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Christian Worship

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Christian Worship

Abstract
When in 313 the emperor Constantine declared his support for the Christian religion, he was taking a risk. An earlier generation of church scholars had supposed that in the three hundred years since the death of Christ, his followers had manage to expand to the point that Constantine's declaration of support was simply a recognition of the inevitable--Christian triumph by sheer force of numbers. Recent work suggests a more complex reality. Christianity was very slow to get going: by about 200, perhaps as many as 200000 Christians existed on the earth. Even by maximum estimates of expansion, Christian populations in the early years of the 4th century probably totaled only about 6 million, perhaps as much as 10 percent of the Roman population. That 10 percent was unequally distributed: in cities, particularly in Rome and the big cities of the eastern empire, and among the poorer and, above all, more middling classes--merchants, lower-level bureaucrats, soldiers, and their wives--who aspired to rank and prosperity. Christianity had more limited progress among the senatorial elite and in vast expanses of the countryside where about 90 percent of Romans lived out their lives as poor farmers. By 313, in other words, Christianity had a notable presence among urbanites climbing the social ladder, but among both old aristocratic elite and the rural majority the new religion was a vague form on a distant horizon. Constantine's support of Christianity in 313 was no capitulation to an inevitable surge of Christians, but rather a gamble, not only on a faith but also on a class of people on the move.

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism | Arts and Humanities | Christianity | Classics

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CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Kimberly Bowes

Church: From Private Home to House of God

When in 313 the emperor Constantine declared his support for the Christian religion, he was taking a risk. An earlier generation of church scholars had supposed that in the three hundred years since the death of Christ, his followers had managed to expand to the point that Constantine’s declaration of support was simply a recognition of the inevitable—Christian triumph by sheer force of numbers. Recent work suggests a more complex reality. Christianity was very slow to get going; by about 200, perhaps as many as 200,000 Christians existed on the earth. Even by maximum estimates of expansion, Christian populations in the early years of the 4th century probably totaled only about 6 million, perhaps as much as 10 percent of the Roman population. That 10 percent was unequally distributed: in cities, particularly Rome and the big cities of the eastern empire, and among the poorer and, above all, more middling classes—merchants, lower-level bureaucrats, soldiers, and their wives—who aspired to rank and prosperity. Christianity had more limited progress among the senatorial elite and in vast expanses of the countryside where about 90 percent of Romans lived out their lives as poor farmers. By 313, in other words, Christianity had a notable presence among urbanites climbing the social ladder, but among both old aristocratic elite and the rural majority the new religion was a vague form on a distant horizon. Constantine’s support of Christianity in 313 was no capitulation to an inevitable surge of Christians, but rather a gamble, not only on a faith but also on a class of people on the move.

This somewhat more sober view of Christian expansion and, above all, of Christian demographics is important to understanding the art and archaeology of the earliest Christian worship. Both the Gospels and the letters of Paul make explicit the fact that the earliest Christian groups, beginning with Christ himself, met in private homes. Here they prayed together, initiated new members into their group through the rite of baptism, and shared a meal, one moment of which would be formalized into the Eucharistic rite of bread and wine. The choice of house for worship space was not an unusual one, nor was it necessarily motivated by fear of persecution from the authorities. Ancient houses were not refuges from work and public life as they are today, but they served any number of other functions, as places for politicking, for negotiating business deals, and for religious worship, both within the family and for extra-family groups. The myriad of religious groups that populated the Roman Empire—Jews, devotees of Mithras, worshippers of Dionysos, and others—often met in homes. The earliest Christian groups were no different, and the home was the principal space for Christian worship until the time of Constantine and probably beyond. By the 3rd century, major cities such as Rome and Alexandria may have had several hundred Christians who seem to have organized themselves around specific household meeting spaces.

Archaeologists have applied the term domus ecclesiae (house of the church) to these domestic meeting places, and they have labored for over a century to locate them. Despite intensive excavation focused particularly in Rome and the Holy Land, only one certain example of a pre-Constantinian Christian meeting house has been found, located in the garrison town of Dura Europos on the empire’s Syrian frontier (fig. 1). The Dura Europos Christian meeting house was originally simply a two-story house typical of the region, organized around a central courtyard. At some point about 241, the rooms on the ground floor were remodeled; on one side two rooms were joined to form a rectangular hall with a raised dais on the eastern end, and on the opposite side of the courtyard, a smaller chamber was outfitted with a small niche into which was built a basin and the walls covered with a fresco depicting Jesus’ miracles, such as the Healing of the Paralytic, and the approach of the Three Mary’s to Christ’s empty tomb, along with Old Testament prefigurations such as David and Goliath. Its hall seems to have been a meeting room for readings, prayers, and perhaps a Eucharistic service, although no permanent altar was found, while the other room served as a baptistery to initiate new converts.

