

Curiosities of the Roman Catacombs; History and Purpose Made Clear

WHAT MODERN RESEARCH HAS DISCLOSED—GALLERIES EXTENDING 587 MILES UNDERGROUND—TOMBS OF ANCIENT SAINTS AND MARTYRS—THE INSCRIPTIONS.

Modern research has established beyond a doubt the original exclusive use of the catacombs by the Christians as places of burial and of holding religious assemblies, and the various other theories put forth to explain the origin of these cemeteries have all been proved to be unfounded.

The Christian mode of burial in the catacombs seems to have been copied from the Jews. A short time before the birth of Christ Judaea was made tributary to Rome by Pompey, and many thousands of its inhabitants were transferred to Rome, where a special district on the right bank of the Tiber was assigned for their habitation.

These first Jewish settlers adhered to the customs of their forefathers, especially in a matter so sacred as funeral rites, and they laid their dead in rocky sepulchres outside the gate nearest their quarter. Here, in fact, was discovered in 1850 the so-called Jewish catacomb, which it may be assumed was the prototype of later Christian sepulchres.

The earliest Roman Christians were very probably converted Jews, were naturally familiar with the Jewish mode of burial and in all probability adopted it for themselves. A grave-stone discovered in one of the Roman catacombs bears the date of the third year of the reign of Vespasian, A. D. 71, and thus affords proof of the antiquity of the catacombs as places of burial.

In early times Christians were probably buried on property, a garden or vineyard, belonging to private families, and in fact nearly all the ancient names of the catacombs were taken from those of the owners of the land. Thus, for instance, Lucina, a Roman matron, otherwise known as Pomponia Gracina, who was converted to Christianity in 58, gave a vineyard near the Ostian Way for the burial of St. Paul, while another matron of the same name and probably of the same family excavated and gave her name to some crypts on the Appian Way.

With the passing of time and the increase in the number of Christians the original cemeteries were extended, excavation on a larger scale was undertaken and gradually the catacombs were formed. The architects of the catacombs were a special class of persons known as fossores, or diggers, who either formed the lowest order of the clerics or were a voluntary association of laymen, a forerunner of the mediaeval confraternities who out of Christian charity devoted themselves to this task.

The work of the fossores was undertaken at the peril of their lives, especially in time of persecution. Besides attending to the excavations of the catacombs they also undertook the still more perilous task of fetching thither the bodies of the dead. The catacombs originally were used exclusively as cemeteries, but later

they provided places for religious assembly and in some cases worship. In Apostolic times they generally met in the house of some wealthy member of the community. Later they built churches. After Diocletian in 303 ordered the churches to be destroyed the Christians evidently then took refuge in the catacombs, which, although known by their persecutors to exist, could not be reached or entered, as their precise position nor their entrances could be ascertained.

The catacombs were also used occasionally as places of concealment. Several popes used them as a hiding place from the beginning of the second century onward. St. Stephen was murdered in the catacombs, where he had lived for some time during the Valerian persecutions, and his successor, St. Sixtus, was also martyred in the catacombs.

Even after Christianity had become the recognized religion of the empire the catacombs afforded shelter and concealment to popes, as Liberius remained hidden for over a year in the catacombs of St. Annes until the death of the Arian Emperor Constantine, and Boniface I, went to the cemetery of St. Felicitas when the anti-Pope Eulalius was elected.

With the cessation of Christian persecutions, when the catacombs were no longer needed as places of refuge, they gradually ceased to be used as cemeteries. The latest date found on any grave in the catacombs is 410, and although during the first half of the fifth century and the latter part of the fourth Christians had a pious desire to be buried near the tombs of the martyrs this practice seems not to have been encouraged.

For several centuries the catacombs were used as places of devotion. St. Jerome and Prudentius mention the stream of people flocking from sunrise to sunset to pay their devotions at the catacombs, and not from Rome alone but from all neighboring cities and other more distant places.

The entrance of the catacombs were now rendered public. Shafts or air holes called luminaria were opened for purposes of ventilation. The subterranean chapels were enlarged, while many churches were built over the catacombs of the more celebrated martyrs.

