

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA – CHARLOTTE

THE LITERARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE
FOR THE BURIAL AND REMAINS OF ST. PETER

SUBMITTED TO DR. JAMES TABOR

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

RELS 6612

BY

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MAY 9, 2014

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INTRODUCTION

Few scholars today would doubt the historicity of the tradition that the apostle Peter suffered martyrdom in Rome. The exact year or the circumstances that surround the event remain unclear but the common presumption that the execution took place during Nero's retaliatory persecution of Christians blamed for the great fire of Rome in 64 C.E. remains tenable. Though knowledge of the precise date and proximate cause of Peter's death is not necessary in terms of this paper, the general manner of it, i.e. martyrdom, and the location in which his death and burial took place is.

0.1. The Life and Death of Peter in Rome

Ancient tradition holds that Peter was crucified in Rome, in or near the circus of Nero, upside down. The literary sources for these bits of information are scattered. The earliest indication that Peter came to an untimely end in Rome may be found in the letter of the Roman presbyter Clement who, in his missive to the Corinthian church (ca. 96 C.E.), wrote that "there is Peter, who because of unjust jealousy bore up under the hardships not just once or twice, but many times; and having thus borne his witness (*martyrēsas*) he went to the place of glory that he deserved" (1 Clement 5:4). One is left to infer that the "witness" Peter bore was in fact execution and that it took place in Rome, the home of Clement. As to the manner of Peter's demise, the Gospel of John (ca. 100 C.E.) may hint at crucifixion when Jesus says to Peter, "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not

wish to go” (John 21:18). Again, the passage must be interpreted but many believe the act of “stretching out the hands” is a technical term for crucifixion.¹

The writer of the letter attributed to Peter in the New Testament (late first century C.E.) refers to “she who is in Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13). “She” may indicate Peter’s wife, or the Christian community, or someone else entirely.² However, Babylon is nearly universally accepted as a cypher for Rome. The Biblical book of Revelation (ca. 90 C.E.) makes this identification equating Babylon with the city of “seven mountains” and “seven kings.”³ Clement of Alexandria (150-215 C.E.) certainly understood Babylon to be Rome (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.15.2). Less equivocal statements come from later in the second century. Dionysius of Corinth (ca. 171), as quoted by Eusebius, wrote that Peter and Paul “both came to our Corinth and planted us, and taught alike; and alike going to Italy and teaching there, were martyred at the same time” (Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26).⁴

The tradition that Nero was the instigator of Peter’s execution may be found in the second-century *Ascension of Isaiah* which uses the code name “Beliar” for the “king of this world . . . a slayer of his mother, who himself (even) this king will persecute the plant which the

¹ As does Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29-29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 2:1118: “In [verse] 19 it is clear that the redactor knows that Peter has died a martyr’s death and perhaps even that Peter was crucified on Vatican Hill.” Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962; repr. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 88, writes that the Greek expression “stretching out of the hands” makes an indication to execution by crucifixion “quite likely.” Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R.W.N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 713, however finds in the verse a reflection of the proverb: “In youth a man is free to go where he will; in old age a man must let himself be taken where he does not will” and thus is not related to crucifixion. Jonathan Hall, *Artifact and Artifice: Classical Archaeology and the Ancient Historian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 196, questions the temporal series of events: Peter’s hands are first stretched and *then* he is girded and taken elsewhere. Donald Fay Robinson, “Where and When Did Peter Die?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64 (1945): 258, argues that “stretching out” could refer to being manacled.

² Hall, 196.

³ Revelation 17:5, 9-10. Rome was widely known in antiquity as having been built on “seven hills.” The seven kings are Roman emperors whose identities vary depending on where the count begins.

⁴ Robinson, 259, believes Dionysius is completely dependent on Clement.

Twelve Apostles of the Beloved have planted; and one of the twelve will be delivered into his hand” (*Ascension of Isaiah* 4:2-3).⁵ The second-century *Acts of Peter* overtly blames Nero and gives the first indication of Peter’s mode of martyrdom.⁶ The apostle requests that the executioners “crucify me head-downwards – in this way and no other” (*Acts of Peter* 37).⁷

A tradition regarding the disposition of Peter’s lifeless body appears first in the *Acts*. The converted Marcellus, apparently a Roman senator,

without taking anyone’s advice, since it was not allowed . . . took him down from the cross with his own hands and washed him in milk and wine; and he ground up seven pounds of mastic, and also fifty pounds of myrrh and aloe and spice and embalmed his body, and filled a trough of stone of great value with Attic honey and laid it in his own burial-vault (*Acts of Peter* 40).⁸

Allusions in this passage to the fate of Jesus’s body following his crucifixion are notable.

Nevertheless, both Jewish and pagan burial procedures involved a washing and, if possible, an anointing and perfuming of the corpse.

By the late second century, it was presumed that both Peter and Paul were among the earliest, if not the original, missionaries to the Christian community at Rome. Irenaeus (d. 202 C.E.) wrote that “Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the

⁵ Translation by Detlef G. Müller, *NTA* 2:609. Nero murdered his mother, Agrippina, in 59 C.E. The “plant” then is Peter, one of the Twelve.

⁶ The *Acts of Peter* is available in a sixth or seventh-century Latin manuscript called the *Actus Vercellenses* (from Codex Vercellenses CLVIII). The Latin translation may originate from the third or fourth century. Greek texts of the martyrdom are available in several manuscripts from the Middle Ages. There is a papyrus fragment (pap. Oxyrhynchus VI, 0849) from ca. 325 C.E.

⁷ Translation by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *NTA* 2:315. Seneca (ca. 4-65 C.E.), *To Marcia on Consolation*, 20.1-3, refers to this type of crucifixion: “Yonder I see instruments of torture, not indeed of a single kind, but differently contrived by different peoples; some hang their victims with head toward the ground, some impale their private parts, others stretch out their arms on a fork-shaped gibbet.” Lucius Annasus Seneca. *Moral Essays* (Basore, LCL). Cited 2 March 2014. Online: http://www.stoics.com/seneca_essays_book_2.html.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:316.

Church” (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1).⁹ Irenaeus’s contemporary, Tertullian (160-225 C.E.) knows the tradition of Peter’s crucifixion: “How happy is [Rome’s] church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood; where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 36)¹⁰ and again, “We read the lives of the Caesars: At Rome Nero was the first who stained with blood the rising faith. Then is Peter girt by another, when he is made fast to the cross” (*Antidote to the Scorpion’s Bite* 15).¹¹ The phrase “girt by another” is apparently an echo of John 21. Another second-century contemporary, Origen (184-254 C.E.), who visited Rome ca. 211-212 C.E., says that “Peter seems to have preached to the Jews of the Dispersion in Pontus and Galatia and Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia, and at the end he came to Rome and was crucified head downwards, for so he had demanded to suffer” (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1.2).¹² Origen may simply be repeating what he was told, what *seems* to have happened, and thus has no direct knowledge. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that these second- and third-century writers are drawing on traditions already recorded in the *Acts of Peter* with, perhaps, some independent knowledge of the apostle’s earlier presence in Rome.

0.2. The *Tropaion* of Gaius

Nevertheless, not all the information from this time period is derived from apocryphal accounts. Gaius, a presbyter and resident of Rome, wrote against Proclus, a Phrygian. Hierapolis in Phrygia could boast of being the location of the tombs of the evangelist Philip and his four prophetess daughters. Gaius responded that “I can point out the trophies (*tropaia*) of the

⁹ Translation by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, *ANF* 1:414.

¹⁰ Translation by Peter Holmes, *ANF* 3:260.

¹¹ Translation by S. Thelwall, *ANF* 3:633. Tertullian is the first to explicitly connect Peter’s death with Nero.

¹² Translation by Kirsopp Lake, *LCL* 1:191.

Apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way you will find the trophies (*tropaia*) of those who founded this Church” (Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25.7).¹³ There has been much discussion over the meaning of the Greek *tropaia*¹⁴ but most scholars acknowledge that Gaius is referring to monuments marking either Peter’s and Paul’s tombs, their places of martyrdom, or both. Where exactly on the Vatican Hill was the *tropaion* of Peter?

The fifth-century *Martyrium Petri* (“Martyrdom of the Blessed Apostle Peter by pseudo-Linus”),¹⁵ a Roman revision of the second-century *Acts*, adds a number of details including that the execution occurred “at the place which is called the Naumachia, near to the obelisk of Nero, on the mount, for there was his cross placed” (*Martyrium Petri* 10).¹⁶ The Naumachia was a large water tank built for spectacles that involved naval battles. Its location is only theorized – no remains have yet been discovered. The obelisk refers to the monolith brought from Egypt by Gaius Caligula for the circus.¹⁷ Unfortunately, the text of the *Martyrium* post-dates the erection of the fourth-century Petrine basilica on Vatican Hill so its value as pre-Constantinian evidence is suspect.

¹³ Translation by Lake, *LCL* 1:183 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Especially by Friedrich Lammert, “τρόπαιον,” *Real Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Second Series, Vol. VII (Neue Bearbeitung), Part I (1939), 663-73; and Christine Mohrmann, “A propos de deux Mots controversies de la Latinité chrétienne-tropaeum-nomen,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, VIII (1954), 154-73. Both cited and summarized in Daniel Wm. O’Connor, *Peter in Rome: The Literary, Liturgical, and Archaeological Evidence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 97-99.

¹⁵ In Latin, the *Martyrium beati Petri apostoli a Lino conscriptum*. See *NTA* 2:436-7.

¹⁶ Translated by Andrew Eastbourne. Online: http://archive.org/stream/ActsOfPseudo-linus/Ps-Linus_djvu.txt. Cited 15 February 2014.

¹⁷ Pliny (ca. 23-79 C.E.), *Natural History* 36.15.11, wrote that “the third obelisk at Rome is in the Vaticanian Circus, which was constructed by the Emperors Caius and Nero; this being the only one of them all that has been broken in the carriage. Nuncoreus, the son of Sesoses, made it: and there remains another by him, one hundred cubits in height, which, by order of an oracle, he consecrated to the Sun, after having lost his sight and recovered it.” John Bostock and H. T. Riley, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855). Cited 2 March 2014. Online: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D36%3Achapter%3D15>. The obelisk may now stand in the Piazza San Pietro in Rome. See Hall, 194 n. 37.

In his indictment *Against the Galileans*, i.e. Christians, the emperor Julian (361-3 C.E.) wrote of an earlier time when Christianity began infesting Rome, when “even the tombs of Peter and Paul were being worshipped – secretly, it is true” (Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Julian* 1.130-131). This secret Christian worship at the tomb of Peter may be associated with the tropaion of Gaius. Shortly before Julian, Eusebius noted how “Simon who was called Cephas . . . should be more celebrated among the Romans . . . so that he should be considered worthy of an honorable sepulchre in the very front of their city; and, that great multitudes of the Roman Empire should run to it, as to a great asylum and temple of God” (*Divine Manifestation* 4.7).¹⁸ Though Eusebius’s writing post-dates the Constantinian basilica at the Vatican, Bowersock has plausibly argued that time and distance would have prevented him knowing of it at the time he wrote.¹⁹ He may, in fact, be referring to the tropaion lauded by Gaius. The Syriac *Preaching of Simon Cephas in the City of Rome* seems to know of this monument:

When therefore Cæsar had given orders that Simon should be crucified with his head downwards, as he had himself requested of Cæsar . . . there was great commotion among the people, and bitter grief in all the Church, because they had been deprived of the sight of the apostles. And Isus [Linus, successor to Peter] the Guide arose and took up their bodies by night, and buried them with great honor, and there came to be a gathering-place there for many” (*Preaching of Simon Cephas in the City of Rome* 40.19-26).

The *Preaching* has not been reliably dated. It is virtually certain, however, that the tropaion of Gaius has been discovered beneath the high altar of St. Peter’s Basilica on Vatican Hill.

Archaeological excavations in the 1940s and 1950s uncovered not only the tropaion but an entire necropolis dating at least to the second century C.E. constructed over graves dating to the first.

¹⁸ Translated by Samuel Lee, *The Theophania or Divine Manifestation of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843), n.p. Online: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_theophania_05book4.htm. Cited 15 February 2014.

¹⁹ Glen W. Bowersock, “Peter and Constantine.” in *St. Peter’s in the Vatican* (ed. William Tronzo; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

Before proceeding with an account of those discoveries, a brief history of the basilica will help explain how and why the tropaion “disappeared” in the first place.

1. ST. PETER'S BASILICA AND VATICAN HILL

The present basilica of St. Peter's is a product of the Renaissance, a virtual replacement of the Old St. Peter's originally commissioned by Constantine in the early fourth century.²⁰ Its period of construction extended from about 1503 through 1630. Architect Donato Bramante began the process of levelling, one might say with free abandon, nearly the entire basilica which had by then become a ruin.²¹ His work was continued by a succession of architects including Giovanni Gioncondo, Raphael, Michaelangelo, Barozzi, and Della Porta.

Fortunately, twentieth-century archaeology has now revealed the purposeful design of Constantine's basilica as well as clarified the successive stages of its renovations prior to Bramante. While the specific discoveries will be explained in detail below, it seems clear now how the original monument to Peter's death came to be forgotten. It was literally buried by a succession of popes each trying to outdo the other by creating an ever more elaborate altar over a monument dedicated to a simple fisherman.

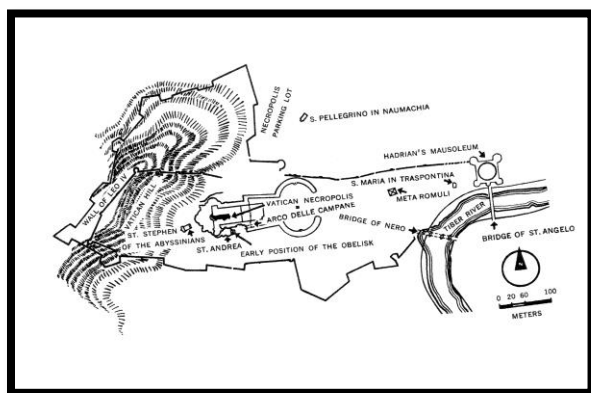
²⁰ Debated by Bowersock, 11, who prefers to assign the work to the emperor Constans (337-350). According to most scholars, construction at least began during Constantine's reign. The *Liber Pontificalis* indicates that the basilica was built with donations from eastern portions of the empire that would not have accrued to the emperor until September 324. A dedicatory inscription in the basilica identifies Constantine as *victor*, a title he only used after 323-4. A law passed by Constans dated 28 March 349 which prohibited the removal of parts of tombs, was made retroactive to 333 possibly indicating the date of construction which involved the desecration of tombs over which the basilica was built (see below). Others believe that 333 marks the date of completion of the work while some contend it was not begun until the second half of Constantine's reign and completed by one of his sons. For all this see the discussions in Cullmann, 141; Bowersock, 8-11; John R. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 111; and James Lees-Milne, *Saint Peter's: The Story of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 64.

²¹ Lees-Milne, 142, suggests Bramante was advanced in years and anxious to get the job done: "He was in such turmoil . . . that he respected nothing inside the old basilica."

1.1 The Landscape

In terms of site planning, Constantine chose a wholly unsuitable location upon which to build a basilica honoring the chief apostle. Rural and poor, the area had nothing to commend it.

“Vaticanum” was the fourteenth and last urban zone designated by Caesar Augustus and lay



outside the city walls.²² Its lowland plain along the Tiber River was swampy but rose in the west to “meet an arc of hills extending from Monte Mario in the north to the Gianicolo (Janiculum hill) in the south.”²³ The region was notorious for mosquitoes, malaria, snakes and bad-tasting wine.²⁴ Agrippina, the mother of

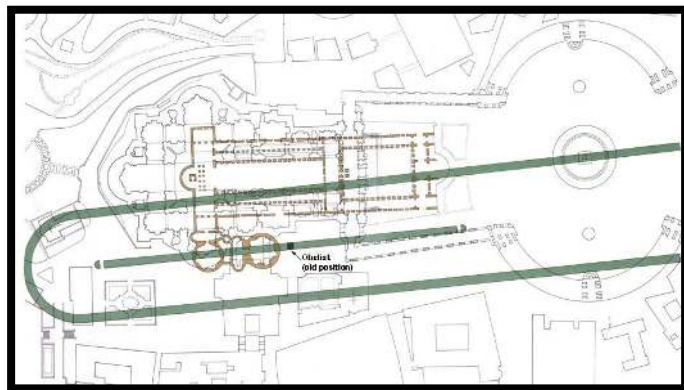
Caligula, attempted to improve the area by draining the swampy terrain and erecting terraced gardens. These gardens of the Domitii were inherited by Caligula who constructed a circus there.²⁵ He had an obelisk brought from Egypt which he installed on the *spina* (the dividing wall)

²² “Vaticanus” probably derives from the fertility rites practiced in honor of the Phrygian goddess Cybele. They were performed *ex vaticinatione archigalli*, that is, according to the prophecies of her high priest. See Lees-Milne, 64.

²³ Hall, 189.

²⁴ Tacitus (ca. 56-117 C.E.), *The Histories* 2.93: “Finally, with no regard even for their very lives, a large proportion camped in the unhealthy districts of the Vatican, which resulted in many deaths among the common soldiery; and the Tiber being close by, the inability of the Gauls and Germans to bear the heat and the consequent greed with which they drank from the stream weakened their bodies, which were already an easy prey to disease” Moore, LCL. Cited 3 March 2014. Online: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/2B*.html. Martial (ca. 40-102/4 C.E.), *Epigrams: To Ammianus, Drinking Bad Wine* 6.92: “By the serpent which the art of Myron has graven on your cup, Ammianus, it is indicated that, in drinking Vatican wine, you drink poison.” Bohn’s Classical Library. Cited 3 March 2014. Online: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book06.htm 2008.

