

Santa Costanza

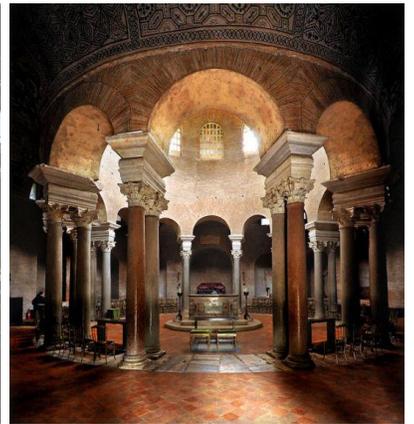
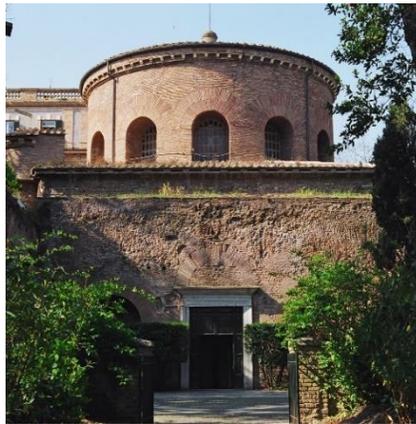
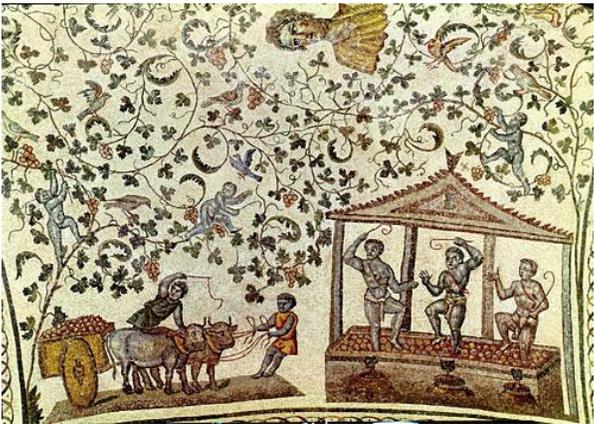
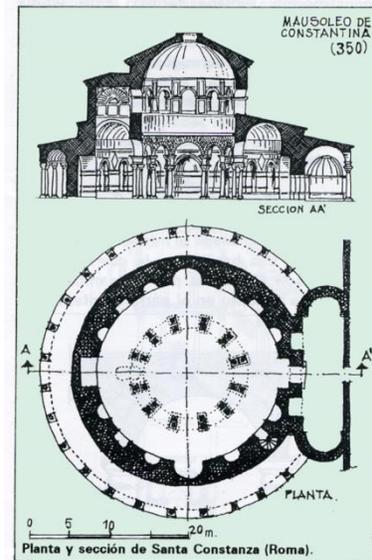
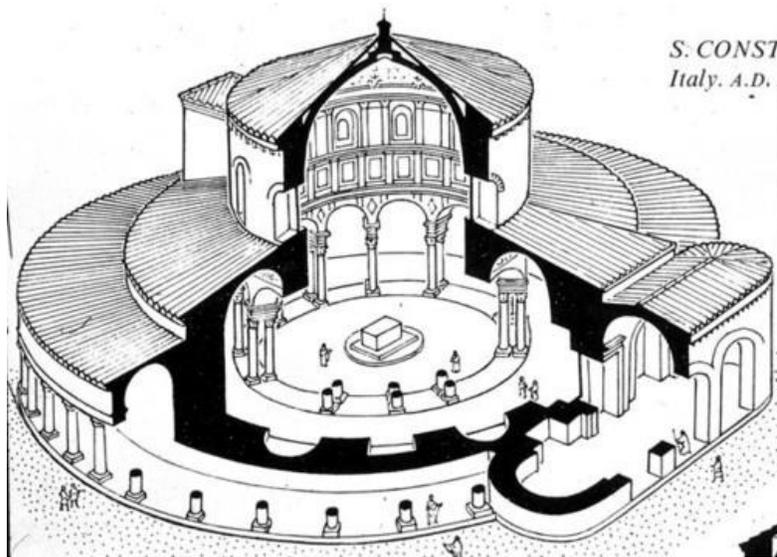
Via Nomentana, 349

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The Mausoleum of Santa Costanza is named for Constantine the Great's daughter **Constantia** (also known as Constantina or Costanza), but the latest scholarship suggests it was actually built for her sister Helena, who died in 360.

Early accounts record that Constantine built a **funerary hall** here on the imperial estate at the request of Constantia - this is the long building now in ruins next to the mausoleum. The funerary hall was dedicated to the virgin martyr St. Agnes and resembled others built by Constantine in this period. The early accounts also report that Constantine built a **baptistery** on the site, in which both Constantia and Constantine's sister were baptized by Pope Sylvester (315).

