and Taj al-Mulk, his nemesis, with support from female members of the court, quickly replaced him. The new vizier's dome (see Figure **14.1.84**), built in 1088, is smaller but considered a masterpiece of proportions.



Figure **14.1.84**: Interior decoration of Taj-al-Mulk (north) dome. (Photo: Matt Werner, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

When Shah Abbas I, a Safavid dynasty ruler, decided to move the capital of his empire from Qazvin to Isfahan in the late 16th century, he crafted a completely new imperial and mercantile center away from the old Seljuq city. While the new square and its adjoining buildings, renowned for their exquisite decorations, renewed Isfahan's prestige among the early modern cities of the world, the significance of the Seljuq mosque and its influence on the population was not forgotten. This link amongst the political, commercial, social, and religious activities is nowhere more emphasized than in the architectural layout of Isfahan's covered bazaar. Its massive brick vaulting and lengthy, sinuous route connects the Safavid center to the city's ancient heart, the Great Mosque of Isfahan.

Two Royal Figures

by Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis and Dr. Steven Zucker

Transcript of a conversation between Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis and Dr. Steven Zucker



Figure **14.1.85**: Two Standing Figures, mid 11th- 12th century, Saljuq period. Modeled and carved stucco with polychrome paint and gilding, 56.5" high, 20.25" wide. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: These are just perhaps my favorite figures in the entire Metropolitan Museum of Arts' Islamic Collection.

Steven Zucker: I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like these.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: No, well, there really isn't anything else in the world like them. They are two exceptional pieces carved and molded sculptural figures made out of stucco. They are extraordinary.

Steven Zucker: Stucco. It's this soft, cement-like material, it's not stone, and so it's pretty easy to carve.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: Oh, it's fantastic to carve. You can mold it and then carve it. The wonderful thing is it's light, it's easy to affix to walls.

Steven Zucker: Even though it's pretty soft stuff, it survived beautifully. These are in great condition.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: They really are; probably one of the reasons why they're in such good condition is they were from the desert. I love them because they are so alive. They are so dynamic, beautiful, bright, gorgeous, and they also throw one of the great misconceptions about Islamic art out the window, which is that Islamic art is aniconic.

Steven Zucker: Right. I had been taught that in Islamic culture, just like in Judaic culture, you don't represent the human body, you don't represent animals.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: That's true in a lot of cases, but that conception comes from one of the hadiths that says you basically shouldn't be making graven images, not too different from the prohibitions in the Old Testament; but, what seems to happen is very early on in Islamic art, that prohibition seems to be upheld in mosques, in religious spaces, but in the secular world, all bets are off.

Steven Zucker: This is a complex culture with subtle distinctions, and so making these kinds of broad generalizations really doesn't make sense.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: That's exactly right. We have figurative works in stucco. We have it on ceramics, on vases, and metal work. We have it in manuscripts. We have it in painting. It's not like these are just one-offs, actually it's part of a much larger

tradition, but these are just exceptional examples of it.



Figure **14.1.86**: "The Elephant Clock", Folio from a Book of the Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices by al-Jazari dated 1315, Syria. Leaf from a manuscript on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Steven Zucker: It's really all about context; so what do we think the context for these figures was?

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: That is one of the big questions. We don't know what the context is, but what we think is that they were probably in some type of reception hall and that they were affixed to the walls; so that when you were coming in to see a strong man or a new ruler, because these were produced around 1200, somewhere in Iran, which was a very unstable period, that these and perhaps others would greet you. Because we have other examples of painted reception rooms where we have guards or royal figures standing. We have examples in Bust in Afghanistan, and in Samarkand, as well, in Uzbekistan.

Steven Zucker: They're clearly representations of power. Both of them are clutching swords. They're armed and dangerous, but even a clear expression of their power, I think, comes from their dress.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: Certainly, because, yes, we have the swords, we have this royal napkin that one of the figures is holding, but the dress is really impressive. This would have been blues, reds, black, and they would have been gilded as well. You have to imagine gold; they are bejeweled. They have earrings, they have necklaces.

Steven Zucker: I'm a little confused because you would think that these would be guards, but these are also royal figures.



Figure **14.1.87**: Detail of Standing Figure, mid 11th- 12th century, Saljuq period. Modeled and carved stucco with polychrome paint and gilding, 56.5 inches high, 20.25 wide. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: That is the big question that we have. Are these princes? Kings of kings? Shahs of shahs. Or are they royal guards? They are wearing crowns. One of the figures here is wearing the winged crown. The winged crown in Iran is probably the oldest symbol of authority. It was worn by the Sasanian kings.



Figure 14.1.88: Wall panel with wings and a Pahlavi device encircled by pearls c. 6th century CE. Stucco, 15 3/4 × 16 5/16 × 2 1/16". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Steven Zucker: This is a pre-Islamic empire.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: Yes, it was very, very powerful. To take this symbol of authority is really an amazing thing to do, because it is a symbol that is recognizable to almost anyone who walks into the room.

Steven Zucker: The figures themselves feel so eastern, not only in the complexity of their costume, but also in their faces; they have these beautiful, round faces.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: They have what's called the Turkic moon face. You can see that that's really, then, the influence of central Asia and the East.

Steven Zucker: We're looking at these two figures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, thousands of miles away from their original home. Do we have any sense of how they got here?

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: One turns up in the 1950s, and one in the 1960s. That is amazing because that means they didn't get here together. One would assume that they would have because they are clearly the same size, they are decorated in the same way, they are painted in the same way; these two came from the same context.

Steven Zucker: Almost 1,000 years later.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: They've been reunited, and still stand as this wonderful presence.

Steven Zucker: You had mentioned the polychromic; those blues and reds are so vivid.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: We have to remember that electric lights didn't exist for most of human history; and if you want to make an impression you need vibrancy, you need color, because otherwise, how are things going to stand out? You may have natural light coming in, but natural light and candle light are the only ways these things are illuminated.

Steven Zucker: Color itself could also be an expression of wealth, of power.

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: Certainly, because obviously, gilding something with gold is expensive. Also, where are your blues coming from? If you're grinding up lapis lazuli, that's from Afghanistan, you have to trade for that; you have to import that. The different types of materials that are used are very important, and another symbol of wealth. Not only is it the stucco, the crowns, the swords, but it's also even the materials.

Steven Zucker: I think these are now some of my favorite figures as well.

Articles in this section:

- Glenna Barlow, "Arts of the Islamic world: The medieval period," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beatrice Leal, "Arts of the Abbasid Caliphate," in *Smarthistory*, December 19, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Sabahat Adil, "The vibrant visual cultures of the Islamic West, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, January 7, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

- Dr. Razan Francis, "The Mosque of Bāb al-Mardūm (the Church of Santa Cruz), Toledo," in *Smarthistory*, August 25, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Diane Reilly, "Medieval synagogues in Toledo, Spain," in Smarthistory, April 6, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Shadieh Mirmobiny, "The Alhambra," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Elizabeth Kurtulik Mercuri, "Dado Panel, Courtyard of the Royal Palace of Mas'ud III," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "Gold pendant with inset enamel decoration," in *Smarthistory*, September 9, 2021 (© Trustees of the British Museum)
- Dr. Radha Dalal, "The Great Mosque (or Masjid-e Jameh) of Isfahan," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Two Royal Figures," in *Smarthistory*, December 5, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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14.2: The Latin West

The Vikings

By Boundless Art History (excerpted)

Jelling Stones

The Jelling Stones are massive carved runestones from the 10th century, named for the town of Jelling in Denmark. Prior to the 10th century, stone carving was extremely rare or non-existent in most parts of Scandinavia. Subsequently, and likely influenced by the spread of Christianity, the use of carved stone for permanent memorials became prevalent.

The older of the two Jelling Stones is attributed to King Gorm the Old, thought to have been raised in memory of his wife Thyra. King Gorm's son Harald Bluetooth raised the larger of the two stones in memory of his parents, in celebration of his conquest of Denmark and Norway, and to document his conversion of the Danes to Christianity. Art historians consider the runic inscriptions on the Jelling stones the best-known in Denmark.



Figure **14.2.1**: Jelling Stones: The Jelling Stones are massive carved runestones from the 10th century, named for the town of Jelling in Denmark. Here they are seen protected behind glass. (Photo: Alicudi, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Scholars have long considered the Jelling Stones visual records of the transitional period between the indigenous Norse paganism and the victory of Christianization in Denmark (see Figure **14.2.1**). The larger stone, known as Harald's stone, is often cited as Denmark's baptismal certificate (*dåbsattest*), containing a depiction of Christ and an inscription celebrating the conversion of the Danes to Christianity. The Jelling Stones are also strongly identified with the creation of Denmark as a nation-state, and both stones offer the earliest examples of the name Danmark (in the form of *tanmaurk* on the large *ston*, and *tanmarkar* on the small stone).



Figure **14.2.2**: Harald's Stone: Carving of Christ: The figure of Christ on Harald's runestone. One scholar has suggested that this imagery was used to indicate that Christ had replaced the Norse pagan god Odin, who in one myth hung for nine nights in the tree Yggdrasill. (Photo: Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The runestone of Gorm, the older and smaller of the Jelling Stones, has an inscription that reads: "King Gormr made this monument in memory of Thyrvé, his wife, Denmark's adornment." The larger runestone of Harald Bluetooth is engraved on one side with an inscription that reads: "King Harald ordered this monument made in memory of Gormr, his father, and in memory of Thyrvé, his mother. That Harald who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian." Harald's stone has a figure of Jesus Christ on one side and on another side a serpent wrapped around a lion (see Figure **14.2.2**). The depiction of Christ standing in the shape of a cross and entangled in what appear to be branches is of note. One scholar suggested that this imagery was used to indicate that Christ had replaced the Norse pagan god Odin, who in one myth hung for nine nights in the tree Yggdrasill.



Figure **14.2.3**: Harald's Stone: Inscription: This Jelling Stone, with its depiction of Christ and celebration of the Conversion of the Danes, is widely regarded as Denmark's "baptismal certificate." (Photo: Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Remnants of red pigment show that the Jelling Stones were once brightly painted (see Figure **14.2.3**). This practice was apparently widespread across Scandinavia, with runestones at locations such as Strängnäs Cathedral (Sweden) and Oppland (Norway) bearing similar hues. Replicas made from plaster casts in the twentieth century recreate the stones' polychromatic appearances (see Figure **14.2.4**).



Figure **14.2.4**: Replica of Harald's Stone: This plaster-cast replica gives us an idea of the original polychromatic appearance of the Jelling Stones. National Museum of Denmark. (Photo: National Museum of Denmark, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The reliefs on Harald's Stone bear a striking resemblance to the styles of humans, animals, and abstract patterns that appear in illuminated manuscripts and on decorative arts in the British Isles of the Early Middle Ages. This common thread is a result of contact between the cultures through migration and invasion.

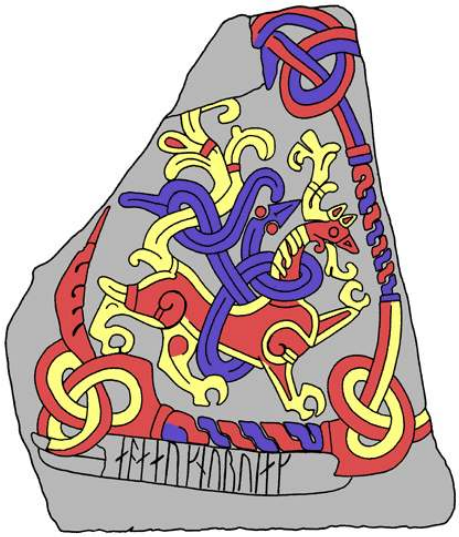


Figure **14.2.5**: Animal relief on Harald's Stone: The drawing of this stone depicts a colorful, stylized animal that bears a striking resemblance to similar forms found in the British Isles, such as in the hoard found at Sutton Hoo. (Image: Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Norse Timber Architecture in the Early European Middle Ages

Timber architecture is used to describe a period of medieval art in which two distinctive wood building traditions converged in Norwegian architecture. One was the practice of building with horizontal logs notched at the corners, a technique likely imported east of Scandinavia. The other influence was the stave building tradition, which possibly evolved from improvements on the prehistoric long houses that had roof-bearing posts dug into the ground.

Although scant evidence exists of actual buildings from the earliest permanent structures, the discovery of Viking ships (i.e. the Oseberg) and stave churches suggest a significant mastery of woodworking and engineering in Viking culture. Not counting the 28

remaining stave churches, at least 250 wooden houses predating the Black Death of 1350 are preserved more or less intact in Norway. Most of these are long houses, some with added stave-built galleries or porches. As political power in Norway was consolidated and had to contend with external threats, larger and more durable structures including fortresses, bridges, and ultimately churches and manors were built with stone and masonry.

Long Houses



Figure **14.2.6**: Viking Long House: Reconstructed long house in the Viking Museum in Borg, Vestvågøy/Lofoten, Norway. (Photo: Jörg Hempel, public domain)

Very little archaeological evidence of actual buildings from the earliest permanent structures in the Viking era have survived. However, in the Lofoten archipelago in Northern Norway, a Viking chieftain's holding has been reconstructed at the Lofotr Viking Museum. In 1983, archaeologists uncovered the Chieftain House at Borg, a large Viking-era building likely established around the year 500 CE. Excavations later in the 1980s revealed the largest building ever to be found from the Viking period in Norway. The foundation of the Chieftain House at Borg measured 272 feet long and 30 feet high. After the excavation ended, the remains of what had once been the long house remained visible.

Also known as mead halls, long houses typically housed the high-ranking members of Viking society, particularly royalty and aristocracy (see Figure **14.2.6**). From around the year 500 up until the Christianization of Scandinavia (by the thirteenth century), these large halls were vital parts of the political center. They were later superseded by medieval banquet halls.

Typically load-bearing with post-and-lintel entrances, long houses had sharply pitched roofs that bore a curve similar to that of a ship. In fact, the roofs of many reconstructed long houses resemble inverted boats placed atop the exterior walls. This shape was likely due to the climate, as pitched roofs allow snow to fall to the ground without causing collapse.

Stave Churches



Figure **14.2.7**: Stave Church: Example of a Norwegian wooden stave church: Stave church in Lom. Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. (Photo: Axel Lindahl, public domain)

The most commonly cited examples of timber architecture are the Norwegian stave churches. Until the beginning of the 19th century, as many as 150 stave churches still existed. Many were destroyed as part of a religious movement that favored simple,

puritan lines , and today only 28 remain (although a large number were documented with measured drawings before they were demolished).

A stave church is a medieval wooden church with post-and-beam construction related to timber framing (see Figure **14.2.7**). The wall frames are filled with vertical planks. The load-bearing posts (stafr in Old Norse, stav in Norwegian) lend their name to this building technique. The stave churches owe their longevity to architectural innovations that protected these large, complex wooden structures against water rot, precipitation, wind, and extreme temperatures. Most important was the introduction of massive sills underneath the staves (posts) to prevent them from rotting. Over the two centuries of stave church construction, this building type evolved to an advanced art and science.

Forms of Church Construction

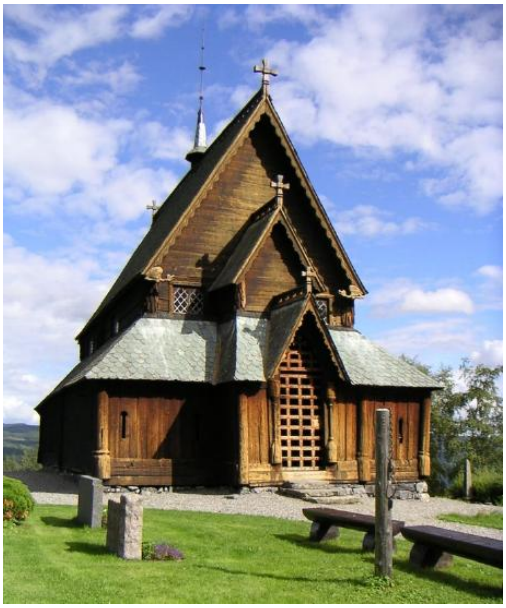


Figure **14.2.8**: Type A: Reinli Stave Church: Reinli stave church with the old pillory and a single nave: Sør-Aurdal. (Photo: John Erling Blad, CC BY-SA 2.5)

Archaeological excavations have shown that stave churches descend from palisade constructions and later churches with earth-bound posts. Similar palisade constructions are known from the buildings of the Viking era. Logs were split in two halves, rammed into the ground, and given a roof. This was a simple form of construction but very strong. The wall could last for decades if set in gravel—even centuries. Remains of these buildings are found over much of Europe and are commonly grouped into two categories. Type A had no free-standing posts and a single nave as seen in the Renli Stave Church (see Figure **14.2.8**).



Figure **14.2.9**: Type B Lomen Stave Church Interior: Interior from Lomen stave church depicting a raised roof and cross braces between upper and lower string beams and posts. Intermediate posts have been omitted. (Photo: Nina Aldin Thune, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Type B had a raised roof and free-standing internal posts as in the Lomen Stave Church (see Figure **14.2.9**). Type B churches were often further divided into two subgroups. The Kaupanger group had a complete arcade row of posts and intermediate posts along the sides and details that mimic stone capitals . These churches gave an impression of a basilica. The other subgroup was the Borgund group. These churches had cross braces joining upper and lower string beams and posts that formed a very rigid

interconnection, resembling the triforium of stone basilicas. Many stave churches had or still have outer galleries running around the entire perimeter, loosely connected to the plank walls. They probably served to protect the church from the harsh climate.



Figure 14.2.10: Hedal stave church portal: Drawing by G. A. Bull of the main portal in Hedalen stave church (c. 1853), depicting the intricate ornamentation. (Photo: Wikimedia, public domain)

After the Protestant Reformation, no stave churches were built. Instead, new churches were composed of stone or horizontal log buildings with notched corners. Most old stave churches disappeared because of redundancy, neglect, deterioration, or because they were too small to accommodate larger congregations and too impractical according to new architectural standards.

Ornamentation of Stave Churches

Even though the wooden churches had structural differences, they give a recognizable general impression. Facade difference may conceal common floor plans, while apparently similar buildings might have significant structural differences. Certain basic principles were common to all church types.

Basic geometric figures, simple numbers, just a few length units, simple ratios, and perhaps proportions were among the theoretical aids all builders inherited. The specialist knew a particular type of building so well that he could systematize its elements in a slightly different way from previous designs, thus carrying developments a stage further. Ornamentation included intricate interlace patterns, stylized human figures, and mythological animals (see Figure 14.2.10).

Ottonian art, an introduction

by Victoria Valdes

After Charlemagne's legacy had begun to die out, the warlike tribes in what is now Germany (then Saxony) banded together to elect a king from among their nobility. In 919 C.E., they chose Henry the Liudolfing, the son of a high-ranking duke, a brilliant military strategist and a well-respected leader. Henry, dubbed "the Fowler" because of his hobby of bird hunting, led the Saxon armies to a number of decisive victories against the Magyars and the Danes. These newly secured borders ushered in a period of immense prosperity and artistic productivity for the Saxon empire.



Figure **14.2.11**: Detail, *Otto I presenting the Cathedral of Magdebur*g, from the Cathedral of Magdeburg, probably made in Milan, northern Italy, 962–968. On this ivory, Otto presents a symbolic model of the church to Christ for his blessing. As a humble servant, Otto is depicted smaller than the company of patron saints. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Henry's son Otto I (who became emperor in 962) lends his name to the "Ottonian" period. He forged an important alliance with the Pope, which allowed him to be crowned the first official Holy Roman Emperor since 924. This contact with Rome was extremely important to Ottonian artistic development, since each Ottonian king was determined to define himself as a Roman Emperor in the style of Constantine and Charlemagne. This meant perpetuating a highly intellectual court and creating an extensive artistic legacy.

Ottonian art takes a number of traditional medieval forms, including elegantly illuminated manuscripts, lavish metalwork, intricate carving, and Romanesque churches and cathedrals. Perhaps the most famous of the Ottonian artistic innovations is the Saxon Romanesque architecture style, which is marked by a careful attention to balance and mathematical harmony. This focus on geometry is based on the texts de Arithmatica and Ars Geometriae by the 6th century philosopher Boethius. The Ottonians held mathematical sciences in high regard and this is reflected in many of their artistic productions.

The illuminated manuscripts produced by Ottonian "scriptoria," or monastery painting and writing schools, provide documentation of both Ottonian religious and political customs and the stylistic preferences of the period. Manuscripts were most often produced of religious texts, and usually included a dedication portrait commemorating the book's creation. The royal or religious donor is usually shown presenting the book to the saint of his or her choice.



Figure **14.2.12**: Uta Codex (Uta Presents the Codex to Mary), Clm. 13601, f. 2, recto, c. 1020. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Germany. (Photo: Library of Congress, public domain)

Here we see a powerful abbess, Uta, presenting her codex to St. Mary. Many manuscripts also included a page depicting the artist or scribe of the work, acknowledging that the production of a book required not only money but also artistic labor (see Figure

14.2.12).



Figure 14.2.13: Hillinus Codex (Hillinus Presents the Codex to St. Peter), Cologne Dombibliothek, folio 16, verso, manuscript 12, (digitized) c. 1020. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In the Hillinus Codex, a monk presents the codex that he has written or painted—or both!—to St. Peter (see Figure 14.2.13). The work of the artist and scribe were often one and the same, as can be seen in many of the fantastic decorated initials that begin books or chapters in Ottonian Manuscripts. As you can see from the dedication pictures, the manuscripts in question are often depicted as they were frequently displayed, that is with the text securely enclosed between lavish metal covers.

Ottonian metalwork took many forms, but one of the most common productions was bejeweled book covers for their precious manuscripts. This cover is one of the most expensive that survives; it includes not only numerous jewels, but an ivory carving of the death of the Virgin Mary.



Figure 14.2.14: Presentation of Christ, bronze doors commissioned by Bishop Bernward for Saint Michael's, Hildesheim, Germany, 1015. (Photo: Holly Hayes, CC BY-NC 2.0)

On a larger scale, clerics like Bernward of Hildesheim cast his 15-foot doors depicting the fall and redemption of mankind out of single pieces of bronze (optional: watch a video about the doors). This was an enormous undertaking, and the process was so complex that it would not be replicated until the Renaissance.

For a modern viewer, Ottonian art can be a little difficult to understand. The depictions of people and places don't conform to a naturalistic style, and the symbolism is often obscure. When you look at Ottonian art, keep in mind that the aim for these artists was not to create something that looked "realistic," but rather to convey abstract concepts, many of which are deeply philosophical in nature. The focus on symbolism can also be one of the most fascinating aspects of studying Ottonian art, since you can depend on

each part of the compositions to mean something specific. The more time you spend on each composition, the more rewarding discoveries emerge.

Gospel Book of Otto III

by Dr. Andreas Petzold



Figure **14.2.15**: Double page opening: Provinces Bringing Tribute (f.23v.) and Ruler Portrait of Otto III (f.24) *Gospels of Otto III*, c. 1000. Ink, gold, paint, parchment, each page 33.4 x 24.2 cm. Bayerische Stattsbibliothek, Clm.4453, Munich, Germany. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.2.16**: St. Luke, *Gospels of Otto III*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The double page opening of the ruler portrait of Otto III (f.24, Figure **14.2.15**) and the accompanying image of provinces bringing tribute (f.23v, Figure **14.2.16**) is taken from the Gospels of Otto III (Munich, Bayerische Stattsbibliothek, Clm.4453), one of the most magnificent manuscripts to have come down to us from the early medieval period. It is thought to have been made about the year 1000 at the Benedictine monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance where Austria, Switzerland and Germany converge and belongs to a group of stylistically related manuscripts from the monastery known as the Liuthar group. The monk Liuthar is represented in another gospel-book made for Otto III that is now in the cathedral treasury at Aachen (Aachen, Domschatzkammer, G25). Liuthar is now thought to have been a scribe rather than an artist but the scribe was usually the main coordinating figure for a manuscript project.



Figure **14.2.17**: Charles (detail), Ruler portrait of Charles the Bald, *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram*, 9th century. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm.14000, f. 5 v., Munich, Germany. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The pages of the Gospels of Otto III manuscript measure 334 by 242 millimeters and are made of parchment. The script is written in ink, with gold initials, and the manuscript is extensively illustrated with portraits of the four evangelists (the authors of the four gospels), and scenes from the life of Christ as well as the ruler portrait. The front cover is decorated with precious jewels and inset with a Byzantine ivory representing the dormition or death of the Virgin Mary. The double-page is near the beginning of the manuscript before the gospel texts.

We do not know the name of the artist (as is the case for most of the painters from this period) but he most likely belonged to a team of craftsmen working on the manuscript. In devising the double opening, he appears not to have worked from his imagination but to have followed an earlier source such as the ruler portrait of Charles the Bald in the ninth century manuscript known as the *Codex Aureus of Saint Emmeram* (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm.14000, f. 5 v.; Figure **14.2.17**).

On the right side of the double page Figure **14.2.3**), emperor Otto III is shown seated frontally, crowned, and holding a golden orb and a sceptre surmounted by an eagle. Otto III was the Holy Roman Emperor and nominally ruled over territories corresponding to modern day Germany, France and northern Italy. The title Holy Roman Emperor dates back to Charlemagne and like this earlier emperor, Otto III was crowned by the Pope in Rome where Otto III spent most of his reign. Otto III was Holy Roman Emperor from 996 to 1002, when he died at the age of 21.

Otto III looks out at us with hypnotic eyes, and is dressed in green and the imperial purple. He was the son of Otto II, who died when he was three, and a Byzantine Princess called Theophanu, and we know that he was an educated man.



Figure 14.2.18: Ruler portrait of Otto III (f.24), *Gospels of Otto III*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

He is flanked on either side by members of his court: on the right by those who fight (two members of the nobility who carry a sword, a lance and shield) and, on the left, by those who pray (two members of the clergy who hold books).

The pendant image depicts four personifications of the territories over which Otto ruled and who are shown bringing him tribute. They are identified as: Sclavinia (Slavic east), Germania (roughly Germany), Gallia (roughly France), and Roma (Rome). The device of the personification (whereby an abstract idea is represented by a human figure, usually a female one) goes back to classical art. There is a parallel between this scene and that of the adoration of the three magi (represented as crowned kings, a tenth century innovation; Figure 14.2.19) bringing gifts to the infant Christ (represented on f.29 of the manuscript), which underlines the quasi-divine nature of the Emperor.



Figure 14.2.19: Provinces Bringing Tribute (f.23v.), *Gospels of Otto III*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This is not a portrait in the conventional sense of a likeness and gives us very little idea of what Otto III must have looked like. Otto III is represented out of proportion with the much smaller figures that flank him—indicating his status (see Figure 14.2.20). The opening pages probably represent an ideal of Otto III's rule rather than the reality of his situation as his rule was fraught with division. The style of the opening looks back to late antique illusionism (note, for example, the lozenge-shaped ornament in the

borders, and the atmospheric backgrounds which recall, for example, such manuscripts as the Vatican Vergil made in about 400) but has an extraordinary flatness to it as if the scene has been pressed between two panes of glass.



Figure **14.2.20**: Detail of ruler portrait of Otto III (f.24), *Gospels of Otto III*. (Photo via Smarthistory)

This style is known as Ottonian, a period style concept that covers both the reigns of the three emperors bearing the name Otto and of their immediate successors through the late eleventh century. It both precedes and anticipates the Romanesque style.

After Otto's death, the manuscript passed to his cousin and heir, Henry II, who gave it to the cathedral of Bamberg which he founded, where it remained until 1803 when during the secularisation of the church it was transferred to the Bavarian State Library. The manuscript is rarely exhibited but a facsimile of it has been made.

A beginner's guide to Romanesque art

by Dr. Andreas Petzold

> **Note**
>
> Read this introduction carefully to avoid thinking that it covers the entire Middle Ages. For example, scanning the heading "The first international style since antiquity" might mean missing the crucial qualifier: "The Romanesque is the first international style in *Western* Europe since antiquity."

The first international style since antiquity

The term "Romanesque," meaning in the manner of the Romans, was first coined in the early nineteenth century. Today it is used to refer to the period of European art from the second half of the eleventh century throughout the twelfth (with the exception of the region around Paris where the Gothic style emerged in the mid-twelfth century). In certain regions, such as central Italy, the Romanesque continued to survive into the thirteenth century. The Romanesque is the first international style in Western Europe since antiquity—extending across the Mediterranean and as far north as Scandinavia. The transmission of ideas was facilitated by increased travel along the pilgrimage routes to shrines such as Santiago de Compostela in Spain (a pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place) or as a consequence of the crusades which passed through the territories of the Byzantine empire. There are, however, distinctive regional variants—Tuscan Romanesque art (in Italy) for example is very different from that produced in northern Europe.



Figure 14.2.21: Master of Taüll, apse painting, San Clemente in Taüll, c. 1123. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya–MNAC, Barcelona, Spain. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The relation of art to architecture—especially church architecture—is fundamental in this period. For example, wall-paintings may follow the curvature of the apse of a church as in the apse wall-painting from the church of San Clemente in Taüll, and the most important art form to emerge at this period was architectural sculpture—with sculpture used to decorate churches built of stone.

Many sculptors may have begun their career as stone masons, and there is a remarkable coherence between architecture and sculpture in churches at this period. The two most important sculptural forms to emerge at this time were the tympanum (the lunette-shaped space above the entrance to a church), and the historiated capital (a capital incorporating a narrative element usually an episode from the Bible or the life of a saint). One of the most famous tympanums is on the west entrance to Autun Cathedral (see Figure 14.2.22) which represents—appropriately for this part of the church—the Last Judgment. An inscription (Gislebertus hoc fecit" "Gislebertus made me"), at the base of the giant immobile figure of Christ at the center, records the name of the artist or head of the workshop which produced it, though it has been suggested that it may refer to the original patron who was responsible for bringing the relics of Lazurus to Autun in the Carolingian period.



Figure 14.2.22: Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Façade, Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun, France, c. 1130-46. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure 14.2.23: Calling of St. Peter and St. Andrew, Sant Pere de Rodes monstery, Spain, c. 1160. (Photo via Smarthistory)

One influence on the Romanesque is, as the name implies, ancient Roman art—especially sculpture—which survived in large quantities particularly in southern Europe. This can be seen, for example, in a marble relief representing the calling of St. Peter and St. Andrew from the front frieze of the abbey church of Sant Pere de Rodes on the Catalonian coast (see Figure 14.2.23). The imprint of the antique can be seen in the deep undercutting in the drapery folds, an effect achieved by the Roman device of the drill, and the individualization of the faces.

Classical influence was also frequently mediated through an intermediary—most importantly Byzantine art (especially textiles and painting), but also through earlier medieval styles which had absorbed elements of the classical tradition such as Ottonian art.

The illustrations in the Bury Bible have, for example, been convincingly compared to Byzantine wall-paintings in a church at Asinou in Cyprus which suggests that its artist—a certain Master Hugo (having the name of the artist is unusual during this period) had seen them or a similar source. Monasteries such as that of Bury St. Edmunds in East Anglia in England (where the Bury Bible was made) were important centers of production—especially for the writing and decorating of manuscripts. The Bury Bible is a good example of the remarkable achievements of monastic scriptoria in the Romanesque period (see Figure 14.2.24).



Figure 14.2.24: The Bury Bible, MS 2, fol. 94, Bury St Edmunds, England, Corpus Christi College, c. 1130-1135. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Monasteries were not the only centers of production. Romanesque art is also associated with towns that were revived and expanded during this period—for the first time since the fall of the Roman empire—a consequence of broad economic expansion (examples

include Assisi in Umbria with its Romanesque cathedral or the newly founded town of Puente La Reina in northern Spain on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela).



Figure **14.2.25**: Casket with troubadours, from the court of Aquitaine, Limoges, France, c. 1180. 21 x 15.6 x 11 cm. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Romanesque art is for the most part religious in its imagery, but this is partly a matter of what has survived, and there are examples of secular art from the period. Unusual is a casket in The British Museum, a product of Limoges craftsmanship, which is made of wood with champlevé enamels attached to it (produced by heating powdered glass set into groves hollowed out of bronze plate). This is decorated with scenes to do with courtly love inspired by troubadour poets from Provence.

Metalwork

The distinction between the fine and decorative arts is one that emerges only in the Renaissance and does not apply at this earlier period. If anything the most highly valued works of art during the Romanesque period were objects of metalwork made from precious metals that were frequently produced to house relics (characteristically the body part of a saint, or—in the case of Christ who, the faithful believe ascended to heaven—objects associated with him such as fragments of the so-called true cross on which Christ was thought to have been crucified).



Figure **14.2.26**: Stavelot Triptych, c. 1156-8. Gold and enamel, 48 x 66 cm open. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York. (Photo via Smarthistory)

An example of this is the reliquary known as the Stavelot Triptych (see Figure **14.2.26**). It consists of a central panel flanked by side wings that can be closed, a design format derived from Byzantine art but made at the Benedictine monastery of Stavelot in the Mosan region in present day Belgium in the mid-twelfth century. The triptych was commissioned by the abbot, a man called Wibald, whom we know travelled extensively and who acquired, during a trip to Constantinople, the two Byzantine enamel plaques incorporated into the center of the triptych that contain what were believed to be fragments of the true cross.

A wall painting from San Clemente in Catalonia

The apse wall-painting from the church of San Clemente is a good example of the Romanesque style. The church is situated in a remote valley in northern Catalonia, north-east Spain today, and is typical of the handsome stone-built churches which sprung up in this region in the Romanesque period. The painting would have been painted onto fresh plaster applied to the walls of the church (it was transferred for safekeeping to the Museum of Catalan Art in Barcelona early in the twentieth century). The painting is dominated by the giant figure of Christ in a mandorla, a halo around the body of a sacred person, represented as he will appear at the end of time as described in the Book of Revelation.



Figure **14.2.27**: Master of Taüll, apse painting, Sant Clement in Taüll, c. 1123. (Photo via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.2.28**: Mary (detail), Master of Taüll, apse painting, Sant Clement. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Christ is represented characteristically out of scale to the other figures to indicate his status. His head is distorted, elongated and highly geometric, and he has piercing hypnotic eyes. To either side of him are written the Greek letters “alpha” and “omega” (the beginning and the end), and with one hand he gestures in blessing, while the other holds an open book with the words Ego sum lux mundi (I am the light of the world) inscribed on it. Below him is an equally elongated and distorted figure of the Virgin Mary who holds a chalice with Christ’s blood, a representation of the Holy Grail which predates the earliest written description of the subject. Her presence in the scheme is symptomatic of the growing cult of the Virgin Mary at this period.

It would be just as much a mistake to regard the lack of naturalism found in this painting as indicating lack of artistic competence as it would be in a work by Picasso. Rather it indicates that its artist (whose real name we do not know) is not interested in replicating external appearances but rather in conveying a sense of the sacred and communicating the religious teachings of the church. Picasso (who was brought up in Barcelona) greatly admired Catalonian Romanesque, and it is significant that later in his

life he kept a poster of this painting in his studio in southern France. We live in a world saturated with images but in the Romanesque period people would rarely encounter them and an image such as this would have made an immense impression.

A beginner's guide to Romanesque architecture

by Valerie Spanswick

The name gives it away–Romanesque architecture is based on Roman architectural elements. It is the rounded Roman arch that is the literal basis for structures built in this style.

Ancient Roman ruins (with arches)

All through the regions that were part of the ancient Roman Empire are ruins of Roman aqueducts and buildings, most of them exhibiting arches as part of the architecture (you may make the etymological leap that the two words—arch and architecture—are related, but the Oxford English Dictionary shows arch as coming from Latin *arcus*, which defines the shape, while arch—as in architect, archbishop and archenemy—comes from Greek *arkhos*, meaning chief and *ekton* means builder).



Figure **14.2.29**: Interior of the Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen, Germany, 792-805. (Photo: Elena, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 CE, Europe began to take its first steps out of the "Dark Ages" since the fall of Rome in the fifth century. The remains of Roman civilization were seen all over the continent, and legends of the great empire would have been passed down through generations. So when Charlemagne wanted to unite his empire and validate his reign, he began building churches in the Roman style–particularly the style of Christian Rome in the days of Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor.

After a gap of around two hundred years with no large building projects, the architects of Charlemagne's day looked to the arched, or arcaded, system seen in Christian Roman edifices as a model. It is a logical system of stresses and buttressing, which was fairly easily engineered for large structures, and it began to be used in gatehouses, chapels, and churches in Europe.

These early examples may be referred to as pre-Romanesque because, after a brief spurt of growth, the development of architecture again lapsed. As a body of knowledge was eventually re-developed, buildings became larger and more imposing. Examples of Romanesque cathedrals from the early Middle Ages (roughly 1000-1200) are solid, massive, impressive churches that are often still the largest structure in many towns.

In Britain, the Romanesque style became known as "Norman" because the major building scheme in the 11th and 12th centuries was instigated by William the Conqueror, who invaded Britain in 1066 from Normandy in northern France. (The Normans were the descendants of Vikings—Norse, or north men—who had invaded this area over a century earlier.) Durham and Gloucester Cathedrals (see Figures **14.2.30**) and **14.2.3**)and Southwell Minster are excellent examples of churches in the Norman, or Romanesque style.



Figure 14.2.30: Gloucester Cathedral, nave, Gloucester, England, begun 1089 (ceiling later). (Photo: Michael D. Beckwith, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The arches that define the naves of these churches are well modulated and geometrically logical—with one look you can see the repeating shapes, and proportions that make sense for an immense and weighty structure. There is a large arcade on the ground level made up of bulky piers or columns. The piers may have been filled with rubble rather than being solid, carved stone. Above this arcade is a second level of smaller arches, often in pairs with a column between the two. The next higher level was again proportionately smaller, creating a rational diminution of structural elements as the mass of the building is reduced.

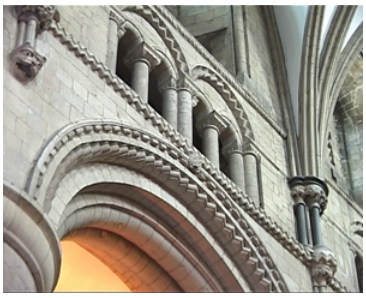


Figure 14.2.31: Gloucester Cathedral, decorative carving on the nave arcade and triforium. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The decoration is often quite simple, using geometric shapes rather than floral or curvilinear patterns. Common shapes used include diapers—squares or lozenges—and chevrons, which were zigzag patterns and shapes. Plain circles were also used, which echoed the half-circle shape of the ubiquitous arches.

Early Romanesque ceilings and roofs were often made of wood, as if the architects had not quite understood how to span the two sides of the building using stone, which created outward thrust and stresses on the side walls. This development, of course, didn't take long to manifest, and led from barrel vaulting (simple, semicircular roof vaults) to cross vaulting, which became ever more adventurous and ornate in the Gothic.

Pilgrimage routes and the cult of the relic

by Christine M. Bolli



Figure **14.2.32**: Basilica Ste-Madeleine, Vézelay, France, dedicated 1104. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Basilica Ste-Madeleine became an important pilgrimage site after acquiring the relics of St. Mary Magdalene.

The end of the world

Y2K. The Rapture. 2012. For over a decade, speculation about the end of the world has run rampant—all in conjunction with the arrival of the new millennium. The same was true for our religious European counterparts who, prior to the year 1000, believed the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, and the end was nigh.

Editors' Note

When Bolli writes of "our religious European counterparts," she seems to assume that "we" are not Muslims or Eastern Orthodox Christians or Jews, all of whom lived in Europe in 1000. Remember that things were very different in the Iberian peninsula and east of the Adriatic. Going to Compostela was an important pilgrimage for Western European Christians, but pilgrimages have been important to many other people. Ancient Greeks went to Delphi and Byzantines to Ephesus; the pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam, the core beliefs and practices of the religion.

When the apocalypse failed to materialize in 1000, it was decided that the correct year must be 1033, a thousand years from the death of Jesus Christ, but then that year also passed without any cataclysmic event.

Just how extreme the millennial panic was, remains debated. It is certain that from the year 950 onwards, there was a significant increase in building activity, particularly of religious structures. There were many reasons for this construction boom beside millennial panic, and the building of monumental religious structures continued even as fears of the immediate end of time faded.

Not surprisingly, this period also witnessed a surge in the popularity of the religious pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place. These are acts of piety and may have been undertaken in gratitude for the fact that doomsday had not arrived, and to ensure salvation, whenever the end did come.



Figure **14.2.33**: Map of pilgrimage routes. (Image adapted from: Manfred Zentgraf, Volkach, Germany, via Smarthistory)

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela



Figure **14.2.34**: Pilgrims from the tympanum of Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun, France. (Photo: Holly Hayes, Art History Images, via Smarthistory)

For the average European in the 12th Century, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Jerusalem was out of the question—travel to the Middle East was too far, too dangerous and too expensive. Santiago de Compostela in Spain offered a much more convenient option.

To this day, hundreds of thousands of faithful travel the "Way of Saint James" to the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela. They go on foot across Europe to a holy shrine where bones, believed to belong to Saint James, were unearthed. The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela now stands on this site.

The pious of the Middle Ages wanted to pay homage to holy relics, and pilgrimage churches sprang up along the route to Spain. Pilgrims commonly walked barefoot and wore a scalloped shell, the symbol of Saint James (the shell's grooves symbolize the many roads of the pilgrimage; see Figure **14.2.34**).

In France alone there were four main routes toward Spain. Le Puy, Arles, Paris and Vézelay are the cities on these roads and each contains a church that was an important pilgrimage site in its own right.

Why make a pilgrimage?

A pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela was an expression of Christian devotion and it was believed that it could purify the soul and perhaps even produce miraculous healing benefits. A criminal could travel the “Way of Saint James” as an act penance. For the everyday person, a pilgrimage was also one of the only opportunities to travel and see some of the world. It was a chance to meet people, perhaps even those outside one’s own class. The purpose of pilgrimage may not have been entirely devotional.

The cult of the relic



Figure **14.2.35**: Reliquary of St. Foy at Conque Abbey, France. (Photo: Holly Hayes, Art History Images, via Smarthistory)

Pilgrimage churches can be seen in part as popular desinations, a spiritual tourism of sorts for medieval travelers. Guidebooks, badges and various souvenirs were sold. Pilgrims, though traveling light, would spend money in the towns that possessed important sacred relics.

The cult of relic was at its peak during the Romanesque period (c. 1000 – 1200). Relics are religious objects generally connected to a saint, or some other venerated person. A relic might be a body part, a saint’s finger, a cloth worn by the Virgin Mary, or a piece of the True Cross.

Relics are often housed in a protective container called a reliquary. Reliquaries are often quite opulent and can be encrusted with precious metals and gemstones given by the faithful. An example is the Reliquary of Saint Foy, located at Conques abbey on the pilgrimage route. It is said to hold a piece of the child martyr’s skull. A large pilgrimage church might be home to one major relic, and dozens of lesser-known relics. Because of their sacred and economic value, every church wanted an important relic and a black market boomed with fake and stolen goods.

Accommodating crowds

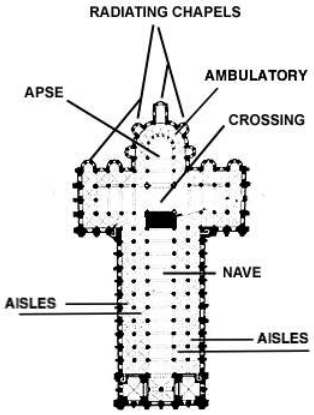


Figure 14.2.36: St. Sernin (plan), Toulouse, France. (Image via Smarthistory)

Pilgrimage churches were constructed with some special features to make them particularly accessible to visitors (see Figure 14.2.36). The goal was to get large numbers of people to the relics and out again without disturbing the Mass in the center of the church. A large portal that could accommodate the pious throngs was a prerequisite. Generally, these portals would also have an elaborate sculptural program, often portraying the Second Coming—a good way to remind the weary pilgrim why they made the trip!

A pilgrimage church generally consisted of a double aisle on either side of the nave (the wide hall that runs down the center of a church). In this way, the visitor could move easily around the outer edges of the church until reaching the smaller apsidioles or radiating chapels. These are small rooms generally located off the back of the church behind the altar where relics were often displayed. The faithful would move from chapel to chapel venerating each relic in turn.

Thick walls, small windows

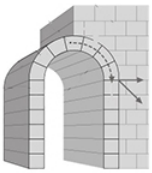


Figure 14.2.37: The thrust of a barrel vault. (Image via Smarthistory)

Romanesque churches were dark. This was in large part because of the use of stone barrel-vault construction (see Figure 14.2.37). This system provided excellent acoustics and reduced fire danger. However, a barrel vault exerts continuous lateral (outward pressure) all along the walls that support the vault.

This meant the outer walls of the church had to be extra thick. It also meant that windows had to be small and few. When builders dared to pierce walls with additional or larger windows they risked structural failure. Churches did collapse.



Figure 14.2.38: Nave, Tournus Cathedral, France, 11th century. (Photo via Smarthistory)

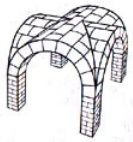


Figure 14.2.39: Groin vault. (Image via Smarthistory)

Later, the masons of the Gothic period replaced the barrel vault with the groin vault which carries weight down to its four corners, concentrating the pressure of the vaulting, and allowing for much larger windows (see Figures 14.2.38 and 14.2.39).

Church and Reliquary of Sainte-Foy, France

by Dr. Elisa Foster

On the road

Imagine you pack up your belongings in a sack, tie on your cloak, and start off on a months-long journey through treacherous mountains, unpredictable weather and unknown lands. For the medieval pilgrim, life was a spiritual journey. Why did people in the Middle Ages take pilgrimages? There are many reasons, but visiting a holy site meant being closer to God. And if you were closer to God in this life, you would also be closer to God in the next.

A Romanesque pilgrimage church: Saint-Foy, Conques

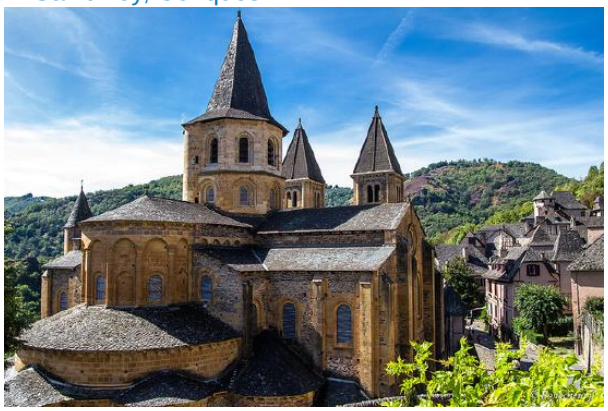


Figure 14.2.40: Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, c. 1050–1130. (Photo: Jean François Bonachera, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Located in Conques, the Church of Saint-Foy (Saint Faith) is an important pilgrimage church on the route to Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain (see Figure 14.2.40). It is also an abbey, meaning that the church was part of a monastery where monks lived, prayed and worked. Only small parts of the monastery have survived but the church remains largely intact. Although smaller churches stood on the site from the seventh century, the Church of Saint-Foy was begun in the eleventh century and completed in the mid-twelfth century. As a Romanesque church, it has a barrel-vaulted nave lined with arches on the interior.



Figure 14.2.41: Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, c. 1050–1130. (Photo: Manuel Alende Maceira, CC BY 2.0)

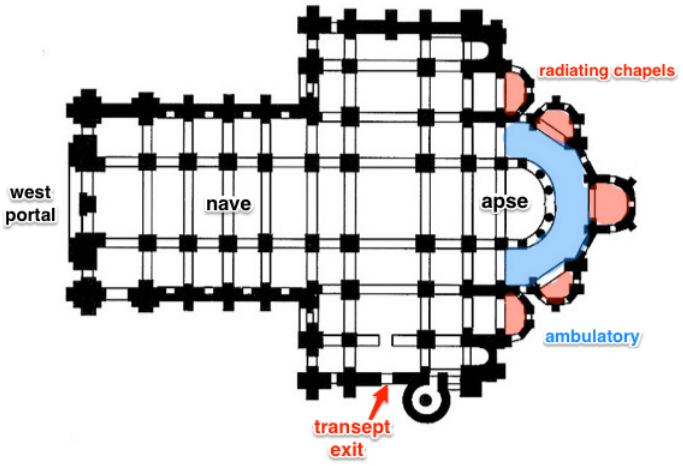


Figure 14.2.42: Plan (adapted), Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, c. 1050–1130. (Image via Smarthistory)

It is known as a pilgrimage church because many of the large churches along the route to Santiago de Compostela took a similar shape. The main feature of these churches was the cruciform plan. Not only did this plan take the symbolic form of the cross but it also helped control the crowds of pilgrims. In most cases, pilgrims could enter the western portal and then circulate around the church towards the apse at the eastern end. The apse usually contained smaller chapels, known as radiating chapels, where pilgrims could visit saint's shrines, especially the sanctuary of Saint Foy. They could then circulate around the ambulatory and out the transept, or crossing. This design helped to regulate the flow of traffic throughout the church although the intention and effective use of this design has been debated.



Figure 14.2.43: Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, France, c. 1050-1130. (Photo: syvwlch, CC BY 2.0)

When a pilgrim arrived at Conques, they would probably head for the church to receive blessing. Yet before they got inside, an important message awaited them on the portals: the Last Judgment. This scene is depicted on the tympanum, the central semi-circular relief carving above the central portal.

In the center sits Christ as Judge, and he means business! He sits enthroned with his right hand pointing upwards to the saved while his left hand gestures down to the damned. This scene would have served as a reminder to those entering the Church of Saint-Foy about the joys of heaven and torments of hell. Immediately on Christ's right are Mary, Peter and possibly the founder of the monastery as well as an entourage of other saints.



Figure 14.2.44: Last Judgment tympanum, Church of Sainte-Foy, France, Conques, c. 1050–1130. (Photo: Òme deu Teishenèir, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Below these saints, a small arcade is covered by a pediment, meant to represent the House of Paradise. These are the blessed, those have been saved by Christ and who will remain in Paradise with him for eternity. At the center, we find Abraham and above him notice the outstretched hand of God, who beckons a kneeling Saint Faith (see Figure 14.2.45).



Figure **14.2.45**: The blessed in paradise, with the hand of God above beckoning Saint Foy (Saint Faith) (detail), Last Judgment tympanum, Church of Sainte-Foy, France, Conques, c. 1050–1130. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

On the other side of the pediment, a row of angels opens the graves of the dead. As the dead rise from their tombs, their souls will be weighed and they will be admitted to heaven or hell. This is the scene that we see right under Christ's feet—you can see the clear division between a large doorway leading to Paradise and a terrifying mouth that leads the way to Hell.

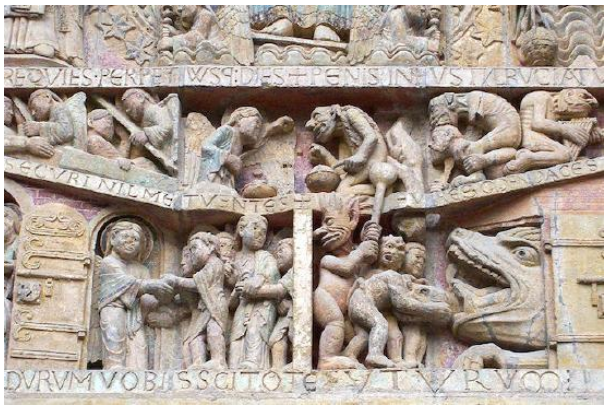


Figure **14.2.46**: The gates of heaven and the mouth of hell (detail), Last Judgment tympanum, Church of Sainte-Foy, France, Conques, c. 1050–1130. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Inside Hell, things aren't looking very good. It is a chaotic, disorderly scene—notice how different it looks from the right-hand side of the tympanum. There is also a small pediment in the lower register of Hell, where the Devil, just opposite to Abraham, reigns over his terrifying kingdom.



Figure **14.2.47**: Hell (detail), Last Judgment tympanum, Church of Sainte-Foy, France, Conques, c. 1050-1130 (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 14.2.48: A gluttonous man hung by his legs and cloth stripped from the wealthy, Last Judgment tympanum, Church of Sainte-Foy, France, Conques, c. 1050–1130. (Detail taken from gigapixel image, Columbia University, via Smarthistory)

The devil, like Christ, is also an enthroned judge, determining the punishments that await the damned according to the severity of their sins. In particular, to the devil's left is a hanged man. This man is a reference to Judas, who hanged himself after betraying Christ. Just beyond Judas, a knight is tossed into the fires of Hell and above him, a gluttonous man is hung by his legs for his sins. Each of these sinners represents a type of sin to avoid, from adultery, to arrogance, even to the misuse of church offices. Indeed, this portal was not only a warning for pilgrims, but for the clergy who lived in Conques as well.

The reliquary



Figure 14.2.49: Reliquary statue of Sainte-Foy (Saint Faith), late 10th to early 11th century with later additions. Gold, silver gilt, jewels, and cameos over a wooden core, 33 1/2". Treasury, Sainte-Foy, Conques. (Photo: Holly Hayes, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Pilgrims arriving in Conques had one thing on their mind: the reliquary of Saint Foy (see Figure 14.2.49). This reliquary, or container holding the remains of a saint or holy person, was one of the most famous in all of Europe. So famous that it was originally located in a monastery in Agen but the monks at Conques plotted to steal it in order to attract more wealth and visitors. The reliquary at Conques held the remains of Saint Foy, a young Christian convert living in Roman-occupied France during the second century. At the age of twelve, she was condemned to die for her refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods, she is therefore revered as a martyr, as someone who dies for their faith. Saint Foy was a very popular saint in Southern France and her relic was extremely important to the church; bringing pilgrims and wealth to the small, isolated town of Conques.



Figure 14.2.50: Head (detail), Reliquary statue of Sainte-Foy (Saint Faith). (Photo: Holly Hayes, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Although the date of the reliquary is unknown, Bernard of Angers first spoke it about in 1010. At first, Bernard was frightened that the statue was too beautiful stating, “Brother, what do you think of this idol? Would Jupiter or Mars consider himself unworthy of such a statue?” He was concerned about idolatry—that pilgrims would begin to worship the jewel-encrusted reliquary rather than what that reliquary contained and represented, the holy figure of Saint Foy. Indeed, the gold and gem encrusted statue would been quite a sight for the pilgrims. Over time, travelers paid homage to Saint Foy by donating gemstones for the reliquary so that her dress is covered with agates, amethysts, crystals, carnelians, emeralds, garnets, hematite, jade, onyx, opals, pearls, rubies, sapphires, topazes, antique cameos and intaglios. Her face, which stares boldly at the viewer, is thought to have originally been the head of a Roman statue of a child. The reuse of older materials in new forms of art is known as spolia. Using spolia was not only practical but it made the object more important by associating it with the past riches of the Roman Empire.

The Church of Saint Foy at Conques provides an excellent example of Romanesque art and architecture. Although the monastery no longer survives, the church and treasury stand as a reminder of the rituals of medieval faith, especially for pilgrims. Even today, people make the long trek to Conques to pay respect to Saint Foy. Every October, a great celebration and procession is held for Saint Foy, continuing a medieval tradition into present day devotion.

Saint-Pierre, Moissac

by Dr. Shannon Pritchard



Figure 14.2.51: South-side portal (detail), Church of Ste. Pierre, Moissac, France, 1115-1130. (Photo: Simon, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The church of Ste. Pierre (St. Peter) in Moissac, France, dating from 1115-30, has one of the most impressive and elaborate Romanesque portals of the twelfth century. Carved images occupy the walls of the extended porch leading to the door, the door itself, and even the space over the door.

Pilgrimage routes

The church of Ste. Pierre was on one of the pilgrimage roads through France that led to Santiago de Campostela, in Spain. As it was home to the remains of St. James Major, that Spanish church was one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Western Europe. Ste. Pierre in Moissac was a popular stop for those making the long and arduous journey to Spain.

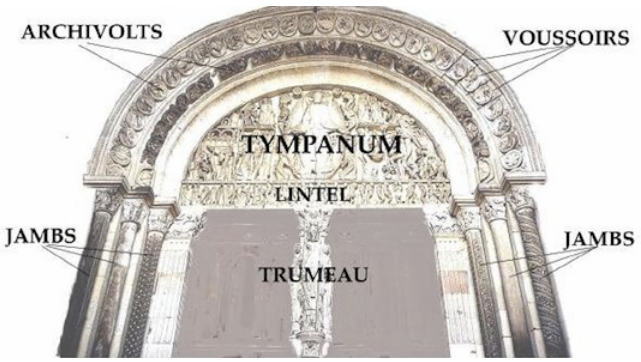


Figure 14.2.52: The parts of a Romanesque portal. (Image via Smarthistory)



Figure 14.2.53: Old Testament prophet (Jeremiah or Isaiah?), right side of the trumeau of the south portal of Saint-Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC 2.0)

In order to understand what is depicted on the main areas surrounding the portal that leads into the church, let's break it down into its constituent parts. The term portal refers to a doorway or entry into a building, and Romanesque portals have distinct architectural elements which were oftentimes carved with a variety of ornament and subject matter.

In the case of Ste. Pierre, the portal is divided in half vertically by the trumeau, which is decorated on three of its four sides. On the front, the viewer is faced with three pairs of intertwined lions and lionesses who are there to symbolically guard the entry into the sacred space of the church. Such symbolism comes from Early Christian imagery where the doors to Christ's tomb are often shown with lion's heads on them. On the east side of the trumeau is a representation of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah (some scholars suggest it is Isaiah), who holds a scroll in his hands. On the west side is a figure identified as St. Paul, from the New Testament.

The placement of these two figures on the sides of the trumeau was no doubt deliberate as they face two other figures on the door jambs (the outer walls of the portal where the doors are attached). Across from St. Paul is a representation of St. Peter, also a New Testament saint (and the namesake of the church), and across from Jeremiah, is the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The pairing of

Old and New Testament figures was common during this period as a means of suggesting the fulfillment of Mosaic law (the law coming Moses) in the new Christian law under Christ.



Figure **14.2.54**: Rosettes on the lintel, south portal, Saint-Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The trumeau has more than just a decorative function though as it is also supports the horizontal beam of stone above called the lintel. The lintel is decorated with ten rosettes that are bound together by a carved rope and have a repeated floral pattern at both the upper and lower spaces between each rosette. Notice that on both the left and right ends of the lintel, the rope and rosette design is coming from the mouth of a fantastical animal of some sort (see Figure **14.2.53**)! Details such as these, with imaginative, hybrid animals are a common characteristic in Romanesque art from illuminated manuscripts to sculpture.



Figure **14.2.55**: South portal, Saint-Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo: Josep Renalias, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Just above the lintel is the lunette-shaped (semi-circular) tympanum, which has the majority of the sculpted decoration (and this is true in most Romanesque and Gothic portals). In this case, the tympanum is surrounded by three decorative archivolts (arches), which have various foliate patterns carved into the individual blocks of stone, known as the voussoirs, which make them up.



Figure **14.2.56**: Tympanum from the south portal, Saint-Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC 2.0)

During the Romanesque and Gothic periods, there were two subjects which were popular for tympanum decoration. One was the subject of the Last Judgment, when Christ sits as judge over those who will be divided into the Saved and the Damned. An example

of this can be seen at Autun.

The other oft-represented subject is known as the Maiestas Domini (Christ in Majesty), and here at Moissac we are presented with a very literal depiction of a passage from the Book of Revelation (4:2–7), which reads:

And immediately I was in the Spirit, and behold a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne…And round the throne were four and twenty seats; and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold…And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto a crystal; and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts…And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.

The moment described in this passage, and represented here, is not a narrative in the sense that the Last Judgment is, but it is rather a more esoteric concept of the Second Coming of Christ and the End of Time.



Figure **14.2.57**: Christ enthroned, Tympanum, south portal, Saint-Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC 2.0

In the very center of the composition is the figure of Christ, seated on a throne, with his right hand raised in gesture of blessing. In his left hand he balances a book on his knee, perhaps a reference to the Book of Revelation. His circular halo is inscribed with a cross (known as a cruciform halo), and we can just make out the suggestion of a larger, almond-shaped body halo (called a mandorla after the Italian word for almond) just visible as the pointed arch behind Christ's haloed head.

Immediately to the left and right of the seated figure of Christ are the Evangelical Beasts, three animals and one human figure, who represent the four Evangelists who wrote the New Testament Gospels. Matthew, in the upper left, is represented by the winged man, Mark just below is shown as the lion, Luke on the bottom right is seen as the ox, and John the Evangelist is represented as the eagle. The representation of the four Evangelists as a tetramorph was common in sculpture, painting, and illuminated manuscripts.



Figure **14.2.58**: Elders, from the south tympanum, Saint Pierre, Moissac, c. 1115-30. (Photo: Nick Thompson, CC BY-NC 2.0)

On either side of the Evangelical Beasts are two tall, elegant angels holding scrolls, as well as the twenty-four elders mentioned in the text from Revelations. They are arranged on three levels, two of which are divided by wavy lines, reminding us of the "sea of glass." Each elder holds a small musical instrument in one hand and a chalice in the other (some of these have broken off over time). Very clearly all of the figures—man and beast—are turned toward the central figure of Christ, who stares serenely out toward the viewer. The twenty-four elders crane their necks and twist their bodies as do the Evangelical beasts. Even the lines of the drapery seem to be directing our attention toward the center.



Figure **14.2.59**: Tympanum, Chartres Cathedral Tympanum, Chartres Cathedral, c. 1144-55. (Photo: Guillaume Piolle, CC BY 3.0)

A brief comparison between the style of the sculptures in this tympanum and that employed on the Early Gothic portal of Chartres Cathedral (see Figure **14.2.59**), which is also a *Maiestas Domini*, clearly illustrates the very lively, almost agitated sense of the figures at Moissac. At Chartres, the twenty-four elders are now the voussoirs in the archivolts and the figure of Christ, seated frontally and surrounded by the mandorla, is flanked by the four evangelical beasts. Here, however, is a sense of clarity and three-dimensionality that is markedly different from the style seen at Moissac.

And as the road weary pilgrims would have approached the portal of the church Saint-Pierre, they were met with spectacular imagery that warned against sin, and reminded them of Christ's sacrifice and his final coming. The portal at Moissac would have been a veritable feast for the Romanesque viewer's eyes and souls.

Last Judgment, Tympanum, Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun (France)

by Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

In this conversation, Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris discuss the Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal on west facade of the Cathedral of St. Lazare in Autun, from c. 1130-46. Click here to watch the video.



Figure **14.2.60**: Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare, Autun, France, c. 1120-35, church 1120-46 (consecrated in 1130). 11 feet 4, inches x 21 feet at its base. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Zucker: The prospect of spending an eternity in Hell is terrifying even in the abstract, but to be confronted with images that depict this must have really scared the medieval mind.

Dr. Harris: We're looking up at the doorway of the Cathedral of Autun which represents, I think, the most terrifying image of The Last Judgement, of the damned in Hell that exists in art history.

Dr. Zucker: Of course it also includes Heaven, but I think people were, probably, spending much more time looking and fearing Hell. This is a sculpture that is one of the first monumental sculptures to be made in the Medieval period. There had been, of course, monumental sculpture in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome but after the 5th Century or so, monumental sculpture really fell away and this has been part because of the economic and political chaos of the Medieval Period. It's at this time, around 1000 or just after that things begin to stabilize.

Dr. Harris: There's an enormous building boom of churches in Europe during this time and we begin to see monumental sculpture on the doorways of churches and inside the churches on the capitals.

Dr. Zucker: We have this magnificent new cathedral at Autun and it's important to remember that this was because of the relics that were here.

Dr. Harris: Pilgrims were traveling all over Europe during this period to visit the relics, the parts of saints. In this case, here at Autun, the bones of St. Lazarus. Each church had relics.

Dr. Zucker: The relics were extremely important. It was believed that they could heal the sick, that could offer blessings that might even shorten one's time in [pb_glossary id="996″]purgatory [/pb_glossary]if you came and paid homage to them, if you prayed to them.

Dr. Harris: Often churches were refurbished or special reliquaries were made to house those relics, but in the case of Autun, this church was built specifically to house the relics of St. Lazarus. They built a whole church for their relics.

Dr. Zucker: Of course there's the spiritual dimension, but there's also an economic dimension; these relics were economic engines for a community because you had these pilgrims come in, they needed to stay in inns, they needed to eat, there was a real economic prosperity that surrounded important relics. That's certainly the case here. If you think about Lazarus, the person whose bones are within the church, this is the brother of Mary who Christ brought back to life, according to the New Testament. This is about rebirth, about a kind of hope after death. Of course, that is the subject of The Last Judgement.

Dr. Harris: So we imagine the faithful looking up at this doorway reading the "sermon in stone," as Bernard of Clairvaux said, the story of The Last Judgement, people were illiterate, this was how they learned these stories.

Dr. Zucker: The images really were text and we are meant to read them, so let's go ahead and do exactly that.

Dr. Harris: So, we have the most obvious figure, Christ, in the center. He's bigger than everybody else.



Figure **14.2.61**: Christ in Majesty, Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare, Autun (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Zucker: This is a kind of organization, the most important figure is largest by far. He's so flat, he's so linear, and there's no concern with the proportions of his body.

Dr. Harris: He's elongated and we see lines that are carved into the stones to indicate these repeated folds of drapery.

Dr. Zucker: There's real concern with the decorative.

Dr. Harris: He's frontal, he's symmetrical, he's this divine figure who stares out in judgement.

Dr. Zucker: He stares out past us as if he's on a plan that is completely different from ours. He sits on a throne that is the city of Heaven and you can make out the little arched windows both below his feet and as if it was actually the furniture that he sits upon. Of course that's a literal reading and this is meant to be metaphoric. His hands and his halo and his feet break the mandorla. This almond shape that completely encloses his body and is meant to function as almost a kind of a full body halo, a representation of his divinity.

Dr. Harris: There are four angels that surround him that seem to be ushering him forward.

Dr. Zucker: They also are literally holding up the mandorla as if this divine light that surrounds Christ has weight.

Dr. Harris: And like Christ, those angels are also elongated, their bodies move and twist in these wonderful ways.

Dr. Zucker: There is this incredible expressiveness.

Dr. Harris: We read images of The Last Judgement thinking about Christ's left and Christ's right. On Christ's left are the damned, going to Hell and on his right are the blessed who've been selected for Heaven.

Dr. Zucker: On Christ's right, at the top, we see the Virgin Mary who's enthroned in Heaven. There's an angel next to her.

Dr. Harris: Blowing a trumpet to awaken the dead and to announce the coming of Christ.

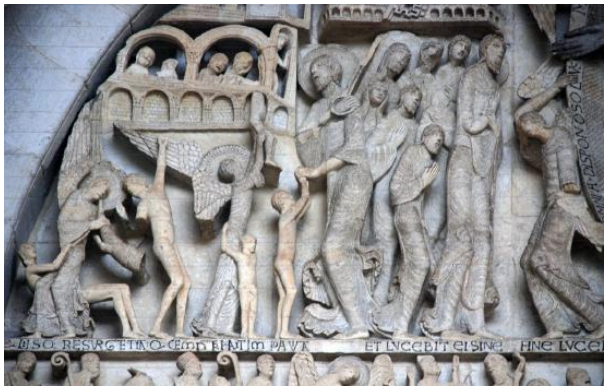


Figure **14.2.62**: The Blessed, Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare, Autun (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Zucker: We can see the architecture of Heaven itself with some blessed souls within it. We can see angels, as well, assisting the blessed into Heaven. It's interesting to note that souls are represented as nude figures.

Dr. Harris: One of the most famous parts of this Tympanum is the figure of St. Michael who is weighing souls, a demon seems to be trying to tip the scales in favor of those who have sinned so they can get more souls for Hell.

Dr. Zucker: It's so interesting to think about this literal representation of the weighing of souls, that morality has gravity in some way.

Dr. Harris: Look at that figure who hides in the drapery, those curling, lovely swirls of drapery of St. Michael. That figure is so different from the figures to the right who are being pulled up by hooks, by a demon, into the fires of Hell who have realized that they're going to spend eternity being tortured.

Dr. Zucker: It's pretty bad.

Dr. Harris: It's terrifying.



Figure 14.2.63: The Damned, Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare, Autun, France. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Zucker: I find the demons much more interesting. Their mouths are gaping open, they look just ravenous as if they're ready to eat those souls. They've got claws, there's a three headed serpent wrapping around the legs of one of the devils. There really are images of horror here.

Dr. Harris: There's an inscription right below the figures that make this point exactly. It reads, "May this terror terrify those whom earthly error bind, for the horror of these images here in this manner truly depicts what will be." In the Medieval mind there is no doubt this will happen and where will you be when this happens?

Dr. Zucker: And don't look to Christ because Christ is looking past us, it's too late. So, let's move down then to the area that's closest to us that speaks to this issue of which side will we be on. The tympanum itself is that lunette, it's that half circle, but it's supported by a long cross beam which is called a lintel. This is the moment when the dead are lifted out of their graves, are resurrected to be judged. This is kind of a line, waiting, for the judgement.

Dr. Harris: They're literally, at this moment, emerging from their tombs.

Dr. Zucker: You can see the sarcophagi at their feet. I see an angel that is clearly helping one soul, but on either side there are two other souls who seem to desperately clutch at that angel hoping that he'll bring them along as well. As we move to the center, things almost seem to become a little less certain. You can see two people's purses, one with a cross, one with a scalloped shell. This would be a reference to pilgrims who had perhaps gone to Jerusalem, who had perhaps gone to Spain trying to visit important relics so that they might be among the blessed.

Dr. Harris: Right, to improve their chances of getting into Heaven.

Dr. Zucker: And if you didn't, things would not always work out well.

Dr. Harris: And so we see exactly that. Directly below Christ we see an angel wielding a sword toward a terrified figure, who, with his eyes bulging, seems to try to move away from the angel.

Dr. Zucker: And in fact everybody who's in front of the angel looks absolutely terrified. Look at the figure that is kneeling, clutching the sides of his head, almost as if he's saying, "How could this be true? How can it "have come to this?"



Figure **14.2.64**: Weighing Souls, Last Judgment Tympanum, Central Portal, West Facade, Cathédrale St-Lazare, Autun. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dr. Harris: If you continue to bring your eye toward the right we see figures who are contorted in this recognition of their fate in Hell. They bend their knees, they form angular shapes with their bodies, compressed as though they're being crushed into Hell. It's incredibly expressive in their bodies.

Dr. Zucker: Dramatic, absolutely, but probably nothing is more dramatic than the realization on the face of the soul who's head is being clutched by two enormous claws—the hands, presumably, of a devil who's being plucked up into Hell.