²⁵ The *circus Gai et Neronis*. No remains of the circus have yet been found. This may be because its construction materials consisted of earthen berms and wooden seats. O’Connor, 164, suggests the circus may only have existed as a memory by the fourth century. Hall, 189, believes it was located just to the south of St. Peter’s.



of his circus in the center of the oval racecourse. But Constantine faced obstructions at least as serious as the local terrain, however.

On the south side of one of the main streets, probably the Via

Cornelia,²⁶ across from the circus running up the Vatican Hill, was a double row of mausoleums at just the spot Constantine chose for his basilica.²⁷ The desecration of graves involved serious ethical and moral considerations. Romans did not easily condone the disturbance of the dead; capital punishment could result from doing so. None but an emperor could attempt it.

There is no point in hyperbolizing the damage inflicted on property interests and on social and religious sentiment by the cropping and burying of the necropolis, or the magnitude of the cutting and filling required to establish a level field on the hillside.²⁸

Constantine's builders were not instructed to move the graves but to level the tombs at the highest point of his church's footprint.²⁹ Tombs further down the hill might have escaped with only their tops sheared off in order to accommodate the platform that stretched out eastward, kept level by two rows of massive piers up to 35 feet in height sunk into the bedrock. At the lowest levels, the tombs beneath the structure remained unaltered but were nevertheless

²⁶ The main Vatican streets were the Via Cornelia, Via Aurelia, and the Via Triumphalis. No remains of any highway were discovered beneath St. Peter's. See O'Connor, 161.

²⁷ Vatican Hill began to be used as a burial ground in the late first century; the mausoleums date from about the middle of the second century. See Hjalmar Torp, "Recent Excavations Under St. Peter's Basilica in Rome," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 20 (1952): 29.

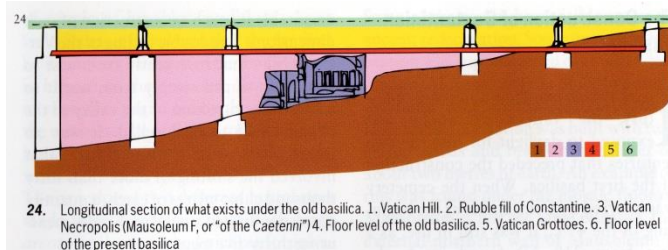
²⁸ Edgar R. Smothers, "The Excavations Under Saint Peter's," *Theological Studies* 17 (1956): 306.

²⁹ Adriano Prandi (*La zona archeologica della Confessione Vaticana. I Monumenti del II secolo*, Vatican City, 1957) suggested that pagan burials continued during construction. Cited by Curran, 110.



completely buried, as they all were, by nearly 40,000 cubic meters of dirt and rock carved out from higher up the hill.³⁰ This earthen fill mixed with debris from the destruction of the mausoleums helped create the foundation for the raised surface

of the floor of the basilica. Concrete retaining walls faced with brick and stone were built to surround this fill removing any tell-tale signs of the pagan burial grounds. One monument at the top of the hill was not leveled however and answers the question of why Constantine went to this much trouble when there was available flatland nearby on which to build.

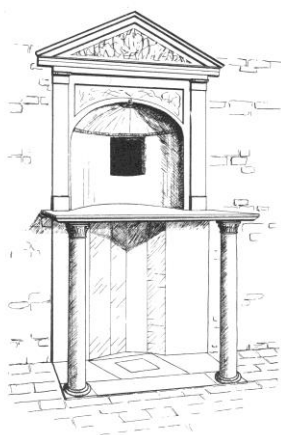


³⁰ Roger T. O'Callaghan, "Recent Excavations Underneath the Vatican Crypts," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 12 (1949): 20. John Evangelist Walsh, *The Bones of St. Peter: The First Full Account of the Search for the Apostle's Body* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 2011, repr. New York: Doubleday, 1982), 29, claims one million cubic feet of earth was removed

1.2 Honoring the tropaion

Left to stand at the level of the pavement, the focal point of the new basilica, was an aedicular monument built in Peter's honor that had stood on that spot for untold decades and was fervently

A column of the shrine above Peter's grave remains in its original position *left*. A conjectural reconstruction of the appearance of the shrine *right*



believed to mark the place of the apostle's burial. The emperor could build nowhere else. He was convinced it was the tropaion of Gaius, a simple monument built into a brick wall consisting of two niches, one above the other, separated by a horizontal travertine slab supported by columns.

Another travertine slab with a hole cut into it formed the base.

To honor the tropaion, Constantine ordered it encased in marble and brick. The new



memorial included pilasters made of porphyry with a canopy, or *ciborium*, on four columns. Inside, pilgrims could access the hole in the base through which they dropped pieces of cloth or money down into what was believed to be Peter's actual grave in order to receive blessings.

There was apparently no altar installed in the basilica until the late sixth century.³¹ Nevertheless, it was the largest building constructed by the emperor in Rome and the only one in the shape of a cross.³² Over the monument, Constantine may have erected a golden cross.³³ The *Liber*

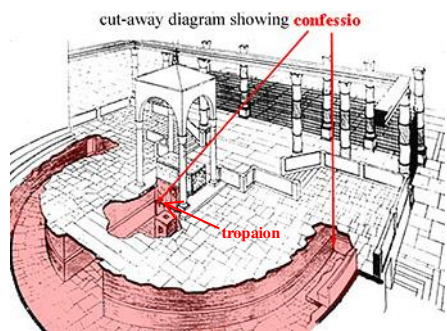
³¹ Hall, 192.

³² Curran, 109.

Pontificalis, or “Book of the Popes,” a seventh-century combination of history, tradition, and legend, says that the remains of the apostle were placed in a bronze coffin as well.³⁴

1.3 Renovations and Alterations

Almost three centuries later, Pope Gregory, called the Great (590-604 C.E.), decided to add a high altar in the basilica. To accomplish this, he raised the level of the chancel, or space



surrounding the altar, four-and-a-half feet both at the rear and immediately above the encased tropaion, leaving it buried underneath the new altar placed over it. The entrance to the little monument was screened by six new columns.³⁵

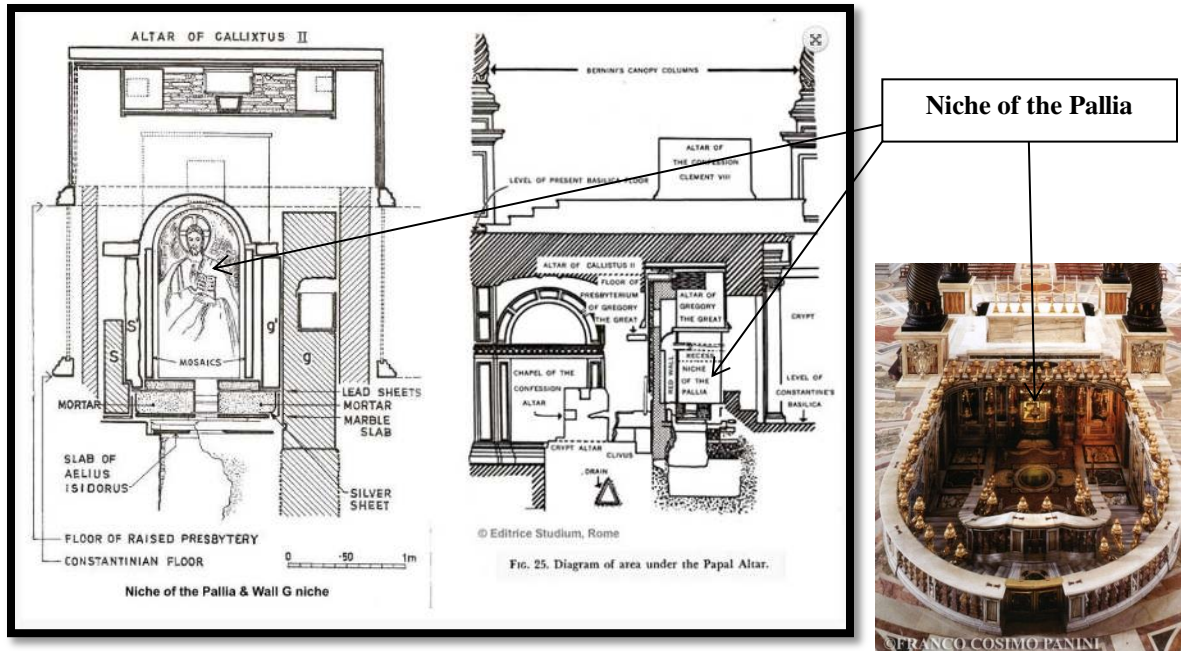
One tall, decorated niche was placed into the lower niche of the tropaion; it was called the Niche of the Pallia.³⁶ Newly created behind the tropaion, and underneath the chancel, was the covered Chapel of Clement. In the 8th century, Gregory III (731-41 C.E.) replaced the ciborium built by his predecessor.

³³ Curran, 114.

³⁴ *Liber Pontificalis* XXXIV, Sylvester: “At the same time Constantine Augustus built [by request of Silvester, the bishop] the basilica of blessed Peter, the apostle, in the shrine of Apollo (?), and laid there the coffin with the body of the holy Peter; the coffin itself he enclosed on all sides with bronze, which is unchangeable: at the head 5 feet, at the feet 5 feet, at the right side 5 feet, at the left side 5 feet, underneath 5 feet and overhead 5 feet: thus he enclosed the body of blessed Peter, the apostle, and laid it away. And above he set porphyry columns for adornment and other spiral columns which he brought from Greece. He made also a vaulted roof in the basilica, gleaming with polished gold, and over the body of the blessed Peter, above the bronze which enclosed it, he set a cross of purest gold, weighing 150 lbs., in place of a measure (?), and upon it were inscribed these words: ‘Constantine Augustus and Helena Augustus this House Shining with like Royal Splendor a Court Surrounds,’ inscribed in clear, enameled letters upon the cross.” Louise Ropes Loomis, *The Book of the Popes (Liber Pontificalis)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916). Cited 16 February 2014. Online: <https://archive.org/details/bookofpopesliber00loom>.

³⁵ This created a kind of primitive confessio, normally a crypt consisting of a series of linked passages. See Lees-Milne, 81.

³⁶ “Pallia” refers to the markings – six purple crosses, pendants on front and back – that appear on the vestments worn by bishops. Traditionally these vestments were stored in the Pallia Niche prior to their bestowal



A hundred years later, invading Saracens (Muslim Arabs) attacked the basilica and smashed the lower part of the trochileum destroying the right side of the travertine ledge separating the two niches.³⁷ They apparently forced their way to the space below the floor slab and robbed the grave below, “almost certainly desecrating, if not dispersing the saint’s remains.”³⁸

The next major renovation to the high altar was initiated by Pope Callixtus (or Callistus) II (1119-24 C.E.). He chose to reconstruct the altar fashioned by Gregory the Great by surrounding it with white marble. Sixtus IV (1471-84 C.E.) constructed a new ciborium incorporating the columns of those of Callixtus. It was this configuration that would remain until the great reconstruction begun by Pope Julius II (1503-13 C.E.).

During most of the Renaissance construction, the chancel and confessio were protected by a temporary structure. This was later removed by Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85 C.E.) who

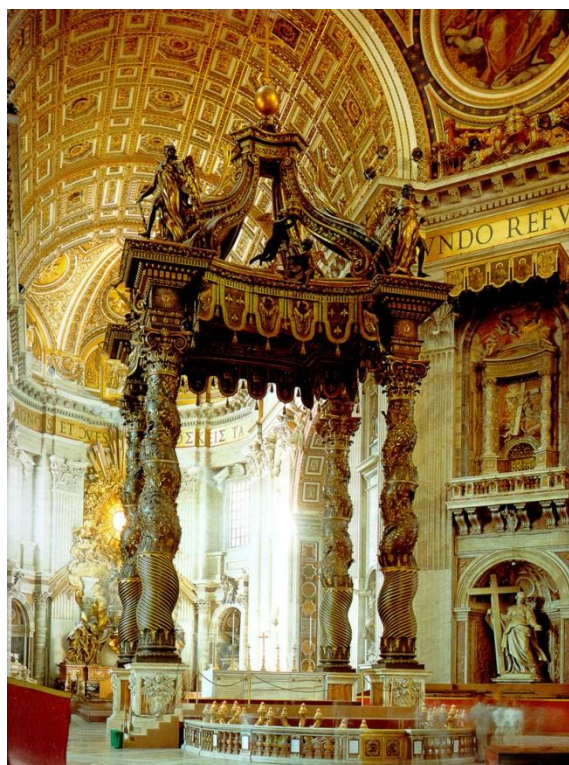
upon newly inaugurated (arch)bishops. Lees-Milne, 82, notes how the axis of the Niche alters that of the original aedicula monument by $4\frac{3}{4}''$ to the south.

³⁷ Lees-Milne, 113.

³⁸ Ibid. This cannot be proven.

ordered his chief architect Della Porta to create a new altar raised above that of Callixtus by no less than seven steps, approximately eight feet. Part of Constantine's original covering for the trophaion was cut off in the process. In 1594, as recorded by Torrigio, workmen accidentally cracked the foundation floor surrounding the high altar. Through it, the new pope Clement VIII (1592-1605 C.E.) and others claimed to see an altar older than that of Callixtus and a golden cross once supposedly placed on Peter's coffin in the fourth century (see above). Clement ordered the crack sealed up, not to be disturbed again.³⁹

It was in 1615, while installing support pillars for the new Confessio that workers discovered that the original fourth-century church of Constantine had been constructed over the remains of a pagan cemetery. These tombs were encountered again in 1626 when the foundations were laid for the four columns of Bernini's *baldachino*.



235. Fabbrica di San Pietro, model of the "Trophy of Gaius" built above Peter's tomb in the middle of the 2nd c. On the right: the Graffiti Wall built in the middle of the 3rd c. while the northern column of the Trophy was moved toward the centre. Shown in clear plastic are the bases of the baldachino of Bernini
 236-237. Fabbrica di San Pietro, model of the "Constantinian Memorial", view from the front and from the back. This monument encased the tomb of Peter, the aedicule from the 2nd c. and the "Graffiti Wall" with its cavity. It was some 2.75 m wide, 1.50 m deep, and some 3 m high. It was surmounted by an exceptionally elegant pergola represented on the Samagher ivory chest
 238. Fabbrica di San Pietro, model of the raised presbytery with the altar of Pope Pelagius II (579-590) or of Gregory the Great (590-604). Later it was encased in another altar of Pope Callixtus II, that was 1.35 m high, 2.70 m wide, and 1.65 m deep. It was consecrated on March 25, 1123
 239-240. Fabbrica di San Pietro, model of the "Confession of St. Peter", view from the front and from the back. The present-day papal altar (1.23 m high, 4.35 m wide, 2 m deep) was consecrated by Pope Clement VIII on June 26, 1594. To the left, the Niche of the Palla in the Vatican Confession; to the right: the "Constantinian Memorial" from the Clarentine Chapel

³⁹ Lees-Milne, 225, considers this "an unlikely story."

2. THE GROTTOS

The numerous renovations made to the basilica of Constantine created a space between the raised floors and the original floor of Constantine's church. Within was formed the so-called Grottoes, a semi-circular region beneath the high altar and central aisle not more than eight to ten feet in height. Interspersed throughout the Grottoes are the supporting pillars and connecting arches that support the modern structure. Within are buried such luminaries as the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II of Germany (955-983 C.E.), the English pope Hadrian IV (1100-1159 C.E.), and Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689 C.E.), who abdicated the throne after converting to Catholicism.⁴⁰

In 1939, Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) decided to enlarge the grottoes to make room for a chapel dedicated to his predecessor, Pius XI (1857-1939). Workmen were instructed to dig beneath the Constantinian floor to a depth of from two to three feet in order to increase the available headroom.⁴¹ Once they had pried loose the marble flooring and began digging they immediately encountered the outlines of the tops of brick walls. As soon as the digging began to expose a series of pagan tombs beneath the basilica, work was halted and a team of professional excavators was assigned to carry the project forward.

⁴⁰ Only three other women are buried in the Grottoes: Queen Charlotte of Cyprus (1444-1487), Agnesina Colonna Caetani (d. 1578), wife of the general of the papal infantry who served in the battle of Lepanto (1571), and Polish noblewoman Maria Clementina Sobieski (1702-1735). Many other women were buried in the pagan graves beneath the grottoes. See below.

⁴¹ The floor of the Grottoes was discovered to be about 8 inches above the actual Constantinian floor.

3. THE EXCAVATIONS

The team of archaeologists, under the nominal direction of the administrator of St. Peter's, Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, was selected in 1941 to begin scientifically-controlled excavation of the mausoleums. Team members included Enrico Josi, an expert on catacombs, epigraphist



Antonio Ferrua, archaeologist Engelbert Kirschbaum, and architect Gustavo Giovannoni.⁴²

Initially instructed to refrain from excavating beneath the altar to avoid disturbing the legendary monument to Peter,⁴³ the team, assisted by the Sampietrini, a permanent group of skilled workers

and artisans permanently assigned to St. Peter's Basilica, began its incursion into the area of what would soon be labelled tomb F.⁴⁴ After removing nearly 23 feet of soil from several mausoleums, they realized they had uncovered a pre-Constantinian necropolis, largely pagan with traces of Christian influence.⁴⁵

⁴² Giovannoni was replaced in 1947 by Bruno Apollonj-Ghetti.

