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A History of Vatican City

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Introduction

Vatican City, a walled enclave within the city of Rome, stands as the smallest independent state in the world by both area and population. Despite its diminutive size, the history of Vatican City is vast in scope, interwoven with the cultural, political, and spiritual fabric of much of Western civilization. As the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church and the official residence of the Pope, it has played a central role in religious affairs for well over a millennium, while also serving as a stage for the machinations of kings, emperors, and powerful families.

The roots of what is now Vatican City reach deep into the ancient past, to times when the area was scarcely inhabited, lying outside the main bounds of imperial Rome. Over the centuries, the Vatican has witnessed and shaped seismic transformations: it has been the site of imperial circuses and the martyrdom of saints, the locus of Renaissance art and Baroque architecture, a bastion in the face of religious schisms and political upheavals, and, ultimately, the sovereign heart of a global faith. The city's story is inextricably linked to the shifting fortunes and spiritual stewardship of the papacy.

Central to the emergence of Vatican City as a unique temporal and spiritual power was its relationship with Rome and the broader Italian peninsula. The development of the Papal States marked centuries when the Popes wielded both spiritual leadership and secular authority, ruling vast swathes of land and engaging continually with European powers. However, this authority was challenged repeatedly—by emperors, reformers, and the movements that would ultimately lead to the unification of Italy and the dissolution of papal rule over central Italy.

The establishment of Vatican City as an independent state in 1929, through the Lateran Treaty, resolved the long-standing “Roman Question” and created a new chapter in its storied history. Since then, the Vatican has continued to evolve. It has remained a microcosm of both tradition and change, influencing global affairs, guiding millions, and serving as a custodian of spiritual and artistic treasures.

This book offers a comprehensive survey of the history of Vatican City, tracing its origins from ancient times through periods of triumph and turmoil, up to its current role as a modern sovereign state. By exploring Vatican City's development, governance, and global significance, readers can better understand how this remarkable territory has maintained its distinctive identity and profound influence across centuries.

In telling this story, the book draws upon detailed historical accounts and the enduring

symbols of Vatican City—its basilicas, museums, archives, and rituals. Whether you are a student of history, a person of faith, or simply a curious traveler, the Vatican's journey from a humble hill to the spiritual heart of Catholicism and the world's smallest country promises a fascinating glimpse into the forces that have shaped both the past and present.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of Vatican Hill: Pre-Christian Era and Ancient Rome

Long before the grandeur of St. Peter's Basilica or the bustling crowds of the Vatican Museums, the land that would one day become Vatican City was a far less distinguished place. Situated on the west bank of the Tiber River, opposite the famous seven hills of Rome, lay an area known in antiquity as the Ager Vaticanus. This "Vatican Territory" encompassed not just the modest elevation we now call Vatican Hill, but also a broader plain stretching towards the Janiculum Hill and Monte Mario.

In the early days of Rome, the Ager Vaticanus held a rather unfavorable reputation. It was a largely undeveloped and somewhat inhospitable region. The low-lying areas were prone to the Tiber's frequent and sometimes dramatic flooding, which could turn the landscape into a marshy, unhealthy expanse. This susceptibility to inundation and the resulting damp conditions likely contributed to a perception of the area as being dismal and perhaps even ominous to the early Romans. Furthermore, its location across the Tiber placed it outside the Pomoerium, the sacred boundary of the city of Rome, and beyond the initial defensive walls. For a long time, it remained distinctly separate from the urban heart of the burgeoning Roman Republic.

The name "Vatican" itself has roots in this pre-Christian era, though its precise etymology is debated. One theory suggests it derives from the Latin word "vaticinor," meaning "to prophesy" or "foretell," hinting at the possibility that the area was once associated with oracles or soothsayers (vates). Another proposes a connection to a local Etruscan settlement named Vatica or Vaticum, given the area's proximity to Etruscan territory. Whatever the exact origin, the name was in use during the Roman Republic to refer to this specific region across the Tiber.

