

Early Church Buildings

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What evidence is there that before 400 AD the Christian churches possessed church buildings, and what did they use them for?

In this essay the written and visual evidence that Christian churches possessed church buildings before 400 AD and what they used them for will be presented mostly by building type.¹ Visual evidence will be placed in the appendix. The word “possession” will be used in the sense of occupation or use, as well as legal ownership.² Evidence for a range of understandings of the word “church” will be used.³

The word translated as “church” has changed from referring to “people” to include referring to a “place”, and it could be argued that there has been a parallel change in theology, control and type of meeting place.⁴ For instance Ignatius referred to people, when he told Christians to gather wherever the bishop was, because that was where Christ Jesus and the church was.⁵ By the time Clement of Alexandria was writing, the term “going to church” as in a building was being used, although Clement preferred to call the gathered people, rather than the place “church”.⁶

¹ Photos and images have been placed in the Appendix.

² The justification for using the word possession in these ways is because an item may be in the possession of someone who doesn't own it and this may have been the case for Roman church buildings in the first two centuries because in the Roman law governing organisations, the common treasury wasn't “considered property of a corporation but as the undistributed property of individual members...” (Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 370.). Changes occurred in the legal possession in the first part of third century, when evidence of legal ownership can be found (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 370.).

³ Our ability to accurately translate what we discover from the past into the language and concepts of the present is not always easy, because language is culturally and contextually anchored in time and the meaning and significance we attach to objects and words change. In the first century, two words were used when speaking of God's people, “*ekklesia*” and “*synagoge*” (Paul J. Achtemeier, “The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary,” ed. Michael Fishbane Roger S. Boraas, PHEME PERKINS, William O. Walker Jr. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 183.).

The people who later became known as Christians and “church”, used *ekklesia*, which has been translated as “church”, meaning “assembly” or “gathering” of those called, rather than a “building” as in a structure that has or had a roof, which is the image that might be triggered by the word “church” today (Alfred Marshall D. Litt, *The RSV Interlinear Greek - English New Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Limited, 1968), 553.).

⁴ a. The word “Church” meaning people was used in the New Testament: “and the Lord added to the church daily (Acts 2:47(American King James)).

b. The word “Church” was used to refer to an orthodox Christian group by Cyprian: “concerning the baptism of heretics, who being placed without, and established outside the Church, claim to themselves a matter over which they have neither right nor power.....there is one baptism, that appointment in the Catholic Church” (From Cyprian, *Ep. LXX111.1* (CSEL, 111.2.778f., in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, Second Edition Revised by W.H.C. Frend ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 240.).

c. Lactantius writes of churches as buildings: “the Church was abandoned.....That Church situated on rising ground was in view of the palace” (Lactantius, *on the deaths of the persecutors*, 3-4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 272 & 318.) The words translated as church need to be elaborated here. Were they “temples”?

d. The word “Church” was used meaning a Corporation: “Their corporations, namely their churches” (Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 8-9, in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337.*, 285).

⁵ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, V111.2, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 15.

⁶ Philip Francis Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, vol. 1-2 (London: Routledge,2000), 715.

By the time of Cyprian, there were buildings with raised pulpits, called “the tribunal of the church” which may have referred to the building or the people (Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, 718.).

The first type of meeting place was in whatever building “suited the occasion”.⁷ There is some evidence that Christians gathered together in privately owned houses for fellowship, prayer, “the breaking of the bread”, collection of donations, worship and sharing of food.⁸ This was probably a room on the top floor and usually the largest and most ventilated and furnished room in the house.⁹ According to Lassus, the Anastasia Christian community used the rooms above a row of shops for their meetings, while at Clemente they used the rooms that were above “large dark warehouses”.¹⁰ There is also archaeological evidence of rooms on the ground floor being set aside for worship even in the first century.¹¹

Other buildings, such as the Jewish synagogues, continued to be used as they had been, as the majority of the first Christians were Jews, and Paul may have encouraged them to keep meeting there.¹² Some Christians continued to use Herod’s temple in Jerusalem for praying as well, but also for preaching and met at nearby at Solomon’s portico.¹³ It is possible too, that the shops or workrooms that were typically at the front or side of the Roman town

⁷ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, ed. Slobodan Curcic, Revised ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 24.

The early Christian churches may have adopted particular types of buildings for pragmatic reasons, because of their theology of church, persecution, state attitudes and laws, or even because of the kind of donations given.

⁸ Acts 2:46, Acts 1:12-15, Acts 4:31, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 9:5, Romans 16:3-6.

Sharing food included feeding widows (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 375.)

⁹ The anageion or hyperon which is translated as “upper room” was the only large room. It was dining room usually on the top story of the building (Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 24.).

The upper rooms were not usually used for everyday activities but set aside for “rest and relaxation”, study and teaching (Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission. The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 65.).

¹⁰ J. Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World* (London Paul Hamlyn, 1967), 10.

¹¹ Excavations in Capernaum revealed a room set aside for worship in a first Century private house. The house is under a Basilica style house form the fourth Century, which is under an octagonal basilica style church from the fifth century, and is believed to have been Peter’s house in Capernaum. Egeria mentions the church having been created from Peter’s house in her writings (Gehring, *House Church and Mission. The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, 32.).

¹² When Paul uses the word “Episynagogen” in Hebrews 10:25, it could be argued that he was encouraging the church to keep meeting together in the synagogue (D.Litt, *The Rsv Interlinear Greek - English New Testament*, 880.).

“At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (Acts 14:1(New International Version))

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews and Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures”(Acts 17:1-2(New International Version)).

¹³ “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46(New International Version)).

Acts 5:12-13, Acts 3:1

house, being owned by the householder or leased out, were used by Christians to teach some aspect of the Christian faith.¹⁴ Lassus uses the words “poverty and then prudence” as reasons why no “purpose built” buildings were erected in the beginning, but Turner suggests that it is more likely that the concept of house church (“*domus ecclesiae*”) had taken over from God’s house (“*domus dei*”).¹⁵ However Luke tells us that no-one thought that what they possessed was their own, so they shared their possessions and everyone had what they needed.¹⁶ Some sold their property and others kept their legal ownership, but put their property at the disposal of the church, because before the third century AD, property could only be owned by a legal person, and Christian corporations or societies were not legal.¹⁷

¹⁴ Origen tells of “illiterate... yokels” encouraging children to go to a shop or workplace in order to “learn perfection” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 111.55, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 135.)

