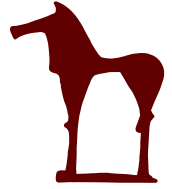




BABESCH

Seventeenth BABESCH Byvanck Lecture



Barbara E. Borg

*The True Burial Site of Peter and Paul?
Christians and Jews on the Appian Way*



Tuesday April 23rd 2024

in collaboration with the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden

The BABESCH Foundation

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Barbara E. Borg
Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa



The BABESCH Foundation

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The rise of BABESCH to an established forum for international scholarly exchange has been due in no small part to the tireless efforts of the late dr. Lili Byvanck-Quarles van Ufford (1907–2002). Her passionate involvement continues through the substantial endowment she made to Leiden University in the form of the Byvanck Fund (LUF), with the BABESCH Foundation explicitly labelled as one of the beneficiaries. This has enabled the Foundation to develop, aside from its scholarly publishing duties, various other activities geared to a wider community, of which the BABESCH Byvanck Lecture series is the best known. Another initiative perpetuating Lili's name is the BABESCH Byvanck Award for the best contribution of a young, debutant scholar in the BABESCH journal. A fairly recent addition is the publication of the annual BABESCH Byvanck Lecture in a booklet.



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The True Burial site of Peter and Paul? Christians and Jews on the Appian Way

Despite the current catholic orthodoxy that the original burial sites of the martyr saints Peter and Paul were where they are still venerated – underneath their churches on the Vatican hill and on the Via Ostiense – a controversy still surrounds an enigmatic site at the third milestone of the Appian Way. The present, 17th-century church of Saint Sebastian was built over an early, simple cult site for the apostles and a 4th-century Basilica Apostolorum. Based on archaeological evidence, I will argue that it was here, in a former pozzolana mine, that the apostles were believed to have been buried from at least the 2nd century onwards, and trace how their cult developed from ordinary funerary cult to martyr cult.

There are arguably very few questions concerning the ancient world that have been discussed more extensively and more controversially than the death and burial of the apostles Peter and Paul. It is a subject that has occupied, not only an army of scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds – an annotated bibliography by De Marco of 1964 already featured 870 entries – but also the general public. Contributors in the debates have often been deeply invested in the questions involved, after all, St. Peter is regarded as the rock on which the Catholic Church is built. I am approaching the subject, not from a theological viewpoint. What interests me is ultimately not the ‘true burial site’ of the apostles, but what people *believed* in the second to fourth centuries AD to have been their true burial sites. This question is so interesting since it allows us to better understand the relationship between the early Christians and their non-Christian surroundings, not least from a socio-historical point of view. The site in question is now underneath the church of S. Sebastiano at the third mile of the via Appia (fig. 1). I shall start with a brief overview of the history of the site, then discuss the most popular interpretation offered for the cult of the apostles Peter and Paul at this spot, and finally present some of my own readings of the remains in their wider context.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

In antiquity, the area known as *ad catacumbas*, near the hollows, initially hosted a pozzolana mine on the right side of the via Appia, positioned between the second and third milestones. Commencing from the mid-first century AD, a sprawling necropolis began to take shape along secondary roads

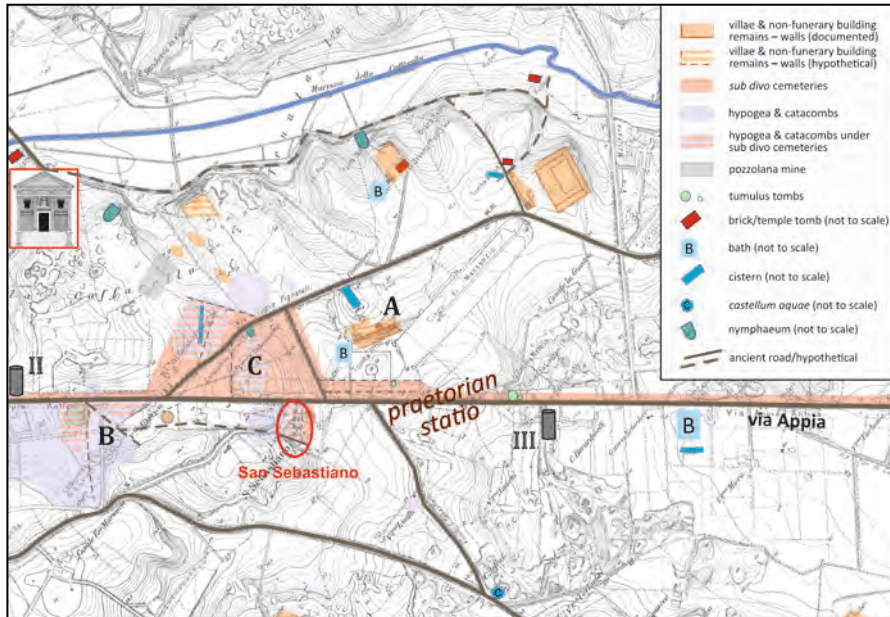


Fig. 1: Via Appia between the second and third milestone (elaboration B.E. Borg).

