

A Study on the Evolution of St. Peter's Basilica from Early Christian to Baroque

“I can show you the trophies of the apostles. If, in fact, you go out to the Vatican or along the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who founded this Church.”

- Roman presbyter Gaius, handed down by Eusebius of Caesarea

The emergence of Christendom is one of the major events in Western history. Christendom inspired countless leaders and architects throughout central Europe, due to its Divine Right, through the erection of countless iconic churches and historical doctrines that sprouted from the political influence of the Church. The most significant monument to this culture, being the Vatican in Rome, Italy, follows a complex lifetime that encompasses characteristics of Ancient Roman, Early Christian, Secular Christian, and Modern religious eras. What we see today in St. Peter's Basilica is the constructed result of two thousand years of religious evolution. This complex process began between the founding principles of Early Christianity under its earliest martyrs and the establishment of Constantine's monument to the Holy Apostle Peter. It was then revived through a 120-year-long project that commenced under Pope Nicholas V and Early Renaissance popes with a remembrance of the lost faith, completed with the concluding works of High Renaissance architects.

I. The Church's founding principles of Early Christianity under its earliest martyrs

During the reign of Nero from 54-68 AD, the Vatican was located in the fourteenth district of Rome, in a stretch of land along the right bay of the Tiber river that was connected to the ancient capital by the Bridge of Caligula. During the early centuries of the Roman Empire, major cemeteries were built along large avenues or roads in accordance with the old Roman laws that prohibited any burials of the dead inside the city walls. During the reign of Emperor Claudius, sources indicate that the area surrounding the Vatican was much less hospitable than it is now. Marshy lands infested with mosquitos and large snakes comparable to those found in the Amazon River isolated this area to any significant form of urbanization by the ancient Romans. The soil lacked the simplest nutrients to produce wine. It did, however, provide excellent forms of clay used by bricklayers and potters at the time. Where the Vatican currently resides was in fact the most welcoming portion of the ancient Vatican lands. Because of this fact, Emperor Caligula began construction of a circus in 37 AD that was later worked on by Claudius from 41 AD until Nero completed it in 45 AD. Located at the center of the circus was an Egyptian obelisk, a staple monument to the Roman circus (Zander, 2009). Emperor Caligula transported the 25-meter high obelisk comprised of red granite, originating from Heliopolis, Egypt (Crimi, 2012). That exact obelisk was later transported to its present location in St. Peter's square under Pope Sixtus V in the year 1586. The Caligula Circus had another purpose after the devastating fire of Rome in 64 AD, which housed a majority of the city's homeless until Nero used it as an execution area for the scapegoated Christians (Zander, 2009).

Executions of the Christians, including the crucifixion of St. Peter, were carried out for nine days and focused on attacking the newly formed religion and neutralizing any preacher or early followers ("The First Persecution, Under Nero, A.D. 67", n.d.). At the time, the apostle Peter was in Rome spreading the word of faith throughout the western world. After the terror ended, the Christian community was granted permission by imperial authorities to remove Peter's body from the upside-down crucifix to a proper burial place within the Vatican hill. Fifty years after the burial of St. Peter, construction of the oldest tombs that still run parallel to the outside edge of the circus began. Present day tours into the necropolis, or Scavi, of the Vatican show us the tombs and mausoleums that match the direction of the Vatican's nave. The architecture of the buildings discovered underneath the Vatican are closely related to that of burial tombs in the middle imperial age. The best modern representation of ancient structures comparable to those in the necropolis can be seen in the Isola Sacra at the mouth of the Tiber River. Preserved in an open-air environment, these Ostian tombs have been the closest related in structural analysis to the necropolis tombs of the Vatican. Both tomb styles follow the same rectangular shape, brick style, portal entrance, and window scheme. It is also believed that the necropolis tombs at the Vatican also had wooden doors covered with nailed lead sheets, another common characteristic shared with those tombs located in the Isola Sacra. The necropolis was full of pagan worshipping families and a small group of Christian tombs, most likely some of St. Peter's first papal descendants, located closest to the surrounding resting place of the apostle (Zander, 2009).

