

THE CONGREGATION OF THE ORATORIAN AND THE  
ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN ARCHEOLOGY:  
A REAPPRAISAL

**Late 19<sup>th</sup>- and Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Developments**

One could say that as far as the modern discipline of Christian archeology goes, all roads lead to Rome and to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894). A Roman by birth, De Rossi devoted most of his life and career to the study of the material remains of Early Christianity, notably to the exploration and interpretation of the catacombs that lay under the soil of his native city. Hailed as “princeps eruditorum Itolorum” by the German classical scholar Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903),<sup>1</sup> De Rossi is considered to be the founder of the modern science of Christian archeology or, in rather pompous terms, “Il Principe dell’archeologia cristiana.”<sup>2</sup> Nowadays still, few publications on the subject fail to cite his articles and books, or at least to mention his name and authority.

*Roma sotterranea Cristiana* (Rome, 1864-1877) was arguably De Rossi’s most important work. With this publication, the author aimed to offer an exhaustive description of each one of the Roman catacombs, based on an analysis of all the relevant literary sources as well as the archeological discoveries of the past and present age.<sup>3</sup> The archeological trove that constitutes the main body of the work was enormously influential, but perhaps even more significant

<sup>1</sup> *Ephemeris epigraphica: corporis inscriptionum latinarum supplementum*, ed. by Wilhelm HENZEN and others, 9 vols, Rome, 1872-1912, VII, *Incipit*.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio BARUFFA, *Giovanni Battista de Rossi: L’archeologo esploratore delle catacombe*, Vatican City, 1994, p. 43. On De Rossi, see Nicola PARISE, *De Rossi, Giovanni Battista*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* [referred to subsequently as DBI], 69 vols., Rome, 1960-, XXXIX, p. 201-205, with further bibliographical references.

<sup>3</sup> De Rossi’s ambitious project was never completed. Only three volumes of *Roma sotterranea Cristiana* were eventually published, covering not all the Roman catacombs as it was first planned, but only one, the catacomb of S. Callisto. The blueprint of the work is given in Giovanni Battista DE ROSSI, *Roma sotterranea Cristiana*, 3 vols, Rome, 1864-77, I, p. 75.