

CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY: HISTORY & STRUCTURE

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SUMMARY

This paper presents a detailed description of the present Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, erected over the Cave of the Nativity during the reign of Justinian (527-65). The description includes its doors, its vestibule, its interior, its walls, its floor, its roof, its transept and its Grotto of Nativity.

INTRODUCTION

The present Church of the Nativity is one of the earliest Christian structures. The original Basilica, erected in the 4th century by Emperor Constantine, was completely destroyed in the Samaritan Revolt of 529 A.D. It was replaced during the reign of Justinian (527-65) on the same site, by a larger Basilica, slightly different in plan and incorporating different parts of the original building. Evidence of the turbulent history of the church can be readily seen in the fabric of the building; for centuries it was one of the most fought-over of the Holy Places. It was only by chance that this building escaped destruction during the Persian invasion of A.D. 614. It was the only major church in the country to be spared. Later, the building was seized and defended by a succession of Moslem and Crusader armies; this explains the fortress-like appearance of the church's exterior. This is also a common feature of most of the ancient religious buildings in the Holy Land. In the course of time, the complex was expanded by the addition of several chapels and monasteries belonging to different Christian Churches.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHURCH

Today, the compound of the Nativity church covers an area of approximately 12,000 square meters and includes, besides the Basilica, the Latin convent in the north, the Greek convent in the south-east and the Armenian convent in the south-west. A bell-tower and sacristy were built adjoining the south-east corner of the Basilica. In front of the principal western entrance of the 4th century church lied the atrium of the basilica. This was a quadrangle surrounded by colonnades in the center of which were several cisterns for ablutions and baptisms. West of the Church some vestiges of the former Atrium are still visible, but since they involve no structural problem it is unnecessary to describe them here. From the atrium, three doors led into the vestibule of the church, but of these the central one only has been preserved.

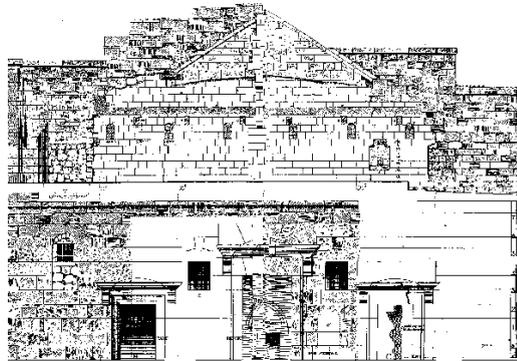


Figure 1: Diagram of the Facade

The Door & the Vestibule

The main access to the Basilica is by the very small Door of Humility (78 cm in width and 130 cm in height, 2.3 X 4.3 feet). Visitors must enter bending over, as if to a real cave. Originally the church had three entrances, two of which have been bricked up. They are hidden respectively by a buttress built later (after the 16th c.) and by the Armenian buildings. The central and highest portal of Justinian's church door was reshaped by the Crusaders. This resulted in a pointed arch which is still visible today; with the cornice of the Justinian entrance which can be seen above (see figure 1). The present small entrance was made during the Ottoman era to prevent mounted horsemen from entering the Basilica. There is another small door on the northern side (*left of the main entrance*) which leads to the Franciscan convent and another small one on the southern side of the church which leads to the Greek Orthodox monastery.

Immediately past the main entrance is a vestibule, the former narthex of Justinian's imposing church. It is now bare, dark and divided into three somewhat gloomy compartments. From the vestibule a single wooden door gives access to the interior, directly into the main body of the Basilica. The panels of the door were constructed at the bidding of the Armenian king, Haytoun, in 1277, and these were made by two Armenian artists as testified by two inscriptions carved on the upper part in Arabic and Armenian.

The Interior:

The interior of the church is impressive chiefly because of its simplicity. It contains four rows of monolithic columns of Corinthian order carved from local stone. The Basilica, composed of five aisles, was kept during the Justinian rebuilding, but the western wall was moved further westward so as to lengthen the body of the church by one bay. This necessitated the demolition of Constantine's atrium and its replacement by a new one built further west. Only a few traces now remain of the original. The Basilica is a rectangle 53.9 m. (*180 feet*) long and the nave is 26.2 m (*94 feet*) wide and the transept 35.82 m. (*120 feet*). The stone for the numerous golden-hued supporting columns was quarried in Bethlehem. The pillars, 44 in all, 6 meters (*20 feet*) high, and of white marble capitals are in debased Corinthian style and bear in the center of the abacus a rosette with an ornate Greek Cross. The limestone columns, were painted during the Middle Ages with frescoes of the Apostles; unfortunately, they have faded almost completely. A number of saints are represented on the columns with inscriptions in Greek and Latin. Of interest are the armorial devices sketched in the 14th and 15th centuries on the lower parts of many of the columns. A beautiful baptismal font, probably of the sixth or seventh century, is seen in the south-west corner of the church; it is a monolith, octagonal in shape, with a clover-shaped tank. This location corresponds to the old baptismal rite: the catechumen arrived from the outside, received baptism and then entered the church.

