EARLY CHRISTIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ROME

Janet Huskinson

Early Christian art and artifacts of the kinds discussed in earlier chapters had an influential “after-life” in following centuries: they were reused (often for new purposes and contexts), their styles and forms imitated, and their archaeology developed and deployed in various ways. In this general respect, they differed little from their counterparts in the secular art and architecture of ancient Rome, which were appropriated by later societies to serve as cultural or moral exemplars or for political authentication. Some of these reuses implied a sense of continuity with the past, some a distancing from it, which allowed space for critical study and reflection.

But the religious nature of early Christian art brought other values to these processes. Firstly, the later societies involved were themselves Christian, and might evaluate its monuments and artifacts rather differently from the classical antiquities, which they also appropriated. Sometimes they applied critical scholarly analysis. But on many other occasions they treated them as devotional objects whose own histories were subsumed (if not re-created) by the particular cults that they served; thus, in medieval Marseilles, the Christian man portrayed in Figure 22.1 was apparently identified with the female St Eusebia, whose tomb his sarcophagus had become.

Secondly, although early Christian art and artifacts evoked a particular formative period in church history, their themes and subjects could be interpreted as representing timeless Christian truths and traditions: the Marseilles sarcophagus dates to the fourth century, while its biblical scenes represent God’s eternal covenant with man (Figure 22.1).

Marble sarcophagi, such as this, will feature prominently in this chapter, which focuses on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Rome. Sarcophagi carved with biblical or symbolic imagery were by far the largest type of early Christian sculptures in Rome, in antiquity and surviving into later centuries. Like their pagan counterparts they were widely reused, either as whole coffins or as dismembered panels, and in Rome by this time they had long provided prestigious resting-places for popes and the remains of early saints (Figure 22.2). In short, they provide prolific examples of both material and symbolic worth.
Figure 22.1  Fourth-century sarcophagus reused as tomb of St Eusebia. Marseilles, S Victor. Photo: DAIR 60.1588 (Böhringer).

Figure 22.2  Fourth-century Christian sarcophagus (with scene of Jonah) reused in the basilica of Sta Prassede, Rome, for relics. Photo: DAIR 59.425A (Böhringer).
As a meeting-place of classical and Christian culture, Rome is unsurpassed, both for its surviving monuments and for the diversity of their advocates and interpreters. Wealthy and sophisticated collectors, pilgrims, humanists, antiquarians, and local Christians all had stakes in its past and different ideological positions to negotiate. Its early Christian history had shaped the later development of the Catholic Church, doctrinally and also topographically, through sites in the city where Christian communities had worshipped or buried their martyrs. Over centuries pilgrims came to visit these holy places, and also to marvel at the city’s ancient sights. Together these formed a landscape and culture that was exclusively “Roman.” How to relate imperial and early Christian Rome in a history that could take account of both and form a basis for the city’s present and future was a matter that occupied many scholars (such as Flavio Biondo) in the mid-fifteenth century.8

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the material remains of Rome’s pagan and Christian past had acquired a new potency and significance. They were at the forefront of two great movements: the humanist re-discovery of classical antiquity in the Renaissance, and the Counter-Reformation when the Catholic Church made strategic use of historical material to confront Protestant challenges to its authority. At the same time, the city’s own soil yielded a stream of new discoveries that could help meet these new demands.

**Sarcophagi from St Peter’s in the Vatican**

One site that increased the availability of early Christian sarcophagi in Rome was St Peter’s in the Vatican. The long running building works for the new basilica involved demolishing many early Christian burials in and around the old church and uncovered a large number of sarcophagi. It makes a good starting-point for this discussion, which will re-visit several of these sarcophagi later.

