

Original Research Article

## Nature and Landscape Elements in Byzantine Mosaics

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**Abstract** | The belief and nature-oriented thinking that are evident in the art and architecture of Iran have been manifested more prominently in Iranian miniature painting than in any other artistic branch. The presence of nature and its elements can be observed in decorative and applied arts, in simple and geometric forms, and in romantic, mystical, heroic, and festive motifs and narratives. Various flowers and plants are always present in Iranian miniatures, depicting gardens, flower-filled courtyards, and orchards with water and various birds. The combination of a star-filled sky with the moon and the sun represents a blend of the real and imaginary world; a part of which is reflected in Byzantine mosaic art, with some of these works clearly showing the influence of Iranian miniatures. The coloring and use of natural symbols and signs in Iranian painting and Byzantine mosaics have their roots in naturalistic thinking and rituals, examples of which can be found in the museums and art centers of Europe and Asia, as well as in the Mehr and Anahita temples in Iran. The most prominent examples of Byzantine mosaics can be seen in the churches of San Vitale, Sant'Apollinare, and the holy sepulchers in Ravenna, Italy, the apse of the Church of San Clemente in Rome, and the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The interplay and continuity of the Mithraic ritual in Christianity and Zoroastrianism have shaped the art and culture of both Zoroastrians and Christians in a way that combines new beliefs with ancient cultural and artistic traditions.

**Keywords** | *Nature, Temple, Church, Mithraism, Symbol, Miniature, Byzantine Mosaic.*

**Introduction** | Mosaic art was a common artistic practice in ancient Roman architecture, and it was transferred to the decoration of Christian architecture during the Byzantine period. The themes of these mosaics, like other arts of the Christian era, include biblical narratives and the stories of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The influence of this art from the naturalistic Roman art and Iranian miniatures is evident, as the presence of nature in ancient Roman art itself was inspired by Aryan-Iranian (Mithraic) thinking and belief. It also found its way into Byzantine art. In Iran, nature and landscape elements are portrayed in miniatures through a combination of realism, surrealism, and various decorative and applied arts in geometric and symbolic forms. The belief in Mithraism or Mithraic worship, rooted in nature and the worship of the Sun and Moon, also had connections with astronomy and celestial bodies, which was then transferred to Christian art. Many symbols and rituals of this belief can be found in the

mosaics of Europe and Asia, displaying their connection with nature and its derived elements. Thus, the ancient Iranian naturalistic belief had a profound and visible influence on the thinking and art of Rome, Iran, and Byzantium. In miniatures, narrative scenes are depicted within the context of nature, and the same can be seen in the narrative style of Byzantine mosaics, where nature is depicted alongside Mithraic symbols and signs.

### Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis states that naturalistic thinking in Byzantine mosaics has its roots in Mithraic beliefs and is influenced by Iranian miniatures.

### Research Background

There is currently no independent or specialized analysis or research specifically focusing on the presence of nature and the relationship of its elements in Byzantine mosaics, tracing the origins of ancient thinking and beliefs, and their influence on Iranian decorative painting and

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mosaics. However, there is visual evidence and occasional references to paintings that have been inspired by Iranian miniatures (Clark, 1991:33). The attention to nature, which can be traced back to pre-Zoroastrian Iranian beliefs, has been mentioned in some other articles by the author (Javadi, 2015; 2007; 2004; 2009; 2016).

### Naturalism in Byzantine Mosaics

Mosaic art was a common decorative technique during the Byzantine era, but it had earlier existed in ancient Roman and Etruscan art. During that time, mythological themes, landscape depictions, and elements related to nature adorned the interiors of temples, aristocratic houses, and public baths, and the floor and wall decorations in cities like Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia in Italy, as well as the mosaics in the ancient Roman cities of Roman and Carthage in North Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, southern Spain-Andalusia, and other regions under the Roman Empire.

The art of mosaic-making was transferred from ancient Roman architectural decorations to Christian architecture and continued to thrive. In the early years of Christianity, when the first basilicas and Christian churches were built based on the patterns of previous temples<sup>1</sup>, decorative mosaics with prominent figures and sculptures emerged, incorporating many symbolic elements derived from Christian beliefs and even pre-Christian beliefs. Mosaic decoration in the interiors of churches followed the traditional style but with new themes and Christian beliefs presented in a unique way. Since Christianity was still in its formative stage with the development of new thinking, culture, and art, and was transitioning from Mithraism to Christianity, we witness the substitution of Mithraic art with Christian art, which is a unique blend of various influences.

