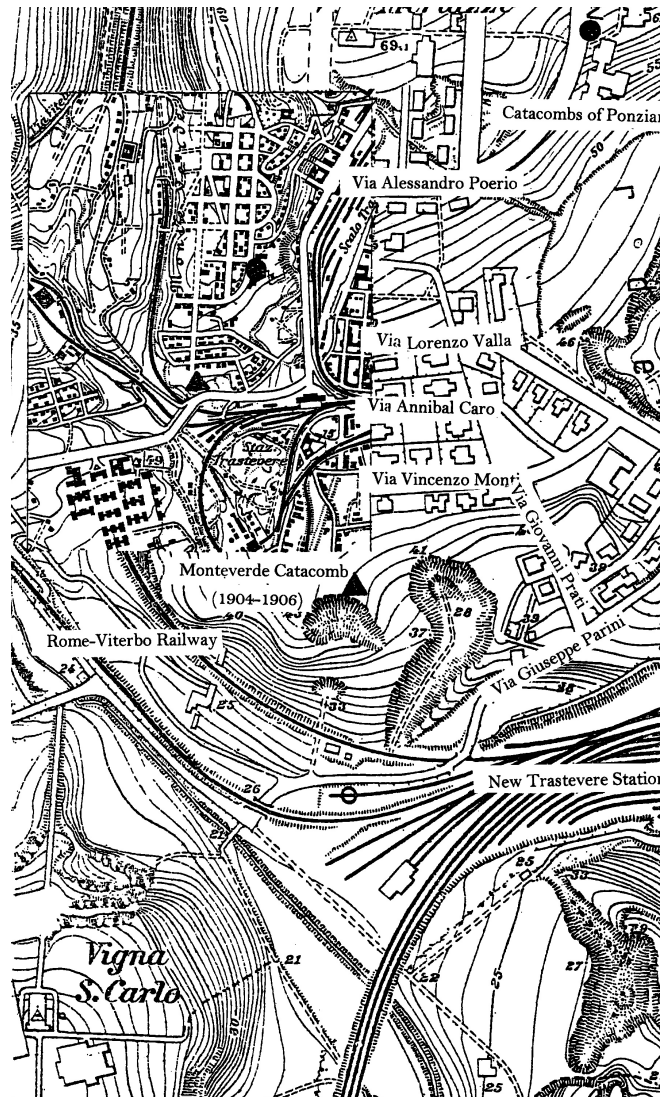


Jessica Dello Russo

2011 Update on the Catacombs of the Monteverde in Rome

Rome, June 16th, 2011 – At a press conference on June 16th, 2011 in the “Caduti di Forte Bravetta” Council Chamber of Rome’s 16th Municipal District, archaeologists from the LATERES Cooperative and University of Rome at Tor Vergata presented the initial results of their study of the southern slope of the Monteverde in Rome above the Tiber River’s right bank.ⁱ Drilling in 2009 for the foundations of a multi-level subterranean parking garage near the intersection of via Vincenzo Monti and via Lorenzo Valla had broken into two cavities cut into the tufa rock at roughly 10 m. below street level, though not quite at the same height. While exploratory probes inserted into drill holes 80 cm. in diameter were unable to identify the nature and extent of these caves, partially conserved but filled with dirt and other debris, older topographical data showed the site to be in close proximity to that of a “Jewish catacomb of the Monteverde” last explored in the early 20th century before industrial mining, railway construction, and urban design removed all last traces of its tombs.