The spectacular finds at Dura Europos, now housed in the Yale University Art Gallery, remain unique. No other identifiable Christian meeting house from the first three centuries of Christianity has been located. Two possible explanations suggest themselves. The first is that such meeting houses remain to be discovered or were destroyed by the later monumental churches built atop them in subsequent centuries. It is more likely, however,
that the earliest Christians did not modify their houses in any way that can be archaeologically identifiable as Christian. That is, Christians probably met, prayed, and shared Eucharistic meals in their homes without creating specialized spaces or specialized furniture for these activities. Why they didn’t remains unclear: fear of persecution is possible, but the single example of the Dura Europos house church, which lies on an important street and underwent major and certainly public modifications, suggests that the reason may be related to the fact that Christians were simply not very numerous until the middle years of the third century, indeed, the moment when the Dura house church was built. Few Christians would have produced few worship spaces, spaces that, given the small size of many communities, may simply not have required specialized equipment.

Constantine’s support for the Christian religion caused radical changes in the space devoted to Christian worship. These changes should be understood not necessarily as an attempt to meet the needs of huge numbers of Christians, but rather to make a rhetorical statement about the importance of the Christian faith. In 320 Christians seemed to have had only a few identifiably “Christian” buildings, and these were ad hoc in nature—remodeled from houses, baths, and other structures—and with minimal specialized furnishings. By 320 major Christian centers, including Rome, Jerusalem, and Antioch, had new, large-scale structures that shouted out their Christian affiliation and proclaimed the emperor’s favor for his adopted religion in their fine sculpture, brilliant interior paintings, and glowing lamps. In giving Christians their first real, monumental worship spaces, Constantine pushed Christianity onto the public urban stage.

Many of these new churches adopted the basilica form (fig. 2). This form was not invented by Christians or by Constantine but had been used for centuries in Roman judicial and public buildings. A long rectangular space was divided into a central nave and lateral aisles by columns, atop which sprang arches or, more rarely, a flat architrave. Atop the columns, finely carved capitals modified the traditional Corinthian order to embed crosses and other Christian imagery among their foliage, while a new architectural member—a trapezoidal stone called an impost block—evolved to bridge the transition from column capital to arch. The impost block became a showcase for sculptural virtuosity; like the example from Hypati in central Greece (cat. no. 98), these blocks not only contained Christian imagery such as the Four Rivers of Paradise, but they would also eventually be permeated by a web of foliage so deeply undercut as to make the block itself seem weightless and the arches and walls above supported by God’s miraculous hand alone.

Some of Constantine’s churches borrowed from different Roman traditions and started a parallel trend in church building, one that would be particularly influential in the eastern Mediterranean: centrally planned buildings. Borrowed from the circular or polygonal architecture of baths and tombs, church designs like the Golden Octagon in Antioch or the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (fig. 3) were round or octagonal rather than rectangular. These centrally planned structures might have columns marking out an enveloping gallery or ambulatory from the center, or they might remain...
undivided, soaring from pavement to their covering domes.

Just as new, clearly Christian churches provided the Christian faithful with their first monumental architecture, the furnishings of those churches announced with sculptural fanfare the special qualities of Christian worship. The new churches, whether basilican or centrally planned, had a marked-out sanctuary, typically opposite the main door and thus the immediate focus of action and attention (fig. 4). The axially oriented line of columns that marked out the nave culminated in the sanctuary, where chancel screens marked its boundaries (cf. cat. no. 101). The screens separated the faithful from the altar (cat. no. 105), itself also often covered with sculpture. The cross—the symbol of the Christian faith—was everywhere here, not only marking this part of the building as the holiest of holies, but also broadcasting to a still not-quite-fully Christian world the triumph of the church. Similarly triumphalist was the decoration on the ambo, a raised platform for the reading of the Gospels and the giving of sermons typically placed part way down the nave. Tiny elevated platforms, sometimes with their own canopies, ambos were like a church within a church, proclaiming the power of the Christian histories read from within them, as well as the power of the Christian bishops who might mount their stairs. On the ambo from the church of Hagios Demetrios at Nea Anchialos in Central Greece (cat. nos. 99, 100), intricate foliage, deeply undercut so that it seems to have sprung miraculously from the marble, has been wrapped around a structure whose base bore the repeated images of the cross. The Gospel messages and sermons read above were thus stamped with the image of the faith triumphant and surrounded by verdant nature, likewise brought about by the power of the faith.

