

# Venice Revealed

## **St. Mark's Basilica**



# Venice, Italy Revealed: St Mark's Basilica

**Version 1.1**

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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# INTRODUCTION

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food, or wine.

Before Venice could establish itself as a maritime trading power, it had to find a way to preserve its independence in a world dominated by two massive empires: the Holy Roman empire in the West and the Byzantine empire in East. The capture of St Mark's relics — and the subsequent construction of a grand basilica to house them — was a brilliant solution given the tight linkage between religion and politics in the Middle Ages. With one bold move, Venice had acquired the prestige it required to prosper without interference.

As the source of the Venetian Republic's legitimacy, St Mark's Basilica increasingly became the symbol of its accrued economic, political and military strength. Perhaps no other single monument better embodies the city in which it stands. It is yours to discover.

## What's in this guidebook

- **History.** We explain why the securing of St Mark's relics was of fundamental importance to Venice's political independence and how it influenced the design of the basilica.
- **Architectural evolution.** The current church is the third to sit on the site. We cover how the church's architectural arrangement — based on the 6th century Byzantine Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople — evolved over the ages and review its distinctive features.
- **Mosaics.** The church's Byzantine-inspired mosaics are unrivaled. We discuss their history, their organization in the church, the message they were intended to communicate to the faithful and the defining characteristics of the prevailing styles.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we tour the church, walking step-by-step through architectural and artistic highlights. All of our descriptions reference high quality images.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook offers logistical advice and provides links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

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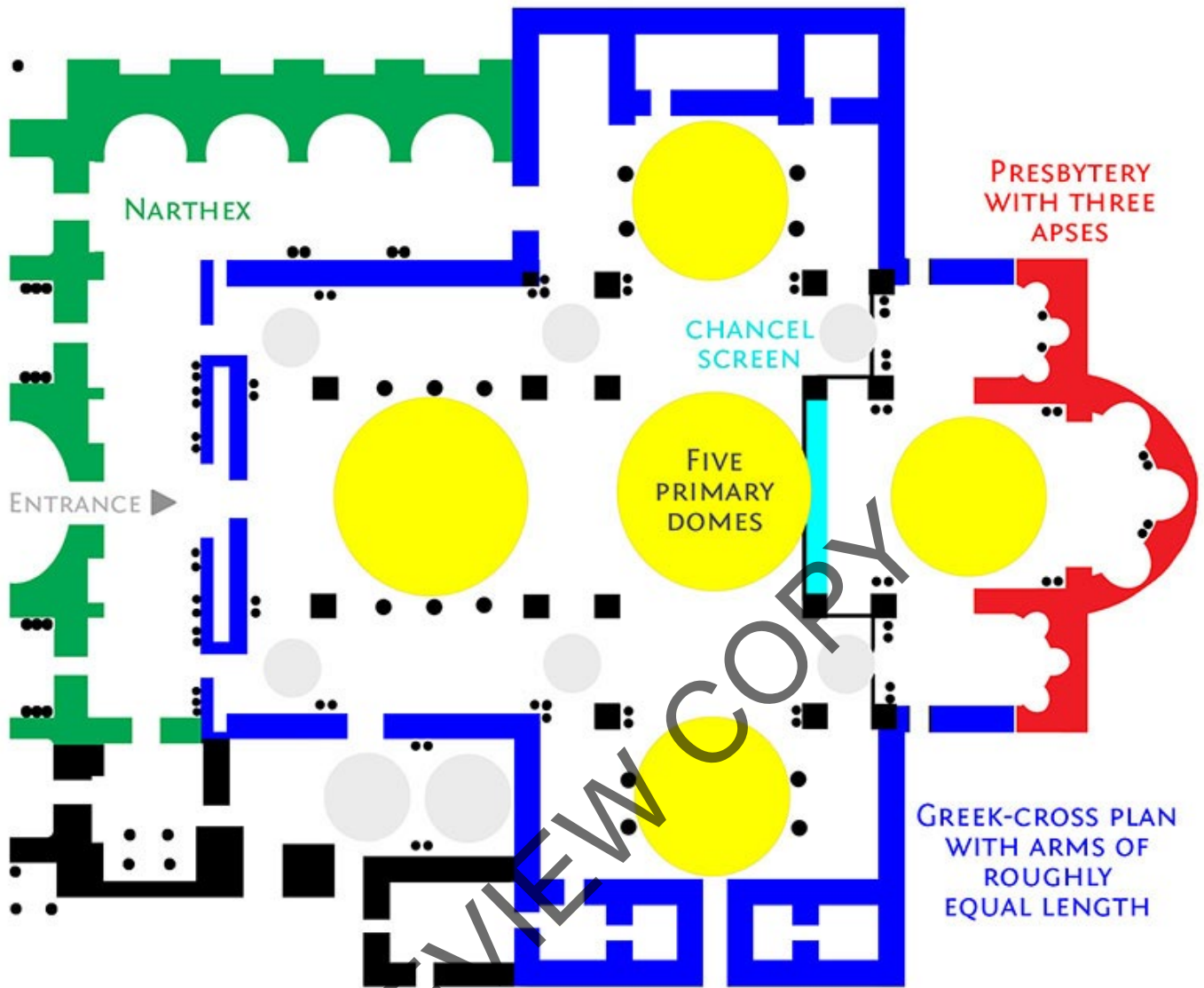


Fig. 4. Layout, St Mark's Basilica.

### Third Church

Less than 100 years later, Doge Domenico Contarini decided to build a grander, more spectacular church. Construction began in 1063 and was largely completed by 1094, when the body of St Mark was placed in a crypt under the high altar. It is this church that stands in St Mark's Square today.

