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*The Church Atrium as a Ritual Space:
The Cathedral of Tyre and St Peter's in Rome*

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The predominant view of Early Christian church building in modern scholarship is that it introduced hardly anything new. Scholars tend to stress the continuities with Ancient Roman architecture and the long history of the basilica type, which served as a model for the standard formula of the Christian church. The classicists among them do not fail to stress that such continuity did not prevent a dramatic loss of understanding of the classical canon.¹ From this point of view, the Early Christian church building is just a poorly gifted, bastard child of a very noble family, architecturally the result of a more or less skilful cut-and-paste operation on the vast repertoire of the Classical tradition.

There may be something in this perception that is at least methodically fruitful, but it suffers from a chronic inclination to overlook the substantial renewal that took place both in Late Antique architecture in general and in Early Christian church building in particular. Seen from a certain perspective – not that of outdated apologetic – the Early Christian church was a highly innovative creation. This insight, however, presumes a readiness to abandon the pure analysis of isolated elements, and to comprehend the spatial effect, in which not just the forms as such, but the dynamics between form and function, and hence between form and meaning, are included. From this point of view, the church atrium is one of the most intriguing elements of Early Christian architecture (Plate 4).

This paper will attempt to outline a perspective on ritual and space regarding the Early Christian atrium by confronting two cases of early church atria: one known from a literary source, the other from its archaeological reconstruction. The discussion will focus on Late Antiquity, but its approach will contain elements that continue to be relevant during the Middle Ages and even beyond. But first, a few introductory remarks are needed on the formal genesis and the definition of the atrium in Early Christian architecture.

¹ A useful recent overview of the historiography is F. Guidobaldi, 'Caratteri e contenuti della nuova architettura dell'età costantiniana', *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 80 (2004), pp. 233–76, at pp. 234–43.

1. *Terms, Forms and Functions*

In scholarly convention, the notion *church atrium* usually means an open court in front of a church.² Its essential features are, first, that it is horizontally an enclosed space, but vertically open to the sky and, second, that it is related to the entrance of a church and itself directly accessible from the street. The denomination *atrium* is already in use in the earliest sources relating to Christian churches, in Latin as well as in Greek variants, as we will see. In classical Roman architecture the name *atrium* was chiefly applied to the central space of a private house, the so-called *domus*. The most widespread use of the Latin word *atrium* in antiquity was indeed connected to domestic architecture.³ It was, furthermore, in use for features of Roman public or sacred architecture, but not exclusively for a court or piazza. It could designate an entire palace, temple complex or monumental area (*Atrium Libertatis*, *Atrium Vestae*) or buildings used for business such as auctions.⁴ Only in late antiquity, did the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus use *atrium* more than once to indicate a monumental piazza or court, in particular with a central statue or lined with columns.⁵

Most variants of the Roman house *atrium* were open to the sky in the centre, where the *impluvium* or water basin could collect the rain water from the surrounding roofs. Some types had columns to support these roofs. Essentially, the area called the *atrium* was roofed over but for a limited rectangular opening in the

² C. Delvoye, 'Atrium', in *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* vol. I (1966), cols 422–40; S. Spain Alexander, 'Studies in Constantinian Church Architecture', *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 47 (1971), 281–330 and *ibid.*, 49 (1973), 33–44 (catalogue outdated on several points); R. Stapleford, 'Constantinian Politics and the Atrium Church', in *Art and architecture in the service of politics*, ed. H. A. Millon and L. Nochlin (Cambridge MA – London, 1978), pp. 2–19; J.-C. Picard, 'L'atrium dans les églises paléochrétiennes d'occident', in *Actes du XIe Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne. Lyon, Vienne, Grenoble, Genève et Aoste (21–28 septembre 1986)*, 3 vols. (Vatican City, 1989) vol. I, pp. 505–58; J. Guyon, 'Cours et atriums paléochrétiens. Retour sur les prototypes romains', in *Avantnefs & espaces d'accueil dans l'église entre le IVe e le XIIe siècle: Actes du colloque international du CNRS 1999*, ed. C. Sapin (Paris, 2002), pp. 13–23; S. de Blaauw, 'Kultgebäude', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 22 (2008), cols 227–393, at 353–9.

³ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, editus auctoritate et consilio Academiarum quinque Germanicarum (Leipzig, 1900), vol. II, cols 1101–04; for example Vitruvius, *De architectura*, ed. C. Fensterbusch (Darmstadt, 1987), 6. 5. 2–3, pp. 282–4.

