

NOTES

THE BONES OF ST. PETER

In 1951 the archeologists entrusted by Pius XII with the excavations under the confession of St. Peter's published their official report,¹ and the way was opened to a flood of discussion. Had the tomb of St. Peter been found? Among the earlier descriptions in English of the newly discovered evidence was that of Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins,² based on the report and supplemented by an extensive study of the site by the authors themselves. A review-article on the subject, following the general lines of the latter survey, appeared in these pages in September, 1956.³

It is assumed that the reader knows something of this older background. A number of new and important finds, as well as opinions, have appeared in more recent years. An attempt is made in the following pages to notice salient points of these and to consider their value, reserving main emphasis for the most important matter of all, Margherita Guarducci's report on the bones found in or near the focal grave. We begin by recalling briefly the generally accepted results of the original exploration.

I

Deep beneath the pavement level of the present basilica, in the vertical axis that would fall from the center of the dome through the center of the papal altar into the crypt, within the encrusting walls of the Niche of the Pallia, and beneath it, are found the physical vestiges of a monument, similar to other ancient sepulchres, which was incorporated by Constantine into the martyr-shrine of the prince of the apostles, to form the nucleus of Old St. Peter's. The monument was ancient enough to be securely identified with the trophaion of the apostle on the Vatican of which Caius the Roman writes.⁴ It may be dated about 160 A.D. Beneath it was a ruined earthen vault containing a cache of bones, the identification of which remained for the excavators an open question.

Was the earthen vault in fact the grave of St. Peter? So the excavators believed. They found in Arnim von Gerkan, distinguished veteran of classi-

¹ B. M. Apollonj-Ghetti, A. Ferrua, E. Josi, E. Kirschbaum, *Esplorazioni sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano eseguite negli anni 1940-1949* (2 vols.; Vatican City, 1951).

² *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (London and New York, 1956).

³ E. Smothers, "The Excavations under St. Peter's," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 17 (1956) 293-321.

⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2, 25.

cal archeology, a redoubtable adversary.⁵ Briefly, it is his contention that the vault could not have originated as early as the reign of Nero (37–68 A.D.), because of its elevation compared with that of the second-century graves nearby. It must be supposed that it lies in earth-filling from the tomb chambers not far away, they too of the second century.

Engelbert Kirschbaum, professor of Christian archeology and coexcavator of the shrine, has stated his reply to this argument repeatedly.⁶ The uneven contours of the site, like those found anywhere in the Latin countryside—for example, in the Vatican Gardens—sufficiently account for the comparatively high level of the disputed grave. It is unnecessary to assume extensive earth-filling.

To the present writer it has appeared curious that great quantities of excavated earth should have been thrown out on Campo P, the area in front of the tropaion, to be washed down on the tomb chambers by the rains on the upper slope, when with a little effort it could have been dumped on the lower slope to the south. In any event, von Gerkan's objection appears not to be preemptory.

It is combined, we should observe, in his system with elements that are by no means admissible. The grave, it will be remembered, is cut short by a wall, built around 160 A.D., with which the Petrine monument is in part solidary. The foundation of this, the Red Wall, overstrides the grave in a roughly shaped arch. Von Gerkan, without having seen this, was convinced that it was due to the hammer blows of second-century Christians seeking the relics of St. Peter, relics which for some mistaken reason they thought to find here.

As we shall see, when von Gerkan wrote this, we had photographs and descriptions of the foundations over the earthen vault, based on the fresh investigations of Adriano Prandi, which exclude the hypothesis of violence.⁷ The lifting of the foundations over the grave is original and is naturally explained if the builders of the wall consented to spare, as far as possible, the grave beneath.

Positive material gathered by Margherita Guarducci, professor of classical epigraphy at the University of Rome, illustrates the first-century origin of the east-west Vatican necropolis within which lies Campo P.⁸ It consists of inscriptions and other fragmentary remains found in this line outside the

⁵ See especially his "Zu den Problemen des Petrusgrabes," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 1 (Münster, 1958) 79 ff.

