

Peter and Paul *ad catacumbas*: a Pozzolana Mine Reconsidered

Barbara E. Borg

The site and excavations of S. Sebastiano at the third mile of the via Appia has been discussed in literally hundreds of publications due to its importance for our understanding of the cult of the martyr saints Peter and Paul. It is a major focus of my larger project, which examines the relationship between early Christians and their non-Christian surroundings through the study of the interaction between different social groups in a small but intensively used part of the Roman suburbium, generously funded by the Leverhulme foundation.¹ The present paper can only outline one element of the larger argument. I shall start with a brief overview of the history of the site, then discuss the most popular interpretation offered for the cult of the apostles Peter and Paul at this location, and finally present some of my own readings of the remains in their wider context.

History of the Site

The area known in antiquity as *ad* (or *in*) *catacumbas*, near the hollows, was occupied initially by a pozzolana mine on the right side of the via Appia between the second and third milestone.² From the mid-first century onwards, along secondary roads, both perpendicular and parallel to the Appia, a vast, fairly regularly laid out necropolis started to develop (fig. 1). In the first half of the second century, a building with several rooms around a courtyard, the so-called Villa Grande, which may have been the seat of a voluntary association and/or a place to celebrate the festivals of the dead, was erected on one such secondary road that ran parallel to the Appia. A smaller structure consisting of an open courtyard and three semi-interred rooms underneath, the so-called Villa Piccola, was added in the Severan period just to the north of this building, and may have served a similar purpose.

While tombs started to be built aboveground, and after mining activities had ceased, the first loculi were cut into the tuff walls of the mine's galleries. In the Hadrianic period, part of the cavities collapsed and, following some levelling and smoothing of surfaces, a sunken piazza, the so-called *piazzola* with its floor level some 5.5 m beneath the surface, was created, and three mausolea, X, Y, and Z, built into cavities of the former mine (figs. 2. 7). In the Antonine period, the so-called building β of uncertain designation was erected above the attic of Mausoleum Z.

After c. 240, the entire cavity was filled in to create a slightly sloping piazza above ground (figs. 2. 3). A simple portico, the so-called *triclina*, was erected at

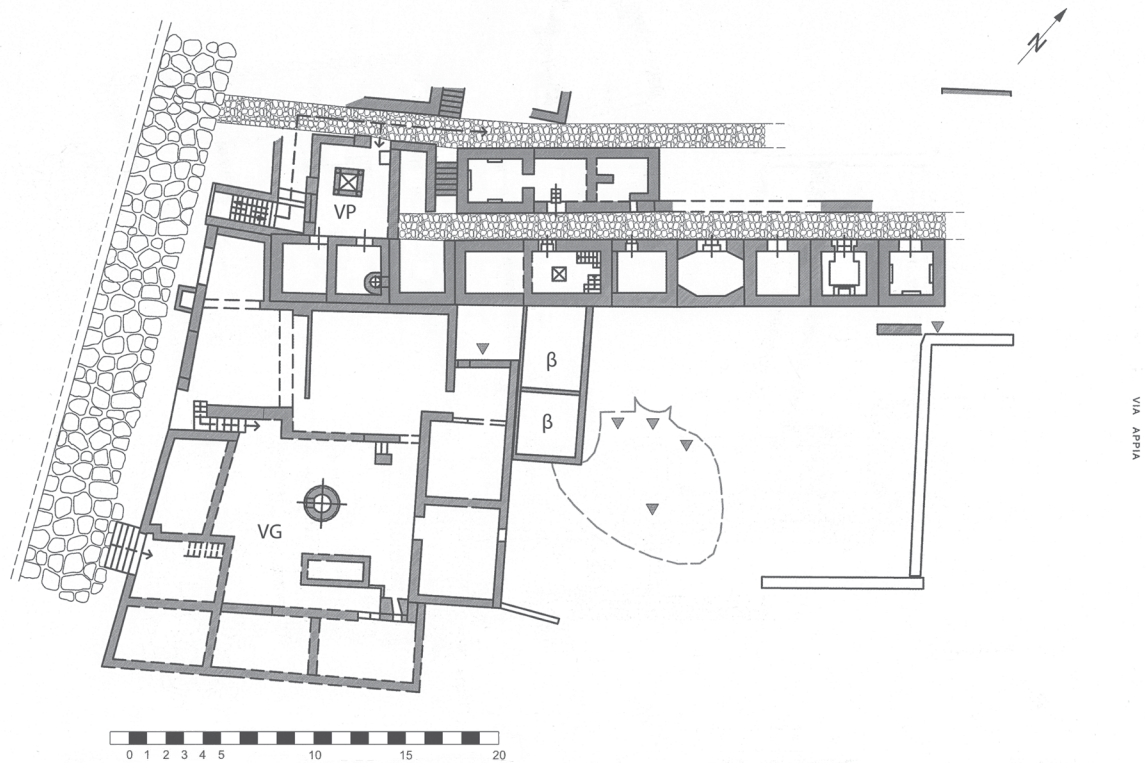


Fig. 1: Buildings underneath S. Sebastiano, early third century.

the eastern edge of the piazza with a bench running along its rear wall, which in turn was decorated with painted stucco. Some 600 graffiti were engraved into this stucco, which invoke the apostle martyrs Peter and Paul, ask for their support, and commemorate *refrigeria* in their honour. This memorial for the apostles has given the entire piazza the name *memoria apostolorum*. Finally, building β was partly demolished, and a small semi-circular niche was set into a wall that now closed off the rear, filled-in part of the building (fig. 4).

