

**The Memorial of the Apostle and the Constantinian Basilica**

by Jose Ruyschaert

The history of the tomb of the Apostle Peter at the Vatican has been enriched during the last thirty-five years since Pius XII, who at the very beginning of his pontificate, decided to extend archaeological investigations throughout the entire lower sections of the Vatican crypts and also under the papal altar. These investigations had been begun by chance at the site chosen for the burial of his predecessor, Pius XI.

Little by little, as the encrusted legends and learned theories were stripped away, the Memoria of Peter began to reappear in a more exact light, thus making possible a comparison of the monuments with ancient texts. This is the history we would like to relate, starting with the present Basilica and going back through the course of the centuries to the Basilica of Constantine, to the ancient 2nd-century necropolis and the small burial monument marking the site of Peter's tomb, and finally to the archaeological setting of the 1st century which offers a starting point.

The paradoxical character of this history stems from the fact that the small burial monument which, since the middle of the 2nd century, has never ceased to be the evidence on which this history is based, has stayed in place, despite successive raisings of the level of the ground, both in the first Basilica, built during the pontificate of Sylvester and the reign of Constantine, probably between 320 and 333, and in the present Basilica as well, built under eighteen popes from Julius II to Paul V, from 1506 to 1615. But, as is often the case, the contradiction is only an apparent one, as we shall see. The presence of the tomb has never ceased throughout the centuries to be the center of this history and its only justification.

This presence is that of a small burial monument built in the 2nd-century necropolis. It is made up of two superimposed niches forming part of a wall seven m long. The niches were made in the middle of the wall at the time of its construction, about the year 150. Originally a marble plaque supported by two small columns separated the two niches. In front of this small monument there was an enclosure measuring seven m by four. Some family monuments of the necropolis bordered part of it. That was how Peter's tomb appeared in the middle of the second century. It is easy enough to locate this modest set of constructions in the present Basilica. In fact, at the side of the small chapel called the Niche of the Palliums, under the papal altar, the small monument with niches and small columns has been discovered substantially intact, while some remains of the enclosure were discovered during excavations directly underneath the open area called the Confession which, protected by a balustrade, gives access to the Niche of the Palliums.

The tomb's first architectural setting, moreover, is now right before the eyes of visitors who descend from the Basilica into the crypts and pass through the archaeological area below those just mentioned. Thus taken suddenly from the present era into the 2nd century, the visitor walks along narrow paths hemmed in by the high family burial chambers of an ancient Roman necropolis. Having recovered from the surprise, the visitor realizes that he is walking on what was the slope of a hill. After a short climb to the north, he finds himself on the narrow main path which rises gradually towards the west in the direction of the papal altar, following the principal axis of the Basilica. As he moves on, the visitor gradually realizes that the family monuments he is passing have been demolished, more and more extensively, so that where the path ends, immediately under the papal altar, the last of the monuments consists only of a pavement and part of a wall.

Such a visit enables the visitor to form a good idea of the problems facing the architects of Constantine's time who were given the task of constructing the first Vatican Basilica. On the side of a hill where an important necropolis was located and which at that time was still being used, they managed to create an artificial plateau, by building imposing walls of substructure and by filling in the area with earth. The plateau was extended considerably beyond the site of the future Basilica. The level of the plateau was planned in such a way as to keep the small monument with niches intact and isolated at the focal point of the new structure, located directly in front of the apse. A simple burial monument in a necropolis, now closed by imperial authority, thus became the reason for the construction of a Basilica and the transformation of an entire area of what was then open country. Placed in the contemporary context of the martyria-basilicas, the way in which the Vatican Basilica was constructed is explained solely by the fact that the monument with niches was considered by the Christian community of Rome to be Peter's tomb. And without a doubt the most important result of the Vatican excavations is that it has been possible to recognize even in terms of the construction of the first Vatican Basilica the archaeological and historical proof for a community belief which was beyond dispute: if it is a palaeo-Christian Basilica built ad corpus, that is, to serve as a martyr's tomb, then it is clearly the one built at the Vatican according to Constantine's

wishes.

Significant in the construction of the Basilica, the small monument is no less unusual in the 2nd century necropolis. In the first place, it is an individual building constructed in the middle of a large number of family monuments. Furthermore, it also interrupts the straight line which the others follow. In fact, the closest monuments are built around the enclosure with the small building in the center, as if it were an obstacle. Moreover, among these buildings two contemporary staircases were put in to provide access to the revered enclosure. Finally, the soil of the enclosure seems to be partly a built-up mound resting against the family monuments. The height of the mound is dictated by the height of the small monument built at a particularly steep point on the slope.

In the midst of these family monuments, therefore, the enclosure and the small building seem to answer to the desire that an already existing tomb should be preserved and integrated within the new necropolis then being developed. During the second half of the 3rd century, other plans attest to an identical wish. Two marble decorations and small walls were added to the small building, flanking it on each side. At the same time, the earth of the enclosure where, in the meantime, numerous ground burials had taken place, was covered over with a mosaic pavement. In addition, the paths to the two stairways were closed by gates.

An archaeological continuity is thus attested to, from the middle of the 2nd century when the small building was constructed up to the beginning of the 4th century which marks the start of the Basilica's construction: the Petrine identity of the small building at the beginning of the 4th century can thus be traced back historically to the middle of the 2nd century. The Vatican excavations have once again placed before our eyes the tomb as it was marked by the small building with niches before the construction of the Basilica.

These excavations have also allowed us to have a more precise idea of what visitors to the first Basilica saw, for they clarify and confirm the descriptions given by ancient texts and by a reliquary of the 5th century found at Samagher and now preserved in Venice. Isolated from the razed monuments and walls of the necropolis, the small Petrine building was located in front of the apse, in the center of the transept.

After the sides had been altered to correct irregularities in shape inherited from the 3rd century modifications, it was covered with marble decorations similar to those covering the apse. Its façade was divided into two parts. A golden cross bearing the names of Constantine and his mother Helena was placed in the upper part, and the lower section was closed with a double door. This door opened into a small area where, at least by the end of the 4th century, an opening in the floor was made, enabling visitors to lower objects on to the earth inside the small cavity below. This design, which still exists in the present Niche of the Palliums and is typical of the veneration practiced at the tombs of martyrs, is an extremely significant element of the tradition intimately linking the small monument to the site, immediately below, of Peter's tomb.

Gregory of Tours gives us a picture of a pilgrim lowering into the small shaft a cloth which would touch the Apostle's tomb and thus become a relic of it. The mediaeval liturgy placed a censer there for the whole year from 29 June to 29 June.

The temporary placing of the Palliums in the niche, a custom still observed, is a further indication of the respect in which this spot was held.

Around the monument of Peter, four spiraling columns of sculpted marble connected with the balustrades, likewise of marble, formed the supports for a baldacchino crowned by architraves and arches. Two other spiraling columns at the angle of the apse were connected to the other four by two architraves. But the six columns of the baldacchino were not alone in stressing the importance of the monument of Peter in the Basilica. The plan of the Basilica itself also marks its importance. The architectural works just described are not only in front of the apse but also at the center of the transept.

This architectural fact is in itself unusual. Churches with transepts "in the form of a cross" may be familiar to us, but the historian notes that, among all the martyria-basilicas of the Near East and of Rome in Constantine's time, the Vatican is the only Basilica which has this design, a design later to be spread by the Carolingian renaissance. In the Vatican Basilica the transept was, in fact, the martyrion, the structure centered above the martyr's tomb and reserved for liturgical functions, as opposed to the five aisles reserved for the assembly of the faithful. The martyrion was a huge rectangle, 87 m by 18, separated from the aisles at the time by a large central triumphal arch decorated with a mosaic showing Constantine offering the building to the Saviour, and by four arch-shaped openings on the sides. Taken together, the naves were 91 m long and 64 m wide. Besides the six columns of the baldacchino, 100 simpler columns taken from a variety of ancient monuments (as was much other material for the Basilica), in groups of 22, separated the aisles, or were

placed at the lateral arch-shaped openings to the transept and at both ends of the transept. The entrance of the Basilica, a portico 12 m wide, was preceded by a quadriportico 62 m by 46, reached by 35 steps.