In the early seventeenth century some of these sarcophagi were used for the reburial of churchmen whose original tombs had been in the old basilica. Popes Gregory V9 and Marcellus II10 each received an early Christian sarcophagus decorated with a central—and papally appropriate—scene of Christ in majesty with Peter and Paul. Marcellus’s sarcophagus was installed in the Vatican Grottoes in 1606, on a new marble base sculpted with classicizing garlands, and a dedication carved on its lid.11

Some idea of what happened next to many of the sarcophagi from the Vatican site comes from Antonio Bosio’s *Roma Sotterranea*12 where—in systematic detail typical of his scholarship—he records them individually, with illustrations and a note of their subsequent location. Some went to buildings associated with the Church,13 or were re-used as tombs of leading clerics and popes (including the two mentioned above). But many others had secular destinations: one fragment graced a Roman street,14 and another a private museum,15 while others ended up in the houses and palazzi of cardinals and Roman nobility,16 showing that their Christian subject matter did not restrict them to religious settings.

**Early Christian reliefs in Roman collections**

Exactly how these sarcophagi were deployed in palaces and houses would be interesting to know. Bosio mentions some used as fountains,17 and others displayed on walls18 or in courtyards.19 There is scarcely any other evidence for the inclusion of early Christian sculptures in the great Roman collections from the mid-fifteenth century on,20 but this lack is not surprising. Collectors preferred prestigious freestanding statuary for display, and any sarcophagi
they acquired were usually reused as containers or as decorative reliefs set into walls. Early Christian sarcophagi had a further disadvantage in that their figural style was generally seen as aesthetically inferior.21

This focus on classical antiquity and finer works was also true for popes and cardinals who, from the early sixteenth century, were the main collectors. As Rome’s temporal leaders, they also wished to assert control of its ancient art and monumental heritage “for moral edifying purposes, advertising the idea that their collecting was as pious and beneficial to Rome as was the safeguarding of relics or the restoration of churches.”22 Their collections were enriched by material found on land in ecclesiastical control, and by the acquisition of antiquities once located in Roman churches.23 In 1467 pope Paul II had taken a step too far and was heavily criticized when he removed the sarcophagus of Sta Costanza from the basilica of Sta Agnese to the great collection of antiquities in his palace, allegedly intending it to be his future tomb.24 (It would have been a special attraction as the sarcophagus of a saint, with imperial connections, and made of porphyry.)

In sum, early Christian material appears to have featured little in Roman sculpture collections of the sixteenth century, even those of leading churchmen. Yet there were some instances, and the following three cases illustrate different approaches to its display, across nearly two centuries.

The first is the later fifteenth-century collection assembled by the Millini family, which had a strong focus on inscriptions, especially from ancient Roman funerary monuments.25 They housed it in various properties around Rome, but kept the Christian epitaphs separately in the small church of Santa Croce on Monte Mario, which they had restored in 1470. This was located near to their own villa and, more significantly in Christian terms, to the site of Constantine’s decisive vision at Milvian Bridge.26 Here then, the Christian material was given a separate devotional setting, although the collection as a whole belonged in the wider context of renaissance humanist learning and enthusiasm for antiquities.

The second case involves a late fourth-century “City Gate” sarcophagus that Bosio recorded as originally found near the Vatican (and then stored in a nearby garden).27 But by the time it was reused in the decoration of the Villa Borghese in Rome during the early seventeenth century it had been dismantled to create four panels of decorative reliefs.

The Villa had been built for Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1576–1633) and his collection of antiquities, and between 1616 and 1624 its main exterior walls were decorated with arrangements of ancient figured reliefs, including the front and side panels of this sarcophagus.28 These introduced—for the first time in such displays—Christian images alongside the usual conventional subjects that celebrated the culture and civilization of ancient Rome.29 The front panel (Figure 22.3), showing Christ and the apostles, decorated the front façade of the Villa’s southern belvedere. The two side panels (Figure 22.4), with various scenes of Old Testament leaders (Elijah, Moses, and Abraham), were juxtaposed in a corresponding position on the north.30