These changes have an undisputed *terminus post quem* of 238/44³ and a *terminus ante quem* is given by the circiform cemeterial basilica that was eventually erected over the entire complex in the early fourth century (fig. 5). Robert Marichal's reading, in one of the *triclina* graffiti, of the names of the consuls of 260 has found much approval but unfortunately is all but certain.⁴ The basilica continued the existing cult and was aptly named *Basilica Apostolorum*. Due to the sloping terrain, the tombs originally standing east of the *triclina* had to be completely razed to the ground, and their former existence is now indicated by their underground hypogea only. The western tombs and the "villas" were partly razed and partly filled with earth, and integrated into the foundations of the basilica.

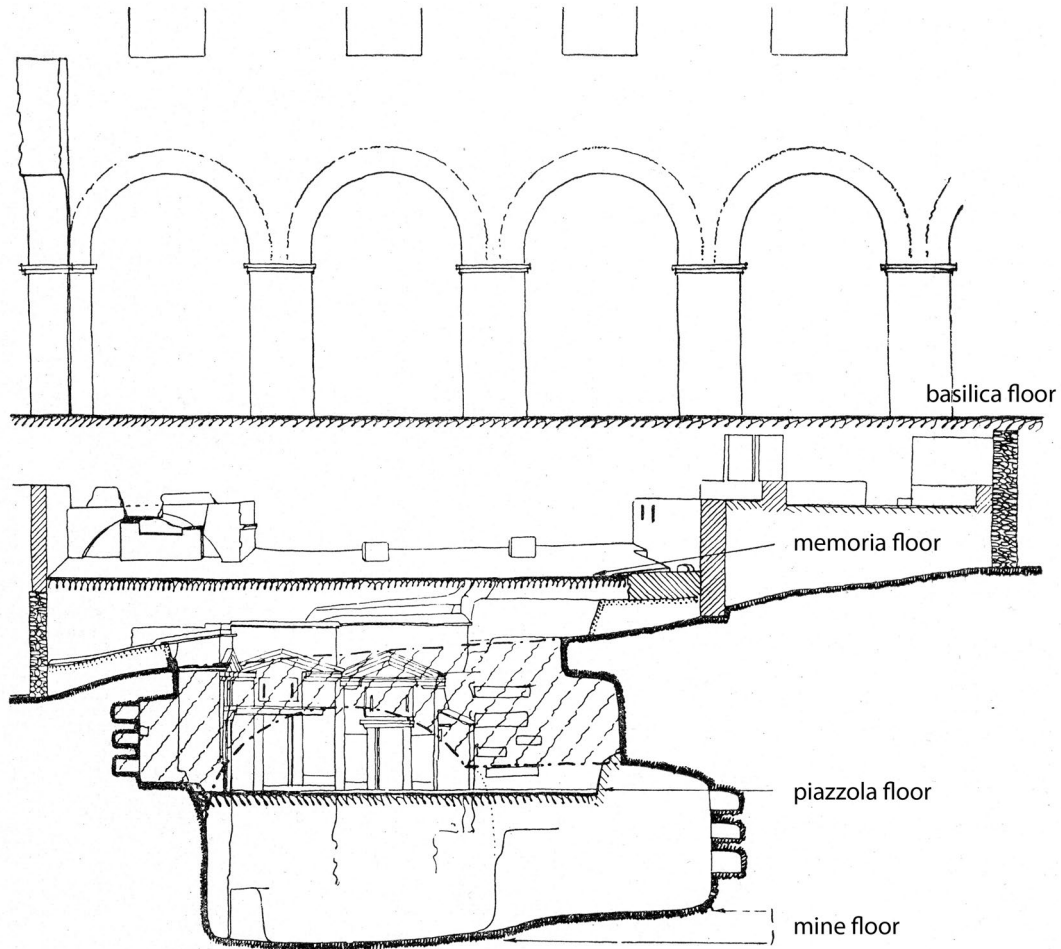


Fig. 2: Cross-section through the excavation underneath S. Sebastiano.

Key Questions

Most scholars agree on the history of the site as outlined so far, but the most significant questions around the origins and character of the apostles' cult are still unsolved. The majority now agrees that the graffiti are typical of burial sites,⁵ and some later sources equally attest to the belief that the apostles were once buried there. Yet, this flies in the face of the other tradition that has become an orthodoxy among modern Christians, according to which the apostles' graves were in the Vatican and on the via Ostiense respectively, where basilicas were erected to them in the early fourth century and their cult is still celebrated today.

That there was an official cult at all three sites is confirmed by the *Chronography of the Year 354* and the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, which report the introduction of this cult in 258. Scholars have tried to solve the conundrum in various ways, two

