9.1: Early Byzantine Art

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire began as a continuation of the Roman Empire but gradually became distinct through cultural changes.

Learning Objectives

Explain the rise and duration of the Byzantine Empire

Key Takeaways

Key Points

• The Byzantine Empire, so-called for the former name of Constantinople, was the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire. After the Western Empire fell in 476, the Byzantine Empire would continue for another millennium.

• Those living within the borders of the empire called themselves Romans, as opposed to Byzantines. Cultural shifts between them emerged with the change of the official language in the early seventh century, and the Byzantine split with the Roman Catholic Church in the eleventh century.

• The surviving Byzantine art is predominantly religious and follow traditional models that translate their carefully controlled church theology into artistic terms.

• Byzantine churches began in the style of many Western Roman churches but gradually shifted to centrally planned and then to Greek-cross structures over the course of the empire’s history.
Key Terms

- **Greek-cross**: The dominant architectural form of middle- and late-period Byzantine churches, featuring a square center with an internal structure shaped like a cross, topped by a dome.

- **centrally planned**: Having a central nave with an aisle on either side separated by a colonnade, and an apse at one end.

The East–West Schism

After the death of Theodosius I in 395, the Roman Empire was divided into an Eastern half, based in Constantinople, and a Western, half based in Rome. Less than a century later, in 476, the last Western emperor Romulus Augustulus abdicated to a Germanic warlord who placed his own rule under that of the Eastern emperor. This act effectively ended the line of Western emperors and marked the end of the Western Empire. However, the Eastern portion (what historians call the Byzantine Empire) would continue for approximately another millennium.

The Byzantine Empire at its height: The Byzantine Empire (red) and its vassals (pink) in 555 CE during the reign of Justinian I.

The word Byzantine derives from Byzantium, the original name of Constantinople before Constantine moved the Roman imperial capital there in the fourth century. Despite this present-day appellation, those living within the borders of the Byzantine Empire did not call themselves Byzantine. They continued to call themselves Romans and, until the early seventh century, continued to speak Latin. Even Roman Catholicism remained the official religion of the Byzantine Empire until the eleventh century.

In an effort to recreate a unified Roman Empire, Justinian I (r. 527–565) was able to reconquer most of the Mediterranean coast, including North Africa, Rome, and southern Spain. This swath of territory remained in the Byzantine Empire for two centuries.

A significant cultural shift occurred in the early seventh century when Heraclius (r. 610–641) replaced Latin with Greek as the official language of the Empire. This caused religious tensions with the church in Rome that began in the fourth century, and resulted in seven Ecumenical Councils over six hundred years. Finally, in 1054, the East–West Schism officially made the Eastern Orthodox Church, centered in Constantinople, its own separate entity from the Roman Catholic Church.
From the tenth century to the fifteenth, the empire experienced periods of peace and prosperity, as well as war and economic downturns. In the late eleventh century, the empire lost much of Asia Minor to the Turks, a temporary setback that foreshadowed the eventual weakening of Constantinople and the further loss of territory to the growing Ottoman Empire. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks invaded and captured Constantinople, bringing the Byzantine Empire to an end.

**Byzantine Art and Architecture**

Surviving Byzantine art is mostly religious and, for the most part, highly conventionalized, following traditional models that translate their carefully controlled church theology into artistic terms. Painting in frescoes, mosaics, and illuminated manuscripts, and on wood panels were the main, two-dimensional media. Manuscript painting preserved some of the classical realist tradition that was missing in larger works. Figurative sculpture was very rare except for small, carved ivories.

Byzantine art was highly prestigious and sought-after in Western Europe, where it maintained a continuous influence on medieval art until near the end of the period. This was especially true in Italy, where Byzantine styles persisted in modified form through the twelfth century.

However, few incoming influences affected Byzantine style. By means of the expansion of the Eastern Orthodox church, Byzantine forms and styles spread throughout the Orthodox world and beyond.

*Ascension scene from the Rabula Gospel: Miniatures of the sixth-*
century Rabula Gospel display the more abstract and symbolic nature of Byzantine art.

Early Byzantine architecture drew upon the earlier elements of Roman architecture. After the fall of the Western Empire, several churches, including the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and San Vitale in Ravenna, were built as centrally planned structures. However, stylistic drift, technological advancement, and political and territorial changes gradually resulted in the Greek-cross plan in church architecture.

