



BRIEF GUIDE TO THE CATACOMBS OF SAINT CHRISTINA



1. ENTRANCE

We find ourselves in the oldest and most sacred part of the monumental complex which we are visiting; we are in the cemetery of the early Christian Community of Bolsena used from the end of the 3rd century until the first 20 years of the 5th century.

Here, together with many brother and sisters in Christ who are waiting for the Resurrection, **Saint Christina, the young Martyr of Bolsena**, was buried, a victim of the great persecution of Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th century, as she was only 12 years old. Upon her venerated tomb immediately a small memorial monument was erected which was enlarged in the 10th century in the actual form of a small underground basilica (or "Grotto of Saint Christina"). The frescos that adorn the semi-cylindrical vaulted ceiling are probably from the 16th century; the "Saint Peter" in the bowl of the apse is of the second half of the 15th century and the stupendous statute, portraying the "Saint Christina in the sleep of death", is the work of Benedetto Buglioni which was done between 1493 and 1497.

In 1880 a lucky group of archaeologists, directed by Giovanni Battista De' Rossi and Henry Stevenson, agreed to search for the presumed tomb of our Martyr

2. AROUND THE SARCOPHAGUS

This tomb is a grand sarcophagus, in local stone covered with pedestals (acroteri), of the late-imperial age. On the posterior face there is an irregular opening which allows of the cineraria urn of white marble with the inscription: †I·RQES/CP·BAT·X·M (†HIC REQUIESCIT CORPUS BEATAE XRISTINAE MARTYRIS - *"Here rests the body of Blessed Christina Martyr"*). Inside this urn were found a large number of "small" bones of a human body not older than 14 years and a silver coin of king Berengarius from the first half of the 10th century. The irregular opening, the relics and the coin, confirm the ancient tradition of the Local Churches of Bolsena, Sepino and Palermo about the theft of part of the mortal remains of the Saint carried out by two pilgrims of the 10th century. The relics discovered in the sarcophagus are today kept in the basilica, in the new Chapel of Saint Christina, in a precious silver urn with enamels.

3. IN THE CATACOMB

We are able to enter into a part of the catacomb which was discovered in the last century by means of a modern entranceway. Our underground cemetery is of the typical "Christina Tree" plan: one central gallery and different lateral branches which become shorter as we proceed further from the entrance. What immediately attracts your attention is the remarkable vertical development of the promenade galleries. This witnesses to the long period for which the necropolis was in use, and also the strong devotion of that Community to the place of burial of Saint Christina; in fact, the first gallery, to the left of the entrance, is among the longest, higher and more densely used. The most ancient burials are those at the top, in that to digging deeper was done as the need

increased, and it is in that old phase that we find "Arcosolio" tombs (a niche in the form of an arch, sculpted into the wall), later we note more simple niches closed with molded slabs and sealed with mortar. Some of these niches are distinguished by simple graffiti drawn in the plaster of crosses, monograms of Christ, or brief passages; others are richly decorated with frescoes, and still others with marble-like inscriptions where we are often able to read the beautiful augural acclamation: "**PAX TIBI CUM SANCTIS - PEACE TO YOU WITH SAINTS** (Saints, in this context, means Faithful - all baptized people, buried here in this catacomb)".

Frequently near the niches we notice some shelves or niches which served to place lamps and balsam Tars. **It is important to remember that the Catacomb was only the cemetery of the christian community, and it was never a place of refuge for the Christians during the persecutions, nor a hiding place; rather the Catacomb was known by all and protected by Roman law.**

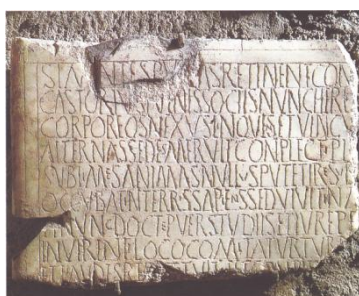
4. THE LOMBARD CEMETERY

Climbing back up to the level of the Sanctuary, one can enter the so-called "Lombard Cemetery", mistakenly defined this way in the last century. In reality we find ourselves in a small section of the catacomb which remains with the same dimensions of its origins (height) and afterwards it was enlarged with the demolition of the tufo walls which divided the galleries. We notice many "Arcosolio" tombs, -burial niches and more recent tombs in the pavement. Here there are also inscriptions, many of them very important, as that of the youth **Alexander** who died shortly after having received Confirmation (*the translation is to be found above this epitaph*), that of child **Castorio**, or that of **Maecio Paterno**, "Mayor" of the city.



*To **Mettia Navigia**, a good wife, the sweetest daughter, respectful daughter-in-law: her fidelity, her pudency and her devotion will never be overcome. She lived 34 years, 4 months, 8 days; spend with her husband 20 years, 4 months, 24 days. The husband, protector of the fortune of this city, posed (this epitaph). She was buried on 12th September, as consuls were our lords Valens, for the fifth time, and Valentinianus. PTCS (Peace to you with saints.)*

(Mettia was married to an important man short time before her 14th birthday. Deceased in 376.)



*If the borders of heaven receive the souls of elected, now the young **Castorio** is there in company of those who are gone ahead. Abandoning the bounds of the body and those of the world, he deserved to reach the eternal seats of the blessed.*

Nobody should believe that noble souls finishes between the shadows: the wise dies on the earth, but continues to live in heaven.

And now, well-educated boy, expert in the studies of the law, a legion of blessed is accompanying you to the verdant place.

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