

The Architectural Context of Medieval Winchester Cathedral

by Benedict Yates M.A.

When presented with a grand church like Winchester Cathedral it is very easy to think of it as a unified whole that appeared out of the blue when someone decided to build it. In fact all church buildings are part of a much greater picture, the picture of developing church buildings from the first house churches through to the modernist structures of the present day. Winchester Cathedral was built within this context, and this article will help to show how the preceding centuries caused it to be the way it is.

Early Development of Church Architecture

In the first centuries of the Church, when Christianity was still liable to be a fatal pastime, houses were used to build hidden churches. The best example known of this (indeed an almost unique example) was found during archaeological excavation at Dura Europos on the edge of the Eastern Empire (now Syria), a find preserved by a concatenation of circumstances involving a lengthy siege in the third century. This house church was designed around a series of rooms, each with a different function. For our purposes the important one is the dining room (fig. 1), which was used for eucharistic action: the early version of Holy Communion. It is a rectangular space with a raised area at one end where the reader or leader would have been placed. A similar shape can be seen on the opposite side of the Empire in the reconstructed house church at Lullingstone in Kent, albeit much smaller and a century later (but much more of a back-water of the Empire). This is the origin of the shape for almost all churches, but it was mediated through the building work of the first Christianised Emperor, Constantine, in the fourth century.

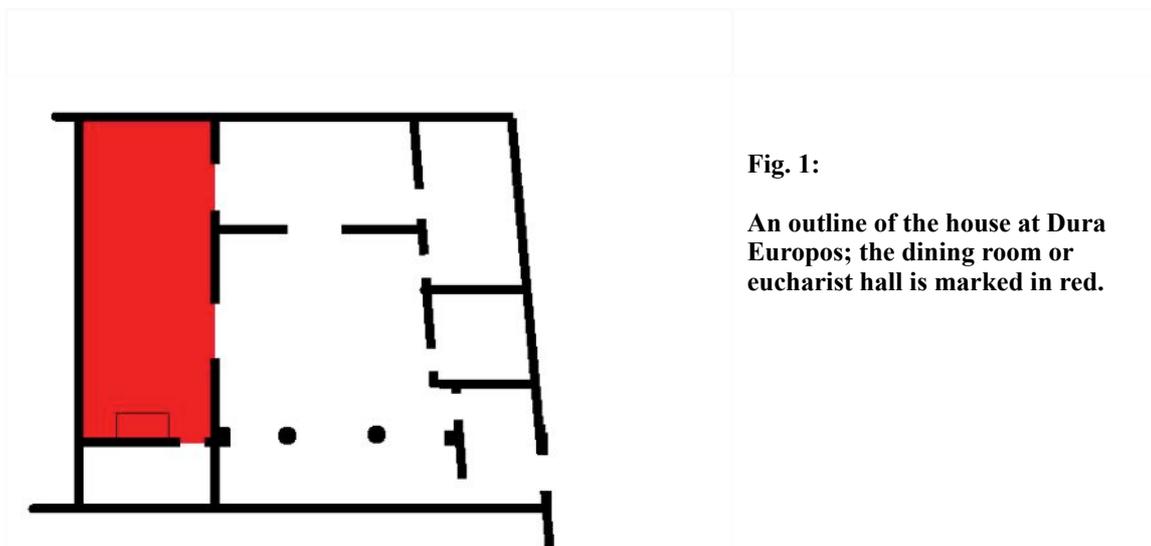


Fig. 1:

An outline of the house at Dura Europos; the dining room or eucharist hall is marked in red.

When Constantine decided to build churches, he and his bishops were more or less starting from scratch, and in the end two designs were regularly used. Circular churches, inspired by Roman mausolea, became standard for churches built over tombs of martyrs, and most importantly over the tomb of Jesus: the Holy Sepulchre. In the end circular churches became rarer and rarer, but they were still closely associated with the Holy Sepulchre (hence its use in the Middle-Ages by the Templar order, as at the Temple Church in London). The other design was a variant on the dining room shape: the Imperial reception hall. This was a rectangle with an apse at one end from which the Emperor or his representative would imperiously greet those who sought an audience, a shape that was remarkably similar to that of a wealthy Roman's triclinium or dining room. That similarity is particularly clear in the design of Emperor Flavian's palace (fig. 2).

