

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Vatican Excavations

For some years now there has been widespread discussion of the excavations which have been carried out under the basilica of St. Peter. The results of these excavations were, in sober truth, quite remarkable. From the point of view of the dissemination of the facts in a purely scientific way, it was unfortunate, if perhaps inevitable, that it was not possible to avoid altogether certain overtones of a question much more alive than could arise from most archaeological investigations. While the historical fact of St. Peter's Roman episcopate, and *a fortiori*, the dogma of faith that the Roman Pontiff is the successor of St. Peter in the primacy of the Church, in no way depend on the results of the Vatican excavations, they easily entered the argument and clouded it in the popular mind. When Schliemann opened the shaft-graves at Mycenae very few felt personally involved in the question whether or not he had really "gazed on the face of Agamemnon," at least not in the same way as people felt themselves involved in the question whether or not the tomb of St. Peter had been found on the Vatican hill.

The archaeological investigation of the site of St. Peter's tomb involved issues which were very much alive. So on the one hand there were suggestions that the excavations had been conducted, well, one might say with a purpose in mind; that they had been directed more to proving a thesis than to establishing the facts. Stress was laid on the fact that the excavations had been carried out by the Vatican archaeologists alone. The fact that the public were not—in fact, could not—be admitted indiscriminately to the site led to suggestions that something was being hidden from other archaeologists, the motive being too easily imputed. On the other hand, some people were tempted to speak as if the excavations had revealed a duly authenticated inscription of the 60's of the Christian era, marking quite unambiguously the Apostle's tomb.

In short, here was a question where the complexities of reality were easily pushed aside by the simplicity of prejudice, all the more easily as the evidence was not easily available to many people who nevertheless made their judgments on it. The magnificently-produced official report was written in Italian, and was published at a price which put it beyond the reach of most individuals. This report was analysed, criticised, and supplemented in books and articles from many countries in many languages. There was real need of a book which should, for the English-speaking world, deal with the problem as a whole, presenting dispassionately the results of the investigations in a reasonably popular way at a reasonably popular price. There can be little doubt that this book fills such a need.¹

¹ *The Shrine of St. Peter.* By J. Toynbee and Ward Perkins. Longmans Green and Co., Ltd. Price 42s.



The authors have indeed been remarkably successful in achieving the many purposes which they set before themselves. The general reader and the specialist will both find profitable reading in it. Furthermore, they decided to give an account of the excavations as a whole, and not merely of the problems raised by the tomb of St. Peter. For the Vatican excavations have brought to light a large necropolis of the first centuries of the Christian era, which is of very great interest for students of the history and culture of the time. The authors have presented its evidence very thoroughly, and illustrated it with many well-chosen photographs. In particular, the chapter "The Vatican cemetery—III: the owners and occupants—their social position and beliefs" will be read with great interest by students of the life of these centuries, particularly from the religious point of view.

However, as has been said already, the vital question is the "memoria apostolica." There is no doubt that most people will read this second section of the book much more closely than the first. Close reading here is particularly necessary; indeed it is safe to say that nothing else will bring much reward. In the remainder of the excavated cemetery we are dealing with solid and tangible monuments of the past, which were covered in at the beginning of the fourth century, and which, once disinterred, are just as solid and tangible as they then were. At the "memoria apostolica," on the other hand, we have a site which since Constantine's adoption of Christianity has been the focal point of enormous buildings erected to honour it. The site itself has been preserved, but in order to make it the focus of their work the builders have had to destroy the immediately surrounding area. In addition, during the Dark Ages the central shrine has on at least one occasion been very thoroughly plundered.

The material remains to be studied are very slight—a small monument built up against and into a second-century wall, and under this a hole in the earth, in which were found some human bones. To assess the significance of what was found at this site calls for delicate archaeological work and meticulous archaeological reasoning. Delicate work, for it had to be carried out under the most cramped conditions—the site lies at the back of the "open confession" which is familiar to every visitor to St. Peter's basilica; meticulous reasoning, for the material remains were so slight, so disturbed, and of such a nature that they had to be moved or even destroyed—at least in the sense of changing their relationship to one another—in the actual process of excavation.