⁶ See especially his *Die Gräber der Apostelfürsten* (2nd ed.; Frankfurt, 1959) pp. 94–101.

⁷ See infra pp. 83–84.

⁸ M. Guarducci, "Documenti del 1 secolo nella necropoli Vaticana," *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti* 29, 111 ff.

segment covered by the basilica. It would be odd if no graves of the first century existed within it. In fact, one of the graves for inhumation within Campo P, and in the near vicinity of the earthen vault, yielded a tile bearing the mark of a maker of the first century.⁹ This, if it be a reused piece, or of belated use, bears no evidence of it. Close to it, and even closer to the vault, and actually above its level, were found remains of a burial which, according to Prof. Guarducci's analysis, is to be referred to the middle years of the first century.¹⁰ It is obviously of special importance for the chronology of the vault itself.

Von Gerkan dismisses all this as Flavian, and therefore inconclusive. It would be after Nero, and in consequence of the opening of the Neronian estates to the public by Vespasian, that the Vatican necropolis in question would develop.¹¹ There is much to be questioned in this sweeping assertion, above all since the discovery in 1957 of another Vatican necropolis, lying in a north-south direction, with indisputably Neronian graves, and even earlier ones. Filippo Magi, director of the Vatican Museum, writes as follows of the significance of this discovery:

The necropolis of the parking lot, while distinct from that of the Basilica of St. Peter, extends not more than 400 meters away by air, and in similar conditions, on the slope of the same Vatican hill. The irrefutable chronological data which it offers now demonstrate as clearly as may be that when Nero became proprietor of the place, not only did he permit burials to continue along the Via Triumphalis, on the northeast flank of the hill, but he also consented that his own slaves be buried there. It does not appear why the same might not happen along the Via Aurelia or Cornelia, where tradition has the burial place of St. Peter.¹²

This is sound reasoning, and it quite sweeps away the assumption that in Nero's lifetime the gardens would have been immune to burials. A kindred objection, however, retains a certain plausibility. We now know, thanks to recent investigations, that when the obelisk of the Piazza San Pietro stood in the circus of Nero, it rose precisely on the spot indicated by Renaissance drawings, near the present sacristy, and that in consequence the circus must

⁹ Cf. Kirschbaum, *Die Gräber der Apostelfürsten*, pp. 85-87.

¹⁰ Guarducci, *Rendiconti* 29, 131-37.

¹¹ Von Gerkan, *art. cit.*, p. 81. Nero had, in fact, himself opened the gardens to the poor of Rome who had been burned out in the great conflagration. He erected improvised shelters (*subitaria*) for them (Tacitus, *Annals* 15, 39). For an excellent study of this text, in combination with the famous passage on the persecution (*Annals* 15, 44), and their bearing on our subject, see M. Cagino de Azevedo, "L'Origine della necropoli Vaticana secondo Tacito," *Aevum* 29 (1955) 575-77.

¹² Filippo Magi, "Ritrovamenti archeologici nell'area dell'autoparco Vaticano," in *Triplice omaggio a Sua Santità Pio XII* 2 (Vatican City, 1958) 99.

have occupied the east-west level ground just below the higher strip on which the east-west necropolis developed. Again, it may be facetiously assumed that no graves in Nero's time would have lain so near; but it would be merely an assumption.

Von Gerkan himself seems to recognize that such presuppositions are not decisive, for he closes his study "Zu den Problemen des Petrusgrabes" with the words: "If at the end of the second century genuine knowledge existed of the site of the mass grave which is to be assumed, it must, in spite of assurances of the excavators, lie considerably below the *fondo attuale* [of the earthen vault], or somewhere in the vicinity, and its discovery could now be hoped for only by accident."¹³ One may be pardoned for retaining the concession—that burials of Neronian date in this locality were possible—without accepting the statement in every particular.