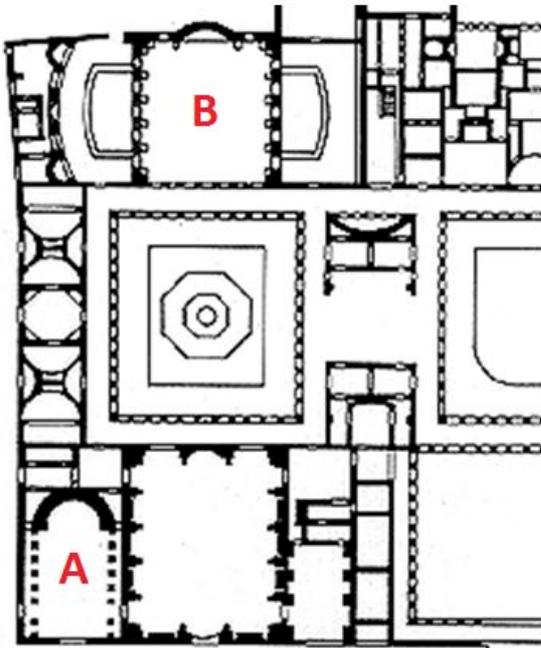


Fig. 2:

A plan of the Flavian palace.

The throne room is marked A, and the dining room B. Note the similarity of shape.

The parallels were clear: the shape fitted in with the developing eucharistic liturgy derived from the old dining room setting, whilst the host of the dinner was understood to be Christ, the Emperor of Emperors. Indeed a surprisingly large amount of Christian ritual derives from the rituals of respect given to the Emperor. Thus the apse, traditionally the location for the throne of the Emperor or the table of the host became the location for the altar and the presiding bishop who was, in some sense, representing Christ. In order to achieve great height, whilst also allowing space for rapidly expanding Christian communities, it was natural to make these new church halls (or basilicas) aisled, and this we see with the plan of several of Constantine's Churches, one fine surviving example of which may be found at the basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome.

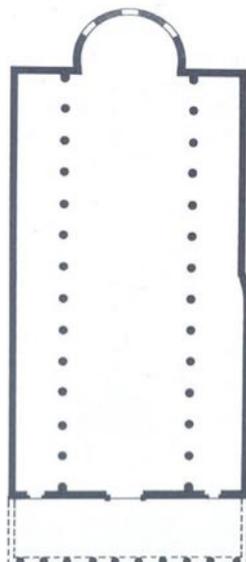


Fig. 3:

A simplified outline of Santa Sabina in Rome.

This form is generally known as the 'Basilica' type.

Here, in fig 3, we can see the prototype of the typical Western Church form, although there were already variations on the theme, and it roughly equates to the nave, nave aisles and nave sanctuary that we have now in Winchester Cathedral. The altar would usually have space around it for the clergy, whilst the baptised laity filled the nave and the unbaptised catechumens (those learning how to be Christian) were restricted to the aisles, frequently with curtains or screens to prevent them seeing the sacred parts of the liturgy. In this period the sanctuary area in front of the altar often went a little way down the nave, and there was no screen to obscure the view. A good example of this layout can be found preserved at San Clemente in Rome. This plan worked well, but it did assume that one person would be celebrating one Mass (which for sake of brevity as much as anything else we shall use in this article), with just a few (usually seven) deacons standing behind the celebrating bishop. As centuries passed and the presbyters started celebrating Mass as well as the bishop there was a need for more altars. The answer to the problem of where to put them was answered by adding little chapels around the original altar. Generally this meant an expansion outward at the east end forming transepts, and by making the apse more complex, with an ambulatory and radiating chapels. A late example of this sort of plan can be seen at Santiago de Compostela.