We have roughly sketched out what was by the will of Constantine the new architectural setting for the tomb of Peter. The Basilica, demolished by the Renaissance on the pretext that it was in danger of collapse, and precisely on the spot where it rested on the highest substructures, had certainly been damaged, but just as certainly it had been improved. Canons of the Vatican, architects and artists have fortunately left numerous testimonies which opportunely complete the information furnished by the recent excavations. We hesitate to stop here: certain stages of these changes, the first ones and the last, are essential to our subject matter. The solution which Constantine's architects decided upon was the best - if not the simplest - which could have been chosen for a cemetery-basilica ad corpus, which was both a grandiose burial monument built around a tomb and a cemetery set aside to receive the bodies of the dead who wished to be placed near a saint's tomb, as was done in the catacombs. This burial characteristic is certainly a primary one for the Vatican Basilica. The solution of Constantine's architects nevertheless presented a serious inconvenience, since even then the influx of pilgrims made evident the need for regular liturgical functions. The monument and its baldacchino took up too much space in the middle of the transept. To his credit, Gregory the Great solved this problem with an architectural device which respected the monument as ingeniously as had that of Constantine's architects.

The problem was to establish a permanent altar at the center of the transept, easily accessible and perfectly visible, without touching the monument. The area immediately surrounding the Petrine monument, apse included, was raised about one and a half m, while the top of the monument was transformed into an altar, without doubt the first permanent altar of the Petrine tomb. Four small columns placed on the altar allowed for the construction of a baldacchino. Nevertheless, the monument of Peter remained accessible, as before. Not only was it still completely visible from the central nave, separated from it only by the six columns of the ancient baldacchino now placed in a single row and crowned by an architrave, but also two stairways permitted direct descent from the new presbyterium. In addition, under the presbyterium an original architectural contrivance had been built. Extending along the interior of the apse wall, an almost circular corridor, reached from the transept by two doors, led to a chapel, likewise underground, built directly behind the small monument and for that reason called ad corpus in some mediaeval texts. About two m high (thus it was a little lower than the height of Constantine's construction), the new design, properly called the "Confession", gave a completely new appearance to the Memoria Petri. The ancient Basilica underwent only secondary changes. Under Gregory III, a second row of six spiraling columns of sculpted marble in the same style as the others was placed parallel to them. Under Calixtus II a new altar was constructed above that of Gregory the Great.

We noted above that the design of the Basilica with transept created at the Vatican by Constantine's architects spread throughout religious architecture from the Carolingian renaissance onwards. The architectural contrivance of Gregory, consisting of an altar-tomb and a presbyterium-crypt, imposed on the Vatican by liturgical needs and the requirements of a burial monument which was not intended to be touched, became almost instantaneously the model for builders of churches where the body of a saint was venerated, even if they did not have the problem of a pre-existing tomb in the edifice under construction. We may add that, from its time of construction onwards, the "uncovered Confession" which was to be built under Clement VIII and Paul V would become a prototype for similar constructions, imposed, and most often wrongly, on some altars in Roman Basilicas, including in the 19th century the altar of the Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls. But it seems to be beyond our purpose to stress the different manifestations of the attraction which Peter's place of pilgrimage has had on religious architecture.

What we have hitherto described of the history of Peter's tomb at the Vatican shows that this history was dominated architecturally by a desire to keep the tomb intact. It is very tempting to state that this concern was equally dominant in the most delicate phase of this history - the construction of the present Basilica. The first measure taken at that time was dramatically of a preservative nature. In 1507, temporary walls joined to the apse wall permitted the setting up of a small construction which protected the papal altar until 1592. It was only under the pontificate of Clement VIII that the first part of the present architectural contrivance was constructed. The floor of the new Basilica, raised 3.20 m above the previous floor level, required a corresponding raising of the 13th century papal altar. A new altar, the present one, was superimposed over the altar of Calixtus II. At the same time, the "uncovered Confession" with stairways maintaining direct access

to the Niche of the Palliums was also constructed. Paul V added little to its present appearance. But Clement VIII did not limit himself to external modifications of the Petrine Memoria.

Preserving the underground contrivance of Gregory the Great, he adapted it. On the outside of the almost circular corridor of Gregory, parallel to it and bordering the outside of the wall of Constantine's apse, a new circular corridor was built. Access was still assured from the crypts previously added according to the plans of Michelangelo between the floors of the two Basilicas. This new corridor, an essential element of what is called the new crypts, preserved access to the chapel ad corpus of Gregory which, since his time, had been enlarged a little and given the name "Clementine Chapel". It is in this small chapel, at the end of which still stands the small 7th century altar ad caput, as it is called, and in the two adjacent areas that the small burial building of the middle of the 2nd century presents for our reflection and devotion the first architectural testimonies preserved for us by a history which, until the recent excavations, had been concealed, as well as preserved, by the Niche of the Palliums.

Following the changes made by Clement VIII, a final architectural note needs to be made so that we can place in the new and prestigious setting of the present Basilica the ancient Memoria, which is somewhat lost in the immense space of the new edifice even while remaining its center.

Urban VIII's authority and Bernini's art carried out this final stage, through the construction of the bronze baldacchino of the altar which bids the onlooker to unite inseparably in his vision Michelangelo's dome with Peter's tomb. Eight spiraling columns which surrounded that same tomb in the ancient Basilica are included in the four pillars which support the dome and these columns, surrounding the baldacchino of bronze which was inspired by them, remain a witness to the continuity which we are striving to bring out.

It has been described above how the history of the Vatican Memoria of Peter is dominated by the constant desire to keep it intact. No less abiding is the wish to keep it visible and to ensure direct access to it. These aims seemed particularly evident in the Constantinian Basilica, both at the time of construction and during the changes of Gregory, but these desires were already asserted, as we have seen, in the middle of the 2nd century when the small burial monument with niches and columns was built. Let us now add that these same imperatives were, at the price of a whole series of projects and plans, the final determining elements for the construction of the present Basilica.

An architectural tradition thus permits us to go back as far as the middle of the 2nd century; it is centered on a burial monument considered without interruption to be the one built above Peter's tomb. Yet our aim would remain unachieved if we did not present, in the light of the excavations made under and near the Basilica, the essential points of the record which could be described as the archaeological setting of the site of Peter's tomb in the first two centuries.

To begin with, it should be observed that, in giving a strict explanation, it would be better to talk here about the location of the tomb rather than about the tomb itself. In fact, the excavations did not discover the remains of Peter's body as it was buried after his martyrdom. Moreover, no archaeological element retrieved from the small cavity next to and below the Niche of the Palliums can be considered as belonging to a burial monument, however modest, of the 1st century. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the recent archaeological investigations have added nothing to the history of the first decades of the tomb.

First of all, the investigations established that the 2nd century necropolis had been built beside a secondary road running directly along the northern border of the Circus of Caligula and Nero. It is equally clear that the family monuments which were part of it were built in an area already in use as a burial place. In the immediate surroundings of the Petrine monument there have been found piles of bones taken from previous tombs. These remains had been gathered together by the 2nd century masons, who did not take great pains to respect the material arrangements of the tombs in question. They seemed to be acting according to the customs prescribed by law. But this fact, hitherto hardly noticed, throws some light on what may have happened to the Petrine tomb at the moment of the construction of the small monument with niches. Under that monument only the remains of the body of the Apostle-martyr would have been collected. Did they remain there until the time of the construction of Constantine's Basilica? Had they already been moved in the middle of the 3rd century, when the monument underwent important changes? Our present purpose does not include answers to these questions.

On the other hand, it is important to stress that although this Vatican area was imperial property in the 1st century, it was then lined with roads beside which other burial grounds have been discovered. In particular, a small part of the most important one was unearthed in Vatican City at the time of the construction of a

garage. It remained in use during the first four centuries and was located beside the ancient Triumphal Way. It included, in particular, two tombs which according to their inscriptions date from the reign of Nero. Further excavations have led to the discovery of some burial monuments of the Flavian age on the south side of the Circus.