Scholars had long given up the Monteverde catacomb as lost for good, since only recently has passing acknowledgement been made of its “few remains.”ⁱⁱ Certainly there should be a good deal less of the cemetery now than what was visible in 1904, the year that dynamite explosions unexpectedly caused many of its galleries to collapse into the pits of an open quarry. A barrel-vaulted entrance chamber and stairwell of brick were among the first items to emerge from the long-forgotten cemetery site, as well as dozens of surface tombs, but their precarious condition made any further study impossible by the German archaeologist Nikolaus Muller of Berlin, who excavated the catacomb between 1904 and 1906 with funding from the “Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums”.ⁱⁱⁱ A number of

funerary chambers and galleries, as well as the remains of an interior staircase and lower floor, also soon disappeared as a result of irreversible structural damage from the “crater-like” opening of the quarry around which these features were now exposed.^{iv} With key structural elements facing imminent collapse, Muller’s reports, posthumously released in 1912 and 1915, are unclear about the catacomb’s age, extent, and condition.^v He himself openly declared in 1907 that he had been forced to leave work on the site incomplete.^{vi} In the aftermath of his studies, mining in the property and in other sites nearby did, indeed, expose Jewish catacomb galleries that Muller had not seen.^{vii} But it is not known for certain if and how these new galleries identified in 1913 and 1919 had any direct connection to the cemetery found earlier in Muller’s dig.^{viii} In both instances, the artifacts of value were quickly removed to make it easier to demolish that which remained.^{ix}

Over the next decade, what else was left of Muller’s excavation was also cut away for a wide terrace along the Circonvallazione Gianicolense. It was hoped that such drastic alterations would support further construction above and below the site.



Following an official inquest into the fatal consequences of a sinkhole below a nearby building on the via dell’Ongaro on October 14th, 1928, caused by the presence of many cavities below ground, developers

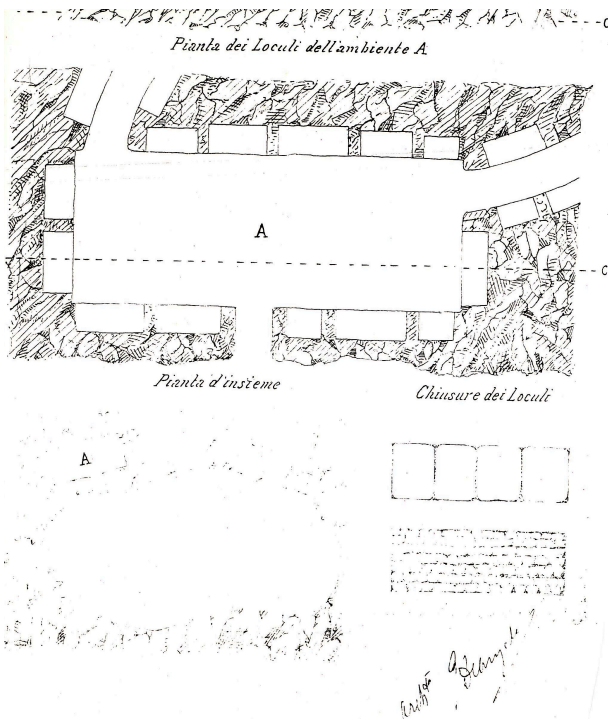
made sure that the last traces of the Jewish catacomb likewise disappeared from view.^x A photograph from the early 1930’s shows a cluster of four apartment buildings at street level barely concealing a steep, barren slope and long strip of land roughly smoothed over with rubble, the area of the former Monteverde quarries that, for this brief moment in time, appears surprisingly natural once again.^{xi}

The tragic incident of 1928 highlights only too well the hasty and greed-driven efforts of developers to excavate and build upon land described at the time as “honeycombed with catacombs” - the construction that would soon undermine –

and quite literally – the ancient Jewish cemetery on the Monteverde in Rome. The panoramic site, privately owned by members of the Papal nobility, the Pellegrini Quarantotti, had, in fact, remained fairly undeveloped up to this time, except for a small number of buildings at the base of the sharp incline between the “via di Monteverde” and the gaping quarry mouths just beyond the vineyard’s second gate about 100 m. from the road.^{xiii} Monteverde’s famous lithoid tufa had long been extracted from this zone. It was also known to scholars since the early seventeenth century, if not before, as the site of a Jewish catacomb.^{xiii} Yet for hundreds of years, access to the latter was nearly impossible due to the private use of the land for planting and occasional tufa extraction.^{xiv} Such activities, on their part, did little actual harm to the catacomb, and might even have managed to protect it to some degree from Rome’s “avid diggers” of the treasures such sites were still believed to contain. At the start of the 20th century, however, the entire nature of this semi-rural estate changed once again during an unprecedented period of the city’s growth. Even this steep and rocky slope now had a part to play in the making of modern Rome.

