

HISTORY

It remains uncertain as to whether Bassilla was the lady who owned the land on which the catacombs were excavated, or a martyr of the early 4th century who was buried there.

Saint Hermes was certainly interred there and ancient sources also mention SS Protus and Hyacinth who have a legend attached to them.

The suburban street on which the catacombs are located was originally part of the Via Salaria Vetus. The original structure on the site seems to have been a nymphaeum of a Roman villa that was abandoned during the 2nd century. In the late 4th century Pope Damasus utilized the existing ruins to build a two levels basilica incorporating the shrine of Saint Hermes, one floor being underground and the other at ground level.

There is evidence of major restoration work in the 6th or 7th century, in the early Middle Ages an oratory with important frescoes (dated about the 1100) was attached to the main edifice.

In this period the basilica was part of a Benedictine monastery and the site functioned as a cult centre until it fell into decay and was eventually abandoned in the 13th century ; this may be linked with the collapse of the benedictine monasticism in the city during the period.

The ruins of the basilica were unearthed when the catacombs were discovered by the Jesuits In 1576 during the building of a new college. The famous 16th century explorer of catacombs Antonio Bosio first described the site in 1608 and he was he who identified the basilica.

The plan is rectangular with a semi-circular apse attached, the dimension being 15.5 by 7 meters.

The upper church has a trapezoidal extension to the apse with its own small semi-circular niche, and this is presumed to have been designed for the bishop's chair. The nave was un aisled, with two transverse arches, and was entered via a longitudinal rectangular portico with the door on the left side.

The right hand side of the same portico had the top of the stairs leading down to the lower church and the catacombs. The upper church had three other entrances, two in the left end wall and a third in the right hand side of the apse. There was a woman's gallery on the right hand side of the nave, with its own entrance at catacomb access.

The lower church had the same plan, except that the chair niche was not replicated and the left hand nave wall had a row of three small apses in between the transverse arches.

The medieval oratory was attached to the left end wall of the upper church. Two frescoes were discovered in 1940, one of Christ with angels and the other showing Our Lady with the angels Gabriel and Raphael and the saints Hermes , John the Evangelist and Benedict.

Saint Hermes born in Greece, died in Rome as a martyr in 120, is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic church and the eastern Orthodox church.

A catacomb on the Salarian way bears his name and its entry in Roman Martiriology is as follows:” *In the Cemetery of Bassilla on the Old Salarian Way , Saint Hermes, Martyr, whom as reported by Saint Damasus , Greece sent forth but Rome kept as its citizen when he died for the holy name”.*