A History of Vatican City

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Introduction

There is a fundamental paradox at the heart of Vatican City. It is, by any measure, the smallest sovereign state in the world. With an area of just over 120 acres and a population that hovers around 800, it is a microstate of almost comical proportions. One could fit it comfortably inside New York's Central Park with room to spare, or walk its perimeter in under an hour. It possesses its own post office, a radio station, a

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newspaper, and a banking system. It even has its own army, the famously attired Pontifical Swiss Guard. Yet, this tiny enclave, nestled entirely within the city of Rome, wields a level of global influence that is wildly disproportionate to its physical size. Its history is a sprawling, epic narrative that spans two millennia, intertwined with the rise and fall of empires, the shaping of Western civilization, and the spiritual lives of over a billion people. This book tells that improbable story.

To begin to understand Vatican City, one must first grasp a crucial distinction: the difference between "Vatican City State" and the "Holy See". The two are often used interchangeably, but they are separate and distinct entities. The Holy See, from the Latin *Sancta Sedes* or "Holy Chair," is the central governing body of the entire Roman Catholic Church. It is an ancient, non-territorial, sovereign entity that traces its origins back to the apostolic era and the primacy of Saint Peter. The Holy See is the institution that sends and receives ambassadors, maintains diplomatic relations, and speaks for the global Catholic Church. Vatican City State, on the other hand, is a much more recent creation. It is the physical, territorial base of the Holy See, an independent state established on February 11, 1929, by the Lateran Treaty between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Italy. In simple terms, Vatican City is the country, while the Holy See is the ancient, universal government of the Catholic Church headquartered within it. This book is a history of both the place and the institution, as their stories are now inseparable.

The land on which Vatican City sits, the *Ager Vaticanus* or Vatican Hill, was originally an unremarkable area on the west bank of the Tiber. In ancient Rome, it was a flood-prone, somewhat unhealthy backwater that lay outside the city's formal boundaries. Because Roman law forbade burials within the city walls, the Vatican Hill became the site of a necropolis, a city of the dead. It was also the location of a circus, first built by the Emperor Caligula and later completed by Nero, where chariot races and public spectacles were held. It was here, according to long-standing tradition, that the Apostle Peter was martyred by crucifixion around 64 AD, during the persecution of Christians under Nero. His burial in the nearby necropolis would transform the destiny of this unassuming hill forever.

The journey from a pagan burial ground to the heart of Christendom began in the 4th century. After Emperor Constantine's conversion, Christianity was granted tolerance, and the Emperor commissioned the construction of a grand basilica over the traditional site of Saint Peter's tomb. This first St. Peter's Basilica would stand for over a thousand years, becoming a major pilgrimage site. Over the centuries that followed, the power and influence of the Bishop of Rome—the Pope—grew, not just spiritually but also temporally. This culminated in the formation of the Papal States, a collection of territories in central Italy under the direct sovereign rule of the popes, which lasted from 756 to 1870. For more than a millennium, the popes were not just spiritual leaders but also secular princes, ruling over a significant portion of the Italian peninsula, with Rome as their capital.

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This temporal power came to an abrupt end in the 19th century with the unification of Italy. On September 20, 1870, the army of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy breached the walls of Rome and captured the city, annexing it as the kingdom's new capital. Pope Pius IX, refusing to recognize the authority of the Italian state, retreated behind the Vatican walls and declared himself a "Prisoner of the Vatican." This standoff, known as the "Roman Question," lasted for nearly sixty years. Successive popes refused to leave the Vatican, a self-imposed confinement to avoid any action that might be seen as recognizing Italy's sovereignty over Rome. It was a period of intense diplomatic tension and mutual denunciation, pitting the ancient authority of the Church against the modern forces of nationalism.

The impasse was finally broken in 1929 with the signing of the Lateran Pacts. Negotiated between Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri, representing Pope Pius XI, and the Italian Prime Minister, Benito Mussolini, on behalf of King Victor Emmanuel III, the treaty created the independent state of Vatican City. The agreement recognized the full sovereignty of the Holy See within this newly defined territory, provided financial compensation for the loss of the Papal States, and established Roman Catholicism as the state religion of Italy (a provision that was later revised in 1984). With the treaty's ratification on June 7, 1929, the world's smallest state was born, created specifically to ensure the "absolute and visible independence of the Holy See" and to guarantee its "indisputable sovereignty in international matters."

Thus, the state of Vatican City is a 20th-century invention, yet its history is ancient. It is the inheritor of a legacy that stretches from the Roman Empire, through the turbulent Middle Ages and the splendors of the Renaissance, to the complex challenges of the modern world. This book will navigate that extensive history. We will explore the artistic triumphs of Michelangelo and Bernini, which transformed the Vatican into one of the world's greatest cultural treasures. We will delve into the political intrigues of the Renaissance papacy and the religious upheaval of the Reformation. We will examine the Vatican's precarious neutrality during two World Wars, its role in the Cold War, and its response to the sweeping social changes of the 20th century. And we will trace its path into the new millennium, confronting issues of global diplomacy, financial reform, and its place in an increasingly secularized world.

