

at last, He felt it safe to ask them directly, first, Whom men were saying He was, and then Whom they said He was. And Peter's answer gave Him what He had been waiting for : *not* an authoritative pronouncement from Him to them : but a confession *freely drawn* from them, which had been what He had been working for all the time from the moment He had chosen them " to be with Him ", the only possible way a true "*Deus absconditus*" could become a true "*Deus Revelatus*", without in any way infringing upon the free will of any of His creatures, including the specially chosen.

And immediately on their confession, He charged them to tell no man : because no others outside their immediate circle were prepared to receive the truth about Him, even as no nation outside Israel had been prepared to receive God's Old Covenant Revelation. In the fulness of time, at His appearance, at His Own chosen and appointed hour before the High Priest, He would proclaim Himself : for the time would then have come for Him to meet, fight, and undergo to overcome death.

So the Nature Miracles in St. Mark were never wrought for any advantage to Himself : to rescue Him from any otherwise fatal situation : that, indeed, would postulate a docetic Christ : but were all wrought as part of His whole training of the Twelve and His immediate circle of disciples, for His Resurrection, when it came, could only be to chosen witnesses : to those who, of their own free will, had beforehand accepted Him for what He truly was.

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## Peter's Bones

BY PROFESSOR R. K. HARRISON, PH.D.

**I**N his customary Christmas broadcast on December twenty-third, 1950, Pope Pius XII rather startled the listening world by the statement that the " grave of the Prince of the Apostles " had at last been found as the result of excavations underneath the Vatican. Though this announcement was immediately qualified by the admission that certain bones recovered from that locality could not be identified beyond doubt as those of the Apostle Peter, his remarks provoked a good deal of speculation in the academic world, and not least amongst archaeologists who had for some time been desirous of obtaining first-hand information about the progress of the excavations, which had then been going on for a decade.

Archaeological investigation of the site on which the Church of St. Peter stands is no new occurrence, though modern scientific methods naturally involve a somewhat different approach from that which was typical of earlier years. As long ago as 1615 it was known that the church of those days was situated above a pagan cemetery of a period between the second and fourth centuries of the Christian era.<sup>1</sup> But in 1939, a serious attempt was made to enlarge the crypts of the Vatican in response to the wish of Pope Pius XI, who had expressed a wish to be buried in the grottoes. Accordingly, work was commenced at a

hollow place in the wall near to the tomb of Pope Pius X, and by the year 1941 was being pursued seriously.<sup>3</sup> The excavations were undertaken on a distinctly partisan basis, but this may have been occasioned in part by conditions arising out of the second World War. Despite this, however, publications from others than the Roman Catholic scholars who were actually engaged in the work of excavation began to make their appearance,<sup>3</sup> along with interim reports from the archaeological Commission itself.<sup>4</sup>

The content of these documents quite naturally raised questions not only about the excavations themselves, but also about the historical and theological presuppositions of the Petrine problem. Before we discuss some of the actual findings we must consider certain historical aspects of the situation, so as to place the archaeological work in its proper perspective. As is well known to readers of this Journal, the Roman Church envisages the primacy of Peter in terms of the Petrine *confessio* in Matt. xvi. 16, and the subsequent promises of Christ regarding "binding and loosing". This 'primacy' was interpreted as 'supremacy' in the third century A.D., and the Bishops of Rome who succeeded Peter were regarded as supreme over all other Bishops of Christendom, and thus, according to the theory, unique in their authority. This claim has been asserted ever since in one way or another, and has been challenged on many notable occasions through the centuries. The Roman case rests in the last analysis on the assumption that Peter was actually the first Bishop of Rome, which, of course, necessitated at least some period of residence on his part in the Imperial city.

