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The Apostle Peter in Rome

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Jesus' Chief Disciple Examined

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WHAT TRADITIONS CONNECT THE APOSTLE PETER TO ROME?

[Jesus' chief disciple, Peter](#) (also called Simon Peter or Cephas), has been associated with Rome for nearly 2,000 years. The earliest testimony to the apostle Peter's presence in [Rome](#) is a letter from a Christian deacon named Gaius. Writing probably toward the end of the second century C.E.—so, around 170 or 180 C.E.—Gaius tells about the wondrous things in Rome, including something called a *tropaion* (see below for more) where Peter established a church—in fact, *the Church*, the Roman Catholic church at the site where St. Peter's Basilica is today. But there are other traditions besides Peter's *tropaion*.



One early Christian text, the *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, recounts many things that Peter did in the city. At one point in *Acts of Peter*, Peter is taunted by a flamboyant heretic, Simon Magus. Simon challenges Peter to a flying contest around the Roman Forum, but Peter's prayers make Simon crash to the ground, proving that Simon's powers are not as great as his own.

At the end of this text, Peter, not wishing to be martyred for his faith, flees from Roman authorities on the Via Appia leading out of the city. Rather unexpectedly, Peter meets [Jesus](#), who is traveling in the opposite direction. He asks Jesus, "Where are you going?" Jesus tells Peter that he is going to Rome "to be crucified again." Peter realizes, from this, that he cannot flee from his fate.

"Where are you going?" in Latin is "*Quo Vadis?*" and there's a medieval church in Rome called the Church of Quo Vadis at the spot where Peter met Jesus. To prove that his vision was real, you can still see there a bit of marble pavement which the faithful say miraculously preserve Jesus' footprints.

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IS IT LIKELY THAT THE APOSTLE PETER WENT TO ROME AND FOUNDED THE CHURCH THERE?

Interestingly, the Bible says nothing about Peter ever traveling to Rome.

When the gospels end, Peter is in Jerusalem. It's the same in the Book of Acts. [The apostle Paul](#), in his letters, also talks about meeting Peter in the eastern Mediterranean. After Jesus' death, Paul says that [Jesus' brother, James](#), and Peter are the co-leaders of the "church," or assembly, of Jesus-followers in Jerusalem.

In short, there is no early textual evidence for Peter in Rome, so for some people, it's very hard to believe that he ever traveled there. Not only is it a very long way, according to the New Testament, Peter was a fisherman who was not very educated and who spoke only Aramaic; he was not the type of person that might travel widely across the Roman Empire to a large city where Latin and Greek were the dominant languages.

The absence of connection between Peter and Rome in the New Testament, the lack of references to him in our earliest Roman Christian literature, and what we know of Peter's background and character all combine to make it unlikely, to my mind, that he ever went to Rome.

IS THERE ANY EVIDENCE THAT THE APOSTLE PETER DIED IN ROME?

There is no solid evidence—textual or even archaeological—that Peter died in Rome.

Starting around the end of the second century, Christian pilgrims went to see Peter's *tropaion*. But a *tropaion* is not a tomb. The word itself is very unusual; sometimes translated as "trophy," it means something like a war memorial or a cenotaph (i.e., an empty grave). It's not the word used in the Roman Empire for a burial place. Yet this spot—which was originally in the middle of an ancient cemetery—was quickly understood as the place where Peter was buried.



St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, the traditional burial site of the apostle Peter.

When it was excavated in the 1950s, archaeologists were shocked to find that there was no grave and no bones under the *tropaion*. Only later were some bones produced from that excavation, and it's a fascinating story we talk about in [Finding Jesus](#). Are these Peter's bones? That appears to be a matter of faith. The official Vatican position, first stated in 1968, is that they *might* be.

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WHY ARE THERE TWO PLACES IN ROME WHERE THE APOSTLE PETER WAS SUPPOSEDLY BURIED?

This is another fascinating thing we explore in *Finding Jesus*. Most people know about Peter's traditional burial site at St. Peter's. But it turns out that there's a second site in Rome where pilgrims went for hundreds of years, which was known as the *Memoria Apostolorum* (the Memorial to the Apostles). It's off the Via Appia at the modern site of the Catacombs of San Sebastiano, and you can still go and visit it today, although the memorial itself is largely built over.

What's amazing is that the site preserves around 600 graffiti scrawled by [Christian pilgrims](#) in the early Middle Ages, most of them prayers to Peter and Paul, the joint patron saints of Rome. It certainly looks like people believed that Peter was buried there, but excavators found no evidence of a tomb there, either!

As far as I can tell, this leaves us with two options: Either Peter's body was at both these sites at one point and moved from one to the other, or Peter's body was never at either site, but people still associated him with the site. It didn't always take a body or a tomb for a site to be sacred, after all.

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In this blog post, Brown University Religious Studies professor Nicola Denzey Lewis answers frequently asked questions about the apostle Peter. Denzey Lewis appears in the CNN series [Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery](#), which aims to investigate artifacts that shed light on the world in which Jesus lived. —Ed.

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