

Predecessors of the ‘new’ St. Peter’s Basilica



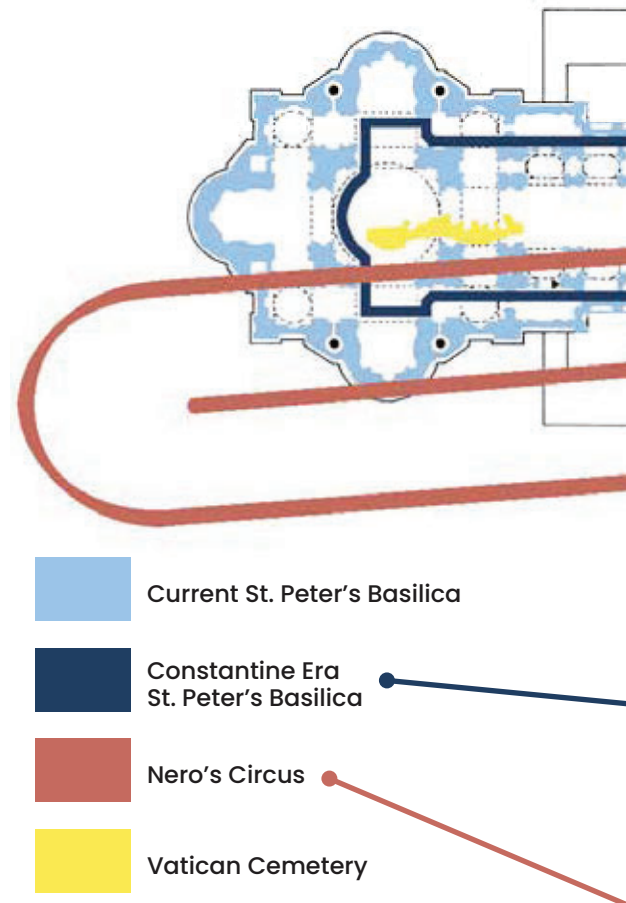
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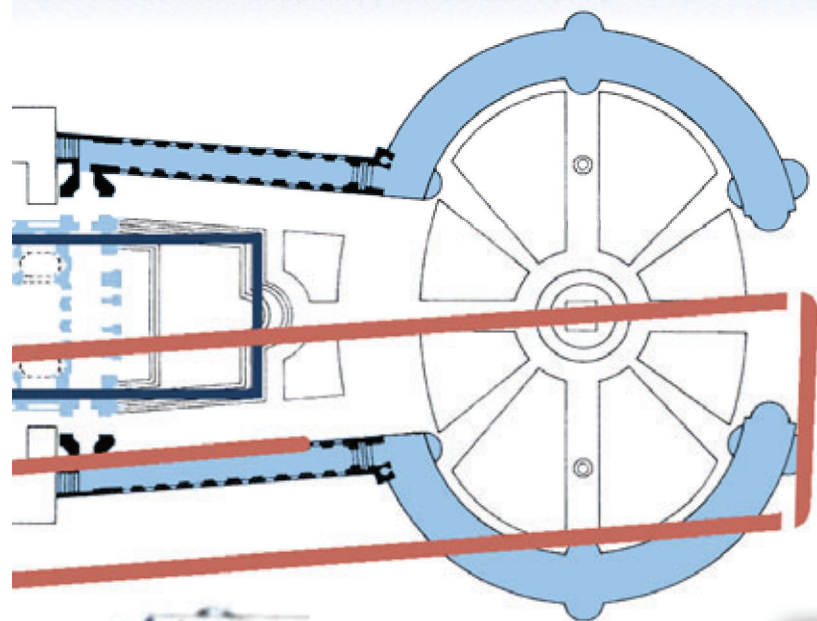
Visitors to the Vatican are often surprised to learn that several important structures have stood on the very spot where St. Peter’s Basilica currently stands. These structures tell the story of how the most famous Catholic church in the world came to be.

Prior to the martyrdom of St. Peter at the base of the hill known as Vaticanus—which lies across the Tiber River from what is today downtown Rome—the emperor Caligula (A.D. 37-41) had constructed a circus (arena) where he hosted various games and public spectacles. It was known as the Circus Caligula or Circus Vaticanus. Later, the emperor Nero renamed it after himself. It was in this circus that St. Peter was crucified upside down in approximately A.D. 67, having been found to be the leader of a seditious group known as the Christians, whom Nero had blamed for setting a massive fire that destroyed most of the Eternal City—a fire he most likely instigated. At the time of Peter’s execution, the circus contained an obelisk, which had been taken from Heliopolis, Egypt. The obelisk, which now stands in St. Peter’s Square, dates back to the time of the Exodus. It is remarkable to think that the very obelisk that Peter saw before he died was among the monuments that Moses and the Hebrews gazed upon before their liberation from slavery in 1450 B.C.!

