

The Church of the Nativity

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, was originally commissioned by Constantine the Great soon after his mother St. Helena, visited Jerusalem and Bethlehem in 325–326. It was built on the site that was traditionally held to be the birthplace of Our Lord Jesus Christ. That original basilica was built between 330–333, being already mentioned in 333, and was dedicated on May 31st, 339. It was destroyed by fire during the Samaritan revolts of the sixth century, possibly in 529, and a new basilica was built a number of years later by Byzantine Emperor Justinian (reigned from 527–565), who added a porch or narthex, and replaced the octagonal sanctuary with a cruciform transept complete with three apses, but largely preserved the original character of the building, with an atrium and a basilica consisting of a nave with four side aisles.

The Church of the Nativity, while remaining basically unchanged since the Justinianic reconstruction, has seen numerous repairs and additions, especially from the Crusader period, such as two bell towers (now gone), wall mosaics and paintings (partially preserved). Over the centuries, the surrounding compound has been expanded, and today it covers approximately 12,000 square meters, comprising three different monasteries: one Greek Orthodox, one Armenian Apostolic, and one Roman Catholic, of which the first two contain bell towers built during the modern era. The silver star marking the spot where Christ was born was stolen in 1847. Some assert that this was a contributing factor in the Crimean War against the Russian Empire.



★ Grotto of the Nativity
The grotto is the church's focal point. A silver star is set in the floor over the spot where Christ is said to have been born.



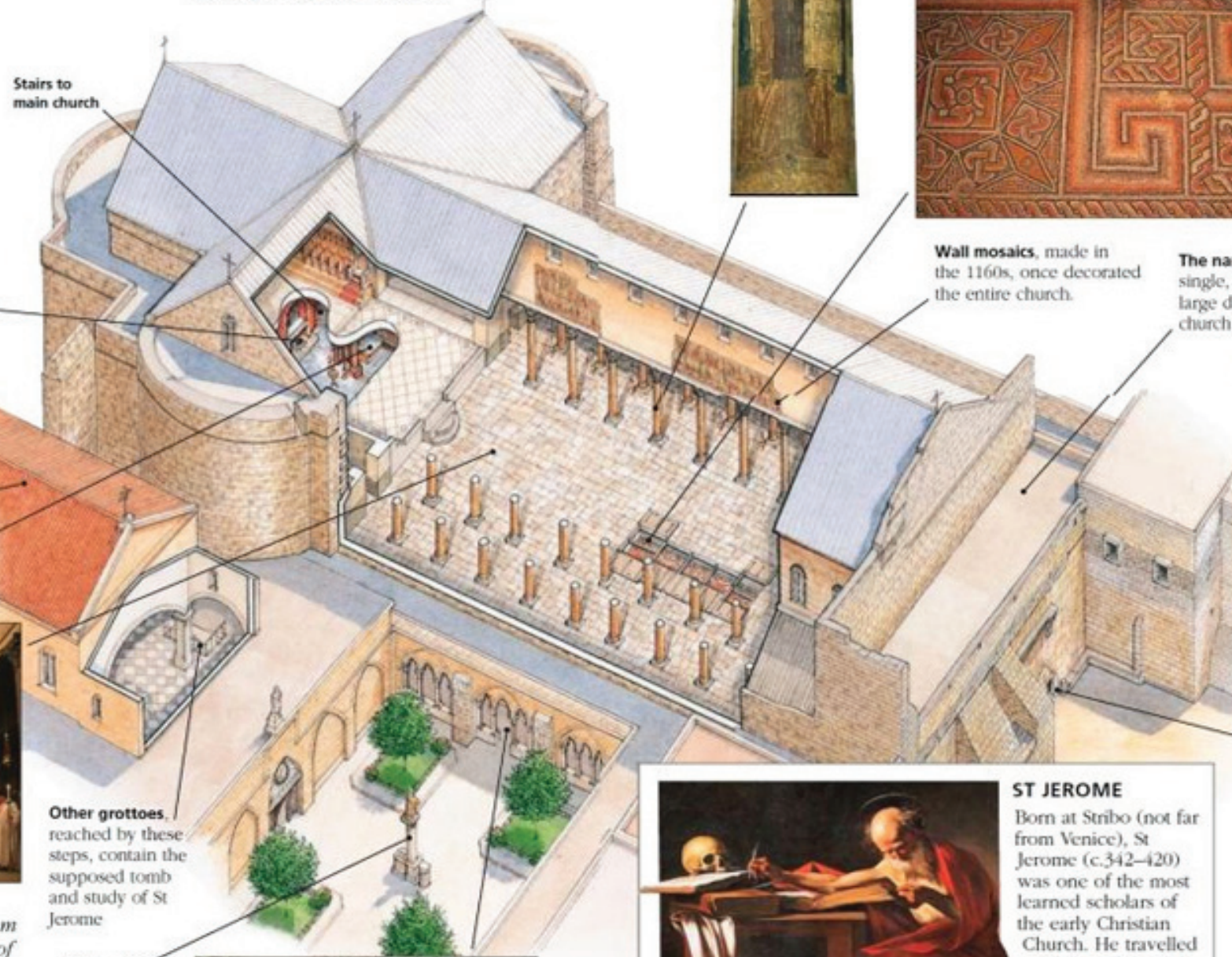
Nave
The wide nave survives intact from Justinian's time, although the roof is 15th-century, with 19th-century restorations. Fragments of high-quality mosaics decorate the walls.