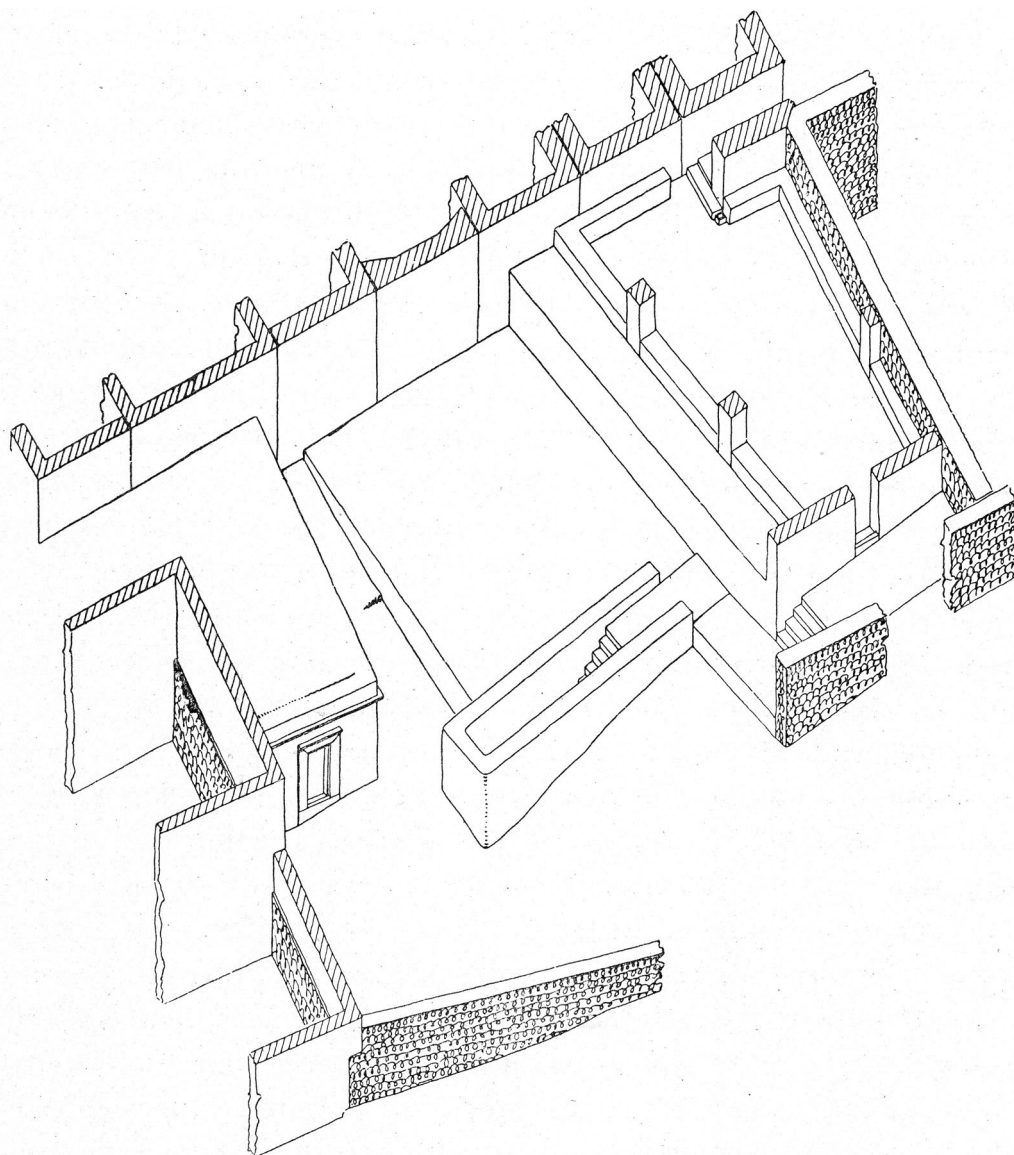


Fig. 3: Buildings around the memoria underneath S. Sebastiano, third quarter third century.

of which are currently the most popular. One simply suggests that there were two rival traditions about where the apostles were buried, none of which could be established as more historically 'correct' than the other.⁶ The other suggestion, still supported by a majority today, starts from the observation that 258 is the second year of the Valerianic persecutions. In order to protect the remains of the apostles from the authorities, so the claim goes, they were temporarily translated to *ad catacumbas*.⁷ This paper aims to explore the likelihood of this second hypothesis, and the possibility to proceed beyond the somewhat frustrating conclusions of the former.

