

## Christian Ancient Burial Places

doc. ThDr. Peter Caban<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

Culture of a nation is expressed in the methods of burial. This sentence characterizes the basic archeological attitude towards the burial and all the related activities in the Christian antiquity. Natural desire of a human being that memory of him could be preserved in the next generations is visible in the methods of burying of the dead. In the burial places we find the archeological testimonies of the natural historical and religious environment where a human person – a Christian – lived, prayed and worked.

---

**Keywords:** ChristianArcheology. Christian Roman Burialplaces.Catacombs in Rom

### Introduction

From school times we know the famous expression: "*Historiamagistra vitae est.*" – History is the teacher of life. Even though times change, we can learn a lot from the past. In this historical context we can see some line which leads us to the roots of Christian civilization and to the roots of our faith. Contemporary young person may ask rightfully: "*Is there any sense to consider what was in the past? It is past and we cannot change it.*"

*Is history useful for us? Does it have anything to say to a contemporary young person?*" Surely contemporary person in the post-modern era and in the time of the computer world and virtual reality does not consider such questions very often.

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts and Letters, KU University in Ružomberok, Hrabovská cesta 1, SK 034 01 Ružomberok, Slovakia. Phone: 00421-917708872, E-mail: [peter.caban@ku.sk](mailto:peter.caban@ku.sk)

He is interested in the world and environment where he lives. He looks at the future and many times he prefers pragmatic viewpoint toward his environment. He accepts what he needs. He is fascinated by the achievements of the technological progress which facilitate and simplify his reality. Sooner or later he acknowledges that his life is influenced by many facts that transcend him and go beyond the needs of everyday life. It is good to ask a question whether it is meaningful for him to consider old things which took place in the past. If a person lived in the present time only regardless of the past and the future, he would be similar to a tree which has a trunk but no roots and branches. Such tree could not survive. Without roots, i. e. without past and without branches, i. e. without future, life is not possible.

## 1. Origin and Meaning of the Christian Burial Places

Ancient pagan nations respected the graves of their relatives. The same is true for Christians who valued the body as the temple of Holy Spirit which deserves respect. Christianity coming from Judaism was spreading in Jewish Diaspora initially. First Christians were coming from Jewish families, therefore they kept many Jewish customs – including customs related to the burying. Jews did not burn their dead ones. First they washed the body, then they anointed it with perfume ointments and wrapped into a shroud. They put a white scarf on the head of the dead person - *sudarium*. The dead were buried in the surface burial places.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. 1 Confrontation with Death

Christianity was spreading among pagans so it was natural that it accepted the customs of the nations and many customs were Christianized later. Everything which could be harmonized with the teachings of Christ was adapted or revalued. Christians refuted the customs which were contrary to the gospel of Christ.

Later Christian communities established their own customs under the influence of various circumstances and experience.<sup>3</sup> Roman pagan custom<sup>4</sup> of burning the dead was not accepted by Christian because they believed in the resurrection of the body.

<sup>2</sup> HIŠEM, C., Kresťanská archeológia, epigrafia a ikonografia, Seminársv. Karola Boromejského, Košice 2004, s. 11.

<sup>3</sup>BAGIN, A., Kresťanská archeológia, Rímskokatolícka Cyrilometodská bohoslovecká fakulta, Bratislava 1976, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that also Etruscans buried their dead ones and they did not burn them.

The inhabitants of the Roman Empire were confronted with death quite often so it was not something terrifying or non-understandable for them. Death could be seen everywhere in Rome. It was visible in the games in the circus, in the amphitheatre or games of gladiators. In Rome the rate of children mortality was high. Many Romans died within 30 years since the birth. Even though they were confronted with death more often than we are confronted in today's world, death was a sad event for certain.

As the Christianity spread, opinions of Christians about post-mortal life were formed in the spirit of the faith. These opinions were reflected in the methods of burying and Christian burial customs or liturgical specifications.

