Constantine & Rome

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The Tomb of St. Peter

S. Pietro in Vaticano today is a church brought into being by an accumulation of genius. The colonnades, which replaced the atrium of the ancient and medieval basilica and curve around the square before the present basilica, are the work of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1656–57). Of course Bernini was given some assistance and some direction. Carlo Maderno’s façade was in place when he began work, and the obelisk that once adorned the median divider of Nero’s Circus situated slightly south of the basilica was reerected in its present location in 1586. The new church itself, begun in 1506, was completed as a Latin cross, with a long nave by Maderno ending in the crossing covered by Michelangelo’s dome. But the original plan of Bramante and then Michelangelo was a Greek cross. The Latin cross design was introduced by Pope Julius II relying on Raphael and Giuliano da Sangallo. Then over the course of the sixteenth century the Constantinian basilica was torn down, while a series of master architects struggled over the final design. The basilica faces east onto Piazza S. Pietro. Its apse is turned toward the west.

St. Peter’s is also a church built for pilgrims (fig. 4.1). It offered them a magnificent setting in which to approach the tomb of the apostle and, thanks to Maderno’s nave, offered space sufficient for the crowds that came from near and far for the great feast days. Like all great Christian churches of the Middle Ages and later centuries, it gave the pilgrim some intimation of the glories of paradise to which the Christian life would surely lead. Everything about the interior is gigantic. The cherubs supporting fonts of holy water along the nave dwarf whomever approaches them. The bronze baldacchino of Bernini which towers over the papal altar below the dome has none of the canopy-like delicacy of medieval ciboria. It is an imperial monument
worthy of Solomon himself, whose temple, and from it the Column of the Flagellation, was evoked by the four spiral columns that are its most prominent feature. (The bronze for the baldacchino was acquired by stripping the Pantheon porch of the sheathing of its roof beams, not without some satirical comment from Romans comparing the Barberini pope [Urban VIII, 1623–44] to the barbarian looters of ancient Rome.) Finally, surrounded by an explosion of alabaster, one sees the dove of the Holy Ghost in the apse. All around papal tombs and colossal saints are overshadowed by their setting.

At the base of the dome, in dark letters on a gold mosaic background, there run the words of Jesus in St. Matthew’s Gospel, “You are Peter and upon this rock I shall build my church.”1 It is St. Peter, the first bishop of Rome, who justifies the primacy of the Roman Church, a claim enunciated forcefully by Rome since the time of Leo the Great (440–61). The basilica that bears St. Peter’s name was erected over the place where Constantine and the Christians of his day believed the apostle’s tomb was located, and the archaeological investigation of this site led to one of the most courageous, difficult, and disputed excavations of modern times.

In the basilica immediately before the papal altar one can look down over a balustrade into a lower level (fig. 4.2). This is the confessional of the basilica, given its present form by
Maderno, illuminated by ninety-five lamps kept burning day and night and decorated with marble and intarsia work.

At the west end of the confessional behind a gold door made by Benvenuto Cellini there is the Niche of the Pallia (figs. 4.3, 4.4). The pallium is a narrow band of white wool trimmed with black silk worn by the pope and archbishops and occasionally conferred on bishops as a special mark of favor. Today the pallia, which are consecrated once a year in a service at San Giovanni in Laterano, are kept here. Throughout the Middle Ages each pallium was lowered through an opening (a fenestrella) down a shaft (a cataract), where it remained overnight in proximity to the relics of the apostle.²

The simple pilgrim, too, could approach the tomb with the expectation of participating in its wondrous grace. Gregory of Tours (ca. 530–94) describes the experience of visiting Peter’s tomb as follows:

His tomb is located beneath the altar and certainly is a thing of rarity. But one who wishes to pray having opened the gates that enclose the tomb, reaches a point above it. There a small window makes an opening and putting his head inside the
Fig. 4.3 S. Pietro in Vaticano. Niche of the Pallia. Photo Center for Old World Archaeology and Art, Brown University.
supplicant asks what he needs. Nor is there delay in answering his prayer if it is just. And should he wish to take away some talisman, he lowers a bit of cloth that he has weighed before. Then keeping vigil and fasting, he prays most earnestly that the apostolic power may assist his devotion. Wonderful to relate! If his faith prevails, the cloth emerges from the tomb so imbued with divine power that its weight is increased beyond what he found it weighed before. Then he who lowered it knows that together with it he has raised the grace he sought.³

The tomb, however, was very much of a mystery. In 1615 graves were discovered during the work undertaken around the papal altar, and another group came to light during the laying of foundations for Bernini’s baldacchino in 1626. These were apparently both pagan graves and burials of Christian ecclesiastics.⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century Hartmut Grisar, S.J., attempted to study the cavity of the tomb through the opening in the rear of the Niche of the Pallia.⁵

The full-scale exploration of the apostle’s tomb would have to wait another four decades. The credit for undertaking the excavations belongs to Pope Pius XII (fig. 4.5), who was elected to the throne of St. Peter in 1939. He lost no time in making clear his intention of investigating the last resting place of the apostle by thorough excavation. It was a decision requiring both courage and faith, but Pius XII was prepared to attempt to establish once and for all the reality of Peter’s tomb and the primacy of the Roman Church.
The excavations, beginning in 1940 and continuing in their first phase through 1949, were entrusted to distinguished students of Christian archaeology, Engelbert Kirschbaum, S.J., and Antonio Ferrua, S.J., and together with them the eminent collaborators Bruno M. Apolloni-Ghetti and Enrico Josi. The directional oversight of operations was held by Mgr. Ludwig Kaas, Segretario della Congregazione della Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro, that is, the administrator of the basilica. The results of their work in two handsome volumes were presented to Pius XII just before Christmas, 1951. After 1949 the excavations were extended by Adriano Prandi. The most recent excavations were carried out in 1979 in mausoleum N of the pagan sector of the necropolis.

