

A solution to urban cemeteries...The Catacombs

Going back to the time of the Romans, limestone and gypsum were quarried in the Paris area for building material. While these mines were once on the outskirts, by the eighteenth century they were right under the city. In 1774, a hundred feet of street collapsed into the mines, leading to the establishment of the Inspection Générale des Carrières to inspect and repair the system of subterranean tunnels.

The quarries were identified as receptacle for the troublesome dead. Between 1785 and 1787, the bodies in the Cemetery of the Innocents were carted by night into the quarries. Other burial grounds soon followed. Although initially the tunnels were filled with disorganized piles of bones, in the early 1800s Inspector Héricart de Thury led the rearrangement of these remains into elaborate walls and other formations joined with masonry altars, columns, and plaques with quotations that evoked reflections on mortality. The Catacombs opened by appointment to tourists in 1809, who descended stairs into an underground illuminated by candles. Today, visitors enter beneath the words: “Arrête! C’est ici l’empire de la mort,” or “Stop: this is the empire of death.”

Most major cities have had to contend with the dead of previous generations as they grew. In Paris, the solution was to create an underground city of the departed.



