

## Archaeology and St. Paul's Tomb by Matthew T. Seddon

Just before Christmas last year, the Vatican press office announced that the tomb of St. Paul of Tarsus—apostle, martyr, and patron of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Salt Lake City—had been exposed by archaeological excavations in the Papal Basilica of Saint Paul's Outside the Walls in Rome. The church and tomb had long been a pilgrimage destination for those seeking connection with St. Paul, although the tomb itself had not been easily visible for more than 150 years. As an archaeologist and communicant of St. Paul's, I've noticed an interest in the story, and I've put together this brief review of the evidence and issues, using the limited information available to the general public, for those who are curious.

Before I launch into what is really a fascinating and complicated story, I must provide a few caveats. Although I have a Ph.D. in Anthropology with specific training and focus on the field of Archaeology, my training and experience is not in either Roman or early Christian archaeology. Furthermore, the terrifically dull, but detailed, archaeological technical report that I would ordinarily use to evaluate the findings is not yet widely available as they just finished the excavations. My comments perforce are limited to works published for the general public. May my fellow archaeologists and the good Lord forgive my presumption and any errors of commission or omission.

The archaeological excavations brought to light the tomb itself, the actual stone sarcophagus or coffin, believed to contain the mortal remains of Paul, reportedly killed in Rome in the first century A.D. Paul is arguably a prominent, if not the chief, architect of the formal religion of Christianity. After a dramatic vision of the risen Jesus, he went on a series of missionary expeditions that were a major reason Christianity grew from a small sect within Judaism to the world religion it is today. At least six of his letters are incorporated in the New Testament. He is a central figure in the book of Acts. Oddly enough, despite his importance, we have no contemporary accounts of his death and burial.

However, a strong tradition within the Christian Church dating to at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century holds that he was martyred in Rome around A.D. 64 on the order of the Roman Emperor Nero. Tradition also holds that, as a Roman citizen, he was beheaded by a sword rather than being tortured, crucified or thrown to wild beasts. Accounts from the late first to mid-second century A.D. strongly suggest that he was buried along the road from Rome to the Port of Ostia known as the Ostian Way. The first Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls was built in A.D. 324 by the emperor Constantine. He built over a spot alongside the Ostian Way that was firmly believed at that time to be the tomb of the Apostle. The present church is on the floor plan of a major remodel that occurred about 75 years later. Although subsequently further enlarged, remodeled (multiple times), flooded by the Tiber River, sacked by invaders, hit by earthquakes, and burned down at least once over the intervening centuries, this church, and its altar specifically, were understood to lie over the tomb of St. Paul.

Although the American press reported this story as the discovery of a "lost" tomb of St. Paul, the truth is that the location of the venerated tomb was well known. It had simply been completely closed over after a remodeling of the church. The recent excavation was intended to re-expose

the tomb for the benefit of pilgrims. The Vatican and their archaeologists knew exactly where it was and essentially cut into the existing walls and the floor of the sanctuary in a very precise manner. They exposed portions of the sides and top of a large stone sarcophagus or coffin. Small slabs of marble engraved with the words “Paulo Apostolo Mart” meaning “Paul, Apostle, Martyr” were also recovered in proximity to the coffin. These slabs have several holes cut into them, and the sarcophagus has evidence of a single, now-filled, hole as well. Such holes were commonly used by pilgrims in the ancient and medieval world to push cloth and other objects through to touch the tomb or even the purported remains of the apostle, and thereby create portable memorials of their pilgrimage experience.

Reports from the excavations indicate that the sarcophagus, in addition to being labeled as containing St. Paul, is in a location that supports many aspects of early Church tradition surrounding Paul’s last resting place. The coffin is reported as firmly integrated into what archaeologists call an archaeological “context” or set of physical associations with other remains. In this case, it may well be associated with the first church built on the site in A.D. 324 by Constantine. The archaeologist reported that it was certainly associated with the remodeled basilica built around A.D. 400. This means that it is linked spatially—usually by physically touching—with other archaeological remains, in this case probably foundation and other structural features of the earliest churches on the site. In essence, the dating and nature of those churches are well established by archaeological data and multiple, independent, historical accounts. The coffin is fully and clearly integrated into that construction. The holes provide evidence of pilgrimage. Therefore, we can be very confident that (at a bare minimum) the recent excavations demonstrate that the Vatican archaeologists have re-exposed a tomb that has been considered to be St. Paul’s tomb for more than 1600 years and that hasn’t moved much, if at all, over that time. This result is no small thing and pretty cool in and of itself!