Events from the narratives of the Bible, such as the birth of Jesus (peace be upon him), images of the mother and child, and descriptions of the stories related to the prophets and the apostles, including the sitting and reign of Mary and Jesus (peace be upon them), depicted as queen and king, gradually transformed into the crucifixion of Jesus the Savior on mosaics. Scenes of the announcement of the coming of the Prophet and the narratives of Iranian saints who followed the rising star and foretold the coming of the promised Messiah, as well as the depiction of the Holy Mary among the angels, can be observed as magnificent examples of Byzantine decorative mosaics in the Church of Sant'Apollinare in Ravenna, Italy (Figs. 1 & 2). Regarding Fig. 1, Professor Jonneydi states: "The image in which these three Iranian Magi, guided by the shining star, journey towards the birthplace of the Messiah, clearly shows that Nahid, the morning star, is brighter than all other stars and after its shining, Mehr-



Fig. 1. The Church of Sant'Apollinare in Ravenna, Italy. Three Zoroastrian Magi announce the birth of Jesus. The landscape is depicted in the style of Iranian miniatures, with regard to colors, proportions, flowers, shrubs, and greenery. Source: Borini, 2006, 48.



Fig. 2. The Church of Sant'Apollinare in Ravenna, Italy, depicting the Holy Virgin with a crown between angels. The landscape features a green meadow with colorful flowers, reminiscent of the nature-oriented background in Iranian miniatures. Source: Bovini, 2006, 70.

Mithras becomes manifest. So, those who wear Iranian hats turn towards Mithra and the birth of Mithra or the shining of the morning star, which is accompanied by the radiance of the morning star" (Joneydi, 2006). In the Christian tradition, it is also mentioned: "When Jesus was born in the days of Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him'" (Matthew, Chapter 2). In fact, the term "Magi" is derived from the Arabic "mughus" and was originally used for the followers of Mithraism, later transferred to the Zoroastrian priests. This painting and other scenes from the early days of Christianity to the peak of the formation of the Christian religion are present in the ensemble of the Church of San Vitale, including the baptistery and the sanctuary, Sant'Apollinare, and the sacred tombs in Ravenna. Among the other masterpieces of Byzantine mosaics, one can mention the decorations of

the Hagia Sophia Mosque in Constantinople, the center of the Byzantine Empire, which reflects a style of color, symbols, and geometric motifs inspired by the beliefs and art of Mithraism (Fig. 3).

An interesting and significant point in all of these mosaics is the emphasis on landscape depiction and attention to nature. Most of the depicted scenes from the biblical narratives are shown within nature, amidst gardens and orchards. This narrative and visual style bears a strong resemblance to Iranian miniatures, which also have a direct connection to nature, water, sky, gardens, and fruit trees. Even subjects that are not directly related to nature and convey historical or religious narratives are situated within a natural backdrop. In Iranian paintings, even in scenes depicting the interior of a room, there is usually an open window offering a view of the sky, trees, mountains, flowers, and greenery (Fig. 4). The narrative mosaics related to basilicas and early churches, built upon the remains of previous temples, depict Christian events and beliefs along with natural landscapes using realistic and symbolic colors, creating a spiritual and mystical atmosphere (Figs. 5a & 5b).

### Mithraism Signs in Byzantine Mosaics

The vast ancient Roman Empire, which included present-day Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, most of Europe, and some regions of Africa, had connections with the Parthian and Sassanid empires. During this period, the cult of Mithras migrated to those lands by Roman warriors and eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire, lasting for about five centuries. Since Mithras was the ally and protector of warriors, he gained special credibility among the Romans and received more attention than other Roman gods and deities, to the extent that Mithraic temples were erected throughout the empire.