At the time of Nero's reign, there were no tombs or mausoleums in the surrounding area outside of the circus. Rather, St. Peter was granted the first plot of burial ground at this site. By the middle of the 2nd century AD, this open area was situated between a western Red Wall (given its name for the color of its plaster) and two other later mausoleums; one to the south, the other the east. Early pilgrims must have travelled to pay homage and pray to the apostle, assumed by scholars to enter from the northern side. A funerary aedicule, surrounded by a green and white tile mosaic floor, was built against the red plastered wall at this location and is known today as the "Trophy of Gaius." This came to light in the twentieth century excavation. The Trophy was the first monument erected above St. Peter's tomb by St. Cletus, the second successor to St. Peter. It was set in a niche of the red plastered wall and had two separate parts divided by a horizontal travertine stone table supported by two white marble columns during Roman Emperor Domitian's time (Lopes, 1997). The aedicule had a covered opening in its base which opened onto the tomb of the apostle below. That tomb became the subject of veneration and was enlarged by St. Anicetus I to form an aedicule, or funerary chapel, around 160 AD (Lopes, 1997). To the right of the Trophy lay a Graffiti Wall dating back to the 3rd century AD or early 4th century AD. It sat perpendicular to the Red Wall where pilgrims etched Latin messages, complex Christian symbols, invocations, and names. The upper portion of it is cut off by Constantine, destroyed from the construction of the original basilica (Zander, 2009).

II. The establishment of Constantine's monument to the Holy Apostle Peter

Two centuries passed during the existence of this public cemetery when Emperor Constantine asserted his Christian authority on the Roman Empire. After his victory at the Milvian Bridge over Maxentius, Emperor Constantine decided, in agreement with Pope Sylvester I, to build a large basilica atop this public area. To do this, he began a daring excavation within the Vatican hill (Crimi, 2012). Interred by Constantine in the 4th century AD, the necropolis was completely covered with dirt. The pagan cemetery saw its last light of day, becoming a hidden past of old practices. According to the very ancient Roman custom and law, the inviolability of tombs was

strictly prohibited. Vesting his authority as Emperor and Pontifex Maximus, Constantine ordered the demolition of the upper parts of the mausoleums. He was beginning the foundations of a new Church to celebrate the resting place of St. Peter at a magnitude thought to be impossible based on the naturally unstable ground and topography of the earth (Zander, 2009). Legend has it that Constantine began the excavation of the necropolis with his own hands, filling twelve baskets of earth, one for each of the Apostles (Cecilia, 2001). He leveled the hill to create an incline that slowly elevated the western side of the hill from the eastern. In order to create such a stable foundation from an unstable origin, Constantine covered the pagan tombs whose upper parts were previously demolished. His laborers filled the individual tombs as they were with earth from the upper portion of Vatican hill, without disturbing the final resting place of its inhabitants and their sacred items within. Laborers erected massive retaining walls of tufa and brick, known as *Opus Vittatum*, around the southern portion of the Constantinian basilica to ensure the stability of the foundation. The necropolis and the new support structure for the basilica were to be covered and forgotten for over 1,600 years until an excavation in the mid-twentieth century initiated under Pope Pius XII in the Vatican Grottoes (Zander, 2009).

After the foundations for the basilica were constructed, Constantine built his own memorial surrounding the “Trophy of Gaius.” The Constantinian Memorial, still seen today in the Clementine Chapel within the Vatican Grottoes, is faced with paonazetto marble and strips of porphyry in the center and at the base of it. The intention of the emperor was to enclose and protect the original shrine of the apostle with this three-meter-high marble box. Surrounded by a pergola with finely sculpted white spiral columns, the memorial rested at the back apse of Constantine’s original basilica. Following a succession of different altars, the memorial acted as precedent for the late altar of Gregory the Great from 590 until 604, the late altar of Calixtus II in 1123, and the contemporary Papal altar of Clement VII since 1594. Above this Papal altar, Bernini raised his baldacchino to rest underneath Michelangelo’s grand dome (Zander, 2009).

