

in the days of bitter persecution, and above all, that they were the tombs of the martyrs, and were eloquent with their veneration. The light of modern erudition has, however, dispelled much of the darkness which hung about these monuments of Christian antiquity. They were not formerly Roman stone quarries. They were used only in very exceptional circumstances as retreats for worship, and they are almost silent regarding those who suffered martyrdom.

The catacombs owe their existence to the belief of the Christians in the resurrection of the body, joined to their position as a suspected, afterwards persecuted, sect, together with certain facilities which, nevertheless, they enjoyed under protection of the Roman government.

The Romans generally burned their dead bodies. The national customs and prejudices of the Jews were opposed to this practice. They clung with tenacity to their hereditary mode of sepulture.

It is probable that the Christians borrowed their customs of burying from the Jews. But, even without the example of the Jews, their belief in the communion of saints and in the resurrection would prompt them to prefer burial after the manner of our Lord. They therefore buried their dead. It is highly improbable that vast underground cemeteries would at once be planned. There is evidence that many of the catacombs began as private sepulchres for single families. "The rich," says E. Scherer,—"for the early Church counted a certain number among its adepts—gathered together the members of their families, their freedmen, their clients, and then, from natural inclination, also the members of their spiritual family—the poor Christians whose remains they did not know where to lay, and whom religious fraternity made it an honour to welcome. The private

crypt excavated in imitation of the sepulchre of Christ thus gave birth to the extended underground cemetery.

Though it is evident from an examination of the earliest catacombs that they were not the offspring of fear on the part of the Christians, for there is no attempt at secrecy in their construction, yet, doubtless, the preservation and advancement of the true religion was better secured by help of their dark recesses when persecution afterwards befel the Church, and in an age and court unparalleled for their corruptions.

Moreover, the law during the birth and infancy of Christianity at Rome made the catacombs a safe resting place for the dead, or in persecution a safe retreat for the living. Burial in Rome had a religious character, and all places set apart for sepulture were regarded as sacred, and enjoyed the special protection of the law.

"One during life, the believers wished to remain united in death. Grouped together in their struggles and trials around their special chiefs, and full of enthusiasm for the heroes of their faith, they wished still in the tomb to be near the heroes and martyrs. Having lived in the communion of the same Saviour they wished to await in the same union the eternal awakening."

Such, then, are the causes of these monuments of Christian antiquity. Certain material conditions were necessary, however, to allow the cemetery to take this peculiar form. They have been dug on the heights, from one to three miles outside the city, in granular tufa—a volcanic rock of coarse, loose texture, at once easy to hew into and yet so compact that without offering too great resistance to the pick-axe of the grave digger, secured the solidity of the galleries. Space and labour had to be saved, and therefore the passage ways were made narrow. When the limit of ground