MIDDLE BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

It is difficult to succinctly characterize Middle Byzantine architecture because the Byzantine Empire was so expansive during this period that regional building traditions exerted just as strong an influence over building styles as did contemporary trends. 1 Therefore, rather than studying “Middle Byzantine architecture,” it is more useful to study “Middle Byzantine architecture in the West,” “Middle Byzantine architecture in Greece,” etc. By way of introduction to architecture in this period, this reading assignment will provide you with examples of major architectural monuments from three different regions in the Byzantine Empire: Greece, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), and the West.

Although it is difficult to ascribe particular styles to Middle Byzantine architecture, there are a few general features that are associated with architecture of this period. To begin with, societal changes that had taken hold by the early days of the Middle Byzantine Period changed the purpose, function, and patronage of Byzantine churches. The population had declined and there was greater instability in the culture, owing in part to the chaos and unrest of the earlier iconoclastic period. Christian services became smaller and more intimate, and with the growth of monasticism, patronage shifted away from church authorities towards monasteries. Ultimately, this shift resulted in the emergence of smaller, more intimate churches and the development of a condensed, centralized church plan. Worship also became a quieter, more individual experience involving private prayer, in contrast to the large-scale, public services of the Early Byzantine period. This new type of worship necessitated a new church style with more than just a large hall for Christian ceremony. The newer churches, which tended to be smaller than the earlier counterparts, included a number of secondary spaces for private worship and contemplation. 2 Other features common to Middle Byzantine churches include brick construction, a cross-in-square plan, and extensive interior mosaic decoration.

Myrelaion Church, Istanbul, 10th Century (Please view the following relevant images of this building: Exterior.)

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This small, domed church follows the cross-in-square plan, a hallmark of Byzantine architecture. It was an important church in the Byzantine capital and is representative of other early Middle Byzantine churches in Constantinople.

The church is a complex combination of domes, niches, and vaults. Domes spill out, almost organically, into vaulted semi-domes in what amounts to a pyramidal construction suggestive of an active interest in three-dimensional space. Not only are the plan and elevation considered, but so is the relationship between these two design elements. The result is a space that is inhabited with lively architectural volumes, rather than simple curves and lines.\(^3\) Even the wall surfaces are enlivened with recesses and textured brickwork. Notice in the view of the exterior the way that the niches and hemispherical pilasters along the wall surface create an almost sculptural quality in the building’s walls. Combined with the rough wall-surface created by the creative use of bricks, this is a truly tactile building exterior.

Although very little remains of the interior decoration (the walls were once covered in elaborate mosaics and stone revetment), visitors continue to

\(^3\) Ibid., 16.
experience a sense of billowing spaciousness as the semi-domes open up further into the large central dome. This sense of openness is taken even further in the building’s Greek counterpart: The Monastery of Hosios Loukas.

**Hosios Loukas Monastery, Distomo, Greece, 10th Century** (Please view the following relevant images of this building: Exterior, Plan & Section View.)

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4 Ibid., 206.
Middle Byzantine architecture in Greece is distinct from the Middle Byzantine architecture of the Byzantine capital in a number of ways. For one thing, the exterior of Middle Byzantine churches in Greece emphasize the flat wall surface more than they do the sculptural possibilities of the wall. Greek Middle Byzantine church exteriors lack the deep niches and rounded, sculptural pilasters of buildings like the Myrelaion in Constantinople, and instead use two-dimensional patterning to enliven the wall surface. Whereas churches in Constantinople articulate their wall surfaces with an interplay of recessions and projections to create effects of light and shade, a Greek Middle Byzantine church
(as at Hosios Loukas) articulates its walls with patterning made of different colored stones and a textural handling of the stone and brick building materials.\textsuperscript{5} This is evident in a comparison between the Hosios Loukas Monastery in Greece and the Myrelaion on Istanbul. (Please take a look at the exterior views of both buildings to make the comparison.) At Hosios Loukas, the exterior walls are decorated with interweaving horizontal and vertical decoration: intermittent horizontal brick accents and bands of horizontal friezes interact with the vertically oriented windows and mullions, creating a visually interesting wall surface.\textsuperscript{6} This wall surface is as lively as the walls on the Myrelaion in Istanbul, but in an entirely different way. The emphasis on flat patterning versus sculptural depth is a key regional difference in Middle Byzantine architecture, but both are equally characteristic of Middle Byzantine architecture.

**San Marco, Venice, 11\textsuperscript{th} Century** *(Please view the following relevant images of this building: Façade, Corner View, Interior, Aerial View, Plan.)*

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\textsuperscript{5} Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 402.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 407-08.
Although this church will be briefly discussed later in this unit (as an example of the Byzantine Empire’s relationship with its Western neighbors), it deserves its own discussion in this section as well because it is one of the most important examples of Middle Byzantine architecture.

Italy proved to be fertile ground for Byzantine architecture. Since the days of Emperor Justinian, Ravenna and Naples had been official Byzantine outposts and therefore were in contact with Byzantine culture. Venice had also long been tied to the Byzantine world, having been under Byzantine rule in the fifth century. (It later grew into an independent republic, made wealthy and powerful because of its status as a merchant city, with outposts in Greece and Constantinople.) It therefore had direct contact and frequent interaction with the Byzantine Empire.

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7 Ibid., 426.

The city of Venice discloses this long-standing relationship in the Byzantine-infused structures that constitute its cityscape.

The Basilica of San Marco is Venice’s main church, designed as a chapel for the city’s Doges, or political leaders. Its design is rooted in Byzantine architecture, but—despite the fact that its main period of construction fell during the Middle Byzantine period—it is not a characteristic “Middle Byzantine” church, but rather a fusion of Early Byzantine and Middle Byzantine architectural plans. It resembles Early Byzantine architecture in its massive central space: huge domes and semi-domes rise over massive, decorated piers, much like the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The domes resting on tall drums, with windows that illuminate the top part of the building, are more in line with Middle Byzantine architecture.

Importantly, however, the Basilica of San Marco merged its Byzantine style with local contemporary building traditions, including (most conspicuously) the Western Romanesque style. The materials and builders were of Italian origin: bricks came from northern Italy, and the builders were most likely from the Lombard region of Italy. Even the plan of the church has a slightly Western flair, with its slightly basilican orientation (the preferred Western church style) and only a slight suggestion of the cross-in-square plan favored in Byzantium. The nave is elongated with a clear east-west axial emphasis.

The fusion of Western and Byzantine styles in this building is not anomalous and should be kept in mind as we move forward with this course. The Byzantine Empire was nothing if not expansive and multi-cultural, and—as we shall soon discover—its art not only influenced the periphery of its empire, but the predominant local traditions of the empire’s periphery were also to exert an influence on the heart of Byzantium. As Krautheimer says of a certain decorative feature in Byzantine architecture:

“…Dogtooth friezes are a common decorative element in Lombard brick construction. Such features might easily have reached eleventh-century Constantinople either directly or by way of Venice. It is too early to go beyond a mere suggestion of this possibility. But it is certainly worthwhile considering the idea that Byzantine architects were not entirely ignorant of, or disinterested in, the development of Western architecture.”

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9 Ibid.

10 Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, 432-33.

11 Ibid., 436.

12 Ibid.