The main idea behind this arrangement was that the side altars were mini versions of the main altar, and were thought to be representations of it. After all, as they reckoned it, Jesus Christ made one offering of himself on one altar; so a church ought to have only one altar. But lots of altars were needed, so they got round it by saying that there was *really* only one altar but several representations of that one altar. To make the point all the altars were placed close to, and in a similar position of orientation with, the main one, which was central, and far grander, to show that it was the only *real* one. It is noticeable, however, how small the actual space around the main altar often is in churches of this design; an indication of the shortage of actual altar-party participants.

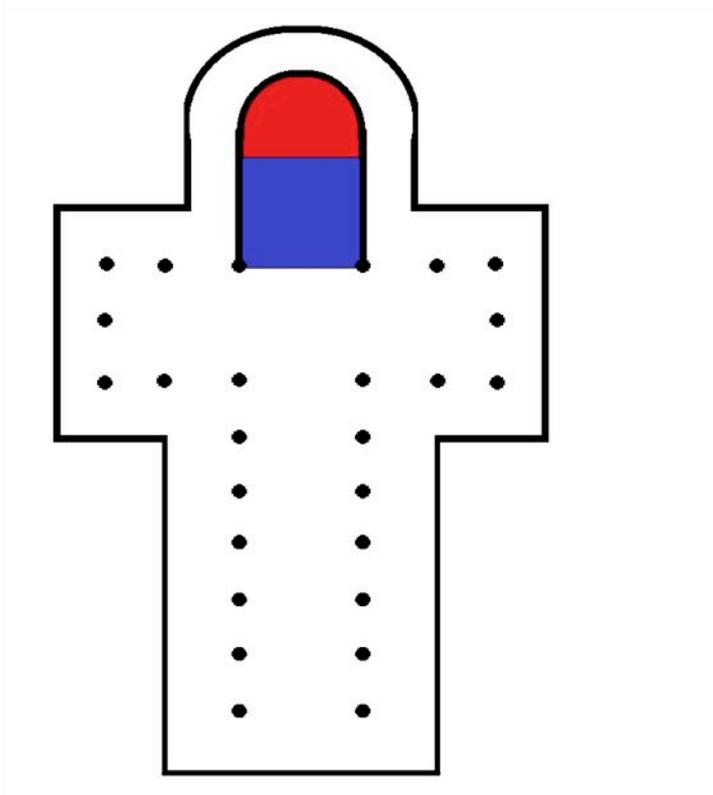


Fig. 4:

A simplified and generic outline of a great church building c. 8th-12th Century.

The sanctuary area is marked in red and the presbytery in blue. The transepts and apsidal ambulatory would generally contain side chapels.

As time progressed the bishop's staff increased, with a large assortment of archdeacons, canons and sundry other recent ecclesial additions joining the traditional seven deacons (who were dispensed with as the concept of the diaconate grew ever more peripheral to the contemporary ecclesiological outlook). The bishop (and we are still at a period where all big churches would have a bishop or an abbot equivalent) had always been positioned behind the altar, and as his attending clergy grew more numerous the space behind the main altar had to increase, and the apse was extended. This was particularly true in some monastic churches where the entire monastery would assemble behind the Altar. This gives a generic plan such as can be seen in fig. 4.

Cruciform Churches

All of a sudden the church is cruciform, and, not surprisingly, the Christians of the time noticed that. This coincided with a rapidly increasing interest in the mystical symbolism of liturgy, and much was made of the cruciform church. There also developed the notion of putting the altar at the east end with the clergy in front, particularly the priests. Using their old name of presbyter this area became known as the presbytery. We are now at roughly the tenth and eleventh centuries, and we can already find an example of this sort of church building at Winchester in Old Minster.