The Walls:

In the central nave, there are two walls, each 9 meters high. Eleven semi-circular windows pierce the upper part of each wall, and each has a corresponding bay. The clerestory windows below the elevated roof of the nave provide a bright illumination of the church interior (see figure 2). There are traces of a beautiful mosaic on a gold background, dating from the second half of the twelfth century and attributed to a certain Basilius Pictor. Originally, all the inner walls of the church were covered with mosaics. The remaining mosaics on the side walls and floor attest to the former splendor of this sanctuary. The fragments of the lowest row of mosaics, still visible on the south side wall, show a series of half-figures representing the ancestors of Christ. Many others, however, are indistinguishable.



Figure 2: The Nave, coupe transversal

Above this row there are arcades, with altars concealed by curtains and containing the books of the Gospel. Still higher there is a Greek inscription and two Greek crosses. The inscription is an extract from the resolution of the Council of Constantinople. This testifies that essential unity in regard to dogma existed in 1169 when the decoration of the church was brought to an end by Ephraim as it is shown by the inscription in five lines in Greek and Latin still legible in the periphery of the apse of the Choir. Above the architrave of the pillars, in spaces between the fantastic carvings of foliage, are representations of the churches of Antioch and Sardis. Others are the Resolution of the Council of Constantinople held in 381 A.D. and figures of the ancestors of Jesus. A more remarkable remnant is still to be seen on the north side wall where the churches of Antioch and Sardica are represented. Underneath the picture the resolution of the Council which gathered in that city in 347 A.D is written in Greek. A few others can be seen in the transepts, in the northern part: *Doubt of St. Thomas* and a part of the *Ascension of our Lord*; in the southern part, the *Triumphal Entry of Jesus* can be seen. The faded mosaics on the wall executed by the artist Ephraim, are the gift of the Emperor Manuel Camnenos, who reigned at Constantinople in the twelfth century and

The Floor & the Roof:

The present floors, made of rough stone slabs, date back to the restorations made by the Greeks in 1842 who attempted to repair the damages caused by the 1834 earthquake. The mosaic floors were covered up with two feet of imported soil, and a pavement of marble slabs was laid at a higher level. While the church being repaired in 1934, a fine mosaic floor with a Greek inscription dating from the 4th century was discovered. This inscription read: *Ichthus* which means fish and also form the initials of the five titles of Jesus. Under some wooden boards, patches of the ancient mosaic floor can be glimpsed.

Since the removal of the decorated flat ceiling built by Justinian, the original pointed inner roof-structure is once more visible. Since the pre-Crusader times it has been of cedar wood with the rafters exposed. The present ceiling is from the 14th century, and it was restored in 1842. The outside roof was also restored and covered with lead.

The Transept:

Beyond the transept the five aisles reappear; the two outer ones have one bay, the inner ones have two, all ending in a straight wall. The two side arms end in a semicircular apse similar to that of the center (see figure 3). In front of the central apse, stands the Iconostasis which was

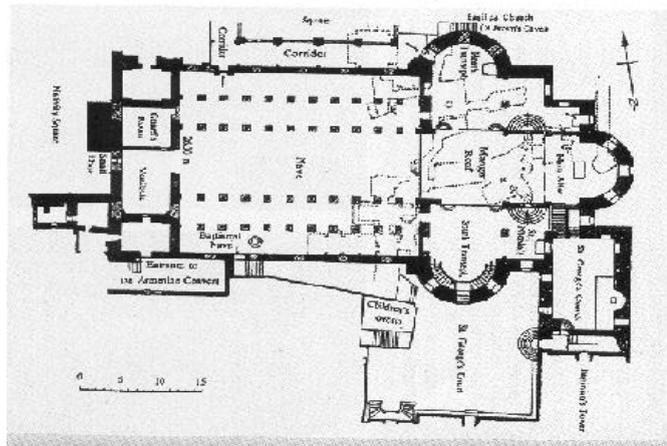


Figure 3: General Plan of the Church of Nativity

erected by the Greeks in the 17th century. It is a decorated screen across the width of the sanctuary, separating the altar and the main body of the church. It has three doors leading to the Temple. Religious pictures and icons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, Saints and others are placed on it. The present iconostasis or screen was erected in 1764 to replace an earlier screen built by Patriarch Dositheos and destroyed in 1689. It is an elaborately carved and well proportioned piece of woodwork designed in three zones each containing a series of pictures.