The problem then is not one which can be described in general terms or illustrated by photographs as the cemetery as a whole can. Instead, the text must consist of very close reasoning, and the only possible illustrations are a series of diagrams indicating the relationship of the various objects found by the excavators. On both counts the present book is highly successful. It demands close reading, but it rewards it.

In most matters the authors agree with the findings of the official report of the excavations. Indeed, as they point out, these agreed conclusions are admitted by every reputable archaeologist in the face of the evidence. In fact, it can be stated that there is no reasonable disagreement on the history of the site back to about the year 160 A.D. Constantine, in building his church, faced very considerable difficulties in order to ensure

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that it should be sited exactly on this particular spot. First, in order to use this exact site, a large cemetery had to be covered over and in part destroyed. This involved legal difficulties which the emperor would certainly not have faced without grave reasons, especially in Rome, which was and continued to be a stronghold of paganism. As well as the moral obstacle to the choice of this particular site there was an equally formidable physical obstacle, for it involved building the basilica at a spot where the Vatican hill had a particularly steep slope. In consequence, very much excavation of the hill had to be carried out to the north of the site, while to the south it was necessary to construct huge foundation-walls where the ground fell away.

These facts, established by the recent excavations, show that Constantine must have had some very compelling reason for placing his great church in honour of St. Peter exactly on this site, for the difficulties could have been avoided by siting the church a short distance to the south, away from the cemetery and in the valley at the bottom of the hill. The excavations show further that Constantine was so insistent on this exact spot because he wished a small object, existing in the cemetery, to occupy the exact centre of the apse of his church, where it stood above the pavement, enclosed in a precious shrine. There was no question of building a church at the place traditionally associated with St. Peter's martyrdom. There is instead a determination to mark and honour a small, exactly delimited space. No obstacle, moral or physical, is allowed to stand in the way of this purpose. It is difficult to understand Constantine's action except on the hypothesis that he believed he was honouring the actual grave of the apostle.

What have the excavations to say concerning this hypothesis? What was this object which Constantine was at such pains to enshrine at the focus of his church? It was a small monument, of a well-known funerary type, built into a red-plastered wall. The monument and the portion of the wall immediately behind it were built into Constantine's shrine, everything around being levelled so that it might stand free in the centre of the apse of the basilica. Moreover, it can be established with certainty that the monument and the complex of which it forms a part were built about 160 A.D. Furthermore, it is agreed that this monument is to be identified with the *τρόπαιον* of Peter mentioned c. A.D. 200 by the Roman priest Gaius as quoted by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* II.25.7). It would also seem to be beyond doubt that Gaius spoke of the monument as marking a grave, not merely a commemorative monument erected at or near the place of Peter's martyrdom. Eusebius certainly understood him to speak of a grave-monument, and it is a natural, if not indeed the most natural, interpretation of his words.

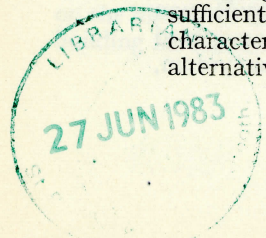
Further, it is almost impossible to envisage a second-century monument being erected on the actual site of the martyrdom. Firstly, it would have to be erected either in the circus or in the gardens of Nero. Secondly, it is difficult to see how such a monument to the leader of a sect then under continuous persecution could have been erected or could have survived other than in association with the protection afforded to a grave by Roman law and sentiment. Thirdly, the concept of honouring places associated with events in the lives of the Christian dead, even the place of martyrdom,

as distinguished from the actual relics reposing in the tomb, is, in the light of our present knowledge of early Christianity, an anachronism. For instance, the *τρόπαιον* of Paul is to be found, not at the spot at Tre Fontane traditionally associated with his martyrdom, but on the Ostian Way, associated with his burial. Fourthly, closer examination of the monument, and an investigation of what preceded it on the site, shows the same meticulous anxiety to delimit exactly one small area of ground.

Here, we enter on the most delicate phase of the interpretation of the excavations. The material remains are slight, and the site has been very much disturbed through the centuries, especially, it would seem, when the Saracens in 846 "invaded and occupied the church of the Blessed Peter, committing unspeakable iniquities." From this note in the *Liber Pontificalis* and some other contemporary accounts, together with what the excavations have revealed, it is reasonable to infer that the Saracens broke into the tomb itself and plundered it.