The excavations of the 1940s were made under difficult circumstances. The Second World War was hardly a favorable time for such exploration, even in the relative safety of Vatican City. But the topography of the excavations created even greater problems. This was to be an investigation carried out by burrowing under and around the substructures of the existing church and those of Constantine's basilica. The opportunities for exposing the pre-Constantinian remains would always be limited. In some cases, notably in that of the surroundings of the
apostle's tomb, the possibility of observation would be reduced to a minimum. Excavation was most often a one-man operation in a cramped space. The removal of earth must always have been a slow and awkward business. Furthermore, the work was to be done without publicity. Consequently, little could be accomplished in the open setting of the confessional. Fortunately, the inner wall of the confessional, with the Niche of the Pallia, was approached within feet from the opposite side by the Cappella Clementina (Clement VIII, 1592–1605). The latter is, as it were, a tunnel running east–west, on the same axis as the confessional but under the papal altar. The chapel could be closed off to permit the archaeological work to go on undisturbed. When work had to be carried out in the confessional, it was done at night.¹⁰

The official excavation report is a magisterial, flowing account of the labors of the excavators to recover the resting place and relics of St. Peter. Appreciation of its persuasiveness, however, must be tempered by the realization that the authors tend to gloss over those aspects of the excavation in which the evidence remained incomplete and difficult to interpret. The excavation drawings, in particular, often give the impression of fact even when they represent hypothesis. This emerges clearly from Father Kirschbaum's debate with the early critics of the excavations. Yes, he admits, there are misleading drawings in the publications, but the assertions of the excavators are supported by other—and, he emphasizes—more accurate drawings in the same publication.¹¹

There were two main parts of the investigations. The first was the actual probing of the traditional location of St. Peter's tomb. The second was a by-product of the undertaking but physically the more extensive of the two parts. This was the excavation of two lines of Roman masonry tombs of the second century that extend eastward from the confessional toward the main doors of the basilica (fig. 4.6). The alignment of these tombs continues that of another of the same date that was excavated earlier underneath Piazza S. Pietro.¹² The tombs below St. Peter's were preserved because the ground level around them was artificially raised to create a terrace against the hillside to the north when the Constantinian basilica was built. Yet this important discovery of a necropolis of prominent Romans of the Antonine period is of only marginal importance to the study of St. Peter's tomb and Constantinian Rome.¹³

As the street of the tombs goes westward, however, the ground level rises toward the Vatican hill, and just as the ancient ground surface rises it encounters the sunken level of the confessional (fig. 4.7).¹⁴ Thus, while the visitor to the street of the tombs can be standing in a deep excavation surrounded by masonry structures that reach above his head, in the area of the confessional the ancient level is separated from the floor above by a mere crawl space. Indeed, between the west end of the confessional and the eastern end of the Cappella Clementina the excavators were to encounter pre-Constantinian remains that had been trapped in the space between the end walls of these two sunken parts of the Renaissance basilica. Below the floor of the confessional immediately in front of the Niche of the Pallia and thus just before the narrow space between the chapel and the confessional, there was the hidden cavity venerated
Fig. 4.6 Roman tomb beneath S. Pietro in Vaticano. Photo Sansaini, DAI Rome, Inst. Neg. 54.618. Copyright Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

Fig. 4.7 S. Pietro in Vaticano. East–west section. Excavations 1940 and following tinted in gray. Drawing by A. Walsh.
as the Tomb of St. Peter. My use of the term *the tomb* in what follows is merely one of convenience reflecting a tradition of belief as old as Constantine and is not intended to prejudice any assessment of the archaeological results.

The excavation in the area of the tomb began by the making of an opening in the east wall of the Cappella Clementina. The excavators found themselves face to face with a surprising discovery. Immediately behind the Renaissance structure there appeared the facing of another wall, intact and as well preserved as the day it had been set in place. Two large slabs of marble were set above a dado of porphyry while an upright band of porphyry separated them (fig. 4.8). The large, beautifully encased construction had risen 2.34 m above the floor of the Constantinian basilica. One could immediately see how it occupied the focal point of the basilica, placed on the centerline of the nave before the apse and extending slightly into it. It was too high to be an altar. It was, therefore, immediately recognized as part of the regal monumentalization of the tomb.
This was the porphyry monument that Constantine had raised over the tomb according to the *Liber Pontificalis*. Naturally, there was a grave question how to proceed. The direct route to the tomb was obstructed by the marble- and porphyry-covered monument. So the rear wall of the Cappella Clementina was opened both to north and south of the original breach. In the meantime it had been possible to observe the walling to which the marble and porphyry surface had been added. It was distinctive in that it was covered with a red plaster, and this same red surface was to be found later in the excavations on the opposite face of the wall. From its red coating this wall was named the Red Wall (frequently abbreviated *MR* for *Muro Rosso*). It was to play a significant role in the further investigations. To the south, observation through a narrow opening found the actual return of the Constantinian monument running toward the east from the southwest corner of the monument. The Red Wall had originally extended beyond this point further toward the south. But here it had been cut down to the level of the paving of the early basilica by Constantine’s workmen, as was the case to the north of the Constantinian monument.
The further removal of the east walls of the Cappella Clementina revealed two blocked-up spaces that had been left when the chapel was installed. In both, fragments of the marble paving of the Constantinian basilica were still in place. In both, moreover, there were marks on the pavement showing that something had rested there, presumably the bases of columns. A fencing of some kind had run from column to column. Apparently temporary at first, like the wooden barriers of San Giovanni in Laterano, the arrangement was made permanent in marble at a later date. Here, then, were traces of the position of "vine scroll columns" mentioned in the Liber Pontificalis. Subsequently, three appropriate bases and the setting marks for two columns in line with those found behind the walls of the Cappella Clementina were discovered farther east. An enclosure could thus be reconstructed. The columns of the enclosure, carved with spiral shafts and floral decoration, apparently survive, having been reused by Bernini to decorate niches on the piers below the cupola of the present basilica. With the aid of the design on the ivory casket from Samagher in Istria, which shows not only a monument enclosed by four such columns, but also an architrave over the columns continuing to right and left to reach two additional columns, the excavators have suggested a reconstruction for the monument,
or Memoria (figs. 4.9, 4.10). It is on this basis that they restore additional columns left and right at the very beginning of the apse and on line with the western columns of the enclosure. The enclosure on the casket is open, but suspended from two arching beams that meet over its center there is a large lamp. This is presumably the lamp recorded as one of Constantine’s gifts to the basilica in the Liber Pontificalis: “a gold crown in front of the body, which is a chandelier, with 50 dolphins, weighing 35 pounds.”

