ROME

AT THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

Very soon after Jesus’s death, a small Christian community developed in Rome; Peter and Paul visited them before being martyred. The community would become more visible in the third century, as the graves of the catacombs show.

by SOPHIE LAURANT

At the beginning of the third century A.D., Rome, the imperial city teemed with activity. Nearly a million inhabitants filled the market streets or the forums. These large public squares, nestled between the hills and bordered by porticoes and temples, were at the center of Roman political and religious life.

The great majority of Romans dutifully honored the gods of their ancestors or those of conquered peoples, which had been adopted more recently. They sought the gods’ favor and assistance by taking part in ancient rituals and feasts.

Others, however, were on what we would today call “spiritual quests,” attracted by different paths to the divine. Thus, soldiers now offered sacrifices to the mysterious sun god Mithra, whom they learned about during military campaigns in the East. Temples dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis had their followers as well; they were organized into small fraternities of initiates. Some Romans were intrigued by Judaism, and asked representatives of that community, which had been established in the capital centuries ago, about their beliefs. Still others approached another group, the Christians, who did not seem that different from the Jews.

Philippe Pergola, research director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research) in Aix-Marseille, France, and dean of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archeology in Rome, observes: “It is from this era, the beginning of the third century, that we have the first archeological evidence of the presence of this new religion in Rome.”

There is, however, an important exception, as Pergola points out: “The tombs of Peter and Paul, martyred in Rome around 64 or 67 A.D., were immediately preserved. We are certain of their location because we have found ancient artifacts that confirm an unbroken Christian tradition. A text corroborates these findings.”

Indeed, a letter from the presbyter (the name for priests at the time) Caecilius to a certain Proclus, written at the end of the second century and cited by the Church father Eusebius of Caesarea, says: “Whether you go to the Vatican or on the road to Ostia, you will find the trophies of those who established the Church in Rome.” The word “trophy” likely refers to a stone stele (slab or marker) erected by some of the faithful on Peter’s tomb, in a pagan necropolis on Vatican Hill (see page 29), and on Paul’s tomb, located on the road leading to the port of Ostia.

ALONG THE ROMAN ROADS

In Antiquity, cemeteries were located outside the cities, along major arteries. Stele therefore line these roads as reminders to passersby of the deceased person whose ashes have been buried there. As the growing Roman population needed constant supplies, large agricultural estates developed outside the city limits.

When land became scarce, the Romans adopted the Greek and Eastern custom of hypogea — vast communal underground chambers.

Philippe Pergola adds: “At the same time, because of the influence of Eastern religions, including Christianity, the practice of burial spreads, replacing cremation.” Important families or fraternities thus bury their loved ones, to the point of extending a hypogeum by progressively digging a complex network of funerary galleries. Over time, the necropolises became catacombs, where Romans of all religions lie side by side.

A turning point happened in the time of Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome between 198 and 217 and the 15th successor of Peter, with the creation by Deacon Callistus (who succeeded Zephyrinus until his own martyrdom in 222) of a catacomb entirely dedicated to Christians. The catacomb is located along the Via Appia.

Philippe Pergola warns: “This does not mean Christians were trying to hide. On the contrary, this catacomb, which was built, decorated, and visited daily, is the sign that their community, in adopting the practices of other religious groups, was becoming visible. Even during imperial persecutions, which were violent but...”
From Antiquity to the end of the 19th century, Vatican Hill remained rural, even though visitors to St. Peter’s and the arrival of an administration and a papal court slowly transformed fields into neighborhoods.

by SOPHIE LAURANT

A HILL SURROUNDED BY FIELDS

40 A.D.
UNDER THE VATICAN, A CIRCUS

The circus of emperors Caligula and Nero (illustrated here by archeologist Jean-Paul Golvin) was built around 40 A.D. on Vatican Hill, outside the city. Peter was crucified in the year 67 (or perhaps 64) in the middle of this circus, at the foot of the obelisk that was later erected in St. Peter’s Square. Peter’s remains were buried in a pagan necropolis, a little north of the site, on the other side of the Via Cornelia. It soon became a place where Christians went to honor him.

326 A.D.
CONSTANTINE’S BASILICA

Emperor Constantine, who now supported Christianity, ordered the construction of an immense basilica, 387 feet long, over Peter’s tomb. It was dedicated by Pope Sylvester I in 326 (or perhaps 324). Its large marble columns that divide its five naves are impressive. As can be seen in this 19th-century rendering, a large atrium (court) welcomes pilgrims. At the center, a bronze fountain in the shape of a pine cone (la pigna – see page 46) has been installed for the ablutions of the faithful.

