

Did you know that for more than one thousand years the popes of the Catholic Church were the rulers of Italy? Today's site of St. Peter's in the city of Rome is all that's left of a vast area of 17,000 square miles that was known as the Papal States until 1859.

Beginning in the 4th century, gifts of land had been given to the popes, and as more were bestowed, the political power of the popes spread up and down the Italian peninsula. Not only were they the representatives of Christ on earth, but also they were also temporal rulers, landlords, and even war leaders. One remnant of the popes' military campaigns is the massive fortress of Castel Sant' Angelo connected to the Vatican Palace by a corridor. The castle was originally the tomb of the Roman emperor Hadrian, but underwent a series of changes that turned it into a fortified citadel in the shape of a pentagon with dank prison cells, an armory and papal apartments. In this complex, which overlooked the Tiber and surrounding city, the popes could escape and defend themselves during times of siege and political unrest. With the unification of Italy in 1859 spurred by leaders like Giuseppe Garibaldi, the pope's power over his vast territory was annulled. After years of negotiation, the pope was given exclusive dominion over what is now Vatican City (Video2). Thus, the Catholic Church is the only religion to own its own country, post office, and national flag and coat of arms. Vatican City – or the Holy See – is not only the administrative and religious capital of Roman Catholicism; it is also the world's smallest independent state. This means that when you cross into St. Peter's square, you are actually traveling to another country. The sovereign state of Vatican City has about 1000 citizens and is located on the site of a hill the Romans called the "mons Vaticanus." In ancient times this was the site of Nero's circus, Nero's circus was a long oval racecourse with a narrow spine bisecting the middle. The spine was decorated with an Egyptian obelisk at its center. It was probably near the obelisk that St. Peter was crucified, since a highlight of the games was sometimes the execution of condemned prisoners. St. Peter's body was buried in a necropolis nearby, and later, in 324 C.E. the emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity, built a basilica on the burial site. In this illustration you can see how the original St. Peter's church overlapped the ruins of Nero's circus. This original St. Peter's cathedral was demolished in the 15th century when it was deemed unsafe, and was rebuilt, eventually to become the spectacular structure you see today. Today's St. Peter's Basilica is represented by the dotted outline overlapping the other two plans. Visitors who take an underground tour of St. Peter's can still see the buried ruins of the old Roman cemetery, some of the foundations of Old St. Peter's church, and even the casket containing the bones believed those of St. Peter himself. You can also find Nero's obelisk. It's the focal point of the grand piazza outside. Even from a distance it's clear to see that the current St. Peter's basilica is a vast building. Its plan was changed numerous times, and originally was a Greek cross shape surmounted by a huge dome. Michelangelo completed the first basilica in this style, but reinforced the huge piers holding up the enormous dome (still9) that rises 308 feet above the floor. Four massive piers more than 60 feet thick were needed to support it, two are seen here outlined in red. During the Baroque period (the 17th century) the nave was elongated turning the church into a Latin Cross shape. Its façade was expanded, and Gianlorenzo Bernini created the theatrical arms of the elliptical piazza (still10), which reach out 1,115 feet outward from the main entrance to gather in the faithful for the pope's blessing. The arms are composed of two hundred eighty four columns and eighty-eight pilasters arranged into four corridors, and along the roof above are 162 carved statues of saints. A

permanent staff of architects and expert artisans, called the sampietrini, are constantly maintaining the building complex. Walking the interior of St. Peter's means walking about 693 feet, about 1/4 mile. Within there are thirty-four altars, each of which contains sacred relics including the bodies of saints and several apostles. The center of attention is Bernini's great altar canopy (still11), the baldacchino, which fills the space beneath the massive dome. Only the pope may celebrate mass within the four elaborate, energetically twisting columns and Baroque canopy surmounted by fluttering angels. Beyond the canopy is the throne of St. Peter (still12), believed to be the seat Christ will take when he returns for the Last Judgment. Other important artworks along the nave are the bronze statue of St. Peter, and Michelangelo's famous marble sculpture, the Pieta (still13).

Although it's only .17 sq. miles in size, smaller than the Washington D.C. Mall, with a border only 2 miles in length, the Vatican is probably the richest country in the world per square foot. What it lacks in natural resources it makes up for in its incredible collection of priceless artworks (Still14) in its museums. Today when you visit these treasures you're walking through buildings that were originally papal palaces built by some of the great popes of the Renaissance. Centuries of papal patronage formed the collections (still15) that are grouped into various art historical periods. The collections are so vast that visitors are reminded to allow plenty of time to rest and recover before continuing their visit, since some routes can take five hours to complete. For example, to see the Sistine Chapel (still 16), expect to walk for thirty minutes from the entrance, with no lingering to look at other art along the way. One thing's for sure—walking through the Vatican Museums is like walking through an art history textbook.