

RU

Тайные римские катакомбы: о раннехристианских захоронениях и символах веры

Стреначикова-старшая М., Стреначикова-младшая М.

Аннотация. Древнеримские катакомбы являются неотъемлемой частью истории развития христианства. Они относятся к тем старинным строениям, которые привлекают внимание людей и в современности. В Древнем Риме катакомбы служили как подземные христианские кладбища, на которых римляне хоронили своих умерших, молились, исповедовали веру, читали библейские тексты и т. д. На гробах и стенах ранние христиане размещали символы, эпитафии, краткие тексты и рисунки, относящиеся к их вере. Сохранившиеся символы считаются компендиумом веры, собранием христианских истин и миниатюрой Евангелия. Наиболее часто встречались такие символы, как рыба, монограмма Христа, символ Альфы и Омеги. Самыми известными римскими христианскими катакомбами являются Катакомбы Св. Каликта (со второй половины II века), Катакомбы Св. Себастьяна за стенами, где хоронили исключительно христиан уже с III века, Катакомбы Св. Присциллы или Катакомбы Св. Домитиллы. Несмотря на интенсивные научные исследования, римские катакомбы до сих пор представляют собой важный исследовательский материал для археологов, историков и теологов, поскольку они дают неоценимое представление о религиозной и социальной динамике Древнего Рима. Даже сейчас римские катакомбы скрывают в себе много ценной информации и свидетельств, которые ожидают своего открытия.

EN

Mysterious Roman catacombs: The study of early Christian burials and faith symbols

M. Strenacikova Sr., M. Strenacikova Jr.

Abstract. The ancient Roman catacombs are an integral part of the history of Christianity. They are fascinating buildings that attract people's attention even today. In ancient Rome, they served as underground Christian cemeteries, where Christians buried their dead, and also prayed, confessed their faith, read biblical texts, etc. On graves and walls, early Christians placed symbols, epitaphs, short messages and paintings related to their faith. The preserved symbols are considered a compendium of faith, a summary of Christian truths and a miniature gospel. The most numerous symbols include fish, the monogram of Christ, and the symbol of Alpha and Omega. The most famous Roman Christian catacombs are the Catacombs of St. Callixtus built during the 2nd half of the 2nd century, the Catacombs of St. Sebastian outside the Walls, where only Christians were buried since the 3rd century, the Catacombs of St. Priscilla or Catacombs of St. Domitilla. Despite the intensive research already done, the Roman catacombs still provide important research material for archaeologists, historians and theologians, as they offer an invaluable insight into the religious and social dynamics of ancient Rome. Even now, they hide a lot of valuable information and testimonies waiting to be revealed.

Introduction

The Roman catacombs (Italian: *Le Catacombe cristiane di Roma*) are among the most fascinating and mysterious historical monuments. They stretch beneath the surface of the Eternal City Rome, which was destined to become great (Cornel, Matthews, 1995) and its surrounding areas, forming a network kilometers long and provide a place of eternal rest for hundreds of thousands of people.

Here, in the underground labyrinth, the first Christians met during cruel persecutions. "Romantic historiography of the 19th century describes with a certain fondness Christians hiding in the catacombs in order to live there in greater peace and safety from their persecutors. The reality is, as it often happens, simpler: the catacombs never served as accommodation and certainly not as places of customary cult. The catacombs were just underground Christian cemeteries and their location was well known even to the Roman police. The existence of Christian cemeteries is understandable, because it is natural that Christians wanted to be buried together with their brothers in faith" (Dolinský, 2010, p. 35).

Expert research confirms that the catacombs did not serve as hiding places from persecution, but their primary function was to provide space for the burial of believers. During the funeral ceremony, Christians prayed together, read biblical texts, praised the Only God and marked the graves with Christian symbols (Figure 1). The catacombs are a rare testimony of the unbreakable faith, spiritual strength, endless love, determination, perseverance and suffering of the people who publicly professed *Christianus/Christiana sum! (I'm a Christian!)*.



Figure 1. *Worship service of early Christians in the Catacombs of St. Callixtus (engraving from the 19th century) (Wikimedia. Aavindraa. 24.11.2010. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Early-Christians-Worship-in-the-Catacombs-of-Saint-Calixtus.jpg>)*

Discussion and results

Catacombs existed even in the pre-Christian era (Morris, 1992). It is believed that they were created when mining tuff (volcanic rock), which was used as easily obtainable building material for the spectacular constructions and roads of Rome. It was mined directly under Rome and in the surrounding areas. In the mined places, hollows and caves remained, which served as cemeteries. The *Law of Twelve Tables (Lex Duodecim Tabularum)* from around 450 BC was in force in the capital, and it also contained provisions regarding burial and funeral customs to protect i.a. the health of the inhabitants against the spread of diseases and odors. Therefore, it was strictly forbidden to bury or burn bodies inside the city walls. Burials took place along the roads leading from Rome, mainly along the *Via Appia Antica*. Gradually, large underground tunnels and labyrinths were created, and rectangular niches (*loculi*) were built in the walls, which were closed with a stone, clay or marble plate after one or more bodies were put in them.

Christian funerals differed fundamentally from the rituals and traditions of pagan Roman society. While ancient Rome preferred cremation and placing remains in urns, Christians practiced burial, imitating the way Jesus Christ was buried. It corresponded to the essence of their eschatology, which was a belief in the resurrection of the body at the end of time and a faith in eternal life. They perceived the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, it was sacred and required respect even after death.

The very preparation of the deceased for burial was modest and simple, but filled with faith and spiritual power. It consisted of the ritual washing of the body with the symbolic meaning of cleansing the soul and, if the conditions allowed, anointing with fragrant oils or ointments with a reference to the anointing of the body of Jesus Christ. This was followed by wrapping the body in a simple burial cloth or shroud, the simplicity of which was an image of Christian humility and the equality of all before God. Christians preferred the most modest burial practices. They did not use coffins, but they placed the prepared body directly in a niche in the catacombs, in a *loculus* (Figures 2-3).