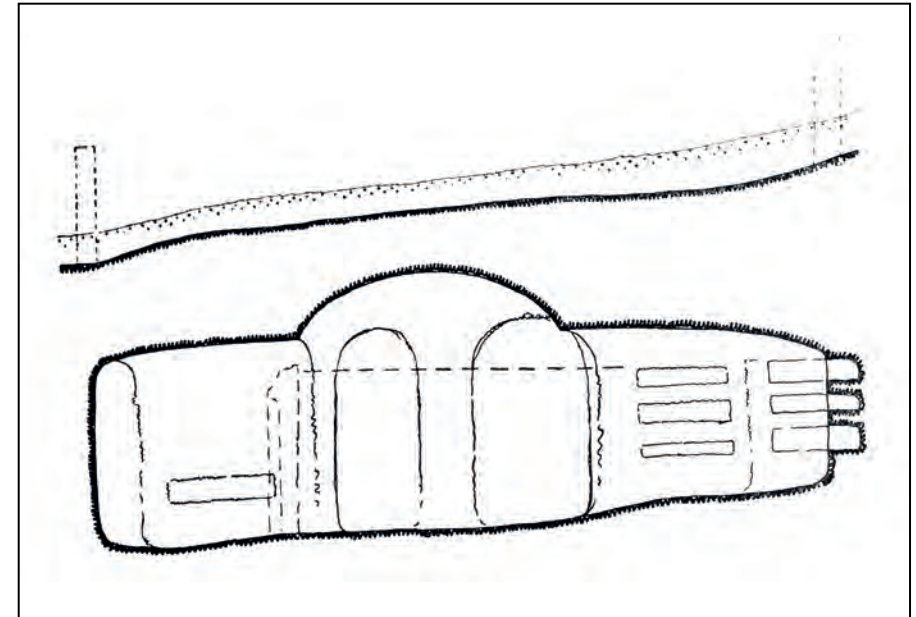


Fig. 3: Schematic drawing of the main cavity of the pozzolana mine with the first loculi (Tolotti 1953, fig. 22).

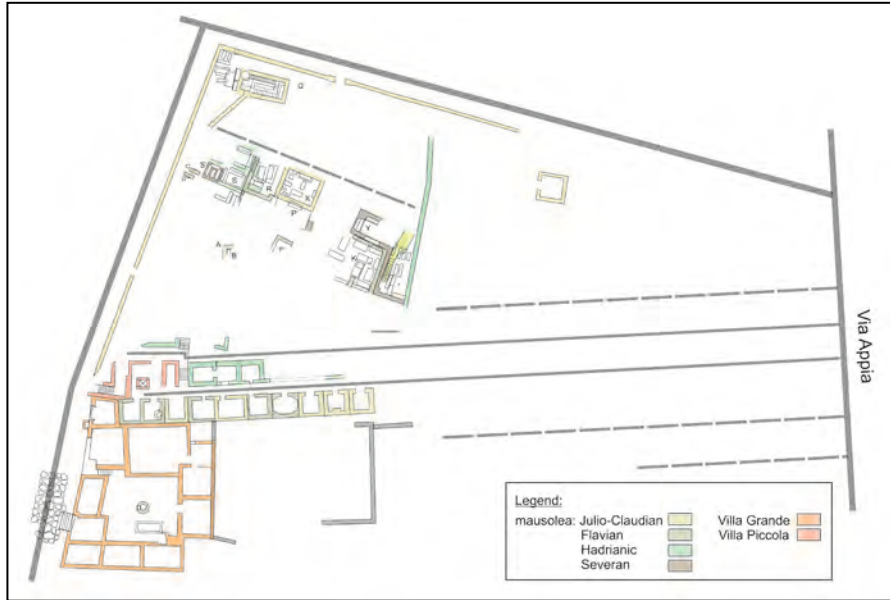


Fig. 2: The early necropolis on the via Appia underneath and around S. Sebastiano (elaboration B.E. Borg).

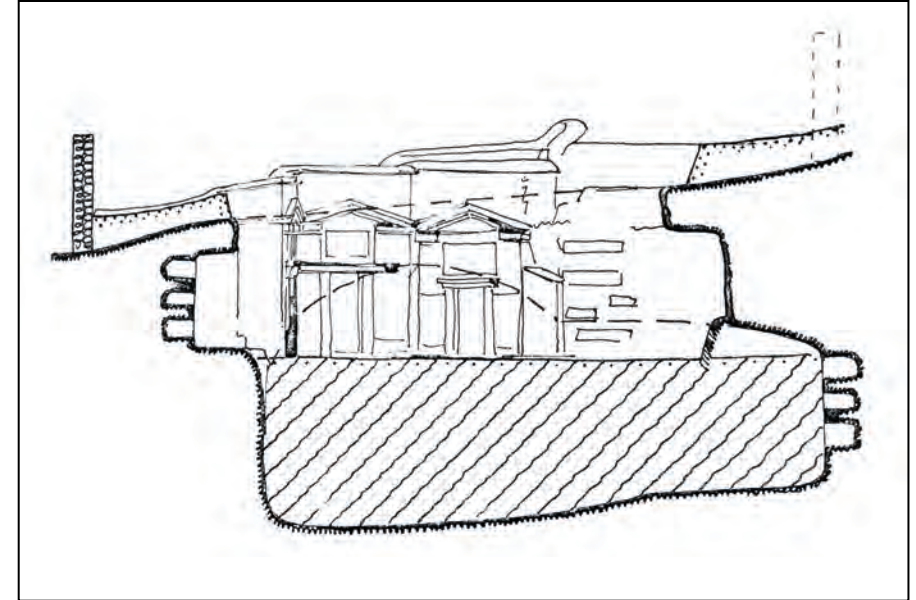


Fig. 4: The piazzola of the second century with mausolea after the collapse of the mine's roof (Tolotti 1953, fig. 28).



