



Jewish catacombs at Rome's Villa Torlonia

RESTORATION IMMINENT: The frescos show from left to right: Lulav, menorah, flask of oil, the Temple or Aron Kodesh in Jerusalem, shofar, menorah, knife and etrog. (Irving Spitz)

A fascinating burial site may soon be opened to the general public

• By IRVING SPITZ
Special to The Jerusalem Post

ROME – Cremation represented one of the usual burial practices for pagan Romans. With the emergence of Christianity, burials began to take place in catacombs. This word is derived from the Greek meaning “within the quarries.” Catacombs are underground cemeteries consisting of intricate labyrinths or tunnels with recesses for burial chambers. There are more than 60 sites of catacombs in Rome which date from the end of the second to the early fifth century CE.

The vast majority of catacombs represent the final resting places of Christians, but there are also several of Jewish origin. One of these is situated in the gardens of the

Villa Torlonia in the northeast of Rome. This villa was built in the first half of the 19th century for the wealthy banking Torlonia family. In 1929 it was taken over by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. After his death in 1945, the villa and the gardens remained unused for many years, but have now been restored and are open to the public.

In 1918, while conducting alterations in the very extensive gardens, workers stumbled on ancient catacombs. Excavations revealed two separate catacombs which had been united. This was shown to be a large burial ground for the Jews of the period. These catacombs are currently closed to the general public. I was fortunate to be taken on a tour by Cristiana-Barbara Pazienti, press representative of Atlazio, an agency which promotes tourism in Rome, and Simona Morretta, a senior archeologist from

Rome's State Archeological Commission.

The long narrow passageways are surrounded on both sides by multiple levels of niches, or *loculi*, carved out of the rock. These loculi extend from the ceiling to the floor. Bodies were placed in these niches which were then sealed with rubble and bricks and then coated over with a layer of lime. In addition there is also a *geniza*, a depository where holy documents were deposited. These catacombs are extensive, extending for more than 13,000 square meters with over 1,000 meters of galleries on the two floors. To access them, one has to descend a series of stairs.

THE MAIN interest in these catacombs is the plethora of beautiful colored frescos on the walls and part of the vaulted ceilings. These represent characteristic iconographic Jewish symbols and many are in an excellent

state of preservation. These include the seven-branched menorah, shofar, ark with the law tablets, etrog, lulav, circumcision knife, cruse of oil and matzot. There are also depictions which may possibly represent the façade of the Temple destroyed in 70 CE by Titus.

Additional frescoes include geometric patterns, grapevines, birds, plants and fish. These are not specific to Jewish catacombs and are also seen in those of Christian origin. Not unexpectedly, there are no depictions of humans consistent with the Ten Commandments which prohibited displays of graven images. There are also stamped tiles with the name of the ancient Roman workshop. Interestingly enough, the inscriptions found in these and other Jewish catacombs are in Greek and not Hebrew.

Radiocarbon testing using organic material incorporated during the construction of the catacombs was conducted by Prof. Leonard V. Rutgers. This revealed that these catacombs date from about 100 BCE (Rutgers et al., *Nature*, 2005). According to Rutgers, these specific catacombs came into general use in the first century and pre-date Christian catacombs by at least 100 years. This implies that burial of the dead in catacombs may have begun as a Jewish custom and that it was subsequently adopted by the Christians.

On the other hand, it should be noted that other archeological findings such as oil lamps found in the catacombs of Villa Torlonia date from the end of the second to the early fifth century CE. Thus the question of the precise dating of these catacombs is not definitely resolved. It should be remembered that the Roman Jewish Diaspora community is the second oldest in the world and dates back to the first century BCE. Jews would have likely chosen to bury rather than cremate their dead since cremation is prohibited by Jewish law. Roman jurisdiction forbade burial places in the city itself and in view of the scarcity of land, catacombs were established in the soft volcanic rock outside the city walls.