But in Rome it is without doubt along the Ostian Way that the true archaeological and architectural parallel to the history we have been tracing is found: the tomb of the Apostle Paul and his two Basilicas. Concerning the second Basilica, built at the end of the 4th century and destroyed by fire at the beginning of the 19th, the reconstruction which respected the essence of its design gives us a precise enough picture. Concerning the first, built by Constantine, the excavations carried out at the time of the reconstruction tell us that it was of modest proportions. There, too, Gregory the Great raised the presbyterium and designed a crypt, limited this time to a chapel ad corpus located behind the altar and reached through a door. And, as at the Vatican, the tomb is situated in the middle of a pagan necropolis, but this time it is inside a family monument. We are obliged to end these pages dedicated to Peter's tomb by a visit to Paul's, since the true Roman pilgrimage ad limina has never consisted of anything other than a visit to the two tombs of the Apostles, "at the Vatican" and "along the Ostian Way". This was expressed at the end of the 2nd century by the priest Gaius, and at the beginning of the 5th century by the Spanish poet Prudentius - Gaius to justify a point of Roman ecclesiastical discipline and Prudentius to present the two Apostles as the guarantors of the faith of Rome. Thus the history of the two tombs has been, through nineteen centuries, a matter of parallel faithfulness to those who, by their common presence, their common preaching and their common martyrdom, "laid the foundations" of the Roman Church in the faith of Christ.

On the vault of the Constantinian apse, did not the mosaic erected by Pope Liberius exalt the divinity of Christ, as the bordering inscription indicates, and are not Peter and Paul standing together on either side of Christ in order to be the first ones in Rome to proclaim his divinity?

Now let us go down, step by step, to see what is under the altar. And as we go down, it is easy to see that we are also going back through the centuries. Under the present altar, which belongs to the time of Clement VIII (1592-1605), is the altar of Callistus II (1119-1124); lower still, that of Gregory the Great (590-604). Next we find the monument built in honor of St. Peter by the Emperor Constantine after his victory near the Milvian Bridge (October 28, 312) and the establishment of peace with the Church by the Edict of Milan (313 AD). The date of this monument cannot be fixed with absolute certainty, but there are good reasons to think that it preceded the construction of the basilica (begun about 322) and perhaps it is no later than 315; that is, the year in which great holiday were held in Rome to exalt Constantine and his victory; the year in which Rome dedicated the famous Arch of Triumph which still rises majestically from its soil. Constantine's monument to Peter contained within its rich marble construction an earlier chapel (or, more literally, shrine) which has been brought to light by excavations. This chapel indicates, evidently, the place sacred to the Apostle, the place that Constantine considered so important and worthy of honor that he did not hesitate to build on it first his precious monument and later - at the cost of incalculable expense and enormous labor - the great basilica. The characteristic chapel rises from the level of the ancient necropolis already described. It stands in a little open area, a sort of small square in the middle of various tombs. (See Plate III.) This little area which, in relation to the modern basilica, is directly under the Confession, was called "Field P" by the excavators. It is rectangular in form (about seven meters from north to south, about four from east to west), and it lies in a place where the terrain rises quite rapidly from the south to the north, i.e. toward the Apostolic Palaces, and more gradually from the east to the west, i.e., toward the Vatican Gardens. Field P is bounded on the west by a wall called "Red" because of the red color of the plaster (now largely fallen off) which was used to cover it; on the south by a tomb which the excavators call S; on the east, but only in the southern half of the east section, by another tomb called O (this tomb was owned by the Matuccii and is sometimes called by their name). The northern boundary of the eastern side and all the northern boundary of the eastern side and all the northern boundary cannot be traced today, but there are good reasons for believing that there were once structures there which have been mostly destroyed.

Behind the Red Wall ran a small street (the so-called clivus) which slopes up from the south to north and includes some sets of stairs (Fig. 24). On the other side of this clivus are the remains of two other tombs, called R and R1 by the excavators. The clivus gave access to the Tomb R1 and to a tomb called Q which lies behind the



Red Wall with the Red Wall itself used for its eastern wall.

345 Under the clivus runs a little gutter used for drainage and covered with a line of tiles, five of which, fortunately, bear a mark by which they can be dated. The mark mentions Aurelius Caesar (the future Emperor Marcus Aurelius) and his wife Faustina as proprietors of the furnace in which the tiles were made.<sup>1</sup> The tiles can therefore be dated between about 146 and 161 AD. It was about 146 when Faustina, wife of the  
350 future Emperor Marcus Aurelius, received the title of Augusta, and in 161 Aurelius Caesar, having succeeded Antonius Pius, abandoned the name of Aurelius Caesar and took that of Marcus Aurelius.

The essential purpose of the Red Wall seems to have been to fix the boundaries of the various burial places in the area. From this fact, it can be considered contemporary  
355 with the gutter I have mentioned, and therefore it can be dated between about 146 and 161 AD. In round numbers, and wishing to take the latest possible date, we can say that it was built by about 160 AD.

The most ancient of the tombs surrounding Field P is certainly Tomb O, which, as can be seen from the marble tablet over the entrance, belonged to the Matuccii family.  
360 This tomb, in which the rite of cremation was practiced, can be dated about 130, and is certainly later than 123, since a brick was found in one of its walls with a seal dating from that year.

The Tomb S, which bounds all the southern flank of Field P, contains traces of cremation urns and of repositories for inhumation. Later than Tomb O, Tomb S is still  
365 earlier than the Red Wall, since the wall leans on it, thus barring access to Field P from the south. Therefore Tomb S can be assigned a date somewhere between 130 and 150.

#### THE REMAINS OF PETER

One of the surprises of the excavations carried out between 1940 and 1949 under the Confession of the Vatican Basilica was the discovery - beneath the papal altar - of  
370 the site of Peter's original tomb empty and in disarray.

The Apostle's remains were strangely missing.

After his martyrdom in Nero's Circus (autumn of 64), Peter was buried a short distance away, beyond the road (Via Cornelia?) which bordered the Circus, in a place  
375 where tombs already existed. That place corresponds to the area which archaeologists today call Area P. In the course of the centuries, various monuments were placed over the modest grave of the Apostle: the so-called "Trophy of Gaius" (about the middle of the 2nd century), the monument of Constantine (after 313), the altar of Gregory the Great (590-604), the altar of Calixtus II (1119-1124), and the altar of Clement VIII  
380 (1592-1605), which is the present altar. All these monuments were built (or so it seemed at first) over an empty tomb.

At the western edge of Area P there were found remains of human bones, remains to which some people attributed a certain importance. It was subsequently shown that in fact these remains had nothing to do with Peter, differing as they did with regard to  
385 both age and sex.

But the excavations inside Constantine's monument had also revealed a characteristic loculus which had been deliberately hollowed out of an already existing wall (the wall which archaeologists today call "Wall G"), included within the Constantinian construction. Wall G is built against the back wall of the Trophy of Gaius, that is  
390 the wall which - on account of the vivid red colour of its plaster - came to be called the "Red Wall". Wall G, therefore, is later than the Red Wall, but earlier than the monument of Constantine in which it was enclosed. On the whole, Wall G can be dated to about the mid-3rd century. Inside this wall, as I have said, a secret hiding-place (the loculus) was discovered. It measured 0.77 m long by 0.29 m wide and  
395 0.315 m high, and was lined with slabs of Greek marble.

Wall G and its hiding-place are at the center of extraordinary events, due in part to the somewhat abnormal situation in which the 1940-1949 excavations took place. The first opening made in the northern side of the Constantinian monument brought to light the north section of Wall G, covered with Christian graffiti, and, below it,  
400 the opening of the famous loculus. No detailed study of these graffiti was made either then or during the entire period of the excavations. They were deciphered and commented upon at a later time by myself, and in fact they proved to be a wonderful page of Christian spirituality in which the names of Christ, Mary and Peter are particularly prominent and their victory is acclaimed. As for the loculus, the  
405 excavators had immediately noticed that it was about half filled with plaster rubble which had fallen from above, that is from the inside of Wall G itself, and from the side, that is from a section of the adjacent Red Wall. For various reasons a systematic emptying of the loculus was not carried out immediately. However, it happened that a certain moment someone noticed that there were bone fragments mixed  
410 in with the plaster rubble inside the hiding-place, and arranged for these bones to be gathered up, put in a wooden box and placed in a nearby spot in the Vatican

Grottoes, where they remained forgotten for a long time.