Dr. Harris: You can see that the sculptor carved the eyes deeply, carved the open mouth deeply so that we get a sense of his, almost, primal scream. Our historians have interpreted an inscription on the doorway which reads, "," Gislebertus made this, as being an inscription referring
to the sculptor himself.

Dr. Zucker: That would be extremely unusual. In the modern era we associate artwork with the genius of the individual, but in the Medieval Period artists were craftsman, artists were not seen as individual geniuses. So these objects were not signed.

Dr. Harris: But it was so nice to imagine that we knew the name of the artist who did this.

Dr. Zucker: There has been some new scholarship that suggests that perhaps we have been misled and that Gislebertus is not actually the name of the artist.

Dr. Harris: The recent scholarship suggests that Gislebertus is actually the name of a Duke who was associated with bringing the bones of St. Lazarus to Autun, so in a way, legitimizing this church as the rightful place for the bones of Lazarus.

Dr. Zucker: But even if we don't know the name of the artist, we do know the power of his work.

Dr. Harris: There's no doubt about that

The Romanesque churches of Tuscany: San Miniato in Florence and Pisa Cathedral

by Dr. Diane Reilly



Figure **14.2.65**: San Miniato al Monte, Florence, begun 1013. (Photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **14.2.66**: Map of Roman roads on the Italian peninsula. (Image: Eric Gaba, Agamemnus, Flappiefh, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Before the Italian peninsula was unified into a single nation in the nineteenth century, it was divided into numerous separate countries, papal-controlled territories, and city states with constantly shifting boundaries. Unlike regions north of the Alps, in Italy the durable old Roman roads that snaked down the length of the peninsula were preserved by mild weather and continuous use. The former Roman cities along these roads became hubs of trade. These included Florence on the Via Cassia between Rome and the old central Italian heartland, and Pisa, on the Via Aurelia between Rome and what was known as “Roman Gaul” (today France and Belgium).

Roman walls, aqueducts, monuments, and buildings dotted the landscape, and this Roman heritage profoundly impacted the appearance of the region’s churches. During the middle ages, residents of the cities of Tuscany valued their Roman past, particularly as it was associated with the origins of institutional Christianity. Although Tuscany was a duchy and controlled by the Canossa family, in reality the cities of Tuscany soon established their own governments and civic identities.

Florence and Pisa are wonderful examples of this. During the eleventh century, each city’s Roman heritage was still visible in the form of roads and bridges, walls and cemeteries, but each city also took on its own character based on the preferences of its inhabitants and the sources of their economic strength. The architecture of San Miniato in Florence and the Cathedral of Pisa visibly express both their unique regional and civic qualities, as well as links to the Roman past.

A monastery on a hill

The church of the Benedictine monastery of San Miniato al Monte (see Figure **14.2.65**) lies outside the early medieval walls and across the Arno from Florence. It hovers over the city on the crest of a hill, or “monte,” where Florentines believed the cell of Saint Minias, an Armenian Christian hermit who was allegedly martyred by the Roman Emperor Decius in the third century, once stood. By 1018, the bishop of Florence had ordered the construction of a church and installed a community of Benedictine monks there, following a familiar medieval pattern of locating monasteries outside, but within a short distance of, a city so that the monks could minister to the spiritual needs of the city’s inhabitants.



Figure **14.2.67**: Crypt (below the high altar), San Miniato al Monte, Florence, begun 1013. (Photo: Rufus46, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A synthesis of forms

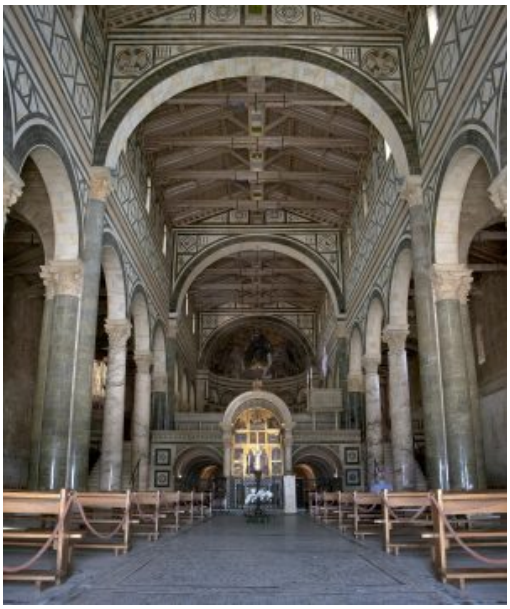


Figure **14.2.68**: View down the nave toward the raised chancel. Wooden trusses are visible above and diaphram arches can be seen spanning the width of the nave. San Miniato al Monte, Florence, begun 1013. (Photo: Waldstein, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The builders cleverly designed the church so that it could accommodate visitors to the tomb of Minias. Adapting a basilica -style structure with its single apse and a trussed timber roof , the builders incorporated an innovative raised chancel . Central stairways allow visitors to see and visit the crypt housing Minias's relics, while flanking stairways lead to an elevated platform holding the altar and choir used by the monks.



Figure **14.2.69**: Corinthian capital, San Miniato al Monte, Florence, begun 1013. (Photo: Rufus46, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A similar synthesis of ancient, Early Christian, and medieval forms is visible in the church's walls. An arcade of polished stone columns supporting Corinthian capitals march down the nave, above which colorful stone inlay brightens the surface—all

reminiscent of Early Christian basilicas like Santa Sabina in Rome. Many of the capitals are Roman spolia, noticeable because they are much narrower than the columns they crown.

The roots of Florentine style

Yet onto this traditional framework the builders grafted imposing diaphragm arches that divide the nave into three massive bays, marked on the walls with attached columns and compound piers. The green and white stone inlay familiar from some Early Christian interiors clads the surfaces of the façade and the interior (though in some places, after money ran out, artists imitated the decorative stone in paint). This style of construction, joining modified basilican architecture with colorful, two-dimensional stone inlay, would become typical of the Florentine region.



Figure **14.2.70**: San Miniato al Monte, Florence, begun 1013. (Photo: Rufus46, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The façade also references the Roman past. Although the component parts are flattened and rendered in pink, green and white stone, we can still identify an orderly row of columns topped by Corinthian capitals, crowned by a set of four Corinthian pilasters holding a triangular pediment that recalls a Roman temple front. In the fifteenth century, the Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti, would use many of the same elements in crafting the typically Tuscan façade of Santa Maria Novella , across town.



Figure **14.2.71**: Baptistery, cathedral, and campanile, Piazza dei Miracoli, Pisa, 11th-12th century. (Photo: Massimo Catarinella, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **14.2.72**: Campanile (bell tower), Piazza dei Miracoli, Pisa, begun 1173. (Photo: Nikolai Karaneschev, CC BY 3.0)

The Arno, the river that flows through Florence, eventually reaches the city of Pisa on its way to the Mediterranean Sea. In the Middle Ages, before the river’s silt deposits pushed the sea away, Pisa was located very near the coast. It was an important port city from Roman times onwards, and by the eleventh century it became a maritime republic (a city-state whose economic base was maritime trade), competing with the other Italian naval powerhouses like Genoa, Venice, and Amalfi to dominate Mediterranean trade. Pisa warred constantly with rival maritime powers in Corsica, Sicily, North Africa and on the Italian mainland. The cathedral for which it is now famous was built starting in 1063, in the wake of, and using booty from, Pisa’s naval victory over Palermo.

Like most cathedrals on the Italian peninsula, Pisa’s was built as an assemblage of freestanding buildings, including a baptistery and bell tower (campanile) in addition to the church. The Pisa cathedral complex was unusual, however, in that it was situated well outside the city walls in a grassy precinct that incorporated an ancient cemetery. Surrounded by the marshes of the Arno, the precinct’s damp soil contributed to unstable ground under the complex’s key structures, most noticeable in the campanile, which began to lean even while it was still being built in the twelfth century.

Old meets new

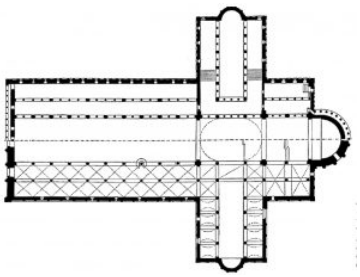


Figure **14.2.73**: Plan of Pisa Cathedral, begun 1063, from Georg Dehio, Die kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes (1887), plate 68. (Heidelberg University Library, via Smarthistory)

Pisa Cathedral, like San Miniato, borrows heavily from the architectural past. It has a basilica footprint with double aisles separated from the nave by colossal Corinthian columns, a trussed timber roof, and a single semicircular apse, all perhaps intended to recall Old St. Peter’s in Rome. Each of the arms of the transept repeats this basic formula on a smaller scale, with single aisles flanking a central space that leads to a smaller apse, creating a four-armed ground plan. This and the substantial galleries below clerestory windows recall the basilicas of the early Byzantine east.



Figure **14.2.74**: Interior, Pisa Cathedral, begun 1063. (Photo: Tango7174, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The builders also added new features. Above the arcade and galleries and between the clerestory windows one finds expanses of cream and green striped wall. Although the pattern here is different from that found on the walls of San Miniato in Florence, both share the same complexity and conspicuous display of expensive materials.

An unusual dome

Although they probably originally planned a simpler wooden covering for the crossing, by the end of the eleventh century the builders had begun to construct a dome, perhaps to keep pace with contemporary domes built north of Tuscany in Lombardy, or even by Pisa's economic rival, Venice. The unusual and complicated elliptical shape was dictated by the rectangular outline of the crossing created by the meeting of the nave, choir and transepts. The builders bridged the corners of this opening under the dome's base with Byzantine-inspired squinches that resemble those built at Hosios Loukas in Greece just a few years before. Above the squinches, subtlely incised blind arcades can be seen. The colorful fresco depicting the Assumption of the Virgin was added in the 17th century.

A virtual Holy Land



Figure **14.2.75**: Pisa Cathedral, begun 1063. (Photo: Stefan Lew, CC0 1.0)

Most impressive to medieval visitors would have been the exterior. The simple geometry of the façade immediately recalls San Miniato's stack of rectangles and triangles, all resting on a shallow arcade with Corinthian capitals that frame three doors. At Pisa, though, above the ground floor, the façade becomes dramatically three-dimensional, with open arcades that screen a wall decorated with grey and white stripes.



Figure **14.2.76**: Pisa Cathedral, begun 1063. (Photo: © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 3.0)

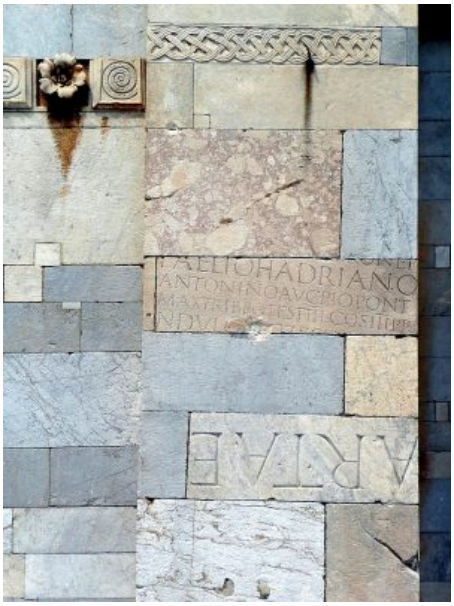


Figure **14.2.77**: Spolia on the exterior of Pisa Cathedral. (Photo: Lucarelli, CC BY-SA 3.0)

On the church's sides, transept, and apse, the grey and white stone has been embellished with blind arcades and colonnades (rows of columns). Lozenges, roundels, and rectangles of multicolored stone inlay dot the exterior.

Reused stones covered with inscriptions and sarcophagi imported from Rome are inserted seemingly at random: a testimony to the builders' desire to invent an ancient heritage for the building and demonstrate the wealth and power of Pisa.

The other buildings in the complex, built starting in the twelfth century after the Pisan navy participated in the First Crusade, complete this sumptuous display. The centrally-planned, domed baptistery may have been intended to imitate the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It and the leaning campanile are completely encased in stacked arcades, mirroring those on the cathedral. The "Camposanto," an enclosed cemetery, was filled with earth imported from the Holy Land in the holds of Pisan ships. Pisans may have imagined this collection of buildings, with its many references to ancient Christian sites, as a virtual Holy Land, a site they were then trying to reconquer.

Each a product of its particular region, San Miniato and Pisa Cathedral speak to the ways that medieval builders sought to express their cities' unique identities through both ancient allusions and innovative forms.



Figure 14.2.78: Pisa Cathedral, begun 1063. (Photo: Dr. Cerise Myers, CC BY)

The Bayeux Tapestry

by Dr. Kristine Tanton



Figure 14.2.79: Viewing the Bayeux tapestry at the Bayeux Tapestry Museum; Bayeux tapestry, c. 1070. Embroidered wool on linen, 20" high. Bayeux Tapestry Museum, France. (Photo: boris does burg, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 14.2.80: Map showing the location of the Battle of Hastings. (Image via Smarthistory)

Measuring twenty inches high and almost 230 feet in length, the Bayeux Tapestry commemorates a struggle for the throne of England between William, the Duke of Normandy, and Harold, the Earl of Wessex (Normandy is a region in northern France). The year was 1066—William invaded and successfully conquered England, becoming the first Norman King of England (he was also known as William the Conqueror).

The Bayeux Tapestry consists of seventy-five scenes with Latin inscriptions (tituli) depicting the events leading up to the Norman conquest and culminating in the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The textile's end is now missing, but it most probably showed the coronation of William as King of England.



Figure **14.2.81**: Falconer (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Although it is called the Bayeux Tapestry, this commemorative work is not a true tapestry as the images are not woven into the cloth; instead, the imagery and inscriptions are embroidered using wool yarn sewed onto linen cloth.

The tapestry is sometimes viewed as a type of chronicle. However, the inclusion of episodes that do not relate to the historic events of the Norman Conquest complicate this categorization. Nevertheless, it presents a rich representation of a particular historic moment as well as providing an important visual source for eleventh-century textiles that have not survived into the twenty-first century.



Figure **14.2.82**: Normans with horses on boats, crossing to England, in preparation for battle (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Bayeux Tapestry was probably made in Canterbury around 1070. Because the tapestry was made within a generation of the Norman defeat of the Anglo-Saxons, it is considered to be a somewhat accurate representation of events. Based on a few key pieces of evidence, art historians believe the patron was Odo, Bishop of Bayeux. Odo was the half-brother of William, Duke of Normandy. Furthermore, the tapestry favorably depicts the Normans in the events leading up to the battle of Hastings, thus presenting a Norman point of view. Most importantly, Odo appears in several scenes in the tapestry with the inscription ODO EPISCOPUS (abbreviated “EPS” in Figure **14.2.83**), although he is only mentioned briefly in textual sources. By the late Middle Ages, the tapestry was displayed at Bayeux Cathedral, which was build by Odo and dedicated in 1077, but its size and secular subject matter suggest that it may have been intended to be a secular hanging, perhaps in Odo’s hall.



Figure **14.2.83**: The inscription (partially cut off in the reproduction above) above Odo reads, “Here, Odo the Bishop, with a staff (baculum) encourages the young warriors,” Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

We do not know the identity of the artists who produced the tapestry. The high quality of the needlework suggests that Anglo-Saxon embroiderers produced the tapestry. At the time, Anglo-Saxon needlework was prized throughout Europe. This theory is supported by stylistic analysis of the depicted scenes, which draw from Anglo-Saxon drawing techniques. Many of the scenes are believed to have been adapted from images in manuscripts illuminated at Canterbury.



Figure **14.2.84**: The death of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The artists skillfully organized the composition of the tapestry to lead the viewer’s eye from one scene to the next and divided the compositional space into three horizontal zones. The main events of the story are contained within the larger middle zone. The upper and lower zones contain images of animals and people, scenes from Aesop’s Fables, and scenes of husbandry and hunting. At times the images in the borders interact with and draw attention to key moments in the narrative (as in the image of the battle in Figure **14.2.84**).

The seventy-five episodes depicted present a continuous narrative of the events leading up to the Battle of Hastings and the battle itself. A continuous narrative presents multiple scenes of a narrative within a single frame and draws from manuscript traditions such as the scroll form. The subject matter of the tapestry, however, has more in common with ancient monumental decoration such as Trajan’s Column, which typically focused on mythic and historical references.



Figure **14.2.85**: Servants preparing food (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The embroiderers' attention to specific details provides important sources for scenes of eleventh-century life as well as objects that no longer survive. In one scene of the Normans' first meal after reaching the shores of England, we see dining practices. We also see examples of armor used in the period and battle preparations. To the left of the dining scene, servants prepare food over a fire and bake bread in an outdoor oven (see Figure **14.2.85**). Servants serve the food as the tapestry's assumed patron, Bishop Odo, blesses the meal (see Figure **14.2.86**).



Figure **14.2.86**: The Normans' first meal in England, at the center is Bishop Odo, who gazes out as he offers a blessing over the cup in his hand.(detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Immediately after dining, William and his half-brothers Odo and Robert meet for a war council. Preparations for battle flank both sides of the first meal episode. Here we see visual evidence of eleventh-century battle gear and the construction of a motte-and-bailey to protect the Normans' position. A motte-and-bailey is a fortification with a keep (tower) situated on a raised earthwork (motte), surrounded by an enclosed courtyard (bailey). Images of battle horns, shields, and arrows as crucial ammunition shed light on military provisions and tactics for the time period.



Figure **14.2.87**: Preparations for war, including the building of a motte-and-bailey (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

William's tactical use of cavalry is displayed in the "Cavalry" scene. The cavalry could advance quickly and easily retreat, which would scatter an opponent's defenses allowing the infantry to invade. It was a strong tactic that was flexible and intimidating. Although foot soldiers are included in the tapestry, the cavalry commands the scene, thus presenting the impression that the Normans were a cavalry-dominant army.



Figure 14.2.88: Cavalry and foot soldiers in battle (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In addition to depicting military tactics used in the Norman Conquest, the scene also provides visual evidence for eleventh-century battle gear. Cavalrymen are shown wearing conical steel helmets with a protective nose plate, mail shirts, and carrying shields and spears whereas the foot soldiers are seen carrying spears and axes. Representations of the cavalry show that the soldiers were armored but the horses were not. The brutality of war is evident in the battle scenes. Figures of mortally wounded men and horses are strewn along the tapestry's lower zone as well as within the main central zone.



Figure 14.2.89: Wounded soldiers and horses (detail), Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1070. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Bayeux Tapestry provides an excellent example of Anglo-Norman art. It serves as a medieval artifact that operates as art, chronicle, political propaganda, and visual evidence of eleventh-century mundane objects, all at a monumental scale. This astounding work continues to fascinate.

The Utrecht Psalter and its influence

Editors' Note: Most of the manuscripts art historians study are copies of other manuscripts. Sometimes connections can be drawn between multiple manuscripts; one striking example is the use of the Early Medieval Psalter now in the library of Utrecht University as a model for the images in two Psalters made hundreds of years later. Remember that a Psalter is a Christian book, which sets translations of the Hebrew Psalms in their Christian liturgical context. There are now two ways of numbering the Psalms. The Hebrew number appears first in captions here, with the Vulgate number in parentheses next to it.

Transcript of a conversation between Dr. Kathleen Doyle of The British Library and Dr. Beth Harris.

Beth Harris: We're in the British Library, very fortunate to be looking at the Utrecht Psalter. It's especially fascinating today in this Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms exhibition to see this book near other manuscripts that it influenced.

Kathleen Doyle: I'm tremendously excited to conclude the exhibition with the extraordinary Utrecht Psalter and two of its early copies. It was made in France during the reign of Louis the Pious. So, in the early 9th century.

Beth Harris We're referring to the time when Charlemagne and his successors ruled much of Europe.

Kathleen Doyle: And this must be one of the most elaborate and creative and interesting manuscripts ever made.

Beth Harris We may be used to seeing manuscript illuminations where you have, for example, an evangelist page, a page that introduces the text of manuscript.



Figure **14.2.90**: Lindisfarne Gospels, folio 137v, Evangelist Portrait of Luke, early 8th century, Northumbria. Ink and paint on parchment. British Library, Cotton MS Nero D IV. (Photo: British Library, via Smarthistory)

But here what's so wonderful about The Utrecht Psalter is that we have these illustrations that tie very tightly to the text and really bring it alive.



Figure **14.2.91**: Utrecht Psalter, fol. 8r, illustration to Psalm 15(16):5, about 825. Ink on parchment 330 x 255 (244 x 222) mm. Utrecht University Library, Netherlands. (Utrecht University Library, via Smarthistory)

Kathleen Doyle: It's revolutionary approach. Every Psalm gets its own, it's almost like a comic strip kind of layout. This horizontal register of images and this is a combination of quite literal depictions of a word of phrase in the relevant Psalm and also, a more Christological interpretation, an understanding of the Psalms as a prefiguration of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. For example, at the bottom of this page you see a man who's touching his lips and he's holding a cup. And this refers to a phrase in the Psalm [15(16):5] which says, “the Lord is my inheritance and my cup.”



Figure **14.2.92**: Utrecht Psalter, fol. 8r illustration to Psalm 15(16):5 (detail) about 825. Ink on parchment. Utrecht University Library, Netherlands. (Utrecht University Library via Smarthistory)

So it's a very direct picking up of that phrase, but other images are much more interpretive. We have a man leaning down to pull two figures out of a hole. This is probably the Harrowing of Hell, Christ rescuing Adam and Eve. And comes from another verse in the Psalm. That verse [15:1] is, “because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.”

Beth Harris: So what we're seeing here is this Old Testament--this Jewish Bible--Psalm, interpreted in the light of Christianity, of Christ's descent into hell and bringing out souls from hell including those of Adam and Eve. And what I love especially about these illustrations is these lovely fluid lines that have a lot of energy, but they're also very expressive of human emotion. And so Adam and Eve reaching up to Christ to save them from the mouth of hell or, one of my favorites, is in Psalm 13 one of the lines is, “You have confounded the counsel of the poor man.”



Figure **14.2.93**: Utrecht Psalter, fol. 7v, illustration to Psalm 13(14):6, about 825. Ink on parchment. Utrecht University Library, Netherlands. (Utrecht University Library via Smarthistory)

And we see what looks like a woman with smaller figures, perhaps children and a sense of their being neglected. They seem in need of pity and sympathy, which the woman in front of them is pleading with the ruler to provide to them, but he is involved in evil and we see those serpents twining around the canopy that he sits under and the violence around him. These are people who are not listening to the word of God. And we see God above them surrounded by angels.

Kathleen Doyle: This agitated, gestural, very emotional, as you say, style had an incredible impact on the art of Anglo-Saxon England, which is why it's in the exhibition.

And we can see the influence of this in the book that's placed right next to it: the Harley Psalter. The figures and what they're doing, the way they look is exactly the same. Almost an exact copy of the Utrecht Psalter.
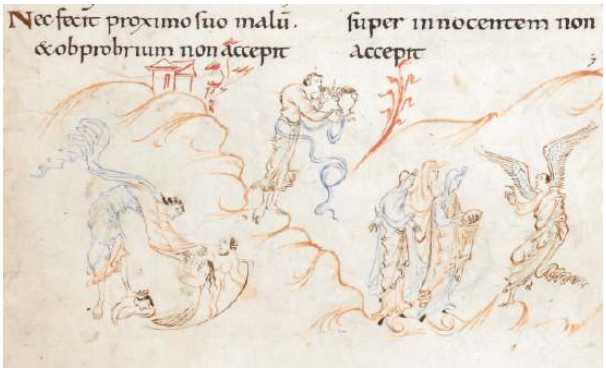


Figure **14.2.94**: Harley Psalter, illustration to Psalm 15(16):5, Harley MS 603, fol. 8r, (detail), Canterbury, England, first half of the 11th century. Colored inks on parchment, 380 x 310 mm. British Library, London, England. (Photo: The British Library, public domain)

So this is the evidence that that earlier book was in England by around the year 1000 when this book was made. However, there's an immediate difference.

Beth Harris: Ink in different colors.

Kathleen Doyle: Right. So we've gone from the text in all capitals in the earlier book and all of the illustrations have this very delicate ink line drawing, but the ink was all black. Here it's been enlivened and the ink is in red, green, blue and it transforms how it looks on the page.

Beth Harris: And we see again that kind of fluttering drapery.

Kathleen Doyle: Exactly

Beth Harris: And the enlarged hands which are very expressive. So we can really read the story.

Kathleen Doyle: They're very sophisticated books, as you've just articulated. Some of the visual commentary on the Psalms are quite complicated. Moreover, we've got a change in the actual text itself. By tradition, Saint Jerome, working at the behest of the pope, made three translations of the Psalms into Latin. The first one is the version that's here in the Harley Psalter, which is known as the Roman version because it was adopted by the church in Rome. It was, in the Anglo-Saxon period, the version that most often occurred in English Psalters. In contrast, the Utrecht Psalter has the Gallican version that was adopted in Gaul.

In the Eadwine Psalter, we've moved another century later. Here three versions appear in parallel columns so the Gallicanum, the Roman, and the Hebraicum, but moreover, you've got two more versions.

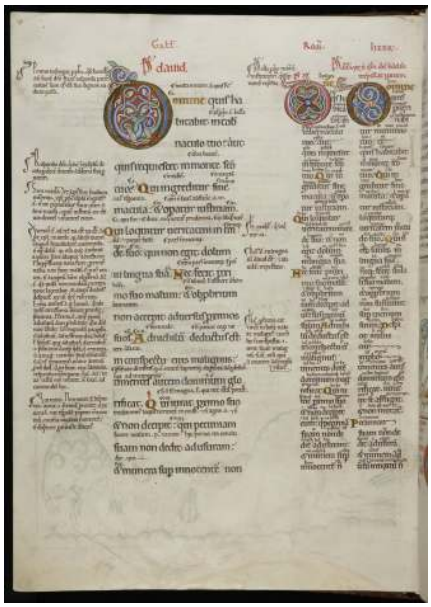


Figure **14.2.95**: Eadwine Psalter, fol. 23v, text of Psalm 13(14), Canterbury, England, around 1150. Colored inks and paint on parchment, 46 x 33 cm. Trinity College, Cambridge, England. (Photo: Trinity College, CC BY-NC 4.0)

In the column closest to the gutter, you have little translations of the Latin words written in Anglo-Norman French.



Figure **14.2.96**: Eadwine Psalter, fol. 23v (detail) text of Psalm 13(14), Canterbury, England, around 1150. (Photo: Trinity College, CC BY-NC 4.0)

So this is the language, after the Norman Conquest, of the new aristocracy. Next to it, above the Romanum version, you have little words in old English. This is the language of the old aristocracy. And then all around are words and phrases and marginal glosses, which is a Latin commentary explaining, in many cases, the Christological understanding of the Psalms. So this is an extraordinarily complex book.

Beth Harris: Although we see a lot of similarities to the earlier illustrations, we do see some differences here.

Kathleen Doyle: This is a much bigger book. So Psalm 14, instead of taking half a page, takes a whole page and a half. So on this one, you only get one illustration. It's colored, it's line drawings, but we're seeing them move into what we sometimes refer to as Romanesque art.



Figure **14.2.97**: Eadwine Psalter, fol. 24r (detail), illustration of Psalm 13(14), Canterbury, England, around 1150. (Photo: Trinity College, CC BY-NC 4.0)

The fluttering draperies you mentioned, they're gone. Everything's straight, it's linear, it's more patterned, It's more static. The illustration has been put in a box so it's separated from the text. We're entering into, again, a different aesthetic, but again, faithfully, keeping the sort of details: the man holding his cup, Christ reaching down to rescue Adam and Eve. Every time I come in and look at the details I see something new.

Beth Harris: What a treat to see these three manuscripts side-by-side here in this remarkable exhibition of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms in the British Library. It's really wonderful to be here.

Kathleen Doyle: Thank you.

Durham Cathedral: A Conversation

by Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

This conversation took place in Durham Cathedral (Durham, England), begun c. 1093. Speakers: Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris. The transcription has been abbreviated; watch the full video here.



Figure **14.2.98**: Interior of Durham Cathedral, Durham, England, begun c. 1093. (Photo: Michael D. Beckwith, CC0 1.0)

Steven: We're in Durham Cathedral at the top of a hill in north eastern England. This is one of the great early cathedrals.

Beth: And it's built less than three decades after the Norman Conquest, that is, after William the Conqueror crossed the channel with his army and invaded and took over England in a rather brutal invasion and replaced the old order of Anglo-Saxon England for this new Norman order, and built many churches, among the first of which is Durham Cathedral.…

Steven: English history is complicated. We have native peoples here that were conquered by the Romans who then left in the early fifth century. The political vacuum was then filled by invaders from what is now southern Denmark and northern Germany, peoples that we call the Angles and the Saxons, or the Anglo-Saxons.

Beth: And then Anglo-Saxon England is supplanted by Norman England and this is one of the first Anglo-Norman churches, and we feel the ancientness of this building. It is heavy, it feels fortified, and in that way we know that we're standing in a Romanesque church.

Steven: This was some of the earliest large-scale architecture to take place since the Romans had left, and we call it Romanesque because this architecture was dependent on the technology that the Romans had originally used, that is the round arch.

Beth: One of the things that one notices immediately was how decorative the surfaces are, that is a key feature of Anglo-Norman Romanesque that differentiates it from what was going on on the French continent.

Steven: We're standing in the nave and we're surrounded by these massive piers that hold up the heavy vaulting above us, and there are basically two types of piers that alternate. One is a simple cylindrical pier, and the other is a more complex and larger compound pier that has attached columns.

Beth: And the cylindrical piers are the ones that carry this amazing linear decoration. When we walk in from the west and we see fluted columns. As we make our way east towards the holiest end of the church we see cylindrical piers decorated with chevrons, these zig-zag shapes. And then we come upon lozenge shapes, and in each case really deeply cut creating dark shadows that were likely originally painted.



Figure **14.2.99**: Durham Cathedral, begun c. 1093. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And if you look closely you'll notice that ingeniously the stonemasons created a kind of mass production, each stone is identical to another and yet when they fit together they create these continuous patterns.

Beth: And this is a testament to the increasing skill of stonemasons during the Romanesque period.…

Steven: The inter-elevation is three-part. Above the nave arcade is this broad, heavy gallery.

Beth: I'm struck by the depth of the archway and the rolls of molding that lead our eye up to that gallery and we can see that in some cases that molding is decorated with that chevron zig-zag pattern in these wonderfully complex ways.

Steven: And we see that chevron zig-zag everywhere in this church. It creates the most lively pattern that activates the surfaces of stones.

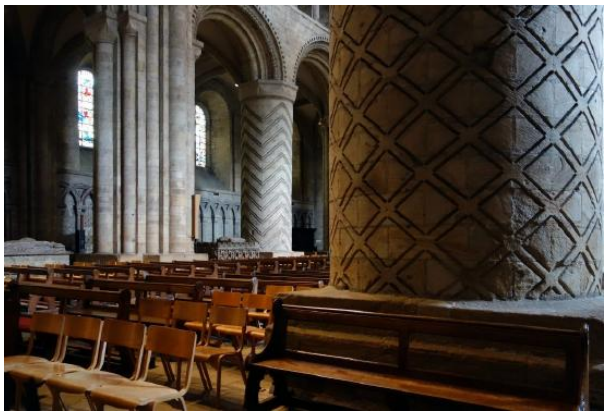


Figure **14.2.100**: Durham Cathedral, begun c. 1093. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Now the church is relatively dark as most Romanesque churches are. We can see a clerestory which is rather small and interestingly those windows are slightly inset, again we have a sense of the depth of the wall.

Steven: There is in fact a narrow walkway that moves just in front of those windows.

Beth: So this idea of emphasizing the depth of the wall, this interesting decorative carving, these are all things that art historians sees carrying through after the Romanesque into the English Gothic.

Steven: And one of my favorite decorative aspects of the church can be seen in the aisles. We see these doubled attached columns with these interlacing arches just above. It's almost musical.

Beth: We have to imagine these painted in reds and greens and yellows so they would have really stood out. Art historians believe that these might be influenced by the art of Islamic Spain.

Steven: For example, in the great mosque at Cordoba we see interlacing similar to this. An aspect of this church that fascinates art historians is the vaulting, because here we see the precocious early use of ribbed vaulting.

Beth: Ribbed vaulting does in some form go back to the ancient Romans, but its use here is very important because we know what's going to follow in the Gothic. Before stone vaulting, churches had been covered with wood, sometimes even flat wood ceilings. And so not only was stone vaulting more fireproof, it allowed for a shaping of space that was far more decorative.

Beth: If we follow the lines of the vault, we notice that it leads our eye down a shaft which is attached to the compound pier, and so you have this unifying of the nave from the ground all the way up through and across the transverse arch that takes to the other side of the nave. This unification of space is something that will become very important in the Gothic era…

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- Boundless Art History, "The Vikings" (CC BY-SA)
- Victoria Valdes, "https://smarthistory.org/ottonian-art-an-introduction/," in *Smarthistory*, December 25, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Andreas Petzold, "Gospel Book of Otto III," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Andreas Petzold, "A beginner's guide to Romanesque art," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Valerie Spanswick, "A beginner's guide to Romanesque architecture," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
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- Dr. Diane Reilly, "The Romanesque churches of Tuscany: San Miniato in Florence and Pisa Cathedral," in *Smarthistory*, May 11, 2018. (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Kristine Tanton, "The Bayeux Tapestry," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Kathleen Doyle, The British Library and Dr. Beth Harris, "The Utrecht Psalter and its influence," in *Smarthistory*, February 8, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
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14.3: Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest

Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy

by Dr. Evan Freeman

The “Iconoclastic Controversy” over religious images was a defining moment in the history of the Eastern Roman “Byzantine” Empire. Centered in Byzantium’s capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) from the 700s–843, imperial and Church authorities debated whether religious images should be used in Christian worship or banned. Who were the players and what was this Controversy all about?



Figure **14.3.1**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire at its greatest extent in the mid-6th century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

Key Terms



Figure **14.3.2**: Icon of Christ, Thessaloniki, Greece, late 14th century. Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Icons (Greek for “images”) refers to the religious images of Byzantium, made from a variety of media, which depict holy figures and events.

Iconoclasm refers to any destruction of images, including the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries, although the Byzantines themselves did not use this term.

Iconomachy (Greek for “image struggle”) was the term the Byzantines used to describe the Iconoclastic Controversy.

Iconoclasts (Greek for “breakers of images”) refers to those who opposed icons.

Iconophiles (Greek for “lovers of images”), also known as “iconodules” (Greek for “servants of images”), refers to those who supported the use of religious images.

What was the big deal?

Debating for over a century whether religious images should or should not be allowed may puzzle us today. But in Byzantium, religious images were bound up in religious belief and practice. In a society with no concept of separation of church and state, religious orthodoxy (right belief) was believed to impact not only the salvation of individual souls, but also the fate of the entire Empire. Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to understand how debates over images could entangle both Church leaders and emperors.

The arguments

The iconophiles and iconoclasts developed sophisticated theological and philosophical arguments to argue for and against religious images. Here is a quick summary of some of their main points:

The iconoclasts noted that the Bible often prohibited images, notably in the Second Commandment (one of the Ten Commandments appearing in the Hebrew Bible):

> *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them….(Exodus 20:4–5, NRSV)*

The iconophiles countered that while the Bible prohibited images in some passages, God also *mandated* the creation of images in other instances, for example God commanded that cherubim should adorn the Ark of the Covenant: “You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat.” (Exodus 25:18, NRSV).

The iconoclasts argued that God was invisible and infinite, and therefore beyond human ability to depict in images. Since Jesus was both human and divine, the iconoclasts argued that artists could not depict him in images. The iconophiles agreed that God could not be represented in images but argued that when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born as a human being with a physical body, he allowed himself to be seen and depicted. Since some icons were believed to date to the time of Christ, icons were understood to offer a kind of proof that the Son of God entered the world as a human being, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven—all for the salvation of humankind.

The iconoclasts also objected to practices of honoring icons with candles and incense, and by bowing before and kissing them, in which worshippers seemed to worship created matter (the icon itself) rather than the creator. But the iconophiles asserted that when Christians honored images of Christ and the saints like this, they did not worship the artwork as such, but honored the holy person represented in the image.

Timeline of events

Early centuries

Sporadic evidence of Christians creating religious images and honoring them with candles and garlands emerges from as early as the second century CE. Church leaders often condemned such images and devotional practices, which seemed too similar to the pagan religions that Christians rejected.

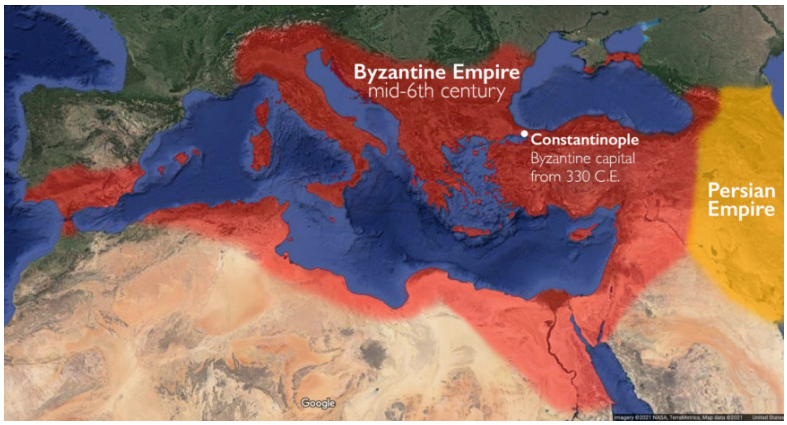


Figure **14.3.3**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire at its greatest extent in the mid-6th century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

The seventh century

The Byzantine Empire faced invasions from Persians and Arabs in the seventh century, resulting in significant loss of territory. Trade decreased and the empire experienced an economic downturn. Byzantine anxieties over images likely emerge, at least in part, as a result of these devastating events (which may have been perceived as signs of God's displeasure with icons).

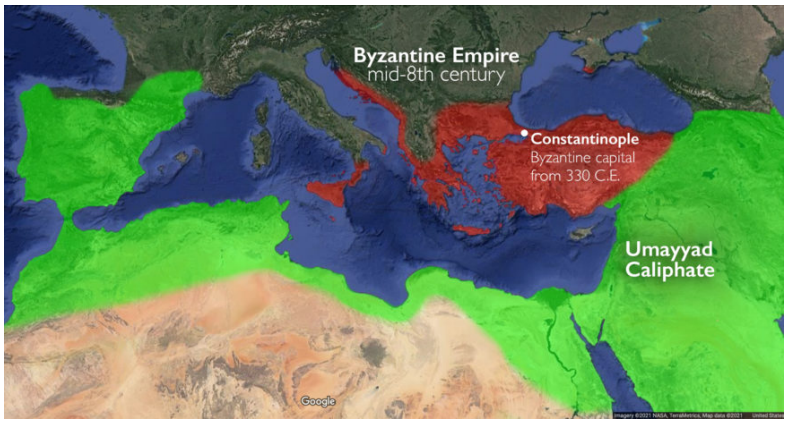


Figure **14.3.4**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire in the mid-eighth century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

Through the centuries, icons became increasingly widespread in Byzantium. By the late seventh century, the Church began to legislate on images. Church leaders at the Quinisext Council (also known as the Council of Trullo) held in Constantinople in 691–692 prohibited the depiction of crosses on floors where they could be walked on, which was understood as disrespectful. They also mandated that Christ be depicted as a human rather than symbolically as a lamb in order to affirm Christ's incarnation and saving works. Around this same time, emperor Justinian II incorporated icons of Christ onto his coins. These events suggest the growing importance of religious images in the Byzantine Empire at this time.



Figure **14.3.5**: Solidus of Justinian II showing Christ on one side (left) and the emperor on the other side (right), Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey), 692-95. Gold, 4.43 g, 2cm. (Photo: Yale University Art Gallery, CC0 1.0)

The first phase of Iconoclasm: 720s–787

Historical texts suggest the struggle over images began in the 720s. According to traditional accounts, Iconoclasm was prompted by emperor Leo III removing an icon of Christ from the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace in Constantinople in 726 or 730, sparking a widespread destruction of images and a persecution of those who defended images. But more recently, scholars have noted a lack of evidence supporting this traditional narrative, and believe that iconophiles probably exaggerated the offenses of the iconoclasts for rhetorical effect after the Controversy.

Historical evidence firmly identifies Leo's son, emperor Constantine V, as an iconoclast. Constantine publicly argued against icons and convened a Church council that rejected religious images at the palace in the Constantinople suburb of Hieria in 754. Probably as a result of this council, iconoclasts replaced images of saints with crosses in the *sekreton* (audience hall) between the patriarchal palace and Constantinople's great cathedral, Hagia Sophia, in the 760s (discussed further below).

787 Iconophile Council of Nicaea II

In 787, the empress Irene convened a pro-image Church council, which negated the Iconoclast council held in Hieria in 754 and affirmed the use of religious images. The council drew on the pro-image writings of a Syrian monk, Saint John of Damascus, who lived c. 675–749.

The second phase of Iconoclasm: 815–843

Emperor Leo V, who reigned from 813–820, banned images once again in 815, beginning what is often referred to as a second phase of Byzantine Iconoclasm. Leo V's ban on images followed significant Byzantine military losses to the Bulgars in Macedonia and Thrace, which Leo may have viewed as a sign of God's displeasure with icons. Theodore, abbot of the Stoudios Monastery in Constantinople, wrote in defense of icons during this time. Evidence suggests this second phase of Iconoclasm was more mild than the first.



Figure **14.3.6**: Icon of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey), c. 1400. Tempera on wood, 39 x 31 x 5.3 cm. The British Museum, London, England. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

The iconoclastic emperor Theophilos died in 842. His son, Michael III, was too young to rule alone, so empress Theodora (Michael III's mother), and the eunuch Theoktistos (an official), ruled as regents until Michael III came of age. Later sources describe Theodora as a secret iconophile during her husband's iconoclastic reign, although there is a lack of evidence to support this. For reasons not entirely clear, Theodora and Theoktistos installed the iconophile patriarch Methodios I and once again affirmed religious images in 843, definitively ending Byzantine Iconoclasm.

Imperial and Church leaders marked this restoration of images with a triumphant procession through the city of Constantinople, culminating with a celebration of the Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia. The Church acclaimed the restoration of images as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy," which continues to be commemorated annually on the first Sunday of Lent in the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day.

Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy in Byzantine Mosaics

The Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy was not merely an intellectual debate, but was also an inflection point in the history of Byzantine art itself. Let us consider the examples of three Byzantine churches, whose mosaics offer visual evidence of the Iconoclastic Controversy and subsequent Triumph of Orthodoxy: Hagia Eirene in Constantinople (Istanbul), the Dormition in Nicaea (İznik, Turkey), and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Istanbul).



Figure **14.3.7**: Hagia Eirene, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) begun 532, rebuilt following an earthquake in 740. (Photo: Alexxx1979, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Hagia Eirene in Constantinople



Figure **14.3.8**: Hagia Eirene, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) begun 532, rebuilt following an earthquake in 740. (Photo: Gryffindor, CC0)

The emperor Justinian constructed the church of Hagia Eirene in Constantinople (Istanbul) in the sixth century, but the church's dome was not well supported, and the building was badly damaged by an earthquake in 740. Emperor Constantine V, who reigned from 741–775, rebuilt Hagia Eirene in the mid to late 750s.

Constantine V—who, as an iconoclast, opposed pictorial depictions of Christ and the saints—is credited with decorating the apse of the church with a cross, which the iconoclasts found acceptable. The cross mosaic makes liberal use of costly materials, such as

gold and silver. The skilled artists who created the mosaic bent the arms of the cross downward to compensate for the curve of the dome so that the crossarm would appear straight to viewers standing on the floor of the church.



Figure **14.3.9**: Apse mosaic with cross, Hagia Eirene, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey), rebuilt after 740. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Clearly, while the iconoclasts opposed certain types of religious imagery, they did not reject art entirely, and were sometimes important patrons of art and architecture, as was Constantine V. There is also evidence that emperor Theophilos—who reigned during the second phase of Iconoclasm—expanded and lavishly decorated the imperial palace and other spaces.

The church of the Dormition in Nicaea

Iconoclastic activity can be directly observed in the mosaics of the church of the Dormition (or *Koimesis*) at Nicaea (İznik, Turkey). Although the church does not survive today, photographs from 1912 clearly show seams, or sutures, where parts of the mosaics were removed and replaced during the Byzantine era.

Although the precise history of the mosaics at Nicaea is difficult to reconstruct, the 1912 photographs clearly indicate three distinct phases of creation and subsequent restorations during and after the Iconoclastic era.



Figure **14.3.10**: Apse mosaic at the church of the Dormition (now destroyed). Nicaea (İznik, Turkey). Left: black and white photograph, 1912. Right: phases of creation and restoration, marked in yellow, red, and purple. (Photo: N. K. Kluge, via Smarthistory)

Phase 1 (yellow) The original mosaics predate Iconoclasm and were probably created in the late seventh or early eighth century. They pictured the Virgin and Child standing on a jeweled footstool in the apse. An inscription refers to the church's founder, whose name was Hyakinthos.

Phase 2 (red) Sometime during the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries, the image of the Virgin and Child was removed and replaced with a plain cross like the one in Hagia Eirene in Constantinople, whose outlines can still be partially observed in the 1912 photograph.

Phase 3 (purple) Sometime after the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, the cross was replaced with another image of the Virgin and Child.

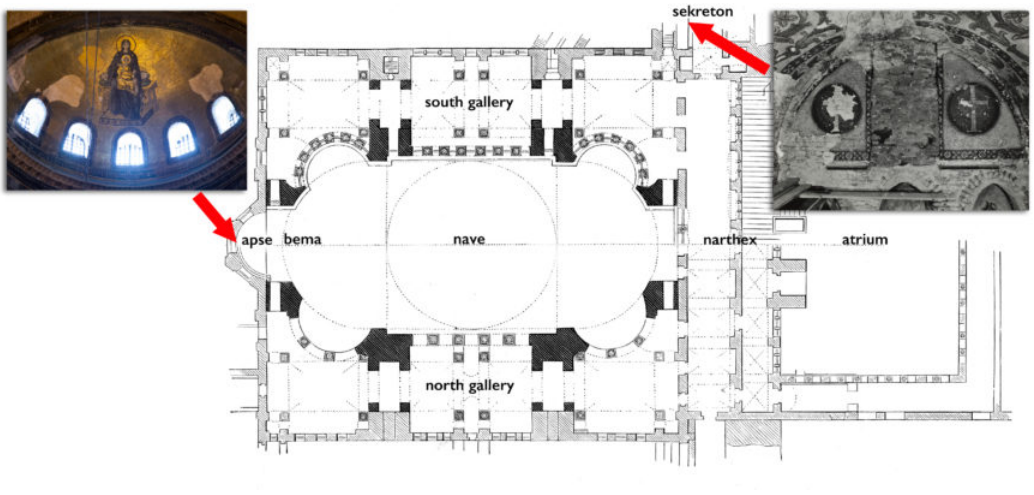


Figure **14.3.11**: Plan of Hagia Sophia showing apse mosaic and *sekreton* mosaics. (Image via Smarthistory)

Hagia Sophia in Constantinople

Iconoclasm in the *sekreton*

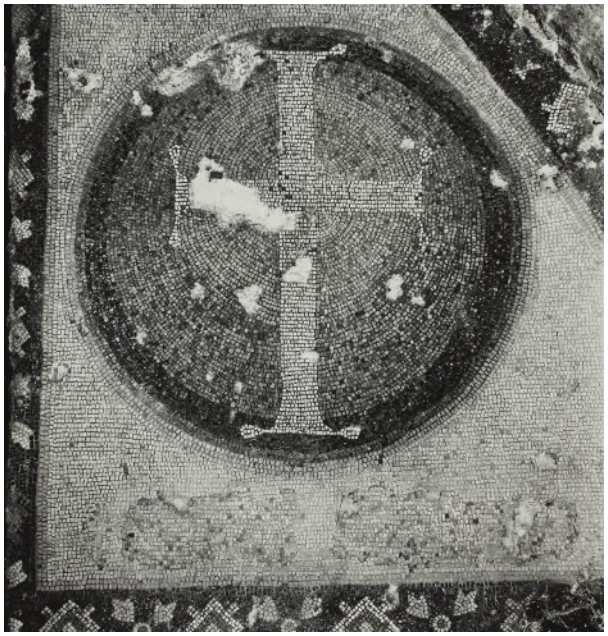


Figure **14.3.12**: Mosaics in the small *sekreton*, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). (Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks, CC0 1.0)

The only surviving evidence of destruction of images in the Byzantine capital survives at Hagia Sophia, in audience halls (*sekreta*) that connected the southwestern corner of the church at the gallery level with the patriarchal palace. Primary sources speak of patriarch Niketas—the highest-ranking Church official in Constantinople—removing mosaics of Christ and the saints from the small *sekreton* sometime between 766–769.

And as at the church of the Dormition in Nicaea, scars are visible in the mosaics in the small *sekreton*. Roundels with crosses, which survive today, likely once contained portraits of saints, which patriarch Niketas is said to have removed. Beneath the roundels, the ghostly remnants of erased inscriptions indicate where the missing saints' names once appeared.



Figure **14.3.13**: Mosaics in the small *sekreton*, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). (Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks, CC0 1.0)

Apse mosaic and the Triumph of Orthodoxy

Following the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the Byzantines installed a new mosaic of the Virgin and Child in the apse of Constantinople's Hagia Sophia. The image was accompanied by an inscription (now partially destroyed), which framed the image as a response to Iconoclasm: "The images which the imposters [i.e. the iconoclasts] had cast down here pious emperors have again set up." Yet unlike at Nicaea, there is no evidence of the apse's previous decoration or of any interventions by iconoclasts. So while the inscription implies that iconoclasts removed a figural image from this position, this ninth-century Virgin and Child mosaic installed after the Triumph of Orthodoxy may be the first such figural image to occupy this position in Hagia Sophia.



Figure **14.3.14**: Apse mosaic depicting the Virgin and Child, dedicated 867, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In 867, patriarch Photios, the highest-ranking Church official in Constantinople, preached a homily in Hagia Sophia on the dedication of the new mosaic. Photios condemned the iconoclasts for "Stripping the Church, Christ's bride, of her own ornaments [i.e. images], and wantonly inflicting bitter wounds on her, wherewith her face was scarred. . . ." He went on to speak of the restoration of images:

> *[The Church] now regains the ancient dignity of her comeliness. . . . If one called this day the beginning and day of Orthodoxy . . . one would not be far wrong. Photios, Homily 17, 3*

The mosaic in Hagia Sophia and the homily by Photios both illustrate how the iconophiles—the victors of the Iconoclastic Controversy—framed their victory as a triumph of religious orthodoxy, perhaps exaggerating the offenses of the iconoclasts along the way for rhetorical effect.

Copying — spotlight: Virgin Hodegetria

by Dr. Asa Simon Mittman



Figure **14.3.15**: Map with Rome and Constantinople. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory).

In the early fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine decriminalized Christianity and began funding churches and works of art. He also moved the capital of the Empire from Rome to Byzantium, a wealthy city in modern-day Turkey, which he then renamed Constantinople after himself (today we call this city Istanbul). While at the time, its inhabitants still called their empire Rome, we now refer to it as the Byzantine Empire, which lasted about a thousand years, ending in the 15th century, when the army of the powerful Ottoman Empire conquered Constantinople. The most characteristic creation of the Byzantine period is the icon—an image of a holy figure or event from Christian tradition, often presented against a gold background and thereby separated from any worldly context.

One of the most common subjects for such icons is the Virgin Hodegetria, literally “She Who Shows the Way” in Greek. These are images in which the Virgin Mary holds Jesus and gestures toward him, guiding the viewer to Jesus and therefore, according to Christian belief, to salvation. Because of its common appearance from Late Antiquity to the present, Hodegetria icons are useful examples of the remarkable continuity of copies of icons throughout time.

At a glance, Byzantine icons strike many viewers as repetitive, that is, as being more or less the same. Their similarity, though, is by careful design. Their makers sought to preserve information about the appearances of their subjects, and traditions of their representations, and thereby to produce images that were both accurate and magically or divinely powerful.

To be clear, the icons discussed here are a few examples out of thousands of this same subject, and there is no evidence that these particular images were directly copied from one another. Rather, they were part of a large network of icons, all based on related models.



Figure **14.3.16**: Virgin Hodegetria, painted icon, Rome, c. 500–525, overpainting c. 1100, heavily restored (Santa Maria Nova now called Santa Francesca Romana, originally likely for Santa Maria Antiqua). (Photo via Smarthistory)

Visual elements

One of the earliest known versions of the Virgin Hodegetria is now housed in Santa Francesca Romana, in Rome, Italy (see Figure **14.3.16**). This work has been altered more than once, and has been extensively restored, so its details do not accurately reflect its original state, but do record some of the ways it changed over the centuries. The two faces are the oldest parts, painted in encaustic (pigment suspended in wax) on canvas. Sometime in the Middle Ages, these heads were cut out and inserted into a new painting, which is why the faces seem out of place. They are different in technique (the medieval portion of the icon is tempera on wooden panel) but also in color and scale. Jesus's face seems far too small for his head. Mary's face seems too large for hers, and is much paler than her hands. It is also likely set at the wrong angle; her neck meets her body at an angle, suggesting that in the original work, her head was inclined toward Jesus.



Figure **14.3.17**: Reproduction of the Virgin Hodegetria in Santa Maria Antiqua, consecrated in the 6th century and located at the foot of the Palatine Hill beside the Roman Forum (originally part of the Roman emperor Domitian's palace complex of c. 81-96 CE), consecrated in the 6th century with paintings from the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries. (Photo via Smarthistory)

But despite these later interventions, what we see in this image is quite typical of Hodegetria icons: a bust-length image of Mary, holding Jesus with one hand and gesturing toward him with the other. She wears a dark blue robe, as does Jesus. He holds a scroll in one hand and raises the other toward Mary in a two-fingered gesture of blessing. Her face is quite pale and, surrounded by her dark clothing and the gold background, draws our eyes. In this case, she looks out at us, while he looks up at her. Her eyes are dramatically enlarged, and their irises are very dark against their whites, so that they become the focal point for the work. We are compelled to make eye contact with Mary, as she then encourages us to look to Jesus. Behind them, on the restored golden background, we see two haloes, with Mary's radiating waves of light that again guide our eyes back to her face.



Figure **14.3.18**: Virgin Hodegetria, 13th century, embossed silver. Icon Gallery, Ohrid, North Macedonia. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Almost a millennium later, little has changed. An icon of the Hodegetria from the thirteenth century preserves many of the features of the earlier icon. Again, there were changes made to the icon over time, including the addition of embossed silver, covering the original gold background, which now shows through at the edges where the silver has been lost.

The changes made to these icons over time indicates both their usage, which results in wear and tear, and their importance—damaged works can always be replaced rather than repaired. The whole image has been reversed, so that Jesus is now to Mary's left, which will remain more common. Some features are strikingly similar. In addition to their basic gestures and poses, Mary's very long nose, sharply cut brows, and very small mouth are quite similar. Again, she looks out at us, though her eyes are no longer so dramatically oversized. Jesus still holds a scroll in his left hand and raises his right in blessing. Jesus' attention, though, has been shifted quite significantly from Mary to us. He looks out as us, and his hand, with the same gesture as in the earlier icon, is now turned toward us. The impact for a devout Byzantine Christian would be quite different, now that he or she is the object of Jesus's blessing.

There is something peculiar about the size and shape of Jesus' head. It may be intended to suggest that, though he is here a baby, he already bore adult (and divine) wisdom. On the other hand, it may be an echo of the strange medieval reconstruction of the earlier icon, where the earlier, smaller face of Jesus was set into the larger head of the later work.



Figure **14.3.19**: *Our Lady Hodegetria*, Russia, late 16th century. Tempera on panel and gilding, 34.5 x 29 cm. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Moving forward another three hundred years to a sixteenth-century Russian Hodegetria icon, we find that much is again copied from earlier models. The two figures are posed as before, Mary in her blue robes against a backdrop of gold. Mary's features are quite similar to the earlier works—her long, narrow nose, her sharp brows, and her small mouth. And again, Jesus bears the curiously enlarged forehead. He is yet smaller, though, and more doll-like in her arms, and his proportions are less child-like. He is proportionally taller and thinner, more like an adult. This effect furthers the implications that he has adult wisdom. The figures also seem more cheerful—their lips curve up ever so slightly at the corners.



Figure **14.3.20**: Christabel Helena Anderson, *The Theotokos of the Don*, 2011. Egg tempera panel icon with natural pigments (including ochres from the Forest of Dean in England and lapis lazuli from Afghanistan) and 24 carat gold. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The Byzantine icon tradition carries on in the present, especially in Greece, Russia, and eastern Europe, though it is present all throughout the world. Contemporary London-based icon painter Christabel Helena Anderson created her *The Theotokos of the Don* in 2011. Its connection to the 1500-year tradition that preceded its creation is clear. Again, Mary bears her long nose and sharp brows and Jesus's head is oversized and bulbous. The sixteenth-century icon—or any of the many like it—seems to have been a

direct inspiration for Anderson, as the robes are strikingly similar. Anderson has, however, made her own alterations. Most importantly, she has made the scene significantly more tender, with the child pressing his cheek against his mother's. Jesus looks up at Mary, and his two-fingered gesture of blessing is turned toward her, rather than toward us. Instead of making eye contact with us, Mary looks off into the middle-distance, her gaze seemingly unfixed, and her expression ambiguous. Is she perhaps contemplating the sorrowful fate of her baby? In a sense, this is not a Hodegetria, properly speaking, because Mary does not "show us the way" by guiding the viewer toward Jesus. The pair is more self-contained, sharing what seems to be a private emotional moment. The work is clearly and deeply rooted in the very long icon-painting tradition, but like many icon painters before her, Anderson finds a way to create something new out of a very well-worn formula.

Each artist who turns to this subject has a challenge: how does one preserve the perceived accuracy and authority of the image, while creating a work that is new, fresh, and effective? The goal is not "originality," since a genuinely original work would break the connection with the works of the past from which the new icons draw their power. But a work of simple, rote copying is likely to be less effective than one that finds a way to bring nuance to an old theme.

Cultural context: Byzantine Icons

Hodegetria icons were considered particularly important and authoritative, since it was believed that the first version was painted by St. Luke, author of one of the four Gospels—the core texts of Christianity. This version was therefore considered accurate and authoritative; artists strove—and still strive—to copy it as exactly as possible, in order to preserve its record of what they believe to have been an actual, historical moment when Luke painted Mary and Jesus from life. There is debate over what happened to this first image. Some believe it was destroyed when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453. Others believe it was smuggled out of Constantinople, and survives in Western Europe, though this camp has not reached consensus on which of several possible icons is the one painted by Luke. Most art historians, though, believe that the form of the Hodegetria developed in the Early Byzantine period, perhaps in the fifth or sixth century.

Icons were quite controversial in the Early Byzantine period. At the time, Christianity was still working to demonstrate its difference from Roman polytheism (the worship of many gods, in this case Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Venus, and the rest of the Roman pantheon of deities). One of the main differences that early Christians and their Byzantine successors sought to emphasize was their rejection of polytheistic worship of idols, that is, of statues believed to represent and house gods. Some Christians, following the Second Commandment, which prohibits idol worship, saw any images as problematic, but many others embraced images. The ways that icons were often used by Byzantine Christians did not help their critics to feel any more at ease. Numerous records survive that indicate that many Christians were treating the physical objects (as well as the figures they represented) as powerful, magical, or divine. Icons were dipped into poisoned wells to purify them. Sick people would shave off bits of icons to make medicinal drinks. Icons were carried as protective talismans before armies heading into battle. All of these practices indicate that, whatever highly educated Christian writers thought about the difference between worship of idols and veneration (honoring) of icons, many people clearly confused the two, and treated Christian icons in much the same ways their families had treated polytheistic idols, only a few generations earlier.

When the Byzantine Empire was threatened by the spread of new powers and religions, particularly by the rise of Islam and the attendant Muslim conquests of territory, images were placed at the center of internal debates. Tensions between iconophiles (those who favored the use of icons), and iconoclasts (those who opposed icons) led to the Iconoclastic Controversy (the first phase of Iconoclasm, 720s–787 and the second phase of Iconoclasm, 815–843). This was probably the longest sustained debate on the use of art in the world's history. The extent of the destruction of images and persecution of iconophiles is a subject of current debate among scholars, and it is worth bearing in mind that the early sources we have describing these events were written by iconophiles after the controversy ended. Whatever the cause, though, only a handful of icons survive from before the Controversy. The debate centered on the use of the images. In particular, did the veneration of icons violate the 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; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand of those who love me and keep my commandments.Exodus 20:5-6*

To make their case, iconoclasts simply pointed to this fairly strict regulation of images, though the Bible contains other passages that provide direct instruction on the creation of three-dimensional images, so this case is not as simple as it is often presented as being. The iconophiles, in contrast, made intricate arguments in favor of the use and veneration of images. They held that Jesus, whom they considered to be the son of God and therefore God, himself, became an incarnate human being and thereby allowed himself to be seen. If, the argument ran, God allowed himself to be seen in physical form, making images of that form could be seen as following this divine example. Those in favor of images ultimately triumphed, not only because of their theological arguments, but undoubtedly also because, on the whole, people love images. The Byzantines resumed creating and venerating icons in 843 CE, and Byzantine Christians (modern day Orthodox Christians) have been copying and reinterpreting their earliest surviving models, ever since.

The vita icon in the medieval era

by Dr. Paroma Chatterjee

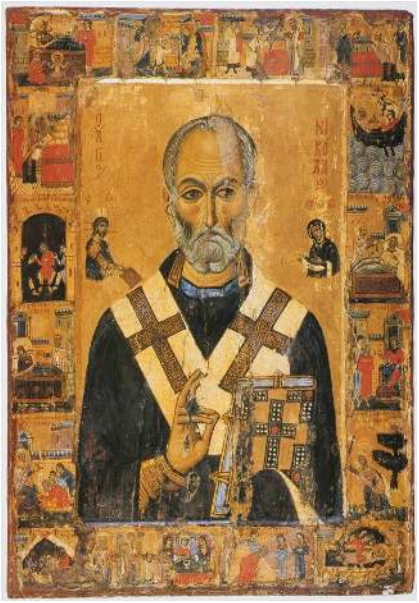


Figure **14.3.21**: Vita icon of St. Nicholas, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, late 12th to early 13th century. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The “vita” icon is literally the image of a life. Its usual format consists of the magnified central portrait of a saint surrounded by those episodes in his/her biography that made him/her a saint. In these vignettes, the saint appears in a smaller and relatively more active stance as s/he goes about the business of sanctity by performing miracles, praying, and sometimes, even being martyred.

A vita icon of St. Nicholas

The “vita” icon of St. Nicholas, currently located in the Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, is a perfect example. The bust of the saint looms large at the center whereas the smaller, full-figured, mobile version of Nicholas features on, and as, a frame on all four sides.



Figure 14.3.22: St. Nicholas as an infant in the bath, detail from icon of St. Nicholas, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, late 12th to early 13th century. (Photo: Princeton University, via Smarthistory)

One may begin to read this frame from the top left hand corner (although we have no evidence that viewers did so) where Nicholas appears as an infant who miraculously stood erect in his bath. As we proceed horizontally, we see Nicholas' transformation to a child, an adolescent, and finally, at the top right hand corner, an adult.



Figure 14.3.23: St. Nicholas as an infant, child, adolescent, and adult, details from icon of St. Nicholas, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, late 12th to early 13th century. (Photo: Princeton University, via Smarthistory)

But after that, one might be at a loss as to know where to direct one's gaze, for nowhere are we given any specific visual or textual directions (although in some examples of the "vita" icon, one may detect, upon trying, a logical narrative design to the episodes). We could skip to the left-hand side of the panel and continue vertically all the way down, or we could scan the rectangular panels on the left and right alternately, criss-crossing the still, hieratic, central bust as we do so. Regardless of the visual path we choose to follow, we catch glimpses of various moments in Nicholas' life.



Figure 14.3.24: Inside the basilica at Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt. (Photo: Library of Congress, public domain)

Viewers may even have focused on a small selection of scenes, or the bust alone, depending on lighting conditions and how close they might have been to the icon. In the flicker of candle light, it is more than probable that a number of details on the frames might

have been lost. However, if the “vita” icon were displayed as a *proskynetarion* icon (an image placed on a stand, usually at eye level, for veneration on a feast day), then it probably would have been visible for contemplation in its entirety at various moments of the day. This example of the icon of St. Nicholas suggests a flexibility of viewership enabled by the “vita” format in juxtaposing the monumental and miniature versions of a saint in a non-linear orientation.

Origins of the vita icon

The precise date of the origin of the “vita” icon format is debated, with some arguing for the 10th century C.E. and others positing a slightly or much later period ranging from the 11th to the 13th centuries. The general characteristics of the format in the Byzantine Empire are: size (ranging from 70 cm to 2 m in height), and the remarkable consistency of standardized scenes that appear on the frame from icon to icon; in other words, surviving “vita” icons of St. Nicholas often display similar scenes. The frame is an intriguing phenomenon in itself since from the 11th-century onward we find the addition of precious revetments (thin sheets) of gold, silver, and other metals, which often feature donor portraits and inscriptions.



Figure **14.3.25**: Metal revetment appears on the frame and around the central figure on this icon of St. Theodore the Stratelates, from the church of St. Theodore the Stratelates on the Brook, mid-16th century. Novgorod Integrated Museum-Reservation, Novgorod, Russia. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Image and text

“Vita” icons usually incorporate texts identifying the saint and the episodes from his/her life. While we might expect the narrative scenes in the frames of “vita” icons to parallel written accounts of saints’ lives, or “hagiographies,” which were widely circulated in the medieval era, scholars have remarked on the apparent independence of “vita” icons from the standard textual versions of the lives of the saints depicted. By the 11th century in the Byzantine Empire, saints’ lives had been compiled into a more or less definitive version by Symeon Metaphrastes known as the Metaphrastean Menologion; yet, the “vita” icons from the 13th century do not reflect this book so much as older hagiographies. Some have argued that this was probably because the 13th-century exemplars are copies of even older “vita” icons which, in turn, relied on the earlier hagiographical texts. While this may have been the case from the point of view of the creators and patrons of the icons, from the perspective of the viewer these panels may be read as visual statements in their own right with the inscriptions permitting the identification of scenes, not necessarily intended to evoke specific passages in written hagiographies.



Figure **14.3.26**: Vita icon of St. George, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt late 12th or early 13th century. (Photo: Princeton University, via Smarthistory)

The mobility of vita icons

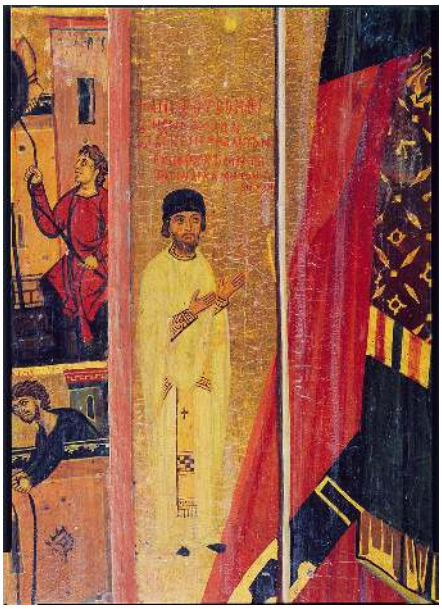


Figure **14.3.27**: Donor figure identified as "John the Iberian," vita icon of St. George, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, late 12th or early 13th century. (Photo: Princeton University, via Smarthistory)

Since a significant number of Byzantine "vita" icons are preserved in the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, Egypt (view location on map), it is possible that some might have been gifted or donated to the Monastery by pilgrims. One of the 13th-century "vita" icons of St. George, for example, depicts a donor figure sandwiched between the towering, imposing figure of the warrior-saint and the frame. Clad in white in stark contrast to the broad swathes of red and black characterizing George, this figure is identified as John the Iberian ("Iberian" here is a reference to medieval Georgia on the eastern shore of the Black Sea) who was both monk and priest. Alternatively, some of the icons might have been made at the Monastery of St. Catherine itself.

More interesting than these questions of origins, is the fact that the "vita" icon format gained popularity across Europe within a relatively short period. This may have occurred because of its distinctiveness and clarity in conveying information about saints as individuals, as well as its ability to make a vivid visual statement about sanctity writ large. Examples are known in Italy, Cyprus, and Russia, among other places.



Figure **14.3.28**: Bonaventura Berlinghieri, *Saint Francis Altarpiece*, c. 1235. Tempera on wood, 5′ high. San Francesco, Pescia, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Vita icons, east and west

"Vita" icons were most strikingly used in the service of one of the most radical saintly personalities of the medieval west: Francis of Assisi, whose life and many posthumous miracles were included in the format. As the first person to have been recognized officially as a genuine stigmatic (St. Francis was blessed with the wounds of Christ) by the Catholic Church, St. Francis revolutionized ideas of the human body (as an image of the divine), the natural world (Francis preached to birds and other animals), and property (Francis advocated the renunciation of worldly possessions), although a number of Franciscan ideals stemmed from existing strands of ascetic and monastic thought and practice.



Figure **14.3.29**: Vita icon of St. Clare (*Santa Chiara Dossal*), 1280s. (Photo: Web Gallery of Art, public domain)

One major difference between the Byzantine and Western "vita" icons is that the format was almost exclusively used in the east for well-established, long-deceased saints (e.g. Nicholas and George) and in the west for recently minted saints (e.g. Francis), and initially for those associated with the Franciscan Order such as St. Clare of Assisi and St. Margaret of Cortona.



Figure **14.3.30**: Master of the Bardi Saint Francis, Bardi Chapel, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence, altarpiece with scenes from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi (Bardi Dossal), c. mid 13th century. Tempera on panel. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Some of the Franciscan "vita" icons were also used as altarpieces (a work of art set above and behind an altar)—a category of object that was never used in the medieval Orthodox church, but which furnished a focus of devotion and a high degree of visual elaboration in the Roman Catholic churches of western Europe.



Figure **14.3.31**: Left to right: Sts. Boris and Gleb with scenes of their lives, second half of the 14th century, Moscow (Tretyakov Gallery); Elijah the Prophet in the wilderness with scenes of his life and Deësis, second half of the 13th century, Pskov (Tretyakov Gallery); St. Nicholas (St. Nicholas of Zaraisk) with scenes of his life, second half of the 14th century, Rostov (Tretyakov Gallery). (Photos via Smarthistory)

In Slavic Rus', too, by the fourteenth century we find the phenomenon of recent saints such as Boris and Gleb, sons of prince Vladimir the Great of Kievan Rus', portrayed in the "vita" format, along with icons dedicated to far more traditional figures such as Elijah and St. Nicholas.