⁴ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, cols 1101–03; for the examples in ancient Rome see *Lexicon topographicum Urbis Romae*, ed. E. M. Steinby, 6 vols. (Rome, 1993–2000) vol. I, pp. 132–42.

⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, ed. W. Seyfarth, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1978), 16. 10. 15: [Forum of Traianus] '... Traiani equum ... locatum in atrii medio...' (... the horse of Trajan, which stands in the middle of the atrium); *ibid.*, 22. 16. 12: [Alexandria] 'Serapeum ... atris tamen columnatis amplissimis ... est exornatum...' (Temple of Serapis ... is decorated ... with very large columned atria).

centre, the so-called *compluvium*. The house atrium might therefore be quite a gloomy place.⁶ Notwithstanding the terminology, the church atrium had closer analogies to the *peristylum*, a court surrounded by open colonnades, a feature very much associated with public architecture. In domestic building, the Hellenistic housing type had such an unroofed courtyard in its centre, whether or not with a covered portico around its edges. The peristyle court then became a notable feature of Roman palace and villa architecture in the imperial age and grew ever more popular in house design as well.⁷ It has been observed that the ultimate success of the peristyle in ancient house building was due to its brightness and attractiveness, as against the relatively dark atrium.⁸

The lexicological correspondence between the forecourt of a church and the central courtyard of an atrium house can only refer to its rough form. In both instances there is a courtyard of rectangular shape, uncovered in the centre and surrounded by roofed porticoes on all sides, which might be colonnaded. But as far as its disposition in the building context is concerned, the church *atrium* has little in common with either the space called the *atrium* in an Italic *domus* or the average domestic peristyle. The court was often in the centre of the house, connecting a series of surrounding rooms, which served the main domestic functions. The Roman house atrium functioned as a reception hall, hence as a destination room for visitors and occupants. The romanised domestic peristyle was also usually situated in the heart of the house, where it gave light, air and access to a variety of room functions on all its sides. The church atrium, considering its layout within the wider complex, was not a connecting hub between various equivalent rooms, nor can it have been a place of destination. It was clearly an arrangement to allow entry, an area of transition between outside and inside. A tendency towards this particular function has been noticed in Late Antique villa complexes, but there, the axial relationship between the colonnaded court and one principal room is more ambiguous than in churches.⁹ A rare example of a Late Antique palace with a clear-cut axial sequence, street – vestibule – atrium – main hall, seems to date from the period when church building was already developing (Plate 5).¹⁰

⁶ A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Rethinking the Roman Atrium House', in *Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and Beyond*, ed. R. Laurence and A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplement 22 (Portsmouth RI, 1997), 219–40, at 236.

⁷ I. Baldini Lippolis, *La domus tardoantica: Forme e rappresentazioni dello spazio domestico nelle città del mediterraneo* (Imola, 2001), pp. 55–6. For examples, *ibid.*, pp. 240–2 (domus, Ostia 12–13), 276–8 (palaces, Romuliana 1–2).

⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, 'Rethinking the Roman Atrium House', pp. 234–36.

⁹ T. Lorenz, 'Überlegungen zur Vorgeschichte der frühchristlichen Basilica', *Boreas* 23/24 (2000/2001), 113–32.

¹⁰ Romuliana (Gamzigrad), 'Palace II', dated between AD 300 and 450, Baldini Lippolis, *Domus tardoantica*, pp. 277–8 (with uncertainties).

In form as well as in function the church atrium resembled most closely the public peristyles surrounding temples. Sometimes, these temple courtyards were also called *atria*, but *atrium* does not seem to have been the common term.¹¹ Spacious piazzas, surrounded by colonnaded porticoes, were typical for representative complexes in general, such as the imperial forums in Rome. Formally, there is an obvious relationship to the church atrium, but again, the disposition is quite different.¹² The court was often an area of passage between various adjacent buildings of equal importance, such as a temple and a basilica, but a unique axial orientation towards one principal building was rare. It is important to recall that in temple complexes, the main cultic services did not take place in the temple *cella*, but in the court outside. Finally, it is worth noting that a colonnaded court was rarely connected exclusively to the building type that was so decisive for the genesis of the Christian church building: the forum basilica.