In 1907, having conceded to the Vatican’s Commission for Sacred Archaeology the lion’s share of the artifacts from Muller’s dig, the Pellegrini-Quarantotti sought to destroy what remained of the catacomb in order to eliminate any last “vincoli archeologici” before selling the land. The lengthy standoff among all interested parties (but not in any direct manner the Jews of Rome!), compounded by the Italian Archaeological Commission’s inability to enforce a ban on mining in the site, made it all the more difficult to preserve what was left. Yet a number of individuals expressed strong feelings at the time about keeping something on the site as a “memorial” to the Jews of Ancient Rome. Hopes were revived even as late as 1929 that the new caretaker for Jewish catacombs in the city, the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology, could come up with a way to stabilize and preserve any “catacomb-like” galleries thought still to exist.^{xv} The PCAS did release the first volume of Fr. Frey’s extensive research on Jewish inscriptions shortly thereafter, in 1936, with a fine illustrated catalogue of those from the Monteverde site, but otherwise did not contribute to any great degree to the study of Jewish catacombs until Fr. Fasola’s excavations in the Torlonia catacombs in the early 1970’s.^{xvi} The Italian State, on its part, also did not play an active role until the end of the 20th century, at which point it once again took possession of the surviving Jewish catacombs in the city in collaboration with the Union of Italian Jews (UCEI).

The documentation of the underground cavities recently discovered below the via Lorenzo Valla is being undertaken by the State Archaeological Commission and its collaborators with financial support from the Provincial Council and 16th Municipal District of Rome. Members of Rome’s Jewish Community, especially Dr. Bruno Orvieto, former president of the Foundation for Jewish Culture in Italy, have also played a pivotal role by first calling attention to the site’s proximity to the area where Jewish catacombs had been found a century before and then advocating for a fuller investigation into the site out of concern for the potential violation of Jewish bodily remains should garage construction be allowed.^{xvii}



Despite its title, the June 16th conference did not identify the exact nature of the site under investigation. It is not in the precise location of the Jewish catacombs seen at the start of the 20th century by Muller.^{xviii} The galleries of interest today are closer to a steep and irregular embankment above the Trastevere train station. As a result, their association with the Monteverde Jewish catacomb is one of several possibilities to explore.^{xix} Yet no matter the outcome, it is a welcome opportunity to address outstanding issues concerning the Monteverde Jewish site, particularly the current whereabouts of many

artifacts removed from the site (we know of inscriptions, sarcophagi, clay lamps, and bricks with stamps, most found today in the Vatican Museums, but what about all the glass fragments and other ornamental objects that Muller claims to have found?).^{xx} The project in course must also track down unpublished evidence of the early 20th century digs, particularly those of 1913 and 1919, that may or may not survive. These and many other concerns have led Dr. Rossi to propose the excavation of the garage site in the summer of 2011, and further outreach to area residents for insights into the changes affecting the Monteverde quarter in recent times.^{xxi} The publication of these studies, along with a new archaeological map of the zone, should be recognized as a significant contribution by the Italian government to the Jewish cemeteries in its care.