In the meantime, the scholars working on the excavations returned to the loculus of Wall G and naturally found it empty, except for "some remains of organic material and bone fragments mixed with earth" (these are their own words) which had remained at the bottom. It was easily perceived that the hiding-place had been made during the building of the Constantinian monument, and from this perception there sprang the theory that it had been intended for the bones of Peter. This theory was admitted, in fact, by various scholars: Father Antonio Ferrua (1952), Jerome Carcopino (1953), Father Engelbert Kirschbaum (1957) and Pasquale Testini (1957). But for the moment the theory remained only a theory. The essential element of proof was missing: the box which had been placed in the nearby spot in the Vatican Grottoes and forgotten. Since the excavators were unaware of the existence of the box, and on the other hand wished to give some explanation for the riddle of Wall G, the idea was put forward and gained increasing credence that the hiding-place had been opened during the Middle Ages on the eastern side, and that through this opening the remains of the Apostle had been taken away.

The wooden box containing the material removed from the hiding-place was found by me only in 1953. Besides bones, it also contained earth, flakes of red plaster, small pieces of rich fabric and two marble fragments. A note, written by a Sampietrino who took part in the first excavations and read by me clearly and in its entirety, stated that the material had been taken from the loculus of Wall G. The flakes of red plaster belonged to the adjacent section of the Red Wall (as can be easily understood). The fragments of marble were shown by a chemical analysis to originate from the front slab of the lining of the loculus. Both the plaster and the marble fragments clearly confirmed the statement in the note.

The idea accredited by the excavators and then generally accepted that the loculus had been broken into during the Middle Ages meant that at that time I myself did not attribute to these remains the importance due to them. But the elementary duty of serious scientific inquiry led me to transfer them to a dry place and to the making of provisions for their systematic examination by a qualified specialist. The specialist chosen was Prof. Venerando Correnti, who then held the chair of anthropology at the University of Palermo and today holds the same chair at the University of Rome.

Prof. Correnti was therefore asked in 1956 to begin his work. But before anything else he had to make a long and careful study of the skeletal remains, found in the earth on the western edge of Area P, to which (as I have stated above) a certain importance had hitherto been attributed. The anthropological examination showed in fact that the bones belonged to four different individuals, none of whom could be taken into consideration in connection with the problem of Peter's remains. Only in October 1962 was Prof. Correnti able to devote himself to the examination of the bones found in the loculus of Wall G. This work lasted until the end of June 1963. Briefly, the result was the following: bones of a single individual, of male sex, sturdy build and advanced age (between 60 and 70 years old), encrusted with earth.

This result corresponded with the historical and archaeological data. In the only loculus of Peter's monument-tomb there was in fact to be expected the presence of bones with these characteristics. And this precisely is what had happened.

Furthermore, it had to be kept in mind that among the remains from the loculus were small fragments of rich fabric. These indicated that these bones really were the mortal remains of Peter.

There remained a single doubt in my mind: that of the alleged opening of the loculus from the east during the Middle Ages. But it quickly vanished when a minute examination of the interior of the loculus, carried out at my request by the best specialists in Roman wall-construction, proved that the loculus had never been broken into from the time of Constantine until the moment when the excavators of the 1940-49 period had made the first breach of the Constantinian wall.

Experimental analyses of the remains of fabric and of earth were also carried out. All of these tests yielded positive results. The gold was genuine; the cloth was dyed with purple made from murex; the earth matched that of the area.

At this point it seemed reasonable to draw the following conclusions: at the time of Constantine, after the peace of the Church (313), when it was decided to arrange definitively the site of Peter's tomb, the bones lying in the earth under the Trophy of Gaius were collected, wrapped in a precious cloth of purple interwoven with gold and placed in a loculus specially made inside a wall (Wall G) already existing beside the Trophy. In front of this wall, enriched by the precious material inserted, another wall was built which was to be partially broken down only by the excavations begun in 1940. It can be added that the reason for the transfer of Peter's relics from the earth tomb to the loculus in Wall G was probably the well-founded fear that the dampness of the earth, which is notoriously very considerable in the Vatican

area, would rapidly damage the venerable remains which had once been entrusted to it. At this point, it would seem appropriate to sum up, for the sake of clarity, the chief elements which have permitted the present writer to proceed to the identification of the bones in the loculus of Wall G as those of the Apostle:

1. The Constantinian monument was considered, in Constantine's day, to be the tomb of the martyr.
  2. Inside the monument-sepulchre there exists a loculus, and one only: the loculus of Wall G.
  3. This loculus was carved out of Wall G and lined with marble at the time of Constantine.
  4. The loculus was never broken into from the age of Constantine until the time of the excavations (about 1941).
  5. From this loculus come the bones which were removed at the beginning of the excavations, kept without interruption in a nearby spot in the Vatican Grottoes and recovered from this spot in 1953.
  6. These bones, therefore, are the ones which were verified at the time of Constantine as the bones of Peter and place in the loculus of Wall G, inside the monument-sepulchre.
  7. The cloth of purple interwoven with gold-thread in which the bones were wrapped at that time confirms the highest dignity then attributed to the remains. The royal purple harmonizes perfectly in fact with the royal porphyry which decorates the outside of the monument.
  8. The anthropological examination of the bones - belonging to a single individual - showed that they conform perfectly to what, by tradition, we can imagine was Peter's physical appearance at the time of his martyrdom. Apart from the obvious fact that they belong to a male, the bones indicate a sturdy build and an age somewhere between 60 and 70.
  9. The earth encrusted on the bones indicates that the bones themselves originally lay in an earth-grave, and we know that Peter's first burial was in the earth.
  10. The characteristics of the earth, shown by the scientific examination, match those of the place where the original tomb was dug (marly sand), while in other parts of the Vatican area the earth is different (blue clay or yellow sand).
  11. The place of the earth-burial under the Trophy was found empty. This is in harmony with the presence of the bones, transferred about two metres higher up, in the loculus in the monument of Constantine.
- From this concise exposition it can be seen that the above elements constitute the links of a chain, joined to one another, and that chain leads to a conclusion: the bones of Peter have been identified.

#### Constantine's Basilica

Constantine the Great brought about the triumph of Christianity in making it the religion of the State. The subversive, oppressed, underground creed had been raised out of obscurity to a height of authority of which no third-century pope could have dreamed. What the Faith owes to this extraordinary layman cannot be assessed in terms of ordinary human gratitude. Constantine was a soldier and dictator, a ruthless and ambitious ruler, whose worldly interests played a prominent, but not a predominant part in his determination to advance the banner of Jesus Christ. He was helped and exhorted in the role of supreme protagonist of Christianity by Pope Sylvester. The reigns of popes are not usually long. The longest in history has been that of Pius IX, which was thirty-two years. Before his death in 1878, no pope had covered more than twenty-five years, the presumed limit of St Peter's spiritual sovereignty in Rome; and until Pius reached his quarter of a century of tradition always maintained that it would never be exceeded. Pope Sylvester did not reach twenty-five years, yet he reigned twenty-two, which was a record not to be broken before the death in 795 of Adrian I who surpassed it by one year. Very little is known about Sylvester's character or life beyond the legend that he baptized Constantine and cured him of leprosy in the process. He clearly laboured diligently to promote the Faith and encouraged the emperor's pious reinstatement of martyrs' remains and erection of magnificent churches over their tombs. That he was a saintly, disinterested bishop we guess from his achievements. We may surmise that he was also a man of immense tact and diplomacy to have worked in partnership and apparent harmony from 314 until 335 with an autocrat of Constantine's passion, violence and unpredictability. The munificent emperor founded, in addition to St Peter's and St John Lateran, the original basilicas of S. Croce in Gerusalemme (in which to deposit the sacred relic of the cross brought to Rome by St Helena his mother), S. Agnese, St Paul and S. Lorenzo, (five of them over the remains of the titular saints and only St John's and S. Croce within the city walls,) the churches of the Nativity at Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, besides lesser churches outside Rome and in other parts of the ancient world of which no vestiges now remain. No pagan emperor Constantine