- The **core of the church** (blue highlights in Fig. 4) adheres to the same **Greek cross plan** as the original, i.e., a centralized plan with arms of roughly equal length.
- Each arm has a **central aisle and two side aisles**.
- A **narthex** (green highlights in Fig. 4) or entrance atrium was added to the west side in the 12th century; it was extended in the 13th century to cover part of the north side.
- The most ambitious element of the new design was the construction of **five large domes** (yellow highlights in Fig. 4) — one over the crossing and one over each arm of the cross — to

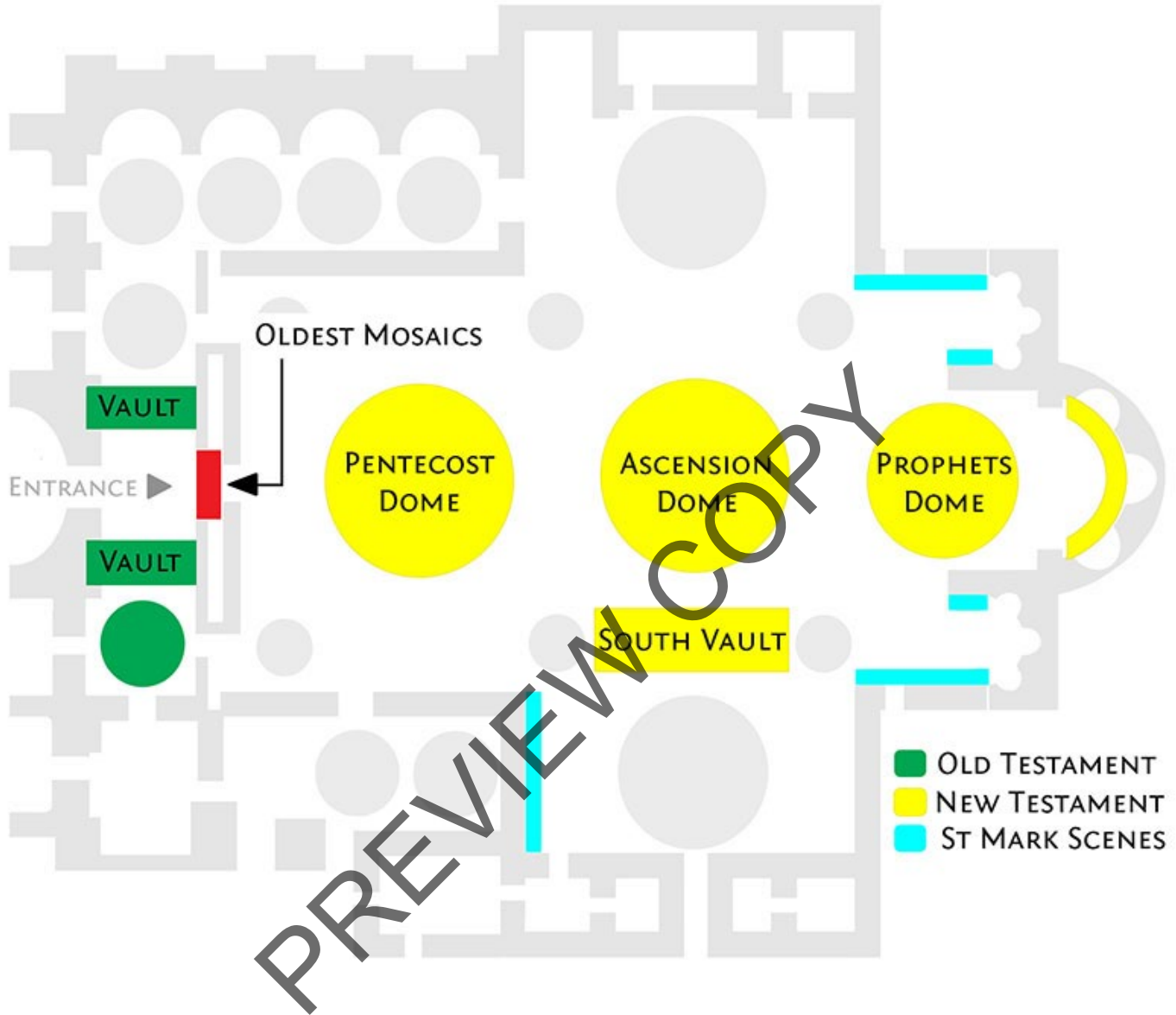
make it an even more perfect replica of Constantinople's Church of the Holy Apostles. Each dome rests on four arches that spring from large square piers, bridged to a round base using Byzantine-style **pendentives**.

### Deviations from the Byzantine prototype

As similar as it was, the plan of St Mark's deviated from the Byzantine Church of the Holy Apostles in two key respects.

- **The western arm is slightly longer** than the other three, providing both more space for the faithful and greater directional momentum along the church's primary axis from west to east. This preference reveals a residual connection to the Western Latin church building tradition prevalent on the mainland that favored basilican plans with long naves.
- **The eastern arm of the church holds a presbytery with three apses** (red highlights in Fig. 4). An **chancel screen** (light blue highlights in Fig. 4) separates the presbytery — the most sacred part of the church, holding the altar over the crypt of St Mark — from the rest of the church. While the use of an chancel screen is perfectly consistent with the Byzantine tradition, **the liturgical focus on the sacred eastern arm similarly reinforces the west-to-east momentum consistent with a Western basilica**. By contrast, the altar of the Church of the Holy Apostles likely stood in the absolute center of the church, under the crossing, in a true Byzantine centralized arrangement; in this classical layout, the momentum flowed to the center from all four directions.

## Mosaics Overview



**Fig. 5.** Interior, position of key (profiled) mosaics.

### Arrangement

The sheer scale of St Mark's mosaic decoration is incredible, covering over 8,000 square meters / 86,000 square feet of wall space. We lay out the general arrangement below.