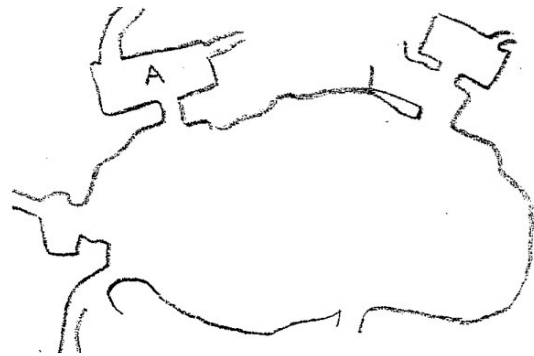


Illustration Credits:

1. Plan of the Monteverde Region, adapted from G. De Angelis d'Ossat, *La geologia delle catacombe Romane: I, via Portuense, II, via Ostiense*. Roma, 1937.
2. Aerial view of the Monteverde in a private collection, W. Graebner & D. Bennett, "Rome the Second Time": www.romethesecondtime.com (12/24/11).
3. Plan of the Monteverde catacomb ca. 1905 in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome.
4. The same, showing arrangement of galleries around quarry mouth (author).

Recent media reports:

- F. Bastianelli, "Catacomba Ebraica: al via la valorizzazione," Cinque Giorni, June 18th, 2011, p. 10.
 - G. Capone, "Catacomba Ebraica a Monteverde," on: http://gaetanocapone.blogspot.com/2011_06_01_archive.html (06/14/2011).
 - Provincia di Roma June 14th 2011 Press Release: <http://www.provincia.roma.it/news/progetto-catacomba-ebraica-di-monteverde-presentazione-dei-primi-risultati> (06/14/2011).
 - G. Saban, "Catacombe di Monteverde, primi risultati degli scavi" on Moked. Il Portale dell'Ebraismo Italiano: <http://moked.it/blog/2011/06/20/catacombe-di-monteverde-primi-risultati-degli-scavi/>.
- Jessica Dello Russo, July 2011 (updated October 2012).

ⁱ The June 16th press conference was introduced by Giuseppina Maturani, President of Rome's Provincial Council, Fabio Bellini, President of the 16th Municipal District of Rome, Dr. Daniela Rossi, Inspector of the 16th Municipal District for the Archaeological Superintendent of Rome, and Riccardo Pacifici, President of Rome's Jewish Community. The presenters were Dr. Marzia Di Mento and Dr. Alessandra Negroni from the LATERES Cooperative and Professor Marco Fabbri and Dr. Francesco Laddaga of the University of Rome at Tor Vergata. An open discussion followed these talks. Source: G. Saban, "Catacombe di Monteverde: Primi risultati degli scavi," Moked Blog (June 20th, 2011), <http://moked.it/blog/2011/06/20/catacombe-di-monteverde-primi-risultati-degli-scavi/>.

ⁱⁱ "Quel poco che resta a Monteverde" (what little that remains at Monteverde): a quote from archaeological inspector Maria Rosaria Barbera on the state of the Jewish catacombs in Rome in P. Broghi, "Catacombe ebraiche: al via il recupero," *Corriere della Sera*, July 27th, 2005, p. 5. At the June 16th conference, it was noted that other "galleries" and the remains of a cemetery sub divo had been previously identified near the site.

ⁱⁱⁱ The brick chamber and short flight of steps leading into the catacomb (I-II in the 1905 Palombi plan for the PCAS published in N. Muller, "Il cimitero degli ebrei posto sulla via Portuense" in *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, 2.12 (1915), pp. 205-318) were not fully excavated due to concerns about their position roughly 6 meters below ground level and the insufficient means of support from the relatively slender piers of tufa inside the man-made caverns below. Modern excavation methods and equipment had considerably weakened this area by the time of the catacomb's discovery in 1904. Muller, on his part, found the construction of the ancient entryway, with its abundant use of mortar, quite "crude" (1915, p. 221). The large rooms and tall recesses irregularly arranged around this point of entry lasted long enough to be included in Palombi's plans of the site in 1905. By 1909, however, these, too, had disappeared. Over fifty tombs (not identified as Jewish) were also found in 1904 at two meters below ground level in the area of the Pellegrini-Quarantotti casino (G. Gatti in *Notizie degli Scavi d'Antichita'*, 1904, p. 390). These tombs, nearly all found to be in a heavily damaged state, had been originally covered by tiles in the style "a cappuccino." Other tombs of the late Roman period, perhaps contemporary to the catacomb itself, have come to light in more recent times near the area now under investigation (Saban, 2011).