¹⁵ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 10.

“*Domus ecclesiae*” has been translated as “church house” (Achtmeier, “The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary,” 183.) and “*Domus Dei*” translates as “house of god”.

Turner suggests that the concept of the body being the new “temple meant that the reason for there being no purpose build buildings could not be regarded as “an unfortunate necessity forced upon the church by the social or legal disabilities under which it laboured” (Harold W. Turner, ed. *From Temple to Meeting House. The Phenomenology & Theology of Places of Worship* (Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1979), 153-54.).

Later some Christians were deprived of their property and “poverty and prudence” could be used as reasons for not building special church buildings during that period. In the persecution by Domitian in 96 AD, “some were put to death, while others were at least deprived of their property” (Dio Cassius, *Epitome*, LXV11.14, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 6.).

Lampe writes that the words “*Domus ecclesiae*” and “*Domus Dei*” are not used in literature in the first two centuries and most likely there were no rooms specially set aside for worship in that time either (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 368.).

¹⁶ The Jerusalem community is portrayed by Luke as a “family” worshipping in the temple and meeting in each other’s houses for prayer and breaking of bread” (W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1984), 87.).

Luke is traditionally considered to be the author of Acts (Achtmeier, “The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary,” 10.). Many of the first Christians believed that everything they had belonged to God and/or was for the common good. Jesus spoke of the temple as His Father’s house (Luke 2:49 and John 2:16).

According to Acts, 2:44 (American Standard) “all that believed were together, and had all things common”. Some of the first Christians pooled their assets to meet the needs of the church whose numbers increased by 2000 one day (Acts: 2:41-42).

¹⁷ “I had forbidden the existence of clubs” (Pliny, *Ep.* X.96, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 19.).

“Early Christian texts name women as supporters and benefactors of churches, just as Jewish inscriptions honour them as supporters and benefactors of synagogues (Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29.).

Lampe thinks that corporate community property centrally administered didn’t happen until the third century (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 370 - 74.).

By 66 AD most of the Christians in Jerusalem had left, and the Christians continued to hold meetings in private houses that were owned or leased.¹⁸ Instead of the Jewish temple, other buildings, such as halls, were also used for teaching and preaching. Clementine mentions large halls being used by the Apostle Peter for preaching.¹⁹ One hall was capable of holding five hundred people and was lent by a man named Maro.²⁰ The New Testament mentions the “hall of Tyrannus” that was used for regular lecturing/arguing sessions by Paul and some of his disciples.²¹ Milburn mentions Theophilus lending Peter a hall in Antioch so that he could preach and the church could meet.²² Justin used the area “above the bath of Myrtinus” for free Christian schooling and probably for worship services.²³ Later there is evidence of buildings or rooms being used specifically for study or Catechetical learning. For example, Eusebius mentions a “school of the faithful” in Alexandria.²⁴ White tells of a large hall with no internal divisions specifically built in Rome for Christian use in 310 AD. It was remodeled later and used as a recognizable “church”.²⁵

There were regular church gatherings that took place on the first day of the week, where a visiting leader might speak and answer questions, as well as special gatherings that could be called for by a travelling apostle, prophet or teacher as evidenced in the New

¹⁸In 49 AD Jews were expelled from Rome, and in 66 AD those Christians who were still in Jerusalem fled and no purpose built church buildings have been found in Jerusalem around this time (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, xxv.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 1.). Lampe argues that Priscilla and Aquila didn't own their house because the word home rather than house is used (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 192-3.). Their home is among those whom the New Testament mentions as being places where the church meets (Acts 18:2-3, and 1 Corinthians 16:19).

¹⁹ This information comes from “Clementine Recognitions” which was written by Clementine in the third century (Maurice M. Hassett, “Christian Archaeology ” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann. Edward A. Pace. Conde B. Pallen. Thomas J. Shahan. John J. Wynne (New York: Encyclopedia Press, Inc., 1914), 407.).

²⁰ *Recog.*, iv, 6, in *Ibid.*

²¹ Acts 19:9.

²² Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Aldershot: Wildwood house, 1988), 10.

²³ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 377-78.

²⁴ Eusebius, *HE*, V.10, 1, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 179.

²⁵ “San Crisogono in Rome’s Trastevere region” (Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, 719.).

Testament and the *Didache*.²⁶ Luke uses the term “liturgizing”, which has been translated as “worship” and “ministering” to describe a small meeting of prophets and teachers who were fasting before the Lord. In some meetings the Old Testament books as well as letters from church leaders were read.²⁷ Frend suggests that the prayers and readings that took place probably followed the pattern of the synagogue Sabbath liturgy.²⁸ The codex may have been chanted along with the recognised scriptures.²⁹ Orderliness of celebrations called “sacrifices and services” was expected and often took place at “fixed times and hours”.³⁰ Paul had this to say about church meetings: "When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification".³¹

As the church spread, Paul appointed leaders in different places and it wasn't long before other church leaders were “planting” churches and appointing bishops to oversee the gatherings.³² It wasn't long either before letters with instructions on how the meetings were to be conducted were sent to the churches that met in a particular home.³³ These letters help us to build a picture of what the “church buildings” were used for, or the expectation of what they should have been used for, and this depended on the purpose of the gathering and the background culture of the Christians.

²⁶ This happening at Troas, where Luke writes about the church gathering together on the third floor of a building to break bread and listen to Paul's preaching (Acts 20:9).

The *Didache* was an early handbook of church order (Stuart G. Hall, ed. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, Second ed. (London: SPCK, 2005), 29-31.).

The instructions in the *Didache* included rules for helping travelling prophets and teachers (Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (Michigan: William B Eerdmans publishing Company, 1976), 31.).

²⁷ “I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren” (D.Litt, *The Rsv Interlinear Greek - English New Testament*, 813.).

Achtemeier, "The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary," 184.

²⁸ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 141.

²⁹ The early Christian writings were not written in scroll form but in book or what is known as “codex” form (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 158.

³⁰ This was one of the admonitions from the writer of “1 Clement” (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 141.).

³¹ 1 Corinthians 14:26.

³² Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5.

³³ “Greet also the church that meets at their house” (Romans 16:5).

“Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house” (1 Corinthians 16:19).