Today the extensive gardens of Villa Torlonia are a large municipal park. The villa itself is opulently decorated. The central feature is the two-story high ballroom and vault, lined with paintings, stuccoes and marbles. On the second floor is Mussolini's bedroom with the original furniture.

The management of the catacombs was originally under the direction of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archeology. The current custodian is Rome's State Archeological Commission. Because of dangers of rock falls, noxious gases and the issue of preservation of the frescoes, these catacombs are closed to the general public. Discussions are currently under way with archeologists and the Jewish authorities in Rome with a view of eventually opening this fascinating place to tourists. It is anticipated that the restoration of the catacombs in Villa Torlonia will begin at the end of current year.

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Genoa: A largely unexplored jewel at the crossroads of Western civilization

• By IRVING SPITZ
Special to The Jerusalem Post

GENOA – Throughout its history, Genoa has been the meeting point not only between the disparate cultures of the east and west but also between those of the north and south. Since the city is bounded by high mountains in the north and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, it is squeezed into a narrow belt which stretches for 33 kilometers. It is the largest port in Italy with a population of approximately 650,000. Despite its art, palaces, museums and inviting gardens, it is invariably bypassed by tourists.

From the outset, the Genoese proved to be outstanding traders and merchants. It was already a prominent city in the sixth century BCE. From about the year 1000, Genoa became a powerful maritime republic with military dominion over most of the Mediterranean, and it exerted considerable commercial influence. Genoa's only rivals were the other maritime republics, Pisa, Venice and Amalfi. As a reward for participating in the First Crusade, the Genoese were allowed to establish trading colonies in the Near East.

What the Genoese singularly failed to do was to govern the city efficiently for the benefit of all its citizens. Political life was characterized by turmoil and civic strife. The real power was in the hands of a bank, the Casa di San Giorgio. This syndicate controlled the city, its overseas possessions and, most critically, the treasury.

