

ROMA ANTICA. VATICANO

Introduction

On the right bank of the Tiber, the fourteenth region of Rome, *Transtiberim*, was never really part of the city centre. In the second half of the 3rd century, the district closest to the Tiber island was included within the perimeter of Aurelian's walls, up to the top of the Janiculum, both for strategic purposes and to protect the mills powered by water from the cave of the Aqua Traiana. From the late Republican period, this part of Trastevere became increasingly populated by artisans and workers from the nearby port, with an important component of foreigners, in particular Jews and Syrians, who celebrated their cults there. Further north, beyond the Settimiana gate, there were parks with rich villas, such as the Farnesina, which perhaps belonged to Agrippa. The Vatican area, crossed by roads lined with tombs - among which, at its eastern end, Hadrian's mausoleum - was occupied by large gardens, including those owned by Agrippina and Domizia, respectively Nero's grandmother and aunt. The construction of St. Peter's Basilica drastically changed the use and townscape of this region of Rome.

History

The oldest known monument in the *ager Vaticanus* is the circus built by Caligula in the gardens of his mother Agrippina, later passed to Nero. Its capacity is estimated at about 20,000 spectators. Its ruins are preserved partly under the southern sector of St. Peter's Basilica, partly outside it, from the entrance to St. Peter's Square, to the east, where the *carceres* from which the race started were located, to a point slightly to the west of its main apse. In the centre of its central *spina* there was an obelisk 25 m high, the second tallest in Rome. In 1586, four months of work, directed by Domenico Fontana, were necessary to move this obelisk, which remained erected in its original position, and to install it in the centre of St. Peter's Square. After the Circus was abandoned, during the reign of Caracalla, a large circular mausoleum, the "rotonda di Sant'Andrea", was built next to the obelisk. Along the north side of the circus, under the basilica, a double row of mausoleums dating back to the 2nd century, owned by rich freedmen who lavishly decorated them with stuccoes, paintings and mosaics, has been brought to light. From the 3rd century onwards, the funerary epigraphy and the iconography of some scenes testify the sure presence of Christian burials: the Good Shepherd, Jonah, and Christ - like Apollo - represented on the chariot of the Sun. In the western part of the excavated area, several mausoleums were erected between the 1st and 4th centuries around a small square, where Peter's tomb would have been located, before it was moved to the catacombs in 258. The small monument that marked its position ("the trophies of Gaius") was to be visible to the faithful in the centre of the presbytery in the first Christian basilica. This basilica, erected by Constantine in the second quarter of the 4th century, under the papacy of Sylvester I, opened with a large four-sided portico, while the interior, of impressive dimensions (63 x 119 m), was divided into five naves. Its construction on a cemetery area, unusual, would be explained by the desire to erect it on the very site of Peter's tomb, who was perhaps martyred in the nearby imperial gardens. The present basilica, begun in 1506 by Pope Julius II, was consecrated only in 1626.

Rediscovery and restoration

The Circus of Caligula and the Vatican necropolis were buried under a 5 to 12 m thick layer of earth during large-scale terracing work carried out by Constantine for the construction of the basilica, thus ensuring the exceptional preservation of its splendid mausoleums. Part of the Vatican necropolis was brought to light between 1939 and 1949, covering an area of about 1,200 m²; the restoration of the tombs was started in 1998, in order to improve their conservation and lighting, and the necropolis was opened to the public. However, a large part of this vast funerary area remains unexplored: in 2003, north of the Vatican City, along the ancient *Via Triumphalis*, during the construction of a car park in the Santa Rosa courtyard, a new, perfectly preserved section of the necropolis came to light by chance. It was occupied by members of a middle class or less affluent class of slaves and freedmen, who were buried there between the Augustan period and the 4th century: the excavated area has 40 burial buildings, some decorated with stuccoes or bas-reliefs, and more than 200 individual burials bearing numerous inscriptions, and offered the opportunity to carry out detailed anthropological studies. In 1984, the UNESCO added the entire Vatican City to its World Heritage List, covering a total area of 44 hectares; in 1990, other areas of the Vatican, together with the Holy See's extra-territorial assets and St. Peter's Basilica *fuori le Mura*, were added to this area. As an archaeological site of great importance, a major place of pilgrimage due to the presence of the tomb of the Apostle Peter, the Vatican is directly and intrinsically linked to the history of Rome and the development of Christianity.