The sculpture and other imagery that covered the interior of the new Christian churches was no mere decoration. It marked the arrival and proclaimed the triumph of a faith whose success, even in the age of Constantinian, was by no means certain and whose precarious beginnings and unlikely victory were constantly recalled to Christians’ minds through the image of the cross. Constantinian’s support did not mean overnight conversion of the remainder of the empire’s population; that would take the better part of two centuries. What Constantinian gave the Christian faith was in some senses just as powerful—a monumental, blatantly Christian architecture that not only housed Christian communities but also proclaimed their belonging.
The Liturgy

The Christian liturgy developed slowly, beginning with shared meals and prayers once a week held in private houses and ultimately culminating with what we term today the liturgy of the mass, which in major cities may be held every day. It was not a straightforward evolution, moving inexorably from meal to Eucharist, from weekly to daily services, from ad hoc readings to the Divine Service. Regional variation was considerable, and individuals crafted their own rituals that might either intersect with those of the communal group or stand alone. In many respects, early Christian liturgy would have been startlingly different to a modern viewer accustomed to the Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox service, differences illustrated by many of the objects in this exhibition.

The advent of the first specialized Christian buildings, particularly those of basilican form, not only provided a permanent, monumental home for Christian liturgy but also seem to have exerted their own influence on its development. Again, it is important to remember that, even in the early 4th century, Christian communities were unevenly concentrated in cities and still heterogeneous in their practices. The advent of the basilica as the most common building type for Christian worship enhanced certain already existing liturgical practices and, although we cannot know for sure, probably helped to homogenize these through a broadly shared building form. By the 5th and 6th centuries, when most of the objects in this exhibition were in use, liturgies had become more regularized and, within regions or specific cities, more homogeneous. As a result, specific, recognizable furnishings were made to accommodate these liturgies, objects that represent some of our most precious evidence for the elements of 5th- and 6th-century Christian ritual.

One of these elements was procession. The procession of entrance and exit of clergy and the Gospels still forms part of Roman Catholic and Orthodox liturgy today, but in early Christian churches it was more elaborate and embraced the whole of the church building. In the church of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, about whose 6th-century liturgies we are relatively well informed, the first entrance began with an acclamation of the bishop outside the church, after which the bishop, clergy, and the whole of the faithful trooped into the church together. The faithful would have carried gifts of food, including bread and wine, which were by the end of our period placed in a special room near the apse or, as at the Hagia Sophia, a separate building. The faithful would then have taken their place in the nave, with women perhaps isolated in the aisles or in a second-story gallery, while the clergy sat in great benches in the apse and the bishop on a raised throne. The so-called Great Entrance marked the beginning of the Eucharistic liturgy and saw the bread and wine taken from their storage place and walked to the altar. At this point the non-baptized members of the church, or catechumens, were removed to form yet another procession.

Processions were not restricted to the church, however, but might range over the whole of the city. At times of military victory, a threatening enemy, plague, or other natural disaster, urban processions in large cities such as Constantinople or Rome marched from church to church, halting to beseech particular saints and embracing one by one each neighborhood of the city. These “emergency” citywide liturgies were then repeated on the anniversary of the day in question and eventually became part of the city’s religious calendar and an extended part of the regular liturgy—the so-called stational liturgy. Objects like the procession cross in this exhibition (cat. no. 112), icons, and relics would have been carried by the participants, while the bishop and clergy, gorgeously attired in the garb associated with their liturgical office, not only made these processions visually stunning but also marked the literal movement of the church—its symbols, liturgical apparatus, and liturgical personnel—around the city. So too the great processions within the church, which moved from door to apse, back to the altar, and back to the ambo for the sermon, continually brought together the people, the clergy, and the most basic elements of the liturgy: the gifts, the gospels, the bread, and the wine, periodically breaking down their assigned positions to knit the community together ritually.

The principal element of the liturgy, as it is today, was the celebration of the Eucharist. It was at this moment that the blood sacrifice of Christ was reenacted as the bloodless sacrifice of his community, and thus the central communal moment of Christian life. The Eucharist was the centering point of the liturgy and was emphasized by the church’s very architecture, as well as by the ritual objects that highlighted its significance. The focal point of any early Christian church, basilican or centrally planned, was the altar (cf. cat. no. 105). Often made of marble, the altar took the form of a table and was placed before the apse inside the sanctuary, where it was protected by chancel screens (cf. cat. no. 101). Lamps were set to illuminate the altar, small teardrop-shaped containers for oil placed on the altar (cf. cat. no. 111) or hung from the ciborium on hanging platforms that served as candelabra (cf. cat. no. 110). Further veneration of the altar was made through smell: censers like the silver example here depicting Christ, Peter, Paul, angels, and saints (cat. no. 109) were used to cover the altar in fragrant incense, driving away evil, opposing the putrefaction of mortal death, and giving the congregation a whiff of the eternal paradise prepared by Christ’s sacrifice. Finally, the containers that held the bread and wine, which were the object of every congregant’s gaze, received special attention. Even poor village churches, such as that in Kaper Koraon in Syria where the Riha paten was dedicated, might have silver platters on which to place the bread (cat. no. 106), while the wine was blessed in silver cups (cat. no. 108). The precious materials would have glimmered in the dim light and been visible even to the throngs in the nave. These objects often bore imagery that commented upon their use; the so-called Riha paten, for instance, carried a modified version of the Last Supper. Instead of depicting that shared meal, however, the image shows the apostles gathered around an altar and receiving the bread and wine from Christ. The historical origins of the Eucharistic liturgy have been re-imagined to show the liturgy in which the faithful were actually participating. The image of the triumphant cross again appears everywhere, on lamps, censers, liturgical
silver, and the altar itself, alluding both to Christ’s sacrifice on
the cross that the Eucharist re-creates and to the communal
triumph of the Christian community, whose central communal
act is the Eucharistic moment.

