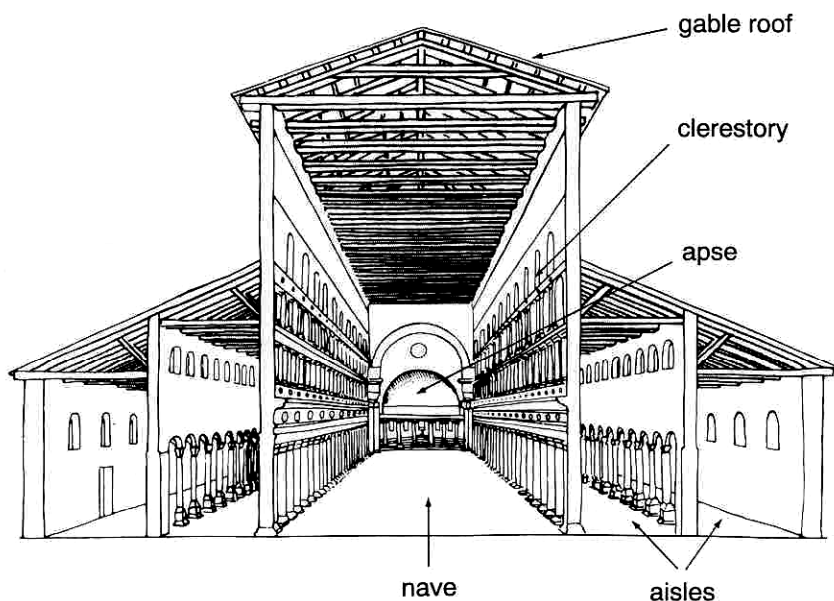
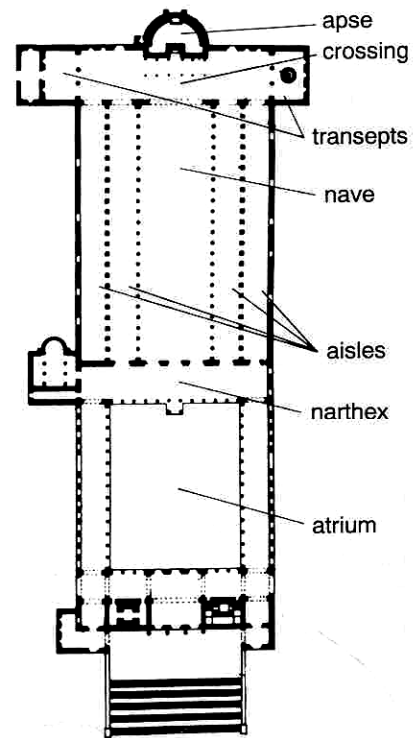


EARLY CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE



4-12. Reconstruction of the nave, Old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. c. 333–90. Interior length approx. 368'. This basilica was demolished in the sixteenth century, when today's imposing edifice (see figs. 6-24–6-28, 7-22–7-23) was begun. The earlier church then became known as Old St. Peter's. Commissioned by the Roman emperor Constantine



4-13. Plan of Old St. Peter's Basilica

Old St. Peter's Basilica was a prototype for developments in Christian architecture (figs. 4-12, 4-13). The plan was initially adapted from the

Roman **basilica** (see fig. 3-111), which was usually entered on its long side, but the Christian church was entered through an **atrium** and **narthex** (entrance hall) on its short side. This narthex was usually on the west, and the altar was toward the east, an orientation followed in most later medieval churches.

The interior division of space, with a **nave** flanked by side **aisles**, is similar to certain Roman basilicas. Old St. Peter's has **transepts** (from the Middle Latin *transseptum*, "transverse enclosure"), a feature that would become traditional in Christian churches. These architectural spaces, extensions to the north and south, meet the nave at the **crossing**. Transepts create cross shape; the term **cruciform** (cross-like) **basilica** designates Early Christian churches with transepts. At St. Peter's, as in many Roman basilicas, wooden beams supported a **gable roof**, and **clerestory** windows allowed light to illuminate the nave. Many of the columns used in building Old St. Peter's were taken from earlier Roman buildings; materials thus reused are known as **spolia** (Latin, "spoils"). The group of spiral columns that decorated the altar area at Old St. Peter's had a special significance, for they were thought to have been taken from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

The size of Old St. Peter's mirrors the triumphant attitude of Christianity following the Edict of Milan in 313, which granted religious freedom to the Christians. Constantine realized the unifying strength that the newly recognized religion could bring to his reign. Many privileges, including tax exemptions and donations of land and money, were granted the Church. Constantine personally contributed to the construction of St. John Lateran in Rome (begun 313), which marks the first use of the basilica plan for Christian architecture. Constantine's support was further evidenced by his decision to build Old St. Peter's, which was both a martyrium (built over the grave site of Saint Peter, it marked and commemorated his martyrdom) and a basilica used for worship. It is believed that the development of the transept at St. Peter's derived from the need for additional space for worshipers and pilgrims around the shrine and a desire to separate Peter's grave from other tombs in the nave.

