

THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

VOL. XXXV.

JANUARY, 1888.

No. 3.

THE CATACOMBS OF ROME.



BAPTISM OF CHRIST. (FROM CRYPT OF LUCINA.
ACCORDING TO ROSSI AND ROLLER.)

AMONG the many objects of interest which claim the attention of visitors to Rome are the Catacombs, or subterranean cemeteries of the early Christians, outside of the city walls. They attract alike the archæologist, the historian, and the theologian. It is now more than fourteen hundred years since the celebrated scholar and monk, St. Jerome, the translator of the Latin Bible, then a student at Rome, used to visit that vast necropolis with his friends on Sundays to quicken his devotion by the sight of the tombs of martyrs and confessors from the times of persecution. "There," he says, "in subterranean depths the visitor passes to and fro between the bodies of those that are buried on both sides of the galleries, and where all is so dark that the prophecy is fulfilled, 'The living go down into Hades.' Here and there a ray from above, not falling in through a window, but only pressing in through a crevice, softens the gloom. As you go onward, it fades away, and

in the darkness of night which surrounds you that verse of Vergil comes to your mind :

"'Horror ubique animos, simul ipsa silentia terrent'
(Horror on every side, and terrible even the silence)."

The same impression is made in our days, only the darkness is deeper and the tombs are emptied of their treasures ; yet the air is filled with the associations of the past when heathen Rome and Christian Rome were engaged in deadly conflict which ended in the triumph of the cross.

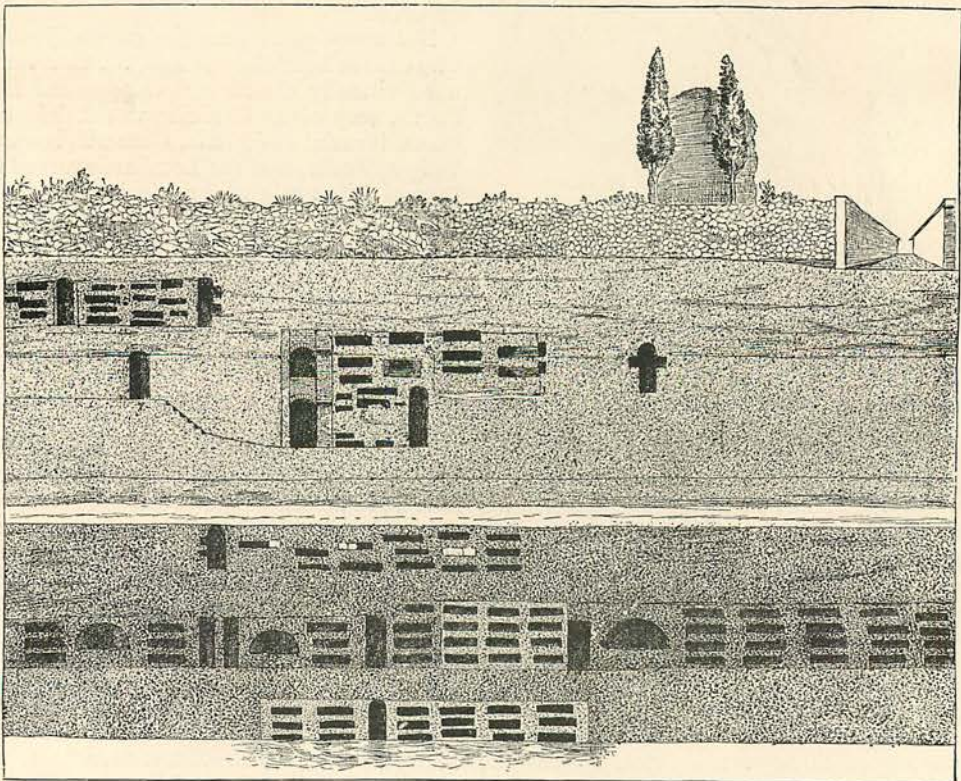
Not many years after the days of Jerome, who died at Bethlehem in 420, the Catacombs were virtually closed and disappeared from the memory of the Christian world. The barbarian invasions of Alaric, Genseric, Ricimer, Vitiges, Totila, and the Lombards turned the Eternal City again and again into a heap of ruins and destroyed many valuable treasures of classical and Christian art. The pious barbarism of relic-hunters robbed the graves of martyrs and saints, real and imaginary, of their bones and ornaments and transferred them to the Pantheon and churches and chapels for more convenient worship. Cart-loads of relics were sold to credulous and superstitious foreigners.