Surrounding the Constantinian Memorial, the emperor gave the beginning orders for the construction of an impressive basilica in 323 AD. In 326 the basilica was consecrated (Crimi, 2012). The basilica, from only a few written records, formed the shape of a Latin Cross. It consisted of five naves, with the tomb of Peter as the fulcrum of the new construction. According to Vatican Library archives, a wide quadrilateral portico preceded the basilica with a colossal bronze pinecone of the Roman period at its center. Now in the Vatican Museum’s niche of the Cortile della Pigna, the bronze pinecone from the medieval times acts as a fountain for the ablutions of the catechumens. The façade of this former basilica splendidly depicted Christ and the four evangelists in a fine decoration of mosaics, with rare marbles and ornate mosaic decorations embellishing the interior of the basilica (Cecilia, 2001). The former basilica was finished in 349 by Constant, son of Constantine, and had a nave with four side-aisles, preceded by a four-sided portico accessed from a thirty-five-step stairway (Crimi, 2012).

For twelve centuries, it stood there, deteriorating over time from the sack of Rome after being abandoned during the Avignon period. A period of renewed power for the papacy began under Pope Martin V in 1420. Immediately following its 68-year-long Babylonian Captivity, the papal seat was moved back to Rome from Avignon after the Great Schism took place from 1378 until 1417. This new papal authority continued until 1527 when Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sacked Rome, which resulted in the dissolvent of papal power (Norris, 2014).

III. The revival of the lost faith under Pope Nicholas V and Early Renaissance Popes

After the sack of Rome by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, sculptors and artists along with bureaucrats fled the area, depleting it from its prior strengths in commercial independency and banking establishments. Rome quickly shifted from a newly reestablished city to one of dependency in its own agriculture and pilgrimage visitations. Popes became heavily involved in temporal matters to secure Rome and its Papal States, creating the capital of Christendom in the city of Rome. It was by these acts that Rome became the center of a Golden Age in unity, order, and peace through art, architecture, and literature. Looking to Imperial Rome as a model, popes were well situated to become serious collectors of ancient art. The Church conceived building and art projects as political statements and staples to their reign (Norris, 2014). It wasn't until the beginning of Pope Nicholas V's reign in 1447 that attempts of restoration services on the basilica began (Cecilia, 2001). During and after this declaration, Pope Nicholas V and his successors constructed and rebuilt the fortifications, streets, bridges, and piazzas of Rome to ensure safe access to the Vatican area for pilgrims and processions (Norris, 2014). Commissioned initially to Leon Battista Alberti, Nicholas V appointed Bernardo Gamberelli, also known as Rosellino, as Works Director of the grand task. Total reconstruction of the basilica promptly started but immediately halted after Pope Nicholas V's sudden death in 1455. His successors lacked the conviction to follow the attempted footsteps of Nicholas V (Crimi, 2012). The true reconstruction of St. Peter's began under Pope Julius II, who assigned Donato Bramante to construct the new church (Cecilia, 2001). Opting for a Greek Cross plan, Bramante saw to the construction of a basilica that contained four powerful columns with huge arches that were to support a great central dome. Nicknamed "Maestro Ruinante," or the master of ruination for his attempt to preserve portions of the original basilica and plan a basilica in the form of a Greek Cross, his design never advanced in both the pope's lifetime and his (Crimi, 2012). Similar to his Tempietto, Bramante's basilica design planned to have a spacious hemispherical cupola placed over a central body with four minor cupolas between the arms of the cross. After the start of designs in 1506, drafting ideas halted after the death of Julius II in 1513 and the death of Bramante in 1514. At the end of Bramante's life, the four pilasters and supporting arches of the cupola were made for the foundations of his planned dome. After his death, a succession of various architects followed the completion in construction for the new basilica. The first architect to succeed Bramante was Raffaello Sanzio, with continued efforts under Baldassarre Peruzzi and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, and then the important contributions left under Michelangelo Buonarroti, finally to be completed under the two architects Giacomo Della Porta and Domenico Fontana (Cecilia, 2001).

To begin, Raphael radically modified Bramante's plan. He returned to the idea of a Latin Cross with a longitudinal body that exhibited five naves. Later architects, Giuliano da Sangallo, Baldassarre Peruzzi, and Antonio da Sangallo, continued Raphael's suspended work. Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, summoned by the impulsive Pope Paul III, finally executed the proposed project by Raphael after raising the elevation of the flooring from its original level in detailed revisions and modifications (Cecilia, 2001).