Fig. 5: Mausoleum X on the piazzola with third-century paintings on the attic (© Alamy, image ID: CRCHRT).

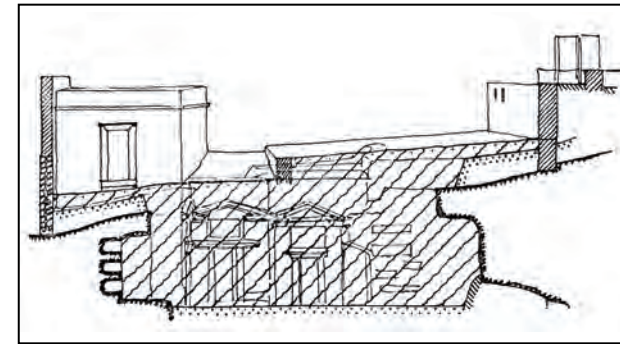


Fig. 6: Schematic drawing of the filled cavity of the piazzola with the memoria on top (Tolotti 1953, fig. 39).

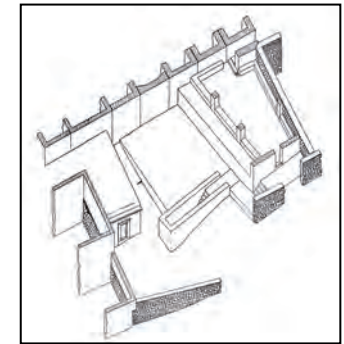


Fig. 7: Isometric reconstruction of the memoria with the triclia on the right hand side (Tolotti 1953, fig. 40).

perpendicular and parallel to the Appia (fig. 2). During the first half of the second century, the so-called Villa Grande, characterized by multiple rooms around a courtyard, emerged on a secondary road, potentially serving as a venue for voluntary associations or festivities related to the commemoration of the deceased. In the Severan period, the so-called Villa Piccola, a smaller structure with an open courtyard and three semi-subterranean rooms, was added to the north of the 'Villa Grande', possibly serving a similar purpose.

As tombs began to be constructed above ground, and after the cessation of mining activities, the first loculi (horizontal burial niches) were carved into the tuff walls of the mine galleries underneath (fig. 3). In the Hadrianic period, a portion of the cavities collapsed, leading to the creation of a sunken piazza known as the *piazzola*, situated approximately 5.5 meters below the surface. Three mausolea, labelled X, Y, and Z, were integrated into the former mines cavities (figs 4-5). In the Antonine period, an uncertain structure referred to as building β was erected above the attic of Mausoleum Z. Around 240, the entire cavity was filled to create an above-ground piazza with a slight slope (figs 6-7). A triclia, a simple portico with a bench at the back and adorned with painted stucco, was established at its eastern edge. Approximately 600 graffiti were engraved into the stucco, which invoke the apostle martyrs Peter and Paul, ask for their support, and commemorate *refrigeria* in their honour (fig. 8). This site is typically referred to as the *memoria apostolorum*. These transformations can be dated to between AD 238/44 and the early fourth century when a circiform cemeterial basilica was built over the entire area and destroyed it.

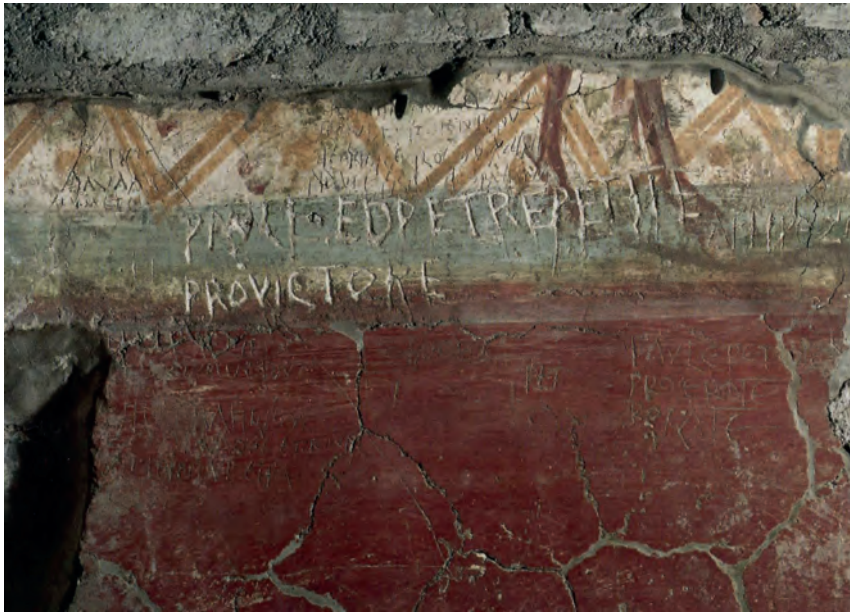


Fig. 8: Graffiti evoking the apostles Peter and Paul from the rear wall of the trichlia (image in the public domain).

KEY QUESTIONS

While there is a general consensus among scholars regarding the history of the site outlined so far, the most crucial questions surrounding the origins and nature of the apostles' cult remain unresolved. The prevailing view now acknowledges that the graffiti found are consistent with burial sites, and some later sources affirm the belief that the apostles' were once interred there. However, this contradicts another tradition that has become a Christian orthodoxy, suggesting that the apostles' graves were located in the Vatican and on the via Ostiense respectively, where basilicas were constructed in their honour in the early fourth century, and their cult continues to be celebrated.