The decisive terms for the church atrium appear already in the course of the fourth century. It is not certain whether the widespread Latin word *atrium* was called into being from a free association with the house atrium, or was rather derived from the Greek word *aithrion* (area under the open sky), which was sometimes used for church forecourts as well.¹³ The classical term *atrium* and the (probably) new creation *quadriporticus* are mentioned in combination in an inscription found in Porto. An unknown founder from the fourth or fifth century in this seaport of Rome, is said to have donated an *atrium cum quadriporticum*, in which columns were also involved.¹⁴ The term referring to the four surrounding porticoes has a Greek equivalent too, already in the first half of the fourth century (*tetrastóon*).¹⁵ Hence, it might be not mere coincidence, that Ammianus Marcellinus seems to be the first pagan author using *atrium* for a monumental public piazza or court (see above), since he was writing at a time when the first monumental church atria already existed and were named by that term.

From these summary observations, the reception of forms, functions and nomenclature in the church atrium can be seen to have been a process of considerable complexity. In fact, the results of the process were in many respects sur-

¹¹ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* gives very few instances.

¹² This does not rule out the reception of a surrounding courtyard into Constantinian church building, as for example at the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople or the Golden Octagon in Antioch. This discussion will concentrate, however, on the regular church atrium, which preceded the main building on a longitudinal axis.

¹³ A short observation on the question is in H. Vincent and F. Abel, *Jérusalem: Recherches de topographie, d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1914–26) vol. II, p. 156 n. 1; See also Stapleford, 'Constantinian politics', pp. 17–18, n. 3.

¹⁴ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, consilio et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Regiae Borussicae editum (Berlin 1862–), vol. XIV, no. 1941.

¹⁵ Laodikea c. 340, see M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia Greca*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1967–78) vol. IV, p. 396.

prising. The miracle of the genesis of the church basilica is that immediately after Constantine's act of tolerance regarding the Christian church in 313, the building of monumental churches broke out along similar lines and according to common concepts, at different places all over the empire. In Rome and Palestine as in Constantinople, imperial church foundations included a monumental colonnaded quadrangle in front of the basilica's façade. Nothing of these earliest atrium layouts has been preserved, but that of Old St Peter's in Rome can be fairly well reconstructed. While already important enough on its own, this material reconstruction can also be compared with a systematic description, dating from the early years of Constantine's reign. In a passage in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius of Caesarea celebrates a church, the cathedral of Tyros (Tyre), dedicated probably in 315, which was not the product of an imperial commission, but corresponds astonishingly closely to the concept of the imperial church projects.

2. *The Evidence of Old St Peter's*

The artificial platform on which the basilica on the location of Peter's tomb was built, was 240 metres in length. This means that the atrium must have been conceived as an inherent part of the original Constantinian project (Plate 6).¹⁶ It was slightly elongated in shape, and corresponded exactly in width to the outer walls of the basilica. Indeed, its total size equalled that of the entire nave of the basilica. A vast flight of stairs on the east side compensated for the difference of level between the ground outside and the platform. Written sources and inscriptions suggest that the atrium complex was not yet finished in the fourth century. It seems that the Constantinian fabric was given the finishing touches in a campaign commissioned by Pope Symmachus (498–514), shortly after AD 500.¹⁷ The

¹⁶ R. Krautheimer *et al.*, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae. The Early Christian Basilicas of Rome (IV–IX Cent.)* [henceforth CBCR] 5 vols. (Vatican City – Rome – New York, 1937–77), vol. V, pp. 261–71, 277, 279; J.-C. Picard, 'Le quadriportique de Saint-Pierre-du-Vatican', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Antiquité* 86 (1974), 851–90.

¹⁷ CBCR, V, pp. 267–8 and *Liber Pontificalis* [henceforth LP], ed. L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire*, 3 vols (Paris, 1886–92), 53 c.7; *Additions et corrections*, ed. C. Vogel (Paris, 1957): 'Ad cantharum beati Petri cum quadriporticum ex opere marmoribus ornavit et ex musivo agnos et cruces et palmas ornavit. Ipsum vero atrium omnem conpaginavit; grados vero ante fores basilicae beati Petri ampliavit et alios grados sub tigno dextra levaque construxit. Item episcopia in eodem loco dextra levaque fecit. Item sub grados in atrio alium cantharum foris in campo posuit et usum necessitatis humanae fecit.' Translation (with some debatable points) in *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): the Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715*, translated with a commentary by R. Davis, 2nd edn (Liverpool, 2000), p. 47: 'At St Peter's fountain with the square colonnade he provided marble adornments, including mosaic, lambs, crosses, and palms. He completely enclosed the actual atrium; outside the doors of St Peter's he widened the steps, he

description evokes precious architecture, with colonnaded porticoes, marble paving and mosaic decorations including lambs, crosses, and palms. The texts call it a *quadriporticus*, a perfectly adequate name, but also use the term *atrium*.¹⁸