For centuries, the Ager Vaticanus remained primarily agricultural land, dotted perhaps with small farmsteads or larger estates belonging to wealthier Romans who didn't mind the less desirable location. The higher ground of Vatican Hill might have offered slightly better drainage and conditions compared to the riverside plain. Despite some limited use, it was far from the vibrant center of Roman civic and social life.

However, as Rome grew and its emperors sought to leave their mark on the city, the Ager Vaticanus began to see more significant development, albeit still on the periphery of the urban core. In the 1st century AD, Agrippina the Elder, mother of the future Emperor Caligula, owned extensive gardens in the area. Recognizing the potential of this land, even with its drawbacks, she undertook efforts to drain the marshy parts and establish these elaborate gardens, known as the Horti Agrippinae.

It was Agrippina's son, Caligula (reigned 37-41 AD), who introduced a feature that would indelibly mark the landscape and tie it to events of profound historical significance. A fervent enthusiast of chariot racing, Caligula began the construction of a private circus within his mother's gardens, intended for training and private spectacles. This initial structure, sometimes referred to as the Gaianum, was a precursor to a more famous and ill-fated arena.

Caligula also undertook the impressive feat of transporting a massive Egyptian obelisk from Heliopolis to Rome to adorn the central spine, or *spina*, of his circus. This towering monolith, carved from a single piece of red granite and weighing over 350 tons, had stood in Egypt for over three thousand years. Its perilous journey across the Mediterranean and intricate erection in the circus were testaments to Roman engineering prowess. This obelisk, remarkably, still stands today, a silent witness to the events that unfolded around it millennia ago, now gracing the center of St. Peter's Square.

Following Caligula's death, his successor, Emperor Claudius (reigned 41-54 AD), continued and likely completed the work on the circus. The property, including the gardens and the circus, was eventually inherited by Nero (reigned 54-68 AD). Nero further developed the area, and the circus became more famously associated with him, known as the Circus of Nero or the Circus Vaticanus. While initially a private venue, Nero is said to have opened it to the public for them to witness his own chariot racing skills.

The Circus of Nero was a substantial structure, a typical Roman circus with an elongated oval arena designed for chariot races and other public spectacles. Its dimensions were considerable, though exact measurements vary in ancient accounts. The presence of the obelisk on the *spina* provided a central turning point for the chariots. The area surrounding the track would have included seating for spectators.

Beyond the circus and Agrippina's gardens, the Ager Vaticanus during the Roman Imperial period was also known for something else: its use as a burial ground. Roman law generally prohibited burials within the city walls for sanitary reasons. As a result, necropolises, or "cities of the dead," sprang up along the major roads leading out of Rome. The area of the Ager Vaticanus, being outside the formal city boundary until much later, became the site of several such burial areas. Tombs and mausolea lined the Via Cornelia and Via Trionfale, roads that traversed the Vatican territory. This practice of burial outside the city walls was commonplace and would, in time, play a pivotal role in the transformation of this otherwise unremarkable area.

Despite the presence of the imperial gardens and the circus, the Ager Vaticanus did not shed its reputation for being somewhat insalubrious. Ancient writers commented on the poor quality of local products, including its wine. Tacitus, the Roman historian,

noted that even after the imperial developments, the area remained marshy and unhealthy. He recounted how in 69 AD, during the chaotic "Year of the Four Emperors," when the army of Vitellius camped in the Vatican area, many soldiers fell ill and died from the unhealthy conditions and poor water.

Thus, the pre-Christian history of the land that would become Vatican City is one of a low-lying, often swampy, and initially less-than-desirable area on the fringes of ancient Rome. It was a place for gardens and private entertainment on imperial land, and a necessary location for burials outside the city's limits. There was little to suggest the extraordinary spiritual and historical significance it would acquire in the centuries to come. The stage, however, was being set, unknowingly, for events that would forever change the character and destiny of the Vatican Hill and its surrounding plain. The structures and uses of this ancient Roman landscape, particularly the Circus of Nero and the surrounding necropolis, would become intrinsically linked to the dawn of Christianity in Rome and the eventual rise of the Vatican as the heart of a global faith.

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