In consequence, the work of interpretation of what has survived is very delicate. The authors of this book pay high tribute to the skill shown by the Vatican archaeologists on this difficult site. They disagree with some of the conclusions they have drawn, but, it seems to me, they are so very anxious to delimit certainties that they have not brought out sufficiently the finer distinctions between hypotheses, and are inclined to err on the side of excessive caution. It must be said, however, that these are questions which must be argued at length to be argued intelligently, and the space at their disposal is limited. An example of what might perhaps be described as an "over-conservative" attitude may be taken from the statements on pp. 158-9, where they put forward the hypothesis "that the Christian community of the mid-second century believed St. Peter to be buried in approximately this spot, and that the builders of the Wall, in trenching for their foundations, did hit on something which was, in detail at any rate, unexpected, one end of a deeply-buried grave, which was promptly identified as that of St. Peter." This seems to me to beg the question and furthermore to assume that what was unexpected to the workmen was equally unexpected to the Christian community. There is, in fact, no evidence that the grave was disturbed at this time. There is evidence that the builders took special pains to avoid disturbing some object in the earth which lay along the path of the wall which was being built, and this object can hardly have been anything except a pre-existing grave.

Another example of this is the statement on p. 153 concerning the pre-"trophy" walling referred to in all studies of the site as "*m*¹". This was interpreted by the excavators as all that survives of a revetment that once ran around the four sides of what later became the central space (under the "trophy of Gaius") in order to protect whatever once occupied that space from the encroachment of the rising earth. The authors note that "an alternative explanation is that it served a similar purpose in regard to γ (a neighbouring grave). "Neither interpretation," they say, "is altogether free of difficulties, and the surviving evidence is hardly sufficient to justify further discussion." It does seem, however, that certain characteristics both of the walling *m*¹ and of the grave γ make the former alternative a more compelling hypothesis than the latter. This is an



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important point, for the little wall m^1 is the most important material testimony to care bestowed on this place directly under the "trophy of Gaius" before the erection of the trophy. However, these are matters which, as has already been suggested, can hardly be adequately discussed even within the limits of a book. If they are to be discussed at all they must be discussed exhaustively.

I would, however, venture to suggest that the authors, in their anxiety to avoid going beyond the evidence, have sometimes been over-cautious in their hypotheses. To their conclusions, that "although it is not certain that the "aedicula" (the "trophy of Gaius") marks the site of an earlier grave, the hypothesis that it did so explains much that is otherwise obscure," they might, I think, have added that the hypothesis that it did not, raises so many formidable difficulties that it is almost impossible to entertain it. Their further conclusion, that "although there is nothing to prove that this grave was that of St. Peter, nothing in the archaeological evidence is inconsistent with such a conclusion" might have had its emphasis somewhat changed by recalling the two principal difficulties alleged against the identification of the grave with that of St. Peter, First, it is suggested that it is unlikely that the site of an unmarked grave would be remembered exactly over a hundred years. This assumes that the grave was in fact unmarked, for which there is no proof. Indeed, what has been suggested above concerning the interpretation of the walling m^1 would seem an argument of some force against such an hypothesis. Secondly, doubts have been expressed as to whether Peter's body could have been recovered for burial in the circumstances of the Neronian persecution. Again, there is no real evidence for such a suggestion, and account must be taken of the strength of the Christian conviction concerning the resurrection of the body, a conviction strong enough to induce the faithful to undertake formidable, but by no means insuperable risks.

These few pages are a very inadequate summary of some of the points raised by this very valuable book. Others have not even been mentioned, such as the still-unsolved problem of the "cult-centre" of SS. Peter and Paul on the Appian Way, or the subsequent history of Constantine's basilica, a fascinating story in its own right. Enough has been said, I trust to show that this scholarly, well-documented, sober introduction to the story of the excavations under St. Peter's basilica will be a boon to all English-speaking people who wish to have an informed interest in what was discovered there.

PATRICK J. CORISH

A Christian Intellectual Élite I

One of the very striking things about the organization of present-day society is the unifying process which is everywhere going on in industrial life, in social and even in intellectual. Individuals may vary, but

¹ A talk given to students of St. Mary's Training College, Strawberry Hill, London.