Figure **14.3.32**: Detail of St. Nicholas (St. Nicholas of Zaraisk) with scenes of his life, second half of the 14th century. Tretyakov Gallery, Russia. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.33**: Relief icon with St. George and St. Marina and Irene (?) on back, 13th century. 107 x 72 cm. (Photo: © Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, via Smarthistory)

Variations

Although “vita” icons most commonly appear in tempera on wood panels, we sometimes find the “vita” format deployed in intriguing variations in media, such as in frescoes or textiles. In some instances, the confection plays on the deliberate contrast of media, displaying the central figure in relief and the images on the frame as panel paintings, as seen with a thirteenth-century icon of St. George in Athens.



Figure **14.3.34**: Left: St. Nicholas fresco, 12th century, Church of St. Nicholas tis Stegis, Kakopetria, Cyprus. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); Right: Vita icon with St. Nicholas, late 13th century, 203 x 158 cm, from the Church of St. Nicholas tis Stegis, Kakopetria, Cyprus. (Photo: Archbishop Makarios III Foundation, Byzantine Museum, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.35**: Church of St. Nicholas tis Stegis, Kakopetria, Cyprus. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In other cases the "vita" format seeks to recreate not just the saint per se, but a specific local image of the saint which was probably known and venerated previously. Such is the case of the church of St. Nicholas tis Steges in Kakopetria, Cyprus in which a life-sized frescoed image of St. Nicholas was likely reproduced in the large "vita" icon dedicated to the same saint and formerly located in that very church. Interestingly, this vita icon of St. Nicholas portrays Latin, and not Byzantine, donors on its frame, thus attesting to the general appeal of the visual format across faiths and ethnicities.

A work in progress: Middle Byzantine mosaics in Hagia Sophia

by Dr. Evan Freeman



Figure **14.3.36**: Isidore of Miletus & Anthemius of Tralles for Emperor Justinian, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), 532-37. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Who was the artwork's patron? What were the artwork's original meanings and functions? When art historians study a work of art, they ask questions about the artwork's initial creation. But often, works of art and architecture change over time, challenging us to take a longer view of an artwork's history and position within social networks, something anthropologist Arjun Appadurai referred to as the "social life" of a thing. [1]

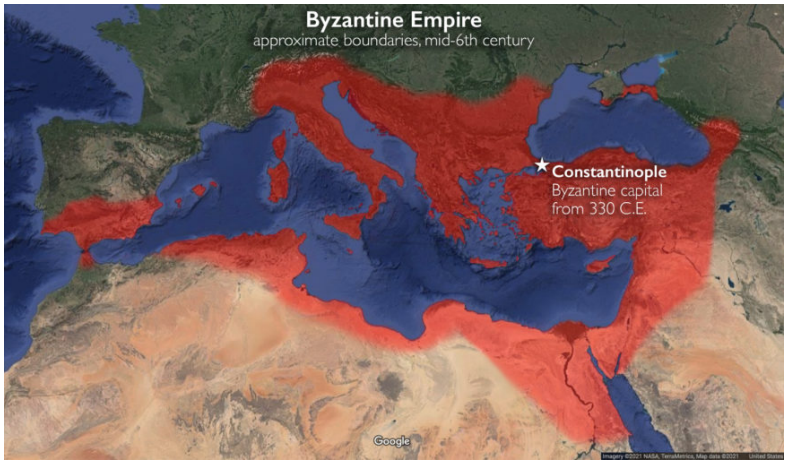


Figure **14.3.37**: The Byzantine Empire, approximate boundaries, mid-6th century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

This is the case with the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia—the main cathedral in Constantinople (modern Istanbul)—which the Byzantines often referred to as the "Great Church." Built by emperor Justinian during the brief period of 532–537, Hagia Sophia was at first primarily decorated with crosses and non-figural motifs. But in subsequent centuries—and particularly following the a ban on religious images (icons) during the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries—several figural mosaics were added to the walls of Hagia Sophia, which dramatically changed the appearance of Justinian's Great Church. These mosaics illustrate the ways Hagia Sophia became entangled in and responded to theological controversies, imperial donations, and even marriages.



Figure 14.3.38: Apse mosaic with Virgin and Child, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Holy figures

Apse mosaic: Virgin and Child

The first major mosaic added to Hagia Sophia following the 843 end of Iconoclasm depicted the Virgin Mary and Christ Child in the apse, the semidome above the altar at the eastern end of the church. It was accompanied by an inscription that alluded to Iconoclasm: "The images which the imposters [i.e. the iconoclasts] had cast down here pious emperors have again set up." The mosaic was probably completed around 867, when patriarch Photios, the leader of the Church in Constantinople, preached a sermon that also interpreted this image in terms of the end of Iconoclasm. The location of this Virgin and Child mosaic—which visualized Christ's incarnation (becoming flesh and blood)—was also significant since the Byzantines believed that the Eucharistic bread and wine similarly became Christ's flesh and blood on the altar below.

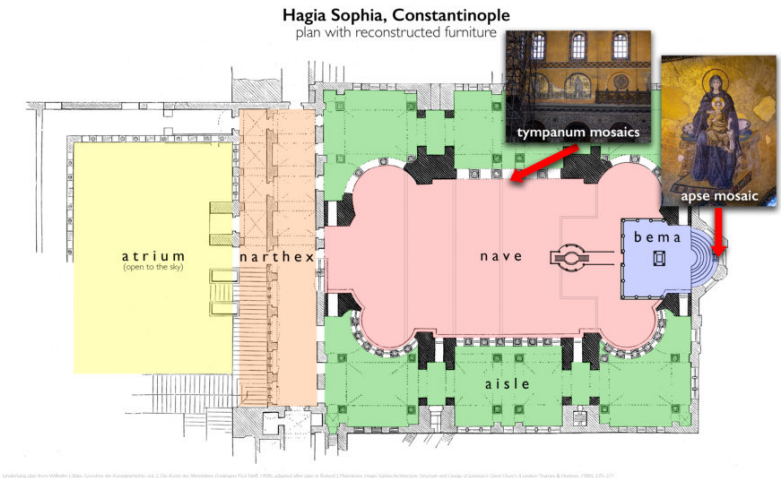


Figure 14.3.39: Plan of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Image via Smarthistory)

Tympana mosaics

Not long after the apse mosaic was installed, additional mosaics were added high on Hagia Sophia's north and south walls, in the tympana beneath the central dome, toward the end of the ninth century.

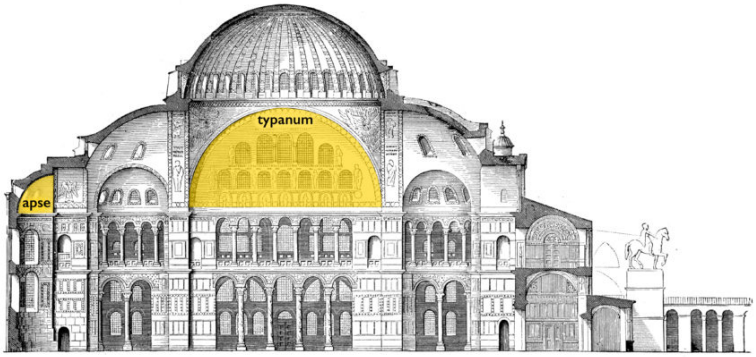


Figure **14.3.40**: Apse and tympanum in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Image via Smarthistory)

These depicted rows of holy figures—Church fathers on the bottom, prophets in the middle, and probably angels above—though only a few of these mosaics survive today. Strikingly, recent patriarchs such as Ignatius the Younger (who died in 877) are pictured among Church fathers in the tympana, likely because of their defense of images during Iconoclasm, as well as their association with Hagia Sophia.



Figure **14.3.41**: Left: General view of north tympanum, (photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: St. Ignatios the Younger mosaic in north tympanum, late 9th century, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.42**: Southwest vestibule, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Emperors and ceremony

But not all of the images in Hagia Sophia were purely religious in their subject matter. Several mosaics featured images of emperors and empresses: some long dead and others still living at the time when the mosaics were installed. Such images remind us that over the long history of the Byzantine Empire, there was no separation of Church and state. The emperor often participated in Church rituals with the clergy in Hagia Sophia.

Two mosaics depicting emperors were positioned along a ceremonial route by which the emperor sometimes entered Hagia Sophia for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, as described in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*.

Southwest vestibule

As they entered the narthex of Hagia Sophia, living emperors would have passed under a mosaic of great emperors from centuries past (see Figure **14.3.42**). This mosaic appears in a lunette in the southwest vestibule and was likely installed in the early tenth century.

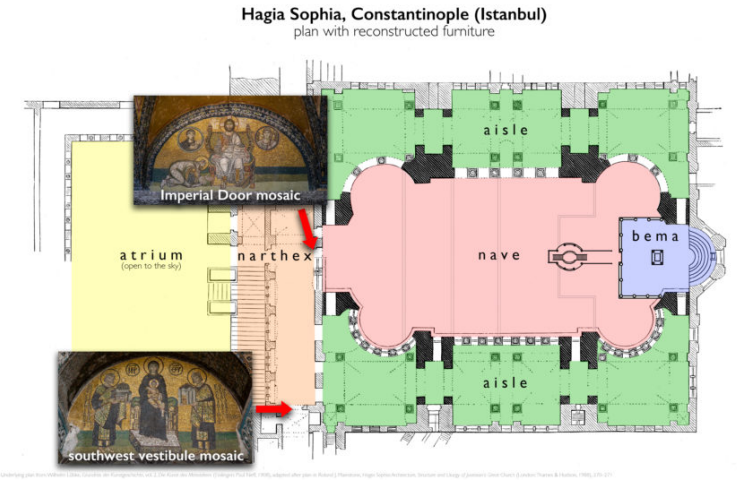


Figure **14.3.43**: Plan of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Image via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.44**: Southwest vestibule mosaic with the Virgin and Child flanked by emperors Constantine and Justinian, early 10th century, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A towering image of the Virgin appears at the center, flanked by large letters identifying her as the "Mother of God." She holds the Christ Child on her lap and sits on a lavish throne, resting her feet on a jeweled footstool (see Figure **14.3.44**). This central image of the Virgin and Child is similar to the ninth-century image in Hagia Sophia's apse discussed in Figure **14.3.38**, which the emperor would encounter as he continued into the church.

On the right, emperor Constantine, who founded Constantinople in 330 C.E., offers a model of the city, with its high crenelated walls, to the Virgin and Child. On the left, emperor Justinian, who built Hagia Sophia between 532–537, offers a domed model of Hagia Sophia—the very church in which this mosaic is located—to the Virgin and Child. Images showing donors offering smaller

models of the buildings they had built to heavenly figures were common in medieval art. Both emperors wear the imperial *loros*, a rich sash-like garment that was often decorated with precious stones. The mosaic highlights the Byzantine understanding of the Virgin as protector of Constantinople, as well as the importance of imperial patronage.



Figure **14.3.45**: Mosaic over Imperial Door, c. 900, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Imperial Door

As the emperor continued his ceremonial entrance into Hagia Sophia, he proceeded into the main part of the church through the "Imperial Door," the central door between the inner narthex and the nave. A mosaic dated to around 900, probably slightly earlier than the mosaic in the southwest vestibule, appears in the lunette above the Imperial Door (see Figures **14.3.45** and **14.3.46**). In this mosaic, a frontal Christ sits formally on a lyre-backed throne. He blesses the viewer with his right hand and rests an open book on his left knee, which displays the text: "Peace be with you; I am the light of the world" (a paraphrase of John 20:19 and John 8:12). Two roundels flank Christ. An angel appears within the roundel on Christ's left. On his right, a woman who is probably the Virgin Mary extends her hands toward Christ in a gesture of supplication.



Figure **14.3.46**: Narthex mosaic over Imperial Door, c. 900, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Pphoto: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Below the Virgin, an unnamed emperor with similarly outstretched hands bows before Christ in a gesture of reverence known as *proskynesis*. Who is this emperor? Several theories have been proposed. Some have understood the emperor as Leo VI atoning for marrying four times—considered a sin and even illegal—in pursuit of a male heir. More recently, scholars have questioned whether this mosaic even represents a specific, historical ruler, or whether it is a more generalized representation of imperial submission to Christ. This image certainly would have been meaningful when emperors performed their own acts of *proskynesis* here in the narthex (as described in the *Book of Ceremonies*) before passing beneath this mosaic to enter the nave of the church.



Figure **14.3.47**: Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Imperial patrons

Two additional mosaics were added to Hagia Sophia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their subjects and location are closely related. Both depict emperors and empresses and are located in the south gallery (on the second level, above the south aisle, Figure **14.3.48**)—which was traditionally reserved for imperial use during church services—near a doorway that connected Hagia Sophia with the Great Palace.

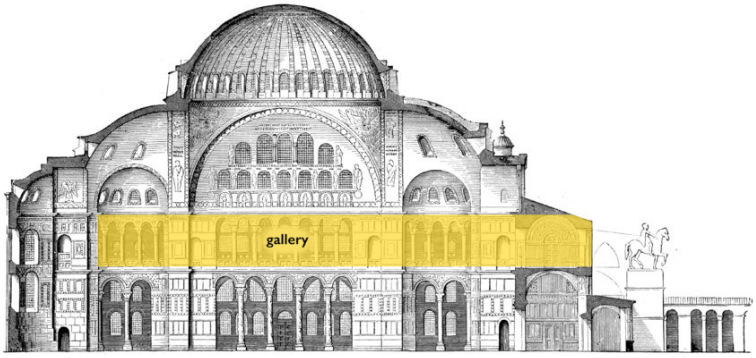


Figure **14.3.48**: Gallery level in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Image via Smarthistory)

Constantine IX and Zoe with Christ

In the first mosaic, added during the waning years of the Macedonian dynasty, Christ appears enthroned at the center, flanked by an emperor and empress (see Figure **14.3.49**). When it was first installed between 1028–1034, this mosaic probably depicted empress Zoe and her first husband, Romanos III. The mosaic would have commemorated an imperial donation to Hagia Sophia, when the capitals of the Great Church were gilded.



Figure **14.3.49**: Mosaic with Christ flanked by Constantine IX Monomachos and Zoe, c. 1028–1034 and 1042–1055, south gallery, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

But the mosaic was subsequently altered between 1042–1055, replacing Romanos III with Zoe's third husband, Constantine IX Monomachos (who was also a patron of Nea Moni on Chios, known for its lavish mosaic decoration). This revised version of the mosaic, which survives today, probably commemorated another imperial donation to the Hagia Sophia, one which enabled the Divine Liturgy to be celebrated in the Great Church every day rather than only on weekends (the cost of putting on a service in Hagia Sophia—including paying the large number of clergy and staff—was considerable). Constantine IX and Zoe turn inward toward Christ, offering a bag of money and what is probably a contract of donation. This image illustrates how such donations to the Church were understood as offerings to God.



Figure **14.3.50**: Empress Zoe, c. 1028–1034 and 1042–1055, south gallery, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Curiously, when the identity of the emperor was updated, Zoe and Christ were also given new faces. Perhaps the goal was to give all three faces a consistent stylistic appearance. Another theory suggests that Zoe's original face may have been destroyed as an act of *damnatio memoriae* (the official erasure of someone's legacy) when Zoe was briefly exiled before her third marriage, and therefore needed to be replaced.

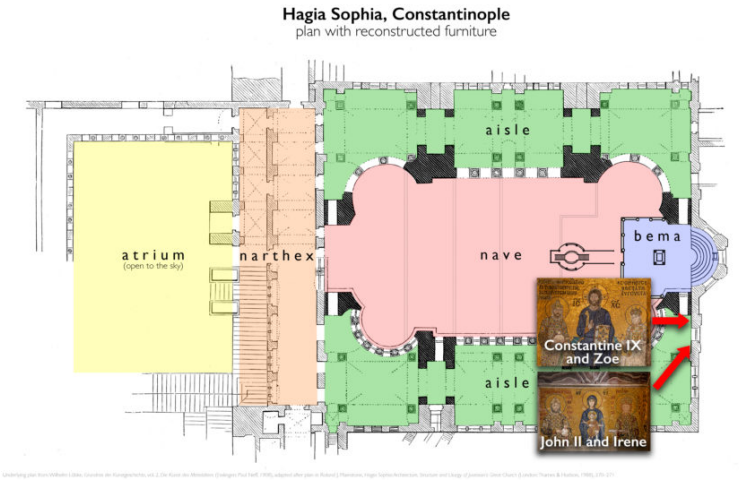


Figure **14.3.51**: Plan of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Image via Smarthistory)

John II and Irene

A similar imperial mosaic was installed c. 1118–1134 beside the image of Constantine and Zoe in the south gallery. It is the only surviving mosaic from twelfth-century Constantinople. The Virgin and Child appear at the center, complimenting the nearby image of Christ (see Figure **14.3.52**). On either side, emperor John II of the Komnenian dynasty and empress Irene of Hungary occupy the same positions as Constantine IX and Zoe in the earlier mosaic, similarly offering a money bag and a rolled document.



Figure **14.3.52**: Mosaic with the Virgin and Child flanked by John II and Irene, c. 1118–1134, south gallery, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

These emperors and empresses in the south gallery all appear shorter than the important central figures of Christ and the Virgin whom they flank. At the same time, the closeness of these haloed emperors and empresses to Christ and the Virgin suggests the considerable power of these Byzantine rulers, who immortalized themselves in fields of gold on the walls of Constantinople's Great Church.



Figure **14.3.53**: Deësis mosaic, c. 1261, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Although Justinian finished building Hagia Sophia and dedicated it in the year 537, Constantinople's Great Church was, in a sense, an ongoing work in progress, since subsequent rulers continued to decorate it through the following centuries. When Constantinople was sacked by crusaders in 1204 and subsequently reclaimed by the Byzantines in 1261, Hagia Sophia was again refurbished, and a new mosaic showing the Deësis—an image of intercession and divine mercy—was installed in the south gallery (see Figure **14.3.53**). This last major mosaic was added to the Great Church more than seven centuries after Hagia Sophia's initial construction.

The continuous addition of mosaics to Hagia Sophia—reflecting theological controversies, imperial donations, and even remarriages—illustrates how the continual creation, or "social life," of a monument can often be a complex, ongoing process.

Notes:

[1] Arjun Appadurai coined this phrase in his edited volume: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Byzantine frescoes at Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi

by Dr. Evan Freeman



Figure **14.3.54**: Church of Saint Panteleimon, 1164, Nerezi, North Macedonia. (Pphoto: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Eastern Roman "Byzantine" Empire is well known for its glittering, gold mosaics. But the medieval artists of Byzantium were also adept at a wall painting technique known as fresco: a less expensive medium than mosaics in which artists applied pigments to wet plaster so that the painting became chemically bonded to the wall itself. A small church located in the village of Gorno Nerezi (commonly just "Nerezi") on the outskirts of Skopje, North Macedonia, preserves some of the finest examples of fresco from the Byzantine period.



Figure 14.3.55: Byzantium Empire with location of Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi, c. 1173. (Map © Google, via Smarthistory)

Imperial Patronage

According to a painted inscription in the church, the Middle Byzantine church of Saint Panteleimon (pronounced *pan-tah-LAY-mon*) was built as a monastery church in 1164 by Alexios Komnenos, a nephew of Byzantine emperor John II (see Figure 14.3.56). Alexios may have owned land in this region. Nerezi's five-domed architecture and high-quality frescoes reflect its imperial patronage.



Figure 14.3.56: Church of Saint Panteleimon, 1164, Nerezi, North Macedonia. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) (view annotated image)

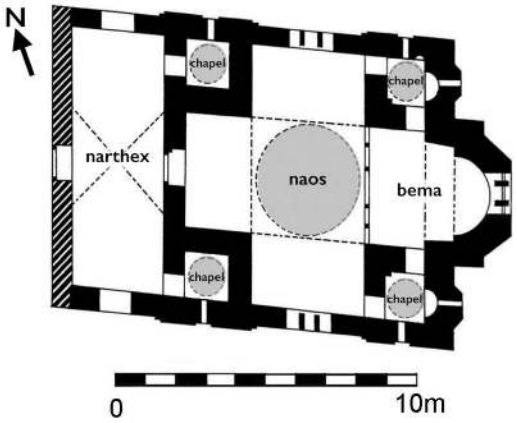


Figure 14.3.57: Plan of Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Adapted from plan © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

Saint Panteleimon is a modest, cross-domed structure with four smaller domed chapels, making it a five-domed church (read more about cross-domed churches anplan in Figure 14.3.57). Its five-domed design echoes the form of the church of the Holy Apostles in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (destroyed following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453)—which contained relics of the Apostles and the tombs of Byzantine emperors—reflecting Nerezi's connections with the capital and imperial family.

Like most Byzantine churches, Saint Panteleimon is divided into three main parts, which were adorned with frescoes:

1. the *narthex* at the western end of the church, which functioned as an entrance vestibule;
2. the *naos*—the main part of the church—where most of the worshippers attended church services; and
3. the *bema*, or sanctuary, where the altar was located and where the clergy led the celebration of the Eucharist.

The two eastern chapels connect to the bema, enabling them to function as a *prothesis* and *diakonikon*. The two western chapels connect with the narthex and may have been used for services that took place in the narthex.

Frescoes



Figure 14.3.58: Portrait of monastic Saint Arsenios in the southern crossarm of the naos, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

While the frescoes in the narthex have been badly damaged and the upper portions of the naos and bema were replaced with post-Byzantine paintings, the naos and bema preserve much of the original, twelfth-century frescoes on the lower levels.

A stunning, blue background unifies the original, twelfth-century frescoes, which have been executed with a range of vivid colors. The figures at Nerezi are slender and often elongated. Nerezi's painters have made extensive use of lines to define the boundaries of shapes, model forms, and portray emotions in the individualized faces of many of Nerezi's figures (see Figure **14.3.58**). This elongation of the figures and repetition of lines create a sense of visual rhythms and movement within the church, and were a hallmark of Byzantine painting during the Komnenian period.

The high quality of Nerezi's frescoes and similarities with other artworks have led many scholars to conclude that the church's painters hailed from the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, a major center of artistic patronage and production. Nerezi's frescoes are particularly valuable since no painted church programs from Constantinople survive from this period (much of Constantinople's church art was destroyed following the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1453).



Figure **14.3.59**: Frescoes in the northern crossarm of the naos, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Naos

As was common in post-Iconoclastic churches, Nerezi features full-length, nearly life-size portraits of saints at the floor level, with narrative scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary (see Figure **14.3.59**).



Figure **14.3.60**: The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple fresco in the southern crossarm of the naos, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple

This narrative cycle begins on the southern crossarm of the naos, which is dominated by a large image of the *Meeting of the Lord in the Temple*. Here, Mary and Joseph bring the newborn Jesus into the Jewish temple and the prophets Simeon and Anna identify him as the Messiah (view annotated image).



Figure **14.3.61**: Detail of *Meeting of the Lord* with painted imitation of bookmatched marble revetment at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The artists have imagined the interior of the temple as a Christian church with an altar, ciborium, and marble revetment (including bookmatched marble slabs like those found in Justinian's sixth-century Hagia Sophia and other Byzantine churches).



Figure **14.3.62**: Bookmatched marble revetment, Hagia Sophia, 532–37, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Deposition

Christ's followers mourn his death on the north side of the naos, a common theme of hymns and sermons during the post-Iconoclastic era.



Figure **14.3.63**: Deposition fresco in the northern crossarm of the naos, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the *Deposition*, Christ's followers remove his body from the cross. Joseph of Arimathea looks out at the viewer with a piercing gaze from the center of the scene.



Figure **14.3.64**: *Lamentation* fresco in northern crossarm of the naos, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Lamentation



Figure **14.3.65**: North crossarm of the naos at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The narrative continues with the *Threnos*, or *Lamentation*, located next to the *Deposition*. The dead Christ now lies on the ground but has not yet been placed in the tomb (see Figures **14.3.64**, **14.3.66**, **14.3.67**, and **14.3.68**, left). Christ's followers mourn his death. Lines of grief crease their faces, creating emotional expressions often absent from Byzantine art. The Virgin cradles her dead son in her lap, recalling how she carried him into the temple in the *Meeting of the Lord* on the opposite wall. (View annotated image.)



Figure **14.3.66**: Detail of the Lamentation with Christ and the Virgin at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

John the Evangelist clings to Christ's hand at the center of the scene. His hunched body creates sweeping contours that move the viewer's eyes toward the dead Christ and his mother. Additional mourners gather at Christ's feet and angels appear in the sky above, echoing the grief of Christ's followers below. These human and angelic figures display a range of emotions and gestures of bereavement, which must have invited Byzantine viewers to engage emotionally with this image.



Figure **14.3.67**: Detail of the *Lamentation* at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In Byzantine mosaics and panel paintings, such scenes often appeared against a solid gold background. Yet here, the artist has effectively employed fresco to create a naturalistic environment: an undulating green ground, tan hills with rhythmic curves, and a deep blue sky. This landscape also serves the larger composition; the silhouettes of the hills sink toward the center of the scene, moving the viewer's eyes to the figures, and heightening the overall drama of the image.



Figure **14.3.68**: Left: Lamentation at Nerezi (photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Giotto, Lamentation fresco, Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel, 1305–06, Padua. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This scene, its naturalistic setting, and its emphasis on emotion all anticipate developments associated with Renaissance Italy. Scholars have noted the striking similarities between Nerezi and Giotto's fourteenth-century frescoes at the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy, particularly in Giotto's own rendition of this same scene: The Lamentation (see Figure **14.3.68**, right). Although Giotto's figures are more naturalistic than those at Nerezi, both frescoes emphasize the mourners' grief within a landscape that amplifies the drama of the scene.

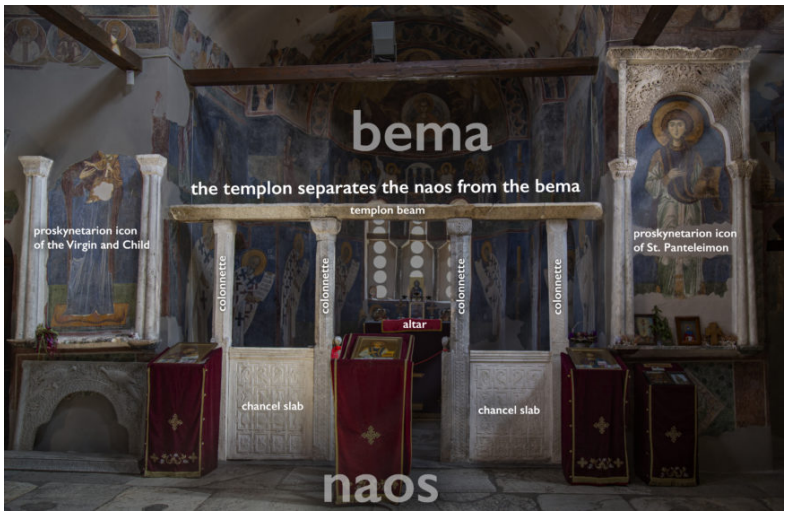


Figure **14.3.69**: Annotated templon and proskynetaria icons at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Templon



Figure **14.3.70**: Templon with intercolumnar icons at the church of Saint George, Staro Nagoričino, 1313-1318, North Macedonia. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A *templon* separates the naos (where most worshippers stood) from the bema (where the clergy stood around the altar), reconstructed from twelfth-century fragments (view location in plan). This form of sanctuary barrier, consisting of chancel slabs, colonnettes, and an epistyle or templon beam, was widespread in Byzantium during this time, and enabled laypeople to see into the bema. Later, Byzantine templons incorporated intercolumnar icons (as seen at the fourteenth-century church of Saint George of Staro Nagoričino) creating what has become known as an "iconostasis," which can still be found in Orthodox churches today.



Figure **14.3.71**: Detail of Saint Panteleimon proskynetarion icon at Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As was common in Middle Byzantine churches, the church of Saint Panteleimon features two large proskynetaria icons on either side of the templon. The damaged icon to the north once depicted the Virgin and child, resonating with the narrative depictions of these figures in such scenes as the Meeting of the Lord and the Lamentation. The icon to the south represents Saint Panteleimon, a healer who was the church's patron saint (see Figure **14.3.71**). Panteleimon retains his original stucco frame, which features delicately carved birds and vegetal motifs. The large scale, prominent position, and elaborate frames of these proskynetaria icons must have made them a focus of prayer and veneration for Byzantine worshippers.

Figure 14.3.72: Interior of Saint Panteleimon. (© Google Maps, via Smarthistory)

Bishops in the Bema



Figure 14.3.73: Apse mosaic of bishop Saint Severus, Sant'Apollinare in Classe, c. 533–49, Ravenna, Italy. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The bema, where the clergy celebrated the Eucharist, displays images that reflect the ritual function of this particular space. Eight bishop saints decorate the bema walls at ground level, two of whom appear to emerge from the side chapels. Images of bishops

were a common feature in Byzantine bemas for centuries, where they were usually depicted frontally and holding books, as with the mosaic of Saint Severus at the sixth-century church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, near Ravenna, Italy (see Figure **14.3.73**).

But the bishops at Nerezi appear in a three-quarter view and strike a more dynamic pose, an innovative approach at this time (see Figure **14.3.74**). Instead of closed books, the bishops at Nerezi hold unfurled scrolls, or "rolls," that display prayers spoken by the clergy in the Divine Liturgy. Such scrolls were actually used by clergy during this period, as seen in a roughly contemporary, twelfth-century example preserved at the British Library.



Figure **14.3.74**: Left: bishop saints on the south side of the bema at Nerezi (photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Liturgical roll with Divine Liturgy St. Basil (Add MS 22749), 12th century, Byzantine. (British Library, CC0 1.0)

This new way of depicting bishops in a three-quarter pose and accompanied by contemporary liturgical objects made these saints appear as active participants in the church services celebrated in this space.



Figure **14.3.75**: *Hetoimasia* fresco at floor level in the apse behind the altar in the bema, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.76**: Liturgical fan, 565–578 C.E., Byzantine. (© Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)

In the apse behind the altar, two angels vested as deacons hold liturgical fans, another contemporary liturgical object (see Figure **14.3.76**), on either side of the *Hetoimasia*, or "prepared throne," a symbolic image that evoked Christ's Passion and anticipated second coming (see Figure **14.3.75**). Additional angel deacons appear above, where Christ is shown giving Eucharistic bread and wine to his Apostles like a priest, mirroring the Divine Liturgy as it unfolded below. (View annotated image.)

Scholars refer to this tendency of church art to illustrate contemporary ritual and material culture during this period as “liturgical realism.”



Figure **14.3.77**: Frescoes in the apse behind the altar in the bema, 1164, Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Nerezi in art history

Byzantine art may be known for its golden mosaics, but the five-domed church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi challenges modern viewers not to forget Byzantium’s equally beautiful frescoes. With vivid colors and graceful lines, Nerezi’s frescoes depict elongated figures that exhibit a range of emotions and sometimes occupy naturalistic landscapes, anticipating the Italian Renaissance and demonstrating Byzantium’s importance in the history of art (see Figure **14.3.77**).

Mosaics and microcosm: the monasteries of Hosios Loukas, Nea Moni, and Daphni

by Dr. Evan Freeman



Figure **14.3.78**: Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Mark L. Darby, all rights reserved, via Smarthistory) A mosaic of Christ as Pantokrator dominates the central dome, serious and watchful against a flat gold ground.

Ecstatic Motion

The city of Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire since its foundation by Constantine in 330 C.E., was roiled by the Iconoclastic Controversy in the 8th and 9th centuries. Emperors, bishops, and many others debated whether images, or “icons,” of God and the saints were holy or heretical. Those in favor of images triumphed in 843. Soon after, a new church was built in Constantinople’s great imperial palace and adorned with rich mosaic icons. The church was dedicated to the Virgin of the *Pharos*, named with the Greek word for a lighthouse, since a lighthouse stood nearby. Around 864, patriarch Photios of Constantinople—the highest-ranking cleric in the empire—gushed about the church of the Pharos and its glittering mosaics: “It is as if one had entered heaven itself... and was illuminated by the beauty in all forms shining all around like so many stars, so is one utterly amazed.” Photios describes how his whirling to view the church produced the impression that the church itself was moving:

> *It seems that everything is in ecstatic motion, and the church itself is circling round. For the spectator, through his whirling about in all directions and being constantly astir, which he is forced to experience by the variegated spectacle on all sides, imagines that his personal condition is transferred to the object. Photios of Constantinople, Homily 10*

Photios offers us a tantalizing impression of the Pharos church and a sense of how Byzantines viewed mosaics during this period.



Figure **14.3.79**: Map with Constantinople and the monasteries of Hosios Loukas, Nea Moni, and Daphni. (Map © Google, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.80**: View of the naos, katholikon, 11th century, Hosios Loukas, Boeotia. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0) Mosaics and marble revetment give the interior of the church a glittering richness.

Middle Byzantine mosaics

While the church of the Pharos has been lost, three churches from around the eleventh century preserve much of their original mosaic programs, which were likely inspired by churches like the church of the Pharos in the capital. These three monuments—Hosios Loukas, Nea Moni, and Daphni—point to common trends in Middle Byzantine mosaics, while also demonstrating the flexibility of church decoration during this period.

Mosaics are patterns or images made of *tesserae*: small pieces of stone, glass, or other materials. They commonly adorned floors in antiquity but became popular decoration for church walls and ceilings in Byzantium, especially among wealthy patrons such as emperors.

In the Middle Byzantine period (c. 843–1204), domed, centrally planned churches became more popular than the long, hall-like basilicas of previous centuries. While basilicas created a strong horizontal axis between the entrance on one end and the altar at the other, domed churches added a vertical axis that prompted viewers to look upward. New decorative programs developed in tandem with this architectural trend, covering walls and domes with mosaics and frescos of holy figures in complex, new configurations. The lower portions of churches were often decorated with marble revetment (thin panels of marble, often beautifully colored).

Church as microcosm

Byzantine texts interpreted the domed church as a microcosm—a three-dimensional image of the cosmos—associating the sparkling gold vaults above with the heavens, and the colored marbles below with the earth. Within this framework, images often seem to be arranged hierarchically: with a heavenly Christ reigning above, events from sacred history unfolding below, and portraits of saints surrounding the worshippers in the lowest registers. Many of these images took on additional meanings as church services unfolded.



Figure **14.3.81**: Left: "spatial icon" of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple at Hosios Loukas (photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0); right: Masaccio's Holy Trinity fresco at Santa Maria Novella. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Spatial icons

The mosaicists who decorated these churches made no effort to create illusionistic backdrops for the holy figures, as one often finds in works from the Italian Renaissance, such as Masaccio's *Holy Trinity* fresco (Figure **14.3.81**). Instead, the holy figures situated in the curves and facets of these Middle Byzantine churches appear against a gold ground. Often, these prophets, saints, and angels seem to face and even communicate with each other across the space of the church. Such "spatial icons"—as the art historian Otto Demus famously described them—created the impression that the holy figures occupied the same physical space as the worshippers.



Figure **14.3.82**: Panagia and katholikon churches seen from the east, 10th and 11th centuries, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Boeotia. (Photo: © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory). Both buildings feature distinctive decoration in red brick.

Hosios Loukas

The monastery of Hosios Loukas, located in central Greece, is probably the oldest of the three churches. It is named for St. Loukas of Steiris, a local monastic saint who lived on this site and died in 953. Two connected churches survive here. The older church,

dedicated to the Virgin and located to the north, features a cross-in-square plan. The katholikon church, built to the south in the eleventh century, utilizes a larger, octagon-domed plan (read more about these church types). The katholikon church retains many of its mosaics, undoubtedly the result of rich patronage. St. Luke's body was interred between the two churches, and the monastery attracted pilgrims who sought the saint's healing.

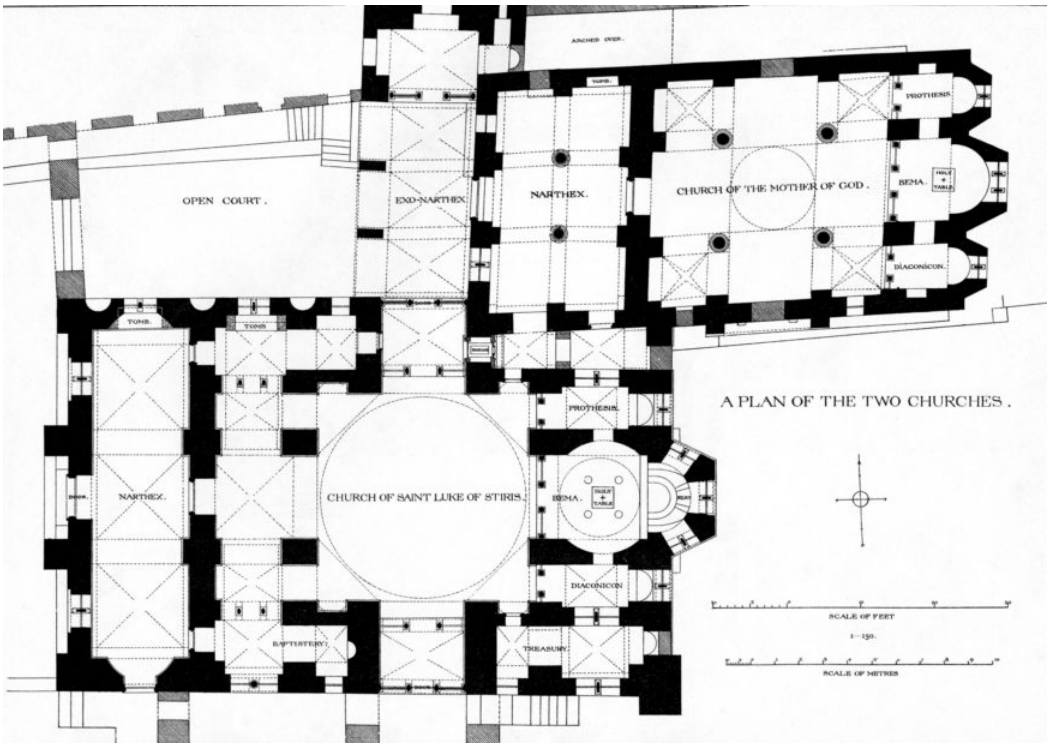


Figure **14.3.83**: Plan of Hosios Loukas, Greece, 11th century, from Robert Weir Schultz and Sidney Howard Barnsley, *The Monastery of Saint Luke of Stiris, in Phocis, and the Dependent monastery of Saint Nicolas in the Fields, near Skripou in Boetia* (London: Macmillan, 1901). (Image via Smarthistory)

Worshippers entered the katholikon through the "narthex," a vestibule at the western end of the building. Here, they encountered portraits of saints and large images of Christ's Passion and Resurrection: Christ washing his disciples' feet, the Crucifixion, the Anastasis, and the incredulous Thomas touching the wounds of the risen Christ.



Figure **14.3.84**: Narthex mosaics, left: a group of women saints, right: Christ washing his disciples' feet, katholikon, Hosios Loukas, Boeotia, 11th century. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Worshippers then passed beneath a large mosaic of Christ Pantokrator to enter the main part of the church, or "naos." Christ displays an open book that proclaims him to be the "light of the world" (John 8:12). The mosaic's gold tesserae reflect sunlight from the front door in the daytime, and flickering candlelight at night.



Figure **14.3.85**: Christ Pantokrater mosaic, narthex, katholikon, Hosios Loukas, 11th century, Boeotia. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A large fresco of Christ surrounded by angels occupies the heavenly space of the dome in the naos. This fresco may replicate the original dome mosaics, which have been lost. Four squinches beneath the dome displayed mosaic images from the life of Christ. The Annunciation likely once adorned the northeast squinch but has been lost. The mosaics in the other three squinches depict Christ's Nativity, Presentation in the Jewish Temple, and Baptism.



Figure **14.3.86**: Central dome and squiches, katholikon, Hosios Loukas monastery, Boeotia, 11th century. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Various saints appear below. An abundance of monastic saints—including St. Loukas himself—reflects the building's function as a monastery church.



Figure **14.3.87**: Hosios Loukas (St. Luke of Steiris) mosaic near his tomb, west wall of northern crossarm, katholikon, Hosios Loukas, 11th century, Boeotia. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Proceeding through the naos, worshippers saw an image of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles at Pentecost in a smaller dome above the altar. The Virgin and Child sit enthroned in the apse behind the altar, a reminder that God became a human being for the salvation of the world. During the Divine Liturgy, this image of Christ's incarnation took on new significance as the bread and wine also became the body and blood of Christ.



Figure **14.3.88**: Pentecost, Virgin and Child mosaics, bema, katholikon, Hosios Loukas monastery, Boeotia, 11th century. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Nea Moni

Hermit monks founded Nea Moni ("new monastery") on the island of Chios sometime before 1042, and its katholikon was built with the patronage of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos between 1049–1055. It features a rectangular plan, and its architectural design may have been adapted to accommodate its mosaic program.



Figure **14.3.89**: Left: view of Nea Moni from the west (photo: FLIOUKAS, CC BY-SA 4.0); right: Plan of katholikon of Nea Moni, Chios, 11th century. (Photo: © Robert G. Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.90**: St. Joachim mosaic, 11th century, narthex, katholikon, Nea Moni, Chios. (Photo: Marmontel, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In the narthex, worshippers again encountered an array of saints and large narrative images centering around Christ's Passion. In the naos, the main dome has lost its mosaics. But remnants of cherubim and seraphim, evangelists, and apostles inhabit pendentives beneath the dome. Further down, eight alternating conches and niches displayed a ring scenes from the life of Christ. The Virgin appears in the eastern apse behind the altar with hands upraised in prayer, flanked by the archangels Gabriel and Michael.



Figure **14.3.91**: View of the naos, Nea Moni, Chios, 11th century. (Photo: Meltedrainbow, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure 14.3.92: Daphni Monastery seen from the east, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Evan Freeman, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Daphni

The monastery of Daphni, located just northwest of Athens, was likely the last of the three churches to be built, probably constructed between 1050–1150. Little is known about the foundation of this cross-in-square church.

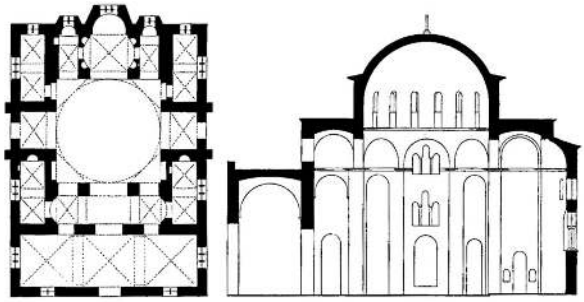


Figure 14.3.93: Plan and elevation of Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150, from Robert Weir Schultz and Sidney Howard Barnsley, *The Monastery of Saint Luke of Stiris, in Phocis, and the Dependent monastery of Saint Nicolas in the Fields, near Skripou in Boetia* (London: Macmillan, 1901) (Image via Smarthistory)



Figure 14.3.94: Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple mosaic, narthex, Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Mark L. Darby, all rights reserved, via Smarthistory)

Here, the narthex combines scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin, suggesting the church may have been dedicated to Mary. Notably, the Last Supper and Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple (where she was fed with heavenly bread by an angel) both appear on the eastern wall of the narthex, where worshippers would have seen them as they entered the church. Such images were meant to connect past events from sacred history with the celebration of the Eucharist in the present: Christ sharing bread and wine with his apostles at the Last Supper and Virgin eating heavenly bread in the temple were both understood to prefigure and symbolize the Eucharist. The appearance of the Foot Washing in the narthexes of all three of these churches may reflect the use of this part of the church for a ritual foot washing on Holy Thursday, when abbots imitated Christ by washing the feet of the monks.



Figure 14.3.95: View of the naos looking east, Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Ktiv, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A monumental image of the heavenly Christ Pantokrator, framed by a rainbow mandorla in the central dome, dominates the naos. Photios interprets what must have been a similar image in the Pharos church as Christ reigning from the heavens:

> *You might say He is overseeing the earth, and devising its orderly arrangement and government, so accurately has the painter been inspired to represent, though only in forms and in colors, the Creator's care for us. Photios of Constantinople, Homily 10*



Figure 14.3.96: Christ Pantokrator mosaic, dome, Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Mark L. Darby, all rights reserved, via Smarthistory)

Scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin—such as the Annunciation—unfold in the squinches below and throughout the rest of the naos. The eastern apse reveals another Virgin and Child, and additional saints appear throughout the naos.



Figure **14.3.97**: Annunciation mosaic, Daphni monastery, Chaidari, c. 1050–1150. (Photo: Mark L. Darby, all rights reserved, via Smarthistory)

For worshippers entering these churches, mosaics offered a vision of God reigning from on high, a reminder of salvation history, and face-to-face encounters with so many saints who had come before. No wonder Photios found himself whirling around, trying to take in the overwhelming mosaics at the Pharos church, and feeling as if he had "entered heaven itself."

The *Paris Psalter*

by Dr. Anne McClanan



Figure **14.3.98**: *David Composing the Psalms*, from the *Paris Psalter*, c. 900 CE. 14-1/8 x 10-1/4″ / 36 x 26 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France. (Image via Smarthistory)

The classical past and the medieval Christian present

Why would a Biblical king surround himself with pagans? The *Paris Psalter* embodies a complex mixture of the classical pagan past and the medieval Christian present—all brought together to communicate a political message by the Byzantine emperor.

The Byzantine Empire, which ruled areas of the eastern Mediterranean from the fourth through fifteenth centuries, left a dazzling visual legacy that has influenced other medieval Christian and Islamic societies as well as countless artists in our own time.

What is a psalter?

The word "Psalter" in the name of this manuscript is the term we use for books and manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible's Book of Psalms. Psalters were one of the most commonly copied works in the Middle Ages because of their central role in medieval church ceremony.

The images



Figure **14.3.99**: *David Glorified by the Women of Israel*, from *The Paris Psalter*, c. 900. 14-1/8 x 10-1/4″ / 36 x 26 cm Bibliothèque nationale de France. (Image via Smarthistory)

This work was unusually large and lavishly illustrated, with 14 full-page illuminations included in its 449 folios (a folio is a leaf in a book). Eight of these images depict the life of King David, who was often seen as a model of just rule for medieval kings. Because King David was traditionally considered the author of the Psalms, he is shown here in the role of musician and composer, sitting atop a boulder playing his harp in an idyllic pastoral setting.

This manuscript so carefully follows models from prior centuries that scholars once thought it was made during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. Only later did research demonstrate that the Paris Psalter was actually made in the tenth century as an exquisite imitation of Roman work from the third to fifth centuries—in other words, it was part of an intentional revival of the Classical past. Classical style, as a general term, refers to the naturalistic visual representation used during periods when, for example, the Roman emperors Augustus and Hadrian ruled.

Classical revival

The period of classical revival that produced the *Paris Psalter* is sometimes called the Macedonian Renaissance, because the Macedonian dynasty of emperors ruled the Byzantine Empire at the time. This classical revival followed Byzantine Iconoclasm. The notion that this Byzantine revival of the Roman past was a Renaissance, in the sense of a full-scale revival of classical thinking and art such as in the Italian Renaissance, has been questioned. However, there is no doubt that we see in this, and other contemporary works, a conscious appropriation of elements of the classical artistic vocabulary.

Thus we have the conundrum of the Biblical David encircled by classical personifications, a figure that represents a place or attribute. In this example, the seated woman embodies the attribute of Melody. David's seated posture with his instrument is likely based on the classical tragic figure Orpheus, usually shown similarly positioned holding his lyre. Likewise the hazy buildings in the background also belong to the Greco-Roman tradition of wall painting. The meaning of the personifications such as the woman, Melody, perched beside David, is intriguing—within the medieval Christian context she presumably has now become a symbol of culture and erudition as opposed to her earlier significance as a minor deity in the pagan classical world.

Notice how the surroundings including plants, animals and landscape differs from the resplendent gold backgrounds used in the imperial mosaics of Justinian and Theodora at Ravenna or the icon we call the *Vladimir Virgin*. In contrast, David is depicted naturalistically as a youthful shepherd, rather than the grand king he was to become. The classicizing, more realistic style of the figures and the landscape coupled with the overt classical allusions made by the personifications show the pains taken to render a coherent vision uniting subject and style.



Figure **14.3.100**: Rape of Europa (detail, lid), *Veroli Casket*, second half of the 10th century, wood overlaid with ivory with traces of polychrome and gilding. (Victoria and Albert Museum, via Smarthistory)

Connecting with great emperors of the past?

Other Byzantine art from the so-called Macedonian Renaissance, such as the ivory *Veroli Casket* (see Figure **14.3.100**), also show a renewed interest in classicism that called upon Late Roman artistic models. The patron of the *Paris Psalter* perhaps sought to liken himself this way with great emperors of the past by reviving a style that had been out of favor for hundreds of years and perhaps evoked a "golden age." Choice of artistic style could function as a tool for conveying meaning within the sophisticated Byzantine society at the time.

The *Paris Psalter* was produced in Constantinople, today known as Istanbul, and takes its name from its modern location, Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale. The *Paris Psalter* manuscript, like most western medieval manuscripts, was not made from paper, but from carefully prepared animal skins. Medieval manuscripts were far more rare and precious than mass-produced modern printed books. Large-scale examples, such as this, made for an aristocratic if not imperial patron, show how Biblical art of the highest craftsmanship could serve many purposes for its medieval audience and patrons.

Middle Byzantine secular art

by Dr. Anne McClanan



Figure **14.3.101**: Veroli Casket, 950–1000 C.E. (Constantinople), wood overlaid with ivory and bone, traces of gilding and paint, V&A, London. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

For many of us, "Byzantine art" evokes gold icons with sacred figures or splendid church interiors. But the Byzantines also created art and architecture with no religious imagery and without explicit religious functions in mind.

Religious vs. secular?

Admittedly, classifying medieval art in tidy categories of the "religious" or "secular" is a bit anachronistic, especially in the arts of the Byzantine court, where religious and political elements were often seamlessly blended. For example, the *Book of Ceremonies*, compiled in the 10th century, describes the elaborate protocols that shaped life in the Byzantine palaces, and many—such as the coronation of a new emperor or empress—involve aspects that we would today call both religious and political.

The *Book of Ceremonies* describes the patriarch, a bishop who was the highest-ranking church official in Constantinople, crowning the emperor in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia:

> *[The patriarch] says a prayer over the ruler's imperial crown, and having completed it, the patriarch himself takes the crown and places it on the ruler's head. Immediately the people cry out, "Holy, holy, holy! Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth," three times. Then: "Many years to so-and-so, great emperor and sovereign!" Book of Ceremonies I, 38*



Figure **14.3.102**: The patriarch crowning emperor Constantine II, in the Madrid Skylitzes, between 1126 and 1150? (Biblioteca Nacional de España, Vitro. 26-2, fol. 114v, via Smarthistory)

An image in the twelfth-century *Madrid Skylitzes*, which shows the patriarch crowning emperor Constantine II, offers us a glimpse of what such a coronation event might have looked like. Such texts and images demonstrate that the sacred and secular often mingled in Byzantium. Acknowledging this, let us nevertheless consider Middle Byzantine "secular" artworks that display non-religious images and motifs.



Figure **14.3.103**: Emperor Alexios V (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. Hist. gr. 53, fol. 291v, via Smarthistory)

Silks

Manuscript illuminations show the gorgeous silk ceremonial garb of the court, as seen in this depiction of emperor Alexios V, whose brief reign ended with the Fourth Crusade's conquest of Constantinople in 1204 (see Figure **14.3.103**). The emperor wears deep purple silk, not decorated with religious motifs, but with white medallion patterns that display a griffin at the center. Similar textiles survive, including an example at the cathedral treasury in Sion, Switzerland.



Figure **14.3.104**: Byzantine silk with paired griffins in roundels, 11th century, Valère Basilica, Sion, Switzerland. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Although brownish-looking now, chemical analysis shows this Byzantine textile once had the rich purple hue seen in the manuscript since the silk was dyed with "murex," an extremely expensive purple dye whose use was tightly restricted to the highest echelons of Byzantine society (see Figure **14.3.104**). The shared griffin imagery on both the manuscript illumination garment and Sion textile is typical of luxury goods, which often featured exotic and fictive creatures. The griffin is a mythical creature with the head and wings of an eagle, the body of a lion, and sometimes a snake for a tail, which originated in the ancient world and appears in the arts of many cultures.

Ceramics

A menagerie of strange beasts also populates Byzantine ceramics. A twelfth-century plate, recovered from a medieval shipwreck, shows a cheetah attacking a deer.



Figure **14.3.105**: Plate with cheetah attacking a deer, mid-12th century, glazed earthenware with sgraffito decoration. Nea Anchialos Archaeological Collection. (Photo: National Gallery of Art, via Smarthistory)

Other Byzantine ceramic vessels featured abstract ornaments or even scenes from popular stories, such as this thirteenth-century plate that might render a scene from the tales of *Digenis Akritis* which roughly translates as "biracial border lord." The *Digenis Akritis* is a Byzantine poem of the twelfth century that narrates the exploits of a fictional hero of Byzantine and Arab descent named Basil on the eastern frontier of the Byzantine empire.



Figure **14.3.106**: Plate with lovers, first half of 13th century, probably from northern Greece or eastern Thrace, glazed earthenware with champlevé decoration. Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth. (Photo: National Gallery of Art, via Smarthistory)

The plate shows a woman perched on the lap of a young man. It includes details such as the rabbit on the right, which broadcasts the amorous intentions of the central figures, since this animal symbolized fecundity and sex to its medieval audience.

Ivory Boxes

A similar playfulness is seen in the imagery of Middle Byzantine ivory and bone boxes, or caskets, of which over forty survive. Additional panels also survive, detached from boxes that are now lost. While some caskets display Biblical figures such as Adam and Eve, many instead portray an eclectic array of figures that seem calculated to delight rather than edify.



Figure **14.3.107**: Veroli Casket, 950–1000, Constantinople, wood overlaid with ivory and bone, traces of gilding and paint. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The tenth-century *Veroli Casket* includes scenes from classical mythology such as the hero Bellerophon with his winged horse Pegasus (see Figures **14.3.101**, **14.3.107**, and **14.3.108**).



Figure **14.3.108**: Detail of *Veroli Casket*, 950–1000 C.E., Constantinople, wood overlaid with ivory and bone, traces of gilding and paint. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Strips of ivory decorated with rosettes, which frame the scenes on the *Veroli Casket*, are another common characteristic of such boxes. Carved pieces of bone and wood attach to a wooden armature, which come in a few standard shapes. Earlier scholarship assumed these lavish works were made for women, but there is no imagery or other evidence that suggests they were seen as particularly feminine. Instead, what is clear is the use of classical, pagan imagery to signal the erudition and status of the owners, who may have used such boxes to store a range of precious objects.



Figure **14.3.109**: Bowl, 11th–12th century, enameled and gilded glass, 17 x 33 cm (with handles). Treasury of San Marco, Venice. (Photo © Regione del Veneto, via Smarthistory)

San Marco bowl

An exquisite tenth-century glass bowl now in Venice's San Marco illustrates another way the classical is rendered in Middle Byzantine art (see Figures **14.3.109** and **14.3.110**).



Figure **14.3.110**: Detail of bowl, 11th–12th century, enameled and gilded glass, 17 x 33 cm (with handles). Treasury of San Marco, Venice. (Photo © Regione del Veneto, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.111**: Warrior placing wreath around column, carnelian ring stone, 3rd–2nd century BCE. Italic, carnelian, 1.4 cm high. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0 1.0)

Various attempts have been made to connect the imagery on the San Marco bowl with specific classical myths, identifying such figures as Dionysus, Hermes, and Mars. But none of those explanations have ultimately been persuasive. The elegantly-posed nudes on the bowl, pictured in dramatic contrast with the dark enamel background, convey a loose sense of the classical rather than recounting a specific myth. A medieval audience would have recognized this object to be of the highest quality in terms of workmanship and value, and the classicizing rendering of figures, which vaguely allude to mythological scenes, further enhanced its status. Perhaps the scenes were inspired by ancient carved gems—such as this carnelian ring stone at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Figure **14.3.111**—which similarly show vignettes in silhouette?

Like the Veroli Casket and the Paris Psalter, the San Marco bowl has been attributed to the so-called "Macedonian Renaissance," a phase of Middle Byzantine art soon after the end of Iconoclasm in which classical subject matter and a more naturalistic style were preferred by patrons of the Macedonian imperial family.

This bowl also references contemporary luxury goods from the Islamic world that were circulating around the eastern Mediterranean at this time. Around the inside of its rim and exterior of its base, the bowl displays pseudo-Arabic inscriptions. These are an imitation of a Kufic script, but they are not actual, readable texts. Alicia Walker has theorized that these classicizing figures and pseudo-Arabic inscriptions indicate that this vessel may have been used for divination, which was associated with ancient gods and eastern cultures. [1] But the significance of these non-Christian motifs remains uncertain.



Figure **14.3.112**: Detail of bowl, 11th–12th century, enameled and gilded glass, 17 x 33 cm (with handles). Treasury of San Marco, Venice. (Photo © Regione del Veneto, via Smarthistory)

Even after the end of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy that raised religious concerns over images, Byzantine artists and patrons continued to use and enjoy many kinds of non-religious images and subject matter. Sometimes this imagery overtly connected to classical mythology or medieval folktales, but other times—as with creatures both fictive and real—the imagery did

not come from a specific story but was derived from a broader visual culture shared around the eastern Mediterranean in both Christian and Islamic artworks.

Notes:

[1] Alicia Walker, “Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl,” *The Art Bulletin* 90.1 (March 2008): 32–53.

Medieval Nubian Kingdoms, an introduction

by The British Museum



Figure **14.3.113**: This sandstone block is from the cathedral at Faras. It is one of several which formed a decorative frieze around the apse. Between the pillars stands a dove or eagle, wings outstretched, beneath a Coptic-type cross. Both birds were important symbols in Egyptian and Nubian Christianity – representing paradise. Around the neck of the bird on the left is a *bulla*, a small receptacle worn as an amulet. Sandstone frieze, early 7th century, from Faras (Nubia), Sudan, 25.4 x 43 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Between 500 and 600 CE, the rulers of three Nubian medieval kingdoms, Nobatia, Makuria and Alwa, governed the Nile valley from the first cataract to just south of modern Khartoum in Sudan. Missionaries from the Byzantine Empire, sent by Justinian I and his empress Theodora, converted these kingdoms to Christianity. This introduced a marked cultural change into the region.

Churches replaced temples and simple burials replaced the grand tombs of the earlier pagan rulers. This transformation is visible in numerous objects found in the British Museum collection including the iron cross of Bishop Timotheos and a carved wooden pectoral depicting an archangel.

After a brief period of conflict with their Arab neighbors in Egypt, the borders were secured, and the medieval kingdoms flourished for almost a thousand years. The introduction of the water wheel (*saqia*) allowed agriculture to expand. Villages, towns, monasteries and fortresses lined the banks of the river Nile. Artists attained new heights of achievement, particularly in the fields of mural art and pottery production, and there appears to be a dramatic increase in literacy in Greek, Coptic, Old Nubian, and later Arabic.



Figure **14.3.114**: Red sandstone capital, 7th century, from Faras (Nubia), Sudan, 56 x 90.3 cm. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Fine churches were built, decorated with wall paintings and carved stone elements, including the sandstone frieze and column capital from the Faras cathedral found in the Museum collection (see Figure **14.3.114**). Wide-ranging trade and diplomatic contacts were established with the Muslim world and Byzantine Empire.



Figure **14.3.115**: Bowl, 9th–10th century, Faras (Nubia), Sudan, 10.8 cm. (© Trustees of the British Museum, via Smarthistory)

Faras was an important Christian site from the seventh century and some of the most important bishops were based there. As well as the cathedral, with its brightly colored murals and intricate friezes, there were at least six churches, a monastery, and pottery workshops. In the later Medieval period, the importance of Faras declined as it was eclipsed by Qasr Ibrim, just north of the Egyptian border. (Faras was excavated by Polish archaeologists before being flooded by Lake Nubia/Nasser in 1964.)

This fragment of a ceramic bowl in Figure **14.3.115** was made at Faras, in the northern part of Nubia. It has a typical radial pattern on a white background—other popular motifs included Christian iconographic symbols such as fish, doves, crosses and palm fronds. Stamped impressions were also sometimes used for decoration.

The long period of relative peace from the mid-seventh century onwards enabled Nubian artistic expression to flower. This took various forms, the most notable other than ceramic production being wall painting. Traces of brightly colored wall paintings have been found in over fifty churches in Nubia, as well as in some private houses. Black paint was usually derived from charcoal, and yellow and brown from ochre. Textile production became more advanced during this period and basket-making, leatherworking, and metalworking were practiced to a high standard.

From around 1200 onwards, dynastic strife, poor relations with the rulers of Egypt, and the rise of the Funj kingdom in the south, brought about the collapse of the Nubian medieval kingdoms.

An iron benedictional cross from the grave of Bishop Timotheos



Figure **14.3.116**: *Cross of Timotheos*, late 14th century, iron, from the grave of Bishop Timotheos, cathedral at Qasr Ibrim, Egypt. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Nubia was converted to Christianity by a missionary expedition sent by the Byzantine emperor Justinian. An incentive to the Nubian rulers was that they would receive the support of Byzantium against their enemies. But Christianity brought a major change: the Nubian rulers were no longer considered divine, and their control over religious matters was transferred to bishops of the Christian Church.

Arab attempts to invade Nubia were unsuccessful and the country remained Christian long after Egypt was conquered in 641. Christianity in Nubia was strengthened by its affiliation with the Coptic Church in Egypt. Many Nubian bishops were appointed at Alexandria, where the Coptic patriarch had his seat. They controlled religious activity in Nubia from the major centers of Dongola, Faras and Qasr Ibrim. The cathedrals at these sites were decorated with paintings of saints, bishops, and Biblical scenes and intricately carved columns and friezes.

The majority of burials at this time were not elaborate and were without grave goods. Clerics were buried in their robes of office, sometimes with pottery vessels perhaps containing holy water. Bishop Timotheos appears to have been unusual in wearing his traveling clothes, without the usual finery. This iron benedictional cross in Figure **14.3.116** accompanied him to the grave. He may have died on the journey to take office at Qasr Ibrim. In addition to his cross, Bishop Timotheos was buried with two scrolls, one in Coptic and the other in Arabic (both now in Cairo). These scrolls take the form of Timotheos' 'letter of appointment' by the Coptic patriarch to his new See, and can be dated to 1372.

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J.M. Plumley, *The scrolls of Bishop Timotheo* (London, Egypt Exploration Society, 1975)

J.H. Taylor, *Egypt and Nubia* (London, The British Museum Press, 1991)

Byzantium, Kievan Rus', and their contested legacies

by Dr. Evan Freeman

Editors' Note

Since 2014, Russia has claimed Ukrainian territory, beginning with its invasion of Crimea. Part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim is that Ukraine is and has always been part of Russia. One way Ukrainians have countered Russian propaganda is by insisting on their independent Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian names for cities. "The Ukraine" sounded like a province, so it is now Ukraine. Since Kiev is transliterated from Russian, Kyiv is the preferred Ukrainian spelling of the capital.



Figure **14.3.117**: Virgin of Vladimir, or *Vladimirskaya*, 12th century with later repainting, tempera on wood. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. (Photo via Smarthistory)

One of the most beloved artworks in Russia is a tempera on wood icon known as the Virgin of Vladimir, or *Vladimirskaya*. It presents a common composition known as the Virgin *eleousa* (“compassionate”), which shows Mary and Jesus in tender embrace, their faces pressed together. The Virgin gazes out at us, commanding our attention, but her hands seem to gesture toward her son, destined to die on the cross and rise from the dead as the savior of humankind. Through the centuries, many miracles have been attributed to this icon, and as a result, numerous patrons and artists have sought to produce copies of it.



Figure **14.3.118**: Locations of the Virgin of Vladimir icon. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

But despite the Virgin of Vladimir’s enduring religious and cultural importance in Russia, the icon is not Russian in origin. It was likely painted in the twelfth century in Constantinople (Istanbul), capital of the Eastern Roman “Byzantine” Empire, and brought to

Kiev, capital of Kievan Rus', as a diplomatic gift around 1131. Later, the icon was transferred to the city of Vladimir (hence its name), and eventually to the Russian capital of Moscow, where it still remains.

The Virgin of Vladimir's journey from Constantinople to Kiev, and eventually, to Moscow, is part of a larger story of the conversion of Kievan Rus' to the Orthodox Christianity of the Byzantine Empire in the tenth century and Moscow's subsequent rise as a new center of power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While neither the Byzantine Empire nor Kievan Rus' survive today, works of art and architecture like the Virgin of Vladimir can help us understand the relationship between these medieval states, as well as their contested legacies in today's world.

The Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus'

Kievan Rus' emerged as a powerful confederation of city-states during the second half of the ninth century in Eastern Europe, where rivers helped link the Baltic Sea with the Black Sea and facilitated trade with Constantinople, the wealthy capital of the Byzantine Empire. The capital of Kievan Rus' was Kiev on the Dnieper River, which is today the capital of Ukraine. The name "Kievan Rus'" refers both to the state and its people.



Figure **14.3.119**: Map of the Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus'. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.120**: A modern monument to prince Vladimir I overlooks the Dnieper River in Kiev, Ukraine. (Photo: Library of Congress, via Smarthistory)

Kievan Rus' was sometimes a trading partner and other times an enemy of the Byzantine Empire. But in 987, Prince Vladimir I of Kiev, ruler over Kievan Rus', formed an alliance with the Byzantine emperor Basil II, converting from paganism to Christianity and marrying Basil II's sister Anna in 988. Historical texts describe the subsequent conversion of Vladimir's formerly pagan subjects by mass baptism in the Dnieper River in Kiev. With its conversion to the Orthodox Christianity of the Byzantines, Kievan Rus' now began appropriating and adapting Byzantine art and architecture for itself.

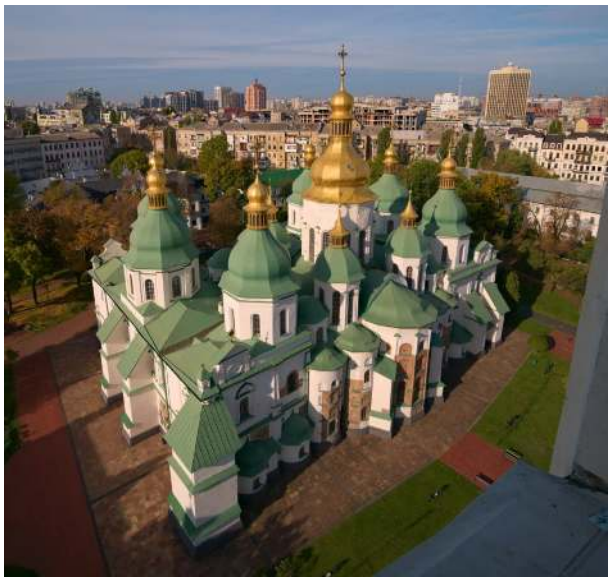


Figure **14.3.121**: St. Sophia, begun 1037 (with later additions), Kiev. (Photo: Daniel Kraft, CC BY-SA 3.0)

St. Sophia, Kiev

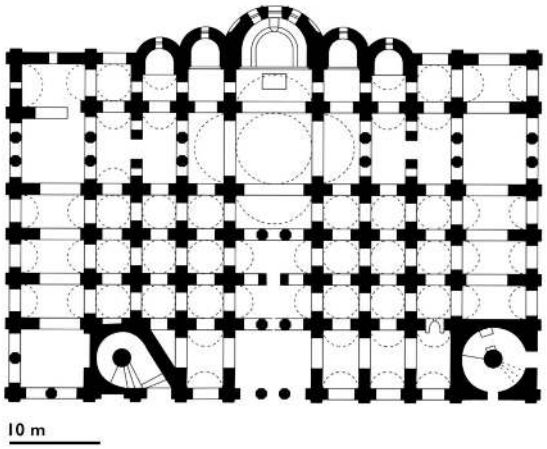


Figure **14.3.122**: Plan of St. Sophia, Kiev, begun 1037. (Evan Freeman, redrawn after John Lowden, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Wishing to emulate the Byzantine capital of Constantinople and its cathedral Hagia Sophia (dedicated to Christ as "Holy Wisdom"), Vladimir's son Yaroslav expanded Kiev and built a magnificent new church to function as the city's main cathedral, which he likewise dedicated to St. Sophia ("Holy Wisdom") in imitation of Constantinople's Hagia Sophia. St. Sophia in Kiev illustrates how Kievan Rus' appropriated the art and architecture of the Byzantine Empire while also making it their own.

Begun c. 1037, Kiev's St. Sophia was likely the product of collaboration between Byzantine and local craftsmen. The core of St. Sophia takes the form of a typical Middle Byzantine cross-in-square church, incorporating additional aisles and galleries to accommodate a large cathedral congregation, though still falling short of the astonishing scale of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Kiev's St. Sophia was probably finished in the 1040s and even its first bishop, Theopemptos, came from Constantinople. St. Sophia in Kiev still stands today, albeit with later restorations and additions.

Figure 14.3.123: St. Sophia's Cathedral interior. (© Google Maps, via Smarthistory)

The interior of St. Sophia displays mosaics and frescoes—hallmarks of Byzantine church decoration—though the former are better preserved than the latter. And although church services in Kievan Rus' were celebrated in Church Slavonic, a language whose written form was first developed by Byzantine missionaries in the ninth century, St. Sophia's mosaics are labeled in Greek, the language of Byzantium.



Figure 14.3.124: Christ Pantokrator surrounded by angels, and below apostles and the four evangelists, Dome mosaics, St. Sophia, Kiev, begun 1037. (Photo © Archimandrite Seraphim, via Smarthistory)

Christ Pantokrator

Byzantine worshippers probably would have found the interior of Kiev's St. Sophia very familiar. As in contemporary Byzantine churches, such as Daphni monastery, a bearded Christ Pantokrator ("almighty") reigns over the church from the central dome. Christ is surrounded by angels with large wings in imperial garb. Apostles fill the spaces between the windows in the drum that supports the dome and the four evangelists (authors of the Gospels) appear in the pendentives just below the windows.



Figure **14.3.125**: Annunciation mosaics, St. Sophia, Kiev, begun 1037. (Photos © Archimandrite Seraphim, via Smarthistory)

The Annunciation

The mosaics in the bema where the altar is located similarly mirror contemporary Byzantine churches and point to the function of this part of the church as the place where the Eucharist was celebrated. Gabriel and the Virgin enact the Annunciation from either side of the bema. The angel announces to the Virgin that she will give birth to Jesus, suggesting a parallel between Christ's incarnation (becoming flesh and blood) through the Virgin and the Eucharistic bread and wine believed to become Christ's body and blood on the altar below.



