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## THE UNDERGROUND CEMETERY OF SAN SENATORE

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### Abstract

At the fifteenth mile of Via Appia, in a deviation to the right of the path of the *regina viarum*, forced to the deviation from a deep valley in the past broke the linear direction of the consular road, there is the underground cemetery known as the Catacombs of San Senatore. The Christian necropolis was built using the articulated and irregular space of the galleries of ancient pozzolana quarries. The galleries of the quarry appear to develop following the shape of a pozzolana layer existing underground, with no thought to follow a regular layout table. The work of the quarrymen was facilitated by the configuration of the site, since the pozzolana deposit is between two layers of lava stone, that represented, respectively, the floor and the ceiling of the quarry. The presence, in antiquity, of more gateways that led to the underground environments, accessing directly from the Via Appia, suggest to an “industrial” use of the extracted material, easily transportable through the ancient Roman road. Around the third century AD the quarry was transformed, and the first underground burials were made, followed by an intensive development of the cemetery. The construction of the tombs was accompanied by the redefinition of the underground environments: paintings with religious frescoes, which decorate some of the walls of the underground areas closest to the Via Appia, demonstrate the successful conversion of the quarry environments, which have become a sacred place for the first Christian communities of the *civitas albana*. The present work is aimed at reconstructing the phases that have characterized the human settlement of the hypogeum, placing it in the historical and topographical context.

**Keywords:** underground, quarry, catacomb, Via Appia, San Senatore, Alban Hills, pozzolana, Christian cemetery.

### Riassunto

Al XV miglio della Via Appia, nel tratto iniziale di svolta a destra del percorso della *regina viarum*, costretta a tale deviazione da un profondo vallone che in passato interrompeva il deciso sviluppo in linea retta della strada consolare, è ubicato l'ipogeo cimiteriale conosciuto con il nome di Catacombe di San Senatore. La necropoli cristiana fu realizzata utilizzando lo spazio articolato e irregolare di lacinie appartenute ad antiche cave di pozzolana, aperte probabilmente a cavallo tra il I secolo a.C. e il secolo successivo. Le gallerie della cava sembrano svilupparsi seguendo la conformazione naturale dello strato di materiale pozzolanico presente nel sottosuolo, più che impostarsi su un regolare tracciato prodotto da uno studio a tavolino. L'opera dei cavatori fu agevolata dalla fortunata configurazione del sito, infatti il deposito di pozzolana è compreso tra due strati di peperino, la cui disposizione e consistenza ha permesso di utilizzare uno dei due strati tufacei come pavimento della cava, l'altro come soffitto. La presenza, in antichità, di più ingressi che conducevano negli ambienti sotterranei, accedendo direttamente dalla Via Appia, fanno pensare all'impiego “industriale” del materiale estratto, facilmente trasportabile attraverso la percorrenza dell'antica via romana. Intorno al III secolo d.C. la cava cambiò destinazione d'uso, comparvero le prime sepolture ipogee, seguite da un intenso sviluppo sepolcrale dell'area. Alla realizzazione delle tombe si accompagnò la ridefinizione degli ambienti sotterranei, le pitture, di tipo religioso, che decorano alcune pareti dei settori ipogei più vicini all'Appia, testimoniano l'avvenuta riconversione degli ambienti di cava, divenuti ormai luogo sacro per le prime comunità cristiane della *civitas albana*. Il presente lavoro è mirato a ricostruire le fasi che hanno caratterizzato l'antropizzazione dell'ipogeo, inserendolo nel contesto topografico e storico.

**Parole chiave:** ipogeo, cava, catacomba, Via Appia, San Senatore, Colli Albani, pozzolana, cimitero cristiano.

### Geological consideration

During the Pleistocene (GRADSTEIN, OGG, SCHMITZ, OGG, 2012) the coast of Latium assumed approximately its present appearance.

Starting from the middle Pleistocene, six major volcanic districts, known as the Roman Magmatic Province, erupted thousands of cubic kilometers of magma.

The volcano of the Alban Hills, called Latium Volcano (AAVV, 2009), is one of these districts and is considered dormant. The activity of this volcano has given rise to four separate devices eruptive, or facies:

- Lazio Volcano (about 600,000 years ago);
- Tuscolano-Artemisio (about 300,000 years ago);
- Faete (between 290,000 and 270,000 years ago);

- Via dei Laghi (between 50,000 and 19,000 years ago).