## 1. 2 Preparing of the Dead Body for Burial

Preparing of the dead body for burial was similar in majority of the ancient nations of the Roman Empire. In order to preserve the body wrapped into a shroud for a long time, pieces of lime were put to the shroud and jars with perfumes were put into the grave. The fragrance could be felt for several centuries since the burial. Graves had to be located outside settlements.<sup>5</sup> In the Roman Empire there were so called acts of 12 tables and one of the regulations said: "*Do not bury or burn the dead person in the city!*" Therefore in the time of the Roman republic there arose several kilometers long route of tombstones along the famous Via AppiaAntica and other ways. Incorruptibility and sanctity of graves regardless of faith or origin of the dead person was obligatory for all the nations of the empire. The venue of the grave was always sacred. Nobody could dig or demolish or steal something in the grave. Any person who damaged a grave committed a sacrilege. Roman law punished this transgression by sever punishments, especially by *damnatioadmetalla* – forced labors in mines. Roman laws distinguished two kinds of graves:

- a) *sepulchrumfamiliaire* – a private grave for the members of one family,
- b) *sepulchrumhaereditarium* – a rave whose owners could be changed in time.

The law allowed the poor persons to be associated in burial fraternities. First Christians used this option. In this way they could own some property, i.e. cemeteries and buildings built in the cemeteries.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example Jewish graves were often located in gardens.

On the other hand the law allowed that anybody who asked for the body of the executed criminal could bury the body.<sup>6</sup> This procedure was kept in the case of Christ when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. It was the same in the case of St. Peter and Paul, the apostle, who were executed in Rome and in the case of many early Christian martyrs.

### 1. Division of the Burial Places

Systematic research of the early Christian burial places provided valuable information about the life of first Christian, organizational structure of the Christian communities, initial Church hierarchy, liturgy and public and private lives of Christians. When we realize that many Church communities were persecuted in the first three centuries and many memorabilia from this era were lost, we can understand the value of the archeological material which was found and is still found by Christian archeologists in the early Christian burial places. We can rightfully call these burial places *"the archive of faith of first Christian generations."*<sup>7</sup> Christians did not burn their dead ones. Burning of the bodies was the insult of their own body. Christian custom of burying was the continuation of the Jewish tradition. Christians followed the example of Jesus Christ who was buried and he was resurrected on the third day. Christian graves are places of rest and waiting for the glorious resurrection.

Early Christian burial places can be divided into:

a/ surface

b/ underground (*catcombs*)

### 2. Surface Burial Places

First Christians did not belong to rich classes of the populations and their number was relatively small at the beginning. Therefore they did not build luxurious tombs over the bodies of their dead ones. In the beginning they could not afford to establish their own burial places for financial reasons. Initially Christians buried their dead ones in normal surface (pagan) burial places.

---

<sup>6</sup> „Corpora adversorum quibuslibet ad sepulturam dandasunt.“

<sup>7</sup> HIŠEM, C., Kresťanská archeológia, epigrafia a ikonografia, Seminársv. Karola Boromejského, Košice 2004, p. 12.

When they built a humble tomb for the dead, they used the inscriptions and symbols customary for these burial places. Therefore we cannot distinguish early Christian graves and pagan graves. This situation lasted until the half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Christian burial places distinct from other burial places of other religions appear around 150 AD.

Surface Christian cemetery was protected by a wall (*maceria, muruscinctus* – fence), it was called *area* (land), in Africa for example *Area christianorum*, in the East *topos* (venue). In order to distinguish the burial places the name of the owner of the land was mentioned for example in Africa *Area MacroliiCandidiani*, in Umbria *Area Vindiciani*.<sup>8</sup> If this burial place was arranged as a garden, it was called *hortus*.<sup>9</sup>

The best venues in the surface cemeteries were near the fence. Some canopy protected them near the fence.<sup>10</sup> Some Christian graves had a special roof in the form of *arcosolia*<sup>11</sup> or *baldachin*<sup>12</sup> Later baldachins protected Christian altars in basilicas and they symbolized the heavenly firmament. In the surface Christian burial places there were individual and group graves, richer ones or poorer ones. It was customary to orient the dead toward the East but this custom was not kept in the catacombs, in atria of basilica and in mausoleums.

## 2. 1 Burial into the Ground

The simplest and cheapest method of burial in the Christian antiquity was this: A hole was dug in the ground, the dead body was put into the hole and it was covered with earth. To avoid the situation when earth is going onto the dead body, it was protected by marble or stone plates or shards.

---

<sup>8</sup> Covered places for burying were located in the atria of the early Christian basilicas.

<sup>9</sup>For example in Milan HortusPhilippio.