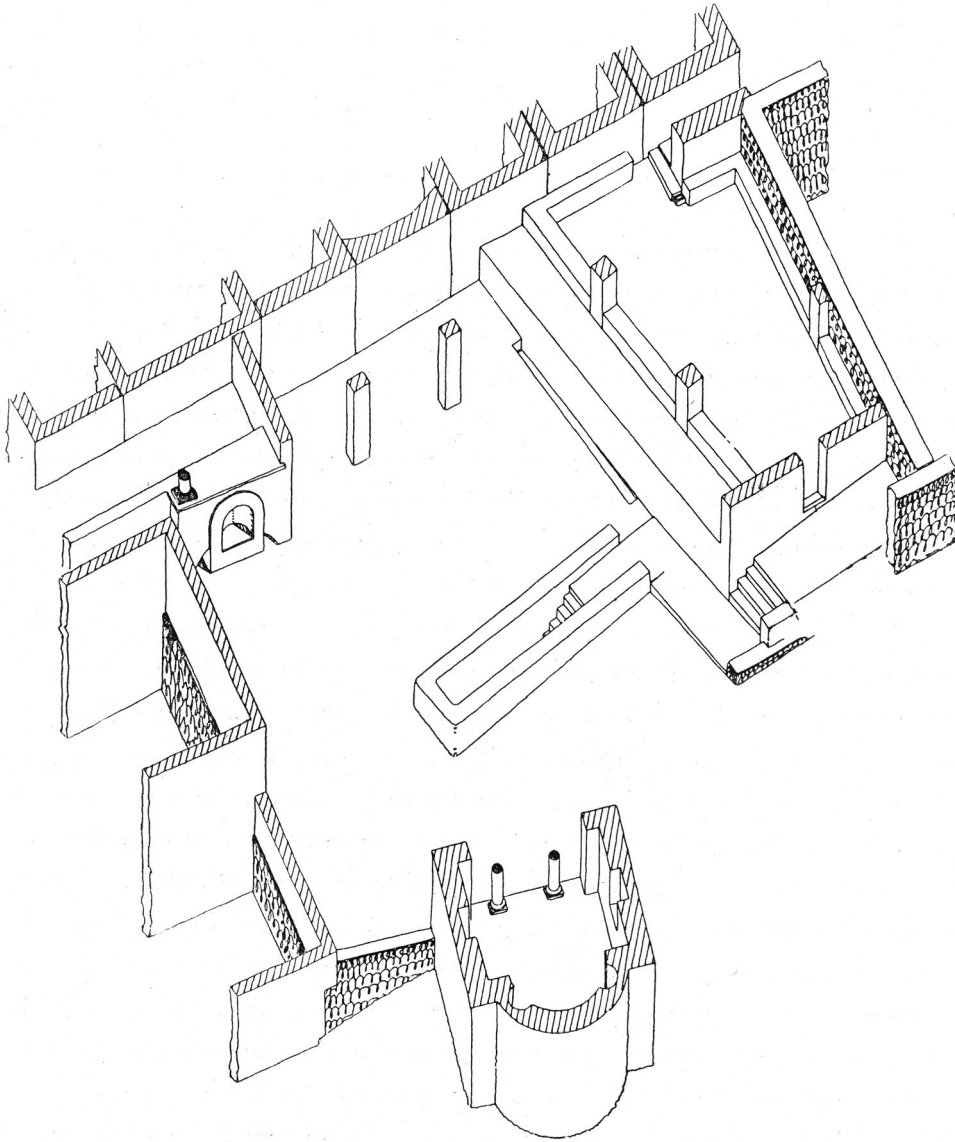


Fig. 4: Buildings around the memoria underneath S. Sebastiano, end of third century.

Difficulties with the latter scenario have been noticed early on. Not only would it have been illegal and highly dangerous to relocate the apostles' bones, but it also was unnecessary since they would have been protected from violation by law in their original place, a law that does not seem to have been violated by the authorities in any persecution. Kurt Lampe therefore suggests that not the apostles' bones but only the commemorative meetings on their behalf were moved, and that it was precisely the pagan nature of the necropolis, which, together with the remoteness of the location, made the place ideal for inconspicuous and unsuspecting Christian meetings.⁸

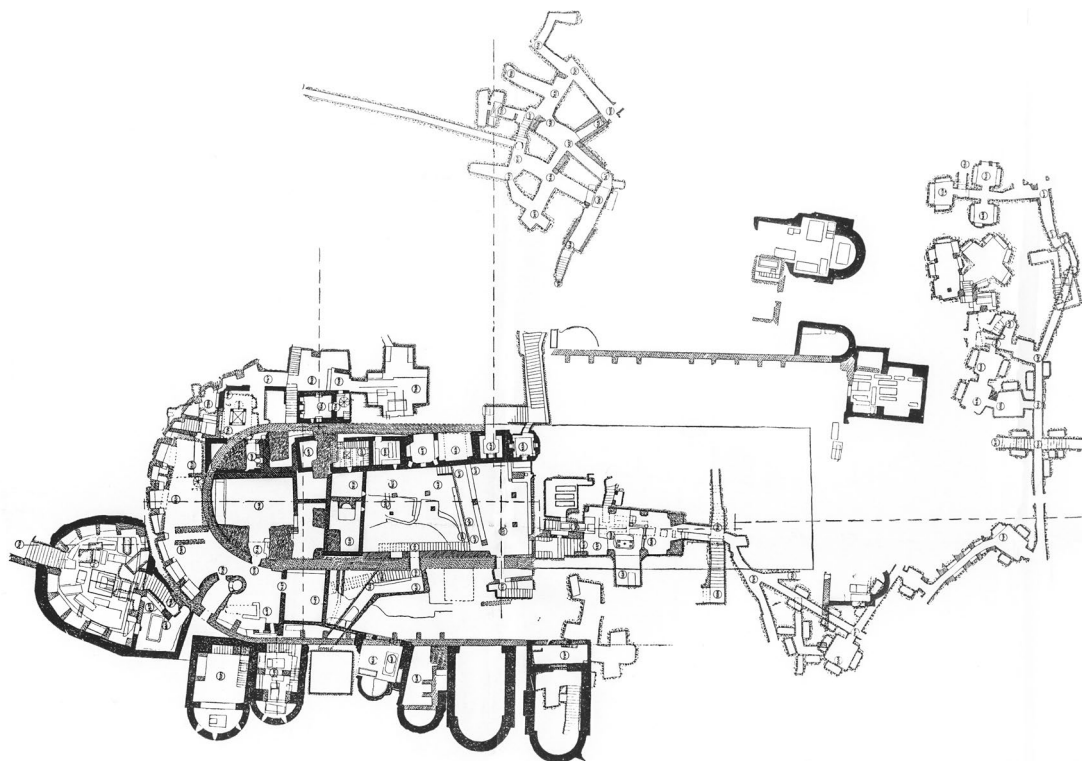


Fig. 5: Outline of the Basilica Apostolorum and some late antique mausolea over the remains of the necropolis and memoria.

Yet this characterisation of the area, which also underlies the translation theory, is seriously flawed. The area was situated close to the most prominent consular road, and right opposite a villa that may have been imperial already in the later second century, but definitively by the time the apostles' cult was founded.⁹ Moreover, a *statio* of praetorians was situated somewhere between the mausoleum of Caecilia Metella and S. Sebastiano, and there is a high percentage of burials around *ad catacumbas* of imperial slaves and freedmen, and of members of various elite military corps.¹⁰ They suggest that the area may have been imperial or public property, and demonstrate in any case its regular frequentation by members of the imperial household and security forces. The site is therefore anything but inconspicuous, and arguably one of the busiest and well-watched areas of the entire suburbium.

