

TITLE: Catacomb of Priscilla **LOCATION:** Rome, Italy. **DATE:** C. 200-400 C.E.

ARTIST: Tufa and fresco **PERIOD/STYLE:** Late Antique Europe **PATRON:** Acilii Glabriones family

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Excavated tufa and fresco.

FORM:

The Catacomb of Priscilla is a stunning eight-mile series of underground tunnels. Artists used a sketchy brush stroke and often painted in the Pompeian style.

FUNCTION:

Early Christians used catacombs to bury their dead. There are 4 million dead among the buried including 7 popes and many early Christian martyrs.

CONTENT:

An image of Jesus as a shepherd carrying one sheep on his back while two others mosey around nearby. Doves, peacocks (birds associated with the Roman goddess Hera, but in the Christian context a symbol of immortality), and pheasants fly above his head. One of the catacombs has been nicknamed "The Greek chapel" because of some Greek inscriptions on the walls. Depictions of Christ are restrained and often depict him as a good shepherd. Images of Jonah are also utilized as a metaphor for Christ's resurrection. Parallels between the Old and New Testaments are common in Early Christian art as Christians see it as a fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

CONTEXT:

The image of the Good Shepherd and the story behind it is prominent in the Christian catechism. Jesus is symbolized as especially sympathetic herdsman who guides his flock of Christian believers. In the Orant Fresco, the orant figure stands with his arms outstretched and his eyes gazing toward the heavens. The figure appears to be enjoying a moment of praise, and this posture became important in the early Christian era. This sucking-in-the-divine-rays-of-god posture was typical of how Christians prayed at the time. They adopted this stance from pagans, who used the figure of the orant as a symbol of the soul. The orant figure was part of a larger series of images depicting a woman progressing through three stages of life, so it could possibly depict the persistence of the soul into the afterlife.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The Catacombs of Priscilla number among the most mysterious underground Christian burial sites that archaeologists have investigated. Dug out of the soft volcanic tuff, these catacombs have been the source of ghost stories, Vatican lootings, and plenty of controversy over the role women played in the makings of early Christianity. Perhaps because of all the controversy, after the fifth century, Christians no longer buried their dead in this catacomb, though the site would remain important for pilgrims who made sojourns to Rome. The catacombs gradually became less and less popular, falling off the public's radar until the 15th century, when Antonio Bosio rediscovered them. Then, in the 19th century, archaeologist Giovanni Battisti de Rossi began the first academic excavation of the catacombs.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Burying people underground was not specifically a Christian custom. Underground burials, or hypogea, went back to the days of the Etruscans. Christianity did not become the official religion of the Roman Empire until Constantine warred on his enemies in the name of the Christian god around the year 300. These catacombs predate Constantine's rise to power and his influence in making Christianity a lasting presence in Europe. It was he who convened a number of Bishops in 325 A.D. for the Council of Nicea, where much of Christian doctrine was settled upon. Prior to this point, Christians were often persecuted and martyred for their beliefs. The catacombs house a number of Christian martyrs from that era.

INTERPRETATION:

The catacombs feature an impressive number of frescoes, or paintings rendered onto a wall with pigment and lime. These frescoes depict some of the most well known biblical events and people. They represent an important movement in early Christianity, as some of the most cherished and enduring symbols of the religion, such as the Madonna and Child, appear here for the first time.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

New evidence from a recent dig suggests all sorts of other earth-shattering hypotheses about early Christian practitioners. Italian archaeologists have found a number of images of women holding key roles in many of the catacombs' murals. Certain scholars go so far as to surmise that women could have been priests during these early years. We also see evidence of papal looting over time.

TITLE: Santa Sabina **LOCATION:** Rome, Italy **DATE:** c. 422-432 C.E

ARTIST: Peter of Illyria **PERIOD/STYLE:** Late Antique Europe **PATRON:** Constantine

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Brick and Stone, wooden roof.

FORM:

This is a three aisled basilica with no transept. It has a long, tall nave and is built on an axial plan (meaning that the entire focus of the church is on the apse). It had a flat roof with a coffered ceiling and thin walls. The plain exterior was designed to contrast with the beautiful interior.

FUNCTION:

A Christian place of worship.