550 had raised so many temples to the old gods within so short a space of years; and it is exceedingly doubtful if before his reign a single Christian assembly room had ever been built specifically for a Christian congregation. That the Church had downed property in the third century we already know from the fact that the Emperor Gallienus, a tolerant predecessor, restored it after the Decian persecutions. And by property land, and not churches, is meant. There was no church architecture before 555 Constantine's day, even if some private houses were used more or less exclusively for worship, and had been given decoration of a religious character. Architecturally, such places would be indistinguishable from dwellings, for which purpose they had been erected. From the earliest times the houses of rich Christians may have contained small oratories set aside for prayer, and nothing else. With Constantine 560 all was changed. There was no longer any need for the worshippers of Christ to assemble behind closed doors. Christianity was adopted as the state religion and came into the open. Artists appeared whose talents were in sudden demand. The emperor's churches glowed with rich decoration and treasure. An appreciative contemporary describes the 'paints of every colour' of church exteriors, 'reflecting their gold, 565 which the water blends with green reflections in the ornamental pools,' made for ablutions in the courtyard. He rhapsodizes over the interiors and their 'ceilings with gilded beams that make the whole chamber seem like a sunrise. And in the windows glowing stained glass, so that they look like fields studded with gorgeous flowers'. We shall only be dealing with one of Constantine's basilicas, and that the greatest 570 in the Christian world. In precisely which year St Peter's was begun is not known. Certainly not at the beginning of the emperor's reign. Whereas the endowments for the earlier Lateran basilica came from Italian sources, those for St Peter's were financed by the eastern provinces which only fell to the emperor in 324. The year 322 has been suggested for the foundation date by Toynbee and Perkins. They believe that 575 Constantine may have anticipated the colonial riches which were shortly to come to him. By his death in 337 at least the structure of St Peter's was completed.

#### The Site

580 The first questions which present themselves to us are these. Why was the particular site on the Vatican Hill chosen by the emperor for his church? And did a previous building associated with St Peter exist upon it? These questions, which have been examined and thrashed out by many eminent past and present-day scholars with the most scrupulous attention, I shall endeavour to summarize. For a start, let us consider the history of the site in ancient times.

585 The Mons Vaticanus, or Vatican Hill, derives its name from the worship of Cybele, whose fertility rites associated with her youthful lover Attis were performed here, ex vaticinatione archigalli - that is to say in accordance with the prophecies of the goddess' high priest. On this hill of prophecy the annual spring festival was held. A pine tree, the phallic symbol of Attis, was reared outside the temple in preparation for the Day of Blood. The events that took place on this occasion were to commemorate 590 the self-castration of the youth at the instance of Cybele, whose motives were to prevent him marrying another. In Asia Minor, whence the Cybele cult was brought to Rome, Attis was called Papas, or Zeus Papas. By certain ancient writers his myth has been confused with that of Apollo and, like the great god of perennial youth and beauty, he was supposed to have been slaughtered by a wild boar. But Attis was rather 595 a god of vegetation and propagation, and the spring festival coincided with his death and resurrection. The hill to which the worshippers resorted at the festivals being outside the city walls was indeed until medieval times at the mercy of enemy assaults. This was a cogent reason why the earliest popes preferred not to reside in the Vatican but in the comparative safety of the Lateran Palace. The elder Pliny 600 clearly thought the hill a barren and unattractive spot. He referred to it as infamis Vaticanis locis, an area infested with mosquitoes, which in the summer of 69 decimated the troops of Vitellius posted there. Few people lived on it apart from some fabricators of cooking utensils and wine jars. Worse still, the hill produced a horrible wine. 'If you drink Vatican wine', wrote the satirist poet Martial, 'you are 605 drinking poison: if you like vinegar you will like Vatican wine: Vatican wine is perfidious.' From time to time members of the imperial family attempted to improve the soil. Agrippina senior, Nero's grandmother, drained it, digging channels to take the water down the sticky clay slopes, altering the contours and constructing terraced gardens, and even a covered way to the Tiber. When Nero inherited or 610 appropriated the gardens after murdering his mother, Agrippina junior, in AD 59 they were flourishing. He built a bridge over the river near where the Santo Spirito hospital now stands. So whenever he wished to dally in his grandmother's pleasures or to disport himself in the circus which his predecessor Caligula had made on the lower ground, he could go there at a moment's notice.

615 The whereabouts of Caligula's Circus was until only a few years ago a puzzle. Most historians were of the opinion that the south wall of Constantine's basilica had been

built on the foundations of the northern boundary of the circus. The misapprehension was caused by a belief that the famous Egyptian obelisk, which had been brought from Heliopolis by Caligula, was set up on the central point of the low wall, called the spina, dividing lengthwise the new circus around which the emperor raced his chariots; and that, until its re-erection by Pope Sixtus V in the present piazza in 1586 it had never been moved from its original setting. This was on a spot fairly close to the south side of the medieval St Peter's, and midway between the east and west ends. Yet the excavations which Pope Pius XII put in train in 1940 have proved conclusively that Constantine did not build his basilica over the northern boundary of Caligula's Circus.

So contemporary historians now suggest that the great needle must have been shifted after Caligula's and before Sixtus's time. But when, and by whom? Did Constantine in discontinuing the use of the circus need the site for some buildings ancillary to his basilica, and finding the obelisk in his way move it closer to his new south wall? This question will be considered when we come to the story of Pope Sixtus V's removal of the obelisk in a later chapter.

At all events Nero made his predecessor's racecourse his favourite playground. Here on every possible occasion of popular holiday he would take the reins and drive frenziedly round and round, his egregious vanity tickled by the obligatory plaudits of his embarrassed subjects. Here too after the Fire of Rome, in order to distract the minds of the miserable citizens from their plight and the whispered allegations of his reckless responsibility for the disaster, he organized in AD 67 spectacles of ineffable carnage and brutality at the expense of the Christians. We may therefore assume, until archaeological or literary evidence to the contrary is forthcoming, that St Peter met his death by crucifixion in the field of blood, Caligula's Circus. Why then did Constantine not select the circus terrain for the foundations of his huge basilica? As the presumed site of the Apostle martyrdom and as a relatively level space at the foot of the Mons Vaticanus, it offered sentimental as well as physical advantages apparent to the least percipient builder.

On the contrary, Constantine did a very extraordinary thing. He chose to erect the great basilica in honor of the Apostle Peter on the steep slope of the Vatican Hill and right on top of an existing cemetery. We shall come to the difficulties he encountered from geographical causes in due course. First of all, there were distinct legal and moral ones involved in the total destruction of a burial ground in full use. The profanation of a Roman cemetery (*violatio sepulchri*) was in Roman law a criminal offence. Not even the highest officials of the land dared do such a thing without risking prosecution and the direst penalties. And here was the emperor himself razing tombs and sepulchers in order to build over the rubble to which they were reduced. That he could flout public opinion and the law in this flagrant manner is an indication of the height of power the emperor had now attained. The Vatican cemetery was not a very old one. It had developed within a comparatively short period. The large majority of its tombs date from AD 125-200. Pope Pius XII's excavators have established that it was not a particularly high-class cemetery. Few persons belonging to the old Roman families were buried in it. Some of the deceased had been freeborn, many not. Most were of Greek-speaking origin. Nearly all came from the lower clerical and administrative grades of the civil service. As the place became a more and more popular burial ground - remember it was outside the city walls - speculators began buying up plots which they resold for the building of family tombs. The process continued on somewhat haphazard lines and showed little advanced planning. Several of the excavated tombs are, in spite of their middle-class ownership, objects of much beauty as well as interest. Those which escaped total pulverization by Constantine lie below the western half of the old basilica where the land slopes steeply away to the south. The emperor left their roofs intact, merely filling the interiors with rubble to make a firm foundation. The rubble has lately been dug away. The tombs below the eastern half of Constantine's church, which unlike the western half was not built over a crypt, were absolutely razed and cannot for reasons of safety to the present fabric be investigated.