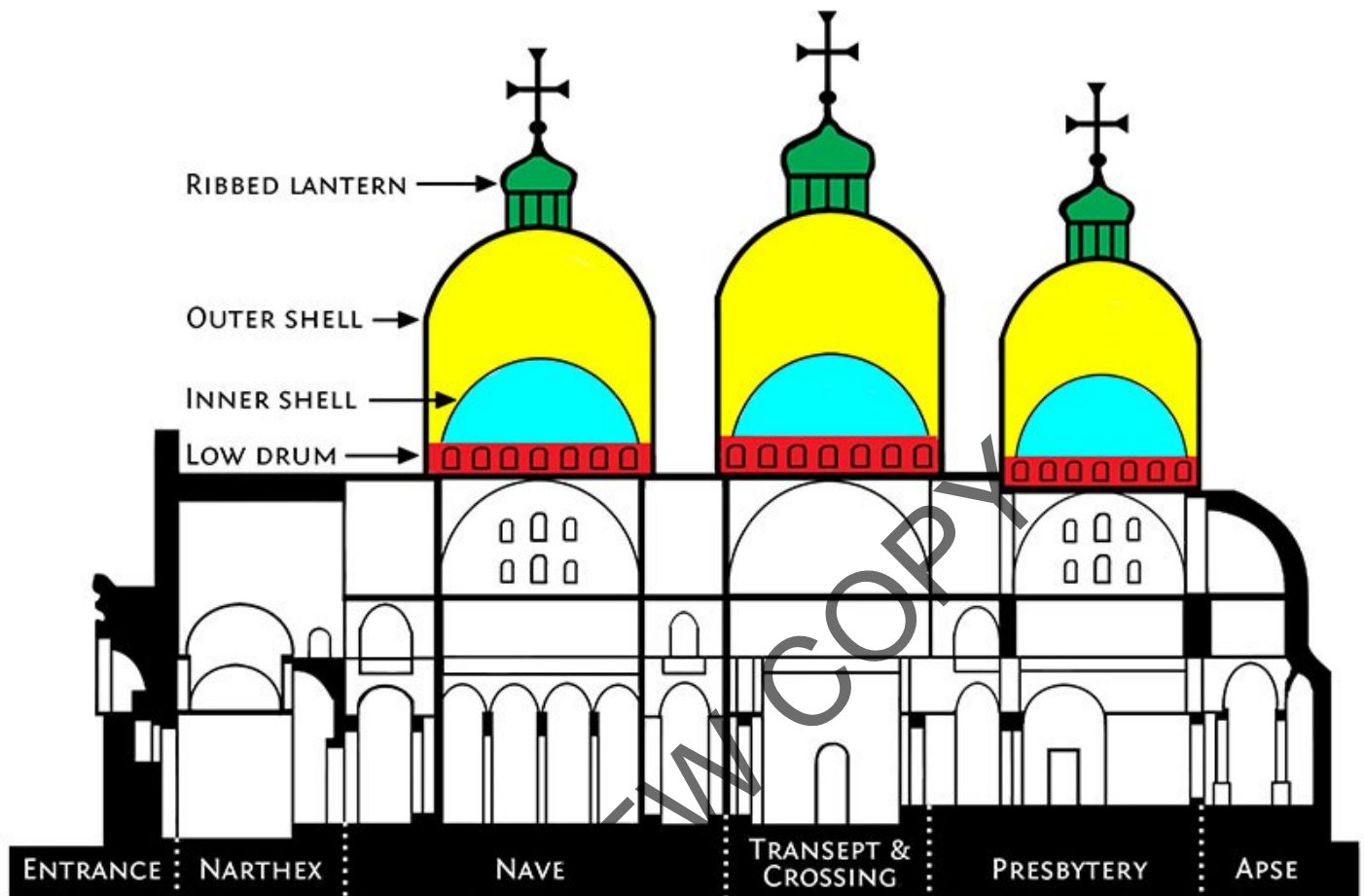
#### Narthex

- **Old Testament scenes.** Mosaics in the narthex hold scenes from the Old Testament. The premier examples — profiled in this guidebook — are marked with green highlights in **Fig. 5**.

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# Domes



**Fig. 8.** Elevation cross section, view from south.

**Author tip:** By far, the best view of the church's domes is from the top of the early 20th century campanile (bell tower) just across the plaza. We highly recommend visiting, as the view (shown in [Fig. 9](#)) is unsurpassed. An elevator provides easy access.

## Domes

St Mark's five domes are perhaps the church's most distinctive feature. They employ a double-shell design to powerful visual effect.

- **Inner shell.** The inner shells of the domes (light blue highlights in [Fig. 8](#)) — only visible from the interior of the church — were made with brick vaulting; they are shallow and resemble Byzantine models. Further, they sit on **low drums** with round-arch windows (red highlights in [Fig. 8](#); see also [Fig. 9](#)).
- **Outer shell.** The outer shells (yellow highlights in [Fig. 8](#); see also [Fig. 9](#)) — constructed of timber and covered with lead — are tall and steep, assuming ever-so-slight bell-shaped profiles. They are surmounted by similar-shaped **ribbed lanterns** (green highlights in [Fig. 8](#);

see also Fig. 9). The outer shells served no structural function — purely ornamental, they were added to afford the structure a more striking appearance.