Also part of the sculptural displays at the front of the Villa was another sarcophagus bearing a “Good Shepherd” figure (identified in one near-contemporary guide-book as Christ).31 As in the corresponding group on the other side, this sarcophagus was flanked by Roman statues of an emperor and a captive barbarian. The sarcophagus is now in Louvre.32 The prominent settings of all these Christian images and their deliberate juxtaposition with traditional Roman representations of culture and power project messages about a new Rome built on a combination of its classical and Christian past.33

The back of the “Borghese sarcophagus” also contributed to the adornment of the Villa, but in a corner of the garden (Figure 22.5).34 It was further dismantled to produce separate figured reliefs of a shepherd and two saints, which were then set into richly ornamented sections of
a precinct wall. There seems less of an ideological charge than with the other panels, as the figures were less obviously religious (and the shepherd may have represented a rustic idyll). Immuring sarcophagus fragments to decorate walls in this way was a local tradition, and other early Christian examples occur at the Villa Albani and Villa Doria Pamphili.

The third case also involves immuring, as a means of display favored by the seventeenth-century collector Francesco Gualdi (1574–1657). Gualdi frequently donated items for display in various public places in Rome, usually with accompanying inscriptions. Two such gifts involved the dismantled front panels of early Christian sarcophagi. He gave two to the basilica...
of Santa Maria Maggiore where they were displayed together as a single piece. The inscription stated that he had donated the sarcophagus, which had been “made by the piety of early Christians during the persecution of the Church,” so that it should be more venerable in its setting. The front of a third sarcophagus formed the central element in an elaborate arrangement installed in the portico of the Pantheon in 1646 (Figure 22.6). This showed busts of a couple within a double register of biblical scenes. Along with the arms of Gualdi and of Cardinal Mazzarin (the sponsor), it was accompanied by another lengthy inscription identifying the sarcophagus’s figured scenes as a testament from the early Church against the “iconomachos”—in other words, against Protestants who attacked images as having had no place in it.

Figure 22.4 The side panels of the “Borghese sarcophagus.” Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: from A. Bosio (1632), 73. By kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.
Figure 22.5 The back panel of the “Borghese sarcophagus”, Centrale Montemartini, Rome no. 829. Photo: from A. Bosio (1632), 71. By kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Gualdi’s installations deliberately re-configured the sarcophagi to display them as part of a visual argument, which was re-stated in the accompanying texts. This process also celebrated the religious images, as well as the antiquity of the sarcophagi themselves, and the piety of their early Christian patrons.
Gualdi’s explicit use of sarcophagus reliefs for the purpose of contemporary religious debate shows just how far the Church’s polemical use of early Christian antiquities had developed.
since the mid-sixteenth century. The main impetus had come from the church itself, as it faced pressure to reform from within and from Protestant challenges without. Art, artifacts, buildings, and archaeology all became strategically important in this Catholic Counter Reformation, which “With its emphasis on sacred spaces, devotional objects and holy bodies … was driven by material culture.”

For centuries since Late Antiquity, classical and Christian monuments of Rome had been appreciated together as joint tokens of the city’s great past. Witness the twelfth-century visitor’s guide, the Mirabilia Urbis Romae, which presented highlights of each. This inclusive approach survived into sixteenth-century antiquarian scholarship: for instance, Andrea Fulvio’s account of the city’s antiquities also contained a section on early Christian burial places, while, as we have seen, the sculpture collections of wealthy churchmen reflected their interests in classical culture and learning.

From the mid-sixteenth century the Church’s pressing needs gave a new direction to such interests. Some leading antiquarians were drawn into this: Onofrio Panvinio (1529–1568), for instance, was asked by the future pope Marcellus II to prepare a history of the Church and its monuments of which only a section on early Christian burial, including catacombs, De ritu sepeliendi mortuos apud veteres christianos et eorum coemeteriis liber, was completed in 1568. Ancient churches were restored in Rome, with up-to-date liturgical arrangements and programmatic artwork, and interest in the art and artifacts of Rome’s earliest Christians burgeoned. For many early Christian sarcophagi this meant a new lease on life, reused as altars or tombs, and valued for their significant imagery.

