The Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy is one of the most important examples of early Christian Byzantine art and architecture.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVE**

- Identify characteristics of the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy that make it one of the most important examples of early Christian Byzantine art and architecture

**KEY POINTS**

- The building is styled an "ecclesiastical basilica" in the Roman Catholic Church, though it is not of architectural basilica form. The church is of extreme importance in Byzantine art as it is the only church from the period of the Emperor Justinian I to survive virtually intact to the present day.

- The church has an octagonal plan and combines Roman elements (the dome, shape of doorways, and stepped towers) with Byzantine elements (polygonal apse, capitals, and narrow bricks).

- The Basilica of San Vitale is most famous for its wealth of Byzantine mosaics, the largest and best preserved outside of Constantinople.

**TERMS**

- **fascia**
  A wide band of material covering the ends of roof rafters, sometimes supporting a gutter in steep-slope roofing, but typically it is a border or trim in low-slope roofing.

- **theophany**
  A manifestation of a deity to a man.

- **presbytery**
  A section of the church reserved for the clergy.
and architecture in Western Europe. The building is styled an "ecclesiastical basilica" in the Roman Catholic Church, though it is not of architectural basilica form. The church is of extreme importance in Byzantine art, as it is the only major church from the period of the Emperor Justinian I to survive virtually intact to the present day.

Basilica of San Vitale

*The Basilica of San Vitale is styled an "ecclesiastical basilica" in the Roman Catholic Church, though it is not of architectural basilica form.*
The church was begun by Bishop Ecclesius in 527, when Ravenna was under the rule of the Ostrogoths, and completed by the twenty-seventh Bishop of Ravenna, Maximian, in 546 during the Byzantine Exarchate of Ravenna. The architect or architects of the church is unknown. The construction of the church was sponsored by a Greek banker, Julius Argentarius, and the final cost amounted to 26,000 solidi (gold pieces). The church has an octagonal plan and combines Roman elements (the dome, shape of doorways, and stepped towers) with Byzantine elements (polygonal apse, capitals, and narrow bricks). The church is most famous for its wealth of Byzantine mosaics, the largest and best preserved outside of Constantinople.

The central section is surrounded by two superposed ambulatory ambulatories, or covered passages around a cloister. The upper one, the matrimoneum, was reserved for married women. A series of mosaics in the lunettes above the triforia depict sacrifices from the Old Testament. On the side walls, the corners, next to the mullioned windows, have mosaics of the Four Evangelists, under their symbols (angel, lion, ox and eagle), who are dressed in white. The cross-ribbed vault in the presbytery is richly ornamented with mosaic festoons of leaves, fruit, and flowers, converging on a crown encircling the Lamb of God. The crown is supported by four angels, and every surface is covered with a profusion of flowers, stars, birds, and animals, specifically many peacocks. Above the arch, on both sides, two angels hold a disc and beside them are representations of the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. These two cities symbolize the human race.
The Presbytery

The cross-ribbed vault in the presbytery is richly ornamented with mosaic festoons of leaves, fruit and flowers, converging on a crown encircling the Lamb of God.
All these mosaics are executed in the Hellenistic-Roman tradition: lively and imaginative, with rich colors and a certain perspective and with a vivid depiction of the landscape, plants, and birds. They were finished when Ravenna was still under Gothic rule. The apse is flanked by two chapels, the prothesis and the diaconicon, typical for Byzantine architecture. Inside, the intrados of the great triumphal arch is decorated with fifteen mosaic medallions, depicting Jesus Christ, the twelve Apostles, and Saint Gervasius and Saint Protasius, the sons of Saint Vitale. The theophany was begun in 525 under bishop Ecclesius. It has a great gold fascia with twining flowers, birds, and horns of plenty. Jesus Christ appears, seated on a blue globe in the summit of the vault, robed in purple, with his right hand offering the martyr's crown to Saint Vitale.

At the foot of the apse's side walls are two famous mosaic panels, executed in 547. On the right is a mosaic depicting the East Roman Emperor Justinian I, clad in purple with a golden halo, standing next to court officials, Bishop Maximian, palatinae guards, and deacons. The halo around his head gives him the same aspect as Christ in the dome of the apse. Justinian himself stands in the middle, with soldiers on his right and clergy on his left, emphasizing that Justinian is the leader of both church and state of his empire. The gold background of the mosaic shows that Justinian and his entourage are inside the church. The figures are placed in a V shape. Justinian is placed in the front middle to show his importance. Bishop Maximian is on his left, and lesser individuals are placed behind them.
Justinian Mosaic

The mosaic of Emperor Justinian and his entourage of bishops and officials of state.