The most serious obstacle to the theory, however, conspicuous as it is, has never been taken into account as far as I am aware: the implications of the filling of the sunken piazzola prior to the establishment of the triclia. This measure put an active cemetery out of use, which not only needed permission from the pontifex maximus (i.e. the emperor). It also afforded a considerable effort. The volume of the hole in the ground can be estimated at a minimum of some 340 m³, which, to be filled,

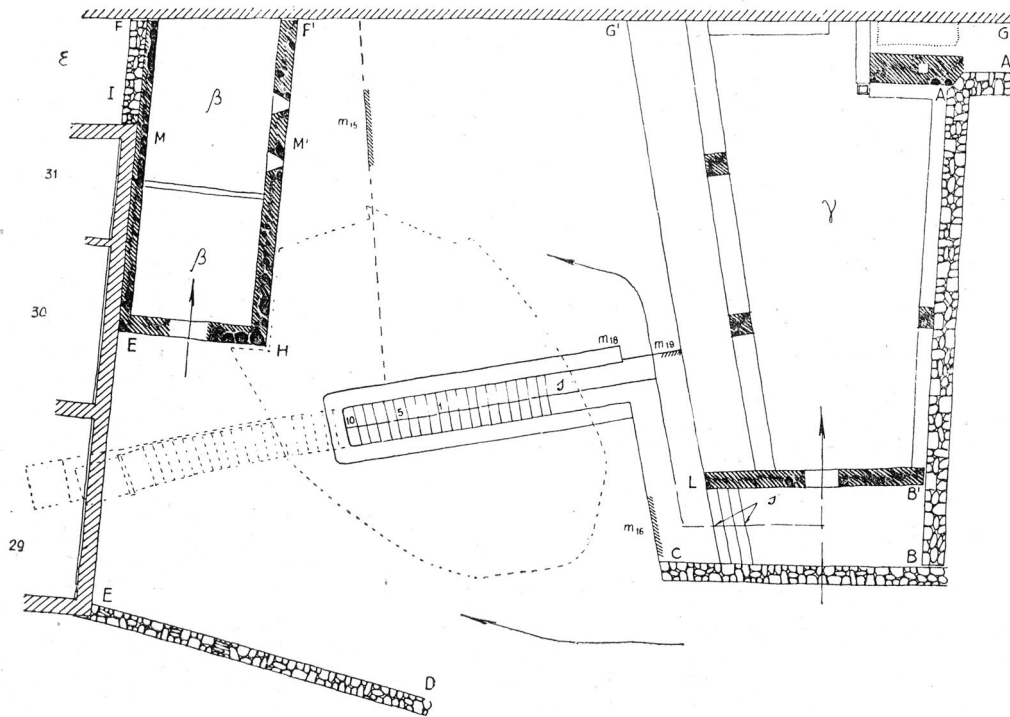


Fig. 6: 'Scala del pozzo' and its extension onto the memoria underneath S. Sebastiano, third quarter third century.

needed about 680 tons of earth, or the load of at least 1700 ox carts. We do not know where the material came from, and it may not have needed long distance transport. Yet this volume would have filled over 10,000 panier baskets each carrying over 66kg of weight. Assuming that the fill arrived over the via Appia, just offloading the material into smaller containers for transport to the site would have required between 22.5 (basket) and 12.7 (wheelbarrow) man days of work. To get the material over the 70m distance from the Appia to the site would have afforded between 32 (wheelbarrow) and 40 (basket) additional man days.¹¹ The fill would also have to be emptied into the void, the layers compacted at regular intervals, and the staircase extended from the piazzola floor level to the new surface. Even allowing for a high margin of inaccuracy in my figures, which have been calculated assuming an unrealistic minimum volume of fill, the building work was clearly not done in a day, nor without attracting major attention. Whoever initiated these building works would clearly have needed the consent of the imperial administration as well as access to some resources.

These observations rule out the story behind the translation theory and raise the question with new urgency: When exactly was this work carried out? And by whom?

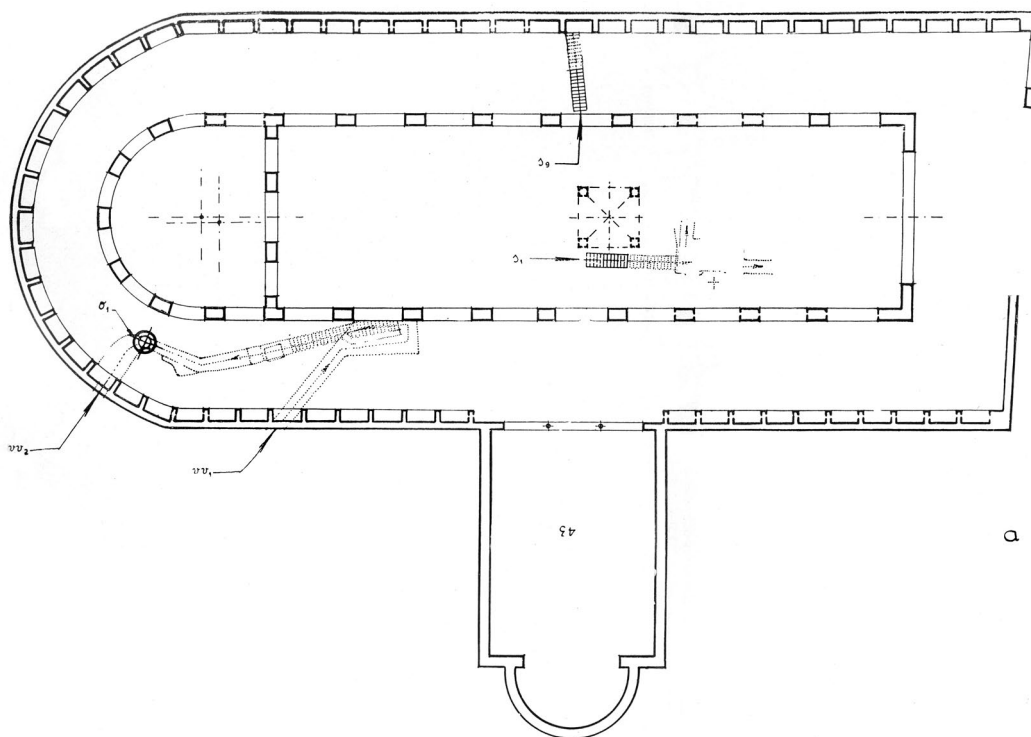


Fig. 7: Basilica Apostolorum with new access to the 'scala del pozzo'; early fourth century.