Peter was buried outside the arena in a Christian cemetery a few hundred yards from the arena. Fellow believers found it desirable to be buried near

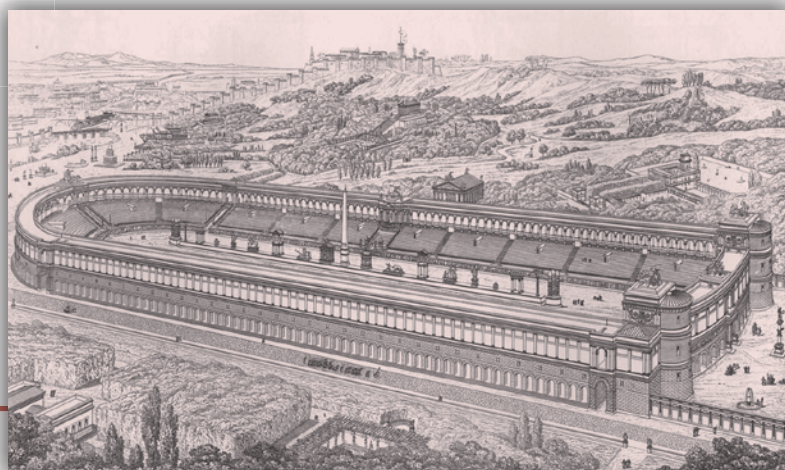
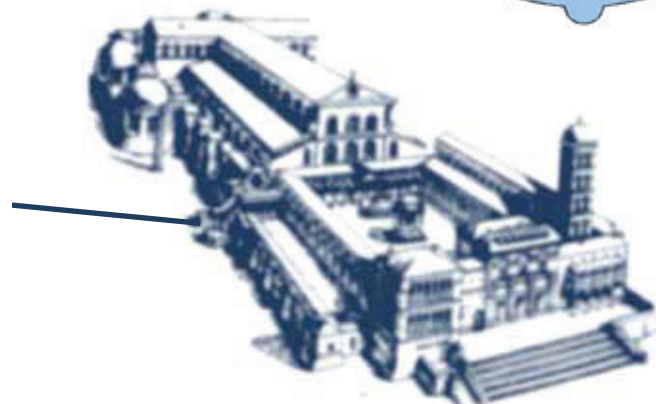
ST. PETER’S BASILICA & TOMB

