

## Has St. Peter ever been in Rome?

by Otto Zwierlein, Bonn

### St. Peter in Rome

At the end of March 2013, there appeared a review of my recently published book ‚Petrus und Paulus in Jerusalem und Rom‘ in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*.<sup>1</sup> This in turn gave rise to an interview that did not make it to the press, although a considerable amount of time and work was spent on it. Encouraged by colleagues who found my remarks in the interview a helpful summary of the main points of the book, I now put my statements made there online “ad usum felicem”.

### The impetus for my research on the topic

I was trying to identify the author of a five-volume history of the First Jewish-Roman War written in Latin (*Bellum Judaicum*), customarily attributed to a “Hegesippus”, a free paraphrase of Flavius Josephus’ work on the Jewish war written in Greek between 75-79 AD. The author of the paraphrase is most probably Ambrose, the later bishop of Milan, writing his work around 370-372 AD and including at the beginning of book three an excursus on the persecution of the Christians in Rome during the reign of Nero, which has no counterpart in Josephus’ *Bellum Judaicum*. Ambrose focusses on the competition between the apostle Peter and the magician Simon who had come to be a friend and advisor of Nero. Simon’s death marks the beginning of the persecution and martyrdom of Peter (and Paul) in Rome.

The search for the sources Ambrose used for his depiction of the events in Rome that are not attested in Josephus led me to a comprehensive investigation of the literary witnesses and their reliability as historical sources all the way back to the New Testament. The results were published in the volume “Petrus in Rom. Die literarischen Zeugnisse” in 2009.<sup>2</sup> The book triggered a broad and interdisciplinary debate; in fact, two congresses were held, one in Rome and one in Freiburg, to refute my assumptions. Therefore, I felt it necessary to follow up on the discussion with another book (the one mentioned at the beginning)<sup>3</sup> in order to refute the objections made by my opponents and to bolster specific points under discussion with new material.

### Relevance of the topic

In an article in the German version of *Wikipedia* (being the subject of an online article is a fact one has to live with, having become a person “of public interest”) it says at the end:

*Both for reasons of content and because of their far-reaching consequences for the legitimation of the position of the papacy within the Roman-Catholic Church, i.e. the primacy of the pope, justified by the so-called apostolic succession, they [i.e. Zwierlein’s theses] have met with heavy opposition both from the Roman Institute of the Görres-Society and from the De-*

<sup>1</sup> B. Lang, War der Apostel Petrus in Rom?, NZZ, 30. 3. 2013, No. 74, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Otto Zwierlein, Petrus in Rom. Die literarischen Zeugnisse. Mit einer kritischen Edition der Martyrien des Petrus und Paulus auf neuer handschriftlicher Grundlage, UaLG 96, Berlin/New York 2009 (2., durchgesehene und ergänzte Auflage 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Otto Zwierlein, Petrus und Paulus in Jerusalem und Rom. Vom Neuen Testament zu den apokryphen Apostelakten, UaLG 109, Berlin/Boston 2013.

*partment of Classical Studies of the Görres-Society, which opposition has in turn been rejected by Zwierlein as unfounded.*

I myself see these “consequences” as less dramatic. Already the humanist Erasmus finished his exegesis of the first epistle of Peter, with particular reference to the final greeting in 1 Peter 5:13 and the mysterious term ‘Babylon’, remarking that the primacy of the Roman see does not depend on the place (Rome) since, he says, it is well-known “that the papal see has been removed from the city (of Rome) several times, e.g. by John XXIII to Lyon [he probably means Avignon] where it stayed for 74 years.” (cf. Zw. 2013 fn. 10). In turn, one might ask whether it was not the concept of Peter’s presence in Rome – an idea for which the earliest evidence starts from around 160/170 AD – and of the Roman succession of the popes derived from it that has paved the way for “Roman centralism”, an ecclesiastic structure that nowadays is felt by many to be problematic.