About the middle of the fifth century a portion of the catacombs was filled by the barbarians in hopes of finding treasures, and thus began the devastation which led ultimately to their neglect and ruin. Pope Paul I, writing in 761 says:

"Many of the catacombs had before been neglected and in great measure ruined, but now by the impious Lombards they were thoroughly destroyed. They disinterred and carried away the bodies of saints. In consequence of which the homage due to such holy places was now carelessly paid; even beasts had access to them, and in some places men had dared to put up folds and so convert the consecrated burial places of Christians into stables and dungheils."

For this reason it was considered more reverent to cause the bodies and relics of martyrs to be removed to churches within the walls and the translation of martyrs began. There is evidence of such translations in the beginning of the seventh century, when Boniface III, removed a considerable number of bodies to the Pantheon, which was thereafter called Sancta Maria ad Martyres. But it was in the ninth century that the catacombs really began to be emptied, and the work continued until the beginning of the thirteenth, when religious interest in them began to diminish.

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century all knowledge of the ancient cemeteries seems to have perished. The accidental falling in of a portion of the high road outside the Porta Salaria in 1578 led to the discovery of the catacomb of St. Priscilla. Public interest in the subterranean Christian cemeteries was awakened and archaeologists turned their attention to their examination and study.

Alfonso Ciaconni, a Dominican friar, discovered several forgotten catacombs. He was followed by Bosio, who spent thirty-three years of uninterrupted labor in connection with the catacombs. Pope Clement XII, and his successor, Clement XIII, entrusted the care of all the catacombs to the Cardinal Mazarin of Rome, under whose direction they were excavated exclusively for the extraction of relics.

Pius IX, appointed in 1851 a commission to excavate and study, under whose direction the work of excavation and research in the catacombs has since been conducted. The name catacomb is, comparatively speaking, modern. The Christian cemeteries were named either after some saint buried in them, or the person who originally owned the land where they were situated. The use of the present name dates back to about the sixteenth century.

Almost all the catacombs are outside the walls of the city. The aggregate length of their galleries is said to be about 587 miles, and they are excavated on different levels and cross and recross each other. Hence although the area which they underlie is not considerable, yet if the galleries were stretched in a continuous line they would extend through the whole of Italy.

The galleries vary in height from eight to twelve feet, and are from two to four feet in width. Their sides are pierced with a series of shelves, one above another, which have been aptly compared with the bookshelves of a library, and every niche contained one or more bodies.

The sepulchres are all after the pattern afforded by the burial of Christ, "laid out by the rock, where, in never yet had any man been laid," and each corpse was assigned its separate place. The niches are characterized by the simplicity of their form and a careful economy of labor and space.

Almost every grave had a marble or stone slab with an inscription engraved upon it, or sometimes only scratched, mostly in Latin, but several in Greek, containing generally an invocation or dedication, followed by the name, and in some instances a description of the deceased. These inscriptions vary in length and they afford a vast field for study.

The ordinary graves are known as loculi, but at various intervals the succession of shelves in the galleries is interrupted and room is made either for a doorway opening into a small chamber, where the graves have a semicircular form, called arcossolia or cubicoli, or else for several chambers made close together, with altar tombs, which contained the bodies of saints and where the faithful used to meet for worship.

St. Cecilia was martyred in 177 and her body was carried in the catacombs of St. Callistus, where it was found by Pope Paschal I. (817-824) after the saint had appeared to him in a dream and pointed out the exact locality where she had been buried.

On the wall there, is a painting representing St. Cecilia, richly attired. Under it is a niche for a lamp, at the back of which is a head of the Saviour, represented according to the Byzantine type with rays of glory behind it in the shape of a Greek cross.

To the right of the niche is a figure of Pope St. Urban in full pontifical dress, who with his own hands buried the saint's remains in the arcossolium near the paintings. The painting belongs to the sixth century.

The crypt contains several ordinary graves besides the arcossolium, and it receives light and air from a luminaria, on the wall of which are to be seen other frescoes representing the three saints, Felicitas, Sebastianus and Cyrianus, who were buried in the same chapel.