312

Constantine, after having a vision of the cross, defeats Maxentius

c. 333–90
410

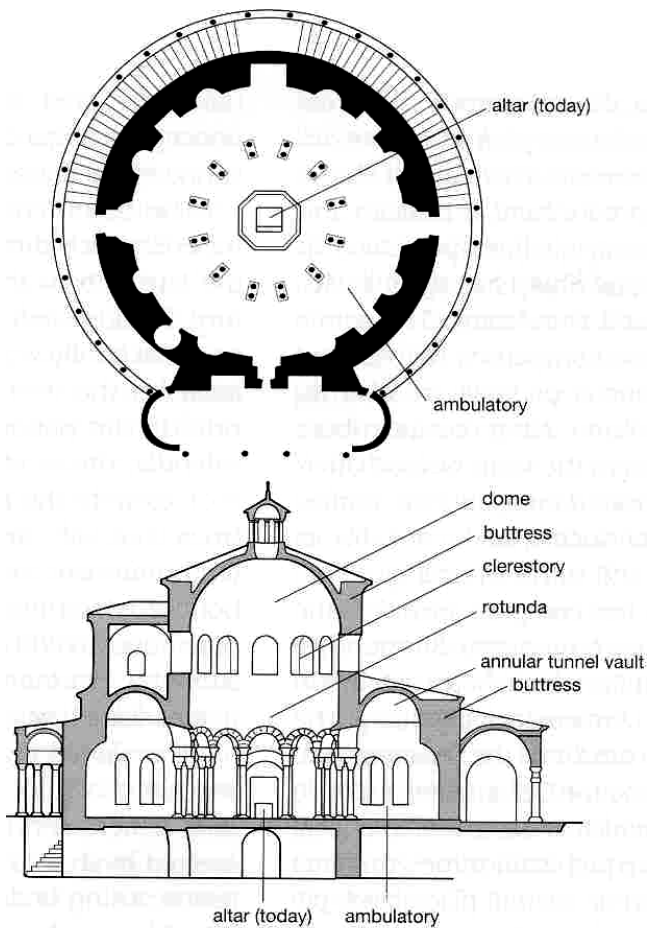
Old St. Peter's Basilica, Rome
Visigoths sack Rome

Old St. Peter's had a rather plain brick exterior, but the interior was adorned with precious materials, including marble Roman columns, mosaics, and frescoes. The decorated interior contrasted with the exterior, subtly reminding the visitor that the beauty of the inner spirit was more important than external, physical adornment. From the entrance, one's attention was focused on the high altar, set below an enormous arch on which a mosaic depicted Christ, Saint Peter, and the emperor Constantine with the inscription:

*Because under Your guidance the world rose triumphant to the skies,
Constantine, himself a victor, built You this hall.*

In the apse, where in a Roman basilica a statue of the emperor might be located (see fig. 3-101), another mosaic displayed an enthroned Christ flanked by Saints Peter and Paul. A reference to Christ as the supreme judge is thus found at a point where, in a Roman basilica law had been dispensed. On some churches, the cathedra, or throne, of the bishop was set in the apse. These churches, where bishops preside, are called **cathedrals**.) With the support of Constantine, who probably converted to Christianity near the time of his death, the flourishing Christian faith transformed the architectural forms and imperial symbolism of ancient Rome.

4-14. Interior, Santa Costanza, Rome. c. 354. Commissioned by the Roman emperor Constantine for the members of his family.



4-15. Plan of Santa Costanza

Another type of design adapted by the early Christians was the **centrally planned** structure, in which the main parts of a building radiate from a central point. It was used for baptisteries and mausoleums. Santa Costanza exemplifies the centrally planned structure (figs. 4-14, 4-15). Built about 354 as a mausoleum for Constantine's family, it features a central altar within a ring of paired columns that support the **dome** and clerestory. Between the columns and the outer wall is a circular corridor that at Santa Costanza is **barrel-vaulted** and decorated

with mosaics; it is called the **ambulatory** (*ambulare*, "to walk"). Four large niches in the walls define the shape of a Greek cross (a cross with four equal arms). The cross circumscribed by the circular plan symbolized salvation and eternal life for the Christian and was thus an appropriate design for a Christian tomb.