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Recent Excavations Under St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

L. E. HUDEC*

NOBODY ever expected at the end of 1940, when it was decided to lower the floor of the crypt of St. Peter's in Rome, in order to give a more fitting space to the elaborate sarcophagus of Pius XI, that it would lead to the discovery of a Roman necropolis which would furnish valuable additional knowledge of the early Christian era. Nobody ever thought at that time that this discovery, in turn, would lead to the recovery of St. Peter's tomb, something of interest to the entire Christian world. Certainly these excavations belong to the most interesting ones which have been recorded in the annals of excavators.

The history of the excavations and their results have been described in great detail in various publications. In the *Osservatore Romano* of March 13, 1941, appeared the first article about them; and other important published materials are listed in the accompanying bibliography. However, a comprehensive and authoritative report is still lacking, although such has been compiled and will appear as a publication of the Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia. Its appearance was expected during the Anno Santo, but it was not then forthcoming.

One of the outstanding results of the excavations under the main aisle of the basilica are briefly the following: the discovery of a cemetery belonging to middle-class but well-to-do Romans, including about twenty mausolea and some ossuaries wherein bones from a previous cemetery had been deposited. The mausolea

date from the end of the first century until Constantine's time, when the cemetery was destroyed by the edict of Constantine in order to enable him to build his basilica over it. For this reason, he had to build a huge retaining wall, cut part of the Vatican hill away, and fill the grounds of the cemetery and the mausolea with the earth so excavated—raising the level about 21 feet. The roofs of the mausolea were taken off and all of the vaults protruding above this level were broken down. The present level of the rebuilt Renaissance basilica is nine feet above the Constantinian level, which latter forms the present floor of the crypts (Grotte Vaticana). The excavations were conducted under the most difficult conditions, being carried down practically to the bottom of the great north-east pillar which upholds the cupola rising about 500 feet above. Constant attention was needed lest any settlements or cracks appear in the structure of St. Peter's. The floor of the present basilica had to be strutted up, since its pillars rested partly on the excavated mausolea. When I visited the site in 1947 the work was still in progress, and as an architect, I indeed appreciated the great difficulties involved in the excavations.

The mausolea were found to contain niches for urns or sarcophagi; some have both. They mostly belonged to non-Christians, the greater part of whom pursued Egyptian or Roman pagan cults. In one of them, however, even though all sarcophagi belonged to the same family, the earliest shows motifs of an Egyptian cult and one from a later period reveals a Dionysian scene, while those from a still later time have Christian motifs. In one of the mausolea are the earliest known Christian mosaics, decorating the ceiling and walls. On the ceiling is Helios riding in his chariot drawn by four horses, on one of the walls is a fisherman, on another the prophet Jonah, and on another the Good Shepherd. The Helios motif in itself

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is pagan, but in the Christian surroundings can be interpreted as "Sol Salutis."

Mention must be made of the remarkable condition in which the paintings and painted decorations have been found, after having been covered with earth for 1600 years. The colours, especially the red and green, are as vivid as if the painter had just finished his work. The colour photographs of *Life*, March 27, 1950, give an idea of this. However, these were taken after they had been exposed for some time to the fading condition of humid air.

The dates of the mausolea and their contents can easily be traced. The way the brickwork is laid—apart from the fact that the bricks bear a seal of the kiln and the date of the reigning consuls—make it possible to identify the period. Very narrow joints with good workmanship indicate the earlier era (Augustus, etc.); while Constantine's time is revealed by joints as thick as the bricks themselves and poorer workmanship. The dates of the sarcophagi can be judged not only by their style but also by the style of the inscriptions. The epigraphist, with the present advanced knowledge, can place the date fairly accurately from the style of the lettering alone. Furthermore, the names inscribed on the sarcophagi give a good clue to the archeologist, who knows the vogue in names during different periods.

The second important discovery, from the Christian point of view, is an inscription found on the exterior of the mausoleum of a certain C. Popilius Heraclea, containing part of his will and testament. He left his estate to his heirs on the condition that his mausoleum be erected "in Vaticano at Circum juxta monumentum Ulpii Narcisii." This inscription found *in situ* proves that we are at the right place—near Nero's circus. This cemetery extends toward the east to the obelisk which stands now in the middle of St. Peter's square and which used to stand in Nero's time on the "spina" of the circus. Traces of this cemetery were found years ago, before this excavation, when other repairs were being made.