Unlike pagans, who enriched graves with many material objects because they wanted to equip their dead with everything they would need in the afterlife, Christians did not focus on material needs after death. They believed that a person does not take earthly things to heaven, and the grave is only a resting place for the body awaiting the resurrection (Groh, Hejzlar, 1972). Objects found in Christian graves had spiritual and theological significance, e.g. oil lamps symbolized light and union with Christ, who said: *"I am the Light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of Life"* (Evanjelium podľa Jána 8, Jn, 8:12 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/search/?searchtext=Jn+8%2C12>). The lamps accompanied the deceased on the way to eternal life. Small containers (*ampullae*) were also found in the graves of martyrs and saints endowed with charisma so that they could act as instruments of God's will. The contents of these containers were traditionally considered to be the blood of those who died for the faith. They symbolized sacrifice and steadfastness of faith. However, scientific

analysis of some containers did not confirm the presence of blood, but substances that were apparently used in funeral rituals, such as scented oils. Scientists' reactions are justifiably cautious, and in several cases even sophisticated research has not translated into official opinions and statements. As an example, we can point on the sealed ampullae with the miraculous blood of Bishop St. Januarius, who died a martyr's death on September 19 in the year 305. In general, his blood changes from a solid state to a liquid state three times a year, as has been documented since 1389 (V Neapole sa zopakoval zážrak skvapalnenia krvi sv. Januária // Tlačová kancelária biskupov Slovenska. 04.05.2010. <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocclanku=20100504007>). *"When liquefied, the weight of the blood also increases. Not always the same, but the increase often reaches up to 27 grams... Also, the volume of liquefied blood in the ampoule changes. This pulsation of volume and weight is exactly inexplicable, because no physical or chemical laws can be detected between the fluctuations"* (Schamoni, Besler, 1991, p. 7-8).

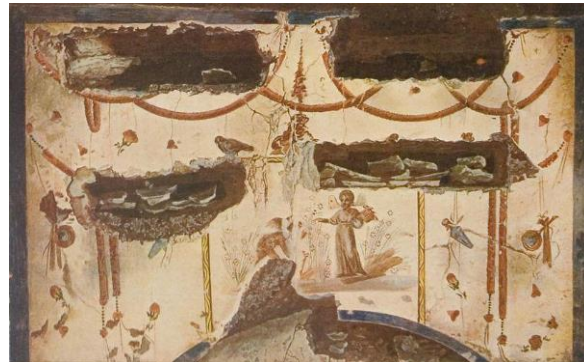


Figure 2. *Catacombs of St. Domitilla* (photo by J. Wilpert), 1903 (Wikimedia. Testus. 19.11.2008. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Wilpert_052.jpg)

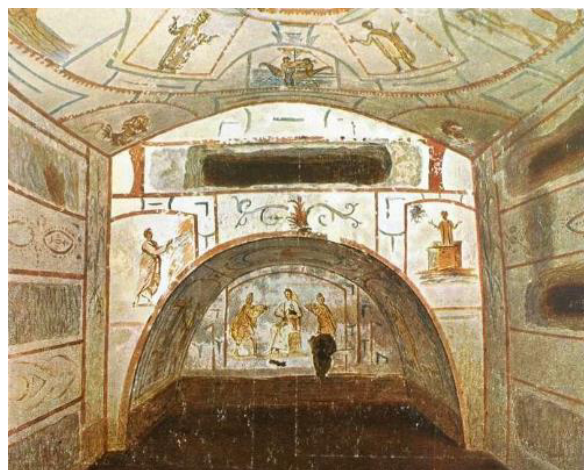


Figure 3. *Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus* (J. Wilpert), colored black and white photograph, 1903 (Wikimedia. Sokoljan. 02.01.2013. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Wilpert_060.jpg)

NB: Above the arch on the left, Moses is pictured hitting a rock with a stick, from which water miraculously gushed out; on the right, Noah is praying in the Ark.

Funeral rites were as modest and simple as the preparation of the deceased for burial. The ceremony consisted of the reading of the Scriptures, prayers for the deceased, songs, expressions of respect for the dead and a common confession of faith in eternal life and salvation. Special respect was shown to martyrs and saints, whose remains became relics and were later transferred to churches (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Lenepveu, J. E. Martyrs in the catacombs*, 1855 (Wikimedia. Alonso de Mendosza. 23.08.2018. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1c/Jules_Eugene_Lenepveu_The_Martyrs_in_the_Catacombs.jpg)

On the graves of Christians and on the walls of the catacombs, symbols, epitaphs, short messages, modest paintings, scenes from the Old and New Testaments and simple decorative elements appeared. They originated in the first centuries AC and are considered a form of early Christian art. At first, their authors observed a strict ban on figurative depictions, so as not to provoke God's wrath. In the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy, the warning against idolatry and the worship of other gods is mentioned clearly and several times: *"You shall not follow foreign gods, the gods of other nations"* (Kniha Deuteronomium, Dt 6, 14 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/5/kniha-deuteronomium-kapitola-6/katolicky-preklad/>), also *"... smash their altars, break their idols, cut down their groves and burn their statues in the fire"* (Kniha Deuteronomium, Dt 7, 5 // Biblia.sk. <https://biblia.sk/citanie/seb/dt/7>). Silvia Struhárová states that only in the 3rd century, wall paintings inspired by the Holy Scriptures or prayer texts appeared, such as the Last Supper in the Catacombs of St. Priscilla, the image of the Good Shepherd etc. (Putovanie dejinami..., 2001) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Agapé, fresco from the Catacombs of Saint Priscilla*

(Wikimedia. Leinad-Z~commonswiki. 10.02.2006. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/04/Agape_feast_05.jpg)

The Agapé fresco was discovered in 1893 in the Greek Chapel (Capella Greca) in the Priscilla's Catacombs. It was created in the 2nd century and it is a rare reminder of the Lord's Supper (Kern, 2006). It shows seven figures seated at a semicircular horseshoe-shaped table on which there is a bowl with two fish and a bowl with five loaves. It became an important source in the study of the early Christian ritual related to the establishment of the Eucharistic worship.