16TH CENTURY FROM ONE BASILICA TO ANOTHER

At the end of the 16th century as seen on the engraving below, the building site of the new St. Peter’s Basilica was in full swing, but the dome had yet to be completed. The Vatican Gardens were well developed, even though the surroundings remained rather bucolic; the popes were known to hunt there on occasion. Beyond the Castel Sant’Angelo, on the other side of the Tiber, one can see the sprawling city of Rome.
As the sun rises, it illuminates the entrance to St. Peter’s, which, unlike at many churches, does not have its sanctuary in the east end of the church, facing Jerusalem. The location of the apostle’s relics and the desire to have the entrance doors oriented toward the city of Rome dictated this orientation. At the bottom right-hand corner, overlooking the meandering Tiber River, the layout of Castel Sant’Angelo is clearly visible, with its circular imperial mausoleum surrounded by a square medieval fortress. A Vauban-style glacis (gentle slope), now a garden, embraces it. Between the two, the Via della Conciliazione’s wide and straight line takes in a series of old classical palaces on either side. On the north side, the 19th-century façades of the buildings of the Prati district are arranged in a “modern” Haussmann-like plan; they end at the Vatican City walls, simply disregarding St. Peter’s Square. Beyond, the two wings of the museums glow red in the light of dawn.
Past the central bronze door, designed by Antonio Averulino, also known as Filarete, (1), which was salvaged from the previous basilica, the nave floor is a sprawling “carpet” of colored marble geometrical forms. It was undoubtedly designed by Bernini, whose vision transformed the interior space of St. Peter’s into an impressive Baroque jewel box.

The gray marble statues placed in the alcoves between the pillars represent 39 founders of religious orders. At the level of the third bay, the aisles of the nave lead to two large chapels (2). To the right, near the entrance to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, is the funeral monument of Gregory XIII (3). Other papal tombs are found in the basilica or its crypt. Pilgrims are greeted by two holy water fonts made of yellow marble (4).
An impressive bronze statue of St. Peter greets pilgrims as they enter the sanctuary. He is shown seated on a marble throne, blessing the faithful with his right hand while his left holds the keys to the kingdom. For a long time it was thought to be the work of Arnolfo di Cambio, a 13th-century sculptor, but a number of experts have raised questions. More recent hypotheses suggest that it might be a fifth-century work from a Syriac workshop. The statue’s right foot is worn from centuries of pilgrims touching or kissing it.
The Sistine Chapel
A Sparkling Jewel

On May 10, 1508, commissioned by Pope Julius II, Michelangelo began work on a massive composition to redecorate the ceiling of the chapel and achieved a visual masterpiece.

by Sophie Laurant

Captivating Images
Dazzled by the pervasiveness of the paintings, by the bright colors of the pleated clothing, by the never-ending movement of the figures, the visitor’s gaze does not know where to focus. In spite of the crowd, patience and time are needed to decipher Michelangelo Buonarroti’s complex pictorial design.
In less than four years, the artist accomplished the remarkable feat of completing, by himself, 6,500 square feet of frescoes — that is, painting on fresh plaster, where the paint must be applied on the same day, a giorno. The very moody Michelangelo did not get along with the fresco painters sent to assist him. He had to work nearly lying on his back on the scaffolding 66 feet high. Amazingly, in 1536, when Paul III commissioned him to paint The Last Judgment on the altar wall, Michelangelo, now age 60 and despite suffering from painful osteoarthritis, took up his brushes once again. This new project would last five years.

Around 400 figures swirl around the central figure of Christ the Judge. What is striking about this tempestuous “day of judgment” is the confusion, the anguish, the torment affecting most of the figures, including the saved souls, the saints, and martyrs who surround Christ. Michelangelo, convinced that he himself is damned, thus expresses his spiritual trepidation. His obsession is represented by his own image placed on the flayed skin that St. Bartholomew holds, a symbol of his martyrdom (bottom right corner). Like the ceiling, this innovative work breaks with the models of standard representations and was considered shocking when it was unveiled. Paradoxically, it is in full view of the cardinals when they elect a new pope! Despite the fact that Julius III (pope from 1550 to 1555) ordered that clothing be painted over the naked bodies of the resurrected, the work is undiminished.

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CEILING, WALL, ALCOVES...

OTHER ARTISTS

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The Vatican

The world’s smallest state

842 people live in Vatican City: More than 450 of them have Vatican citizenship. The Vatican is the least populous state in the world. Source: VaticanState.va
You are Peter. The papacy can be traced back more than 2,000 years to the words of Jesus: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The Catholic Church views this moment in time as Jesus’ inauguration of Simon Peter as the first pope. It followed momentously after Simon Peter’s confession of Jesus as the messiah. It not only led to a name change for the fisherman the disciples knew as Simon, but it also named his future mission as the leader of the early Church.

Let’s look at this account in the Gospel according to Matthew:

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say I am?’”

In this section, you’ll find a papal timeline along the top of the page and continuing throughout. Since most popes reigned until their deaths, we list the year they died. We’ve also selected significant moments in the pontificates of some of the great popes (below), many of whom are saints.