Figure **14.3.126**: Apse mosaics, St. Sophia, Kiev, begun 1037. (Photo © Archimandrite Seraphim, via Smarthistory)

Virgin orans

A towering Virgin *orans* (about 5.5 meters tall) looms against the gold ground of the apse. She stands on a gold platform and raises her hands in prayer beneath large Greek characters that identify her as the "Mother of God."



Figure 14.3.127: Communion of the Apostles, Apse mosaics, St. Sophia, Kiev, begun 1037. (Photo © Archimandrite Seraphim, via Smarthistory)

The Communion of the Apostles

Below the Virgin, Christ presides a8 the celebration of the Eucharist in a scene known as the "Communion of the Apostles," which became a common feature in Byzantine churches at this time, and which paralleled the celebration of the Eucharist unfolding at the altar below. Although reminiscent of the Last Supper, this image anachronistically depicts Christ presiding at a celebration of the Divine Liturgy like a Byzantine priest with all the trappings of a contemporary church altar. This image must have helped connect the experiences of contemporary worshippers with these holy figures of Christ and his apostles from the past: as worshippers drew near to the altar to receive the Eucharist, they mirrored the apostles who similarly approached Christ in the mosaic in Figure 14.3.127.

Perhaps surprising to modern viewers, Christ actually appears twice in this image. The artists have employed a common medieval visual device known as continuous narration in an attempt to depict two moments within one scene: on the left, Christ offers the Eucharistic bread to six of the apostles; on the right, he offers the Eucharistic wine to six more apostles.



Figure 14.3.128: Virgin and Child flanked by emperors Constantine and Justinian, Southwest vestibule mosaic, early 10th century, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Lost frescoes

Badly damaged frescoes once depicted Vladimir's son Yarloslav, his wife Irene, and their children. Yaroslav, now lost, was once shown offering a model of St. Sophia cathedral to Christ, much as the Byzantine emperors Constantine and Justinian offer models of Constantinople and Hagia Sophia to the Virgin and Child in a tenth-century mosaic in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.



Figure **14.3.129**: Icon with the Battle of Novgorod and Suzdal (The Miracle of the Icon of the Mother of God of the Sign), c. 1475 (Novgorod Integrated Museum-Reservation, Novgorod, Russia). (Pphoto: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The fragmentation of Kievan Rus'



Figure **14.3.130**: Icon of the Virgin orans (Our Lady of the Sign), which is associated with the 1170 battle between Novgorod and Suzdal, on display in the cathedral of St. Sophia, Novgorod. (Photo: Дар Ветер, CC BY-SA 3.0)

By the middle of the twelfth century, Kiev lost control over its expansive territories, and Kievan Rus' fragmented into several smaller states, which sometimes fought amongst themselves. This fifteenth-century icon from Novgorod depicts a battle in 1170 when forces from Suzdal laid siege to Novgorod (view locations on map). The main subject of this icon is itself another icon—in this case a miracle-working icon of the Virgin orans and Christ Child still preserved in Novgorod's cathedral of St. Sophia—which, according to legend, played a pivotal role in the battle between Novgorod and Suzdal (see Figure **14.3.130**). This episode illustrates the importance that the holy images, or icons, of the Byzantine Empire came to play in the culture of Kievan Rus', and later, Russia.



Figure **14.3.131**: Novgorodians process with the icon of the Virgin and Child (detail), icon with the Battle of Novgorod and Suzdal. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The icon is divided into three registers, in which the narrative of the battle unfolds from top to bottom. The top shows the people of Novgorod processing with the icon of the Virgin orans and Christ Child—a practice inherited from the Byzantines—into the fortified center of their city (see Figure **14.3.131**). The narrative unfolds from right to left. On the right, the clergy retrieve the sacred icon from the Church of the Savior on Elijah Street in the eastern part of the city. The clergy process through the middle of the scene and are received into the fortified center of the city where Novgorod's cathedral of St. Sophia is located.



Figure **14.3.132**: The army of Suzdal attacks Novgorod and strikes the icon of the Virgin and Child with an arrow (detail), icon with the Battle of Novgorod and Suzdal. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Novgorodians affixed the icon of the Virgin and Child to the walls of their city as a protection against the army of Suzdal. In the middle register, the army of Suzdal attacks from the right. One of their arrows strikes the icon of the Virgin and Child on the walls of Novgorod, seen in the upper left (see Figure **14.3.132**). According to legend, this prompted the icon of the Virgin to turn inward toward the city of Novgorod and weep. A supernatural darkness then covered the attacking army of Suzdal, and as a result, the attackers began attacking each other.



Figure **14.3.133**: The army of Novgorod defeats the army of Suzdal with the help of the saints (detail), icon with the Battle of Novgorod and Suzdal. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the bottom register (Figure **14.3.133**), the soldiers of Novgorod triumphantly counterattack the army of Suzdal with the help of the saints. The Archangel Michael—leader of the heavenly armies—swings his sword as he swoops down into the center of the scene. Additional haloed warrior saints gallop with the soldiers of Novgorod on horseback.

This icon and its subject illustrate the important role that the icons of Byzantium came to play in Kievan Rus' and Russia. More specifically, the battle between Novgorod and Suzdal illustrates the power ascribed to the Virgin and her miracle-working icons and parallels similar accounts from the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. At the same time, this icon with the Battle of Novgorod and Suzdal illustrates how the people of Novgorod adapted the arts of Byzantium to tell their own stories, in this case, the local miracle of the defense of their city.

The rise of Moscow, “Third Rome”

In the middle of the thirteenth century, Kiev and many of its former territories fell to Mongol invaders, bringing an end to Kievan Rus’. But after two centuries of Mongol rule in the region, the city of Moscow emerged as a new center of power. Moscow was a latecomer among the older cities of Kievan Rus’, emerging in the twelfth century and gaining wealth and power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III “the Great” achieved independence from the Mongols around 1480 and established Moscow as the center of what now became known as “Russia.”

But as Moscow ascended, the Byzantine Empire declined. Constantinople (today Istanbul) fell to the Ottomans in 1453, ending the long history of the Eastern Roman Empire that had begun when emperor Constantine dedicated the capital city of Constantinople in 330, which he also referred to as “New Rome.” In the years that followed, Moscow increasingly viewed itself as successor to Byzantium and even began referring to itself as the “Third Rome.” [1] In 1472, Ivan III married Sophia Palaiologina, niece of the last Byzantine emperor, symbolically cementing the continuation of Byzantium in Russia.

Rublev’s *Trinity*

In addition to the Virgin of Vladimir, one of Russia’s best-known artworks—an icon of the Holy Trinity attributed to Andrei Rublev—dates from this period of Moscow’s ascent. (see Figure **14.3.134**) Rublev was an influential Russian painter who probably lived from the 1360s until around 1430. Texts describe him painting the Cathedral of the Annunciation of the Moscow Kremlin with the Byzantine painter Theophanes the Greek, although these paintings no longer survive. Rublev probably painted his icon of the *Trinity* for the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius in Sergiyev Posad, an important monastery near Moscow, where it was part of a church iconostasis (the barrier that separates the sanctuary from the rest of the church).



Figure **14.3.134**: Andrei Rublev, The Trinity, c. 1410 or 1425-27, tempera on wood, 142 × 114 cm. (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, via Smarthistory)

The harmonious colors and rhythmic contours of the symmetrical composition depict three angels who visited and were served food by the biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah in Genesis 18 in the Hebrew Bible or “Old Testament.”Christian theologians long interpreted this visitation of the three angels as an image of the Holy Trinity. Byzantine depictions of this event, as seen, for example, in the sixth-century mosaic at San Vitale in Figure **14.3.135**, typically include both Abraham and Sarah, who play a central role in the biblical episode. But Rublev eliminated Abraham and Sarah from his icon, allowing the viewer to focus on the simplified composition of the three angels seated around an altar-like table. Rublev’s innovative icon reflects new Russian contributions to the Byzantine artistic tradition it inherited.



Figure 14.3.135: Hospitality of Abraham and Sacrifice of Isaac mosaic, San Vitale, consecrated 547, Ravenna, Italy. (Image via Smarthistory)



Figure 14.3.136: Map with Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus'. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory).



Figure 14.3.137: Map showing Moscow and Kiev. (© Google, via Smarthistory).

Contested legacies

The Byzantine Empire and Kievan Rus' do not survive, and their former territories are now divided among several states (as seen in the maps in Figures 14.3.136 and 14.3.137. Consequently, the legacies of Byzantium and Kievan Rus' are often contested among these modern successor states, as the following two competing monuments illustrate.



Figure **14.3.138**: Dedication of Monument to prince Vladimir I, Moscow, Russia, 4 November 2016. (Photo: mos.ru, CC BY-SA 4.0)

In Moscow, Russia, the 2016 unveiling of a statue of the tenth-century prince Vladimir I of Kiev caused international consternation. Located in the shadow of the Kremlin—Russia's center of government—the statue of prince Vladimir towers over Moscow at nearly sixty feet tall (see Figure **14.3.138**). Vladimir holds a monumental cross with his right hand while his left hand clutches a large sword.

To many, Moscow's menacing new prince Vladimir statue appears as a thinly veiled reference to the very similar, nineteenth-century statue of prince Vladimir that stands on the banks of the Dnieper River in Kiev, Ukraine, the site of the baptism of Kievan Rus' into the Christianity of the Byzantines in the tenth century. The timing of Moscow's installation of the new statue of prince Vladimir in 2016 was also significant: it coincided with Russia's recent annexation of Crimea and ongoing armed conflict with Ukraine.

By installing the new statue of prince Vladimir in its capital, Russia seemed to lay claim to the historical legacy and perhaps even the former territories of Kievan Rus', even while some of those territories are part of other states, such as Ukraine.

While the Virgin of Vladimir, St. Sophia in Kiev, and other works of art and architecture tell the story of the conversion of Kievan Rus' to the Christianity of the Byzantine Empire and the subsequent rise of Moscow as a new center of power, these more recent monuments speak to the enduring, if contested, legacies of Byzantium and Kievan Rus' in our world today.

Notes:

[1] The monk Philotheus (or Filofei) of Pskov first described Moscow as "third Rome" in a letter in 1510. v

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Cross-cultural artistic interaction in the Middle Byzantine period

by Dr. Alicia Walker



Figure **14.3.139**: Scene of an imperial lion hunt, front panel of the Troyes Casket, Middle Byzantine, Constantinople (?), ivory and purple pigment, 13 x 26 x 13 cm, Cathedral Treasury, Troyes France. (Image via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.140**: Scenes of an imperial lion hunt (front panel), imperial procession (lid panel), and *feng huang* bird (end panel) of the Troyes Casket, Middle Byzantine, Constantinople (?), ivory and purple pigment, 13 x 26 x 13 cm, Cathedral Treasury, Troyes France. (Image via Smarthistory)

The treasury of the cathedral of Troyes (France) houses an unexpected masterpiece of Middle Byzantine secular art. This ivory casket combines conventional images of imperial might—the top, front, and back of the casket depict emperors departing on campaign and engaged in heroic hunts against a lion and wild boar—with a most un-Byzantine decorative motif on the short end panels, which depict the mythical Chinese bird known as the *feng huang* (commonly referred to as a phoenix). The ivory was dyed purple, a color that enhanced the object's royal affiliation because purple was associated with Roman-Byzantine emperors.



Figure **14.3.141**: Chinese *feng huang* bird (end panel), Troyes Casket, Middle Byzantine, Constantinople (?), ivory and purple pigment, 13 x 26 x 13 cm, Cathedral Treasury, Troyes France. (Image via Smarthistory)

It is not known how this medieval Chinese motif found its way into the Middle Byzantine iconographic repertoire, or what it might have meant to Byzantine viewers. Perhaps the *feng huang* evoked the farthest reaches of the known world and anticipated Byzantine imperial expansion to these distant peripheries. Maybe the Byzantines were familiar with the significance of the *feng huang* in medieval Chinese lore as a supernatural harbinger of golden ages of rule. While we may never know precisely what significance this exotic motif held, the *feng huang* on the Troyes casket exemplifies the intercultural connections of medieval Byzantium and the art it produced.

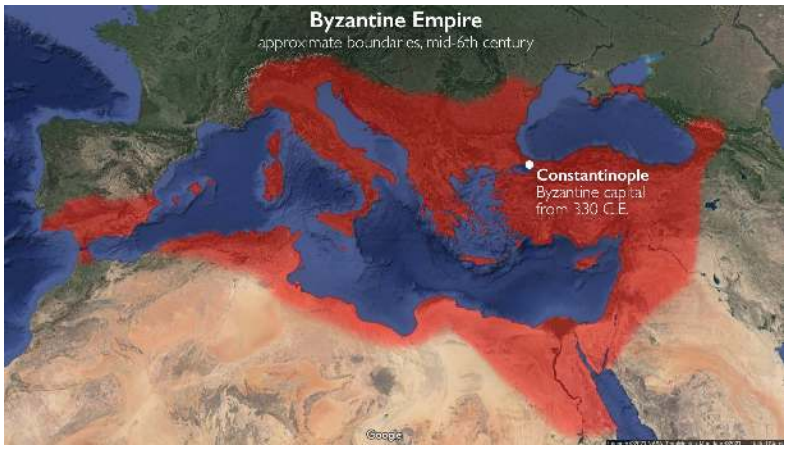


Figure **14.3.142**: Map of Byzantine Empire, approximate boundaries, mid-6th c. (© Google, via Smarthistory)

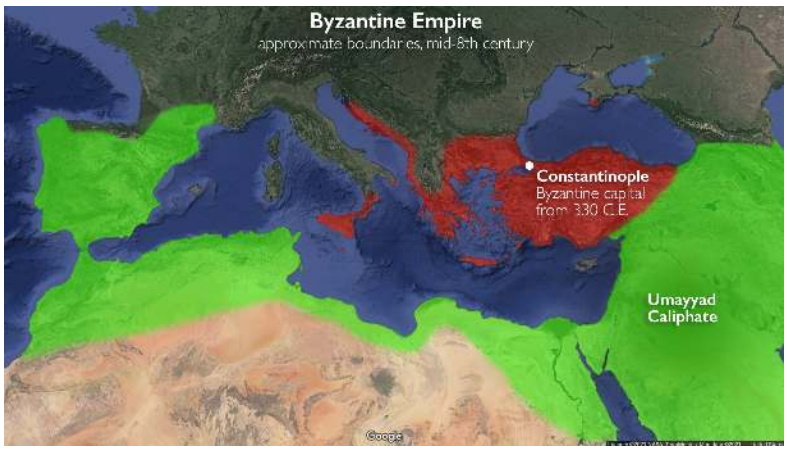


Figure **14.3.143**: Map of Byzantine Empire, approximate boundaries, mid-8th c. (© Google, via Smarthistory)

As the boundaries of the Roman-Byzantine Empire gradually constricted over the period of Late Antiquity (c. late third to mid-eighth century C.E.), the Byzantines found themselves in contact with an ever expanding range of cultural groups. Following the rise of Islamic armies in the seventh centuries, extensive eastern regions of the Byzantine Empire were lost to Islamic conquerors. Many territories across North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean coast were never recovered, and from the seventh to early thirteenth century Byzantium struggled to preserve its eastern borders against diverse rivals, especially newly emerging Islamic polities. Simultaneously Byzantium faced perennial challenges to its political authority from the North and West, with Western and Eastern European adversaries periodically vying for control of territories at the Empire's edges.

These military conflicts occurred in tandem with diplomacy, and objects frequently played a role in intercultural negotiations. An eleventh-century text produced at the Fatimid (medieval Islamic) court in Cairo (Egypt), *The Book of Gifts and Rarities* (*Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuḥaf*), includes detailed accounts of the wondrous gifts exchanged with Byzantium, including silk garments and hangings, precious metal vessels, and exotic animals. While the exact objects described in this text are not preserved today, surviving examples of these categories of luxury objects give shape to these verbal accounts.



Figure **14.3.144**: Roundel (Orbiculus), Egypt, 7th–9th century, tapestry weave in polychrome wool and undid linen, 23 x 22.7 cm. (Photo: ©Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)

For example, Byzantine silks depicting animal and hunter motifs were favored as diplomatic gifts to Islamic rulers because their iconography referred to a shared value for the reverence of nature and the pleasures of elite pastimes.



Figure **14.3.145**: Silk fragment with imperial hunters (Mozac Hunter silk), Byzantine, possibly 8th or 9th century. Musée des Tissus, Lyon. (Photo: Pierre Verrier, via Smarthistory)

Diplomatic relations also included the exchange of people. *The Book of Gifts and Rarities* and medieval historical accounts document the presentation of enslaved people, the exchange of prisoners, and the transfer of conquered people across medieval Afro-Eurasia. These individuals sometimes included craftsmen, who helped to spread artistic knowledge, styles, and technical skills. In some instances, diplomatic relations were secured through marriage alliances that entailed the transfer of brides. In 972, Theophano, niece of the Byzantine emperor, was wedded to Otto II, heir to the Holy Roman Empire. Their union was commemorated with an Ottonian marriage contract that, alluding to Byzantine tradition, was written in gold on richly purple-dyed parchment and decorated with animal motifs in roundels, which resemble ornamental patterns found on precious silks.



Figure **14.3.146**: Marriage contract of Emperor Otto II and Theophano, Ottonian, 14 April 972, parchment, black and gold ink, c. 155 x 40 cm, Niedersachsisches Staatsarchiv, Wolfenbüttel, Germany. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

Theophano was a tastemaker at the Ottonian court. Having carried with her works of Byzantine art, she helped to transmit Byzantine artistic models and forms to medieval Western Europe. An ivory plaque depicting Theophano and Otto portrays them in typical Byzantine fashion, their union (and rule) affirmed by Christ himself (see Figure **14.3.147**).



Figure **14.3.147**: Otto II and Theophano crowned by Christ, Byzantine-Ottonian, 982-983, ivory, c. 19 x 11 x 1 cm. Musée de Cluny. (Photo: Musée de Cluny, via Smarthistory)

Foreign women also married into the Byzantine royal family to secure alliances. The Byzantine manuscript in Figure **14.3.147** (Vatican cod. gr. 1851) depicting a foreign child-bride might celebrate the betrothal of Agnes of France (daughter of the French king Louis VII) to Alexios II (son of the Byzantine emperor Manuel I Komnenos) in 1179. It includes illuminations, one of which visualizes the young woman's metamorphosis into a Byzantine princess through the transformation of her regalia (in the upper register, between the images from left to right) and her culminating appearance enthroned in imperial splendor (lower register, at center). [1]



Figure **14.3.148**: A foreign bride (with a red-outlined halo) arrives in simple attire (upper left corner) at Constantinople (depicted in the middleground); she is subsequently transformed into a Byzantine princess through changes in her garments (as depicted in the upper right, where she is received by women of the imperial court, and the lower center, where she is enthroned). Vatican City, Vatican Library, cod. Gr. 1851, Fol. 3v. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Elite Byzantine women were also wed to Islamic potentates. For instance, in the eleventh and twelfth century, Byzantine women who married into Seljuq aristocratic families served as conduits for the transfer of Byzantine material culture. These women typically retained their Orthodox Christian identities, passing on their language and faith to their children and helping to generate intercultural social spheres at the Seljuq court.



Figure **14.3.149**: Map showing Constantinople (upper left corner) in the network of trade routes that made up the Silk Roads, adapted from Françoise Demange, *Glass, Gilding, and Grand Design: Art of Sasanian Iran (224–642)* (New York: Asia Society, 2007) (Evan Freeman, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As a result of military confrontations and diplomatic interactions, Byzantium was in persistent communication with a diverse range of other societies. In many cases, periods of peaceful relations led to economic cooperation that promoted intercultural trade. Constantinople (the capital of the Byzantine Empire) occupied a firm position as a major terminus point of the famed Silk Road, receiving a rich array of raw substances and finished goods that had traveled via Central Asia from China, India, and beyond. The ninth- or tenth-century code for the regulation of guilds in Constantinople, *The Book of the Eparch* (the eparch being the

commercial administrator of the city) names a guild dedicated to the trade in goods from the East, so-called *bagdadikia* (things from Baghdad, the capital of Islamic Abbasid Empire) and *sarakenike* (things from the East or from "Saracen" [i.e., Islamic] lands).



Figure **14.3.150**: Islamic ceramic vessels (glazed sgraffito and splashware) recovered from the Serçe Limanı shipwreck off the coast of Turkey, eleventh century. (© Institute of Nautical Archaeology, via Smarthistory)

Trade goods transported by sea could travel rapidly but at high risk. An early eleventh-century Byzantine shipwreck discovered near Serçe Limanı off the coast of Turkey contained both Byzantine and Islamic objects, including Fatimid ceramic and glass vessels but also Byzantine and Fatimid coin weights, indicating that the crew was interacting with markets across a broad commercial and cultural network (see Figures **14.3.150** and **14.3.151**).



Figure **14.3.151**: Glassware recovered from the Serçe Limanı shipwreck off the coast of Turkey, eleventh century. (© Institute of Nautical Archaeology, via Smarthistory)

In addition to finished goods, its cargo included several tons of cullet, or broken glass, of Fatimid origin that served as ballast—cargo of substantial weight that helps to stabilize a ship (see Figure **14.3.152**). Less energy was required to melt recycled glass than to produce glass from scratch, and it is thought that cullet originating from Fatimid territories along the Syrian-Lebanese coast was being shipped for recycling at a Byzantine center of glass production.



Figure **14.3.152**: Cullet (glass waste) recovered from the Serçe Limanı shipwreck off the coast of Turkey, eleventh century. (© Institute of Nautical Archaeology, via Smarthistory)

Intercultural artistic and commercial connections spurred changes in Byzantine fashion, as expressed through personal objects such as clothing, jewelry, and seals. Finished garments of Islamic origin were among the goods imported to the markets of Constantinople. Items of clothing typical of medieval Islamic dress—like the turbans and caftans—were popular in Byzantium, especially in border communities like Cappadocia, at the eastern edge of the Byzantine Empire (as shown in Portrait of the donor in Figure **14.3.153**).



Figure **14.3.153**: Portrait of the donor, Theognostos (left) , wearing a turban, Middle Byzantine, c. 1050, wall painting, Çarikli kilise, Göreme (Cappadocia), Turkey. (Photo: © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

Byzantine jewelry incorporated foreign motifs, including pseudo-Arabic (decorative forms that resemble Arabic letters but are illegible).



Figure **14.3.154**: Bracelet with repoussé pseudo-Arabic motifs within a scrollwork frame, 11th century, silver-gilt and niello, diam. 6 cm. (Photo: © Benaki Museum, via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.155**: Silver bracelet with decorated with griffin motif in repoussé and niello, 11th c., diam. 6 cm. (Photo: © Benaki Museum, via Smarthistory)

In addition, exotic animal motifs were found in Middle Byzantine jewelry as well as on lead seals. The Byzantines authenticated contracts, letters, and even containers of trade goods with lead disks attached to strings, which were then impressed with an inscription relating to the seal owner. As such, lead seals served as a surrogate for their owners and were intimately tied with personal identity and authority. These seals often included images. Exotic animals such as the *senmurv* (an ancient Persian mythical beast prevalent in Sasanian and medieval eastern Islamic art that combines the head of a dog, the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the tail of a peacock) and the *feng huang* on Byzantine seals may have been intended to project the cosmopolitan identities of their owners.



Figure **14.3.156**: Seal of Theodore (left: obverse; right: reverse) depicting a *senmurv*, 11th century, lead, diam. 1.6 cm. (Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks,via Smarthistory)



Figure **14.3.157**: Seal of John imperial *spatharokandidatos* and *dioiketes* depicting the *feng huang* bird, 10th century, lead, diam. 2.4 cm. (Photo: © Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)

Even as the Byzantines struggled to maintain their preeminent position in medieval geopolitics, their art and material culture continued to be an object of emulation throughout Afro-Eurasia. The Western European mendicant orders were inspired by the affective properties of Byzantine icons, and they imported Byzantine sacred art and artistic forms to the West.



Figure **14.3.158**: Berlinghiero, Madonna and Child, Italian, possibly 1230s, tempera on wood, gold ground, 80.3 x 53.7 cm. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

These images generated new styles in devotional painting by the thirteenth century, as evident in the work of artists like Berlinghiero, Cimabue, and Duccio, sometimes described as proto-Renaissance, who drew from Byzantine stylistic and iconographic models.



Figure **14.3.159**: Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1290–1300, tempera and gold on wood, 27.9 x 21 cm. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Some medieval Eastern European polities fashioned their religious and royal artistic images in the likeness of Byzantium. The church of the St. Sophia in Kiev, founded by the Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise in the eleventh century, boasts a monumental mosaic and wall painting program in a Byzantine mode and is one of many works of art and architecture that records the robust intercultural relations between Byzantium and medieval Rus'. Byzantine objects and buildings encountered by conquering armies in former Byzantine territories were often converted to new purposes and assimilated with emerging artistic traditions. This is especially apparent in medieval Anatolia, where, beginning in the eleventh century, the Seljuqs repurposed Byzantine sacred and secular structures to serve new needs, sometimes incorporating fragments of Byzantine architectural elements into newly constructed monuments.



Figure **14.3.160**: Horses of San Marco (ancient Greek or Roman, likely Imperial Rome), 4th century BCE to 4th century CE. Copper alloy, 235 x 250 cm each. Basilica of San Marco, Venice. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Following the Sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, masterpieces of Byzantine imperial and sacred art were disseminated throughout the medieval world, especially to treasuries in Western Europe. Such items may have included the Troyes Casket (discussed at the beginning of this essay), although conclusive evidence of an object's traveling in the hands of Crusaders is rarely attested. Documented examples of Crusader trophies include the sculptures of horses that adorned the façade of San Marco in Venice (which had previously been displayed in the Hippodrome in Constantinople; see Figure **14.3.160**) and the relics of the Passion of Christ (including the Crown of Thorns and fragments of the True Cross), which king Louis IX of France acquired around 1238 (after his cousin Baldwin II, the Latin emperor of Constantinople, used the relics to guarantee a loan from the Venetians). Louis paid the Venetians an exorbitant sum, which was said to be over five times what it cost to construct the Sainte-Chapelle, the royal chapel in Paris where Louis deposited the relics. Even as Byzantium's political fortunes dwindled in the wake of the Fourth Crusade, the valuation of its visual and material culture remained high across Afro-Eurasia.

Notes:

[1] Cecily Hilsdale, "Constructing a Byzantine Augusta: A Greek Book for a French Bride," *Art Bulletin* vol. 87, no. 3 (2005), pp. 458-83.

The visual culture of Norman Sicily

by Dr. Ariel Fein

The southern-Italian island of Sicily is often described as a stepping stone, a hub, or a crossroad of the Mediterranean Sea. To the North, the small island is separated from mainland Italy and its gateway to Christian Europe by only 2.5 miles. To the South, the Strait of Sicily, only 90 miles wide, joined Sicily to Ifrīqiyya (modern-day Tunisia) and to the Muslim territories of North Africa and the Maghreb. The waters of the Mediterranean Sea also connected the island to the more distant shores of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, whose capital was Cairo, and to the Eastern Roman "Byzantine" Empire, whose capital was Constantinople (modern Istanbul). As a bridge across the Mediterranean, Sicily continuously attracted settlers and conquerors and encouraged trade, travel, commerce, as well as substantial artistic interaction throughout the region.



Figure **14.3.161**: Kingdom of Norman Sicily c. 1154 (underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

The Normans in Sicily

For centuries, Byzantine and then Islamic rulers governed the island of Sicily. In the eleventh century, warring southern Italian rulers, Byzantines, and Lombards alike hired Norman mercenaries from Northern France to aid them in their struggles against each other and against local Muslims. Setting out from Northern France, the Norman invaders gradually conquered the region for themselves, securing Southern Italy and Sicily by 1091. During this same period, Normans were also invading England, and as a result, the Normans were able to establish independent outposts in both Sicily and England, where they drew upon local artistic and architectural traditions in their monuments. In Southern Italy and Sicily, the Normans unified the entire region as the Kingdom of Norman Sicily—which endured from 1130 to 1194—with the city of Palermo as its capital.

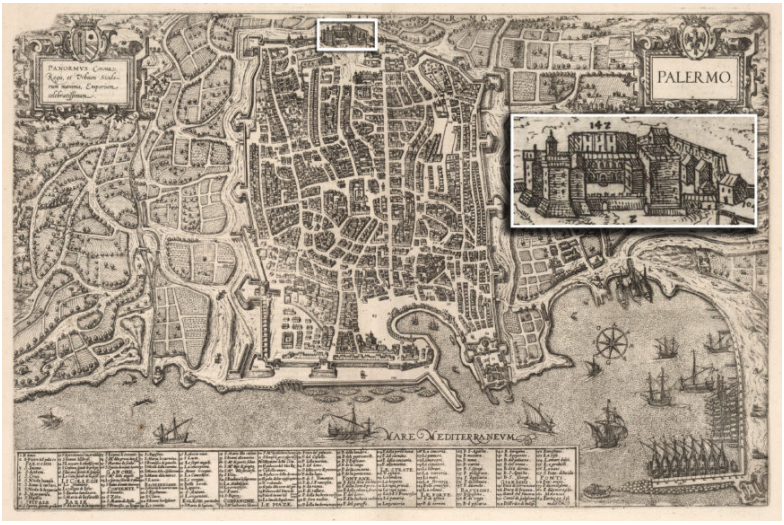


Figure **14.3.162**: Map of Palermo by Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg with detail of the Palazzo Normanni (royal palace), 1588. (Map: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, via Smarthistory)

Under Norman kings Roger II, William I, and William II, Sicily flourished as a multiethnic center. Although the Norman kings were Latin Christians, loyal to the Pope in Rome, they governed a diverse, predominantly non-Latin-Christian population and fostered a multicultural ambience on the island. Their royal policies actively borrowed and reformulated local Greek (Byzantine) and Islamic cultural, religious, and administrative traditions and invoked those of rival political powers. As part of this policy, the Norman kings patronized art and architecture that brought together the distinctive visual cultures of the Mediterranean region—Byzantine, Islamic, and Romanesque. In so doing, they reinvented and presented themselves as legitimate Christian rulers to their subjects and peers.



Figure **14.3.163**: Interior of the Cappella Palatina looking west, c. 1130–43, Palermo. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Royal Architecture



Figure **14.3.164**: Detail of muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, c. 1130–43, Palermo. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As part of their vast project to transform Palermo into the thriving capital of their new kingdom, the Norman kings built on an unprecedented scale. They furnished the kingdom with an elaborate royal palace, the Palazzo Reale (also known as the Palazzo Normanni), and its prized chapel, the Cappella Palatina, cathedrals in nearby Cefalù and Monreale (view locations on map), and extensive suburban dwellings. The most famous of the Norman royal monuments, the Cappella Palatina masterfully combines diverse architectural and decorative sources, including Byzantine-style mosaics, an Islamic-style painted muqarnas ceiling, opus sectile floors, and multicolored marble and stone wall revetments. The resulting aesthetic transformed the building into a visual manifesto of the king's Mediterranean ambitions.



Figure **14.3.165**: Cefalù Cathedral façade, 1131–1240, Cefalù. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 14.3.166: Detail of central apse with Pantokrator, Cefalù Cathedral, 1131–1240. (Photo: Gun Powder Ma, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Like the Cappella Palatina, the Norman kings' other churches and cathedrals similarly evoked a synthesis of Byzantine, Islamic, and Romanesque forms. Roger II's Cefalù Cathedral (view location on map), built between 1131 and 1240, intertwines the region's diverse decorative traditions. Its overall design is reminiscent of Norman and French architecture in Northern Europe, following a Latin abbey design, and furnished its interior with mosaics executed in a Byzantine style, including images of Christ Pantokrator, the Virgin, apostles, and prophets in the apse. While the high quality of the chapel's mosaics has led many scholars to conclude that Roger II imported Byzantine craftsmen to Sicily to decorate his churches, it is also possible that the chapel's mosaics were executed by local artisans.



Figure 14.3.167: Central apse with Pantokrator, Virgin, apostles, and prophets, Cefalù Cathedral, 1131–1240. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.168**: Painted wooden ceiling panel, Cefalù Cathedral, 1131–1240. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Moreover, Islamic-style painted wooden trusses and star-shaped panels surmount the nave. Their painted scenes, like those of the Cappella Palatina's muqarnas ceiling, feature themes of courtly life drawn from an Islamic repertoire. The origins of the ceilings' builders and painters remains a contentious issue, with scholars suggesting Sicily itself, Fatimid Egypt, North Africa, northern Syria, and northern Iraq.



Figure **14.3.169**: Bichromatic inlaid decoration, Monreale Cathedral exterior, 1174. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Monreale

Similarly, King William II's crowning architectural achievement can be seen at Monreale (view location on map): a large complex comprising a cathedral church, monastery, and cloister, which was completed in 1174. On the church's eastern façade, Islamic-style decoration of repeating ogival arches and geometric medallions are formed by alternating black and white stone and marble.



Figure **14.3.170**: Central apse, Monreale Cathedral, 1174. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

On its interior, the Cathedral is composed almost entirely of flat surfaces, providing ample space for mosaic decoration. In the central sanctuary, images of the Pantokrator, Virgin, and saints adorn the central apse, while side apses feature scenes from the lives of Saints Peter and Paul. The transepts and aisles contain scenes from the life of Christ as well as scenes from the Old Testament and the life of the Virgin.



Figure **14.3.171**: Old Testament scenes, Monreale Catheral, 1174. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A pair of mosaic panels portray William II being crowned directly by God and donating his church to the Virgin. Positioned in the sanctuary, directly above the royal throne and the bishop's ambo, or platform, they prominently represent the king's presence within the church and the sacred space of the sanctuary. Moreover, as William appears in royal regalia reminiscent of a Byzantine emperor, the panels conveyed his desire to emulate the wealth and prestige of the Byzantine Empire.



Figure **14.3.172**: Left: Christ crowning William II; right: William II presenting his church to the Virgin, Monreale Cathedral, 1174. (Photos: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Royal dwellings

In addition to ecclesiastical buildings, the Norman kings also constructed suburban royal dwellings for recreation and hunting set in the midst of luxuriant gardens (see Figure **14.3.173**). In their architecture and cultivation of the surrounding verdant landscapes, these palaces drew heavily upon Islamic architecture and garden culture.



Figure **14.3.173**: La Zisa, 1164–1175 (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.174**: Muqarnas hood, Fountain Hall, La Zisa, 1164–1175. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

William I and II built their palaces, La Zisa and La Cuba in the midst of the park of Genoardo, which takes its name from the Arabic phrase Jannat al-ard, meaning “earthly paradise.” La Zisa (1164–75) towers over a landscape of fertile gardens, embellished by fountains and large ponds, formed by impressive feats of hydraulic engineering.

Its central Fountain Hall is decorated by an elaborate muqarnas hood and Arabic inscriptions describing the hall as “paradise on earth made manifest” (see Figure **14.3.174**) At the heart of the salon stands an impressive Islamic-style wall fountain with a sloped water chute (shādirwān), featuring furrows in a zig-zag pattern. The scalloped surface created rippling sounds and patterns in the water as it circulated through an elegant system of fountains culminating in a great fish-pond in front of the palace. A depiction of a similar fountain can be seen in the painted muqarnas ceiling of the Cappella Palatina.



Figure **14.3.175**: Fountain hall, La Zisa, 1164–1175. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.176**: Gold *tari* of Roger II with Greek (left) and Arabic (right), 1142 (The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Alongside monumental architecture, the Norman kings disseminated their message of legitimate rule through coinage, multilingual texts, and objects. Despite the changes in political rule, the Norman royal mint continued to produce and circulate the Sicilian *tari*, a gold quarter dinar first issued in Muslim Sicily (before being conquered by the Normans). After his coronation, King Roger II's *tari* staged his authority using both Arabic and Greek (the language of the Byzantines). One side of the coin bears a cross with the Greek inscription ICXC NIKA (Jesus Christ will conquer) encircled by the Arabic name of the mint and date of minting. The reverse, written entirely in Arabic—a vernacular and intellectual language in Norman Sicily at this time—displays the name and honorific of the king as well as the name of the mint and date in the year of the hijra, or the Islamic lunar calendar. The coin thus presents an unambiguous statement of the strength of the Sicilian state and of Norman kingship in the dominant textual and symbolic languages of the medieval Mediterranean.



Figure **14.3.178**: Coronation Mantle, 1133/34, fabric from Byzantium or Thebes, samite, silk, gold, pearls, filigree, sapphires, garnets, glass, and cloisonné enamel, 146 x 345 cm. Schatzkammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The precious jeweled, ivory, and textile products of the royal workshops likewise combined a variety of visual forms, styles, and languages. Along with King Roger II's coronation mantle, with its Islamic-style and Arabic epigraphy, painted ivory caskets similarly paired Christian and Islamic scenes. The casket shown here, composed of a rectangular wooden box with thin ivory plaques fixed with ivory pegs along its exterior, is decorated on all sides with images painted in black and gold leaf. Scenes of the hunt common in Islamic art, such as falconers pursuing gazelles with falcons and greyhounds and a hunting leopard catching its prey, adorn the sides of the casket, while a medallion of Christ flanked by two saints is rendered on the lid.



Figure **14.3.177**: Hunting scenes on a painted ivory casket, 12th–13th century, Palermo, Cappella Palatina, Treasury. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Optional Online Resource: The Coronation Mantle

The Coronation Mantle was likely made for the Norman ruler Roger II in 1133/34 in the royal workshop in Palermo, using fabric from Byzantium or Thebes, Samite, silk, gold, pearls, filigree, sapphires, garnets, glass, and cloisonné enamel. The Kufic script reads:

> *This mantle was worked in the most magnificent clothing workshop and is connected with the desire and hopes, felicitous days and nights without cease or change, with authority, with honor and felicity, assurances of trust, reverent care, protection, good destiny, freedom from harm, triumph and livelihood in the capital city of Sicily in the year 528 [or 1133/34 in the Gregorian calendar].*



Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "The Coronation Mantle."



Figure **14.3.179**: Figure **14.3.1**: Martorana Church interior, Palermo, 1143 (photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The majority of the surviving art and architecture from Norman Sicily was built by and for the island's Latin-Christian Norman kings. However, some surviving works reveal glimpses of the art and identity of the island's diverse population. The most famous of these monuments is the Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio in Palermo, better known as the Martorana. George of Antioch, the Arab-Christian grand-vizier, or prime minister, to King Roger II, built the church as a private burial chapel for himself and his family as well as for the city's Greek- and Arab-Christian communities. On the one hand, it closely resembles King Roger II's Cappella Palatina in its mosaics, opus sectile floors, and marble revetments. On the other hand, the church's Arabic epigraphy draws more heavily upon George's own Arab-Christian identity. The church's mosaic dome, with images of Christ Pantokrator surrounded by archangels, is encircled by a narrow band of wood, now faded, but once brightly painted with the Arabic translation of two texts from the Greek liturgy.



Figure **14.3.180**: Dome with Christ Pantokrator surrounded by archangels and Arabic and Greek epigraphy, Martorana Church, Palermo, 1143. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **14.3.181**: Tombstone with inscriptions in four languages (Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Judeo-Arabic), white marble with opus sectile decoration, 1149, Palermo, Museo della Zisa. (Photo: Ariel Fein, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Similarly, an opulent white marble funerary epitaph commemorates the death of Anna, mother of Grisandus, a priest working in the Cappella Palatina (see Figure **14.3.181**). Surrounding the vibrant, multicolored opus sectile cross are four inscribed texts—Latin (left), Greek (right), Arabic (bottom), and Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew script; top). While few people would have been

able to read the quadrilingual epitaph in its entirety, even an illiterate viewer would have understood, or could have been told, that the four scripts represented the four religious communities of the Kingdom. Moreover, its opus sectile ornament would have further reminded the viewer of the decoration of the island's royal churches and palaces, thus visualizing the prestige of its patron and the deceased.

These buildings and works of art are expressions of a unique Norman Sicilian cultural and visual identity. Drawing upon local styles on the island, as well as more distant traditions from Byzantium, Fatimid Egypt, the Maghrib, and the Levant, the kings and courtiers of Norman Sicily fashioned and mobilized Norman Sicilian visual culture in promoting their royal ideology and articulating their religious identities.

Optional Online Resource: St. Mark's Basilica

Saint Mark's Basilica, in Venice, Italy, was begun in 1063 and houses the body of the Evangelist St. Mark, whose remains were smuggled from Alexandria to Venice in 829. The interior is covered in glittering gold mosaics and the style deliberately evokes Constantinople. In this video, Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker discuss the history of Saint Mark's Basilica and the mosaic of the Anastasis, or the Harrowing of Hell.



Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice"

Global Connections: *The Book of Morals of Philosophers*

In cosmopolitan cities of the Islamic world, scholarship flourished. The material wealth of Muslim courts, combined with tolerance of Christianity and Judaism, supported the synthesis of existing knowledge and the discovery of new ideas. Many words in the English language that are related to mathematics and numeric problem-solving, for instance, have their roots in Arabic. Algebra, for example, comes from Muhammad ibn Musa al-Kwarizmi's ninth-century book 'ilm al-jabr wa'l-muqābala (meaning, "the science of restoring what is missing and equating like with like"). *Al-jabr* initially meant setting broken bones.

In the video below, Stephen Zucker and Ronnie Perelis discuss a particularly vivid example of the scholarly exchange that took place between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures during a "period of transformation."



Dr. Ronnie Perelis and Dr. Steven Zucker, "*Book of Morals of Philosophers*"

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Triumph of Orthodoxy," in *Smarthistory*, February 2, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Asa Simon Mittman, "Copying — spotlight: Virgin Hodegetria," in *Smarthistory*, June 7, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Paroma Chatterjee, "The vita icon in the medieval era," in *Smarthistory*, June 21, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "A work in progress: Middle Byzantine mosaics in Hagia Sophia," in *Smarthistory*, February 26, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Byzantine frescoes at Saint Panteleimon, Nerezi," in *Smarthistory*, November 20, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Mosaics and microcosm: the monasteries of Hosios Loukas, Nea Moni, and Daphni," in *Smarthistory*, June 17, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Anne McClanan, "The *Paris Psalter*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Anne McClanan, "Middle Byzantine secular art," in *Smarthistory*, February 22, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- The British Museum, "Medieval Nubian Kingdoms, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, March 9, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Byzantium, Kyivan Rus, and their contested legacies," in *Smarthistory*, May 10, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Alicia Walker, "Cross-cultural artistic interaction in the Middle Byzantine period," in *Smarthistory*, July 30, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Ariel Fein, "The visual culture of Norman Sicily," in *Smarthistory*, May 21, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

15: Medieval III- Reorganization of the East

In This Chapter

15.0: Chapter Introduction
15.1: Ilkhanid
15.2: Timurid
15.3: Mamluk
15.4: Late Byzantine
15.5: Christian East Africa

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15.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Dramatic Storytelling

In 1262, the Armenian T'oros Roslin wrote and illuminated an exquisite Gospel manuscript, featuring 15 full-page miniatures as well as dozens of smaller illustrations, and gleaming with gold and vivid, expensive colors. Today it is held in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. Armenians treated Gospel Books with the reverence Byzantium reserved for icons and the Latin church for reliquaries. But unlike icons, which are expected to be copies of older images, and reliquaries, whose power derives from the relics inside, Gospel Books are meant to transmit the story of Jesus. Roslin was a master storyteller.

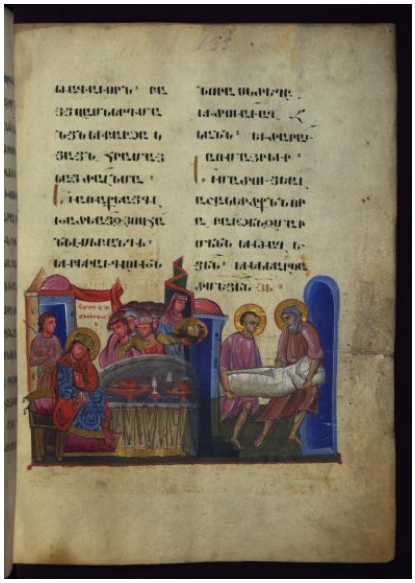


Figure 15.0.1: T'oros Roslin, Herod's Banquet and the Burial of John the Baptist, Ms. W. 539, fol. 66, 1262. Ink and pigments on parchment, folios 30 x 21.5 cm. Walters Art Museum. (Photo: Walters Art Museum, CC0)

The painting inscribed "Herod's Banquet" recounts the Gospel story of how King Herod, capitulating to his stepdaughter Salome's request, has John the Baptist beheaded. Drama, anxiety, and a unique expressiveness infuse the scene. Herod sits on the left, looking downward; the Gospel text just behind him—on the previous page, and written, like the rest of the book, in Armenian—says he "was dejected." Behind his half-round table set with gold and fine glassware stand his guests, their number suggested by a cluster of heads. Although the crowd obscures most of the faces, two show reactions to the murder. The man closest to Herod inclines his head toward the guilty king, his furrowed brow suggesting his sorrow and perhaps pity. The next face registers shock or anger, with arched brows and eyes boring into Herod.



Figure **15.0.2**: T’oros Roslin, Herod’s Banquet and the Burial of John the Baptist (detail showing the painted figures at the bottom of the page), Ms. W. 539, fol. 66, 1262. Ink and pigments on parchment, folios 30 x 21.5 cm. Walters Art Museum. (Photo: Walters Art Museum, CC0)

Also behind the table, but turning away from Herod’s banquet, the very serious, well-dressed Salome carries John’s head on a golden platter. Her eyes turn sharply upward out of the picture towards the text that reads, “the girl gave it to her mother.” The folding screen behind her head extends into the margin between two columns of text, neatly dividing the page in half. The right half of the miniature illustrates the six lines of text directly above it: “And John’s disciples came and took the body and buried it.” The two, one rather baby-faced and the other gray-bearded, exchange a serious look as they carry the body (wrapped but still bleeding at the neck) into a blue arch suggesting a tomb. From the disciples struggling under the weight of the headless corpse to the man standing behind Herod, holding his bloody sword, this miniature typifies Roslin’s dramatization of Gospel texts.

A Precarious Situation

Roslin worked at a scriptorium in Hromkla, an Armenian fortress on the Euphrates River. The location of the small, Christian, Armenian kingdom of Cilicia on what is now the southeast coast of Turkey placed it at a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East: visited by (and often aligned with) European Crusaders, as well as subject to incursions by their Islamic neighbors, especially the Turkic Seljuks and the Egyptian Mamluks. Just four years before the manuscript was created, Cilicia had allied with the Ilkhanid Mongols in the destruction of the Abbasid capital of Baghdad.

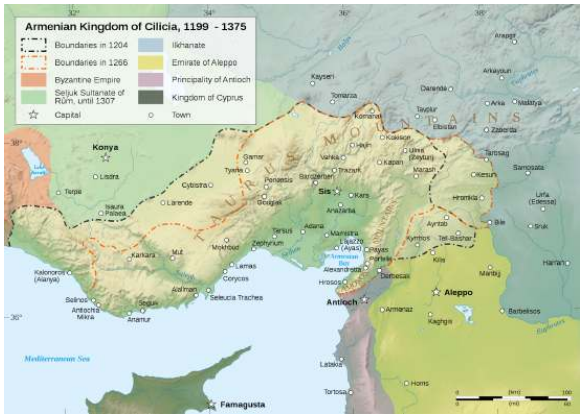


Figure **15.0.3**: Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, 1199-1375. (Map: Sémhur, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Led by the formidable general Genghis Khan, the Mongols had swept from their homeland in Mongolia across Asia, adding territories and quickly becoming the most-feared force on the continent. Cities were offered the options of either submitting to Mongol rule and paying tribute or facing utter destruction. Cilicia began paying tribute to the Ilkhanid Mongols in 1243, but their own alliances had rarely been stable, as their Christian and Islamic neighbors battled one another for land and power. The Mongols added a confusing element since they explored Christianity and Islam as possible replacements for the shamanistic belief system of Mongolia until the Ilkhanid Khan Gazan adopted Islam in 1294.

Manuscripts and the circulation of information

Manuscripts contain information in both written text and imagery, and represent an incredible investment of the makers' time, skill, and fine materials. Combined with their often relatively portable size, manuscripts are unique vessels for communication. Roslin seems to have painted King Herod as if he were an Ilkhanid prince. He wears the gold crown with a wide brim around a dome and a jewel or a peak on top, an elaborately-patterned robe, and pointed red boots usually seen in Ilkhanid illustrations of rulers. His round face, thin mustache and long, dark hair, appear in many Ilkhanid paintings.

The same features appear in a manuscript of the *Jami' al-Tawarikh*, or *Compendium of Chronicles*, a book conceived of as a history of the known world up to that point. Commissioned by Ghazan Khan, and written by the powerful court advisor Rashid al-Din, it aims to legitimize Mongol rule not only through scholarship and an emphasis on monotheism, but imagery. Figures from the biblical Old Testament to the pre-Islamic Iranian kings to the Prophet Muhammad himself reflect the characteristic Mongol representation (Figure **15.0.4**).



Figure **15.0.4**: Noah's Ark, from *The Jami' al-Tawarikh (Compendium of Histories)* of Rashid al-Din, MSS 727 Folio 45a, 1314-15. Ink, translucent and opaque watercolor, gold and silver on paper, folios 14 x 25.5cm. (Photo: The Kalili Collections, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Both T'oros Roslin's sacred Gospels and the secular *Compendium of Histories* demonstrate the flow of ideas, culture, and styles during this time, in a world that was still volatile but connected by routes of trade, pilgrimage, conflict, and Crusade. In the artworks introduced in this chapter, influences as diverse as Classical sculpture and Chinese painting meet on the page, wooden panel, and glittering mosaics.

Historiography

As noted in Chapter 13, this book presents an alternative way of examining the Middle Ages. Many traditional textbooks center the Middle Ages in England, France, and Italy—a view which pejoratively sets aside two major cultural groups, Byzantium and Islam. Instead of segregating Byzantium and Islam, this chapter once again extends the boundaries of the traditional "Survey of Western Art." Outside of Gothic Europe (the subject of Chapter 16), the major cultural groups of the Late Medieval world were the Byzantine Empire, Mamluk Egypt, and the Mongols of central Asia and Iran. Though its power and territory were shrinking, the Byzantine Empire was heir to a prestigious Greek, Christian Roman tradition going back to 333. Perhaps the greatest military and economic power in the Mediterranean was Mamluk Egypt. The Mongols ruled the largest land empire in the history of the world, so large that this chapter does not attempt to include its easternmost part, Yuan China; the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia; nor the Golden Horde, which ruled much of what is now Eastern Europe and Russia.

As a reminder, this is the way the three Medieval chapters are broken down:

Content in Chapters 13-15

Chapter	13	14	15
Title	Medieval I: The Reorganization of the Roman World & the Rise of Islam	Medieval II: Contested Empires, Christian and Islamic	Medieval III: Reorganization of the East
Dates	333-843	843-1260	1260-1453
Material covered	• Early Byzantium ◦ Introduction/the lives of Jesus and Mary ◦ Manuscripts and ivory miniatures • The Migration Period ◦ Anglo-Saxon ◦ Vikings ◦ Insular • The Early Islamic World ◦ Introduction to Islam ◦ Mosque architecture ◦ Umayyad ◦ Abbasid ◦ The Islamic West • Carolingian	• Fractured Islam ◦ Fatimid ◦ Seljuk ◦ Ghaznavid ◦ The Islamic West, cont. • The Latin West ◦ Vikings, cont. ◦ Ottonian ◦ Pilgrimage ◦ Romanesque • Byzantium from the End of Iconoclasm to the Latin Conquest ◦ Icons, frescoes, and mosaics ◦ Macedonian Renaissance ◦ Medieval Nubian Kingdoms ◦ Kievan Rus’ ◦ Norman Sicily	• Ilkhanid • Timurid • Mamluk • Late Byzantine • Christian East Africa

Nationalism

Nationalism colored a fascination with the medieval that arose in the 18th century and continues to this day. European conceptions of the Middle Ages focused on their own countries: for the British, the height of medieval architecture was the English perpendicular Gothic style, (revived by Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin for the Houses of Parliament 1840-18760) and for the French novelist Victor Hugo, the center of the medieval world was Paris, France (as in his 1831 *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). Sergei Eisenstein’s Medieval epic film *Alexander Nevsky* (1931) stages the struggle between civilization and barbarism in Novgorod, Russia, where the locals defend themselves against invading knights of the Holy Roman Empire.

This chapter presents cultures that were dominant in the Middle Ages, but tend to be less celebrated as a focus of national pride. Modern Greece preserves and values its Byzantine past—but gives precedence to a classical Greek one. Although it is a predominantly Muslim country, Egypt prides itself on its Pharaonic buildings and artifacts. The former Shah of Iran promoted art of the fifth-century BCE Persian Empire, and although the Islamic Republic of Iran greatly values its Islamic and pre-Islamic past, it rejects many aspects of Ilkhanid and Timurid Persia, including the role of foreigners and the prestige of Islamic figural images. The Slavic countries impacted by Mongol rule (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Serbia) celebrate achieving independence from “the Mongol Yoke.” By including the Mongols in the survey, this chapter continues the stories of art in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, even as they were ruled by those with roots much farther east. The focus is on the Ilkhanids and the Timurids, whose capitals were in Persian-speaking areas, but maintained vital trade and intellectual connections to the wider Mongol Empire.

Terminology

This chapter does not attempt to deal with all the Islamic groups active from 1260-1453 in the eastern Mediterranean, much less in Africa and the Indian Ocean, and instead focuses on just the two largest groups: the Mamluks and the Mongols. “Mamluk” is an Arabic word meaning “one who is owned,” that is, enslaved. It refers to enslaved warriors, on which many Islamic rulers depended for personal protection and for their armies from the ninth to the nineteenth century. “The Mamluks” generally refers to the rulers of Egypt who arose from the military to claim power in the chaos following the unsuccessful Crusader invasion of Egypt in 1250. “Mongol” refers to people from Mongolia. There were two major waves of Mongol conquest, one begun in 1207 under Genghis Khan, which created the largest contiguous empire in history, reaching from Hungary to Korea. His heirs divided the Mongol Empire into smaller units, creating the Yuan Dynasty in China, the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde north of the Black Sea (including most of Russia), and the Ilkhanate in Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, on which we focus. The second wave was led by Timur, who took advantage of the decline of Ilkhanid power to expand his rule over Persia and surrounding areas.

Chapter Overview

The Byzantines, Ilkhanids, Timurids, and Mamluks

Three artistic cultures dominate this chapter: those of the Byzantine Empire, the Ilkhanate, and the Mamluk Sultanate. Much divides them. Christian Byzantium spoke Greek; the Ilkhanids adopted Farsi (the language of Persia) as their administrative language; and the Mamluks used Arabic. Though the Ilkhanids and the Mamluks were both Muslim polities, they battled each other over control of the eastern Mediterranean.

The Byzantine Empire regaining control over Constantinople after expelling Crusader occupation provides the opening date for this chapter, 1261. In a remarkable parallel, the Mamluk Sultanate arose when Egyptian armies soundly defeated the forces of the seventh Crusade and captured the French King Louis IX in 1250. An equally meaningful start could be 1260, when a Mamluk army defeated the Ilkhanids near Jerusalem—the first major defeat of a Mongol force by non-Mongols since Genghis Khan.

Asserting Legitimacy

Byzantium traced its legitimacy back to the founding of Constantinople in 333, whereas Ilkhanid and Mamluk rulers alike felt the need to assert their rights to rule. The Ilkhanids distanced themselves from their heritage as Mongol conquerors by embracing Islam in 1295, and having Persian poets write them into world history. Artists, many of them captured in war, illustrated these histories with miniatures that not only told Old Testament, Islamic and Persian stories, but did so in styles that displayed Ilkhanid command of styles with roots across Mongol lands, from Yuan China to Ilkhanid Syria. The stable trade routes that Mongols supported not only brought them riches, but encouraged a lively exchange of artistic ideas. Ilkhanid architecture draws on traditions from central Asia and Persia, including palaces meant to overwhelm and mosques that display full support of Islam. After Timur led a second Mongol invasion of Iran, he and his successors made similar use of Islamic architecture and Persian books (Figure **15.0.5**) to support their rule.



Figure **15.0.5**: "Journey of the Prophet Muhammad," folio from the Timurid *Majma al-Tavarikh (Compendium of Histories)*, c. 1425. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, folios 42.8 x 33 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain) From the Metropolitan Musem: "This is a leaf from a dispersed manuscript entitled the Majma' al Tavarikh, produced for the Shah Rukh in Herat. Although simple in style, many of the paintings are effective in their straightforward presentation. Here the Prophet, perched atop the exaggerated hump of his dromedary, dominates the composition. His position and that of his two footmen in the foreground emphasize their importance in the scene."

The Mamluks were known to their contemporaries as Turks or Circassians, although slavers brought Arabs, Georgians, Armenians, Slavs and many others to man the Egyptian army. Their formal claim to legitimacy was through their allegiance to distant and relatively powerless caliphs. (The term “sultan” referred to a subordinate of the caliph, similar to an emir or a vizier.) The material wealth provided by Egyptian control of sea routes to India and China supported the production of impressive Qur’ans and endowed madrassas and mosques, all in support of the Mamluk claim to be the defenders of Islam.

Salvation

Although Byzantium prided itself on its long and proud history, its power waned after the empire regained Constantinople. Seljuk and then Ottoman Turks occupied most of its former lands, and the Mongol Golden Horde had taken over most of its Slavic dependencies.

Genoese merchants controlled trade out of the Black Sea. The empire's search for military support led it to reach out to the Pope, despite the disaster of the fourth Crusade. The exchange of scholars and texts played an important role in sparking the Italian Renaissance, but did not result in assistance against the Turks. Alliances with the Mamluks proved more practical, but did not prevent the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

In the still-rich capital, aristocrats seem to have focused on their own salvation, building monasteries where monks would pray for their souls. The surviving programs of images in such monasteries are dramatic evidence of their hopes and fears.

Christians Beyond Byzantium

In surveying Christian art in the Middle Ages, this book has simplified a complex history, focusing on the Latin church and the Byzantine church. A very different Christian tradition exists in Armenia, represented here by T'oros Roslin's dramatic narrative images, and, in northeast Africa, here represented by Gospel Books and icons painted in a distinctive colorful style stressing bold patterns on flat surfaces.

Objects Overview

This chapter includes medieval art often omitted from surveys. Mamluk and Mongol patrons supported palaces, mosques and madrassas. Ilkhanids and Timurids sought to create Mongol-centered world histories by means of illustrated manuscripts. In the Byzantine Empire, church buildings showcased the piety and wealth of aristocrats. Ethiopia is included as one example of the many forms of Christianity that made art beyond the borders of Byzantium.

In this chapter, readers will encounter:

Architecture intended to impress:

- The Ilkhanid Mausoleum of Sultan Oljetu in Soltaniye, Iran, with its huge blue-tiled dome
- The Timurid Gur I Amir Mausoleum at Samarkand, Usbekistan, featuring colorful tile of the haft-rangi technique (also called *cuerda seca*, or dry cord technique)
- The massive Mamluk Sultan Hasan's Mosque, Mausoleum and Madrassa complex, its exterior enhanced with stone carvings, its interior with stucco and colored marble
- The Chora Monastery in Constantinople, with an exterior enlivened by multi-colored brickwork

And paintings with a point to make:

- The illuminations of Sultan Baybar's Qur'an, so extensive that the book could hardly have been used except for display
- The illustrations of Mongol world histories in the Great Mongol Shahnama
- Illustrations of Nizami's Persian poetry in Timurid books
- Dramatic visions of Christian salvation in the frescoes and mosaics of the Chora Monastery

By the time you finish reading this chapter on the Late Medieval Near East, you should be able to:

- Explain how Ilkhanid and Timurid illustrations tell the stories in the manuscripts that hold them
- Compare Mamluk and Ayyubid metalwork
- Compare how frescoes and mosaics from the Chora Monastery are both traditional and unusual in their depiction of Christian imagery and connection to the liturgy
- Discuss the styles of Late Byzantine and Solomonic Ethiopian religious painting

Want to know more?

- Sultan Baybars' Qur'an (see every page in the seven-volume manuscript), The British Library
- Helen C. Evans (ed.), Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261-1557, for the Met Museum
- Stefano Carboni and Komaroff, Linda (eds.), The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353, for the Met Museum
- Stefano Carboni and Qamar Adamjee, Folios from the Great Mongol Shahnama (Book of Kings), for the Met Museum
- Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire (overviews of the history and geography related to the Mongol Empires), for Khan Academy
- National Museum of Asian Art, Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), an introduction (The Mongol Dynasty in China), for Smarthistory
- Maria Evangelatou, "Textile Mediation in Late Byzantine Visual Culture: Unveiling Layers of Meaning through the Fabrics of the Chora Monastery," in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019).
- Professor Nasser Rabbat, Religious Architecture of the Timurids (course notes)

- Thomas F. Mathews and Alice Taylor, The Armenian Gospels of Gladzor: The Life of Christ Illuminated

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15.1: Ilkhanid

Making and Mutilating Manuscripts of the *Shahnama*

by Dr. Sheila Blair



Figure 15.1.1: "The Bier of Iskandar (Alexander the Great)," folio from the Great Mongol *Shahnama* (Il-Khanid dynasty, Tabriz, Iran), c. 1330, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 57.6 x 39.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1938.3. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Illustrated manuscripts are one of the glories of Persian art, especially those made during the heyday of production from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century. The most popular text was the *Shahnama*, or Book of Kings. This 50,000-couplet poem recounts the history of Iran from the creation of the world to the coming of the Arabs in the seventh century through the reigns of fifty successive monarchs. Rulers and their courtiers often commissioned splendid copies of the *Shahnama* to link themselves to the heroes of the past, whether the "Alexander of the Age" (Figure 15.1.1) or "The Lord of the World" (Figure 15.1.2 and detail, Figure 15.1.3).

Today some of the most important manuscripts are sadly dismembered. Reconstructing the history of two of these splendid manuscripts—from creation to mutilation—shows how they have been used (and misused) over the centuries as political propaganda, loot, and even fodder in the international art market.



Figure **15.1.2**: Sultan Muhammad, “The Court of Kayumars,” 47 x 32 cm, opaque watercolor, ink, gold, silver on paper, folio 20v, *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp I (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Great Mongol *Shahnama* and the Tahmasp *Shahnama*

These two illustrated pages (Figure **15.1.1** and Figure **15.1.2**) come from the most ambitious manuscripts known: the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, made for the Mongol court in northwest Iran around 1330, and the Tahmasp *Shahnama*, made two centuries later in the same region for the Safavid shah Tahmasp (and perhaps inspired by the earlier one).



Figure **15.1.3**: Sultan Muhammad, “The Lord of the World” shown as part of “The Court of Kayumars,” 47 x 32 cm, opaque watercolor, ink, gold, silver on paper, folio 20v, *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp I (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Large books with hundreds of illustrations

Both of these manuscripts are very large books. The 759 folios, or leaves, in the Tahmasp *Shahnama* measure 32 x 47 cm (12½ x 18 ½ inches) with a whopping 258 illustrations, many of them nearly full size and sometimes spilling into the gold-sprinkled margins. The Great Mongol *Shahnama* was even larger: it had around 300 folios with some 200 illustrations, most about half or two-thirds the area of the written surface. [1] Both projects must have taken a decade to complete, even with a workshop of papermakers, calligraphers, painters, illuminators, binders, and other craftsmen.



Figure 15.1.4: "Bahram Gur Hunting with Azada," within the bound Great Mongol *Shahnama*, 1880–1910. Photograph taken by Antoin Sevruguin in Tehran. Freer Gallery of Art, FSA.A.04, Item FSA A.4 2.12.GN.40.07. (Image: Freer Gallery of Art, usage conditions apply)

Both manuscripts became part of the royal library, a necessary accoutrement of a cultured prince from the fourteenth century onwards in Persia and elsewhere. The Great Mongol *Shahnama* seems to have stayed there until the nineteenth century when the manuscript, perhaps unfinished or damaged, was repaired: some of the faces in the paintings were retouched with pink cheeks and heavy eyebrows typical of the nineteenth-century Qajar style, the folios were numbered and remargined on imported Russian paper dated 1832, and the original two volumes were conflated into one. A photograph taken in Tehran at the end of the nineteenth century by the Armenian photographer Antoine Sevruguin shows the bound volume open to one of the illustrated pages (Figure 15.1.4).



Figure 15.1.5: Painting of "Bahram Gur Hunting with Azada" from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*. By 1931, Georges Demotte had sold this folio from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, separated from the larger book, to Edward W. Forbes, director of the Fogg Museum at Harvard University. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Edward W. Forbes. (Image: Harvard Art Museums, via Smarthistory)

The Tahmasp *Shahnama* is given to an Ottoman sultan

The Tahmasp *Shahnama* had a different trajectory. It remained prized at Tahmasp's court for a few years, as the court librarian Dust Muhammad extolled its painting of "The Court of Kayumars" in an album preface written in 1544, and two illustrated folios were replaced for unknown reasons. But then in 1566 Tahmasp, who had apparently tired of painting and dispersed his royal workshop, decided to give the manuscript to the Ottoman sultan Selim II to mark his succession. Tahmasp sent the *Shahnama* at the head of a

long camel train along with a Qurʾan manuscript attributed to the hand of Prophet's son-in-law ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, books chosen to emphasize the shah's royal and religious pedigree and show up his rival as a mere parvenu.



Figure 15.1.6: Nakkaş Osman, "Presentation of Gifts by the Safavid Ambassador, Shahquili, to Sultan Selim II at Edirne in 1568," from Seyyid Lokman, Sehname-i Selim Han. Istanbul, Topkapi Palace Library A3595, fol. 53b-54a (Image: Topkapi Palace Museum Library, via Smarthistory)

The Ottomans got the message, and their reception of the embassy and its gifts was just as orchestrated. They produced their own richly illustrated dynastic histories, including one with a painting showing the enthroned Selim loftily accepting the gifts from groveling ambassadors as a form of entitled tribute rather than an exchange between equals (Figure 15.1.6).

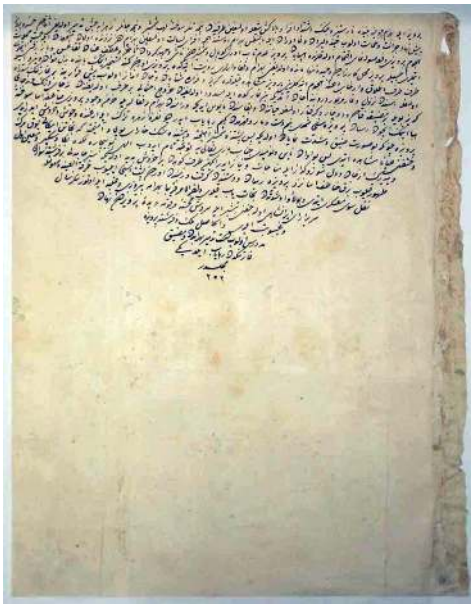


Figure 15.1.7: Commentaries by Mehmed ʿArif Efendi, added on a separate sheet and pasted into the Tahmasp *Shahnama* (opposite the painting of "The Angel Surush rescues Khusraw Parviz," attributed to Muzaffar ʿAli,), Figure 15.1.10, from the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp I (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran, c. 1530–35, opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper, 34.3 cm high (Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1970.301.73, via Smarthistory)

The Ottomans sequestered the Tahmasp *Shahnama* in their royal library. It may have been examined occasionally, as details of the Safavid paintings are occasionally repeated in Ottoman manuscripts, but the lack of fingerprints, smudges, creases, and other marks show that few people consulted the volume. One exception was Mehmed ʿArif Efendi, keeper of guns at the court treasury, who added synoptic commentaries about the paintings in Ottoman Turkish in 1800–01. Written on polished sheets that were glued into the manuscript opposite the illustrated pages (Figure 15.1.7, these synopses suggest that readers at the Ottoman court, which by this point used Ottoman Turkish, merely flipped through the Persian text, looking only at the paintings.

Cutting up the Great Mongol *Shahnama*

The situation for these and many other illustrated manuscripts changed dramatically at the turn of the twentieth century with political upheavals in the Islamic lands and the growing power of Europe and the art market there. Impoverished courtiers apparently filched manuscripts from royal libraries and sold them to European and American dealers and collectors who had developed a taste for richly illustrated texts. The Tahmasp *Shahnama* was the first of the two manuscripts to go. By 1903 it had moved, perhaps via Iran, to Paris where it entered the collection of Baron Edmund de Rothschild.

The Great Mongol *Shahnama* left a few years later, and by 1910 it was in the hands of the Belgian collector Georges Demotte. Unable to sell the whole manuscript, perhaps because of the looming threat of war in Europe, Demotte decided to cut it up and hawk the folios separately to collectors who could display them framed, hanging on the wall. Demotte was faced with a problem, however, as some folios had paintings on both sides.



Figure **15.1.8**: "Zahhak Enthroned," from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, c. 1330–40 (Il-Khanid dynasty, Tabriz, Iran). Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 24.3 x 19.7 cm (Freer Gallery of Art, F1923.5, via Smarthistory) Thas been abraded while being split from the original reverse side of the folio. It is now pasted into a page with text from another part of the epic (scissor icons indicate the edges of the top sheet of paper). It was purchased from Demotte, Inc in 1923.

To maximize his profits, he had the two sides of the folio pulled apart and then remounted the pages separately (such as "Zahhak enthroned" and "Faridun mourning his son") or had the detached paintings pasted onto other folios (such as "Faridun goes to Iraj's palace and mourns") (Figure **15.1.9**).



Figure 15.1.9: Left: “Faridun mourns the coffin of his son Iraj,” from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, c. 1330–40 (Il-Khanid dynasty, Tabriz, Iran). Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 59.5 x 40 cm (Sackler Gallery of Art S1986.101). Right: “Faridun goes to Iraj’s palace and mourns,” from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, c. 1330–40 (Il-Khanid dynasty, Tabriz, Iran). Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 59.3 x 40.1 cm. (Sackler Gallery of Art S1986.100, via Smarthistory) These two paintings were originally on different sides of the same folio. To maximize his profits, Demotte pulled the folio apart and in doing so damaged the pages. The page on the left, much abraded but intact, is now pasted to a back side with unrelated text about Kay Khusraw’s war. The painting shown on the right has no original text around it and is now pasted onto a folio with irrelevant text about Siyavush.