In fact, the main features of St Peter's atrium are already referred to earlier by Paulinus of Nola, in his description of a huge funeral banquet, given by the senator Pammachius in memory of his deceased wife Paula in 396.¹⁹ So many poor people were invited that the entire church, the atrium and the square in front were filled with crowds. Paulinus mentions the open square in front of the complex, named *campus*, the steps leading to the level of the atrium, the landing in front of the gates, an entrance hall or *vestibulum*, the courtyard or *atrium*, a central fountain called the *cantbarus* under a bronze baldachin supported by four marble columns, and the bluish-green gleaming façade of the basilica.²⁰ The impression of architectural splendour is not inferior to that of Symmachus' patronage, a century later. All this confirms the successful development of the church atrium already in the course of the fourth century. It had become a characteristic and obviously eye-catching feature of a Christian basilica, even if we accept that St Peter's was not exactly an average church.

3. Eusebius' Vision of the Atrium in Tyre

It is striking to recognize all these elements in the literary description by Eusebius of the cathedral in Tyre on the Phoenician coast, in the very first years of public, Christian architecture. The bishop of Caesarea was invited by his fellow bishop, Paulinus of the city of Tyre to pronounce a solemn address on the occasion of the dedication of his new cathedral. This event must have taken place in 315 at the latest. Eusebius incorporated the full text into his *Ecclesiastical History*, by means of which it has come down to us.²¹ His panegyric encompasses a rather detailed description of the building, of course not for the sake of architectural clarity, but with the obvious intention of depicting it as a symbol of the heavenly Jerusalem,

built other steps under the awning on right and left, and there he also built episcopal rooms on the right and left. He also set up by the steps to the atrium another fountain outside in the open, and he built a convenience for people to use when needed.'

¹⁸ LP, *ibid.*, and, for example, LP 80 c. 1: 'Hic atrium beati Petri apostoli superiore, qui est ante ecclesiam in quadriporticum, magnis marmoribus stravit.' Translation, from *The Book of Pontiffs*, trans. Davis, p. 75: 'He paved the upper atrium of St Peter's, in the square colonnade in front of the church, with marble slabs.'

¹⁹ Paulinus Nolanus, Epistola 13. 11–13 quoted in CBCR, vol. V, p. 173.

²⁰ See H. Brandenburg, 'Das Baptisterium und der Brunnen des Atriums von Alt-St. Peter in Rom', *Boreas* 26 (2003), 55–72 and C. Gnilka, 'Prudentius über den *colymbus* bei St. Peter', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 152 (2005), 61–88.

²¹ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. J. E. L. Oulton, *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History Books VI–X*, Loeb Classical Library, No. 265 (Cambridge MA/London, 1932), 10. 4. pp. 37–45 (with an introduction on the occasion, *ibid.*, 10.3. 2–10. 4.1).

according to the best neoplatonic procedures.²² The atrium receives ample attention in this context, without the use of a proper *terminus technicus*. The following elements regarding its form and function can thus be discerned (what follows is an interpretative paraphrase with reference to the paragraphs of *Historia ecclesiastica* book 10, chapter 4):

Enclosure: the outer enclosure is strong, with a surrounding wall, a 'most secure defence' (37).

East Gate: a great porch (*própylon*), raised aloft, functioning as 'first entrances': 1. it is directed towards the rays of the rising sun; 2. it is visible from afar and provides an ample prospect of that which is within to those standing outside, strangers to the faith included; 3. it invites people to experience the beauty of the building as a promise for the soul (38).

Court: a large space between the first entrances and the temple: persons that pass inside the gates are not permitted to go further with unhallowed and unwashed feet to the holy places within (39).

Court, colonnades: this space is adorned all around with four porticoes (*stoai*), fencing the space into a quadrangular shape; the intercolumniations are filled with wooden barriers of lattice-work of convenient height (39).

Court, skylit: in the midst of the colonnades is an open space where one can see the sky, thus providing the space with air and sunlight (39).

Court, fountain: in this open space the 'symbols of sacred purifications' have been placed. Right opposite the temple are the fountains with copious streams of flowing water, supplying cleansing to those who are going further into the sacred precincts (40).

Court, function: this space is the first stopping-place for those who enter; it supplies at once adornment and splendour to the whole, and is a suitable place of sojourn for those still in need of their first instructions (in the faith) (40).

Entrance hall of the church: the innermost portico with wide openings accommodates the entrance to the temple. There are three gates, which also receive the rays of the sun. The central doorway is taller and larger than the flanking two and is plated with bronze and adorned with reliefs (41).