Buildings increased in geometric complexity. Brick and plaster were used in addition to stone for the decoration of important public structures. Classical orders were used more freely. Mosaics replaced carved decoration. Complex domes rested upon massive piers, and windows filtered light through thin sheets of alabaster to softly illuminate interiors.

Influences from Byzantine architecture, particularly in religious buildings, can be found in diverse regions from Egypt and Arabia to Russia and Romania. Most of the surviving structures are sacred in nature; secular buildings are mostly known through contemporaneous descriptions.

Plan of the katholikon church of the Pelekete monastery: The plan of katholikon church provides the typical layout of Byzantine churches after the eighth century.

Architecture in the Early Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Emperor Justinian I launched an ambitious building program to develop holy sites to restore the glory of the Roman Empire.
Learning Objectives

Describe the characteristics of Byzantine architecture

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Christian architecture was a significant component of Justinian’s project of imperial renovation.
- The church-building program of Justinian was intended to assist the Emperor in his mission of religious unification.
- Justinian hoped to recreate the glory of the Roman Empire, partly through his building projects in Constantinople.
- The Hagia Sophia was the most notable of Justinian’s projects, intriguing scholars and architects for centuries and influencing the designs of religious architecture, particularly mosques.
- Justinian also ordered the construction of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, and the reconstruction of the Church of the Holy Apostles. Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, who also designed the Hagia Sophia, designed both structures.

Key Terms

- **pendentive**: A constructive device that permits the placing of a circular dome over a square room or an elliptical dome over a rectangular space.
- **buttress**: An architectural structure built against or projecting from a wall that serves to support or reinforce the wall.
- **narthex**: An architectural element typical of early Christian and Byzantine basilicas and churches consisting of the entrance or lobby area, located at the west end of the nave.

Justinian I devoted much of his reign (527–565 CE) to reconquering Italy, North Africa, and Spain. During his reign, he sought to revive the empire’s greatness and conquer the lost western half of the historical Roman Empire. This attempt at restoration included an ambitious building program in Constantinople and elsewhere in the empire, and is the most substantial architectural achievement by one person in history.
Justinian I from San Vitale in Ravenna: Byzantine Emperor Justinian forcefully pushed for the spread of Christianity along with the expansion of his empire.

Hagia Sophia

One notable structure for which Justinian was responsible is the Hagia Sophia, or Church of Holy Wisdom, built by Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, both of whom would oversee most building projects that Justinian ordered within Constantinople. Like most Byzantine churches of this time, the Hagia Sophia is centrally planned, with the dome serving as its focal point.
Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles plan for the Hagia Sophia: a) Plan of the gallery (upper half); b) Plan of the ground floor (lower half).

The vast interior has a complex structure. The nave is covered by a central dome that at its maximum is over 180 feet from floor level and rests on an arcade of 40 arched windows. Although the dome appears circular at first glance, repairs to its structure have left it somewhat elliptical, with its diameter varying between 101 and nearly 103 feet.
An interior view of Hagia Sophia: The Emperor Justinian
ordered the construction of Hagia Sophia in 532 CE.

The dome of Hagia Sophia has spurred particular interest for many art historians, architects, and engineers because of the innovative way the original architects envisioned it. The cupola is carried on four, spherical, triangular pendentives, an element that was first fully realized in this building.

The pendentives implement the transition from the circular base of the dome to the rectangular base below to restrain the lateral forces of the dome and allow its weight to flow downwards. They were later reinforced with buttresses.

At the western entrance side and the eastern liturgical side are arched openings that are extended by half domes of identical diameter to the central dome, and carried on smaller semi-domed exedras. A hierarchy of dome-headed elements creates a vast, oblong interior crowned by the central dome, with a span of 250 feet.

The Imperial Gate, reserved only for the emperor, was the main entrance of the cathedral. A long ramp from the northern part of the outer narthex leads up to the upper gallery, which was traditionally reserved for the empress and her entourage. It is laid out in a horseshoe shape that encloses the nave until it reaches the apse.

After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the plan of the Hagia Sophia would significantly influence the construction and design of the Süleymaniye Mosque (1550–1557).

The Church of the Holy Apostles

The Church of the Holy Apostles, originally built under the purview of Constantine in 330, was no longer considered grand enough when Justinian ascended the throne. Because of this, the architects Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles designed and built a new church on the same site in the late 540s (consecrated in 550).

Like the original church, Justinian’s replacement had a cruciform plan and was surmounted by five domes: one above each arm of the cross and one above the central bay where the arms intersected. The western arm of the cross extended farther than the others to form an atrium. Because blueprints did not exist yet, and because the church was demolished shortly after the Ottoman conquest, the design details of the building are a matter of dispute.