The daily gatherings for a charity, fellowship meal and/or “breaking bread”, later became two separate events, one is known as the “agape feast”, and the other as the Eucharist.³⁴ Rumors of what went on in the feasts disturbed the peace and Pliny the Younger, disputed them in a letter to the Emperor Trajan around 112 AD, which gives us a picture of what the Christians said they did. Pliny wrote that they assembled on a fixed day “before daylight and recited by turns a form of words to Christ as a god”, and took an oath not to do specific things.³⁵ After this was done, “they departed and met again to take food, ordinary and harmless food”.³⁶ Around 177 AD, Athenagoras also disputed the false rumors about these feasts, which Stevenson believes arose because of the secrecy of the meetings.³⁷

As the church became more organized, synods and councils, such as those at Nicaea (AD), Antioch (325 AD), Tyre (335 AD), Niumidia and Elvira in (305 AD), the were held, presumably in church buildings.³⁸ Bishops along with their clerical supporters, gathered together to debate canons, creeds, heresies, heretics and church discipline.³⁹ Documents relating to one of the synods reveal some of the possible disciplining activities that may have gone on in some of the church buildings, indicating that some buildings may have had cells for the purpose of imprisoning.⁴⁰

There is evidence that the early Christian churches sometimes gathered in secret places for baptism as well, which included exorcism.⁴¹ Afterwards the baptized person was

³⁴ Hall, ed. *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, 22-23.

Fend writes of the difficulties of distinguishing the agape and Eucharist. The Eucharist he says was reserved for Christians who had been baptised (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 141-42.).

³⁵ Pliny, *Ep.* x.96, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 18-19.

³⁶ Pliny may have heard them quoting an adapted form of the Ten Commandments. According to the Christian’s testimony to Pliny, the love feasts this group of Christians held were by order abandoned (Ibid., 142.).

³⁷ The Christians were accused of “Atheism, Thyestean feasts” and “Oedipodean intercourse” (Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis*, 3, in Ibid., 67.).

———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 16 & 22 & 67.

³⁸ Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 290-94 & 97-98 & 362.

³⁹ Clerical supporters are mentioned in Ibid., 327.

⁴⁰ Sozomen, *He*, 11.25.3-8, 12, in Ibid., 363.

⁴¹ Ibid., 62 & 141-43.

Justin, *Apology*, 1, 65, in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 63.

brought to the place where the “brethren assembled” and prayers were offered, followed by the “kiss” greeting. The Eucharist was then shared.⁴² By 100 AD there is evidence of standardization in many church practices. Rules concerning church activities were sent to the churches, who were encouraged to obey the bishop as they would Jesus Christ. The authority given to bishops was in regards to all things “pertaining to the church”.⁴³ There is evidence that after this time, some special buildings were built for baptism near the church, but most baptisteries appear to be part of a larger church building.⁴⁴ A Vatican sarcophagus (174 AD) depicts a separate, circular baptistery building.⁴⁵ Milburn writes about Bishop Paulinus building a cathedral in Tyre in 314 AD with a subsidiary building for baptism and the writings of Bishop Ambrose tell of an octagonal baptistery near the church of St. Thecla at Milan.⁴⁶ Excavations under the Milan cathedral have also produced a baptistery.⁴⁷ The Lateran that was given to the bishop in Rome is another example, and the remains of a “monumental baptistery” can found at Djemila.⁴⁸

There are legends about early Judean Christians in Britain, who were given land and built a church, but there is also archaeological, literary and language evidence suggesting church buildings in the possession of Christians.⁴⁹ There are place names such as those

⁴² Justin, *Apology*, 1, 61-7, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 62-64.

⁴³ In the Didache there is an outline of what to do when baptising, sharing the Eucharist, and about visiting teachers and prophets (Didache, V11-XV.2, in *Ibid.*, 9-12.).

Ignatius, *To the Smyrneans*, V111, in ———, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 15.

⁴⁴ Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 204.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁸ Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 90.

Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 558.

⁴⁹ “Historians William of Malmesbury, Maelgwyn of Llandaff and Polydore Vergil all place Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury. Four Church councils (Pisa 1409, Constance 1417, Sienna 1424 and Basle 1434), mention that “the Churches of France and Spain must yield in points of antiquity and precedence to that of Britain as the latter Church was founded by Joseph of Arimathea immediately after the passion of Christ”(n.a. 2002.http://biblefacts.org/myth/j_arimathea.htm).

“The first notable act of the king, Arviragus, was to bestow upon the twelve disciples of Joseph, the Judean refugees, twelve hides of land free of tax. This grant of twelve hides of land tax free, is recorded in Domesday Book, “This land has never paid tax” (Domesday Survey, folio p.249 b)” (Elder. n.d. <http://www.ensignmessage.com/josephofArimathea.html>).

containing a translation of the word “*ecclesia*” into “*ecles*”, that could have originated from the site of a Christian community or church, as Egeria used this word when writing about the churches she saw and Gildas used the words “*renovant eclesius*” when referring to British church buildings that were being renovated.⁵⁰ Objects such as lead troughs with Christian decoration, from the Roman period of occupation, have been found suggesting church activities too.⁵¹ In Iclingham, Suffolk (could be derived from *ecclesia*) a number of these troughs have been found along with a group of cemeteries with Christian characteristics and a lot of associated buildings, which does suggest ownership of buildings by a Christian community, bishop or individuals.⁵² One of the pieces of early Christian “fittings and furnishings” found at Water Newton may have been removed from a Christian “sanctuary” or shrine at some time, which also points to the existence of an early Christian building.⁵³ Milburn tells us that the evidence for purpose built church buildings is more abundant in Britain and cites one in Silchester that was a stand alone building and one in Dorset that was a Christian Chapel but in a “private house”.⁵⁴ Thomas mentions rooms being set aside by a bishop for liturgical purposes as well.⁵⁵ He also mentions another church built at Richborough

It is reasonable to assume that along with a Christian king, there would be possession of buildings for use by the Christian church among his people and during the reign of Marcus Antoninus Verus (156) there was such a king. Bede writes, “While the holy Eleutherius ruled the Roman Church, Lucius, a British king, sent him a letter, asking to be made a Christian. This pious request was quickly granted, and the Britons held the Faith which they received in all its purity and fullness until the time of the Emperor Diocletian.” (Leo Sherley-Price, ed. *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*, Revised ed. (Penguin Books, 1990), 49.).

