

with bas-reliefs upon them, and also fitted up and painted portions of the chapels, and other parts. It is well to remember this, for it may serve to distinguish between the simpler memorials of the first ages, and the decorated remains of the period which had already become partially corrupted.

The Catacombs remained in this state until towards the close of the fifth century, when there poured over Italy hordes of northern barbarians, who seized upon and devastated the city of Rome. Then ceased the burials in these honoured cemeteries,—then ceased the Christians even to visit them; accumulations of rubbish blocked up their entrances, until to the generations following they became quite unknown, except in a few of the more exposed apertures, and even these for only short distances; and in the tumults of the middle ages such small portions as were accessible were used as lurking places for the midnight assassin, or the armed retainer of the feudal noble, rather than as burying-places for the dead.

A thousand years rolled away,—the dark night of the middle ages ceased; the dawn of civilization, of letters, of better hopes and of purer faith succeeded, and with them came the desire for the re-opening of the Catacombs. This desire was gratified towards the close of the sixteenth century, in the year 1590, under the pontificate of Sixtus V.

When they were opened, there was a rush made on the part of the curious of the different countries of Europe to obtain portions of their contents, which were borne away to different museums, both public and private. But it must be remembered that the tombs and sarcophagi which were first exposed, were generally of those who were buried after the fourth century, and therefore of inferior value. The relics of the early Christians were to be found in the more secret recesses, which were preserved from violation by the Government, and, finally, a large portion of them were removed and deposited in the Vatican with the greatest care. To them we shall have frequent occasion to advert hereafter. But large portions of the contents of the Catacombs still remain as they were originally deposited, and have never been disturbed by the few visitors who have been permitted from time to time to penetrate into the most remote and secluded chambers.