

Rome's Jewish catacombs opened briefly to public as part of Jubilee Year

by [Josephine McKenna](#) in the [April 27, 2016](#) issue

Beneath a former vineyard lies a vast underground catacomb where Jewish people in Rome buried their dead nearly 2,000 years ago.

While Rome has more than 40 Christian catacombs, which attract hundreds of thousands of tourists every year, only a handful of Jewish catacombs exist, and they are usually open only to small groups and private tours.

Now the Jewish catacombs of Vigna Randanini will open to the public from May 1 to June 5 as one of several initiatives by the Italian cultural ministry to broaden the scope of Pope Francis's Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Giorgia Calo, cultural councilor for the Jewish community in Rome, welcomed the move to highlight Jewish history in Italy, saying that Jews "have always been a part of the history of the capital."

The Jewish catacombs, like the Christian ones, lie outside the walls that once encircled ancient Rome.

Discovered beneath a vineyard in 1859, the Jewish burial site consists of a labyrinth of tunnels that covers nearly 200,000 square feet at a depth of 15 to 50 feet beneath the surface.

Visitors can see inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which give clues about an individual's family connections, status, or line of work. While the catacombs have been sacked over the centuries, visitors can still see many colorful frescoes and tablets with depictions of the traditional Jewish candelabra.

The walls of family tombs are covered in dancing maidens, birds, grapevines, and floral tributes, and there are also pockets of *kokhim*, a type of Jewish burial chamber.

The catacombs were included in 20 cultural itineraries unveiled by Dario Franceschini, Italy's cultural minister, to mark the Jubilee Year.

These itineraries, he said, were “the product of an extraordinary collaboration” that showed how fundamental culture is for affirming integration, coexistence, and dialogue.

Yahya Pallavicini, an imam and vice president of Italy’s Islamic community, also attended the minister’s launch. He said the concept of mercy in the pope’s Jubilee initiative exists in both Jewish and Muslim doctrine and presented an opportunity to consider what they had in common.

The announcement of the catacombs’ opening came as Venice marked the 500th anniversary March 29 of the Venetian Republic’s requirement that Jewish people live in a confined area, which gave the Italian word *ghetto* to the world.

Rome’s cultural itineraries include a visit to the remains of a synagogue in the ancient port of Ostia Antica, south of the Italian capital, and a tour of the Roman Forum’s Arch of Titus, which graphically records the Romans’ sacking of Jerusalem in the year 70.

“We have tried to create a suitable itinerary to help people understand how much the Jewish people have been part of Rome,” Calo said.

Close to the Jewish catacombs are the Christian catacombs of Callixtus, which are among the most extensive in Rome. The second-century tombs are part of a huge burial complex. Sixteen popes and many Christian martyrs were once buried there.
—Religion News Service

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