<sup>10</sup>So called *protectum, taglata*.

<sup>11</sup> Originally from Latin *arcus* – arch, *solium* – throne, sarcophagus.

<sup>12</sup>Sometimes called *ciborium*.

Christians tended to adapt customs from other civilizations and nations, therefore items from silver, bronze or gold could be found in their graves.<sup>13</sup> It was not easy to acquire lands in Rome; therefore surface burial places had to use the location to the maximum. Graves for just one dead body were rare.

What was the simple and most common method of burying among first Christians? In the beginning grave-diggers dug a deep vertical shaft, one dead body was laid there. It was wrapped in the linen with fragrant essences or pieces of lime. It was covered with a marble or stone plate. This plate was the bed for the second body. In this way they laid the dead bodies until the surface of the terrain. Sometimes ten dead bodies could be laid one over another. Disadvantage of this method of burying was that relatives could not reach the lower graves. In order to avoid this situation, more spacious shaft was made next to the grave, they made walls and in the walls they made holes so called *loculi*. A specific name for such group grave under the surface was *locus* or *forma*. According to the number of places for the dead bodies locus could be: *bisomus*, *trisomus*, *quadrisomus*, etc. When the group grave was full, it was called *locus plenus*.<sup>14</sup> Graves in the surface Christian burial places were open to weather conditions.

Therefore they were covered by stone or marble plates and sometimes these plates were artistically decorated.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. 2 Burying into a Sarcophagus

Burying of the dead body into a sarcophagus was more expensive method of burying. A Roman sarcophagus was a decorated coffin for surface burying which was used in the whole Roman Empire since the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> For example in Christian graves there were various items of everyday use or items for entertainment – such as dice from stone or ebony. In the graves there were dolls, bells from bronze and silver, glass balls, deer from bronze, metal mirrors, necklaces, bodkins for hair, combs, earrings, jewels, rings, buttons etc. Many of these memorabilia is deposited in the Vatican museum.

<sup>14</sup> KAUFMANN, C. – M., *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie; Einführung in die Denkmälervelt und Kunst des Urchristentums*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 1922, pp. 121–123.

<sup>15</sup> In the particular countries one type of these tombstones prevailed. The simplest graves had a flat plate with the inscription. Graves under the roof in basilicas and mausoleums were decorated by a mosaic.

<sup>16</sup> Archeologists from the University of Durham found the sarcophagi from Roman times in Newcastle, UK. They were 1,800 years old stone sarcophagi, 180 long and carved from one piece of the sandstone. They probably belonged to a Roman family living in the fortress Pont Aelius. Probably it was a family of the commander of the fortress or a highly ranked officer in the army.

Burying into a sarcophagus was not a Roman custom before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Sarcophagi were used by Etruscans and Greeks. They were located in the mausoleum near the wall or niche.<sup>18</sup> Mythological portraits on the sarcophagi were interesting and they got various meanings within the funeral context. Pictures on the sarcophagi were the symbols of the Roman belief about death and post mortal life.<sup>19</sup> Sarcophagi could be made from stone, burned clay, marble or lead. They were decorated and designed in such a way that some part of the sarcophagus was protruding over the earth. They could be placed on the surface or in crypts. There were sarcophagi with interesting figure decorations on the frontal side and two side walls. If a part of the sarcophagus was protruding over the ground, the inscription was in the internal part of the sarcophagus.<sup>20</sup> Christians did not put emphasis on the artistic decoration of a sarcophagus but on the Christian meaning of death and post mortal life. An embossment with the motive of Christ as the Good Shepherd is known. He was wearing a sheep on his shoulder. This embossment was found on one sarcophagus in Salon near Split.

## 2.3 Burying into Amphora

In the Greek-Roman world amphorae were the transportation jars. They were ceramic jars with handles.

They were destined for transportation and depositing of liquids, especially wine, olive oil and other kinds of food.<sup>21</sup> Amphorae were used in the Roman era, especially in western Mediterranean. Phoenician - Carthagian method of the burying of dead persons was used among first Christians.

---

<sup>17</sup> Romans put the remains of the bodies into urn or ossuaries.

<sup>18</sup> Some considered a sarcophagus as the "house" for the dead persons but others called it "the temple" of the dead person.