In doing so, he damaged some of the pages. Many of them are abraded because of the paper sheets that were temporarily glued on to help separate the two sides of the folio. In a few cases, parts of the folio, including the painted area, were damaged. Some entire pages or folios may have been destroyed. All together, Demotte is known to have sold 58 illustrated folios and a handful of text folios that were attached to them so that collectors could frame a double-page spread to resemble an open book. The rest of this magnificent manuscript, with some of the most emotional scenes ever produced in Persian painting, is missing, likely destroyed.

The dispersal of the Tahmasp *Shahnama*

The Tahmasp *Shahnama* again followed a different course. Two years after the death of Baron Rothschild’s son Maurice in 1957, the manuscript, intact with all of its 258 paintings, was sold to the American magnate and bibliophile Arthur A. Houghton, Jr. who commissioned the American scholars Martin Dickson and Stuart Cary Welch to prepare a lavish monograph that reproduced all 258 illustrated pages at full size. To make the plates for publication, the volume had to be unbound, a step that presaged its dispersal.



Figure **15.1.10**: “The Angel Surush rescues Khusraw Parviz” (Folio 708b), from the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp I (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran, c. 1530–35, attributed to Muzaffar ‘Ali. Ink, opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper, 47.3 x 31.4 cm. (Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1970.301.73, via Smarthistory). This vibrant page, with the central painting's colorful rocks and foliage bursting out of their borders and into the gold-flecked margin, was one of the original 76 folios from the Tahmasp *Shahnama* that Houghton donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1970.

Small groups of paintings, now framed in silk mats, were exhibited starting in 1962 at the bibliophilic Grolier Club in New York, of which Houghton was president. At this time the international art market was heating up, and works of Middle Eastern, particularly Persian, art were in high demand. Empress Farah of Iran was a major collector, and texts like the *Shahnama* that reflect the glories of Iranian kingship were particularly popular in this imperial era. Houghton, who was in the midst of divorcing his third wife and marrying his fourth, began to auction off his rare books. In 1970 when The Metropolitan Museum of Art celebrated its centennial, Houghton, then chairman of the board, donated 76 illustrated folios from the Tahmasp *Shahnama* to it (see Figure **15.1.10**). He needed to establish a tax basis for his donation, and beginning in 1976, individual folios appeared for sale on the market. The first seven comprised works by all the major painters that Dickson and Welch assigned to the manuscript, thereby establishing a unit price for works by different hands.

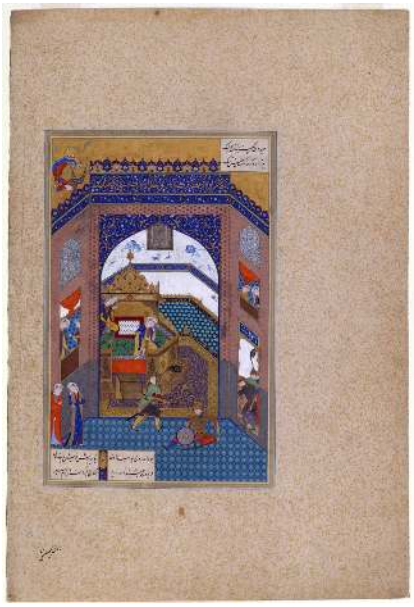


Figure **15.1.11**: Folio from the Tahmasp *Shahnama* that was sold in 1977 to the British Rail Pension Fund and then resold at auction in 1996 to the Freer Gallery of Art. "Faridun strikes down Zahhak," from the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp I (Safavid), Tabriz, Iran, c. 1525, ink opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 27.2 x 17.4 cm. (Image: Freer Gallery of Art F1996.2, via Smarthistory)

More sales followed, some to connoisseurs like Prince Saddrudin Aga Khan who acquired what is regarded as the finest painting in the manuscript, "The Court of Kayumars" (Figure **15.1.2**), but others (such as "Faridun strikes down Zahhak," Figure **15.1.11**) went to investors such as the British Rail Pension Fund.

The manuscript's peregrinations did not end there. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the art market changed and uproar over the manuscript's crass dismemberment increased. After Houghton's death in 1990, his son decided to sell intact the carcass of the manuscript, including its binding and 118 remaining paintings. Complex negotiations through the London dealer Oliver Hoare led to an arrangement in 1994 with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran to trade the manuscript's remains for a 1953 Willem de Kooning painting, *Woman III*, a large oil of a standing nude purchased by Empress Farah but considered distasteful in the Islamic Republic. In a scene worthy of a Graham Greene thriller, the trade-off took place one rainy night on the tarmac of Vienna airport. The manuscript, disbound and deprived of its finest paintings, returned to its homeland where it was feted as a national treasure.

Reconstructing the manuscripts today

It is impossible to undo the damage suffered in dismembering these manuscripts, but scholars have pursued several strategies to help us appreciate some of their original glories. Each approach brings different benefits, but also entails certain limitations. Exhibitions of disbursed folios allows viewers to compare folios side by side, especially important in the case of the Great Mongol *Shahnama* in which the individual paintings differ so widely. But some museums are prohibited from lending, and few would risk sending all of their folios from one manuscript at a single go.

Another approach is to produce a handsome monograph with full-size color illustrations of all the folios, as Sheila Canby did with the Tahmasp *Shahnama* to celebrate the poem's millennium in 2010. The book showcases the wonders of the images, but privileges paintings over poetry and downplays the manuscript as the integral work of art. Calligraphers, heirs to two centuries of tradition in transcribing this text, wanted to have the lines describing the action frame the painting. To do so, they manipulated the layout.

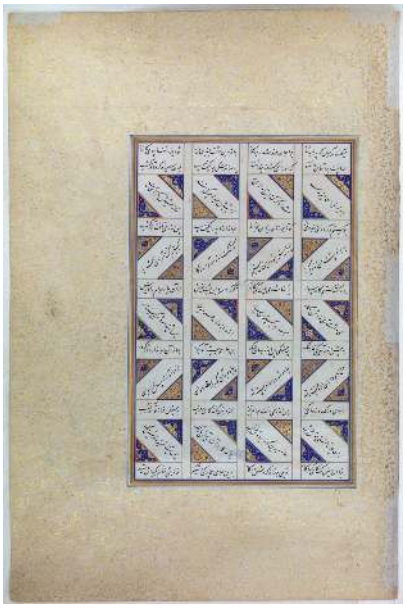


Figure **15.1.12**: Folio 708a, front side of the folio with "The Angel Surush rescues Khusraw Parviz" shown in Figure **15.1.10**. The calligrapher needed to stretch out the text and wrote some of the lines on the diagonal so that the appropriate verses fell around the painting on the back side of the folio. (Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1970.301.73, via Smarthistory)

In the case of the "The Angel Surush rescues Khusraw Parviz," for example, the calligrapher wrote some of the lines on the front side of the folio diagonally so that the page contains only 12 lines of text instead of the standard 22 (Figure **15.1.12**, and the couplets describing the angel's descent fall next to the painting on the reverse (Figure **15.1.10**). The diagonal layout signals to readers that an illustration is approaching and heightens their anticipation in turning the page.

A digital reconstruction of the manuscript would allow the reader to sense the rhythm while flipping the pages, but such an enterprise is exceedingly difficult given that this manuscript is divided between two major institutions in the U.S. and Iran, with additional folios scattered among dozens of public institutions and private collectors, with some still changing ownership. Furthermore, books in the Islamic lands were never meant to be seen flat, as the bindings allow them to be opened only 110 degrees. Instead, books were read three-quarters open while supported on a cradle or stand. So images of a two-page spread flat on a computer screen directly in front of viewers are distorted and do not convey the original aspect of reading the book. Nevertheless, all of these approaches help us to visually reconstruct these glorious illustrated books, in the words of the Safavid chronicler Dust Muhammad, the likes of which the celestial spheres have never seen.

Notes:

1. For the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, we cannot say exactly how large the folios were since it was remargined, but the written area is more than twice that of the Tahmasp *Shahnama* (1160 vs 486 sq. cm.) The larger area of writing in the Great Mongol *Shahnama* allowed for more columns (six vs. four) and more lines (31 vs. 22) per page.

Global Connection: The Tactile Lives of Medieval Manuscripts

Medieval illuminated manuscripts are portable objects of luxury. Skilled artists not only copied text to the pages, but also imbued them with intricate imagery, rich colors, and gold leaf. Dr. Bryan Keene and Rheagan Martin describe how books such as these were made to be held, carried, and touched (something that, as Sheila Blair noted, evidently did *not* happen with the Tahmasp Shanama, given its lack of fingerprints). Keene and Martin examine the unique history of illuminated manuscripts as leading "eventful lives" because of the relationship a manuscript had with its owner. More specifically, they introduce how pages of manuscripts featuring religious imagery, such as that of Christ on the crucifix, even acted as "vehicles" with which to connect the reader with the divine. Such images were touched, kissed, and rubbed repeatedly as signs of religious devotion or in acts of prayer. Some images were even touched or rubbed so much that the images became erased over time. In Islamic manuscripts, pious users sometimes sought to render human figures lifeless by rubbing out their eyes, or drawing a line across their necks, symbolically slitting their throats. Other images, such as some showcasing naked figures or people engaged in

extramarital sexual activity, even seemed to be rubbed out in an act of censorship. Read Coming Out: Queer Erasure and Censorship from the Middle Ages to Modernity to learn more about how readers and viewers engaged with their manuscripts and how that helps historians now to reveal historical evidence of sexual norms and practices, while and making LGBTQIA history more visible.



Figure 15.1.14: Left:*The Crucifixion*, begun after 1234, completed before 1262. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig V 5, fol. 104v; Right:*The Crucifixion*, about 1420–30, Master of the Kremnitz Stadtbuch. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig V 6, fol. 147v. (Images via Smarthistory) As the article points out, in the *Crucifixion* on the left, "the body of the crucified Christ was repeatedly touched in the past for devotional purposes." The page on the right "includes an osculation plaque beneath The Crucifixion, and this roundel with the risen Christ was specifically meant for kissing."

Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)

by Jayne Yantz



Figure 15.1.15: *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)*, from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*, c. 1330-40, Iran, ink, colors, gold, and silver on paper, folio 41.5 x 30 cm. (Image: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, via Smarthistory)

> *As Bahram Gur's men faced the Karg, a monstrous horned wolf that had been terrorizing the countryside, they cried, "Your majesty, this is beyond any man's courage…tell*

> *Shangal this can't be done…."*

Bahram Gur Fights the Karg is a book illumination depicting one of the many stories from the *Shahnama*, the Persian *Book of Kings*. Though this particular image (Figure **15.1.15**) was painted in the fourteenth century by artists in the Mongol court in Persia (present-day Iran), the text of the *Shahnama* was composed by a poet named Firdawsi four hundred years earlier, around 1000 C.E. The *Shahnama* incorporates many older stories once told orally, chronicling the history of Persia before the arrival of Islam and celebrating the glories of the Persian past and its ancient heroes. The *Shahnama* is, in fact, still taught in Iranian schools today, and is considered to be Iran's national epic—to know or recite the stories of the *Shahnama* is to express pride in the country's glorious past. The illustration *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg* depicts one such story of the brave deeds of a Persian king, Bahram Gur, who single-handedly defeated the monstrous Karg (horned wolf). It is much more than just an exciting tale, however; the Mongol artists who created this work were fulfilling their patrons' strong desire to identify with the noble, virtuous, and powerful warrior-kings of ancient Persia.

Who was Bahram Gur and what is a Karg?



Figure **15.1.16**: Plate with a hunting scene from the tale of Bahram Gur and Azadeh, c. 5th century, Sasanian, silver, mercury gilding, 20.1 cm. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

Bahram V was a king of the Sasanian empire that ruled Persia from the third to the seventh century, just prior to the arrival of Islam. His nickname, Bahram Gur, refers to a "gur" or onager—a type of wild ass which is one of the world's fastest-running mammals. The word "gur" may also mean "swift." He was known as a great hunter of onagers (Figure **15.1.16**), a favorite game animal in ancient Iran, and he was renowned for his talents in warfare, chivalry, and romance. On a trip to India, according to the *Shahnama*, the king of India, a ruler named Shangal, recognized Bahram Gur's abilities and sought his help in ridding the Indian countryside of the frightening and fierce Karg.



Figure **15.1.17**: *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)* (detail showing the defeated and bloodied beast), from the *Great Mongol Shahnama*, c. 1330-40, Iran, ink, colors, gold, and silver on paper, folio 41.5 x 30 cm. (Image: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, via Smarthistory)

Some translations of Firdawsi's work describe the Karg as a rhinoceros, some as a wolf, and some, as we find here in *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg*, as a combination of the two—a ferocious horned wolf. When Bahram Gur and his men found the lair and saw the beast, his men beseeched, "Your majesty, this is beyond any man's courage…tell Shangal this can't be done…." The hero, of course, went forward alone, first using his bow to weaken the Karg with arrows, then using his blade to cut off the Karg's head to present to Shangal.

The Mongol court and the art of the book

The Sasanian empire fell in the seventh century, and it was not until well after this that the Mongols invaded Persia. They came from the eastern Asian plains, where open grasslands had encouraged a nomadic lifestyle of herding, horsemanship, and fierce warfare. They first became a serious force under the leadership of Genghis Khan in the early thirteenth century, and later, under his grandson Hulagu, the Mongols expanded their reach all the way to the Mediterranean.

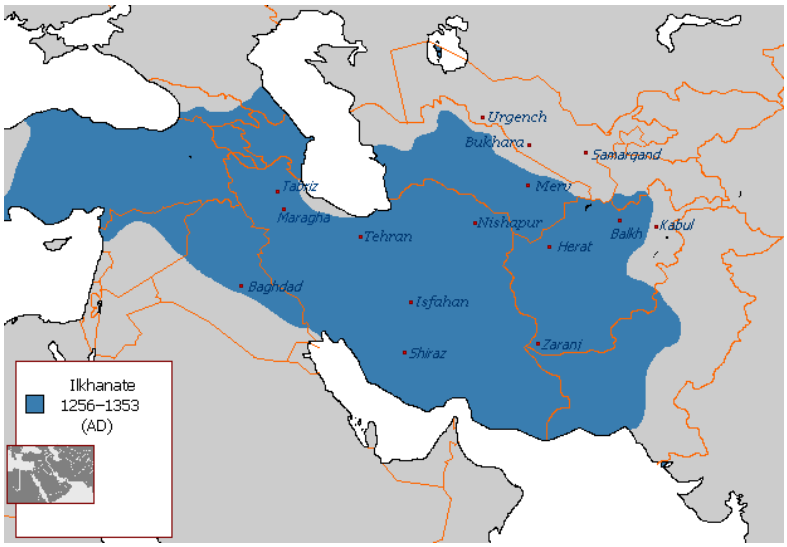


Figure **15.1.18**: Map of the Ilkhanid state, 1256-1353 (Map: Ahmed Hafez, public domain)

Settled in Persia, the Mongols fostered the growth of cosmopolitan cities with rich courts and wealthy patrons who encouraged the arts to flourish. The rule of Hulagu's dynasty, which lasted until 1335, is commonly known as the Ilkhanid period. Book illustration thrived under the Ilkhanids and became a major art form for both religious and secular texts. Since the Mongols began as, and largely remained, nomadic peoples (moving from place to place during the year to satisfy the needs of their herds), artworks tended to be small and portable. Their long nomadic history also meant that the Mongols developed strong oral traditions of storytelling, which gave them an appreciation for narrative art—especially manuscripts with paintings to accompany the stories. Illustrated manuscripts were also prestige items, created in very sumptuous formats suitable for kings, princes, and members of the court.

It was within this environment of lavish artistic book production that the manuscript depicting *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg* was created, probably in a court workshop. The artists who crafted it used silver and gold accents over ink and opaque watercolor. While we do not know the name of the patron, scholars suggest that it may have been the court vizier, a high-ranking official. The full page, or folio, is relatively large for a hand painted book, and because of its size, the manuscript is also referred to as the *Great Mongol Shahnama*. It was most likely a prestige item intended to express the owner's power and wealth, and it is the most luxurious of all the Ilkhanid painted books that survive. In its original form, scholars believe this complete manuscript probably comprised about 280 folios (pages) with 190 illustrations painted by several different artists, bound into two separate volumes. Today, however, only 57 folios are known to have survived. Like many other manuscripts, the *Great Mongol Shahnama* was taken apart by an early twentieth-century art dealer so that the pages could be sold separately.

The illumination as a stylistic blend



Figure **15.1.19**: *Six Horses*, 13th–14th century, China, ink and color on paper, 47.1 x 647.1 cm (image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, public domain)

This manuscript was likely completed at the Mongol court in Tabriz, a rich and cosmopolitan urban center (in what is today northern Iran). By the time the book was produced, the Mongols had settled into their role as refined rulers with international contacts, and their lands were secure enough to ensure the safe exchange of both goods and ideas throughout the empire. The increased availability of paper, invented in China in the eighth century, also encouraged the diffusion of artistic ideas. Consequently, Ilkhanid art had an international flavor. Landscape elements, for instance, often show influences from China, incorporating motifs seen on imported Chinese scrolls (Figure **15.1.19**) and ceramics. In *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg*, the worn and twisted trees, overlapping forms that create spatial recession, rapidly brushed foreground vegetation, and a taste for asymmetry all suggest eastern Asian influences.



Figure 15.1.20: *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)* (detail of Baram Gur), from the *Great Mongol Shahnama*, c. 1330-40, Iran, ink, colors, gold, and silver on paper, folio 41.5 x 30 cm (image: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, via Smarthistory)

Local influences are also apparent: Persia had a long artistic tradition of depicting heroes, kings, and hunters riding horses over slain opponents. Bahram Gur is depicted in this tradition. Shown on horseback, he wears kingly garb, with a golden crown, luxurious garment, and an elegant gold and pearl earring visible in his right ear. But he is also clearly a warrior, holding a mace over his shoulder, and with a bow, sword, and arrows covered in a leopard skin hanging from his waist.

The result is a dynamic, energy-filled image (Figure 15.1.15) with a monumental figure almost bursting out of the frame: Bahram Gur is cut off slightly at the top, trees and landscape details are truncated at the edges, and the horse is captured in mid-motion with one leg raised above the Karg. The Karg's head, very close to the viewer, is centrally placed and dripping blood, while the splayed length of the Karg's battered body pulls the viewer's eye toward the left. The focus returns to the hero, however, because a visual circuit is created around him. Our eyes travel along the horn of the Karg, to the continuous arc of the tree branch, and up to Bahram Gur, whose glance leads our eyes back down across the vegetation and the body of his horse.

The page surrounding *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg* is covered with calligraphy (Figure 15.1.22), but we do not know what originally appeared on the page adjoining the painting because the book pages are dispersed today. Calligraphy is the most highly regarded form of Islamic art, and it can be highly stylized, showing off an artist's personal flare and skill. Ideals of beauty in Islamic culture draw on calligraphy's inherent harmony and balance, spacing, proportion and compositional evenness on the page, and these aesthetic values are also visible in the painting style of the Great Mongol *Shahnama*.



Figure 15.1.21: Calligraphy (detail), *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)*, from the *Great Mongol Shahnama*, c. 1330-40, Iran, ink, colors, gold, and silver on paper, folio 41.5 x 30 cm (image: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, via Smarthistory)

Old heroes for a new regime

There is a tradition within Islam that strongly discourages the visual representation of human or animal figures. In practice, however, figurative representations can very often be found in secular and private Islamic contexts, such as the Ilkhanid court, where it was acceptable—even desirable—to create splendid figurative artworks for private consumption.

This was true of the *Shahnama*, which was a favorite subject at the Mongol court, eagerly enjoyed by wealthy and sophisticated courtiers. The painters who illustrated the *Shahnama* were drawn to dramatic subjects such as battles or encounters with astonishing beasts such as the Karg. However, images like *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg* were not just meant as illustrations of simple, enjoyable fairy tales, but contained deeper meaning and significance for the Mongol nobility. Here, Bahram Gur symbolizes just rule and civilized society triumphing over chaos and disorder, represented by the Karg. In simple terms, this means good defeating evil, but it also implies that a good and stable social order is based upon kingship, and that warrior-kings like Bahram Gur are moral and courageous models to be emulated by the readers of the book. The *Shahnama* therefore also provided a teaching tool, subtly incorporating moral stories and illustrating desirable behaviors for future kings and nobles.

Many scholars also believe that the new Mongol rulers in Persia wanted to link themselves to the great heroes and kings of Persia's past, a link which would enhance their authority. The Mongols and the ancient Persians had a shared respect for the manly arts of fighting, hunting, feasting, and courtship, and it is not a coincidence that Bahram Gur rides a horse as he defeats the Karg: the story is Persian, but the hero is shown as a great Mongol horseman.

The *Shahnama* is filled with magical tales of courtly life, including kings and heroes who fight, hunt, and live life to the fullest, as illustrated in the story of *Bahram Gur Fights the Karg*. But the *Shahnama* is also somewhat fatalistic, presenting a hostile world filled with fierce foes like the Karg. The book even ends with the defeat of the Persians by the Arabs. The stories, however, teach about the importance of courage and ethics while traveling through such a threatening world, and they provide guidance for readers confronting questions about death, love, honor and just rule.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Sheila Blair, "Making and Mutilating Manuscripts of the *Shahnama*," in *Smarthistory*, July 27, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Bryan C. Keene and Rheagan Martin, "Coming Out: Queer Erasure and Censorship from the Middle Ages to Modernity," in *Smarthistory*, July 30, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Jayne Yantz, "*Bahram Gur Fights the Karg (Horned Wolf)*," in *Smarthistory*, January 20, 2017 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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15.2: Timurid

Arts of the Islamic world: The Timurids (1369-1502)

by Glenna Barlow (excerpted)

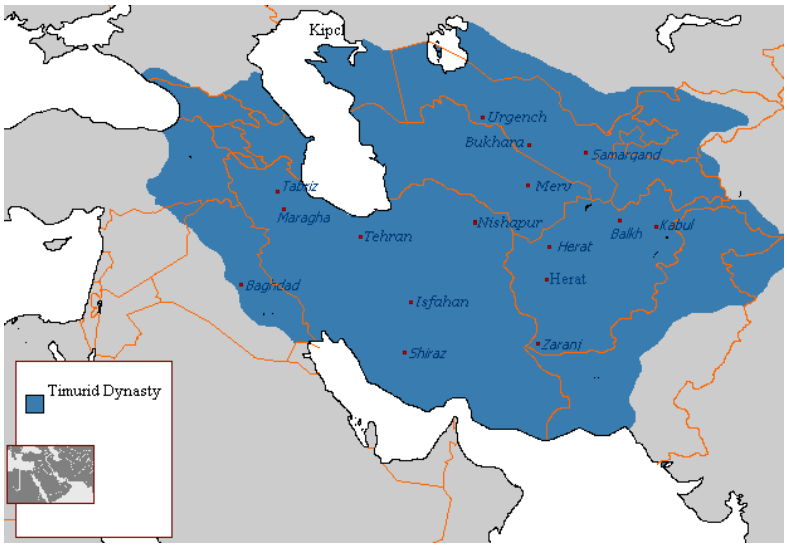


Figure 15.2.1: Timurid Dynasty at its greatest extent (map via Smarthistory)

This powerful Central Asian dynasty was named for its founder, Tamerlane (ruled 1370-1405), which is derived from Timur the Lame. Despite his rather pathetic epithet, he claimed to be a descendent of Genghis Khan and demonstrated some of his supposed ancestor's ruthlessness in conquering neighboring territories.

After establishing a vast empire, Timur developed a monumental architecture befitting his power, and sought to make Samarkand the "pearl of the world." Because the capital was situated at a major crossroads of the Silk Road (the crucial trade route linking the Middle East, Central Asia, and China), and because Timur had conquered so widely, the Timurids acquired a myriad of artisans and craftspeople from distinct artistic traditions. The resulting style synthesized aesthetic and design principles from as far away as India (then Hindustan) and the lands in between.



Figure 15.2.2: Registan, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 15th-17th centuries (Image via Smarthistory)

The result can be seen in cities filled with buildings created on a lavish scale that exhibited tall, bulbous domes and the finest ceramic tiles (Figure 15.2.2). The structures and even the cities themselves are often described foremost by the overwhelming use of blues and golds. While the Timurid dynasty itself was short-lived, its legacy survives not only in the grand architecture that it left behind but in its descendants who went on to play significant roles in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires.

The Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan (Add.27261)

adapted from Muhammad Isa Waley

Imagine being a position to commission a magnificent one-volume selection of the reading matter you would most like to carry around on your travels – a kind of miniature personal library. With no expense spared, you could order the most skillful calligraphers in the land to write it, the best painters to illustrate it, the best illuminators to decorate it, the best binders to bind it…

Such was the good fortune of Jalāl al-Dīn Iskandar Sultan ibn ‘Umar Shaykh, grandson of the famous Central Asian conqueror Tīmūr (Tamerlane). Iskandar ruled much of southern Iran for just five years (1409-1414) before meeting his death after rebelling against Shāh Rukh, his overlord. Iskandar was an enthusiastic and discerning patron of the arts and learning, and a number of the exquisite Persian manuscripts produced for him have survived. Amongst the most remarkable of these are his two Miscellanies, one of which is preserved at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon and the other at the British Library, now fully digitized as part of our Digital Access to Persian Manuscripts sponsored by the Iran Heritage Foundation and others. Thanks to a generous grant from the Andor Trust, selected folios from the London volume are now available to view and study, with notes and a number of translated extracts, as a ‘Turning the Pages’ presentation.



Figure 15.2.3: Illuminated double frontispiece, folio 2v-3r, *Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan*, copied 813-4/1410-11. (Photo: British Library, public domain) The British Library writes, "The text in the upper and lower panels is written in an especially ornate version of floriated Kufic script, and consists of supplicatory phrases that complement the prayer in Arabic for the patron of the manuscript, Iskandar Sultan, which is inscribed in thulth script in the lobed circular central panel."

The Miscellanies of Iskandar Sultan, then, are illustrated compendia of texts. Those in the first half of our volume were copied by Muḥammad al-Ḥalvā’ī, and the remainder by Nāṣir al-Kātib; their work is dated 813-814/1410-1411. We do not know who was responsible for the illumination and paintings; but some of the latter are probably by Pīr Aḥmad Bāgh-shimālī, reputedly the greatest artist of his time. Notable features of the book include the small page size (182 x 129 mm.) and writing; exquisitely detailed and inventive illumination; and jewel-like miniature paintings. The manuscript has been skilfully restored by British Library conservators and rebound in traditional Islamic style to open as flat as possible. Because the new binding is undecorated, for ‘Turning the Pages’ the covers from a different manuscript were used instead.

The texts chosen by the royal patron and/or his advisers could hardly have been more miscellaneous. They include a wide-ranging selection of religious, narrative and lyrical poetry; in prose, there are treatises on astronomy and astrology, geometry, medicine, farriery, alchemy, history, and Islamic law. In this ‘Turning the Pages’ production we have tried to make a representative selection of the 1092 pages (i.e. 546 folios), in the hope of doing justice, as far as possible, to the quality and wide variety of texts, decorative designs, and images.

A detailed description of the contents is available as a PDF, so for present purposes, it will suffice to mention some of their interesting features, with a brief discussion of a few pages by way of example.

The poetical texts in the first half of the Miscellany all consist of parts or the whole of well-known lengthy works in *masnavī* form (rhyming couplets).



Figure 15.2.4: Illustration to Niẓāmī's *Iskandar-nāmah* ('Epic of Alexander the Great'), folio 286r, *Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan*, copied 813-4/1410-11. In this miniature, Alexander and his servant witness the enchanting and innocent spectacle of young girls bathing together at night in a pool out in the wilds. The sophistication of this painting is to some extent disguised by the simplicity of the composition. (Image: British Library, public domain)

The Miscellany also includes *qaṣīda*s, poems in monorhyme, in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad or the Imams of the Shī'a. Others are technical *tours de force*, single poems incorporating as many different metres or rhetorical devices as possible. Next comes a selection of over two hundred poems in the shorter ghazal form. This is complemented by a more extensive anthology, occupying the outer text panels of almost three hundred pages. Categorised variously by subject, genre or metre, it contains ghazals and other poems by over three hundred authors. Famous contributors include Farrukhī, Manūchihrī, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, Salmān-i Sāvajī, Amīr Khusraw, Ḥāfiẓ (one of the earliest known textual sources), and 'Imād-i Faqīh. These last two both feature in a previous blog posting: see Jahangir's Hafiz and the Madrasa Jurist. Others are little known today; whether their verse was fashionable in 8th/14th century southern Iran, and what criteria were applied by the compilers of Iskandar Sultan's two Miscellanies would be an intriguing topic for literary historians to investigate.

As for the prose contents of Add. 27261, their subject areas have been enumerated above. The inclusion of a summary of jurisprudence according to the Ja'farī school (*mazhab*) followed by Imāmī (*Ithnā-'Asharī*) Shī'īs is another indication, coupled with the above-mentioned poems in praise of the Imams, of interest in Shī'ism at a time when the great majority of Iran's population was Sunnī. There is also a concise guide to sacred law pertaining to religious obligations attributed (even though it is in Persian) to Abū Ḥanīfa, main founder of the (Sunnī) Ḥanafī juristic school.

Ā'īnah-'i Sikandarī, a treatise on alchemy named after Iskandar Sultan, was written expressly for him, as was *Risālah-'i Kibrīt-i aḥmar* ('Red Sulphur'), on the same subject. *Mukhtaṣar dar 'ilm-i Uqlīdis*, 'Elements of Geometry,' presents some theorems from the first book of Euclid's work, complete with illuminated geometrical figures and adorned with illuminated margins incorporating verses in praise of a patron and here doubtless intended for Iskandar Sultan (Figure 15.2.5).



Figure **15.2.5**: "Elements of Geometry," from a translation of Euclid, folio 344r, *Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan*, copied 813-4/1410-11. (Image: British Library, public domain)

Finally, a large proportion of the second half of the Miscellany is devoted to astronomy and astrology. This fact, coupled with the magnificent illuminated 'Horoscope of Iskandar Sultan' (now preserved at the Wellcome Institute, just half a mile along Euston Road from the British Library) suggest that the Sultan had a strong interest in such matters. The computation of calendars and the use of the astrolabe are described in *Ma'rifat-i taqvīm va usṭurlāb*. Lastly, some of the 340 pages devoted to *Rawẓat al-munajjimīn*, a comprehensive early treatise on astrology, are enlivened by colourful, imaginative and exotic drawings in the margins. At the end of the copying process some blank pages remained, and it appears that at least one artist was literally 'given carte blanche' to decorate them in any matter he wished.



Figure **15.2.6**: Marginal illustrations, *Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan*, copied 813-4/1410-11. (image British Library Add.27261, f 542v, public domain)

Who decided what to put into the Miscellany? Did Iskandar choose for himself, or did others help? The manuscript has sometimes been described as a kind of encyclopedia, but even with the contents of the Lisbon volume added, one would not only have a few subject areas covered; there is an abundance of great imaginative poetry but little practical information. If asked to design a 'Swiss knife' book for a Sultan, I think I might include some of the following (besides the poetry and jurisprudence): a cookbook; guides

to hunting and to edible plants; at least as much geography as history; a primer of navigation by land and sea; a concise multilingual phrasebook; and prayers, passages from Scripture, and other words of wisdom and consolation for hard times. (The British Library has a kind of miniature miscellany compiled by the novelist George Eliot.) In any case, as a great bibliophile Iskandar must have been a happy man when the Miscellany was first presented to him for inspection.

The Khamsah of Nizami: A Timurid Masterpiece

One of the best loved of the illustrated Persian manuscripts in the British Library is the *Khamsah* of Nizami Or. 6810. Made in Herat during the reign of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, and with one picture dated 900/1494-95, it contains some of the finest late 15th-century painting. The glorious colour and meticulous drawing of its illustrations strike the viewer immediately, while the depth and complexity of their meaning is endlessly fascinating. In addition the manuscript poses interesting problems of artistic attribution and patronage.



Figure **15.2.7**: Attributed to Bihzad and Mirak, "Harun al-Rashid and the barber," folio 27v, *Khamsah* of Nizami, 900/1494-5. British Library, London. (Image: British Library, public domain)

Illustrating a parable in *Makhzan al-Asrar* (‘Treasury of Secrets’), the first of the five books of the *Khamsah*, ‘Harun al-Rashid and the barber’ takes us inside a hammam (‘bathhouse’). We are well and truly inside since the plain doorway in the right marks the entry to an area of privacy, or relative privacy. In its main saloon, men, with their gaze politely directed away from each other, are dressing or undressing with proper decorum. To the left is a more private space, its status is expressed in a more stately architecture: this is for the moment reserved for caliphal use. In it Harun al-Rashid is the direct object of attention of two attendants, and appears to have engrossed the activity of two more. This space is the focus of the narrative: the viewer’s eye has been led towards it from right to left, according to the reading direction of the Persian script. The text tells us that when Harun visits the hammam the barber who shaves his head asks for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Harun is incensed by this impertinence, which is, moreover, repeated on his subsequent visits. Harun puts this problem to his vizier, remarking that it seems unwise to subject oneself to the double threat of an actual razor and a dagger-like word. The vizier speculates that the barber’s presumption might result from his standing over a treasure: the caliph should order him to move his position. Harun acts accordingly; standing on a different spot, the barber no longer feels himself the caliph’s equal; excavation reveals the treasure over which had been beneath his feet.

Over and above the requirements of the narrative, the depiction of the hammam is the gift that the artist makes to the viewer. There are minutely observed practical details such as the soot deposited on the walls by the lamps in the private room, or the precise position of hands that wring a wet towel in the public space; and there is the symbolic detail that the caliph’s robes and crown are temporarily laid aside, so that in a sense he becomes a vulnerable man on a level with the others. There is careful observation and judgement in the use of colour: the dark buff tiles of the floor are evidently not glazed, so that even when wet they will not be

slippery; their colour is beautifully set off by the array of blue towels of varying stripe that blazon the function of the establishment, and that are secured into the main composition by the rod that lifts them to or from the drying line.

Is this picture the work of the great painter Bihzad? The names of both Mirak, the older master, and of Bihzad have been written underneath it at an unknown date, but the majority of scholars would attribute it to Bihzad. Writing in 1605, the Mughal emperor Jahangir, then in possession of the manuscript and priding himself on his connoisseurship, asserted that 16 of its pictures were by Bihzad, five by Mirak, and one by ʿAbd al-Razzaq, though he did not specify which (See earlier post: 'A Jewel in the Crown').



Figure **15.2.8**: "The Prophet mounted on the Buraq and escorted by angels passing over the Kaʿbah," folio 5v, *Khamsah* of Nizami, 900/1494-5. British Library, London. (Image: British Library, public domain)

One of the pictures to which no notes of attribution have been added is the 'Miʿraj' ('ascent') (Figure **15.2.8**), the picture of the Prophet Muhammad carried up into the heavens on the back of the Buraq, a mount with a human face—the Buraq's face suggests the work of Mirak, the other faces less so. The Prophet is seen in a swirl of golden clouds and surrounded by angels, against a night sky. He is above the black-draped Kaʿbah, with the town of Mecca around it treated in fascinating detail, albeit in a rather Persianate architecture replete with blue and turquoise tiling. The picture follows the type of one produced some 80 years earlier in the Miscellany for Iskandar Sultan BL Add. 27261 of 1410-11 (see earlier post: 'The Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan'). The later picture has, however, two brilliant innovations. The Prophet is here looking around him in wonder, and the precinct of the Kaʿbah contains two human figures that are so tiny that the viewer seems to look down on them from an immense height.



Figure 15.2.9: "Iskandar, in the likeness of Husayn Bayqara, with the seven sages," folio 214r, *Khamsah* of Nizami, 900/1494-5. British Library, London. (Image: British Library, public domain)

This magnificent manuscript clearly draws upon the talents of artists of the royal workshop, but it does not display the name of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, who ruled Herat from 1469 to 1506, as patron; instead, a line on one of the arches of Shirin's palace (f. 62v) says that it was made for the Amir ʿAli Farsi Barlas, and it seems that he is depicted in the frontispiece. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that it is Sultan Husayn Bayqara who appears, in proxy portraiture, in illustrations to the story of Iskandar (Alexander the Great), as an ideal king, surrounded by philosophers (Figure 15.2.9) or showing respect for a holy man (Figure 15.2.10).

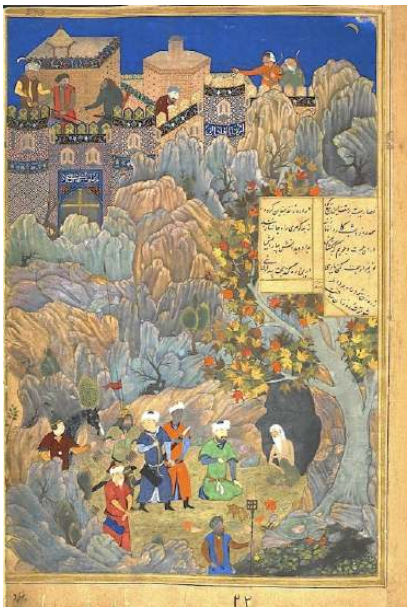


Figure 15.2.10: "Iskandar, in the likeness of Husayn Bayqara, visiting the wise man in a cave," (ascribed to Bihzad underneath, but to Qasim ʿAli in the text panel), folio 2734r, *Khamsah* of Nizami, 900/1494-5. British Library, London. (Image: British Library, public domain)

Thanks to the generosity of the Barakat Trust this manuscript has been fully digitized and can be viewed in our digitized manuscripts viewer. You can also check out this detailed catalog description [PDF] with links to all of the miniatures.

Articles in this section:

- Glenna Barlow, "Arts of the Islamic world: The later period," in *Smarthistory*, July 8, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Muhammad Isa Waley, "The Miscellany of Iskandar Sultan (Add.27261)," in The British Library's Asian and African Studies blog, March 28, 2014 (CC BY)
- Barbara Brend, "The Khamsah of Nizami: A Timurid Masterpiece," in The British Library's Asian and African Studies blog, May 18, 2014 (CC BY)

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15.3: Mamluk

Arts of the Islamic world: The Mamluks

by Glenna Barlow (excerpted)

The name ‘Mamluk’, like many names, was given by later historians. The word itself means ‘owned’ in Arabic. It refers to the Turkic slaves who served as soldiers for the Ayyubid sultanate before revolting and rising to power. The Mamluks ruled over key lands in the Middle East, including Mecca and Medina. Their capital at Cairo became the artistic and economic center of the Islamic world at this time.



Figure **15.3.1**: Mosque Lamp, 13th-14th century. Colorless glass; blue, green, red, yellow, and white enamels; and gold; free blown, applied, enameled, and gilded; tooled on the pontil, includes base, now detached: 12 x 8 in. (30.5 x 20.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William H. Herriman, 21.484. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, CC BY)

The period saw a great production of art and architecture, particularly those commissioned by the reigning sultans. Patronizing the arts and creating monumental structures was a way for leaders to display their wealth and make their power visible within the landscape of the city. The Mamluks constructed countless mosques, madrasas and mausolea that were lavishly furnished and decorated. Mamluk decorative objects, particularly glasswork as in Figure **15.3.1**, became renowned throughout the Mediterranean. The empire benefitted from the trade of these goods economically and culturally, as Mamluk craftsmen began to incorporate elements gleaned from contact with other groups. The growing prevalence of trade with China and exposure to Chinese goods, for instance, led to the Mamluk production of blue and white ceramics, an imitation of porcelain typical of the Far East.

The Mamluk sultanate was generally prosperous, in part supported by pilgrims to Mecca and Medina as well as a flourishing textile market, but in 1517 the Mamluk sultanate was overtaken and absorbed into the growing Ottoman empire.

Basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis)

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker.

This is the transcript of a conversation held at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Click here to watch the conversation.

Steven: We're in the magnificent new Islamic Art Galleries at the Louvre in Paris. We're looking at one of their treasures. It's an object that was used to baptize the children of the royal family of France for centuries but it wasn't originally a French object.



Figure **15.3.2**: Mohammed ibn al-Zain, Basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis), c. 1320-40. Brass inlaid with silver and gold, 22.2 x 50.2 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: No, it actually comes from the area of Egypt and Syria and it dates to between 1320 and 1340.

Steven: It was created by Mamluk artisans. The Mamluks had been slave warriors and they had asserted their independence and had been able to rule in the countries that are today Egypt and Syria for several hundred years. During that period, they became known as extraordinary craftsmen. They were known especially for their textile work and for their metal work. This is a premier example.

Beth: Normally, vessels like this would have large bands of calligraphy. This one doesn't. This one is filled with figures and animals and decorative patterning.

Steven: The only part that is not completely covered are the bottom few inches of the walls of the inside of the basin. Even the floor of the basin is completely covered. Let's start there.



Figure **15.3.3**: Mohammed ibn al-Zain, Basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis), c. 1320-40. Brass inlaid with silver and gold, 22.2 x 50.2 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: There is a very abstract pattern there of sea animals.

Steven: These are very complex interconnected designs similar to tile work.

Beth: The basin is brass. It's got areas of silver and gold and black paste. I see eels in silver at the bottom.

Steven: And then above that, we see first a continuous band of animals that parade around the inner wall and then a wide **frieze** of men on horseback interspersed by animals as well as medallions, figures that are clearly rulers, as well as coats of arms.

Beth: There are two rulers. They sit frontally. They both hold goblets. The figures in between seem to be hunting—but also scenes of battle. We see limbs and we see a decapitated head so there's violence here.

Steven: The largest frieze is on the exterior.

Beth: There we see four figures in roundels. Each on horseback, slightly different. Two of them are hunting.

Steven: Another one is drawing his bow. Then the last seems to be processing, perhaps holding a club.

Beth: There are figures on either side of the roundels, sometimes four, sometimes five, all in procession toward the royal figures.

Steven: These figures are doing all kinds of interesting things. I'm looking at one, for example, that seems to be holding a leopard by a leash. Another seems to raise a goblet in one hand, perhaps in celebration and holding a vessel in the other. The figures are so dense that it actually takes time to be able to untangle the complex interwoven forms.

Beth: On the very bottom band, there are small roundels that carry **fleur-de-lis**. The Fleur-de-lis is the symbol of the royal family of France. Interestingly, it was also associated with a Mamluk Sultan. Art historians think these may have been reworked when they came to France. There are other alterations that make us think that the person who commissioned this was not the person who it was ultimately delivered to.



Figure **15.3.4**: Mohammed ibn al-Zain, Basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis), c. 1320-40. Brass inlaid with silver and gold, 22.2 x 50.2 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: As you mentioned before, generally we would expect to see Islamic inscriptions. That would have been very common but they're absent here. There's some speculation that this may have been made for somebody who was not a Muslim. Perhaps it was even made for export.

Beth: The **iconography** is very complicated and art historians have not untangled it yet.

Steven: Look how rich the imagery is just under the rim. I can see a unicorn, an elephant. I can see a leopard, a camel, an antelope.

Beth: All processing, all running, all jumping. There's such movement and energy not only in the decorative forms which move in and out but also in the figures.

Steven: There is a little bit of Arabic inscription, the signature of the artist. We can see that just under the rim. Beth: Actually, he signed it six times, so maybe he was especially proud of it. His name was ibn al-Zain and actually the Louvre has another work by this great Mamluk artist.

Madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo

by Dr. Christian A. Hedrick



Figure **15.3.5**: Madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. It covers an area of approximately 8,000 square meters, and measures approximately 65 x 150 m and 65m high (on the north side). The mosque of Al-Rifa'i, built 1869–1912, is to the right (Photo: Mariam Mohamed Kamal via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Described by a 15th-century observer as a building with “no equivalent in the whole world,”[1] the mosque-madrasa-funerary complex of the Mamluk Sultan Hasan in Cairo has been considered one of the greatest mosque complexes ever built since its construction in the 14th century. It includes a mosque, a madrasa (school), a mausoleum, and other buildings—all within the same space. A complex like this one was typically designed as one structure and sponsored by one patron. If the building has a tomb within, as this one does, it will also be referred to as a “funerary complex.” It stands today as one of the most imposing mosque complexes in Cairo. The complex is a quintessential Mamluk building type, especially in Cairo. It was the first building to combine a madrasa and congregational mosque together in the Islamic world, and it set a new standard in Mamluk Cairo.

The complex was built during a period of crisis between 1350 and 1380, when plagues, Nile floods, and famine all undermined political stability. This complex of buildings was a means for Sultan Hasan—a young and weak ruler—to express his power and piety. Although the complex was never completed and Sultan Hasan was not buried here, it is a famous examples of the many funerary complexes that the Mamluk sultans erected.



Figure **15.3.6**: Location of the Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hasan, Maydan Rumayla, and Citadel, Cairo. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

The site

The Sultan Hasan complex is one of the largest buildings in all of Cairo. It faces directly onto a large *maydan* (public square) formerly called Maydan Rumayla (commonly known today as Maydan Salah al-Din) that was of central importance to Mamluk ceremonial rituals because it occupied the space just below the citadel, royal residences and military barracks that were the real, as well as symbolic, source of power and authority in Cairo. The complex was also very close to the location of the hippodrome and the famous horse market (that no longer survive), which played a key role in Mamluk military pursuits because, above all else, they were the most effective cavalry warriors since the Mongols.

Plan and design

Although we do not have the name of someone considered an “architect” we do know the name of the “supervisor of construction,” an emir named Muhammad Ibn Baylik al-Muhsini, whose name is inscribed on a text band on the interior of the mosque. The complex is composed of a four-iwan *jami‘ masjid* (Friday Mosque), a *madrasa* (secondary school or college), and a *qubba*, or mausoleum (see Figure **15.3.7**). In this organization, the congregational mosque was composed of a central courtyard (*sahn*) with four iwans—halls enclosed on three sides and open to the courtyard on the fourth—on each side. When not in use for prayer, these spaces functioned as seminar meeting spaces for the madrasa.

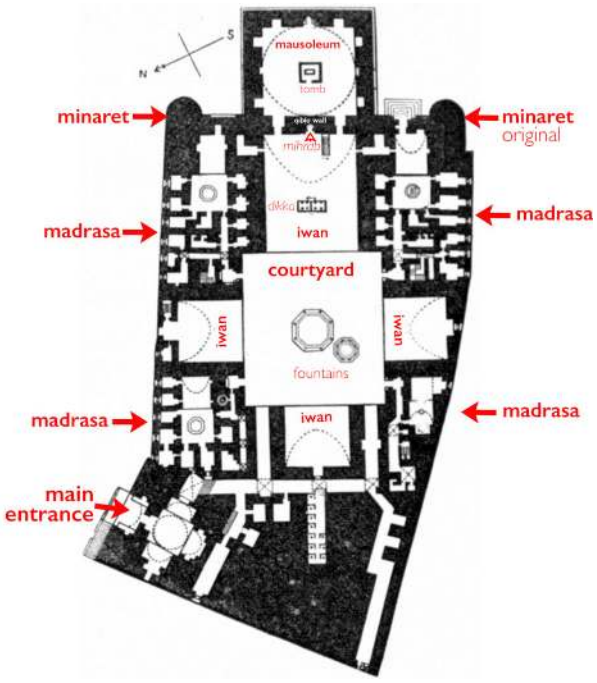


Figure **15.3.7**: Plan of the madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Image via Smarthistory)

The square space adjacent to the mosque is the mausoleum, and most of the rest of the building is dedicated to the madrasa and other support functions. The madrasa is also one of the largest in Cairo and contains four separate schools of Sunni Islamic law (each of which fits within the corner spaces around the central courtyard) faced by four unequal sized *iwans*, of which the southeastern was the largest because it is the direction of Mecca (known as the *qibla iwan*).



Figure **15.3.8**: Courtyard with fountains, surrounded by iwans, in the madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Mohammed Moussa via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In the decades up to and after the sack of Baghdad in 1248, the Caliph's power had diminished, so the Mamluk Sultan and various other strong men vied for power across the Islamic World. The fact that the building contained all four major Islamic schools of law underscored the strong relationship between the Mamluk Sultan and the Caliph, who had become a figurehead by this time.

The building's *waqf*, or endowment document, has survived partially intact and tells us about the complex's buildings and how they were used and staffed. The *waqf* explains that in addition to the mosque, madrasa, and mausoleum, the complex was also to contain spaces for physicians to service the community and a *sabil-kuttab* (public water fountain dispensary and primary school for boys). In all the *waqf* stipulated that there should be accommodations for over 500 (madrasa) students, 200 school boys, and 340 staff members in all making it the largest of its day. [2]

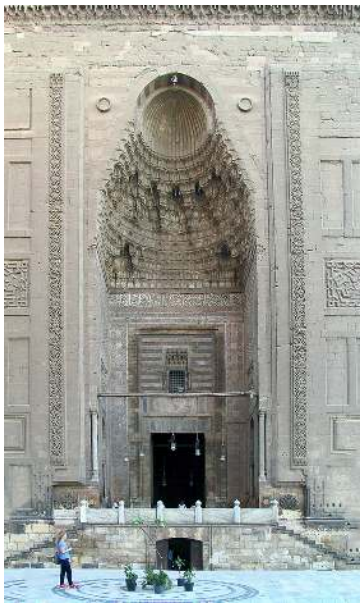


Figure **15.3.9**: Main entrance, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Djehouty via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The decoration and design

The entrance portal and vestibule, and courtyard with *iwans*



Figure **15.3.10**: *Muqarnas* above the main entrance portal, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH.(Photo: Ahmed Al.Badawy via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The exterior of the complex is stone, and the interior is mostly brick with stucco decoration. Due to the exterior's vast surface, most decorative carving occurs near the entry portal and the elevation of the mausoleum facing onto the maydan (public square). One enters the complex through an enormous portal—the largest in Cairo—which is capped by an enormous hood filled with *muqarnas* (carved stalactite-shaped decoration).



Figure **15.3.11**: Decorative panels, main entrance, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Djehouty via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Both sides of the portal have highly refined stone carvings, including spiral cut columns to exaggerate their height, panels with interlacing geometric patterns, carved arabesques (intertwining and scrolling vines), and even Chinese decorative motifs (see Figure **15.3.11**). Chinese designs were transmitted, alongside with Chinese goods, on the silk roads, especially after the peace treaty signed between the Mamluks and Mongols in 1322, and would later make their way into Ottoman ceramics too.



Figure **15.3.12**: Entrance vestibule, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (photo: Michal Huniewicz via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

After passing through the entrance, you then enter a vestibule that allows you to either enter the mosque or other areas of the complex (see Figure **15.3.12**). Entering the mosque, you are confronted with the vast and grand open paved courtyard with four large iwans facing onto it and a large domed ablution fountain in the center.

The main or *qibla* iwan



Figure **15.3.13**: Qibla iwan, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Mustafa Shorbaji via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure **15.3.14**: Taq-i Kisra, Ctesiphon, Iraq, 3rd–6th century. (Photo: Hassan Majed via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

According to contemporary chroniclers, Sultan Hasan ordered the main iwan with the *qibla* (a wall indicating the direction of Mecca) to be "five cubits wider" than the greatest known arch in the world at the time: the famous Sasanian Taq-i Kisra in Ctesiphon from centuries earlier. (see Figure **15.3.14**) While the arch was not, in fact, bigger, this detail reveals something about Sultan Hasan's global ambitions.

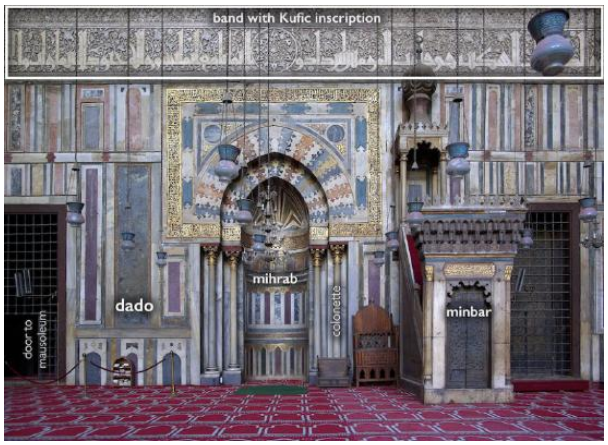


Figure **15.3.15**: Qibla wall in an iwan, labeled with dado, mihrab, band with Kufic inscription, and minbar, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Berthold Werner via Smarthistory, CC BY 3.0)

The main iwan is by far the most elaborately decorated due to its association with Mecca (see Figures **15.3.13** and **15.3.15**). The *qibla* wall within it is articulated with a rich marble paneled dado, and a large and unique stucco text band in Kufic letters above that wraps around the entire iwan.

The mihrab niche (also indicating the direction of Mecca) is given special treatment with a pointed arch, stone *ablaq* (alternating color stone), and is flanked by Gothic style colonettes, which were included due to exchanges with the Crusader kingdoms in and around Jerusalem. On either side are doors (one original bronze remains) that lead into the mausoleum directly behind the qibla wall. There is also a marble minbar (pulpit with steps) from which the sermon would be preached.

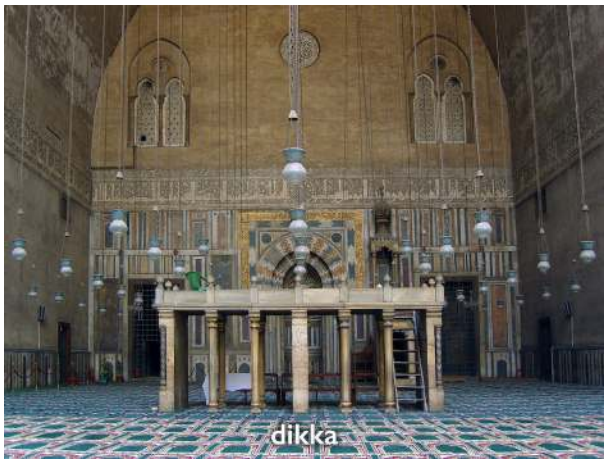


Figure 15.3.16: Dikka in the qibla iwan, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Effeietsanders via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In front of the iwan, almost in the main courtyard area, stands the *dikka*—a large raised platform carved out of marble that allows individuals to loudly repeat the prayer so those in the back can hear it (see Figure 15.3.16). The iwans also had approximately 155 oil lamps hung from their ceilings at the same height above the ground, which, at night, would have illuminated the mosque in a magical way.

The mausoleum



Figure 15.3.17: Mausoleum, madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (Photo: Baldiri via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The mausoleum—Sultan Hasan's intended eternal resting place—is immediately behind the *qibla* wall with the mihrab, which represents a significant shift in planning and symbolism; this organization did not happen prior to the Mamluks. Placing a mausoleum directly behind the *qibla* wall has the—likely intended—result of hundreds of people praying in the direction of the tomb (see Figure 15.3.17). If that were not enough, the *waqf* actually stipulates that there would be 160 full-time *hafiz* (men who were tasked with reciting the Qur'an out loud) placed in the various deep window sills around the mausoleum reciting the Qur'an at all hours of the day such that passers-by are reminded of the sacred gifts the sultan bestowed on the city in the form of this religious complex.

Famed minarets



Figure 15.3.18: Minaret of the madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Egypt, 1356–1363/758–764 AH. (photo: Djehouty via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

On the exterior, an unprecedented four minarets were ordered for the complex including two flanking the portal and two flanking the dome on the outer corners of the mausoleum on the maydan, or public square (see Figure 15.3.18). Out of the four giant minarets, only three were constructed and two of those collapsed; the first while Sultan Hasan was still alive in 1361 killing roughly three hundred people, mostly children attending the *kuttab* (primary school). The collapse was seen as a bad omen and the sultan was murdered a month later. Another minaret collapsed in 1671 while the mosque was full of worshipers, but luckily it fell away from the crowd. The only original remaining minaret is on the south-east corner of the mausoleum and reaches a staggering height of approximately 84 meters above street level.

The minarets of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan are famous for initiating the famous three-tiered minarets—a signature of Mamluk religious architecture—for which the city of Cairo is famous. In the Sultan Hassan mosque, the first several stories of the surviving minaret are integrated into the wall of the complex. Above that the minaret's base is square until, further up it transitions into an octagon with small balconies on every other face. A larger balcony with muqarnas separates the middle tier, which is also octagonal, but significantly truncated and without decoration. The top balcony is articulated with muqarnas, upon which an open colonnade pavilion is capped with another ring of muqarnas that transitions to a tapered stone bulb. This example was to be emulated and refined throughout the rest of the Mamluk period, forever defining Cairo's iconic skyline.

World famous mosque

Although Sultan Hassan was murdered by one of his own Mamluks, construction of the mosque continued after the Sultan's death, but was never completed. His body was never recovered nor entombed in this mosque. During his short reign, he managed to restore the mosque of al-Hakim in Cairo and monuments in Mecca, establish a madrasa in Jerusalem, build a lavish palace in the citadel in Cairo, construct a mausoleum for his wife and one for his mother, build several *sabil-kuttabs* (school and water dispensary), and founded one of the most famous mosques in the world. Clearly, architecture was a way he could express his ambitions. The building remains one of the most ingeniously designed mosques in the history of Islamic architecture; no other Mamluk monument displays as many innovations as this single building.

Notes:

1. Khalil al Zahiri (born c. 1410): "Elle n'a pas de pareille au monde," quoted from Max Herz, *La mosquée du sultan Hassan au Caire* (Cairo, 1899)
2. The *sail-kuttab* (fountain and school for boys) was built, but it was destroyed when the minaret fell on it in 1361 killing many of the children. The accommodations for the physicians (and 10 medical students) was stipulated in the waqf and its location

was specified as occupying an upper floor behind the entry way—but this area is now ruined and we do not know for certain whether it was built and destroyed, or never built at all.

Articles in this section:

- Glenna Barlow, "Arts of the Islamic world: The medieval period," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Mohammed ibn al-Zain, Basin (*Baptistère de Saint Louis*)," in *Smarthistory*, December 15, 2015 [transcript] (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Christian A. Hedrick , "Madrasa and Friday Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo," in *Smarthistory*, November 18, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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15.4: Late Byzantine

Late Byzantine church architecture

by Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout



Figure **15.4.1**: Map showing major centers in the Late Byzantine period. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

Constantinople reclaimed

In 1204, crusaders of the Fourth Crusade sacked and occupied the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, beginning the period of the Latin Empire (the Byzantines referred to western Europeans—faithful to the pope of Rome—as "Latins" or "Franks" during this period). But in 1261, the Empire of Nicaea, a Byzantine successor state, retook Constantinople and crowned Michael VIII Palaiologos as their new emperor, ending the period of the Latin Empire (see Figure **15.4.2**).



Figure **15.4.2**: Deësis mosaic, probably installed by Michael VIII Palaiologos after retaking Constantinople from the Latins, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1261. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Figure 15.4.3: Pantokrator monastery (Zeyrek Mosque), Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1118-36. (view plan) (Photo: Dismas87 via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The "Palaiologan Renaissance" in Constantinople

In Constantinople, church architecture was revived after the reconquest of the city in 1261. Most constructions represent additions to existing monastic churches, probably following the model of the triple church at the Pantokrator monastery (read more about the Pantokrator monastery; see Figure 15.4.3).

In all, there is little attempt at visual integration (see Figure 15.4.4). An impressive funeral chapel as a setting for privileged burials was a standard feature, along with additional narthexes or ambulatories, equipped for burials. The building complexes are distinguished by an irregular row of apses along the east façade, topped by an asymmetrical array of domes. The parts read individually, with a marked contrast between the Middle and Late Byzantine forms.

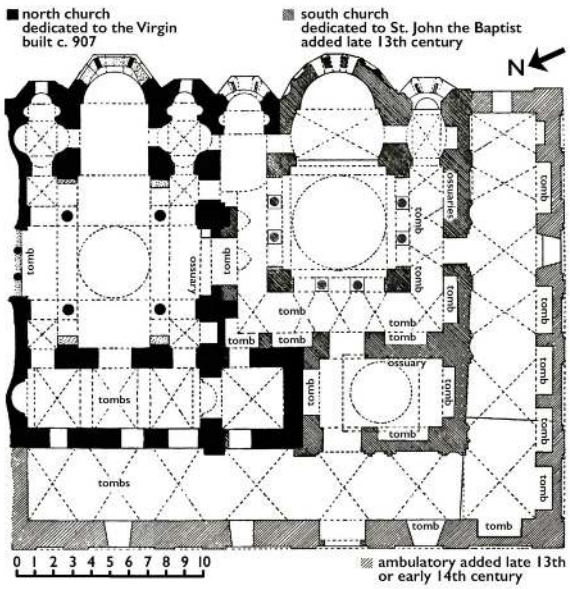


Figure 15.4.4: Plan of Mone tou Libos (Fenari İsa Mosque) with tomb locations. (Image adapted from Millingen, *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople*, via Smarthistory)



Figure 15.4.5: Sarcophagi under the narthex of the North Church in 1937, Mone tou Libos. (Nicholas V. Artamonoff, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Mone tou Libos

The monastic complex known as Mone tou Libos (first established c. 907; see Figure 15.4.3\6), for which the typikon survives, was expanded c. 1282-1303 by the widow of Michael VIII with the addition of an ambulatory-planned church equipped with arcosolia, where the early members of the Palaiologos imperial family were buried.

In a second, closely related building campaign, an outer ambulatory was added along the south and west of the complex, with numerous additional arcosolia tombs.



Figure 15.4.6: Mone tou Libos (Fenari İsa Mosque), Constantinople (Istanbul). (Photo: Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks, CC0 1.0)



Figure 15.4.7: Pammakaristos church, Constantinople (Istanbul), 12th century, parekklesion added c. 1310. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

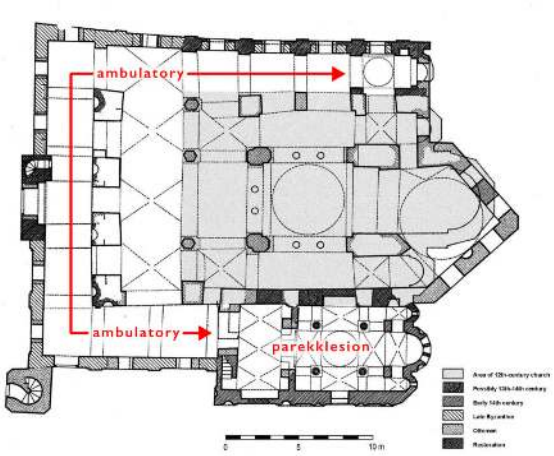


Figure 15.4.8: Theotokos Pammakaristos church, Constantinople (Istanbul), 12th century, parekklesion added c. 1310. (Image adapted from plan © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

The Theotokos Pammakaristos

At the Theotokos Pammakaristos, a twelfth-century ambulatory-plan church was expanded in several stages, with chapels, a belfry, and an outer ambulatory (see Figures 15.4.7 and 15.4.8).

Most important is the south parekklesion, a tiny but ornate cross-in-square chapel, built c. 1310 to house the tomb of Michael Glabas Tarchaniotes (see Figure 15.4.9).



Figure 15.4.9: Parekklesion, Pammakaristos church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1310. (Photo: fusion-of-horizons, CC BY 2.0)

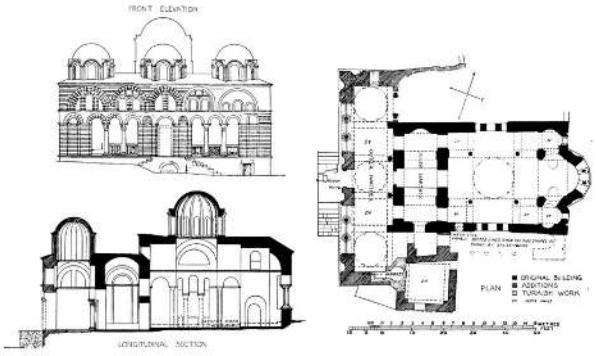


Figure 15.4.10: Vefa Kilise Mosque, Middle Byzantine with Late Byzantine additions, Constantinople (Istanbul). (Image adapted from Millingen, *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople*, via Smarthistory)

Vefa Kilise Mosque

The building now known as the Vefa Kilise Mosque was also expanded in several phases, with the addition of a two-stored annex, a belfry, and a three-domed, porticoed exonarthex with burial vaults beneath its floor.



Figure 15.4.11: Mosaic of Theodore Metochites offering the Chora church to Christ, Chora monastery, Constantinople (Istanbul) c. 1315-21. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The Chora Monastery

Of the Palaiologan monuments in Constantinople, the most important to survive is the Chora Monastery, where the additions uniquely represent a single phase of construction.



Figure 15.4.12: Section and plan of the Chora Monastery (Kariye Mosque), reused portions of twelfth-century naos highlighted. (view annotated plan) (Image © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)



Figure 15.4.13: Chora Monastery (Kariye Mosque) seen from the southeast. (Image © Robert Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

Restored and lavishly decorated by the statesman and scholar Theodore Metochites c. 1316-21, the twelfth-century naos was enveloped with a two-storied annex to the north, two broad narthexes to the west—the inner topped by two domes, the outer opened by a portico façade, and a domed funeral chapel or parekklesion to the south, with a belfry at the southwest corner.



Figure 15.4.14: Interior of the parekklesion funeral chapel (decorated with frescos) with arched tombs visible in the side walls. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

In all of the Palaiologan complexes, complexity is more important than monumentality in the visual expression, and the new portions may be understood as a response to history, an attempt to establish a symbolic relationship with the past. By 1330, however, the short-lived “Palaiologan Renaissance” had ended in the capital, at least in terms of major church construction.



Figure 15.4.15: H. Panteleimon, Thessaloniki, Greece, late 13th or early 14th century. (Photo: Mister No, CC BY 3.0)

Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki also saw the construction of numerous churches in the Late Byzantine period.



Figure 15.4.16: H. Aikaterini, Thessaloniki, Greece, late 13th or early 14th century. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)

Ambulatory-plan churches

At H. Panteleimon, H. Aikaterini, and H. Apostoloi, all late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in date, an attenuated cross-in-square core was enveloped by a pi-shaped ambulatory.



Figure 15.4.17: H. Apostoloi, Thessaloniki, Greece, late 13th or early 14th century. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)

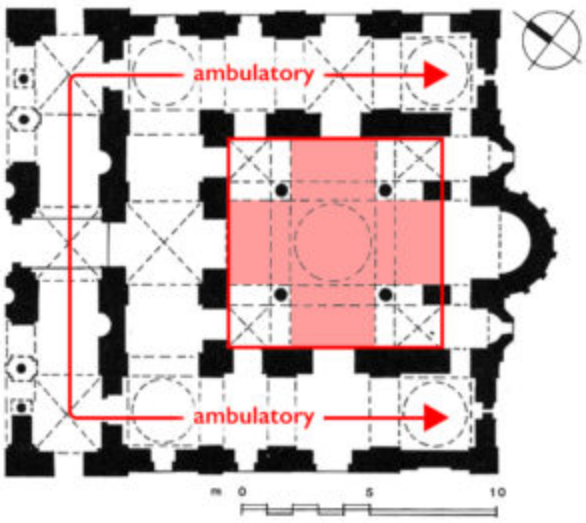


Figure 15.4.18: Plan of the church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, highlighting ambulatory and cross-in-square elements. (Image via Smarthistory)

Topped by multiple domes and opened by porticoes, the auxiliary spaces included subsidiary chapels.

Although their counterparts in Constantinople clearly served for burials, the functions of the ambulatory in Thessaloniki are less evident. Several simpler, unvaulted churches survive from the same period.



Figure **15.4.19**: Profitis Elias, exterior (left) and view of north choros (right), Thessaloniki, Greece, c. 1360. (Left photo: Herbert Frank, CC BY 2.0; right photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Profitis Elias

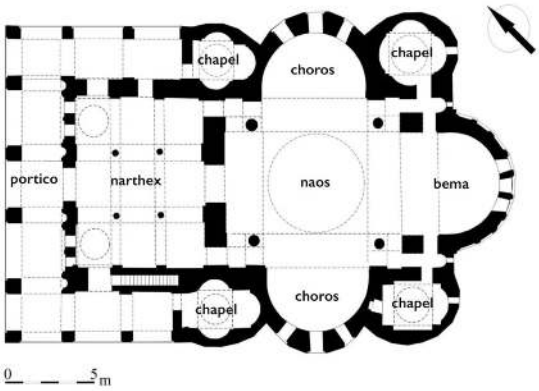


Figure **15.4.20**: Annotated plan of Profitis Elias, Thessaloniki. (Adapted from plan: Archaeology Wiki, © Archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City, via Smarthistory)

The Profitis Elias, built c. 1360 on an Athonite plan (with *choroi* and subsidiary chapels), demonstrates the enduring vitality of architecture in the city.

Mystras

Mystras (in the Peloponnese in Greece) emerged as a major Byzantine political center with the expulsion of the Latins in the mid-thirteenth century (following their occupation of the region since the time of the Fourth Crusade).



Figure 15.4.21: Hodegetria church, Brontochion monastery, Mystras, Greece, c. 1310-22. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)



Figure 15.4.22: Hodegetria church, Brontochion monastery, Mystras, Greece, c. 1310-22. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)

Hodegetria Church at Brontochion Monastery

Several churches of the so-called “Mystras type” (named for their location in Mystras, Greece) combine a basilican ground plan with a cross-in-square, five-domed gallery, the whole enveloped by porticoes, a belfry, and additional subsidiary spaces.

The Hodegetria (or Aphentiko) church at the Brontochion monastery, built c. 1310-22, betrays evidence of an ad hoc creation, begun as a simple cross-in-square church.

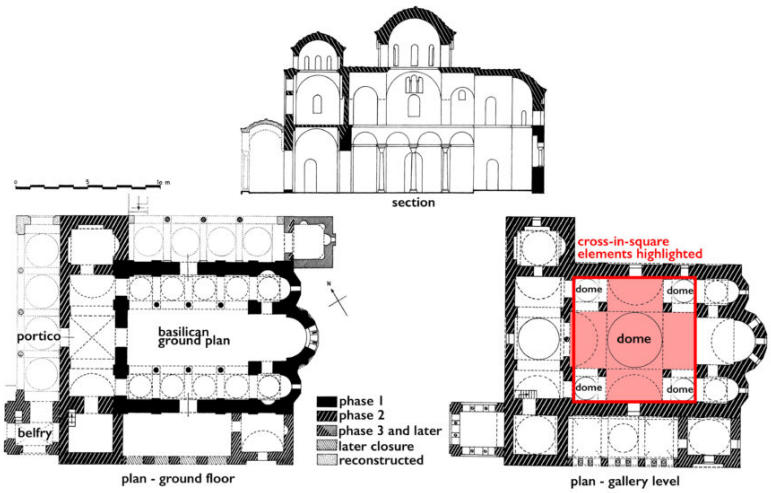


Figure **15.4.23**: Hodegetria church, Brontochion monastery. (Image adapted from Hallensleben, "Untersuchungen zur Genesis und Typologie des 'Mistratypus,'" via Smarthistory)

Pantanassa monastery

The type is repeated as late as 1428 in the church of the Pantanassa monastery.



