Sarcophagus of St Paul discovered

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2006 has been a year of discoveries for Rome. New frescos, new archaeological finds and statues returned after years of foreign residence have made this year a hit parade of novelties.

But, as briefly reported here a week ago, this week the Holy See topped the charts as it announced the unearthing of the tomb (a sarcophagus) of St. Paul. Vatican archaeologist Giorgio Filippi actually found the tomb three years ago, but further research established that there is no doubt, the sarcophagus found under the pavement of the Basilica of St. Paul's is really that of the Apostle, as Filippi announced in a press conference last week (Monday).

Unlike St. Peter, whose traditional presence in Rome was supported by a paucity of factual evidence until the excavations under St. Peter's Basilica from 1939 to 1950, St. Paul's sojourn in Rome is well documented in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul was probably sent to Rome as a prisoner somewhere around A.D. 58 to 60 and spent several years among the early Christian community of Rome.

Eusebius of Caesarea tells us, Paul was beheaded by him [Nero], while tradition elaborates that the saint was martyred outside the city at a site now known as Tre Fontane, or the Three Fountains. This picturesque name is derived from the legend that when Paul was beheaded, his head bounced three times on the ground -- miraculously creating three fountains. A church has graced the spot since the fifth century and today it is a monastery.

St. Paul's body was taken a little closer to the city, along the Via Ostiense, or the main road toward the sea, and buried alongside this major thoroughfare. Eusebius also cites the third-century ecclesiastic Gaius who claimed that he can show you the trophies of the Apostles. If you will go to the Vatican or along the Via Ostiensis you will find the trophies of the founders of this church.

These trophies were simple, makeshift affairs meant to remain hidden from the eyes of Imperial persecutors. Only under Constantine were the apostles given due architectural homage. Great basilicas were erected over the simple tombs and the early graves were enclosed in the foundations of these churches.

The sarcophagus found by Giorgio Filippi was made slightly later, during the reign of Emperor Theodosius, the man who outlawed all other religious cults in 395, leaving Christianity the sole religion of the empire. The large marble sarcophagus was covered by a plaque bearing the

inscription 'Apostle Paul Martyr'.

Thanks to the work of Filippi and the engineers of the church, the sarcophagus, hidden behind the plaque under several feet of cement, was brought to light and can now be seen by pilgrims to the basilica.

This discovery restores to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls its central purpose as the place where the faithful go to pray at the resting place of the great apostle.

Dante, Michelangelo, St. Philip Neri and millions of others never questioned the authenticity of the location until a fire in 1823 devastated the basilica. The dramatic rebuilding and the subsequent enclosing of the sarcophagus in a block of cement made the historical reality of Paul's martyrdom at Tre Fontane and his burial along the Via Ostiense seem dim and doubtful.

The excavations began in 2002 and today the sarcophagus found is on view for the faithful through a glass window laid into the floor. The remaining question is whether, as with the tomb of St. Peter, the remains of the Apostle Paul are still present. Catholics the world over had to wait 35 years from Pope Pius XII's announcement of the discovery of Peter's grave to the declaration that the bones had also been recovered.

Source: Zenit