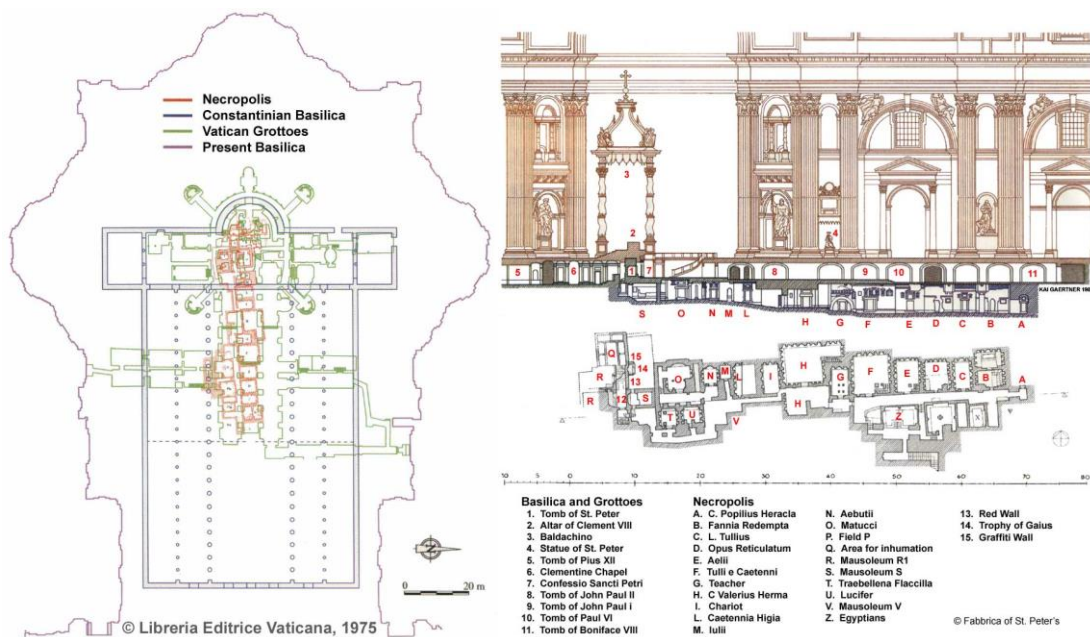
⁴³ Walsh, 19.

⁴⁴ The tombs were assigned capital letter designations.

⁴⁵ This phase of excavation officially ended in 1949. The team's report was published as *Esplorazioni sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano eseguite negli anni 1940-1949: relazione a cura di B. M. Apollonj-Ghetti, A. Ferrua, S.J., E. Josi, E. Kirschbaum, S.J., prefazione di Mons. L. Kaas, Segretario-Economista della Rev. Fabbrica di San Pietro, appendice numismatica di C. Serafini, vol. i, testo; vol. ii, tavole, 1951. New excavations were begun in 1953 under the directorship of Adriano Prandi. These were designed to answer questions raised by the previous effort and to enhance the epigraphic reports. His report was published as *La zona archeologica della Confessione Vaticana. I Monumenti del II secolo*. Vatican City: Tipografia Poliglotta Vatican, 1957.*

4. THE NECROPOLIS

Two rows of mausoleums, their openings on the south side, were eventually uncovered running east to west in parallel, separated by a moderately wide passage. Twenty-two brick mausoleums were eventually liberated although more are believed to exist further east and west beyond the footprint of the basilica in areas that are now inaccessible. The entire site may extend as far as the Tiber to the east and the Church of St. Stephen of the Abyssinians to the west.⁴⁶



⁴⁶ Margherita Guarducci, *The Tomb of St. Peter: The New Discoveries in the Sacred Grottoes of the Vatican* (trans. Joseph McLellan; New York: Hawthorn, 1960), 57.

4.1 The Mausoleums

The mausoleums have been dated to between the early second century and the late third, the northern row being the earliest. Both cremations and inhumations, two types of burials practiced during this period of funerary transition, are evident. The ashes of the cremated were stored in urns which resemble small boxes that were placed in niches in the walls of the mausoleums. Inhumed corpses, sometimes embalmed, were placed in coffins, often of terra cotta.⁴⁷

Some of the mausoleums show evidence of having had terraces on their roofs accessible via exterior steps. These terraces may have been used for the purpose of the *refrigerium*, meals eaten by friends and relatives in honor of the dead. Other tombs were highly damaged due to the placement of foundation piers for later above-surface structures such as Bernini's seventeenth-century baldachin.⁴⁸

4.2 Christian Inhabitants

Those who lie in these mausoleums were largely members of the freedmen class, wealthy clerks and administrators who were not Roman born.⁴⁹ The necropolis is not entirely pagan, however. Evidence of growing Christian influence over the years is not limited to the Jewish and Christian preference for inhumation.⁵⁰ Images adorning the walls of some of the mausoleums as well as inscriptions and carvings betray Christian burials. A lid from a marble sarcophagus, for example,

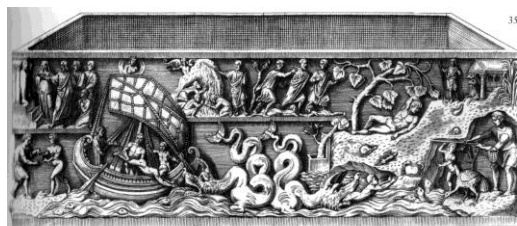
⁴⁷ According to Edgar R. Smothers, "Notes: The Bones of St. Peter," *Theological Studies* 27 (1966): 81, another necropolis, discovered a quarter-mile away in 1957, contains "indisputably Neronian graves, and even earlier ones." Nero's slaves were buried there. It also runs north-south, possibly along the Via Triumphalis. Filippo Magi, director of the Vatican museum, suggests such provisions for slave burials "might not happen along the Via Aurelius or Via Cornelius" (quotation in Smothers, "Bones").

⁴⁸ These piers reached down and stood within tombs R and Q.

⁴⁹ One Roman administrator's tomb was uncovered, however. Ostorius Euhodanus, a senator and consul designate, was buried with his daughter Ostorina Chelidon and her husband Vibius Iolaus behind tomb Z (zeta).

⁵⁰ Pagans during this period were also experimenting with inhumation.

shows the progression of Jonah as he is shown being thrown into the sea, then rescued; in the third scene he reclines under a fruit tree. This episodic depiction became an early metaphor



35. The "sarcophagus of Jonah" (about 300 AD) found in the 16th c. during the construction of the new basilica. Vatican Museums, inv. 31.1448. From Bosio, *Roma sotterranea*, Rome, 1932

for Christian death and resurrection.⁵¹ Within the first tomb to be entered and cleared, that of the Caetenii (tomb F), a Christian woman, Aemilia Gorgonia, was found to have been buried by her husband. Along with

a depiction of her drawing water from a well, and following the husband's epitaph for his *co[n]iugi dulcissime feci* ("most sweet wife"), are the Christian words *dormit in pace*, "rest in peace" inscribed between two images of doves bearing olive branches, symbols of peace.⁵²



The tomb of the Julii (tomb M) bears the most obvious examples of Christian funerary art. Once a pagan tomb, by the third century its family had converted and redecorated the walls with Christian murals, the earliest ever found. On the primary wall is the depiction of a fisherman casting his line into the sea and catching fish. On the wall to the right is Jonah, again being cast into the sea, this time feet first – an unusual posture – into the mouth of the waiting beast. Visible on the wall to the left are the slight remains of a mural depicting the Good

⁵¹ O'Callaghan, 12.

⁵² The full inscription reads "Gorgonia sweet soul. To the wondrous beauty and chastity of Aemilia Gorgonia, who lived 28 years, 2 months and 28 days. She rest in Peace. I gave this burial to my most sweet wife." Quoted in Pietro Zander, *The Necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican* (Rome: Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano, 2009), 72.

Shepherd, a sheep securely about his shoulders. Finally, the roof is adorned with the painted image of Christ-Helios (Christ the Sun) riding his chariot drawn by a noble steed across the sky.⁵³ Rays emanating from his halo form the shape of a cross, claimed to be the earliest surviving use of crucifixion symbolism yet found.⁵⁴



Other discoveries among the tombs are important as well. The tomb of C. Popilius Heracla (tomb A) contains an inscription of the dying man's wish to be buried "in the Vatican near the Circus beside the monument of Ulpian Narcissus." The inscription demonstrates that, even though no physical remains of Nero's circus were discovered, it was in fact nearby.

4.3 The Courtyard Area

The mausoleums most important to the study of the tropaion are those adjacent to an open area or courtyard designated by the excavators as "P".⁵⁵ These include enclosures marked "S" to the south, and "Q", "R", and "R¹" to the west. Q is itself an open courtyard with space hollowed out

⁵³ See below for other Christian insignia including the drawing of Peter in the tomb of the Valerii.

⁵⁴ Walsh, 26.

⁵⁵ This area was practically leveled by Constantine's builders to allow the aedicular monument to stand alone in the new basilica's altar area. Access to this area was secured by the excavators from behind the monument through the Clementine Chapel underneath the chancel or presbytery.

around the perimeter for six coffins (none are occupied). R is the mausoleum of Flavius Agricola and his wife and son. R¹ is not a mausoleum but a kind of antechamber (called a “solarium” by Torp),⁵⁶ though it does not connect with R. Within R¹ is a cistern the purpose of which is unknown.⁵⁷

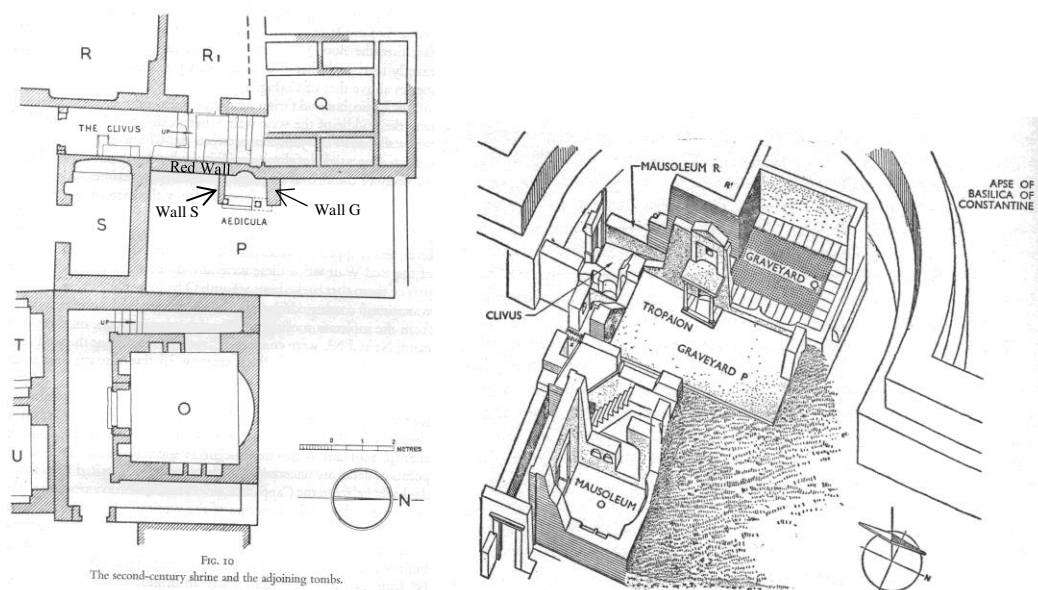


FIG. 10
The second-century shrine and the adjoining tombs.

Running between Q, R, and R¹ to the west and P and S to the east is a little 6-foot wide alleyway called the *clivus*. Partially a ramp but otherwise stepped it provided access to the western tombs and perhaps P as well. Within P on the inside of its western wall is what has come to be accepted as the *tropaion*, an aedicular, pre-Constantinian monument.

4.4 The Red Wall Complex

The western wall of P is referred to as the Red Wall owing to the remains of red paint still attached to its western side adjacent the *clivus*. The Red Wall was built to separate R, R¹, and Q

⁵⁶ Torp, 36.

⁵⁷ R¹ has been variously described as a solarium, etc. An ingenious suggestion as to its use has been provided by Walsh who makes of it a Christian baptistry.

from area P. It once measured about eight feet high, two feet thick and runs the length of P. All but the portion immediately surrounding the aedicula was cut down by Constantine in his effort to level everything around it. The wall takes a slight northwest bend at the point where the clivus meets Q.

This entire series of structures, the mausoleums, the *clivus*, and the Red Wall were

determined to have been constructed at roughly the same time.⁵⁸



The dating was based on the presence of a gutter that was built contemporaneous to and beneath the *clivus* to expel rainwater from Q. Stamped into five of the tiles that covered the triangular-shaped drain was the mark of a tileworks owned by [Marcus]

Aurelius Caesar and his wife Faustina Augusta. Faustina became

Augusta ca. 146 C.E. and Aurelius remained “Caesar” until 161 C.E. (when he became emperor).

“Since there is little likelihood of five identical tiles having been reused from some earlier structure, we can be reasonably certain that this group of tombs was built very little, if at all, after the death of Antoninus Pius in 161.”⁵⁹ Thus, the approximate dates of the construction of the nearby tombs: tomb O (130), S and R (130-150), R¹ (150-160), and Q not much later than these.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ This is disputed by Torp. Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 59 n. 7, puts tomb R-R¹ earlier than either Q or the clivus (in its present form). However, “the absolute chronology of Q and of the Red Wall is not affected.”

⁵⁹ Toynbee and Perkins, 32.

⁶⁰ Guarducci, 82; O’Connor, 174. Torp, *passim*, provides later dates for all the elements because he dates the northern part of the Red Wall as independent of the monument and southern part. What the original excavators consider a continuation of the Red Wall north of the monument, Torp, Prandi, O’Connor, etc., consider to be the eastern wall of Q “built a year, or even less, later than the southern part” though “the dating of the whole complex in the mid-second century is not affected” (O’Connor, 175). Torp believes, based on plaster levels on the west side of the Red Wall, that the clivus was constructed in two phases (Toynbee and Perkins agree regarding the clivus). His dates are as follows: Tomb O (180-190 C.E.), Tomb S (200), Tomb R, R¹, the first clivus, and Red Wall south (210-

In time, the red wall developed a vertical crack at the point where it bends slightly to the northwest. A short buttressing wall was built perpendicular to it which excavators have labelled “G”. (The northern face of G eventually became covered with Christian pilgrim inscriptions which will be discussed in more detail below.)

Area P measures about 26 feet by 13 feet and perhaps could accommodate thirty to forty people.⁶¹ Its northern wall, if there was one, has not been discovered. Toynbee and Perkins speculate that it was destroyed in the Middle Ages to make room for the covered Confessio of Gregory the Great above it.⁶²

These mausoleums did not mark the earliest burials in this vicinity, however. Simple graves have been uncovered which show that a graveyard had already occupied the necropolis grounds when the mausoleums were built. At that time, some of the bones of the deceased were gathered up into ossuaries a few of which were found during the excavations (especially in tomb Z). Untouched graves, however, have been found near the monument. More will be said about those following a more detailed description of the aedicula itself.

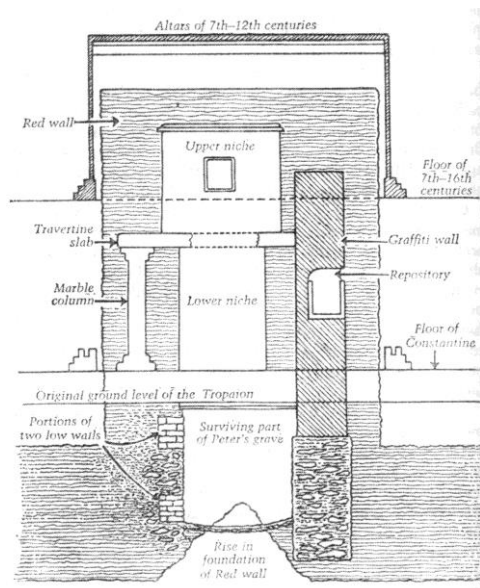
220), Tomb Q (and thus “Red Wall north”), the drain, and the reworked clivus (230), the aedicula (230-250), and wall G (300).

⁶¹ Bowersock, 7. Walsh, 142, claims sixty to seventy people can fit in the courtyard.

⁶² Toynbee and Perkins, 138.

5. THE AEDICULA

The small, pre-Constantinian niched monument, or aedicula, around which the fourth-century basilica was originally built was fashioned as part of the Red Wall not carved out of it. As stated earlier, a four-inch-thick horizontal travertine slab separates the two niches. It projects three feet



out from the wall and once rested six feet from the ground on two small columns. The column to the south remains in its original position, the other was displaced at an unknown time. These, in turn, rest on another travertine slab. The aedicula's construction is similar to that of other pagan aedicular monuments, though about twice as high and proportionately larger.⁶³ This one has been described as "poor and rather insignificant."⁶⁴

The niches are identified by the letter "N".⁶⁵ N² (ca. 4.5 feet high by 2.3 feet wide) is the lower niche into which the Niche of the Pallia intrudes from the front. It was once covered with a layer of red plaster and ultimately faced with marble.⁶⁶ N³ (3.7 feet wide) above had to be hypothetically reconstructed as its top was sheared off during reconstruction in the Middle Ages; it remains enclosed by the raised altars of Gregory and

⁶³ Walsh, 69.

