



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

“I lived inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre for three years”

Interview with Professor Francesca Romana Stasolla



Francesca Romana Stasolla is a full professor of Christian and Medieval Archaeology at the “La Sapienza” University of Rome and a member of the Pontifical Roman Academy of Archaeology. She leads several archaeological excavation projects, including the one carried out during the interventions on the floor of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

Professor, during the archaeological excavations that preceded the interventions on the flooring of the building, you spent many months inside the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. How did you feel during this privileged experience?

Together with the team of archaeologists, and colleagues from other disciplines (botanists, geologists, archaeozoologists, historians, philologists, etc.) from the “La Sapienza” University, we spent about three years inside the basilica, with a brief interruption only after the events of October 7, 2023. It is an extraordinary opportunity both from a professional and human point of view. We never imagined we would be able to conduct excavations in such a sacred place, where the entire history of Jerusalem is encapsulated, from the Iron Age – i.e. from the 8th century BC onwards – up to the present day.

From a human point of view, what impressed us was the ability of the various communities to live together in Jerusalem, a city that is the epitome of multiculturalism and multi-religiosity. We were profoundly changed during the months spent observing this “permanent miracle” of coexistence amidst the local social and religious complexities.

It was an exercise of trying to assimilate ourselves discreetly into this harmonious complexity, which greatly opened our minds. We tried to understand without judging, and sometimes we also accepted that we could not understand certain situations, while still remaining humanly close to the people we met. It was about building bridges between all the worlds that intersect at the Holy Sepulchre. We got to know everyone, and gradually found the keys to relationships, which allowed us to integrate more and more into the reality of the Resurrection sanctuary. Now, we have many friends in Jerusalem. How would you define the Holy Sepulchre? It is not simply a “church,” for it is a “sanctuary,” open freely to everyone, without any entrance checks, located in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem. As I mentioned, I lived within the Holy Sepulchre for three years, and this extraordinary place inspires peace. You cannot break down an open door! This permanent spiritual hospitality embodied by the basilica disarms hearts and encourages contemplation, mutual respect, understanding beyond differences, and openness to others. This coexistence is remarkable, especially in such a historically difficult moment, which is so full of conflicts.



What did you find particularly moving in the Holy Sepulchre, for example?

The team, consisting of about ten people, has been working in the Holy Sepulchre since May 2022. Every day, we send the documentation of what we find to the team in Rome, at the “La Sapienza” University, and here a larger group of archaeologists work on analysing, processing and systematising the data. Archaeology gives materiality to history. For example, we found evidence that this site, which was a quarry during the Iron Age, was a garden at the time of Christ. The paleobotanical analysis shows that the area of land beneath the Northern part of the basilica was cultivated with vines and olive trees, according to pollen samples collected on-site, near a typical low wall that surrounded the plantation there. This confirms what the Gospel of John tells us, which speaks of a garden where a new tomb was located, in which the body of Christ was placed after His descent from the cross. We have also gained a better understanding of the work conducted around the rock of the tomb venerated in the 4th century, from the time of Constantine. The complex has grown continuously since the early 5th century. The archaeological data collected is being studied in relation to the liturgical paths described, in particular, by Egeria, the woman from Roman Hispania who, in 380, left an account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

In your opinion, when did the pilgrimage to the Tomb of Christ begin?

The material traces of the first Christian community are very difficult to find, although it is clear that the early Christians venerated the tomb, as indicated by some ancient documentary sources. The location was topographically determined and passed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, the antechamber of the Sepulchre, where there could have been graffiti, was destroyed when Constantine built a new entrance to the venerated tomb, after destroying a cultic installation ordered by Emperor Hadrian.

Therefore, we have no historical or archaeological evidence, because everything surrounding the tomb chamber was removed under Constantine to create a larger space for the veneration of the tomb. What was your personal experience of the Risen One in Jerusalem?

First of all, I find it providential that the Christian communities responsible for the Holy Sepulchre have chosen to allow us to organise these excavations before restoring the floor of the basilica. In fact, they could have devoted themselves directly to the technical work without dealing with the archaeological aspect. Thanks to their decision, I had a wonderful spiritual experience. My faith, of course, is not based on my research, it is independent from my work. I do not need material evidence to believe, and the archaeological data is there to help tell the long story of Jerusalem. On an inner and personal level, I am always very impressed by the large number of faithful who have regarded Jesus' burial place as a Holy Place for twenty centuries. The faith of these millions of faithful gave material form to history, handed down memory, built what I now have the privilege of investigating.

Interview by François Vayne

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