At this point in the development of the investigation beneath the confessional, the work was still focused on the Constantinian era. But what came before? and especially what was the Red Wall? To look further into this mystery the excavators removed the upright band of porphyry between the two marble facing slabs. They were now looking at the back of the Red Wall at the point where today it carries (on its other side) a mosaic of Christ facing into the confessional. The mosaic is the facing of a niche which was to become known as N2 in the reports of the excavation. It had been hollowed out of an earlier depression in the wall, N3, which carried a “small wall surface with a coating of smooth plaster, running back diagonally, which must constitute the remains of a small rectangular window aperture that had been inserted here.” Quite apart from the limited opportunity afforded the excavators to examine them,
Fig. 4.12 S. Pietro in Vaticano. Reconstruction of the Memoria over the Tomb of St. Peter. After Esplorazioni.

there are two aspects of these features of the Red Wall that should be emphasized. The first is that the character of \( N_3 \) is more than a little unclear. Its existence could be hypothesized only from what could be seen through the sill of the small plastered opening. Second, any detailed examination of \( N_2 \) was impossible because of the mosaic on its eastern side facing into the confessional. And one must keep in mind what excavators found as they began probing from the Cappella Clementina onto the far side of the Red Wall: "The general impression here is one of chaos and it is eloquent of repeated destructions."\(^{20}\)

Probing continued. A bit of marble facing was exposed on the east side of the Red Wall. Clearly at some time the Red Wall had presented an embellished face toward the east which was hidden by the construction of the Constantinian monument. With small pick and penknife the explorers dug further into the space to the east of the Red Wall. And now they were greeted by a column shaft of white marble that had been built into a small spur wall (fig. 4.11).\(^{21}\) The wall enclosing the column that one sees today is a secondary structure built on the stump of an earlier wall. This earlier wall is wall \( s \). Above the column, resting horizontally in the fill, was a travertine slab broken into two pieces. The travertine slab and the column (with fragments of the second, similar column), together with \( N_2 \) and \( N_3 \), are the basic elements of the re-
construction of the Memoria, which the excavators restore against the Red Wall (figs. 4.12, 4.13). Yet just as N2 and N3 are incompletely known, so the travertine slab and the column present their own problems. The travertine slab that is restored as the shelf of the Memoria is fragmentary; it was not resting on the column that is supposed to have carried it. The excavators noted with satisfaction that there could have been just room for a capital, now lost, to fit between the top of the column and the travertine slab. But how are we to imagine that the slab remained perfectly in position when the capital was removed from below it? Surely no antigravitational force was present to sustain it in midair. The slab would either have slipped onto the top of the column or, more likely, would have fallen to the ground.

The marble column itself cannot have been part of any memorial structure such as proposed by the excavators (see fig. 4.12). The key to this fact is the marble facing found on wall s. The facing covered a small U-shaped alcove formed against the Red Wall by wall s and another wall, wall g, which I shall consider presently. The Red Wall between walls s and g (including N2), the alcove side of wall g, and the side of wall s opposite it all had marble facing (see fig. 4.16). Wall s was something of an afterthought in the creation of the alcove, as shown by the fact that it was built up against the marble facing on the Red Wall. The column, moreover, is certainly an afterthought in respect to Wall s because the marble facing of that wall runs tight behind it, so tightly that it could not have been wedged into place behind a column that
was already in position. One is left to conclude that the column was simply a piece of stone, unsuitable for reuse (the side facing into the wall was badly damaged), that belongs to the next phase of construction after the marble-faced alcove.²⁴

In the fill beneath the column there was another flat piece of travertine on which the excavators assumed that the column had been positioned, although again their possibilities of observation were extremely limited, and they may well have exaggerated the size and importance of this element (figs. 4.14, 4.15, 4.16).²⁵ The excavators further assumed that this element would originally have been long enough to have supported a matching column on the other side (the
north side) of the niches. When the investigation reached that point, however, the excavators found that the travertine slab did not extend so far. The lower part of a column was there, standing loose in the fill. This column is not quite the mate of the southern column because its base was made separately from the shaft. Its precise location was never recorded. There was no support below it. The northern column was thus left, as it were, hanging in air (fig. 4.17). The expression is not completely fanciful. The fragmentary column was in a position directly above the cavity of the tomb, which the excavators soon entered. Their probing in the soil surrounding the cavity resulted in the unsupported column's crashing down into the open space below it.

A further problem connected with the travertine piece under the southern column arises when one examines the plans published in the major report of 1951. In the original state of the Memoria the southern column sits at the edge of the travertine foundation. In the second state of the Memoria, after the construction of walls g and s, the column has been moved toward the north, but it is still at the edge of the same piece of travertine, which seems to have shrunk conveniently to fit the new position. It is all too clear that the excavators never saw the edge
of the travertine element lying below the southern column in the fill and altered its dimensions to suit the convenience of their restoration. In fact, it seems they were able to observe very little of this piece of travertine, and, as already suggested, they may have unduly exaggerated its size and importance. It may have been no more than a fragment that never played a role in any structure. In the following discussion I shall continue to follow the excavators’ line of reasoning in their work, but one must keep in mind that the evidence for the Memoria as they restored it is insufficient to support their reconstruction.

