

ST PETER'S COLUMNS

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ON entering St Peter's the eye of the visitor is almost immediately caught and held by the great canopy sheltering the papal altar which, according to an ancient tradition, stands over the burial place of St Peter. The arresting feature of the canopy is the shape of the columns which stand like gigantic old-fashioned sticks of barley sugar in the heart of Christendom. This canopy, executed in bronze and standing on the immense piers necessary to carry its great weight, was made in the sixteenth century by Bernini on the instructions of Pope Urban VIII, and it is, perhaps, one of the most remarkable features of a remarkable church.

The recent excavations under St Peter's have thrown much light on the tradition that the papal altar marks the place where St Peter was buried, and they have illumined much that has hitherto been obscure. The archaeological evidence resulting from the excavations does not, it is true, provide conclusive proof of the authenticity of the tradition, but it is entirely consistent with it. It is certain, however, that from very early times it was the firm belief of the Church that the apostle was buried on the traditional site. This site was in a pagan cemetery adjoining the road which ran near the Circus of Gaius and Nero; it is this cemetery which has now been partly excavated. The early Christians erected a shrine there to mark the place and to honour the remains of the apostle. There can be little doubt that this shrine was the *τροπαιον* seen by the Roman priest, Gaius, on the Vatican Hill in the third century.¹ The shrine was in the form of a small open courtyard, in the west wall of which was an apsidal niche; against this niche was set a horizontal travertine slab supported on two small columns. It seems probable that the remains of St Peter had been buried in a position at the base of the niche, and it is of interest to record that the Vatican excavators found bones in this position.

1 Gaius's description is quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccles.*, ii, 25, 6, 7.

When Constantine conceived his plan to build a church on the Vatican hill he chose a site that was remarkable for its great difficulties. The site was a sloping one, on the side of the hill, where a Roman cemetery was already in existence. It involved the builders, not only in vast terracing operations, carried out on difficult and shifting ground, but also in the destruction of a pagan cemetery that was still in active use. The compelling reason for the choice of such a difficult site could only have been the rooted belief that the shrine marked the burial place of the apostle, since it is clear that Constantine's purpose was to build a church in which the tomb of St Peter had the place of honour as its central feature. The immense difficulties presented by the site thus afford eloquent testimony to Constantine's belief that in undertaking the building of his church he was doing honour to the actual burial place of St Peter. The building of the great church is, therefore, a striking demonstration of the strength of the ancient tradition that placed the tomb of St Peter in the open courtyard in the cemetery on the Vatican hill. Indeed, it would be difficult to account satisfactorily for the remains which have been found under the papal altar except upon the assumption that they are the remains of the actual grave of St Peter.

Constantine's church was a basilica having an apse and a transept and it was so situated that the shrine was at the centre of the line joining the shoulders of the apse. The recent excavations have shown quite clearly, and unexpectedly, that the shrine was not buried beneath an altar but stood above the pavement. When the church was built, all the surrounding masonry was demolished except the primitive shrine itself which was then encased in marble, and this little structure became the architectural focus of Constantine's church. The position of the altar in the church is unknown. It cannot have been within the railed enclosure of the shrine, since the available space would have been too small, and this conclusion seems to be supported by the references in the relevant documents; in all probability it stood in the nave of the church.

Although very little of all this remains today, it is possible to form a fairly accurate idea of the appearance of the shrine as it stood in Constantine's church, for we can supplement the surviving remains by the description in the *Liber Pontificalis* and by

the representation on the so-called Pola casket.² The shrine itself is shown on the Pola casket as having pilasters at the corners,³ a carved cornice and an arched opening in the eastern face. Within the arch of the opening there is shown a cross standing on a shelf which, presumably, represents the travertine slab of the primitive shrine. The space below the slab appears to be closed by doors. The shrine stood upon a low platform enclosed by a railing and over the shrine there was a canopy carried by four columns. The canopy consisted of four ribs, each springing from a column and arched towards the central point from which some object hung.⁴ Two further columns were set against the shoulders of the apse, in line with the rear pair of columns supporting the canopy, and this line of four columns formed a continuous screen hung with curtains. The marks of the bases of the two rear columns of the canopy can still be seen. Thus, the shrine itself stood on the line of the screen, and the canopy, with the railed space beneath, projected forward into the transept.