In Mithraeums, which were usually built in natural caves or in the form of caves, the main focus of worship and devotion was the scene of the sacred sacrifice or bull-slaying, which is seen in all Mithraic sanctuaries. This scene is represented by the presence of Mithras, wearing a red cloak adorned with moon, stars, and sun symbols, and a crown or a conical cap. The pine or cypress tree, wheat sheaves, and the signs of the 12 zodiacal constellations are also always present in this scene. The nature-related elements that existed in Mithraism were then transferred to Christianity. As the Mithraeum transformed into the Christian church, the role of natural elements and decorations in the form of mosaics became more prevalent during the Byzantine era. Prominent examples of this transformation can be observed in the apse of the Church of St. Clement in Rome (Figs. 6a & 6b), depicting an azure sky with golden stars. The cross symbol,



Fig. 3. Atrium, First Floor. Hagia Sophia Church. Ayasofya Mosque. Istanbul, Turkey.

Colors, symbols, and geometric patterns inspired by the beliefs and art of Mithraism. Various representations of the sun in golden yellow and red colors. Source: www.HagiaSophia.com

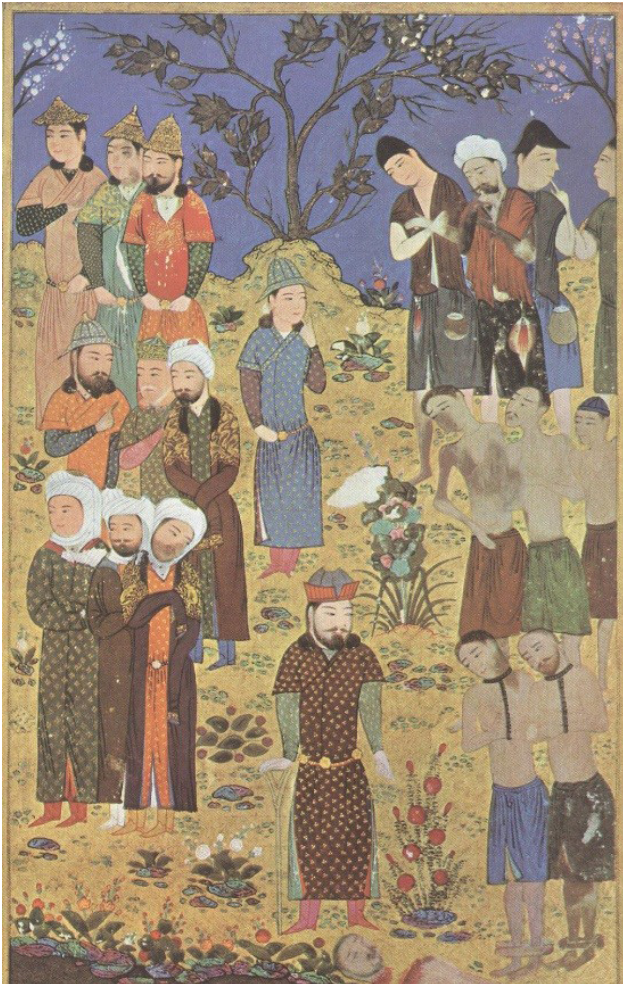


Fig. 4. Imprisoned Figure Facing Khosrow, Miniature from the Shiraz School, 1410. The scene depicts a narrative set in the embrace of nature. Source: Gray, 1995, 77.

flowers and plants, and plant-related elements, as well as golden, red, white, and black colors that were previously present in Mithraic sanctuaries, clearly demonstrate how elements and symbols have transitioned from one cult to another and are presented with a new interpretation. The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy, contains several mosaic scenes from Christian narratives that clearly demonstrate the influence of coloring and naturalism (Figs. 7a & 7b). In the vicinity of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, there is a structure called the Medo Dome, which is attributed to an Aryan temple. The architecture and decorations of this cubic building, with surrounding circular platforms enclosing a water basin, a mosaic panel in a circular frame depicting the sacred baptism ceremony, and numerous symbols prominent in the decorations of the side walls, all tell the story of the transformation of this building from a Mithraic temple to a Christian baptismal site (Fig. 8).