We have already referred to contributions of Margherita Guarducci, one of the most assiduous students of the ancient shrine, and have later to dwell on the latest and most significant of them. It is necessary to say something here, though the subject is only in part essential to our main concern, about her massive work on the graffiti near the monument.¹⁴

Wall *g*, it will be remembered, is a low oblong structure at right angles to the Red Wall and abutting upon it, just to the north of the earliest form of the shrine. It is of somewhat later date, but pre-Constantinian. Though its original purpose would have been to retain the earth above it from the monument, it became so identified with the latter as to be preserved in place when the Constantinian embellishment of the martyr-shrine was effected.

This is the Wall of the Graffiti, inscribed on the northern side in bewildering confusion. Though only a fragment of the inscribed surface remains, the editor with reason writes: "The tangle of inscriptions across the wall became practically labyrinthine."¹⁵ Elsewhere she speaks of "questa tormentatissima zona del muro." The patient, meticulously minute pains spent by the editor in deciphering these graffiti are beyond all praise.

Besides the usual pious petitions and the names of dear ones written on the wall, the chi-rho monogram of Christ frequently appears, and a combination, in various forms, of P-E and P-E-T that Miss Guarducci does not hesitate to interpret as a monogram of Peter, putting an end to the earlier assertion that the apostle's name never appeared on Wall *g*. It is well known that the sign was used by pagans as some sort of good luck or prophylactic device, just as chi-rho was used in various non-Christian senses; but here

¹³ Von Gerkan, *art. cit.*, p. 93.

¹⁴ Margherita Guarducci, *I graffiti sotto la confessione di San Pietro in Vaticano* (2 vols.; Vatican City, 1958).

¹⁵ M. Guarducci, *The Tradition of Peter in the Vatican* (Vatican City, 1963) p. 50.

the context rightly determines the meaning. I should agree with P. M. Fraser of Oxford that "a 'secular' interpretation of the sign [P-E] in this particular context strains credulity."¹⁶

Besides these, Prof. Guarducci finds a whole system of accessory signs interspersed among the primary graffiti, and in this subject matter she encounters contradiction. There is question of interpolated acclamations, in various abridgments and intricate attachments with the main texts, specimens of what the author calls "mystical cryptography." The expression may not be a happy one, suggesting connotations with which the classical philologist wishes to have nothing to do. We have no occasion to probe this contentious subject. I have to admit that the author's more speculative interpretations seem to exceed the bounds of a soberly critical assent; yet I must acknowledge, after a careful reading of her text and much poring over the plates, that I can by no means dismiss her whole theory out of hand. There is more in it than a mare's nest.

The most important graffito of all is not on Wall g, but is—or was—on the Red Wall, just where the former juts upon it. It was first read and published by Antonio Ferrua, distinguished Christian epigraphist and co-excavator of the shrine;¹⁷ but a thorough restudy of it, after numerous essays by various writers, was needed, and Prof. Guarducci has supplied it.¹⁸ Her reading of the Greek inscription in the form *Petros eni* ("Peter is here") appears to me to be thoroughly justified.

Adriano Prandi, already known to students of Christian archeology by his work on the site *ad catacumbas*,¹⁹ was associated with Prof. Guarducci in her study of the inscriptions under St. Peter's, being charged with the re-investigation of the topographical and structural setting. His work, carried on over several years, yielded a rich harvest of information confirming, supplementing, and correcting the findings of the original excavators. A preliminary report, existing in a very few copies, was printed by the Vatican Press in 1957.²⁰ The present writer was fortunate in being able to read it in microfilm at St. Louis University.

Prandi makes much of the role of earth-filling, in connection with the

¹⁶ P. M. Fraser, reviewing Guarducci, *Graffiti* (supra n. 14), in *Journal of Roman Studies* 52 (1962) 218.

¹⁷ See A. Ferrua, "La storia del sepolcro di San Pietro," *Civiltà cattolica* 103 (1952) 25-26.

¹⁸ Guarducci, *Graffiti*, pp. 396-407.

¹⁹ A. Prandi, *La Memoria apostolorum in catacumbas* (Rome, 1936).