To anybody well versed in the Holy Scriptures – the percentage may have been high in Eusebius' audience at the dedication – it is obvious that these words contain numerous references to the Temple of Jerusalem, as described in the book of Ezekiel in the Septuagint, with additional information from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. John Wilkinson has brought this biblical rhetoric to light, noting direct quotations, allusions and variants.²³ This is remarkable enough, as it bears witness to the fact that the Christian attitude towards sacred space was changing rapidly in the first years of public church building. This contrasted with

²² C. Smith, 'Christian Rhetoric in Eusebius' Panegyric at Tyre', *Vigiliae Christianae* 43 (1989), 226–47.

²³ J. Wilkinson, 'Paulinus' Temple at Tyre', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32 (1982), 553–61.

the deeply felt aversion towards pagan sacred buildings in Christian circles, in which inner-Jewish criticism of the temple also resonated.²⁴ Obviously, Eusebius wants to stress the continuity between the church, which he calls *naos* (a temple), and the lost temple of the Israelites. Implicitly, he accepts the sacred character of a structure built by human hands, something that was not yet a widely accepted idea in Christian theology.

One of the questions arising, and with regard to the atrium in particular, is whether the architects designed these first monumental churches with the conscious intention of imitating the Temple of Jerusalem. Although Wilkinson is inclined to think they did, there is reason to be sceptical. Neither patrons, nor architects could have known the Jerusalem Temple other than from the ambiguous Old Testament texts or perhaps from Flavius Josephus' descriptions of the latest, Herodian version of the Temple.²⁵ Hence the model was highly theoretical and a-visual, something difficult to deal with for a builder. Conversely, immediate visual knowledge of the pagan Roman temples with their courts, porticoes and squares was abundantly available. These could never have functioned as a direct model, either from a functional, or from a theological point of view. Yet, one may suspect that the visual preponderance of the monumental temple precincts was inescapable even for the architects of churches. It was simply part of the game.

Of course, Eusebius does what he can to depict the cathedral of Tyre as a spiritual successor of the Temple of Jerusalem. As far as the atrium is concerned, this means that his rhetorical descriptions of the enclosure, the east gate, the court, the porch and doors to the inner sanctuary are all inspired by Ezekiel's vision. For the exclusion of the non-initiated, there is a parallel in Josephus' Temple description, which mentions a barrier to exclude the Gentiles.²⁶ On the other hand, the fountain, mentioned emphatically by Eusebius, is without a precedent in the Temple literature. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that the atrium in Tyre could have existed without the spiritual model of Jerusalem. The more so, when we realize that a similar atrium lay-out, connected to churches, was built in other places of the Empire, where a sophisticated theological concept like that of Eusebius, was not quite so loudly pronounced.

²⁴ See for example, F. W. Deichmann, 'Vom Tempel zur Kirche', in *Mullus. Festschrift Th. Klausner* (Bonn, 1964), p. 529, reprinted in *idem, Ravenna, Konstantinopel, Naber Osten. Gesammelte Studien zur spätantiken Architektur, Kunst und Geschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1982); P. Corby Finney, 'Early Christian Architecture: The Beginnings', *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988), 319–39.

²⁵ Josephus, 'Jewish Antiquities', ed. R. Marcus and A. P. Wikgren, in *Josephus in Ten Volumes*, Loeb Classical Library, nos. 186, 203, 210, 242, 281, 326, 365, 410, 433, 456 (Cambridge MA – London, 1934–76), vol. VIII, *Jewish Antiquities. Books XV–XVII*, p. 15.

²⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities* 15. 417; Wilkinson, 'Paulinus' Temple at Tyre', p. 555.

4. *St Peter's Atrium against the Background of Eusebius*

Returning to St Peter's atrium, we can envisage a structure with all the elementary features described by Eusebius (Plate 7). A direct influence seems out of the question, but at least a parallel development can be determined. It gives evidence of a very early tendency towards standardisation in Christian church building, which was not entirely dependent on imperial patronage (and could hardly have been so in Constantine's early years).²⁷ The Vatican complex had a gate building directed to the east and visible from afar for those approaching the basilica from the city. Having gone through the gate, the visitor entered a spacious quadrangular court, open to the sky and bounded with colonnaded porticoes. There was an elegant water installation in the centre of the court. The columns and the added marble and mosaic adornments contributed to a level of splendour that may have equalled that evoked by Eusebius. In the background to the west rose the façade of the basilica, with monumental doorways and – from the fifth century onwards at least – a mosaic decoration, bringing to mind the magnificent display of the church front in Tyre.²⁸