That this is based almost entirely on tradition presents no problem to the Roman Church, for whose authority tradition is one of the criteria. The belief that Peter went to Rome arose from an interpretation of Acts xii. 17, where the Greek is quite vague as to his destination, apparently for reasons of security. The *ἕτερον τόπον* mentioned then witnessed the development of a Christian community over which Peter is alleged to have presided as Bishop for some twenty-five years, *i.e.*, c. 42-67 A.D.<sup>5</sup> It is not our purpose to examine such a tradition in this article, though criticism of it is important in determining, as far as the available evidence makes possible, whether Peter actually resided in Rome or not. Suffice it to say here that the Roman tradition takes no account of the fact that Peter may have left for Antioch rather than Rome, nor does it recognize that tradition also credits Peter with the founding of the Church at Antioch, as recorded by Eusebius,<sup>6</sup> in addition to that at Corinth.<sup>7</sup> One thing is certain, however, with regard to the events which took place after the departure of Peter from Jerusalem, and that is that he meant to conceal his activities and his personage rather than run the risk of further imprisonment, and perhaps death, by subsequent appearances in territory which was under the jurisdiction of Herod. But the New Testament gives no hint whatever as to his destination, and the indeterminate nature of the Greek in Acts xii. 17, admits of no certain, or even probable identification. Even the Roman Catholic *Encyclopædia* concedes that there are no precise details extant regarding Peter's residence in Rome, and

states that his ministry there rests largely on the tradition of the third century A.D. and later, a tradition which was so general in nature that not even the date of the Apostle's death was certain.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say, however, that Peter could not have visited Rome at some time prior to 55 A.D., nor that he could not have met his death there ten or twelve years later. What we are able to deduce from such information as we have seems to indicate quite clearly that Peter was not a Bishop in Rome for over two decades, and that he had no executive, legislative or episcopal jurisdiction over the Church in Rome when Paul wrote Romans.<sup>9</sup>

In the tradition of the Early Church, the martyrdom of Peter was associated with the Vatican Hill, and that of Paul with the *via Ostensi*, their relics apparently being placed in the Catacombs at a later period.<sup>10</sup> The remains of Peter were supposed to have been moved from one site to another before being brought to the Vatican Hill and interred there in the fourth century. In general, the liturgical tradition tended to associate the memory of Peter with both the Vatican Hill and the Catacombs, which does little to resolve the confusion. The records which attest these movements preserve at the best a questionable tradition, since as Cullmann points out, the violation of graves was a capital offence under Roman law.<sup>11</sup> For Christians, who were already under deep public suspicion, to attempt such an enterprise would have been hazardous in the extreme.

Since there is considerable doubt as to the general area in which we ought to begin to look for the grave of Peter, it might be expected that the recent excavations would throw some light on the situation, especially as Roman tradition assigned the tomb of Peter to a spot beneath the "high altar" of the Church. According to a sixth century tradition, Constantine had encased the burial site with bronze, and had built over it a *Confessio* on which was placed a gold cross. This structure was alleged to have been seen again in 1594, when the present 'high altar' was being erected. If the Constantine edifice could be uncovered in even a moderate state of preservation, the problem would be considerably nearer a solution.

Discoveries under the *Confessio*, therefore, were eagerly awaited both in and out of archaeological circles, and we may now survey briefly some of the more important of these findings. The excavators unearthed the lid of a sarcophagus, depicting scenes from the life of Joseph in the Patriarchal period, and this find was dated about the middle of the fourth century A.D. A number of medieval and early coins, brought by pilgrims from various parts of the Roman ecclesiastical empire, were also brought to light, and attested to the veneration of the spot in earlier ages. Portions of a columnar structure of a simple form were uncovered,<sup>12</sup> which Pope Pius XII, in a broadcast on May 13th, 1942, identified with the "trophy" or memorial mentioned by Gaius.<sup>13</sup> Traces of pagan graves were found here also, the existence of which was already known, as we have previously remarked, and in an underground cavity which contained some coins mixed with earth were discovered the remains of other human bones.<sup>14</sup> The coins dated from the time of Antoninus Pius, and the bulk of them came from the middle of the third century or later. Roman Catholic authorities were quick

to assert that the bones in this deep recess under the *Confessio* were those of an elderly male of unusual physical proportions, and from that it was an easy step to claiming the relics as those of Peter.

