

THE LOCATION OF CONSTANTINE'S GOLD CROSS

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The *Liber Pontificalis* gives us a detailed but not always clear account of the work done under the direction of the Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester at the tomb of Saint Peter. From hints and brief descriptions which we may interpret in the light of similar Roman memorials that are known to us we may infer that the mausoleum that contained the venerable remains of Saint Peter consisted of two floors. According to usual practice the lower one, where the body rested, was below ground, the upper one was probably at ground level. When planning the magnificent basilica of the Vatican the Emperor left this tomb undisturbed, though considerable difficulties were encountered by the architects on this account. The ground here was sloping irregularly from the west and north to the east and south-east; water was seeping through the ground from the higher levels to the river beyond the lower parts; the soil was a clay of uncertain consistency. Still Roman tradition had so great a respect for a corpse once deposited that no thought was entertained of removing the venerated relics to a more favorable location.

This grave was taken as the center of the choir or sanctuary. Behind it, to the west, rose the semicircular apse with its splendid mosaic. Above was the roof of the transept. To the east ran the majestic rows of pillars that divided the space into five naves. Special care was devoted to the mortuary chamber itself and to its immediate surroundings. Here our chief source is very detailed but also lacks clearness to a degree. Hence arise difficulties of interpretation and consequent discussions.

The *Liber Pontificalis*, according to the opinion of its recent editors, was compiled in the middle or toward the end of the sixth century.¹ However, much of the material used was taken from official records and hence we have to deal at least in substance with contemporary accounts. Thus, through the barbarous latinity of the post-ostrogothic times we must seek to arrive at the mind of late classical official scribes. The original sources are no longer available except as they are embedded in the uncouth mass which we know as the *Liber Pontificalis*.

The passage which interests us at present is the following:

Augustus Constantinus fecit ex rogatu Silvestri episcopi basilicam beato Petro apostolo . . . cuius loculum undique ex aera cypro ita recondit: ipsum loculum undique ex aere cypro conclusit, quod est immobile; ad caput, pedes V; ad pedes, pedes V, ad latus dextrum,

¹L. Duchesne, *Le Libre Pontifical. Texte, introduction et commentaire*. Paris, 1886. 2 vols. 4°. T. Mommsen, *Liber Pontificalis (Gesta Romanorum pontificum I) Proleg.*

pedes V, ad latus sinistrum, pedes V, subter, pedes V, supra, pedes V; sic includit corpus beati Petri apostoli et recondit.

Et ornavit supra columnis porfyreticis et alias columnas vitineas quas de Graecia perduxit.

Fecit autem et cameram basilicae trimitam auri fulgentem et super corpus beati Petri supra aere quod conclusit fecit crucem ex auro purissimo, pens. lib. CL, in mensurae locus, ubi scriptum est hoc:

CONSTANTIUS AUGUSTUS ET HELENA AUGUSTA HANC
DOMUM REGALI SIMILI FULGORE CORUSCANS AULA CIR-
CUMDAT, scriptum ex litteris puris nigellis in cruce ipsa.

There follows a lengthy list of liturgical furniture such as candelabra, chalices, patens, torches. Finally the item

ipsum altarem ex argento auro clusam cum gemmis prasinis et yaquintis et albis . . .

There is no attempt at a general description of the monumental church, nor even any indication of the outstanding features. The compiler merely transcribed the dry details of some official list that had fallen into his hands.

In view of what will be said later it will be necessary to examine the meaning of the first paragraph, *Constantinus . . . loculum cum corpus sancti Petri ita recondit . . .* The barbarian invasions had made the writer uncertain regarding the case endings. What is the *loculus*? Etymologically it is the diminutive of *locus*, the Latin equivalent for our place or space or locality. In the language of the gravediggers, however, this word had a technical meaning. *Loculus* or *locus*, often expressed by the abbreviation L or I was an empty grave in an underground cemetery, prepared but not yet occupied by a body. One inscription reads:

ANNIBONIUS FECIT SIBI ET SUIS LOCUM HOMI(ni)BUS
(Numero) VIII INTRO FORMAS.²

The *locus* or *loculus* is the shortened expression for *locus sepulturae*, often equivalent to *umulus*, thus losing the implication of not being used as yet. More especially it designated the graves that were formed by cutting niches lengthwise into the walls of the underground corridors or rooms in the catacombs.³ In the case of Saint Peter the *loculus* may well have been a sarcophagus, though we have no further information.