The underground object of this study, located between the crater and Ariccia to Albano, born during the Via dei Laghi facies, (FUNICELLO, GIORDANO, DE RITA, CARAPEZZA, BARBERI, 2002), originated from the activity of excavation carried out by the Romans, in order to extract the pozzolana, a term that derives Latin *puteolānu(m) pulverem* meaning “dust of Pozzuoli” (in Latin *Puteoli*), a volcanic material widely used in construction. The pozzolana quarry in question is characterized by three main layers of volcanic material, the pozzolana being precisely enclosed within two layers of gray tuff, and tuff, in ancient times known as *lapis albana*.

## Topography

In *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* it is specified that at the XV mile of the Via Appia, in Albano, there were the remains of these saints Secondo, Carpofofo, Vittorino and Severiano (DE ROSSI, DUCHESNE, 1894). This is a clear indication for the pilgrims of the first half of the fifth century (LIBERA, 2010), of the place where there was a Christian cemetery.

The Appian Way was built in 312 BC by the censor Appius Claudius (LIVIO, IX, 29). The paving was built in the following years, in different phases. The Appia was provided with stations, for changing horses, placed between seven and eight miles in highly populated sites, while in the less populated the stations were every ten to twelve miles distant (VISTOLI, 2013).

In the area next to the XV mile of the ancient consular road, before the transformation of the pozzolana quarry in the Christian cemetery, there were built different funeral and burial buildings with different shapes (LILLI, 2002).

During excavations (CASERTA, 2005), conducted between 1999 and 2002, structures belonging to a Roman Villa, adjacent to the Catacomb of San Senatore, came to light. In the SW sector of the villa, near the service areas, works aimed at creating a funeral area, from the late imperial age can be identified. The depositions were carried out in "formae" (graves dug in the ground) dug in tuff and partly covered with cement.

## The underground in the ancient sources

The cavities objects of this study are mentioned in ancient sources (VALENTINI, ZUCCHETTI, 1942) of Christian origin, but there is not any reference, about the existence of the hypogeum at the time of its use as a quarry of pozzolana.

In *Depositio Martyrum*, the drafting of which is between the first half of the third century and the beginning of the next, four saints are mentioned as buried in Albano. Even in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum*, from the first half of the fifth century, the four saints Secondo, Carpofofo, Vittorino and Severiano are commemorated, on August 8, always "in Albano" also specifying the point where the Saints were deposed "Via Appia, miliario ab Urbe XV" (Via Appia, the XV mile from Rome).

The *De Sanctis locis Martyrum quae sunt Foris civitatis Romae*, text of reference for Christian pilgrims in the late seventh century, at least in the form arrived today, which should go back to the last years of Honorius I (625-638), or at the beginning of the period of Pope Theodore I (642-649), reports the following: "On the same road (Appia Antica) you come to the city albana, and, through the same city, at the church of San Senatore, where rests also the body of Perpetua and countless saints who will do to you great miracles". So, it seems that the pilgrims visited the Christian cemetery of suburban of the *civitas albana*, to pay tribute to the remains of the martyrs of San Senatore, Santa Perpetua, and some other saints.

It remains the *Vetus Martyrologium Romanum*, in which is mentioned the date of the anniversary of San Senatore, indicating Albano as his place of deposition.

## Explorations and studies

The first news about the existence of the hypogeum of San Senatore, after the abandonment occurred presumably in medieval times, date back to 1671, when, with the casual discovery of some areas of the catacombs, due to the work of construction of the convent of the Carmelites, the underground voids were visited and described by the Carmelite Father LUDOVICO PEREZ DE CASTRO (GALIETI, 1948).

Later, the explorations of BOLDETTI, in 1720, followed and the quotation of the catacombs of Albano, in 1787, by the historian ANTONIO RICCY (1787).

Other scholars has studied the catacomb of Albano, here we recall, in addition to those already mentioned, G. B. DE ROSSI, who, at the age of just 22 years, in 1843, visited the Christian underground of Albano; in 1869 he carried out a study on the history of the catacombs of San Senatore. The latest research, in chronological order, are the result of the excavation that took place during the years 1989-90-91, under the direction of the prof. VINCENZO FIOCCHI NICOLAI, and on behalf of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology (PCAS). They are without any doubt the more detailed investigation carried out in the Christian cemetery of Albano. The main publication from these works (FIOCCHI NICOLAI et al., 1992) is to be considered the fundamental text of reference in this paper.

## Pozzolana quarry

The geological conformation of the ancient pozzolana quarry has been the object of deep studies from GIOACCHINO D'OSSAT (1942). He observed that the peperino layer visible from the catacombs access, whit estimated power of 5.3 m, was as well the vault of the cave.