<sup>19</sup> AWAN, H. – T., *Roman sarcophagi*, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rsar/hd\\_rsar.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rsar/hd_rsar.htm) 27. 7. 2013.

<sup>20</sup> BAGIN, A., *Kresťanská archeológia*, Rímskokatolíckacyrilometodskábohosloveckáfakulta, Bratislava 1976, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> The study of the production, distribution and dating of the amphorae is one of the most important sources for the analysis of Roman ancient economy.

The bottom of an amphora was removed and then they put the dead body into the amphora. One amphora was sufficient for a child. More amphorae were used for adults. They were broken on sides and put around the dead body.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Burying into a Mausoleum

The most luxurious method of burying in antiquity was burying into a mausoleum. Mausoleums were graves in the form of an ancient temple on the elevated pedestal with grave chambers. The name *mausóleon* is derived from the monumental grave of the king Mausolus II. from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and his wife Artemis in Halicarnassus.<sup>23</sup> In Rome mausoleum denoted any monumental grave or tomb. Christians adapted the method of the burying into a mausoleum but they adapted it according to their faith. They built mausoleums for one or more graves with several floors. On the first floor there were relics or a grave of a martyr, in the lower part there were graves of the owner and his family members.<sup>24</sup> Mausoleum was always a dignified method of burying

## 3. Underground Christian Burial Places – Catacombs

Roman Christians buried their dead ones on the surface burial places as it is attested by the graves of St. Peter and Paul. They were buried in the mixed necropolis.<sup>25</sup> In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century richer Romans who accepted Christianity gave their graves and mausoleums for burying of Christians.

There came an idea to bury the dead in the underground. First Christian burial places known as *catacombs* came into existence.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> HIŠEM, C., *Kresťanská archeológia, epigrafia a ikonografia*, Seminársv. Karola Boromejského, Košice 2004, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Its construction is amazing for its architectonic concept – combination of a pyramid, zikkurat and a Greek temple. The basis of the whole construction was the huge pedestal from marble of Prokonnes. In fact the pedestal was just covered with marble. The core consisted of the massive blockstone from unburned bricks. The pedestal was in the form of rectangle with the measures of 19 x 42 x 11 metres. According to the maximum data this grave had the measures of 66 x 77 x 30 metres. At the pedestal the grave temple was situated. It was surrounded by 36 Ionian columns which wore the roof in the form of 24-degree pyramid. At the summit there was a platform with the statues of the rulers Mausolus II. and his wife Artemis in the quadruple chariot.

<sup>24</sup> BAGIN, A., *Kresťanská archeológia*, Rímskokatolíckacyrilometodská bohoslovecká fakulta, Bratislava 1976, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Small Christian communities could not establish their own burial places at that time.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. JUDÁK, V., *Kresťanské rímske katakomby*, in *Historická revue*, year 13, n. 3/2002, p. 27.

This method of burying is very interesting for Christian archeology.<sup>27</sup> Meaning and importance of catacombs<sup>28</sup> can be characterized by the words of Oratius Marucchi from the school of the famous archeologist G. B. de Rossi: “*Catacombs can be considered a cradle of Christianity and the archive of the first Church. Painting, statues and inscriptions provide valuable material which depicts the life of first Christians and history of persecutions.*”<sup>29</sup> We should not forget that not all catacombs belonged to Christians, for example in Rome, in the west of the centre, Jewish catacombs were built and in the south, near the river Tiber pagan catacombs were located. But most catacombs in Rome belonged to Christians.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. 1 Etymology of the Catacombs

From the etymological viewpoint the word catacombs is derived from the Greek<sup>31</sup> word *κατά*– to, toward, with, down, under... and Latin word *cubare* – lay which means *lay together, lay down*. Catacombs denote two kinds of graves – graves *ad cryptas*, under the ground or *ad valles* – at a slope.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> In the beginning the burial places were denoted as *venues of sleep*. Pagans used the word *necropolis* i.e. the city of the dead.

<sup>28</sup> The catacombs were distinguished from the crypts by smaller use of masonry and they tended to form the complex systems of the corridors.

<sup>29</sup> JUDÁK, V., *Kresťanskérimskéekatakomby*, in *Historická revue*, year 13, n. 3/2002, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. VALACHOVIČ, P., *Ludia v podzemí: prví kresťania a tajomstvo evanjelii*, in *Historická revue*, year 22, n. 1/2011, pp. 14–15.

