

Saint Peter's Bones: A History of His Findings

The purpose of this short research article is to bring to light a fact that very few people know: that the supposed bones of St. Peter that lie at the bottom of St. Peter's basilica were found as a result of Pope Pius XII purposefully and secretly organizing an excavation below the church during the difficult and dangerous years of World War II. It is also the intention of this article to emphasize the antagonistic forces inside the Vatican surrounding this amazing finding, as well as to describe the long and controversial process of finding and identifying the bones of the apostle on which the Catholic Church is founded.

I learned about this topic reading John O'Neill's *The Fisherman's Tomb. The True Story of the Vatican's Secret Search* (2018), and Thomas J. Craughwell's book *St. Peter's Bones*, which I recommend. Craughwell explains that, "in 1940, Pope Pius XII authorized a thorough reconstruction of the Vatican Grottoes, the undercroft of the Basilica of St. Peter" (1). Then, in January 1941, workmen uncovered an elegant mausoleum that had belonged to the Cetenni family that would later be dated between AD 130 and 170. Archeologists were called, and they declared an important discovery. On their recommendation, Pius XII allowed a full-scale excavation of the area (1). To supervise the project, the pope created a commission and assigned to it a group of experts and a team of "sampietrini" (expert crafters responsible for the maintenance of St. Peter's Basilica). The scholars included "a leading expert on the catacombs: Antonio Ferrua, S.J. considered the foremost scholar of epigraphy, the study of ancient Christian inscriptions" (2). The project manager "was Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, one of Pius XII's closest advisers" and "administrator of the Basilica of St. Peter" (2).

To make this story short, this team was commissioned to search for other tombs belonging to the Christian era, but, particularly, for Peter's tomb, and they were sworn by the pope to keep all this enterprise secret to the outside world. They uncovered all kinds of magnificent, ancient monuments, but, most importantly, they discovered a mausoleum wall with an inscription saying that Peter's tomb "was near" (14). In 1942, the workers found two important walls: the Red Wall, "made of bricks from the time of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius" (dated near 160 A.C.), and the "Graffiti Wall" (built around 250) (O'Neill 80). The Graffiti Wall had a bunch of marks that "were clearly Roman names and symbols, but they were otherwise unreadable to the Ferrua team, who dismissed the wall as unintelligible and insignificant" (O'Neill 80-81). O'Neill mentions that this dismissal "would turn out to be a disastrous mistake" (81). The inscription mentioned earlier that said that Peter's bones were near led Ferrua and his team on a frenzied search for the grave, treating ancient bones and artifacts with complete disrespect and damaging them in the process. Father Kaas, horrified at their disrespect for the dead, would come to the catacombs at night and collect the bones they left behind, placing them in boxes that he labeled and dated, citing the location where they were found, without saying anything about it to anybody (81).

The Ferrua team later discovered the structure of what had been the original basilica that Constantine had built. Inside of it, they found Gaius's mausoleum (AD 150), which held "many coins (one dating to AD 14) and Christian votive offerings" (84) and "wonderful murals of saints, confirming the monument's Christian origin" (84). Even though they found no reference

to Peter, excited at those findings, they dug under the grave and found an additional chamber with more "coins and votive offerings, suggesting offerings made in honor of a saint. Finally, they found a small opening near the very base of the Red Wall... and in that opening, they encountered bones" (84). They summoned Pope Pius XII, and, though perplexed to find Peter's bones "in a simple dirt grave" (85), Ferrua's team, together with the pope, concluded that what they had found was enough evidence to conclude that those were Peter's bones (85). "It was 1942. The bones were placed in lead-lined boxes at the pope's direction and moved to his own apartment, where they would rest for many years" (85). "At the express command of Pius XII, the find was to be kept absolutely secret" (85).

Meanwhile, WWII was going on, with Pius XII ignoring its devastation by focusing of his excavations. "In July 1943, more than nine hundred Allied bombers attacked the rail yards in Rome, which were being used to support Axis troops in the south, killing more than 4,500 Romans" (96). There were more Allied raids on Rome during 1943 and 1944, though Montini (future Pope Paul VI at the time) and others tried hard to dissuade the Americans from further attacks on Rome (96). It's a miracle the Vatican's Basilica survived the attacks and Rome was not destroyed. According to O'Neill, Walter Carroll was largely responsible for saving Rome from being destroyed (98). Carroll was a Pittsburgh, PA priest with close ties to the Vatican who rode the Jeep that entered Rome in June 1944 with General Clark and Eisenhower's chief of staff, Bedell Smith en route meet with Pius XII (98). That meeting turned out to be crucial in saving Rome from destruction.

The secret of the discovery remained until "August 22, 1949, when an Italian journalist, Camille Gianfara (whose sources are still secret and unknown) published the story of the excavations. The *New York Times* carried a front-page story headlined, "BONES OF ST. PETER FOUND. The cover of *Time* magazine also proclaimed the discovery" (107). Somebody had leaked the secret out. A year later, "Pius XII broke his silence in a radio address" and "affirmed that Peter's bones had been found, but needed additional testing" (107).