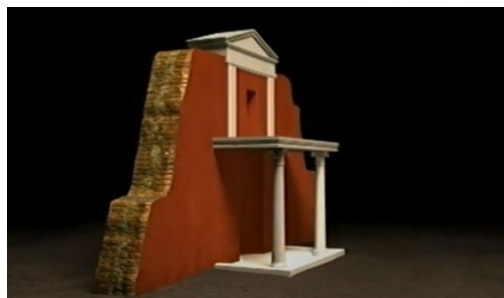
⁶⁴ Torp, 47.

⁶⁵ N¹ is an even lower niche which is discussed below.

⁶⁶ Torp, 46, 48.

Callixtus. Inexplicably, during the installation of these altars, a window was cut into the back of N³ but was later sealed. Though the top niche may have once contained a statue or bust,⁶⁷ nothing was found in it by the excavators. Nor were any markings immediately observed by which the monument might be identified.

Since the aedicula was built into the red wall, its date of origin is the same:



approximately 160 C.E.⁶⁸ The date puts the construction of the aedicula during the reign of Antoninus Pius, an arguably more tolerant emperor than many of those before or after him. In addition, the date makes it possible, and indeed quite probable that the aedicula is

the one referred to by Gaius ca. 200 C.E. as the *tropaion* of Peter. It may also serve to correct information provided in the *Liber Pontificalis* which perhaps mistakenly attributes the construction of a Petrine memorial to bishop Anacletus (d. ca. 92 C.E.). While this date is much too early to agree with the aedicula's construction date, the text may have confused this prelate with the similarly-spelled Anicetus, bishop from 155 to 165 C.E., the time of the aedicula's construction.

As stated earlier, a short perpendicular wall was erected on the north side of the aedicula sometime in the third century. Eighteen and one-half inches thick, wall G extended 33 ½ inches from the Red Wall. Painted red with sky-blue borders, its purpose seems to have been to buttress the Red Wall after it developed a vertical crack on the north side of the monument. It may also

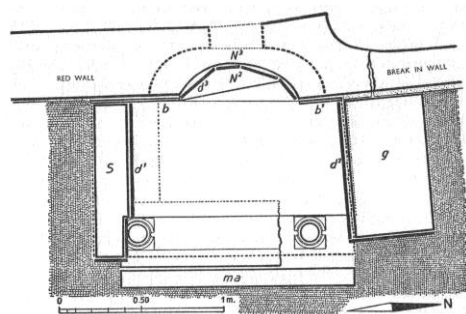
⁶⁷ O'Callaghan, 78.

⁶⁸ Guarducci, 87; Toynbee and Perkins, 140. Smothers, "Excavations," 310, puts it during "the third quarter of the second century." Torp, 42, who provides consistently later datings, fixes the aedicula at 230 C.E. He also does not accept that the aedicula was built at the same time as the red wall since he holds that the wall was built in two sections with the aedicula connecting the two.

have been an aid to preventing the earth from the northern slope above from washing over the aedicula. Its north face is covered with a virtual “palimpsest”⁶⁹ of graffiti to such a degree that it appears at first glance to be an indecipherable mass of letters, lines and symbols. No graffiti was found on the south side of G or on either side of southern wall S. Wall S, less than half the



thickness of G, may have been built to provide symmetry to the monument after wall G was constructed; it originally rose to the top of the travertine slab. It may also have been placed so as to support the weakened monument. Both walls were determined to have been built after the



primary structure because they are not symmetrical with the aedicula. Also the travertine slab separating N^2 and N^3 had to be carved out at the ends to accommodate the new walls. G was likely constructed about 250 C.E.⁷⁰ The interior of walls S and G were later faced with marble as

was the concave surface of the Red Wall within N^2 . This may have been about the time that area P was paved with white marble mosaic tile edged in green.

⁶⁹ Hall, 192.

⁷⁰ Guarducci, 95.

5.1 The Loculus

On the north side of wall G, about two-and-a-half feet from the ground, a small cavity, or *loculus*, was discovered hidden behind the plaster surface. It was determined to have been created after the graffiti had been inscribed.⁷¹ A bit of fallen plaster created a hole through which the excavators could detect within a marble-lined rectangular vault. Leaving this discovery for further investigation, the team occupied themselves with other matters. That decision was to be the undoing of the entire search for the remains of the apostle Peter. That evening in 1942, Kass



and a Sampietrini assistant, Giovanni Segoni, examined the loculus after work had ceased and the team had left.⁷² Using a flashlight, they discovered that bones were lying within. For whatever reason, Kaas had Segoni enlarge the

opening slightly in order to remove the bones as well as a few “shreds of cloth, a few thick threads, and two corroded coins”; they placed them in a wooden box labelled “ossa-urna-graf” (bones, urn/box, graffiti).⁷³ This was tagged and stored in a closet in the grottoes, not to be heard of again for the next ten years.⁷⁴

When the archaeological team turned their attention back to the loculus they determined its size to be about 2 ½ feet long by 1 foot high by 1 foot deep. Widening the opening a bit (more) and apparently not recognizing that it was already a little larger than they had left it, the

⁷¹ Cullmann, 151.

⁷² A description of the following events is apparently included in a signed, sworn deposition by Segoni in the files of the Vatican.

⁷³ Walsh, 79.

⁷⁴ Ferrua maintained to the end that there never was anything else in the loculus other than that which they discovered later (Hall, 188).

team managed to scrape out “slight remains of earth mingled with bone splinters, a little lead, a few silver threads and a medieval coin of the French Count of Limoges (10th c.).”⁷⁵ Later, in 1959, before the Kaas box had been discovered, one of the excavators, Englebert Kirschbaum already speculated that the loculus had once contained venerated bones and had been rifled in a previous period (just how recently he could not have guessed).⁷⁶

In the 1960s, an effort was made to address Kirschbaum’s hypothesis about earlier breaking and entering. Several archaeologists under the supervision of Margherita Guarducci re-examined the loculus.⁷⁷ The marble slabs lining the enclosure were pried loose so that closer examination of the east side of the loculus might be made. It was the only area of wall G that showed possible signs of forced entry from without. The team found no evidence of any mortar damage, repair work, or tampering of any kind. The examination did reveal that the loculus was cut into the wall after the wall had been built. “In several spots, the blue-white plaster covering the face of the graffiti wall had carried over to cover some small breaks in the red wall, breaks which had occurred during the building of the shrine.”⁷⁸ Thus the team concluded that the loculus had not been breached from the time of its construction until the twentieth century.

⁷⁵ Engelbert Kirschbaum, *The Tombs of St. Peter & St. Paul* (trans. John Murray; London: Secker & Warburg, 1959), 71.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Craughwell, 102-3.

⁷⁸ Walsh, 125.

5.2 The Fossa

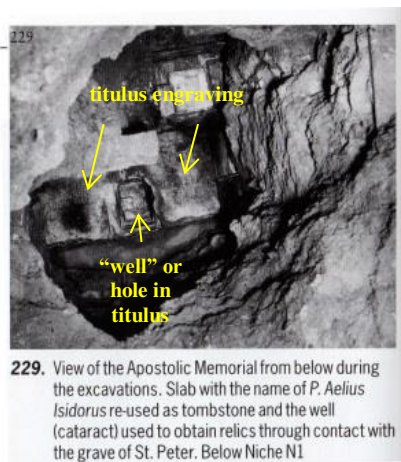
In order to explore the area of the monument below its travertine slab base, the original team of excavators dug down in front of the north side of wall G and punched a hole through its foundation. Once through, they discovered a dilapidated cavity (also referred to in the literature



as a vault, trench grave, or *fossa*) hollowed out directly below the base slab.⁷⁹ Its ruinous state was assumed to be the result of the Saracen invasion of 846 when the basilica was sacked.

The underside of the covering slab was found to have writing on it. It was, in fact, a pagan titulus obviously installed to replace an original which had evidently been damaged in a prior period. It may

have come from mausoleum E of the Aelii.⁸⁰



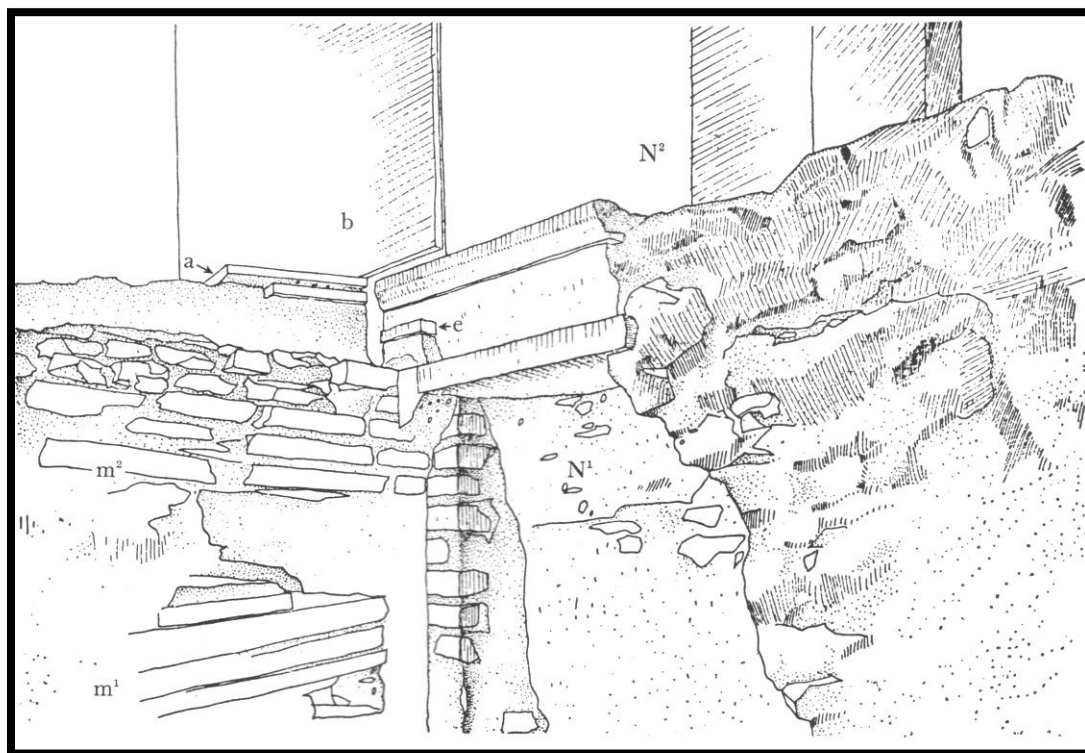
The south side of the fossa was formed by the remains of the foundations of two short walls made of brick, both designated "m". The lower of these walls, m¹, is older than the aedicula. It may be the remains of a structure that once surrounded the entire fossa demarcating it.⁸¹ On the other hand, it could belong to one of the nearby graves (γ - gamma) to be discussed below. It has been suggested that both m¹, and

⁷⁹ This also lay beneath the embossed bronze floor of the Niche of the Pallia. A trap door in the bottom of the Niche could be opened to expose a hole made in the marble slab which in turn opened into the earthen fossa. Hartmann Grisar had already "discovered" this series of holes and shone a light down into the fossa in the 19th century. See O'Connor, 193-4.

⁸⁰ It reads: D[is] M[anibus] S[acrum] / P[ublio] Aelio Isidoro seniori/parenti benemerenti fili e / ius fecerum[t] / liberti[s] liber[tabus] posteris / que eo[rum]. See Toynbee and Perkins, 230 n. 15.

⁸¹ Hall, 191.

m^2 above it, were built as retaining walls partially as protection against the continuous slide of mud being washed down the slope.⁸² The travertine base closure-slab sits above m^2 .



The west side of the fossa is the most interesting. This side is formed by the Red Wall. A roughly gouged-out niche (N^1) was discovered in the Red Wall at this point; it is the only one of the three niches originally underground. Its function remains unclear. It was clear however that this modification to the wall was done after its construction. Also at this point in the bottom of the Red Wall, an intentionally-constructed arch was formed at its base. It was made to rise like an inverted V over the western edge of the fossa, looking as if it was formed to avoid disturbing something beneath it. The best interpretation so far is that the “something” was a grave once marked by the familiar inverted V created by upturned tiles. It has been surmised that workmen erecting the wall stumbled onto and accidentally cut through a grave identified even then by

⁸² O'Connor, 195; Kirschbaum, 108-9. Some have argued that wall m^1 served as protection for grave γ .

Christians as that of Peter.⁸³ To avoid delays requesting permission to move the remains, a compromise was reached whereby the bones were reinterred and provision was made to erect a monument at the spot. As if to confirm that hypothetical reconstruction, excavators digging into the dirt under the wall at this point found a collection of human bones, about 250 pieces in all.⁸⁴ It was then determined that the fossa was originally about twice as long and extended beneath the red wall to the other side thus approximating the size of a full-length grave. No structural remains of a grave, coffin, or marker tiles were found here, however.

Further digging in the loose fill at the bottom of the fossa produced “innumerable coins of all ages and countries,”⁸⁵ from the early Roman empire to the fourteenth century. One example dates from the time of Augustus (43 B.C.E. to 14 A.D.) and three from that of Domitian (81 to 96 C.E.).⁸⁶ It is likely that these were thrown down into the hole in the base slab by pious pilgrims either directly or later through the hole in the Niche of the Pallia.

Of further note is the discovery that the replacement titulus slab (and, therefore, its original), as well as walls m¹ and m² and the fossa they protect lie offset at an eleven degree angle from the Red Wall and built-in aedicula. One explanation for this is that the aedicula replaced an earlier monument that once stood in a position that could no longer be quite duplicated when the wall was built owing to the position of other structures that had encroached around it.⁸⁷

⁸³ This is the suggestion of Toynbee and Perkins, 159. See also Toynbee, “The Bones of St. Peter,” *The Month* (1965): 354.

⁸⁴ Walsh, 58.

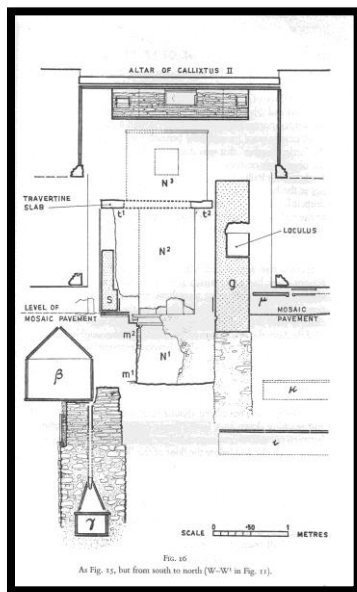
⁸⁵ Toynbee and Perkins, 152.

⁸⁶ Guarducci, 88.

⁸⁷ Toynbee and Perkins, 157.

6. THE GRAVES

The fossa beneath the aedicula was not the only evidence of a grave in the grounds beneath courtyard P. In fact, many more graves were uncovered by the excavators. When the team began its search for the foundations of graffiti wall G, they determined that it rested on a tomb which they identified as ι (iota – graves are all designated by lower case Greek letters). Within the fossa itself another grave (η - eta), made of simple brick slabs, formed its east wall. Lowest, and thus oldest, of all the graves discovered in area P is γ (gamma) which extends partially beneath the

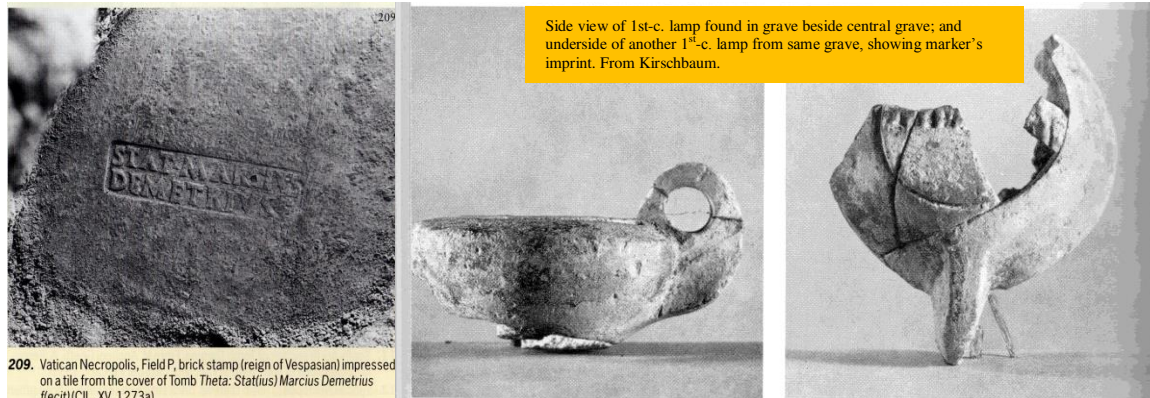


red wall to the south of the monument. It is a child's grave in which the bones lie in a gabled, terra cotta sarcophagus.⁸⁸ There is no incontrovertible evidence that it is Christian though this is not impossible. Grave θ (theta), which rests under η, is nearly as old as γ and is marked by two uplifted tiles above it. One of the tile markers is dated with a stamp that shows it was fired during the time of Vespasian (69-79 C.E.).⁸⁹ Later excavations close to the grave recovered a small, terra cotta lamp which bears the mark of a potter, L. Munatius Threptus, whose workshop was active in the

⁸⁸ Hall, 190, notes that “the roof was pierced by a small lead pipe that allowed libations of wine or milk to be poured onto the remains – an originally pagan practice, though one also practiced by many Christians.”