### “Peter in Rome” and the New Testament

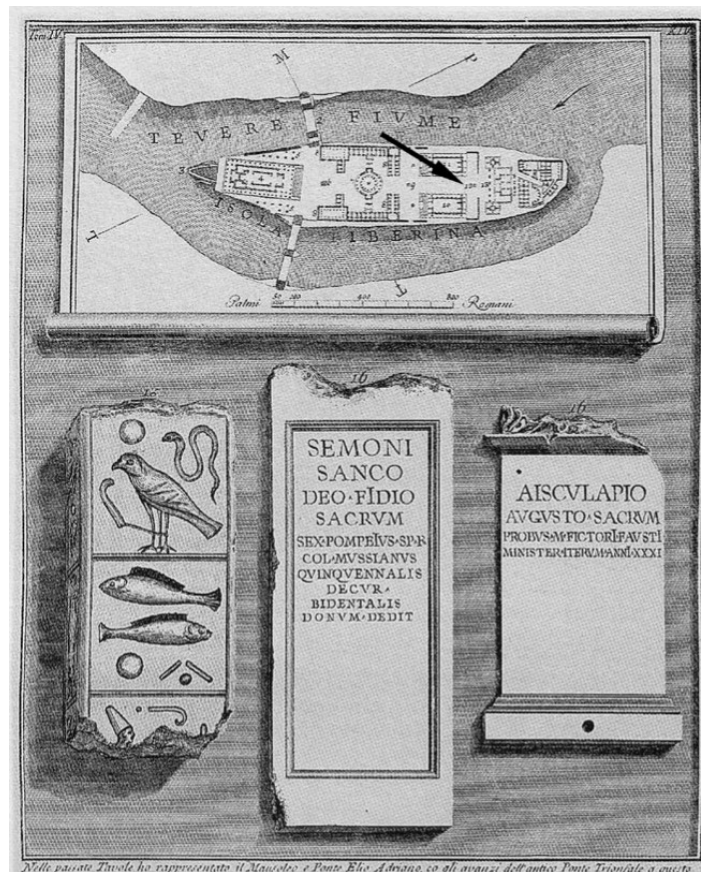
**Rome** is **not** mentioned in connection with Peter in the New Testament **anywhere**. Paul’s epistle to the Romans and the end of Acts (ca. 100 AD) allow the conclusion that neither of the authors knew anything about a presumed stay of Peter in the city; what is more, Romans 15:20 and 2Cor 10:16 actually exclude such a possibility (Zw. 2013, 3). When Peter and Paul divided among themselves the areas of their missionary activities (Gal. 2:7), Paul was charged with evangelizing the uncircumcised heathens, and Peter the circumcised Jews (in Palestine). His last appearance in the NT shows him on a temporary visit to Antioch (Gal. 2:11), otherwise his activities are restricted to Palestine. In Jerusalem he plays an important role next to the Lord’s brother Jacob, from where the mission of the “diaspora” is organized. Around the year 50 or 54 at the latest (cf. 1Cor 9,5) we lose track of the apostle Peter in the Bible. Exegetes who interpret the passage in John 21:18–19 as an anticipatory reference to Peter’s crucifixion have to take into account the fact that the (spurious) additional chapter 21 of the gospel of John is attested at the earliest around 180/185 (in Irenaeus) and is not likely to have been written before 160. The scene is lake Tiberias, Rome is not mentioned at all.

The only other passage in the NT taken to speak in favour of Peter’s presence in Rome is the first epistle of Peter. The final greeting of this fictitious letter written by an unknown author around 112–115 (1 Peter 5:13) is – in the imagination of the author writing under the name of the apostle – sent not from Rome, but from Jerusalem, Peter’s home parish and the metropolis of early Christianity. It is from here that the greeting is sent to the fellow Christians in the eastern diaspora, who are the chosen foreigners of the dispersion together with the Christian community of Jerusalem, gathered around Peter. “Babylon” is not a geographic, but an ontological metaphor, it does not refer to Rome on the banks of the Tiber, but is a cypher for the forced imprisonment of all Christians into a surrounding that is “foreign”, hostile, and addicted to vice and idolatry. So Peter’s and his community’s greeting (wherein Marcus, Mary’s son, is singled out, whose house was the usual gathering site of the Christians in Jerusalem) goes out to their fellow Christians in the eastern diaspora. Together with the Christian community in Jerusalem, they have to endure in “Babylon” (i.e. in the “confusion” and hostile affliction of earthly exile) for a while – knowing, however, that they, too, belong to the ones chosen for the heavenly Jerusalem. This metaphorical interpretation of the final greeting has been conclusively demonstrated to stand up against all objections in Zw. 2013, 265–273. The first epistle of Peter acts as a continuation and a further development of the Acts of the Apostles, both in terms of the personnel appearing in it and the geographic orientation of the initial greeting. The nucleus of the movement, the ‘metropolis’ Jerusalem, is both the starting point and the constant reference point of the “dispersion” (diaspora). Further references to Peter and Jerusalem may easily be found in the index (Zw. 2013, 312), s.v. Jerusalem.