In the year 1578 they were unexpectedly brought to light again, and created as great an interest in the Christian world as the discovery of long-lost Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth, and the discovery of Nineveh and Babylon, Mycenæ and Troy, in the nineteenth century. Some laborers in a vineyard on the Via Salaria, digging *pozzolana*, came upon an old subterranean cemetery ornamented with fresco paintings, sculptured sarcophagi, and Greek and Latin inscriptions. "On that day," says De' Rossi, "was born the name and the knowledge of *Roma Sottterranea*." A new chapter of ancient church history was opened,

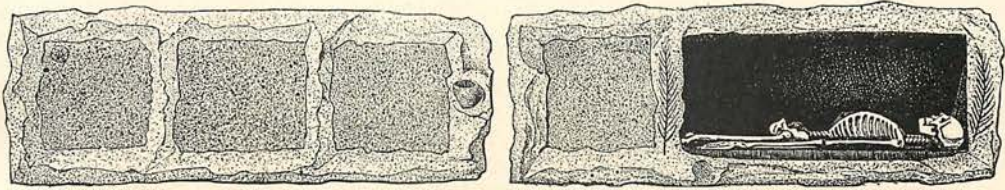
full of instruction about the domestic and social life, the manners and customs of the early Christians, and their religious views in the face of death and eternity. But it was only in our generation that the Catacombs were thoroughly explored and made the subject of systematic and scientific research, free from dogmatic and sectarian prejudices. The acknowledged pioneer in this department of antiquarian knowledge is the still living Cavalier John Baptist de' Rossi of Rome. His monumental Italian work, "Roma Sotterranea" (Rome, 1864-77, 3 vols.), richly illustrated, and his periodical, "Bulletino di Archeologia Cristiana," are the chief sources from which Allard, Northcote and Brownlow, Marriott, Kraus, Lundy, Withrow, and others have drawn the material for their more popular works. Next to De' Rossi must be mentioned John Henry Parker, who in the twelfth part of his "Archæology of Rome" (Oxford and London, 1877) discusses the Catacombs, and Théophile Roller, a French Protestant pastor who devoted years of study to the same subject and embodied the results of his researches in two large and richly illustrated folio volumes, "Les Catacombes de Rome" (Paris, 1879-81).

For a long time false opinions were entertained which have been dispelled by modern research. The Catacombs were supposed to be forsaken sandpits and stone-quarries, excavated by the heathen and occasionally used as receptacles for the corpses of slaves and criminals. But it is now ascertained from the difference of soil, which is not at all adapted for building material, and the mode of construction, that they are of *Christian* origin and were intended from the beginning for burial-places. Another error, that they were places of refuge from heathen persecution, has likewise been abandoned. The immense labor required for their construction could not possibly have escaped the notice of the Roman police; and the heathen persecutor, by simply closing the access, could have easily smothered the Christians by thousands if they had taken refuge in those dark and narrow passages. In spite of the knowledge gained on the subject within the last twenty years, these errors are still repeated in popular books, and even in Dr. Killen's "Ancient Church," republished in New York, 1883.

The Catacombs, on the contrary, owe their origin to Roman *toleration*. The imperial government protected by law the burial



A SECTION OF THE CATACOMBS SHOWING SEVERAL STORIES OF TOMBS.



