

VISIT TO ST. SEBASTIAN CATACOMBS



The catacombs are underground cemeteries of Christian origin. St. Sebastian's ones were in use between the third and the fifth century a.D.

All the catacombs developed outside the ancient city walls of Rome (Aurelian walls) as a IV b.C. Roman Empire Law forbid to bury the dead men and women within the inner wall perimeter due to hygienic reasons and to avoid epidemics.

The high cost of the land forced a development of the catacombs under the ground which was mainly made of tuff (a solid volcano rock yet easy to dig). We can count 55 catacombs in Rome, of which 5 are open to the public.

Inspired by the Christian ideas of Parusìa (to rest all together while waiting for the Resurrection from the death) the catacombs extended for

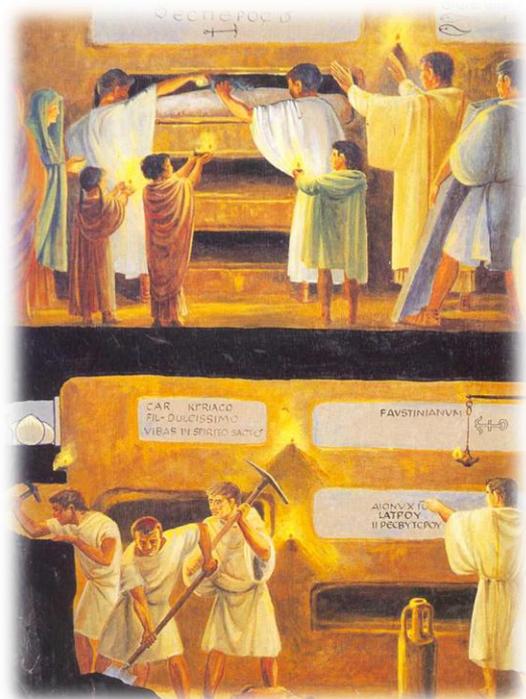
several squared kilometers. St. Sebastian's ones enlarge for more than 12 kilometers and are divided into three levels: 3, 9 and 12 meters deep within which we can find more than 65.000 tombs.

There are three kind of tombs inside the cemetery:

- The burial niche, simple rectangular tomb.
- **Arcosolio**: tomb, mainly used to bury families.
- **Cubicolo**: funeral room, very close to a chapel, used to bury people belonging to the same job category or to the same family.

The bodies were interred, wrapped into a shroud and covered with quicklime in order to hasten the decomposition process and disinfect the tomb.

It is important to remember that the catacombs had never been hiding zones as some modern movies let us nowadays believe; they were only



used to bury people and their commemoration.

The care and custody of this place was in the hands of the Christian community, especially in the *fossores's* duties; men employed by the same community who had to dig the tombs and also led the people to their departed ones.

II - THE SYMBOLS

The majority of the first Christians were slaves therefore illiterate, unable to read neither to write. In order to recognize their deceased tombs they did not write their names, but as an alternative used different objects once belonged to the departed (shells, coins etc.) or other typically Christian symbols.

The gravestones were made of clay, very rarely of marble, depending on the family wealth. The first kind always showed a roman seal with name of the consul of the time; it is thanks to these seal that we could date all the tombstones and, consequently all the catacombs.



The main symbols of the Christian iconography are:



- **The anchor:** symbolizes the hope in eternal life
- **The fish:** in Greek ICTUS which is stands for Iesus Cristos Theou Uios Soter and it means "Jesus Christ, the Son of the Savior God.
- **The Constantine monogram:** it is made of the first letters of the word Cristos. In Greek the letter X is ki and the P is ro; the monogram means Christ.
- **The praying man:** represent the departed's soul in the act of praying while waiting for the resurrection.
- **The dove with a olive branch in the beak:** means salvation as we find it in two episodes within the Bible. The first one with the help the dove gave to Noah after the flood (Old Testament); and the second one the dove represent the Holy Ghost descending onto Jesus (New Testament).

III - ST. SEBASTIAN'S CRYPT

The Crypt was built in the XVII century for the will of Cardinal Scipione Borghese during the basilica restoration and in honor of the martyr Sebastian, buried there before the IV century.

St. Sebastian was a praetorian soldier, a guard of the emperor Diocleziano and head of the archers. As he converted to Catholicism he was martyred twice, according to a medieval legend. This legends, which goes back to the V century, tells that the first martyrdom happened by the hands of his own archers who tied him up to a trunk and then killed him. Sebastian was then healed by St. Irene and once healed he wanted to go

back to the emperor Diocleziano. The martyr publicly scolded the emperor because of the Christian persecutions so that he was caught again and killed on the Palatino hill.

His body was thrown into the roman cloacae (cloacae maxima) so that no one could find it. The roman noble woman Lucina yet had a dream in which Sebastian told her: "come to get me into the cloacae and bring my body to rest within the catacombs". Once they get the body, in the 370 a.D., it was then moved into the catacombs where it rests up to now. This place has, since then, become a place of pilgrimage thanks to the great devotion people always had toward this saint.