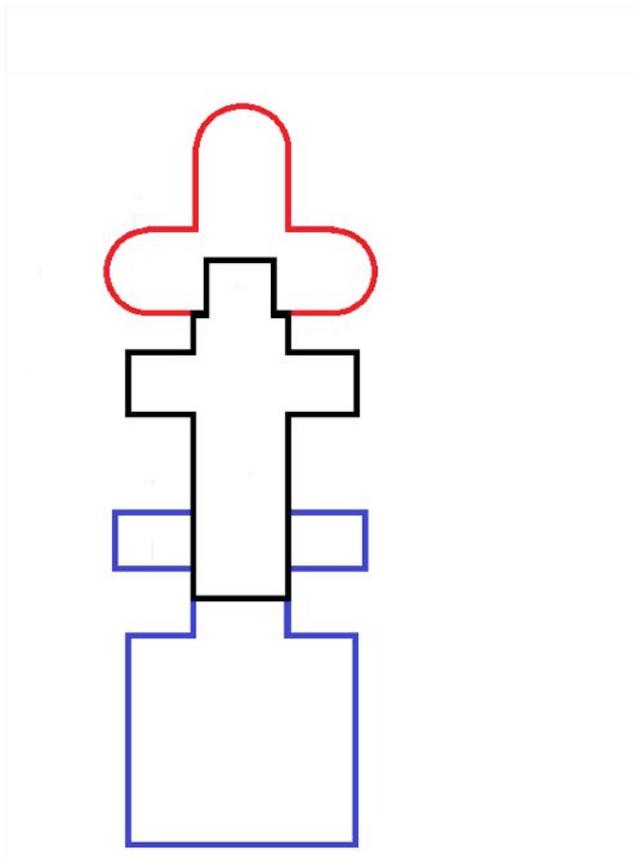


Fig. 5:

A simplified outline of Old Minster.

The three principal phases are outlined as black for first, blue for second and red for third.

Old Minster has quite a lot of extra bits added on. We see the original seventh century church, with transepts added in the tenth century, followed soon after by the large western section, related architecturally to the forecourts or narthexes (an outer bit of church where the unbaptised were allowed) of Eastern Churches, and probably serving as the context for St Swithun's burial shrine, and finally an increased eastern end (see fig. 5). All these add-ons reflect Old Minster's development as an ecclesiastical complex with many clergy, and its development into a principal pilgrimage shrine. In other words, Old Minster's design reflects the practical use of the church building in a number of different liturgical capacities. This explains the presence of a core building

that reflects the church building itself, with peripheral structures for alternative liturgical and pilgrimage 'action'.

The Norman Conquest

Overall, the generally cruciform plan began to be standard, driven doubtless by its similarity to the most important symbol of Christianity, and the developing Cross and sacrifice theology of the Mass. During the eighth and ninth centuries there had also been a blossoming of mystical symbolic meaning being attached to and associated with the accoutrements and location of liturgical action. The church building was involved in this and by the time of the Norman conquest, the association of the crucifixion with the various parts of the standardly cruciform church had become general. Consequently when the Normans chose to build new churches in England, and were starting afresh, they used the simple cruciform plan in all its glory.

All Norman great churches were built to a fairly standard plan, the culmination of the growth towards fully cruciform, whilst retaining the apsidal eastern end. We can see this in Durham, Norwich and Ely, and countless other examples. The buildings were grandiose, and intentionally so. The Normans were a new society, and only a few generations before had been pagan vikings (North men) carving out new domains along the Western coastline of Europe as far into the Southern Mediterranean as Sicily. Rapidly Christianised, and influenced by the sophisticated societies they were over-running, they appear to have wanted to make their mark, and they built vast churches in order to do so. At Winchester there was certainly some intention to subdue the indigenous Saxons and express Norman power, as can be seen by a simple comparison of size, with the Norman building massively larger than its Saxon predecessors.