CLOSED. OPEN.
LOCULI, WITH TILES. (SUPPOSED TO BE OF THE SECOND CENTURY.)

clubs, composed mostly of poor people who by regular contributions secured decent interment for their relatives and friends. The Romans were not savages, but civilized men, and respect for the dead is an instinct of human nature—"De mortuis nil nisi bonum."

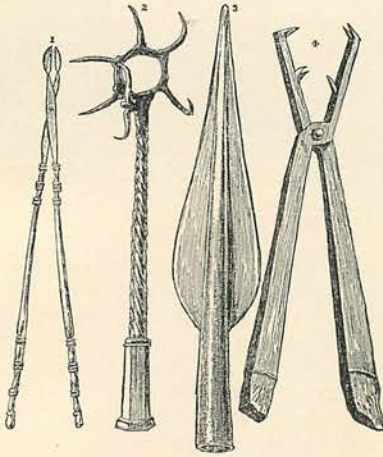
The Catacombs, then, were excavated by the early Christians for the express and sole purpose of burying their dead. The hope of the resurrection of the body made them averse to the custom of cremation then prevailing among the Greeks and the Romans. They adhered to the older Jewish custom of burying the dead in rock-hewn tombs and galleries. Hence the close resemblance of Jewish and Christian cemeteries in Rome. After Constantine, when the Christians could afford to buy and hold land and could bury their dead without fear of disturbance, they located their cemeteries above-ground around their churches and chapels.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CATACOMBS.

THE Roman Catacombs are long and narrow passages or cross-galleries, excavated in the bowels of the earth in the hills outside and around the city, for the burial of the dead. They are dark and gloomy, with only an occasional ray of light from above. The galleries have two or more stories, all filled with tombs, and form an intricate net-work or subterranean labyrinth. Small compartments (*loculi*) for the reception of the dead were cut out like shelves in the perpendicular walls, and rectangular chambers (*cubicula*) for families or distinguished martyrs. They were closed with a slab of marble or tile. The more wealthy were laid in sarcophagi. The ceiling is flat, sometimes slightly arched. Space was economized so as to leave room usually only for a single person, the average width of the passages being two and one-half to three feet. This economy may be traced to the poverty of the early Christians, and also to their strong sense of community



ENTRANCE TO THE CATACOMBS.



TOOLS FOUND IN THE CATACOMBS.

wall, which represents an elderly matron named "Veneranda," and a young lady, called in the inscription "Petronilla martyr," and pointing to the Holy Scriptures in a chest by her side as the proofs of her faith. The former apparently introduces the latter into Paradise. The name naturally suggests the legendary daughter of St. Peter. But Roman divines, reluctant to admit that the first pope had any children (though his marriage is beyond a doubt, from the record of the Gospels which mention his mother-in-law), understand Petronilla to be a spiritual daughter, as Mark was a spiritual son, of the apostle (1 Pet. v. 13), and make her the daughter of some Roman Petronius or Petro connected with the family of Domitilla.