Eusebius makes various observations regarding the function and meaning of the atrium, which can also be compared with the situation of St Peter's. First he stresses the function of the atrium as a transitory area between the outer and inner world, the public and the private, the profane and the sacred. It is a zone of liminality. From outside, it is possible to cast a glance into the atrium, but not into the basilica. The atrium offers a first means of acquaintance with the church for non-Christians and it serves as an itinerary of reflection for Christians who come to church, leaving their everyday business behind. To underline the latter function, the faithful will wash themselves with the water furnished by the fountain. In other words, the atrium makes them spiritually worthy to enter the house of God. Furthermore, the atrium is a place of segregation between different ranks of the faithful: those who are not baptized are not supposed to proceed to the nave of the church. The atrium permits them to abide in the sacred precincts, but prevents them from joining the mystery celebrated inside the church. All these functions can easily be attributed to the church atrium in general. Only the last – regarding the non-baptized – should not be taken too literally: the same rules and conventions, concerning the role and place of catechumens or of penitents, were not everywhere and always in force.²⁹ But even then, the character of the atrium as a

²⁷ Spain Alexander, 'Studies', 34–5 tends to explain the standardization by common roots in Roman official architecture, while Stapleford, 'Constantinian Politics', p. 17 stresses imperial patronage.

²⁸ On St Peter's façade, see most recently, M. Andaloro, 'L'orizzonte tardoantico e le nuove immagini 312–468', in *La pittura medievale a Roma 312–1431. Corpus e atlante*, ed. M. Andaloro and S. Romano, Corpus, vol. I (Milan, 2006), pp. 416–18.

²⁹ For example, catechumens were not allowed to enter the Anastasis and probably stayed in the inner atrium of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, c. 380. See Aegeria,

space and a moment of transition was a powerful metaphor and hence an effective point of reference for the position of those awaiting baptism.

Two other aspects referred to by Eusebius add to the significance of the atrium. The axial forecourt strengthens the alignment of the church on the symbolic east-west axis. Both in Tyre and in the Vatican, the churches were directed with their façade to the east. Correspondingly, the morning light entered through the atrium gates and the basilica doorways into the nave. This façade orientation is a typical feature of the first, experimental phase of Christian church building and may have been inspired by the biblical Temple of Jerusalem, an ideal context for Eusebius' interpretation (Ezekiel 43, 1-4 and 47, 1). It was soon converted into an apse orientation as the norm in many regions, for reasons that cannot be discussed here.³⁰

The powerful symbolism of the morning sun entering through the façade was still noticeable in St Peter's during the fifth century. In one of his sermons, Pope Leo the Great rebukes those faithful who, before entering the church, could not resist the old pagan custom of turning to the sun and bowing to it.³¹ This practice was obviously inspired by the disposition of St Peter's, since it offered an elevated position and a clearly coordinated system of orientation. The pope specifies this reprehensible practice as taking place in front of St Peter's, 'when they have mounted the steps which lead to the raised platform', that is on the landing fronting the atrium gate. Obviously, the symbolic function of the atrium in terms of the sacred direction of the church was still working well, if not opportunely, for some foolish people.

On the other hand, even with an apse orientation, the atrium would contribute substantially to the spatial experience of the orientation of a church in a cosmic and symbolical alignment. Its disposition emphasized the longitudinal axis of the church and hence its direction towards the east. This lengthways connection of the main building elements on a single axis with an unambiguous direction

'Itinerarium', ed. A. Francheschini and R. Weber, in *Itineraria et alia geographica*, ed. P. Geyer and O. Cuntz, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 175-176 (Turnhout, 1965), vol. I, pp. 35-90 (76-7). See also M. Metzger, W. Drews, H. Brakmann, 'Katechumenat', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 20 (Stuttgart, 2004), cols. 498-574.

³⁰ S. de Blaauw, 'En vue de la lumière: Un principe oublié dans l'orientation de l'édifice de culte paléochrétien', in *Art médiéval: Les voies de l'espace liturgique*, ed. P. Piva (Paris, 2010), pp. 15-45. Here, it is argued that after an experimental, Constantinian, phase, in which both apse orientations towards the East and towards the West were practised, it was established that the apse at the east end offered the best harmony between the principles of architectural alignment on the East-West axis and the liturgical requirement of celebration towards the East.

³¹ Leo Magnus, *Tractatus septem et nonaginta*, ed. A. Chavasse, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 138-138A (Turnhout, 1973), *Sermo* 27.4, pp. 135-6; De Blaauw, 'En vue de la lumière', pp. 34-5.

is to a high degree characteristic for the church atrium and distinguishes it from nearly all ancient precedents.