Another element of early Christian liturgy whose intensity
might surprise modern Christians is the cult of relics. Relics were
fragments of bone, hair, or clothing of a holy person, or even
some object, such as a strip of cloth, that had touched a holy
person’s tomb or relics. Veneration of the bodies of holy men
and women had already begun in the later 2nd century, and by
the late 3rd century shrines were being built over their graves. It
was Constantine and his son Constantius II who brought these
in situ graveyard veneration into the church proper—
Constantine, by setting up “monuments” to the Apostles around
his own tomb dedicated to the Holy Apostles, and Constantius,
by actually excavating the Apostles Timothy, Andrew, and
Luke, transporting their remains to Constantinople, and
installing them in a building adjacent to Constantine’s
mausoleum, a church dedicated to the Holy Apostles. The
phenomenon of the translation, or movement, of relics, which
was set in motion by Constantius, meant that a martyr’s remains,
or relics, were not bounded by the grave or the martyr’s shrine
but could be moved into any kind of church, or indeed even be
appropriated by individuals for private veneration.

It was in part because of concern over the proliferation of
martyrs’ remains in private hands, as well as the feasting and
party ing that took place at martyrs’ graveyard tombs, that
bishops sought to control the worship of martyrs, restricting
their veneration to churches under episcopal control. Martyrs’
relics eventually became required in all churches and were placed
beneath the altar as part of the ritual of consecration performed
by the bishop. The consecration reliquary that transformed the
Temple of Asklepios in Athens into a Christian church (cat. no.
104) contained the remains of some unknown martyr (or saint)
and would have been placed beneath the altar in order to
guarantee the martyr’s protection for the new church and the
bishop’s seal of approval.

The phenomenon of relics and their translation reminds us
of the many aspects of Christian liturgy that are portable and
thus could take place outside the great public churches, and,
indeed, beyond the watchful eye of the bishop. Many of the
objects on display here—the great patera, goblets, or the altar
itself—probably come from church contexts. But other objects,
including lamps bearing the cross and even smaller patera or
cups, may just as easily have been used in more personal
contexts, such as a home or private chapel. Domestic prayer and
personal liturgies were a mainstay of daily life in the Late
Antique world, as people of all religious persuasions sought to
plug the gaps between the heady moments of the public mass
with small-scale but probably more frequent rituals. Just as Greek
Orthodox households today reserve a corner for images of the
saints, candles, and written prayers that serve as a focus for
household devotion, so too many Late Antique Christians (as
well as pagans and Jews) would have had similar installations in
their homes for personal relics, a holy image, or simply a lamp lit to
accompany supplications for the well-being of self and family.

It was not only in the household, however, that liturgy was
personalized. Many of the liturgical implements used in public
churches bear the name of the person who donated them, from
the modest lamp tag that recalls Thekla (cat. no. 102) to the
great Riha paten (cat. no. 106), which was given to the tiny
church of St. Sergios in the Syrian village of Kaper Koraon by
one Megas, an imperial curator. The names of individuals,
including laymen and especially clergy, might cover every surface
of the church’s liturgical furnishings, from the altar and chancel
screens to lamps and Eucharistic vessels. By giving to their
church in this way, individuals not only obeyed the calls for
charity but also inscribed themselves into the liturgy, tying their
names to the community’s united call for divine aid and
salvation. In some sense, this was not new; the Greco-Roman
temple was littered with altars and other equipment used by
individuals to call for special, personalized aid for themselves
and their families. In the Christian churches, however, these
calls were literally knit into the communal liturgy and its
furnishings, the personal call for salvation being merely a
piece—a lamp, an altar leg, a paten—of a ritual apparatus defined
by the community as a whole. We must imagine the voices of
Megas, the curator, and the anonymous donor of the Peter/Paul
censer as the most penetrating voices of an entire choir, the call
of a community for divine aid resounding through the prayers
and furnishings of the liturgy.

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