The exact nature of the work in bronze that was done remains a puzzle. That it was something weighty and solid appears from the clause *quod est immobile*. Msgr. Wilpert and some others conceive it as a mass extending five feet in every direction from the sarcophagus and enclosing it.⁴ There

²See De Rossi, *Roma Sotterranea*, III, 410.

³*Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* IX, pt. 2, coll. 1934-1943.

⁴See *Rivista d'archeologia cristiana* 13 (1936) 34-36.

is no doubt that this would be *immobile*, but it is a tax on our credulity. There might also be question of heavy bronze plates that were placed in position so as to enclose the casket and be welded together at the edges. Such a cube would also be securely *immobile*. With such conjectures we must leave this matter.

As we proceed in the account we are placed at once at the altar, the only one in the huge church at that time, which stood directly above the grave of Saint Peter. It will be recalled that there was an upper chamber to the mausoleum and above the ceiling of this the altar must have been placed. About this altar two groups of pillars were erected. Some were of deep red porphyry, others were of Greek marble, hence, probably, white. These latter were *vitineae*, that is, twisted. How many of each there were and how they were arranged is not stated. However, at a latter date the *Liber Pontificalis* tells that Pope Gregory III (731-741) received six new pillars as a gift from the Byzantine exarch and placed them

circa presbyterium ante confessionem, tres a dextris et tres a sinistris,
iuxta alias antiquas sex filopares.

Thus the six ancient Greek pillars and the six new ones stood till 1544.

Behind the altar-space with its red and white pillars rose the semicircular apse or *camera*. Nothing is said regarding the mosaic decoration and the inscriptions except that it was *auri fulgentem*, meaning that the background consisted of gold-colored glass blocks.

The author now continues without a break:

et super corpus beati Petri supra aere quod conclusit fecit crucem ex
auro purissimo pens. lib. CL, in mensurae locus.

Where, then, was this precious cross placed? How must we understand the words *super corpus beati Petri supra aere quod conclusit*? Wilpert and others would have the cross lying on or sunk into the bronze encasement of the tomb. This would be taking the expression *super . . . aere* very literally. Independently of the context this would be the obvious meaning and its simplicity of interpretation is intriguing.⁵

Yet a more careful reading of the context creates difficulties. As we have been at pains to show, the description in the *Liber Pontificalis*, while jejune and unsatisfactory in many ways, is nevertheless quite orderly. After the broad general statement that Constantine and Sylvester erected a splendid basilica, it proceeds at once to describe in detail what work was done within the mausoleum. Thence it proceeds to the area within the church just above the tomb, then to that immediately about that spot. And here the cross is mentioned and described in some detail. There follows at once a long list of liturgical articles within the church. Are we then to believe

⁵See the ingenious reconstructions in the *Rivista* l.c. 35-37; the same in *La fede della chiesa nascente*, p. 210-213.

that for a moment we are led back into the vault which lay some twenty or thirty feet below the altar? Just as the pillars are said to be *supra*, so also the cross would be *super corpus beati Petri supra aere*, though it were not in immediate contact with the mass of bronze.

The altar over the body of Saint Peter and the pillars connected with it stood before the apse and within the transept of the church. Alpharani gives the width of the transept as 78 palms, or about 50 feet. Where the rows of pillars that lined the central nave connected with the transverse nave stood two huge pilasters or columns. These were joined together at the top by a huge beam "resembling a bridge."⁶ At the central point of this *bridge* stood a very large cross; below this, at the time when Alpharani wrote, hung another large cross. Either of these would seem to be more suitable for the emplacement of the precious cross of Constantine than the underground chamber which was perhaps never visited after the erection of the basilica.