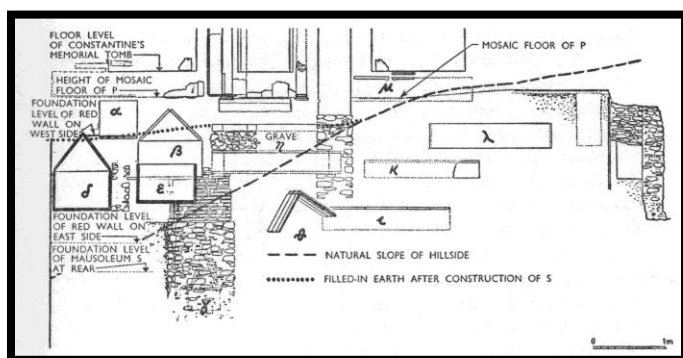
⁸⁹ Cullmann, 148, challenges the resulting date of the grave based on this tile. He claims that it must have been reused. He rightly points out that none of the graves can be definitively dated to the time of Nero. According to O'Connor, 186, “the opinion of the majority is that a single tile bearing a seal cannot be used as independent evidence in determining the *terminus ad quem*, because of the common custom, especially in the poorer grave areas, to reuse tiles.” Nevertheless, a number of scholars accept the authority of the tile.

time of Vespasian.⁹⁰



209. Vatican Necropolis, Field P, brick stamp (reign of Vespasian) impressed on a tile from the cover of Tomb Theta: Statilius Marcus Demetrius fecit (CIL, XV, 1273a)

The north-south slope under area P is quite steep here. As the mausoleums were constructed over the ancient graveyard around P, the earth was trenched and terraced resulting in a quantity of earth being dumped in this area and subsequently raising the ground level of area P after tombs O and S, but before the Red Wall and Q were constructed, roughly 140-160 C.E.⁹¹



Accordingly, γ and θ , the lowest graves today, were dug out of the original surface; graves η and ζ (zeta), at the eastern edge of P, were dug from the later, raised surface.⁹² Dirt also washed down the slope due to winter rains.

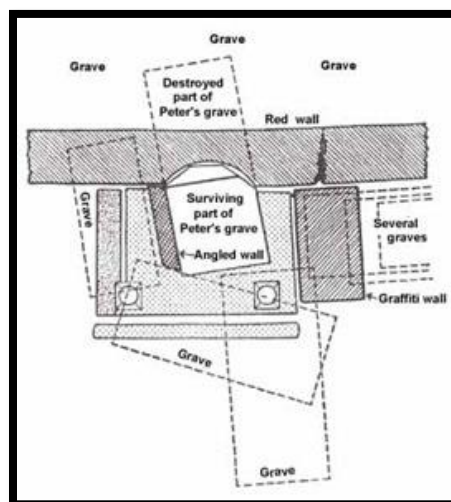
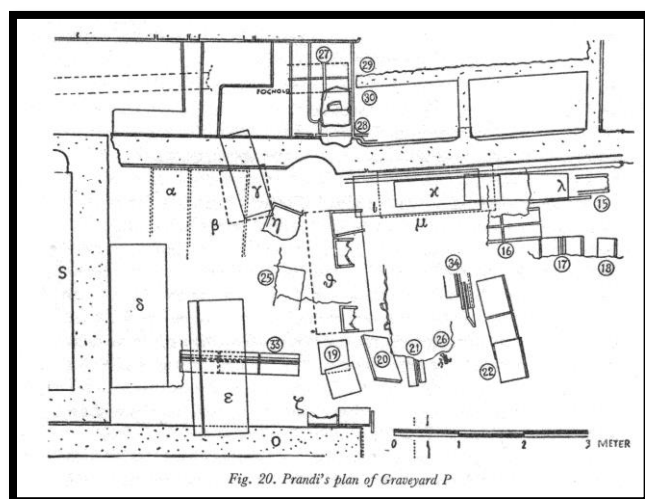
⁹⁰ Guarducci, 58. Other lamps with this maker's mark have been discovered including one "in the tomb of the Statilii near the Porta Maggiore, which was closed in the time of Statilia Messalina, third wife of Nero, about 70 A.D." Therefore the lamp must be of first-century manufacture. Found near the lamp associated with γ were funerary objects such as "burned bones, pieces of another lamp, vases, glasses, etc." that can be dated to the first century.

⁹¹ Toynbee and Perkins, 147.

⁹² Toynbee and Perkins, 147. Adriano Prandi, who led the second phase of the excavations with Guarducci, believes none of the graves in area P are from the first century but are all mid-second century. However, recognizing that there remains uncertainty over the contours of the terrain in the time of Nero, he refrains from stating unequivocally that the fossa beneath the aedicula could not be Neronian.

Stratigraphically, therefore, the later graves must pre-date the mid-second century but no earlier than the Flavian tile. All predate the Red Wall.

The date of the fossa is contemporaneous with the older graves γ and θ . Note the angular orientation of all three which differ from the aedicula and Red Wall. Note also the cluster of subsequent graves located about the fossa (α , β , δ , ϵ , κ , λ , and μ). Some have suggested that they may be Christian owing to their owners' apparent desire to be located near the apostle.⁹³ The excavators for both phases of investigation ultimately discovered thirty burials, in whole or in part, surrounding the reputed grave of Peter, nine pre-Constantinian and twenty-one "determined to be anterior to the building of the Basilica and at least four were later."⁹⁴ A number of others were in too poor condition to provide much data.



⁹³ Lees-Milne, 73.

⁹⁴ O'Connor, 184.

7. THE GRAFFITI

As noted earlier, graffiti, inscriptions, and markings were all found among the mausoleums of the necropolis including at the pre-Constantinian aedicula. Initial disappointment at the lack of discovery of the name of Peter anywhere on the grounds has since been overcome by several finds, or interpretations of finds, that postdated the initial phase of the discovery. These were conducted by Margherita Guarducci beginning in 1952 after the publication of the excavators' findings and her request to re-examine the site. The most significant discoveries include: 1) a drawing and attached inscription found in the Valerii tomb H; 2) an inscription and pictograph found in the Flavii tomb R; 3) a graffito found on a broken fragment from the Red Wall; and 4) an abundance of graffiti on the north side of wall G.

7.1. Tomb of the Valerii

The niche in the north wall of tomb H utilized by the Valerii family was marked with a drawing of two human heads, one above the other. The drawing was first made in red lead and retraced in black charcoal. The lower head is that of an old man, bald with a furrowed brow, large eyes, and pointed beard. An adjacent inscription records a prayer: "Peter, pray for the pious Christian men buried near your body." At the end of the first line of the five-line prayer⁹⁵ is an Egyptian ankh, the *crux ansata*, or symbol of life, often used by Christians, as well as the contracted form of Christ: XS-HS ("Christus-Hiesus" or Christ-Jesus). The head above the probable head of Peter

⁹⁵ "PETRUS ROGA ꝛ XSIHS / PRO SANC[TI]S / HOM[INI]BUS / CHRESTIANUS [A]D / CO[R]PUS TUUM SEP[ULTIS]."

has VIBUS (“living”) written on the forehead and a depiction of the phoenix, a symbol of resurrection, next to it. From these clues Guarducci identified the upper head as that of Christ.⁹⁶ Guarducci dates the drawing and inscription to about 280 C.E., prior to Constantine’s erection of the basilica.⁹⁷



FIG. 43. The heads of Christ and Peter in the tomb of the Valerii (end of the third—beginning of the fourth century A.D.). Excavations of the Vatican necropolis (photograph taken during the excavation). To the left of Peter’s head is written PETRV, to the right, S ROGA; the rest of the epigraph was still covered with dirt.

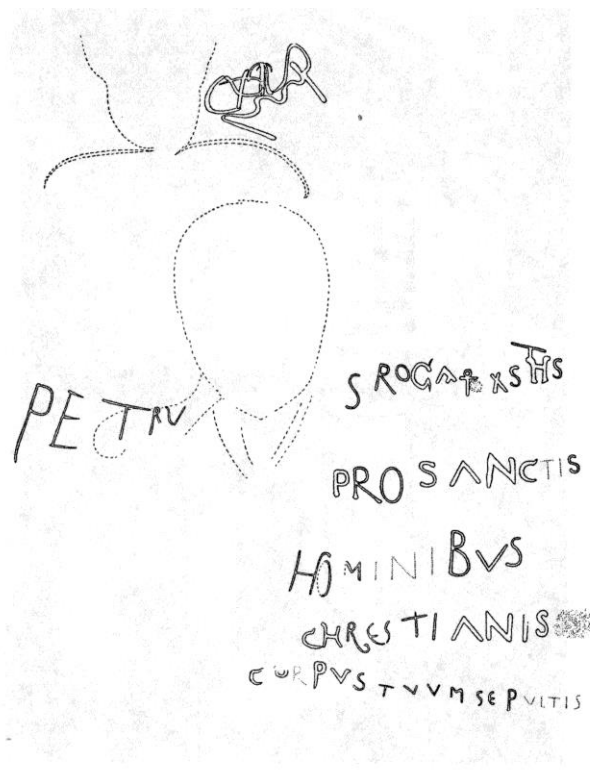


FIG. 44. Prayer to St. Peter in the tomb of the Valerii (end of the third, beginning of the fourth century A.D.). Excavations of the Vatican necropolis.

⁹⁶ Ferrua rejected Guarducci’s findings. He claimed there was nothing decipherable in the faded inscription. It has now, unfortunately, faded completely from sight.

⁹⁷ O’Connor, 180, opts for a date early in the fourth century. “Others,” according to Walsh, 86, would also date the inscription to the fourth century, ca. 330, as no Christian would have dared deface a pagan gravesite before then. O’Callaghan, “Vatican Excavations and the Tomb of Peter,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 16 (1953): 83, points out that this would prove a counter indication that the bones of Peter were resting *ad Catacumbas* at this time as other traditions stipulate. See the appendix.

7.2. Tomb of the Flavii

On the east wall of tomb R belonging to a father, mother, and son, a visitor has left an inscription: “Lucius Paccius Eutyclus remembers Glycon.”⁹⁸ Guarducci speculates that because there is no apparent reason for a pagan to consider the place of such significance that he would record the name of his friend here, the inference must be made that these are Christians who favor the site due to Peter’s supposed presence.⁹⁹ She dates the inscription to ca. 130-150 C.E. based upon the style of the printing, the use of Greek and the name in *tria nomina* form, a practice which began to die out at the end of the second century.¹⁰⁰ If inscribed by a Christian loiterer, the work would have likely been done prior to the construction of the Red Wall (ca. 160 C.E.) since that wall cut off access to P from the south via the *clivus*. Visitors to Peter’s grave from that point on would have been obliged to enter P from either the north or east. As if to confirm the Christian character of the notation, the outline of a fish is inscribed on the same wall as the graffito.

Inscription “Lucius Paccius Eutyclus remembers Glycon” on three rows of brick from tomb R.

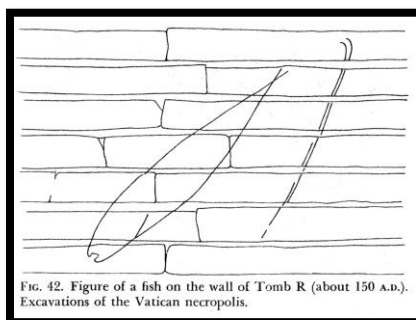
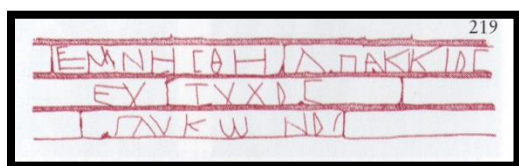


FIG. 42. Figure of a fish on the wall of Tomb R (about 150 A.D.). Excavations of the Vatican necropolis.

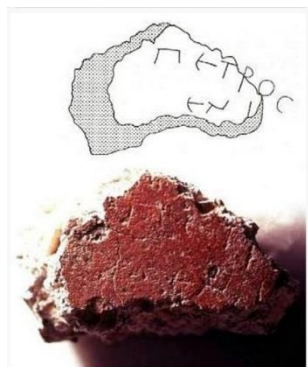
⁹⁸ The names of the buried are Flavius Agricola, Flavia Primitiva and Aurelius Primitivus.

⁹⁹ Guarducci, 140. Neither of these men were buried here – the inscription was made later by a visitor.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 142.

7.3. Red Wall Graffito

After the primary work of the first excavation was completed, one of the participants of that work, epigraphist Antonio Ferrua, returned to study the loculus in wall G and discovered lying on the bottom of it a piece of the surface plaster from the Red Wall that had, “for some reason we could not fathom,”¹⁰¹ come loose and fallen.¹⁰²



Upon examination, Ferrua identified two lines of Greek text. The first line bore the letters ΠΕΤΡ (PΕΤR). The inscription sloped down to the right. It was an easy assumption to add the two final letters ΟΣ (OS) and derive the name of Peter. This reconstruction has not been seriously challenged. However, the second line is open to a number of possible reconstructions. The letters ΕΝΙ form the last line. Some scholars would add additional letters to extract its meaning. But Ferrua determined that it was complete as is and Guarducci added that the slope of the upper line would have prevented any effort to add additional letters to the first three.¹⁰³ Reconstructed as ΠΕΤΡ[ΟΣ] ΕΝΙ, the meaning would be “Peter is [buried] within.”¹⁰⁴ According to Guarducci the use of Greek in the inscription indicates a second-century date.¹⁰⁵ Its inscription on the Red Wall may have been

¹⁰¹ Kirschbaum, 72.

¹⁰² Walsh, 75.

¹⁰³ Guarducci understands *eni* as *enesti*, “he is present.” Cullmann, 147 n. 89, notes the suggestion of J. Carcopino (*Etudes d’histoire chrétienne. Le christianisme secret du carré magique. Les fouilles de Saint-Pierre et la tradition*, 1953) that by adding “d” (*endei*) the line would read: “Peter is away,” i.e., his bones removed to the Appian Way catacombs. Cullman considers that to be “an unusual expression.” See the appendix.

¹⁰⁴ Guarducci, 135.

¹⁰⁵ Guarducci, 135. Toynbee, “Bones,” 356, states that Guarducci later changed her dating of the inscription believing it to have been inscribed during the reign of Constantine at the time the bones were transferred to, and sealed in the loculus in order to mark the spot. This change of opinion obviously reflected the discovery of the bones surreptitiously removed from there by Kaas. She believes someone leaned into the loculus and, using their elbow as a pivot, scratched the notice onto the red wall just before it was sealed up, thus accounting for the convex curvature

made at the time the Red Wall was built, i.e. ca. 160 C.E., in order to indicate that Peter was buried below.¹⁰⁶ However, it could have been inscribed at any time up until the third-century construction of wall G which blocks the area where the graffiti was inscribed.

Another graffito was discovered inscribed on the Red Wall. The remaining legible letters are KAIP, perhaps the beginning letters of the Greek *Charein* (“hail”).¹⁰⁷ No further indication remains as to who was being hailed.

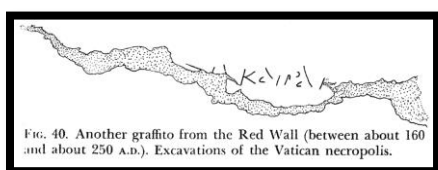


FIG. 40. Another graffito from the Red Wall (between about 160 and about 250 A.D.). Excavations of the Vatican necropolis.

7.3. Wall G Graffiti

Into the stucco coating of the buttressing wall G, as indicated above, is inscribed a mass of graffiti, nearly all of which are in Latin. The inscriptions were applied on various occasions from the time of the wall's third-century construction to the erection of Constantine's fourth-century basilica. Guarducci, who has done the most work on deciphering these graffiti, believes the inscriptions were made by custodians of the monument, a supposition rightly challenged by Toynebee, rather than by a steady stream of pilgrims over the years.¹⁰⁸

Among the inscriptions are the names of Christians, both male and female, often deceased. Among the many names, Guarducci has claimed to find the name of Peter multiple times, though never spelled out in its entirety. If she is right, it is a significant oversight by the

in the first line. Toynebee considers this revised dating “far-fetched” and opts for a date before wall G was constructed. See also Walsh, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Guarducci, 135.

¹⁰⁷ Guarducci, 136. She notes that in the imperial period, a K (kappa) could be used in place of a X (chi).

¹⁰⁸ Toynebee, “Graffiti Beneath St. Peter’s: Professor Guarducci’s Interpretations,” *The Dublin Review* (1959): 235.

original excavation team to have missed these important clues.¹⁰⁹ Other names discovered by Guarducci in abbreviated form are those of Christ and Mary.

Guarducci argues that the names and messages appear in the graffiti symbolically in a code that would be recognizable only to Christians. Within this cryptographic language are signs, symbols and abbreviations such as IXΘΥΣ,¹¹⁰ T for the cross, I or H for Jesus, X, X , and P for *Christus*, D for *Deus*, P or PA for *pax* (peace), and L or LV for *lux* (light).¹¹¹ Likewise, occurrences of P, PE, or PET mean Peter while M stands for Mary. AP, APE, and APET, according to Guarducci, stand for *ad Petrum* (“towards Peter”), indicating a desire on the part of the inscriber to be near to Peter in Paradise.



Guarducci suggests that the cryptograms were considered necessary by ancient Christians who tried to hide both their identity and the special concepts of their faith from persecutors.¹¹² There was, she adds, already a propensity among Romans to use artifice to create mystery regarding their intimate associations.¹¹³ In these graffiti, Christians attributed symbolic value to letters of the alphabet,

¹⁰⁹ Ferrua rejected Guarducci's findings: "Thus one can either commiserate with or admire the illustrious Authoress for her immense exertions, carried out with commendable passion and ingeniousness, and indeed with a faith that ought to move mountains. But all this cannot suffice to make us accept a work that is fundamentally wrong" (quoted in Craughwell, 99-100).