²⁰ A. Prandi, *La zona archeologica della Confessio Vaticana del II secolo* (Vatican City, 1957). I am especially indebted to Lowrie J. Daly, S.J., librarian of the microfilm collection of the Pius XII Memorial Library, St. Louis University, for obtaining from the Vatican Library a film of Prandi's book.

erection of the tomb chambers around Campo P; and it must be recognized that his account of the matter is based on experienced acquaintance with the site. It leads him to the belief that none of the burials of Campo P are of the first century; they date rather from the middle of the second century. Such a judgment points toward the conclusion that the earthen vault under the tropaion could not date from the age of Nero. It points toward it; Prandi does not draw the conclusion. The fact is that no one has yet established the contours of the age of Nero securely enough, no one has demonstrated the alterations due to earth-filling clearly enough to eliminate the uncertainties. Prandi recognizes that the case of the earthen vault and its superstructure is unique.

Of decisive importance for the peculiar feature in the foundation of the Red Wall, where it passes over the earthen vault, is Prandi's report, based upon complete re-excavation, illustrated with photographs and diagrams.²¹ The rough arching of the foundation at this point is beyond question and is certainly original. In Prandi's opinion it may have been caused by a gravestone left in place above the vault when the masonry of the wall was formed overhead. In any case, it is a moral bond between the superstructure and the vault, and in this respect completely vindicates the thesis of the official excavators. It is not an effect of violence.

The chain of archeological evidence carries us back not only to the date of the Red Wall, as we have seen, but further still, for there are vestiges of structure within the vault earlier than the tropaion; and in the pavement of the latter the central plaque was set obliquely, in the exact orientation of the vault beneath. We may prudently affirm that at the middle of the second century the tradition of the Christian community was definitely attached to this spot, a tradition invincibly viable and early enough to bear authentic memories.

II

"Eventually we shall even know more about the bones"; so the writer ventured to affirm at the close of his article in 1953. In March, 1965, appeared the slender volume by Margherita Guarducci, *Le reliquie di Pietro*,²² which for the first time gives us an adequate fulfillment of those words, and adds a new dimension to the whole discussion. The story of the delay and of its termination is a strange one.

We have noticed the graffiti on the short Wall *g* abutting at the west upon

²¹ Cf. Prandi, *La zona archeologica*, pp. 69-70, with fig. 90. Prandi remarks that no reproduction can replace "la visione diretta."

²² M. Guarducci, *Le reliquie di Pietro* (Vatican City, 1965).

the Red Wall. Within Wall *g*, at the end closed by the Red Wall, the excavators found a rectangular recess lined and floored with marble. There was no cover other than the masonry of the containing wall. At the west end, above the marble lining, was a crevice opening toward the Red Wall. The excavators found little to report of the contents of this receptacle—some earth, splinters of bone, a medieval coin, nothing of very definite significance. Even so, one of them, in an independent statement, made the remark: "To our way of thinking, this coffer must have contained what was left of the mortal remains of St. Peter."²³ Only the meagerness of the residue could explain the relative inattention accorded so serious a suggestion.

The fact is that the recess had been emptied before the official excavators were able to examine its complete contents. Inquiries of Prof. Guarducci in 1953, when she turned to the task of deciphering the graffiti, led to the information that the late Msgr. Ludwig Kaas, official guardian of the fabric of St. Peter's, through the agency of the foreman Giovanni Segoni²⁴ transferred the bones from Wall *g* to a wooden casket which was deposited in the semicircular *confessio* of the crypt²⁵ back of the Niche of the Pallia. Of this, apparently, the official excavators were unaware. Not until 1956, with the consent of Pius XII, was the casket entrusted to the care of a professional expert, Venerando Correnti, of the chair of anthropology at the University of Palermo, for a scientific study.²⁶

These were not the only bones to be considered. There were those found, photographed, and reported by the original excavators from the heap of earth in the vault under the foundation of the Red Wall.²⁷ There were other bones turned up in the immediate vicinity of the vault, some of which might have come from it. Of these, the former group had been taken into serious account, to the practical exclusion of others. Fortunately, as we have seen, the official report of the excavators left their identification open. Unfortunately, a doctor of medicine,²⁸ privately it seems, ventured the opinion that this group were the bones of a single individual, a man of advanced age and strong physique, and that the skull was missing. This opinion led to the suggestion that they were perhaps the authentic bones of St. Peter.²⁹

In Correnti's hands this material was brought at last under competent

²³ A. Ferrua, "A la recherche du tombeau de saint Pierre," *Etudes* Jan., 1952, p. 45.