Scholars and Oratorians

This urgent exploration of early Christian art and monuments was less concerned “with the material culture of paleo-Christian Rome per se, but rather with the spiritual reality it symbolized and mediated.” Such a spiritual quest is evident in the life of St Philip Neri (1515–1595) and in the work of the Congregation of the Oratory that he founded. Although debate continues about the degree of the Oratorians’ contribution to the later sixteenth-century development of “Christian archaeology” as a separate field for study, there is little doubt that their desire to return to the roots of the Roman Church galvanized an interest already present in the work of contemporary antiquarians.

Neri himself identified closely with Rome’s sacred sites, especially those linked with its early martyrs. As a young man in the 1530s he used to retreat to the catacomb of S Sebastiano for lengthy personal meditation, and in 1559 instituted an annual pilgrimage around the “Seven Churches” of Rome. At the Oratory, he was surrounded by a circle of clerics and scholars, many of whom were greatly interested in the art and buildings of early Christian Rome, and their relevance to the Church’s contemporary needs.

Among them, Cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538–1607) is best known, particularly for his prolific writing that emphasized the continuity of the Roman Church, in doctrine, cult, and holy places. He had lectured on church history at the Oratory and was also in contact with non-clerical scholars such as Philips van Winghe and Antonio Bosio, whose work will be discussed shortly. Baronio’s great multi-volumed history, Annales Ecclesiastici (published between 1588 and 1607), gave a chronological account of the Church from its start to 1198. It was essentially a work of Catholic apologetic that showed the origins of the Church’s position on such matters as images and the cult of saints, and so set ecclesiastical tradition against Protestant claims. He also published two editions of historical annotations to the Martyrologium Romanum, which similarly had a focus on the times, monuments, and places associated with Roman saints.
Baronio frequently cited early Christian archaeological material to support his arguments and also translated it into built form, in ancient churches in Rome that he renovated. This restoration work, at SS Nereo ed Achilleo (his titular church) and S Cesareo de Appio, included the creation of new liturgical spaces (based on early Christian prototypes, as Baronio interpreted them), the reuse of older materials from other Roman churches, and artwork that followed early Christian forms and iconography. It was a tangible re-statement of Rome’s earlier Christian history.

Baronio’s work represents a considered use of archaeological sources in chronicling the early Church, but other writers were far more partisan or dramatic, especially in describing the catacombs and how Christians allegedly used them during the persecutions. Some accounts of horrific deaths and sufferings were so graphic that they colored not only contemporary representations of martyrdom (in Jesuit art, for example), but also the interpretation of some actual biblical scenes in the catacombs as depicting martyrs’ deaths. From the standpoint of Protestants, who claimed that religious images were products of later Catholic idolatry, the discovery of these early catacomb paintings proved problematic. For Catholics the paintings seem to have been less important than their location in the catacombs, which were sites of great symbolic value because of their associations with the early martyrs.

**Catacomb archaeology**

In this context of heightened interest there was great excitement at the chance discovery by workmen on 31 May 1578 of what is now known as the “catacomba anonimo” of via Anapo in Rome. But this was by no means the beginning of catacomb exploration. Even before Neri’s devotional retreats, pilgrims had long visited martyrs’ tombs in catacombs where they remained accessible; the catacomb of S Sebastiano, for instance, is mentioned in a guidebook of the second half of the fourteenth century. But from the fifteenth century there is evidence of antiquarian interest in the catacombs. Not all were motivated by a pursuit of the Christian past: for instance, Pomponio Leto and members of his Accademia Romana degli Antiquari, who explored in the later fifteenth century, were primarily interested in classical antiquity. The sixteenth century saw a new wave of scholars particularly after the 1578 discovery: Alfonso Ciacconio, Jean L’Heureux, and Philips Van Winghe were among those who recorded the “new” catacomb and others, taking a secular (rather than apologetic) approach to describing and mapping what they found.