The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus

The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus (527–536), known today as Little Hagia Sophia, was probably a model for the actual Hagia Sophia. It was recognized at the time as an adornment to all of Constantinople.

During the reign of Justinian’s uncle Justin I, the future emperor faced accusations of conspiring against the current emperor and was killed for it. However, the Saints Sergius and Bacchus were said to intervene and vouched to Justin that his nephew was innocent. After the restoration of his title, Justinian commissioned Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles to construct the church as a gesture of thanksgiving.

When the church was built, it shared its narthex, atrium and propylaea with another church. It became one of the most important religious structures in Constantinople.
Painting in the Early Byzantine Empire

The Early Byzantine period witnessed the establishment of strict guidelines for the production of icons.

Learning Objectives

Contrast Early Byzantine representations of religious figures to those of earlier Christian art

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- As Christians were able to practice their religion openly, paintings depicting the stories of martyrs became popular.
- Byzantine icons follow a strict code of symbolism based on color and imagery.
- Early Byzantine icons were wooden panels covered with encaustic paint. Icons from the sixth century and earlier...
were incredibly lifelike and sometimes caused veneration of the objects, as opposed to who the objects represented. This led to a fifth-century ban on the representation of secular imagery.

Key Terms

- **iconoclastic**: Pertaining to the belief in, participation in, or sanction of destroying religious icons and other symbols or monuments, usually with religious or political motives.
- **icon**: An image, symbol, picture, or other representation that is usually an object of religious devotion.
- **pagan**: A person not adhering to any major or recognized religion; a follower of a pantheistic or nature-worshipping religion.
- **hagiography**: The study of saints.

Icon Painting

Icon painting, as distinct from other forms of painting, emerged in the Early Byzantine period as an aid to religious devotion. In contrast, earlier Christian art had relied more on allegory and symbolism. For example, earlier art might have featured a lamb or a fish rather than Christ in human form.

Before long, religious figures were being depicted in their human form to emphasize their humanity as well as their spirituality. While this issue would be debated and challenged during the later Iconoclastic period, for a time, images of the saints in icon paintings flourished.

After the adoption of Christianity as the only permissible Roman state religion under Theodosius I, Christian art began to change not only in quality and sophistication but also in nature. Paintings of martyrs and their feats began to appear, and early writers commented on their lifelike effect. Statues in the round were avoided as being too close to the principal artistic focus of pagan cult practices, as they have continued to be (with some small-scale exceptions) throughout the history of Eastern Christianity.

Icons were more religious than aesthetic in nature. They were understood to manifest the unique presence of the figure depicted by means of a likeness to that figure maintained through carefully maintained canons of representation. Therefore, very little room is made for artistic license.

Almost every aspect of the subject matter has a symbolic aspect. Christ, the saints, and the angels all have halos. Angels, as well as some depictions of the Holy Trinity, have wings because they are messengers. Figures have consistent facial appearances, hold attributes personal to them, and use a few conventional poses.

Use of Color

Color plays an important role, as well. Gold represents the radiance of Heaven. Red signifies divine life, while blue is the color of human life. White is the Uncreated Light of God, only used for scenes depicting the resurrection and transfiguration of Christ. In icons of Jesus and Mary, Jesus wears a red undergarment with a blue outer garment (God as Human), and Mary wears a blue undergarment with a red outer garment (humanity granted divine gifts). Thus, the doctrine of deification is conveyed by icons. Most icons incorporate some calligraphic text naming the person or event depicted. Because letters also carry symbolic significance, writing is often presented in a stylized manner.
Russian icon depicting the Holy Trinity: Christ, seated in the middle, wears a blue garment over a red one to symbolize his status as God made human. All three figures wear wings to signify their roles as messengers. The gold background places their location in Heaven.

Early Byzantine icons were painted in encaustic on wooden panel and, like Egyptian funerary portraits produced in the same media, they appeared very lifelike. Nilus of Sinai, in his fifth-century Letter to Heliodorus Silentiarius, recounts a miracle in which St. Plato of Ankyra appeared to a Christian in a dream. The Saint was recognized because the young man had often seen his portrait.

Veneration of Icons

This recognition of a religious apparition from its likeness to an image was also a characteristic of pagan, pious accounts of appearances of gods to humans and was a common theme in hagiography. During this period, the church began to discourage all non-religious human images, with the Emperor and donor figures counting as religious.