The story of Vatican City is a story of continuity and change, of spiritual authority and temporal power, of faith and politics, and of art and history. It is the story of how a small patch of land, once a graveyard on the fringe of ancient Rome, became the headquarters of a global religion and a unique, sovereign player on the world stage. It is a history that is, in every sense, far larger than the place itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Vatican Hill in Antiquity

To understand the Vatican, one must first forget St. Peter's Basilica, forget the Pope, and forget the state itself. Before it was the epicenter of a global faith, it was simply a place, a low hill on the wrong side of the river. To the Romans, whose civilization thrived on the opposite bank, the *Ager Vaticanus*, or Vatican Field, was an afterthought. It lay outside the *pomerium*, the sacred and ritually defined boundary of Rome, and therefore beyond the formal city. This was not one of the fabled Seven Hills; it was a peripheral area, somewhat marshy, prone to the Tiber's floods, and generally considered unhealthy. Its reputation was not improved by the notoriously poor quality of the wine produced from its grapes, a fact the poet Martial was not shy about mentioning.

The very name *Vaticanus* is shrouded in ambiguity. The ancient Romans themselves had differing opinions on its origin. The 1st-century BC scholar Varro connected it to a local deity, Deus Vaticanus or Vagitanus, who was believed to open the mouths of newborns to utter their first cry, or *vagitus*. A more enduring theory links the name to the Latin word *vates*, meaning "prophet" or "seer," suggesting the hill was a place of prophecies, or *vaticinia*. It is also highly plausible that the name has deeper, pre-Roman roots, perhaps deriving from an Etruscan settlement in the area, possibly named Vatica or Vaticum, as the field once formed a natural boundary between Rome and the Etruscan city of Veii. Whatever its true origin, the name carried connotations of the otherworldly and the ominous long before Christianity arrived.

For much of the Republican era, the *Ager Vaticanus* was a fringe territory. Being outside the city walls, its primary legal distinction was that it could be used for activities forbidden within the *pomerium*, most notably burials. Roman law, for reasons of both sanitation and religious purity, strictly prohibited interring the dead within the city. Consequently, the roads leading out of Rome, like the Via Cornelia which ran along the base of the hill, became lined with tombs and mausolea. The area was also used by the destitute and was generally seen as an insalubrious district. The historian Tacitus noted that in 69 AD, when a northern army arrived in Rome, a large number of its soldiers camped in the "unhealthy districts of the Vatican," leading to many deaths from disease exacerbated by the heat and the nearby Tiber.

The character of the Vatican Hill began to change in the early Imperial period. The land started to attract the interest of Rome's elite for the construction of luxurious private residences and gardens known as *horti*. The most significant of these belonged to Agrippina the Elder, the formidable granddaughter of Augustus and mother of the future emperor Caligula. Her vast estate, the *Horti Agrippinae*, covered much of the area where St. Peter's Basilica now stands, stretching down to a porticoed terrace on the banks of the Tiber. After Agrippina's death, the villa passed to her son, Caligula, a man with a passion for spectacle and, in particular, chariot racing.

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It was on his mother's property that Caligula began construction of a private circus, a grand stadium for chariot races and other entertainments. Completed by his successor, Nero, it became known as the Circus of Gaius and Nero. This was not a public venue on the scale of the Circus Maximus, but a lavish imperial facility. Its most prominent feature was an Egyptian obelisk of red granite, standing today in the center of St. Peter's Square. Devoid of hieroglyphs, this monolithic needle was originally erected in Heliopolis. Caligula had it transported to Rome in 37 AD on a specially constructed ship of enormous size, a marvel of engineering in its own right. The ship was later filled with concrete and sunk to form the foundation for a lighthouse at the port of Ostia. In the circus, the obelisk was placed on the *spina*, the central dividing barrier around which the chariots would race. For over 1,500 years, it would stand as a silent witness to the hill's transformation.

The circus and its adjacent gardens were not only used for amusement. They would soon acquire a more infamous reputation. In July of 64 AD, a catastrophic fire swept through Rome, raging for over a week and devastating much of the city. The emperor Nero, who was away at his villa in Antium when the fire began, returned to a city seething with rumor and suspicion. Many believed the emperor himself had ordered the fire to clear land for his grandiose rebuilding projects, a rumor he struggled to quell despite his relief efforts. Needing a scapegoat, Nero turned his attention to a small and widely misunderstood religious sect known as the Christians. The historian Tacitus, no admirer of Christians, described them as a group "hated for their abominations" and practitioners of a "mischievous superstition."