Confirmation of an official cult at all three sites comes from the *Chronography of the Year 354* and the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, which document the introduction of this cult in AD 258. They read: '29. June [...] Peter in the Vatican, Paulus on the Via Ostiensis, both in catacumbas, martyrdom under Nero, during the consulate of Bassus and Tuscus [AD 258]'. Scholars have attempted to resolve this puzzle in various ways, with two prevailing theories. One proposes that there were two conflicting traditions

about the apostles' burial sites, neither of which can be established as historically more 'accurate' than the other. The second one, still widely supported, suggests that, during the Valerianic persecutions in AD 258, to safeguard the apostles' remains from authorities, they were temporarily moved to *ad catacumbas*. This paper aims to explore the feasibility of the latter hypothesis and the potential to move beyond the somewhat frustrating conclusions of the former.

Challenges to the second scenario were identified early on. It would have been not only illegal and highly perilous to relocate the apostles' bones but also unnecessary, as they would have been protected by law, a law seemingly unviolated by authorities in any persecution. Accordingly, Kurt Lampe and others propose that, instead of the apostles' bones, only the commemorative meetings in their honour were moved. The pagan nature of the necropolis, coupled with its remote location, supposedly made it an ideal place for discreet Christian gatherings.

However, this characterization of the area, underlying the translation theory, is seriously flawed. The site was close to a prominent consular road—the via Appia—, opposite a villa that may have been imperial as early as the second century, but definitely was by the time of the apostles' cult foundation (fig. 1A). Additionally, a praetorian *statio* was located between the mausoleum of Caecilia Metella and S. Sebastiano, and a significant number of burials around *ad catacumbas* belonged to imperial slaves, freedmen, and members of elite military corps (fig. 1). This suggests imperial or public ownership of the area and illustrates in any case the frequent presence of members of the imperial household and security forces. Contrary to being inconspicuous, the site was one of the busiest and well-monitored areas in the entire suburbium.

The most substantial obstacle to the theory, however, has been completely overlooked: the implications of filling the sunken *piazzola* before establishing the *trichlia* (fig. 6). This action closed down an active part of a cemetery and required not only the permission of the *pontifex maximus* (i.e., the emperor) but also considerable effort and resources. The volume of the hole in the ground, conservatively estimated at around 340 m³, would have needed about 680 tons of earth, equivalent to the load of at least 1700 ox carts. The source of the material is unknown, but even assuming a short-distance transport, moving the material from the Appia to the site involved a minimum of 45 man-days of effort even before filling in the hole and creating the extension of a flight of stairs through the fill (figs 7 and 10). No doubt that this was impossible to do in secrecy. These observations challenge the credibility of the translation theory and prompt a new, urgent question: When exactly was this work carried out, and by whom?



Fig. 9: The second-century piazzola with mausolea X, Y and Z and the stairs to the shallow basin v2 on the left (Tolotti 1953, fig. 27).

A NEW PROPOSAL

The most straightforward assumption would be that these works had already been completed when the Christian community established their cult site. However, this seems unlikely when considering a feature that has been overlooked until now—the long staircase concluding in a shallow basin in front of a niche, commonly known as *scala del pozzo*. It is evident that the basin and niche, or more precisely, the space they occupy, existed before the establishment of the *piazzola*. Astonishingly, access to it was maintained for over three centuries: first, when the *piazzola* was created at a level of 3m above the mine's floor (fig. 9); later, over a flight of stairs when the *piazzola* was filled in (figs 7 and 10), and even when the Basilica Apostolorum was erected above the entire site, a new entrance was built from the outside (fig. 11).

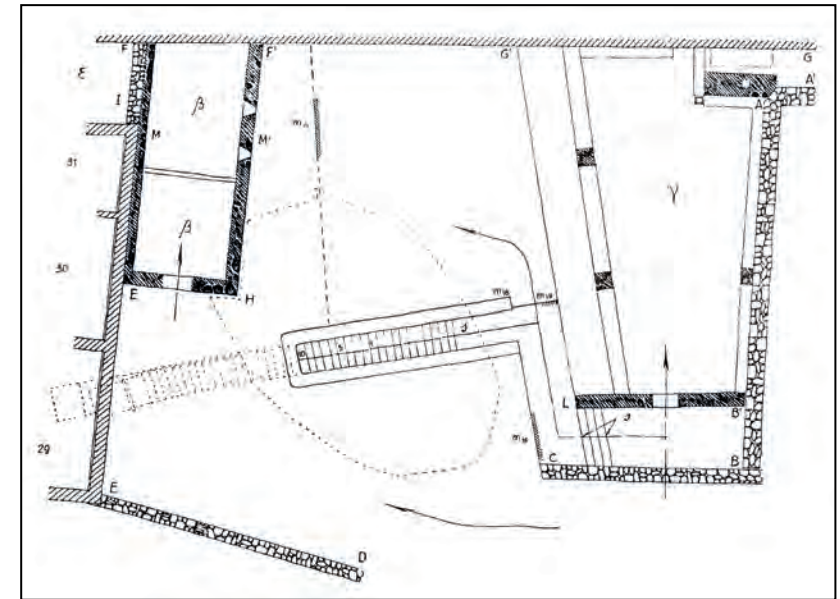


Fig. 10: Schematic floor plan of the third-century memoria with indication of the stairs through the fill (Tolotti 1953, fig. 38).