The last function of the atrium, which Eusebius does not fail to underline, is its display of architectural splendour. Of course, this is a metaphor for spiritual beauty, but yet, human eyes can only grasp this magnificence in its material capacity. This sensorial aspect is also clear enough in the atrium of St Peter's, but it is worth taking notice of the fact that the external display of monumental gate houses, colonnades, marbles, portals and fountains diverges from the rather nude and crude exterior of Early Christian buildings in general. This outer simplicity has sometimes been interpreted as a kind of silent protest against the external profusion of materials and decoration of the pagan temples.³² The atrium proves, however, that the house of the Christian God was also expected to have a worthy appearance, even if the centre of gravity was certainly on the interior, where the congregation would gather in liturgical community.

In St Peter's, the splendour and eminence of the atrium was continuously enhanced during the Early Middle Ages, with new wall paintings and figural mosaics, and by the enrichment of the fountain with additional ancient spolia, like the famous bronze pineapple (Plate 8).³³ The atrium was a sensual place: open but enclosed, lively but concentrated, providing delight by bright illumination, shelter from the rain, the presence of clear water and the loveliness of its décor.

Finally, one functional aspect of the atrium is not referred to by Eusebius explicitly, but had certainly developed already during the fourth century: atria served as interchanges for liturgical traffic.³⁴ In some cases the baptistery was located adjacent to the atrium. In that case, the processions inherent to the baptismal ceremony would cross the atrium. But more standard was probably the use of the atrium for gathering in readiness for the solemn entrance of the clergy preceding the celebrations inside the church. In Rome, the sacristy where the pope was dressed for the liturgy was always adjacent to the façade and communicating with the atrium. In St Peter's, the papal sacristy was built in the fifth century at the northwestern corner of the forecourt.³⁵ This means that solemn processions would start in the atrium or in the narthex (the entrance hall directly in front of the main doors of the basilica). In Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, in the sixth century, it was usual not just for the clergy, but also for the faithful to gather in the

³² For example, A. Riegl, *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (Vienna, 1927), pp. 60–62, 65–66; compare De Blaauw, 'Kultgebäude', cols 347–8.

³³ M. Finch, 'The Cantharus and Pigna at Old St Peter's', *Gesta* 30 (1991), pp. 16–26; S. Angelucci and P. Liverani, 'Pavones aurei qui sunt in cantaro Paradisi', *Bollettino dei Monumenti, Musei e Gallerie Pontificie* 14 (1994), 5–38.

³⁴ De Blaauw, 'Kultgebäude', cols 358–9.

³⁵ S. de Blaauw, *Cultus et decor. Liturgia e architettura nella Roma tardoantica e medievale: Basilica Salvatoris, Sanctae Mariae, Sancti Petri* (Vatican City, 1994), pp. 469–70, and compare p. 74.

atrium before a solemn mass, and then proceed in a common procession into the church.³⁶ This was never a custom in Rome, but in all cases, the atrium served a markedly liturgical purpose.

Not every Early Christian church had an atrium, and in some regions, like Syria and Egypt, they were virtually non-existent. Obviously, its functions and meanings could also be realized or evoked in other ways, or some of them might even be omitted. The practical functions could often easily be concentrated into an entrance hall or narthex in front of the church façade. We may suspect that the inclusion of an atrium had more to do with a desire for dignity and beauty, than with indispensable practical requirements. The truism that ‘in architecture function is never sufficient excuse for form’, was nowhere better demonstrated than in the Constantinian church atrium, as Richard Stapleford observes.³⁷ This is confirmed by the fact that atria occur in combination with all kind of churches: cathedrals, urban churches, funerary and memorial basilicas.³⁸ But none of this alters the significance of the phenomenon.

5. Outlook: the Dynamics of Form and Function

In conclusion, some brief observations may be made on the medieval perspective of the atrium story. Many reasons contributed to the virtual disappearance of the atrium from Christian church building after the sixth century, in the East as well as in the West. They cannot be discussed now, but in some places, Early Christian atria were consciously preserved.³⁹ Indeed, in some later building projects, new atria were deliberately designed.⁴⁰ In all these cases, the atrium was obviously perceived as a powerful bearer of meanings. Among these meanings were certainly important historical memories, since the chief sanctuaries of medieval Christianity were Early Christian complexes with a prominent atrium: St Peter’s in Rome and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Both were linked with the memory of an important patron, the emperor Constantine, both survived for many centuries and were well-known to many generations of pilgrims. The landing in front of St Peter’s atrium became the stage for the coronation of the pope and the *adventus* of the emperor, both significant ceremonies in Western history.⁴¹

³⁶ C. Strube, *Die westliche Eingangsseite der Kirchen von Konstantinopel in justinianischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 97–105.