Nero accused this unpopular group of starting the fire and unleashed a brutal and public persecution. The venue he chose for this spectacle was his own circus and gardens on the Vatican Hill. Tacitus provides a chilling account of the events, describing punishments designed for maximum cruelty and public entertainment. Christians were covered in the skins of wild beasts and torn apart by dogs. Others were crucified. Most horrifically, some were coated in flammable material, fixed to posts, and set ablaze to serve as human torches, illuminating the evening's festivities. Tacitus reports that Nero himself mingled with the crowds, sometimes dressed as a charioteer, taking in the show. It was a display of such calculated cruelty that even the Roman populace, accustomed to violent spectacle, reportedly felt a stir of pity for the victims, feeling they were being sacrificed not for the public good but to satisfy the depravity of one man.

Among the victims of this persecution, according to a powerful and longstanding tradition, was the Apostle Peter. The details of his death are not recorded in scripture, but early accounts hold that he was martyred in the Circus of Nero. Tradition further states that, deeming himself unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus, he requested to be crucified upside down. The precise location of his crucifixion is believed to have been near the Egyptian obelisk on the *spina* of the circus. This single

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event, the execution of a Galilean fisherman, would irrevocably alter the destiny of the Vatican Hill, setting it on a path to become the spiritual center for hundreds of millions.

Following his death, Peter's followers took his body for burial. As was the custom, they sought a resting place outside the city walls, in the nearest available cemetery. This was the necropolis that had long existed on the southern slope of the Vatican Hill, adjacent to the circus and running alongside the Via Cornelia. The word "necropolis" literally means "city of the dead," and the Vatican necropolis was a bustling one, an open-air cemetery filled with a mix of humble graves and more elaborate mausolea for the wealthy. Here, amidst the tombs of pagans from all walks of life, Peter was laid to rest in a simple grave in the earth.

For decades, the site of this modest burial was likely marked only by the memory of the local Christian community. However, by the late 2nd century, archaeological and historical evidence points to the existence of a specific monument. Around 200 AD, a presbyter named Gaius wrote of "trophies" of the apostles, stating, "I can show you the trophies of the apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who founded this church." The "trophy" (from the Greek *tropaion*, meaning a monument of victory) on the Vatican Hill is believed to have been a small, open-air shrine or aedicula marking the exact spot of Peter’s grave. This structure, later referred to as the "Trophy of Gaius," stood in the midst of the pagan necropolis and served as the earliest physical focal point of veneration for the apostle’s tomb.

Excavations conducted deep beneath St. Peter's Basilica in the 1940s brought this ancient world to light. Archaeologists unearthed a remarkably preserved section of the Roman necropolis, with streets and tombs dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries. These were not subterranean catacombs, but an open-air cemetery that was eventually buried. The excavations revealed a series of mausolea, some with elaborate decorations, belonging to Roman families. Within this city of the dead, archaeologists identified a specific area, designated Field P, and a 2nd-century red brick wall. Set into this wall was a niche, a simple shrine corresponding to the description of the Trophy of Gaius. Beneath this shrine was a humble grave, which centuries of tradition had identified as that of St. Peter.

The necropolis was not exclusively a Christian site, nor was it even solely a burial ground. The religious landscape of the *Ager Vaticanus* was complex. Not far from the circus and cemetery was a temple dedicated to the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele, known as the Magna Mater. This shrine, called a Phrygianum, indicates the presence of one of the many eastern mystery cults that were popular in the Roman Empire. The area around the Vatican was also associated with other pagan worship, reflecting the diverse spiritual tapestry of ancient Rome.

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Over time, however, the Christian presence in the necropolis grew. While the earliest tombs were pagan, later burials show a blending of old and new traditions. One of the most fascinating examples is the Tomb of the Julii, a 3rd-century mausoleum discovered under the basilica. Its vaulted ceiling is decorated with a stunning mosaic depicting a figure in a sun chariot, holding an orb, with rays emanating from his head. This image clearly draws on the iconography of the Roman sun god, Sol Invictus, or the Greek Apollo. Yet, surrounding this central figure are other mosaics depicting unequivocally Christian themes: Jonah and the whale, a fisherman, and a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders—the Good Shepherd. This tomb is a remarkable piece of syncretism, a visual representation of a world in transition, where older pagan symbols were being reinterpreted to express new Christian beliefs, identifying Christ with the rising sun.

By the early 2nd century, the Circus of Nero had fallen into disuse and was eventually abandoned. The area was partitioned and given over to the expansion of the necropolis. For another two centuries, the Vatican Hill remained a place of the dead, a sprawling cemetery outside the city, distinguished primarily by the small shrine that drew a growing number of pilgrims to a particular grave. It was a place defined by martyrdom and burial, its soil consecrated by the blood of early Christians and the bones of the chief apostle. The hill’s identity was slowly but surely being claimed by the new faith. The era of pagan spectacle was over, but the stage was now set for a construction project of an entirely different kind, one that would bury the old necropolis and raise a monument that would transform the unassuming Vatican Hill into the center of the Christian world.

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