Byzantine Architecture Essay, Research Paper

Byzantine Architecture

The architecture of the Byzantine Empire was based on the great legacy of Roman formal and technical achievements. Constantinople had been purposely founded as the Christian counterpart and successor to the leadership of the old pagan city of Rome. The new capital was in close contact with the Hellenized East, and the contribution of Eastern culture, though sometimes overstressed, was an important element in the development of its architectural style. The 5th-century basilica of St. John of the Studion, the oldest surviving church in Constantinople, is an early example of Byzantine reliance upon traditional Roman models.

The most imposing achievement of Byzantine architecture is the Church of Holy Wisdom or Hagia Sophia. It was constructed in a short span of five years (532?37) during the reign of Justinian. Hagia Sophia is without a clear antecedent in the architecture of late antiquity, yet it must be accounted as culminating several centuries of experimentation toward the realization of a unified space of monumental dimensions. Throughout the history of Byzantine religious architecture, the centrally planned structure continued in favor. Such structures, which may show considerable variation in plan, have in common the predominance of a central domed space, flanked and partly sustained by smaller domes and half-domes spanning peripheral spaces.

Although many of the important buildings of Constantinople have been destroyed, impressive examples are still extant throughout the provinces and on the outer fringes of the empire, notably in Bulgaria, Russia, Armenia, and Sicily. A great Byzantine architectural achievement is the octagonal church of San Vitale (consecrated 547) in Ravenna. The church of St. Mark’s in Venice was based on a Byzantine prototype, and Byzantine workmen were employed by Arab rulers in the Holy Land and in Ottonian Germany during the 11th cent.

Secular architecture in the Byzantine Empire has left fewer traces. Foremost among these are the ruins of the 5th-century walls of the city of Constantinople, consisting of an outer and an inner wall, each originally studded with 96 towers. Some of these can still be seen.

Bibliography

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