

BASILICA OF SAN VITALE

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ORDER IN PLAN

During the fifth and sixth century, many churches were built in the city of Ravenna. Many of them were basilicas, which were buildings that contained large assembly halls. They were either formed in a circular or octagonal pattern. The most famous of these octagonal type buildings is the Basilica of San Vitale.

Commissioned by the bishop of Ravenna, Ecclesius in 526, and crafted by Italian masons, San Vitale is planned in an octagonal pattern with a rectangular shaped narthex, sanctuary and an apse off of two of the sides. “The overall form of the church expresses a hierarchy of volumes in their progression toward the center” (Castex, 153). With its large windows that wrap around the church, light is able to stretch into the space and highlight the murals along the walls and ceiling.

The center area is a two level space supported by a series of eight-sided, hollow clay vase drums to support the large dome that covers the space. “To compensate for the mass of the piers, the architects replaced the rhythmic attention of semicircular and straight screens with a continuous row of semicircular niches” (Ching, 271). This gives the space the perception of feeling larger.

The side chambers in the churches in Ravenna all have similar features, they are oriented beside the apses. At San Vitale, there are two chambers, one on both the north and south sides. These were believed to be a prothesis and diaconicon.

ART IN ARCHITECTURE

Mosaic paintings spread across the walls and ceiling that recreate the stories told in the Old and New Testament. The churches in Ravenna contain some of the last remaining sixth-century mosaic art that was created in the Byzantine Empire because of the destruction of the eastern churches by the Crusaders and the Ottoman Turks.

The glass windows have had a large impact in the architectural design during the Byzantine Empire. These windows were important because they provided all the light that was in the spaces. The type of glass that they used for the windows affected how the building was structurally designed and made. Stain glass windows were more popular in the west. These normally depicted a biblical story with figures and symbols. The oldest surviving piece of a figurative stained glass window was a disk with Christ on it at San Vitale. The structure of this window was speculated to be held together by wooden window grilles rather than stucco screens.

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