

Mudslides helped protect ancient Vatican necropolis

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Necropolis under Vatican City State will open to visitors in early 2014

Mud and gravel slides entombed five centuries of pre- and early Christian burials, keeping the "city of the dead" sealed for two millennia. CNS/Vatican Museums photo



It took years and about \$900,000 to excavate and restore the site. Most of the funding came from the Canadian chapter of the Vatican Museums's Patrons of the Arts association, CNS/Vatican Museums photo



Unlike Pompeii which was frozen in time, the necropolis continued to be used even after buried by mudslides, giving archeologists a rare multi-level view. CNS/Vatican Museums photo



Guided tours of the site, limited to small groups by reservation only, will make use of a series of new iron catwalks and informational monitors throughout. CNS/Vatican Museums photo



The necropolis is separate from the catacombs and cemetery under St. Peter's Basilica. It provides a remarkable look at the evolution of early Roman burial practices from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. of Rome's poor, middle and upper classes. CNS/Vatican Museums photo

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Slipping hillsides of clay, mud and gravel entombed an enormous necropolis below today's Vatican City State, keeping its underground "city of the dead" safely sealed for two millennia.

But unlike the Italian town of Pompeii, which was abandoned and frozen in time after the disastrous eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D, the Vatican hillside was still used after each mudslide, and offers a multilayered record of pre- and early Christian burial practices and

treasures spanning over five centuries.

"A necropolis this vast, with so many chronological phases, with so many preserved decorative objects, makes it one-of-a-kind in Rome," Vatican archaeologist Sabina Francini told Catholic News Service Dec. 10.

Finally, after years of excavations and restoration and the installation of interactive monitors for visitors — a 650,000 euros (\$900,000) project funded largely by the Canadian chapter of the Vatican Museums' Patrons of the Arts association — the site will be opened to the public in early 2014.

Guided tours of the necropolis near "Via Triumphalis" (Triumphal Way, a major road leading out of ancient Rome) will be limited to groups of 25 people. Reservations will have to be made in advance via the museums' website. To access, please [click here](#).

The necropolis — separate from the catacombs and cemetery under St. Peter's Basilica believed to include the tomb of St. Peter — will give visitors a remarkable look at the detail and evolution of early Roman burial practices from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. There are hundreds of burial sites on view of people belonging to the poor, middle and upper classes of ancient Rome.

Grated metal catwalks circle around bricked tombs decorated with mosaic tile floors and frescoed walls; terracotta urns containing cremated human remains; and now-open graves revealing human skeletons that lie just as the archaeologists found them.

One small child has two small metal jugs at its feet and a real egg near its right hand. Francini said the "infinite, spherical" form of the egg could represent eternity, though other interpretations see it as a symbol of rebirth.

Another tomb was decorated with a marble replica of a small boy's head; the inscription said the boy was named Tiberius and lived to be four years, four months and 10 days old. The same grave held a terracotta figurine, perhaps the head of doll.

It's easy "to become a bit jaded" about death after working on so many tombs, Francini said, but seeing the loving mementos and memorials left for the departed, "you get choked up."

Among the numerous funerary objects, many exceptionally well-preserved, are small glass bottles that held oils and perfumes; coins placed in the deceased's mouth to pay the ferryman's fare across the rivers separating the worlds of the living and the dead; and a lot of broken mirrors made of burnished metal.

Because almost no mirror was found intact, Francini said she thinks they were intentionally shattered in a symbolic gesture, "perhaps because your image, too, disappears with death."

Bodies were cremated on a flat mound of dirt, visible where the extreme heat of the funeral pyres turned the clay bright red. Charred pinecones, perhaps used as kindling, were also found there.

To hold the ashes, poorer families would use recycled terracotta amphorae made to hold oil or wine; richer families used ceramic or marble urns.

The amphorae were buried with terracotta tubes sticking out of the ground so relatives could pour in ritual offerings of wine, milk or honey. Small libation holes can be seen in many slabs over the tombs.

According to Giandomenico Spinola, director of the museums' ancient Greek and Roman section, people eventually stopped burying their loved ones at the Via Triumphalis necropolis around the early fourth century — the period when the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity.

It then became much more popular to be buried near St. Peter the Apostle on the other side of the Vatican hill, he said, because even the rituals surrounding death were susceptible to "a bit of snobbery."