These assertions need to be examined rather carefully, especially as access to the excavations has been almost entirely restricted to Roman Catholic scholars. Firstly, the discoveries under the *Confessio* make it necessary for us to acknowledge the essentially mythical nature of the tradition which alleged that Constantine encased the burial site with bronze, since the most painstaking work on the part of the excavators failed to uncover the slightest indication that such a state of affairs had ever existed.

Secondly, we must consider critically the nature of the monument which was identified with the "trophy" of Gaius. This edifice was situated in a retaining wall which ran north and south, and from the scanty remains was held to be a structure of about four feet in height and two and a half feet approximately in width. Traces of twin pillars, located about two feet in front of the niche were found, and these apparently supported some form of stone canopy or cover. Bricks from a nearby water-canal were dated in the time of Marcus Aurelius, which would indicate that this monument was erected about 160 A.D., assuming that the wall and the monument were built at the same time, which need not, of course, be the case. If this is in fact the "trophy" of Gaius, it is certainly a more modest structure than one might infer from his proud assertions to the Montanist Proclus. In view of widespread newspaper reports that the "grave" of Peter lay underneath this structure, it is important for the reader to realize that *there are no traces whatever* of any grave beneath the "trophy". Other niches were found in the retaining wall which housed the monument,<sup>18</sup> and these cavities contained bones, the lowest one accommodating those which we have mentioned above. These relics date from the first century A.D., and merely indicate that the site had been used for some time as a burial ground. Thus, to assume that we are here dealing with *Christian* graves is entirely gratuitous, as is also the idea that some of these belonged to the Apostle Peter.

Furthermore, we still have to decide what the term *τρόπαια* itself meant. In Classical writings it was used to signify a place where the enemy had been defeated, or alternatively, a site of victory. It was not used primarily of a "grave", but rather of a "memorial". Thus, if it is employed at all in association with a burial site, it need mean nothing more than a "cenotaph". In any event, it would not be the equivalent of a gravestone, and from the available evidence seems to the present writer to have been a memorial, which, because it was associated with the Apostle Peter, conferred a degree of veneration upon that particular site. In view of the tradition which spoke of the removal of the Apostle's bones from the Appian Way to Vatican Hill, and the fact that the relics of martyrs were only venerated from the middle of the second century onwards, the general uncertainty as to the precise place of burial virtually demanded a more permanent location for the veneration of Peter's memory, and this appears to have been met by the modest structure which was uncovered by the exca-

vators. This may or may not be the "trophy" of Gaius, but in any event, we are still left in doubt as to the location of Peter's bones.

The "memorial" nature of the edifice seems further indicated by the discovery of a head portrayed in red lead on the northern wall of a mausoleum nearly twenty-five yards east of the *Confessio*. The head is that of an old bearded man, and beside it is the name *PETRUS*, along with certain early Christian symbols. An inscription beneath requested the help of Peter for all those who had been buried near his body. Professor Guarducco of the University of Rome dates the findings towards the end of the third century A.D., *i.e.*, at a time when the *tradition* of the site was becoming established. The erection of Constantine's basilica in the fourth century over the alleged burial site of the Apostle Peter fixed the tradition irrevocably as far as Church authorities were concerned. Thus, the drawing with its accompanying inscription may have been nothing more than a pious attempt to invoke the aid of the Apostle for those who had been put to death with him, and buried in a common cemetery. It does not suggest that any bones which may be found in a place adjacent to that which could be proved beyond doubt to be the grave of the Apostle Peter are even contemporaneous with his, and it is certainly of no assistance in determining the site of the grave of Peter. It may well be that further excavations will reveal the existence of many more such inscriptions in the grottoes, and if such are found in the future, the problem will become all the more complex.

It seems difficult to resist the observation that despite the partisan nature of the archaeological work under the Vatican, the factual information which has been published in the official report is accurate and forthright. Maps and plans have been drawn to scale, and they depict an interesting survey of what must have been a most difficult and trying piece of investigation. Considering all the obstacles involved, the members of the archaeological Commission are to be congratulated on their achievements as set forth in the official report. What will be done by way of *interpretation* in the matter of these findings, however, is another matter, and it is at this point that most non-Roman scholars, having examined the evidence as best they can, will doubtless wish to part company with most Roman expositions of the significance of these discoveries.