CONTENT:

CONTEXT:

The church was built on the site of early Imperial houses, one of which is said to be of Sabina, a Roman matron originally from Avezzano in the Abruzzo region of Italy. Sabina was beheaded under the Emperor Vespasian, or perhaps Hadrian, because she had been converted to Christianity by her servant Seraphia, who was stoned to death. She was later declared a Christian Saint.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The basilica form had initially been used in Roman courtly contexts, rather than religious ones. Constantine built a basilica in Trier, Germany, the location of his northern capital city, that became the template for Santa Sabina. Like Santa Sabina, the Trier Basilica had a central axis that led to the apse. Typically, Constantine would receive messengers while sitting in this space after his spectacular entrance, which involved processing down the axis with robes and hair flowing. From this example, we can infer that non-religious buildings served as the basis for early Christian spaces of devotion. In Santa Sabina, the apse, once the Emperor's prized space for receiving visitors, transformed into an altar where the priest would give mass.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The relationship of the exterior to the interior of Santa Sabina was meant to be symbolic of the relationship of a Christian believer's outer and inner selves. On the outside, a Christian following in the footsteps of the catechism would look and act humble. A peek beyond this humble exterior into his or her soul would reveal blinding radiance. Radiant light was a symbol of faith, devotion, purity, innocence, and even heaven, so having inner radiance was a good thing. Windows were made of gypsum called selenite, not glass.

INTERPRETATION:

This building is often referred to as a model of what the original St Peter's Cathedral would have looked like. Light is interpreted as symbolic of the holy spirit, so the clerestory windows were very important.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Mosaics were common during this era and in fact predated Santa Sabina and Christian use. Mosaics existed in antiquity but were usually reserved for floor decoration. The tall slender columns were stolen from the Temple of Juno in Rome. (Spolia)

TITLE: Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well **LOCATION:** Constantinople or Antioch **DATE:** Early sixth century C.E.
and Jacob Wrestling the Angel

ARTIST: A royal workshop perhaps? **PERIOD/STYLE:** Early Byzantine **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: tempera, gold, and silver script (which has oxidized to black) on purple vellum

FORM:

The artist uses classical techniques of contrapposto, foreshortening, shading and perspective in these illustrations. The settings are shallow and organized in the lower portion of the page with Greek text above.

FUNCTION:

The possession of manuscripts were a status symbol. These are illustrations known as manuscript illuminations. 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 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.

CONTENT:

These pages of the Vienna Genesis, an illustrated manuscript, depict two scenes from the Old Testament's Book of Genesis. Each page is split in two halves. The written narrative, penned in silver ink in Greek, is on the top. The illustration for the written bits is on the bottom. 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.

CONTEXT:

The Vienna Genesis is the oldest book of its kind. An illustrated manuscript produced in Syria and held in Vienna, the Vienna Genesis contains twenty-four folios, of which "Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well" and "Jacob Wrestling an Angel" are just two. During the fourth and fifth centuries, a Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint was the most popular form of the Christian scriptures. In addition to this written Biblical account, the Vienna Genesis uses images to help convey meaning.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The Vienna Genesis and the Cotton Genesis are especially significant because both predate the emergence of more opulent illuminated manuscripts, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels. Pairing written stories with images was taken to another level through illuminated manuscripts, which often featured decorations covering the entire page. Illuminated manuscripts also showed that even non-pictorial forms like words could be simultaneously ornamental and informational. The Vienna Genesis is an excellent example of the sophisticated court style of manuscript painting. The Vienna Genesis combines pictorial techniques familiar from the ancient world with content appropriate to a Christian audience, which is typical of Byzantine art.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Created on purple-dyed calfskin, the images show the stories of Rebecca and Eliezer at the well and Jacob wrestling the angel in an interesting way. In both images, the main characters, Rebecca and Jacob, appear multiple times in the same frame to convey the progression of an event over time. In "Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well," Rebecca is depicted twice. In the first instance, she is seen leaving the city of Nahor. She wanders down a path holding a vessel on her shoulder as she makes her way to a well. In the second instance, she is seen at the bottom of the well giving Eliezer water from her vessel while his ten thirsty camels stand nearby waiting to hydrate. 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.

INTERPRETATION:

What the picture of Rebecca and Eliezer at the well really details is the "camel test." Abraham sent Eliezer on a mission to find a wife for Isaac. The only way that Eliezer believed he could find someone worthy enough was by asking the woman for water. If she presented water to his camels as well, this would show to Eliezer that the woman was without a doubt virtuous enough to become Isaac's wife. Clearly she passed the test, and this page illustrates her generosity to the thirsty traveler and his hump-backed companions.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

From Genesis 24: 15-61 and Genesis 32:22-31 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.

TITLE: Hagia Sophia **LOCATION:** Constantinople **DATE:** 532-537
ARTIST: Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus **PERIOD/STYLE:** Early Byzantine **PATRON:** Emperor Constantius in 360 and Justinian & Theodora in 532

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:

FORM:

It is a centrally planned building with domes that seem to float over square bases by the use of pendentives. The dome is composed of a set of ribs meeting at the top. The spaces between those ribs are not supporting the dome and could be opened up for windows. There are 40 windows at the base of the dome. Creating a halo of light over the congregation.

