

The Roman Catacombs

By Christie for 2nd 2013-2014 TKC oral presentation
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The Roman catacombs were underground burial places that the persecuted Christians used to bury their dead and martyred friends and family. There are at least forty different catacombs in Rome. The largest is called Domitilla. It has 8 miles worth of corridors. The total length of all the catacombs in Rome is between sixty and ninety miles. They were built along the roads just outside the city and went under the city.

The Roman catacombs started being dug about 150 AD and stopped being used around 400 AD. Those who dug the passages and graves of the catacombs were called fossores or diggers and were no doubt slaves. They wore a short tunic and carried a pick and lamp and sometimes a basket or bag for the materials they excavated. The lamp had a chain with a spike which could be put into the wall to hold the lamp. The marks the fossores made with their picks while digging can still be seen clearly today. They show us how much work was put into these tunnels and chambers. The passages were about 8.2 ft in height 3.3 ft in width.

Fossores also decorated the inside of the catacombs by painting and inscribing on the walls and ceilings of the tunnels and even on the graves themselves. Pictures in the catacombs are pretty much all that is left of Christian art during that time of persecution. Common symbols that they used were doves, fish, ships, anchors, and lyres. They also painted scenes from the Old Testament and some of Jesus and His disciples. The decorating by painting tombs, though, has a long history and did not originate with the catacombs. Some of the gold-glass drinking cups that they used had engravings on them of the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep over His shoulder. The wealthier Christians likely bore the price of decoration. This decorating started about 200 AD and continued until 400 when the use of the catacombs ended.

As I already said, there are between 60 and 90 miles of corridors in the catacombs under Rome. If there are a little over 60 miles, then there would be about 500,000 tombs, and if there are a little over 90 miles, then there would be about 750,000 tombs. This is only a rough estimation, though. There is no way possible to tell exactly how many Christians are buried in the Roman catacombs. There were three steps that fossores took to bury the Christians: 1) dig a hollow in the wall of the passage; 2) wrap the body in linen and put it lengthwise into the hole; 3) seal the opening with tiles, stones, or marble. Then engrave on a slab the name of the person, their age, and day of death and attach it to the grave. Such graves as these are called in Latin, loculi. Sometime they were made large enough to hold two, three, or more bodies. The graves that held multiple bodies usually had marks on the outside that indicated how many people had been buried there. Sometimes, when room was scarce, graves were dug into the floor. Sadly even little children were martyred. The greatest time of persecution for the Christians in Rome was from 303-305, so this was probably the time when the most Christians were martyred and buried in the catacombs. Around the year 200, there were only about 10,000 Christians in Rome. And in 313, there were no more than 70,000 to 80,000. But not all were killed.

Christians, because they only acknowledged the one true God as their God and refused to participate in any pagan rituals, were probably considered disloyal and a threat to the Roman Emperor, whom they considered to be one of their many gods. So the Romans caught and killed many of them in extremely cruel ways. If a Christian was caught by a Roman soldier, there were many ways of murder. Some of these were crucifixion, fighting gladiators or lions in the Colosseum while unarmed or very lightly armed, or covering them with tar and pitch and setting fire to them. The Romans considered these spectacles entertainment and the Colosseum was always full of bloodthirsty people. The martyrs' fellow Christian friends would usually try to come get the bodies after the Colosseum was empty so that they could bury them. This was quite risky, though, because they themselves sometimes got caught. Also, there is

evidence that the Emperor Nero, as a special event for his birthday ordered that some of the Christians be covered in tar and pitch and set fire to. The pitch helped them burn long. Then he had them set around his palace as torches. All these were terrifyingly cruel deaths, but I think this one is worse than any of the others.

Today, there are still passages in the catacombs under Rome that haven't yet been found or have hardly been explored. Most of the bodies that have been found, though, have been removed. They have found very few or no whole skeletons. The Roman catacombs are owned by the Roman Catholic church today. There are six known Jewish catacombs under Rome and two of them are open to the public. There are five other catacombs open to the public as well.