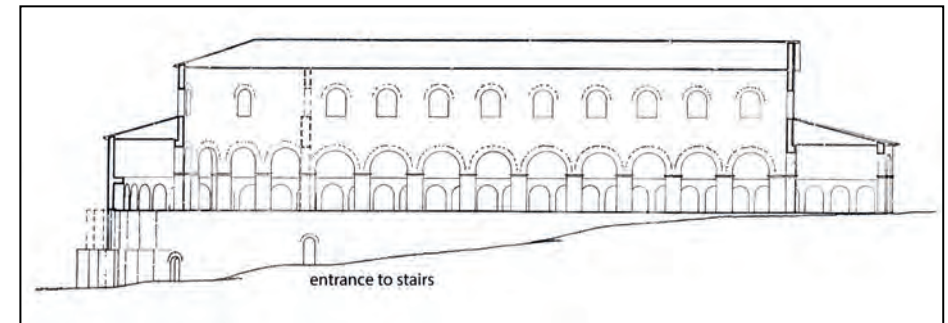


Fig. 11: The early fourth-century Basilica apostolorum with its entrance to the stairs and basin (Tolotti 1953, pl. 7).

Considerable skills and effort were expended to maintain this access at each stage, which is noteworthy since the basin and niche served no practical purpose. Following Francesco Tolotti, who published the only monograph on the site in 1953, the basin is often considered a well for fetching water, but its excavator, Orazio Marucchi, observed its unsuitability for this purpose already in 1921. The water level was typically less than 60cm deep, less than half the depth of another water basin in the mine that was abandoned when the *piazzola*

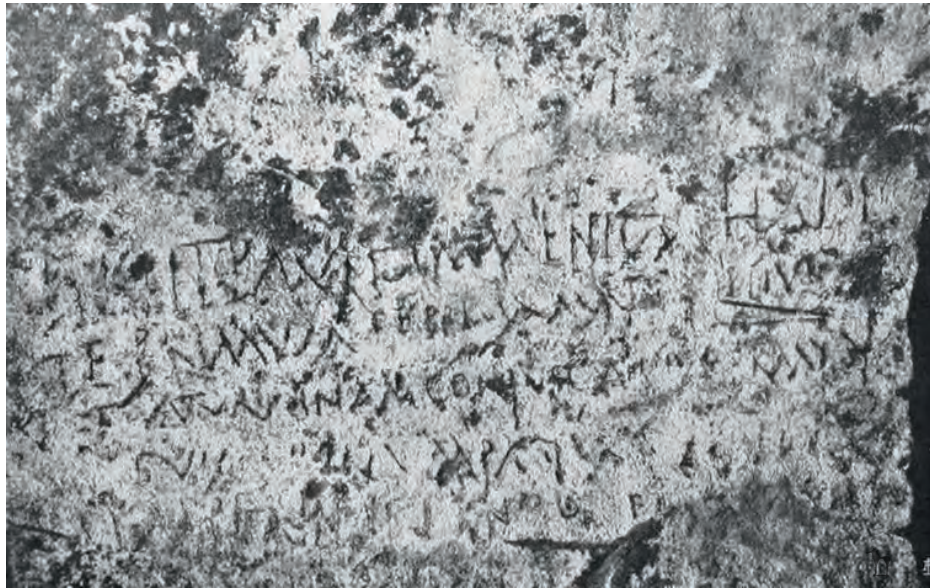


Fig. 12: Graffiti evoking the apostles Peter and Paul in the white plaster surrounding the niche behind the water basin at the foot of the stairs (Marucchi 1921, pl. 4).

was established. Despite the effort to maintain access, nobody considered the simple and quick remedy of cutting deeper into the tuff to facilitate access to the water. Moreover, water could not be drawn through a shaft from above; instead, one had to climb down—and up again—some 10m over 40 steps, equivalent to four floors in a modern house, just to fetch water from the small, shallow basin. None of this scenario makes practical sense, leading to the conclusion that the basin and niche held some symbolic or ideological significance.

The clue to a better understanding, I suggest, lies in the final step of the site's history. Despite the Basilica Apostolorum destroying everything in its path, it preserved access to the stairs and basin, which can only mean that the latter's importance was related to Christian faith and cult. This assumption is supported by graffiti, similar to the *tricia* ones but of a later date, scratched into the white plaster covering the end of the tunnel (fig. 12). It further suggests that also those constructing the *memoria piazza* in the third century preserved the useless basin for religious reasons, hinting at the possibility that already in the second century, the architects of the *piazzola* attached the same significance to it.

While the discussion here does not delve into the possibility of the apostles' actual burial in this tunnel, those preserving access to it against all odds must have