The symbolic image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd originates in the parable of mercy recorded in the Gospels of both Luke and Matthew: "Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one, until you found it? And when found, you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home, call in your friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me! For I have found my lost sheep'" (Evanjelium podľa Lukáša, Lk 15, 1-7 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/search/?searchtext=Lk+15%2C1-7>; Evanjelium podľa Matúša, Mt 18, 10-14 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/search/?searchtext=Mt+18%2C10-14>). In early Christianity, the symbol of the Good Shepherd was preferred especially during the persecutions in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Figures 6-7).



Figure 6. *The fresco of the Good Shepherd on the ceiling of the Catacombs of Callixtus*

(Wikimedia. Vafle9761. 15.04.2016. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_02b_close.jpg)



Figure 7. *Fresco of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in Domitilla's Catacombs* (Wikipedia. Leinad-Z~commonswiki. 12.01.2006. https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%ADmske_katakomy#/media/Súbor:Good_Shepherd_04.jpg)

In addition to figural representations, there are many sign symbols in the catacombs. They are considered a compendium of faith, a summary of Christian truths or a miniature gospel. They helped the first Christians to understand the faith (Švančarková M. *Jonáš a veľryba sa stali komiksom pre pohanov* // *Katolícke noviny*. 16.07.2019. <https://www.katolickenoviny.sk/reportaz/category/reportaz/article/jonas-a-velryba-sa-stali-komiksom-pre-pohanov.xhtml>). The symbols are most often found on the stone plates that close the graves, but also on the walls of the catacombs. In times of persecution, when Christians could not publicly confess their faith, they used these symbols for security as secret codes. The oldest and the most numerous symbols include the fish and the diversely rendered monogram of Christ. We would like to emphasize that the cross, seen today as the central symbol of Christianity, was not used until the 4th century, when Emperor Constantine the Great legalized Christianity in 313, and when the last emperor of the unified Roman Empire, Theodosius I, elevated Christianity to the only officially recognized religion in 380. This ended the danger of betrayal and persecution for the Christian community, and the Latin cross (*crux immissa*), on which Jesus sacrificed himself, gained a priority position in symbolism.

Ichthys

The concept of fish, in Greek "*Ichthys*", is traditionally interpreted as an acrostic, in which individual letters represent the initial letters of new words with a new word combination and a new logical meaning. The five Greek letters that create the word *Ichthys* (I, Ch, Th, Y, S) represent the terms *Iesous Christos Theou Hyios Soter* – *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior* (Matáková, 2006). Among the oldest known depictions of fish as a Eucharistic dish is a fresco in the Catacombs of Callixtus (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Eucharistic bread and fish in the Catacombs of Callixtus* (Wikimedia. Testus. 09.11.2008. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3e/Wilpert_028.jpg)

The word 'fish' often appears in the Gospels. It is associated with Jesus Christ and his resurrection. "*In the New Testament, we find parables in which Christians are compared to fish, the apostles to fishermen, and the kingdom of heaven to a fishing net*" (Janiga, 2020). It is said that the sign of the fish was an important means of marking the Christians' meeting places and of identifying an unbeliever at a random meeting. When a Christian met a stranger, he drew one arch of a fish in the sand. If it was an unknown Christian, he recognized the symbol and completed the second arc.

The unique and significant Christian position of the fish symbolism continues to these days. The fish is depicted on the representative insignia of each pope on the so-called fishing ring (*Anulus piscatoris*); practicing Christians stick the fish symbol on their cars, it is used in jewelry, etc.

Based on the analysis of a rare find of a fish carved on a marble torso discovered in the ruins of the Greek city Ephesus in Turkey, the initial version of the ichthys symbol is identified with the wheel, which is created after writing the Greek letters IXΘΥΣ (Figure 9).



Figure 9. *Symbol of Ichthys from Ephesus*
(Wikimedia. Mufunyo-commonswiki. 27.09.2007.
https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys#/media/Soubor:Ephesus_IchthysCrop.jpg)



Figure 10. *Tombstone of Licinia Amias*
(Wikimedia. Jastrow. 21.03.2007.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Stele_Licinia_Amias_Terne_67646.jpg)

A tombstone with a combination of carved pagan and Christian symbols is a historical rarity (Figure 10). Scientists concluded that it was probably created in the pre-Constantine era, when Christianity was illegal. If Christians wanted to avoid persecution, they hid their inscriptions and icons behind traditional pagan ones. Briana Gregg (2019) explains: "...underneath its triangular pediment – is the common Latin funerary dedication 'Dis Manibus,' or 'To the Manes.' The Manes were traditional Roman spirits of the dead... The inscription directly below this is the Greek phrase 'Ιχθυς ζώντων', which translates to 'Fish of the Living.' [vi] Below that is the depiction of two fish alongside an anchor... the use of the Greek word for fish – ιχθύς – alongside the images of the fish leads many to believe that these elements were used in a Christian context... The image of the fish on both sides of an anchor is believed to either represent the Latin phrase 'Spes in Christo' (Faith in Christ) or to represent the tale of Christ multiplying the loaves and fishes. Either or both of these meanings, when taken together with the Ichthys anagram, would have been apparent to any Christian... but would have remained unnoticed by other non-Christian Romans". The tombstone (stele) of exclusive white marble belonged to an as yet unidentified woman, Licinia Amias, who is believed to have been a Christian and belonged to the middle or higher social class.

The Monogram of Christ

The monogram of Jesus Christ consists of the first two connected letters of the name Christ, in Greek Christos, i.e. the letters of the Greek alphabet X (chi) and P (rho). It marks the graves in which Christians are buried (Figure 11). The monogram is associated with a preserved legend, according to which a shining sign of the cross with the letters XP and the text "*In hoc signo vinces*" (In this sign you will win) appeared in the sky to Emperor Constantine the Great before a difficult battle. He ordered his soldiers to have the XP symbol engraved on their shields (Bitva u Milvijského mostu // Wikipédia. https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bitva_u_Milvijského_mostu).

Constantine successfully managed the decisive battle and clearly considered the victory to be the intervention of Jesus Christ. He reconsidered his own pagan mindset, and Christianity became his favorite religion. Therefore, he brought legal equality and the return of confiscated property to the persecuted Christians.