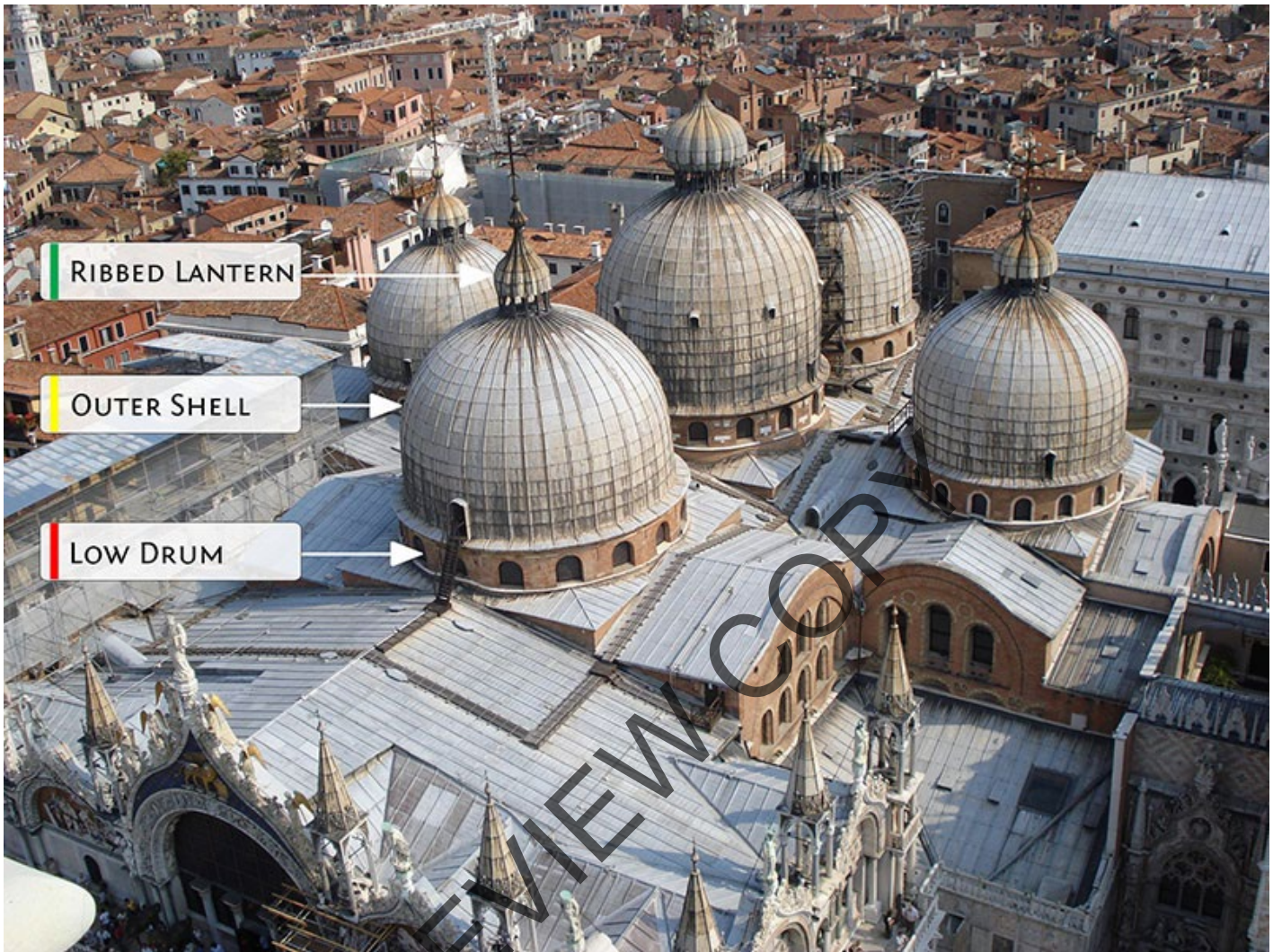


Fig. 9. Five domes, aerial view from bell tower.

## Islamic architectural influences

The **outer shells of St Mark's domes were not added until the 13th century**. Prior to that time, the domes' low lying profiles matched those of its Byzantine prototype. In fact, mosaic depictions on the interior of the church reveal this earlier profile (see Fig. 23 in the section entitled "Tour of the Interior - 2. South Transept").

By the 13th century, Venice had begun to look outward beyond Byzantium for its architectural and artistic inspiration (we will explore the reason for this in greater detail in the next section). Accordingly, the outer shells of the domes reveal **an entirely new source of inspiration: Islamic architecture**. In fact, they were likely inspired by vertical-sided domes built by the Fatimid empire in Cairo (Fig. 10), an increasingly important trading partner. St Mark's new dome exteriors reveal a shared vertical orientation; and perhaps even more striking, its lanterns have a similar ribbed appearance.

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## 2. South Transept

**Author tip:** The south transept holds some important mosaics, largely focused on Venetian lore related to the relics of St Mark. They are the best of the mosaic narratives dedicated to the basilica's great saint.

