



Good day Worthy Knights,

In this part 37, Constantine the Architect and Builder

(Wikipedia)

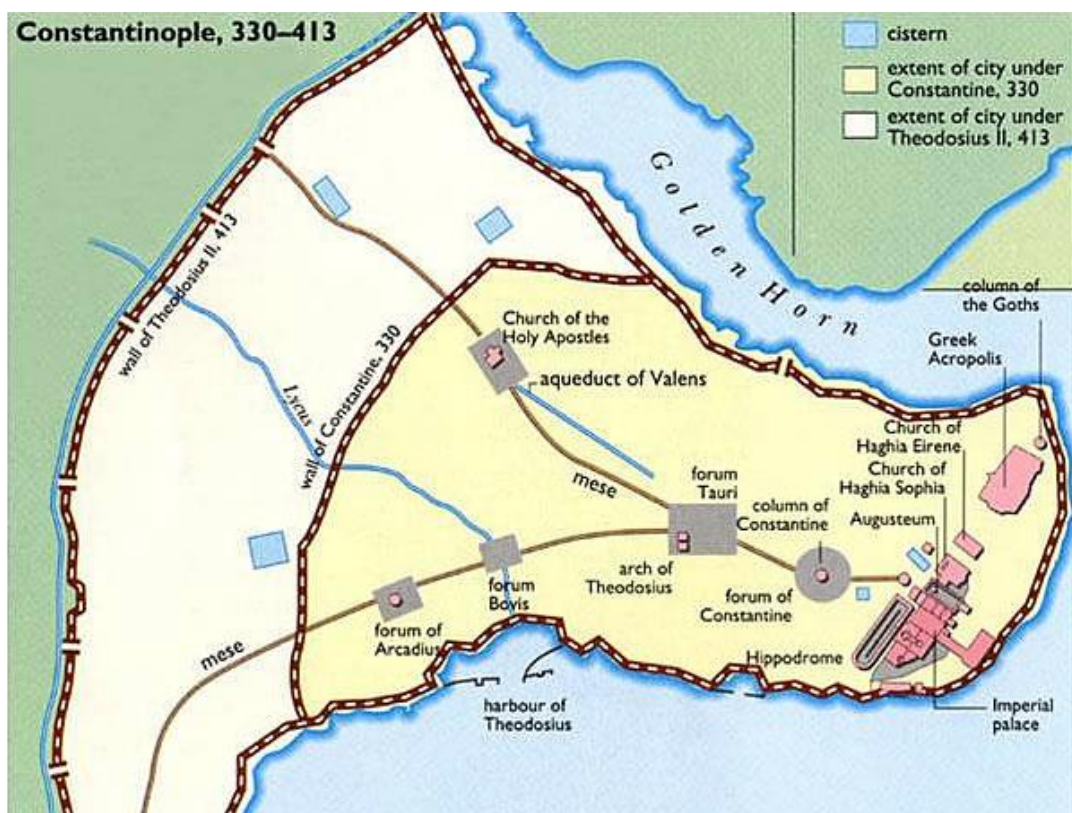
Emperors for centuries had been responsible for the construction of temples throughout the Roman Empire. We have already observed the role of the public cults in defining one's civic identity and Emperors understood the construction of temples as testament to their pietas or respect for the customary religious practices and traditions.

So it was natural for Constantine to want to construct edifices in honour of Christianity.

He built churches in Rome including of St. Peter, in his newly-constructed capital of Constantinople and in the Holy Land, most notably:

- The Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople (Part 38)
- the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Part 39)
- the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (Part 40)

These next three Parts will give details of these famous buildings.



### Old Saint Peter's Basilica

Old St. Peter's Basilica was the building that stood, from the 4th to 16th centuries, where the new St. Peter's Basilica stands today in Vatican City. The Basilica was built over the historical site of the Circus of Nero,

## History

Construction began by orders of the Roman Emperor Constantine I between 318 and 322 and took about 40 years to complete. Over the next twelve centuries, the church gradually gained importance, eventually becoming a major place of pilgrimage in Rome.

Papal coronations were held at the basilica and in 800 Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire there. In 846, Saracens sacked and damaged the basilica. The Basilica was "filled to overflowing with rich liturgical vessels and with jewelled reliquaries housing all of the relics recently amassed". As a result, the raiders destroyed Saint Peter's tomb and pillaged the holy shrine.

## Design

The design was a typical Roman basilica form with the plan and elevation such as the Basilica Ulpia in Trajan's Forum and Constantine's own Aula Palatina at Trier, rather than the design of any Greco-Roman temple.

Constantine went to great pains to build the basilica on the site of Saint Peter's grave and this influenced the layout of the building, which was erected on the sloped Vatican Hill on the west bank of the Tiber River. Notably, since the site was outside the boundaries of the ancient city, the apse with the altar was located in the west so that the basilica's façade could be approached from Rome itself to the east. The exterior however, unlike earlier pagan temples, was not lavishly decorated.

The church was capable of housing from 3,000 to 4,000 worshipers at one time. It consisted of five aisles, a wide central nave and two smaller aisles to each side, which were each divided by 21 marble columns, taken from earlier pagan buildings. It was over 110 m long, built in the shape of a Latin cross, and had a gabled roof which was timbered on the interior and which stood at over 30 m at the centre. An atrium, known as the "Garden of Paradise", stood at the entrance and had five doors which led to the body of the church; this was a sixth-century addition.

The altar of Old St. Peter's Basilica used several Solomonian columns. According to tradition, Constantine took these columns from the Temple of Solomon and gave them to the church; however, the columns were probably from an Eastern Church. When Gian Lorenzo Bernini built his baldacchino to cover the new St. Peter's altar, he drew from the twisted design of the old columns. Eight of the original columns were moved to the piers of the new St. Peter's.