Figure **15.4.24**: Pantanassa monastery, Mystras, Greece, 1428. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)

Churches of the octagon-domed church and cross-in-square types were also constructed in this period (read more about octagon-domed churches). Architectural detailing suggests close connections with both Constantinople and Italy.



Figure **15.4.25**: Pantokrator church, mid-14th century Nesebar, Bulgaria. (Photo: Chrumps, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Bulgaria

Perhaps most significant in this period is the emergence of neighboring powers as creative centers of architecture. Bulgaria remained closest to Byzantium in its architectural developments.



Figure 15.4.26: Sv. Ivan Aliturgetos, mid-14th century, Nesebar, Bulgaria. (Photo: MrPanyGoff, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure 15.4.27: Detail of east façade, Pantokrator church, Nesebar. (Photo: Wizzard, CC0 1.0)

The Pantokrator and Sv. Ivan Aliturgetos at Nesebar

Although more robust in terms of their surface decoration, the late churches of Nesebar, for example, follow the construction techniques and façade ornamentation of Constantinople. The coastal town passed repeatedly between Byzantine and Bulgarian control.

The churches of the Pantokrator and Sv. Ivan Aliturgetos date to the mid-fourteenth century and are most distinctive for their colorful exteriors, combining brick and stone decoration with glazed ceramic disks and rosettes.



Figure 15.4.28: Sopoćani Monastery, Serbia, c. 1265. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Serbia

Medieval Serbia experienced some western European influence from the Dalmatian coast in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (as at Sopoćani, c. 1265), but as close ties and political rivalry with Byzantium developed in the fourteenth century, Serbian architecture generally followed Byzantine developments, importing both ideas and masons.



Figure 15.4.29: Gračanica Monastery, Gračanica (modern Kosovo), before 1321. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Figure 15.4.30: Inside Gračanica Monastery. (Photo: Julian Nyča, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Gračanica Monastery

In many ways, king Milutin's church at Gračanica, built before 1321, represents the culmination of Late Byzantine architectural design. Integrating a highly attenuated cross-in-square naos with a pi-shaped ambulatory, the whole is topped by five domes. With simplified façade arcading and a pyramidal massing of forms, the building exhibits an external clarity that belies its complexity.



Figure 15.4.31: Lesnovo Monastery, Lesnovo (modern North Macedonia), 1341-47. (Photo: Tosee, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Lesnovo

The reigns of both Milutin and Stefan Dušan witnessed a great deal of construction, often similar to developments in northern Greece. The monastic church at Lesnovo (in modern North Macedonia) built 1341-47, for example, is a grand cross-in-square church with a domed narthex. It would not seem out of place in Late Byzantine Thessalonike in its scale, construction technique, or style.



Figure 15.4.32: Ravanica Monastery, Serbia, 1370s. (Photo: Petar Milošević, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ravanica Monastery

Later architecture in Serbia, notably that of the so-called Morava School, is smaller and more decorative, often utilizing the so-called Athonite plan (with *choroi* and subsidiary chapels), as at Ravanica (1370s), with five domes, or the smaller and simpler Kalenić (after 1407).



Figure **15.4.33**: Kalenić Monastery, Serbia, after 1407. (Photo: Ванилица, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Romania

Romania represents a latecomer to the scene. Wallachia (a historical region in southeastern Romania), liberated from Hungary in 1330, came under the influence of Serbian architecture, while Moldavia (a historical region in northeastern Romania), liberated in 1365, shows a greater originality.



Figure **15.4.34**: Voroneț Monastery, Moldavia (modern Romania), c. 1488. (Photo: Eugen Naiman, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Figure **15.4.35**: Detail of frescos on exterior of Sucevița Monastery church. (Photo: Alex Berger, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Fifteenth-century churches like that at Voroneţ, built c. 1488, or Suceviţa, built c. 1485, have steeply pitched, heavy overhanging roofs and a diminished dome above a triconch plan, the walls entirely frescoed on the exterior. The origin of this distinctively hybrid architecture is unclear.



Figure **15.4.36**: Suceviţa Monastery, Moldavia (modern Romania), 1485. (Photo: Ava Babili, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Russia

Russia was destabilized in the thirteenth century by the invasion of the Mongols, with the notable exceptions of Novgorod and Pskov, where medieval churches survive from the twelfth century onward.



Figure **15.4.37**: Saviour-on-the-Ilyina-Street, Novgorod, Russia, 1374. (Photo: Ludvig14, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure 15.4.38: Dormition Cathedral, Zvenigorod, c. 1399. (Photo: Sergey Ashmarin, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In Novgorod, churches like the Saviour-on-the-Ilyina-Street (1374), are steep-roofed and roughly built. As Russia recovered from the Mongol invasions, Muscovy developed its own distinctive architecture, first seen perhaps in the Dormition Cathedral in Zvenigorod (c. 1399). Moscow emerged as the most important center, and following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, it assumed the role of spiritual leader of the Orthodox world.



Figure 15.4.39: Aristotele Fioravanti, Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin, Moscow, 1475-79. (Photo: Don-vip, CC BY-SA 4.0)

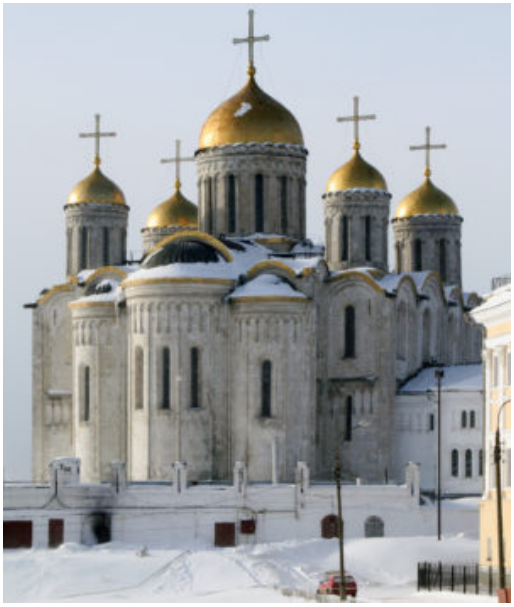


Figure **15.4.40**: Cathedral of the Dormition, Vladimir, 1158-60, expanded 1185-89. (Photo: Булатов Даниил, CC0 1.0)

In the late fifteenth century, a new architectural impetus arrived from Italy, in the form of imported Italian architects.

The Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin, constructed 1475-79 under the direction of Aristotele Fioravanti, combined details derived from the Cathedral of Vladimir with an Italian Renaissance modular plan, topped by five domes; it became the coronation church.



Figure **15.4.41**: Interior of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, Moscow, 1484-89. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Cathedrals of the Annunciation and of the Archangel were added to the Kremlin shortly thereafter.



Figure 15.4.42: Cathedrals of the Annunciation (let) and the Archangel Michael (right). (Photo: Jorge Láscar, CC BY 2.0)

Anatolia

With the defeat at Manzikirt in 1071, much of Anatolia passed into the control of the Seljuqs and other Turkic beyliks, but this does not mark the end of Christian architecture in the region.



Figure 15.4.43: Tatlarin Kilisesis, Church A, north nave, Cappadocia (modern Turkey), 13th century. (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

In the thirteenth century, there is evidence of rock-cut architecture in the Christian communities of Cappadocia (in central Anatolia), as for example at Tatlarin, Gülşehir, and Belisırma.



Figure 15.4.44: Church of St. John (Karşı Kilise), Gülşehir, Cappadocia (modern Turkey). (Photo: Evan Freeman via Smarthistory, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

By the early fourteenth century, the Ottomans emerged as the dominant power in northwest Anatolia, and by the 1320s–1330s, the former nomads were actively building, and in a manner technically and stylistically following local, Byzantine practices, although plans and vaulting forms may be more closely aligned with the architecture of the Seljuqs.



Figure **15.4.45**: Orhan Mosque, Bursa, late 1330s. (Photo: Adbar, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **15.4.46**: Church of the Pantobasilissa, Trilye, late 1330s. (Photo: © The Byzantine Legacy, via Smarthistory)

The Orhan Mosque in Bursa of the late 1330s corresponds closely to contemporaneous works of Byzantine architecture in its mixed brick and stone wall construction and its decorative details.

Many of the same features appear at the church of the Pantobasilissa in nearby Trilye, also from the late 1330s, suggesting that the same workshops were constructing both churches and mosques. At Bursa, the first Ottoman capital (conquered in 1326), two Byzantine churches were appropriated for use as the mausolea of Osman and Orhan.

Monasteries

Monasticism follows Middle Byzantine models, as for example at Hilandar on Mount Athos, founded by Milutin c. 1303.



Figure **15.4.47**: Hilandar Monastery, Mount Athos. (Photo: Саша Шљукић, CC BY 3.0)

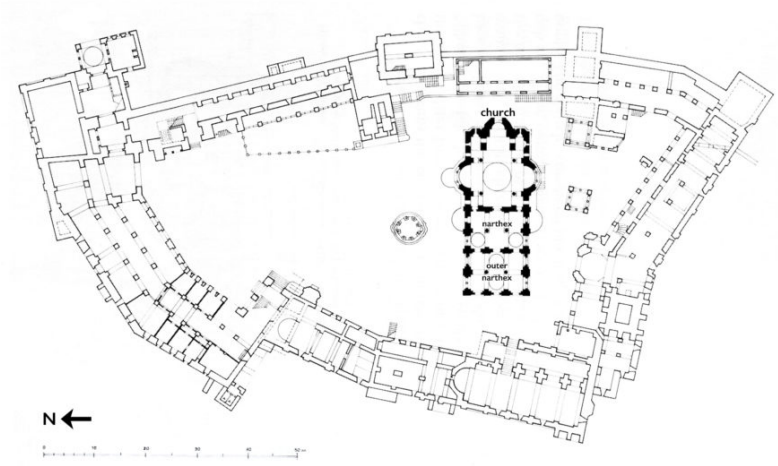


Figure 15.4.48: Plan of Hilandar Monastery. (Image adapted from plan in Ćurčić, “Hilandar Monastery: An Archive,” via Smarthistory)



Figure 15.4.49: Katholikon, Hilander Monastery, c. 1303, Mount Athos. (Photo: Zeljkokiss, CC0 1.0)

The freestanding, Athonite-plan katholikon included a large, twin-domed narthex or lite, subsequently expanded with a large, domed outer narthex in the latter part of the century. Both reflect the increased role of the narthex in monastic worship.

Fortified, with the monastic cells lining the wall, the monastery has its refectory set opposite the entrance to the katholikon, with a phiale or holy water font in the courtyard to one side. Similarly planned monasteries appear throughout the Balkans.

Byzantine miniature mosaics

by Dr. Evan Freeman



Figure **15.4.50**: Apse mosaic depicting the Virgin and Child, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), dedicated 867. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

For many of us, the term “mosaics” evokes the soaring golden walls and ceilings of the Eastern Roman “Byzantine” Empire. But from approximately the twelfth to the fourteenth century, the Byzantines also began creating mosaics that were portable and sometimes small enough to fit in the palm of the hand.

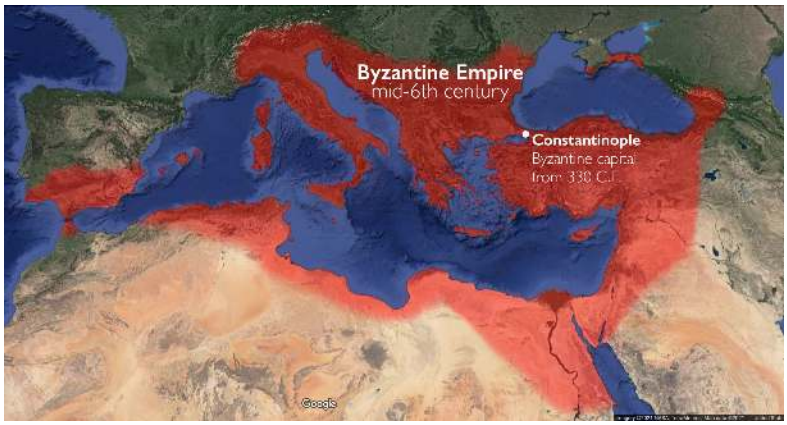


Figure **15.4.51**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire, mid-6th century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

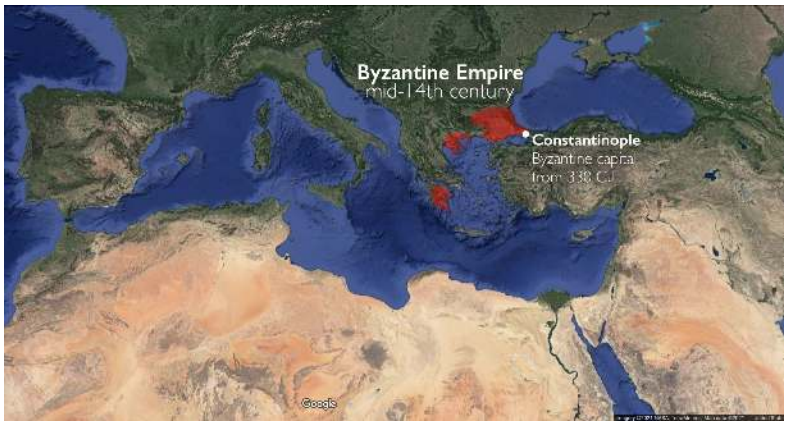


Figure **15.4.52**: Approximate boundaries of the Byzantine Empire, mid-14th century. (Underlying map © Google, via Smarthistory)

Historians often speak of the Late Byzantine period (1261–1453) as an age of “decline.” During this time, the Byzantine Empire—which was a continuation of the ancient Roman Empire—shrank until it was finally conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. But Byzantine miniature mosaics, which emerged as a new art form in the twilight of the Empire, show that even as Byzantium’s imperial prospects faltered, artistic creativity and patronage continued to flourish.



Figure 15.4.53: Floor mosaics, Baths of Neptune, Ostia, Italy, c. 139 CE. (Photo: Nicholas Hartmann, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Mosaics

A mosaic is an artwork made by combining small cubes (tesserae) of stone, glass, ceramic, or another material to create a pattern or image. The ancient Romans often used mosaics to decorate floors, as seen at the Baths of Neptune in Ostia. In some cases, ancient Roman mosaics utilized small, colored tesserae that enabled them to appear almost like paintings.

Later, the Byzantines frequently used mosaics to decorate the walls and ceilings of churches. Mosaics were the costliest form of monumental decoration in Byzantium, and were generally favored by imperial and other elite donors, as seen, for example, in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna and in Hagia Sophia, the cathedral in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, modern Istanbul (see Figure 15.4.54).



Figure 15.4.54: Mosaic of Christ (center) with emperor Constantine IX (left) and empress Zoe (right), Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), 1042-1055. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Miniature mosaics

From around the twelfth century to the fourteenth century, the Byzantines also began creating portable mosaic icons by setting small tesserae into wax or resin on wood panels, which were often enclosed in silver-gilt frames. These objects are sometimes referred to as “miniature mosaics” or “micro-mosaics.” While the Byzantines had long used mosaics for large scale images in buildings, this new use of mosaics to create smaller, portable images was innovative.

Since monumental mosaics were generally viewed from afar, individual tesserae tended to blend together in the vision of the beholder. But since miniature mosaics could be viewed up close, artists began employing tiny tesserae—often as small as 0.5–1 mm, or even smaller—to create a blended rather than a “pixilated” appearance. Such objects must have demanded considerable time and skill to create.

There is little evidence to indicate where or why miniature mosaic icons began to be produced when they did. Some scholars theorize that miniature mosaics may have initially emerged as a preparatory step in the production of monumental mosaics, which enabled artists to plan ahead what they would put on walls or ceilings. Because of the cost and skill that must have been required to produce them, miniature mosaic icons were likely created for imperial and other elite patrons by artists who produced luxury objects in Constantinople. Some fifty miniature mosaic icons survive—most of them from the Late Byzantine period—although many are badly damaged. Byzantine inventories suggest that more once existed, which have not survived.



Figure **15.4.55**: Mosaic icon of the Virgin Glykophilousa, Triglia in Bithynia, near Constantinople, late 13th century. 107 x 73.5 cm. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Larger mosaic icons, such as the thirteenth-century icon of the Virgin Glykophilousa in Athens, sometimes measured several feet tall (see Figure **15.4.55**). Their size suggests they may have been publicly displayed and venerated in churches. Some may have been installed on the templon barrier that divided the altar area from the rest of the church. Other mosaic icons, such as the early fourteenth-century icon of the Virgin Eleousa in New York, were small enough to be held in the palm of one hand (see Figure Runaway argument for \eatSpaces?). They would have been too small for public display and were likely used in private devotion.



Figure 15.4.56: Portable icon with the Virgin Eleousa, probably made in Constantinople, early 1300s. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0 1.0)

An Icon of Christ's Transfiguration

A mosaic icon of Christ's Transfiguration in the collection of the Louvre Museum in Paris offers an early example of the miniature mosaic technique, dating from c. 1200. Its miniature tesserae—made from gilded bronze, marble, lapis lazuli, and glass—measure between 0.5 mm and 1 mm on a side (about the diameter of a pencil lead; see Figures 15.4.57 and 15.4.59). Its owner(s) undoubtedly treasured this icon not only for its beauty and religious significance, but also as an object of great luxury. Based on its size, this icon may have been displayed in a church or used for private devotion.



Figure 15.4.57: Icon of the Transfiguration, Constantinople, beginning of the 13th century. Mosaic, 52 x 36 cm. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 15.4.58: Transfiguration Apse mosaic, the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt, 6th century. (Photo: Europa Nostra, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The icon depicts the Transfiguration as described in the New Testament—in Matthew 17:1–13, Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36—when Christ reveals his divinity to three of his apostles, Peter, James, and John. Christ and his apostles climb a mountain (identified by tradition as Mount Tabor). Suddenly, Christ is transformed, radiating brilliant, heavenly light. Moses and Elijah, prophets from the Hebrew Bible (what Christians refer to as the Old testament), appear on either side of Christ, and the voice of God from heaven identifies Jesus as his Son. The apostles fall down before Christ in fear. The white tesserae used to create Christ's garments and the mandorla of light that surrounds him, as well as the reflective, gilded tesserae used for the rays and background, must have helped evoke the divine light for Byzantine viewers. The composition closely corresponds with some of the earliest surviving images of the Transfiguration, such as the sixth-century mosaic in the apse of the basilica of the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai, Egypt (see Figure 15.4.58).



Figure 15.4.59: Portable Icon with the Virgin Eleousa, probably made in Constantinople, early 1300s. Miniature mosaic set in wax on wood panel, with gold, multicolored stones, and gilded copper, 11.2 x 8.6 x 1.3 cm. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0 1.0)



Figure 15.4.60: Virgin of Vladimir, 12th century with later repainting. Tempera on wood. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0)

Another miniature mosaic icon (see Figure 15.4.60) depicts the Virgin and Child rather than a narrative scene and is part of the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Created in the early 1300s, roughly a century after the Louvre's Transfiguration icon, the Met's miniature mosaic shows the Virgin *Eleousa* ("compassionate"), who tenderly holds the Christ child to her cheek. The Virgin Eleousa was one of many compositions of the Virgin and Child in Byzantium; its best-known example is probably the Virgin of Vladimir, which was transferred from Byzantium to Russia in the twelfth century, where it became well-known and widely imitated.

The miniature mosaic icon of the Virgin and Child at the Metropolitan is smaller than the Louvre's Transfiguration, measuring 11.2 x 8.6 cm, and likely functioned as a private devotional object. A fifteenth-century Latin inscription on the icon's back testifies to its preservation in western Europe following the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 (see Figure 15.4.61).



Figure 15.4.61: Latin inscription, portable icon with the Virgin Eleousa (reverse), probably made in Constantinople, early 1300s. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0 1.0)

An Icon of the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia

Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. preserves another fine example of Byzantine miniature mosaics, this time picturing an account of Christian martyrdom: the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia (see Figure **15.4.62**). The icon dates to the late thirteenth century, combines gold and multicolored stone tesserae set in wax on a wood panel, and has been somewhat damaged. The icon utilizes tiny tesserae measuring less than 0.5 mm, which must have made the production of this icon long and difficult, but which gives the image an almost painterly appearance.



Figure **15.4.62**: Miniature mosaic icon with the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia, Byzantine, 13th century. Stone and glass on wax and wood, 22 x 16 cm. (Photo © Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)

The image recounts the tale of forty Roman soldiers sentenced to die for their Christian faith by exposure in a frozen lake in Lesser Armenia around 320 CE. The artist has taken no shortcuts, rendering the figures in individual poses that convey their suffering. One man in the foreground collapses. Another, in the upper right, holds his hands to his face in distress. The soldiers' suffering is vindicated as the hand of God bestows crowns of martyrdom on the soldiers from a heavenly dome in the top of the mosaic.



Figure **15.4.63**: Miniature mosaic icon with the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia, Byzantine, 13th century. (Photo © Dumbarton Oaks, via Smarthistory)

Such miniature mosaic icons illustrate how the arts flourished in the final centuries of the Byzantine Empire. Although the medium of mosaics had been used to decorate buildings since ancient times, artists from the twelfth-century onward reimagined the medium to create small, portable icons that were nothing short of innovative.

Picturing salvation: Chora's brilliant Byzantine mosaics and frescoes

by Dr. Evan Freeman



Figure **15.4.64**: Christ Pantokrator mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An arresting, larger-than-life mosaic of Christ confronts viewers entering the Chora, a church that was once part of a monastery in the Eastern Roman "Byzantine" capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul). The bust-length Christ, who blesses viewers with his right hand and holds a jeweled Gospel book in his left hand, appears in the lunette above the door between the outer and inner narthex (view location in plan). Such depictions of Christ are commonly known as the "Pantokrator," which means "almighty." This mosaic is one of many well-preserved mosaics and frescoes in this church, which date to the fourteenth century.

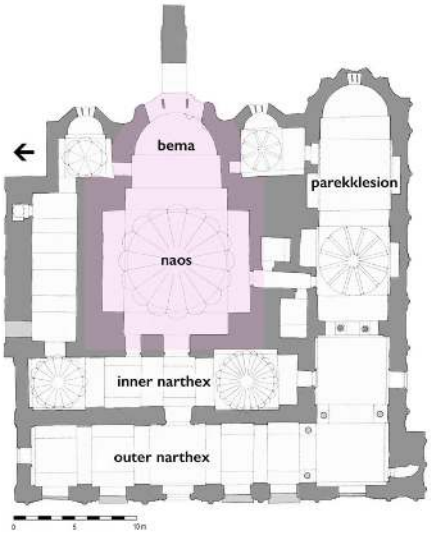


Figure **15.4.65**: Chora church plan with the reused portions of the older naos highlighted in pink. (Image: © Robert G. Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

Power and patronage

These mosaics and frescoes are the result of patronage by a wealthy intellectual and high-ranking official named Theodore Metochites, who restored the Chora c. 1316–1321, where he intended to be buried when he died. The early history of the Chora monastery is hazy, but the core of the current church was built in the twelfth century by Isaac Komnenos and fell into disrepair when Constantinople was sacked by western Europeans in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade.

About a century later, Metochites, a scholar of classical texts who donated his personal library to the Chora, held the position of *Mesazon*, or "prime minister," to emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, making him the second most powerful man in the empire. As *ktetor* ("founder," or in this case, re-founder) of the Chora, Metochites oversaw the restoration of the twelfth-century church as well as the addition of inner and outer narthexes and a subsidiary chapel, or *parekklesion*, which served as a funeral chapel. The Chora's

rich mosaics and frescoes—among the finest examples of Late Byzantine art—illustrate Theodore Metochites' ambition and his hope for salvation after death.

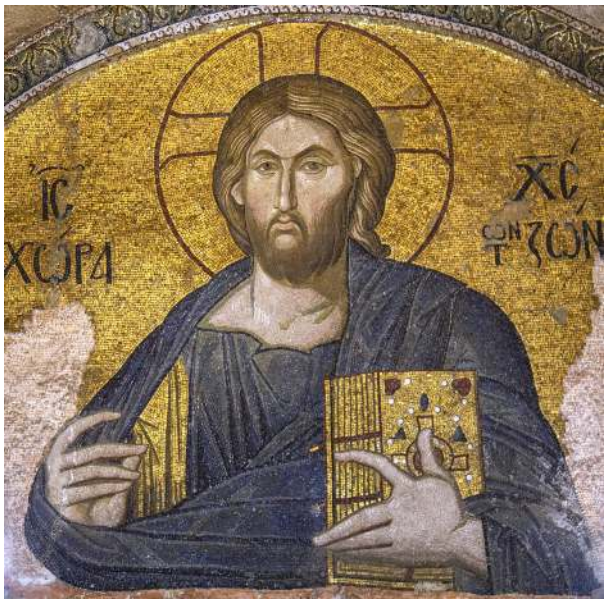


Figure **15.4.66**: Christ Pantokrator mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

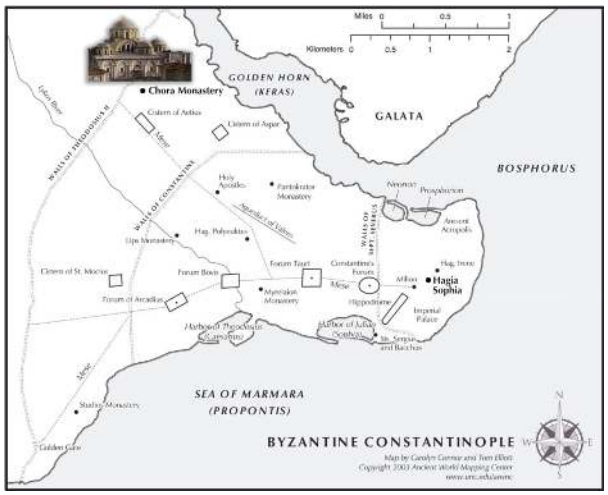


Figure **15.4.67**: Location of the Chora in the city of Constantinople. (Map: Carolyn Connor and Tom Elliot, Ancient World Mapping Center, CC BY-NC 3.0)

Jesus Christ, land of the living

Despite his seemingly stern gaze, the entrance mosaic of Christ Pantokrator is optimistically labeled "Jesus Christ, the land (*chora*) of the living," a play on the monastery's name, which likely originally referred to its location "in the country" outside of the city walls built by emperor Constantine. This phrase—"land of the living"—comes from Psalm 116:9: "I walk before the Lord in the land (*chora*) of the living." [1] The same text from Psalm 116:9 also appears in the Orthodox funeral service, which would have taken place in the Chora's funeral chapel. So, by labeling Christ "land of the living," Metochites put a spiritual spin on the Monastery's name while also expressing hope for eternal life within the church where he planned to be buried.



Figure 15.4.68: Virgin and Child mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Mother of God, container of the uncontainable

This mosaic of Christ faces a mosaic on the opposite wall, which pictures the Virgin with hands raised in prayer and the Christ child over her torso as if in her womb (view location in plan). The Virgin is labeled: "Mother of God, container (*chora*) of the uncontainable (*achoritou*)." This phrase, which describes the paradox that a human (Mary) could contain the Son of God (Jesus) in her womb, similarly references the monastery's name. Such prominent images of Christ and the Virgin in the Chora reflect their important role in the Christian story of salvation, as well as the fact that the Chora monastery and parekklesion were likely dedicated to the Virgin and the main church to Christ.



Figure 15.4.69: Theodore Metochites and Christ mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Donor image

Proceeding into the inner narthex, viewers encounter a mosaic of the patron himself, Theodore Metochites, in the lunette over the door to the main part of the church, or naos (view location in plan; see Figure 15.4.69). Christ sits on a jeweled throne against an expansive gold ground. Metochites kneels to Christ's right, dressed in extravagant garments and wearing a flamboyant, turban-like hat, the asymmetry of the composition emphasizing the interaction between the two figures. This mosaic suggests Theodore's high position within the empire but also his submission to Christ. As was common in medieval donation scenes, Metochites offers a model of the Chora—the very church in which this mosaic is located—to Christ.

Deësis

To the right, on the eastern wall of the inner narthex, a monumental Deësis mosaic shows the Virgin asking Christ to have mercy on the world (view location in plan; see Figure 15.4.70). Because of her important role as the Mother of God, the Byzantines viewed the Virgin as a powerful intercessor between Christ and the faithful. John the Baptist, often included in the Deësis, has been

omitted, probably to maximize the scale of the image within the space. Two past patrons of the Chora kneel on either side: Isaac Komnenos and a nun labeled “Melanie, the Lady of the Mongols,” who may be the daughter of emperor Michael VIII.



Figure **15.4.70**: Deësis mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Chora and Hagia Sophia

For Byzantine viewers, the image of Theodore Metochites would have called to mind two imperial images in Constantinople’s great cathedral, Hagia Sophia. Metochites’ gesture of donation evokes the tenth-century mosaic of Constantine and Justinian offering models of the city and Hagia Sophia to the Virgin and Child in the southwest vestibule. And Metochites’ kneeling gesture and position above the central door to the naos echoes the tenth-century mosaic of the prostrating emperor above Hagia Sophia’s “Imperial Door.”



Figure **15.4.71**: Left: Chora’s donor mosaic; top right: Hagia Sophia’s southwest vestibule mosaic; bottom right: Hagia Sophia’s Imperial Door mosaic. (Photos: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA)

The large scale of the Chora’s Deësis alludes to the monumental Deësis mosaic installed in Hagia Sophia’s south gallery—a section of the church reserved for imperial use—following the Latin crusaders’ occupation of Constantinople from 1204–1261. These visual echoes, or “intervisuality” between the Chora and Hagia Sophia, suggest Metochites’ desire to associate himself with Byzantium’s emperors, and his church with the capital’s cathedral, Hagia Sophia. [2]



Figure 15.4.72: Left: Chora's Deësis (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Hagia Sophia's Deësis (photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

Christ and the Virgin

Christ and the Virgin are the main subjects of the majority of the mosaics that fill the inner and outer narthexes. Narrative scenes from the lives of the Virgin and Christ adorn various architectural spaces, and often exhibit experimentation with figures and compositions.



Figure 15.4.73: Annunciation mosaic, inner narthex, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In a dynamic depiction of the Annunciation, the Virgin looks awkwardly over her shoulder as Gabriel approaches from above. The image responds to the triangular architectural surface in which it is situated, resulting in an unconventional, diagonal composition.



Figure 15.4.74: The Virgin with her parents, inner narthex, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316-1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An image of the Virgin Mary with her parents exhibits a remarkable intimacy and evokes everyday life. Such "everyday" images in the Chora challenge common generalizations about Byzantine art as distant, spiritualized, and otherworldly.



Figure 15.4.75: South pumpkin dome, inner narthex, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 15.4.76: Detail of north pumpkin dome, inner narthex, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The mosaics of the inner narthex culminate with two pumpkin domes (named for their fluted shape that resembles the undulating surface of a pumpkin) that display mosaics of Christ and the Virgin surrounded by their saintly ancestors from scripture (view location in plan).

Within the Chora, all human history seems to point toward these two figures and the pivotal role they play in the salvation of humankind.

The main church



Figure 15.4.77: Dormition mosaic, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: © thebyzantinelegacy, via Smarthistory)

Only three mosaics survive in the main church today. A mosaic of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary appears on the back western wall of the naos (see Figure 15.4.77). And pair of *proskynetaria* icons of Christ and the Virgin once flanked the templon (the barrier

between the sanctuary and naos, which no longer survives). These three images indicate that the emphasis on Christ and the Virgin that began in the narthexes continued in the main church where the Eucharist was celebrated.



Figure 15.4.78: Proskynetaria icons, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: © thebyzantinelegacy, via Smarthistory)

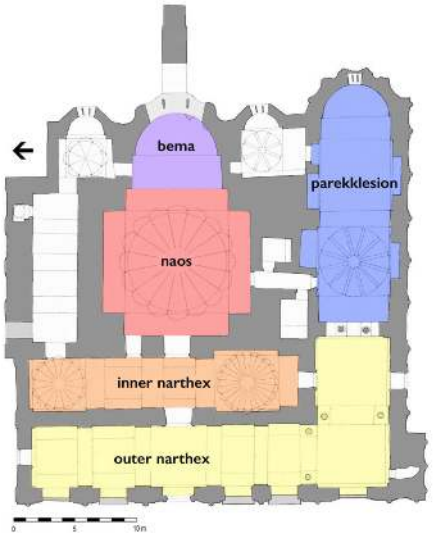


Figure 15.4.79: Chora church plan. (Image adapted from plan © Robert G. Ousterhout, via Smarthistory)

The Parekklesion

Better preserved are the frescoes in the parekklesion (side chapel), located to the south of the main church, which present a message of salvation that is fitting for this funeral chapel. Arcosolia (arched recesses for tombs) punctuate the walls and were intended for the burial of Metochites and his loved ones (view location of tombs in plan; see Figure 15.4.81).



Figure 15.4.80: Parekklesion dome, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 15.4.81: Soldier saints seem to guard the arcosolia, parekklesion, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

One enters the parekklesion beneath a dome decorated with frescoes of the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels (view location in plan). Hymnographers appear in the pendentives beneath the dome. Further below are scenes from the Old Testament, including Jacob's ladder, Jacob wrestling the angel, Moses and the burning bush, scenes with the Ark of the Covenant, and more, which were understood as "types" of Christ and the Virgin. In other words, the Byzantines believed these episodes from the Old Testament prefigured Christ's salvation of humankind. At ground level, soldier saints surround the tombs, brandishing their weapons like sacred guardians over the dead.



Figure **15.4.82**: Last Judgment fresco, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Judgment and Resurrection

Proceeding further into the parekklesion, the viewer passes under a sprawling image of the Last Judgment, sobering but also hopeful, since it depicts the damnation but also the salvation of souls (view location in plan; see Figure \(\PageIndex{382\)). The parekklesion frescoes culminate at the east end with images of resurrection, reflecting the Christian belief that God will raise the dead at the end of time.



Figure **15.4.83**: Anastasis fresco, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

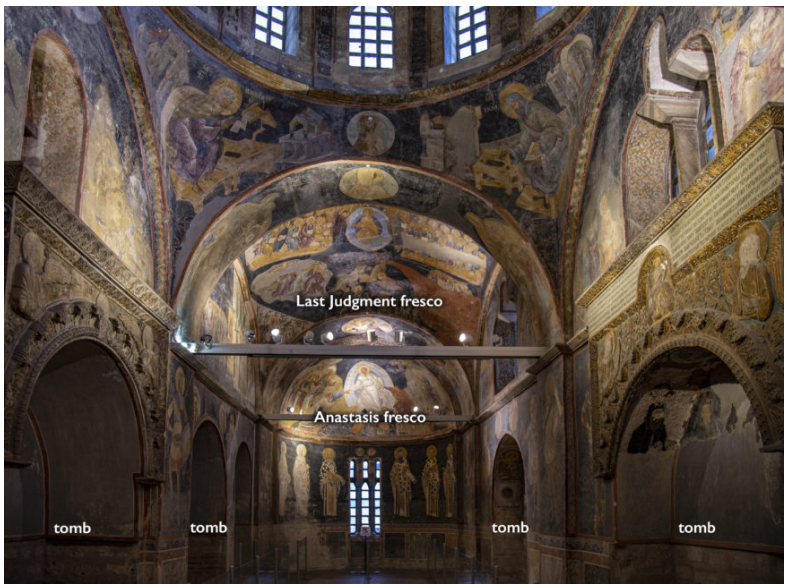


Figure **15.4.84**: Parekklesion, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The focal point of the parekklesion is the *Anastasis* (“resurrection”) fresco in the apse (view location in plan; see Figure **15.4.85**). The voluminous garments on the figures in this scene are a hallmark of Late Byzantine art. Drawn from non-biblical texts, the Anastasis visualizes Christ descending into Hades (the underworld) following his crucifixion to free human souls from the captivity of death. Christ’s death on the cross has paradoxically made him a victor over death, as described in the Orthodox hymn for Pascha (Easter): “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!” Clad entirely in white, Christ strides dynamically over the broken locks and doors of the underworld, and a personification of Hades lies bound and defeated at the bottom of the composition. Adam and Eve—the archetypal first humans responsible for bringing sin and death into the world—are forcefully pulled from their tombs by the risen Christ.



Figure **15.4.85**: Detail of Anastasis fresco, Chora church, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1316–1321. (Photo: byzantologist, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Hope for salvation

Despite his considerable learning and political ambition, Metochites remained mindful of his mortality as he rebuilt the Chora monastery. While his donor image clearly communicated his position and achievements to all who entered the church, the frescoes of the parekklesion speak to Metochites’ anticipation of God’s judgment and his hope for resurrection and eternal life in the *chora*, or land, of the living.

Notes

[1] The Byzantines used a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint. This passage appears in the Septuagint Psalm 114:9.

[2] Robert S. Nelson, “The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth-Century Constantinople,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999): 67–101.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Robert G. Ousterhout, "Late Byzantine church architecture," in *Smarthistory*, September 18, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Byzantine miniature mosaics," in *Smarthistory*, January 25, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Evan Freeman, "Picturing salvation — Chora’s brilliant Byzantine mosaics and frescoes," in *Smarthistory*, April 28, 2021 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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Christian Ethiopian art

by Dr. Jacopo Gnisci



Figure 15.5.1: Church of St. George, Lalibela, Amhara region, Ethiopia, c. 12th-13th century. (Photo: Rod Waddington, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ethiopia is a country in Africa with ancient Christian roots. It possesses a vigorous artistic tradition and is home to hundreds of old churches and monasteries perched at the top of hard-to-access mountains, hidden by lush vegetation, or surrounded by the tranquil waters of one of its lakes.

What is Christian Ethiopian art?

The introduction of Christian elements in art and the construction of churches in Ethiopia must have started shortly after the introduction of Christianity and continues to this day, since about half of the population are practicing Christians. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church claims that Christianity reached the country in the 1st century CE (thanks to the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch described in the Acts of the Apostles 8:26-38), while archaeological evidence suggests that Christianity spread after the conversion of the Ethiopian king Ezana during the first half of the 4th century CE.

The term “Christian Ethiopian art” therefore refers to a body of material evidence produced over a long period of time. It is a broad definition of spaces and artworks with an Orthodox Christian character that encompasses churches and their decorations as well as illuminated manuscripts and a range of objects (crosses, chalices, patens, icons, etc.) which were used for the liturgy (public worship), for learning, or which simply expressed the religious beliefs of their owners. We can infer that from the thirteenth century onwards works of art were for the most part produced by members of the Ethiopian clergy.

Periodization

Artworks from Ethiopia can and should be contextualized within the country’s historical development. Scholars still disagree on how to divide and classify the development of Christian Ethiopian art into chronological phases. In this essay, the development of Christian Ethiopian art is broadly divided into the eight periods listed below, but it must be kept in mind that the dates for the earlier periods are still debated and we have very limited evidence prior to the early Solomonic period (1270-1527).



Figure 15.5.2: View from Debre Damo, Ethiopia; the monastery is accessible only by rope up a sheer cliff. (Photo: Fabian Lambeck, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure 15.5.3: Map showing the Kingdom of Aksum, with cities Aksum and Adulis, in relation to Egypt and South Arabia. (Map via Smarthistory)

This period takes its name from the city of Aksum which had been the capital of Ethiopia for several centuries before the conversion to Christianity of King Ezana (who ruled from c. 320–360) and served as capital for several centuries after. While we cannot rule out the possibility that Christianity had been present in the country prior to the conversion of this ruler, it is only starting from this period that expressions of distinctly Christian beliefs appear in the material record.

A small number of Ethiopian churches, such as Debre Damo (Figure 15.5.2) and Degum, can be tentatively ascribed to the Aksumite period. These two structures probably date to the 6th century or later. Still standing pre-6th century Aksumite churches have not been confidently identified. However, archaeologists believe that a small number of now-ruined structures dating to the 4th or 5th century functioned as churches—a conclusion based on features such as their orientation. A large stepped podium in the compound of the church of Mary of Zion in Aksum (considered by the Ethiopians as the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant), probably once gave access to a large church built during this period.



Figure 15.5.4: Gold coin, Aksumite, Ethiopia, c. 270-300 CE. Obverse showing head and shoulders bust of King Endubis facing right, wearing headcloth with rays at forehead and triangular ribbon behind, framed by two wheat-stalks, disc and crescent at top. The British Museum, London. (Photo: The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Aksumite churches adopted the basilica plan. These churches were constructed using well-established local building techniques and their style reflects local traditions. Although very little art survives from the Aksumite period, recent radiocarbon analyses of two illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts known as the Garima Gospels suggest that these were produced respectively between the 4th-6th and 5th-7th centuries. Aksumite coins can also be looked at to gain insight into artistic conventions of the period (see Figure 15.5.4).

The Post-Askumite period (c. 8th/9th-12th centuries CE)

A number of factors contributed to the gradual impoverishment and decline of the Aksumite kingdom. The Arab expansion into Northern Africa cut off the kingdom's access to the Red-Sea waterway (and to the markets which could be reached through it and on which a large part of the kingdom's prosperity had been based). There is also evidence to suggest that some of the kingdom's natural resources, such as gold and ivory, had been depleted. Very little is known about this phase of Ethiopian history and scholars even disagree on the dates of its beginning and end.

The political center of Ethiopia seems to have gradually shifted to the southern and eastern parts of the Tigray region in the Post-Aksumite period. A few churches in these areas have been tentatively attributed to this period, but subsequent adaptations combined with the inability to obtain permissions to conduct archaeological surveys make dating difficult. It seems likely that churches continued to be built as well as hewn (cut) out of rock. A group of funerary hypogea, or underground chambers, in the Hawzien plain (in northern Ethiopia) may have been transformed into churches during the post-Aksumite period. This could be the case for churches such as Abreha-we-Atsbeha (Figure 15.5.5) and Tcherqos Wukro (the paintings in these churches probably date from a later period). According to local oral traditions, a small number of iron crosses date to the Aksumite or Post-Aksumite periods, but the absence of reliable dating methods and the fact that such crosses were produced at least until the sixteenth century, makes it extremely difficult to verify these claims.



Figure 15.5.5: Interior of the church of Abreha-we-Atsbeha, post-Aksumite Period(?), Tigray region, Ethiopia. (Photo: Jay Ramji, by permission, via Smarthistory)

The Zagwe period (c. 1140-1270 CE)

By the first half of the twelfth century, the center of power of the Christian Kingdom had shifted even further south, to the Lasta region (a historic district in north-central Ethiopia). From their capital Adeffa, members of the Zagwe dynasty (from whom this period takes its name), ruled over a realm which stretched from much of modern Eritrea to northern and central Ethiopia. While limited evidence about their capital exists, the churches of Lalibela—a town which takes its name from the Zagwe ruler credited with its founding—stand as a testament to the artistic achievements of this period (see Figure 15.5.1).



Figure 15.5.6: Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 12th-13th century. (Photo: A. Davey via Smarthistory, CC BY 2.0)

Lalibela includes twelve buildings destined for worship which, together with a network of linking corridors and chambers, are entirely carved or "hewn" out of living rock (see Figures 15.5.1 and 15.5.7). The tradition of hewing churches out of rock, already attested in the previous periods, is here taken to a whole new level. The churches, several of which are free-standing, such as Bete Gyorgis (Church of St. George, image at top of page), have more elaborate and well-defined façades. They include architectural elements inspired by buildings from the Aksumite Period. Furthermore, some, such as Bete Maryam, feature exquisite internal decorations (see Figure 15.5.6), which are also carved out of the rock, as well as wall paintings. The interiors of the churches blend Aksumite elements with more recent elements of Copto-Arabic derivation. In Bete Maryam, for example, the architectural elements—such as the hewn capitals and window frames—imitate Aksumite models (see Figure 15.5.7), whereas the paintings can be compared with those in the medieval Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea.



Figure 15.5.7: Left: exterior, Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 12th-13th century (photo: Bernard Gagnon via Smarthistory, CC BY-SA 3.0); right: interior, Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 13th century (Photo: A. Davey via Smarthistory, CC BY 2.0)

Several wooden altars survive from this period, some decorated with figures, together with numerous crosses, some of which are engraved. No illuminated manuscripts or icons from this period have been discovered thus far.

The Early Solomonic period (1270-1527)

By 1270, the last Zagwe ruler was overthrown by Yekunno Amlak, who claimed to descend from the kings of the Aksumite period and traced his lineage all the way back to the biblical union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. His descendants—the Solomonics—ruled Ethiopia until the third quarter of the twentieth century. For much of this period, the Solomonics did not have a fixed capital, but moved across the country according to the seasons and their needs.

The Solomonics were as active as patrons of the arts as their predecessors, and endowed churches with hundreds of precious gifts. Works of art were also donated to ecclesiastic centers by nobles and clergymen, as well as by individuals known from dedicatory inscriptions on the work they commissioned. The rock-cut church of Gannata Maryam, a few kilometers south-east of Lalibela, features an almost complete set of murals depicting saints, angels, and motifs inspired by the New Testament. The church also features a portrait of Yekunno Amlak. Numerous illuminated manuscripts, particularly Gospel books, were created between the late thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. A few dozen feature not just Canon Tables and portraits of the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), as in the earlier Garima Gospels, but also scenes from the Old and New Testaments.



Figure 15.5.8: *Annunciation, Ethiopien d'Abbadie 105*, fol. 5. (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, via Smarthistory)

By the turn of the fifteenth century other manuscripts, especially Psalters, are frequently illustrated and crosses are often embellished with depictions of saints and of the Virgin and Child (see Figure 15.5.8). The earliest surviving Ethiopian icons also date from this century (Figure 15.5.8) and *Diptych with Mary and Her Son*, discussed in the next section). Written sources suggest

that the Ethiopian Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob encouraged the use of panel paintings in church rituals. While other artistic mediums used during the fifteenth century are largely indebted to the art of the fourteenth century, the icons feature new iconographic motifs and the lines are more elegant and sinuous and the figures have less rigid poses.

The mid-Solomonic period (1527-1632)

After a period of relative stability in the fifteenth century, a sequence of events shook the Ethiopian kingdom to its foundations, bringing it to the brink of collapse. First, came an invasion from the neighboring Muslim Sultanate of Adal led by a general called Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi whose army pillaged and destroyed numerous churches and Christian works of art across the country between 1529 and 1543. Incursions by the Oromo people from the south throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries further strained the country's fragile structures. To make matters worse, the conversion to Catholicism of Emperor Susenyos in 1622 soon plunged the country into a civil war, for many of his subjects refused to adhere to the religious beliefs and liturgical practices that the Jesuit missionaries present in Ethiopia wanted to enforce. The conflict lasted until his abdication in favor of his son Fasilides in 1632.

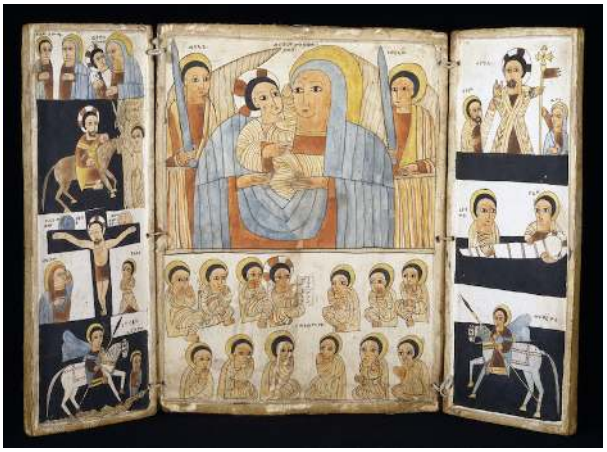


Figure **15.5.9**: *Triptych with Mary and Her Son, Archangels, Scenes from Life of Christ and Saints*, Ethiopia, early 16th century. Tempera on wood, 10-1/2 x 7-7/8 x 1-1/16 inches. (Photo: The Walters Art Museum, via Smarthistory)

This phase of Ethiopian art has been sometimes described as period of "transition" because artworks produced during the sixteenth century still include stylistic and iconographic elements that are typical of the fifteenth century, while foreshadowing developments which will take place in the second half of the seventeenth century. However, as such, this description of transition is applicable to most historical periods, and is therefore not particularly helpful. The art produced during the mid-Solomonic period reflects the difficult situation the country was in (see Figure **15.5.9**). The practice of decorating manuscripts with pictures and geometric motifs declined considerably, and few crosses and churches have been confidently attributed to the sixteenth century. Moreover, although numerous icons from this period have survived, these seldom achieve the linear elegance of painted panels from the fifteenth-century.

The Gondarine period (1632-1769)



Figure 15.5.10: Zämänfäs Qeddus (Scribe), *Archangels Michael and Gabriel*, late 17th century (Early Gondarine). Tempera and ink on parchment, 10 x 9 1/16 inches. (Photo: The Walters Art Museum, via Smarthistory)



Figure 15.5.11: May showing Gondar, in present-day Ethiopia, relative to Lake Tana, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. (Map via Smarthistory)

The ascent to the throne of Fasilides in 1632 marks the beginning of a period of renewed stability for Ethiopia and the Solomonic dynasty. Fasilides ordered a new a capital, Gondar, about 50 kilometers north of Lake Tana (the largest lake in Ethiopia). He and his successors funded the construction of palaces and banquet halls within the royal compound that still exist today and they promoted the building of churches near by and in the Lake Tana region. The adoption of a circular plan for the construction of churches becomes standard, as opposed to the longitudinal format of the basilica.

Scholars usually divide the Gondarine period into two stylistic phases. The first Gondarine style, is characterized by the use of bright colors and the absence of shading (see Figure 15.5.10). The clothing, often embellished with decorative elements, is usually painted in red, blue or yellow and the folds are indicating with simple parallel lines. The contour lines are well-defined and the modeling of the face is executed using a plain coral red resulting in an unnatural effect.

Works painted in the second Gondarine style (see Figure 15.5.12), which was developed roughly during the reign of Iyasu II (1730-1755), have darker shades of color; the contour lines become lighter and a more delicate use of shading confers volume to the bodies and faces of the figures. A number of new themes, many of which were inspired from books printed in Europe, appear during the eighteenth century and it becomes increasingly common to find depictions of donors and patrons. Numerous crosses (like this processional cross from The British Museum), decorated with depictions of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and saints were produced during the second part of the Gondarine period.



Figure **15.5.12**: *Adoration of the Magi*, from an illuminated manuscript, folio 27r. Vellum, tempera, and leather binding, 12 5/8 x 8 11/16 x 2 3/8 inches. (Photo: Princeton University Art Museum, via Smarthistory)

Zemene Mesafint period (1769-1855)

The period known as Zemene Mesafint, or the Era of Judges, begins with the deposition of Emperor Iyosas. This period, which lasted almost a century, saw a decline in the prestige, influence, and authority of the Solomonics, and witnessed the rise of a number of regional warlords who fought against each other for supremacy. This period has received less attention from historians, but seems to have been characterized by a decline in the production of art. Paintings from this period are strongly indebted to works executed during the second Gondarine style in terms of themes and forms, but the palette used by artists moves once again toward bright, plain colors.

The Late Solomonic period (1855-1974)



Figure **15.5.13**: *Emperor Menelik II, the Archangel Raguel, and a court writer*, c. 1889. Entoto Raguel Church, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (Photo: author, via Smarthistory)

The final historical period begins with the ascent to the throne of Tewodros II, who claimed Solomonic descent and ends with the deposition of Haile Selassie, the event that marks the end of Solomonic rule in Ethiopia.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, church painting continues to show indebtedness to the second Gondarine style, but contemporary figures and events are depicted next to religious subjects with an increasing frequency. Moreover, while patrons had occasionally been depicted from the Zagwe period onwards in an idealized manner, by the turn of the twentieth century they are portrayed more realistically, as can be seen by the painting of Emperor Menelik II (see Figure **15.5.13**) in the church of Entoto Raguel. After the Second World War, traditionally trained Ethiopian painters, such as Qes Adamu Tesfaw, continued to work

alongside artists influenced by modernism. The use of imported synthetic colors became increasingly common and by the 1960s icons and manuscripts were created, to a large extent, for the tourist market.

An Ethiopian icon

by Dr. Jacopo Gnisci



Figure 15.5.14: *Diptych with Mary and Her Son Flanked by Archangels, Apostles and a Saint*, Ethiopia, 15th century. Tempera on wood, left panel: 8 7/8 x 7 13/16 x 5/8 inches. (Photo: The Walters Art Museum, via Smarthistory)

The term icon is used to refer to a devotional image. It is typically painted on a flat wooden panel, although in Ethiopia, as in other traditions, materials such as metal or stone could also be used to produce this type of image. The earliest known Ethiopian icons have been dated to the fifteenth century and are generally painted with tempera on gesso-primed wooden panels. Ethiopian icons from this period typically portray the Virgin and Child, the Apostles, and Saint George.

The piece shown in Figure 15.5.14, which can be dated tentatively to the second half of the fifteenth century, features precisely such a combination of subjects. On the left panel, the Child touches his Mother's chin, a gesture of tenderness which appears more frequently in works from this period onwards. The central pair is flanked by two angels with unsheathed swords who act as their royal guard.

The right panel is decorated with portraits of the Apostles who turn their gaze in adoration towards the Virgin and Child. In the bottom right corner is a representation of Saint George on horseback. The names of several of the figures on the right panel have been written on the borders which divide the scene into registers. It is likely that inscriptions identifying the upper row of Apostles and the Virgin and Child were originally present on the upper frame of the two panels. Icons such as this were most likely created to encourage devotion towards the Virgin Mary in accordance with the wishes of the Ethiopian emperor Zarʾa Yaʿ əqob (who ruled from 1434–68) and would have been used in churches and in religious processions.

Images of African Kingship, Real and Imagined

by Dr. Kristen Collins and Dr. Bryan C. Keene

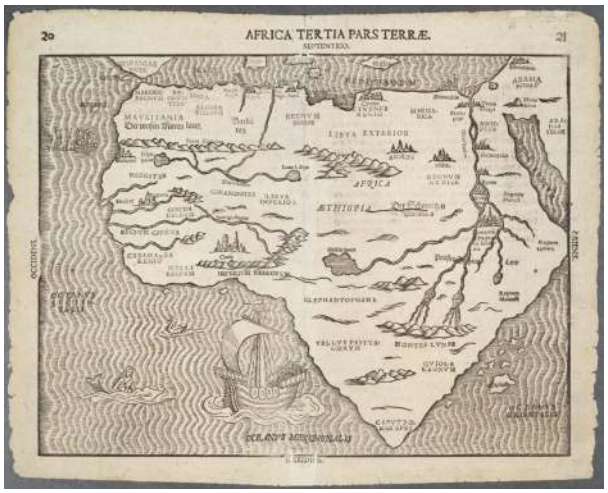


Figure **15.5.15**: Heinrich Bünting's Map of Africa from *Travel through Sacred Scripture*, Magdeburg, Germany, 1597. (Courtesy of Dr. Oscar I. Norwich Collection of Maps of Africa and its Islands, 1486-c.1865, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries, via Smarthistory)

The exhibition Balthazar: A Black African King in Medieval and Renaissance Art examines the figure of the Black king, an artistic invention arrived at by Europeans painting during the 1400s.

Nativity (or *crèche*) scenes from the Middle Ages to today often include three kings, or magi, bringing gifts to the infant Jesus. Often, these scenes include a Black king, sometimes referred to by the name Balthazar (his two traveling companions are known as Caspar and Melchior).

European Christian tradition often referred to Balthazar as coming from Africa, and maps from the time reveal a combination of fantasy, desire, and lived encounters with Africa and African people.

In 1597, German Protestant scholar and cartographer Heinrich Bünting designed a map of Africa marked by both real and imagined kingdoms. In West Africa, we encounter the realm of the Muslim king Mansa Musa of Mali, who was famous for wealth and piety.editerranean North Africa features numerous cultures, including kingdoms in Tunis and Egypt (visible on the map in Figure **15.5.15**). In East Africa, near the horn of the continent, we read the name of the legendary Christian king Prester John, who was said to reign in Ethiopia or India—reflecting Europeans' imprecise understanding of world geography at the time. Beginning in the 1440s, Portuguese sailors embarked on searches for Prester John and his mythical kingdom, violently enslaving non-Christian Black Africans along the way.

The mythical Prester John and images of Balthazar reveal European fantasies about Africa and the wealth of kingdoms there. Below we look at three rulers from premodern Africa, each of whom had a major impact on the politics, economy, religion, and culture of the time. We also wish to acknowledge the presence of free Africans living in Europe during this period.

The continent of Africa is vast and was home to more kingdoms than premodern Europeans imagined, and to more than we're exploring here. While histories of Afro-European contact have traditionally focused on the three faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Africa was home to many other literate and oral religions and traditions.

Mansa Musa: The Wealthiest Person in the History of the World



Figure 15.5.16: Mansa Musa and the Sahara Desert in the Catalan Atlas of Abraham Cresques, made in Majorca, Spain, 1375. (Photo: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Espagnol 30, fol. 5v., via Smarthistory)

The map of Africa, Europe, and Asia in Figure 15.5.16 was created by the Spanish Jewish cartographer Abraham Cresques. It contains a rare medieval depiction of Mansa Musa, who ruled the West African Mali Empire, a territory the covered parts of present-day Mauritania and Mali, from 1312 to 1337. Mansa Musa's holdings in gold were so great that to this day he is unsurpassed in personal wealth.

A pious Muslim who embraced charitable almsgiving as one of the five pillars of Islam, Mansa Musa made the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca with an entourage reportedly consisting of 60,000 subjects, 80 camels, and thousands of pounds of gold dust. His donations to the poor and diplomatic gifts along the way pumped so much gold into the economy of the Mediterranean that it devalued gold currency in the wealthy European mercantile cities such as Florence for decades.

The 14th-century Arab scholar Ibn Fadl Allah al-Umari lived in Cairo at the time and later reported on the ruler in his encyclopedia: "This man flooded Cairo with his gifts. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The people here profited greatly from him and from his entourage in buying, selling, giving, and taking. They traded gold until these lessened its value in Egypt, making its price fall…"

Sultan Qaitbay: Mediterranean Diplomacy with Muslim African Rulers



Figure 15.5.17: *Reception of a Venetian Delegation in Damascus*, Venice, Italy, 1511. Oil on canvas. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Italian artists from Florence to Venice traveled frequently throughout the Mediterranean to broker political, religious, and mercantile partnerships with their Muslim neighbors. One powerful individual in the 1400s was the Mamluk sultan of Egypt called Qaitbay, who reigned from 1468 to 1496.

An anonymous Venetian painter depicted a reception scene in Damascus, Syria, between Europeans and representatives of the sultan, whose escutcheon is emblazoned on the gates of the city in the painting (see Figure 15.5.17). "Glory to our Sultan, the master, the king of kings, the wise, the ruler, the just al-Ashraf Abu al-Nasr Qaitbay, the Sultan of Islam," reads the gilded inscription, proclaiming the sovereignty of Qaitbay. His dominions stretched from the Nile basin of the southeastern Mediterranean to Israel, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.



Figure **15.5.18**: Shirt of Mail and Plate of Qaitbay, probably Egyptian, about 1468–96. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain) Qaitbay built arcitectural monuments which are still destination sites for pilgrims and tourists.

Like Mansa Musa, Qaitay made a pilgrimage to Mecca and as an act of piety, he commissioned brass candlesticks for the shrine of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. Architectural monuments built under his reign are still major destinations for curious travelers and the faithful alike.

Qaitbay's diplomatic relationships included the wealthy Medici merchants in Florence, who received rare and valuable gifts from the Sultan. The most notorious gift that the sultan sent to the Tuscan city-state was a giraffe, which was memorialized in works of art, including a fresco of *The Adoration of the Magi* by Ghirlandaio in the church of Santa Maria Novella. The arrival of the giraffe with a retinue of Egyptian delegates may have evoked the pageantry of gift-giving reenacted in the annual magi processions in Florence, commemorated each January 6 on epiphany day.

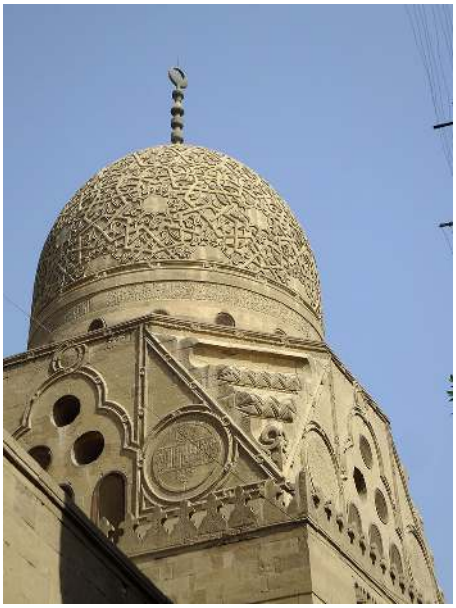


Figure **15.5.19**: Qaitbay's Mausoleum, Cairo, Egypt. (Photo: Casual Builder, CC BY-SA 3.0) Qaitbay's Mausoleum features intricate architectural details includeing relief work on the dome.

For Qaitbay, such relationships with the Italian courts could lead to financial and military support against their shared rival in the northeastern Mediterranean: the Ottoman Turks. European princes and popes also feared Ottoman expansion and thus maintained

ties with the Mamluks. Trade goods from Egypt—including metalwork, manuscripts (from Coptic Christian and Muslim communities), and glassware—had a great impact on European art at the time.

Zar'a Ya'eqob and the Medieval Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia

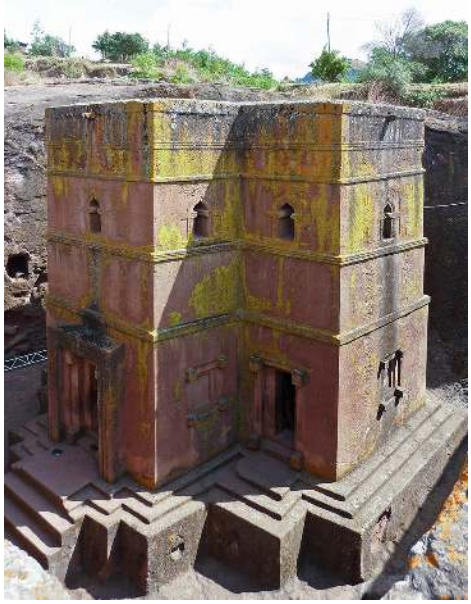


Figure **15.5.20**: Bete Giyorgis (Church of Saint George), Lalibela, Ethiopia. (Photo: Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ethiopia has a long history as a powerful Christian kingdom, as an empire, and later, as a nation. By the end of the third century, the four great powers of the ancient world were considered to be Rome, Persia, China, and the African kingdom of Axum—which occupied parts of present-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia.

The later kingdom of Ethiopia, an early adopter of Christianity, developed a vibrant artistic tradition that included rock-hewn churches (such as Lalibela, Figure **15.5.20**), illuminated manuscripts, and liturgical crosses (Figure **15.5.22**). In the 15th century, successive Ethiopian *nägäst* (rulers) sent church delegations to Italy in an attempt to forge alliances, both religious and military, with Rome.

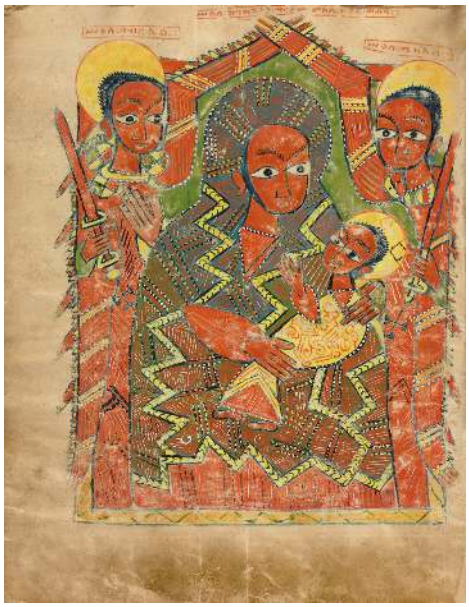


Figure **15.5.21**: The Virgin and Child with the Archangels Michael and Gabriel in a Gospel book, made in Ethiopia, probably Gunda Gunde, about 1504–5. (Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 102 (2008.15), fol. 19v, CC BY)

The 15th-century Ethiopian emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob was known for his strength and diplomacy. Zar'a Ya'eqob, who reigned from 1434 to 1468, resolved a major internal theological strife, a debate over the observance of the Sabbath (holy day of worship) that had been waged for over a century prior to his rule. It was also during his reign that the 1441 delegation joined the Council of Florence, one of the great church gatherings of that century. In Florence, his subjects were perplexed at Europeans' continued identification of Zar'a Ya'eqob with the legendary priest-king Prester John.



Figure **15.5.22**: Cross, Ethiopia, Zagwe or Solomonic dynasty, about 1200–1400. (Photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art via Smarthistory)

At home, Zar'a Ya'eqob reportedly had an honor guard that stood to either side of his throne, holding drawn swords. The opening image of a Gospel book made at the Gunda Gunde monastery shows the Virgin Mary and Christ child similarly flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel (see Figure **15.5.21**). The Ethiopian kingdom had been Christian since the fourth century, but Zar'a Ya'eqob had Muslim subjects as well. The emperor's wife, Eleni, was a Muslim convert and she continued to rule and exert significant influence after Zar'a Ya'eqob's death.

Servant or King? Constructing Balthazar



Figure **15.5.23**: Peter Paul Rubens, *Head Study for Balthazar*, about 1609–11. (Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, CC BY).

This study for Balthazar in Figure **15.5.23**) helped Peter Paul Rubens refine the figure of the king for a large painting of *The Adoration of the Magi*, commissioned by the town council of Antwerp, in Flanders, northern Belgium. The biblical story of three kings traveling from afar with gifts for the Christ child resonated in Catholic Antwerp, Rubens's home city and a center of international commerce. The cult of the magi so captured the imagination of local inhabitants that many children were named Balthazar, Melchior, or Caspar after the kings. This oil sketch was painted on repurposed ledger paper; the marks of mercantile transactions are visible through the figure's robe, face, and turban.

The immediacy and vibrancy of Rubens's figure, with his parted mouth and gaze directed to the side, suggest an individual captured in a moment of speech and motion. Was this depiction inspired by an actual person, and if so, whom?

Rubens often drew from life (a practice used by other artists, including Andrea Mantegna, whose *Adoration of the Magi* was featured in the exhibition together with the oil study). One of Rubens's patrons in Antwerp had Black African servants in his household, and Rubens made other studies using them as models. The Flemish city of Antwerp was a major center for the slave trade. Much research remains to be done on the status of forcibly Christianized Black Africans living there, specifically their positions and rights within domestic settings.



Figure **15.5.24**: Jan Cornelisa Vermeyen, *Mulay Ahmad*, about 1535–36. (Photo: Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, via Smarthistory)

We also know that Rubens used an earlier print of Mulay Ahmad, the Hafsid Muslim ruler of Tunis, as inspiration for other works, such as *The Three Magi Reunited* (see Figure **15.5.24**). The Tunisian turban in Rubens's head study casts the biblical character of Balthazar as a sixteenth-century North African king.



Figure 15.5.25: Peter Paul Rubens, *Mulay Ahmad*, about 1609. (Photo: Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, via Smarthistory)

Thus Rubens's Balthazar may be an amalgam of an unidentified sitter, likely a servant or enslaved person, and a nearly contemporary ruler. The artist's image speaks to the intersections of power, faith, and race in commercial Antwerp at the height of its global reach.

African Europeans in the Courts of Europe



Figure 15.5.26: Jan Jansz Mostaert, *Portrait of an African Man* (Christophle le More?), about 1525–30. (Photo: Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, via Smarthistory)

Europeans came to know African people in many different ways. While rulers made their way into the imagination of European artists, Africans living in Europe also became part of the art being produced at the time.

A significant number of Africans or members of the African diaspora in Europe occupied positions in the courts or noble households. Little documented, their histories can be guessed at from the evidence in archival documents and in art. *Portrait of an African Man* was long speculated to have been a painting of Christophle le More, a Black man, formerly a slave and groom, who went on to become an archer for the bodyguard of Emperor Charles V (see Figure 15.5.26).

This painting by Jan Jansz Mostaert has long been celebrated as the only surviving European portrait of a Black man during this early period. Unlike images of Balthazar or other biblical figures, he wears the attire of a Flemish courtier. Moreover, he does not appear as a member of an entourage, but in the context of an individualized portrait. Who was this man?

Unlike the institution of slavery that became codified in the Americas at the time, it was possible for enslaved people in Europe to gain their freedom and to possess social mobility, working in positions as disparate as the elite bodyguard of the Holy Roman Emperor or as gondoliers in Venice.

Recent research has discouraged the identification of this sitter with Christophle, which leaves us only with the frustrating hints provided by his costume, such as the pilgrimage badge in his cap (to Our Lady of Halle, near Brussels), his gloves appropriate for a court setting, or for the embroidered bag at his waist, perhaps a gift from a wealthy patron.

Although his identity is unknown, he nevertheless offers a potent reminder of the lived experiences of Africans in medieval and Renaissance Europe.

This essay first appeared in *the iris* (CC BY 4.0)

Global Connections: A German Sculpture of an Imagined African King



Figure **15.5.27**: African Magus, one of the Three Kings from an Adoration Group, before 1489. Maple, paint and gilt, 61 1/2 x 17 x 13 1/4." The Metropolitan Museum, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum, public domain)

This wooden sculpture in Figure **15.5.27** depicts one of the Magi [singular: Magus], or three kings who are said to have traveled from afar to visit the baby Jesus after his birth. Featured prominently in paintings and sculptures in the Middle Ages, such nativity scenes usually depict the three kings carrying gifts, and include one Black king, said to be from Africa and sometimes called Balthazar. This specific sculpture is from Swabia, a historic region of southwestern Germany.

As the preceding article notes, Europeans' ideas about Africa were shaped more by their own imaginings than actual interactions with people from the African continent. A sculpture like this one, then, can be studied to learn what German artists in the Middle Ages might have been considering and imagining in creating this image of an African king.