### On the controversy among scientists

While of course an overly self-confident or overbearing tone should be avoided when discussing the objections brought forward by one's opponents, it is legitimate to state one's own view of the discussion for the sake of the matter itself, the gist of it being that the putative counter-arguments assembled at two conferences and published in two books do not hold water, and have been refuted reliably or corrected in the epilogue ("Nachlese") of my book on Peter and Paul (2013, 263–288). The result of my studies of the available sources carried out in my two books is unambiguous: none of the passages presumed to speak in favour of a sojourn of Peter in Rome is conclusive. On the contrary, a detailed philological analysis of the written sources allows us to conclude that none of the "key passages" datable up to the middle of the 2nd c. AD presupposes any knowledge of Peter's ever having been in Rome. This applies also to the first epistle of Clemens (ca. 120–125), which has been treated exhaustively in both books.

Justinus Martyr, who lived in Rome and wrote an apology to the emperor Antoninus Pius around 150/154, tells us about the magician Simon playing his tricks in the city, but he does not know anything about 'Peter in Rome'. The archaeological witness he invokes to prove that the magician Simon had been in Rome has been shown beyond any doubt to be a false ascription: the inscription he quotes as evidence, written on the base of a statue on the island of the Tiber, has been preserved until the modern era (see the following figure). It does not run, as Justinus claims, **SIMONI SANCTO DEO**, but **SEMONI SANCO DEO FIDIO**. It has nothing to do with Simon Magus, but refers to an old Sabellic god of vows (Semo Sancus) of whom another base with a similar inscription was found on the slopes of Mount Pincio in 1879.



GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI, *Le Antichità di Roma IV* (1784) tab. XIV

Looking back at the discussion of recent years and allowing somewhat of a generalization due to space restrictions, it seems that the conflict is one between, on the one hand, researchers thinking in terms of – partly dogmatically fixed – theology, who are concerned with apology, and, on the other hand, researchers with an interest in philological and historico-critical analysis. This may be exemplified by one of the many statements made in the discussion: in the preface to the volume on the “Blutzeuge”<sup>4</sup> (martyr) one reads: “The conference was confronted with the challenging hypothesis that Peter had never been in Rome, hence had not died there and that therefore there was no grave of Peter in Rome. Opinions such as this, which have been known for ages, have found adherents also in recent times, even among Catholics whose pride it should be to guard the grave of St. Peter in the Vatican and the grave of St. Paul at the Via Ostiense in Rome and to be able to show them to visitors from all over the world.”

With such an attitude, the outcome of the debate is determined from the start. An open dialogue and unprejudiced, critical questions are undesired. The reader may make up his mind about the ensuing attempts at an apology laid down on more than a hundred pages by reading Zw. 2013, 74–88.

The endeavour to find an answer to the vexing question of “Peter in Rome” is not about the reception and defence of the official teaching of the church, but about a critical assessment of the literary (and inscriptional) sources (on the archaeological data see below). This requires first and foremost a good command of philology, not theology, something that is lacking in both apologetic books – *sit venia verbo* – in many nooks and crannies. A spectator looking at the debate from outside should therefore not be misled into believing that “scholarship is divided” in this matter, but should rather evaluate the weight of the arguments brought forward on both sides. Readers who, due to an understandable lack of self-confidence in the assessment of the intricate details of the question, prefer to rely on the judgement of an internationally recognized authority may refer to the evaluation of my book on St. Peter by Walter Burkert (Zurich): “I find (in it) a remarkable triumph of philology, which is further supported by a new manuscript.” (in a letter dated June 18, 2010).

