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Catacomb Find Boosts Early Christian-Jewish Ties, Study Says

James Owen
for [National Geographic News](#)
July 20, 2005

For millions of pilgrims and tourists, the ancient catacombs of Rome represent the rise of Christianity. Yet a new study suggests that these vast underground burial complexes may owe their origins to Jews—and that Judaism may have influenced Christianity for longer than previously thought.

Carved over several centuries from soft rock on the outskirts of the imperial capital, the catacombs are the resting places of hundreds of thousands of Christians.

But along with the 60 early-Christian complexes, two Jewish catacombs survive in Rome. They are distinguished by Judaic motifs, such as the seven-branched candelabras, or menorahs, that appear on many grave stones.

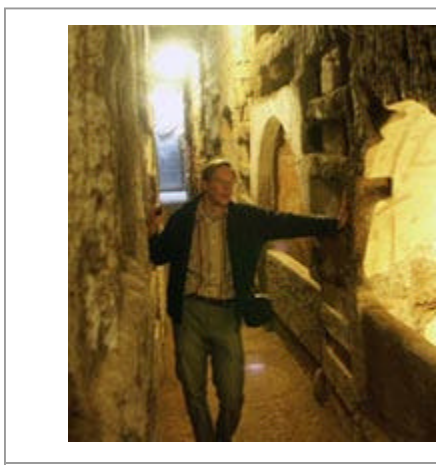
Dutch-based researchers now report that at least one of the Jewish catacombs, Villa Torlonia, predates its Christian counterparts.

Using radiocarbon dating techniques, the team found that charcoal fragments embedded in lime powder used in the construction of Villa Torlonia dated from 50 B.C. to A.D. 400. The discovery suggests that the Jewish catacomb came into use a century before the earliest Christian sites.

The researchers describe their findings in tomorrow's issue of the journal *Nature*.

The discovery also suggests that the Jewish roots of early Christianity run far deeper than previously thought,

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Historian Leonard Rutgers explores the Villa Torlonia Jewish catacomb in Rome. Rutgers led a team that found that the city's Jewish underground complex predates the earliest Christian ones. The discovery contradicts the long-held belief that Christians pioneered the building of catacombs.
Photograph courtesy Utrecht University

according to the study's lead author, Leonard V. Rutgers, professor of late antiquity at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

"Scholars have frequently argued that Christianity came into its own fairly early on in the first century, and from then on there was no Jewish influence," he said. "The period of separation probably took a lot longer and was much more gradual than we thought."

The catacombs were built just outside Rome's boundaries because, at the time, Roman law forbade burial places in the city itself. It's thought that early Christians also used the sites for worship and to celebrate the anniversaries of their martyrs.

Earliest Evidence

"These catacombs are the earliest archaeological evidence we have for Christianity," Rutgers said. As such, they remain potent Christian symbols.

Visiting the catacombs, the recently deceased Pope John Paul II asked, "How can we fail to be moved by the humble but eloquent traces of these first witnesses to the faith?"

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Rutgers says that, because the underground constructions are so vast and were continuously expanded for centuries, they provide a unique insight into the religion's evolution.

For instance, over time a shift is seen toward recognizably Christian iconography, such as the Crucifixion and Bible scenes from the New Testament.

Christian and Jewish catacombs share features that link their development, according to Rutgers. "They are quite similar in terms of architecture," he said. "If you're in a site where there are no inscriptions and no wall paintings, then it's hard to say whether it's Jewish or Christian."

There are no known writings that suggest that Christians adopted the practice of catacomb burials from Roman Jews. But the new dating evidence helps establish a chronology that supports this argument, Rutgers says.

"It's not unlikely that the Christians said to themselves, Well this is a great idea, let's copy it," he said.

Some scholars argue that the Christian catacombs have even earlier origins that tie in with pagan funerary customs.

Amanda Claridge, a classical archaeologist at the University of London, says it's unlikely the practice began with the Jews. "I think it evolved from the cremation burials [of pagan Romans], which were all rock-cut, underground depositories that date from the very early first century B.C.," she said.

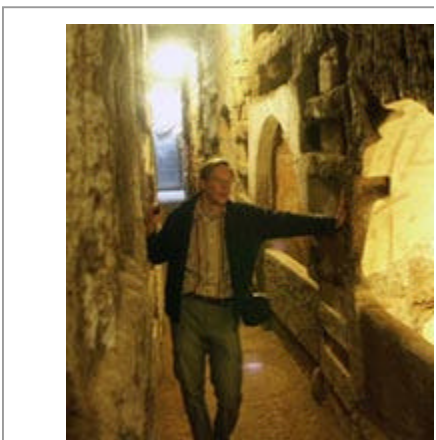
Claridge adds that Roman pagans later switched from cremation burials to corpse burials, which necessitated bigger chambers like those found in the catacombs.

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Historian Leonard Rutgers explores the VII Jewish catacomb in Rome. Rutgers led a team that found that the city's Jewish underground chambers predated Christian ones. The discovery contradicts the long-held belief that Christians pioneered the building of catacombs.

Photograph courtesy Utrecht University

Roman Motifs

The Christians adopted traditional Roman motifs for their tombs, including garlands, flowers, birds, and other animals, according to Claridge.

"They get taken over into the Christian world and acquire ever more exclusively Christian associations," she said. "For instance, sheep are considered very Christian, but they are already there in the existing [ancient Roman] repertoire for the decoration of tombs."

The archaeologist says the catacombs were a cheap option for Rome's poorer people, who couldn't afford to buy a burial plot. "The Christians often belonged to that social-economic group," she added.

Given that Christianity grew out of Judaism, it might seem a fair assumption that Jewish customs also influenced early Christian burials. Yet ever since catacomb studies began in the 16th and 17th centuries, Christian scholars appear to have overlooked the Jewish connection.

The reason for this is theological, according to Rutgers, the lead study author.

"These scholars weren't interested in Judaism," he said. "It may sound very silly today, but they didn't like the idea that Christianity had Jewish roots. Therefore, they thought it wise not to investigate."

Even in the 20th century catacomb archaeology has clung to very old methods. It's a very traditional field, and this strong theological influence is still felt."

Claridge, of the University of London, added, "The early history of the exploration of the catacombs was done by members of [17th-century] society in Catholic Rome, where Jews were marginalized and often treated extremely badly."

"Since the 17th century it's been traditional that catacomb archaeology is done by members of the Catholic Church and nobody else," she said. "After all, the Church owns most of the catacombs of Rome."

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