Figure 11. *The symbol XP – the monogram of Christ in the Catacombs of Callixtus*
(Le catacombe di San Callisto a Roma. Symbol XP – monogram Krista v Kalixtových katakombách // Le catacombe Cristiane di Roma. <https://www.catacombesancallisto.it/it/simboli-cristiani.php>)

Alpha and Omega

Another frequently used Christian symbol is the letters Alpha and Omega (Figure 12). The sign of the alpha and the omega symbolizes the beginning and the end, referring to God's eternity and omnipotence. They appear three times in the Revelations of the Apostle John:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Zjavenie apoštola Jána, Zjv 1, 8 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/66/zjavenie-apostola-jana-kapitola-1/>).

"He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life'" (Zjavenie apoštola Jána, Zjv 21, 6 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/66/zjavenie-apostola-jana-kapitola-21/katolicky-preklad/>).

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Zjavenie apoštola Jána, Zjv 22, 13 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/66/zjavenie-apostola-jana-kapitola-22/>).



Figure 12. Symbol ΑΩ – monogram of Christ in Domitilla's Catacombs
(Wikipedia. Dnalor 01. 05.05.2014. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rom,_Domitilla-Katakomben,_Steintafel_mit_Inscription,_Alpha_und_Omega_und_Christussymbol_Chi_Rho.jpg)

Ancient Christian symbols retain their spiritual power and iconographic presence throughout the centuries. In today's modern times, they are used in Christian churches around the world as an enduring image of faith in Christ and God's timeless power and presence (Figure 13).

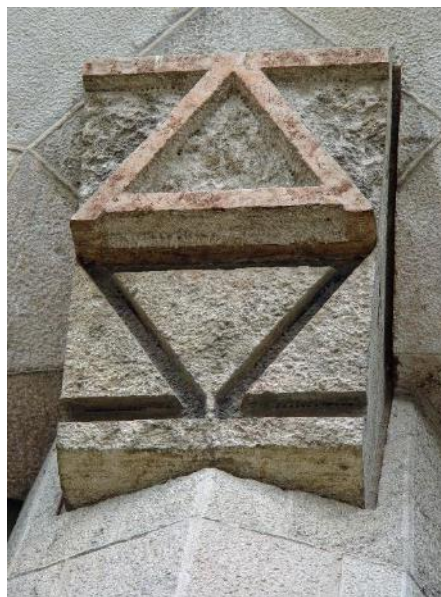


Figure 13. Antoni Gaudí: Alpha and Omega at the entrance of the Sagrada Família in Barcelona
(Wikimedia. Etan J. Tal. 18.12.2009. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/06/AlphaOmega.jpg>)

The Roman catacombs represent a unique archaeological and historical site that provides valuable information about burial customs and religious life in the early Christian period. Today, as they offer invaluable insight into the religious and social dynamics of ancient Rome, they serve as important research material for archaeologists, historians and theologians.

The catacombs stopped being used for burials only after the 5th century. *"The ancient cemeteries were transformed into an object of pious interest, and then, from the 8th century (before the Lombardic danger), the bodies of many martyrs had been transferred to the churches that stood inside the city"* (Dolinský, 2010, p. 36). And the catacombs were forgotten... Gradually, their entrances were sealed by earthquakes, the corridors collapsed, they were flooded, and even the places of underground burials disappeared from the memory of the Romans... Only at the end of the 16th century, during excavation work and extraction of tuff, workers accidentally came across deep underground spaces, where sarcophagi, inscriptions and paintings were discovered. At first, this sensational discovery stimulated the research of only enthusiastic amateur archaeologists. *"For nearly 300 years, the exploration of the catacombs was random, until the young Italian Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894) began to explore the peripheral parts of Rome in search of long-forgotten underground cemeteries. He found about 10 of them"* (Craughwell, 2022). Among them, there are Callixtus' catacombs and in them there is the original grave of St. Cecilia, who was, after her martyrdom, buried by the Pope Urban I, in this most extensive burial ground.

The most famous Roman catacombs are located on the *"Queen of the roads, which is the Via Appia Antica... It is lined with the graves of twenty generations mainly of patrician families. The closer to the road, the rarer the family is"* (Mikloško, 2022, p. 56). The unique catacombs along Via Appia include the catacombs of St. Callixtus and St. Sebastian, and to the left of it, the catacombs of Praetextatus. Other great ancient consular roads are also lined with the catacombs: of Domitilla (Via Adriatina), Priscilla (Via Salaria), Agnesina (Via Nomentana), Marcellinus and Peter (Via Labicana).

The Catacombs of Callixtus

The creation of the Catacombs of St. Callixtus (Italian: *Catacombe di San Callisto*) dates back to approximately the middle of the 2nd century. These catacombs are the largest, the most important and the most extensive catacombs in Rome. Official data about the cemetery complex (*Complesso Callistiano*) give colossal figures: it occupies an area of more than 36 hectares; the labyrinth of corridors reaches a total length of almost 20 kilometers; the graves are located in four underground levels that reach a depth of 20 meters; dozens of martyrs, 16 popes and thousands of Christians were buried in the catacombs; 2378 inscriptions appeared on the tombstones (The Catacombs of Saint Callixtus // The Christian Catacombs of Rome. <https://www.catacombesancallisto.it/en/le-origini-delle-catacombe.php>) (Figures 14-15).