¹¹⁰ The acronym *ichthys*, Greek for "fish," is derived from Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ = *Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr* = "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior".

¹¹¹ Toynbee, "Graffiti," 237.

¹¹² Guarducci, 98.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

joined letters to unite them to form expressions of mystical concepts, and altered certain letters to represent others or to create symbols to express multiple thoughts simultaneously.¹¹⁴ An example of the latter is the use of both α (alpha) and ω (omega) to stand for God or Christ, the beginning and the end. The Greek letters X (chi) and P (rho), the first two letters of $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma$ (*Christos*), became combined into the symbol $\chi\rho$.¹¹⁵



243. Constantinian Memorial - north zone, detail of "Wall G" or "of the graffiti" with a loculus (cavity) made in its interior at the beginning of the 4th c.

¹¹⁴ Guarducci, 100.

¹¹⁵ Another abbreviated inscription: HO / VIN, is reconstructed by Guarducci as IN HOC VINCE ("In this, conquer"), the (partial) words of Constantine's vision of the cross in 312 C.E. before he defeated Maxentius for control of Rome (the full message was *In Hoc Signo Vinces*, "with this sign, you will conquer"). This would be the earliest recorded evidence to support the story first told by Lactantius (240-320 C.E.), in *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.4-6, and, with the quotation included, by Eusebius (260-340 C.E.), in *Vita Constantini* 1.28. See Walsh, 92-3.

8. THE BONES OF PETER?

If it be granted that the aedicula at St. Peter's has been adequately demonstrated to be the tropaion of Gaius commemorating the martyrdom of Peter, what is the likelihood that his bones were ever there?

8.1 The Jewish Propensity to Inhume the Dead

A number of scholars dismiss out of hand the possibility that Peter's actual remains were ever recovered and buried by his followers. Glen Bowersock reflects this view referring to the remains of both Peter and Paul:

No one tells us whether or how the bodies of the two martyrs were recovered, or, if so, what was done with them. It is highly likely that both corpses disappeared into the welter of the dead after the persecution. The crucified Christians might well have been thrown into the Tiber, and it is hard to credit that any Christians would have been able to step forward in the frenzy of the occasion and securely remove the remains of Peter or Paul.¹¹⁶

Opinions such as these seem to inadequately account for Jewish concerns over the treatment of their dead and their veneration for fallen heroes including martyrs. It is often overlooked that Peter was a Jew. Despite the expulsion of a number of Jewish Christians by Claudius in 49 C.E., an action likely limited only to leading agitators, not all such Jews were banished. And some who left likely returned within the following decade.¹¹⁷ The edict does indicate that Christians and non-Christians were somewhat distinguishable even at this early

¹¹⁶ Bowersock, 6.

¹¹⁷ If Aquila and Priscilla are representative of these banished Jewish Christian leaders, they were back in Rome when Paul wrote to them in the mid-50s C.E. (Romans 16:3).

period. Nevertheless, as a Jew visiting Rome, Peter would in all probability have developed contacts upon his arrival from among the Jewish or Jewish-Christian population at their synagogues or house churches.¹¹⁸

Jewish sensitivity over the treatment of the dead ran deep: it was the worst possible fate to be left unburied, prey for dogs, jackals, and vultures. Even diaspora Jews could read in their scriptures how the Lord once promised to condemn the house of Jeroboam: “Any one belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat” (1 Kings 14:10-11). The prophets used the specter of unburied corpses to instill fear both in their enemies and in their own people. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet curses Egypt and promises that the Lord “will cast you forth into the wilderness . . . you shall fall upon the open field, and not be gathered and buried. To the beasts of the earth and to the birds of the air I have given you as food” (Ezekiel 29:5). The prophet Jeremiah threatened the people of Judah that “they shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth” (Jeremiah 16:4).

The inhumation form of burial practiced by Jews was well-known to the Romans. The historian Tacitus (ca. 56-117 C.E.) noted how Jews “bury the body rather than burn it, thus following the Egyptians’ custom” (Tacitus, *History* 5.5). To Jews, “the Roman custom of cremation was anathema.”¹¹⁹ In fact, “although the Jews of Rome do not seem to be tied to any strict legal code with respect to burial, they do appear to observe traditions and practices similar

¹¹⁸ William L. Lane, “Roman Christianity during the Formative Years from Nero to Nerva,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson, eds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 213: “The early house churches must have drawn whatever organizational structure they had primarily from the Hellenistic synagogues and extended family structures of the Greco-Roman households.”

¹¹⁹ Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Random House, 2007), 247.

to Jews in other parts of the empire.”¹²⁰ Some were placed in natural or artificial caves, mimicking the practice of their Palestinian kinsmen.¹²¹ (No Jewish catacomb dating from before the second century C.E. has been discovered in Rome)¹²² But there were no rules among the rabbis about segregating Jews from non-Jews in cemeteries.¹²³ Christians were also buried next to non-Christians at least until the last decades of the second century.¹²⁴

In the period of the republic, “from about 400 B.C. onwards,” pagan Romans normally cremated their dead.¹²⁵ It was not until the second century C.E., during the reign of Hadrian that they gradually shifted away from cremation to inhumation.¹²⁶ The most destitute Romans, the *plebs sordida* (“the filthy plebs”) as Tacitus called them,¹²⁷ might continue to be inhumed, but if so they were placed in a common burial ground,¹²⁸ often a mass grave. Romans feared the “anonymity and horror of a pauper’s burial.”¹²⁹

¹²⁰ Deborah Green, “Sweet Spices in the Tomb: An Initial Study on the Use of Perfume in Jewish Burials,” in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context: Studies of Roman, Jewish, and Christian Burials* (ed. Laurie Brink and Deborah Green; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 152.

¹²¹ Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (updated ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 54.

¹²² Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 236. Six Jewish catacombs have been discovered in Rome. See Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* (trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings and Jeanine Routier-Pucci; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 23; and Leon, 55.

¹²³ Rebillard, 25.

¹²⁴ Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 170.

¹²⁵ Toynbee, *Death*, 40.

¹²⁶ Goodman, 248; Toynbee, *Death*, 40.

¹²⁷ Tacitus, *History* 1.4.

¹²⁸ E. Guhl and W. Koner, *The Romans: Their Life and Customs* (London: Senate, 1994), 591.

¹²⁹ John R. Patterson, “Living and Dying in the City of Rome: Houses and Tombs,” in *Ancient Rome: The Archaeology of the Eternal City* (ed. J. C. Coulson and Hazel Dodge; Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2000), 267.

To have no marked grave and to be remembered by no one was the fate of slaves, the poor and the childless. There were thousands upon thousands of them. The corpses of the destitute were thrown in communal pits, *piticuli*, to rot along with ordure and refuse and the remains of animals.¹³⁰

These “huge, stinking open pits”¹³¹ were likely replaced in the imperial period by public crematoria.¹³² Normally, even the poor could afford access to a funeral pyre; many chose to pay dues to a burial-club or *collegia* which in turn provided for the ritual accoutrements associated with the funeral.¹³³

As for Jews, the later Tosefta (third and fourth centuries) and the Jerusalem Talmud (fifth century), doubtless reflecting earlier sentiments as well, recommended “that in cities where Jews live in the midst of pagans they should take care to bury the poor.”¹³⁴ Byron McCane notes that Jewish funerals “generally took place as soon as possible after death, most often before sunset on the same day.”¹³⁵ Evidence comes from the New Testament,¹³⁶ the Mishnah,¹³⁷ and Josephus.

¹³⁰ B. Green, 177.

¹³¹ Ibid., 178.

¹³² Patterson, 267. Leon, 54, claims that some Romans continued to inhumate their remains in hollowed out caves or underground.

¹³³ Funerals were costly as Patterson, 273, notes. Basic accessories included wood for the pyre, perfumes for the corpse and, where affordable, inscriptions or permanent markers or monuments.

¹³⁴ Rebillard, 26.

¹³⁵ Byron McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003), 31.

¹³⁶ McCane, 31, cites Mark 5:38 (“Funeral preparations for Jairus’s daughter begin within a few hours of her death”) and John 11 (“Lazarus too is buried on the same day as his death.”).

¹³⁷ *Sanhedrin* 6:5, *Semahot* 1:4-5, 9:9.

8.2 Victims of Crucifixion

The *Acts of Peter*, Origen, and Tertullian all report that Peter was crucified. Titus Flavius Josephus (ca. 37-100 C.E.), in his six-volume *Jewish War*, written in Rome ca. 75 C.E. (only eleven years after the great fire), indicates that even the corpses of crucified criminals were treated according to custom: “the Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun” (*Jewish War* 4.317). The gospels report how Jesus’s body was removed from the cross before sundown. Though this evidence pertains to Jews in Palestine, these sentiments were not so much geographical as cultural. It has long ago been shown that contact between the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 Jews in Rome and their Palestinian kinsmen continued to be vigorous in the first century C.E.¹³⁸ It is unlikely that such sentiments would be honored by the prefect Pontius Pilate in the backwater of Judea and not in the capital city of Rome itself.

It is not at all incredible that Peter’s corpse could have been obtained from Roman possession.¹³⁹ Josephus, when in Palestine assisting the Roman general Titus in defeating his rebellious countrymen, found that some friends had been crucified by the Romans.¹⁴⁰ He requested, and obtained, permission to cut them down (two were dead).

The first-century crucifixion victim, Yehohanan, whose bones were discovered in an ossuary in 1968 in Jerusalem provides evidence that executed criminals could be afforded an

¹³⁸ Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 95-96: “A particular aspect of Roman Judaism . . . [is] its close political and intellectual affiliation with Jerusalem and Palestine.” Again, “Intellectually, even after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, there was a constant interchange between Palestinian Judaism and Roman Judaism.”

¹³⁹ B. Green, 52, suggests the number of the executed was in the dozens rather than the hundreds.

¹⁴⁰ Josephus, *Autobiography* 75.

honorable burial following a Roman execution.¹⁴¹ Again, all four gospels relate that Joseph of Arimathea requested and obtained the crucified body of Jesus from the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:43//Matthew 27:58//Luke 23:52, John 19:38).

Though again these examples occur in Palestine, it is important to be remembered that all Jews were granted certain privileges in the empire. Since the days of Julius Caesar, it had not been forbidden for Jews to “live according to their own customs . . . even at Rome itself” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.10.8).¹⁴² There is no reason to suppose that Jewish burial customs could not have been likewise respected. There is some evidence that elsewhere in the empire the bodies of executed criminals were made available for burial. Two sections of the *Digest* of Roman law, compiled in the 6th century by the emperor Justinian, speaks both to the historical as well as the contemporary practice of remanding the bodies of executed criminals to family or friends.

The bodies of those who suffer capital punishment are not to be refused to their relatives; and the deified Augustus writes in the tenth book of his *de Vita Sua* that he observed this [custom]. Today, however, the bodies of those who are executed are buried in the same manner as if this had been sought and granted. But sometimes it is not allowed, particularly [with the bodies] of those condemned for treason. The bodies of those condemned to be burned can also be sought so that the bones and ashes can be collected and handed over for burial. (48.24.1)

The bodies of executed persons are to be granted to any who seek them for burial. (48.24.3)¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Magness, 168-9; Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries: What Jewish Burial Practices Reveal about the Beginnings of Christianity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 98-103. Evans notes that the “honorable” burial was the secondary one, in which the bones were first placed in the family tomb after a period of one year.

¹⁴² See Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.10.1-8. Though he is our only witness to these provisions, most scholars accept them as authentic.

¹⁴³ Both quotations of the *Digest* from Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit: Jewish Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 168.

One early example (ca. 155 C.E.) of a Christian martyr whose remains were gathered by his associates is that of Polycarp. Executed by Roman officials at Smyrna, in Asia Minor, he was burned at the stake. Nevertheless, according to his followers

“ . . . afterwards, we removed his bones, which were more valuable than expensive gems and more precious than gold, and put them in a suitable place. There, whenever we can gather together in joy and happiness, the Lord will allow us to commemorate the birthday of his martyrdom” (Martyrdom of Polycarp 18:1-3).

8.3 Burial Customs

Hebrew scriptures indicate a strong desire to mark graves. A pillar (*masheba*) and a monument (*shiyun*) were said to mark the graves of two biblical notables.¹⁴⁴ And sometime during the fourteenth century B.C.E., the Israelites, remembering the location of his entombment, reportedly brought back the body of the patriarch Joseph from Egypt.¹⁴⁵ The burial sites of such prophets and patriarchs were long remembered.¹⁴⁶ Jews honored the dead whom they followed and respected. In first century C.E. Jerusalem there existed tombs attributed to David, Absalom, Jehoshaphat, Zechariah and James, the brother of Jesus.¹⁴⁷ Over twenty percent of the Herodian-period ossuaries so far discovered have been engraved with the names of the deceased.

There is no reason to presume that Peter’s Jewish associates would not mark and hallow his burial site simply because there existed no Roman “cult of the martyrs” at this period of Christianity’s origins. Jewish reverence for martyrs since the Hellenistic period has been

¹⁴⁴ E.g. Rachel (Gen 35:20) and an unnamed prophet (2 Kings 23:17).

¹⁴⁵ Exodus 13:19.

¹⁴⁶ E.g. the cave where Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham and Sarah was remembered (Genesis 25:9); later Isaac and Jacob and their wives were all buried in the same location in order to be gathered up with their fathers. Much later, Herod the Great built a large enclosure over the front of this cave of Machpelah.

¹⁴⁷ Toynbee, *Death*, 188-89. For David’s tomb see William H. Shea, “The Tomb of David in Jerusalem,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34 (1996): 287-293. For James’s tomb see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Where was James Buried?” *Bible Review* 19 (2003). Though James’s tomb had been constructed by the first century C.E., its attribution to him may have come later. It is, in reality, a mausoleum for the sons of Hezir.

convincingly demonstrated. The books of 2 and 4 *Maccabees* recount for posterity a number of examples of Jews undergoing martyrdom for the sake of their laws against the rising threat of Hellenism in the second temple period. These stories were handed down out of respect and admiration for, and as approval of the emulation of, their sacrifice.¹⁴⁸

As Jews, assuming they maintained the customs of their homeland, Peter's followers would have marked the grave in some way in order to "visit the trench grave of the deceased a year after the burial and celebrate his eternal freedom."¹⁴⁹ Gentile Christians, too, would have reason to remember the location. Early Gentile Christians practiced the custom of holding funeral meals for the dead and later "tended to center their social communion around the grave of a martyr" after which they desired to be buried near him (as at least two similarly oriented first-century graves in area P confirm).¹⁵⁰

Other reasons may have driven Peter's followers to remember his burial place. The bones of holy men were sometimes thought to have restorative or magical powers. Those of Elisha were believed to be able to resurrect the dead.

And as a man was being buried, lo, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood on his feet. (2 Kings 13:21)

¹⁴⁸ U. Kellerman calls 2 Macc. 6:18-7:42 "the primeval martyr narrative of Judaism and the early church" (cited by Thomas Fischer, "Maccabees, Books of," *ABD* 4:442). According to Fischer, 4:449, "For the first time in biblical religion, martyrdom had become a new type of divine worship . . . The 'Maccabees' were the first and only Saints to be revered by parts of both Judaism and Christianity . . . These champions were originally adored (in the Greek sense) at the site of their execution, at their grave in Antioch." The book was completed no later than 125 B.C.E. 4 *Maccabees*, which highlights and repeats the martyrologies of 2 Maccabees, is likely contemporaneous with Peter and Paul and was written in the diaspora.

¹⁴⁹ Eldad Keynan, "Jewish Burials," n.p. [cited 26 February 2014]. Online: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/burial357907.shtml>. In the tombs of the well-to-do, at least in the Jerusalem area, the relatives would return to the deceased in a year's time to break down the bones and put them in an ossuary. This practice characterized burials around the city in the Herodian period (ca. 30 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.).

¹⁵⁰ Graydon F. Snyder, "Survey and 'New' Thesis On the Bones of Peter," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 32, (1969): 15.

The personal effects of holy men even in their lifetimes were believed to exhibit mystical properties. The Acts of the Apostles, written between the late first century and early second, tells how Paul's clothing could affect cures: "And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them" (Acts 19:11-12). One touch of the *tzitzit* of Jesus's robe proved curative (Matthew 9:20-22, 14:34-36). The passing of Peter's shadow was thought to heal the sick (Acts 5:15). (Recall that pilgrims of from the fourth century onward dropped bits of cloth down into Peter's supposed grave in order that magical power might be transferred to them.) Though Paul, Jesus, and Peter were alive in these stories, the examples show that belief in the magical powers associated with the bodies or effects of holy men was held by both Jews and Jewish Christians. There were, then, a number of reasons to retrieve, and then remember the location of Peter's remains.

8.4. The Question of Location

Though the questions of whether, how, and why Peter's body could have been retrieved have been addressed, the question of "why here?" should be examined. Could an executed Jew be buried in a grave so near, or even within, the gardens of Nero. First, there is no evidence that the



gardens reached this point on Vatican Hill. The burial, as has been shown, was not necessarily done illegally; the body may have been officially recovered and no secret burial required. Would a Jew have been buried in

area P? As has been shown, Roman “Jews and Christians presumably buried their dead in graveyards along with everyone else.”¹⁵¹ The trench graves (fossae) in the graveyard at area P indicate that only the poor were buried there. Their locations were marked either with simple upturned tiles or left anonymous (some markers may have gone missing). There is every possibility that Peter and several first-century Christians were buried here.