New Observations

The easiest explanation would assume that these works had already been completed when the Christian community established their cult site. But this is unlikely given a feature that I have not mentioned so far, a long staircase that ended in a shallow basin in front of a niche, conventionally called *scala del pozzo* (fig. 6).¹² It is clear that the basin and niche – or rather the space, in which they are now featured – existed already before the piazzola was established, and access was maintained for over 300 centuries, first, when the piazzola was created at a level of 3m above the mine's floor, later, when the piazzola was filled in, and even when the Basilica Apostolorum was erected above the entire site (fig. 7).

Significant skills and effort had therefore been expended to maintain this access at each step, which is particularly striking since the basin and niche have not served any practical purpose. Following F. Tolotti, the basin is normally declared to be a well for fetching water. However, already its excavator O. Marucchi had observed that it was utterly unsuitable for the purpose.¹³ The water normally stood less than 60 cm deep, less than half the depth of another water basin of the mine that had been given up when the piazzola was established.¹⁴ It would have been simple to cut a bit deeper into the tuff, but this was not done despite the effort to maintain access. Moreover, water could not

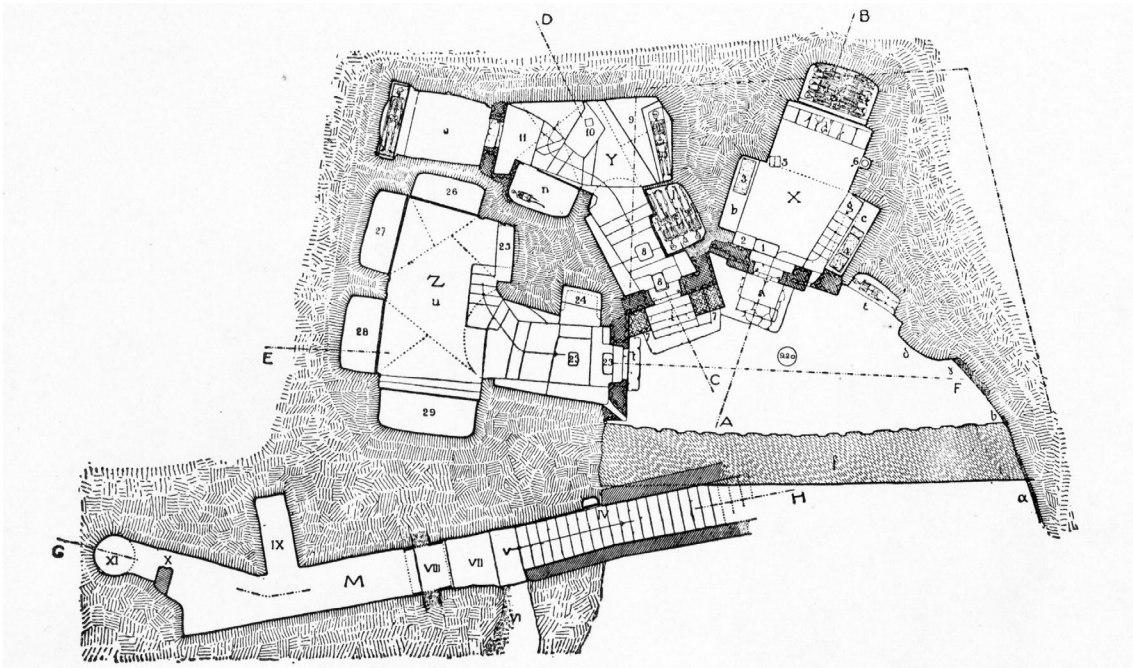


Fig. 8: Mausolea around the piazzola, lower level, and 'scala del pozzo' with its late antique extension M.

be drawn through a shaft from above. Rather, from the floor of the *memoria*, one had to climb down – and up again – some 10 m over 40 steps – the equivalent of four floors in a modern house, just to catch water from the smallish, shallow basin that was left as it was. None of this scenario makes any sense, and the explanation can only be some symbolic or ideological significance of the location.

Considering that the Basilica Apostolorum destroyed everything in its way, the preservation of access to the stairs still at this stage suggests that this significance was related to Christian faith and/or cult – an assumption that is confirmed by graffiti that were scratched into the white plaster covering the end of the tunnel which are similar to the *triclia* ones but of later date.¹⁵ This in turn suggests that also those constructing the *memoria* piazza in the third century preserved the useless basin for religious reasons, raising the distinct possibility that already in the second century the architects of the piazzola attached the same significance to it.

