

BYZANTINE

the 30-second architecture

The fragmentation of the Roman Empire led to systemic collapse in Western Europe, but in the Eastern Roman Empire laws, customs and building traditions were kept alive in the Byzantine Empire, centred on Constantinople (now Istanbul). This location led to the adoption of customs from the eastern Mediterranean, notably Greek culture and Christianity. The most common expression of architecture in the Byzantine Empire was in religious buildings, particularly churches. An exemplar of this architectural type was the Hagia Sophia (537), commissioned by Justinian I and designed by Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. In the centre of the symmetrical plan rises a huge 32-m (107-ft) diameter dome supported on pendentives that transfer the load onto four massive piers. The audacious design in an earthquake zone proved too daring, and the dome had to be rebuilt on several occasions. However, despite these misfortunes, Hagia Sophia set a benchmark in church construction and design for many centuries. One of the most prominent and enduring features of Byzantine church architecture, besides the use of the dome, was the central plan, based on the Roman temple and early Christian churches and the cruciform plan of Greek origin.

3-SECOND FOUNDATION

An eclectic architecture, often utilizing the dome, which reflects the cultural diversity of the Byzantine Empire, centred on Constantinople from the fourth century.

3-MINUTE ELEVATION

Although the power and influence of Byzantium began to wane from the eleventh century – eventually succumbing to the Turks in 1453 – its architecture continued to influence builders throughout southern and eastern Europe. From Venice's St Mark's Basilica (consecrated 1094) to Kiev's eleventh-century St Sophia Cathedral and beyond, the impact of the Byzantine plan and crowning dome is clearly visible on stone and wooden churches of different denominations and sizes throughout much of Europe.

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3-SECOND BIOGRAPHIES

ISIDORE OF MILETUS
fl: mid-sixth century
Byzantine architect, engineer, and mathematician who assisted in the design and construction of Hagia Sophia

ANTHEMIUS OF TRALLES
c. 474–before 558

Byzantine architect and geometrician, responsible for the design and construction of Hagia Sophia

30-SECOND TEXT

Edward Denison

The symmetrical plan and the dome are key characteristics of Byzantine architecture.