³⁷ Stapleford, ‘Constantinian politics’, p. 12.

³⁸ The interchangeability of the atrium and its functional openness are emphasized by Picard, ‘L’atrium dans les églises paléochrétiennes d’occident’, pp. 523–42.

³⁹ I will discuss this question in a forthcoming publication (see below at note 41), but obviously, the ‘semantic’ need for a transitional area preceding the entrance of a church and separating the inner from the outer world was less urgent in the ‘Christian’ middle ages than in the multi-faith society of late antiquity.

⁴⁰ Roman examples: S. Prassede (ninth century) and S. Clemente (twelfth century).

⁴¹ I am preparing another publication on St Peter’s atrium as a place of memory over the centuries, to be published in the series of *Conferenze* of the *Unione Internazionale*

A characteristic, additional function, which developed in many atria was that of a funeral area.⁴² In St Peter's, the first popes were buried in the area of the atrium in the later fifth century, starting with Leo the Great in the adjacent sacristy.⁴³ In 604 Gregory the Great was also buried here, probably in the intercolumniation of the narthex. A drawing in a late eleventh century Farfa Codex depicts this scene (Plate 9). It shows the interment of Gregory's corpse in a sarcophagus in the atrium (left), in a crowd of clergy and mourning people. In the background appears the façade of Old St Peter's, represented with the usual abbreviations and contractions, but characteristically with the roof of the narthex, and three small gables suggesting the central porch projecting from the narthex and the lateral porticoes of the atrium. The peacocks on the roof seem to have flown there from the cantharus.⁴⁴ The abbreviated impression of the façade mosaic reminds us that it had an apocalyptic theme: the adoration of the lamb by the twenty-four elders and the four evangelists. Jean-Charles Picard has suggested that this programme was the main reason for the medieval name for St Peter's atrium, *paradisus* or 'paradise'.⁴⁵ It is an interesting hypothesis that deserves further examination, but the name at any rate confirms the spiritual effect of an atrium, evoked already by Eusebius, and obviously still working far into the Middle Ages. Maybe this spiritual vision of the atrium comes close to an apocalyptic stage setting, as in a miniature of the Gospelbook from St Médard in Soissons, from the early ninth century.⁴⁶

The church atrium was one of the most innovative creations by the patrons and architects of the first generation of public Christian church building. Evidently, there were no preconceived, practical requirements to occasion this building element. The atrium was neither standard in Early Christian architecture, nor was its usage obligatory enough to cause its survival in the Middle Ages. But without doubt, it was an eminent and highly characteristic feature of Early Christian church building. There must, therefore, have been an urgent motive on the semantic level. The form and disposition of St Peter's atrium, as well as Eusebius' text, jointly express a desire to create an intermediate space between the outer world, still predominantly pagan, and the inner world of Christian liturgy. The atrium was a medium of Christian propaganda towards pagan society, as well as a means of spiritual preparation for the faithful when gathering for worship in the interior of the

degli Istituti di Archeologia Storia e Storia dell'Arte in Roma.

⁴² Stressed as one of the main functions of atria (in my opinion too decidedly) by Picard, 'L'atrium dans les églises paléochrétiennes d'occident', pp. 532–5.

⁴³ J.-C. Picard, 'Étude sur l'emplacement des tombes des papes du IIIe au Xe siècle', *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 81 (1969), 725–82, esp. 757–60.

⁴⁴ CBCR, vol. V, p. 222 with reference to Eton College, MS 124 (Codex Farfensis), fo. 122a.

⁴⁵ J.-C. Picard, 'Les origines du mot *paradisus-parvis*', *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 83 (1971), 159–86.

⁴⁶ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 8850, fo. 1v (Adoration of the Lamb).

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church. It was a liminal place, where the Christians segregated themselves mentally from the society they came from.⁴⁷ There was no predetermined ritual to take place in the atrium, but it brought about a ritual of inner experience for every Christian approaching the house of God. Hardly anywhere could a *rite de passage*, in the most literal way, more effectively be given a physical stage than in the church atrium. This space was not created by rituals, but it produced rituals, thanks to its expressive architectural qualities.

⁴⁷ I refer freely to the terminology of Victor Turner, for example in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, first published Chicago – London 1969 and many times reprinted.