<sup>31</sup> In Rome Greek language was used until the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>32</sup> There are several ideas concerning the etymology of the word *catacumba*: Some relate this word to the Latin word *cumba* (boat, ship or slope). In comparison with these explanations it is more probable that the word *cata-cumbas* must be the garble of the word *cata-tumbas* (near graves), i. e. Greek word denoting underground graves. Regardless of previous etymologies De Rossi derived this word from the Latin verb *cubare* (to lay). The letter M was inserted into this word and it was considered identical with the expression *cataaccubitoria*(ad coemeteria)*christianorum*. It seems that this explanation is the best because it relates the words *catacumba* and *coemeterium*. Another opinion says that the name catacomb was created in Rome under special circumstances. It is said of the emperor Maxentius that *fecit ... circum in catacumbas*, he built a circus in chinas. Therefore the name catacombs could be derived from the words *kata kumben*–in the valley. It was the name for the chinas between two Roman hills at Via Apia. Today there are the catacombs of St. Calixt and grave of Cecilia Metella. In the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century a smaller underground Christian burial place was established here. It was called *Ad catacumbas*. It was known during the Middle Ages. Cf. KAUFMANN, C. – M., *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie; Einführung in die DenkmälereWelt und Kunst des Urchristentums*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 1922, pp. 113–115.

### 3. 2 Phases of the Origin of Catacombs

We can see three phases in the origin of Christian catacombs: apostolic era, post-apostolic era and the era of the change in the burial system from the burying on the surface to the burying in catacombs.<sup>33</sup>

#### *A: Apostolic era:*

Christians in the apostolic era made definitive decision to bury a dead body instead of burning it. First Christian symbols such as anchor appeared in the graves. Christians adapted this symbol from pagans but they added the horizontal dash under the eye of the anchor. In this way the cross – symbol of salvation – was formed.

#### *B: Post-apostolic era:*

It was the era of the last decade of the first century and the beginning of the second century. It was the era of maturing. Christian communities were growing in numbers and they acquired respect when senator families of Atilians and Flavians accepted Christianity. It was necessary to be distinguished from pagans and Jews and to make internal structure. This differentiation was necessary in the methods of burying as well because the Church took care for the needs of its poorest members, especially slaves.

#### *C: Transition era:*

In the third phase, in the era of transition from the burying on the surface to the burying in catacombs Christians got more and more independence and they possessed their own burial places which they acquired thanks to burial fraternities and contributions of richer Christians. Christians could express their religiosity and faith more freely. They did not have to be afraid of the ridicule of the enemies or desecration of the graves.

Opinion that catacombs were used by Christians as the constant place of gathering or celebration of liturgy is not true from the historical view.

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibidem, p. 92.

Catacombs were always burial places and they could not provide enough space for multitudes of people due to the lighting, insufficient space and poor air ventilation. They could serve as refuges for a small group of people. Christians gathered together in the catacombs on the birthday of the dead (*dies natalis*), especially a martyr. Catacombs were not visited very often therefore they could be used as short-term refuge for Christians in the time of persecutions.

### 3. 3 Functions in the Catacombs – Fossores and Pictores

Grave-diggers – so called *fossores* were responsible for the arrangements of the catacombs. A fossor was the guardian of the burial place; therefore his Greek name was also *topofylax*, i.e. guardian of the venue, guardian of the grave. Grave-diggers formed their own collegiums and in Rome and northern Africa they were respected persons. They belonged to lower clergy. It seems that these offices were inherited in the families. It is probable that *fossores* wrote the date of the death and burial of the dead to the fresh plaster.<sup>34</sup>

Another interesting function in the Roman catacombs was the function of painters – so called *pictores*. They were the authors of interesting coloured frescos on the walls of the catacombs. Some of them were preserved in the good condition. Their art in the era of early Christianity in the first four centuries was characterized by the fact that Christians used some symbols depicting Christian ideas such as the symbol of cross, dove, peacock, green branch, shepherd as well as scenes from the Scriptures. As for frescos and painting in the catacombs we should not forget the constancy and clarity of the colours used by the painters. It was caused by the quality of colours and artists who used them.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. 4 Procedure in the Construction of the Catacombs

In order to build catacombs it was necessary to own a land. First the ownership right had to be acquired. Therefore the first Christian catacombs were established on private lands. Later the underground burial places were extended as the number of believers grew.