The geological formation right underneath the peperino layer is a loose sand, and was object of the exploitation. D'OSSAT remarked that this pozzolana layer was right for making mortar that means that the pre-cimiterial hypogeum was surely used like a quarry of extraction of building material.

There are many other elements to affirm, with no doubt, that the Christian Cemetery Cave was realized on a pre-existent pozzolana quarry, starting from its own structural conformation: the galleries are very wide, the vaults and walls are rounded, and develop on irregular and winding paths.

The exploited pozzolana layer was 3 meters thick, included between two layers of peperino, the upper one of which, studied by D'OSSAT, represented the vault of the cave, while the lower one was its floor.

In the eastern side of the cemetery the reconstruction of the ancient "lacinie" (long tunnels) looks more difficult because they have been strongly used for the Christian burials.

The entrances gallery toward Appia, characterized by rounded shape, can be seen by the large tomb "n2" (for this and the following references see Fig. 1) and from the arcosolio tomb "a6" in the room "C", which walls were used for closing the outer section of the cave.

It can be presumed that even the other rooms belonging to the eastern section of the cave, had a different



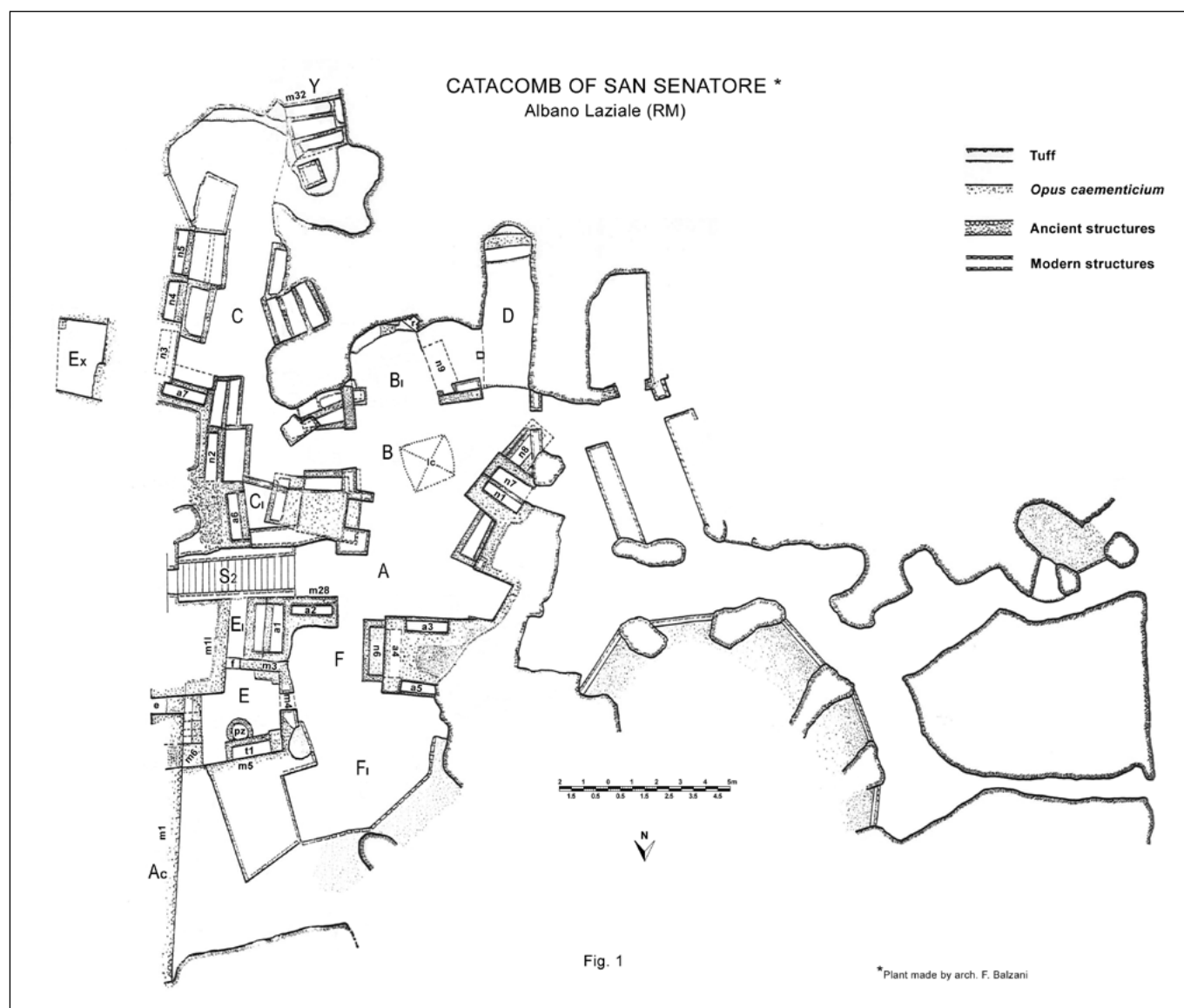


Fig. 1: plant of the Catacomb of San Senatore.  
Fig. 1: planimetria delle catacombe di San Senatore.

conformation compared at the new cemetery plan. This conformation can be seen through short sections of the cave galleries, still visible from the original floor of the quarry, in room "A" and "B", situated about 1 meter below the present floor.