### Another Example of Byzantine Mosaics

The central apse mosaic of the Church of Sant'Apollinare

in Ravenna, Italy, depicts a scene of the shepherd Christ with sheep in a field with trees, flowers, and rocks. A symbol of a turquoise dome with golden stars surrounds a large self-revealing cross. The cross or “chelipa,” known as the “circle of the sun,” has been a symbol of the four elements and four cardinal directions for centuries before Christianity and Mithraism. It has been observed in various roles and contexts throughout history among different peoples and nations. Later, it continued in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and ultimately found continuity in Christianity, each with its own specific interpretations. (Fig. 9)

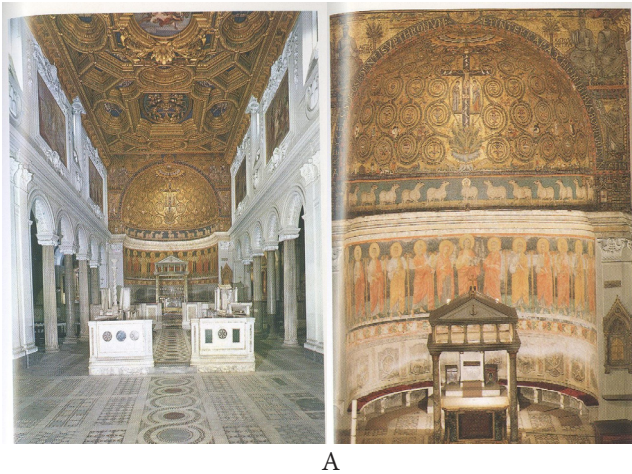


A



B

Fig. 5. A: The Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. Christ Among the Saints, a view of the Paradise Garden with a golden sky and green earth where four rivers flow. Christ is seated on the dome of heaven or the divine throne, surrounded by angels and saints. The composition and colors are reminiscent of Iranian miniatures. Source: Bovini, 2006, 35. B: San Vitale, the Holy Sacrifice, Isaac before Abraham. The scene depicts a story set in a lush and flowery garden, next to a mighty tree. The borders of the painting are adorned with a natural landscape featuring mountains and trees, as well as birds, reflecting Roman naturalism and Iranian miniature art. San Vitale Church, Ravenna, Italy. Source: Bovini, 2006, 36.



A



B

Fig. 6. A: Atrium of the Church of San Clemente - Rome. The decorative motifs of the altar and walls incorporate elements from nature and Mithraic symbols. The colors of red, azure blue, gold, white, green, and black, which have a historical background in ancient Roman mosaics and Persian miniatures, both of which are associated with the belief in Mithraism. Source: Boyle, 1989, 25&27. B: Bottom border of the painting, featuring a pomegranate flower motif commonly seen in Iranian tilework and carpets, which traces back to ancient Iranian beliefs. Source: Boyle, 1989, 49.



A



B

Fig. 7. A: Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy. A stone laver motif with birds, which is a symbol associated with Mithraism. In many surviving artifacts of Mithraism, the crow is a representation of Mithras, while later in Christian belief and art, it is associated with the dove. Source: Bovini, 2006, 16. B: Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a priest among sheep, a meadow with a view of mountains, trees, and a blue sky. This scene is framed by a celestial azure blue background adorned with stars and a golden sun. This landscape composition has a historical background in ancient Roman wall paintings and Iranian miniature scenes. Source: Bovini, 2006, 18.

## Influence of Iranian Miniatures on Byzantine Mosaics

The approach to depicting nature in Byzantine mosaics is similar to the portrayal in Iranian miniatures, with a focus on the embrace of nature within gardens and landscapes. Natural elements such as the sky, clouds, celestial bodies, and plants are represented in a non-realistic and symbolic perspective. Meanwhile, human figures are depicted with specific costumes, hairstyles, and racial characteristics that reflect the ruling Turkic ethnicity of that era. In Byzantine mosaic art, a similar approach is taken, where figures such as Jesus, Mary, saints, and apostles are depicted with specific facial features, clothing, and adornments that reflect the traditions of the time. Colors, symbols, and signs are drawn from previous traditions, creating a type of aesthetics that evokes spirituality and symbolism. The portrayal of large, expressive eyes with high eyelids,

small noses and lips, and slender and elongated ascending figures represents the artistic style of Byzantine art and conveys a sense of spiritual and mystical beauty (Figs. 10a & 10b)