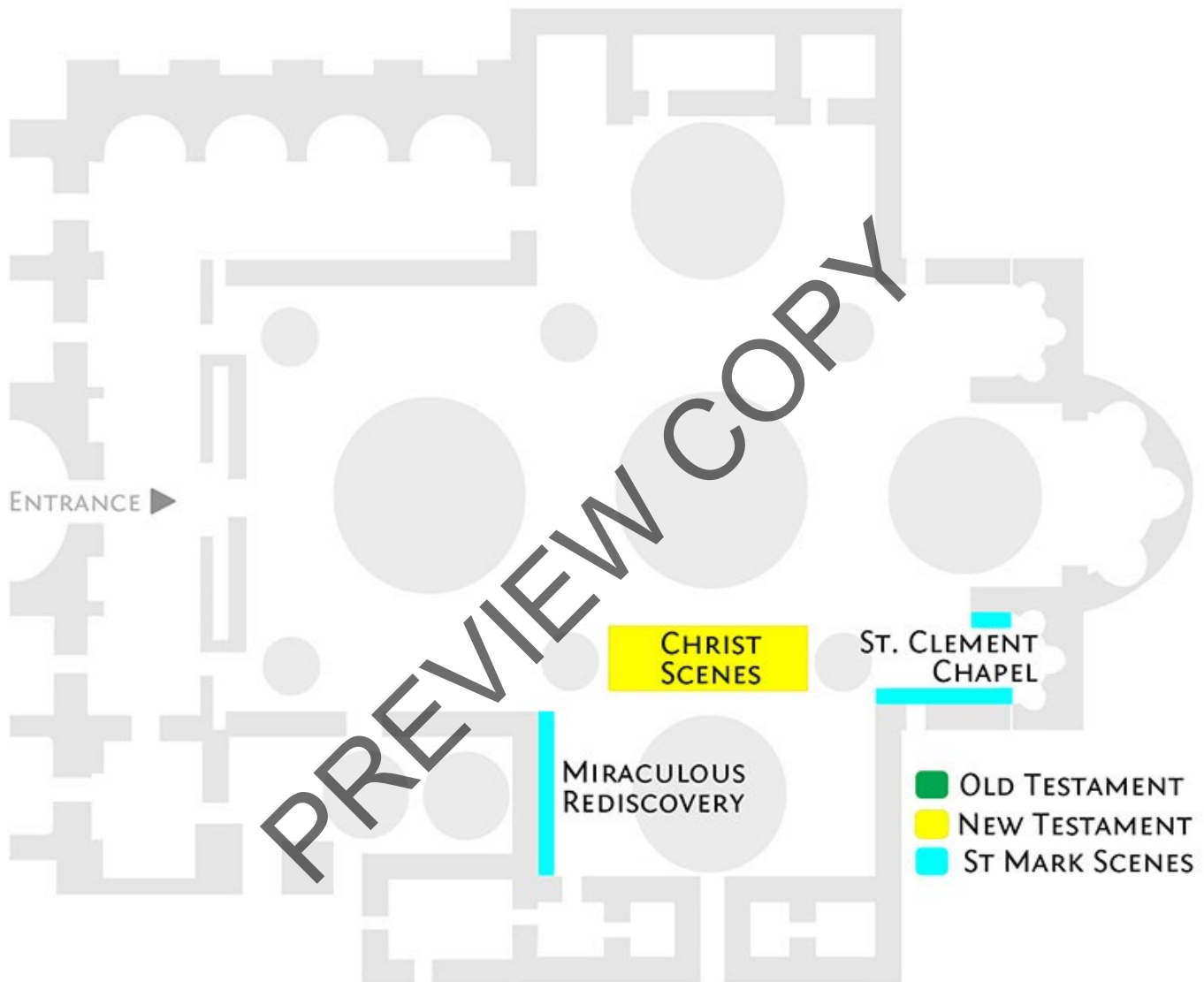


Fig. 22. Location of south transept area mosaics.

### Miraculous Rediscovery of the Body of St Mark

A highlight mosaic is located high up on the western (right) wall of the south transept (Fig. 22). It is noteworthy for its role in cultivating the Venetian “historical” narrative linking the relics of St Mark with the basilica.

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ST PETER



ST MARK



ST NICHOLAS



ST HERMAGORAS

Fig. 29. Early 12th century saints, central apse, under Pantocrator.

## The arrangement

The positioning of the figures subtly communicates their relative hierarchy: of all the figures, only Sts Mark and Nicholas look directly out at the viewer, signaling their elevated status as the saints most closely connected to Venice. But, as you'd expect, Mark is given the higher position of the two: he is the only figure that stands with both arms extended; further, both Sts Peter and Hermagoras turn toward him in deference.

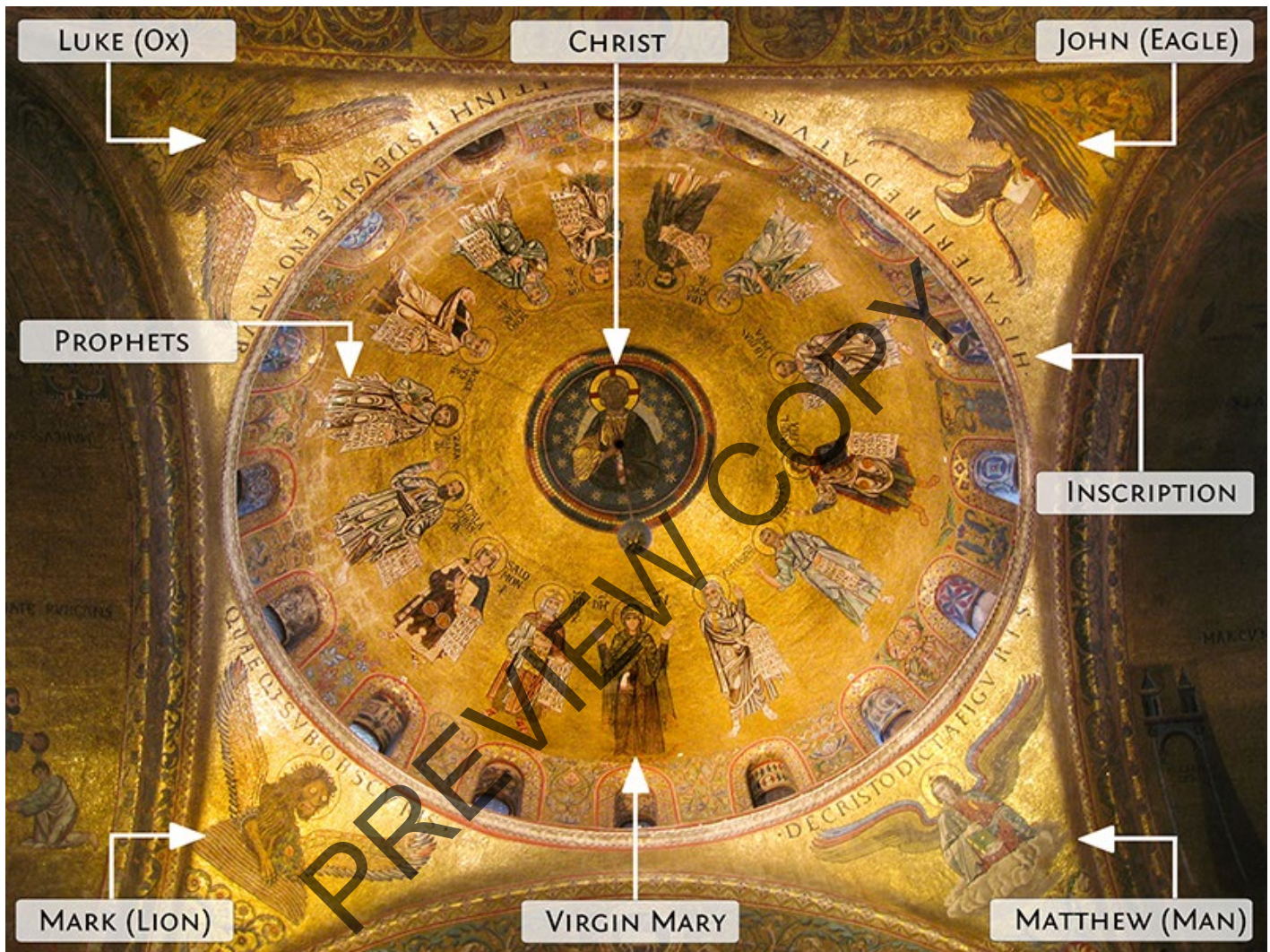


Fig. 30. Prophets dome.

## Prophets Dome

The Prophets dome, rising directly over the high altar at the center of the presbytery, holds mosaics dating largely from the **middle of the 12th century** (Fig. 30). As discussed in the “Mosaics Overview” section, this dome initiates the church’s primary ecclesiastical narrative with figures predicting the coming of Christ.