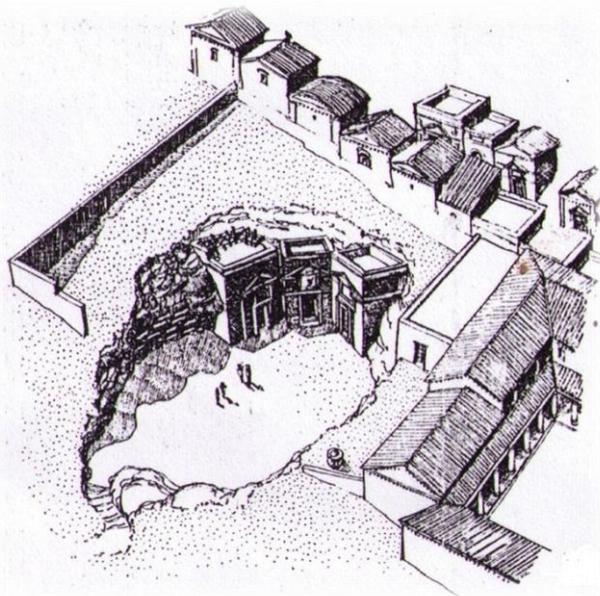


IV - MAUSOLEUMS

The term catacombs comes from the Greek expression "catacumbas" which meant a depression in the soil along the Appia road between the II and the III mile.

We can find a cemetery even before the time of St. Sebastian. The necropolis (from Greek: necro-polis: the city of the dead-men) of the II century A.D. it was before used by the Romans to dig out the pozzolana. In this necropolis we find three well decorated mausoleums, probably belonging to some wealthy family of freedmen. The monumental façades are similar to one another, made of bricks the presents a frontal door on the top of which there's an inscription with the names of the owners. They also have a decorated

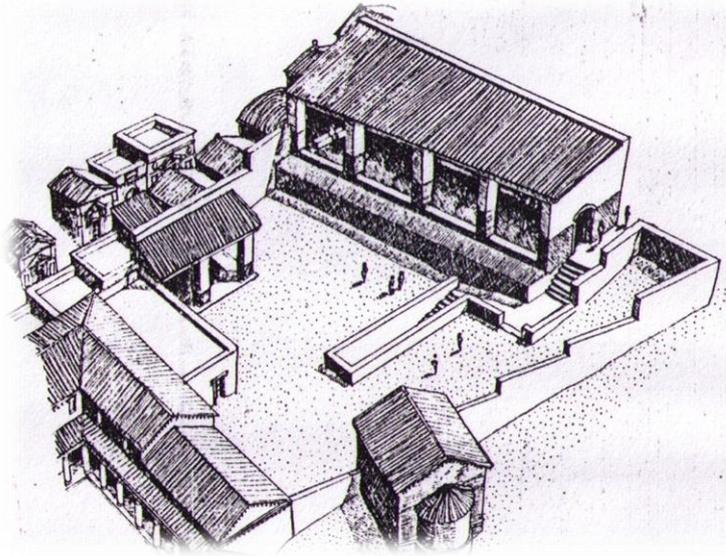
TIMPANO and an attic where they probably held the commemorations for the departed, like the banquets which were held every year the same day the person died (refrigerium). The first mausoleum belonged to a certain Marcus Clodius Ermete, the second one is named "of the innocentes" that, very likely, was the name of an association. The stuccos decorating the stairs vault are very interesting for their delicateness. The mausoleum is named "of the Axe" as there's an axe on the TIMPANO of the façade, this also belonged to an association. These mausoleums have never been restored.



During the third century they have been covered under the ground in order to build a memorial place in honor of the Apostles Peter and Paul. they have been accidentally discovered in the 1922

IV - The Apostolorum memorial

During emperor Valeriano's persecution (258 a.D.) Christians were not allowed to pray on the tombs of the martyrs and of their dear ones; according to a Church tradition they moved the reliquaries of the Apostles Peter and Paul in a place called "ad catacumbas". They build a "Triclia" , a closed place in which you could get into by a small stair; it was made of a big arched room with a banquet for the prayers where, for about 50 years, people could go and honor the reliquaries



of the two Apostles. This is witnessed by some inscriptions dedicated to the two Apostles on the far end wall; they were in Latin and Greek (about 600 inscriptions) and they show the passage and the devotion by the hundreds of pilgrims coming to Rome.

The emperor Constantine in the 313, with the Milan edict, proclaimed the freedom of the Christian worship and begun to build the huge basilica apostolorum, right above the "Triclia" to honor the place where the two Apostles had been temporarily buried. The reliquaries were then moved to their original places: the Vatican necropolis for St. Peter and in the cemetery on the via Ostiense (St. Paul).

It is since the IV century that the basilica had been called Basilica of St. Sebastian.

V - the Basilica

The basilica was restored in the XVII century by Scipione Borghese (symbols: eagle and dragon); it's a building in baroque style. The ceiling is of wood and it's a work of Vasanzio; in the middle we can see a representation of the first St. Sebastian's martyrdom.

a) St. Sebastian Chapel. It is above St. Sebastian crypt and his reliquaries are in this altar. The statue represents the first martyrdom and it's a work of Giorgetti, a Bernini's disciple.

b) Chapel of the reliquaries

we have here the arrow of St. Sebastian's first martyrdom, the column of the second one and the "quo vadis" stone.

The apocrypha St. Peter's gospel says that Peter, running away from Rome in order to escape from Nero's persecutions, while in Via Appia at about 2 Km from the basilica he had a vision of the Christ and asked him "Quo vadis Domine?" (Where are you going Lord?) and he replied "I am going to Rome to be crucified another time". Christ's footprints had been stamped on a rock and they are now called of the "Quo vadis Domine?".