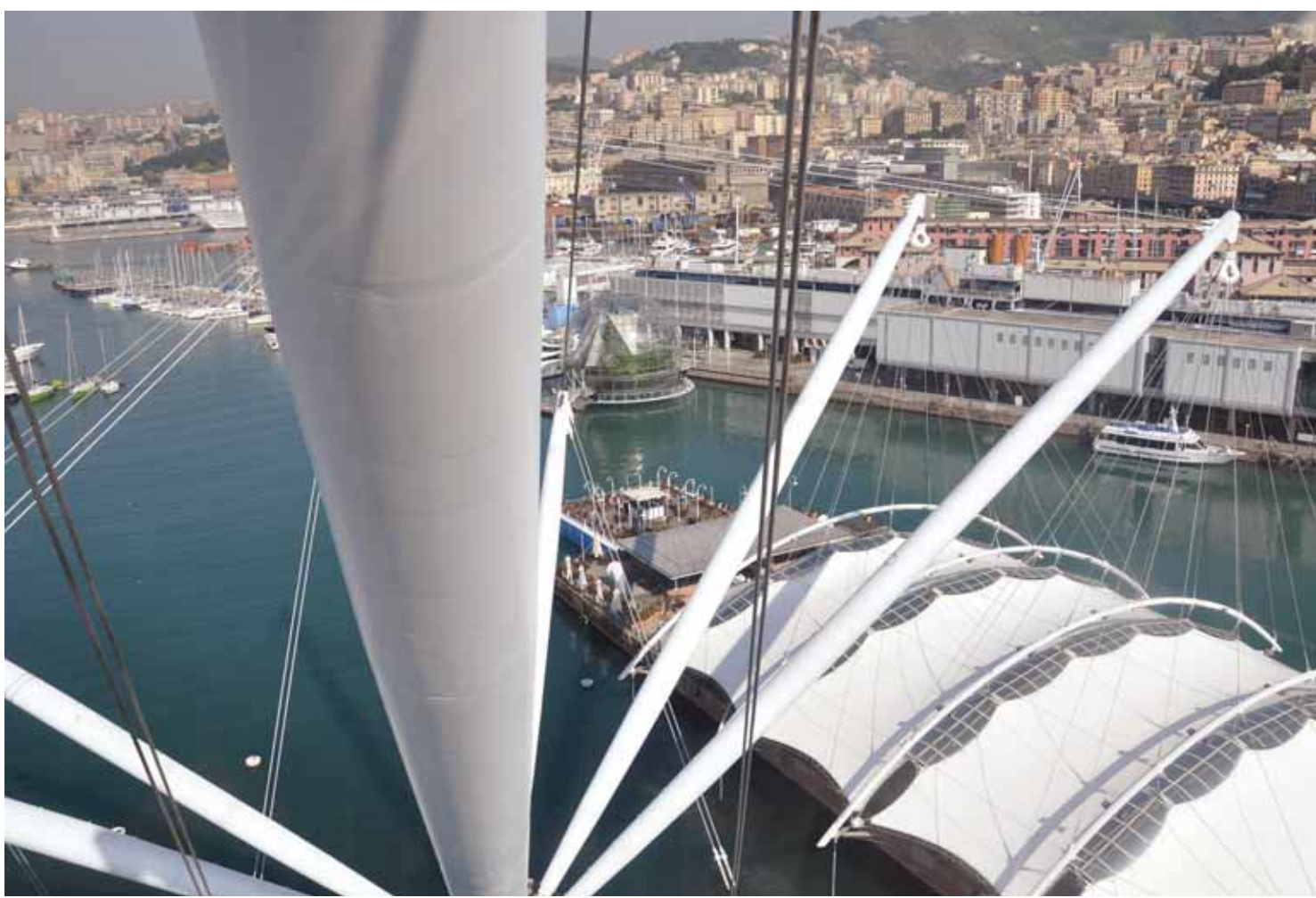
Andrea Doria became doge in 1528, and under him the republic reached its zenith of power and influence. He was a great patron of the arts and introduced the High Renaissance to the city. This was the beginning of the century of the Genoese whose traders, bankers and navigators financed the Spanish empire reaping the profits accrued from the discovery and exploitation of the New World. Medieval Genoa was one of the most populated cities in the world and it earned the distinction of being the only Western city mentioned in the Arabian Nights. More recently, it played a crucial role in the Risorgimento (unification of Italy). The main guiding spirit of this movement, Giuseppe Mazzini, was born in Genoa and his family home is today the museum of the Risorgimento.

Genoa's most famous son was Christopher Columbus. The city received a major facelift in 1992 in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. It was the European capital of culture in 2004. Over the last 20 years, Genoa has undergone major urban renewal including restructuring the old port (Porto Antico) and reclaiming of the seafront. The master plan was drawn up by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano, who was born in the city.

This area has now become the most important tourist attraction of Genoa and has transformed the city. There is an impressive aquarium, the largest in Europe and one of the major Italian tourist attractions. Other highlights of the Porto Antico include a biosphere, which contains a rain forest with plants and birds, an impressive science center for children aged three to 14 and a panoramic revolving elevator, which offers astounding views of the city and port area.

Also present in this complex is the Galata maritime museum, the largest in the Mediterranean. This gives a kaleidoscopic view of the history of seafaring from early row boats to large transatlantic liners. The exhibition is arranged over four floors. There is a hall dedicated to Columbus with his famous portrait by Ghirlandaio, and a shipyard armory with a rich collection of weapons together with a reconstruction of a 17th century Genoese galley. Another floor houses globes and ancient atlases. An interesting exhibit allows the visitor to experience the thrill of steering a boat through the stormy Cape Horn. Finally there is an interactive exhibit showing the difficulties Italian immigrants endured on the steamships departing from Genoa for Ellis Island in New York.

We were fortunate in meeting Claudia Pinna of the National Tourist Agency who arranged for the informative tourist guide, Marina Firpo, to show us around. There are more than 24 museums in Genoa. Time constraints allowed me to visit only a few. Via Garibaldi, also known as Via Aurea, contains numerous palaces built in the Renaissance style. These were the homes of wealthy, powerful and aristocratic Genoese families at the height of the city's seafaring and financial power. Many have frescos and stucco on their façades, often with trompe l'oeil pilasters, balconies, terraces, monumental staircases and magnificent gardens.