²⁴ See Josef Schmitz Van Vorst, "Recht und Unrecht des Prelaten Kaas: Zu Geschichte der Gräbung unter St. Peter," *Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung*, June 29, 1965.

²⁵ Cf. Guarducci, *Reliquie*, pp. 20–21. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–22.

²⁷ *Esplorazione* 1, 120, with fig. 87.

²⁸ According to Van Vorst, *loc. cit.*, this was Dr. Galeazzo Lisi, personal physician to Pius XII.

²⁹ Kirschbaum, *Die Gräber der Apostelfürsten*, p. 89, pl. 23.

control. Not till 1964 was his report, now published in Part 2 of Prof. Guarducci's book, completed.³⁰ Illustrated by photographs and diagrams, with complete inventories and tabulations of the bones, it leaves nothing to be desired.

In all three groups were found a number of interlopers—bones of domestic animals that had come to be confused with the human remains when these lay loose in the common earth. They may point to a very early period in the history of the necropolis, when graves were laid in land which had previously been open for grazing. This seems more easily imaginable than the penetration into graves already existing of the remains of funeral repasts. However it be, such bones were separated, and committed to the care of Prof. Luigi Cardini of the University of Rome, whose inventories are published in Part 2.³¹

Thanks to Correnti's scrupulous care, it is now possible for us to dismiss the first and second group of bones without ado. Those found under the foundation of the Red Wall proved to be of three individuals, one almost certainly female, the others of relatively early age. No one could think of identifying these in whole or in part with a man of advanced age and robust physique. Presumably they had been turned up by accident, when the Red Wall was building, or by the Constantinian workmen, and given reburial here. The second group was very fragmentary, representing as many as five individuals, with no claim to peculiar consideration.

Our interest now centers entirely on the bones from the wooden casket, removed under Msgr. Kaas's orders from the marble lined recess in Wall g. These answered the description mistakenly attached to Group 1—one individual, an old man of strong physique. About half the entire skeleton is represented by identifiable remains; and there are fragments of the skull among them. Obviously, such a specimen, from such a resting place, is entitled to every consideration.

There are bits of earth mingled with the bones; and these, on petrographic analysis, were found to be quite like the earth in the vault in which the skeleton may once have lain.³² There were also fragments of colored plaster from the Red Wall, fallen probably at the time the recess was prepared. Finally, and of notable importance, there were remains of textiles, including purple woolen pieces with golden threads, and others of vegetable fibre wrapped in gold-plated copper.³³ Evidently the bones had been wrapped in

³⁰ Guarducci, *Reliquie*, pp. 83–160.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–68.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 169–79: report of Prof. Carlo Lauro and Dr. Gian Carlo.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–35; also p. 182: report of Prof. Maria Luisa Stein and Prof. Paolo Maltesta.

noble vesture when they were laid in the wall. Vestigial as are all the remains in greater or less degree, the wonder is, after the lapse of time and all the vicissitudes, that they were recovered at all.