St Catherine's Church
Altar of the Adoration of the Magi (Manger Altar)

Cloister of St Catherine's Church
Incorporating columns and capitals from the 12th-century Augustinian monastery that previously stood here, this attractive, peaceful cloister was rebuilt in Crusader style in 1948.



Plaza in front of the Church of the Nativity, with the plain façade in the distance



Other grottoes, reached by these steps, contain the supposed tomb and study of St Jerome

Statue of St Jerome

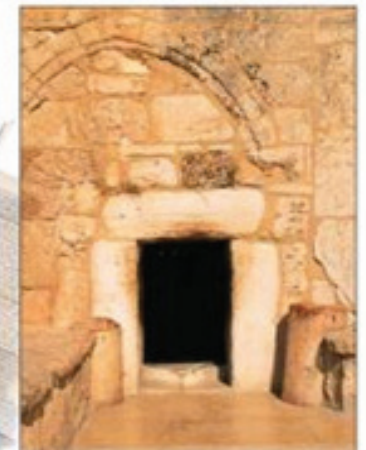


Painted Columns
Thirty of the nave's 44 columns carry Crusader paintings of saints, and the Virgin and Child, although age and lighting conditions make them hard to see. The columns are of polished, pink limestone, most of them reused from the original 4th-century basilica.



Wall mosaics, made in the 1160s, once decorated the entire church.

The narthex was originally a single, long porch with three large doors leading into the church and three onto the street.



★ Door of Humility
The Crusader doorway, marked by a pointed arch, was reduced to the present tiny size in the Ottoman period to prevent carts being driven in by looters. A massive lintel above the arch indicates the door's even larger original size.



St Jerome Writing (c.1604) by Caravaggio

ST JEROME
Born at Stribo (not far from Venice), St Jerome (c.342–420) was one of the most learned scholars of the early Christian Church. He travelled widely and, in 384, settled in Bethlehem, where he founded a monastery. Here, he completed a new version of the Bible inspired by the pope's suggestion that a single book should replace the many differing texts in circulation. His great work later became known as the Vulgate. Tradition places the saint's study and tomb next to the Grotto of the Nativity.

Manger Square, Bethlehem.
Tel (02) 274 2440. ☐ summer: 6:30am–noon & 2–7:30pm daily; winter: 5:30am–noon & 2–5pm daily. Grottoes closed Sun am. ♿