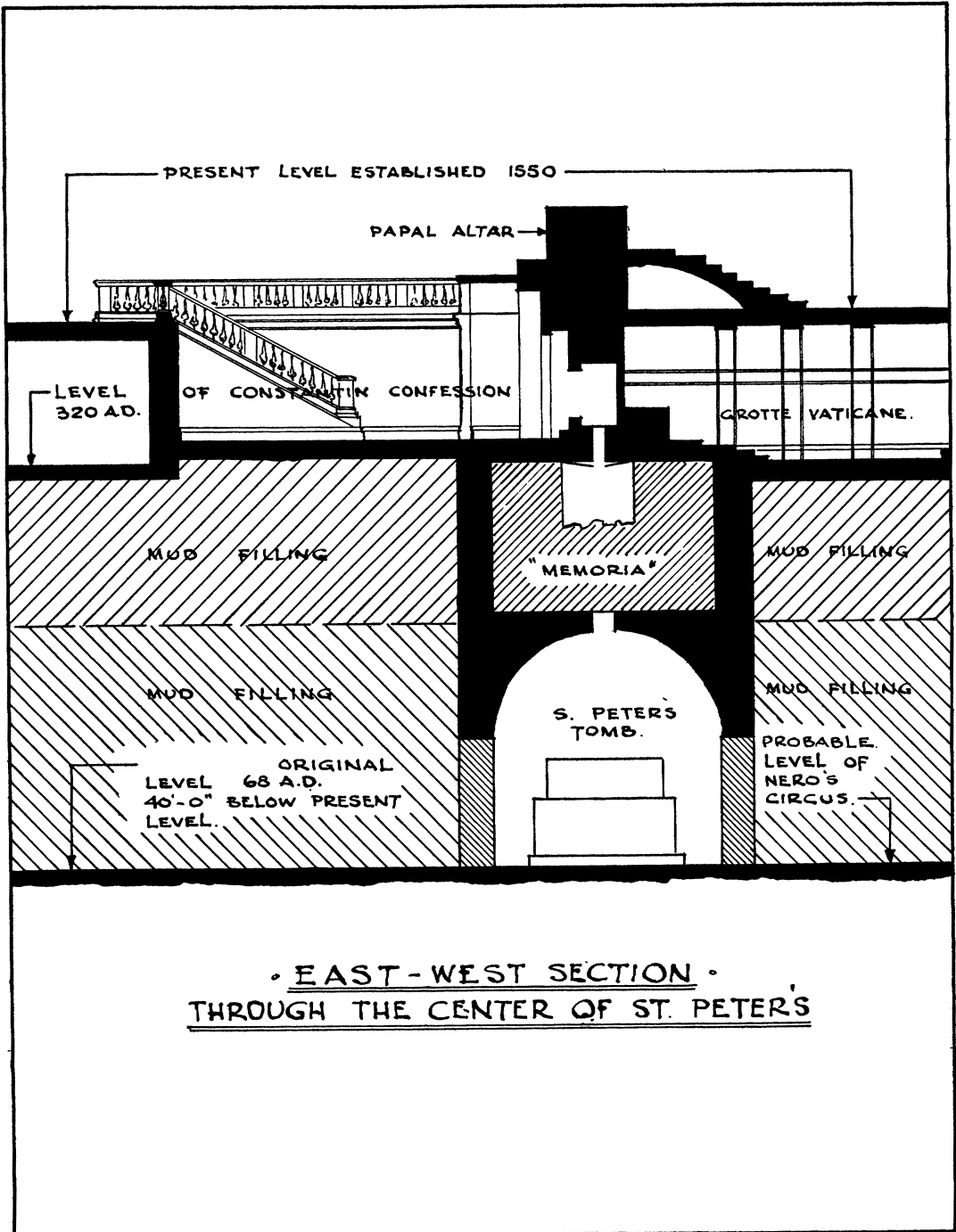
The recent excavation toward the East stopped at the height of the Chapel of the Sacraments, and included the steps which led

to the upper level, used during the construction of the Renaissance basilica while the Constantinian basilica's east half was still standing. However, according to current news from Rome, the excavation has been resumed, this time being extended under the north aisle of the basilica. It was a surprise to the Roman archeologists that no trace could be found of the Via Cornelia, which was supposed to run here under the north walls of Nero's circus. This space is covered with mausolea and the road between the mausolea is only 6–8 feet wide, meant only for pedestrians, so could not have been the Via Cornelia. Prof. Josi, one of the archeologists in charge of the excavations, explains this surprising deficiency by the conjecture that the name of Via Cornelia must be a mutilation of the Via Aurelia which leads further south. As the Via Cornelia is mentioned only in the itineraries and witnesses of the 7th and 8th centuries, this is entirely possible; for in those centuries, when the population of Rome decreased from one and one-half million to 60,000, the people were impoverished and could hardly speak a good Latin and had no idea of the old topography of the Imperial period.