"By May 1952, the presumed bones of Peter continued to rest in the pope's apartments, where they had remained for a decade" (117). The Ferrua team had been celebrated in all kinds of journals and were considered "archeological geniuses and pioneers" (118). Then, Montini invited "one of the first non-Vatican employees to tour the excavation": Margherita Guarducci. Just a month earlier, Kaas had died. Guarducci was considered a world-renowned archeologist and an expert epigraphist and professor of epigraphy at the University of Rome. Guarducci was horrified at all the damage Ferrua's team had done in the Necropolis. However, her trained eye at epigraphy led her to realize the importance of the markings on the wall that Ferrua's team had discarded as meaningless. She decrypted the meaning of part as "Christian men buried near your body". After a long study, she wrote a report and handed it into Montini and Pope Pius XII. The pope decided to make Guarducci "head of the excavations", degrading Ferrua's position. Ferrua was furious at this decision and decided to charge at Guarducci, which he did for years, declaring her "an incompetent interloper preying on the glory of his work" (119). The rancor became worse when Guarducci discovered that Ferrua had removed an inscription from the Necropolis and taken it to his own home for further study. "A direct order from Pius XII secured its return" (119). That inscription, originally located on the Graffiti Wall a few feet from the Trophy of

Gaius, read "Peter is here" (119). Ferrua had hidden it because it contradicted his "finding". That infuriated Ferrua even more, and determined to do anything he could to discredit Guarducci.

Shortly after that, Guarducci "noticed a hole in the bottom of the Graffiti Wall very close to the Trophy of Gaius" (120). When she asked about it, she found out that Kaas had removed the bones from the niche, placed them in a wooden box, and put them in storage, where they had stayed for over a decade, completely forgotten (120). However, she decided to ignore that for the moment, and devoted herself to study the whole Necropolis first. Then, one day, she decided to replace the inscription that Ferrua had removed from the wall and placed it where it belonged originally. To her astonishment, she read: "Peter is within". Upon further examination of the interior, she found Peter's name "inscribed there more than twenty times" (127). Guarducci then remembered the bones Kaas had stored, and, in 1962, presented them to Professor Venerando Correnti, of Palermo University, "one of Europe's most distinguished anthropologists" (<http://stpetersbasilica.info/Necropolis/Wall%20G.htm>), who examined them and determined them "to be those of a sixty-to seventy-year-old robust male, approximately Peter's supposed age when he died... (the remains) had once been covered with an early purple and gold cloth whose dye was of a type only used by Imperial Romans of the first to third centuries. Amazingly, the bones were also compatible with the remains of a person crucified upside down. The feet had been viciously cut off as the Romans were wont to do when removing a crucified corpse, because it was easier than removing nails" (131).

In 1963, Cardinal Montini succeeded Pope John XXIII, taking the name Paul VI. "The pope cautiously authorized various additional tests by Correnti... Additional forensic examinations validated Correnti's conclusions" (131). "In late 1964, Guarducci compiled a report... (that) concluded that it was virtually certain that Peter's bones had been found... Paul VI submitted the report and all working materials to five disinterested experts -three archeologists and two specialists in Greek epigraphy. All five concluded unanimously that the report was impeccably accurate and that Guarducci had found Peter" (132). As a result of that, "on June 26, 1968, Pope Paul VI announced to the world that Peter's bones had been found, concluding that the bone fragments recovered by Guarducci from the Necropolis had been identified 'in a way that we can consider convincing.' The following day, the bones were returned in fiberglass boxes to the Graffiti Wall niche from which they had emerged more than twenty-five years before. The largest of them remained visible in the wall through transparent glass" (135). The remains had been scientifically confirmed to be those of Peter.

However, Antonio Ferrua "resented these findings -Guarducci's archnemesis" (135), and "he continued to hold a variety of powerful positions within the Vatican. By the late 1970s, he had been made head of the Commission of Archeology" (135). "In reviews, which he wrote directly or inspired, Ferrua questioned Guarducci, her findings and, specifically, the authentication of the Graffiti Wall bones now on display in the Necropolis as those of St. Peter" (137). However, in the 70s, Guarducci was hailed as the great discoverer of Peter's bones by reputable magazines, journals, and books all over the world. In 1977, the Vatican published "a small book by Guarducci: *Peter: The Rock on Which the Church Is Built*, beginning with Paul VI's thanks for the successful discovery of Peter's relics" (137).