The ancient cave floor, shows many irregularities. The average height (distance from floor to vault) is about 3 meters, corresponding to the pozzolana layer before the exploitation.

At the NE margin it is possible to see a huge open "Ac" about 12 m long, that connects to the Via Appia. This open was closed by a wall (m1) realized with the *opus incertum* construction technique. At the southern side of this wall there is the passage "e", 80 cm large.

It is possible to see two more ancient entrances in sector "C". The first one, made of mortar, and still showing the wood shape of scaffolding, is located in SW position, beside tomb "n5", behind a support of a modern pillar. The second one, "m32", S of the site, should interrupt the access of sector "Y" of the cave. The entrance stair "s2", made in 1887 by the will of Card. MONACO LA

VALLETTA, Bishop of Albano, was built, more or less, in the same cemetery entrance area.

Nevertheless it is possible to suppose the existence of a more ancient stair by 3 steps situated in the front wall of the arcosolio tomb "a2". The way-in of the cave seems to be less steep than that founded in 1700, as it can be seen from vault cut evidences right over arcosolio tombs "a1" and "a2" situated in lower position with respect to the actual vault.

It is possible to suppose that the 1700 entrance corresponded to an access of the quarry. Once reached the "EI" and "CI" terrace, it was possible to arrive at the present floor by the 3 steps.

### Cemetery phases

At the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the cave became a funeral structure. Actually it seems that the first area used as *cubiculum* (burial chamber) "E" hosted the burial "t1", and is located N of the way-in stairs. After the entrance "e", located on the wall "m1" faced on Via Appia it's been closed, the area it's been limited by

the building up of “m3”, “m4”, “m5”, “m6” walls made by regular shaped tuff bricks. The ancient entrance at the *cubiculum* should be located in the “f” opening of about 50 cm located on “m3” wall, the next room “EI” was a kind of entrance aligned along the arcosolio tomb “a1”.

Inside *cubiculum* there is a pit about 5 m deep, excavated in the peperino layer below the floor level. The pit near the burial “t1” suggest that it was used as cultural aims, maybe for the *refrigerium*<sup>1</sup> rite.

The small fresco relics still *in situ*, decorated by red and green drawings, suggest to date the *cubiculum* “E” between the second and first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century DC. Actually isolated by the rest of the cave, as a consequence of collapses and refillings, still interesting for its advanced position compared to the cave, the funeral room “EX”, eventually founded after a collapse in 1989, shows how the cave and the cemetery in the past developed towards the Via Appia.

The Christian cemetery developed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Probably the catacomb in the first stadium was built in the cave next to the Via Appia, in rooms “A” – “B” – “C” – “D” – “F”, by closing all the old cave entrances, and the construction of the ancient cemetery way-in, located next to stair S2.

The original cave floor, almost irregular, was risen up for about 1 m with pozzolana. It is quite probable that during this phase specifically works were made to destroy part of the galleries, and to gain more rooms for the new use of the cave.

After the new flooring was fixed, more tombs were realized. On the left hand of the aisle “EI”, leading to the *cubiculum* “E”, the arcosolio tomb “a1” was built, on the wall “m28”; perpendicular to “a1”, a new arcosolio tomb can be found, “a2”, at the edge of the stairs. On the right side of the entrance “A” there is a tuff brick wall construction where the arcosolio tombs, “a3”, “a4”, and “a5” are. This tuff brick wall is the N side of room “A”, dividing it from room “FI”, but still keeping a communication through the aisle “F”; later, this space was partially occupied by the funeral large tomb “n6”.

The large tombs “n2”, “n3”, “n4”, “n5” and the arcosolio tombs “a6” and “a7” are on the E side of room “C”; other large tombs, “n1”, “n7”, “n8”, can be found on the W side of the cave section “B”. Eventually, the tomb “n9”, of which only a small portion is visible, is situated on the W wall of room “BI”.