- **Christ** again occupies the center of the dome. He raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing and holds a scroll of gospels in his left. He is backed by a star-filled blue background that

is encircled by a rainbow (Fig. 30; close-up in Fig. 31). This figure was completely restored in 1506; accordingly, the style deviates from that of the original 12th century version, revealing greater naturalism and an altered color scheme.

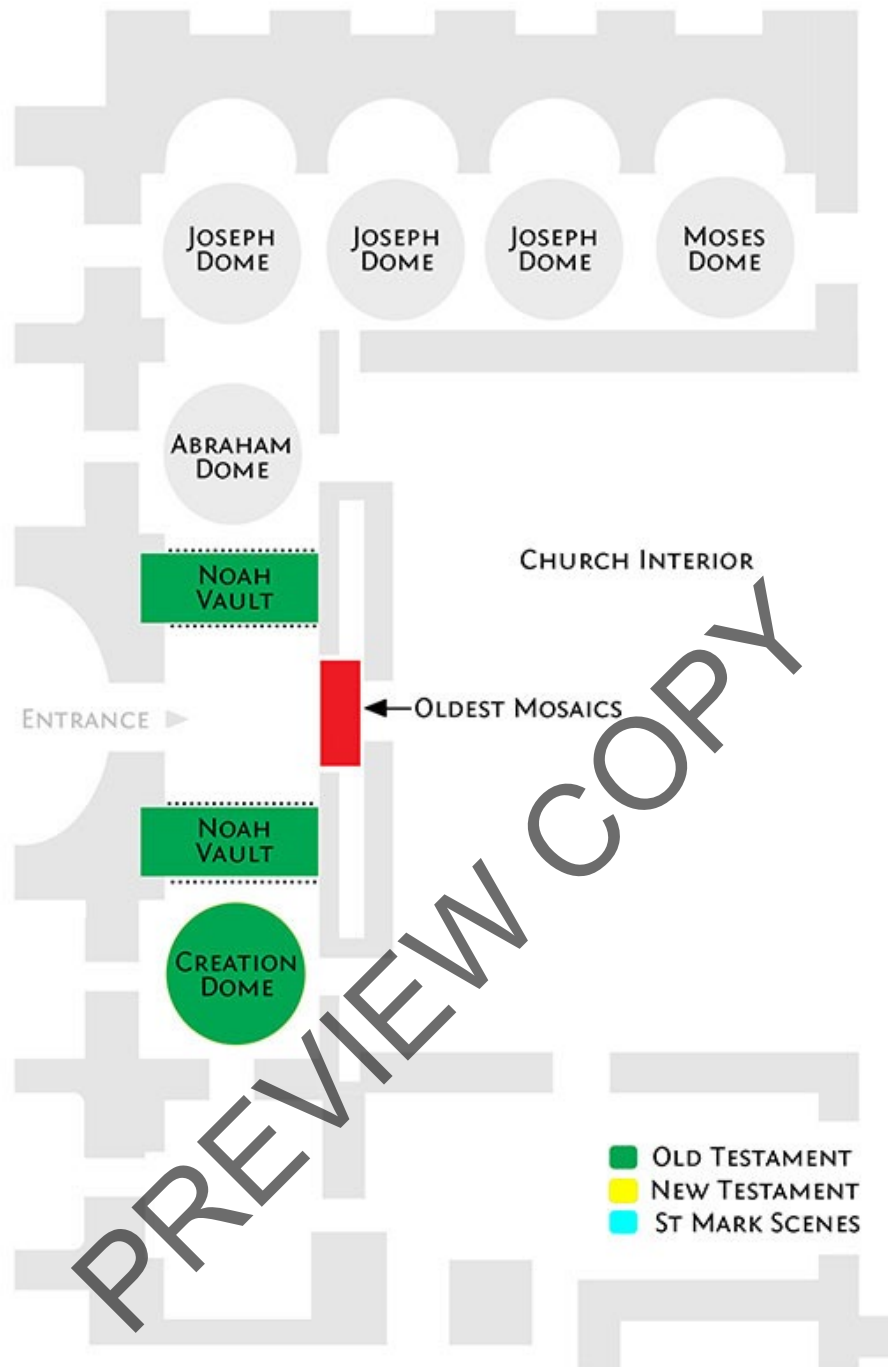
- Unlike his depiction as Pantocrator in the Ascension dome, Christ is revealed as the **messianic Immanuel**. His status as the Immanuel — the divine son of God who has yet to appear on earth, born of a virgin, suffer for humanity's sins and be resurrected — is visually communicated by his lack of a beard (Fig. 31).
- The **Virgin Mary** stands (Fig. 30) — arms raised in prayer in a gesture known as *orans* — on the eastern edge of the dome. In the dome, the Virgin — the window through which the divine Christ Immanuel will enter the world of the living — functions an intercessor by praying on behalf of the faithful. Consistent with the Byzantine tradition, her head is flanked by the Greek monogram MP ΘY: the first and last letters in the Greek words Μητηρ Θεου, meaning “Mother of God.” Further, her blue robes — signaling her human nature — hold gold crosses on the shoulders and veil/shawl (*maphorion*), symbolizing her three-fold perpetual virginity (*aeiparthenos*): before Jesus' birth, during the birth and after the birth. This is a critical piece of the puzzle: Mary's giving birth to Jesus was a miraculous event that defies earthly logic; it necessarily was not the result of intercourse with a man.
- Thirteen **prophets** stand side by side with the Virgin (Fig. 30). Each holds a scroll with prophecies alluding to the coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. To the right of the Virgin, Isaiah holds a scroll that reads: “Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son who shall be called Immanuel, God with us.”
- The pendentives supporting the dome hold the **four evangelists** in their symbolic forms (Fig. 30): Matthew (winged man), Mark (winged lion), Luke (winged ox) and John (eagle).



**Fig. 31.** Close-up of Christ Immanuel with no beard, Prophets dome.

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**Fig. 39.** Narthex, mosaics arrangement.

## Arrangement

The narthex's mosaic decoration is concentrated in six domed bays and the barrel vaults supporting them (Fig. 39). The best work is concentrated on the western portion, near the main entrance, the focus of our tour.