The six columns, which are very clearly shown in the Pola casket, still exist. The axis of the shaft of each column is cut to a gentle spiral, producing the distinctive 'barley sugar' appearance of the columns of Bernini's canopy; they must, however, be carefully distinguished from the common form of column having a straight axis and spiral fluting. They are decorated with alternate bands of spiral fluting and vine scroll. Their shape, which was unique in their period, and their decorative ornament are in agreement with the description in the *Liber Pontificalis*. The *Liber Pontificalis* recorded that these columns were brought by Constantine de Grecias; they must have been carved at about the end of the second century A.D., and in all probability they came from a building in the northern Aegean.

At some time that was probably near the end of the sixth century, the floor of the apse was raised, and the raised floor

2 The *Liber Pontificalis* contains, with some exceptions, the lives of the Popes from St Peter to Stephen VI (*d.* 897); see L. Duchesne, ed., *Le Liber Pontificalis: texte, introduction et commentaire* (vol. i, 1884-6; vol. ii, 1889-92). The Pola casket is a fifth-century ivory casket which was found at Salmagher, near Pola in Istria, in 1906, and which is now in the museum at Pola. On one side of it there is a representation of the shrine in Constantine's church; an identification that has been made certain by the recent excavations.

3 According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, these pilasters were of porphyry.

4 The object must be the golden lamp, shaped in the form of a crown, which, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, was among the gifts made by Constantine and which hung before the shrine of the apostle.

was carried forward into the transept forming a projecting platform. The shrine was almost completely enveloped by this platform, but the front of it, with its arched opening and doors, remained exposed in the wall of a recessed forecourt formed in the front of the platform. Means of access to the shrine itself were provided by a semi-circular ambulatory or *confessio* which was constructed at the circumference of the apse beneath the newly-built platform.⁵ An altar, surmounted by a canopy resting on four porphyry columns, was placed over the shrine. There can be little doubt that the purpose of this radical re-arrangement was to install the altar directly over the relics of the shrine so as to bring St Peter's into conformity with what had become the regular practice of the western Church. This re-arrangement made it necessary to remove from their original position the six spiral columns and the canopy which they supported, and after their removal the columns were set up in front of the raised platform so as to form a screen; the recent excavations have revealed several of the pedestal bases on which the columns stood in their new position.

In the eighth century Pope Gregory III received, as a present from Eutychius, the Byzantine Exarch of Ravenna, six more columns of very similar design and workmanship, and these were set up in front of the original six to form an outer screen. The two sets of columns remained in this position throughout the middle ages, but in 1507 the outer set was removed in order to allow the construction of the building designed by Bramante to protect the apse and shrine during the rebuilding of the church. In the Raphael Room at the Vatican there is a painting by Giulio Romano which, although partly a reconstruction of old St Peter's, shows the screen, altar and apse as they stood in Bramante's structure.

Of the six outer columns removed in 1507, five are still in existence. Two of them stood for a time in the old church at the entrance to the chapel of John VII; they were transferred by Urban VIII to their present position on the altar of St Francesco in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. A third, known as the *colonna santa*, has been frequently moved and now stands, surrounded by a balustrade and grille, in the chapel containing Michelangelo's Pietà. Bernini used two more of these columns

⁵ The remains of this may still be seen in the covered *confessio* and the Capella Clementina.

to decorate the gallery of Longinus above the north-east pier of the dome of the new church. The sixth column of the outer set has disappeared.

An inscription carved on the face of the balustrade surrounding the *colonna santa* recalls a curious legend associated with these columns. The origin of the legend is unknown, but by the fifteenth century it was widely believed that these columns were those of Solomon's Temple and one of them, the *colonna santa*, had been popularly identified as the column against which Christ leaned when he argued with the doctors. This column suffered so greatly at the hands of pious pilgrims, who chipped off fragments as relics, that to protect it Cardinal Orsini, in 1438, ordered that it should be enclosed by a marble balustrade surmounted by a metal grille. The balustrade and grille are still to be seen surrounding the *colonna santa* in its present position in the chapel of the Pietà.

The six columns of the inner screen continued to stand immediately in front of the raised platform, within Bramante's structure. They were eventually moved by Bernini to decorate three of the galleries (those of Saints Helena, Veronica and Andrew) above the piers of the dome of the new church; the fourth gallery (that of Longinus) received, as already noted, two of the columns from the outer screen.