This approach also characterized the most substantial and groundbreaking work on the catacombs by Antonio Bosio (1575–1629). He had extensive knowledge of them, gathered from years of personal exploration and occasional excavation. His influential work, *Roma sotterranea*, was published posthumously in 1632, with the Oratorian Giovanni Severano responsible for the editing and for the last of the four books (on the iconography of catacomb images). Bosio himself had contact with Neri and the Oratorians and in his book he made many references to Baronio’s work.

One reference is particularly telling about how Bosio saw his own methodology and purpose. It concerns the “Borghese sarcophagus” which, as mentioned, ended up as separate panels decorating the Villa Borghese (Figures 22.3–5). It had been found in the mid-fifteenth century in the mausoleum near St Peter’s, belonging to the distinguished Christian family of the Anicii: Sextus Claudius Petronius Probus (who had been consul in 371) was a famous senatorial convert to Christianity, and his wife Anicia Faltonia Proba was renowned for her practical piety. This connection made the sarcophagus a highly valuable piece of evidence for the early Christian community in Rome, and it featured in various seventeenth-century publications.
Baronio included it in the *Annales* as a devotional example for contemporary viewers, but with an inaccurate representation of some figures on its front panel. Bosio picked up on this, and to show what he describes as his own accuracy, conscientious attention to detail, and faithful drawings, illustrated all four sides of the sarcophagus (Figures 22.3–5).

Such careful recording is a characteristic feature of Bosio’s great work, but even more significant (in terms of the development of scholarship) was his systematic approach to the design and topography of the catacombs. He published plans of catacombs, copious frescoes, epigraphy, and objects found in the catacombs such as gold glass and lamps.

Severano’s contribution (in Book 4) on images in the catacombs and their iconography has also been influential. He was more polemical than Bosio had been, and in his desire to prove the continuity of Christian images and the veneration of saints, prefaced his discussions with chapters demonstrating that the catacombs had been used exclusively by Christians. This was a strategic Counter Reformation argument. In the contemporary religious context, the discovery of Christian subjects painted in the catacombs was highly significant as it apparently disproved Protestant claims that religious imagery was a later Catholic aberration.

Bosio’s work was widely disseminated through Latin editions (1651 and 1659) prepared by Paolo Aringhi, with additions of his own. Yet Bosio’s archaeological approach, with its systematic topographical analysis and careful descriptions, rather fell into abeyance. Instead, reference to early Christian material culture remained polemical: interest in catacombs focused on martyrs, and what could be retrieved of their bodily remains. Given “a de facto acceptance that every bone found belonged to a martyr,” the number of martyrs alleged to have died in Rome increased exponentially.

**Relics and archaeology**

The hunt for martyrs’ relics in the Roman catacombs was intense during the later sixteenth and seventeenth century, particularly in sites such as S Sebastiano that were fairly accessible. They found a ready market across Catholic Europe as tokens of traditional piety for individuals, rulers, and churchmen. This trade generated intense activity in the catacombs, which largely operated within the framework of the Church despite a series of papal measures intended to address the situation.

This was more like tomb robbing than archaeology. But the reception of corporeal relics into their new resting places, or the rediscovery and refurbishment of their old, could involve activity that was more deliberate and historically aware. This happened across the Catholic world as communities sought to authenticate the history of local cults by uncovering and celebrating the material remains of their early Christian past in “sacred archaeology.”

In Rome itself many churches were renovated in the late sixteenth century for the Jubilee Year of 1600. This, and the decree by Clement VIII in 1596 that church altars had to contain sacred relics for legitimacy, encouraged investigations and new, more appropriate arrangements for housing the remains. This might involve creating new liturgical spaces around the high altar, often in supposed imitation of early Christian architectural arrangements, or providing new reliquaries (for which ancient sarcophagi were popular choice as at Sta Cecilia).