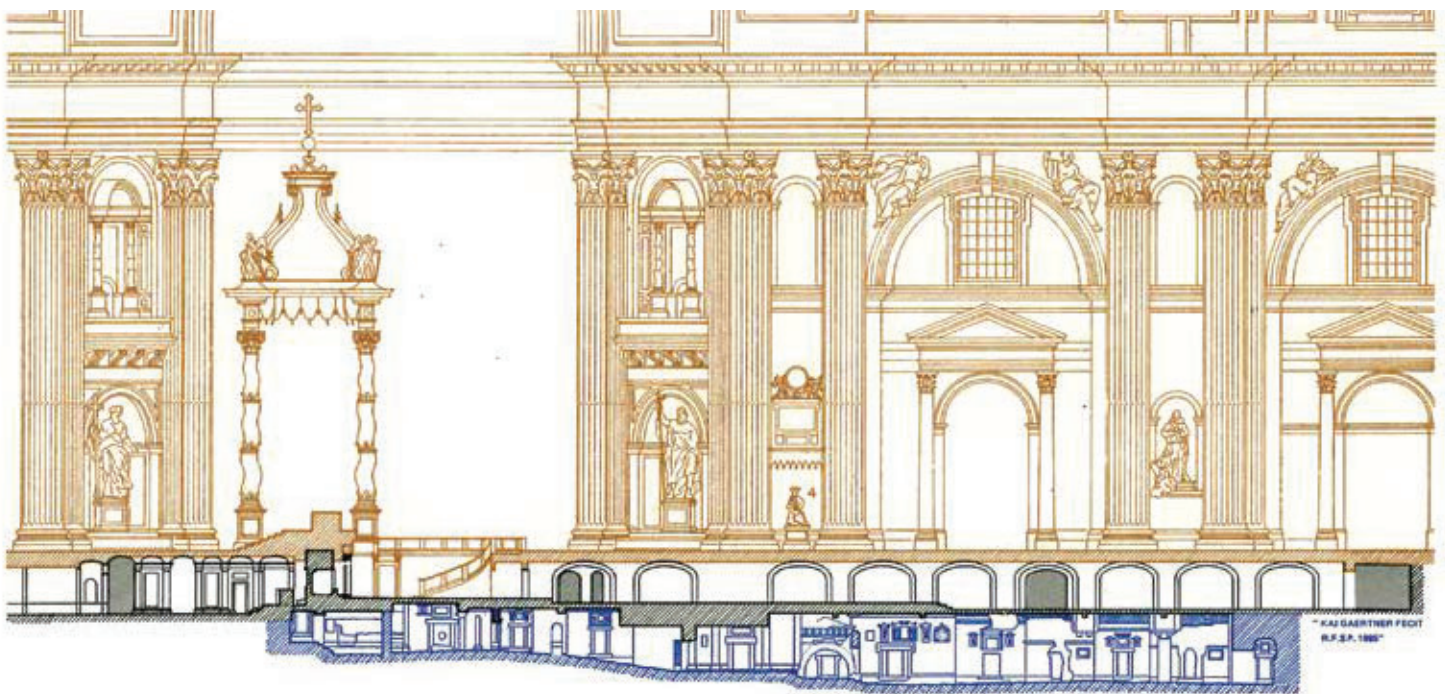




Peter's grave, where eventually a small monument was built. This sprawling necropolis was spread over Vatican hill, and parts of it now feature in the famous Scavi tour (Italian for "excavations," which occurred during the pontificate of Pius XII).

Nearly 250 years after St. Peter's burial, the emperor Constantine, who had legalized Christianity, chose to build a larger church in honor of the first pope. It was Peter's God, the God of the Christian religion, who Constantine believed secured his victory in A.D. 312 at the Milvian Bridge, about 1.5 miles north of the Vatican. In order to construct this first basilica, however, Constantine had to enact a major civil engineering project: leveling Vatican hill to create a flat surface upon which to build the church. This required the desecration of tombs in and around the cemetery >





This longitudinal, east-west cross section of St. Peter's Basilica shows [gold] the basilica above ground; [black] the underground Vatican Grottoes, which include chapels and papal tombs; and [blue] the Vatican Necropolis from the pre-Constantinian era.

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—something that, per Roman law, only the emperor possessed authority to do. Constantine took advantage of this provision of law.

Naturally, the basilica became a place of pilgrimage, as did the city of Rome. Although the popes resided at the Lateran complex on the other side of Rome, the Constantinian basilica was considered the most sumptuous of the major basilicas. It was 400 feet long and looked much like the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. It was entered by 35 gently sloping steps, anticipated by a portico courtyard, and lavishly decorated with rare marble, mosaics, draperies, tapestries and precious stones. The floor of the basilica was ornamented with silver and gold.

During the slow but steady decline of the Western Roman Empire, the city and basilica

began a process of deterioration. Virtually all the treasures of the basilica were stolen by the Visigoths (410), Vandals (455), Saracens (846) and Normans (1084). The 846 raid was particularly brutal, with nearly 10,000 Saracen pirates sacking the city and basilica. By 1309, the Vatican complex was in disrepair. With the pope in Avignon, France, the population of Rome itself dwindled to about 17,000 inhabitants. Rome was in decay.

With the return of the pope to Rome in 1377, however, St. Peter's Basilica saw a revival. Pope Julius II, who also created the Vatican Museums, at first attempted to renovate and restore the Constantinian version of the basilica. It proved futile. St. Peter's needed a fresh start. Pope Julius II laid the cornerstone in 1506. The original plan, proposed by Donato Bramante, was for a building in the form of a Greek Cross (whose four extensions are all of equal length). Eventually, the plan was altered to its present form of a Latin Cross. A whole series of architects contributed to the work, including Raffaello Sanzio (1514-1520), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1546-1564), Giacomo della Porta, Domenico Fontana, Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1629-1667), Carlo Maderno and others. Notably, Maderno constructed the façade, and Bernini constructed St. Peter's Square and the famed bronze baldocchino over the main altar. By the Great Jubilee of 1600, pilgrims would have seen the new dome of the basilica rising over the Roman skyline. The new basilica was consecrated on Nov. 18, 1626—1,300 years after the first consecration (of the Constantinian basilica) and 120 years after construction on the new basilica began. ■