Peter’s burial in area P may have to do with Jewish regulations about the transportation of corpses. The dead had to be buried before sunset after which they must be considered “buried for good.”¹⁵² In Palestine, at least, “Jewish law strictly prohibits moving bodies and/or remains from one place to another.”¹⁵³ Time constraints may have made the nearby graveyard on Vatican Hill the most expedient option for burial. Perhaps this passage from the Torah was in the minds of the *vespillones* (carriers of corpses): “if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).¹⁵⁴ If Peter was crucified, the command of the Torah, centuries of Jewish custom, and respect for Peter the martyr may have helped compel his companions to take the course of action they chose.

8.5 The Relics

In 1942 when the cache of human bones was discovered under the Red Wall behind the fossa, the Pope was immediately notified. In his presence the bones were carefully removed from their “grave” by the archaeological team and handed to representatives of the pontiff. These were later

¹⁵¹ B. Green, 180.

¹⁵² Keynan, n.p.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ This law was seriously studied and exegeted by the community at Qumran.

examined by the Pope's personal physician, Dr. Riccardo Galeazzi-Lisi. After a cursory examination he promptly declared they were the bones of an "elderly and vigorous man."¹⁵⁵ The pope, relying on the skills of his doctor, announced in 1950 that the bones of Peter had quite possibly been found. He may have been right but not in regard to these bones.¹⁵⁶

In 1956, an expert in anatomical forensics, Venerando Correnti, Chair of Anthropology at the University of Palermo, was asked to re-examine not only those bones but also the ones that were spirited away from the loculus in graffiti wall G by Monsignor Ludwig Kaas over ten years earlier. In fact, it was the "discovery" of these bones by Guarducci that prompted her to request permission of Pope Pius XII to have them professionally analyzed.¹⁵⁷

What Correnti's inspection initially determined with regard to the bones from the fossa was disappointing for any who thought that they may have been the bones of the apostle.¹⁵⁸ Rather than the remains of a stout, late-middle-age male, Correnti determined the bone fragments to represent no less than three human individuals plus a large number of animals. Of the human specimens, two were male; both were less than 50 years old when they died. The third was in all probability female and elderly, probably over 70. The animal bones found here and in all the collections examined by Correnti, represented a variety of domestic types: sheep, pigs, goats, cows and fowl. These may have belonged to creatures who roamed the fields at a time before the

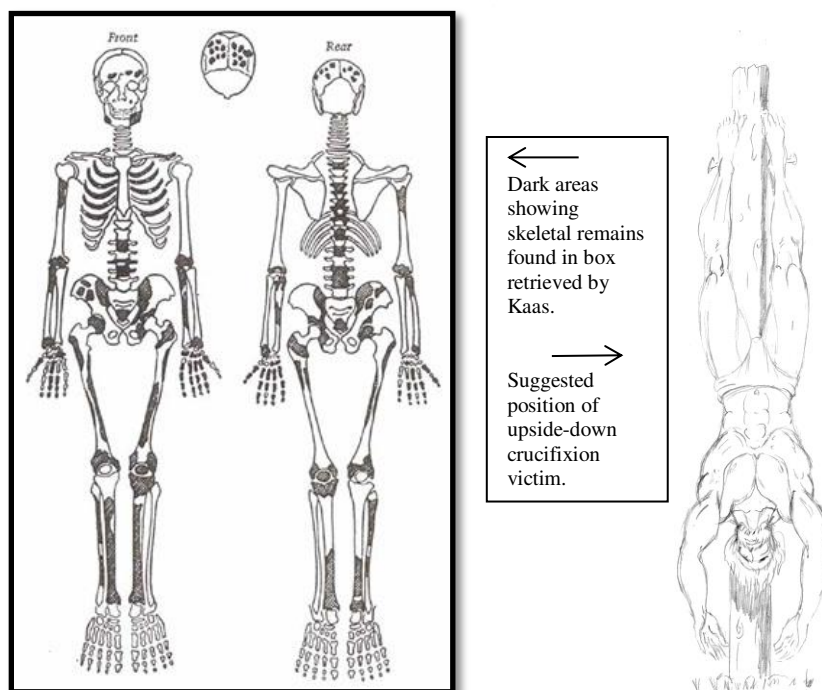
¹⁵⁵ Kirschbaum, 195.

¹⁵⁶ No official report was ever made by Dr. Galeazzi-Lisi. And, to their credit, the original investigative report by the archaeological team refrained from drawing any conclusion about the remains.

¹⁵⁷ Guarducci was made aware of these in 1953 by Segoni. She examined them and they were then re-stored in the wooden box where they lay inexplicably unaddressed for nine years.

¹⁵⁸ Correnti's report was published as part two of M. Guarducci's *Le reliquie di Pietro* ("The Relics of Peter"), Vatican City, 1965.

mausoleums were constructed. The remains of such carcasses could have washed down with the rains into the gravesite.¹⁵⁹



Correnti next turned his attention to the bones found in the loculus and moved to the wooden box by Kaas. These told a different story. All the remains were from a single individual: a male, “robust and aged between sixty and seventy at the time of death.”¹⁶⁰ Bones from every part of the skeleton were represented save for the feet.¹⁶¹ Obviously these remains had a better claim to being those of Peter than those from the fossa. The problem was now how to associate them with the loculus from which they reportedly came. The bones, as explained above, were not

¹⁵⁹ This opinion is shared by Guarducci and Smothers. Toynbee, “Bones,” 353, thinks these are the remains of *refrigerium* meals held at the gravesite by relatives. These bones were separated and inventoried by Luigi Cardini of the University of Rome.

¹⁶⁰ Toynbee, “Bones,” 353.

¹⁶¹ Hall, 189: “The absence of feet accorded with the tradition that Peter had been crucified upside down, meaning that the executioner would simply have hacked off the feet to remove the corpse from the cross.”

removed under controlled circumstances by trained archaeologists. The new examiners had only the word and signed affidavit of Sempietrini Giovanni Segoni as to their origin.¹⁶²

To help resolve the issue, certain tests were ordered. First, the soil that had accumulated in the bone depressions were petrographically tested against soil found in and around the grave site area designated as P.¹⁶³ The soil on Vatican Hill is different, a sandy marl according to experts, than the blue clay or yellow sand that is found throughout most of Rome.¹⁶⁴ The tests showed a match. There were also fragments of colored plaster from the Red Wall found in the box as well as bits of the marble that lined the loculus. Unfortunately, as yet no DNA test has been conducted to try to match these bones from the few remaining fragments that were scraped out of the loculus later by the archaeological team after Kaas had done his work. A match here would settle once and for all the issue of where Kaas got the bones.¹⁶⁵

Other examinations on other artifacts in Kaas's box proved informative. Along with the bones, Kaas and Segoni had managed to remove fabric threads, coins, and some animal bones. These latter included a complete skeleton of a mouse that had apparently inadvertently entered the loculus through the many small cracks and crevices in the brick work of the surrounding walls and then lost its way. This may also account for the presence of the medieval coins which may have similarly dropped into the loculus over time through those same cracks and crevices.

¹⁶² The affidavit was signed 7 January 1965 and is maintained in the Vatican archives. See Walsh, 168.

¹⁶³ The tests were conducted by G. Lauro and G. C. Negretti from the University of Rome. See Smothers, "Bones," 86.

¹⁶⁴ Walsh, 115.

¹⁶⁵ When told of the recent findings three of the four original team members refused to accept that there were ever any bones in the loculus. They apparently went to their graves in disbelief. Only Kirschbaum accepted the new finds.

Initially thrown into the area by well-meaning pilgrims from above, the coins, like those found in the fossa, may have simply taken a different roll and ended up in the loculus.

The textile remains included “purple woolen pieces with golden threads, and others of vegetable fiber wrapped in gold-plated copper.”¹⁶⁶ Chemical tests performed at the University of Rome determined that the dye was derived from the Mediterranean shellfish *murex brandaris* or *murex trunculus*.¹⁶⁷ The method of manufacture typified that prevalent in the third-to-fourth centuries.¹⁶⁸ Such colored fabric was worn exclusively by those of wealth and influence and its presence here likely testifies to the importance attributed to the bones by whoever wrapped them.¹⁶⁹ Someone at the time the loculus was sealed, now determined by Guarducci to have been during the reign of Constantine, venerated these bones to the point of wrapping them in royal purple.

As stated above, every portion of the skeleton of the man found in the wooden box was represented by at least a fragment save for the feet. These remains included pieces of the skull. Tradition has held since the 11th century that the skull of Peter has been stored in the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome. Guarducci secured papal approval to inspect the Lateran skull with Correnti to determine if the pieces from the wooden box conflicted with those held by the

¹⁶⁶ Smothers, “Bones,” 86.

¹⁶⁷ The threads were chemically treated with hydrochloric acid followed by hydrosulfate of ammonia; the reaction indicated the biological origins. See Walsh, 123-4.

¹⁶⁸ Walsh, 115.

¹⁶⁹ According to an announcement by Pope Benedict on June 28, 2009, an interior probe of the sarcophagus of St. Paul beneath the high altar of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls recovered samples of a purple-dyed linen cloth laminated in gold and pieces of blue fabric with linen filaments. Carbon-14 tests identified bone samples from the container as belonging to a first or second century person. See Elisa Pinna, “Sonda nella tomba di S. Paolo: trovati I resti dell’apostolo” *Corriere della Sera*, June 28, 2009, n.p. [cited 2 March 2014]. Online: http://www.corriere.it/cronache/09_giugno_28/san_paolo_tomba_fe6000e8-6414-11de-baf4-00144f02aabc.shtml.

Lateran church.¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately, by stipulation, their official report could not be made public. They could nevertheless announce whether in their view the fragments from each site conflicted with one another or not. Their determination was that they did not. No other report has so far been made public. What is now required to verify the tradition that the skull fragments held by the Lateran match those of Kaas's box is DNA testing. Though positive results would not prove that either set of bones belong to the apostle Peter, the weight of all the evidence would at that point so heavily favor a positive assessment that any case made against their authenticity would prove contrarian.

How and why had the bones of Peter, if those they be, been transferred from the fossa to the loculus? Guarducci suggests they were moved there for security reasons and to protect them from moisture damage.¹⁷¹ (It may also have been at this time that the sealing slab over the fossa was replaced with the one taken from the tomb of Isidorus.¹⁷²) Reasonable objections to this theory have been raised. Was the poor quality of the loculus for such venerated bones the best that Constantine and bishop Maxentius could do? It is clear that Constantine spared no expense with the basilica so why such a meager repository for the actual bones of the apostle? Water damage could have been prevented by placing the bones in a lead lined box and returning them to the fossa. Also, what did Christians in the time of Constantine have to fear that encouraged them to finally secure the bones away? One answer to that may be that no one at the time could guarantee the continuation of Christian-friendly rule after Constantine's death. There were, in fact, attempts to re-establish the old pagan beliefs under such emperors as Julian the Apostate.

¹⁷⁰ Walsh, 116.

¹⁷¹ Toynbee, "Bones," 355.

¹⁷² Ibid., 353-4.

Perhaps the time was right to obtain the required imperial authorization to move the bones and assure their future safety.

Obviously, the hiding of Peter's remains in the *loculus* contradicts the tradition that Constantine granted Peter (and Paul) bronze coffins with gold crosses. Perhaps these were no more than cenotaphs which were looted or stolen by the Saracens as per the reports of the events in 846-7 C.E.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ According to the *Liber Pontificalis* ii, "they invaded and occupied the church of blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, committing unspeakable iniquities." Prudentius of Troyes: "They sacked the church of blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and bore off all the ornaments and treasures, together with the very altar that had been placed over the tomb of the said Prince of the Apostles." (Both quotes in Toynbee, "Bones," 356.) If pilgrims believed that Peter was in the sarcophagus why did they continue to drop coins down into the *fossa*?

9. CONCLUSION

The excavation team, as well as most of the scholars who have subsequently examined both their finds and their interpretations, agree that the tropaion of Gaius has been discovered. By no later than the mid-second century a common belief arose that it marked the grave of Peter the apostle. It served as the single motivating factor for Constantine's decision to build his basilica in honor of the apostle on this particular site and no other. The attribution of the grave beneath the tropaion to Peter is harder to date using the available sources. Later traditions ascribe that belief to an early period, even to the time of Peter's death. But their reliability remains questionable. What may strengthen their testimony are the bones reportedly found in the loculus of wall G by Msgr. Kaas. DNA tests linking those relics to the bone fragments scraped out of the loculus by the archaeologists would confirm their similar origin. Carbon-14 testing of those remains, such as was performed on the reputed bones of Paul which resulted in a first-century dating, would buttress the theory that Peter was indeed buried on the spot. No test would provide certainty but the combined evidence, from literature, archaeology, and forensics should tip the balance in favor of a positive assessment of the authenticity of the remains.

In any event, the Roman Catholic Church seems to have made up its mind.

[W]e believe it our duty, in the present state of archaeological and scientific conclusions, to give you and the church this happy announcement, bound as we are to honor sacred relics, backed by a reliable proof of their authenticity... In the present case, we must be all the more eager and exultant when we are right in believing that the few but sacred mortal remains have been traced of the Prince of the Apostles, of Simon son of Jonah, of the fisher-man named Peter by Christ, of he who was chosen by the Lord to found His church and to whom He entrusted the keys of His kingdom ... until His final glorious

return. (Text of Announcement by Pope Paul VI Concerning the Relics, *The New York Times*, 27 June 1968)¹⁷⁴

The bones, “normally kept in an urn housed in the private chapel of the Pope’s own Vatican apartments,”¹⁷⁵ were put on public display Sunday, November 24, 2013. Monsignor Rino Fisichella, writing for the semi-official Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, seemed to shut the door on further scientific testing by saying, “We did not want to, and have no intention, of opening up any argument,” in connection with the new display.¹⁷⁶



¹⁷⁴ Art and Sue Renz, “Peter’s Bones and Rome’s Truth,” n.p. [Cited 24 February 2014]. Online: http://www.hissheep.org/catholic/peters_bones_and_romes_truth.html.

¹⁷⁵ Bryony Jones, “Pope puts ‘St. Peter’s bones’ on display at Vatican,” *CNN.com*. November 22, 2013. [Cited 24 February 2014]. Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/22/world/europe/st-peters-bones-on-display/index.html?iref=allsearch>. Pope Paul VI was given the urn in 1971 to be kept for his private veneration. See Associated Press, “Vatican displays Saint Peter’s bones for the first time,” November 24, 2013. [Cited 24 February 2014]. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/24/vatican-st-peters-bones-display-pope-francis>.

¹⁷⁶ Lizzy Davies, “Saint Peter’s Bones: Vatican Exhumes Old Argument with Plan to Show ‘Relics’,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2013. [Cited 24 February 2014]. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/18/saint-peters-bones-vatican-relics>.

APPENDIX: THE REMAINS OF PETER AND PAUL IN THE CATACOMBS

Another early tradition that lies uneasily alongside those that fix the resting place of Peter on the Vatican and Paul on the Via Ostia claims that both apostles' remains rested together in the catacombs beneath the current church of St. Sebastian at the third mile marker on the Via Appia. No trace of any of the saints' remains or tombs has been discovered during excavations in the catacombs. Nevertheless, various forms of the tradition led to an early scholarly consensus of sorts that at some point the two apostles were interred here. Conflicts among the sources were remedied through broad interpretations and clever reconstructions. More recently, especially in light of archaeological excavations beneath St. Peter's and St. Paul's churches, experts have tended to interpret the evidence regarding the catacombs in terms of communal festivals that may or may not reflect the actual presence of the apostles. It was the *belief* in the presence, spiritual or otherwise, that likely prompted the commemorations. Nevertheless, it is useful to briefly survey the evidence as it provides a substantive counterstatement to the traditions of Peter and Paul at the Vatican and Ostian Way.

The most important literary witnesses to the tradition that the apostles were interred in the catacombs include 1) the inscription of Pope Damasus, 2) a hymn attributed to Ambrose, 3) the festal calendars including the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* and the *Depositio Martyrum*, 4) the *Martyrium Sanctorum Petri et Pauli*, 5) the letter of Pope Gregory to the empress Constantina, 6) the so-called Salzburg itinerary, 7) the Syriac *Acts of Sharbil*, and 8) the *Liber Pontificalis*.

A.1 Damasus Inscription

On the walls within the Basilica (or Memoria) Apostolorum, built above the catacombs in the fourth century C.E., was once an inscription made by Pope Damasus (366-84). Though the original has been lost, the text was copied by a number of eyewitnesses.

Whoever you may be that seek the names of Peter and Paul should know that here the saints once dwelt (*habitasse*). The East sent the disciples – that we readily admit. But on account of the merit of their blood (they have followed Christ through the stars and attained to the ethereal bosom and the realms of the holy ones) Rome has gained a superior right to claim them as her citizens. Damasus would thus tell of your praises, you new stars. (Damasus, *Epigrams* 26)¹⁷⁷

Does “here” refer to Rome in general or to the catacombs specifically? And what is the meaning of the Latin *habitasse*? It might indicate that the apostles Peter and Paul once resided here during their lifetimes though Henry Chadwick thinks this unlikely.¹⁷⁸ The word may also be a mis-reading of *habitare*, indicating that the martyrs were present in spirit only.¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, the passage may indicate that, in accord with the other texts cited below as well as with graffiti from the catacombs themselves, that fourth century believers held that the apostles’ remains once rested here and were later transferred, or translated, somewhere else.

