

Italy - Rome
Day 11
Monday, March 13 2023

Catacombs

Catacombs of Rome

The **Catacombs of Rome** are ancient underground burial places in and around Rome, of which there are at least forty, some rediscovered only in recent decades. Though most famous for Christian burials, either in separate catacombs or mixed together, Jews and also adherents of a variety of pagan Roman religions were buried in catacombs, beginning in the 2nd century AD,^[1] occasioned by the ancient Roman ban on burials within a city, and also as a response to overcrowding and shortage of land. The most extensive and perhaps the best known is the Christian Catacomb of Callixtus located near the Park of the Caffarella, but there are other sites, both Christian and not, scattered around the city, some of which are now engulfed in the modern urban sprawl.

The Christian catacombs are extremely important for the history of Early Christian art, as they contain the great majority of examples from before about 400 AD, in fresco and sculpture, as well as gold glass medallions (these, like most bodies, have been removed). The Jewish catacombs are similarly important for the study of Jewish culture at this early period.

Roman law forbade burial places within city limits and so all burial places, including the catacombs, were located outside the walls of the city. The first large-scale catacombs in the vicinity of Rome were dug from the 2nd century onwards. They were carved in "*tufa*" (tuff), a type of volcanic rock which is relatively soft to dig into but subsequently hardens.^[8]

Christian catacombs existed as a burial ground for early Christians accompanied by inscriptions and early wall art. Although catacombs were of Jewish origin in the first century, by the end of the sixth century there were over 60 Christian catacombs. These catacombs served as a connector for various Christian communities through the underlying concepts of socio-economic status shown within the art. Additionally, the art showed a story of how Christians in the first couple of centuries viewed the world and their idealistic view of how it should be.

According to prof. L. Michael White, the catacombs of Rome have a place in the romantic historiography of how early Christianity developed. This is because it has often been said those catacombs were good hiding places, and that when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire, they would go there to hold their worship.^[9]

Responsibility for the Christian catacombs lies with the Holy See, which has set up active official organizations for this purpose: the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra) directs excavations and restoration works, while the study of the catacombs is directed in particular by the Pontifical Academy of Archaeology.