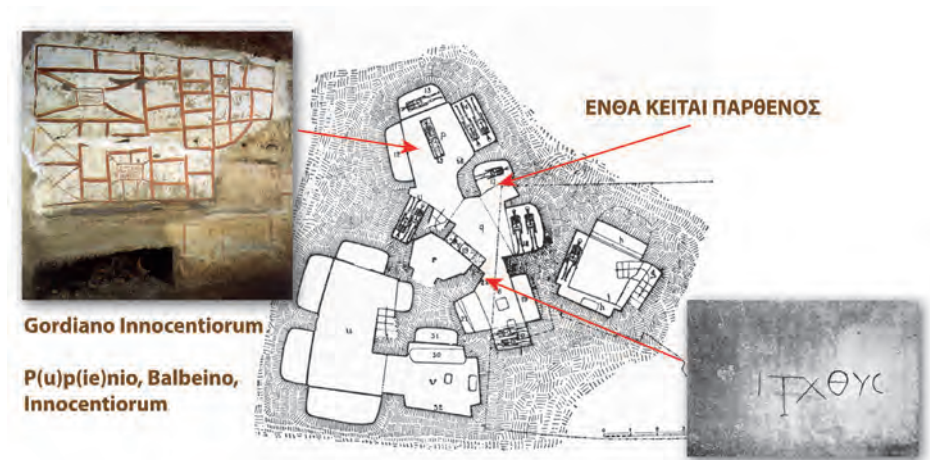


Fig. 13: The lower storey of the mausolea X, Y and Z with significant inscriptions; left: for members of the Innocentii bearing names of the emperors of 238-244; top right: loculus of Parthenos (or of a virgin); bottom right: Christian acrostic ΙΧΘΥΣ (elaboration B.E. Borg).

believed they were there. This view is supported by some unusual epitaphs, which, viewed in isolation, might not necessarily have been conclusive as to their patronage but may now demonstrate how a Christian epigraphic habit developed over time.

The only undisputed Christian inscription dating to the time of the *piazzola* is a graffito scratched into the still-wet plaster of a lower chamber of Mausoleum Y, reading ΙΧΘΥΣ, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour' (fig. 13). Other inscriptions in the tombs adjacent chambers commemorate youngsters named Innocentius and bearing also the names of the emperors of 238-44 (fig. 13). Graffiti scratched into a loculus cover in another room of the hypogeum read ΕΝΘΑ ΚΕΙΤΑΙ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ, 'here lies Parthenos' or 'here lies the virgin' (fig. 13). Both Innocentius and Parthenos are names found outside Christian circles. However, the accumulation of 'speaking names' related to the morals of the deceased in this tomb is striking. The girl's loculus features a number of graffiti written by different hands in a distinct resemblance to graffiti on and around martyrs graves. *Entha keitai* is a rarer form of *enthade keitai*, a formula particularly frequent in Jewish epitaphs from Rome that suggests how Christians may have continued some habits of Jewish tradition before developing an epigraphic habit all of their own. And it may not be mere coincidence that several hypogea with Jewish inscriptions are situated in the vicinity of *ad catacumbas*—including the so-called Vigna Randanini catacomb on the opposite side of the road (fig. 1C).

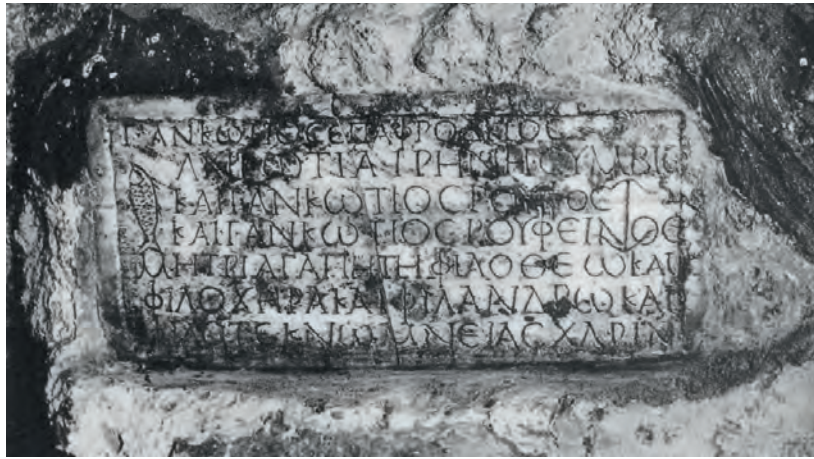


Fig. 14: Greek Christian epitaph for Ankotia Irene marking her loculus next to mausoleum X (Styger 1935, 52a.).



Fig. 15: Latin epitaph for Ankotia Auxesis, daughter of Ankotia Irene and C. Ankotius Epaphroditos (Ferrua 1990, fig. 3.).



Fig. 16: Attic of mausoleum X with third-century paintings likely illustrating parables from the Gospels of Luke (image in the public domain)

Outside Mausoleum Y and on the walls of the former mine, additional inscriptions with suggestive form and content can be found. Another epitaph, starting with a variant of *enthade keithai*, commemorates Theonoë, described as pious, mild, chaste, and wise. In an epitaph on the wall next to Mausoleum X, C. Ankotius Epaphroditus and his two sons praise their wife and mother, Ankotia Irene, for her love of God, widows, her husband, and her children—in this rather surprising order (fig. 14). While love of God (even in the singular) and certainly love of family are not in themselves unusual, Dölger has demonstrated that the epithet *‘philochera’* meaning ‘lover of widows’, was a Christian neologism, probably signifying ‘charitable’ more generally than affection specifically for widows. Although fish and anchors can be found in non-Christian contexts, the context here suggests their Christian significance to also be extended to the epitaph dedicated to their deceased daughter Ankotia Auxesis, which is otherwise entirely conventional and written in Latin (fig. 15).