Figure 14. *Catacombs of St. Callixtus*

(Wikimedia. Friman. 16.05.2006. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catacombe.jpg>)



Figure 15. *Alberto Pissà: Procession in the catacombs of St. Callixtus, painting, 1905* (Wikipedia. Liftarn. 11.02.2006. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A-Procession-in-the-Catacomb-of-Callistus.jpg>)

The catacombs are named after Callixtus I, who entered history as an outstanding figure of Christian antiquity, and an influential figure of the clergy in Rome. Coming from a slave Christian family, Callixtus lived through turbulent years filled with prosecution for embezzling money, exile, hard labor in shackles in a treadmill, toil in mines and prison. Finally, Pope Zephyrinus called him to Rome and ordained him as one of the seven prestigious deacons of Rome (Septem Diacones Urbis Romae), who assisted the Pope in his spiritual and charitable service. At the same time, he appointed Callixtus as the administrator of the great cemetery next to Via Appia (Taylor, 2017), which became the official burial ground of the Roman Church. In 217, Pope Zephyrinus died a martyr's death. The most suitable candidate for the new pope was Callixtus I, who sat on Saint Peter's Chair as the 16th Pope (Figure 16). After a relatively short pontificate (217-222), his life was prematurely ended by martyrdom, which, according to all testimonies, happened on October 14, 222. According to the tradition, Callixtus I was thrown out from the window and stoned by fanatical pagans, and then thrown into a well with a stone tied around his neck. The Roman believers secretly pulled the body out, but in the given situation, they did not dare to carry it across the river Tiber to the cemetery that Callixtus I once managed. Therefore, they buried him in the nearby Kalepodius cemetery next to Via Aurelia (Chlumský J. Sv. Kalixt (zv. též Kalist) // Světcí k nám hovoří... <https://catholica.cz/?id=4782>). The name of Callixtus I is included among the holy martyrs in the Roman Martyrology (Martyrologium Romanum), the official list of saints, the blessed and martyrs of the Catholic Church (Roman Martyrology // Wikidata. 2004. <https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q125252554>). It is paradoxical that Callixtus I did not find a resting place in "his", Callixtus cemetery.



Figure 16. Pope Callixtus I, 3rd century (Wikimedia. Vanished user 211120. 10.08.2015. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:16-St.Callixtus_I.jpg)

Above the catacombs, in the open area, two small basilicas finished with three apses – niches, so-called cellae trichorae (Trichorae) have been preserved. They mark the place where Pope Zephyrinus and other martyrs were buried. On the discovered sarcophagi, images of key Christian biblical scenes with a deep spiritual message have been preserved.

In the underground part of the burial ground, which is currently only partially accessible to the public, precious jewels of early Christian history are hidden: the Crypt of the Popes, the Crypt of St. Cecilia, Cubicles of the Holy Mysteries and many other crypts and Christians' final resting places. They are filled with treasures of nascent Christian art, iconography, religious evidence and messages about the life of ancient Rome.

The crypt of the popes with the apt name "Little Vatican" is the resting place of nine popes and eight other important church figures (Figures 17-18). The relics of the saints were transferred to churches during the 5th-8th centuries, but the wall paintings and engravings refer to an unwavering belief in eternal life.



Figure 17. The crypt of popes (Wikimedia. Dnalor 01. 06.05.2014. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom,_Calixtus-Katakomben,_Krypta_der_Papste.jpg)



Figure 18. G. B. Rossi: *The crypt of popes*, 1854

(Wikimedia. Zio. 01.03.2009. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/de/c/ce/Callistus_Katakomben.jpg)

The Crypt of Saint Cecilia

In the abandoned and unattended catacombs, it was very difficult to determine the exact places of the graves of the buried saints and martyrs. Also, the grave of St. Cecilia was gradually forgotten and was not discovered for at least five centuries. A fascinating legend that has lasted for centuries says that Saint Cecilia appeared to Paschal I, the Pope in 817-824, in a dream or vision, and told him about the location of her relics. The Pope, inspired by this vision, decided to personally search for and rediscover her grave. Reliable research confirms that in 821 the Pope Paschal I had her remains transferred to the new Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, which, according to tradition, was built on the site of the original church constructed over the house of St. Cecilia (Luckett, 1972). In the Pope's autobiographical message, preserved in the *Liber Pontificalis*, "*her intact body was found in a coffin of cypress wood, wrapped in a shroud decorated with a gold thread and with apparently bloodstained cloths rolled up at her feet. He personally placed the relics and the coffin in the marble sarcophagus*" (Catholic Churches, Dedications to St. Cecilia Santa Cecilia in Trastevere // Churches of Rome. https://romanchurches.fandom.com/wiki/Santa_Cecilia_in_Trastevere).

Eight centuries later, on October 20, 1599, a marble sarcophagus with the still intact body of the saint was discovered during the restoration of the church interior led by Cardinal Paolo Sfondrati. This extraordinary event is recorded by many personalities, such as Cardinal Cesare Baronio, who represented the ailing Pope Clement VIII, or the prominent Jesuit archaeologist Antonio Bosio. The young sculptor Stefano Maderno (1576-1636) was also present, and according to his own words, he captured a faithful image of the martyred St. Cecilia and created her masterful sculpture as a symbol of the tragedy of martyrdom and the unbreakable faith of the saint (in the last moments of her life, when she could no longer speak, she professed her faith in the Holy Trinity by three outstretched fingers of her right hand). The original of the statue is in the Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere and a copy is housed in a crypt in the catacombs (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Stefano Maderno: *St. Cecilia*, 1600 (Wikipedia. File Upload Bot (Magnus Manske). 27.01.2012. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Cecilia_\(Stefano_Maderno\)#/media/File:CeciliaMaderno.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Cecilia_(Stefano_Maderno)#/media/File:CeciliaMaderno.jpg))

The Catacombs of St. Sebastian outside the Walls

The Catacombs of St. Sebastian outside the Walls (Italian: *Catacombe di San Sebastiano fuori le mura*) are one of the oldest, smallest, and most visited Roman cemeteries, and they are the only ones that have been continuously

accessible to the public since their inception. Around the 1st century, they became a place of eternal rest for pagans, and from the 3rd century, exclusively for Christians. They were built in the underground tuff quarries near Via Appia, outside the walls of the famous city, which is why they got the name "outside the Walls".