After Pope Paul VI's death in 1978 -and the death of several of Guarducci's main supporters-, Ferrua started a "merciless revenge" on Guarducci. He immediately "fired Guarducci and excluded her from working on or even visiting the Necropolis or the Graffiti Wall. After a short time, the bones that had been identified as Peter's were quietly removed from public view. Guarducci and the bones disappeared from all new Vatican publications. Vatican guides did not mention them or Guarducci. In effect, Ferrua and the Vatican antiquities bureaucracy overruled *sub silencio* Pope Paul VI's authentication of Guarducci's find" (146). "Her work was denounced as the imaginary ramblings of an ignorant, pious woman. These denunciations came not from outsiders, but from leaders within the Church" (146). However, Guarducci, though hurt, responded by "continuing to teach epigraphy and archeology at La Sapienza University in Rome" (147) and by publishing or assisting with articles and books her finds: "each was met with a savage review attacking her by Ferrua or a surrogate" (147).

It was until the 1990s that Guarducci regained her reputation by moving to circles outside the Vatican and authenticating or declaring as fakes ancient objects. "She additionally and simultaneously solved two great mysteries relating to the earliest known image of Jesus' mother, Mary. The first, pre-dating A.D. 438, was known to history as the Madonna Hodegetria" (149), which was housed in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. In 1453, the Turks conquered Constantinople and pillaged their cathedral, stealing their Madonna (149). A second unrelated mystery involved the Black Madonna, now the national symbol of Poland. "Pope Saint John Paul II... first pledged his life to the priesthood in the presence of the Black Madonna", and Popes Benedict XVI and Francis have also visited her shrine when in Poland (150). However, its origin remained in mystery until Guarducci, in her mid-eighties, "located an ancient icon called the Madonna of Montevergine. It was also a black icon -a virtually perfect copy of Poland's Black Madonna" (150). After extensive travel and research, Guarducci proved that this icon "came to Rome in the seventh century as a gift from the Greek emperor" (150). "Guarducci was able to prove that the Polish Black Madonna was the very same image as the seventh-century Montevergine icon, and that both were therefore derived from the early Greek Madonna in Constantinople" (151). For this and other discoveries, "she was hailed as the Grand Dame of Italian Archeology" and "slowly opinion and science moved her way despite Ferrua's iron grip on the Necropolis and the Vatican's concern with more pressing matters" (151).

In 1990, "the University of Milan invited the eighty-eight-year-old Guarducci to appear in what would be the final live symposium of her life. She was interviewed by Italy's most famous expert on antiquities, Federico Zeri, also a major television figure, a Sotheby expert on antiquities. . . Guarducci gave an impassioned defense of her life's work. . . Zeri then spoke. He quietly said he was not a Christian believer, but for fifty years of his long life he had followed Guarducci's work, before and after her involvement with the Vatican. Zeri described her as a "diamond bit" seeking the truth. He knew her work to be sound and scientific. . . He expressed his opinion based on the scientific evidence that she had indeed found Peter. The audience erupted in cheers" (152). "In 1995, at the age of ninety-three, she published her final great defense of her discoveries under the Vatican. . . On September 2, 1999, she died. . . The Vatican took no official notice of any kind of her death" (153).

"In 2003, Ferrua died and was buried at his request and as an honor in the Necropolis below the Vatican, close to where his excavations began. . . surrounded by many popes and royal persons" (155-156). Pope John Paul II showed no interest in archeology, so nothing was done regarding Peter's remains. Benedict XVI would have to become pope to raise the topic of relics again. Interested in archeology, in 2009, he authenticated the gravesite of Paul on the Port Road to Ostia outside the walls of Rome. Later, in March 2013, after the retirement of Benedict XVI, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope, and took the name of Francis. He continued a detailed review of all the evidence regarding Peter's remains gathered by all the experts, and, finally, "at a papal Mass in Vatican Square on November 24, 2013, marking the end of the Year of Faith Pope Francis displayed the Graffiti Wall bones. Clutching them to himself in a case, he announced to the large crowd and the world that these were indeed Peter's relics. A few days later, on December 5, 2013, (he) returned the bones to public display in the niche in the Graffiti Wall where they had been found more than seventy years before" (157). The case was finally laid to rest, and Peter's bones may now be seen by visitors who seek permission to see them way in advance.

Thomas J. Craughwell states in his book that "Today, the Scavi ("The Excavations"), as the Vatican Necropolis has come to be called, is open to visitors, but not many. Groups are limited to 15, children younger than twelve are not admitted, and tickets must be reserved months in advance. . . The tour takes about ninety minutes, led by a guide who is extremely well informed about the Scavi. The tour concludes at the tomb of St. Peter" (114). What Craughwell could not foresee is that in November of that same year of 1993, Pope Francis would donate some of Peter's bones to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, "in sign of church unity", as described in the following website: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-09/pope-francis-patriarch-bartholomew-bones-peter.html>. Francis had decided to gift Bartholomew nine fragments of Peter's bones. History never stops unveiling itself.

In short, the history of these findings is not only important for the discovery itself, but also because it emphasizes the constant discord that has existed and keeps existing within the Holy See. The existence of internal struggles and jealousies, and the fight for fame and power, has been and is an important element within this universal institution.

Works Cited

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