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *ibidem* p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. MORDEL, Š., *Kresťanská archeológia*, Teologický ústav a Kňazský seminár biskupa Jána Vojtaššáka, Spišské Podhradie – Spišská Kapitula 2005, p. 98

Sometimes there were several underground burial places on one land such as the catacombs of Domitila, Calixt, Priscilla, and Praetextatus. When the burial places were extended, they were coming closer together and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century they were united. The whole network of underground corridors was created in Rome.

Once Christians owned the land, it was necessary to choose a suitable venue for the underground catacombs where it was possible to dig. The suitable terrains were in the lowlands under some hill with enough ground over the underground spaces. The structure of the ground was very important for the construction of the catacombs. In the vicinity of Rome three kinds of tuff were in the earth:<sup>36</sup>

1. *Stone tuff* which was used for the construction of city walls,
2. *Grain tuff* which was used as sand for the mortar,
3. *Middle* type of tuff which was not hard or sandy but it was sufficiently resistant for digging of the underground spaces. This kind of tuff was the most suitable for digging of the catacombs.<sup>37</sup>

Fossores dug the access staircase. If the burial place had several floors, the equivalent number of staircases could be built. The access staircase was dug in the tuff but stairs were covered by bricks or marble plates. Staircases into the catacombs were relatively steep. Stairs were some 20 cm high. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century a new broader staircase was built for the quicker access to the graves of the martyrs. It was called *Introitus ad martyres*—Entrance to the martyrs. When fossores found the suitable tuff, they began to dig the proper catacombs. They were working with a hoe – *piccone*. It was similar to our mattock. The underground spaces did not have the same size and form. In the corridors of the catacombs there was a flat ceiling but in more luxurious catacombs there was a vaulted ceiling for example in the catacombs of St. Domitila. In the beginning the corridors were 2 m high at maximum and they were 80-90 cm wide. In some cases the structure of earth enabled the grave-diggers to dig broader and four times higher corridors as in the catacombs of Commodilla.

---

<sup>36</sup> Romans knew the qualities of tuff; they mined it and made irregular corridors or arenaria (sandpits) in the tuff under the ground. In tuff they made canals for aqueducts, tunnels for storage chambers as well as underground burial places.

<sup>37</sup> Some researchers thought that Christians used the deserted sandpits for the construction of their own underground burial places. But there is a difference between underground sandpits with short and wide tunnels and catacombs with long and narrow corridors and flat walls. Christians used the deserted sandpits rarely.

### 3. Burying in the Catacombs

Walls of the corridors and grave chambers were used for the burying of the dead in the catacombs. Graves were located one over the other so there could be five or more graves. This column of graves was called *pila*. Graves were distinguished not only by the type of the catacombs. Each constructor had its own technique, one was building graves one over another. In other catacombs the graves were irregularly put into the walls. Massive pillars of the compact ground were left by *fossares* between the columns of the graves. For statics only small children graves were located in the corners of the corridors. The opening of the grave (*locus* or *topos*) was the horizontal niche suited for the body of the dead. Underground chamber where graves were located was called *a crypt*. The chamber with graves was called *cubiculum*.<sup>38</sup> Graves in the catacombs were covered with bricks and marble or terracotta plates with data about the name or important events from the life of the dead or some symbol. These plates were called *titulus*. In some graves other inscriptions or paintings were preserved. Sometimes the inscription or symbol was engraved into the fresh plaster.

We call it *graffito* or *graffiti*.<sup>39</sup> In many graves Roman ciphers were used.<sup>40</sup> More luxurious graves (but there were just few of them) had a half-circle niche in the tuff over the grave and this niche was decorated with marble. It was called *arcosolium*.<sup>41</sup> Several dead persons (10 at maximum) were buried in such graves. In later times the dead were buried into the floor because there was not enough space in the catacombs. The method of burying was the same as the method in the surface burial places. These graves in the catacombs were called *forma*. The graves in the floor were covered by a horizontal plate which was called *mensa* – table. These graves were marked with inscriptions, symbols or in the graves there were some small items such as coins, shards of glass and other items related to the dead person so that his family and relative could easily find the grave. We must not forget the findings of bodies buried in the marble sarcophagi located in the catacombs. These sarcophagi were simpler than the sarcophagi in the surface burial places.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. MORDEL, Š., *Kresťanská archeológia*, Teologický inštitút a Kňazský seminár biskupa Jána Vojtaššáka, Spišské Podhradie – Spišská Kapitula 2005, pp. 104–106.