A 6-step staircase leads to the choir from where men enter the sanctuary and the presbytery. In this choir there is an artistically-carved throne used by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch or dignitaries visiting the Church. Originally the place of the present Iconostasis contained an octagonal structure covering the grotto, into which the pilgrims could probably look through a large circular opening and see the manger and the birth place without descending into the Grotto. Justinian's architects replaced the polygonal choir area with the transept that characterizes the present edifice. They also facilitated access to the crypt by building two sets of stairs, from the two sides of the great choir, that descend to the Grotto and meet before the Altar of the Nativity.

In the northern arm of the transept there are two altars both belonging to the Armenian Church. To the left, in the southern apse there is a small chapel of *St. George*. The southern apse opens onto the courtyard of the Greek Orthodox convent. This courtyard steps lead down into a series of burial grottoes extending under the southern aisles. On the east side of the courtyard the lower part of the 12th century bell tower can be seen (see Fig. 3).

The Grotto

The part of the Church of the Nativity with the greatest religious and historical significance remains the Grotto of the Nativity, the traditional site of Jesus' birth. In the church, two entrances now lead to the Grotto. Originally, in the fourth century, there was only one entrance to the grotto from the main body of the church. An altar was erected over the birthplace, and a fourteen-pointed silver star was embedded in the white marble to mark the traditional place of Jesus' birth. It was lit by fifteen silver lamps representing the different Christian communities. Six of the lamps belong to the Greek Orthodox, four to the Catholics, and five to the Armenian Orthodox. The star bears a Latin inscription: *Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est - 1717.*) *Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary.*(It was installed by the Catholics in 1717, removed by the Greeks in 1847 and replaced by the Turkish government in 1853. In 1944, the medieval mosaic in the apse above the altar was cleaned and three words of the Latin text of the *Gloria in Excelsis* "*terra pax hominibus*" were found and they are partly preserved. Opposite the altar of the Nativity, three steps lead the visitor to the Altar of the Manger, the place where the Baby Jesus was laid after he was born. A third altar has been erected opposite the Manger. It is dedicated to the Wise Men. The grotto is almost rectangular in shape measuring some 12 m. by 3 m. (40X10 feet) It is encased in white marble. The floor and walls

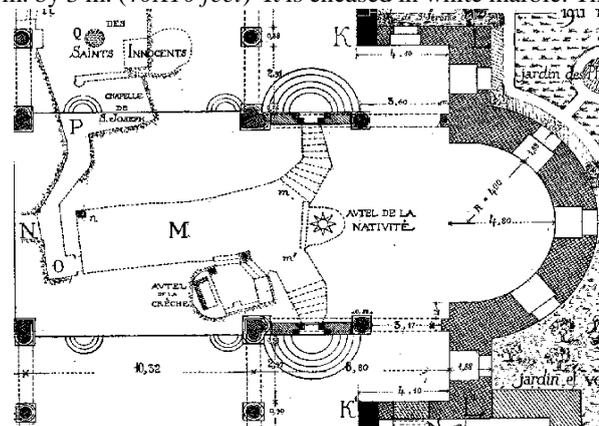


Figure 4: Plan of the Grotto

are covered with slabs of marble. The grotto is decorated with numerous lamps, figures of saints, embroidery, and a variety of sacred ornaments. The walls of the crypt are clothed with a

tapestry of amianthus which depicts the salient facts of the childhood of Jesus. It was partly destroyed by fire in 1869. Naturally dim the crypt is lit by 53 lamps. At the right end of the Grotto of the Nativity, we find a locked door, providing access to the grottoes adjacent to the Cave of the Nativity and associated with the early days of the church (see Fig.4). In the north-west corner of the grotto is a cistern, which has gathered about it a number of pious legends.

The millennium celebrations should have been an occasion to execute repairs and maintenance of the Church of Nativity, the birth place of Jesus and the focus of the Christian world. However, the possessors of the church precluded this, fearing that it will undermine their control of the church.

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