What everyone really wants to know, though, is “Does the coffin contain St. Paul?” This question has not yet been answered and likely cannot be answered. The Vatican archaeologists have not yet opened the tomb, nor have they announced even whether they plan to do so or not. If opened, archaeology can, at best, provide murky answers. Despite what shows like CSI imply, archaeology is actually not very good at identifying specific people, especially long-dead people. Although scientific studies of human skeletal remains can tell us a lot about people—their sex, approximate age at death (in 5-10 year intervals), their height, general health and diet, and whether they suffered any traumas or diseases that affected their bones—these studies don’t provide specific information about the identity of a given person. They can narrow down possibilities, but that is all.

The use of much-vaunted DNA studies (and DNA is very hard to extract from old bone) are not likely to demonstrate the presence of Paul in the tomb. DNA can only definitively identify a person if you have a living relative for comparison or if you have other known remains, like hair, skin, saliva, blood, etc., of the person in question. This is not likely in the case of Paul, a self-described bachelor, whose known relics are dubious at best. Through comparative studies DNA might be able to reduce possibilities for the ethnicity and/or origin of the person in the tomb, but DNA studies will not return the answer “Yes, this is Paul of Tarsus.”

It would be possible, by destroying a large portion of the bones, to get a radiocarbon date for when the person died, but such dates have error ranges of at least 100 or more years. Rather than providing a precise date of, say, A.D. 64, radiocarbon dates are generally expressed as something like “A.D. 60 plus-or-minus 50 years”, meaning the item in question dates to “somewhere between A.D. 10 and 110.” Such a result would not be particularly helpful!

Were the Vatican to open the tomb, the “best” evidence to support the theory that St. Paul is in the coffin, would be the skeletal remains of a male, greater than 50 years old, with evidence of blunt trauma to the cervical vertebrae of the neck, who died sometime between A.D. 10 and 110. This is only circumstantial evidence of the presence of Paul, even if pretty good circumstantial evidence. However, if only a few key bones were missing—such as the pelvis, cervical vertebrae, portions of the skull, bones which are often missing—any conclusions quickly become much more questionable. I have personally excavated more than 20 human burials in my career, some of these in stone tombs. Of these, I’ve been able to identify age and sex on less than a handful. Preservation of bone, even in tombs, is always dicey. Opening the tomb might very well not provide any additional conclusive evidence of the presence of St. Paul. Indeed, the coffin may very well be empty.

Further complicating matters, when you really delve into the meager historical accounts surrounding the tomb, and you look hard and critically at the evidence, the odds that the tomb contains St. Paul start to look even less encouraging.

There are no eyewitness accounts of Paul’s death and burial, and the New Testament nowhere describes these events. He is first noted as a martyr in a letter of Clement, an early Bishop of Rome, written around A.D. 100, nearly 40 years after Paul’s presumed execution. Clement does not discuss Paul’s execution or burial in any detail; he only notes that he was martyred. The earliest detailed account of Paul’s alleged beheading was written in the Acts of Paul. This work also relates that Paul’s neck spouted milk after the sword fell, and that Paul rose from the dead. It fails to note the manner or location of Paul’s burial. Notably this account was not considered, even by the early Church, to be sufficiently valuable or trustworthy to be included in the New Testament.