Wall g derived its name from the graffiti that covered its northern side, that is, its long side away from the alcove. Its foundations reach to a much deeper level than those of wall s. In wall g there was a small, boxlike cavity $77 \times 29 \times 31.5$ cm. lined with marble. Originally its only opening was a small slot that gave out onto the north face of the wall, but at the time of discovery part of its side was missing. When found, according to the excavators, it was empty save for some slivers of bone, a bit of lead, a few threads of silver cloth, and a coin of the Counts of Limoges datable to the tenth/twelfth centuries. This marble box and its contents were to become a point of great contention in the later history of the interpretation of the excavations.

There is an apparent fissure in the Red Wall exactly behind the end of wall g. Prandi’s subsequent observations showed that at this point the Red Wall comes to an end and that what was thought to be its continuation northward is a completely separate structure which he
Fig. 4.17 S. Pietro in Vaticano. Elements combined in the restoration of the Memoria. Drawing by A. Walsh.

termed *Muro Q*, or *MQ*. Wall *g*, furthermore, does not touch the juncture of *MR* and *MQ* and therefore cannot be, as the original excavators supposed, a buttress made in an effort to repair a crack.30

Now for the first time an opening was made in the Constantinian pavement in the northern chamber of the pair that been created behind the east wall of the Cappella Clementina. As Father Kirschbaum describes the result, "The breach was made close to the Red Wall, just large enough for us to push a man through it. Lying flat on his back, he was able to light up a very irregular little space, about 80 cm. square and nearly as high."31 This cavity, no larger than a good-sized cupboard, is in the very location venerated for so long as the Tomb of St. Peter. Overhead could be seen a reused marble inscription of one P. Aelius Isidorus, thought to be the owner of one of the mausolea in the street of the tombs nearby, from where the marble slab with the inscription would have been taken (fig. 4.18).32 The marble slab was placed face down to cover the cavity. It is broken and there is a small section missing toward the Red Wall. The former tombstone, however, was only the lowest covering over the cavity. Above it there
was another marble slab and cut into it a rectangular aperture which matched the opening in the Isidorus tombstone. Finally, there was a thick layer of mortar and above that again the remains of three sections of lead sheeting which originally seem to have covered the upper marble slab and what lay below. The shaft down to the Isidorus tombstone was lined with green porphyry. On the side of the shaft there was a nail, from which, in medieval times, a censer may have been suspended. On the south side of the cavity there are two bits of walling, one above the other, labeled \( m_2 \) and \( m_1 \), respectively.\(^{33}\) The excavators believe that \( m_2 \) could have served to hold one side of a removable cover for the cavity at a time before the arrangement with the Isidorus slab was installed.\(^{34}\) This is a hopeful interpretation of these slender remains, and it assumes that \( m_2 \) at one time formed part of a subterranean enclosure related to St. Peter's
tomb (m1 is below the level considered by the excavators to have been the original floor of the tomb). These two fragments of walling were undoubtedly part of something or of two successive “somethings.” Any other elements of walling that went with them disappeared before the covering using the Isidorus inscription was made.

On the eastern side of the cavity the Red Wall has been hollowed out at its base, and the resulting depression is known as N1. From photographs it gives all the appearance of a heavy-handed attempt to get at something under or protruding from below the wall. This was the opinion of the original excavators, who believed that the niche had been hacked out of the wall and then patched up as well as possible. Prandi, however, viewed the patching as original construction.35 The fact that at this point the foundations of the Red Wall were not carried to the depth found elsewhere along its course was given great importance by the excavators, who saw in this a deliberate attempt by the builders of the Red Wall to avoid a now-vanished tomb on the spot.36 It was on the floor of the cavity under the opening of N1 that a group of bones was recovered. These bones play a vital part in the discussion of the tomb and that will be considered in due course.

Coins, 1,418 in all, were also found on the floor of the cavity. Although in date they are spread over more than ten centuries, the only coins before 270 are a worn coin of Augustus, one of Antoninus Pius, and three of Claudius Gothicus.37 The coins of Claudius Gothicus were issued only after 268 and so were current in 270. The coin of Augustus was worn by long years in circulation, and the single coin of Antoninus Pius is no indication of any reverence for the cavity before the consistent record of coin offerings begins in the third quarter of the third century. The logical interpretation of the evidence is that the deposition of coins in the cavity began around 270. Thereafter the record is one of heavy accumulation through the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, 573 coins in this period, and a steady rate of accumulation in later centuries.

Further proof of the honor accorded whatever had originally been deposited within the cavity was a gold ex-voto, a plaque 3.5 by 6.1 cm. which Father Kirschbaum pried out of the south side of the cavity. Two eyes peer out from its surface, and between, in place of a nose, there is a cross (fig. 4.19). It was this operation that dislodged the column that had been hanging precariously in the fill over the cavity.

From the vantage point of the cavity the excavators could see more of N2, which as noted is largely hidden by the mosaic in the Niche of the Pallia. The flooring at its base was badly damaged toward the north side, where the excavators had entered through their opening in the Red Wall.

Next, an attempt was made to examine the east side of the Red Wall from the confessional. The work lasted only two nights. On the north side the removal of the walling of the confessional revealed medieval paintings on a wall built in front of wall g. To the south more could be seen of the travertine slab in the fill. In the center the mosaic of Christ blocked the way, but the excavators could make out something of the upper niche, N3, which had been so
hypothesised when the first traces of its fenestrella had been discovered on the other side of the Red Wall. The excavators believe that this was the original niche and that 2N was set into it. The section published in the Esplorazioni, however, does not support this view. There, N3 is more deeply embedded in the wall than N2, suggesting that N2 was made first and that N3 represents a further hollowing out of the wall. And as always, one must keep in mind that the higher one goes on the Red Wall, the more hypothetical the section becomes. Certainly the part within the medieval altar of Callixtus II could not be examined.38