⁵⁰ Eg. Eccles near Hickling in Norfolk (Charles. Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500* (London: Batsford Academic And Educational, 1981), 148-49.).

Gildas “published his works in 545 x 549” (Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, 143.).

⁵¹ Special baptismal objects would not be needed unless a lot of baptisms were being done. The troughs were portable so may not mean that the church or Bishop’s building was near where the trough was found (Peter Salway, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Roman Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 521.).

⁵² In some places such as Ashton, the troughs have been found in connection with Roman settlements or a villa such as the one at Wiggonholt in Sussex (Ibid., 522).

⁵³ Ibid., 514 -5.

⁵⁴ Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture.*, 14 & 16.

Cookson, who also cites the Silchester church building, tells us it was probably a stone structure. It had a nave, aisles and a mosaic panel (Neil Cookson, "The Christian Church in Roman Britain: A Synthesis of Archaeology," *World Archaeology. Archaeology & the Christian Church* 1987, 427.).

⁵⁵ Thomas, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500.*, 519.

(225-31 AD), and one at Lullingston in Kent (137-50 AD) that contained Christian iconography.⁵⁶

During the reign of the Emperor Alexander Severan (222-30 AD) Christianity was tolerated and there is archaeological evidence of Christian buildings like the Community House at Dura-Europos being built or renovated from existing houses.⁵⁷ Domestic buildings of this nature, adapted for religious practice have also been found in Rome, Spain and Britain.⁵⁸ Some have been found during excavations under later church buildings.⁵⁹ These early churches were not thought to be distinctive from the outside but often had walls painted with Christian themed images inside.⁶⁰ Esler suggests these buildings indicate a shift from private to publicly identifiable church ownership. He backs up this claim with evidence from Syriac court records that report the destruction in 201 AD, of a “temple (or sanctuary) of the church of the Christians” along with other buildings, in a flood.⁶¹

Following persecution by Decian and Valerianic, some Christians fled into the Thebias desert and lived there as hermits.⁶² Later, others followed their lifestyle and the term “Monk” was used to categorize them, because they lived alone in a cell or a hut called a “monastery”, devoting their time ascetically to God.⁶³ Although these first huts may not fit the classification of being “possessed by Christian Churches”, later monasteries were. In 305 AD Anthony (251-356 AD) who viewed “organized churches”, as “impossible” Christian “dwelling places”, established a monastery of individual huts.⁶⁴ He became known as a

⁵⁶ Cookson, "The Christian Church in Roman Britain: A Synthesis of Archaeology.", 427.

⁵⁷ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 891. See the Appendix page 17 for a photo of part of the interior of the church building.

⁵⁸ Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 13.

⁵⁹ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World's Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 10.

⁶⁰ The community at SS. Giovanni e Paola owned a large building that had painted walls inside on the ground floor, while the church was on the second floor (Ibid., 10-11.).

⁶¹ Esler also mentions the possibility of door plaques in identifying a church building (Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, 715-17.).

⁶² Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 422-23.

Gordon Stowell, ed. *The Book of Knowledge*, 8 vols., vol. 5 (London: The Waverly Book Company Ltd, n.d.), 243.

⁶³ Stowell, ed. *The Book of Knowledge*, 243.

⁶⁴ Anthony was a Coptic Christian (Frend, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461*, 191.).

prophet and a seer and in his “church” community, taught the others, prayed, fasted, studied the scriptures and worked hard for “his own subsistence needs”.⁶⁵ There is evidence that rural settlements called monasteries grew in number and were placed under the oversight of a bishop. In Nitria there were upwards of 5,000 monks who attended regular “church” services.⁶⁶ According to Frend, Pachomius (290-345 AD) built nine large self supporting, rural monasteries.⁶⁷ They were structured “orders” with a chain of authority and thousands of people, studying the scriptures, gathering for church services and “carrying on every form of trade and occupation”.⁶⁸ Pachomius also built two nunneries, one of which was a convent for his sister.⁶⁹ Further evidence of monasteries and what they were used for can be found in letters by Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea.⁷⁰ He established orphanages, schools, hospitals, and hospices staffed by monks and provided opportunities for study, crafts and laboring.⁷¹ Here the monks spent their day in prayer, scripture reading and “doing good works”.⁷² The ability for the church to own monasteries sometimes came from the benevolence of wealthy patrons. Paula, who co-labored with Jerome, used her own wealth and gained allegiance from noble families to found and endow monasteries, where she instigated the copying of manuscripts.⁷³

By the end of the third century church buildings were clearly recognized in many cities.⁷⁴ Census and court records mention “church buildings”, property transfers and ownership, as well as search and seizure of church property.⁷⁵ A letter by the Emperor Diocletian (March 303), ordering all churches to be “razed (sic) to the ground” also implies

⁶⁵ ———, *The Rise of Christianity*, 423.

⁶⁶ ———, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461*, 191.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 192-93.

⁶⁹ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 189.

⁷⁰ “Longer and Shorter Rule of St. Basil” (Frend, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461*, 198.).

Stowell, ed. *The Book of Knowledge*, 243.

⁷¹ Frend, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461*, 195.

⁷² Stowell, ed. *The Book of Knowledge*, 243.

⁷³ Elizabeth Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible a Classical Feminist Perspective* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 137.

⁷⁴ Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, 717.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

that the early church during this period did possess church buildings.⁷⁶ One church didn't blend in as many had before the time of Diocletian. It was a "lofty edifice.....situated on rising ground.....within view of the palace", where Diocletian and Galerius could see it.⁷⁷ This was one of many church building that were demolished, curtailing the amount of physical evidence for church buildings from this period. In 311 AD after the death of Diocletian, Galerius sent out an edict saying that Christian could "exist again" and "establish their meeting houses".⁷⁸

Just as some homes were put at the disposal of the Christian community, so too were burial places.⁷⁹ From the middle of the second century "Christian cemeteries" were created where bodies were "placed between two rows of tiles forming a roof" with a plain monument above ground.⁸⁰ Sometimes bodies were placed in sarcophagi under an arch in "vaults dug into the hillside".⁸¹ In Rome catacombs were used and extended like "labyrinths" to meet the increased demand created by persecution and martyrdom.⁸² Evidence of Christian community possession of catacombs has been inferred by Lampe and Frend.⁸³ Lassus gives some examples of these, including the mid third century catacomb of Priscilla in Rome and the catacomb of St. Peter and St. Marcellinus.⁸⁴ Other evidence for churches possessing burial buildings comes from Hippolytus who writes that Zephyrinus appointed Callistus over the

⁷⁶ Eusebius, *HE*, V111.2.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 273.