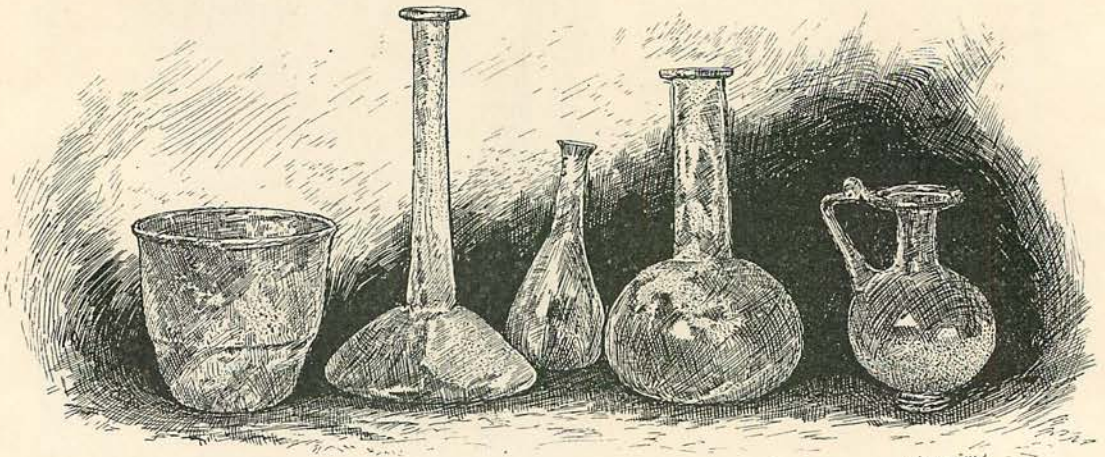
Other ancient Catacombs are those of Prætextatus, Priscilla (St. Silvestri and St. Marcelli), Basilla (Sts. Hermetis, Basillæ, Proti, et Hya-

cinthi), Maximus, St. Hippolytus, St. Laurentius, St. Peter and Marcellinus, St. Agnes, and the Ostrianum, ad Nymphas St. Petri, or Fons St. Petri (where Peter is said to have baptized from a natural well). De' Rossi gives a list of forty-two greater or lesser cemeteries, including isolated tombs of martyrs, in and near Rome, which date from the first four centuries, and are mentioned in ancient records.

THE FURNITURE.

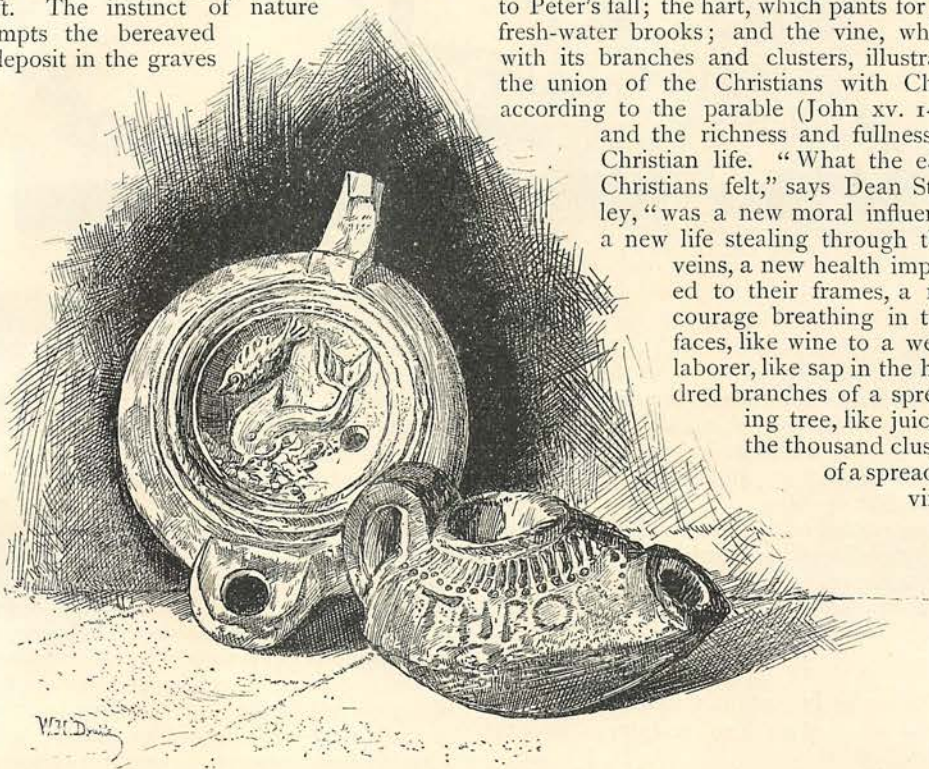
THE furniture of the Catacombs is instructive and interesting, but most of it has been removed to churches and museums, and must be studied outside. Articles of ornament, rings, seals, bracelets, necklaces, mirrors, tooth-picks, ear-picks, buckles, brooches, rare coins, innumerable lamps of clay (*terra cotta*) or of bronze (even of silver and amber), all sorts of tools, and, in the case of children, a variety of playthings were inclosed with the dead. Many of these articles are carved with the monogram of Christ or with other Christian symbols. (The lamps in Jewish cemeteries generally bear a picture of the golden candlestick.)