By the second half of the sixth century, there were isolated cases of direct veneration of the icons themselves, as opposed to the figures represented on them, due to continued claims of icon-associated miracles. This perceived misuse, in part, justified the banning and destruction of icons in the eighth century.
Icon of St. Peter: This icon of St. Peter, produced in encaustic, bears lifelike qualities that eventually vanished from icons in favor of more stylized imagery. This icon is from St. Catherine’s Monastery at Mt. Sinai, circa sixth century.

Documentation exists to prove the use of icons as early as the fourth century. However, there are no surviving examples produced before the sixth century, primarily due to the period of Iconoclasm that ended the Early Byzantine period.

The surviving evidence of the earliest depictions of Christ, Mary, and the saints therefore comes from wall paintings, mosaics, and some carvings. Because Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) argued that no one knew the appearance of Jesus or that of Mary, the earliest depictions of Jesus were generic, rather than portrait images, and generally represented him as a beardless young man. Such an example can be seen in a mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, which houses the remains of the daughter of Theodosius I.
Christ as the Good Shepherd: This mosaic from the mid-fifth century is an example of a generic beardless Christ, as he might have appeared in contemporaneous icons. From the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy, circa 450.

Mosaics in the Early Byzantine Empire

In the Byzantine period, a building’s interior decoration often took the form of mosaic paintings, but with an added sense of spiritual drama that ordinary paintings could not convey.

Learning Objectives

Explain how the Byzantines used mosaics to convey a sense of spirituality in their architecture

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Mosaic tiles were more costly than the materials for traditional painting, and demonstrate the wealth of the Byzantine empire.
  The use of mosaics in Greek and Roman design was reserved for placement in the floor. Byzantine artists continued this precedent but also went further and adorned walls and ceilings with dramatic scenes.

- Mosaics in Middle Eastern locations like Mount Nebo and Mount Sinai provide examples of both dramatically spiritual and seemingly mundane imagery.

- The Italian city of Ravenna is the site of many of the great Byzantine structures that incorporated mosaic. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the Arian Baptistery are prime examples of the powerful impact and spiritual effect of the Byzantine-mosaic style.

Key Terms

- **tesserae**: Small square pieces of stone, wood, ivory, or glass used for making a mosaic.

- **mandorla**: A luminous cloud that surrounds the figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary in traditional Christian art.

- **mosaic**: A piece of artwork created by placing colored squares (usually tiles) in a pattern to create a picture.
Mosaic Art

Mosaic art flourished in the Byzantine Empire from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries. Whereas in Antiquity, walls were usually decorated with less-expensive painted scenes, the Byzantine aesthetic favored the more sumptuous, glittering effect of mosaic decoration.

Some of the finest surviving Byzantine mosaics are preserved in the Middle East and in the Italian city of Ravenna. Mosaics were not a Byzantine invention. In fact, some of the most famous surviving mosaics are from ancient Greece and Rome.

The artists of the Early Byzantine period expanded upon precedent by celebrating the possibilities of the mosaic technique. They began to use it on wall surfaces as a type of painting technique in stone. Unlike traditional wall paintings, however, mosaics could create a glittering, shimmering effect that lent itself to a heightened sense of spirituality. The imagery befit the Byzantine culture that emphasized the authority of one, true religion.

The mosaic technique was more expensive than traditional wall painting, but its effects were so desirable as to make it worth the cost. Further, technological advances (lighter-weight tesserae and a new cement recipe) made wall mosaics easier than they had been in the preceding centuries, when floor mosaics were favored.

The mosaic technique involved fitting together small pieces of stone and glass (tesserae). When set together, the tesserae create a paint-like effect in which different colors meld into one another to create shadows and a sense of depth. Moreover, Byzantine artists often placed gold backing behind the clear glass tesserae, such that the mosaics would appear to emit a mysterious light of their own. This play of light added a sense of drama and spiritualism to the images that suited the symbolism and magic inherent in the Byzantine religious ceremony.

Mount Nebo, Jordan

Most often, however, mosaic decoration in the classical world was reserved for floor surfaces. Byzantine churches continued this tradition in locations such as Mount Nebo in Jordan, a medieval pilgrimage site where Moses is believed to have died.

The Church of Saints Lot and Procopius (founded 567 CE) has a richly tiled floor that depicts activities like grape harvesting. Seemingly mundane, the grape harvest could be symbolic of the wine component of the Eucharist. The mosaic is located in the baptistery, where infants were initiated into the Christian faith and, according to biblical teachings, be cleansed of Original Sin. Thus, a symbolic depiction of the next sacrament in the religion would help to underscore the theme of salvation.