⁷⁷ Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, 12,2-4, in *Ibid.*, 272.

⁷⁸ Various multitudes of Christians had been assembling and now "Christians were allowed to "exist again", and "establish their meeting houses" (Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, 34.3-4, in *Ibid.*, 280.).

⁷⁹ "With us everything belongs to everyone – with the exception of women" (Terullian, *Apol.* 10f., in Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 369-70.).

⁸⁰ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World's Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 12.

⁸¹ These were called "acrosolia" (*Ibid.*, 12).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁸³ Frend infers possession because of the large numbers of dead buried in catacombs with Christian paintings on the walls and sites the catacomb in the Via Latina in Rome as possibly belonging to a wealthy community of Christians (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity.*, 449). Lampe infers church ownership because Pope Fabian (236-50) remodelled catacombs and divided the city into seven ecclesiastical regions and around 235 C.E. Bishops were buried in the cemetery in the Via Appia (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 371.). He also infers ownership because Tertullian wrote of the Christian community taking care of the burial of the needy (———, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 371.).

⁸⁴ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World's Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 19-21. Lampe also mentions Tertullian who writes of cemeteries "known by the pagans as Christian property" (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 371.).

cemetery.⁸⁵ He goes on to say that around 200 AD “The Crypt of the Popes” and other cemeteries were added to the property of the church.⁸⁶ By the third century catacombs were regarded as Church property and as such were maintained by the church.⁸⁷

The catacombs were visited and gifts, honors and prayers to God were given on behalf of the dead, and the Eucharist shared.⁸⁸ Some of the catacombs were enhanced to become shrines of the martyrs and places of pilgrimage for Christians, who celebrated their anniversaries, said prayers and requested intercession by the martyred.⁸⁹ Basilican buildings, a “type of Roman mausoleum” were sometimes built to commemorate a martyr as well.⁹⁰ Some like this have been found in Britain.⁹¹ Constantine marked the spot of what was believed to be the Apostle Peter’s tomb, by building a large basilica above it.⁹² Part of Constantine’s building program included his own tomb which was a church in which he intended to house the relics of the twelve Apostles.⁹³ Constantine’s mother, Helena went to Jerusalem in 326 AD, where she identified sacred sites and ordered the construction of shrines and Christian churches such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to mark the spot, too.⁹⁴ Pilgrimages to these shrines and mausolea were made from all over the Mediterranean. Jerome (345-420

⁸⁵ Zephyrinus (199-217) was the bishop of Rome (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 285.).

⁸⁶ Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, 9.12.14, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 149.
Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 339.

⁸⁷ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 13.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-20.

Archdeacon Caecilian’s rebuke of one of his congregational members for “kissing a martyr’s bone” before receiving the Eucharist is evidence for the Eucharist being shared in a catacomb (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity.*, 408).

⁸⁹ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 13.

⁹⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1963), 30.

⁹¹ A Roman mausoleum in Kent, Faversham, was incorporated into part of a later medieval church and at the Christian cemetery at Pondbury, Dorset, elaborate mausoleums associated with other fourth century Christian graves have been discovered (Salway, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Roman Britain*, 523-26.).

⁹² The basilica had a nave, four aisles and a transept (Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 35.).

A shrine was built on the “Apian Way to honour the Apostles (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 401.).

⁹³ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 33.

⁹⁴ Stephen. M. Miller, and Robert V. Huber *The Bible: The Making and Impact of the Bible a History* (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2004), 112.

AD), and Egeria (380-384 AD) wrote about their travels giving written eye witness accounts of some of the Christian buildings.⁹⁵

There is a burgeoning amount of evidence of the churches possessing buildings during Constantine's reign, beginning with the "Edict of Milan", commanding the return of all possessions taken from Christians.⁹⁶ These possessions included the places where Christians "used to assemble", as well as "others belonging to their corporation, namely to their churches".⁹⁷ Eusebius' comment, "Who can number the churches in every town", gives us a sense of the scale of church building the edict initiated, which may have "outnumbered" public ones.⁹⁸ "Exclusively Christian centres" containing many rooms used for storing goods for charitable purposes, administration, engaging in arbitration, and housing the growing Christian clerical staff were also built.⁹⁹ Buildings for meetings, libraries, catechetical purposes, hospices, schools and accommodation were built during this time as were pilgrimage centres.¹⁰⁰

Constantine's law of 321 AD enabled donations of churches and property including mosaic pavements, to be given to the churches and among the beneficiaries was Bishop Damasus (366 – 384 AD) who, "handsomely" endowed the churches he built.¹⁰¹ There is evidence that Constantine himself gave to the church enabling them to possess great wealth

⁹⁵ Ibid., 112-13.

⁹⁶ Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 285.

⁹⁷ Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, 48.2-12, in Ibid., 285.

⁹⁸ Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, 30.

Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 557.

⁹⁹ Turner, ed. *From Temple to Meeting House. The Phenomenology & Theology of Places of Worship*, 159.

¹⁰⁰ A pilgrimage center at Hippo Regius had 120 separate rooms (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 558.).

Writings from Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil or Caesarea describe a hospital and teaching center that had been built around the cave in Seleucia, where it was believed that Thecla had taught and healed. Monasteries, convents and assembly areas were also built there and are mentioned in Egeria's travel writings of 399 AD. In 1908 the apse of the main basilica was discovered during excavations as were cisterns for bathing the sick (Catherine. Kroeger, Mary Evans, and Elaine Storkey, *Study Bible for Women. The New Testament. Nrsv* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1995), 9.).

Bede writes about ruined churches being rebuilt as well as shrines of the martyrs being completed everywhere before the Arian controversy (Sherley-Price, ed. *Bede: A History of the English Church and People*, 54.

Frend sets the time of the Arian Controversy from 325-360 AD (Frend, *The Early Church from the Beginning to 461*, 146.).