Above the catacombs, the building of the sanctuary Basilica Apostolorum (Basilica of the Apostles) towered with the patronage of the apostles Peter and Paul, whose relics were kept in these catacombs for fear of destruction and desecration. *"The Christians, fearing that the remains of the holy apostles would be dishonored, secretly transferred them on June 29, 258... and were hiding them for two years"* (Catholic Churches, Dedications to St. Cecilia Santa Cecilia in Trastevere // Churches of Rome. https://romanchurches.fandom.com/wiki/Santa_Cecilia_in_Trastevere). In honor of the first apostles, more than 600 engraved votive inscriptions in Latin, Greek, Syriac and Aramaic (so-called graffiti), were created on the walls of the catacombs. They express believers' thanks and prayers and have been preserved to these days (Catacombe di San Sebastiano // Wikipédia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombe_di_San_Sebastiano). A cruel fate awaited the sought-after Basilica of the Apostles: after the relics were taken to their original tombs, pilgrims' interest declined, and it started to decay. At the beginning of the 4th century, it was demolished and buried. In its place, the Emperor Constantine built an extensive three-nave basilica, which was dedicated to the martyr St. Sebastian.

Legends and data about his life tell that he became an officer in the imperial army and held the high tribune position in the praetorian guard, and thus, the bodyguard of the emperor Diocletian. Thanks to his position, he could secretly and uncontrollably spread Christianity in the pagan army, support imprisoned Christians, and take care of martyrs' burials. When the Christian-hating emperor found out about this betrayal, he mercilessly condemned Sebastian to immediate death. The soldiers were ordered to tie the traitor to a pillar and shoot him with many arrows. They obediently sunned the command, abandoned the dying Sebastian and left him to die (Figure 20). The Christian Irena saved him and thoroughly cared for him in her home until his wounds were completely healed. The miraculously healed Sebastian boldly appeared in front of the emperor with a speech about the unjust persecution of Christians. Diocletian's response was immediate and cruel: whip to death (San Sebastiano // Wikipédia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Sebastiano).



Figure 20. Andrea Mantegna: *Martyr St. Sebastian*, 1480 (Wikimedia. Dmitriy Rozhkov. 27.03.2009. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Andrea_Mantegna_014.jpg)

The body of St. Sebastian was buried in the catacombs in 288 (Porubanová, 2017). Although it was tortured to death, pierced by arrows, battered by soldiers' whips and exposed to the destructive influence of water in the crypt, it was miraculously preserved intact. In that state, after six centuries, in 826, it was moved by order of the Pope Eugene II to the Basilica of St. Peter, where it was protected from possible dangers for the next four centuries. In 1218, the Pope Honorius III decided that St. Sebastian will return to the Basilica outside the Walls (Catacombe di San Sebastiano // Romano Impero. <https://www.romanoimpero.com/2021/03/catacombe-di-san-sebastiano.html>).

In the Basilica, in the Chapel of St. Sebastian, under the altar of St. Sebastian the marble statue of a lying martyr pierced by arrows is placed (Figure 21). In the Chapel of Relics are located an arrow and wood from the pillar where St. Sebastian was tortured (Catacombe di San Sebastiano // Romano Impero. <https://www.romanoimpero.com/2021/03/catacombe-di-san-sebastiano.html>). The precious relics are worshiped by pilgrims from all over the world, who come to ask for the saint's intercession and to seek spiritual encouragement.



Figure 21. Giuseppe Giorgetti: *Saint Sebastian*, cca 1670-1672 (Wikimedia. Sgruba112. 04.05.2013. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Bernini%2C_San_Sebastiano%2C_Via_Appia_Antica%2C_Basilica_di_San_Sebastiano.JPG)

In the Middle Ages, the Catacombs and Basilica of St. Sebastian became one of the most visited places during the fascinating pilgrimage of the faithful to the seven Roman basilicas (Pellegrinaggio delle Sette Chiese // Sette Chiese. <https://www.iubilaum2025.va/it/pellegrinaggio/cammini-giubilari-dentro-roma/il-pellegrinaggio-delle-sette-chiese.html>) (Figure 22). In 1553, St. Filip Neri renewed the tour to the beautiful and precious for Christianity basilicas based on traditional pilgrimage practice. The beloved and always humble Philip Neri, known as the "patron of joy", belauded the visits to the churches with his own deep piety and kind humor: *"In times of affliction and spiritual dryness, the idea of being a beggar in the presence of God and the saints is a great remedy – and of going once to one, another time to another saint to ask for spiritual alms with as much emotion and as sincerely as the poor do. And sometimes you have to do it also physically and to go first to the church of one saint, then to the church of another, and ask for such alms"* (Po stopách svätého Filipa Neriho v Ríme, 26.4.-3.5.2013, Rím // Oratórium svätého Filipa Nériho. 26.04.2013. <http://www.oratoriani.sk/2013/04/po-stopach-svateho-filipa-neriho-v-rime.html>).



Figure 22. Antoine Lafréry: *Seven Roman basilicas* (on the left outside the Walls, the Basilica of St. Sebastian is located) (Wikimedia. Dnalar 01. 21.07.2015. [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giro_delle_Sette_Chiese#/media/File:Le_sette_chiese_di_Roma_\(Antoine_Lafréry,_1575\).jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giro_delle_Sette_Chiese#/media/File:Le_sette_chiese_di_Roma_(Antoine_Lafréry,_1575).jpg))

The Catacombs of St. Priscilla

The Catacombs of St. Priscilla (Italian: *Catacombe di Priscilla*) are listed with the grand attributes such as an "Early Christian Art Gem" and an "Early Christian Sistine Chapel", because more than 360 martyrs and several popes were buried there and because they stand out for their unique wall paintings (Katakomby sv. Priscily // Vatican News. 11.02.2019. <https://www.vaticannews.va/cs/svet/news/2019-11/katakomby-sv-priscily.html>). The catacombs are named after the Roman aristocrat Priscilla, who lived in the 2nd century as a member of the wealthy senatorial family of Manius Acilius Glabrione. The widespread belief that she was a saint or martyr is incorrect (Hernández P. L. *Catacombe di Priscilla, eco del cristianesimo in Europa* // Società Dante Alighieri. 17.07.2022. <https://www.dantealighieri.com.mx/it/post/catacombe-di-priscilla>). Priscilla was a matron – a member of an important social class of women who embodied the ideal of a virtuous, faithful and honest woman. They had influence in the society, and respect was shown to them.