**Author tip:** As you move to the western narthex's southern end to view the Creation dome, you

will get yet another opportunity to study the 11th century mosaics over the main entrance door (red highlights in Fig. 39).

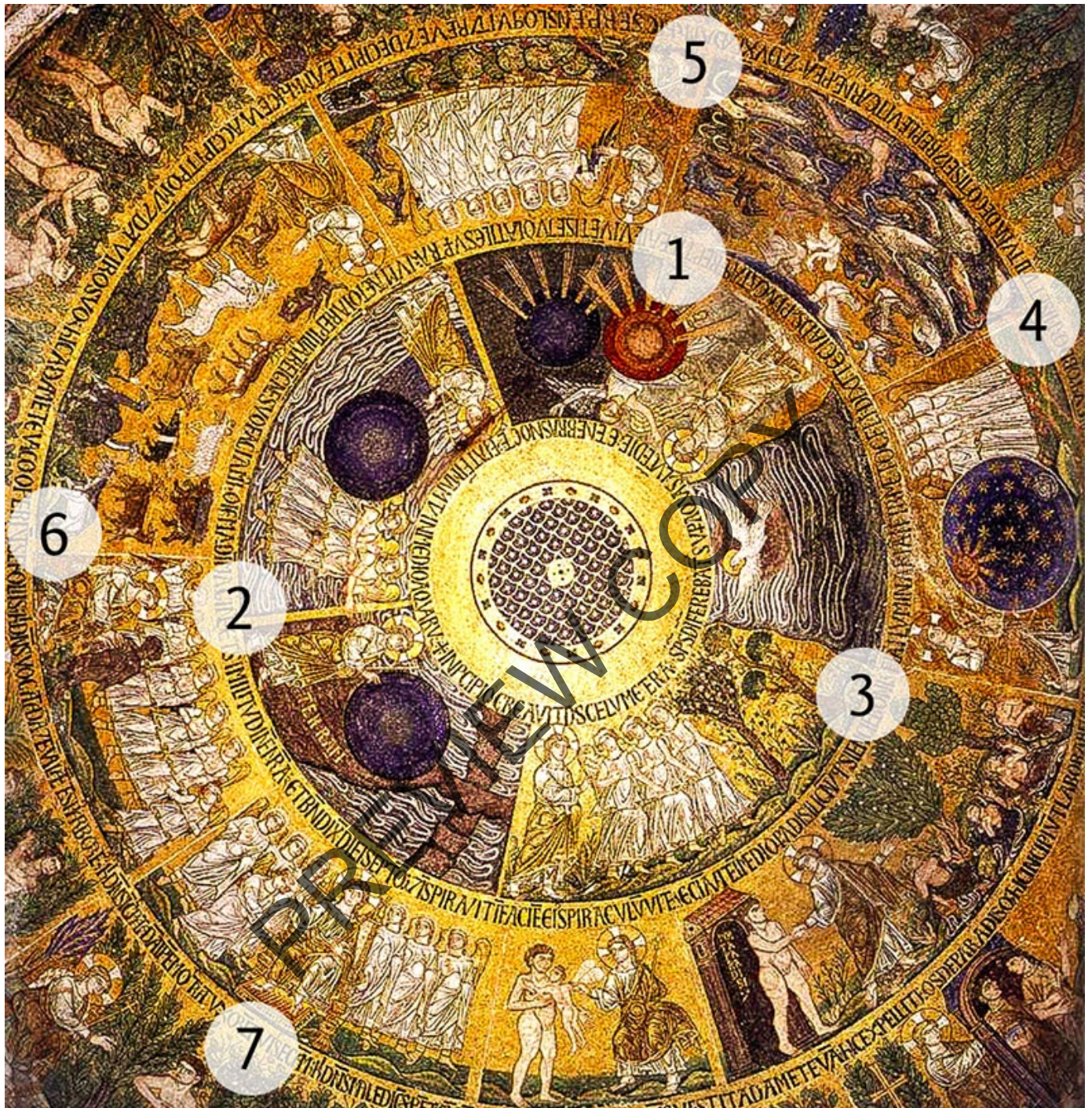


Fig. 40. 7 days of creation dome, narthex.

## Creation Dome

The dome on the south end of the narthex (green highlights in Fig. 39) contains scenes from the biblical history of creation, as described in Genesis 1:1-31 and 2:1-3.

- **The seven-day cycle** consists of the following creation events: day 1 (heavens, earth, light and darkness); day 2 (sky and water); day 3 (dry land, the seas and vegetation); day 4 (sun, moon and stars); day 5 (sea creatures and birds); day 6 (land animals and mankind); and day 7 (rest).
- Beginning in the center ring, the narrative proceeds **counterclockwise**, continuing outward to the outer ring. We marked the depictions for each day in **Fig. 40**.
- To similarly help viewers follow the seven-day progression, the original 13th century mosaicists thoughtfully used **the number of white-robed figures** in the scenes to signal the day represented (e.g., four figures equals day four).
- The narrative then continues with scenes related to **Adam and Eve**, concluding with their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.