Here, we cannot discuss the possibility of the apostles' actual burial in this tunnel, but suffice it to say that those preserving access to it against all odds must have believed they were there. If this is so, some unusual epitaphs also appear in a new light, which, viewed in isolation, would not necessarily have been conclusive as to their patronage. The only undisputed Christian inscription that dates to the time of the piazzola is a graffito scratched into the still-wet plaster of a lower chamber of Mausoleum Y (fig. 8) reading ITXΘΥΣ, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.¹⁶ Whether this graffito indicates that the entire tomb was under Christian patronage is debated. The only other inscriptions in

this tomb feature in the adjacent chambers. Those in the lowest chamber commemorate some youngsters who are all called Innocentius and also bear the names of the emperors of 238–244.¹⁷ The imperial names suggest a close connection to the imperial house, and the association's name of Innocentii would not normally have raised any suspicion. However, in the light of the evidence for Christian presence, including in the same tomb, this name looks less likely to be accidental. The same is true for graffiti scratched into a loculus cover in another room of the hypogeum reading ΕΝΘΑ ΚΕΙΤΑΙ ΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ, 'here lies Parthenos' or 'here lies the virgin'.¹⁸ Like Innocentius, Parthenos is used as a name, and one that does not have to be Christian. Equally, like innocence, virginity was a virtue worth praising especially of the young among pagans and Christians alike. Then again, the accumulation of 'speaking' names related to the morals of the deceased in this tomb is striking, as is the number of graffiti on the girl's loculus and the fact that they were written by several different hands. While this may not be unique among either ordinary Christians or non-Christians (although I am not aware of any further example), it is definitively rare and reminiscent of graffiti on and around martyrs' graves. Moreover, *entha keitai* is a rarer form of *enthade keitai*, a formula that is particularly frequent in Jewish epitaphs from Rome.¹⁹

Outside of Mausoleum Y and in the walls of the former mine, there are further inscriptions of suggestive form and content. Another epitaph starting with a variant of *enthade keithai* commemorates Theonoë, who is described as pious, mild, chaste and wise. On its own, the epitaph would again not necessarily have to be identified as Christian, but in the given context, Jewish or Christian patronage is not unlikely.²⁰

In an epitaph in the wall next to Mausoleum X, one C. Ankotius Epaphroditus and his two sons praise their wife and mother Ankotia Irene for her love of god, of widows, of her husband and of her children – in this rather surprising order.²¹ While love of god (even in the singular) and certainly love of family are not in themselves suspicious, Dölger has shown that the unusual epithet *philochera*, 'lover of widows', like *philoptochos*, lover of the poor, was a Christian neologism, probably meaning 'charitable' more generally rather than an affection just to widows.²² While fish and anchors can be found in non-Christian contexts, here the context speaks for their Christian significance.²³ If this is accepted, fish and anchor on the epitaph that Epaphroditus and Irene had previously dedicated to their deceased daughter Ankotia Auxesis, and which is otherwise entirely conventional, may be regarded as Christian symbols as well.²⁴

This whole context further supports Christian readings for two early third-century sets of highly unusual wall paintings, one on the plaster covering the loculus of an eight-year old imperial slave called Atimetus that was recently discussed by Stefano Tortorella, and the other even more prominently displayed on the attic of Mausoleum X, for which Alistair Logan has proposed an intriguing reading as illustrations of three parables after the gospels of John.²⁵ The picture emerging here is therefore one of a cemeterial area favoured specifically by Christians, although not used exclusively by them, already from the second century onwards.

Conclusions

It is obvious that the really exciting questions only begin at this point. The aim of the present paper was twofold: first, to demonstrate that not only literary sources but also archaeology and context, including practical and economic aspects, are worth taking into account when trying to reconstruct the activities of early Christians and the development of their cult practices. Secondly, in the particular case of *ad catacumbas*, I hope to have shown that a detailed re-assessment of the archaeological and material evidence of the site results in new insights into the history of cult of the apostles Peter and Paul, the beginnings of which can now be traced back at least to the Hadrianic periods.²⁶ I hope to discuss the implications of these results at greater length elsewhere, where I am not primarily interested in the apostles themselves and the notorious question of where they were buried, or indeed whether they ever came to Rome in the first place (which I find hard to deny). Primarily, I use this history as a route into a better understanding of the relationship between the earliest Christians and their non-Christian surroundings. That early Christians were not quite as segregated from the rest of society as some authors (ancient as well as modern) want us to believe, has long been argued, and becomes a more widely accepted view by the day. However, how this relationship may have panned out in actual practice has largely been a matter of more or less educated guesswork for the pre-Constantinian period. By tracing Christian activities, including the lead up to the foundation of an early Christian martyr cult in a specific context of other activities, and more specifically within a context significantly shaped by the presence of imperial staff and elite military forces, will hopefully give a bit more substance to our guesswork.

Notes

¹Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship (2015-18): Mapping the Social History of Rome: a topographical approach to action and interaction in an ancient mega-city.

²Due to word count limitations, bibliography is kept to a minimum. On the site in general see esp. Tolotti 1953; Tacalite 2009; Nieddu 2009.

³See below at n. 17.

⁴Marichal 1953; cf. A. Ferrua in ICUR 5.12935.

⁵Carletti 2008, on ICUR 5.12907–13096.

⁶Gerkan 1927, 297–299, appears to be the first to suggest this; for recent supporters see e.g. Hall 2014, 187–206.

⁷Duchesne 1886, CIV–CVII; Lietzmann 1915; Chadwick 1957, 41; and many later scholars.

⁸Lampe 2015, 287–289.

⁹CIL VI, 1107; VI,1215 with 4336.

¹⁰Latteri 2002.

¹¹Based on Pegoretti 1869, vol. 1, 156 f.; Rea 1902, 50.

¹²Tolotti 1953, 79–80. 132 f. 138–141.

¹³Marucchi 1923, 95. 103.

¹⁴Tolotti 1953, 77–80 on v1.

¹⁵Marucchi 1923.

¹⁶ICUR 5.12889.

¹⁷Mancini 1923, 67–69 figs. 22. 23.

¹⁸Mancini 1923, 69.

¹⁹Noy 1995.

²⁰ICUR 5.12902; cf. Mancini 1923, 49; Marucchi 1923, 96; Finney 1994, 238.