Sangallo's death in 1546 led Paul III to call on someone else to be commissioned the ongoing construction of St. Peter's. In 1547, Michelangelo became Chief Architect of the Vatican under Pope Paul III's appointment. Abandoning Sangallo's design under new papal orders, Michelangelo referred back to Bramante's design by refining the Greek Cross plan with an emphasis in design of a great central cupola. To Michelangelo, the dome became the focus of the basilica's new design. His inspiration drew from Brunelleschi's Santa Maria del Fiore cupola in Florence, where Michelangelo strengthened the pylons that support the base of the dome (Crimi, 2012). The cupola was to characterize the panorama of the eternal city, which eventually became a symbol of the to-be revived Christian Rome. Upon Michelangelo's death in 1564, work done on the dome reached the tambour. Pirro Ligorio took on his work with the aid of Jacobo Barozzi "il Vignola." Lack of construction progress followed until architects Giacomo Della Porta, a former student to Michelangelo, and Domenico Fontana completed the cupola between 1568 and 1590. Construction only lasted 22 months after Pope Sixtus V commissioned the finishing work (Cecilia, 2001). Preferring the raised arch solution and reinforcing chain method, Della Porta increased the dome's height by seven meters from Michelangelo's original plan (Crimi, 2012).

Domenico Fontana proved his genius skill in the engineering field under the impulsive Pope Sixtus V by transporting the obelisk from the circus of Caligula and Nero to the center of St. Peter's Square in the year 1568. The task took four months, one thousand men, four thousand pounds of rope and iron, and one hundred forty horses to complete (Crimi, 2012). Finally completing the halted projects of Sixtus IV and Paul III due to its enormous difficulty, Fontana's dexterity proved to the Pope his worthiness to aid Della Porta in completing the task of Michelangelo's unfinished dome (Cecilia, 2001).

IV. Concluding works done by High Renaissance architects

A shift in the Renaissance style occurred at the same time that the pontifical throne was administered to a new pope, Paul V, were Michelangelo's refined plan of Bramante's design was forsaken. With a newly preferred taste for the more modern Latin Cross plan, Carlo Maderno was appointed as the new architect of St. Peter's in 1603. After final revisions in drafts and proposals, the design was executed in 1608 with the help of his distant relative Francesco Castello, formerly known as Borromini (Crimi, 2012). Murano revised and constructed Michelangelo's Greek Cross plan back to the Latin Cross, extending the length of the central nave to 220 meters ("The Basilica of St Peter", 2013). To this day, St. Peter's nave is the longest of all in the Christian World.

Impressed by Murano's skills in the arts, Pope Paul V again commissioned Carlo Maderno to create the impressive façade seen today on the basilica. Carlo Maderno completed the basilica's façade, finishing Michelangelo's started work in his own revised design. The façade stretches 117.7 meters long and 45.5 meters high and is scanned by twenty-seven columns. Four pilaster strips with the Corinthian capital style sustain the cornice, with thirteen statues atop the façade that represent Christ the Redeemer, St. John the Baptist, and eleven apostles. The atrium is also the work of Carlo Maderno, who was architect of the Reverend Construction of St. Peter's for twenty-six years. The vault of Maderno's atrium, finally decorated with stuccoes by Giovanni Battista Ricci da Novara, narrate the history of the apostles Paul and Peter. The statues to the sides of the lunettes, thirty-one in total, depict the first martyred popes (Crimi, 2012).

With Paul V's death and the ascension of Pope Urban VIII, Maderno's skills became questioned by Urban VIII's opposition of the Latin Cross design. Reaffirming his right as Chief Architect to pursue the proposed Latin Cross plan, Maderno kept his position as Chief Architect and the construction works of the project. In return, Maderno lost his commission for the baldacchino under the newly appointed pope. Rather, its design was assigned to Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who became an earlier consultant of both Maderno and his soon-to-be rival Borromini (Crimi, 2012). Nearly 1,300 years after the construction of the first basilica, Pope Urban VIII solemnly consecrated the new Basilica of St. Peter's on November 18th, 1626 (Cecilia, 2001). Upon Maderno's death in 1629, Urban VIII appointed Bernini as Chief Architect in 1629 at only the age of thirty, skipping past the rightful successor of Maderno's work who was Borromini. (Crimi, 2012).