A.2 Hymn of Ambrose

Ambrose, archbishop of Milan (ca. 340-397), provides the earliest evidence of celebrations for the two deceased apostles taking place in Rome on June 29 at three separate locations. This is found in his hymn, *Apostolorum Passio*, and must be interpreted, in light of the

¹⁷⁷ Translation in Chadwick, 35.

¹⁷⁸ Chadwick, 37.

¹⁷⁹ Guarducci, 163.

other literary evidence below, to refer to commemorations at the Vatican and at the Ostian and Appian Ways.

Through so great a city's circuit,
Dense crowds of people make their way:
In three streets is celebrated
Two holy martyrs' festival. (Ambrose, *Hymn 71*)¹⁸⁰

A.3 Martyrial Calendars

The explicit locations of the celebrations are given in both the *Depositio Martyrum* of the Calendar of Philocalus (or simply the “Calendar of 354” C.E.), and the early fifth-century *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (the “Martyrology of pseudo-Jerome”). Both likely derive from a single source. Each refers to the June 29 date of the martyrial festival of Peter and Paul but in different ways that affect the interpretation of their meanings.

III Kal. Iul. Petri in Catacumbas et Pauli Ostense, Tusco et Basso consulibus (“June 29, Peter in the catacombs, Paul on the Highway to Ostia, in the consulship of Tuscus and Bassus”). (*Depositio Martyrum III Kal. Iul.*)¹⁸¹

The curious omission of any reference to the Vatican is corrected by the fuller account given in the later *Martyrologium*.

III Kal. Iul. Romae via Aurelia, natale sanctorum Petri et Pauli apostolorum, Petri in Vaticano, Pauli vero in via Ostensi, utrumque [sic; utrusque?] in Catacumbas, passi sub Nerone, Basso et Tusco consulibus. (“June 29, on the Aurelian Way, martyr festival of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, of Peter on the Vatican Hill, of Paul on the Highway to Ostia, both in the catacombs, suffered under Nero, in the consulate of Bassus and Tuscus.”) (*Martyrologium Hieronymianum III Kal. Iul.*)¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ “Tantae per Urbis ambitum / Stipata tendunt agmina / Trinis celebrator viis / Festum Sanctorum Marytrum.” English translation by J. C. Bellett in Alexius Aurelius Pelliccia, *The Polity of the Christian Church of Early, Medieval, and Modern Times* (London: J. Masters and Co., 1883), 343. Online: books.google.com.

¹⁸¹ Translation in Cullmann, 124.

¹⁸² Translation in Cullmann, 125.

Bassus and Tuscus were consuls in 258 C.E., the year of the Valerian persecution of Christians at which time Christian cemeteries were closed. The *Depositio*, read in isolation, indicates that the apostle Peter was commemorated in the catacombs whereas Paul was honored on the Via Ostia. But the later *Martyrium*, more complete but more confusing, makes little sense as it stands.¹⁸³ According to Donald Wm. O'Connor, there are at least six ways to interpret the combined notices.¹⁸⁴

- 1) Each apostle was originally buried in the catacombs but moved to their individual resting places prior to the Valerian persecution.
- 2) Each apostle was originally buried separately but moved to the catacombs prior to the Valerian persecution in 258. Later they were returned. (O'Connor identifies this as the most popular interpretation.)
- 3) Only a portion of the apostles' remains were transferred to the catacombs.
- 4) Peter was originally buried in the catacombs but Paul at the Via Ostia.
- 5) The bodies were originally buried in the catacombs; later they were sent to their individual resting places. In ca. 200, when Heliogabulus expanded the circus, Peter's remains were sent back to the catacombs. A similar transfer occurred with Paul's remains prior to the Valerian persecution. Both were returned in the time of Constantine.
- 6) The relics were never in the catacombs; only their commemorative cult was moved here when, in 258, it was no longer safe to worship at their respective sites.

This latter interpretation is gaining consensus among many scholars who now see the catacombs as an unlikely resting place for the remains of the apostles. Before examining the

¹⁸³ O'Connor, 126.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 126-131.

problems created by interpretations one through five, the remaining literary witnesses to the catacomb interment should be reviewed.

A.4 Martyrium Sanctorum Petri et Pauli

In support of the first interpretation of the festal calendars is a story that circulated in the fourth through sixth centuries which recounts that both apostles were buried in the catacombs immediately upon their deaths. Later they were moved to the monuments built in their honor. One version of the story can be found in the fifth-century *Martyrium Sanctorum Petri et Pauli* by pseudo-Marcellus. According to this version, the bodies were only held in the catacombs for a year and a half.

And some devout men of the regions of the East wished to carry off the relics of the saints, and immediately there was a great earthquake in the city; [some mss. add: And the people of the Romans ran, and took them into the place called the Catacombs on the Appian Way, at the third milestone; and there the bodies of the saints were guarded a year and six months, until places were built for them in which they might be put. And the body of St. Peter was put into the Vatican . . . and that of St. Paul into the Vostesian (or Ostesian) Way.¹⁸⁵

A.5 The Letter of Gregory

A similar version of the story is also found in the Letter of Pope Gregory the Great (June, 494) to the empress Constantina.

But what shall I say of the bodies of the blessed apostles, when it is well known that, at the time when they suffered, believers came from the East to recover their bodies as being those of their own countrymen? And, having been taken as far as the second milestone from the city, they were deposited in the place which is called *Catacumbas*. But, when the whole multitude came together and endeavored to remove them thence, such violence of thunder and lightning terrified and dispersed them that they on no account presumed to attempt such a thing again. And then the Romans, who of the Lord's

¹⁸⁵ Translation by Alexander Walker, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8:485.

loving-kindness were counted worthy to do this, went out and took up their bodies, and laid them in the places where they are now deposited.¹⁸⁶

Are those places the Vatican and Ostian Way or the Catacombs? O'Connor considers the story of the attempted theft of the bodies by Orientals "fantastic."¹⁸⁷ In any case he believes the Gregory Letter to be derived from details in the *Martyrium Sanctorum Petri et Pauli*.¹⁸⁸

A.6 Salzburg Itinerary

According to the *Notitia Ecclesiarum urbis Romae* ("Notice of the Churches of the City of Rome" also called the *Itinerarium Salisburgense*), a seventh-century travel guide found in the tenth-century Salzburg-Vienna Codex, the bodies of the apostles lay in the catacombs longer than the year-and-a-half indicated in the *Martyrium* before being relocated.

Next you will proceed along the Via Appia to San Sebastian the martyr, whose body lies in the crypt. There, too, are the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, where they lay for forty years. And at the west end of the church you go down by the steps to where Saint Quirinus, pope and martyr, rests."¹⁸⁹

The itinerary may be based on an earlier version produced during the papacy of Sixtus III (432-40), itself likely dependent on the Roman Calendar of 312.¹⁹⁰

A.7 Acts of Sharbil

Yet another version of the story of the thwarted attempt to remove the apostles' remains can be found in the sixth-century Syriac *Acts of Sharbil*. The text tells how a group of foreigners

¹⁸⁶ Gregory the Great, *Registrum Epistolarum* Book IV, Letter 30. Translation James Barmby *NPNF* Second Series Vol. 12. Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360204030.htm> 2009 [Accessed 7 March 2014]

¹⁸⁷ O'Connor, 108.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸⁹ Translation in Toynbee and Perkins, 169. The 10th-century codex containing the works of Alcuin was found in 1777 at Salzburg. Two topographies of Rome were included at the end of the document.

¹⁹⁰ O'Connor, 114.

(Jews? Eastern Christians?), who were forced to leave Rome, tried to take the apostles' remains with them.

This Barsamya, the bishop, made a disciple of Sharbil the priest. And he lived in the days of Binus [*sic*], bishop of Rome; in whose days the whole population of Rome assembled together, and cried out to the praetor of their city, and said to him: There are too many strangers in this our city . . . but we beseech you to command them to depart out of the city. And, when he had commanded them to depart out of the city, these strangers assembled themselves together, and said to the praetor: We beseech you, my lord, command also that the bones of our dead may depart with us. And he commanded them to take the bones of their dead, and to depart. And all the strangers assembled themselves together to take the bones of Simon Cephas and of Paul, the apostles; but the people of Rome said to them: We will not give you the bones of the apostles. And the strangers said to them: Learn ye and understand that Simon, who is called Cephas, is of Bethsaida of Galilee, and Paul the apostle is of Tarsus, a city of Cilicia. And, when the people of Rome knew that this matter was so, then they let them alone. And, when they had taken them up and were removing them from their places, immediately there was a great earthquake; and the buildings of the city were on the point of falling down, and the city was near being overthrown. And, when the people of Rome saw it, they turned and besought the strangers to remain in their city, and that the bones might be laid in their places again. And, when the bones of the apostles were returned to their places, there was quietness, and the earthquakes ceased, and the winds became still, and the air became bright, and the whole city became cheerful.¹⁹¹

The text is somewhat ambiguous as to where the apostles' bodies were when the foreigners attempted to abscond with them but since they were to be found together, most commentators agree that the catacombs are intended.

A.8 Liber Pontificalis

Finally, a quite different series of events regarding the removal from the Catacombs and re-interment of the apostles' remains is found in the sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis* in the section concerning Pope Cornelius (251-253 C.E.).

He during his pontificate at the request of a certain matron [Lucina], took up the bodies of the apostles, blessed Peter and Paul from the catacombs by night; first the body of the blessed Paul was received by the blessed Lucina and laid in her own garden on the Via

¹⁹¹ Translated by B. P. Pratten, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8:685.

Ostia near [beside] the place where he was beheaded; the body of the blessed Peter was received by the blessed Cornelius, the bishop, and laid near the place where he was crucified, among the bodies of the holy bishops, in the shrine of Apollo, on the Mons Aureus, in the Batican [*sic*], by the palace of Nero, June 29.¹⁹²

Despite the verisimilitude of the story, Chadwick thinks that any search for historicity in the *Liber Pontificalis* passage is misguided.¹⁹³ Lucina is a common character who appears in numerous ancient Acts. Nevertheless, this is the earliest document to speak of a transfer of the remains *from* the catacombs in which they were first interred.¹⁹⁴ Of course, its storyline conflicts with the evidence presented earlier regarding Peter's original interment at the Vatican. Only late documents support the interpretation of the martyrial calendars that the bodies of Peter and Paul were first buried in the catacombs. O'Connor suggests that these represent a misinterpretation of the original Damasus inscription in which the pope wrote that it was the *apostles* who came from the East.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, this and all the preceding witnesses surveyed here agree in their belief that the apostles were first buried in the catacombs whether or not they were transferred somewhere else later.

Unfortunately, no literary or archaeological evidence supports a translation of the remains to the catacombs in the third century (i.e., around 258)¹⁹⁶ or from the catacombs in the fourth century during the time of Constantine. It is becoming the dominant view of most scholars that no transfer of the apostles' actual remains to or from the catacombs ever occurred.

¹⁹² *Liber Pontificalis* XXII Cornelius. Translation in O'Connor, 113 n. 122. The shrine of Apollo either never existed (Guarducci, 42) or this is a mistaken reference to a sanctuary of the Phrygian goddess Cybele and her lover Attis, sometimes confused by ancient writers with Apollo (see Lees-Milne, 64; O'Connor, 113).

¹⁹³ Chadwick, 40.

¹⁹⁴ O'Connor, 113.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109-10.

¹⁹⁶ Though Cornelius is a third-century figure, the *Liber Pontificalis* in which his story appears is a sixty-century document.

The earlier interpretation of the evidence especially of the martyrial calendars that suggest the bodies were first buried separately at the Vatican and Ostian Ways and then later removed to the catacombs contradicts the *Letter of Gregory*, the apocryphal acts, and the *Liber Pontificalis*. In each of these witnesses, the bodies were *first* buried in the catacombs. Left unexplained is why Constantine would have taken the trouble to build his basilica to Peter in the worst possible location if the apostle's bones were resting in the catacombs at the time. There is actually no mention of any transfers in the martyrial calendars or in the notice of the Valerian persecution by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 10.1-9); the assumption results from the academic effort to make sense of the conflicting texts. As Guarducci points out, the Valerian edict did not threaten Christian tombs and moving the bodies would not have made them any safer; both the Vatican and Via Appia were pagan cemeteries.¹⁹⁷ Also the penalties for disturbing graves were severe even though "the sacrosanctity of the tomb was in practice all too often disregarded."¹⁹⁸ According to Chadwick, "the most reasonable interpretation of the available evidence is that the year 258 marked an 'invention' on 29 June in consequence of a special revelation" that the bodies had lain or were lying ad Catacumbas.¹⁹⁹ June 29 also marked the celebration of the founding of Rome by Romulus, a date perhaps intentionally chosen to commemorate the founding of the church.

In any event, commemorations in the catacombs were likely held only by poor laymen "exceedingly ill-instructed in the faith" who practiced refrigerium, a custom which eventually

¹⁹⁷ Guarducci, 165-66.

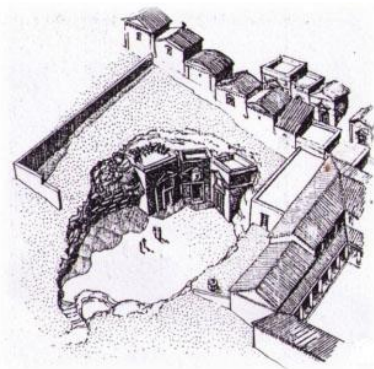
¹⁹⁸ Toynbee and Perkins, 180.

¹⁹⁹ Chadwick, 47. See also O'Connor, 133.

led to “devotional excesses” reined in by the great church.²⁰⁰ The site was popular with them but not universally accepted or recognized.

A.9 Archaeological Results

The first church built along the Via Appia atop the catacombs was called the Basilica Apostolorum, the church of the apostles Peter and Paul. Obviously, the church was constructed prior to the time of Damasus, but the site itself shows evidence of being occupied since the early second century C.E. The site was originally a first-century C.E. quarry, possibly a source of the volcanic deposit called *pozzolana* used to make concrete.²⁰¹ The general location was likely called *kata kymbas* (κατά κύμβασ), “valley dip or bottom.”²⁰² The reference may also have been to a well that currently exists below the monument to St. Sebastian.²⁰³ Once abandoned, the network of passages made an ideal location for burials.



Modern excavations revealed Roman houses, pagan columbaria (storage for cinerary urns), and Christian tombs. The earliest burial was dated to the time of Trajan (98-117).²⁰⁴ These tunnels were used until the beginning of the second century when the roof of the primitive quarry collapsed. The area was then filled in and remade into a courtyard where three pagan

²⁰⁰ Chadwick, 47.

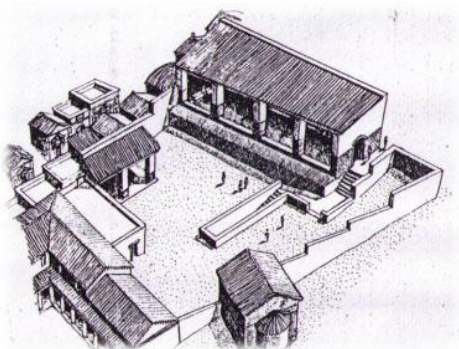
²⁰¹ O’Connor, 140.

²⁰² O’Connor, 136, suggests the word may be a combination of the Greek kata with the Latin tumba (tombs) since the area was near the tomb of the martyrs.

²⁰³ Ibid., 137.

²⁰⁴ It belonged to a freedman named Marcus Ulpius Calocerus.

mausoleums, each dating to between 100 and 110, were constructed.²⁰⁵ Other burials were placed around this sunken, oval courtyard at hilltop level within perimeter walls which demarcated the entire precinct. It was here that cult worship took place in order to avoid the crowded courtyard below. Christian burials in the courtyard did not begin until after the second century when continual raisings of the courtyard floor resulted in the burial of the three original pagan



mausoleums. By the third century, Christian funerary art began to appear.

In the early 1900s archaeologists Anton de Waal and Paul Styger excavated a group of buildings upon whose walls were found graffiti with the names of Peter and Paul. These were dated to the second half of the third century. A large room called the Triclia (“drinking place”) was unearthed which featured a bench and kitchen. These walls, too, were covered with Christian graffiti, some in Greek but most in Latin. They largely consisted of prayers made to the apostles for assistance. Some mention meals eaten in honor of the deceased apostles, a practice called *refrigerium*, obviously carried over by Christians from pagan backgrounds. A nearby water tank was also incorporated into the meal preparations. Together these structures formed the Memoria to the apostles built, perhaps, around 258 or later. “That the purpose of the Memoria was the commemoration of a temporary burial of the Apostles *ad Catacumbas* immediately after their martyrdom is a theory that finds little support from the excavations.”²⁰⁶ According to Kirschbaum, “no credible spot has been found

²⁰⁵ Kirschbaum, 197.

²⁰⁶ Toynbee and Perkins, 176.

beneath St. Sebastian where the apostles could have been buried.”²⁰⁷ It had once been suggested that one of the pagan tombs, the so-called Tomb of the Axe, had served as a temporary resting place for the apostles.²⁰⁸ However no evidence of Christian graffiti or other veneration has been discovered within. But as Toynbee and Perkins concede, no tomb or sarcophagus would have been needed if some political situation required the translation of the apostles’ remains temporarily to the catacombs for safekeeping.²⁰⁹ Their bones could have fit into small boxes requiring little other than shelf space in which to place them for veneration. Unfortunately, the literary evidence does not make mention of this event in 258 or at any other time. Regardless of imperial proscriptions, “Christians continued to meet for public worship in defiance of Valerian’s edit.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Kirschbaum, 199.

²⁰⁸ Toynbee and Perkins, 177.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

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