<sup>39</sup> In the modern language paintings made by sprays are denoted by this name.

<sup>40</sup> Scholars thought that it denoted the number of dead persons in the grave. In fact only in the catacombs of St. Agnes the Roman cipher II denoted the grave with two dead persons so called *locus bisomus*.

<sup>41</sup> KAUFMANN, C. – M., *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie; Einführung in die Denkmälerwelt und Kunst des Urchristentums*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 1922, p. 122.

Sometimes they were decorated with figure decorations such as motives from the New Testament (very often Jesus and his disciples were depicted).<sup>42</sup>

### 3. Development of the Underground Burial Places

Roman catacombs consisted of huge system of underground corridors. They formed several floors and the total length in Rome and vicinity was **876 km**. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman Christian community possessed 25-26 big and 20 smaller catacombs. Today we know more than 60 catacombs under Rome and its vicinity. In the Roman catacombs more than **6 million** dead bodies were buried.<sup>43</sup> In the catacombs slaves, martyrs and saints, even rich citizens of Rome were buried. Their graves were distinguished by their majesty and paintings.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century the number of believers significantly increased. The underground burial places were extended. In some places the original corridors of the catacombs were prolonged, in other places new corridors were made or access staircases were built. In this era the art of Roman grave-diggers reached its climax. Main corridors were dug by masters and their helpers dug smaller spaces. Some corridors were several hundred metres long. When the grave-diggers reached the unsuitable earth or they reached the end of the land, they descended to a lower floor.

Some Roman catacombs have even five floors. Corridors closer to the surface are the oldest ones. When the level above the main corridor was sufficiently thick, a new floor was dug over this corridor. The removal of earth was a big problem in the construction of the catacombs. Usually they used an access staircase, later they made shafts from the surface to the floors and they removed earth by these shafts. Fossores came to the surface by these shafts regularly or they descended into the catacombs. Sometimes earth was exported into the corridors which were full of graves and they made new graves (*formae*) in this imported earth. After the edict of Milan in 313 – to get space for new graves – Roman catacombs were rearranged again. In some places floors were lowered and ceilings were elevated. In the decorated walls they made niches for new graves and even free space at the ventilation system was used.

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. VALACHOVIČ, P., *Ludia v podzemí: prví křesťania a tajomstvo evanjelií*, in *Historická revue*, year 22, n. 1/2011, pp. 14–15.

<sup>43</sup> HIŠEM, C., *Kresťanská archeológia, epigrafia a ikonografia*, Seminársv. Karola Boromejského, Košice 2004, p. 21.

In the catacombs of St. Calixt archeologists found the entrance into the big cave which originates from this era. It was found in the space behind the famous crypts of the popes and grave of St. Cecilia.

It seems that fossores wanted to reuse the graves near the famous crypts so they took the bones from the old graves and they buried them in the cave. They alternated levels of earth with levels of bones. In this way a big *ossarium* (ossuary) was established. A legend later changed this ossuary into the "*sanctuariummartyrum*" – the sanctuary of martyrs. Underground burial places were lightened by Christians with oil lamps which were put into niches or consoles. The lights were burning in the corridors in front of graves as well. Over some chambers there were special openings, shafts for ventilation and lighting of the underground spaces. Such chamber was called *cubiculum clarum* (enlightened chamber). Ventilation and lighting shafts were situated over the main corridors and crossroads of the corridors as well. They were not identical with the big shafts for the removal of excavated earth. The lightening canals were called *luminaria*.

The Roman catacombs were the suitable place for the burying of the popes. Especial private catacombs were suited for this purpose.<sup>44</sup> After the pontificate of the pope Vigilius (537 – 555) 28 successors of Peter were buried in the Roman catacombs:

- 16 in the catacombs of Calixt,
- 7 in the catacombs of Priscilla
- And five popes are buried in other places.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. 7 Names of the Catacombs

Many Roman catacombs were named after some person. In some case it was the owner of the private land where the catacombs were dug such as Priscilla and Domitila. We do not know who were other persons such as Nicomedus, Balbina, etc. The second group of catacombs was named according to the place where they were situated such as: *Ad septempalumbas*– At seven doves, *Ad clivumcucumeris*– At the cucumber slope, *Ad duaslauros*–At two laurels etc.