Another interesting tomb, which is a mere grave in a gallery with a rectangular instead of a semicircular shape, above it, is that of saints Cornelius and Cyrianus, whose portraits decorate the walls. There are other paintings representing martyrs, but only one figure, that of St. Sixtus, has been identified. At the right hand of the tomb there is a low block or pillar, concave at the top, which in ancient times was filled with oil with floating wicks burning constantly before the martyrs' remains and from which the pilgrims used to help themselves at pleasure, carrying away oil as a relic from the shrine of the saints.

The mural paintings of the catacombs represent varied subjects, mostly Biblical, liturgical and symbolical. The adoration of our Lord by the Wise Men of the East—or rather their visit to Him, for they are never found prostrate or kneeling—is a subject of frequent recurrence.

The Wise Men are commonly represented as offering gifts to Christ as He sits in His mother's lap, she also being seated. The number of the Magi is not always uniform, but this is probably owing more to the order and regularity in the paintings than to the knowledge of the ancient apocryphal tradition mentioned by St. Augustin and St. Chrysostom, according to which their number was twelve.

A very interesting painting in the catacombs of Prætextatus represents a lamb between two wolves. Common symbolical subjects are fishes, doves, palms, etc. Symbolical representation was often used owing to the discipline imposed on unbaptized Christians to conceal their unbelief, and great mysteries of faith lest they should be exposed to desecration and blasphemy.

When the fierce persecutions against the Christians ceased and the catacombs were no longer used for burial purposes basilicas, or churches, were built on them. Such was that of St. Petronilla, the spiritual daughter of St. Peter, a noble lady who is supposed to have been one of the Apostles' converts. This basilica was discovered in 1871 and restored recently by the Commission of Sacred Archaeology.

The catacombs have been stripped of all the objects of interest they contained, such as rings, seals, lamps, ampullae, cups of ornamented glass, and fragments of ivory, and even inscriptions, and these are now scattered in the public museums and private collections.

WOMAN IN PANIC.

One of the influential men in the financial district reached home at 6 o'clock in the morning the day after the bank trouble had developed here. He found waiting for him a lady well known to his family. His wife, heroically trying to stifle her yawns, shrouded in a kimono, waited with her. "Save my money," almost went the visitor. "I have \$10,000 in such-and-such a bank, and I fear I will lose it. I beg of you to help me."

The financier calmed her as best he could. "If your bank is going to suspend payment, it will be useless for you to get in line," said he. "I will get up tomorrow morning and see if I can't find a bank which will cash your check for you. Go home, be calm, and have a check ready at 2 o'clock in the morning. When I telephone you, jump in a cab and go to the bank at once. I will try to arrange your matter."

It was past 2 o'clock when he got to bed. He was up at 7, and as soon as he had finished breakfast he got on the phone, trying to find some friendly bank official to take a chance and cash the check. At last he succeeded. He called his frightened female friend at once. "Get a cab, take your check and go to the Seaford Bank at once. They'll cash your check. I've arranged it all."

"Oh, but I can't today," said the woman. "I have an engagement with my friend, a banker." "New York correspondence Cincinnati Times."

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THE TEMPLE WHERE HIPPOCRATES PRACTICED HEALING ARTS.

Ancient Greek Patients Treated 2,400 Years Ago Much as They Would Be in a Modern Hospital—Ruins Recently Unearthed by Two British Architects.

The most famous of the ancient Greek health temples and the last whose ruins have been brought into view is on the island of Cos in the Aegean Sea, not far from the southwest corner of Asia Minor.

There were larger health temples than that of Cos, but the newly-discovered temple is the most celebrated of them all, because it was there that Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, studied and practiced the art of healing and wrote some of the books that have come down to us. It was there that he freed medicine from some of the ancient superstitions and that his powers of observation and scientific insight led him to discoveries of new truths which were a blessing to the Greeks for centuries after his death.

This forerunner of the modern hospital was built about 2,400 years ago. The place where it stood had been so changed by earthquakes and the ravages of time and men that it was not identified as the site of the health temple of Hippocrates till three years ago. Then two British architects began digging and found inscriptions proving that on this spot the long lost temple stood. Excavations were rapidly pushed and the foundations and ruined buildings, now revealed, were found to cover an area of 590 feet from north to south and 423 feet from east to west.