According to historical information, it was Priscilla (or her family) who owned the land on Via Salaria, which she donated to Christians. It is a place, where one of the oldest Roman underground cemeteries with more than 40,000 graves spreads. The extraordinary preciousness of the catacombs is the first depiction of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus on her knees (Figure 23). The fresco was created in the years 230-240, and it is a part of the ancient Christian iconographic

repertoire. According to Joseph Byrne, "this Madonna is the oldest known representation of this most touching and human aspect of Christ's Incarnation... it reflects the early Christian community's reverence for the Mother of God, and for its understanding of God's love for humankind" (Byrne, 2003). Beside the seated Madonna, a male figure pointing to the star of Bethlehem stands. Archaeologists and theologians have long debated trying to identify the man with a specific historical figure. Some claim that it is Joseph, others see Isaiah, others – the prophet Balaam (Balaam). For the Jesuit Emanuel Gambuti, the man wrapped in a tunic is the Archangel Gabriel depicted in Roman iconography without wings. His raised and outstretched hand is a visual gesture "that, in classical iconography, indicates the act of speaking. He is none other than the image of the Word, the voice with which God reveals himself to humanity" (Gambuti E. "Do not be Afraid" – The Annunciation in the Catacombs of Priscilla // Jesuits. 25.03.2022. <https://www.jesuits.global/2022/03/25/do-not-be-afraid-the-annunciation-in-the-catacombs-of-priscilla/>). Thus, it seems that the aim of the author of the painting was not to provide clues for the unambiguous decoding of the figure pointing to the star, that what was important was not the concretization of the prophet, but the personification of the prophecy.



Figure 23. The oldest known image of the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus, a fresco (Wikimedia. Leinad-Z-commonswiki. 11.01.2006. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/Madonna_catacomb.jpg)

The Catacombs of St. Domitilla (Italian: Catacombe di Domitilla)

In 1593, Antonio Bosio, a tireless explorer of Rome's ancient underground world, found himself in vast spaces with tombs, labyrinths of underground passages and galleries. In complete darkness, he was overcome by the feeling that he would get lost, that he would die there and "contaminate the sacred place with his own 'unworthy' corpse" (New Christian frescoes revealed in Rome's biggest catacomb // Archaeology Newsroom. 01.06.2017. <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2017/06/01/new-christian-frescoes-revealed-romes-biggest-catacomb/>). Antonio, nicknamed "Columbus of the Catacombs", was convinced that he was in the magnificent Catacombs of St. Callixtus. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi, based on systematic research, identified them as Domitilla's catacombs. He relied on the analysis of historical texts, inscriptions and paintings that were discovered. Subsequent excavations in the catacombs revealed more than 26,000 graves, a shrine to the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus, and a rare ancient iconography (New Christian frescoes revealed in Rome's biggest catacomb // Archaeology Newsroom. 01.06.2017. <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2017/06/01/new-christian-frescoes-revealed-romes-biggest-catacomb/>) (Figures 24-25).



Figure 24. A Christian prays in the orans pose (Wikimedia. Dnesor. 05.05.2014. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom,_Domitilla-Katakomben,_Steintafel_mit_Inschrift_und_Orant_\(Mensch_in_antiker_Gebetshaltung_mit_erhobenen_Armen\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom,_Domitilla-Katakomben,_Steintafel_mit_Inschrift_und_Orant_(Mensch_in_antiker_Gebetshaltung_mit_erhobenen_Armen).jpg))

NB: The praying figure is in a position with elbows close to the body, with arms slightly spread and palms facing upwards. This pose is called orans or orant (Lat. "one who prays or begs"). Originating in ancient Rome and the Middle East, it was seen by early Christians as a symbolic surrender, prayer, supplication, and union with God. Originally, the orans gesture was also used by pagans and Jews, but later it became a typical Christian iconographic sign depicting saints and martyrs.



Figure 25. Dove with the olive branch (Wikipedia. Dnesor. 05.05.2014.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doves_as_symbols#/media/File:Rom,_Domitilla-Katakomben,_Steintafel_mit_Taube_und_%C3%96lweige.jpg)

NB: For Christians, the dove with the olive branch is a traditional symbol with multiple meanings. It represented the Holy Spirit, God's peace, peace of soul, hope, reconciliation, etc. It has its origin in the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis, where it announced to Noah that the flood was over: "When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him" (Kniha Genezis, Gn, 8, 11-12 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/1/kniha-genezis-kapitola-8/katolicky-preklad/?tr=20&cv=0&c=1&ch=8>). Mentions of the dove also occur in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, Mark and John in the New Testament. On early Christian graves, the symbol was used mainly in the continuity of peace and the saved soul.

The catacombs are 17 km long, they have a respectable four parallel floors, each of which reaches a height of about five meters, and at some points, they reach a depth of almost 30 meters. As in the only Roman catacombs, there is an underground basilica.

For a long time, it was unclear, after which Domitilla the catacombs were named. Historical reports document the existence of several women with the name Flavia Domitilla, and they all come from the circle of the imperial court. Flavia Domitilla was the wife of the emperor Vespasian, but Flavia Domitilla was also his daughter, and the next Flavia Domitilla was his granddaughter, as well as the niece of his granddaughter and the consul Clemens, who was also a member of the noble imperial family by descent. Renowned researchers today confirm that the granddaughter of the Emperor Vespasian and at the same time, the niece of the next Emperor Domitian, married Titus Flavius Clemens, her mother's cousin. Clemens was a consul and an associate of Emperor Domitian, who cruelly persecuted Christians, earning him the nickname "The Second Nero". He accused his consul and his wife Flavia Domitilla of atheism and practicing Christianity (Flavia Domitilla // Catholic Answers. <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/flavia-domitilla>). He mercilessly condemned Clemens to death and Domitilla/wife and Domitilla/niece to exile on various islands. Before Domitilla, the consul's niece left into exile, she donated her land for use by the Christian community, and later, the Catacombs of Domitilla, the most extensive Christian burial land, was created there (Marks M. Flavia, Missing Woman // Martha Marks. <https://www.marthamarks.com/category/historical-characters/the-flavians/flavia-domitilla/>).