To summarize: in the excavators' opinion, above the tomb there had been a small structure reminiscent of the arrangement made to emphasize some groups of ash urns in pagan cemeteries. This they termed the Memoria.39 In essence they restored a travertine "table" supported on two small columns and let into a niche in the Red Wall. I have already called attention to the tenuousness of the evidence for this restoration. Sometime after the original Memoria was built, again in the opinion of the original excavators, two walls were added perpendicular to the Red Wall, the graffiti wall (g) and its companion to the south (s). The excavators believed that wall g had to be built as a buttress against the crack in the Red Wall and that wall s was added for symmetry. But wall g, as noted above, was not a buttress. I prefer to hold that the first monument on the spot consisted solely of the alcove formed by wall g, wall s, and the part of the Red Wall between them, including the newly made niche N2. The walls of this alcove were covered with a marble veneer. Below the floor of this memorial, covered by the Isidorus slab and reinforced by the marble pieces and the lead sheeting between the two, there was the cavity honoring the resting place of St. Peter and kept accessible by means of a shaft through the flooring through which strips of cloth and other objects such as the gold ex-voto, the coins discovered in the excavation, and finally the pallia themselves could be lowered into contact with the relics. The burial on this spot of the bones venerated as the remains of the apostle did not take place, as we shall see below, until 251.

The Isidorus inscription presented a serious problem for the view of the excavators that
their hypothetical Memoria was built in the second century over a preexisting tomb. They too admit that this inscription from a neighboring pagan tomb could not have been reused as a floor slab until possibly as late as Constantinian times. And the second marble slab above it is part of the same flooring meant to seal and protect the tomb. The only alternative to admitting a very late date for the entire group of features connected with the tomb was to suggest that the Isidorus slab had been put in place as a repair to the Memoria well after the time of its original erection.

The further theory, accepted by the excavators, was that the original tomb of the apostle, dating from the time of his martyrdom and thus in place long before the Memoria was created, had left traces in the irregular shape of the base of the Red Wall. But this theory was dealt a serious blow by the results of Prandi’s work on the site. The new director of the excavations pointed out that wall m2 made a poor boundary for the tomb since only the south side of the tomb was protected by it. He surveyed the tomb where his predecessors had envisaged a no-longer-surviving burial running obliquely under the Red Wall and shook his head. “In our opinion,” he concluded, “there was never that obliquely placed tomb under the Red Wall.” This observation, of course, refers to a normal inhumation for a newly deceased individual. There is ample space in the tomb for a container with bones moved to this location long after their original burial, as I shall argue below.

In the area east of the Red Wall, where the tomb was located (Campo P in the excavators’ terminology), the ground originally sloped upward both from the south to the north and from...
the east to the west. As the cemetery of mausolea grew larger, dirt from the excavation needed to build them into the hillside or to clear their foundations was dumped into Campo P, until the slope became less pronounced. In fact, just north of the tomb a terrace wall (of which only meager traces remain) was built to hold back the earth of the slope in that direction, and the Red Wall as well seems to have been a terrace wall protecting the alley (the clivus) west of Campo P from the dirt pile. This dump soon became the site of a modest graveyard.45

The tombs themselves are anonymous (fig. 4.20). Three of them, gamma, theta, and iota, immediately adjoin the cavity. Gamma was the tomb of a child (fig. 4.21). This tile-lined burial was only 1.26 m long. The tile coffin supported a sloping roof of tile, and from this a tube, through which liquid offerings could be poured, led to the surface. The grave and the tube were enclosed in a masonry structure. This has the appearance of a pagan burial, although an argument can be made for the persistence of liquid offerings among the Christians.46 The original excavators wish to date this tomb to the first century, but Prandi found a brick stamp of about 120 in its masonry and concluded that all of the graves in Campo P dated after ca. 135.47

Grave iota also lies partially under the Red Wall.

The burials in the southern part of Campo P took place long after the last loads of earth
from tomb building in the neighborhood had been dumped in Campo P. These burials, in large marble coffins, were made under the floor of the Constantinian basilica. They include tomb beta, which together with epsilon overlies the upper structure of gamma. Tomb beta appears to have belonged to an ecclesiastic of the Constantinian or post-Constantinian era. Fragments of gold thread were found in it, and a fragment of an inscription from one of the pagan masonry mausolea nearby, the Tomb of the Valerii, was used in its construction.

On the western side of the Red Wall there was an alleyway that separated Campo P and its neighbor mausoleum S to the south from two mausolea farther west, R and R' (fig. 4.22). It led up, by a flight of stairs, to mausoleum Q, which begins at the point of the juncture of the MR and MQ. The stairway has two sections. The older, with steeper rises to its steps, is to the north. The foundations below these steps are footed well below the base of the foundations of the Red Wall. The stairway is therefore earlier than the Red Wall. There was a drain under the clivus (fig. 4.23 center). Among the tiles covering this drain there were five bearing the same stamp. On it Marcus Aurelius is designated as Caesar, meaning that the tile was produced before 161, when he became emperor. His wife, however, is already Augusta, a title she received in 147. The tiles, therefore, were made after 147 and before 161.

The relation of the drain to the clivus and of the clivus to the Red Wall is a matter of great
importance for the question of the burial of St. Peter within the confines of Campo P. For the authors of the official publication there was no question that the drain dated the clivus, which in turn dated the Red Wall, which in turn dated the wall monument attached to it, which therefore dated the use of the cavity below it to before 160. Each step in this chain of reasoning, however, is open to question. The drain belongs to an early period in the development of this area of the Vatican necropolis. It is interrupted before reaching the southern end of the Red Wall and of mausoleum R across the clivus from it. In the opposite direction it breaks off under the steps leading up to Q. The date of the tiles covering the clivus drain is simply a terminus post quem for the later buildings. There may, however, be some validity to Prandi’s argument that because the dumping of building spoils into Campo P belongs after ca. 135, the Red Wall, serving as a retaining wall along the clivus, should belong to the same time. At one time a drain led out of Q southward, but this drain is not the beginning of the drain under the clivus. It is larger, it could not connect with the clivus drain (in fact, its floor is at the level of the top of the latter), and it too is broken off, leaving a length of only about 1 m.