In cooperation, Borromini worked under Bernini from 1624 through 1633 on the baldacchino. Superior in both technical competence of structural balance and bronze casting, Borromini still lacked the skill Bernini had on the subject of architecture. For this reason, and the fear of losing his position by Pope Urban VIII as Chief Architect, Bernini convinced Borromini to oversee the technical questions to the basilica construction rather than on-site executions, an order later given to him by the pope himself. Promised equal pay and recognition, Borromini followed the intended tasks only to figure out Bernini would not pay or recognize his works later on, taking all recognition of the work, including the pope's approval (Crimi, 2012).

Never healed from this betrayal, Borromini left the construction site of the basilica, leaving work in the hands of Bernini (Crimi, 2012). Gian Lorenzo Bernini amplified the new basilica even more, which already covered 25,000 square meters, with his bronze baldacchino of 1633 and double elliptical colonnade that was built between 1656-1667. Impressive in both design and sheer size, Bernini constructed his 29-meter high altarpiece with an inspiration from Constantine's former marble serpentine monument from 1,300 years ago. Built to restore the proper centrality of St. Peter's under Michelangelo's cupola, the size of the baldacchino compensates the vastness of the earlier constructed nave. Vatican Archives attest that Pope Urban VIII, the patron of the enterprise, used a tenth of the income of the church and profits accrued from the melting down of the bronze girders of the Pantheon's portico to aid in the construction of Bernini's work (Cecilia, 2001).

The baldacchino is topped by Michelangelo's dome, which rests on four compound piers 45 meters high with a 71-meter perimeter. Above these piers are four medallions designed by Giovanni de' Vecchio, 8.5 meters in diameter, that depict the four evangelists Matthew as a man, Mark with a lion, Luke with a bull, and John with an eagle. The dome, broken into sixteen ribs, depicts the twelve apostles along with Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist, and St. Paul.

With an excess of self-confidence, Bernini attempted to add two bell towers to the façade of the basilica, a revival of Sangallo's initial design for the basilica. Going against earlier projects with negative outcomes by Maderno, he attempted to re-establish an expensive project with two three-story campaniles on either side of the façade. The new pope, Innocent X, appointed a commission for eight cardinals to oversee to responsibility for Bernini's fluked construction with an architectural analysis of the reasserted Borromini. The foundations of Maderno's façade had been designed to only support a single floor above it, not a tower. There were to be two towers in Bernini's initial design that were supposed to be three times higher and six times heavier. Bernini's bell tower construction led to cracks found in Michelangelo's dome, which caused a

serious structural problem later solved by Carlo Fontana and Luigi Vanvitelli. Of the abandoned constructions, large arched passageways remain. These passageways rest on the outside of the façade of the basilica, where two mosaic dial-clocks were designed and installed in the tower's stead by Giuseppe Valadier between 1786 and 1790.

Despite this accidental flaw and expensive reconstruction backfire, Innocent X kept Bernini as head of construction work until his death. Overseeing the site during the transition of papal authority, Bernini vigorously worked on finishing the interior of the basilica while the exterior plaza lay bare. Two fountains done by both Bernini and Maderno were already in the central plaza, Bernini's to the left and Maderno's to the right. Centered between the two was the Egyptian obelisk previously transported by Fontana. Innocent X's successor Pope Alexander VII commended Bernini's work ethic and desired him to finish the construction of the square (Crimi, 2012). Bernini thought of a double elliptical colonnade that wrapped the square in an embrace. The allegorical intention Bernini had for this design symbolically rendered the maternal embrace of the Church towards the faithful. The arms, 120 meters long and seventeen meters wide, represent Charlemagne to the left and Constantine to the right. Atop the colonnade rests 140 statues that depict the defenders of faith, the founders of religious orders, popes, bishops, doctors of the Church, saints, and martyrs (Crimi, 2012).

Bernini also took charge in the elaborate Baroque interior design of the basilica in addition to the baldacchino, the attempted exterior campaniles on the façade, and the double elliptical colonnade. He produced the masterful bronze cathedra of the apse in 1666, constructed to preserve the relic of the claimed chair that St. Peter preached to the Christians of Rome from in his final years. Bernini also took charge of the interior side altars and funerary monuments of various pontiffs we now see today inside St. Peter's. Now a gallery of glamorous and elaborate ornament, this memorial houses the statues of the founders of Religious Orders. Bernini also placed niches, raised ten meters high, on pilasters that support Michelangelo's dome with the four imposing statues of his St. Longinus, Andrea Bolgi's St. Helena, Francesco Mochi's Veronica, and Francesco Duquesnoy's St. Andrew. The bronze statue of St. Peter Enthroned, done by Arnolfo di Cambio between 1245 and 1302, rests underneath the pilaster of Bernini's St. Longinus. It is the famous pilgrimage statue for Christians, with the right foot of it worn away by the rubbing and kissing of its worldly visitors (Cecilia, 2001).