The Met Museum points out that “Trade routes, diplomatic excursions, and increased contact between Europe and Africa in the medieval period led to more images of people of African descent in art, particularly in scenes of this subject. The Magus’ elegant pose and contemporary attire are reminiscent of a medieval royal courtier. For its original audience, this figure represented an imagined African ruler and a reverent, wise man from a distant world.” This sculptural representation of the Magus blends traditions and artistic styles, revealing more about this German artist and artistic styles in Swabia than anything of Africa. As discussed in previous chapters (in discussions about Orientalism, for instance), Europeans often held inaccurate conceptions of cultures and people outside of themselves, including Africans. These misconceptions, stereotypes, and imaginings often correlated to later prejudices which were reinforced visually, via art. In cases such as with this king, it is

important for viewers to remember that the depiction with an elongated body, gestural stance, and distinctive clothing all reflect styles of the later Middle Ages in Germany.

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Jacopo Gnisci, "Christian Ethiopian art," in *Smarthistory*, December 22, 2016 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Jacopo Gnisci, "An Ethiopian icon," in *Smarthistory*, August 27, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Kristen Collins and Dr. Bryan C. Keene, "Images of African Kingship, Real and Imagined," in *Smarthistory*, June 27, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

16: Gothic Europe

In This Chapter

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16.0: Chapter Introduction

Introduction: Hope Ablaze, Notre Dame Cathedral on Fire

In the spring of 2019, the 850-year-old Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire. People all over the world watched, via news coverage, live streams, and social media, as hungry red flames engulfed the spire and roof of the cathedral. The iconic structure, renewed in the public imagination by Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1831, and popularized for a younger generation with the 1996 Disney film of the same title, was a recognizable global landmark. Even for those who had never been to Notre Dame, to Paris, or even to Europe, witnessing the destruction of the cathedral felt like a global, and even personal, loss.



Figure **16.0.1**: Notre Dame Cathedral on fire, April 15, 2019. Paris, France. (Photo: GodefroyParis, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Towering cathedrals like Notre Dame are the most recognizable legacy of what is today called the Gothic period. With their distinctively ornate and spiky decorations and their dizzying height (the first human-made structures since the pyramids to approach such elevation), they stand today as striking examples of human ingenuity and engineering. They soar heavenward despite being made, like their Romanesque predecessors, of heavy stone. Unlike those Romanesque churches which rested heavily on massive piers, though, Gothic cathedrals transfer that weight to the outside of the building so that the walls can enclose, and seem to dissolve into, characteristic stained glass. They also replaced wooden ceilings with stone vaulting, a deterrent to fire during a time when interiors were lit by torches. However, as the chapter points out, this turned out to be an imperfect solution/deterrent, as many Gothic cathedrals were indeed damaged by fire. In the case of the recent Notre Dame fire, it was the wooden scaffolding under the lead roof, as well as the wooden spire—a 19th century replacement for the 13th century original—that caught flame.

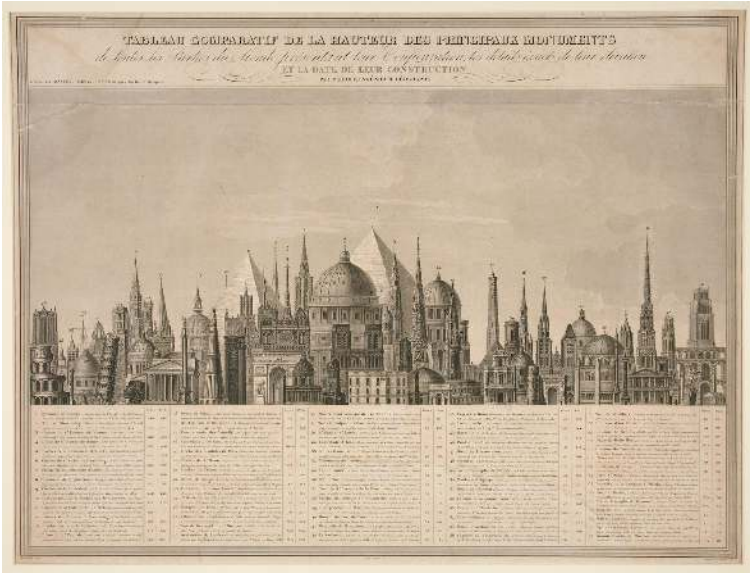


Figure **16.0.2**: Édouard Hocquart, after Antoine Marie Perrot. “Tableau comparatif de la Hauteur des Principaux Monuments,” 1826. Engraving with etching, 17 3/16 × 23 in. (Photo: Yale University Art Gallery, public domain). This illustration compares the heights of the tallest human-made structures in the world at that point, from the Great Pyramids of Giza to the Pantheon in Rome to the spires of Gothic cathedrals across Europe.

Despite its impressive engineering and fantastical silhouettes, Gothic architecture was not always beloved, and even the label “Gothic,” bestowed by the early art historian Giorgio Vasari, was meant not in love but as a sort of a slur. Renaissance Italians like Vasari believed themselves to be experiencing a rebirth of glorious culture that had disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire—a fall Vasari blamed on northern invading Goths. Vasari found this northern, “Gothic” style to be so different and overly ornate, compared to the simplicity of Roman art, that he considered it “monstrous and barbarous.”

Vasari’s distaste notwithstanding, Gothic architecture distills the full flowering of many themes that have been throughlines between the cultures and periods discussed in this textbook. Gothic cathedrals’ towering height mirrors the same urge that drove the Mesopotamians to build their ziggurats and temples millenia ago: exceeding the limits of earth-bound humanity and approaching the heavens. Like the Sumerian White Temple and the pyramids of Old Kingdom Egypt, they required incredible resources and labor, perhaps given out of faith and belief, but by the same token coerced—often by forced labor, or through taxes and tribute. They represent visible pinnacles of civilization, with the monasteries that often housed these cathedrals, bastions in Western Europe of learning and literacy. They also represent the powerful melding of religion and royal power, as seen with both Constantine and Justinian. This connection between the French crown and Catholicism was so strong that in the wake of the French Revolution in the 18th century, Notre Dame and other cathedrals were defaced and desacralized, or divested of sacred status.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

At the same time that an examination of the Gothic period in Europe allows for revisiting these recurring themes from the past, it also invites a look forward—to what the coming centuries bring. Compared to the earlier western portal of Chartres Cathedral, the jamb statues in the south portal already show a trend toward a more realistic, life-like aesthetic that hints at the more naturalistic sculpture to come. Nakedness—representative only of wretchedness in the Last Judgement Tympanum at the Autun Cathedral, will, with the coming Renaissance, be a means of celebrating the beauty of the human body as it was in Classical Greece and Rome. The architectural innovations and use of glass in Gothic cathedrals will continue to be influential, even for contemporary architecture—secular as well as sacred.

Notre Dame, direly damaged in the 2019 fire, will be rebuilt: even as the charred remains smoked, donations surged in from around the world and the debate began about whether reconstruction should mirror the original structure as closely as possible; incorporate new technologies and techniques; and/or memorialize the past, present, and future in bold and creative ways. With the knowledge you have gained of the objects, cultures, and histories this text has covered, and the skills of looking you have been honing, *you* too can be part of this global conversation.

Finally, the collective global mourning for a building that the first art historian dismissed, due to his own narrow lens, is a reminder to take the long view. With the conclusion of this half of the introductory art history survey, we encourage you to continue to keep your eyes open, make detailed visual observations, cultivate critical thinking skills, and take time to consider the context of art's creation.

We hope you continue to approach all of the imagery you see in your life in a thoughtful and inquisitive manner, taking your newly-honed skills in visual analysis, reflective reasoning, and critical thinking, into the rest of your life.

Historiography (Writing History)

Terminology

Like "Romanesque," Gothic is a term that was applied by later art historians looking at the art and architecture of this time, and as mentioned earlier, it was not intended to be a flattering term. Abbot Suger, who conceived of the new style, did not give it a name, and when its distinctive elements spread throughout what is now France and into the rest of Europe, it became known as *opus Francigenum*, or the French Style. These days, the word "gothic" might conjure imagery of creepy, decrepit castles or a brooding style of clothing and makeup. However, although today the singularly sculptural architectural stylings—from circular stained glass windows to delicate stonework to vertical spires pointing heavenward and skeleton-like flying buttresses—maybe have grown dark with age and soot, the original intention was airy, light-filled spaces that evoked a space that was neither quite heaven nor entirely terrestrial.

Chapter Overview

The Birth and Spread of the Gothic Style

Most of this chapter will focus on France, where the Gothic style was born and achieved some of its most remarkable iterations. The style spread from there as well, so the chapter will also examine how the so-called "French style" manifested elsewhere in Europe, particularly in England, the Holy Roman Empire, and even in Spain and Prague. The focus will largely be on architecture, which in the Gothic period achieves truly new heights—literally as well as figuratively.

Culturally, the landscape was shifting at the birth of the Gothic period. During the Romanesque period, the trend of people moving away from the countryside and into towns and cities had already begun, and during the Gothic period, this trend increased. The focus of intellectual life moved from remote monasteries to the growing cities, like Paris. Merchants joined together in powerful guilds, or professional associations, to control their business, as did artisans. The first universities were established. Literacy increased, and books written in spoken languages, rather than just Latin, especially courtly romances, became popular. The power of the papacy—the Catholic church as ruled by the pope and bishops—remained strong.

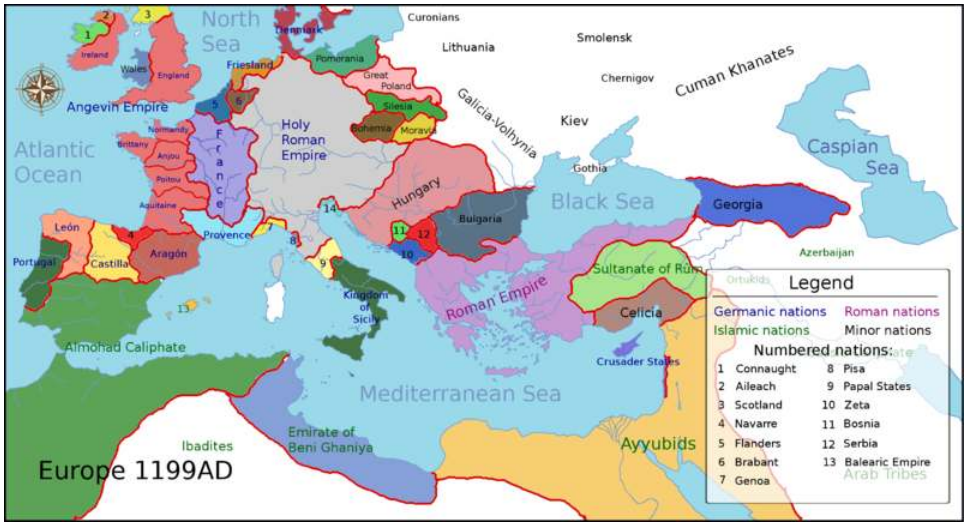


Figure **16.0.3**: A political map of Europe in 1199 CE, with nations categorized by cultural heritage of the rulers. (Image: Adhavoc, CC BY-SA 3.0)

This map shows the lay of the land in Europe around 1200. The Papal States and the Kingdom of Sicily make up most of modern-day Italy. Other modern countries were beginning to take shape—Spain and Portugal divided between a collection of Christian kingdoms and the Muslim Umayyad caliphate; bordering it the kingdom of France, a kingdom including what is today Belgium; and next door the Holy Roman Empire, encompassing what is today Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and parts of Italy.

Objects overview

This chapter covers some iconic works of art that you have likely seen referenced in popular media, books, movies, and television. This includes art as famous as the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Chartres. as well as lesser-known objects such as the Saint Louis Bible, the Röttgen Pietà, and the Gothic synagogue called The Altneushul. This chapter includes Gothic architecture, sculpture, and illuminated manuscripts, including:

- Abbot Suger's Basilica of St. Denis, known as the birthplace of the Gothic style
- The Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres with its central tympanum featuring Christ surrounded by symbols of the Evangelists
- Sainte-Chapelle of 1248, which holds the Crown of Thorns, an important relic said to have been worn and touched by Christ
- Saint Louis Bible from c. 1227, which combines intricate illustrations and shortened passages from the Bible in order to concisely express a moral message
- Röttgen Pietà, part of a northern tradition of sculpture emphasizing the humanity of Christ and his very human suffering
- Ely Cathedral in England, which features four styles of English medieval architecture
- The Golden Haggadah, a luxurious and cross-cultural example of a book used to tell the story of Passover that is both an exquisite example of Jewish art and art in the Gothic style

By the time you finish reading this chapter on Gothic art, you should be able to:

- Analyze the origins and spread of the Gothic style
- Distinguish differences and similarities in regional Gothic architecture and artistic styles
- Identify and describe architectural elements common to Gothic churches
- Trace the spread of Gothic style using examples from multiple cultures

Want to know more?

Here are some additional resources you can explore to further your understanding of the art discussed in this chapter.

- University of Waterloo, "Engineering Models: Gothic Cathedrals" [video]
- Smarthistory, "Chartres Cathedral" [video]
- Benjamin Ramm (NYT), "A Controversial Restoration that Wipes Away the Past"
- Rick Steves, "Paris, France: Sainte-Chapelle's Dazzling Interior" [video]
- HistoryWorks, "Capturing Magic: The Making of Stained Glass" [video]
- BBC, How to Build a Cathedral [video]
- An Enduring Icon: Notre-Dame Cathedral, an exhibit on Google Arts & Culture
- Gothic Treasures of France, on Google Arts & Culture
- Gothic Treasures in England, on Google Arts & Culture

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16.1: Introduction

Gothic architecture, an introduction

by Valerie Spanswick



Figure **16.1.1**: East end of Salisbury Cathedral, Salisbury, England, begun 1220. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Forget the association of the word “Gothic” to dark, haunted houses, Wuthering Heights, or ghostly pale people wearing black nail polish and ripped fishnets. The original Gothic style was actually developed to bring sunshine into people’s lives, and especially into their churches. To get past the accrued definitions of the centuries, it’s best to go back to the very start of the word Gothic, and to the style that bears the name.

The Goths were a so-called barbaric tribe who held power in various regions of Europe, between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire (so, from roughly the fifth to the eighth century). They were not renowned for great achievements in architecture. As with many art historical terms, “Gothic” came to be applied to a certain architectural style after the fact.



Figure **16.1.2**: Early Gothic arches, Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire, England, begun c. 1108. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The style represented giant steps away from the previous, relatively basic building systems that had prevailed. The Gothic grew out of the Romanesque architectural style, when both prosperity and relative peace allowed for several centuries of cultural development and great building schemes. From roughly 1000 to 1400, several significant cathedrals and churches were built, particularly in Britain and France, offering architects and masons a chance to work out ever more complex and daring designs.

The most fundamental element of the Gothic style of architecture is the pointed arch, which was likely borrowed from Islamic architecture that would have been seen in Spain at this time. The pointed arch relieved some of the thrust, and therefore, the stress

on other structural elements. It then became possible to reduce the size of the columns or piers that supported the arch (see Figures **16.1.1**, **16.1.2**, and **16.1.3** for examples of the pointed arch).



Figure **16.1.3**: Nave of Salisbury Cathedral, Salisbury, England, begun 1220. (Photo via Smarthistory)

So, rather than having massive, drum-like columns as in the Romanesque churches, the new columns could be more slender. This slimness was repeated in the upper levels of the nave, so that the gallery and clerestory would not seem to overpower the lower arcade. In fact, the column basically continued all the way to the roof, and became part of the vault.

In the vault, the pointed arch could be seen in three dimensions where the ribbed vaulting met in the center of the ceiling of each bay. This ribbed vaulting is another distinguishing feature of Gothic architecture. However, it should be noted that prototypes for the pointed arches and ribbed vaulting were seen first in late-Romanesque buildings.



Figure **16.1.4**: Open tracery at Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire, England, begun c. 1108. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The new understanding of architecture and design led to more fantastic examples of vaulting and ornamentation, and the Early Gothic or Lancet style (from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) developed into the Decorated or Rayonnant Gothic (roughly fourteenth century). The ornate stonework that held the windows–called tracery–became more florid, and other stonework even more exuberant (see Figure **16.1.4**).

The ribbed vaulting became more complicated and was crossed with lierne ribs into complex webs, or the addition of cross ribs, called tierceron (see Figure **16.1.5**). As the decoration developed further, the Perpendicular or International Gothic took over by fifteenth century. Fan vaulting decorated half-conoid shapes extending from the tops of the columnar ribs.



Figure **16.1.5**: Lierne vaults Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, England, begun 1089. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The slender columns and lighter systems of thrust allowed for larger windows and more light (see Figure **16.1.6**). The windows, tracery, carvings, and ribs make up a dizzying display of decoration that one encounters in a Gothic church. In late Gothic buildings, almost every surface is decorated. Although such a building as a whole is ordered and coherent, the profusion of shapes and patterns can make a sense of order difficult to discern at first glance.



Figure 16.1.6: Gothic windows at Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, England, begun 1089. (Photo via Smarthistory)

After the great flowering of Gothic style, tastes again shifted back to the neat, straight lines and rational geometry of the Classical era. It was in the Renaissance that the name Gothic came to be applied to this medieval style that seemed vulgar to Renaissance sensibilities. It is still the term we use today, though hopefully without the implied insult, which negates the amazing leaps of imagination and engineering that were required to build such edifices.

Articles in this section:

- Valerie Spanswick, "Gothic architecture, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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16.2: France

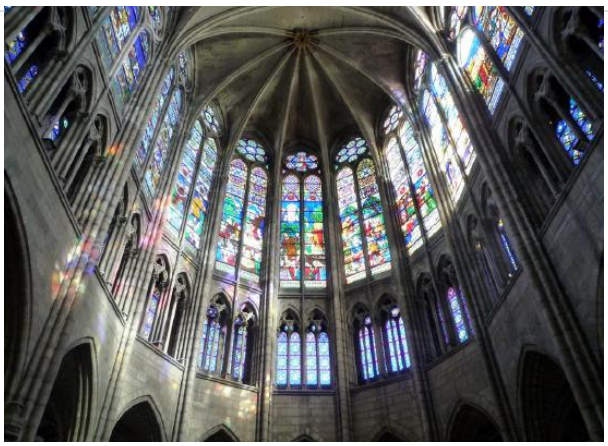


Figure 16.2.1: Later apse vaulting, Basilica of St. Denis, St. Denis, France, 1135-1144. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Basilica of Saint Denis, Paris: A Conversation

By Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This conversation occurred in the birthplace of the Gothic period, the Basilica of Saint Denis, near Paris. Click here to watch the video.

BETH HARRIS: Here we are at the Basilica of Saint Denis.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: The birthplace of the Gothic.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Thanks to Suger, who was the abbot in the first half of the 12th century. This church is incredibly important because it's the burial place of the royal family. Suger himself was also a advisor to the royal family.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: We're standing in the choir. And light is pouring in the windows.



Figure 16.2.2: Choir, Basilica of St. Denis, St. Denis, France, 1135-1144. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

DR. BETH HARRIS: So the choir is the space behind the altar of the church. And the is the aisle that would take one behind the altar.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Actually, it's taking us around behind the altar.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Now, Suger completed the ambulatory and also the façade of the church.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: And none of this was new construction. There had been a ninth-century church here. And Suger felt that it was inadequate as the burial place of the kings. At this historical moment, the kings of France only really controlled the Isle de France, that is, the area immediately around Paris. But this was a time when the king's power was expanding. And Suger really wanted to create an architectural style that would express the growing power of the monarch. Now, in the history of Western church

architecture, the way that this would generally work is you would have an ambulatory that would move around the back of the altar. And that would allow pilgrims to stop at each of these small, radiating chapels, that is, these small rooms that would contain relics.

DR. BETH HARRIS: In the past during the Romanesque period, these chapels would be literally separate rooms with walls around them. And Suger's idea was instead to open up the space and to allow light to flood in. And that's exactly how this looks. And it must have looked so different than anything anyone had seen before.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Instead of this looking like a set of walls that are pierced by windows—and in the Romanesque, relatively small windows—instead, he's figured out how to engineer this structure in stone. So that the walls can basically disappear and be replaced by glass—colored glass—that lets this brilliant, luminous color into the space. So let's talk about two things—how he did this, and second of all, why he did this.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Which one should we do first?

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Well, let's talk about how he did it. If you look above us, there's this complex web of interlocking pointed vaulting.



Figure **16.2.3**: Ambulatory vaulting, Basilica of St. Denis, 1135-1144. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

DR. BETH HARRIS: Pointed arches are really key here, because for one thing, you can cover spaces of different shapes and sizes. Perhaps most importantly, a pointed arch doesn't push so much out as it does it down. And because of that, the architect didn't need to build thick walls.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: A traditional Roman arch generally has to be placed on quite heavy walls, because it really does push outward. It splays. What the pointed arch does is it tends to take the weight of the vaulting and push it more straight down, so that the weight doesn't have to be buttressed from the side.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Looking up at those ribs, we have a sense of a pull toward the vertical. And all of these ribs in this vaulting rests on these thin columns. So there's a real sense of elegance and openness to this space.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: And it's so radically different from the Romanesque that came before, which felt so solid and where your eye was always drawn around that rounded arch back down. And you felt the sense of gravity. You felt a sort of rootedness with the Romanesque. And it is so different here. You have to remember the church itself, any consecrated church, is an expression of the holy Jerusalem. It is Heaven on Earth. And so the idea is how can one transport us to a more heavenly place, to a more spiritual place. Abbot Suger believed that light could do this.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Suger thought he was reading the writing of Saint Denis, of the patron saint of this church.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: Instead, he was reading a philosopher from the sixth century. But the important part is he took this notion of the divinity of light from that writing and made that practical and applicable within an architectural setting.

DR. BETH HARRIS: Right. That writing that he thought was by Saint Denis talked about how light was connected to the divine. So what Suger wanted was to open up those walls and allow in the light that would allow a type of thinking on the part of the visitors where they would move from the contemplation of the light to God.



Figure **16.2.4**: Ambulatory (right side), Basilica of St. Denis, 1135-1144. Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: This was a radical and new notion and actually flew in the face of other theological theories of the time. And if you think about the ideas that are being established by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who's saying, we have to get rid of all the decorative. We have to get rid of everything that will distract us. Suger is moving in the other direction and saying, no, in fact. We can transport people.

DR. BETH HARRIS: That the visual is not a distraction but a way of transporting us to the divine.

DR. STEVEN ZUCKER: I have to say that I think Suger was incredibly successful. This is startlingly beautiful. And I feel transported.

Editors' Notes

Abbot Suger had a name for that "divine light" that Dr. Harris and Dr. Zucker are talking about here: *lux nova*. "New light" in Latin, *lux nova* is the heavenly aura created by the windows, often of colorful stained glass, that now pierce and almost dissolve the walls. For Suger, who wrote a whole treatise on his renovations at Saint Denis, beauty served to elevate the mind —and for him, beauty was all about light. We see that in the inscription for the doors:

> All you who seek to honor these doors,
> Marvel not at the gold and expense but at the craftsmanship of the work.
> The noble work is bright, but, being nobly bright, the work
> Should brighten the minds, allowing them to travel through the lights
> To the true light, where Christ is the true door.
> The golden door defines how it is imminent in these things.
> The dull mind rises to the truth through material things,
> And is resurrected from its former submersion when the light is seen.

An inscription in the upper choir likewise celebrates the beauty and divine significance of this new light:

> When the new rear part is joined to that in front,
> The church shines, brightened in its middle.
> For bright is that which is brightly coupled with the bright
> And which the new light pervades,
> Bright is the noble work Enlarged in our time
> I, who was Suger, having been leader
> While it was accomplished.

Translation by David Burr, as provided at Fordham University's *Medieval Sourcebook*.

Chartres Cathedral: a conversation

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in Chartres Cathedral in Chartres, France. Click here to watch the video.

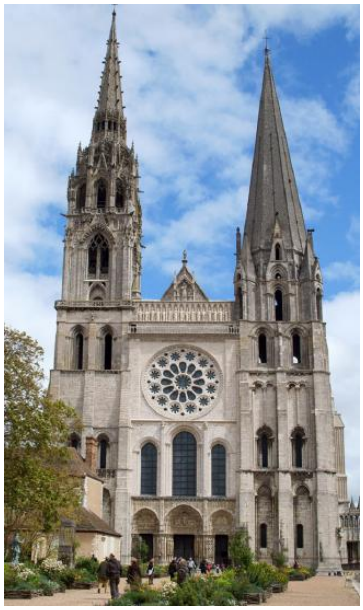


Figure **16.2.5**: Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, c. 1145 and 1194-c.1220 (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the town of Chartres, about an hour's train ride from Paris, looking at the great medieval cathedral, Notre Dame de Chartres.

Beth: It's easy to think about this church as a day trip from Paris, but back in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, the town of Chartres was a major destination unto itself.

Steven: But it's important that we understand it within the orbit of Paris, because Gothic as a style developed in Île-de-France—that is, the area around Paris that was ruled by the king of France. We think now of France as a nation with stable borders, but in the medieval period, the king only controlled the area immediately around Paris, and it was in this area that the architectural style of Gothic first developed.

Beth: Chartres was a destination for a very particular reason: it had, and still has, the tunic that the Virgin Mary wore (it was believed) when she gave birth to Christ.

Steven: As the Virgin Mary's importance grew during the medieval period, the importance of this church—and specifically of this relic—grew.

Beth: We're looking at the cathedral today with apartments and cafés around it, but this was once part of a complex of buildings that included a school, a palace for the bishop, a hospital… In fact, the School of Chartres, an educational institution very much akin to a university, was very important and famous during the Gothic period.

Steven: Many other people associated with the School of Chartres believed that the pursuit of knowledge—learning about the world around us—was the pathway to understanding the divine.

Beth: And they were studying the texts of the ancient Greeks and Romans, of Aristotle and Plato.

Steven: In fact, we can see the impact of the School of Chartres in some of the sculpture that adorns the west doorway.

Beth: we west façade of Chartres dates to the mid twelfth century, and so we see it as an early Gothic façade. That's obvious when we compare it to a High Gothic thirteenth-century church like Amiens, where the portal is pierced everywhere and there's almost no sense of masonry, no sense of the stone. But here, the windows on either side of the doorway are quite small.

Steven: In fact, the first story of the towers still recalls the Romanesque. The windows are actually rounded and very little of the wall is given over to openings. we architects were still nervous about supporting the enormous weight that was to be piled above.

Beth: That's because stone vaulting, the ceiling of these churches, are enormously heavy.

Steven: This is all solid limestone.

Beth: And they exert tremendous pressure downward and outward, and so you need these very strong walls and piers to support the weight of that stone vaulting.

Steven: The façade is fairly simple. From left to right, there are basically three parts. A tower on the left, the central area, and the tower on the right. If we go from bottom to top, we also have a division of three.

Beth: At the very top we see what's known as a Kings Gallery, Old Testament royal figure. Below that, the beautiful round rose window. These are very typical of Gothic architecture. This is using something called plate tracery. We have primary a sense of the stone and then opening within that, as opposed to bar tracery, where we have just these thin bars that separate the panes of the stained glass windows.

Steven: We'll see that especially in later windows in places like Amiens. Now below the rose window are three large lancets and these vertical windows reflect the portals below them.

Beth: The three portals are covered with sculpture. Anyone walking into this church would read something in the pictures. Let's talk about the parts of the Gothic portal. At the very top, we see sculptures within the archivolts and the archway that is framed by archivolts is known as a tympanum.

Steven: Below that, supporting each of the tympana is a lintel. wat is a kind of crossbeam of stone. Those are supported by small engaged columns known as colonettes that line each side of the three doors. Those are really door jambs and attached to those are figures which are known therefore as jamb figures.



Figure **16.2.6**: Royal portal, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: What's interesting is that they're angled inward, and so we're invited to enter the church.

Steven: This front porch is quite shallow compared to what will happen at, say, Amiens.

Beth: For the doorways become almost funnels into the church.

Steven: The archivolts protrude outward, creating canopies. Overall, this front is really fairly modest compared to what happens in the Gothic. Nevertheless, it is one of the most important and one of the earliest fully-conceived sculptural programs. Let's get close and take a look. When I was in school, the three tympana were taught to me as follows. we tympanum on the let showed the Ascension of Christ. we largest of the three, the tympanum in the middle, showed the Second Coming of Christ. we tympanum on the right showed scenes that related to the life of the Virgin Mary. But things have changed.

Beth: We have a new interpretation, and that is that the portal on the left, instead of depicting the Ascension, depicts Christ before he takes on physical form.

Steven: That is, a Christ out of time.

Beth: Before the incarnation, before God has made flesh. Below, we see four angels.

Steven: And probably my favorite part of this is the way that the angels try to reach below the barrier that separates them from the prophets. Some of the prophets don't seem to have any idea that there's anything above them, although a few have cocked their head with some interest.

Beth: Well, they're prophets. They begin to see the future, they begin to understand God's plan for mankind but they can't see it entirely.

Steven: In order to see that, we have to go to the right tympanum, the tympanum devoted to the Virgin Mary…

Beth: …who makes possible God taking on physical form and entering the world so that we can be saved.

Steven: Let's start with the lintel. We can make out a winged figure. This is archangel Gabriel announcing to the Virgin Mary that she will bear Christ.

Beth: And next to this we see a scene known as the Visitation, where Mary is visited by her cousin Elizabeth. Mary is pregnant with the Christ child, and her cousin Elizabeth is pregnant with Saint John the Baptist.

Steven: Then the most important scene in the lintel, the center. Here we see Mary in the manger having just given birth to the Christ child who's swaddled just above her.

Beth: And just to the right, a scene of the Adoration of the three Shepherds have come to honor the Christ child.

Steven: Above this, we see the presentation of Christ in the temple.

Beth: Mary and Joseph have brought the Christ child to the temple.

Steven: wen above that, in the tympanum, we see the Virgin Mary enthroned with the Christ child on her lap with angels on either side. This represents the Throne of Wisdom.

Beth: When Christ is shown seated on Mary's lap, Mary's body is understood as the Throne of Wisdom. Christ is understood as the personification of wisdom.

Steven: Mary, in turn, is understood as that throne, but also as the church itself.

Beth: Both Mary and Christ as shown frontally, very symmetrically, and Mary is enthroned here as the queen of heaven. On the let, we had an image of Christ before the incarnation, before taking human form. On the right, we have the moment when Christ enters the world in order to save it. wen in the center, we have the Second Coming of Christ, when the dead rise from their graves and all of mankind is judged.

Steven: What's important, though, is that that is the end of time. So a period before time, a period of human time, and a period at the end of time.



Figure **16.2.7**: Central tympanum with Christ surrounded by symbols of the Evangelists, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Christ is surrounded by symbols of the four Evangelists—

Steven: –the four writers of the Gospels. And he is shown in the center larger than any other figure. This is called hieratic scale, emphasizing his relative importance. He is shown seated on the throne of heaven surrounded by a mandorla…

Beth: A large, full-bodied halo. Below him, we see 12 figures. These are the 12 apostles. Now, the jamb figures are especially beautiful here at Chartres. These represent Old Testament prophets and kings and queens, and by association, the kings and queens of France.



Figure **16.2.8**: Central portal jamb figures (right), west entrance, Chartres Cathedral, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The jambs of the westwork are my favorite figures at Chartres. They're so long and attenuated. They're so solid and so elegant.

Beth: You'll notice that each figure is attached to a column and each figure resembles a column. And so there's an interdependence between the architecture and the sculpture that adorns it.

Steven: It seems natural to wonder why the figures have been so abstracted, why they're so absurdly long. Or even why their feet seem to be dangling down a bit.

Beth: These are heavenly, divine figures. They're not meant to look physical and on this earth. They're meant to look transcendent. If you look at the drapery, the falls are indicated by lines.

Steven: There's a very little sense of mass. Instead, there's a real emphasis on the linear.

Beth: By the time of the High Gothic period, and, in fact, on other later sculpted portals here at Chartres, we'll see figures who have much more volume, figures become more human.

Steven: Another important attribute is their sense of isolation. Each figure seems isolated from the figures beside it.

Beth: That, too, will change on the later sculpted portals at Chartres and at other High Gothic cathedrals.

Steven: But we've been talking about the portals. I think we ought to use the doors. Let's go in… We've walked into the cathedral and we're entering into this long space, which was based on a basilica plan.



Figure **16.2.9**: View down nave to apse, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA)

Beth: A basilica is a type of building that Christians borrowed from the ancient Romans. It's longitudinal. It has an entrance on one end, opposite that is the apse, the holiest part of the church.

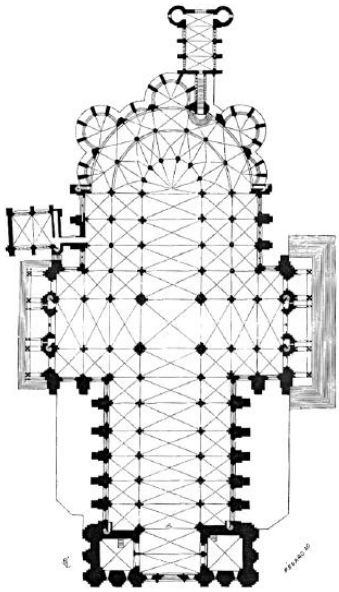


Figure **16.2.10**: Chartres Cathedral Plan. Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Image: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: If you were to look at the church from a bird's eye view, you would see that the church sketches the shape of a cross because it is the long hallway, the nave, that is crossed by something called the transept.

Beth: Here at Chartres, the north and south transept also have doorways that are sculpted.

Steven: This church is a little more complicated because, on either side of the nave, there are auxiliary hallways known as aisles. This was so that pilgrims, that is religious visitors, could enter the church and move through to the apse and around the other side without disturbing a mass that might be taking place.

Beth: Those pilgrims were primarily here to see the famous relic of the tunic of the Virgin, and later another relic that was acquired by the cathedral, the head of Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary's mother.

Steven: In fact, the most famous relic of this church, the tunic of the Virgin Mary, played a very important role in the church that we're now sitting in. We were looking at the west front and that was part of a church that dated to 1145. But in 1194, there was a terrible fire and most of the church burned to the ground.

Beth: But miraculously, two priests saved the tunic of the Virgin Mary. When the people of Chartres saw that the tunic was saved, they interpreted this as a miracle, one with a message: that the Virgin Mary wanted an even more beautiful and grander church to house her relic.

Steven: And that's the church that we're in now.

Beth: The west front of the church that survived the fire is decidedly Early Gothic. The church that we're sitting in now that was built after the fire is clearly the beginning of the High Gothic style.

Steven: That's probably most clear if we look at the interior elevation, because unlike earlier Gothic churches like at Paris where there was a four-part elevation, here we have a three-part elevation.

Beth: The three-part elevation consists of a nave arcade, these very tall, pointed arches that are very slender and graceful.

Steven: That's the lowest level.

Beth: On top of that, we see an arcade standing in front of a wall and that area is called the triforium. Above that, we see very tall clerestory windows. In this case, each bay of the nave we see two lancet windows topped by an oculus.

Steven: we three segments of the elevation are united by the piers and the colonettes that are attached to the piers. You can see them soaring from the pavement below all the way up.

Beth: We have that interest in linearity and these lines that draw our eye upward that are so typical of Gothic architecture. As we follow those colonettes up, we see that they divide into ribs that form the four-part ribbed groin vaults that constitute the ceiling, the vaulting of this church.

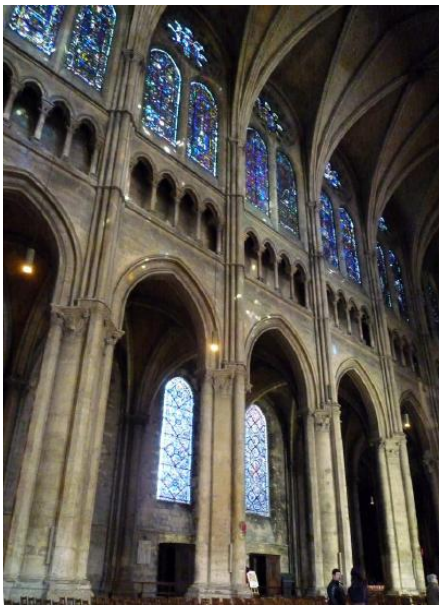


Figure **16.2.11**: North elevation, prior to restoration, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The pointed ribbed groin vault allowed for greater height than a round arch would, and that's because a pointed ribbed groin vault pushes its trust more down than out.

Beth: And as a result, it can rest on smaller piers and not as much buttressing is required. We should say that one of the primary goals of the Gothic architect was to open up the walls to the stained glass, glass that helped to make the interior a space that recalled the divine, that gave one a sense of heaven here on earth. One of the ways you could do that was with a flying buttress essentially supporting the building from the outside.

Steven: Instead of having massive walls within the church, much of the weight is supported by flying buttresses that help support the lateral thrust of the building. While flying buttresses are beautiful architectural elements in their own right, they were really subservient to the idea of allowing the walls to open up to allow for more glass, for more light to enter into the church. But this wasn't aesthetic. we idea was that light itself was an expression of the divine and nowhere is this more evident than in Chartres where more of the original glass survives from the medieval era.

Beth: That glass has largely this lovely deep blue color that's especially associated with Chartres. There's also reds and golds creating a space that makes you feel as though you're almost inside of a jewel, with light refracting in all different ways.

Steven: It is still stunning. It's still spectacular. One can only imagine the impression this glass would have made in the twelfth century, when most people's clothing was earth colors, where painting was rare.

Beth: Where windows in your houses were very small and so coming into this space was a transcendent experience. We're so fortunate to be here today when so much of the restoration work on the interior has been completed and we can see that the walls have been cleaned. They used to be a dark brownish gray. we conservators here have painted the stone the way that is was painted in the twelfth and thirteenth century.

Steven: Somewhat unexpectedly, the stone was covered with a thin layer of plaster and then painted onto that was this light ochre color with white lines painted on top of it to mimic the joinery of the stones below, but not accurately. That layer of plaster and paint obscures the true masonry.



Figure **16.2.12**: Pier and vaulted ceiling, showing recent restoration/repainting. Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Nineteenth- and twentieth-century visitors to Chartres talked about how dark it was, but they were seeing it with centuries of grime and we are fortunate today to begin to see it the way that it looked in the thirteenth century.



Figure **16.2.13**: Notre-Dame de la Belle-Verrière, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1180 (upper panels) and c.1225 (lower panels) (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Let's walk down towards the apse and take a look at one particularly famous stained glass window.

Beth: One that dates from the early Gothic period from before the fire.

Steven: This tall window is sometimes known as the "Virgin of Beautiful Window." The blue contrast against the red is extraordinary. It looks like the window is made out of rubies and sapphires. Mary is frontal. Here, again, we see Mary as the throne of wisdom.

Beth: Mary is elongated. Both of the figures are strictly frontal. We're clearly looking at a heavenly image and not an earthly image, but a projection of the divine.

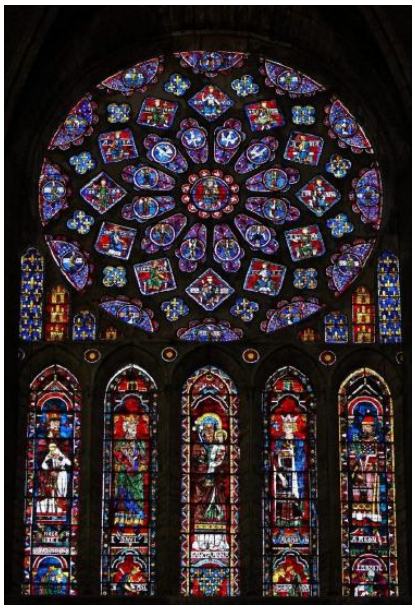


Figure **16.2.14**: North Transept Rose and Lancet Windows, Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1235 (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: At the end of the north transept is an enormous rose window on top of the lancets. This is a much bigger rose than what we've seen in the earlier west front.

Beth: This was paid for by Blanche of Castile, the mother of Saint Louis, King Louis IX, who was a major patron of Gothic art.

Steven: We can see fleur-de-lis throughout this window, a reference to the French monarchy.

Beth: In the center of the rose, we once again see the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child. Surrounding Mary we see doves and angels and then prophets and kings.

Steven: For example, in the 12 o'clock position we see King David.

Beth: When we look at the lancets below, we see in the center Saint Anne, Mary's mother. Remember that the cathedral acquired the relic of the head of Saint Anne, so it's appropriate that she's honored here in this window.

Steven: And she's holding the infant Mary.

Beth: Then the two lancet windows on either side, we see these interesting pairings of virtuous and villainous kings, and also Old Testament priests.

Steven: For example, the lancet just to the let of Anna shows King David, and the smaller figure, Saul, who is shown with a sword through his chest.

…

Steven: We've walked out the south transept and the porch is so different from the west front.



Figure **16.2.15**: Chartres, south portal jamb figures with Saint Theodore (far left). Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres, France, c.1145 and 1194-c.1220. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Here we're about 80 or so years after the sculpture on the west façade and things are really different for Gothic architecture and Gothic sculpture.
Steven: we porch projects much more than the west front did, which is a characteristic of the High Gothic, but the jamb figures have changed so so much.

Beth: Well, before we saw a real interdependence between the figure and the architecture. we figure looked like a column, and it was in front of a column. Here the figures are still in front of columns, but they have an independence from the architecture, which is entirely new.

Steven: The most famous figure on the south porch is Saint Theodore, and you can see why.

Beth: Well, he looks almost like an ancient Greek or a Roman figure. We see that the body has movement. we jamb figures on the west portal were so elongated and static.

Steven: They were columnar.

Beth: And they had no sense of liveliness to them. Theodore seems almost as though he could walk oy the porch and greet us.

Steven: His right hip juts out and it creates this Gothic sway. Just look at the feet. His feet are firmly planted, whereas the figures on the west front seem to dangle, somehow, in midair.

Beth: In his right hand he carries a spear with a banner, and we see much more than on the west front a sense of volume to the drapery, especially when we look to the hem of the garment where we see real three dimensional folds.

Steven: Theodore is still attached to the column.

Beth: We can't call him free-standing.

Steven: But he does seem animated.

Beth: In his belt, we see the hilt of a sword, and his let-hand rests on a shield, which is pressed against his thigh. There's a naturalism to his movement and the way he carries himself that tells us we're now in the High Gothic period.

Steven: we Cathedral at Chartres is remarkable for so many reasons. But what I love about it, especially, is the way that it represents the evolution of the Gothic style, from the columnar jamb figures on the west work to the High Gothic representations that we see on the south porch.

Beth: I'm so glad we decided to spend the day at Chartres.

The Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

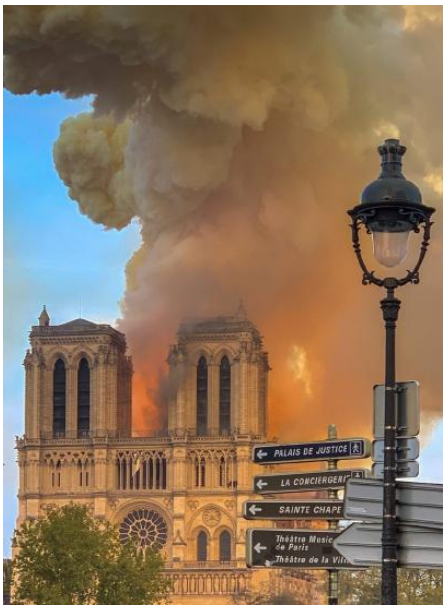


Figure **16.2.16**: April 2019 fire at Notre Dame de Paris, France. (Photo: Milliped, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The fire

The blaze that engulfed the Cathedral of Notre Dame on the small Island known as the Île de la Cité in Paris in April 2019 was a terrible tragedy (see Figure **16.2.16**). Though it may not give us much comfort to learn that the total or partial destruction of churches by fire was a fairly common occurrence in medieval Europe, it does provide some perspective. For example, a fire destroyed most of Chartres Cathedral in 1020 (and again in 1194), in the city of Reims, the cathedral was badly damaged in a fire in 1210, and at Beauvais, the cathedral was rebuilt after a fire in the 1180s. The list goes on and on.

During the medieval periods of the Romanesque and the Gothic (c. 1000-1400), church fires were less frequent than they had been previously due to the development of stone vaulting (which began to replace the timber ceilings commonly found in European churches). But even a stone vault, as we saw at Notre Dame in Paris, is itself protected by a timber roof (sometimes rising more than 50 feet above the stone vaulting and pitched to prevent the accumulation of rain and snow), and this is what caught fire.



Figure **16.2.17**: Île de la Cité, Paris, France. (Photo via Smarthistory) This photograph shows a singed Cathedral of Notre Dame in the aftermath of the fire.

Art historian Caroline Brazelius, who has worked on the building for years said, “between the vaults and the roof, there is a forest of timber”—old, dry, porous, and highly flammable timber. Still, photographs of the interior show at least some of the stone vaulting survived the recent fire. The builders of Notre Dame used Parisian limestone, but, as Brazelius notes, “when it’s exposed to fire, stone is damaged. It doesn’t actually burn….It becomes friable. It chips, and it’s no longer structurally sound.”

Built, modified, rebuilt, and restored

Churches are often an amalgamation of architectural styles, the result of building campaigns and modifications undertaken at different times, some due to fire, some due to the desire for what a new style represents, and some due to (often inaccurate) restoration efforts. And on a single site, churches were often built and rebuilt — and this is the case with Notre Dame in Paris. Before the Gothic-style church was built, a Carolingian church occupied the site (it was destroyed during the 9th century Viking invasions), and before that, a 6th century Merovingian Church stood on the site.



Figure **16.2.18**: Léonard Gaultier, *View of Paris*, 1607, engraving. (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, via Smarthistory) This engraving naturally emphasizes the Cathedral of Notre Dame, based on its size and central location within both the composition and the city.

If we go back further, to the pre-Christian era, Julius Caesar's armies famously conquered much of what we call France today (Roman Paris dates back to 52 BCE). Archaeological evidence suggests that a pagan temple and then a Christian basilica were built on this site. The ancient Romans also built a palace for the emperor on the Île de la Cité, and after the Roman empire collapsed, Clovis I, King of the Franks (who converted to Christianity) established his palace there as well. The Île de la Cité would remain the location of a royal residence until the 14th century. As one historian has noted, "Notre Dame … was not only a religious but also a royal monument that displayed the might of the church and the monarchy, each enhancing the power of the other."[1]

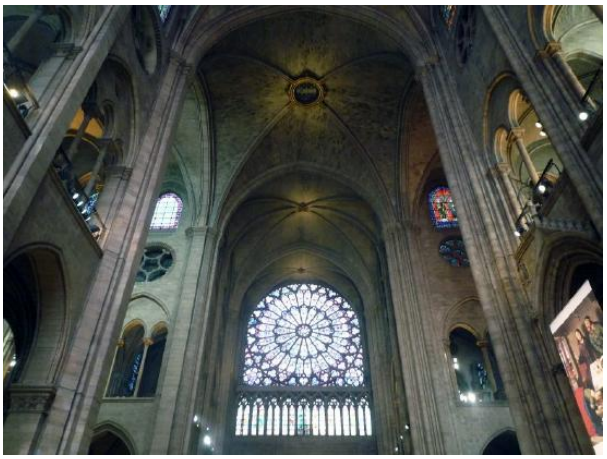


Figure **16.2.19**: Crossing, Notre Dame de Paris, c. 1163-1250. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The Gothic Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris took nearly 100 years to complete (c. 1163-1250) and modifications, restorations, and renovations continued for centuries after. The early Gothic style employed at the beginning of the campaign became outdated and the later Gothic style, the Rayonnant, became fashionable and can be seen in the transepts. The crossing spire that the world watched fall while engulfed in flames was a reproduction created during a 19th-century restoration campaign.

In the following centuries, the church (and its sculptural decoration) survived multiple episodes of intentional destruction: during the Protestant Reformation, due to Protestant objection to religious imagery, and during the revolutions of 1789 and 1830, because of the church's close association with the monarchy. It remained in a neglected state until Victor Hugo's novel, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) revived popular interest the building (see Figure **16.2.20**).



Figure **16.2.20**: View of Notre Dame de Paris, c. 1163-1250. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

As of this writing, just a few days after the April 15th blaze, evaluation of the damage caused by the fire is only just beginning, but a reported one billion dollars has been already been raised to support the reconstruction of Notre Dame de Paris.

Sainte-Chapelle (Paris): A Conversation

By Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris

This is a conversation between Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris. Click here to watch the video.

Steven: We've walked into the courtyard of what had once been the palace of the king of France and in the center is a jewel box, Sainte-Chapelle.

Beth: This was the royal chapel, this was a chapel attached to the Royal Palace for the use of the king and his household but it's much more than that.

Steven: We walked in through the lower chapel which was used by the king's household into the upper channel which was used by the king, by the queen and by the court.

Beth: In fact, there are niches on either side for the king and queen. At the far end was a reliquary and this was the whole point of Sainte-Chapelle.

Steven: The king Saint Louis had obtained one of the great relics of Christendom, the Crown of Thorns. This was part of the passion of Christ. Beth: And of course, a crown is symbolic of royalty and this was the chapel of Saint Louis also known as King Louis IX.

Steven: Saint Louis was able to purchase the crown from his cousin who was the Byzantine emperor.

Beth: For an enormous sum.

Steven: And I think it's important to just step back and think about what that crown signified. The faithful believe that the crown had touched Christ, had made him bleed. And the idea of the relic is central. It collapses time, it brings Christ into our immediate experience.

Beth: Now, relics were incredibly important in Medieval culture. They performed miracles.

Steven: Extremely ornate boxes were produced in order to house them and in some ways one can imagine that this entire chapel functions metaphorically as a reliquary for the Crown of Thorns.



Figure **16.2.21**: Apse interior, Sainte-Chapelle, Île de la Cité, Paris, France, 1248. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: It's said that more than three quarters of this building is made of glass. There's light flooding in. It's a light that is golden and red and blue and purple.

Steven: This is a crowning achievement of gothic architecture. The lancet windows soar upward pointing our eyes towards heaven.

Beth: And typically we see the four part ribbed groin vaults.

Steven: And bundled colonettes that make the masonry feel more delicate. In fact, the masonry has been reduced to almost nothing, really just mullions, that is slender, vertical forms that separate the windows.

Beth: But we're here in the 13th century beyond the high gothic. A period that art historians called the Rayonnant where we have this emphasis on thin line and the total opening up of the walls to windows, which was always a goal of gothic architecture but here taken to such an extreme. Over the west door we see this enormous rose window. Now, rose windows were a typical feature of gothic architecture but during this Rayonnant period, the stone tracery that make up the stained glass window becomes thinner and more attenuated and more complex.

Steven: Now, the windows are not just beautiful, they tell stories. Each window refers to either an old or new testament story or a story referring to the acquisition of the relic. We see a window representing the moment when Christ has the crown of thorns placed on his head, the crown that by tradition was held in this church.



Figure **16.2.22**: Apse interior, Sainte-Chapelle, Île de la Cité, Paris, 1248. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: This is dense with imagery. In addition to the stained glass windows, we have sculptures of the apostles that stand between the windows. We have quatrefoils that depict scenes of martyrdom and there are also angels in the spandrels many of whom hold crowns, some swing censors.

Steven: A reminder of what the space would have been like when it was still used as a church. So, imagine this space filled with music, filled with the voice of the priest, filled with the smoke of the incense with colored lights streaming through. It is this beautiful mystical space.

Beth: In addition to there being so much imagery, so much of the surfaces are painted. There are reds and golds and blues, there's almost nothing that would remind us that this is a building made of stone.

Steven: This completely open the interior space with so much glass seems absolutely miraculous. It is a testament to the sophistication of gothic architects during this late period. There seems like there's not nearly enough stone to hold this building up. Let's go outside and take a look at how this was achieved. We've walked out of the chapel and what strikes me is that the building really stands alone. It's tall and it's thin but here we are in the middle of the Ile de la Cite, a small island in the middle of modern Paris.

Beth: And in the 13th century at the very time that Sainte-Chapelle was built, Paris was becoming the capital that we know it as today.

Steven: We can see how the building structure works from the outside. The actual responsibility for bearing the great weight of the stone vaulting is carried by the buttresses which we can see on the exterior. All of that weight was brought outside but the buttresses are kept fairly small in order to ensure that light can enter in the windows which creates another problem. The lateral force of the roof is pushing outward and these buttresses on their own wouldn't be enough to support the roof.

Beth: There is an additional structural element that was added to help ensure the stability of the building. There are iron rods that act like a kind of girdle to counter the thrust of the vaulting down and out.

Steven: Some art historians have pointed out that the exterior top of the building looks rather like a crown.



Figure **16.2.23**: Exterior, Sainte-Chapelle, Île de la Cité, Paris, 1248. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: If we look up toward the top of Saint-Chapelle, we see gables and in between the gables those buttresses. But the buttresses have on top of them these tall pinnacles and we almost read that alternations of gables and pinnacles as the points on a crown.

Steven: And in fact the phrase Sainte-Chapelle is a specific type of chapel, that is a chapel within the palace grounds and that holds a relic.

Saint Louis Bible (Moralized Bible or Bible moralisée)

by Louisa Woodville



Figure **16.2.24**: Top: Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, and below: Author Dictating to a Scribe, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), France, probably Paris, c. 1227-34. Ink, tempera, and gold leaf on vellum, 14 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches / 37.5 x 26.2 cm. (The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.240, fol. 8) (Photo via Smarthistory)

Blanche of Castile

In 1226 a French king died, leaving his queen to rule his kingdom until their son came of age. The 38-year-old widow, Blanche of Castile, had her work cut out for her. Rebelling barons were eager to win back lands that her husband's father had seized from them. They rallied troops against her, defamed her character, and even accused her of adultery and murder.

Caught in a perilous web of treachery, insurrections, and open warfare, Blanche persuaded, cajoled, negotiated, and fought would-be enemies after her husband, King Louis VIII, died of dysentery after only a three-year reign. When their son Louis IX took the helm in 1234, he inherited a kingdom that was, for a time anyway, at peace.



Figure **16.2.25**: Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227-34. (Photo via Smarthistory)

A manuscript illumination

A dazzling illumination in New York's Morgan Library could well depict Blanche of Castile and her son Louis, a beardless youth crowned king (see Figure **16.2.25**). A cleric and a scribe are depicted underneath them (see Figure **16.2.24**). Each figure is set against a ground of burnished gold, seated beneath a trefoil arch. Stylized and colorful buildings dance above their heads, suggesting a sophisticated, urban setting—perhaps Paris, the capital city of the Capetian kingdom (the Capetians were one of the oldest royal families in France) and home to a renowned school of theology.

A moralized Bible

This last page the New York Morgan Library's manuscript MS M 240 is the last quire (folded page) of a three-volume moralized bible, the majority of which is housed at the Cathedral Treasury in Toledo, Spain. Moralized bibles, made expressly for the French royal house, include lavishly illustrated abbreviated passages from the Old and New Testaments. Explanatory texts that allude to historical events and tales accompany these literary and visual readings, which—woven together—convey a moral.

Assuming historians are correct in identifying the two rulers, we are looking at the four people intensely involved in the production of this manuscript. As patron and ruler, Queen Blanche of Castile would have financed its production. As ruler-to-be, Louis IX's job was to take its lessons to heart along with those from the other biblical and ancient texts that his tutors read with him.

King and queen



Figure 16.2.26: Blanche of Castile (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227-34. (Photo via Smarthistory)

In the upper register, an enthroned king and queen wear the traditional medieval open crown topped with fleur-de-lys—a stylized iris or lily symbolizing a French monarch's religious, political, and dynastic right to rule. The blue-eyed queen in Figure 16.2.26, is veiled in a white widow's wimple. An ermine-lined blue mantle drapes over her shoulders. Her pink T-shaped tunic spills over a thin blue edge of paint which visually supports these enthroned figures. A slender green column divides the queen's space from that of her son, King Louis IX, to whom she deliberately gestures across the page, raising her left hand in his direction. Her pose and animated facial expression suggest that she is dedicating this manuscript, with its lessons and morals, to the young king.



Figure **16.2.27**: Louis IX (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227-34. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Louis IX, wearing an open crown atop his head, returns his mother's glance in Figure **16.2.27**. In his right hand he holds a scepter, indicating his kingly status. It is topped by the characteristic fleur-de-lys on which, curiously, a small bird sits. A four-pedaled brooch, dominated by a large square of sapphire blue in the center, secures a pink mantle lined with green that rests on his boyish shoulders.

In his left hand, between his forefinger and thumb, Louis holds a small golden ball or disc. During the mass that followed coronations, French kings and queens would traditionally give the presiding bishop of Reims 13 gold coins (all French kings were crowned in this northern French cathedral town.) This could reference Louis' 1226 coronation, just three weeks after his father's death, suggesting a probable date for this bible's commission. A manuscript this lavish, however, would have taken eight to ten years to complete—perfect timing, because in 1235, the 21-year-old Louis was ready to assume the rule of his Capetian kingdom from his mother.

A link between earth and heaven



Figure **16.2.28**: Coronation of the Virgin, tympanum of central portal, north transept, Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France, c. 1204-10. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Queen Blanche and her son, the young king, echo a gesture and pose that would have been familiar to many Christians: the Virgin Mary and Christ enthroned side-by-side as celestial rulers of heaven, found in the numerous Coronations of the Virgin carved in ivory, wood, and stone (see Figure **16.2.28**). This scene was especially prevalent in tympana, the top sculpted semi-circle over cathedral portals found throughout France. On beholding the Morgan illumination, viewers would have immediately made the connection between this earthly Queen Blanche and her son, anointed by God with the divine right to rule, and that of Mary, Queen of heaven and her son, divine figures who offer salvation.



Figure **16.2.29**: Cleric (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227-34. (Photo via Smarthistory)

The illumination's bottom register depicts a tonsured cleric (churchman with a partly shaved head), left, and an illuminator (see Figure **16.2.29**).

The cleric wears a sleeveless cloak appropriate for divine services—this is an educated man—and emphasizes his role as a scholar. He tilts his head forward and points his right forefinger at the artist across from him, as though giving instructions. No clues are given as to this cleric's religious order, as he probably represents the many Parisian theologians responsible for the manuscript's visual and literary content—all of whom were undoubtedly told to spare no expense.

In Figure **16.2.30**, the artist, donning a blue surcoat and wearing a cap, is seated on cushioned bench.



Figure **16.2.30**: Scribe (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227-34. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Knife in his left hand and stylus in his right, he looks down at his work: four vertically-stacked circles in a left column, with part of a fifth visible on the right. We know, from the 4887 medallions that precede this illumination, what's next on this artist's agenda: he

will apply a thin sheet of gold leaf onto the background, and then paint the medallion's biblical and explanatory scenes in brilliant hues of lapis lazuli, green, red, yellow, grey, orange and sepia.

Advice for a king

Blanche undoubtedly hand-picked the theologians whose job it was to establish this manuscript's guidelines, select biblical passages, write explanations, hire copyists, and oversee the images that the artists should paint. Art and text, mutually dependent, spelled out advice that its readers, Louis IX and perhaps his siblings, could practice in their enlightened rule. The nobles, church officials, and perhaps even common folk who viewed this page could be reassured that their ruler had been well trained to deal with whatever calamities came his way.

This 13th century illumination, both dazzling and edifying, represents the cutting edge of lavishness in a society that embraced conspicuous consumption. As a pedagogical tool, perhaps it played no small part in helping Louis IX achieve the status of sainthood, awarded by Pope Bonifiace VIII 27 years after the king's death. This and other images in the bible moralisée explain why Parisian illuminators monopolized manuscript production at this time. Look again at the work. Who else could compete against such a resounding image of character and grace?

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Birth of the Gothic: Abbot Suger and the ambulatory at St. Denis," in Smarthistory, December 5, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres," in Smarthistory, December 18, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "The Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris," in Smarthistory, April 24, 2019 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Sainte-Chapelle, Paris," in Smarthistory, May 24, 2017, (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Louisa Woodville, "Saint Louis Bible (Moralized Bible or Bible moralisée)," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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16.3: Holy Roman Empire

Röttgen Pietà

by Dr. Nancy Ross

An emotional response



Figure **16.3.1**: Röttgen Pietà, c. 1300-25. Painted wood, 34 1/2″ high. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, Germany. (Photo: Ralf Heinz, with permission, via Smarthistory)

It is hard to look at the *Röttgen Pietà* and not feel something—perhaps revulsion, horror, or distaste (see Figure **16.3.1**). It is terrifying and the more you look at it, the more intriguing it becomes. This is part of the beauty and drama of Gothic art, which aimed to create an emotional response in medieval viewers.

Earlier medieval representations of Christ focused on his divinity (see Figure **16.3.2**). In these works of art, Christ is on the cross, but never suffers. These types of crucifixion images are a type called *Christus triumphans* or the triumphant Christ. His divinity overcomes all human elements and so Christ stands proud and alert on the cross, immune to human suffering.

Triumphant Christ/Patient Christ

In the later Middle Ages, a number of preachers and writers discussed a different type of Christ who suffered in the way that humans suffered. This was different from Catholic writers of earlier ages, who emphasized Christ's divinity and distance from humanity.



Figure **16.3.2**: An example of a *Christus triumphans* (triumphant Christ), Berlinghiero Berlinghieri, *Crucifix*, c. 1220. Museo nazionale di Villa Guinigi, Lucca, Italy. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Late medieval devotional writing, from the 13th-15th centuries, leaned toward mysticism and many of these writers had visions of Christ's suffering. Francis of Assisi stressed Christ's humanity and poverty. Several writers, such as St. Bonaventure, St. Bridget of Sweden, and St. Bernardino of Siena, imagined Mary's thoughts as she held her dead son. It wasn't long before artists began to visualize these new devotional trends. Crucifixion images influenced by this body of devotional literature are called *Christus patiens*, the patient Christ (see Figure **16.3.3**).



Figure **16.3.3**: Segna di Buonaventura, *The Crucifixion*, c. 1315. Tempera on panel, 38.4 x 27 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain)

The effects of this new devotional style, which emphasized the humanity of Christ, quickly spread throughout western Europe through the rise of new religious orders (the Franciscans, for example) and the popularity of their preaching. It isn't hard to see the appeal of the idea that God understands the pain and difficulty of being human. In the *Röttgen Pietà*, Christ clearly died from the horrific ordeal of crucifixion, but his skin is taut around his ribs, showing that he also led a life of hunger and suffering.



Figure **16.3.4**: Röttgen Pietà, (detail) c. 1300-25. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Pietà statues appeared in Germany in the late 1200s and were made in this region throughout the Middle Ages. Many examples of Pietàs survive today. Many of those that survive today are made of marble or stone but the *Röttgen Pietà* is made of wood and retains some of its original paint. The *Röttgen Pietà* is the most gruesome of these extant examples.



Figure **16.3.5**: Pietà, Austrian, c. 1420. Polychromed poplar wood, 92 cm high. (Photo: Harvard Art Museums, © President and Fellows of Harvard College, via Smarthistory)

Many of the other Pietàs also show a reclining dead Christ with three dimensional wounds and a skeletal abdomen (see Figure **16.3.5**). One of the unique elements of the *Röttgen Pietà* is Mary's response to her dead son. She is youthful and draped in heavy robes like many of the other Marys, but her facial expression is different. In Catholic tradition, Mary had a special foreknowledge of the resurrection of Christ and so to her, Christ's death is not only tragic. Images that reflect Mary's divine knowledge show her at peace while holding her dead son. Mary in the *Röttgen Pietà* appears to be angry and confused. She doesn't seem to know that her son will live again. She shows strong negative emotions that emphasize her humanity, just as the representation of Christ emphasizes his.

All of these Pietàs were devotional images and were intended as a focal point for contemplation and prayer. Even though the statues are horrific, the intent was to show that God and Mary, divine figures, were sympathetic to human suffering, and to the pain, and loss experienced by medieval viewers. By looking at the *Röttgen Pietà*, medieval viewers may have felt a closer personal connection to God by viewing this representation of death and pain.

Optional Online Resource: From Transcendent to Human, the Crucifixion, c. 1200

In this video, Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris discuss what they call "a transitional moment in Italian painting," comparing two late medieval tempera panels showing Jesus on the cross, both housed in the Uffizi Museum in Florence, Italy. Whereas the earlier one (Christ Triumphant [*Christus triumphans*], also known as the 432 Cross, c. 1180–1200) shows a calm, triumphant, and essentially uninjured Jesus, the later one (Crucifix and Eight Stories from the Passion [*Christus patiens*], also known as the 434 Cross, c. 1240) shows emphatic, physical suffering.



Smarthistory, "From transcendent to human: The Crucifixion c. 1200"

Articles in this section:

- Dr. Nancy Ross, "*Röttgen Pietà*," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015 (CC BY-NC-SA)
- Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "The Crucifixion, c. 1200 (from Christus triumphans to Christus patiens)," in *Smarthistory*, December 18, 2020 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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16.4: England

Four styles of English medieval architecture at Ely Cathedral

by Meg Bernstein



Figure **16.4.1**: Partial view of Ely Cathedral from the south, Ely, Cambridgeshire, England, 1083-1375. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Four styles of English medieval architecture

Ely Cathedral, like nearly all medieval English cathedrals, saw many different phases of construction. Major building projects in the Middle Ages were both expensive and time-consuming, so renovations and additions were made piecemeal rather than all at once. The long period of time means that by looking at Ely, we can get a sense of each of the most important medieval English architectural styles, all in one building: Romanesque, in the nave; Early English, in the presbytery; Decorated, in the tower and Lady Chapel; and Perpendicular, in the eastern chantry chapels. See the plan in Figure **16.4.4**.



Figure **16.4.2**: View of Ely Cathedral looking east from the Galilee to the Lady Chapel along the north side of the structure. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A saint in the marshes

Ely Cathedral, sometimes referred to as “the ship of the Fens,” is a massive building rising up from the flat, marshy fenland of East Anglia. It is visible from many miles away like a lone ship on a calm sea. Ely’s history began in the seventh century, when an Anglo-Saxon princess named Æthelthryth, or Etheldreda, made a holy vow of virginity. When she was married for political reasons, she fled her husband and founded a nunnery on the Isle of Ely. In Etheldreda’s time, Ely was an island surrounded by marshes (drained later, in the seventeenth century), and the place takes its name from the eels that dwelled in these swampy waters.



Figure **16.4.3**: Inscribed paving stone marking the original tomb of Saint Etheldreda, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Etheldreda died just seven years after founding her nunnery. When her body was translated, or ceremonially moved, from its original location in Figure **16.4.3** fourteen years later, it was found to be incorrupt and it was put into a "new" sarcophagus—actually a reused one from an old Roman settlement nearby. A cult developed around Etheldreda, who became a saint (the common name for Etheldreda is St. Audrey).

Etheldreda's nunnery was raided by Danish invaders in 870. Whether the relics of Etheldreda survived the raid is an open question, but the author of the twelfth-century text, the Liber Eliensis (Book of Ely), detailed stories of the continued power of Etheldreda's relics, possibly intended to suggest that they had not been destroyed. Relics were very important objects in the Middle Ages, lending prestige to the churches where they were held, and drawing pilgrims, who would come seeking miracles. The existence of Etheldreda's relics was therefore very important for the identity of the church at Ely, where in 970, with royal patronage, the church was refounded as a Benedictine monastery.

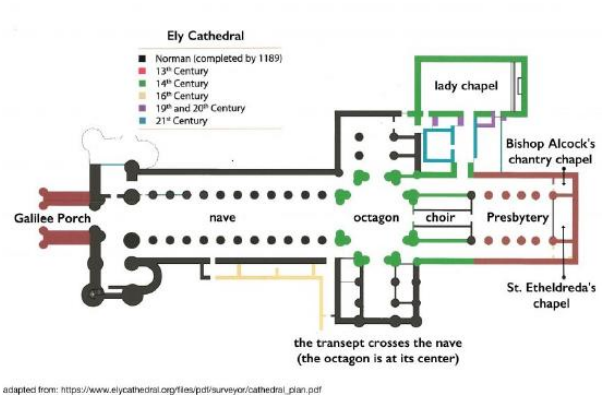


Figure **16.4.4**: Ely Cathedral plan. (Image adapted from www.elycathedral.org/files/pdf/surveyor/cathedral_plan.pdf, via Smarthistory)

The Romanesque (Norman) building

Though it had been the site of Christian worship for hundreds of years prior to 1082, little is known about the architecture of Ely before this date, when the first Norman abbot of Ely initiated the construction of a new church for the monastery. The foundations were laid out by a man in his 80s named Abbot Simeon who had previously been prior of the important monastic community of Winchester, in the south of England, where his brother, Walchelin, was bishop. Simeon and his brother had orchestrated a building campaign in Winchester that was still underway when Simeon came to Ely, and that in-progress church served as inspiration for much of the Ely building program.



Figure **16.4.5**: East elevation (Romanesque), south east transept, after 1082, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Simeon's building plans at Ely began in the east end with the choir and transepts (see Figure **16.4.5**). This is typical for churches, since their primary liturgical functions commonly take place in the east end of the church, oriented towards Jerusalem. This part of the church exemplifies the Romanesque style brought from Normandy after the Norman Conquest in 1066. It was completed in two different phases, which we can tell from the new decorative forms that appear on some of the capitals of the columns of the transepts, which were built later than the others.



Figure **16.4.6**: View down the nave looking east (Romanesque), Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Work on the nave was begun subsequently, and the south side was completed around 1109, when Ely was officially elevated to the status of a cathedral (see Figures **16.4.6** and **16.4.7**). Ely's nave and transepts were some of the first spaces in England to display alternating forms of compound piers. This alternation adds visual rhythm, and diffuses the heaviness of these massive stone forms.



Figure **16.4.7**: Nave elevation (Romanesque), Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Like most Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, Ely's nave elevation has three stories (see Figure **16.4.7**). The nave arcade with its alternating piers is on the ground floor. Above this is a gallery with double-light openings, or double, windowless arches, each pair

set within a larger arch that mirrors the corresponding arch on the lower level. The third level is a clerestory with triplet openings. The tremendous thickness of the walls--a distinguishing feature of the Romanesque--is balanced by the proliferation of openings as one's eyes travel upward. The viewer gets the sense that the building becomes lighter and brighter as it soars heavenward.



Figure **16.4.8**: View from the graveyard beside the north east transept to the west tower, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Late Romanesque and Early English Gothic

The west tower that tops the cathedral's main entrance was built at the end of the twelfth century, towards the end of the Romanesque period in England.



Figure **16.4.9**: Decorative façade with blind arcades and rounded arches, south west transept, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Experiments in the Gothic style brought over from France had already begun to take hold in England—particularly at Canterbury Cathedral and the northern Cistercian monasteries. At Ely, though, the tower still exhibits round Romanesque arches instead of the pointed arches that are a hallmark of Gothic architecture (see Figures **16.4.8** and **16.4.9**).