But the crucial question is whether the hypothetical Memoria was erected at the same time as the Red Wall. This relation hinges on the niches. The original excavators stated that N2 is an integral part of the original structure of the Red Wall. The confidence of these scholars, whose opinion must be accorded great weight since they alone (and Prandi) have had the opportunity to examine the evidence at firsthand, was based on very limited observation. N2 could not be seen from the east, that is, from the Cappella Clementina. Toward the confessional its base retains its marble veneer, and its upper part is covered by the mosaic figure of Christ. The most recent student of the question considers N2 a later feature and falls back on N3 as the original marker of the Tomb of St. Peter belonging to the original state of the Red Wall. N3, however, is also poorly documented, and, as pointed out already, it is a secondary feature. Initially its existence was little more than a guess, and the observations made subsequently from the east side of the Red Wall are far from complete. More to the point, one must
ask with Theodore Klauser why a niche should have been made as part of the original construction in the weakest point of the Red Wall just before it joins MQ.\textsuperscript{54}

To repeat: almost everything about the Memoria and the tomb below it as reconstructed by the original excavators is conjecture. The uncertainties include not only the upper parts of N2 and N3. As noted above, the travertine slab restored as part of the shelf of the hypothetical Memoria is fragmentary; it was not resting on the column that is supposed to have carried it. The column itself was a damaged piece reused in the wall that succeeded wall s. The recess in N2 meant to receive the shelf exists only as a hypothesis. Of the two columns supposed to have supported the shelf, the northern member of the pair was found loose in the fill with no possible support to stand on. The southern column, as stated, was incorporated in the fabric of the wall that succeeded wall s. Its relationship to the piece of travertine observed below it in the fill was never properly observed. On the basis of this evidence, one might advance the theory that the southern column came to its present location only when it was used as building material in the new wall s. Its northern counterpart was even more certainly not in its original position as part of a structure, having been found loose in the fill between the Cappella Clementina and the confessional. Although we have become used to the restoration of the Memoria offered by the excavators, it would be well to keep in mind that there may have been nothing of the sort on the spot and that the first and only Memoria consisted of walls g and s and the marble facing along their inner sides and along the portion of the Red Wall between them, including N2 (fig. 4.24).

As noted, however, a group of bones was found lying below N1 on the floor of the cavity. These bones had a period of notoriety, when it seemed that just possibly they might be relics of the apostle. But analysis of the bones, published in 1965, showed that they belonged to three individuals, two men and a woman, as well as to a number of domesticated animals.\textsuperscript{55} At this point Prof. Margherita Guarducci, who was engaged in the study of the graffiti found during the excavations, brought forward other bones she claimed represented the relics of the apostle. They were connected with the marble-lined recess in wall g. One may recall that this wall was veneered in marble on the side toward the Memoria, but on its far side there were innumerable graffiti scratched on its plaster surface. There were names, but many were simply initials. The deceased were included, identified by the phrase \textit{VIVAS IN CHRISTO}. The \textit{CHRISTO} was always written as Chi-Rho joined together, the ligatured abbreviation which appears first in the Constantinian period. Notably missing from the graffiti was any mention of St. Peter. But Peter’s name was identified by Father Ferrua on a fragment of plaster of the Red Wall. It is a Greek text which reads \textit{PET} (followed by an upright staff which could belong to a Greek $\Gamma$) \textit{EN} (followed by another upright staff of an incomplete letter). Prof. Guarducci proposed the restoration \textit{PETROS ENESTI}, meaning “Peter is within.”\textsuperscript{56}

Prof. Guarducci entered the orbit of the Vatican excavations in 1953 when she began studying the graffiti of wall g. She enjoyed not only her reputation as one of the world’s foremost authorities on Greek epigraphy but also easy entrée to both Popes Pius XII and Paul VI. As
she has recounted on various occasions, Prof. Guarducci happened one day, while engaged on her epigraphical work on wall g, to express her curiosity concerning the material discovered in the boxlike cavity in the same wall. A Vatican workman who was nearby overheard her remark and recalled that there should be something else stored away. He soon produced from the Vatican ossuary a wooden box complete with a ticket specifying that the bones came from wall g. Some, notably Father Ferrua, declared the ticket to be illegible. And the ticket alone does not clarify the problem because the excavators had found the boxlike cavity almost empty. The Vatican workman and Prof. Guarducci maintained that Mgr. Kaas was responsible for having collected the bones and having them deposited in the ossuary without the knowledge or permission of the excavators. Given such uncertainty surrounding the provenance of the skeletal remains in the box, it is difficult to accept the claim that among them there are the mortal remains of St. Peter.

The problems of the graffiti wall and of the bones from the excavations beneath the confessional of St. Peter's are inextricably linked to the pre-Constantinian remains below the Basilica Apostolorum (S. Sebastiano, fig. 4.25). The archaeological situation below the basilica on the
Via Appia is a rich combination of many levels and many uses. Initially, in Republican times, there was a tufa quarry, which later became a burial place. The quarry created a deep pit under what was to become the western part of the basilica. By early imperial times a house (the Villa Grande) had been erected to the west in the area that was later to be largely enclosed by the apse of the basilica. This house remained in use in the third century. Immediately north of the house, beginning in the Julio-Claudian period, there came into being two rows of freestanding tomb chambers flanking a passageway. Entrance to this cemetery was gained by a flight of stairs leading up to it from the road to the west, which also ran along the flank of the villa. The stairs connected first to a small courtyard fronting on the first two tombs. A loculus in its center gave light to another tomb located beneath the floor of the courtyard.