Symbols and signs derived from Christian symbolism can be seen in Byzantine mosaic decorations, such as the chalice and the laver, often accompanied by elements like snakes and birds, which are found in churches. The sun wheel, candles, and plants like blue lotus and cypress are also mentioned. "Dostkami" is the name of a large-footed cup in which friends used to drink together. Today, it is known as "Dostkomi" and is filled with water in mourning ceremonies, and the mourners offer it to the thirsty. In mosques and old grand churches, large stone lavers similar to Dostkamis are placed, which are also symbolic of the grape chalices. Modern fountains, where water is poured for the sake of God, and where candles are lit,



Fig. 8. The dome, or Aryan baptismal font, from the collection of structures in the Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. The ceiling or under-dome mosaic, seen over the water basin (used for baptism in the Mithraic tradition), depicts elements of nature such as water, golden sky, plants, and birds, which are associated with ancient Iranian rituals that have found their way into Christianity. Source: Bovini, 2006, 110.

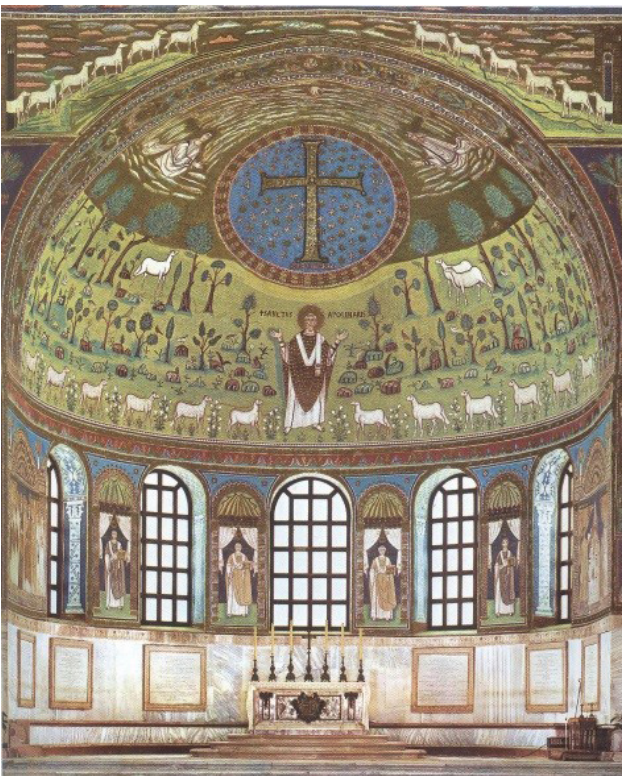


Fig. 9. Christ the Good Shepherd among the sheep, an azure dome with stars and a golden sun (cross) inspired by the motifs of Mithraic symbols. The scene is set in a meadow, surrounded by nature, by the narratives found in miniatures where the shepherd appears in gardens and landscapes. Church of Sant'Apollinare, Ravenna, Italy. Source: Bovini, 2006, 97.



A



B

Fig. 10. A: Christ, the Judge among the angels. Church of Sant'Apollinare, Ravenna, Italy. Source: Bovini, 2006, 75. B: Church of Sant'Apollinare, Ravenna, Italy. The offering of the sacrificial lamb by Abraham, featuring Mithraic symbols such as the sun, cross, and the holy chalice with serpent motifs as its handles. Source: Bovini, 2006, 103.

are reminiscent of the fields and Dostkamis of the era of Mithraism.

The role of the sun wheel, which is now known as the broken cross and is a symbol of Aryan people, can be seen in ancient structures from India to the Roman Empire. Its continuity can be observed in the interlaced patterns of carpets, which represent the morning and midday sun (Hami, 1976, 17).



Fig. 11. The Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. A chalice with serpents (as handles of the chalice), pouring the elixir of life into a chalice. This is a symbol associated with Mithraism. Source: Bovini, 2006, 50.



Fig. 12. Adoration of the Magi, Pietro Lorenzetti, Gothic, 161. The continuity of symbolic colors from pre-Christianity to the Christian era. Source: Laclotte, 1989, 137.