¹⁰¹ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 569.

and build many basilica style churches.¹⁰² Moffett tells us that he gave the “Lateran Palace in Rome to the early church to serve as a residence for the bishop and one of the earliest basilicas was built adjacent to the palace in about 313” AD.¹⁰³ This giving to the church could account for Augustine’s church at Hippo possessing twenty times more property than his father had.¹⁰⁴ Lassus tells us that cathedrals were built everywhere to “replace the more modest churches destroyed” by Diocletian.¹⁰⁵ The Aquileia cathedral in Italy was one such building.¹⁰⁶

Adaptation of existing buildings, including pagan temples, to a basilica plan continued after Constantine’s death and some are still in existence today, having been further renovated, obscuring some of the evidence of earlier church buildings, but not always obscuring traditional knowledge of the origins.¹⁰⁷ The Titulus Priscae for example traditionally traces the “title-parish Priscae”, back to the urban Roman House church of the New Testament Priscilla.¹⁰⁸ New Basilicas were also built as evidenced in Augustine’s writing about a new church, where the Christians under siege, engaged in what was then a new exhortation activity of singing psalms and hymns.¹⁰⁹

Further evidence of publicly identifiable church buildings comes from non-canonical writings. For instance, Severus, writes about the Bishop Valens’ “church of the Martyrs”, near Mursa, that was used by the Emperor Constantius as an “abode”, during the battle against Magnentius in 351 AD.¹¹⁰ Sozomen writes about Aietus, the deacon of the church at Antioch and about George of Laodicea taking a letter about consecrating a church, to the synod at

¹⁰² Ibid., 557.

¹⁰³ Marian. Moffett, Michael Fazio, and Laurence Woodhouse, *A World History of Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2003), 142.

¹⁰⁴ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity.*, 558.

¹⁰⁵ Lassus, *Landmarks of the World’s Art Architecture, Mosaics, Paintings. The Early Christian and Byzantine World*, 37.

¹⁰⁶ Athanasius mentions seeing a “great new church” being built in Aquileia which could have been this cathedral (Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 557.).

¹⁰⁷ Esler, ed. *Early Christian World.*, 730.

¹⁰⁸ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Devout people kept “watch in the church” (Augustine, Confessions, 1X.7.15, in J. Stevenson, ed. *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337-461* (Cambridge: University press, 1989), 134.).

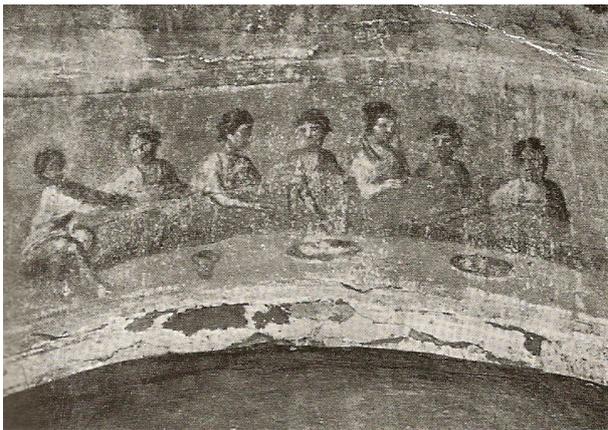
¹¹⁰ Sulpicius Severus, *Chronica*, 11 38.5., in Ibid., 29.

Ancyra.¹¹¹ Socrates’ writings also provide evidence of church buildings. For instance he tells about Gregory of Nazianzus (379-81 AD) holding his assemblies in a small “oratory” next to which an emperor later built a magnificent church called “Anastasia”.¹¹²

The evidence provided in this essay is a sample of the growing written and archaeology evidence that the early Christian churches possessed buildings, although they were not always corporately owned.¹¹³ We can look back and describe some of the things that happened in the church buildings, and infer others, that include church related activities that we are familiar with today, and activities we might not consider best “church” practice. They include activities involving loving God and the world, loving self, and building up those they believed were the “church”.¹¹⁴

Appendix of Visual evidence via Photographs and Images

Wall painting on the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome



Catacomb of Callistus (Crypt of the Popes), Rome



¹¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹¹² 1 Socrates *HE*, V.7.1-2, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, 111.

¹¹³ Archaeological digs are revealing more evidence and ways of reading footsteps from the past may not yet be invented so even more types of evidence may be available in the future.

¹¹⁴ Individual instances of building up personal treasure on earth or some other motive may have and still can overshadow best Christian Church practice, but would also fit into the category of loving self.

Milburn 1988, 35

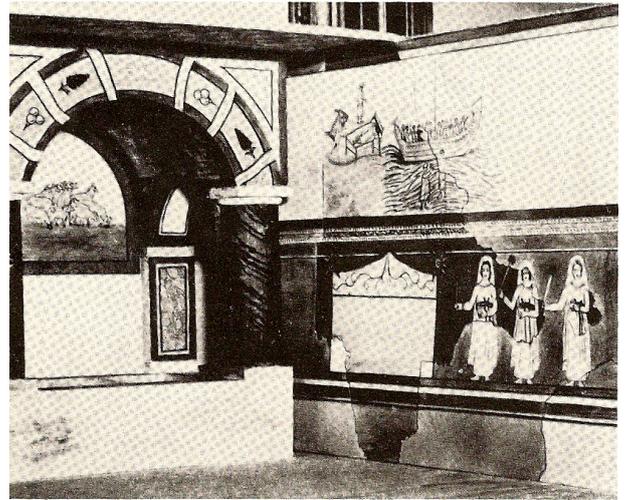
Underground basilica in near the Porta Maggiore in Rome.



Milburn 1988, 87

Milburn 1988, 24

The Christian Community House, Dura-Eutopos, Syria (c. 230) had a baptistery with a large bath under a canopy. The wall paintings in the baptistery depicted scenes from the Old and New Testament.



Lassus 1967, 11

Battistero Paleocristiano, at Milan



Hayes 2008, http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/milan-baptistery-photos/slides/xti_7807.htm

Lateran Baptistery



Hayes 2010, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/rome-lateran-baptistery>

Baptismal font in Saint Peter's Church at Antioch



Photo courtesy of Dick Osseman

The alter in the Church at Antioch



Photo courtesy of Dick Osseman

The Chair at Saint Peter's Church at Antioch



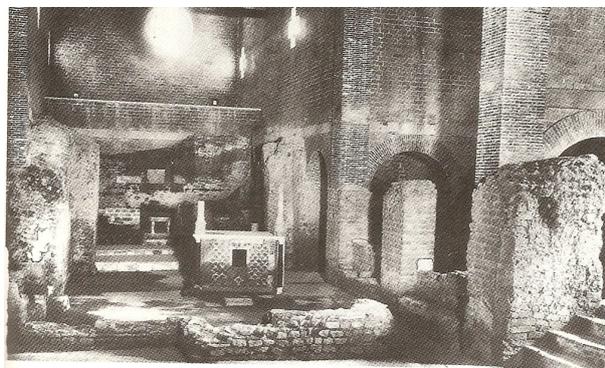
Photo courtesy of Dick Osseman

Fourth century Aquileia Cathedral in Veneto Italy.