We have noticed earlier the graffito on the Red Wall, *Pétr[os] eni* ("Peter is here).³⁴ It had been assumed, even by Prof. Guarducci, that this must have been incised before Wall *g* was in place, since the latter actually covered the inscription from view. This is too low to have been executed conveniently by a person standing erect. Ferrua had suggested that it might have been done by someone on his knees.³⁴ Prof. Guarducci had remarked that the curvature of the first line of writing, the name *Petros*, could have resulted from tracing it with one's elbow resting as a fulcrum for the forearm and hand.³⁵ What is crucial for this stage of our inquiry is that the graffito stands in precise juxtaposition to the outer end of the recess in Wall *g*. Could it have been written after this wall was in position, once the recess had been opened? The answer, Prof. Guarducci now confidently affirms, is yes, and for no other reason, she believes, than to authenticate the contents of the recess.³⁶ One may ponder reasons for and against this opinion, but it is not inherently precluded. Before the recess was closed by its marble lining, it would have been physically possible to incise the graffito; and it would have served, on investigation, to identify the relics.

From all we have seen, it is clear that the quest of St. Peter's bones touches a point of singular interest in the remains recovered from the wall of the graffiti. In the eyes of the Constantinian builders that wall was so important that instead of razing it, they incorporated it as a part of the primitive shrine, encased within the structure of its embellished replacement, which suffered a loss of symmetry in consequence. Such a special concern is less easy to understand if the bones in the wall were not believed to be those of St. Peter. The strangeness would be all the greater if at that time there were no ossuary, and no bones identifiable with St. Peter's, in the earthen vault. So far as positive evidence goes, this was actually the case.

Pure skepticism apart, are there objections to the Petrine identification? As we have noted, a medieval coin was found in the recess of Wall *g*; and three worn ones which Prof. Guarducci ascribes to medieval or ancient date were recovered from the wooden casket. Against a hasty conclusion, however, that this is proof positive of a late date for the deposition of the bones in the wall, it must be remembered that the outer end of the recess, facing the Red Wall, had a considerable open crevice above the marble lining. A few coins, therefore, of the many cast by pilgrims into the depths of the

³⁴ Ferrua, in *Civiltà cattolica* 103 (1952) 26.

³⁵ Guarducci, *Graffiti* 2, 400.

³⁶ Guarducci, *Reliquie*, pp. 40-42, 72.

shrine could well enough have traveled here.³⁷ So did a mouse that has left its skeleton largely intact in the recess.³⁸ Nor has it ever been considered that the recess in Wall *g* is itself of medieval construction. The objection, therefore, is not conclusive.

We are never going to know all we should like to know about these things. It seems sufficiently assured that the Christian community of Rome, at the middle of the second century, believed that the site of the earthen vault was the site of St. Peter's grave. If the vault was not indeed identical with the primitive trench, but somehow a development from it, the localized veneration of the martyr's bones would still be altogether justified. It is difficult not to surmise that at some time in the course of reorganizing the grave its caretakers, the Church authorities, without abandoning the vault, would have gathered the bones into an ossuary. From the ossuary, of which we have no positive trace, the Constantinian builders would have transferred them to the marble-lined recess in Wall *g*. The motive would have been the desire to give a better reliquary to so priceless a treasure. The vault would then have been dismantled, but not desecrated: it was a hallowed spot. There is a considerable element of conjecture, obviously, in such a reconstruction. So will there be in any attempt to account positively for all the facts.

If the bones wrapped in purple and gold in the marble-lined recess of Wall *g* were not those of St. Peter, some unknown person enjoyed the singular privilege of sharing his tomb; and the graffito "Peter is here" was allowed to stand just where it ought not to be, if real confusion was to be avoided. If, on the contrary, the graffito was intended as an identification, then these were the bones of Peter, or believed to be such, transferred from the earthen vault to a more fitting position. Independently of the inscription, there is much in favor of this suggestion.

A final question may be considered. Could the bones from Wall *g* properly be venerated as authentic relics of St. Peter? In the strictest sense, it would seem impossible to assert it. A larger view, however, seems justified. The bones are from the tomb of St. Peter. Are they not entitled to lie once more under the pontifical altar, as they lay for centuries, as they lay beneath the Constantinian shrine, and in Wall *g* before it? A prudent reserve would stand in the way of a categorical judgment of authenticity. There is a positive, serious probability, however, that these are the bones of St. Peter.

Bellarmino School of Theology

EDGAR R. SMOTHERS, S.J.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 64-65.