A great number of flasks and cups, with or without ornamentation, are also found, mostly outside of the graves, and fastened to the grave-lids. These were formerly supposed to have been receptacles for tears, or, from the red, dried sediment in them, for the blood of martyrs. But later archæologists consider them drinking-vessels used in the *agapæ* and oblations. A superstitious habit prevailed in the fourth century, although condemned by a council of Carthage (397), to give to the dead the eucharistic wine, or to put a cup with the consecrated wine into the grave.



GLASS FLASKS FOUND IN THE CATACOMBS. (FROM THE ORIGINALS IN POSSESSION OF GASTON L. FEUARDENT, ESQ.)

The instruments of torture which the fertile imagination of credulous people had discovered, and which were made to prove that almost every Christian buried in the Catacombs was a martyr, are simply implements of handicraft. The instinct of nature prompts the bereaved to deposit in the graves



LAMPS FOUND IN THE CATACOMBS. (FROM THE ORIGINALS IN POSSESSION OF GASTON L. FEUARDENT, ESQ.)

of their kindred and friends those things which were constantly used by them. The idea prevailed also, to a large extent, that the future life was a continuation of the occupations and amusements of the present, but free from sin and imperfection.

On opening the graves the skeleton frequently appears even now very well preserved, sometimes in dazzling whiteness, as covered with a glistening glory, but falls into dust at the touch.

SYMBOLS.

THE following symbols, borrowed from the Scriptures, were frequently represented in the Catacombs, and relate to the virtues and duties of the Christian life: the dove, with or without the olive branch, the type of simplicity and innocence; the ship, representing sometimes the Church as safely sailing through the flood of corruption, with reference to Noah's Ark, sometimes the individual soul on its voyage to the heavenly home under the conduct of the storm-controlling Saviour; the palm-

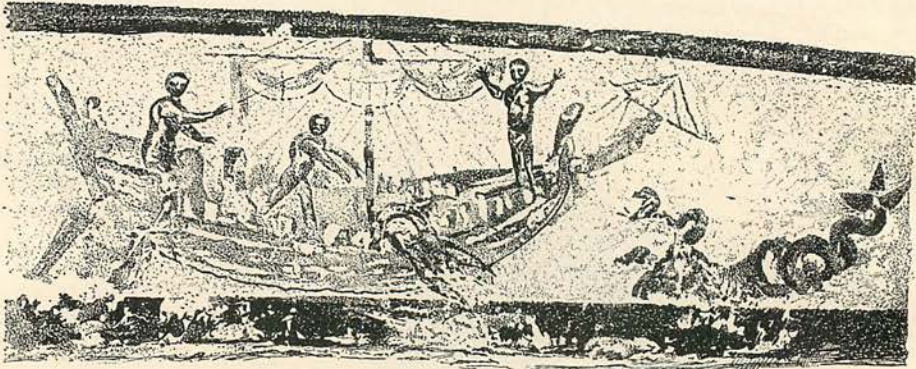
branch, which the seer of the Apocalypse puts into the hands of the elect as the sign of victory; the anchor, the figure of hope; the lyre, denoting festal joy, sweet harmony; the cock, an admonition to watchfulness, with reference to Peter's fall; the hart, which pants for the fresh-water brooks; and the vine, which, with its branches and clusters, illustrates the union of the Christians with Christ according to the parable (John xv. 1-6), and the richness and fullness of Christian life. "What the early Christians felt," says Dean Stanley, "was a new moral influence, a new life stealing through their veins, a new health imparted to their frames, a new courage breathing in their faces, like wine to a weary laborer, like sap in the hundred branches of a spreading tree, like juice in the thousand clusters of a spreading vine."