One of the most outstanding features of these excavations was that they were extended westward toward the supposed tomb of the Apostle, under the order of the reigning Pope. I must draw the attention of my readers to the importance of this decision and the possible dangers involved. The situation was similar to that of 1626 under Urban VIII, when Bernini placed his huge bronze "Baldachino" over the confession altar and the foundation pits were sunk and some graves were discovered. (See Giovanni Severanno's book of 1629.) We also have the record of Monsignor Ubaldi, who was a canon of the basilica under Urban VIII, of the work carried out and of the reasons why the grave of St. Peter should not be disturbed. (See Armellini's book). The first of these is that doubt would arise as to the existence of the body of St. Peter, should no trace of the tomb be discovered, as had happened in the time of Sixtus V in 1586 when the body of St. Jerome was not found in Saint Maria Mag-

giore, the place where it had been revered. The second reason given for not disturbing St. Peter's grave was that the actual body might have been removed accidentally since many

popes had been buried close around him; also that it might be found impossible to distinguish his tomb from the others. Thus with this record in mind, it really was a grave respon-



St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—Longitudinal Section

sibility which Pius XII took upon himself in ordering the excavation to be continued westward.

The excavations were carried out in great secrecy, and nothing was known of the results until on August 22, 1949, when an article appeared in the *New York Times* by its Rome correspondent, Camillo Cianfarla, whose information was undoubtedly received through indiscretion. The question of the existence of the tomb of St. Peter and access to it has been discussed throughout the past centuries. A small library could be filled with the books on this topic. Furthermore, in the past 50 years extensive studies were made by archeologists of world fame like Lanciani, Hartman-Grisar, Wilpert, and Barnes. However, the value of these studies was nominal as no excavations were undertaken to prove the findings of their examinations. The question as to whether St. Peter was in Rome in the time of Nero, I may refer to Prof. Lanciani, the greatest of the Roman archeologists of the past who said, "For the archeologist the execution of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome and their burial places in their respective basilicas are facts established beyond a shadow of doubt by purely monumental evidence." I also refer to the thorough investigation by the Lutheran theologian, Dr. Hans Lietzmann of Berlin University, who came to the same conclusion after years of painstaking studies and careful examinations.

Up to the present date, we have no official information on the results of the excavation of St. Peter's tomb. However, Pope Pius XII in one of his allocutions said: "Under the dome of St. Peter there is and was the place of St. Peter's grave." From Cianfarla's report and A. S. Barnes' book, where he laid down the results of his investigations carried out under special permission of Leo XIII, one can fairly well reconstruct what can be expected to be found. It is evident that St. Peter was buried in one of the empty mausolea in this now discovered cemetery, which was in use in Nero's time, and which was located near the north wall of his circus. In this circus, according

to tradition, Peter was crucified near the obelisk in the "Spina".

Constantine knew of the existence of St. Peter's sepulchre on the slope of the Vatican hill, and wanted to honor the apostle by erecting a basilica over it. Why did he insist upon building the church in this difficult position? He could have avoided the destruction of a cemetery in use, which was an odious act in the eyes of the Romans and he could have avoided cutting the hill away and the cost of the high retaining wall if he had moved his basilica slightly to the north on the flat part of the Vatican hill where the present palace stands. His reason for building it where he did is clear and logical only if one accepts the tomb as the starting point. Constantine built another chamber above the mausoleum which contained the remains of the apostle, since falling earth had covered it. This chamber was called the "Memoria" and was connected, with a hole in the floor, with the sepulchral chamber to which there was access through an outside stair. Through this hole, called the "Billicum Confessionis," objects were lowered to touch the sarcophagus of the apostle.