FUNCTION:

It was a symbol of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Then it was a Muslim mosque. Now it is a museum.

CONTENT:

One prominent mosaic created in the tenth century features Mary and the baby Jesus. In the image, the pair are flanked by two men: Emperor Constantius, son of Constantine, and Emperor Justinian, who underwrote the church's largest reconstruction in the fifth century. The entire surface is covered in decoration, mostly gold, with the figures standing in the center. The two emperors look incredibly similar, with the same hairdo and outfit, both holding maquettes, or scale model, of buildings. Constantius holds a maquette that was meant to represent the city of Constantinople, while Justinian holds a maquette of the Hagia Sophia itself.

CONTEXT:

The spot where Hagia Sophia stands now was originally occupied by a pagan temple. However in 360 the site was appropriated by the Christians who raised a small basilica where the temple had been. Over the next two centuries the building was destroyed and rebuilt many times. It was a controversial site between the Muslims and Christians and even among local iconoclasts who destroyed many of the opulent mosaics. The Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 and the building became a mosque.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The invention of pendentives allowed for the domes to sit upon square sub structures or piers, one on each corner of the building. Churches of the early Christian era concentrate on one or two forms, the circular building containing a centrally planned apse and the longer basilica with an axially planned nave facing an altar. The Hagia Sophia is a marriage of these two forms. With the dome emphasizing the circular central plan and the nave pointing focus toward the altar.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

To create the greatest building since antiquity, he used spolia, elements taken from other classical buildings and locations, and integrated them into the Hagia Sophia. Columns, pillars, and arches from ancient Roman buildings and temples and conquered sites around the ancient world were all utilized in the construction of the church.

INTERPRETATION:

The Byzantine Empire continued to rule Constantinople until the 15th century. In 1453, the empire fell to Ottoman forces. With it, the Hagia Sophia fell into the hands of Muslim leadership. Mehmed II took over the Hagia Sophia and converted it into a mosque, adding four minarets. Any trace of Christianity was covered up until the 20th century. In 1935, the Turkish government opened the Hagia Sophia as a secular museum, bringing all the old Christian iconography that had once been covered up back into the limelight.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

This building's construction was such a massive undertaking for its day that it remained the largest church in the world for the next ten centuries. Hagia Sophia means "Holy Wisdom"

TITLE: Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George **LOCATION:** Mt. Sinai, Egypt **DATE:** . 6th or 7th century
ARTIST: _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Early Byzantine **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Encaustic on wood

FORM:

This is an icon, a religious devotional image, frequently icons were believed to possess spiritual powers and they held a sacred place in the hearts of Byzantine worshippers.

FUNCTION:

Images of saints and holy people were classified as icons. These icons were made to facilitate a deeper sense of spirituality to help channel the grace of the almighty. These objects helped to convert non-Christians—and also generate some extra moolah for the Byzantine Empire when coffers were low.

CONTENT:

In the encaustic painting Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George, the image shows Mary and the infant Jesus seated between St. Theodore (left) and St. George (right). These two are known as the soldier saints, and each carries a golden cross in his right hand. All four figures have radiant golden halos painted with gold leaf, tiny flakes of gold adhered to the surface of the painting.

CONTEXT:

Around the seventh century, however, there was a crisis of images, mostly in response to encounters with Arabs and Islam. Icons had previously been treated in much the same way as relics, as connective tissue to the divine. However, iconoclasts, or image breakers, argued that icons were increasingly worshiped as idols, which went against both Jewish and Christian beliefs. Christian officials debated the issue of icons as early as 692, but it would take another 60 years for them to kick holy images out of churches completely. While icons had been credited with saving Constantinople from a Persian invasion, certain officials believed that the loss of certain Byzantine territories to Islamic warriors was the result of divine retribution for not observing the Christian faith in an orthodox or correct way. It's a wonder, then, that this encaustic icon survived the era of destruction that was iconoclasm. By 843, icons made a comeback, but not after much discussion on how to create images that were recognizable as just that: images.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

In Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between St. Theodore and George, the encaustic combines Classical and Byzantine styles in terms of the depiction of space and the sense of realism. Mary is rendered realistically; her dress shows dimension in the attention to folds and shadowing on her face. However, she is actually much larger than her saintly friends. St. George and St. Theodore appear flattened against the picture plane. This is particularly true for Theodore, whose robes have decorative designs that seem to float on top of the fabric. The architectural elements that recede into the background show some attention to real space, but even this is slightly wonky. On top of all that, everyone has those exaggerated laser beam eyes characteristic of the Byzantine period.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

As a medieval artwork, the artist is not interested in the classical treatment of space and proportion. They have chosen to represent the figures in a flat stage space with halos and wide eyes. The angels are painted in a classical style with brisk brushwork. Their eyes directed towards heaven.