The most notable of the surviving tombs are those facing south across a very narrow street. The fronts, which were of course originally above ground, are more finished than the side and back walls, which were thrust into the northern slope. They present a long line of carefully coursed and jointed brick, washed with thin coats of crimson. They have doorways of travertine and windows and relief panels of terra cotta. The surrounds and lintels of the windows are sharply cut. The perspective reliefs of receding arcades and the figures of quails and other birds are delicately moulded. The street façade is as functional and satisfying as that of a late Georgian London street - which it somewhat resembles only in miniature - where exceedingly plain surfaces are broken by an economy of classical detail in door and window

685 features. The interiors on the other hand are exuberant and aglow with colour and decoration. The barrel-vaulted roods are either paneled with stucco squares and hexagons, framing little rosettes, or painted with arabesques and figures. The walls which provided for the urns or sarcophagi are pierced with shell-headed niches stuccoed in allegorical reliefs, with recesses in lunettes and simple pigeon-hole boxes. In between are crude divisions framing birds and animals finely painted in 690 tempera. The marble sarcophagi are sculptured. Some bear scenes in relief; others are strigilated (that is to say channeled in the familiar Roman S scrolls), flanking a single maenad, a naked Dionysus, or perhaps a bust of the deceased in relief. The second century saw a gradual supercession of cremation by burial, since the Christians favoured the latter way of disposal of their dead, regarding the former as 695 essentially pagan. In the third-century tombs of the Vatican cemetery more definite proof of Christian burial is supplied by some of the inscriptions. Familiar phrases like *Dormit in pace* are taking the place of the old pagan ejaculations such as 'I am ash, ash is earth, earth is divine; therefore I am not dead', or that moving epitaph to a dead boy: 'I pray that his ashes may become violets and roses, and that the 700 earth, whose child he now is, rest light upon him, as he in life weighed heavy on no man.' Paganism was obsessed by speculations on the hereafter.

There are even earlier hints of Christian burial in the mosaic decorations on vault and wall of at least one of the Vatican tombs, namely that of the Julii family. These fragments are the oldest Christian mosaics so far discovered. They date from the late 705 second century. On the east wall Jonah is depicted falling feet foremost from board ship into the whale's jaws. A matrix, deprived of the tiny cubes, shows what looks like St Peter casting his net into the sea. On the west wall the Good Shepherd carries a sheep on his shoulders. Again, on the ceiling vault appears the earliest discovered representation of Christ. Surrounded by spreading vines, in three tones of 710 vivid green, the beardless figure wearing a tunic, his cloak flying in the wind, stands driving a chariot of which one wheel and two white horses in scarlet harness are intact. From his head nimbus rays shoot upwards and sideways. In his left hand he carries a globe. The mosaic is known as the Christ-Helios and illustrates the syncretism of Christianity with the pagan sun-worship instituted at the winter 715 solstice by Emperor Marcus Aurelius at the end of the second century. Lastly, in the tomb of the Valerii the excavators revealed what they believe to be the head of St Peter drawn in faded red lead, with an inscription, 'Peter, pray Christ Jesus for the holy Christian men buried near your body.' Several experts have claimed that the drawing and inscription date from before the basilica was built. 720 Toynbee and Perkins on the other hand conclude that they were roughly daubed by one of Constantine's workmen at the start of the emperor's building operations. There is no reason to regret the later date. On the contrary, it affords striking corroboration of the motives which were behind the whole gigantic enterprise. The sketch and inscription are important evidence of the emperor's own belief. They go a 725 long way to answer the question raised earlier why Constantine chose the awkward site of an existing cemetery on the slopes of a hill for the foundation of his great basilica. He was convinced that the remains of St Peter lay buried there. And he was determined, no matter what the cost, to raise the most central, sacred part of his basilica right above the Apostle's resting place. 730 Clearly then Constantine made a distinction between the site of St Peter's martyrdom and that of his burial. If, as all the records suggest, Peter met his death among hundreds, and perhaps thousands of other victims in the circus, it would have been difficult for his disciples, after the carnage was over, to identify the precise spot. Moreover, did it greatly matter? They will have had a delicate enough task 735 secretly gathering together, probably by night, the cherished remains, of which a reverent interment was their chief concern.

#### **Even the manner of the Apostle's death is conjectural.**

The first written reference to it comes in the Acts of Peter, supposedly compiled by the Gnostic Pseudo-Linus in the second or third century. He stated that the Apostle 740 was crucified 'ad locum qui vocatur Naumachiae iuxta obeliscum Neronis in monten' in the place called Naumachia [i.e. the artificial lake where sea battles amongst other diversions were staged] close to Nero's obelisk and on the hill. The artificial lake could only have been made on level ground, with the rising stone seats of the circus acting as a bank to the waters. Eusebius writing a little later than the author of 745 the Acts asserted that the crucifixion took place head downwards, and that the body was buried in the Vatican 'field'. Did he mean by 'field' the pagan cemetery nearby? And was this understood to be the case by all Christians in the centuries intervening between the martyrdom and the building of the first basilica? Eusebius evidently thought so, for he went on, '...his memory among the Romans is still alive than the 750 memory of all those who had lived before him'.

It is true that men born Greeks and even slaves have their tombs in the Vatican cemetery, but before their death they had presumably become Roman citizens, who observed Roman customs and rites. St Paul, who suffered an ignominious death similar to St Peter's, was buried in a pagan cemetery. But unlike Peter he had from birth been a citizen in spite of his Jewish descent. There can be little doubt that during or just after the Neronian pogrom the less attention drawn to Peter's burial the better. The Acts of Peter maintains that the body was placed in the tomb of a senator, named Marcellus, presumably a Christian convert and follower, a kind of Joseph of Aramathea. But it does not state where the tomb was.

Constantine had absolutely no doubts in his mind where the Apostle lay buried. In order to get the centre of the apse of his basilica over what he believed to be the grave he was obliged to cut deeply into the rock of the Vatican Hill which rose in a northerly direction. To extend the level platform to the south, an equally formidable operation had to be undertaken. This was the raising of massive foundations by means of artificial terraces over the descending hillside to a height of Thirty-five feet above the bottom of the southern slope. Into the space tons of earth and rock scooped from the northern slope and debris from the desecrated cemetery were shoveled, then packed with concrete and faced with brick and tufa stone.

What exactly the emperor found over the Apostle's grave before he began to build will be discussed shortly, and can in the light of the recent excavations be assessed fairly accurately. What, if anything, he found within it is still open to conjecture. Let us deal first with the last query. This involves taking into account the claims of another resting place, or grave of the Apostle Peter. Pope Damasus (366-84) left an inscription in verse (long ago destroyed) to the effect that Peter and Paul 'once dwelt' on the site now covered by the Church of St Sebastian, likewise built by Constantine, three miles outside Rome along the Appian Way. Gregory the Great (590-604) recorded that the two saints' remains were taken there immediately after their deaths and before their final resting places were prepared for them. It is not impossible that during the lull that followed the Neronian persecution Peter's body, after being hidden at St Sebastian's, was transported to the Vatican cemetery, and Paul's to the Ostian Way.

Be this as it may, early documents and a plethora of tradition claim that for a second time the bodies returned to the catacomb of St Sebastian in the year 258 when the persecutions under Valerian were impending, and that they remained there until Constantine's basilicas were ready to receive them. I see no reason to dispute the likelihood of these precautions having been taken. After all, a similar situation arose more than thirteen hundred years later. When Sir Francis Drake threatened to sack the tomb of St James at Santiago de Compostella, the archbishop and three clerics hastily removed the body to a safe place. They died and when the danger lifted no one knew where the body had been hidden. Not until 1879 was it rediscovered. The St Sebastian tradition is given credence by the discovery under the church of over two hundred graffiti scratched on plaster by pious pilgrims invoking the intercession of Peter and Paul. The date of the graffiti is late third century. Why, if the bodies were not in the locality, should these prayers have been addressed to the saints?

### The Shrine

Whether the remains of St Peter were in the tomb on the Vatican Hill when Constantine began to build, or whether the emperor brought them back again from St Sebastian's we may never know. We can only be sure that a monument or shrine to Peter of some kind already existed in the Roman cemetery. Apart from the recent archaeological discoveries, there is written evidence. First of all, the Liber Pontificalis tells us that St Anacletus (AD 79-91), the second pope after Peter, who had ordained him, erected a memorial 'in the vicinity of the Neronian Circus beside the Vatican', to mark the spot where the Apostle's remains were buried after his crucifixion; and that Linus, Peter's immediate successor, had been 'buried there beside Peter's body'. Unfortunately, the Liber Pontificalis is not an invariably trustworthy guide and, as we are about to see, the recent excavations throw doubts upon this early claim. A more revealing quotation is the well-known extract from a letter by a certain Roman priest, named Gaius, written some time between the years 199 and 217. This is what he, an eyewitness, tells his correspondent. 'If you go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way [where St Paul's outside the Walls is] there you will find the trophies [tropaea, for he writes in Greek] of those who founded this church.' Now the meaning of the Greek word tropaion is neither place of martyrdom, nor indeed place of burial, but monument, to be exact triumphal monument, in this context signifying the victory of the winged soul over darkness. In early Christian years before the cult of relics and the morbid lamentation over death had become common, the glory rather than the suffering of martyrs was recorded. Shrines were erected over their graves where commemorative celebrations were held from time to time by jubilant - not mourning -

820 friends and admirers. In the same spirit, early Christian art represented Christ by a variety of cheerful symbols, like the fish, loaf of bread and vine, but never depicted him hanging in agony on the cross.