This symbol is also present in the decorative motifs of mosques and mausoleums, sometimes transformed into sacred expressions such as Allah, Muhammad, and Ali. The images of the blue lotus and the cypress or pine tree also have significance in many European tapestries, as well as in prominent symbols of the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras, which are prominent in Mithraism and symbolize the birth of the Mehr or sun. The presence of red, turquoise, and golden colors in the clothing of prophets and holy figures is derived from the colors that were previously used in Mithraic art (Javadi, 2014). In Iranian miniatures, the patterns on carpets, curtains, clothing, vessels, and objects are inspired by nature but rendered geometrically and abstractly. While the landscapes of gardens and orchards are depicted realistically and naturally, they are imbued with unreal and surreal proportions. The same applies to mosaic art, where grasslands, trees, flowers, and shrubs are represented realistically but with non-realistic proportions,

while decorative patterns on fabrics, carpets, and objects are geometric and simple. In his book "Landscape Painting in European Art", Sir Kenneth Clark writes about fifteenth-century paintings depicting gardens with meadows, birds, and flower-filled orchards, particularly focusing on the curtain "Madonna in a Rose Garden" by Stefano da Zevio in Verona, Italy, stating: "I have no doubt that the inspiration for this curtain was an Iranian miniature" (Clark, 1991, 23) (Fig. 13).

## Conclusion

Continuity and transformation of ancient beliefs and rituals can be observed in the mosaics of the Byzantine era, which were influenced by the art and culture of ancient Roman Mithraism, as well as inspired by Iranian miniatures. Both of these influences have roots in naturalistic beliefs and the worship of Mithras. The presence of nature in Byzantine mosaic art is a combination of the realistic wall paintings of ancient Rome and the symbolic and realistic elements of Iranian miniatures (Fig. 14). Since nature-oriented beliefs existed in the thinking of ancient Iranians and have continued in Islamic eras, and this tradition has also traveled from Iran to the Roman Empire and had a significant impact on Christian culture and art, therefore, the realistic depiction of nature and the integration of geometric and abstract elements derived from natural elements in Byzantine mosaic art can be traced back to the ideology of nature worship in the Mithraic tradition, which had a long-lasting influence in Iran, then in Zoroastrianism, and eventually in Islamic eras. This ideology and art prevailed throughout the Roman Empire for about five centuries and influenced Christian culture and art, leaving visible traces to this day.



Fig. 13. Madonna in a Garden of Roses, by Stefano Duzio. Portrayal of nature is inspired by Iranian miniatures. Source: Clark, 1991, 33.

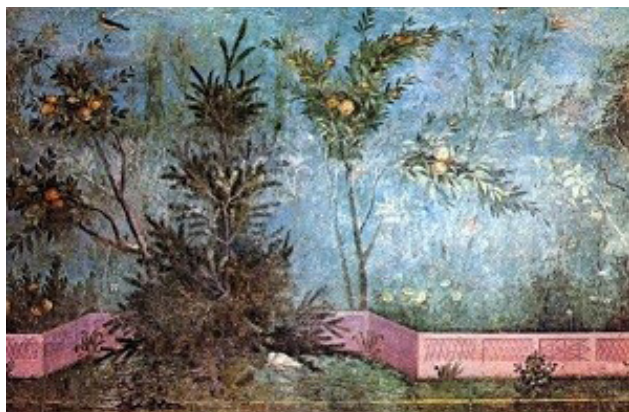


Fig. 14. Garden landscape. A fragment of a wall painting from the Villa of Livia, Prima Porta. 1st century AD. Source: Pinterest.com

## Endnote

1. The oldest churches in the land of Armenia, the birthplace of Christianity, are actually transformed Mithraic temples, and prominent examples of them can be found in the Caucasus region. In the ancient churches of the Caucasus region, one can observe numerous examples of Mithraic symbols and signs in their architecture and decorations, particularly in the baptisteries of the Geghard Church complex (Javadi, 2014, 33-44). Additionally, mention can be made of the water basin and serpent motif in the baptistery of the Church of San Vitale in Italy, which is associated with the Mithraic baptismal ritual. These symbols are also seen in Byzantine decorative mosaics. The book "History of Art" by Jensen explicitly states the influence of Roman pagan temples on the early church architecture (Janson, 1980, 168, 135-159, 169).

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