Wherein lies the significance of St. Peter’s in the Vatican – in its role as first church of Roman Catholicism? as preeminent symbol of an ancient city? as major monument of Western civilization? This book posits an answer to the question (while recognizing that it is only one among many): the significance of the edifice lies in its extraordinary and extraordinarily tormented history. Founded in the fourth century to honor the tomb of Saint Peter, the church gained enormous prestige in the Middle Ages as a repository of holy relics and objects, and as the site of epoch-making events. But with the return of the papacy from Avignon and the shift in papal residence from the Lateran to the Vatican, the building needed to be renovated. Beginning in the fifteenth century and over the course of the next three hundred years, Old St. Peter’s was gradually torn down, and in its midst arose the new structure now in place. The transmutation was far from easy. It involved many changes in design and concept, and interwove the careers of some of the most brilliant – and contentious – architects and artists of the day, including Bramante, Michelangelo, and Bernini. This volume, focusing on selected and key moments in the history of the church from the late antique period to the twentieth century, offers an expertly researched and thoughtful overview of St. Peter’s, full of new insights and appreciation.

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