^{iv} However devastated its actual condition, this area could easily be photographed in the early 20th century because it was now exposed to natural light. Several photographs from 1904-1906 are in Muller, 1915, pl. 11. L. V. Rutgers has recently confirmed that Muller's glass plate negatives are conserved in digital form in the collection of the Theological Faculty of Humboldt University in Berlin: - L. V. Rutgers, "Neue Recherchen in den jüdischen und frühchristlichen Katakomben Roms: Deutungsprobleme und historische Implikationen einer Datierung mittel Radiokarbon" in *Mitteilungen zur Christlichen Archäologie*, 15 (2009), pp. 9-24.

^v N. Muller, *Die jüdische Katacombe am Monteverde zu Rom*, Leipzig, 1912 and art. cit., n. 3. Muller is our key witness to the site, and had been studying Jewish catacombs in Italy for two decades before excavating on the Monteverde (he had visited the location previously in 1884 and 1888). A number

of his conclusions about the Monteverde catacomb's chronology and development, as well as the identification of certain structural elements inside the site as distinctly Jewish in nature, are no longer seen as certain. Yet Muller was never alone in considering the Monteverde catacomb as the oldest Jewish cemetery of its type in Rome. For centuries, it had been assumed largely on textual evidence that the Jews in the Trastevere had used this burial site since the earliest times of their settlement in Rome, therefore giving it a greater antiquity in respect to other Jewish catacombs known by 1904. Muller himself very much hoped that his dig would reveal a "Palestinian" influence on Jewish burial practices in Rome (Muller, 1915, p. 215).

^{vi} Muller, 1915, p. 219, on p. 217 called his work really an "autopsy" because a good part of the catacomb had already collapsed at the time of its excavation (1904-1906). A selection of his notes and photographs of Jewish inscriptions from the site were published after his death in 1912 by one of his students, Nikos A. Bees (1883-1958), in the volume *Die Inschriften der jüdischen Katakomben am Monteverde zu Rom*, Leipzig, 1919.

^{vii} Eugen Bormann alerted the Commission for Sacred Archaeology (CDAS) in late 1913 to the discovery of a Jewish hypogaeum on the Rey property close to the site already excavated by Muller. The report of CDAS Secretary R. Kanzler, "Scoperta di una nuova regione del cimitero giudaico della via Portuense," in *Nuovo Bollettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, 21 (1915), pp 152-157, includes a plan of this catacomb by G. Schneider Graziosi. The latter's own article, "La nuova sala giudaica nel museo cristiano lateranense," in the *Nuovo bullettino di archeologia cristiana*, 21.3 (1915), p. 54, notes that a small number of artifacts (chiefly inscriptions painted or scratched on plaster and bricks with stamps) were taken to the Lateran Museum in 1914. The inscriptions recovered in 1919 are described by Roberto Paribeni, "Iscrizioni del cimitero giudaico di Monteverde," *Notizie Degli Scavi di Antichità*, 16 (1919), pp. 60-72.

^{viii} At least one and possibly two separate entryways led into the galleries of the "small hypogaeum" found on the neighboring Rey property in 1913. Even less is known of the structure and layout of the galleries destroyed by mining in 1919.