The extract from the letter of the priest Gaius need not be questioned. It affords very important written evidence. The evidence of the *Liber Pontificalis* compiled several centuries later, although probably taken from earlier testimony, is, as I

825 have suggested, less reliable. It is not, however, necessarily a fabrication. Pius XII's excavators incline, on the archaeological data revealed to them, to believe that the name Anacletus, the second pope after Peter, was a mistake made by the scribe of the *Liber Pontificalis* for Anicetus, a pope in office from AD 155-66. Tiles discovered by them in a drain close to the site are stamped with the name of the

830 Emperor Marcus Aurelius whose reign coincided with that of Pope Anicetus. In their view, the remains of the shrine, or *tropaion*, which Gaius knew and saw are of the same date as the tiles, that is to say about AD 160, only four years after the death of Polycarp, who had been the pupil of St John!

The long and exciting story of the investigations of the Apostle's grave and monument

835 beneath the basilica has been most skillfully and impartially recorded in Professor Jocelyn Toynbee and Mr John Ward Perkins's exciting book, *The Shrine of St Peter and the Vatican Excavations*, 1956. It would be redundant to go over their ground in detail. I will just summarize very briefly indeed what the excavators' discoveries amounted to. They found immediately below the central chord of the apse of

840 Constantine's basilica sufficient remains of an aedicular shrine for a conjectural sketch to be made of what the structure looked like in A. D. 160. Somewhat similar aedicular shrines to this one have been found intact in other Roman cemeteries in Italy. The St Peter's shrine, a fairly straightforward and simple affair, was built against and into a wall of the same date, called by the excavators the Red Wall

845 because it is lined with a red plaster - which runs from south to north. The so-called Red Wall was built in order to form a division in the cemetery between certain tombs on the west and an uncovered space, or court, on the east. The shrine within the court and facing east consisted of two superimposed niches, originally visible above ground. The upper niche was round headed and was contained within a little

850 tabernacle under a pediment. The little tabernacle rested on a projecting ledge like a table - only slightly higher from the ground than an ordinary table would be - supported in its turn by two advanced columns. Under the ledge and in front of the lower niche were found the remains of a carefully fitted, moveable slab. The odd thing about the slab is that it was not set flush with the shrine and the Red Wall,

855 but asymmetrically at an angle of ten degrees to the north. The irregular setting of the slab at first gave rise to much conjecture until it was found that two very deep graves on either side of the shrine were orientated at precisely the same angle. These graves have been dated from the first century, one of them, again owing to a sealed

860 tile, from Vespasian's reign of AD 69-79. The inference to be drawn from the irregularly set slab and the first-century graves parallel to it is that a previous shrine existed on the site of the A. D. 160 one, but flush with the slab. Other graves dating from the next century were found grouped around the foundations of the shrine, not at the same angle but, as it were, radiating from them. A statement in

865 the *Liber Pontificalis* that Linus, the first pope after Peter, who died in 79, and the next eleven popes were buried round the remains of St Peter may then be borne out by these first - and second-century graves. The fact that the graves are inhumation, not cremation, resting places and were all humble ones, compared with the richly decorated tombs in other parts of the cemetery, contributes to the likelihood that

870 Christian bodies reposed in them.

(In 1626 when the deep foundations for Bernini's baldacchino were being dug the workmen came upon a number of Christian corpses clad in linen, their heads turned towards a central point beneath the high altar. There is no means now of telling the date of the burials.)

875 And what did the excavators find directly beneath the second-century shrine? Below the lower niche, under the floor level, and hacked out of the foundations of the Red Wall, a third niche or arch, the purpose of which can only have been to avoid disturbing a grave below it. On the south side of the lowest niche, and below the foundations of the Red Wall were traces of a short projecting wall parallel with the

880 first-century graves and the moveable slab already referred to. Clearly this deep wall had been built to form on the slope of the hillside a revetment to a grave above it. On examination, the grave proved to be shorter than it originally had been. One third, which lay on the west side of the Red Wall, had at the time of the wall's building been filled in. In the recess which the remainder of the grave formed, on

885 the east side of the wall, was found a pile of human bones without a head. Heaped together the bones were obviously not in the position of their original burial, and the area showed distinct signs of subsequent looting and desecration. Scientific



890 tests have certified that the bones are the remains of a person of the male sex, of  
advanced age and powerful physique. Tradition has always maintained that Peter's head  
was removed for safety in 846, when the threat of Saracen invasion reached Rome, to  
the Lateran church, where it still remains. Of the many sacks of Rome by barbarian  
tribes and Christian potentates, the only one which did not spare the tomb of Peter  
was the Saracens'. Whereas the Nordic invaders of Rome had all been Christians of a  
895 sort, the infidel Saracens alone were in no awe of the Faith's most sacred shrine in  
the west. Contemporary writers mention that they destroyed the altar over the grave,  
committing unmentionable wickednesses around it. The excavators are satisfied that  
they went further than this in smashing and looting what they found within the tomb  
itself. Toynbee and Perkins sum up their synopsis of the long official report made by  
Pope Pius's excavators with these words: 'Although it is not certain that the  
900 aedícula marks the site of an earlier grave, the hypothesis that it did so explains  
much that is otherwise obscure; and although there is nothing to prove that this  
grave was that of St Peter, nothing in the archaeological evidence is inconsistent  
with such an identification.' To which we may merely add that the second-century  
builders of the aedícula, or shrine, must have had sounder reasons for putting it  
905 where they did than any which we of the twentieth century are likely to discover.  
The excavations carried out by a group of highly-trained and skilled archaeologists  
in most difficult circumstances, chief of which was the abiding threat of danger to  
the great fabric of the present-day St Peter's above ground, have not then  
established once and for all, as so ardently hoped, that the Apostle's body rests  
910 beneath the heart of the basilica. On the other hand, they have enabled the experts  
to draw a picture of what Constantine the Great saw when he decided to raise a vast  
basilica in Peter's honour on the slopes of the Vatican Hill. After crossing the  
Tiber by Nero's bridge, the emperor would leave on his right hand the great drum of  
Hadrian's Mausoleum, (now the Castle S. Angelo) which dominated the river where it  
915 loops sharply to the south. He would then ride, or be driven, along a narrow straight  
road to where the southern arm of the present colonnade now claws at the entrance of  
St Peter's Piazza. Ahead of him no sharp cliff of papal palace buildings so familiar  
to us today, but a steepish slope of poorly cultivated vine terraces. At this spot  
his road would incline to the west. On his left, on the low ground stretched the oval  
920 expanse of Caligula's Circus, punctuated in the centre perhaps by the sharp needle  
brought from Heliopolis and now gracing the piazza. On his right, reaching to the  
very edge of the road, the rows of the cemetery tombs, looking like little garden  
pavilions, spruce and compact and huddled closely together. Dismounting, the emperor  
would walk through an entrance gate up a narrow path paved with rough concrete, the  
925 Red Wall of brick coated with washed plaster to his right, and some grandiose family  
mausoleums to his left. Skirting the Red Wall, he would emerge into the small  
courtyard by an entrance in either its northern or eastern enclosure. He then found  
himself in an altogether humbler quarter of the cemetery. Rising above the unpaved  
earthen floor a few headstones, or twin slabs of stone leaning together in the form  
930 of a tent marked the inhumation graves of St Peter's spiritual heirs. Only against  
the west wall of the court stood the more prominent aedícula, or shrine, which we  
have already described as open to the skies. This was the object which the emperor  
sought to make the central feature of the most ambitious church yet projected by a  
member of the new Christian faith. As he stopped to gaze upon it and then turned to  
935 survey the extremely awkward and steep contours of the surrounding land, which sloped  
to south and east, he must have pondered the immense task confronting him as well as  
the odium to be incurred in the total destruction of the cemetery crowded with  
sepulchers and graves of rich and poor alike.  
The Liber Pontificalis states quite categorically that the emperor's first action was  
940 to put the Saint's remains, which he either found below the shrine or brought back  
from St Sebastian's, in a new coffin of cypress wood; this in turn he enclosed within  
a sarcophagus of bronze. Over the sarcophagus fecit crucem ex auro purissimo - he  
laid a cross made of purest gold, on which an inscription recorded that it was his  
and his mother, Helena's gift. This statement has given rise to what in the light of  
945 the excavation discoveries must be a fable, namely that the gold cross was seen in  
1594.