In the area east of the villa and south of the group of tombs just described there was the pit of the tufa quarry. In the second century this was transformed into a cemetery. Three elegant brick façades gave access to burial chambers located at a lower level (fig. 4.26). In the central one beside one of the loculi there is a Greek inscription reading "The two Gordians In. . . ." The final two letters stand for the burial association that owned the tomb, the Innocentii. Two other such inscriptions salute Gordian alone and Pupienus and Balbeinus (Balbinus) together. These names refer to the emperors of the year 238, Gordian I, II, and possibly III, Pupienus,
and Balbinus. The tomb, therefore, was in use in that year. At the same time (beginning in the third century) the old galleries of the quarry began to be used for burial. The occupants of the tombs are an interesting group including imperial freedmen of eastern origin. There is no clearly Christian presence among them.\textsuperscript{62}

At some time after 238 the pit was filled in, and the three impressive tomb façades disappeared from view. On the new level that was created above the old quarry and cemetery there appeared a motley group of structures (fig. 4.27). It is unclear whether these structures were built for the Christian refrigeria they came to serve or whether originally they had a purely secular purpose. In the center of a paved court a stairway led down to a well. At the east side there was a portico known in the literature as the \textit{triclia} (variant of \textit{trichila}, a summer house).\textsuperscript{63} It had a lean-to roof supported by four masonry pillars. It was raised above the level of the courtyard and was furnished with a bench against its back wall. There was a similar, but smaller and less elaborate portico against the outside wall of the complex on the north and a bench in front of it. Beyond it a small niche had been created out of the ruin of a
vaulted substructure originally attached to the villa to the west. Finally, there was an apse-ended isolated chamber entered through a façade with two columns. If not originally a mausoleum, it quickly became one. Four sarcophagi were found in it, and loculi had been cut out of the walls.

It is the first portico, raised above the courtyard on its eastern side, that is the focus of interest in this complex. Its rear wall was decorated with frescoes of birds, animals, and flowers. Scratched into these are 190 graffiti recording Christian refrigeria held here, almost always acknowledging the presence of Saints Peter and Paul (other Christian graffiti were found on its
stairway leading down to the well, figs. 4.28, 4.29). The messages of the graffiti are spontaneous and touching. On the wall of the triclia Tomius Coelius recorded that he made his refrigerium for Peter and Paul. A man whose name ended in . . . sinum asks Peter and Paul to have him in mind while he makes his refrigerium. Sozomenus asks Peter and Paul to remember him and you too who read his wish. Primitivus confesses he is a sinner and asks the saints to come to his aid. And an anonymous Christian prays that Peter and Paul keep us all in mind. To stand before this wall, as one can today below the floor of the Basilica of the Apostles, is to hear the faint voices of those long-departed souls who gave their faith to Christianity in decades sometimes of indifferent tolerance, sometimes of danger, but always with the comfort of the presence of Peter and Paul in this place.

One graffito has a consular date of 260. Obviously, this marks neither the beginning nor the end of the series but has considerable importance in showing that the refrigeria were in full swing on the Via Appia in the third quarter of the third century.

The problem of the double cult of Saint Peter in the Vatican and at San Sebastiano is complicated by the type of evidence found in the two locations. The Tomb of St. Peter that was honored in Constantine's time in the Vatican was reduced over the centuries to that scene of chaos and repeated destructions which greeted the excavators in 1940. The evidence of graffiti in the immediate neighborhood of the grave is controversial. At San Sebastiano there is a
chorus of graffiti invoking the apostle and his relics but no evidence of a tomb. Fortunately, there are testimonia that clarify the problem.

The first is the report in the Liber Pontificalis in its entry for Pope Cornelius (251–53): “In his time, at the request of a certain matron Lucina, he took up the bodies of the holy apostles Peter and Paul from the catacombs by night; first of all the blessed Lucina took the body of St. Paul and put it on her estate on the Via Ostiensis close to the place where he was beheaded; the blessed bishop Cornelius took the body of St. Peter and put it near the place where he was crucified, among the bodies of the holy bishops at the temple of Apollo on the Mons Aureus, in the Vatican of the palace of Nero on the 29th of June.”

This entry in the Liber Pontificalis has been curiously neglected. The objections to it were formulated by Paul Styger, the first excavator of the remains below S. Sebastiano.

First, the story is legendary and does not fit with historical reality. Second, the date of 251 contradicts the date 258 given elsewhere for the establishment of the observance on the Via Appia. Third, the remains at S. Sebastiano are not as early as the mid-third century. The first and second objections are conjecture. Historical reality and chronology are well served by accepting this account, as we shall see. And the triclia is known to have been in use by the year 260.

The second piece of evidence comes from the Deposition of the Martyrs contained in the Calendar of 354, which was compiled by Furius Dionysius Filocalus, the amanuensis of Pope Damasus (366–84). This calendar lists the feast days of the martyrs and in three cases, including those of Peter and Paul, the year that the feast was instituted: “Month of June, the 29th. Of Peter in the Catacombs, of Paul at the Via Ostiensis, in the consulship of Tuscus and Bassus [that is, 258].”
The notice in the Filocalian calendar is actually an abbreviation of the full entry given in the *Martyrology* of St. Jerome:

June 29th, at Rome the anniversary of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, of Peter in the Vatican, Via Aurelia, of Paul on the Via Ostiensis, of both in the catacombs, who suffered under Nero; consulship of Tuscus and Bassus.\(^6^9\)

Finally, there is the inscription of Pope Damasus originally displayed at the Basilica Apostolorum. Only fragments of the original survive, but the text was copied by a pilgrim of the seventh century and is preserved in a manuscript of the eighth century at Einsiedeln:

Here you must know there dwelt
Peter and Paul alike whom by name you seek.
The East disciples sent them, we say.
By Christ’s blood’s power they followed the stars
And sought ethereal regions where the pious reign.
Citizens Rome can claim them hers.
Damasus gives praise to you new among the stars.\(^7^0\)

To these testimonia pertaining to the third century we must add one further item, the much-debated statement of Gaius (ca. 200) quoted by Eusebius: “I can show you the trophies of the apostles. If you wish to go to the Vatican or to the Via Ostiensis, you will find the trophies of those who founded this church.”\(^7^1\)