Another Mount Nebo floor mosaic (c. 530) depicts four registers of men and animals. The first two registers are hunting scenes in which the men hunt big cats and wild boars with the help of domesticated dogs. On the bottom two registers, the animals appear more domesticated, peacefully eating fruit from trees as a shepherd observes them at the left; they wear leashes pulled by their human masters. Among the domesticated animals are a camel and what appear to be a zebra and an emu. As in the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, this mosaic likely has a religious message beneath its...
seemingly mundane subject matter.

Floor Mosaic from Mount Nebo: Hunting and grazing scenes from a floor mosaic in Mount Nebo, circa 530 CE.

Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai

Important Justinian-era mosaics (c. 548–565) decorate Saint Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai. In the apse is a depiction of the Transfiguration on a golden background, that denotes the otherworldliness of the event. Christ, standing in the center as the focal point, is crowned with a halo and surrounded by a mandorla as his awestruck apostles observe the event. The apse is surrounded with bands containing the medallions of Biblical apostles and prophets, and two contemporary figures who are identified as Abbot Longinos and John the Deacon.

Transfiguration of Jesus: Apse of the monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt, circa 548–565 CE.

Ravenna
Arian Baptistery

Inside the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna are four niches and a dome with mosaics that depict the baptism of Jesus by Saint John the Baptist. Although the mosaics were produced before Justinian I annexed Italy to the Byzantine Empire, their overall design is very similar to those produced under Byzantine rule.

Jesus is shown as a beardless, half-submerged youth in the Jordan River. John the Baptist, wearing a leopard skin, stands on the right, while the personification of the Jordan River stands to the left. Above, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove sprays holy water from its beak. Below, a procession of the Apostles, led in separate directions by Saint Peter and Saint Paul circle the dome, meeting at a throne with a bejeweled crucifix resting on a purple cushion.

Baptism of Jesus: Located in the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna, Italy, and created in the late fifth to the early sixth century.

It took the artists several years to complete these mosaics, as can be clearly seen from the different colors of the stones used to depict the grass at the feet of the apostles. The designs are quite simple, but the use of a gold background should be noted, as it was typically used in this era to infuse these simple scenes with an ethereal glow.

Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is one of the earliest Byzantine buildings in Ravenna. While the exterior is plain, the interior is extensively decorated in elaborate mosaics. These mosaics create a truly spiritual space—a world removed from the ordinary. The vaulting is covered with floral motifs (possibly symbolic of the Garden of Eden) and the stars that stand out against a blue background seem to sparkle with their own mystical light.
Ceiling mosaic at the mausoleum of Galla Placidia: The Byzantines used mosaics more creatively and liberally than other cultures in the classical world.

Mosaics cover the walls of the vault, the lunettes, and the bell tower. The iconographic themes developed in the decorations represent the victory of eternal life over death. The inside contains two famous mosaic lunettes, and the rest of the interior is filled with mosaics of Christian symbols.

The central bay’s upper walls are decorated with four pairs of apostles, including Saints Peter and Paul, who acclaim a giant gold cross in the center of the dome against a blue sky of stars. Symbols of the four evangelists float among the clouds. The other four apostles appear in the barrel vaults of the transepts.
An internal view of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia: This early Byzantine structures demonstrates the intricate use of mosaics in Byzantine design.

Ivory Carving in the Early Byzantine Empire

Carved, ivory relief sculptures were central features of Early Byzantine art.

Learning Objectives

Describe the ivory miniature sculptures of the early Byzantine period

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Ivory carving has a special importance to the Byzantine Empire because it has no bullion value and cannot be melted down or otherwise recycled. Elaborate ivory diptychs were central to the art of this period. Early Christians
valued the small scale of these relief sculptures that contrasted with the monumental sculpture favored by pagans.

- The Barberini Diptych and the Archangel Ivory are two significant examples of ivory carving from the first half of the sixth century.
- Ivory panels were used as book covers, usually as a centerpiece that was surrounded by metalwork and gems. They were assembled from up to five smaller panels because of the limited width of the tusk. Carved ivory covers were used for treasure bindings on the most precious illuminated manuscripts.
- Western art gradually began to focus on monumental sculpture and ivory carving declined in importance. However, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it remained significant.

**Key Terms**

- **diptych**: A picture or series of pictures painted on two tablets, usually connected by hinges.
- **relief**: A type of artwork in which shapes or figures protrude from a flat background.