Pope Alexander VII commissioned Bernini again to construct a monument exalting an ancient throne of wood and ivory, thought to belong to St. Peter, that would be situated in the apse of the basilica. Two angels supporting a tiara and the keys to heaven hover over the chair, symbolizing the authority of the pontiff. Four bronze statues, two on either side of the throne, depict the Doctors of the Church. The inside statues, the Doctors of the Greek Church, are St. Athanasius to the left and St. John Chrysostom to the right. The outside statues, the Doctors of the Roman Church, are St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. This symbolic statue placement expresses the theological concept of the Eastern Church and the Western Church united as one under the throne of the Catholic Church, the resting place of St. Peter and his martyred followers. The final sculptural work done by Bernini for the Vatican equestrian statue of Constantine located on the right-hand-side of Maderno's atrium. The opposing left-hand-side statue, finished by Giovanni Battista Ricci da Novara during his work on the atrium's vault, depicts Charlemagne (Crimi, 2012).

“Not for ambition, nor pomp, nor vainglory, nor fame, not the eternal perpetuation of my name, but for the greater authority of the Roman Church and the greater dignity of the Apostolic See...we conceive such buildings in mind and spirit.”

-Pope Nicholas V on his deathbed

The newer, present basilica replaced the old one of Constantine after 120 years of nearly uninterrupted work. Its construction, begun under catalyst Pope Nicholas V, was carried through the energetic activities of Pope Julius II which began on April 18th, 1506. The urging Pope Sixtus V followed it through until its consecration by Pope Urban VII in 1626. The construction phase pipelined through eighteen different Popes and twelve different architects. A portal between the Eastern Orthodox world and the Western Roman Catholic world was thus conceived, inspired by earlier works of the Ancient Romans through the recollection of lost arts and architecture that displayed the revival of a lost faith (Cecilia, 2001).

During construction, corruption became rampant. In an attempt to reestablish the faith of the Church to what it once was before the Babylonian Captivity, cardinals and papal authorities sped up the process of pilgrimages and their acts of confession by initiating indulgences. These ‘temporal remissions’ of punishment in Purgatory allowed the Church to attract more pilgrims to the site yearly, receiving financial aid in return for the constructed basilica that was to be seen by future pilgrims travelling to visit the home of the Holy Apostle. These acts partially spurred Martin Luther’s *95 Theses* and the beginnings of the Reformation in 1517, in which Luther denied the authority of Rome (Norris, 2013).

Even through these historical events and the resulting actions by the Church, St. Peter’s Basilica is still a universal icon to this day. Connecting the Eastern and Western churches under one centralized location, the Vatican acts as a precedent for a multitude of other European cathedrals that is masked by the forceful work and labor of its architects and employees who used old techniques borrowed from the Imperial Roman era and Florentine designs.

One such cathedral, mimicking the original Vatican design by Sangello, is St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, England. Michelangelo’s attempt and Della Porta’s execution of the double-shelled cupola of St. Peter’s that was inspired by Brunelleschi’s Florentine cupola allowed for the triple-shelled dome of St. Paul’s to be conceived. All inspiration for the most modern cathedral evolutions derived from looking back to the structural analysis of Hadrian’s Pantheon, influenced by previous ancient works seen in Emperor Hadrian’s travels to the Ancient Eastern World.

Throughout history, new building designs evolve from old, new principles are inspired from old, and religious entities grow or separate as a result of different philosophies. The reconstruction of St. Peter’s Basilica derives from human conflict and the struggle for power and authority, stemmed from the hidden agenda to unify the known religious world under one centralized domain.