Let it be noted, that in regard to the particular point under discussion in this article, the official publication merely stated that certain human bones had been found, and made no attempt to identify them with those of the Apostle Peter.<sup>18</sup> Even the Pontiff, whilst suggesting such an identification, was careful to state that there could be no degree of certainty attaching to this hypothesis. Many of the statements to the effect that the mortal remains of the Apostle Peter have been found can only be meant for internal consumption by the Roman communion, where the credulity of the faithful knows so few bounds, and for purposes of propaganda.

On factual evidence, however, the problem seems to be no nearer a solution than it was before the excavations commenced. We are still unable to identify the burial place of Peter, and we are in ignorance as to its precise location. The larger question as to whether or not Peter

resided in Rome for a time is also left unanswered, and the Roman claim is no nearer unquestionable demonstration than it was before archaeological excavations began. The rather doubtful witness of the early Christian writings regarding the deposition of the Apostle's bones has not become any clearer as the result of a decade of investigation under the *Confessio*, and we are forced to the observation that the inconclusive nature of the archaeological evidence has not by any means substantiated the Roman claim to have found the grave of Peter.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Leitzmann, *Petrus und Paulus in Rom.* (1927.) p. 191 seq.
- <sup>2</sup> R. T. O'Callaghan. *The Biblical Archaeologist.* (Feb. 1949.) Vol. XII. No. 1, p. 4.  
L. Lemerle. *La Nouvelle Cltio.* (1950.) p. 393, seq; and  
E. Schäfer. *Evangelische Theologie.* (1951.) p. 459.
- <sup>3</sup> e.g., C. Respighi. *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana.* (1942.) Vol. XIX, p. 5 seq.;
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica del Governatorato di Roma* (1942.) Vol. LXX. p. 92 seq.; *Il Vaticano nel 1944.* pp. 188 seq., 200 seq. The final report was published by the Commission in 1951, in two volumes under the title *Esplorazioni sotto la Confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano I Testo.*, and dealt only with the excavations beneath the altar.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam. *Romans.* (Int. Crit. Comm.). (1905.) Intro. p. xxx, where the tradition is traced back to Hippolytus.
- <sup>6</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* iii. 36.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* ii. 28.
- <sup>8</sup> J. P. Kirsch, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911 ed.). Vol. XI, p. 750.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. *Romans* xvi. 20 f. (Cf. Acts xxviii. 21), and for an implied Petrine association cf. Kirsopp Lake. *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul.* (1911.) p. 379. The history of the medieval and later discussion of the Roman tradition is summarized by O. Cullmann. *Peter: Disciple—Apostle—Martyr.* (1953.) p. 71 seq., who concludes that the alleged Petrine foundation of the Church at Rome cannot either be demonstrated, or even held to be likely (p. 113).
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Cullman. *op. cit.* p. 124 seq.
- <sup>11</sup> Cullman. *ibid.* p. 129.
- <sup>12</sup> Figured by Cullman, *id.* p. 144, and also on the cover of *The Biblical Archaeologist.* (Dec. 1953.) Vol. XVI. No. iv. Fig. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> In Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* ii. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Figured in *Bibl. Archæol.* Vol. XVI. No. iv. p. 71.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. the cross-section drawing in *Bibl. Archæol.* Vol. XVI. p. 78. Fig. 7.
- <sup>16</sup> *Esplorazioni, etc.* i. p. 120.

## Correspondence

Sir,

I wonder if, through the courtesy of your columns, I might ventilate a subject which has often been in my mind.

I feel Christian Societies might find it to their advantage from financial and other considerations if they could share a common building, each, of course, having completely independent accommodation. But little thought will show how rents might in this way be reduced and a general interest in each others' work increased. The possibility of there being a common Board room or small Hall would add to the advantage of such a scheme.