^{ix} In Paribeni's 1919 report for the *Notizie degli Scavi*, the gallery in the photograph on p. 60 (fig. 10) is identified as the last area of the Jewish catacomb to survive. This resembles an area of the catacomb already seen by Muller in 1904-1906 (Rutgers, 2009, p. 22, fig. 15) that was photographed again in June of 1928 by J. B. Frey for the *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* 1, Vatican City, 1936, p. LXI. H. J. Leon's *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, Philadelphia, 1960, pl. V, fig. 7, includes a photograph roughly contemporary to that of Frey, but does not document the presence of this gallery (at that point, according to Leon, p. 309, the Monteverde Jewish catacomb "had so completely fallen into ruin that it (was) no longer accessible"). The photograph in G. de Angelis d'Ossat, "*Catacombe Ebraiche a Monteverde*," Rome, 8, 1935, p. 368, taken not long after (although the rubble below the site is now shown covered by vegetation), documents the further erosion of the six tiers of wall niches (loculi) in the gallery and original shape of the vault (at this time, the cavity measured as 3 meters in depth and 5 in height). De Angelis d'Ossat is the last to document the catacomb in its most wretched state.

^x F. Piperno, "Relazione sul disastro del 14 ottobre 1928," *Commissione cooperativa edilizia del Senato, Rome*, 1929, reports on the collapse of some buildings already existing on the southern slope of the Monteverde at this time.

^{xi} This photograph, in a private collection, has recently been published by William Graebner and Diane Bennett on their blog, "Rome the Second Time": www.romethesecondtime.com (12/24/11).

^{xii} At the start of the 20th century, the address for the "Casino" of the Marquis Pellegrini-Quarantotto was via di Monteverde n. 5. The building itself no longer exists.

^{xiii} Areas of the catacomb visited by explorer Antonio Bosio and his contemporaries at the start of the 17th century were seen once again during Muller's excavations.

^{xiv} The archaeological record of this area – concerning the properties owned by families like the Bassano and Raby in the seventeenth century and the Pellegrini and Jacobini in more recent times – is documented by G. N. Verrando, "Il Santuario di S. Felice sulla via Portuense," in *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité*, 100 (1988), p. 336.

^{xv} De Angelis d'Ossat, *La geologia delle catacombe Romane: I, via Portuense, II, via Ostiense*. Roma, 1937, is worth quoting in full: "Sarebbe oltremodo desiderabile che le autorità competenti fossero vivamente interessate dalla Commissione Pontificia preposte alle catacombe, dall' Istituto e dall

Accademia di Archeologia Sacra, e dall'alta gerarchia religiosa israelitica affinché sia almeno conservato quale testimone dell'importante documento storico-religioso l'ultimo relitto, per quanto devastato, pur sicuramente riconoscibile.”

^{xvi} Umberto M. Fasola, "Le Due Catacombe Ebraiche di Villa Torlonia," *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 52 (1976), pp. 7-62.

^{xvii} G. Fua', *Relazione sulle attività della Fondazione Beni Culturali Ebraici*, Rome, 2010, p. 3.

^{xviii} The location of the Jewish catacombs excavated by Muller is documented in the works of De Angelis d'Ossat, 1937, p. 16, fig. 4 and Leon, 1960, fig 5. The site is between the Circonvallazione Gianicolense and via Francesco Massi. At the time of discovery, the small catacombs below the church of Regina Pacis on the Monteverde had no distinctly Jewish elements (J. B. Frey, 1936, p. LXI and Verrando, 1988, p. 365).

^{xix} R. Lanciani found this ridge "so honeycombed with catacombs that it is difficult to single them out and ascertain their origin." R. Lanciani, *New Tales of Old Rome*, London, 1901, p. 247.

^{xx} The glass plate negatives of photographs from Muller's excavations long hidden in the dome of the Berlin Cathedral have only recently been digitized by Humboldt University in Berlin (Rutgers, 2009). A 1991 study on brick stamps from the Monteverde catacomb has also found inconsistencies in the inventories of objects from the site that are now in the Vatican Museums: G. Filippi, "Nuovi dati sui laterizi bollati della catacomba ebraica di Monteverde," *Bollettino dei monumenti, musei e gallerie pontificie*, 11 (1991), pp. 73-99.

^{xxi} Saban, 2011. Funding for the project is being provided by Rome's 16th Municipal District, *Piano Sociale Municipio Roma XVI* (2011-2015), p. 97.