This context further supports Christian interpretations for two sets of highly unusual wall paintings from the early third century. One set is prominently displayed on the attic of Mausoleum X (figs 5 and 16). Their long-discussed scenes have now convincingly been proposed by Alastair Logan as illustrations of three parables from the *Gospels of Luke*: of the Lost Sheep with two men greeting Jesus who returns with the sheep (Luke 15.4-7); the Great Supper to which the host had invited outcasts and the poor to replace his honourable friends that let him down (Luke 4.7-24); and the Lost Son, who returned to his father after having spent his entire inheritance to beg for being hired as one of his day labourers in order to improve his life as a swine herd (Luke 15.11-24).

The other wall paintings are found on the plaster covering the loculus of an eight-year-old imperial slave named Atimetus, recently discussed by Stefano Tortorella (fig. 17). To the left of the inscribed tabula, we find Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem as described in the *Gospels of Matthew* (Mt. 21.1-11)—with two donkeys rather than just one. Whether the *stibadium* meal is an abbreviated version of the Great Supper or refers to real-life celebrations of the dead is less clear, and the images to the right of the epitaph do not match exactly onto any known story or thought in Christian or other writings. We see three very similar scenes with a nude male about to step through an arch, with each scene increasing the size of the male and arch from right to left. The rightmost scene shows a scale above the arch. Scales feature in *psychostasiai* (weighing of souls) in several cultures including in later Christian writings, although depictions normally do not show them in balance as in our case. Equally, arches leading from one sphere of life into another feature in both



Fig. 17: Loculus of the imperial slave Atimetus with its epitaph and enigmatic painted scenes (Pavia 2000, p. 162).

pagan and Christian imagination. In the famous Vibia Hypogeum, for instance, the deceased Vibia is led by the Angelus Bonus through an arch into a space where the *Bonorum iudicio iudicati*, including her husband and priest of the god Sabazius, Vincentius, enjoy the feast of the blessed (fig. 18).

What differs between our painting and the other images is the multiplicity of the arches. The closest to our picture is in fact the so-called *Tabula Cebeitis*, a literary description of a fictional painting that showed three concentric enclosures posing moral and existential challenges which are linked by arches through which the protagonist progresses to the height of 'True Education', Truth, Persuasion and a blessed state of happiness. The church father Tertullian knew this treatise; did the patron of this painting do so as well? Be this as it may, these paintings are excellent examples of the experimental approach to the new desire and objective to



Fig. 18: Painted lunette of the burial chamber of Vincentius, priest of Sabazius, and his wife Vibia showing her entrance into the world of the blessed; Rome, Catacomb of Vibia (Wilpert 1903, pl. 132).

illustrate the Gospels, and of an idiosyncratic choice of stories that did not become part of the standard repertoire of salvation scenes. Established iconographies are combined in innovative and unique ways to communicate new ideas which for us, but presumably also for many ancient viewers, are difficult to interpret.

The emerging picture of our site is one of a cemetery area specifically favoured by Christians, though not exclusively used by them, already from the second century onwards. Together with the evidence from the stairs and water basin, they suggest a belief that the apostles had been buried in the former mine, which in turn has attracted other burials from Christians in the vicinity and ultimately led to the establishment of the cult site. And we can observe how what must have started as commemorative practices known from both Roman and Jewish tradition developed over time into an official martyr cult.

THE CULT OF PETER AND PAUL AND ITS NON-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

These developments, if reconstructed correctly, raise some interesting questions given that all this happened in a busy area dominated by imperial staff and members of the armed forces. The backfilling of the *piazzola* likely involved the Christian community as the preservation of access to the basin and niche must have been at their specific request. Considering the need for approval from the imperial administration and the logistical challenges discussed earlier, it becomes improbable that these changes occurred during the Valerianic persecutions. Given the establishment of the official cult in 258, an earlier date for the building works



Fig. 19: Timeline showing major events discussed in this paper (elaboration B.E. Borg).

appears more likely, as it is easier to envision related festive activities within the spacious piazza above ground than in the confined space of the piazzola below, which probably had to be shared with non-Christians as well (fig. 19 for a timeline).

If this interpretation is accurate, it is tempting to attribute these measures to Fabian, bishop of Rome from AD 236 to 250, who, according to the *Chronography of 354*, instigated significant changes in the organization of the Church and conducted numerous building works related to graves or cemeteries (*multas fabricas per cimiteria fieri iussit*). While the attribution of our building works to Fabian cannot be proven, it would be chronologically consistent with the tolerant attitude towards Christians of emperors Gordian III (238-44) and Philippus Arabs (244-49), who may or may not have offered the group special support but at least discontinued persecutions. There is also the suggestion that Fabian established the ‘Crypt of the Popes’ in Area I of the later Callixtus catacomb (fig. 1B), in which case two highly ideologically important locations would have been patronised by him. Alternatively, Valerian’s early years of reign were equally favourable to Christians, suggesting the time bracket of approximately 253-56 as another option for the building works, in which case they would have occurred under bishop Stephen I (254-57).

In any case, it is likely that the backfilling of the piazzola took place before the Valerianic persecutions, starting in 257, making the establishment

of an official cult in 258 more of a confirmation of an existing practice rather than its initiation. The initiative appears to be a strong statement about the importance of the two apostles as patrons and founders of the Roman Christian community. Despite their local significance, it is highly likely that the festival was meant to strengthen the authority of the bishop of Rome in a conflict with the churches in Africa and Asia Minor, which had culminated in 256/7 in a dispute between the bishop of Rome, Stephanus, and Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage. In 258, the bishop of Rome was Stephanus’ successor Sixtus II, who was martyred on the 8th of August. The *Liber Pontificalis* (25) tells us that this occurred as punishment for refusing to sacrifice to ‘demons’, a typical and rather general explanation. Still, perhaps his offence was, in fact, more specific than this.