That this cross was meant to be within clear view appears from the inscription which the *Liber Pontificalis* has preserved. This, we are told, was *scriptum ex litteris puris nigellis in cruce ipsa*. The lettering was, therefore, a piece of careful and painstaking work such as only an object conspicuously in view would be apt to have. Nigello-work as done in antiquity is described as engraving in gold or silver and filling the grooves by fusion with an amalgam of silver, copper, lead and sulphur.⁷ The inscription, as arranged by Msgr. Wilpert, was in two parts:⁸

On the cross bar were the names of the donors
CONSTANTINUS AUG. ET HELENA AUG.;

The upright had the dedication

HANC DOMUM REGALEM SIMILI FULGORE CORUSCANS
AULA CIRCUMDAT.

It declares that this royal house is surrounded by the *aula*, that is, the basilica with like splendor; it was dedicated by Constantine and Helena. The interpretation is not entirely satisfactory and it may well be that the text as transmitted by the *Liber Pontificalis* is faulty. The *hanc domum* and *coruscans aula* are more naturally understood if the cross stood within the basilica in a dominating position than if it was hidden in a dark chamber below ground.

Such a mass of gold could not fail to arouse the cupidity of the Saracen corsairs who in August, 846, pillaged the basilicas of Saint Peter and Saint Paul at their leisure. The *Liber Pontificalis* has these pregnant words when recording the events under Pope Sergius II (844-847):

⁶T. Alpharani, *De Basilicæ Vaticanæ antiqua et nova structura (Studi e testi, 26)* p. 7.

⁷*Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* XI, coll. 1265-1269.

⁸*Rivista d'archeologia cristiana* 13 (1936) 37; also *La fede della chiesa nascente* p. 122.

Sub cuius etiam tempore eccl. bb. principum Petri et Pauli a Saracenis funditus depredati sunt . . .

The *Annales bertiniani* have this passage:

Mense Augusto Saraceni Maurique Tiberi Roman aggressi basilicam b. Petri apostolorum principis devastantes⁹ . . .

The *Liber Pontificalis* has a very lengthy account of the work done by Leo IV (847-855) to repair the damage inflicted by these Moslem marauders:

Post caedem at depredationem saevae gentis Agarenorum quam in sanctorum apostolorum ecclesiis peregerunt, ad restaurationem ipsarum quotidie animum praetendebat; quatenus omnia quae ab impiis manibus ablata fuerant, reparavit.

Among the specific items we read the following:

Fecit post depraedationem Saracenorum in ecclesia beati Petri apostoli crucifixum mirae magnitudinis constructum cum gemmis hyacinthinis de argento purissimo exauratum, pens. lib. septuaginta, et alias gemmas albas septem, maiorem unum.

May this not have replaced the golden cross of Constantine? This cross of Leo is distinguished from another golden one which he donated and which stood *parte dextra juxta altare maius*.

It was remarked above that the actual tomb of Saint Peter may not have been visited once the work of Constantine was completed. In 519 legates of the Holy See wrote to Pope Hormisdas (514-523) in the name of the *Comes* of Justinian, the later emperor, asking for *brandea* or pieces of cloth that had been touched to the tomb of Saint Peter and were kept as sacred relics. As a particular favor they asked that these be lowered *ad secundam cataractam*, or the lower opening of the chute that put the church into communication with the grave below.¹⁰ This was the best that could be done even for the right-hand man of the emperor and the heir of the throne. Evidently the tomb itself was no longer accessible. Nor do I know of any convincing evidence that visits were made before that date and later than Constantine.

⁹See St. Borgia, *Vaticana confessio*, 1776.

¹⁰Migne, *Patres Latini* 63, col. 474 f. "si fieri potest, ad secundam cataractam ipsa sanctuaria deponere."