The earliest account of some sort of tomb structure associated with Paul appears to date to A.D. 200-220. One Caius the Presbyter is quoted as saying “I can show you the trophies [tomb monuments or memorials] of the apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or Ostian Way you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church.” This quote is found only in a book by the Church historian Eusebius, who wrote his book in A.D. 320 or so, about 100 years after the original quote was written. This fragmentary quote appears to be the first reference to a tomb of an apostle on the Ostian Way. If you combine it with other accounts suggesting that Peter was martyred near the Vatican hill (and present Basilica of St. Peter) and other accounts suggesting Paul was beheaded on the Ostian Way, and if you assume he was buried near the locale of his martyrdom, and if you assume that Caius is indeed referring to Peter and Paul, this account is the first reference to a tomb of Paul on the Ostian way. It is, of course, notably imprecise, as the Ostian Way runs for miles and the location of the tomb is not specified with reference to any other landmarks. Nonetheless, Constantine’s basilica, located on the Ostian Way, was built at about the same time that Eusebius quoted Caius. It is clear then that the early

Church considered the spot to be the location of Paul's tomb, and it has been venerated as such ever since. We should bear in mind, though, that veneration doesn't equate to scientific proof.

To summarize, our best historical evidence for the general location of St. Paul's tomb comes from a book written more than 250 years after his death which quotes a book nearly 100 years older that itself was written at least a half century after the death in question. It would be like placing a memorial over President George Washington's tomb (died 1799) today, using a source written recently that is itself based on a book written in 1850 that said something like "the memorial to our beloved leader is on the road to Richmond." This isn't horrible evidence, but it isn't great evidence either. One presumes there were other beliefs and traditions supporting the evidence used by the early Church to identify St. Paul's tomb, but these accounts are not available to us any more.

Further complicating matters are other stories relating that Paul's remains were moved about at least once, and possibly several times, before reaching the location that would become the church of St. Paul's Outside the Walls. They may have lain for a time in Roman catacombs. Early movement and hiding of his remains is likely, given that Paul's martyrdom probably occurred during Nero's murderous persecution of the Christians. This was a time when Paul's friends and supporters, if not martyred themselves, would have been fearing for their lives. Even supposing they could have recovered his body, the chances that a marginal, often detested religious group, could have entombed it along a major highway and kept those remains undisturbed through several centuries when Christians were outlaws seems slim. The coffin itself, a large, expensive, and engraved item, is not likely the production of such a harried group, and is more likely to have been made at or around the time of the construction of the basilica. Minimally, the recently exposed tomb is not likely to have been St. Paul's first or only resting place, and the sarcophagus is not likely to have been the coffin of the church built by Constantine, which other stories say was one of solid bronze.

Despite these uncertainties, however, the results of the recent archaeological excavations remain interesting. The work has re-exposed to view what is clearly a very old coffin believed to contain the mortal remains of St. Paul for more than 1600 years. The excavations have demonstrated that the current locale is at least firmly associated with the first churches on the site. It is also located along a road that an early account, written 50-75 years after Paul's death, identified as the road where an apostle (probably Paul) was buried. Thus, the archaeology supports much of the tradition but cannot prove the tradition.

So what do I make of all this, as an archaeologist and an Episcopalian? Archaeologists can (and do) nitpick each other's arguments to death, much as I have done here. One could also, reasonably, argue that the archaeological and historical evidence for Paul's burial at St. Paul's Outside the Walls could be a whole lot worse. Certainly, nothing in the recent excavations directly contradicts the church tradition. Perhaps we shouldn't be asking archaeology and science for proof and justification of our beliefs and hopes. What speaks to me in particular about the re-exposure of this sarcophagus is the connection it makes to St. Paul, whether or not he actually rests in that coffin.

I think all humans long for an earthly connection, however tenuous, to the divine. As an Episcopalian, I believe that St. Paul, a one-time persecutor of early Christians, had a stunning personal connection with the divine in his vision of the risen Christ. He teaches us of grace and the power of redemption by faith. He went on from his experience, even though saddled by his background and culture, to preach a stunning message of equality in Christ for ALL people. His mission and letters brought joy and hope to new churches around the Mediterranean; churches that are the ancestors of our churches.

The tomb in St. Paul's Outside the Walls has, for nearly 2,000 years, been our best earthly connection to this apostle, and through him, the astonishing prospect of conversion of the heart and salvation by divine grace. Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people have sanctified this place by their visits, even trying to reach through the stone to touch St. Paul himself. The new excavations firmly demonstrate the long history of pilgrimage to St. Paul's Outside the Walls. I would love to join that throng myself.

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