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### The Appeal of the Miniature

Ivory carving is the manual or mechanical carving of either animal tooth or tusk, wherein very fine detail can be achieved, and the surviving works often demonstrate intricate and complicated designs. This art form has a special importance to the history of Byzantine art because it has no bullion value and is not easily recycled like precious metals or jewels. Because of this, many ivory carvings from the Early Byzantine period still survive. Ivory diptychs, often elaborately decorated, were issued as gifts by newly appointed consuls.

In the Early Christian period, Christians avoided monumental sculpture, which was associated with the old pagan Roman religion and sculpted almost exclusively in relief. During the persecution of Christians, such reliefs were typically kept small in scale, no larger than the reliefs on sarcophagi.

Objects that were small-scale and lightweight are more easily carried and hidden, attributes that a persecuted class worshiping in secret would have found necessary. When Christianity was legalized and later became the official religion of the Empire these attitudes remained. As a result, small-scale sculpture—for which ivory was in many ways the best material—was central to art in a way that it rarely was at other times.

Consuls—civil officers who played an important administrative role until 541—gave Roman consular diptychs as presents. The form was later adopted for Christian use, with images of Christ, the Theotokos (the Virgin Mary), and saints. Such ivory panels were used as treasure bindings (elaborate book covers) from the sixth century, usually as centerpieces, and surrounded by metalwork and gems. These book covers were sometimes assembled from up to five smaller panels due to the limited width of the tusk. Carved ivory covers were used as treasure bindings on the most precious illuminated manuscripts.

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### The Barberini Diptych

The Barberini Diptych (c. 500–550 CE) is a Byzantine ivory leaf from an imperial diptych dating from Late Antiquity. It is carved in the style known as Late Theodosian, representing the emperor as triumphant victor.
Barberini Diptych: This is an early example of Byzantine ivory work, circa 500–550 CE.

The Barberini Diptych is attributed to an imperial workshop in Constantinople. The emperor depicted in it is usually identified as Justinian, or possibly Anastasius I or Zeno. Although it is not a consular diptych, it shares many features of their decorative schemes.

The emperor is accompanied in the main panel by a conquered barbarian in trousers to the left, and a crouching allegorical figure on the right that probably represents territory conquered or reconquered, and who holds his foot in gratitude or submission. An angel or Victory crowning the emperor with the traditional palm of victory, which is now lost.

The spear that partially conceals the barbarian does not wound him. He seems more astonished and overawed than combative. Above, Christ, with a fashionable, curled hairstyle, is flanked by two more angels in the style of pagan victory figures. He reigns above, while the emperor represents him below on Earth.

In the bottom panel barbarians from the West (left, in trousers) and East (right, with ivory tusks, a tiger and a small elephant) bring tribute, which includes wild animals. The figure in the left panel, apparently representing not a saint but a soldier, carries a statuette of Victory; his counterpart on the right is lost.

The Archangel Ivory

Dating to approximately the same period as the Barberini Diptych is the Archangel Ivory (c. 525–550 CE), the largest surviving half of an ivory diptych from the Early Byzantine period. The subject matter is an archangel, possibly Michael,
who holds a scepter in his left hand and an orb capped with a cross in his right hand, which he extends in a gesture of offering.

This is the insignia of imperial power. Above the angel hovers a Greek cross surrounded by a laurel wreath, possibly signifying victory. Its missing half might have depicted Justinian I, to whom the archangel would be offering the insignia. It and the Barberini Diptych are the two most important surviving sixth-century Byzantine ivories attributed to the imperial workshops of Constantinople under Justinian.

**Archangel Ivory:** This is the largest surviving half of an ivory diptych from the Early Byzantine period.

The figure is depicted in a highly classical style, wearing Greek or Roman garb, and with a youthful face and proportions that conform to the ideals of classical sculpture. Although the architectural elements consist of a classical round arch supported by Composite columns, the space is more typically Byzantine in its bending of spatial logic.

The archangel’s feet are at the top of a staircase that recedes from the base of the columns, but his arms and wings are in front of the columns. His feet are also not firmly planted on the steps. The top of the ivory bears a Greek inscription that translates as, “Receive this suppliant, despite his sinfulness;” it is possibly an expression of humility on the part of
Justinian.

In the Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox world, the disapproval of large religious sculpture was to remain unchanged to the present day. However, in the West it was overcome, probably beginning with the court of Charlemagne in the ninth century. As large monumental sculpture in other materials became more important, the centrality of ivory carving slowly lessened.

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