### The Church

Constantine's next move was the leveling of a great space at least 250 m long and 150  
m broad to accommodate his projected basilica and atrium. That the emperor regarded  
950 the whole enterprise as an act of piety is suggested by the tradition that he carried  
on his imperial shoulders the first twelve basketfuls of earth for the foundations.  
Then came the orientation of the church. At St Peter's the setting is the reverse of  
the later, general custom of having the sanctuary at the east end of the axis. Here  
the entrance is at the east end and the sanctuary, upon which the body of the church  
955 is focused, at the west.

This arrangement, not unusual in Constantinian churches, was to enable the rays of the rising sun to fall on the celebrant as he stood before the high altar facing the congregation at Mass. In fact at the vernal equinox the great doors of the porch and those of the church were thrown open at dawn to allow the first beams to illuminate the Apostle's shrine, while the choir and congregation burst into a paean of thanksgiving. The setting is compatible with Constantine's youthful predilection for sun worship and the Roman Christians' tendency to identify Christ with the god of the rising sun.

Just as many pagan traditions of ritual were adapted to the requirements of the new Faith, so too was pagan architecture largely copied in the building of churches by the early Christians. The plan of Constantine's several churches deliberately followed the conventional plan of the Roman hall of justice, called the Basilica. This law court was habitually rectangular, divided by rows of columns into nave and aisles. At one end, steps led to a platform within a semi-circular apse, in the middle of which sat the chief judge on an armed chair, or throne, made of marble. On either side of him assistant judges perched on curved benches of marble, or stone. A rail or low screen would separate the judges from the populace in the hall below. Before either end of the arc of the apse, and in the body of the hall, stood a box, called the 'ambo', from which counsel and witnesses could address the court. In the middle of the chord of the apse there was often an altar dedicated to Minerva, goddess of wisdom, to whom sacrifice might be made before the legal proceedings began.

Out of these various conventional features the Christian basilica derived. The chief judge's throne was turned into the bishop's throne. The assistant judges' benches became those of the presbyters. The two 'ambos' the pulpits from which the Gospel and Epistle were read. The altar of Minerva gave way to that of the Christian Lord. In execution the chief difference between old St Peter's and a basilica like that of Maxentius lay in the roofing. Whereas Maxentius's basilica had elaborate coffered vaults carried on stout piers in the classical manner admired and followed by the Renaissance, the Christian basilica was roofed in a simple wooden construction which was to be widely imitated by early church builders in Italy. The effect was less remarkable as architecture but more aspirant spiritually. The open timber roofs of most Gothic churches were filled in by later ages contemptuous of this primitive form of carpentry. S. Sabina on the Aventine Hill, dating from about 425 and owing much to St Peter's model, has a flat boarded ceiling inserted beneath the timbers. This church, or nave and two aisles separated by arcades in place of architrave, is in other respects the perfect example of an early medieval Roman basilica, its ample width savouring of serenity and peace.

When St Peter's Basilica was built, the second-century shrine was not buried beneath an altar. On the contrary, it was purposely allowed to stand above the pavement level, but encased in a lavish, contemporary framework befitting so precious a relic. Everything else formerly around it in the old pagan cemetery had been flattened. It alone was made the focal point to which all eyes in the church were to be turned. We may refer once again to the Liber Pontificalis to learn precisely what Constantine did. 'Et exornavit supra,' we read, 'ex columnis purphyreticis et alias columnas vitineas quas de Graecia perduxit.' The little, old-fashioned and rude shrine he enclosed with corner columns, or to be accurate, with pilasters of porphyry. The 'other vine-clad columns', specially brought from Greece, formed part of a new screen across the apse and the canopy over the shrine. This is the earliest reference to six of the strange barley sugar columns of translucent white marble, wreathed with vine tendrils, which still remain in the present St Peter's. Each column, capital, shaft and base is a single block, carved probably around the year 200. Their provenance is not known, and the legend that they came from Solomon's Temple is worth no more than the name of solomónica, which they have given to those ubiquitous twisted columns copied on altars and reredoses in innumerable Spanish renaissance churches. Presumably their pagan significance was Dionysiac, which conveniently became translated by the Christians into the vintage of the Lord. For two centuries and a half the Constantinian setting of the shrine survived. A fifth-century ivory casket, unearthed in 1906 at Samagher, bears in relief a faithful outline of what the canopy looked like. Curved ribs from the corners of four of the columns meet in a boss from which is suspended a lamp shaped like a crown, another gift to St Peter's from the emperor. Between each rear column of the canopy and a pair of separate columns placed at the corners of the apse curtains are hanging. Two priests officiate at the shrine while four more with hands upraised in blessing face the congregation from the sides. Shortly before the Constantinian arrangement was altered a certain deacon, called Agiulf, gave a description of the shrine and the strange antics that took place at it. For anyone wishing to pay particular reverence to the Apostle's tomb, the doors, probably at the rear of the shrine, were unlocked and a small window was opened. The

1025 pious person thrust his head inside and was sure to be granted whatever he asked for, provided of course that it was meritorious. Then, having weighed a piece of cloth he might have brought with him, he dropped it on the end of a string into the tomb below. After fervently praying, fasting and waiting, he drew up the cloth. If he was a person of worth, the cloth on being weighed again would prove to be appreciably heavier than before on account of the special virtue with which it had become

1030 impregnated while in contact with the holy remains. Agiulf spoke of the 'snow-white columns of wondrous elegance, four in number' of the canopy, as did his contemporary Gregory of Tours in almost the same phraseology - *mirae elegantiae, candore niveo*. About 594, however, Gregory the Great thought fit to raise the presbytery some four and a half feet above the level of the rest of the church. The platform contrived was

1035 approached by steps leading to a central throne and benches fitted into the apse. In consequence of this alteration, the shrine was left below the presbytery pavement and must henceforth be looked at through a grill from the lower level. A new canopy with different supports was provided for an altar which was now built over the sunken shrine. The six twisted columns were advanced to form a screen to the sanctuary. By

1040 these means, a primitive sort of confession was formed. It was entered from the sides at the base of the platform and gave access to the shrine by a passage running round the apse. Thus was established a precedent to be widely followed in Italy and France in early medieval church building. The first purpose of St. Gregory's alterations was to protect from barbarian incursions - alas, he did not forestall that of the

1045 Saracens! - the shrine now enriched with the treasure of successive donors. This had been accumulating for over two centuries. Emperors and popes competed with one another in making splendid gifts to the Apostle in earnest of their devotion. Pope Pelagius II, St Gregory's predecessor, had, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, 'enclosed the body of Blessed Peter, the Apostle, in plates of gilded silver', which

1050 will mean that he had started to redecorate the shrine. Gregory's second purpose was to form out of the two upper of the three niches of the shrine - all now submerged below the raised presbytery level - one high and narrow niche to contain the historic pallia. The pallium is a circular band of white material, marked with six purple crosses, having pendants on the front and back, to be worn on the shoulders over the

1055 chasuble. It is solely the Pope's right to grant the pallium to archbishops in symbolism of the plenitude of the pontifical office. The coveted garment is made from the wool of lambs blessed on St Agnes's Day in the church of S. Agnese fuori le Mura, and before being dispatched to each recipient rests for a night in front of St Peter's tomb. In the course of forming the single Niche of the Pallia, the axis of

1060 the shrine was shifted some ten to twelve centimeters to the south.