So much has been found that it is not difficult to make a mental picture of the ensemble of the beautiful buildings that stood here over 2,000 years ago.

The site, two miles from the sea, is very beautiful. Mountains rise on two sides of it and it is flanked by the turquoise Aegean dotted with islands. The buildings were grouped on three terraces.

In front is the three-sided portico and its buildings where patients were received and where the consultation and operating rooms and baths were situated. It was here that Hippocrates wrote his notes on many important cases.

The baths were numerous because he was a great believer in the remedial uses of water. It is supposed that the medical school also occupied some of the front buildings.

A flight of stairs in the middle ground leads to the second terrace, and here was the great altar, from which smoke may be seen arising in the picture, and the gymnasium, for Hippocrates prescribed a great deal of exercise in suitable cases. On this terrace have been unearthed many wall slabs inscribed with wise maxims in regard to health that have come down to us in the writings of Hippocrates.

Reached by the broad stairs ascending to the third terrace is the restoration of the beautiful temple to Apollo. The temples of all the greater gods exactly faced the east, and this is the only building in the sanatorium that had precisely the same orientation.

The priests of Apollo here were trained to the care of the sick and so their religious ceremonies occupied only a part of their time. In the buildings that surround the terrace on three sides were the sleeping apartments of the patients.

Thus it is seen that 2,400 years ago the sick in this hospital were surrounded by many of the advantages which today are regarded as helpful to the treatment of patients. They were in a lovely environment, for here was the charm of mountains, plain and sea—a place of rest, peace and beauty.

There was the daily routine of treatment.

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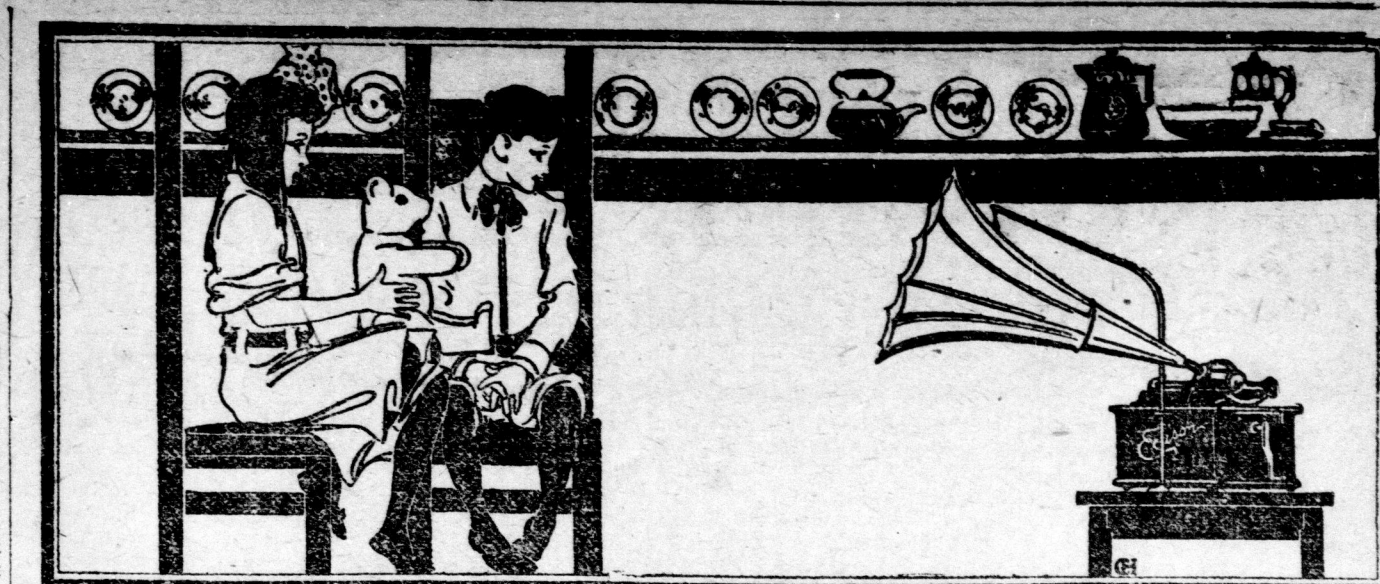
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