

City of the Dead

A part-pagan, part-Christian necropolis lies directly beneath the altar of St. Peter's Basilica.

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After the death of Pope Pius XI in 1939, Vatican workmen digging a crypt for his interment made a remarkable discovery: a 2,000-year-old necropolis lay directly under the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica. This mausoleum-filled city of the dead contained both pagan and Christian burials—

including, many believe, the grave of the apostle Peter.

Just how St. Peter, born near the Sea of Galilee, came to Rome remains shrouded in mystery. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciple, "Thou art Peter [from *petra*, meaning rock], and on this rock will I build my church" (16:18). After the crucifixion, Peter became an important leader of the Jesus movement. Little is known about his travels outside Palestine, although Paul says that Peter visited Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21). Several centuries later, the church father St. Jerome (c. 342-420 A.D.) recounted that Peter arrived in Rome in approximately 42 A.D. to preach the Christian message.

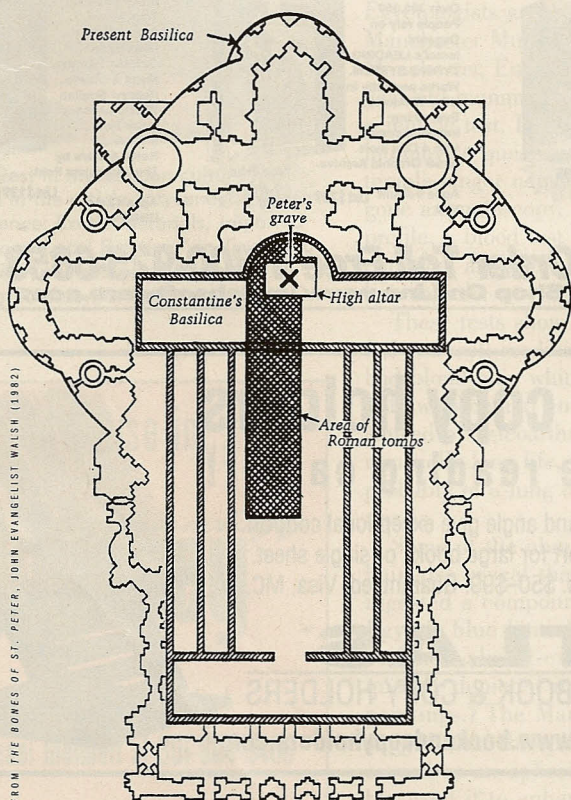
Some 20 years later, in the tenth year of Nero's reign (63-64 A.D.), a great fire destroyed much of Rome. Nero blamed the Christian community for the tragedy and embarked on a campaign of anti-Christian persecution. (Some scholars believe, however, that Nero set the fire himself in order to have an excuse to attack Christians.) Many Christians were martyred,

including the apostle Peter, according to Sulpicius Severus (363-420 A.D.) in his *Sacred History or Chronicle of the World*.

Peter was likely crucified in the circus, an enclosure built for chariot-racing and other spectacles by the emperor Caligula (37-41 A.D.). His body was almost certainly claimed for burial, since no law precluded it, and entombed in the nearby Vatican cemetery.

In Roman times, the term "Vatican" (possibly the name of an early Etruscan settlement) referred to a large tract of land that stretched westward from the banks of the Tiber, beyond the

A tomb-lined street (right) lies far beneath the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica, in the Vatican. In 1939, workers digging a crypt for Pope Pius XI found the subterranean necropolis. Many of the Roman and early Christian tombs were designed to look like miniature houses, with brick facades and frescoed walls. According to ancient tradition, the apostle Peter was buried beneath the high altar of the Byzantine and Renaissance churches, as shown in the plan at left.



FROM THE BONES OF ST. PETER, JOHN EVANGELIST WALSH (1992)

COURTESY OF ENEL