²¹ICUR 5.12900; Marucchi 1923, 97 fig. 2; Dölger 1927, 220.1; Dölger 1943, 697–704, esp. 699 f.

²²Dölger 1943, 699 f.; Finney 1994, 237, who also cites for *philoteknos*, child-loving, three Jewish epitaphs (CIJ 321. 363. 541).

²³Ditto Dölger 1927, 702; for examples of fish and anchor in non-Christian epitaphs see *ibid.* *passim*, and Kraemer 1991.

²⁴ICUR 5.12891: ditto Dölger 1943, 697–704 pl. 322.1

²⁵Tortorella 2011; Logan 2007, with further conclusions which I do not share.

²⁶It must be stressed here that, initially, this cult must have been traditional and commemorative, and developed only with time into the more formal martyr cult that was founded in 258 and continued to develop.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: Re-elaborated after Taccalite 2009, 6. – Fig. 2: Re-elaborated after Tolotti 1953 fig. 21. – Fig. 3: Tolotti 1953, fig. 40. – Fig. 4: Tolotti 1953, fig. 43. – Fig. 5: Fornari 1932, pl. 2. – Fig. 6: Tolotti 1953, fig. 38 – Fig. 7: Tolotti 1953, pl. 7. – Fig. 8: Mancini 1923, pl. 3.

References

Carletti 2008

C. Carletti, Nuovi graffiti devozionali nell'area cimiteriale di S. Sebastiano a Roma, in: O. Brandt (ed.), *Unexpected voices: the graffiti in the cryptoporticus of the Horti Sallustiani and papers from a conference on graffiti at the Swedish Institute in Rome, 7 March 2003* (Stockholm 2008) 137–147.

Chadwick 1957

H. Chadwick, St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome: the Problem of the *Memoria Apostolorum ad Catacumbas*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 8, 1957, 31–52.

Dölger 1927

F. J. Dölger, *Ichthys 4. Die Fisch-Denkmalen in der frühchristlichen Plastik Malerei 4, Religionen und Kulturen der Antike* (Münster 1927).

Dölger 1943

F. J. Dölger, *Ichthys 5. Die Fisch-Denkmäler in der frühchristlichen Plastik Malerei 5, Religionen und Kulturen der Antike* (Münster 1943).

Duchesne 1886

L. Duchesne, *Le liber pontificalis 1,1. Bibliothèque des Ecoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 3,1* (Paris 1886).

Finney 1994

P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God: the Earliest Christians on Art* (New York 1994).

Gerkan 1927

A. v. Gerkan, *Die christlichen Anlagen unter San Sebastiano*, in: H. Lietzmann, *Petrus und Paulus in Rom: liturgische und archäologische Studien* (Bonn 1927) 248–301.

Hall 2014

J. M. Hall, *Artifact & Artifice: Classical Archaeology and the Ancient Historian* (Chicago 2014).

Kraemer 1991

R. S. Kraemer, *Jewish Tuna and Christian Fish: Identifying Religious Affiliation in Epigraphic Sources*, *Harvard Theological Review* 84, 1991, 141–162.

Lampe 2015

P. Lampe, *Traces of Peter Veneration in Roman Archaeology*, in: H. K. Bond – L. W. Hurtado (eds.), *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI 2015) 273–317.

Latteri 2002

N. Latteri, *La statio dei pretoriani al III miglio dell'Appia antica ed il loro sepolcreto „ad catacumbas“*, *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité* 114, 2002, 739–757.

Lietzmann 1915

H. Lietzmann, *Petrus und Paulus in Rom: liturgische und archäologische Studien* (Bonn 1915).

Logan 2007

A. H. B. Logan, *The Paintings on the Hermes Tomb Under San Sebastiano: a New Interpretation*, *Cambridge Classical Journal* 53, 2007, 180–201.

Mancini 1923

G. Mancini, *Scavi sotto la Basilica di S. Sebastiano sull'Appia Antica*, *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* 1923, 3–79.

Marichal 1953

R. Marichal, *La date des graffiti de la basilique de St-Sébastien à Rome*, *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 1953, 60–68.

Marucchi 1923

O. Marucchi, *Nota sulle memorie cristiane esplorate nello scavo di S. Sebastiano dalla Commissione di Archeologia Sacra*, *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* 1923, 80–103.

Nieddu 2009

A. M. Nieddu, *La Basilica Apostolorum sulla Via Appia e l'area cimiteriale circostante*, *Monumenti di antichità cristiana* 19 (Vatican City 2009).

Noy 1995

D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe 2. The City of Rome* (Cambridge 1995).

Pegoretti 1869

G. Pegoretti, Manuale pratico per l'estimazione dei lavori architettonici, stradali, idraulici e di fortificazione per uso degli ingegneri ed architetti (Milan 1869).

Rea 1902

J. T. Rea, How to Estimate: Being the Analysis of Builders' Prices, Giving Full Details of Estimating for Builders, and Containing Thousands of Prices, and Much Useful Memoranda (London 1902).

Taccalite 2009

F. Taccalite, I colombari sotto la Basilica di San Sebastiano fuori le mura (Rome 2009).

Tolotti 1953

F. Tolotti, Memorie degli apostoli in catacumbas: rilievo critico della memoria e della basilica apostolorum al III miglio della via Appia (Vatican City 1953).

Tortorella 2011

S. Tortorella, Il sepolcreto della „piazza“ sotto S. Sebastiano sulla via Appia e il loculo di Atimetus, in: O. Brandt – P. Pergola (eds.), Marmoribus vestita: miscellanea in onore di Federico Guidobaldi (Città del Vaticano 2011) 1359–1373.