Domitilla's catacombs are a rare treasury of ancient art filled with many symbols and frescoes that date back to the era of both pagan and early Christian use of the cemetery. The paintings are inspired by characters and episodes from the Old and New Testaments, but they also exceptionally portray profane themes.

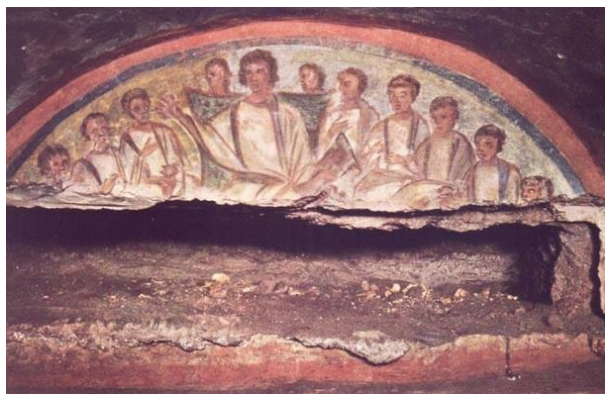


Figure 26. Christ the Teacher (Wikimedia. Leinad-Z~commons.wiki. 13.01.2006.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_teacher.jpg)

The painting is an image of Christ handing over the New Testament to the apostles (Figure 26). Such a depiction has the Latin name "Traditio Legis" and is a typical early Christian iconographic motif of Jesus Christ surrounded by disciples, to whom he hands over the New Testament to spread it among the people. The concept refers to Christ as the true lawgiver and the disciples as bearers of his teachings.



Figure 27. *The Good Shepherd*, 300-350 (Wikimedia. Dnator 01. 05.05.2014.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom,_Domitilla-Katakomben,_Der_gute_Hirte.jpg)

The marble statue depicts a young man in shepherd's clothing with a sheep on his shoulders (Figure 27). It symbolizes Jesus, who says in the Gospel according to John: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep"* (Evanjelium podľa Jána, Jn 10, 11-15 // Moja Biblia. <https://www.mojabiblia.sk/svatepismo/43/evanjelium-podla-jana-kapitola-10/katolicky-preklad/>). In one of the interpretations of this parable, Jesus predicts his sacrifice and death (Matthew, 1706).

Conclusion

Exact research of the Roman catacombs is carried out even today. It focuses on several aspects: with the help of modern technologies such as laser scanning, georadars and 3D modeling, it reveals hitherto undiscovered rooms and tombs; wall paintings and symbols are analyzed to present ancient religious ideas and rituals; based on inscriptions on tombstones, epigraphic studies on buried Christians are created; forensic and biological investigation using DNA analysis focuses on specific persons. The goal of the research is, on one hand, to reveal new information and, on the other hand, to preserve a precious heritage for future generations.

Источники | References

1. Byrne J. Out of the Depths... The Christian Catacombs of Ancient Rome: An Introduction // Belmont University Nashville, Tennessee. 2003. <http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/catacombs/catacombs.htm>
2. Cornel T., Matthews J. Svět starého Říma, kulturní atlas. Praha: Knižní klub, 1995.
3. Craughwell T. St. Cecilia and the History of the Roman Catacombs // National Catholic Register. 22.11.2022. <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/st-cecilia-and-the-history-of-the-roman-catacombs>
4. Dolinský J. Dejiny cirkvi. Trnava: Dobrá kniha, 2010.
5. Gregg B. Roman Funerary Stele. In Religions of Late Antiquity in 20 Objects // Weebly. 2019. <https://hrs390cu.weebly.com/roman-funerary-stele.html>
6. Groh V., Hejzlar G. Život v antickém Římě. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1972.
7. Janiga I. Ryba // Rozmer: časopis pre kresťanskú duchovnú orientáciu. 2020. № 2. <https://www.homilie.eu/sk/texty/biblicke-symboly/r/ryba--1-/666.html>
8. Kern K. Eucharistia. 2006. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian_Kern/evharistija/
9. Luckett R. St. Cecilia and Music // Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association. 1972. Vol. 99. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jrma/99.1.15>
10. Matáková B. Ikonografia vybraných výtvarných motívov – ikonografia ryby // Svätec a jeho funkcie v spoločnosti II. / eds. R. Kožiak, J. Nemeš. 2006. <https://www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?disposition=a&ID=22486>

11. Matthew H. Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible. Volume 5. John. John Part 1 // Wikisource. 1706. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Matthew_Henry%27s_Commentary_on_the_Whole_Bible/Volume_5/John/John_part1#The_Good_Shepherd
12. Mikloško J. Sedem statočných na siedmich pahorkoch Ríma. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov, spol. s r. o., 2022.
13. Morris I. Death-ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611728>
14. Porubánová M. Slovenskí veriaci slávili svätú omšu v Katakombách sv. Šebastiána // Tlačová kancelária Konferencie biskupov Slovenska. 2017. <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocianku=20171103013>
15. Putovanie dejinami kresťanského sakrálneho umenia (1.) / spracovala S. Struhárová // Rytier Nepoškvrnenej. 2001. № 1. <http://www.rytier.sk/rytier/rytier/2001/1-01/putovanie.html>
16. Schamoni W., Besler K. Perly zo života svätých. Košice: Východoslovenské tlačiarne, 1991.
17. Taylor M. Pope Saint Callixtus I // Taylor Marshall. 2017. <https://taylormarshall.com/2017/10/pope-saint-callixtus-controversial-pope.html>

Информация об авторах | Author information



Стреничкова-старшая Мария¹, доц.
Стреничкова-младшая Мария², доц.
^{1,2} Академия искусств в Банской Бистрице, Словакия



Maria Strenacikova Sr.¹
Maria Strenacikova Jr.²
^{1,2} Academy of Arts in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia
¹ maria.strenacikova@aku.sk, ² maria.strenacikova1@aku.sk

Информация о статье | About this article

Дата поступления рукописи (received): 13.10.2024; опубликовано online (published online): 04.12.2024.

Ключевые слова (keywords): Древний Рим; христианские катакомбы; раннее христианство; символы христианской веры; Ancient Rome; Christian catacombs; early Christianity; symbols of Christian faith.