Figure **16.4.10**: West entry (Galilee), Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The exterior is covered almost completely in blind arcading, an English specialty that stands in stark contrast to French medieval architecture, which prefers little extra surface decoration. Below the tower, we see a monumental entrance with blind pointed arches, which was added a bit later in the Early English Gothic style, showing how this new style was rapidly spreading across England during this time (see Figure **16.4.10**).



Figure **16.4.11**: Stacked blind arcades, south west transept, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

At the other end of the building, the presbytery was extended eastward in the 1230s and 1240s. In style, it draws from the nave of Lincoln Cathedral, completed just a decade or so earlier. With engaged colonnettes of Purbeck marble and white limestone, as well as complex rib vaults, it reflected the most fashionable architecture of the time. Then, as now, architectural styles came and went quickly, and the wealthiest and most powerful—such as the Bishop and diplomat Hugh of Northwold, who financed the new presbytery—had the means to stay current.



Figure **16.4.12**: Nave arcade with Purbeck colonnettes, presbytery, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Eastern extensions were popular at this time to provide more room for the shrines of saints, like Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, or, at Ely, the shrine of Etheldreda. The presbytery was large enough to accommodate the many pilgrims who came to Ely to venerate the saint, and brought important income to the church and surrounding area. Having a highly-decorated space made this holy destination even more desirable.

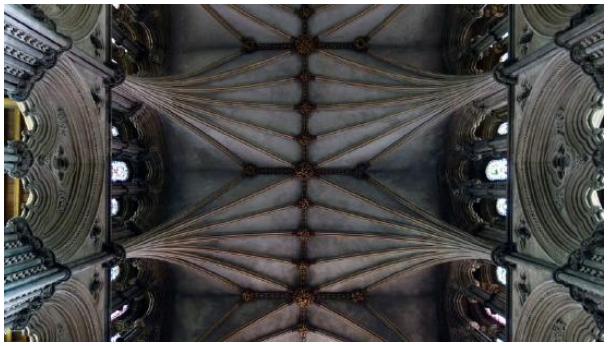


Figure **16.4.13**: Presbytery vaulting, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ely Cathedral in the Decorated Style

In 1321, a new chapel was begun north of the presbytery, which would eventually become one of the most beautiful and artistically innovative of the English Gothic period. But in the early morning hours of February 13, 1322, just as the monks were finishing their morning prayers, disaster struck. The crossing tower of the cathedral collapsed, crushing parts of the choir, and construction on the chapel had to stop.



Figure **16.4.14**: Octagon and lantern, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: TaleynaFletcher, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Though this collapse was devastating, it made room for one of the most remarkable structures of the English Middle Ages. Alan of Walsingham, sub-prior and sacrist of Ely, quickly initiated the building of a new tower—a tall, octagonal structure (often referred to as "the Octagon") surmounted by a tower made of timber clad with lead (see Figures **16.4.14** and **16.4.15**). This type of tower is called a lantern because it is pierced to allow light in. Vaults with tiercerons spring from the base of the Octagon, creating a star-like effect when one looks up.



Figure **16.4.15**: Lantern with central roof boss that incorporates a sculpture of the Risen Christ, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **16.4.16**: Octagon capital depicting Etheldreda's marriage, Ely Cathedral. (James Alexander Cameron, via Smarthistory)

In the supporting structure below, Etheldreda was commemorated with capitals depicting scenes from her life (see Figure **16.4.16**). These include her marriage to Igfrid, and her rest on the way from Northumberland to Ely. The Octagon, from floor to the central roof boss, is 142 feet tall, the same height as the Pantheon in Rome. This correspondence may have been intentional, since the

Octagon is like a Gothic version of the Pantheon's incredible dome, and the tower above it delivers light throughout, like the opening of the Roman temple.



Figure **16.4.17**: Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral; note fragments of original stained glass, upper left. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Once the Octagon was completed, attention was turned back to the Lady Chapel (see Figure **16.4.17**). A Lady Chapel is a space dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and this one is especially clear in its depiction of her life and miracles. The chapel, built in the Decorated Style , is rectangular, and its elevation is composed of a dado and clerestory. A series of niches encircle the room, forming the dado.



Figure **16.4.18**: Niches near altar that form the dado, Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Each niche is protected with a nodding ogee canopy and ornamented with relief sculpture relating to the Virgin (see Figure **16.4.18**). It has been observed that the sculptural niches of the dado have a vulvular shape, perhaps not coincidental given that the chapel celebrates the Virgin Mary, whose chief contribution to Christian history was giving birth to Jesus.



Figure **16.4.19**: Ogee, Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral; note that the heads of the figures have been broken off. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Lady Chapel was interrupted by the collapse of the central tower, and its progress may have been troubled again by the Black Death, which struck England in 1348. On the western side of the chapel, the nodding ogees of the dado flatten, and the diaper-work is halted (see Figure **16.4.19**). The vault fits uneasily on the chapel. Scholars suspect that some of the sculptors and masons at Ely may have fallen victim to the plague, leaving the lavish project to be completed by their less adept colleagues (see Figure **16.4.20**).

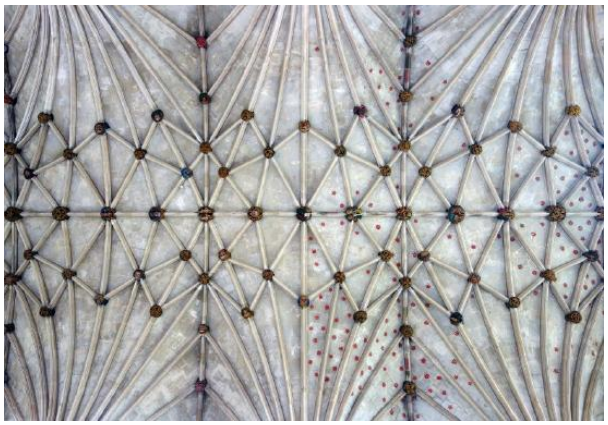


Figure **16.4.20**: Vaulting, Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Iconoclasm in the Ely Lady Chapel

Although the Ely Lady Chapel is one of the most beautiful interiors of English medieval art, it's also one of the most heavily destroyed. During the English Reformation, the sculptures were mutilated because religious imagery was thought to be idolatrous. The images were taken from their niches, and the colorful stained glass that would have filled the windows was destroyed (see Figure **16.4.21**). Some sculpture remains in the life of the Virgin series on the dado, but many have been stripped of their heads or more. Traces of polychromy remain, but are but a pale shadow of the formerly brilliant space.



Figure **16.4.21**: Surviving fragments of stained glass, Lady Chapel, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 16.4.22: Bishop Alcock's Chantry Chapel, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Phil McIver, CC BY-NC 2.0)

After the Black Death, a final style of the English Middle Ages emerges as the primary mode of building. This is called the Perpendicular Style because, unlike the flowing, undulating curves of the Decorated Style that preceded it, it emphasizes straight lines and vertical projections. The Perpendicular Style took hold in the second half of the fourteenth century, and continued through the remainder of the Middle Ages—almost two hundred years!



Figure 16.4.23: Souls being led out of Purgatory, from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves, folio 107r, c. 1440, The Morgan Library. (Faksimile Verlag Luzern, usage conditions)

Bishop Alcock's chantry chapel was built in the Perpendicular Style between 1488 and 1500 (see Figure 16.4.22). A chantry chapel is a space devoted to praying for an individual or a family in order to shorten their time in purgatory. Purgatory was understood to be a fiery place where souls went after death, but unlike hell, one could eventually leave purgatory after serving the required amount of time necessary for sins committed during life (see one artist's conception of Purgatory in Figure 16.4.23). A reduction of

one's sentence in purgatory could be achieved, either during life from the acquisition of indulgences, or in death if one's loved ones or the executors of their wills prayed for them and ensured that masses were said in their honor.

Alcock is likely to have planned the chapel himself—he had been the Controller of the Royal Works and Buildings under King Henry VII. The chapel is cordoned off from the north aisle with a microarchitectural screen with statue niches that are now empty. Though this screen is extremely intricate and beautifully carved, it doesn't quite fit in the space allotted for it. Prior to becoming bishop of Ely, Alcock had held the same post at Worcester Cathedral. It is thought that the chapel may have been planned for a large space there, but was instead jammed into tighter accommodations at Ely. Within the chapel is Alcock's tomb, in a niche, and an altar so that Masses could be said for his soul. Alcock's memory was also made explicit with the use of his rebus with a cock, or rooster, atop a globe, and his coat of arms, three cocks.



Figure **16.4.24**: Crossing tower, Ely Cathedral. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A ship of four styles

The "ship of the Fens" is a wonderful example of the evolution of English architectural style in the Middle Ages: from Romanesque to Early English Gothic, Decorated, and Perpendicular. The people who built churches in the Middle Ages wouldn't have thought of themselves as building in these styles, however—these are names given by historians in the nineteenth century to describe them retrospectively. The builders themselves would have thought of what they were building simply as "current." Although Etheldreda sought refuge her marriage in the quiet, eel-filled marshes of Ely, the Middle Ages saw this site develop into a far more elaborate space than she could possibly have imagined.

Articles in this section:

- Meg Bernstein, "Four styles of English medieval architecture at Ely Cathedral," in *Smarthistory*, October 26, 2018 (CC BY-NC-SA)

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16.5: Gothic Jewish Art and Textbook Conclusion

The Golden Haggadah

by Dr. Elisa Foster



Figure **16.5.1**: The preparation for the Passover festival: upper right: Miriam (Moses' sister), holding a timbrel decorated with an Islamic motif, is joined by maidens dancing and playing contemporary musical instruments; upper left: the master of the house, sitting under a canopy, orders the distribution of matzoh (unleavened bread) and haroset (a sweet made from nuts and fruit) to the children; lower right: the house is prepared for Passover, the man holding a candle searches for leavened bread on the night before Passover and the woman and girl clean; bottom left: sheep are slaughtered for Passover and a man purifies utensils in a cauldron over a fire. From the Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, northern Spain, probably Barcelona. (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 15 recto) (Photo via Smarthistory)

On the eve of the Jewish holiday of Passover, a child traditionally asks a critical question: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" This question sets up the ritual narration of the story of Passover, when Moses led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt with a series of miraculous events, as recounted in the Jewish Bible in the book of Exodus.



Figure **16.5.2**: Four plagues (clockwise from top left): painful boils afflict the Egyptians, swarms of frogs overrun the land, pestilence kills the domestic animals and wild animals invade the city. From the Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, northern Spain, probably Barcelona. (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 12 verso) (Photo via Smarthistory)

For the last and most terrible in a series of miraculous plagues that ultimately convinced the Egyptian Pharaoh to free the Jews—the death of the first born sons of Egypt—Moses commanded the Jews to paint a red mark on their doors. In doing so, the Angel of Death "passed over" these homes and the children survived. The story of Passover—of miraculous salvation from slavery—is one that is recounted annually by many Jews at a seder, the ritual meal that marks the beginning of the holiday.



Figure **16.5.3**: The plague of the first-born: in the upper-right corner, three scenes: an angel strikes a man, the queen mourns her baby, and the funeral of the first-born; upper left: Pharaoh orders the Israelites to leave Egypt, the Israelites, holding lumps of dough, walk with hands raised illustrating the verse: "And the children of Israel went out with a high hand"; bottom right: pursuing Egyptians are shown as contemporary knights led by a king; bottom left: the Israelites' safely cross the Red Sea, Moses takes a last look at the drowning Egyptians. From the Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, northern Spain Plagues (clockwise from top left), probably Barcelona. (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 14 verso) (Photo via Smarthistory)

A luxurious book

The book used to tell the story of Passover around the seder table each year is a special one, known as a haggadah (haggadot, pl). The Golden Haggadah, as you might imagine given its name, is one of the most luxurious examples of these books ever created. In

fact, it is one of the most luxurious examples of a medieval illuminated manuscript, regardless of use or patronage. So although the Golden Hagaddah has a practical purpose, it is also a fine work of art used to signal the wealth of its owners.



Figure 16.5.4: Left: Taking his family back to Egypt, Moses meets Aaron on the way and Zipporah, holding two babies in her arms, rides a mule; right: an angel appears above the bush that burns but is not consumed and on divine instructions, Moses takes off his shoes and hides his face when he hears the voice of God. Upper part of a page from the Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, Northern Spain, probably Barcelona. (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 10 verso) (Photo via Smarthistory)

A hagaddah usually includes the prayers and readings said during the meal and sometimes contained images that could have served as a sort of pictorial aid to envision the history of Passover around the table. In fact, the word "haggadah" actually means "narration" in Hebrew. The Golden Haggadah is one of the most lavishly decorated medieval Haggadot, containing 56 miniatures (small paintings) found within the manuscript. The reason it is called the "Golden" Haggadah is clear—each miniature is decorated with a brilliant gold-leaf background. As such, this manuscript would have been quite expensive to produce and was certainly owned by a wealthy Jewish family. So although many haggadot show signs of use—splashes of wine, etc.—the fine condition of this particular haggadah means that it might have served a more ceremonial purpose, intended to showcase the prosperity of this family living near Barcelona in the early fourteenth century.



Figure 16.5.5: Moses and Aaron come before Pharaoh, from the Golden Haggadah, c. 1320, Northern Spain, probably Barcelona. (British Library, MS. 27210, fol. 10 verso) (Photo via Smarthistory)

Gothic in style

The fact that the Golden Haggadah was so richly illuminated is important. Although the second commandment in Judaism forbids the making of "graven images," haggadot were often seen as education rather than religious and therefore exempt from this rule.



Figure **16.5.6**: Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France (detail), Dedication Page with Blanche of Castile and King Louis IX of France, Bible of Saint Louis (Moralized Bible), c. 1227–34. Ink, tempera, and gold leaf on vellum. (The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M. 240, fol. 8). (Photo via Smarthistory)

The style of the manuscript may look familiar to you—it is very similar to Christian Gothic manuscripts such as the Bible of Saint Louis (see Figure **16.5.6**). Look, for example, at the figure of Moses and the Pharaoh in Figure **16.5.5**. He doesn't really look like an Egyptian pharaoh at all but more like a French king. The long flowing body, small architectural details and patterned background reveal that this manuscript was created during the Gothic period. Whether the artists of the Golden Haggadah themselves were Jewish is open to debate, although it is certainly evident that regardless of their religious beliefs, the dominant style of Christian art in Europe clearly influenced the artists of this manuscript.

Cross-cultural styles

So the Golden Haggadah is both stylistically an example of Jewish art and Gothic art. Often Christian art is associated with the Gothic style but it is important to remember that artists, regardless of faith, were exchanging ideas and techniques. In fact, while the Golden Haggadah looks Christian (Gothic) in style, other examples of Jewish manuscripts, such as the Sarajevo Haggadah, blend both Christian and Islamic influences. This cross-cultural borrowing of artistic styles happened throughout Europe, but was especially strong in medieval Spain and Portugal, where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together for many centuries. Despite periods of persecution, the Jews of Spain, known as Sephardic Jews, developed a rich culture of Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). The Golden Haggadah thus stands as a testament to the impact and significance of Jewish culture in medieval Spain—and the rich multicultural atmosphere of that produced such a magnificent manuscript.

Altneushul, Prague

by Dr. Carol Herselle Krinsky



Figure **16.5.7**: Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Øyvind Holmstad, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In architecture, there is often a dominant mode of design in a given country or region at a particular moment in history. In central and western Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was customary to use Gothic elements such as pointed arches, rib vaults, and thin walls filled with stained glass.

But what about minority groups? Did they follow the trends of the majority or were they told what and how to build by the majority culture? Did the minorities have architects of their own on whom to rely, or were the minority members excluded from certain professions? We know about exclusion and discrimination from modern history. But what happened in the later middle ages?

Jews in Medieval Europe

For centuries, Jews were the most noticeable minority in Europe. They lived only in certain regions, and were excluded from others. Their numbers were usually restricted, even in places where they were allowed to live. Nevertheless, Jews were useful members of society, in part because most Jewish men were literate—they were, and still are, expected to read their prayers (poor Roman Catholics had no schools and relied on priests to read on their behalf). Literate people could be useful in commerce and in keeping records, so some rulers allowed Jews to live in their cities. Often, there was a district designated for Jews, perhaps near the commercial district of a city, near the city walls, or near the palace of the ruler whom they served (see Figure **16.5.8**). There were formal walled ghettoes only from the mid-sixteenth century onward.



Figure **16.5.8**: Křižovnický plán (Map of Prague), 1665. Archiv hlavního města Prahy showing Josefov (Prague's Jewish quarter) in blue. (Photo via Smarthistory)

Synagogue architecture

Every Jewish community had to have a place of worship, called a synagogue--from a Greek word related to assembling. Only a few rules governed the design of a synagogue; these rules were found in the Talmud. Later congregations of Jews adhered to these rules as best they could, despite the restrictions on their residence and use of land. Ideally, a synagogue's focal point, the end of the building's central axis, would face Jerusalem, to the southeast from the city of Prague.

The synagogue would contain carefully hand-written scrolls of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible that were held in a chest known as a Torah ark when not in use. The ark was located at the building's focal point. When the scrolls were removed from their storage chest, they would be carried ceremoniously to the center of the synagogue where the elders of the congregation would mount a low platform (*bimah*) and place the scrolls on a reading table (see Figure **16.5.9**). It would be an honor to be called to read to the congregation. In addition, no one was allowed to live above the synagogue; religious activity was to have pride of place and women would not occupy the same part of the building as men in order to avoid distracting the men from their prayers. Animals and other unclean things were not be allowed to defile the synagogue interior.



Figure 16.5.9: View with *bimah* at left, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Chajm Guski, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Altneushul: a Gothic synagogue

An important late medieval synagogue in Prague is called the Old New Synagogue because the city later gained a newer New Synagogue. It is generally known as the Altneushul in Yiddish (see Figures 16.5.7 and 16.5.10). It seems to have originally been a small rectangular building erected in the thirteenth century, but late in that century or in the next one, the original synagogue was enlarged. Both stages of construction were apparently designed and built by Christians, because Jews were either formally or tacitly excluded from the guilds, or trade associations, of the building crafts. An architect who at other times worked on churches seems to have been in charge because ornamental details are similar to those of a local church; the architect was therefore almost certainly Roman Catholic.

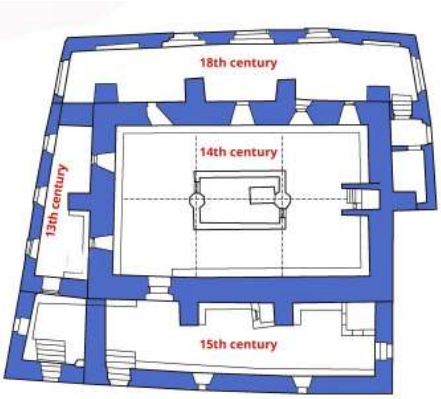


Figure 16.5.10: Altneushul plan. (Image via Smarthistory)

The synagogue stands in what was once the heart of the Jewish quarter. Its floor is lower than the level of the street in order to allow the congregation to utter the words of Psalm 130:1, “Out of the depths, I cry to Thee, O Lord.” The location has become all the more noticeable over time as the level of nearby streets has risen with re-paving, and as Pařížská (Paris Street), just to the east, was built in the nineteenth century to clear part of the old, crowded Jewish neighborhood.



Figure 16.5.11: Rib vaulting, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Peco~commonswiki, CC BY-SA 2.5)

The Altneushul, beyond the vestibule, is a rectangle about 26 feet wide and 45 feet long. It is composed of six bays arranged in two aisles, each with three bays. On the long east-west axis in the center of the building, two slender octagonal pillars allow the interior to be wider than it would have been without these supports. Leaf forms adorn the capitals.

Rib vaults cover each bay, but unlike the four-part, X-shaped ribs found in many Gothic-style vaults, those at the Altneushul have an extra, fifth rib, probably to help ensure stability; the same design can be seen in some secular and Christian buildings of the time (see Figure 16.5.11). The *bimah* stands between the octagonal pillars in the center of the synagogue, and the ark on the eastern wall terminates the principal axis of the interior.

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Figure 16.5.12: Interior view, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A place for prayer and study

This is clearly not the plan of a church. Jews had no need for a church plan with a nave, side aisles, chapels, and a transept because their rituals and customs differed from those of Roman Catholics. Instead, the plan of the Altneushul is more similar to the plan of certain secular buildings, as well as to some chapter houses. The plan of a meeting room was useful for a synagogue in which men meet to read and discuss religious doctrine. When possible, Jews and the Christians would not have wanted to imitate each other's religious architecture, although in some of the simplest churches, chapels, and synagogues, a single room had to suffice for the congregation. Nevertheless, because members of both religions used the same builders, the individual components or ornamental details of the various buildings often resemble each other in design. The Altneushul has only plant decoration, because at that time, Jews would not allow images of human beings within a religious context.



Figure **16.5.13**: Tympanum, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Paul Asman and Jill Lenoble, CC BY 2.0)

Seats and desks are distinctive features of a medieval synagogue; medieval churches had no seats and there was no need for desks since most Christians were not literate. Seats are necessary in synagogues because Jews spend hours there, reading their own prayers—in the middle ages, each man did so at his own pace—and discussing religious doctrine. Books were placed on the desks during the reading, and were later stored inside the desks for the next day's prayer and study meetings, along with the prayer shawls worn during religious services. In the Altneushul, the seats either face the *bimah*, or are arranged around the *bimah* platform; the ones we see today are neo-Gothic but reflect the original arrangement. This disposition assures that everyone is close to the *bimah* where the Torah portion is read each day. Members of the congregation faced each other during prayer, and that practice enhanced the sense of community. This is different from the practice in churches of that time, where the clergymen led Roman Catholics who stood one behind another and listened to a single authoritative voice.



Figure **16.5.14**: Desks, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Paul Asman and Jill Lenoble, CC BY 2.0)

Lighting fixtures are important in synagogues because each man must read the essential texts. In this building, the windows are small, either for customary or structural reasons or to prevent vandals from breaking large and expensive windows. Therefore, artificial lighting was needed and was provided by candlesticks but also by hanging lamps and other devices; the ones in place today are post-medieval (see Figure **16.5.14**).



Figure 16.5.15: Interior view with Torah ark, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Often, the *bimah* was made of wood, with a railing around it. The reading desk on the *bimah* faced the ark. In the Altneushul, the *bimah* is a delicate metal construction from the late fifteenth century that allows members of the congregation to easily see the reader. Both the entrance door and the pointed gable over the ark have carved decoration showing vines and fruits, though the ark is often concealed by a handsome curtain placed over it.



Figure 16.5.16: Opening to women's area, Altneushul, Prague, Czech Republic, completed 1270. (Photo: Chajm Guski, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

And the women?

So far, this essay has mentioned only men. Where were the women if they were not permitted in the main room of the synagogue? Evidence suggests that in early centuries, they were either excluded from synagogue activity or were accommodated in annexes. By the fourteenth century, a first women's annex was built at the Altneushul with small windows that opened to the main room where the men gathered (see Figure 16.5.16). This allowed women to hear the prayers but not to see the men or be seen by them. In the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the congregation built additional annexes to accommodate the increasing numbers of women who elected to, or were allowed to, attend religious services. In the late middle ages, too, the high saddle roof and the brick gable were added, making the synagogue more prominent in the neighborhood.



Figure **16.5.17**: Josef Niklas and Vojtěch Ignác Ullmann, Spanish Synagogue, Prague, Czech Republic, 1886. (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Loss and survival

Given the horrors perpetrated against European Jews during the Second World War, it may seem surprising that this building and several later synagogues in Prague have survived. The Pinkas Synagogue from the late fifteenth century is now a memorial; its walls are painted with the names of over 77,000 Czech Jews who were deported and murdered (see Figure **16.5.18**).



Figure **16.5.18**: Pinkas Synagogue Memorial, detail of names written on the walls (Photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Perversely, the Nazis and their collaborators left these buildings standing in order to provide the setting for a museum of a vanished people that was to contain artifacts collected from the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia and material from an early twentieth-century Jewish museum. These objects are now displayed in several of the other surviving synagogues in Prague, but the Altneushul, as the oldest survivor, has been left to illustrate the appearance of an unusually distinctive medieval synagogue.

Global Connections & Textbook Conclusion: The Future of Technology and Art History

Art and technology have always gone hand in hand. Technological advances, innovations, and inventions have fueled architectural and art historical developments throughout history. In this book, readers have seen how developments in metalwork, such as the lost-wax casting method and decorative cloisonné, led to long-standing artistic innovation, as multiple cultures adopt and adapt techniques in distinct ways. In the digital age, groundbreaking developments continue to forge new roads in art history and museums.

Through crowdsourced fundraising, new apps and video resources, immersive experiences, virtual engagement, and augmented reality (AR), art lovers have new ways to take part in the world of art history, without leaving home. After Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire in 2019, online fundraising campaigns began instantaneously. The fire introduced a new urgency to the Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris fundraising campaign (which had begun only two years prior to raise money for ongoing repairs), so they relaunched their website in a dramatic fashion, calling on everyday citizens to help save a piece of French Gothic history through their crowdsourced site.

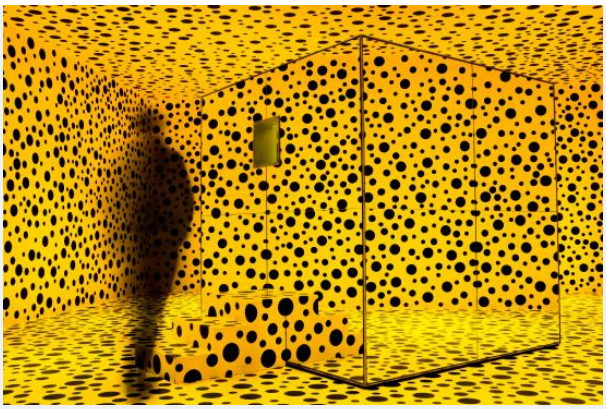


Figure **16.5.19**: Yayoi Kusama exhibition at Louisiana Museum, Denmark (Photo: Kristoffer Trolle, CC BY 2.0) Yayoi Kusama has created immersive experiences in museum spaces for decades. In this visitor's photograph, a viewer has captured some the feelings of physically being in the space and it shows the shadow of a figure standing in in one of Kusama's "infinity rooms." Because of social media engagement and viral posts of Kusama's rooms, her work is often immediately recognizable to viewers, even when they have not yet experienced her exhibits themselves.

Museums have also been involved in amplifying digital engagement with visitors, many of whom were not physically at the museum. In 2014, museums declared January 22 as Museum Selfie Day, encouraging visitors to take selfies with their collections and share online with the hashtag #museumselfie and in 2017, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art made headlines with its “Send Me” campaign. In 2020, inspired by the Dutch Instagram account Between Art and Quarantine, museums such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles challenged viewers to bring famous artworks to life using household items during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Recently, an app created by Indian media company Dentsu Webchutney and produced by Vice World News aimed to highlight the heated debates around repatriation at the British Museum, offering viewers the Truth Behind 10 Looted Objects in the British Museum through their Unfiltered History Tour. Using AR filters and short immersive videos, the app walks viewers through ten famous and contested works housed at the museum, even allowing viewers to see the objects virtually returned to and resituated in their countries of origin (readers will recall artifacts discussed in this text such as the Rosetta Stone, Parthenon Marbles, and Hoa Hakananai’a). Such immersive technology brings the topic of repatriation to life.

At the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA), their app aims to enhance visitors’ experience at the museum using location-specific content and AR that brings art in their collection to life, in the palm of visitors’ hands. Meanwhile, contemporary artists such as Nancy Baker Cahill, Beatriz Cortez, and Alejandro G. Iñárritu have all utilized augmented and virtual reality in their work (particularly using Cahill’s 4th Wall App), in order to immerse everyday viewers in their art, often as a call to action to engage with the politics that surround both the viewer, the location at which they stand, and the art itself.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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17.1: Glossary
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17.0: Index

W

Woman of Willendorf
5.1: Paleolithic Art

17.1: Glossary

abbess | a woman who is the head of an abbey

abbey | a religious community of monks or nuns, or the buildings that house such a community

abbot | a man who is the head of an abbey

abstraction | a style of representation that veers from naturalism, often reducing or distorting recognizable natural forms into shapes which may or may not be recognizably figurative. A means of visually representing concepts and ideas rather than replicating visual details.

acropolis | "high city," from the Greek akro-, (edge or extremity) + polis (city). Although many Greek cities had an acropolis, the most famous was in Athens, and "The Acropolis" refers to it

adlocutio | an address given by a general

aegis | shield or breastplate emblematic of majesty associated with Zeus and Athena

aesthetic | concerned with beauty and the appreciation of beauty, especially without regard for personal meaning or usefulness

agnus dei | Latin for "Lamb of God" (symbolically, Jesus Christ)

agriculture | cultivation of the soil for the growing of crops and the rearing of animals [Oxford Languages]

aisle | a passageway. In a Christian basilica, side aisles flank a large space called the nave.

alabaster | a relatively soft, easily-carvable, pale and often translucent stone

allusion | an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly [Oxford Languages]

ambulatory | from the Latin ambulātōrius (movable, suitable for walking), an aisle around a central space or an apse. In a pilgrimage church an ambulatory allows the faithful access to chapels and relics

amphitheater | a circular or oval performance space, from the Greek amphi (around/both/double) and theater

amphora | an ancient Greek jar or vase with a large oval body, narrow cylindrical neck, and two handles that rise almost to the level of the mouth [Merriam-Webster]

analogous colors | colors next to one another on the color wheel, which tend to blend together smoothly

angel | from the Greek angelos, "messenger," a spiritual being believed to act as an attendant, agent, or messenger of God, conventionally represented in human form with wings [Oxford Languages]

Anglo-Saxon | of or relating to the Germanic peoples who conquered England in the fifth century BCE and formed the ruling class until the Norman conquest [Merriam-Webster]

aniconic | not containing representations of humans or animals

ankh | a cross-like symbol with a looped top, the Egyptian sign of life

apadana | a massive columned hall used by Persian kings for receptions

apocalypse | the end of time and history, in Christianity often imagined as a huge battle

apostle | from Greek apostolos, "one sent, messenger," those sent by Christ to spread his teachings outside the Holy Land

apse | In architecture, a recess, usually semicircular, in the wall of a Roman basilica or at one end of a church, often the east end [Art History Glossary]

aqueduct | a raised channel for carrying water, often positioned atop an arcade

arcade | a row of arches connected side to side

arch | a true arch is a strong structural element in the shape of an inverted U, comprised of wedge-shaped blocks called voussoirs and held in place with a keystone. For a corbeled arch, see corbelling

archaeology | the study of the human past using material remains [National Geographic]

archaic smile | A curved-lip smile on statues of the Greek Archaic period, animating facial features with a degree of naturalism [Art History Glossary]

Arian | pertaining to the teachings of Arius, who held that Christ came into existence after God the Father, and is subordinate to Him.

artifact | tools, clothing, and decorations made by people [National Geographic]

ashlar masonry | stone construction in which stones are cut and placed to form a rectilinear grid with little or no mortar

aurochs | an extinct species of cattle, thought to be the wild ancestor of all later domesticated cattle

axis | line along which an artwork or structure is organized

balance | the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, texture, and space. [Getty]

ball court | an area, generally in the center of a Mesoamerican city, built for the ritual ballgame sport

baptism | the Christian rite of purification by water, originally involving immersion but in later versions also consisting of sprinkling or pouring water on the recipient

baptistery | a building or basin used for the Christian sacrament of baptism

barbarian | from Greek barbaros, "foreigner," probably stemming from how Greeks perceived non-Greek languages as babble; a pejorative term for a culture perceived as less civilized

barrel vault | a vault shaped like a longitudinal section of a barrel

basilica | a common Roman government building that was adapted for Christian church architecture

bay | a division of a building between vertical lines or planes, especially the entire space included between two adjacent supports, such as the columns in a church nave [Britannica]

bilateral symmetry | two-sided symmetry in which two halves of a work of art mirror each other

bilingual vase | a Greek vase painted partly in black figure and partly in red figure decoration

bitumen | a naturally-occurring tar used as an adhesive and decorative material

blind arch | an arch applied to a wall

bovid | an animal of the cattle family

bucrania | (plural: bucrania) Latin, the skull of an ox, or the representation of one

buon fresco | also known as "true fresco," the technique of painting on wet plaster, rather than dry (as is the case with "fresco secco")

buttress | in architecture, a projecting structure that reinforces or stabilizes a wall or building [James Terry]

caliph | one who claims Islamic rule as a successor to Mohammed

caliphate | the area ruled by a caliph

calligraphy | from the Greek calli- (beautiful) + graphy (writing), the art of writing

canon | 1) a rule for a standard of beauty developed for artists to follow; 2) a body of works considered especially important

canopic jar | from Canopus, the name of a town in ancient Egypt, a covered urn used in ancient Egyptian burials to hold the entrails from an embalmed body [Oxford Languages]

capital | the sculpted element at the top of a column or pilaster

Carolingian Renaissance | the revival of Roman art and literature under Charlemagne

carpet page | a richly-decorated manuscript page, where the illumination, occupying all or most of the page, resembles an ornate tapestry

caryatids | weight-bearing columns sculpted in the form of women

castrum | (plural: castra) a Roman military encampment or fortress

catacomb | an underground cemetery comprising a complex of passageways, burial niches, and recessed chambers cut into the living rock. [Oxford Languages]

cathedral | the home church of a bishop

Caucasus | the mountain range between the Black and Caspian Seas. The Caucasus refers to the region in and close to the Caucasus Mountains, and Caucasian to the peoples living there.

cavalry | soldiers mounted on horses

cella | the inner room of a temple that housed an image of the deity

Celt | a member of the Indo-European group that spread over Europe from about 700 BCE to 1 CE. The Irish, highland Scots, and Welsh speak Celtic languages.

centaur | in Greek mythology, a creature with legs and body of a horse and the torso, head, and arms of a human

central plan | in architecture, the arrangement of the structural elements around a central point, often in a circle or octagon (compare to longitudinal plan)

ceramic | made from clay transformed by heating to a minimum of 600 degrees celsius, usually much higher

Chacoan | relating to the people of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico

champlevé enamel | a technique in which enamel fills a space carved for it in a metal surface and is polished flush with the metal after firing

chapel | an often-small or private place of worship, such as a room within a church or palace

Chi Rho | the first letters of Christ in Greek, often used to abbreviate Christ in Latin manuscripts

chiaroscuro | from Italian chiaro ("light") and scuro (dark), the use of lighter and darker shades to create a sense of volume

chimera | in Greek mythology, a creature made up of parts of a lion, a goat, and a snake

choir | the space behind the altar of a church

chronology | an arrangement of events in the order in which they occured, often including dividing them into periods

city-state | a state consisting of one city, often including its immediate environs

civilization | from Latin civitas, "city," a complex human society including at least one city.

classic | the period in the development of a past culture, one which has had a lasting effect upon vast numbers of people, when the particular culture reached its zenith, laying the foundation for later historical developments (for example, Classic Mayan Period, Classic Pueblo Period, Classic Ancient Greek Period).

Classical | the art and culture of ancient Greece between 480 and 323 BCE. Lowercase classical refers more generally to Greco-Roman art and culture [Gardner's]

classical orders | the styles of classical architecture, each distinguished by its proportions and characteristic profiles and details, and most readily recognizable by the type of column and capital employed; three of the five Classical orders of architecture were developed in ancient Greek periods: Doric Order, Ionic Order, Corinthian Order [Art History Glossary]

classicism | relating to the style and values of ancient Greek and Roman art

clerestory | an upper level of windows, rising above a lower roof, to admit light and sometimes air into a tall building

cloisonné | a technique in which melted glass/enamel fills partitions (cloisons, in French), formed by metal wires fused to a metal base (or in which semi-precious stones are inserted into small compartments for a similar effect)

cloister | an area within a monastery or convent to which the religious are normally restricted [Merriam-Webster], or an open area surrounded by a covered walkway

codex | (plural: codices) a manuscript book that, unlike a scroll, allows for writing on both sides of a page, either with pages folded and sewn together or, as in Mesoamerican codices, pleated like an accordion

coffered dome | a dome with inset panels used to lighten weight and/or add decoration

coffers | inset panels in a ceiling, arch, or dome, used to lighten weight and/or add decoration

coil construction | in ceramics, a technique in which forms are created by stacking and combining coils or ropes of clay

colonettes | thin columns

colonial | pertaining to a colony, often used to refer to the periods in which colonies were particularly important, as in Europe in the fifteenth through twentieth centuries

colonnade | a row of evenly-placed columns

colossus | a massive sculpture of a person

complementary colors | colors across the color wheel from each other and that both appear more bold when placed next to each other

composition | the organization of elements within a work of art

concrete | a Roman invention, a mix of lime mortar, pebbles, sand, and water, which can be poured into molds and which hardens to function like stone

conservation | a scientific discipline that seeks to preserve cultural heritage for the future and can involve cleaning and repairing; ideally repairs are visible, but not distracting to the viewer

conservators | professionals trained in the analysis and preservation or artwork

consul | in the Roman Republic, the most powerful elected office; in the Empire, an honorary position representing the emperor in the Senate and at games

content | what a work of art is about; its story

continuous narrative | a method of visual storytelling showing two consecutive scenes simultaneously

contour lines | lines that define the borders of a shape

contrapposto | a stance in which the figure bears weight on one leg, shifting the hips, chest, and shoulders into a more naturalistic, realistic pose

contrast | the amount of variation between the highest and lowest values in a work

convention | a generally accepted or traditional way of representing forms in art. Conventions are characteristic of the art produced in a particular culture, time, and/or medium. [James Terry]

corbeled arch | an arch formed by material being built up in successive layers, or courses, with each one overhanging the one below it until they meet at the top

corbeled dome | an arch formed by material being built up in successive layers, or courses, with each one overhanging the one below it until they meet in the middle, at the capstone at the top of the dome

Corinthian | one of the Greek orders, particularly recognizable by relatively ornate capitals featuring acanthus leaves

corvée labor | unpaid labor coerced by the state

cosmology | beliefs about the order and structure of the universe

cosmopolitan | from the Greek, cosmos (universe) + polis (city), having wide international sophistication [Merriam-Webster]

council | in Christianity, an official meeting of bishops whose decisions should guide the Church

craft | an activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill [Merriam-Webster]

cruciform | having the shape of the cross; a common layout for early and later Christian churches

Crusade | any of the military expeditions undertaken by Christian powers in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries to win the Holy Land from the Muslims [Merriam-Webster]

cuirass | breastplate, sometimes elaborately decorated

cuneiform | writing system developed in ancient Sumer from the Latin for wedge (cuneus) + form (shaped)

Cyclopean masonry | a method of construction using huge, roughly shaped blocks of stone [James Terry]

cylinder seal | a small pierced object, like a long round bead, carved in reverse (intaglio) and hung on strings of fiber or leather

Daedalic | period in the seventh century; name comes from the legendary sculptor Daedalus, who was said to be from the island of Crete [Smarthistory]

damnatio memoriae | literally "damnation of memory" (Latin), the practise of destroying all references to a disgraced person

deity | a god, goddess, or other being having the power of a god

demos | from Greek demos (village), the smallest group of citizens in Athenian democracy, or Athenian citizens as a whole

demotic | language used by ordinary people, such as Demotic Egyptian or Demotic Greek

desacralized | divested of sacred status

diaspora | a population united by ties to a homeland where they no longer live

diorite | a very hard igneous rock, similar to granite though generally darker in color

diptych | an artwork consisting of two pieces, sometimes a pair of panels hinged together

disciple | from the Latin discipulus (learner); in Christianity, one of Christ's followers

Dogon | an African ethnic group from present-day Mali and Burkina Faso

dome | a hemispherical interior space, formed either by corbelling or by spinning an arch on its axis (true dome)

Doric | the Doric order uses a plain capital and a column shaft that rests directly on the stylobate of the temple without a base. The Doric entablature includes a frieze composed of triglyphs (vertical plaques with three divisions) and metopes (square spaces for either painted or sculpted decoration)

dyad | from the Greek dyo- (two), consisting of two elements; a pair

dynasty | a succession of rulers whose legitimacy derives from the normalized transfer of power

earspools | large decorations worn in pierced ears; a feature common to Mesoamerican and North American cultures

Edict of Milan | decree issued by Constantine in 313 CE which legalized Christianity

effigy | a three-dimensional model of a person

elevation | in architecture, a view of a wall or facade head-on, showing the vertical organization of its features

emphasis | drawing particular attention to one or more areas of an artwork

enamel | colored glass in powdered form that is bonded to a metal surface or plaque by firing [James Terry]

encaustic | a painting medium in which the binder for the pigments is hot wax

engaged columns | columns that are not free-standing but become part of the wall they support

entablature | in the Classical orders of architecture, the structure above the columns that supports the roof, typically comprised of, from top to bottom, a cornice, a frieze, and an architrave [Lynch]

entasis | slight adjustments in Greek architecture to account for the perception of human vision, such as slightly swelling the middle of a column so that it would not appear to taper in the middle

epic | a long poem, typically one derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures [Oxford Languages]

equestrian statue | a portrait of an individual mounted on horseback

etymology | the origin of a word

Eucharist | one of the rites of the Christian church, it is based on scripture that quotes Jesus at the Last Supper telling His apostles to remember Him with a ritual of eating bread—"It is my body"—and drinking wine—"It is my blood"; also known as "Holy Communion" or "The Lord's Supper" [Art History Glossary]

Eucharistic chalice | a cup for the wine served in ritual Communion, or Eucharist, in the Christian church

Eurocentric | the tendency to hold that Europe is the natural center of civilization, by which other civilizations and their products should be judged

Eurocentrism | the attitude or ideology that holds that Europe is the natural center of civilization, by which other civilizations and their products should be judged

evangelist | one of the four authors of the Gospels in the Christian New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

evangelist portrait | an author portrait depicting one of the evangelists, generally placed at the beginning of his Gospel in a manuscript

evangelist symbol | one of the four creatures of Ezekiel's tetramorph, representing or accompanying an evangelist. Usually shown with wings, these are a man or angel for Matthew, a lion for Mark, an ox or calf for Luke, and an eagle for John.

façade | the front of a building

faience | a type of ceramic with a glass-like surface

Farsi | the medieval and modern language of Persia, commonly called Persian

feminism | the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes [Oxford Languages]

fibula | a pin for holding clothing in place

filigree | a lacy, delicate style of metalwork, made with fine, twisted wires, usually of gold or silver, soldered to the surface of an object [James Terry]

findspot | the location where an artwork or object was discovered

fine arts | the visual arts historically assigned higher prestige in the early modern and modern European tradition: painting, sculpture, architecture

firmen | in Turkish and Persian, an official decree, order, license, or grant issued by a ruler [Merriam Webster]

fleur-de-lis | a symbol based on a stylized lily, often representing French royalty

fluted | having decorative grooves

flying buttress | in Gothic architecture, an exterior structural element that carries the thrust of the nave vault over to the side aisles; the buttresses (vertical supports) and the flyers (arches that connect buttresses to the wall they support) together form the components of a flying buttress [Art History Glossary]

folded-arm-figures (FAFs) | type of Cycladic sculpture featuring a full-length female form with arms crossed over her chest

folio | a sheet of parchment or paper, comprising two pages, abbreviated "fol." The front page is called the recto (abbreviated "r") and the back page is called the verso ("v")

form | actual, three-dimensional shape (or the illusion of three-dimensionality)

formal analysis | analysis of a work of art based on its formal elements rather than its subject matter or historical context

formal elements | the characteristics of a work of art that can be recognized by the eye—line, shape, color, space, texture, etc. These are separate from an artwork's content or story.

forum | (plural: fora) a central public and/or market space in Roman cities

freestanding | relating to sculpture that can be observed from all sides; sculpture in the round. Compare to relief sculpture

fresco | from Italian "fresh," painting in which a water-based pigment is applied to damp plaster so that it chemically bonds as the plaster cures

frieze | in Greek temple architecture, the part of the entablature above the architrave and often bearing painted or sculpted decoration

frontal | in reference to the depiction of a person, showing both eyes, the width of the shoulders, and the knees (compare profile)

frontality | in sculpture, the quality of having a clear front designed to face the viewer

gallery | in church architecture, a walkway or balcony above the aisle, opening into the nave

geoglyphs | designs formed on the earth

geomythology | the study of stories that may have their origin in geological events

Germanic | the ancient culture and language of the peoples of northern Europe [Collins Dictionary]

gigantomachy | a scene of battle featuring giants

glaze | in ceramics, a coating that when fired melts to form a glassy surface (compare slip)

glyph | a character or figure that communicates meaning

gorget | a neck ornament, pendant, or ornamental collar

Gospels | the four books from the Christian New Testament that record the life of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

graffiti | (singular: graffito) literally, "things written" (Italian), writing or painting done on walls, usually without formal permission.

granulation | a metalworking technique in which small balls, or granules, of metal are fused to the metal surface

Greco-Roman | having characteristics that are partly Greek and partly Roman; specifically: having the characteristics of Roman art created under strong Greek influence [Merriam-Webster]

griffin | mythical animal that combines the physical aspects of a lion and eagle

groin vault | a vault formed by the intersection of two barrel vaults

ground line | a baseline in painting or relief sculpture on which figures appear to stand

guilds | professional associations

haft-rangi | a technique for keeping differently-colored glazes separate by outlining them in wax. Also called cuerda seca ("dry cord" in Italian) for the unglazed space left where the wax had been before firing.

haggadah | (plural: haggadot)the book used to tell the story of Passover around the seder table each year

hajj | an annual pilgrimage to the Kaaba and one of the pillars of Islam

halo | a marker of holiness, often in the form of a circle around an individual's head

hatching | a shading technique made with closely-spaced parallel lines

heraldic composition | an organization of figures in which the central one is flanked symmetrically

heretic | someone who goes against the official teachings of a particular belief system

hermetic | sealed-off

hierarchical scale | scale based on relative importance; the more important a figure, the larger it appears compared to those around it. Also known as hieratic scale, hierarchy of scale.

hieratic scale | scale based on relative importance; the more important a figure, the larger it appears compared to those around it. Also known as hierarchical scale, hierarchy of scale.

hieroglyph | a symbol or picture used to confer meaning in hieroglyphic writing [Gardner's]

hieroglyphic | a system of writing using hieroglyphs [Gardner's]

Hippodamian plan | a settlement plan based on a strict grid system

historiography | the study of how and why histories (including art histories) have been written

Holy Roman Empire | an empire consisting primarily of a loose confederation of German and Italian territories under the suzerainty of an emperor and existing from the 9th or 10th century to 1806 [Merriam-Webster]

horseshoe arch | an arch shaped like a horseshoe, that is, curving wider than its vertical supports

humanities | the branches of learning (such as philosophy, arts, or languages) that investigate human constructs and concerns as opposed to natural processes (as in physics or chemistry) and social relations (as in anthropology or economics) [Merriam-Webster]

hypocaust | interior heating system, invented by Romans

hypostyle | characterized by columns of the same height. A hypostyle hall often gives the impression of a forest of columns supporting the roof.

Iberia | the peninsula in southwest Europe now comprising Spain, Portugal, and Gibraltar

icon | from the Greek eikon ("image") In Byzantine art, any image that aids in the contemplation of the divine.

iconoclasts | literally, "breakers of images," those opposed to depicting sacred imagery, considering it idolatry (worshipping inanimate objects)

iconography | from the Greek eikon ("image") + glúphō ("to carve" or "to write"), the visual images and symbols used in a work of art or the study or interpretation of these [Art History Glossary]

iconophiles | literally "lovers of images," those who argue for the value of imagery as a gateway to worship of the divine

idealization | a style of representation that perfects or makes "ideal" the subject's features, proportions, etc., in accordance with prevailing beauty standards

identity politics | politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns without regard to the interests or concerns of any larger political group [Merriam-Webster]

idolatry | the worship of inanimate obects, or idols

Ilkhanate | the Middle Eastern divison of the Mongol Empire that at its greatest extent included all of modern Iran and Azerbaijan, much of Turkey and Turkmenistan, and parts of Iraq, Syria, Afhanistan, and Pakistan

illumination | a painting in a handmade book

implied lines | lines that are not actually drawn, but that allow us to "connect the dots" to create the lines in our minds

ingot | a mass of metal cast into a convenient shape for storage or transportation to be later processed [Merriam-Webster]

inlay | decoration created by embedding one material into another so that the surfaces are flush

insula | (plural: insulae) in Roman architecture, a multistory apartment house, usually made of brick-faced concrete; also refers to an entire city block [Gardner's]

intaglio | from the Latin, tagliare (to cut). May refer to carving stone or other hard material to produce a positive image when impressed upon soft material, like clay. May also refer to a printing process in which lines are cut or etched into a metal plate and which then, when inked, transfer that inked mark to paper.

interlace | intertwining linear designs, sometimes in the form of knotwork

Ionic | one of the two systems (or orders) invented in ancient Greece for articulating the three units of the elevation of a classical building: the platform, the colonnade, and the superstructure (entablature). The Ionic order is characterized by, among other features, volutes, capitals, columns with bases, and an uninterrupted frieze. [Gardner's]

Islam | from the Arabic, "submission"; a monotheistic religion that arose on the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century and whose first prophet was Muhammad.

ivory | material from the tusk of an elephant or walrus

iwan | a vaulted space fully open on one side, known especially in the four-iwan mosque

Iyoba | Benin queen mother

jade | a hard green semiprecious gemstone

jamb | an upright post forming the side of an opening, such as a door frame or window frame [James Terry]

ka | in Egyptian belief, the immortal spirit which would leave the physical body at death

keystone | the stone at the top of a true arch that holds all the other voussoirs (wedge-shaped blocks) in place

kiva | a Hopi word used to refer to specialized round and rectangular rooms in modern Pueblos. Modern kivas are used by men's ceremonial associations. Archeologists assume that ancient kivas served similar functions.[National Parks Service]

kore | Greek, "young woman;" a sculpture of a female youth

kouros | Greek, "young man;" a sculpture of a male youth

krater | large, open-mouthed vessel for mixing water and wine

Kufic | an angular Arabic script frequently used in Qur'ans, named for the town where it was developed

labrys | the double-headed axe that features frequently in Minoan art

labyrinth | in Greek mythology, the intricate maze King Minos built to confine youths intended for sacrifice; in general use, an intricate maze

lamassu | human-headed winged lion figures, often carved in stone as guardian figures of Assyrian palace entrances

lancet windows | narrow, pointed windows

land acknowledgement | a statement or process recognizing the original Indigenous inhabitants and stewards of the land

landscape | an artwork focusing on natural scenery

libation | a liquid poured out as an offering to a deity

linear perspective | a system for depicting space that is based on the optical illusion that parallel lines seem to converge as they recede into the distance

liturgy | the official ritual of public worship [Gardner's]

LM II | Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who first uncovered the palace at Knossos, divided Minoan chronology into many different periods with distinct abbreviations. LM II stands for the second part of the Late Minoan period.

logographic | characterizing a writing system which uses a sign (picture, symbol, or letter) to communicate a symbol or word

longitudinal | in architecture, describes a plan arranged along a single central axis, culminating at the altar

lost-wax casting | a sculpture technique in which a clay mold is coated in wax, covered in plaster, and then heated, causing the wax to run out. Molten metal is then poured into the resulting channels, allowed to cool, and the mold broken so that the sculpture can be removed and polished.

lunette | from the French (“little moon”), a semicircular architectural space that can be filled with a painting, a mosaic, relief sculpture or a window. [James Terry]

lusterware | a technique of decorating ceramics that results in a shiny, metallic surface that imitates metalware

lux nova | Latin for "new light," referring to the heavenly aura created in Gothic churches by the proliferation of windows, particularly with stained glass

madrassa | an Islamic school, or the building housing one

magus | (plural: magi) a wise man from the east, specifically one of the three who visited the baby Jesus

majuscule | a large, uppercase letter; a style of writing in which all letters have the same height (prior to Charlemagne's introduction of minuscules, or lowercase letters)

Mamluk | Arabic for "owned." Turkic slaves who served as soldiers to the Ayyubid sultanate before revolting and rising to power.

mandala | from the Sanskrit, "circle," a diagram of the sacred universe in Buddhism and Hinduism

mandorla | from the Latin, "almond," a full-body halo in the shape of an almond

mantle | an often-heavy robe or cloak

manuscript | from the Latin manus (hand) + scriptus (written), a document written, and often lavishly decorated, by hand

maqsura | a private space in a mosque intended for the use of the ruler, often indicated by an enclosure and/or by a dome

martyrs | those killed for their beliefs; often with religious connotations

mausoleum | a building meant to house a tomb

meander | a decorative pattern constructed from a continuous line that takes repeated right-angled turns. The term derives from the twisting course of the Maeander River in Asia Minor. [James Terry]

medium | the material(s) from which a work of art is made

megalith | from the Greek mega- (big) + lith- (stone), a massive rock

megaron | a rectangular hall, fronted by an open, two-columned porch. It contained a more or less central open hearth, which was vented through an oculus in the roof above it and surrounded by four columns. The architectural plan of the megaron became the basic shape of Greek temples, demonstrating the cultural shift as the gods of ancient Greece took the place of the Mycenaean rulers.

Mesoamerica | the region that comprises Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and the Pacific coast of El Salvador [Gardner's]

Mesolithic | the "middle" Stone Age, between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic ages [Gardner's]

Mesopotamia | from Greek, "place between rivers," the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

messianic religions | religions that include a messiah figure who is promised to save believers

metopes | rectangular spaces between the triglyphs of a Doric entablature, originally featuring painting or sculpture

mihrab | a niche or small room in the qibla wall

minaret | a tower adjacent or attached to a mosque, from which the call to prayer is announced

minbar | a platform reached by a flight of steps used for preaching in a mosque [James Terry]

mint | to produce a coin

mithraeum | an underground room simulating a cave used for mithraic rites (as initiations) [Merriam-Webster]

Mithraism | an eastern mystery cult focusing on the worship of Mithras

Mixtec | from Nahuatl mixtēcatl, mix- (cloud) + -tēcatl (person), literally, inhabitant of Mixtlan (mountainous area of western Oaxaca) [Merriam-Webster]

moai | monolithic figural sculpture carved by Rapanui people on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in Polynesia. Also spelled moʻai.

Mogollon | a cultural group named for the Mogollon mountains in New Mexico and spanning parts of what is today northern Mexico, Arizona, and New Mexico

monastery | an often remote, self-sufficient community of the faithful (monks) who have committed themselves to a life of religious devotion

monolithic | consisting of a single stone, usually a very large one

monotheistic | characterized by a belief in one god

monumental | huge; referring to, or acting as, a monument

mortise and tenon | joints formed by inserting a projecting point on one piece of wood (tenon) into a hole (mortise) in another piece

mosaic | a technique in which an image is formed using small pieces (tesserae) of hard material, such as stone, glass, and/or metal

mosque | a building intended for Muslim prayer. A congregational mosque is large enough to accommodate all the men of a community for Friday prayer. An oratory mosque is smaller.

movement | a sense of motion as the eye is guided through a work of art--or the physical motion of kinetic artworks

mummification | the ancient Egyptian process of preserving a corpse so that it could serve as a home for the ka

municipium | Latin, town or city

muqarnas | a decorative system that breaks the surface of a vault into small squinches, often referred to as resembling honeycomb. Generally ornamental rather than structural.

mural | a painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall [James Terry]

Muslim | an adherent of Islam

naos | the inner sanctuary of a Greek temple

narthex | (plural: narthices) a portico or vestibule at the entrance of a church

nativity | the Christian scene of Jesus' birth

naturalism | a style of representation that seeks to recreate the appearance of the visible world or nature

nave | from the Latin for "ship," the long central aisle of a basilica or cathedral

necropolis | from Greek, “city of the dead, ”a cemetery located outside a city [James Terry]

necropolis | a large, ancient cemetary [Smarthistory]

negative space | the area around and between the figure and ground

nemes | striped linen headcloth worn by ancient Egyptian kings

Neolithic | from the Greek, "old stone," the last section of the Stone Age, in which people had adopted agriculture

neolithic revolution | the profound social changes that occured when people moved from hunting and gathering to agriculture

Neopalatial period | Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who first uncovered the palace at Knossos, divided Minoan chronology into many different periods, including the Neopalatial period, sometimes abbreviated as MM III.

niello | any of several black enamel-like alloys usually of sulfur with silver, copper, and lead [Merriam-Webster]

Nike | a winged personification of victory; Greek goddess of victory

nome | a geographic designation, similar to the modern idea of a region, district, or county

non-representational | not depicting recognizable objects; non-representational art is sometimes described as pure abstraction

obsidian | naturally occurring black stone/glass formed by lava

oculus | Latin, "eye," an opening at the top of a dome or a circular window

opus caementicium | Roman concrete

oral history | information and traditions passed down through spoken word, stories, and songs rather than through written records

orant | a standing figure with hands raised in prayer [James Terry]

orant | a figure with arms outstretched in a gesture of prayer

orator | a person giving a speech

oratorical gesture | an address given by a general

organic | in art, defining lines or shapes that are loose and curving like those found in nature

Orientalism | the fascination by Europeans with so-called "Oriental" cultures, imagined as mysterious, decadent, and violent, often with pejorative connotations.

orthogonals | the lines used in the technique of linear perspective that converge at the vanishing point to suggest the illusion of depth

outline | a heavy, often black, contour line

palatine | of or relating to a palace

Paleolithic | from Greek "old stone," the oldest section of the Stone Age and the beginning of human cultures

palette | surface used for grinding and/or mixing pigments

Pan-Africanism | unifying political and cultural movements bringing together African nations and people of African descent

Panhellenic | all people of Greek ancestry or origin

pantheon | from the Greek pan- (all) + theos (gods), the collected deities of a particular group or region

Pantocrator | from the Greek, pan- (all) + kratōr (to rule), Christ as the almighty ruler

papyrus | a reed-like plant or the paper-like material created by overlapping layers of its pith, pressing them and polishing them

parchment | a paper-like material made from very thinly stretched and scraped animal skin, treated to receive ink or paint

paterfamilias | Latin for "father of the family," the oldest man in a Roman family (who often lived in multigenerational households), who held rights to all its property and made decisions about marriages

patriarch | in the Greek Church and related churches, the highest clerical rank (compare pope)

patricians | members of the Roman land-owning class

patron | a person who pays for or otherwise orders art

Pax Romana | era of peace in the Roman Empire, initiated by Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, and persisting roughly 200 years until the death of Marcus Aurelius

pectoral | pertaining to the chest; often refers to an ornament worn on the chest

pediment | the triangular space forming the gable of a pitched roof in classical architecture [Art History Glossary]

pendentive | from the Latin pendēre (to hang), a curved triangular shape between a circular dome and a straight supporting pier

perspective | a technique for representing three-dimensional space on a flat surface. May refer to linear perspective, a scientific approach utilizing orthogonals that meet at a vanishing point; atmospheric perspective, where objects farther away appear bluer or foggier; or intuitive perspective, which often features the farther objects at the top of the image.

pharaoh | a king of ancient Egypt

phonetic | representing the sounds of speech [Merriam-Webster]

photograph | from Greek, "drawing with light," an image produced by registering light. Many images in this book are photographs, but most of the objects depicted are not.

pictograph | a picture, usually stylized, that represents an idea; also, writing using such means; also, painting on a rock. [Gardner's]

picture plane | the conceptual surface of a work of art, which can act like a transparent window, opening onto what feels like deep, three-dimensional space, or —especially in modern painting—may emphasize its own flatness as a surface for paint

pier | a heavy stone or concrete support, often larger than a column, with a wider base, and squared edges

pigment | a material, often in powdered form, that is applied directly to a surface or mixed with liquid, such as oil or water, to create paint

pilasters | architectural elements similar to engaged columns, but flat rather than rounded

pilgrimage | a journey undertaken for spiritual purposes, including the answer to a prayer, forgiveness for a sin, or healing for oneself or another

pilgrims | individuals undertaking a spiritual journey, or pilgrimage

plebeian | the class of Romans that included merchants, small farmers, and freed slaves

plebian | in ancient Rome, a merchant, small farmer, or freed slave

pointed arch | an arch that is pointed rather than rounded to allow for the more efficient distribution of weight; characteristic of Gothic architecture and introduced to Europe from the Middle East; sometimes called an ogival arch or a "Gothic" arch [Art History Glossary]

poleis | Greek for "city"

polychrome | consisting of more than one color, from the Greek poly (many) + chroma (color)

polytheism | belief in multiple gods

pope | in the Middle Ages, the head of the Latin Church

porcelain | an extremely fine, hard, translucent, white ceramic invented in China in the 8th century CE [James Terry]

portal | an entrance, especially the large central doorway of a church

portico | a structure consisting of a roof supported by columns at regular intervals, usually attached to a building as a porch [James Terry]

portrait | a representation of an actual person (as opposed to an image of a deity, for example)

post-and-lintel | a simple architectural technique of enclosing space using upright supports (posts) topped by a crosspiece (lintel)

Pre-Columbian | the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus; a problematic term as it both collapses many different cultures and foregrounds the name of a violent European invader

prefiguration | a story or symbol from the Jewish Bible that is seen to prefigure, or predict, an event in the life of Christ

prehistoric | referring to a period before written history

primary colors | the colors red, yellow, and blue, from which the rest of the colors can be formed

profile | the view of a person or animal as seen from the side, rather than the front

pronaos | entranceway of a Greek temple, behind a portico and flanked by walls

proportion | size relationship of parts of a body or form to one another and of the parts to the whole

Proto-Archaic | the period between Geometric and Archaic in Greek and Etruscan art, sometimes formerly called Orientalizing

provenance | the story of an artwork's discovery, findspot, and its various owners through history

psalter | a book containing the Psalms from the Hebrew Bible, used in Christian liturgy

pseudoperipteral | a Roman temple arrangement in which the front columns are free-standing but the columns on the back and sides are engaged

purgatory | in Roman Catholic doctrine, a space of suffering after death through which an individual may atone for sins in order to eventually be admitted to heaven

pylon | a monumental gateway of an ancient Egyptian temple, consisting of two tapering towers flanking the entrance [James Terry]

qibla | the direction of Mecca; in a mosque, a qibla wall often indicates this direction

Qur'an | the holy book of Muslims, who believe that it records the word of God as recited by Mohammed, in Arabic. Also spelled Koran.

radial symmetry | symmetry around a central point or axis, like a sunflower viewed head-on

radiocarbon dating | a method for determining the age of organic materials based on the decay of the carbon isotope carbon-14 [James Terry]

register | a horizontal band containing decorative or narrative imagery. The term is normally used when a work of art is organized in multiple horizontal bands [James Terry]

relic | a piece of material or body part associated with a sacred event or person, and believed to have miraculous powers

relief | sculpture that, unlike free-standing or in-the-round sculpture, does not detach entirely from its background. High-relief sculpture projects far from the background, whereas low-relief, or bas-relief sculpture is relatively shallow. In sunken relief, the imagery is carved into the surface instead of projecting from it.

relief sculpture | unlike sculptures in the round, relief sculptures do not detach entirely from their background. A sculpture may be in high relief, with greater projection from the background, or in low (bas) relief, where there is little projection. In ancient Egypt, we see sunken relief, where instead of projecting from the surface, the figures are delineated by carved-in contour lines.

reliquary | an often-elaborate container for a relic

repatriation | the return of something to its homeland, used in reference to art being returned to where it was made (compare restitution)

replica | an exact copy

repoussé | a metalworking technique in which the decoration is hammered into relief from the back of a thin sheet of metal. From the French "pousser," to push.

representational | depicting recognizable objects or scenes

restitution | the return of a work of art to its rightful owner (compare repatriation)

restoration | restoration generally involves returning a site (or objects) to an earlier state, often through the use of non-original material. Ideally, all added material is detectable and treatments are reversible.

revetment | a decorative covering for a wall, usually of stone

revetment | a decorative covering of stone

rhyton | (pl. rhyta) a ritual vessel used for pouring liquids, often in the form of an animal or animal's head

ribbed vaulting | vaulting with projecting stone "ribs," usually diagonal and transverse, which serve both decorative and supporting functions

rondel | a round decorative element

saint | a particularly holy person

sarcophagus | from the Greek sarkophagos ("limestone"), from sark ("flesh") + phage ("eat"), a coffin, often stone and often decorated

saturation | how bright or dull a color is; also referred to as intensity

Saxon | a Germanic people that inhabited parts of central and northern Germany from Roman times, many of whom conquered and settled in southern England in the 5th–6th centuries. [Oxford Languages] The term can refer to people in England or what is now Germany.

scale | an object's size relative to its surroundings

school | a group of artists or architects sharing close connections, sometimes to a particular artist, building, or architect

scriptorium | center for copying and illuminating manuscripts

sculpture in the round | a sculpture that can be observed from all sides, unlike a relief sculpture that does not fully detach from its background

secondary colors | colors formed by mixing two primary colors

senate | from the Latin senatus, "council of elders," the main body in Roman constitutional government

senator | from Latin senex, "old man," a member of the Roman Senate

shabti | Egyptian funerary sculptures, buried with the deceased to serve as "answerers" in the next life

shading | the use of darker colors to create the illusion of shadows

Shahnama | book of kings, an epic poem describing the stories of pre-Islamic Persian kings

shape | the property of a two-dimensional form, usually defined by a line around it or a change in color

Shedu | in Assyrian mythology, a winged lion with a man's head, also called Lammasu

shendjet | Egyptian traditional short pleated skirt

slip | in ceramics, a coating consisting of very fine particles of clay suspended in water, which can be burnished before firing to create a shiny surface (compare glaze)

sphinx | an Egyptian figure of a lion with a human head; in Greek mythology, a creature with the body of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and the head of a woman

spolia | architectural and decorative elements removed from one monument for use on another

squinch | a vault connecting the drum of a dome to the corner of a polygonal support (compare pendentive)

stained glass | decorative glass consisting of colored pieces fastened together, usually with strips of lead, to form an image or design [James Terry]

stave church | in Norway, a timber, post-and-lintel church

stele | a vertical stone monument or marker often inscribed with text or relief carving

stucco | a type of plaster that could be easily molded or carved to form decorative elements

style | characteristic visual properties of works made by an individual artist or by artists working in the same time and place

stylization | an artistic approach that conforms to particular conventions, or systems, rather than faithfully representing the natural world

stylized | conforming to particular conventions rather than recording a strict observation of the natural world

sultan | a term for a Muslim ruler, implying the ruler has been appointed by the caliph

symmetry | a formal type of balance consisting of a mirroring of portions of an image

synagogue | a Jewish house of worship

syncretism | the amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought [Oxford Languages]

talud-tablero | a construction style that characterizes Mesoamerican pyramids, comprising a sloping base (talud) supporting a vertical tablero (decorated entablature)

tapestry | a textile with imagery woven directly into the cloth. The famous Bayeux "Tapestry" is actually an embroidery.

tempera | traditionally, a painting medium in which the binder for the pigments is egg yolk

terracotta | from the Italian, terra ("earth") + cotta ("baked"), a reddish-brown fired natural clay

tertiary colors | colors formed by mixing a primary color with a secondary color

tessera | (plural: tesserae) a small, roughly cubic piece of cut stone or glass used in making mosaics [James Terry]

tetramorph | a creature combining four others. From the tetramorph in the Book of Ezekiel, later Christians derived symbols for the four Gospel writers or evangelists.

textile | from the Latin textilis, "woven fabric," any cloth

texture | the real or simulated surface quality (roughness or smoothness) of an object

therianthrope | a mythical being or deity which is part human and part animal

tholos | a circular tomb or temple

topography | the natural forms and features of a land's surface

Torah | the most holy text of Judaism, consisting of the first five books of the Bible, usually in the form of a scroll

tracery | the stonework supporting stained glass windows

transept | in church architecture, the arm that crosses the nave to produce a cruciform layout

translation | the attempt to render the meaning of a text in one language into another language

transliteration | the attempt to render the sound of words from one writing system (such as an alphabet) into another writing system (such as another alphabet)

trilithon | from the Latin tri- ("three") + Greek: litho- ("stone"), a grouping of three massive stones

triptych | an artwork consisting of three pieces, usually two wings flanking a central panel

trompe l'oeil | from French, "fools the eye," an artwork that gives the illusion of actual three-dimensional objects

trumeau | a post dividing a doorway and supporting a lintel

tumulus | a burial mound

twisted perspective | a style of representation in which figures are depicted with combination frontal and profile views, also known as composite view

tympanum | from the Greek tympanon ("drum"), a flat, semicircular area above the lintel of a door

Upper Paleolithic | the period between approximately 40,000 and 10,000 years ago; "Upper" is the most recent of three subdivisions of the Paleolithic period of the Stone Age (Lower, Middle, and Upper)

uraeus | the upright cobra commonly shown on the headdress of the Egyptian pharaoh, denoting divine leadership and protection

value | the degree of lightness or darkness of a color

vanishing point | in linear perspective, the point at which the orthogonals converge

vault | a masonry roof or ceiling constructed on the arch principle, or a concrete roof of the same shape [Gardner's]

vellum | a paper-like material made from very thinly stretched and scraped skin of a young animal, treated to receive ink or pain

Venus pudica | Venus or Aphrodite depicted nude, standing with her hand in front of or covering her genitalia and her other arms across her breast

verism | from the Latin vērus ("true"), an artistic style that hyperrealistically exaggerates naturally occurring features, especially those demonstrating age

veristic | hyperrealistic convention of portraying age and natural likeness

Viking | a Norse people who spread by conquest and trade out of Scandinavia starting in the 8th century CE; later identified by other names, such as Norman

Visigoth | the western branch of the Goths, who ruled much of Spain until 711

volutes | ornaments, shaped like scrolls or cinnamon rolls, that are notable features of Ionic capitals

votive offering | a gift of gratitude to a deity [Gardner's]

voussoirs | the wedge-shaped blocks used to construct a true arch

warp | the vertical threads of a loom or cloth [Gardner's]

westwork | the façade and towers at the western entrance of a medieval church

wet drapery | in sculpture, the look of sheer, almost transparent cloth—called "drapery" in art—that appears to cling to the body, exposing the form beneath; introduced in the Greek High Classical period before sculpture depicting the fully-nude female figure was acceptable; the sculptor Phidias is credited with introducing this style [Art History Glossary]

ziggurat | in ancient Mesopotamia, a stepped tower of earthen materials, often supporting a temple or shrine [James Terry]

zoomorphic | in the form of an animal

Zoroastrianism | the state religion of Persia from about 600 BCE until the Muslim conquest, when most adherents fled to India

Notes

Thanks to the following sources (cited in the definitions, where applicable) that provided content:

- Art History Glossary, compiled by Sheila Lynch
- Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global History, 15th Edition. Fred S. Kleiner, Editor. 2016
- James Terry, Art History Glossary
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary
- National Geographic

17.2: Detailed Licensing

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