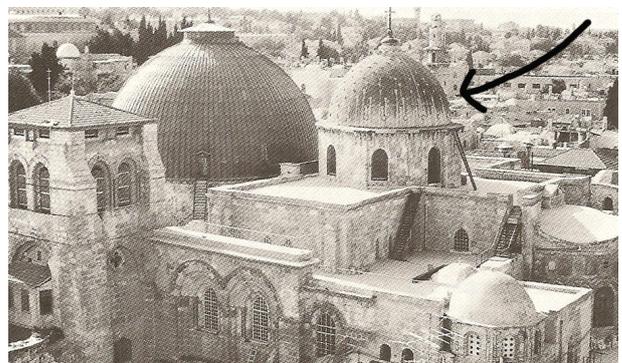
Lassus 1967, 37

Underground chapel of St. Alexander



Milburn 1988, 91

Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Anastasis) in Jerusalem.



Milburn 1988, 102

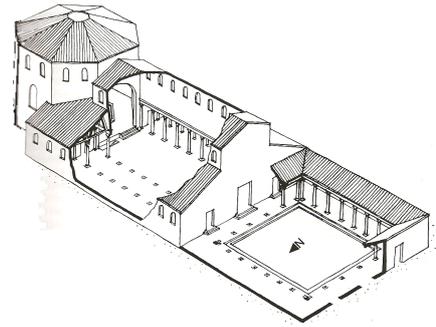
Fourth century basilica at Damos el Karita

Church of the Nativity

(suburb of Carthage), Tunisia.



Ousterhout 2006,
<http://www2.arch.uiuc.edu/courses/arch311/I-D/afterconst.html>



Krautheimer 1986, 59

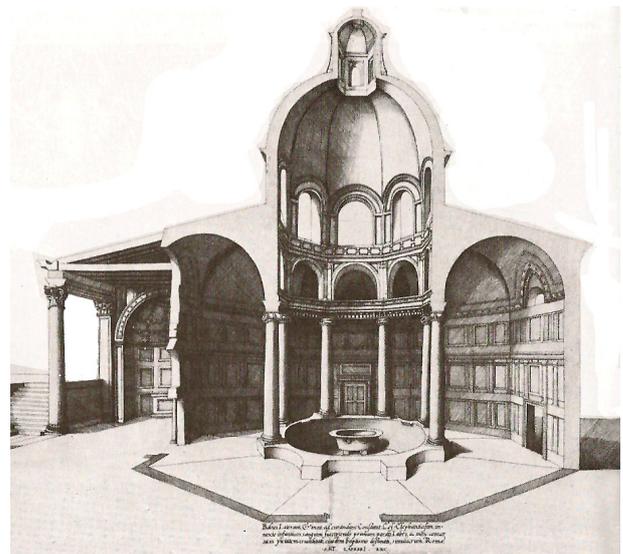


Photo of remains: courtesy of John McCaffrey

This is a reconstruction from the evidence of a church building at Colchester, Britain (320/40) in a Christian cemetery.

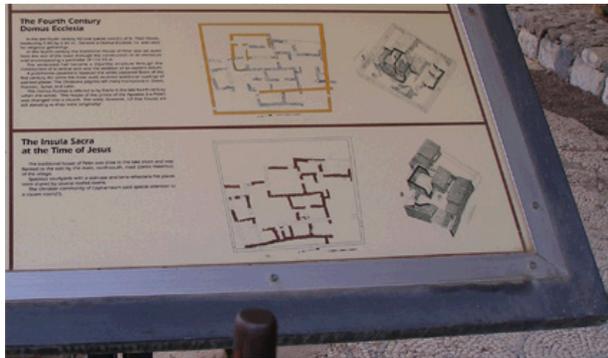


Drawing showing the Lateran baptistry.



Salway 1993, 417

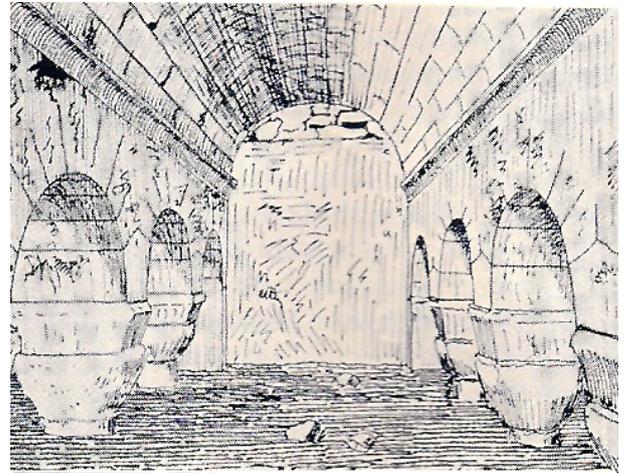
Notice board showing the plan of the fourth century Domus Ecclesiae at Capernaum, believed to be built from and above the Apostle Peter's house. Below are the remains of the Octagonal Basilican church.



Photos courtesy of John McCaffrey

Krautheimer 1986, 90

Reconstruction and remains of the hospital built near what is believed to be Thecla's cave.



