

## CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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#### 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

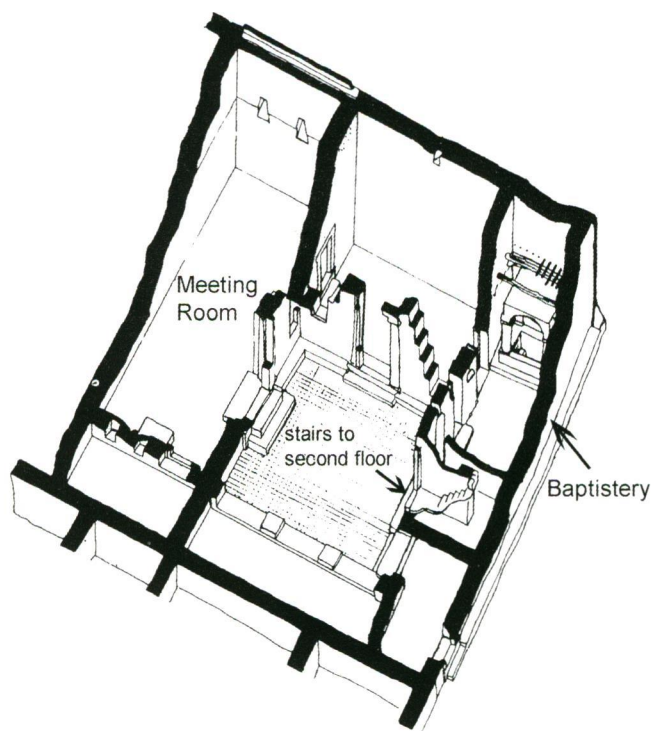


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the Dura Europos House Church (From White 1990 [*Building Gods' House in the Roman World*], fig. 18).

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 baptistry 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,