It was long assumed that the existing mausoleum is this baptistery, but excavations beneath its north end in 1992 revealed a **triconch** (clover-shaped) building that is a more likely candidate.

After Constantia died in **354**, her body was brought back from Bithynia to be buried on the imperial estate in Rome. It was long thought she was buried in the mausoleum, but new data indicates the building was probably still unfinished at that time. So she was probably buried either in the baptistery or in the apse of the funerary hall. The round **mausoleum** that survives today was probably built in the **360s**, based on the combination of pagan and Christian elements in the mosaics.

Despite its name, the mausoleum of Santa Costanza was probably built especially for **Constantia's younger sister Helena**, who was married to the emperor Julian the Apostate (ruled 361-63). As the daughter, sister and wife of successive emperors, Helena had considerable status, so it makes sense she would receive a burial place of great splendor. Helena is known to have died in 360 in Gaul and, like Constantia, her body was brought to the imperial estate here in Rome for burial. Helena was buried in the mausoleum and **Constantia's** body was transferred from its original resting place to the new mausoleum.

The mausoleum **became a church in the 13th century**. Pope Alessandro IV took what were believed to be Constantia's remains from the main sarcophagus, placed them beneath a central altar, and consecrated the building in her honor on March 12, **1256**.

What to See at Santa Costanza

The **4th-century mausoleum** of St. Costanza is a round brick building with a small west porch. The building originally had a forceps-shaped atrium at its entrance and an **external colonnaded ambulatory** (traces of which can be seen in the piazza).

Inside, there is a simple **altar** under a central dome. The central area is surrounded by 12 pairs of **Roman columns**, which form a barrel-vaulted **ambulatory** around the outside. Originally, the walls were covered in marble.

Directly opposite the entrance, at the east side of the mausoleum, is a large niche containing a **sarcophagus**, decorated with reliefs of **putti** harvesting grapes (a common theme in classical art). This is a replica of the grand **porphyry** original that is now in the [Vatican Museums](#), moved there around 1785. It was probably commissioned by Emperor Julian for his wife **Helena**. Constantia's tomb is believed to be the tub-shaped porphyry sarcophagus now in the left transept of [St. Peter's Basilica](#), moved there in 1606.

The **main highlight** of Santa Costanza is the **barrel vaulting of the ambulatory**, which is covered in original **4th-century mosaics**. As in the original dome mosaics, these display a fascinating **mix of pagan and Christian symbolism** and imagery. Santa Costanza perhaps more than any other building in Rome **illustrates the transition from the pagan to Christian city** in its decorative and architectural features.

Dating from the 360s, the ambulatory mosaics were designed in corresponding pairs leading towards the niche with the sarcophagus, where the flanking mosaic pair is the most elaborate. The pair by the entrance are a simple, geometric design; this is followed by a pair with a circular motif with animals and figures. Next are scenes of grape harvesting, then roundels with a leaf design, busts and figures. The pair by the sarcophagus have **branches, amphorae and peacocks**. The imagery is capable of both pagan and Christian interpretation, which is **representative of Constantine's religious policy**.

In the east niche above the sarcophagus are the remains of a mosaic with black stars on a white ground and traces of a gold **Chi-Rho**. The north and south niches bear mosaics dating from either the 5th or the 7th century. They have been poorly restored, but their richly decorated border reveals the quality of the originals. The date and interpretation of these two mosaics have been the subject of much scholarly debate.

The south niche mosaic (left from the entrance) depicts the *Traditio Clavium*, in which Christ **Pantocrator**, seated on a globe, hands over the keys to the kingdom of Heaven to St. Peter.

The north niche, on the right from the entrance, represents the *Traditio Legis*, in which St. Peter receives the right to govern on earth. Wearing golden robes and standing on the hill of paradise, Christ hands Peter a scroll that is inscribed *DOMINVS PACEM DAT*, "The Lord gives peace through his rule," St. Paul stands on the left side of the scene.

The **dome mosaics**, now destroyed, are known from 16th- and 17th-century paintings: they depicted New Testament scenes behind a golden screen of Bacchic imagery beyond the river Styx. A 16th-century antiquarian also reported seeing mosaics of two seated saintly women, which supports the theory that this mausoleum housed the bodies of both Constantia and Helena. Today, the dome bears faded 17th- and 18th-century paintings.

The **funerary hall** (c. 330) now lies in ruins in a garden adjacent to the mausoleum, which it is fenced and not possible to enter. However, descending the hill to Piazza Annibaliano provides a clear view of the west end, where the outer wall survives to its full height.