Summary

This Ph.D. dissertation addresses the question of whether the famous catacombs of Rome are a Christian invention. Traditionally archaeologists believe this to be the case. Recently, however, the idea that the catacombs are a typically Christian invention, has been questioned on the basis of a new analysis of the pertinent literary sources. Such a state of affairs illustrates a basic problem, or rather dichotomy, in current catacomb archaeology: the question of the catacombs' origin is usually addressed on the basis of *either* the archaeological *or* the literary evidence. Such an approach is problematic, not only for methodological reasons, but also because it prevents us from gaining a better understanding of how the catacombs came to be. In this dissertation I specifically seek to unite both approaches in an attempt to reconstruct how and why the early Christian catacombs of Rome came into existence.

In the first chapter I explore the larger historiographical context of discussions on the origin of the catacombs. I not only seek to document the extent to which ideological biases have colored previous discussions of this issue. I also try to uncover flaws in the interpretation of archaeological evidence. I finally discuss problems with regard to current and past interpretations of ancient literary sources that bear on the origin of the catacombs of Rome. Chapter 1 thus sets the stage for the chapters that are to follow in that it documents the necessity of analyzing archaeological sources alongside literary ones

The relevant archaeological evidence is discussed in chapters 2 through 4. Topographically, the evidence included in these chapters derives from the city of Rome and its direct surroundings. Chronologically, it covers the period from Augustus to the early fourth century A.D.

In chapter 2 I address the pagan archaeological materials with an eye to the question of whether pagan *columbaria*, *mausolea* and *hypogea* served as source of inspiration for the Christian catacombs of Rome. Discussing the archaeological characteristics of these funerary constructions in some detail, I seek to uncover how the usage of these various tomb types changed over time. Thus I try to show how the large communal *columbaria* of the first century as erected by the emperor and Rome's wealthy families evolved, from the time of Trajan onwards, into *columbaria* that were still luxurious, but that were clearly destined for either a single or, at most, a limited number of families.

As I argue in Chapter 2 this very same trend, namely towards developing tombs of ever more limited extension, can be discerned in the case of pagan *hypogea* (i.e. underground tombs) too. Thus archaeological evidence from the pagan sphere provides us with clear evidence to argue that the first early Christian communal cemeteries of the early second century did not take their inspiration from pagan counterparts of either the *columbarium* or the *hypogeum*-type.

In chapter 3 I zoom in on the earliest Christian underground cemeteries in Rome, distinguishing and discussing three subtypes, and arguing that two of these subtypes provide the basis for what was soon to become the early Christian catacombs of Rome. Comparing this evidence with the pagan archaeological materials analyzed in Chapter 2, I argue that despite formal similarities, these early Christian cemeteries differ clearly, on a conceptual level, from their pagan counterparts: they are patently less luxurious and unmistakably designed to accommodate relatively large groups of people. In Chapter 4 I finally also discuss *hypogea* of the neutral variety, that is *hypogea* whose decoration is too neutral to assign it either to pagan or to early Christian ownership. Based on a detailed analysis of the formal

characteristics of these sites, I conclude that there is reason to believe that these neutral *hypogea* should be classified as early Christian.

In Chapter 5 and 6 I turn to an analysis of the literary sources with special emphasis on the question of who was responsible for the burial of those we encounter in Rome's extensive necropoleis. Chapter 5 addresses evidence from the pagan world, including evidence on the city or state as organizer of burials, the *collegia*, the family, the emperor as well as individuals. From all the evidence collected it follows that: 1. the family played a central role in taking care of burial; and 2. "public display" was a central notion that helps shape pagan burial customs and pagan funerary architecture.

In Chapter 6 I focus on the early Christian literary sources relating to funerary organization. Here it is possible to distinguish between individuals, (pagan) *collegia*, the family, and the Church as being the agents responsible for proper burial. From a discussion of the evidence bearing on these groups it follows that both individual families as well as the early Church played a prominent role as organizers. In fact, it could be shown that the early Christian catacombs of Rome owe their origin to the involvement of these groups (before 250 A.D. it were primarily families who felt themselves responsible for also burying the poor, after this date the Church took over this role). "Public display" - so important in the pagan world - does not seem to have played a prominent role in early Christian cemeteries. There the proper burial of the poor was the overriding concern.

This dissertation concludes, therefore, that the catacombs of Rome are a typically Christian invention. Although it is true that early Christian funerary architecture has pagan roots, there are clear differences with the pagan world both in terms of how the respective cemeteries were designed as well as in terms of how burial of one's co-religionists was conceived.