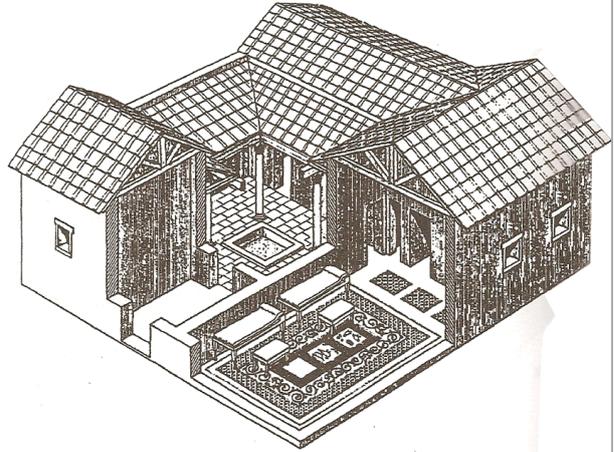
Clark 1988, 34

Fourth Century Floor Mosaic from a Roman Villa at Hinton St. Mary, Britain



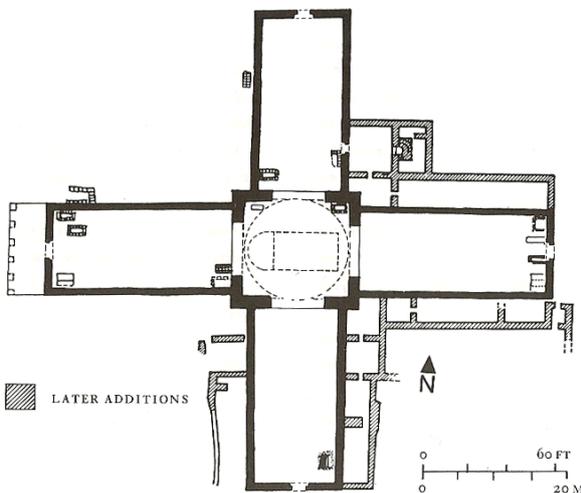
Stokstad 1988, 35

Reconstruction of Roman villa at Anaploga, Corinth with Christian themed mosaic tiles that were laid around 75-100 C.E. in an existing house.



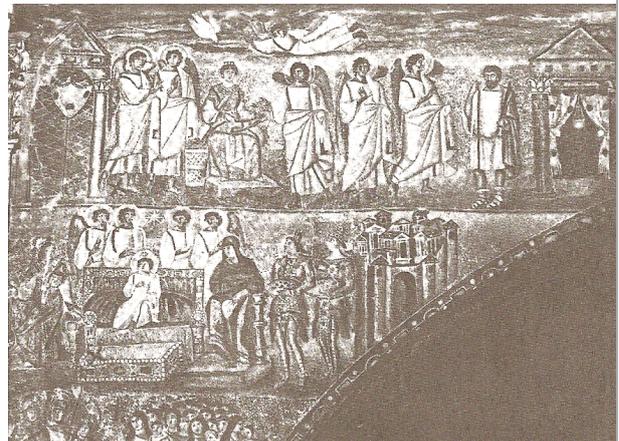
Gehring 2004, 318

Plan of the building of the martyr-shrine for Bishop Babylas of Antioch was begun around 379.



Krautheimer 1986, 76 & 127

Mosaic on the triumphal arch in the Church of Sta. Maria Maggiore, Rome 432-40



Stokstad 1988, 41

Engraving by L. Rossinni of St. Pauls Cathedral that was begun in 384



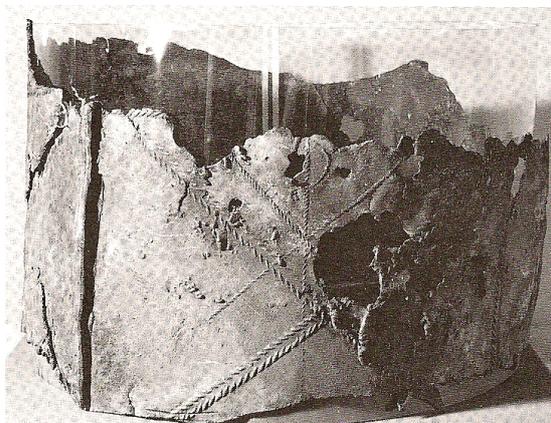
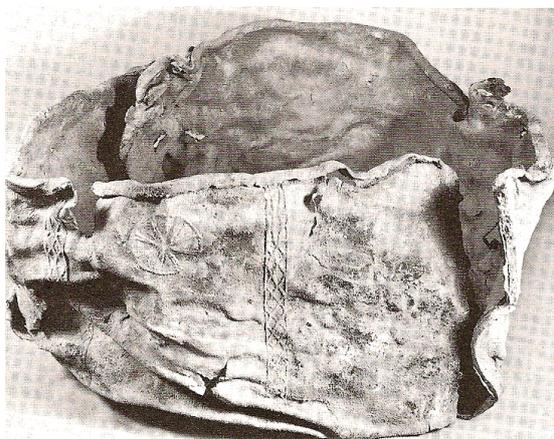
Krautheimer 1986, 87

The remains of the church built over the grave of the martyr Agnes (c. 350) on the Via Nomentana.



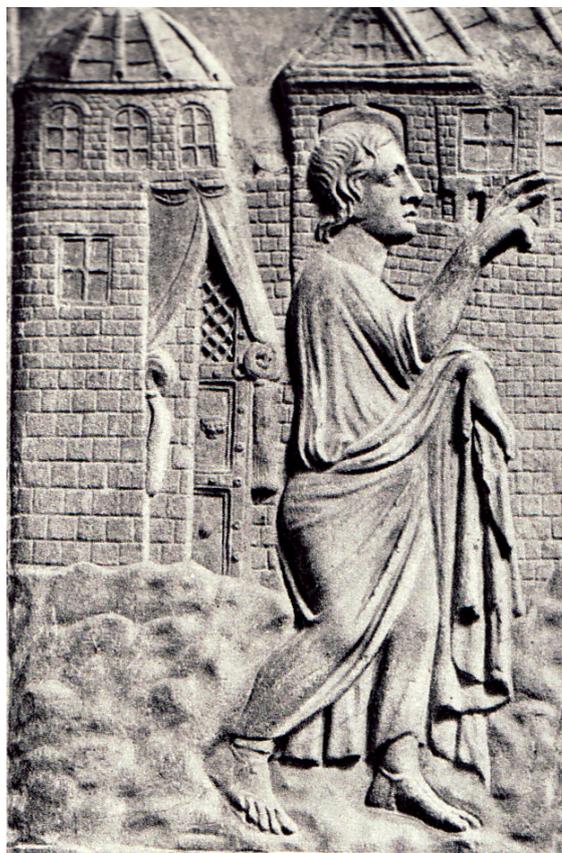
Ousterhout 2006,
<http://www2.arch.uiuc.edu/courses/arch311/I-D/afterconst.html>

Baptismal tanks found at Oxborough, Norfolk and Caversham, Berkshire.



Salway 1993, 524

Section of a Vatican Sarcophagus showing a baptistery next to a church, that Meer thinks may be the Anastasis church building.



Meer 1958, 73

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