### **Relevance of the topic for the claim to primacy of the papal see**

Insofar as the claim to primacy is based on the presence of St. Peter in Rome, it is without foundation. The early church was not organized centralistically. It was the community of the faithful, in which presbyters, deacons, and episkopoi served various functions. The mono-episcopacy developed in the late 2nd c. in the fight directed primarily against the gnostic movements. All the bishops of the Christian communities comprising the entire *oikumene* saw themselves as successors to the apostles on whom the Holy Spirit had been poured out indiscriminately at the feast of Pentecost (cf. Zw. 2009/10, 142. 146 fn. 43). The primacy of the bishop of Rome is due to historical reasons, it took time to develop and took on the form of an absolutistic monarchy, which it still has today, by adopting the Roman imperial law in the High Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> In sharp contrast to this, Polycarp of Smyrna, e.g., negotiated with ‘bishop’ Anicetus about the date of Easter in Rome around 154 AD as a representative of the Asian rite of equal rank. Both presbyters invoked their respective traditions. Although they could not agree on a unanimous solution, they celebrated the Eucharist in the same church and parted in peace.<sup>6</sup> Still in the last decade of the 2nd c., bishop Victor of Rome, presiding over a synod in Rome, was unsuccessful when, in a public letter, he arrogantly tried to declare all the

<sup>4</sup> Chr. Gnllka – S. Heid – R. Riesner, *Blutzeuge. Tod und Grab des Petrus in Rom*, Regensburg 2010, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. K. Ganzer, *Der päpstliche Primat und das römische Kaiserrecht*, Stuttgart 2012 (Abh. Ak. Wiss. Lit. Mainz, Geistes- und sozialwiss. Kl. 2012, Nr. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Church History* 5,24,16–17.

congregations of Asia Minor outside the community of the Church since they insisted on their date of Easter. The bishops of Asia Minor were not impressed by his threats, invoking their own apostolic tradition, and bishop Irenaeus sided with them in the name of the church of Gallia. Fundamental points of dispute such as this were not decided by authoritarian decree in Rome, but cooperatively by mutual agreement of the various regional episcopal synods (in Palestine, Asia Minor, Pontus, Gallia, Osrhoene [Mesopotamia], Rome) and in direct contact with other individual bishops.<sup>7</sup> Despite the regional differences – as Irenaeus looking back tells us – the various congregations lived in peace with each other. For example, as for the question of fasting before Easter they followed the principle that the differences in fasting lay the foundations for the unity in faith.<sup>8</sup> For Irenaeus of Lyon's assessment of the Church of Rome (presumably) founded by Peter and Paul as the representative of the doctrine of the church as a whole see Zw. 2009/10, 140–156.

### St. Peter's church and grave

Nowadays even Catholic reference books acknowledge the fact that there is no evidence for a grave of St. Peter either in the necropolis beneath the church bearing his name or anywhere else in Rome. Excavations have brought to light an *aedicula* of pillars dated between 160 and 180, which has been interpreted as a memorial to St. Peter. When the basilica of Constantine was built, people actually believed that beneath the aedicula St. Peter's grave was to be found. But a real grave never existed there. The archaeologist probably best acquainted with the necropolis below St. Peter, our colleague Harald Mielsch from Bonn, has recently stated his opinion to the same effect. Having conducted field work on the spot for many years, he was able to show that when the cemetery (in use since the 2nd c. AD) containing the memorial was built on the Vatican hill, the existence of a putative grave of St. Peter was not taken into account. What is more, the Red Wall that was designed to protect the ascent leading up to "area Q" from earth being washed down was built partially across the site where the presumed grave of the apostle would have had to be found – which, as is well-known, it never was. He concludes: "The archaeological evidence for St. Peter's grave and its veneration begins at the earliest around 160–180 AD, starting with the erection of the memorial."<sup>9</sup> This agrees perfectly with the dating of the rise of the Roman myth of St. Peter that can be deduced from the literary sources: the apology of Justinus and the letter of Dionysius of Corinth addressed to the congregation in Rome set a time-frame roughly between 155 and 174 AD.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, Church History 5,22–25.

<sup>8</sup> Eus. h.e. 5,24,13 ἡ διαφωνία τῆς νηστείας τὴν ὁμόνοιαν τῆς πίστεως συνίστησιν.

<sup>9</sup> H. Mielsch, Die Umgebung des Petrusgrabes im 2. Jahrhundert, in: S. Heid (ed.), Petrus und Paulus in Rom, Freiburg 2011, 383–404, especially p. 404.