

6.1 Early Christian Architecture :: Italy and the Church

1) Rome in decline and Diocletian abdicates

- 250 CE, Rome begins to lose its primacy, with emperors residing elsewhere
- Rome has really been slowly declining since about 146 BCE due to bad politics, bad policies, and many other reasons
- Between 235-284 Rome had (22) emperors, most coming to a violent end
- Despite all the uncertainty, **Baths of Caracalla** (210) and **Baths of Diocletian** (306) were built
- **Diocletian** (284-305 CE). Tried to pull Rome back together. Created a **four-emperor system** referred to as the **tetrarch** (tetra means "four") — one for East, one for West, and two younger ones who would step into these higher roles as they gained experience.
- **Diocletian** abdicates in 305 and returns to birthplace at Spalato on the Dalmation Coast (modern-day *Split, Croatia*) and builds himself a fabulous palace.
- **Diocletian's palace** was a *heavily fortified rectangular form* with guarded octagonal entrance towers on the W-N-E sides and the South side facing the Adriatic Sea. A prototype for *fortified medieval castle-building*. Principal broad streets E-W and N-S cut into quadrants.
- Diocletian's quarters contained a classical facade with four giant columns and a **fastigium**, a window of appearances, for him to appear for the court or for the masses.

2) First Christian Emperor: Constantine

- **Constantine** was the son of one of *tetrarchs* living in Trier (Germany). He built a large bath there, as well as a large **Constantine's Basilica (300 CE)**, with tall arched windows in a stepped brick facade. It was a reception hall for Constantine, and his throne was in the apse-end under a half dome. Once covered in stucco, now is in brick.
- **Constantine's rival Maxentius** (306-312 CE) the son of another of the tetrarchs, stayed in Rome, entering into an ambitious building program to gain favor. He built **Maxentius's Basilica** consisting of three transverse coffered barrel vaults. Also restored Temple of Vesta on the forum, and built a hippodrome and a great mausoleum to himself.
- Battle of Milvian Bridge outside Rome (312 CE) and Constantine wins the rivalry — he attributes his victory to his Christianity. Maxentius also was pro-Christian.
- A mere ten years earlier, Diocletian had persecuted the Christians.
- Roman Senate builds for him the **Arch of Constantine** (315 CE) on the Roman Forum. Made of **spolia** from other monuments.
- **324 CE — Constantine built first imperially-sponsored church St. John Lateran** on the southern outskirts of Rome, with its back facing the forum (symbolic gesture, of course). St. John Lateran is the **Archbasilica of Rome** (the most important and oldest church), thus the home of the Bishop of Rome. Nave plus four side aisles. Altar to the west (unusual). Constantine gives his wife's palace over to create the Lateran Palace (wife Fausta was the sister of Maxentius). Obelisk was commissioned by Thutmose III and erected by Thutmose IV at the Temple of Karnak. Constantine's son wanted to take it to Constantinople but instead sent it to Rome where it was erected in the Circus Maximus. It fell into ruin and was not rediscovered until 1588 when it was placed at St. John Lateran. The cross on top is the insignia of Pope Sixtus V (Sixtus the Fifth).
- Baptistery of St. John Lateran is prototype of baptisteries throughout Italy.
- Constantine built **Old St. Peter's** in **326 CE**. It was a funeral basilica established over the relics (bones) of St. Peter at the crossing. This St. Peter's lasted until about 1500 when it was razed to build the St. Peter's known today.
- Before leaving Rome for good, Constantine finishes Maxentius's Basilica placing a gigantic statue of himself in the apse (see image). The colossal statue would have been forty feet high as a seated figure. **The head of the statue is eight feet high**. This Forum is now referred to as Constantine's Forum (on the big Forum).

3) Vocabulary

- **nave** - central aisle of church at double-height with clerestory lighting
- **baptistery** - one of the most sacred rituals of Christianity and Constantine sets the standard for all future churches with the octagonal one at St. John Lateran
- **side aisle** - aisle(s) of lower height and less structure either one to each side or two to each side
- **narthex** - basically the front porch of the church
- **transept** - the part of the church turned at 90° to create the *crossing* with the nave
- **crossing** - where nave and transept cross becomes a very holy place, sometimes with a crypt

below or altar above

- **crypt** - holy sepulchre or burial chamber
- **spolia** - fragments or parts cannibalized from other relics or structures

4) After Constantine

- Rome power shifts to *Popes*, away from *emperors*...
- *Alaric I of the Visigoths* sacks Rome (410) but is respectful to the churches.
- Vandals and Ostrogoths savage Rome mid-century (450 CE)
- Popes build ***Santa Sabina*** (430), ***Santa Maria Maggiore*** (440), and ***Santa Stefano Rotondo*** (468) - refined classicism made of ***spolia***.
- ***Roman Empire Collapses 476 CE*** - this date marks the beginning of the Dark Ages
- Invading Franks devastated Rome and killed a large part of the population (576 CE)
- ***Pantheon dedicated as a Christian church (609 CE)***