INTERPRETATION:

The hand of God enters the scene from above. Potentially blessing the group. The Christ Child gazes away perhaps anticipating the crucifixion. Mary looks beyond the viewer as if seeing the future.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Encaustic, from the Greek word "to burn," is a form of painting done with heated beeswax and mineral pigment. It was a common medium for portraits in Classical Greece and Roman antiquity because it had a similar quality to oil paint and was good for rendering dimension and contrast.

TITLE:San Vitale **LOCATION:**Ravenna, Italy **DATE:** C. 526-547 C.E.

ARTIST: _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Early Byzantine **PATRON:** Justinian and Julius Argentarius and Bishop(s) Ecclesius and Maximian

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE:

FORM:

An 8 sided, centrally planned church on a bent axis. Interior mosaics are composed of tesserae like the lost murals of Santa Sabina, the mosaic depicts its figures in a flat style. Dark lines delimit the contours of the figures' robes' folds, while gold and other decorative elements fill the background space.

FUNCTION:

This building is a martyrium. (Burial place of a martyr, that is centrally planned.) It was not uncommon for imperial images to be circulated around the kingdom as a reminder of dual power (Temporal and spiritual) Instead of circulating his image, however, Justinian simply created a building in which many people would observe him at once: the church of San Vitale. It was a bold way to depict the divinity of the emperor

CONTENT:

In the mosaic of Justinian, the emperor is dressed in purple robes, the color of royalty, and pictured holding a paten. A paten is a bowl used for carrying the Eucharist, the bread believed to embody Christ himself. The emperor is surrounded by a group of priests. One priest to the right of Justinian holds the book of Gospels, while another holds an incense burner, an important element of Christian ritual that made churches smell pretty. The burning of incense also symbolized an act of purification, so maybe it was more than a subtle hint to the congregation to bathe more regularly.

CONTEXT:

After conquering a number of Germanic tribes that had overtaken Rome in the fifth century, Justinian remained emperor for almost forty years (527–565 C.E.). Because of his successes in kicking out the so-called barbarians, Justinian believed himself to be among the ranks of earlier Roman (pre-Christian) emperors such as Hadrian and Trajan. This was in part because he and his general/main bro Belisarius reconquered old Roman territories that had been lost under the flag of the orthodox Christian Church. This way of seeing himself as upholding the traditions of imperial authority and the authority of the pope was called Caesaropapism—a combination of "Caesar," or king, and "papal," or pope.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

The Early Christian Monuments of Ravenna show great artistic skill, including a wonderful blend of Greco-Roman tradition, Christian iconography and oriental and western styles typifying the culture of the later Roman Empire. The building combines Roman elements: the dome, shape of doorways, and stepped towers; with Byzantine elements: polygonal apse, capitals, narrow bricks, and an early example of flying buttresses. The church is most famous for its wealth of Byzantine mosaics, the largest and best preserved outside of Constantinople. The church is of extreme importance in Byzantine art, as it is the only major church from the period of the Emperor Justinian I to survive virtually intact to the present day.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The eyes of the figures are focused like laser beams as they stare out onto Christian devotees. In this way, Justinian and the figures around him were depicted as Byzantine icons, sacred images that portrayed Christ, Mary, and the saints. Christians believed that the icons helped facilitate a deeper relationship with God. The wide eyes typical of icons were helpful in this regard because one couldn't easily avoid making eye contact. Empress Theodora, who carries a chalice bearing the wine symbolizing Christ's blood, has a similar gaze. She, too, is accompanied by a number of other figures, including the Magi, seen on the right. The Magi were known for bringing gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense after the birth of Jesus.

INTERPRETATION:

The Theodora and Justinian mosaic panels of San Vitale show the power of the Byzantine emperor and his divine connection to Christ. Located in Ravenna, the church of San Vitale was important for two reasons. First of all, it was the western capital of the Byzantine Empire created in 404 C.E. by the Emperor Honorius. Secondly, it also honored St. Vitalis, a second century martyr-turned-saint. Octagonal in form, the architectural plan of San Vitale evoked a martyrium, or a site where martyrs were buried.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Caesaropapism, the combination of state power and sacred power, was exactly what Justinian was going for when he and his wife Theodora posed for the mural in San Vitale. The two types of power were very tightly bound, and images of the emperor alongside images of saints and Christ helped to bolster Justinian's power as an emperor ordained to rule all the lands.