---

<sup>44</sup> For example during persecutions it was better to bury at the private lands.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. JUDÁK, V., *Kresťanskérimskéekatakomy*, in *Historická revue*, year 13, n. 3/2002, p. 27.

The third group of catacombs was named after a saint who was buried there such as the catacombs of St. Agnes, St. Hyppolite, St. Tecla, etc. Names of the third group were established in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. We do not know how the catacombs were named previously. In the fourth group there are anonymous catacombs. We do not know their names.<sup>46</sup>

The pope Damasus I. helped to develop the catacombs. He was born during the persecution of Christians in the times of Diocletian and he died in 384. As pope he repaired underground cemeteries in the catacombs. He added more comfortable staircases with lighting and ventilation with the help of shafts - lucernaria. Damasus I. venerated his predecessors, popes and martyrs and he put various inscriptions and epigrams in the graves. In a short verse he described their lives, suffering and death for faith. He took care for the catacombs and renewed the churches. In order to preserve the historicity of the memorabilia from this era he transferred the pontifical archive and he gave a task to his friend, St. Hieronym, to revise the Latin translation of gospels according to their Greek original.<sup>47</sup>

We mention various catacombs and even big catacombs so there is a question how pagan Romans could allow Christians to construct such vast cemeteries because corridors of the catacombs were spread under the whole Rome. Did Christians get the permission to construct the catacombs or the construction of such gigantic sizes was kept in secret? And how was it possible that these catacombs were unknown and partially untouched for many centuries?<sup>48</sup> This is the answer: The catacombs were built as small graves for individuals or their families. Richer believer who owned the lands allowed building cemeteries there. According to Roman laws even criminals deserved the dignified burial. Christians were not exempted and they could bury their dead ones and venerate them. They could keep the relics of martyrs and many believers desired to be buried near the grave of a martyr.

---

<sup>46</sup> MORDEL, Š., Svetprvýchkrest'anov, KňazskýseminárbiskupaJánaVojtaššáka, SpišskáKapitula – SpišskéPodhradie 2001, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. JUDÁK, V., Krest'anskérímskekatakomy, in *Historická revue*, year 13, n. 3/2002, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup>Except for those which were robbed.

## Summary

When we talk about catacombs, we mean Roman catacombs usually but underground burial places in the form of catacombs<sup>49</sup> existed not only in Rome: in Naples, in Palermo in Sicilia, in Dalmatia, Gallia, Germany, Austria, Greece, Spain, Asia Minor, Haifa and Jerusalem. We can mention two interesting catacombs: *The catacombs of St. John* at Syracuse. Originally it was the cistern for water but its huge spaces were serving for the construction of the catacombs. The catacombs of St. John consist of the labyrinth of 20,000 graves in seven lines and five floors.<sup>50</sup> One special custom is related to the burying method in these catacombs. The graves of the dead were covered with a stone with three openings. One was for wine, the second for milk and the third for honey. Once a year relative of this dead person came to venerate him with food. *The catacombs of St. Paulin* in Malta are precious because they testify how the Christian families in the countryside buried their dead ones. In Malta it was necessary to bury the dead into the ground. There was scarcity of arable soil so it could not be used for surface cemeteries. Several corridors in these catacombs contain the graves from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. These graves are one of the biggest in Malta.

The Roman catacombs are famous for their vastness and antiquity. They are a complex of underground burial places. Only in Rome it is possible to study the origin and construction of these burial places, their names, the time of usage, arrangement and reasons why they were abandoned.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> The notion of catacombs was broadened. It was also the name for the underground corridors serving not only for burying but also for other purposes.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. KAUFMANN, C. – M., *Handbuch der christlichen Archäologie; Einführung in die Denkmälervelt und Kunst des Urchristentums*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn 1922, pp. 138–141.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. MORDEL, Š., *Kresťanská archeológia*, Teologický inštitút a Kňazské seminár biskupa Jána Vojtaššáka, Spišské Podhradie – Spišská Kapitula 2005, pp. 95–96.