Each of the eleven columns that still exist is in one piece throughout, including the base and the capital. Each column is nearly sixteen feet in length and is cut from fine grained, translucent, Greek marble, and each is decorated with alternate zones of spiral fluting and scroll work. They are not, however, identical. The six original columns of the inner screen form three pairs, but no two are exactly alike. Of the columns of the outer screen, those now in the gallery of Longinus and the *colonna santa* are similar to those of the inner screen but they differ in their details and in the character of their relief. The remaining pair, now in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, were originally of the same general character as the other columns. At an early date, however, they were very skilfully shortened by the removal of the upper fluted zone and by the reworking of the capital. This must have been done before the columns were removed to the chapel of John VII in old St Peter's, as a drawing of the entrance to this chapel by Grimaldi, preserved in the Vatican library, shows the

columns in their shortened form. This pair of columns is of special interest because Bernini used them as the model for the columns of his great canopy surmounting the papal altar. The use of these shortened columns as models is the reason why Bernini's columns differ slightly in shape from the columns now standing in the galleries of the dome.

The spiral shape of these 'barley sugar' columns was unique and their position in old St Peter's, in front of the shrine of the apostle, was well calculated to attract the attention of all who visited the church. It is hardly to be wondered that they were copied from time to time. The oldest survivors of the copies are two small pairs of columns, of which one pair now stands in the church of SS. Trinità dei Monti and the other has stood in the church of San Carlo at Cave di Palestrina, twenty-five miles east of Rome, since the sixteenth century when it was transferred thither from the church of San Lorenzo in Rome.

At the beginning of the twelfth century there was a great revival of Roman decorative sculpture that was largely due to the Roman marble-workers, the *marmorari romani*, who are frequently referred to as the *Cosmati*. Although the *marmorari* drew deeply upon the models of ancient Rome, which they found all around them, and were ready to borrow whatever took their fancy, they were no mere copyists as were the makers of the columns in SS. Trinità dei Monti and San Carlo. Into their work they infused their own spirit which was essentially that of the middle ages. The *marmorari* took the spiral column of St Peter's and turned it into a simpler and more purely decorative thing, and by omitting the scroll work and extending the fluting throughout the length of the column, they emphasized its curious shape. Spiral columns are common in the cosmatesque work of Rome and central Italy and they were, perhaps, first used in the great Paschal candlesticks at Anagni, Ferentino and Terracina.

The spiral column soon became part of the general decorative stock-in-trade, not only of the *marmorari* but of painters and sculptors who carried it far and wide. The spiral column even came to England, where one of the *marmorari*, Peter of Rome, used it to decorate the tomb of Henry III in Westminster Abbey. One of the factors behind this spreading influence, which persisted long after the destruction of Constantine's church and the removal of the columns from the shrine of St Peter, was doubtless

their popular association with Solomon's Temple. Jean Fouquet had drawn them when he was in Rome about 1446, and he reproduced them in a picture of the Temple among the illustrations that he made for Etienne Chevalier's Book of Hours, as well as in his miniatures for the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus; and Pirro Ligorio copied the columns for one of the fountains of the Villa d'Este.

It was Raphael, however, who was chiefly responsible for carrying their influence throughout Europe. Commissioned in 1515 to prepare cartoons for the tapestries intended for the Sistine Chapel, he used the columns in his representation of the healing of the lame man by St Peter at the Beautiful Gate. The tapestries, woven at Brussels and Mortlake from Raphael's cartoons, carried the spiral columns all over Europe and were the inspiration of the twisted columns that became an established feature of all European baroque art.⁶ In some cases the derivation from Raphael's tapestries is direct, as in the Palace of the Gonzagas at Mantua, or in Ham House at Richmond; in other cases the derivation is from the common stock of contemporary ornament inspired by Raphael.

The twisted marble columns have stood in St Peter's for about 1,500 years and during that time they have exercised an influence that is greater, both in time and extent, than that of almost any other monument of antiquity. But perhaps the strangest incident in their long history is the use of two of them by Bernini as models for the columns of the canopy which he placed over the shrine of St Peter, for he could not have known that four of those columns supported the original canopy over the shrine.

6 Raphael's cartoons are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.