

CONVERSION OF TEMPLES IN ROME

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During late antiquity, we saw the introduction of Christianity in Rome. This meant that temples once used to celebrate and practice Paganism were gradually replaced by churches. However rather than straight-forward replacement we see examples of temple buildings being repurposed and converted into churches rather than being demolished and rebuilt.

Before conversions began, churches such as the Lateran Basilica were constructed away from Rome's center. Due to this being an early development it could have been to avoid Pagan aristocracy, however the heavy urban landscape of Rome during this period could also suggest a lack of space within the city itself. Before the construction of this public church, many churches were inside of more humble private homes.



<https://mycatholiclife.com/saints-of-the-liturgical-year/november-9-feast-of-the-dedication-of-the-lateran-basilica-rome/>

The Lateran Basilica, built in 324, is the oldest public church in Rome

Were all temples converted?

Not all temples were converted, and there are examples of destruction despite laws against it. There are three Mithraea that we are aware of, which were destroyed and their foundations filled with rubble in order to construct three churches in their place: The San Clemente, Santa Prisca and Santo Stefano Rotondo. All of these churches were built outside of the city center, and could serve as examples of Christian triumphalism. The outright demolition shows that they were built to display the uprising of Christianity over Paganism rather than a pragmatic use of the space within Rome.

In the year 392 Emperor Theodosius outlawed all forms of Paganism, leading to temples being stripped of their idols and elements that supported the religion. The buildings themselves remained, and the buildings within the city of Rome went untouched.

Conversions begin.

Come the 6th century, new basilicas and titular churches stopped construction and we see the first instances of public buildings; such as **Vespasian's Forum Pacis** and a connected round hall, being converted into churches (527). This marks the beginning of the conversions. The first temple to be converted was the **Pantheon** in roughly 609, with the building being a gift to the Pope from Emperor Phocas. This conversion saw minimal architectural changes and the building was essentially repurposed in its entirety.

We see four more examples of entire conversions within Rome, suggesting a pragmatic approach to opening new public churches. By converting temples which already consisted of master craftsmanship and expensive materials, the church would save a great deal of money.



<https://monolithidome.com/pantheon>

The Pantheon, the first temple to be converted in its entirety.

It is important to note that despite the fact that these temples were *converted* into churches, they bore no resemblance of their former Pagan purposes. To the untrained eye, these were very obviously not temples. Not all conversions were entire conversions, and some buildings were in a state of dilapidation by the time the church repurposed them; such as the church of **San Nicola** which utilised the temple of **Juno Sospita**, taking advantage of parts of the two adjacent temples and building onto the existing structures that remained such as columns.

These conversions suggest that the shift from Paganism to Christianity was more pragmatic, as they did not want to waste existing materials and funds. The building of a Christian landscape was gradual rather than an outright upheaval of Paganism.