Chronology and Evolution of St. Peter's Basilica

Beginning in 37 AD

- 37 AD The beginning construction of a Roman Circus atop Vatican Hill by Roman Emperor Caligula.
- 41 AD Construction of the circus still underway, under the new Roman Emperor Claudius.
- 45 AD Construction of the circus completed under Roman Emperor Nero.
- 64 AD The Roman fire occurs. The circus becomes a house for the homeless, and later a nine-day-long execution area by Nero for the scapegoated Christians (including St. Peter) for the devastating tragedy of the city. St. Peter was then buried outside the walls of the circus into the Vatican Hill.
- c. 114 AD Construction began of the oldest tombs running parallel to the outside edge of the circus.
- c. 150 AD This open area was situated between a western Red Wall (given its name for the color of its plaster) and two other later mausoleums; one to the south, the other the east.
- c. 160 AD A funerary aedicule, built by St. Cletus against the Red Wall, was enlarged by St. Anicetus I.
- Late 3rd cent. AD
Early 4th cent. AD A Graffiti Wall, a message board used by pilgrims for prayer and memory, was attached to the monument of St. Peter.
- October 28, 312 AD The Battle of Milvian Bridge. Constantine's conversion to Christianity and defeat over Maxentius.
- 312 AD Constantine's construction begins for his large Memorial and basilica foundations atop the monument to St. Peter.
- 323 AD Orders were given to construct Constantine's basilica, surrounding his monument over St. Peter's aedicule.
- 326 AD The Basilica is consecrated.
- 349 AD Construction of the Basilica is finished by Constant, son of Constantine.

Chronology and Evolution of St. Peter's Basilica

Beginning in 37 AD

- 590-604 Gregory the Great's altar above Constantine's Monument, its predecessor.
- 1123 The altar of Calixtus II replaced the former altar of Gregory the Great.
- 1447 Initial attempts of basilica restorations by Leon Battista Alberti began under Pope Nicholas V.
- 1455 Pope Nichols V suddenly dies, resulting in all work being halted by Alberti.
- April 18th, 1506 Pope Julius II assigns Donato Bramante the unfinished construction project.
- 1513 Drafting ideas are halted due to Pope Julius II's death.
- 1514 Bramante dies. Raffaello Sanzio, Baldassarre Peruzzi and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, Michelangelo Buonarotti, Giacomo Della Porta, and Domenico Fontana are the architects that follow.
- 1546 Sangallo dies under the commission of Pope Paul III.
- 1547 Michelangelo becomes Chief Architect of the Vatican under Pope Paul III's appointment.
- 1564 Michelangelo dies as Chief Architect, leaving his protégés an unfinished dome.
- 1568-1586 The obelisk from Nero's Vatican Circus was transported to its present location in St. Peter's square by Domenico Fontana under the orders of Pope Sixtus V.
- 1568-1590 Architects Giacomo Della Porta and Domenico Fontana complete Michelangelo's cupola in 22 months.
- 1594 The current papal altar of Clement VII rests underneath Bernini's baldacchino.

Chronology and Evolution of St. Peter's Basilica

Beginning in 37 AD

- 1603 Calo Maderno is appointed the new architect of St. Peter's in 1603 by Pope Paul V.
- 1608 Final revisions to Maderno's designed drafts and proposals were executed with the help of his distant relative Francesco Castello, formerly known as Borromini.
- 1612 Pope Paul V commissioned Maderno to create the impressive façade and atrium of the basilica, unfinished at the time of his death.
- 1621 Pope Paul V dies.
- 1623 Pope Urban VIII ascends the throne.
- November 18th, 1626 Pope Urban VIII solemnly consecrated the new Basilica of St. Peter's.
- 1624-1633 Borromini worked under Gian Lorenzo Bernini on the baldacchino.
- 1629 Maderno dies. Pope Urban VIII appoints Bernini as Chief Architect.
- 1633 Giovanni Battista Ricci da Novara decorates Maderno's atrium with stuccoes, narrating the history of the apostles Paul and Peter.
- 1656-1667 Gian Lorenzo Bernini builds his double elliptical colonnade for the plaza of St. Peter's.
- 1666 Bernini produces the masterful bronze cathedra of the apse, planned by Pope Alexander VII, to preserve the relic of the claimed chair that St. Peter preached to the Christians of Rome from.
- 1786-1790 Giuseppe Valadier designed and installed two mosaic dial-clocks on the outsides of the façade to the basilica.

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