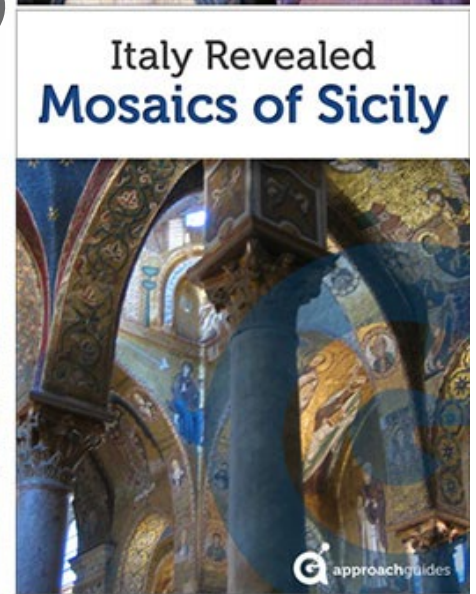
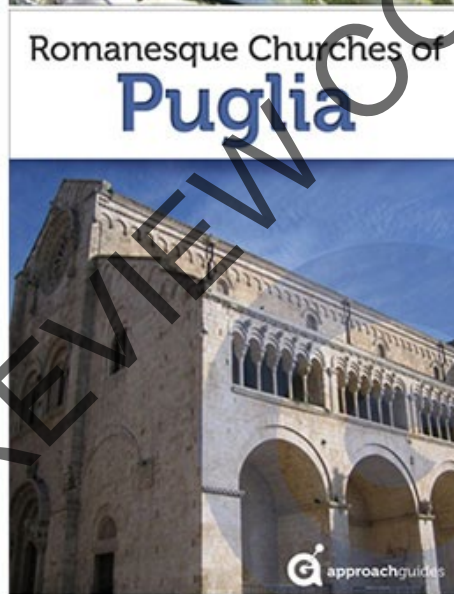
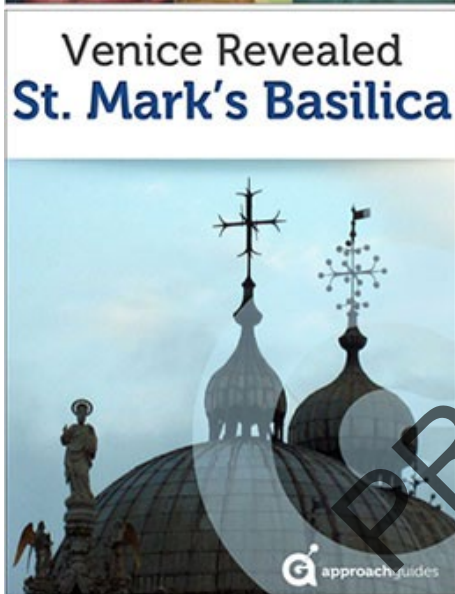
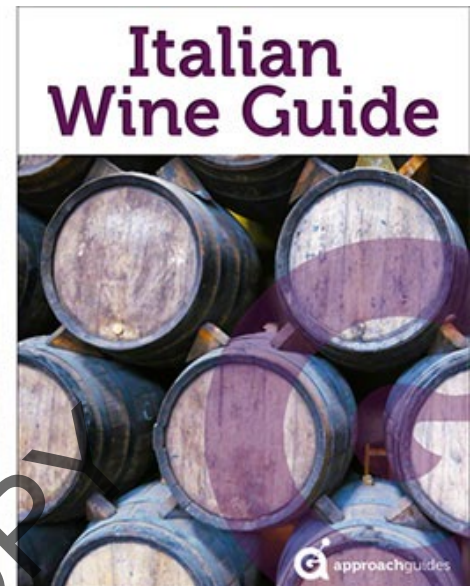
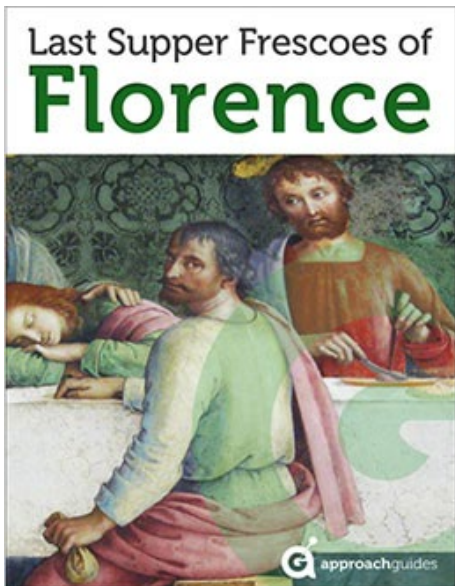
**Fig. 41.** Noah scenes from Genesis 9:20-29, north vault, narthex.

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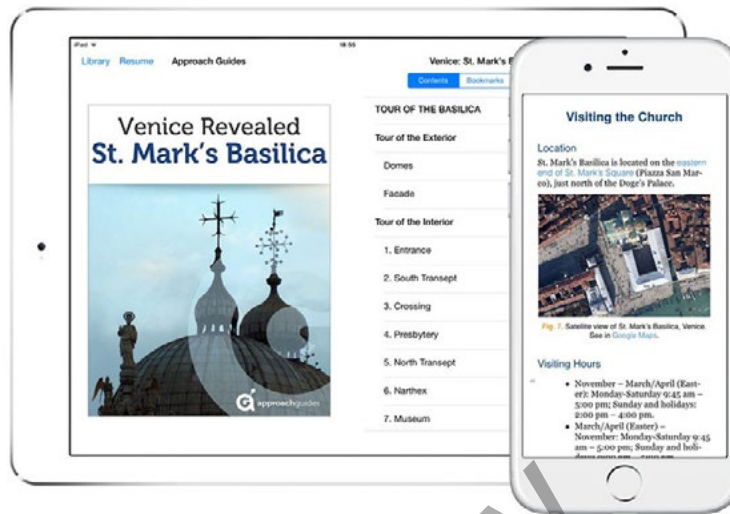
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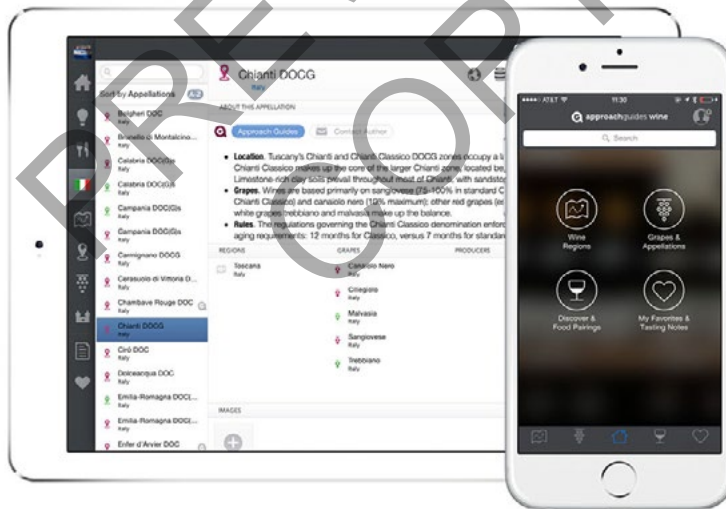
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