What these trophies may be has been long a matter of dispute. They may be the tombs of the apostles. They may be monuments to them, and the excavators of the remains below the confessional of St. Peter’s were not slow to identify Gaius’s trophy with their Memoria. And it is not impossible that the places where they won their crowns of martyrdom were in themselves the trophies of their victory.\(^7^2\) Other testimonia belong to the elaboration of the traditions concerning St. Peter at a later time.\(^7^3\)

Discussion of the problem of St. Peter’s tomb in the Vatican and his presence on the Via Appia has led to various conclusions. In the time of Pope Callixtus II (1119–24) the testimony of the *Liber Pontificalis* was believed. Sts. Peter and Paul were buried at the catacombs. Their remains were moved by Pope Cornelius.\(^7^4\) In the fifteenth century, Maffeo Vegio held that the apostles were buried on the Via Appia and only subsequently translated to the Vatican and the Via Ostiensis. He believed that the translation was carried out by Constantine.\(^7^5\)

Since the appearance of the report on the excavations of the 1940s, there have been four major treatments of the problem in addition: those of Theodor Klauser, Armin von Gerkan, Hans Georg Thümmler, and José Ruysschaert.\(^7^6\) Before reviewing them, however, it may be useful to recall the position taken by the excavators of the work between 1940 and 1949, in the
the body could arrange burial at his own convenience. Then Pope Cornelius moved the bodies. Although a persecution had begun, his decision is not likely to have been connected with concern for the safety of the bones. The Christians had no cause to fear the pagans’ violating their tombs and stirring up ghosts, but habitual Christian gathering places were best to be avoided. The tradition of the victory won in martyrdom by Peter at the Vatican and Paul by the Ostian highway, and reflected in the boast of Gaius some half century before, was strong enough to give a pope, in a moment of crisis, the inspiration of rallying Christian sentiment around the field of martyrdom of the two apostolic saints. Very possibly Cornelius did not release all the relics to their new graves. In any case, a full-size grave was not required for the disarticulated bones of the apostle at the Vatican. Under the pressure of the persecution and due to Cornelius’s death, possibly as a martyr, in 253 the new cults were not inaugurated until some years later, just after the outbreak of the Valerian persecution, which began in 257. The next year, in 258, the Christians, again in need of mutual encouragement, rallied at the Tomb of St. Paul on the Via Ostiensis, at the Tomb of St. Peter in the Vatican, and for both saints at their original resting place, the Via Appia, and this at the very time that Cyprian was calling on the faithful to take up spiritual arms in the face of persecution and fortify themselves with spiritual and heavenly safeguards. The graffito of 260 in the triclia on the Via Appia and the numismatic evidence from the tomb in the Vatican, where coins began to be deposited just at this time, tell the same story. Furthermore, the mass of graffiti in the triclia beneath San Sebastiano is eloquent proof that in the later third century Christians flocked to the celebration there. They would not have done so had not some relics of the apostles remained secretly behind, although the fate of these is uncertain, even that of the supposed skulls of the apostles, whose presence at the Lateran, where they reside today, is not documented before the late eleventh century. The basilica that was raised on the same spot was known, significantly enough, as the Basilica Apostolorum. And Pope Damasus, a half century later, confidently asserted that once the apostles had been lodged there.

Valerian’s edict, it is true, barred the Christians from access to their burial grounds. But the grave against the Red Wall in Campo P was not in the midst of a Christian graveyard. The same would have been true of St. Paul’s grave on the Via Ostiensis. And if the agents of the emperor found gatherings in the triclia at St. Sebastiano, the participants could well have dared them to find any clear sign of a Christian grave. Even though Peter and Paul had been buried nearby—relics of them were possibly still concealed on the spot—and even though the catacombs of San Callisto and Domitilla were at hand, a search for Christian graves would have had little success among the buildings that Richard Krautheimer described as having the appearance of “a rustic trattoria.”

At the Vatican what is sure is only that an open enclosure formed by walls g, s, and the Red Wall, all appropriately veneered in marble, was set up after 251 and apparently some time after that date. The flooring of this shrine was devised to provide maximum security for what was buried below, and possibly from the beginning there was an opening through it to assist
the pious veneration of what were surely believed to be the remains of Saint Peter. The lower marble slab was spolia from a nearby pagan tomb. It is not unlikely that this modest memorial was made only after 312 because the graffiti cut on the surface of the wall g uniformly use the Constantinian Chi-Rho. Constantine then encased the tomb made by Pope Cornelius in porphyry and marble, making it the focal point of the martyrium and then of the basilica in the Vatican. In the process a second wall into which a loose column shaft was built took the place of wall s. The tomb was violated possibly during the sack of Rome by the Saracens (846) or by the Normans (1084). But some part of the precious relics of the Prince of the Apostles was thought to have survived, and lowering of the pallia and brandea through a fenestrella into the cavity below continued long afterwards.

The study of the tomb below the confessional of San Pietro in Vaticano has been clouded by a desire on the part of those engaged in it to document the burial place of the apostle in the Vatican and to document its existence there since the moment of his martyrdom, or, lacking such proof, to document its existence there from the earliest possible time. The alternative hypothesis regarding Peter’s burial, that the apostle was initially buried in an unknown grave on the Via Appia and that his bones were only later moved to the Vatican, has had far less appeal. It is the Vatican grave as a physically proven fact that is important because no other evidence will suffice to overcome the opposition of those who, following in the footsteps of Martin Luther, refuse to believe that Peter ever came to Rome. For the Roman Catholic Church only the Resurrection has more historical importance than this because the denial of Peter’s presence in Rome is the denial of the supremacy of Rome over all Christian communities. For the Protestant nations no question was more central to their liberation from foreign control of religion. Archaeology cannot settle the so-called Petrine question. It does, however, show how Peter was honored in the third century and how those remains that were venerated as his were employed by Pope Cornelius to sustain the resolve of Christians, threatened by persecution but trusting that Peter and Paul would grant them aid in their time of need.