LA SUPERBA! A view of the Genoa harbor from the Bico, a revolving elevator. The biosphere and aquarium are visible in the distance. (Irving Spitz)

This area was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006. Today these palazzi function as museums, galleries, offices, bank headquarters and private homes.

THREE FORMER residential palazzi (Tursi, Rossi and Bianco) on Via Garibaldi have been turned into important art museums and house a host of treasures. Notable paintings include several of the Italian (Caravaggio, Veronese, Lipi, Pontorno, Guernico and Remi), Flemish (Memling, David, Rubens and van Dyck), German (Durer) and Genoese (Strozzi) schools. Especially prominent are the paintings by Anton van Dyck who came to Italy in 1621 and remained for six years studying the Italian masters. He was mostly based in Genoa, and it was here that he began his career as a successful portraitist for the city's aristocracy.

Overlooking the sea is the Palazzo di San Giorgio. This was originally the headquarters of the Casa di San Giorgio and it now houses the premises of the Port Authority of Genoa. This 13th century structure has a great frescoed façade with the figure of St. George slaying the dragon. The explorer Marco Polo was once held as a prisoner in this building.

The Palazzo del Principe was the first royal palace built during the republic for Doge Andrea Doria. Its gardens slope to the sea and include a fountain of Neptune, designed by a pupil of Michelangelo.

Andrea Doria's magnificent portrait by Sebastian del Piombo can be seen in this building, which contains remarkable frescoes by Perino, a pupil of Raphael.

Another interesting building is the Palazzo del Università which was built in 1630 as a Jesuit college. The interior has several tiers of arcades which surround an impressive courtyard. The famous Aula Magna (great hall) houses six statues of the virtues by Giambologna and magnificent frescoes by Michele Colonna.

Palazzo Ducale was the residence of the doges and is now the city's cultural center. For hundreds of years one of its towers, the Torre Grimaldina, was used as a prison for political opponents of the republic, artists or others of noble descent. The virtuoso violinist and composer Niccolò Paganini, a native of Genoa, was imprisoned here after being accused of kidnapping and seduction.

The Staglione cemetery is a city in itself, with miniature chapels, temples, palaces and cathedrals. In his *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain wrote of the cemetery that “we shall continue to remember it after we shall have forgotten the palaces... On either side as one walks down the middle of the passage are monuments, tombs and sculptured figures that are exquisitely wrought and are full of grace and beauty.”

The Commenda, an outstanding example of Genoese Romanesque art, dating from the 11th century, was Genoa's first hotel.

This hospice-convent offered accommodation for knights and pilgrims of the First Crusade on their way to the Holy Land. There are other relics of the crusaders in Genoa's black and white striped cathedral, the Duomo di San Lorenzo, which dates from the ninth century and contains a mixture of Romanesque, Gothic and baroque styles. The Treasury houses a bowl brought home by Genoese crusaders which was reputed to have been used in the Last Supper and is said to be the Holy Grail.

Genoa also has a rich cultural tradition of music. I was fortunate to hear a performance of Wagner's epic opera *Tristan and Isolde* at the opera house, Teatro Carlo Felice. This opened in 1828, was destroyed in World War II and subsequently rebuilt. Conductor Gianluigi Gelmetti led a robust and powerful reading of Wagner's score and also directed the production. The staging by Mauricio Balo comprised large curving timbers of a ship. The protagonists, tenor Ian Storey as Tristan and soprano Elaine McKrill as Isolde, did remarkably well in their punishing and difficult roles. Bass Andrzej Saciuk rose to the occasion as King Mark, and mezzo-soprano Monika Waeckerle was most effective as Brangäne. This was indeed a memorable performance.

Petrarch, the Italian poet and Renaissance humanist, called Genoa “La Superba.” This jewel on the Mediterranean certainly lives up to this appropriate name.