

Ciborium

A ciborium is a freestanding, columned structure, surmounted by a cupola or, less commonly, a pyramid, that protects and architecturally emphasizes an altar, tomb, or throne. It may be put up in the open or inside a building. The terms “ciborium” and “baldachin” are often used synonymously in English, but a baldachin was originally a fabric canopy hung over an altar or door and only later became an architectural term. Similarly *tabernacle* originally meant a tent covering the Hebrew ark of the covenant but later came to mean a small cubical structure housing the host in Roman Catholic churches.

Since the New Kingdom, the throne of Egyptian rulers stood under a ciborium, as can be seen from many pictorial representations (Erman and Ranke, 1923, 1981, p. 67). Similarly, the imperial throne of [Rome](#) was covered by a ciborium. Also many pagan Roman altars had ciboria over them (Klauser, 1957, Vol. 3, pp. 77f.).

In the Christian era the use of ciboria was widespread. They appear over the thrones of Western rulers (Corippus, 1836, pp. 191ff.) and bishops (Klauser, 1953, p. 18), altars, tombs, wells, and baptismal basins. In Egypt, remains of such ciboria in stone and wood have been found in several early [Christian churches](#) such as those in [Abu Mina](#) and Makhurah. All the older Cairo churches are furnished with altar ciboria of this kind, which confirms their use down to the present time. In those examples, the cupola is usually of wood, and it has the form of a sail vault (see below), the underside of which is often richly painted.

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PETER GROSSMANN

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