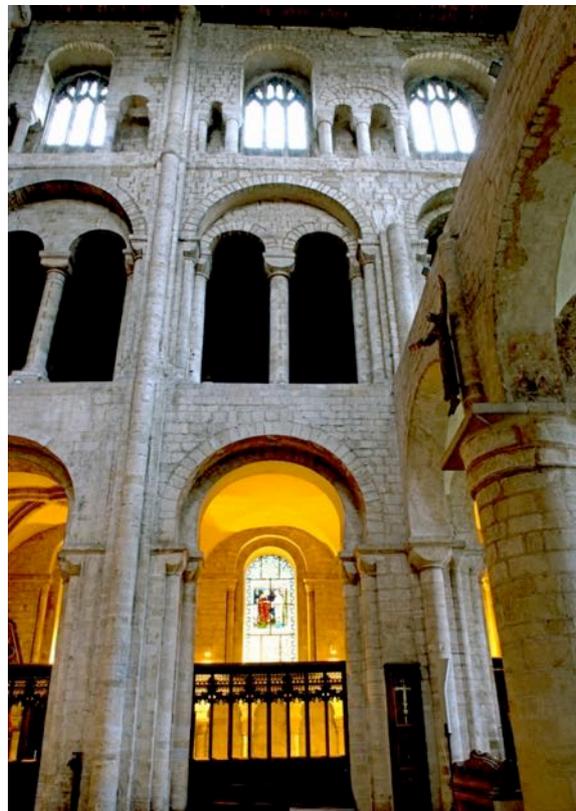


Fig. 6: Winchester's North transept.

The play on the number three in the arches is clearly evident, but it is noticeable at the top right how the design has been narrowed into a unified form rather than two distinct bays. Presumably this was out of building necessity.

The Normans also built with the symbolism of their recently found Christianity in mind. Significant numbers crept into their designs, especial the number three for the Trinity. We can see this in action in the Norman remnant of Winchester's transepts, which conform to a standard Norman design of three levels: a single arch supporting two within one, with that supporting a threefold arch, although at Winchester the design had to be adjusted somewhat, presumably to fit in with building requirements (see fig. 6). The design can be seen very clearly in other examples such as Ely and Peterborough, all the way through to late Norman, Durham Cathedral, where the top level needed adjustment to allow for a transitional stone vault. Overall, there can be little doubt that quite apart from the architectural convenience a Trinitarian motif and symbolism was involved, especially given the mystical and symbolical propensities of the period.

Later Centuries

The story of building Winchester Cathedral does not fully belong to the Norman period. Throughout the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was a wave of great church and cathedral building, with a new architecture, the gothic style. Early trials were made at Durham, which has flying buttresses hidden in its aisle roofs, and pointed arches in its vaulting, but the gothic period really 'kicked off' with the building of the new abbey church of St. Denis in France, under the auspices of the somewhat self-aggrandising Abbot Suger. Relying on height and lightness to create a new aesthetic beauty, gothic architecture also gave new scope to the Medieval passion for mystical symbolism. As Gothic architecture increased in complexity, symbolic meanings were inspiring new forms, and new forms inspired yet more churchmen to read new meanings into them. It was a very two-way process.

Winchester was by no means exempt from this wave of building work in the new style. De Lucy's gothic retroquire represents an early stage of heavy rebuilding, and reflects an increased use of alternative liturgical space within the eastern parts of great churches. In the late fourteenth century the nave was re-modelled and vaulted to suit the new style, and at the end of the Middle-Ages the Presbytery was renewed; not to mention the lavish building of chantry chapels, each the height of fashion for their day. Indeed, at Winchester there are examples of almost all the different gothic styles. And throughout all these extensive building plans there would have been at the forefront of the builders' minds the ways in which their work was expressing the Christian faith in stone.

So it would be fair to say that Winchester Cathedral sits firmly in the phase of Church building where mystical symbolism and hidden meaning were at the very forefront of church design, and church understanding. It sits at the culmination of the development of the church building as a physical expression of the sacrifice of the Cross. It retains the size and linear nature of the very first church basilicas. It has at its very core, in the presbytery and high altar sanctuary, an echo of the dining rooms of the first Christians. And in every detail of its gothic splendour it has symbolic meaning and a rich, mystical significance. Winchester Cathedral was built, in short, in the architectural context of what might be called a 'golden age' of church building.

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This article was written on request, following an excellent talk he gave to Friends of Winchester Cathedral in January 2015.

For Further Reading

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