What happened at two Roman basilicas illustrates this well. Baronio had redesigned and redecorated his titular church of SS Nereo ed Achilleo, incorporating early Christian stylistic references (as mentioned above), but the procession that he devised in 1597 for the saints’ return there from their resting place in the church of S Adriano in the Forum also commandeered the archaeology of ancient Rome. Famous triumphal monuments along the route were equipped with inscriptions that, in various formulations, celebrated the greater triumphs of the
Christian martyrs. Therefore, the Catholic Christian past and its material remains were shown to have triumphed even over the mighty Roman empire and its physical vestiges—"and implicitly over heresy." Past, present, and future triumphs were drawn together.

The basilica of Sta. Cecilia in Trastevere was already rich in the history and material survivals of earlier Roman Christianity. It was supposedly built over Cecilia’s house, where she had been martyred along with various companions, and since the ninth century contained their relics (preserved in ancient sarcophagi), which Pope Pascal I had brought back from the catacombs. These relics were exhumed in 1599 by Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrato (an Oratorian and close associate of Neri) in the course of restoring the basilica. Intent on stressing the history and traditions of the early Church, he investigated the relics buried below the high altar, planning to re-house them more appropriately. The miraculous discovery of the saint’s remains—to which Bosio was an invited eye-witness—was received with great excitement and, after a period on public display, the relics were re-interred below the newly redesigned high altar. There too, in the altar’s sculpture, reference was made back to the materiality of early Roman Christianity: like an enduring “relic,” Stefano Maderno’s famous statue replicated Cecilia’s body as in death, while the black marble “box” in which it was enclosed resembled a loculus (a shelf-like tomb) in the catacombs where it had originally rested.

Conclusion

This brief overview has shown how and why the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were particularly important in Rome for the use and study of early Christian material remains, in various cultural and religious contexts. Its legacy continues, most especially in the appreciation of their value in representing the long traditions of the Roman Church and its connections with the city. For instance, sarcophagi found in mid-twentieth century excavations in the Vatican were reused after their discovery for the burial of earlier popes. Others have become altars: one decorated with Christian symbolic images (of the chi-rho symbol resting on an empty throne) was rescued from its secular reuse as a fountain in a villa to become the new high altar in the church of S. Maria in Vivario at Frascati in April 1968. These instances are interesting for the antiquarian record, but even more significant for their symbolic value: the ancient artifact gains a new life but also reasserts continuity with Christian tradition of the earliest local Christians.

Notes


8 Leonard Barkan, Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 35.

9 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 676.

10 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 684.


13 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 85, 89, 95.

14 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 83.

15 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 97.

16 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 65, 79, 81, 83, 93, 97, 99.

17 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 93, 101, 103.

18 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 91, his own house, 101.

19 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 83, 93.


22 Christian, “Instauratio and Pietas,” 34.

23 Christian, Empire without End, 211–12.

24 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 174; Christian, Empire without End, 97–9.


27 Bosio, Roma Sotterranea 45–7, 6–73.


31 Giacomo Manilli, Villa Borghese fuori di Porta Pinciana (Rome: Per Lodouico Grignani, 1650), 35.


33 Herrmann Fiore, “The Exhibition of Sculpture on the Villa Borghese Facades,” 226, 239.

34 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 829.
Janet Huskinson

60 Anna Maria Nieddu, *La basilica apostolorum sulla Via Appia e l’area cimiteriale circostante* (Monumenti di antichità II serie, XIX) (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2009), 25.

61 Oryshkevich, “Cultural History in the Catacombs.”


70 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* 591A–E.

71 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* e.g., 219–73.

72 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* e.g., 105–9.

73 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* e.g., 509.

74 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* e.g., 203–11.

75 Ditchfield, “Text before Trowel,” 355.

76 Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* 593.


80 Nieddu, *La basilica apostolorum*, 34.


87 Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*.


Further reading