The remains of St. Paul and St. Peter were once removed in A.D. 258, at the time of Valerian's persecutions when his edict deprived the Christian cemeteries of protection. They were moved to the catacombs under St. Sebastian. About 40 years later, when Gallienus gave back the cemeteries to the Christians, the remains were returned to their respective churches, according to Marucchi. In 846 A.D. during the attack of the Saracens, it might have happened that they broke into the tomb in search of treasures. It was well known that treasures were given to the tomb of St. Peter by emperors and popes. A. S. Barnes' theory was that when the Saracen invasion occurred, the approach to the tomb, the stairs which lead from the present chapel of St. Salvatorino, was filled with dirt and rubble and a wall erected across it. The top part of the Memoria was cut off when the Renaissance basilica was erected, and the remaining part was filled with earth. During the construction of the Confes-

sion Altar, which is supposed to be above the grave, the sepulchral chamber was damaged. This was in 1594, under Clement VIII. In the vault an aperture was discovered. The story is found in Bonanni's book of 1696. He claims to be quoting from a manuscript by a certain Francesca Maria Torrigio, who was supposed to have heard it from Cardinal Sfondrato who was present when the architect, Jacomo della Porta, lowered a torch to the aperture, so that the pope could look down and see it. The pope ordered the aperture to be filled with cement in his presence. It is said that a golden cross could be made out, lying on top of the sepulchre. In 1607, when the present semi-circular stair was built under Paul V, the chamber itself was not disturbed, but many graves around it were found; and it is said that among them was one marked Linus P.P., one of the bishops of Rome.

According to Cianfarla's report, the access to the sepulchral chamber was secured through the original stairs when the dirt and rubble were removed from these during the recent excavations. In the middle of the hypogeum, or lower chamber, which was a bare room, a sepulchral urn of plain terracotta was found, and in it were the bones. Numerous coins were found on the floor, the dates of which included the time when St. Peter died. There were coins of later date from the Low Countries, Germany, Hungary, etc., which had obviously been offered by pilgrims who visited the tomb. On the wall were many inscriptions; some of them read "Ave Petrus" and underneath were the names of the visitors. If Cianfarla's report is correct, then the description in the *Liber Pontificalis* (refer to the study by Wilpert in *Roma*, 1937) cannot be true, namely, that the hypogeum was richly decorated and the remains of St. Peter encased in a huge and heavy bronze sarcophagus, on top of which rested the heavy golden cross. That is, it cannot be true unless the Saracens ransacked the sepulchral chamber.

Perhaps this explains the abrupt action of Pope Clement VIII when he ordered that the aperture should be closed in his presence. Since

nobody besides himself had been permitted to look down through the hole, and since he saw no sarcophagus and no golden cross the pope found it wise to close the hole. However, the presence of the urn alone, with the bones in it, supports the tradition that the remains of St. Peter were once temporarily removed at the time of the persecution by Valerian. Nearly 200 years have passed since the death of St. Peter and only a few bones could have been left, so they could have been gathered in an urn which was easier to carry in those dangerous times. It is interesting to know the opinion of one of the archeologists in charge of the excavations, Prof. Kirschbaum S.J., on the question of what can be expected to be found. I will quote from his book which appeared last year, *The Roman Catacombs and Their Martyrs*: "When we speak today of the tombs of the Apostles we must not imagine that there is a tomb, at great depth, which contains a body miraculously undecomposed for 19 centuries, but as in the case of most of the tombs of the saints or other famous historical personages, we must say: here is the place where the bones became dust."

In my opinion, the question of identifying the remains can be regarded as of secondary importance in comparison with the archeological proofs of the existence of the tomb. It is expected that the secrecy which now shields this discovery will soon be lifted by the announcement of Pius XII. The *New York Times* writes: "The secrecy is evident. The Pontiff gave orders to his archeologists to gather proof so incontrovertible that no one would be able to challenge its authenticity. The findings have been incorporated in a report. The Vatican does not wish to have its statement doubted; if controversy arises it may impair the importance of the discovery. Therefore the Pontiff gave approval to the proposal that the world's leading archeologists be invited to check the findings. Each scientist is receiving a copy of this report and is thus being given the opportunity to investigate and discuss the report of the Vatican archeologists. After the members of this neutral committee have closed

their investigations the official publication will appear."

The discovery of the grave of St. Peter is of greatest importance. It supports the Scripture and the tradition that St. Peter existed and was in Rome, and also the interpretation of the passage in Peter's letter where he mentions that he is in Babylon, which in the language of the early Church means Rome. It supports the passage in the letter which Clement, third Bishop of Rome, wrote about 96 A.D. from Rome to the Corinthians where he says that Peter had been there with Paul and had been persecuted and died there. Furthermore, it supports many other contemporary writings. In this connection, it is interesting to note what Hans Lietzmann wrote in 1927 in his book, *Petrus und Paulus in Rom* (p. 238): "All the oldest sources become clear and understandable, fitting into each other, with the supposition that Peter lived in Rome and died there the martyr's death. Every other supposition about St. Peter's last residence and death causes difficulties and finds no support in any contemporary source. I cannot conceive, in view of the above, that there is any doubt that St. Peter was in Rome and was martyred there."

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