According to the *Acts of Cyprian*, Valerian specifically prohibited Christians from visiting their cemeteries. In his 80th letter, Cyprian further informs us that Sixtus and four deacons were martyred ‘in the cemetery’ (*Ep.* 80.1.4). The prevailing belief among scholars is that Sixtus met his demise in the cemetery of Callixtus, being punished for visiting the Crypt of the Popes, just 800m up the road from the memoria (fig. 1B), and an epigram by bishop Damasus of the fourth century found in the vicinity marked his place of martyrdom. Yet Damasus’ epigram, usually cited for details of Sixtus’s death, mentions only that he and his followers were attacked while he was teaching them, not specifying the location.

The rationale behind Valerian’s prevention of Christians from visiting their cemeteries remains unclear. We know that early Christians visited the tombs of their dead and that they held meals at their graves. Yet these were mostly private and commemorative, while the Roman authorities were interested in public displays of honours offered to individuals that could be seen as a continued offence to the government or emperor. They were generally unconcerned about burial and private commemoration, and Christian martyrdom narratives therefore typically know where martyrs were buried by fellow Christians wherever they died, including during the Valerianic persecutions.

Then again, cemeteries, which normally featured also buildings other than tombs, also served as meeting places for Christians, which aligns with our observations on events *ad catacumbas*, on via Ostiense, and in the Vatican. All three sites, during the third century, were located in bustling cemeteries, suggesting that preventing Christians from visiting cemeteries might not have been about stopping them from visiting graves but rather about hindering access to sites of apostle commemoration and veneration. Damasus’ epigram supports this idea, mentioning that Sixtus and his followers were attacked

while he was teaching them. There is no indication that the restriction to visit cemeteries applied to all Christians under all circumstances; at least in the first edict that mentions the cemeteries specifically, it rather seems to have applied to clerics in the first place, i.e. to those persons who were also prohibited to hold assemblies elsewhere. That cemeteries were singled out as known locations where meetings occurred is remarkable. While it cannot be ruled out that there was a place above the 'Crypt of the Popes' where Sixtus would have been teaching, the nearby *memoria ad catacumbas* is a documented location where cult was practiced and teaching could have taken place.

Secondly, as noted by Cyprian, one year later, Valerian displayed particular concern about Christian members of the first two orders and of *caesariani* (Cyprian, *Ep.* 80.1-2)—a term signifying staff involved with financial administration and the management of imperial property. His focus thus remained on eliminating Christian leadership and influence within the imperial household and the state. The Vatican necropolis and *ad catacumbas* were situated on imperial or public land, with the cemeteries being used by imperial slaves and freedmen, especially dominant *ad catacumbas*, where they were joined by members of the elite military corps. The painted inscriptions on the loculi in Mausoleum Y for Innocentii with the names of emperors serving as cognomina (fig. 13) indicate a group associated with the imperial household. The burial of a praetorian and a group of only men in a collective grave in Mausoleum X may be contemporary with the biblical scenes on its attic. If these individuals were Christians, they likely belonged to the category that concerned the emperor. A formally established Christian cult in the heart of their cemetery, adjacent to an imperial villa and praetorian *statio*, would have undoubtedly raised alarm within the imperial administration.

ST. PETER'S AND ST. PAUL'S BASILICAS

I hope to have provided good arguments for the proposal that *ad catacumbas* was regarded, by church leaders as well as ordinary Christians, as the true burial place of the apostles. Yet I still need to explain how this interpretation can be reconciled with the tradition on the sites of the later basilicas for St. Peter in the Vatican and St. Paul on via Ostiense. The two sites deserve more comprehensive treatment than possible here, but I would like to summarise my conclusions. As we have seen, the cult foundation of 258 included both these locations as well, and Gaius, a presbyter writing around AD 200, mentioned the Vatican site as a place of veneration already at his time. Yet there is no direct evidence that these sites were also considered to hold the apostles' graves, and

it would be somewhat schizophrenic to propose that the cult was established at three different graves—just in case. It is far more likely that the via Ostiense and the Vatican were considered the places of the apostles' martyrdom. It remains to explain how the tradition later shifted to a different interpretation of the two sites, and there seem to be two possibilities: Either there was a re-interpretation of whatever information was known at the time, or the bones of the apostles were translated to the churches at their location of martyrdom to make them coincide with a pattern that began to be established, namely that the main site of veneration should be the grave. Written sources remain quiet about the matter, but the time can be narrowed down to between the early 370s and the death of Damasus on 1 December 384. The details of the argument must remain for another time. Towards the end of the fourth century, both the basilicas on the Ostiense and in the Vatican seem to have gained significant prominence and favour, while the popularity of the Basilica Apostolorum, which used to attract significantly more elite burials both inside and around it than any other basilica in the suburbium, declined until it was later even rededicated to St. Sebastian and memory of its original significance faded. What I hope to have shown, is not primarily where the 'true' burial place of the apostles may have been. More interesting, in my view is the history of the site the reconstruction of which allows us a close-up view of the emergence of a Christian cult in the middle of a bustling suburban area where the imperial household and military shared their space with Jewish communities and an emerging Christian church, and where we can observe in detail how early Christians explored ways of expressing their new faith using traditional Jewish, Roman and Greek forms of expression and experimenting with innovative artistic inventions to illustrate the stories that supported their faith.

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