The walls of this first phase belong to the same building typology made of irregular tuff bricks with lines of clay bricks. Thickness of clay bricks is about 3-4 cm, and they were used to divide vertical burial places. The mortar thickness is about 2-4 cm.

The height of such arcosolio tomb was sufficient to contain many superimposed burial places, and also used as closing wall of some of the ancient way-in to the cave.

1) The *refrigerium* was an ancient Christian ritual which provided a meal consumed by the relatives of the deceased at the grave of their loved one; also to the deceased were ideally offerings of food and drink.

The construction contemporaneity of some tombs in room “C” remark that the two different burial typologies are contemporary in San Senatore cemetery. The pozzolana layer over the peperino floor testifies the floor leveling work made by *fossore*s (workers within the catacomb, salaried by the Christian community) and gives many clues for dating. All burial places of the Christian cemetery were built starting from the pozzolana layer; ceramics fragments date this work by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

The wall realized with tuff bricks can be dated to Late Antiquity age (BROWN, 1971). The lack of decoration over the tombs cannot help us to date it, but its comparison with the arcosolio tomb system in *Basilica Apostolorum* along Via Appia, and the eastern Basilica of the Acili's family, in the Priscilla cemetery, dated back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, is a proof that the chronology used for the Albano Catacomb is correct.

Rooms “A” and “C” of the catacomb were used between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries up to the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century for building tombs in brickworks. Unfortunately the sepulchral damages and robbery make difficult a more accurate dating.

Same considerations are possible for several tombs excavated along the peperino wall and for the “*formae*”. Both the W sector of the “C” tombs and the nearby *formae* belong to a more ancient phase compared with the tombs located at the W side of cave.

In the cemetery area very interesting rooms “BI” and “D” are present, not only for the number of tombs, but, even, for the Christian frescoes and the rooms shape, showing their cultural and rite use.

Room “D” is different from the old cave (looking irregular and rounded) for its linearity: it was probably made by *fossore*s. Unfortunately, the lack of the slabs closing prevents the dating of niches.

However the fresco painting reproducing Cristo Apollineo rounded by St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Lorenz and a fourth not identified yet, in the *Deesis* (greek word meaning “prayer” or “supplication”) gesture, makes possible to date it at the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Room “BI”, known also as *Cripta Storica*, was enlarged from a smaller area. Several modifications in this sector were done especially for the cultural importance of the area. Room “BI” was probably the center of worship of the Albano Catacomb. Frescoes richness and high chronology of some of them (Byzantyn Frescoes reproducing the Blessing Christ, the Mother of God e San Smaragdus, can be date to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries), as well as the small arcosolio tomb “r”, in corner position between the edge and W wall, showed how this cemetery sector was important. Small tomb “r” was covered by polychromatic mosaic and, during Prof. FIOCCHI NICOLAI works, it was found under a layer of mosaic the image of a young Saint that it was supposed to belong to San Senatore, whose relics are inside the small arcosolio tomb “r”. Furthermore, Prof. FIOCCHI NICOLAI claims that room “BI” could had been the “*ecclesiam sancti senatoris*” cited in the *De Locis*. Few tombs are being reused in more recent phase (8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries) as shown by the founding

of relics dated at that time, unfortunately not always in the original context.

### Cave back to pozzolana quarry

In the W and SW sectors of the cemetery area there are few galleries that show a different shape compared to those in the E area. In this sector the *lacinie* are of greater size and do not show the typical rounding shape used for the tombs; this maybe is due to the reuse of the cemetery as a quarry.

### Conclusions

There are several questions and uncertainties regarding the chronology of the Hypogeum of San Senatore and the reconstruction of its structural phases. We propose here to reconsider some aspects through new field surveys and sources:

- 1) The extraction of pozzolana, inside the cavity under consideration, could be dated to a time earlier than hitherto said. In this case, it could be a decisive chemical examination of the mortar used for the construction of the stretch of Via Appia that covers the area next to the quarry.
- 2) The closure of the tunnel entrance to the quarry, in the front portion to the Via Appia should be due at the beginning of the use of this area for funeral rites, not for the exhaustion of the quarry excavation, as assumed in the past.
- 3) It would be particularly useful a campaign of excavations and studies to be carried out in the E quarry, which so far seems not to have been involved in the transformation process in the Christian cemetery. In fact, the area in question has a level of accumulation of debris due to the collapse of the walls and ceiling in tuff, preventing a thorough and correct stratigraphic reading.
- 4) The significant use of building structures, especially in the construction of tombs belonging to various types of burial, in the area adjacent to the historical crypt (*Cripta Storica*), could be a further confirmation of the function of this area like underground church of San Senatore.

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