THE FISH.

THE most favorite symbol in the Catacombs is the fish. This can only be properly understood from the Greek word for fish, which is ΙΧΘΥΣ (*ichthys*). This is a pregnant anagram containing the initial letters of the words: Ι-ησοῦς Χ-ριστὸς Θε-οῦ Υ-ιὸς Σ-ωτήρ — *i.e.*, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. The fish, therefore, was an allegorical designation of Christ in his character (the Son of God) and his mission (the salvation of the world).

At the same time, the fish was also the symbol of the Christian saved by the great Fisher of Men from the sea of the world. It thus combined the ideas of the Redeemer and the redeemed. It reminded the Christian also of the water of baptism, with its regenerating effect upon the soul. Tertullian says: "We little fishes (*pisciculi*) are born by our fish (*secundum Ichthyn nostrum*), Jesus Christ, in water, and can thrive only by continuing in water" (that is, if we are faithful to our baptismal vows).

In some pictures the mysterious fish is swim-



JONAH CAST INTO THE SEA. (POSSIBLY FROM THE CRYPT OF CALLISTUS.)

ming in the water with a plate of bread and a cup of wine on his back, with evident allusion to the Lord's Supper.

The oldest Ichthys monument, so far as known, was discovered in 1865, in the cemetery of Domitilla, a hitherto inaccessible part of the Roman Catacombs, and is traced by De' Rossi to the first century.

The symbol of the fish continued to be used till the middle of the fourth century. After this date it occurs only occasionally, as a reminiscence of olden times.

PICTURES.

THE most important remains of the Catacombs are the pictures, sculptures, and epitaphs.

The pictures are painted on the wall and ceil-



MOSES STRIKING THE ROCK. (FROM CATACOMBS OF ST. SATURNINUS. END OF THIRD CENTURY.)

ing, and represent Christian symbols, scenes of Bible history, and allegorical conceptions of the Saviour. A few are in pure classic style, and betray an early origin, when Greek art still flourished in Rome; but most of them belong to the period of decay. Prominence is given to pictures of the Good Shepherd and those biblical stories which exhibit the conquest of

faith and the hope of the resurrection, as Jonah and the whale, Moses smiting the rock, Daniel in the lions' den, and the resurrection of Lazarus. The mixed character of some of the Christian frescoes may be explained partly from the employment of heathen artists by Christian patrons, partly from old reminiscences. The Etrurians and the Greeks were in the habit of painting their tombs, and Christian Greeks early saw the value of pictorial language as a means of instruction. In technical skill the Christian art is inferior to the heathen, but its subjects are higher and its meaning is deeper.

The two most interesting pictures are those of the Good Shepherd and of Orpheus, which express those aspects of our Saviour which afforded most comfort to the early Christians. They combine the nobler reminiscences of heathenism with the new religion and make them subservient to Christian ideas.

The allegorical representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd is found not only in the Catacombs but also on household furniture, rings, cups, and lamps. Nearly one hundred and fifty such pictures have come down to us. The shepherd, an appropriate symbol of Christ, is usually represented as a handsome, beardless, gentle youth, in light costume, with a girdle and sandals, with the flute and pastoral staff, carrying a lamb on his shoulder, and standing between two or more sheep that look confidently up to him. Sometimes he feeds a large flock in green pastures. If this was the popular conception of Christ, it stood in contrast with the contemporaneous theological idea of the homely appearance of the Saviour, and anticipated the post-Constantinian conception.

The picture of Orpheus is found twice in the cemetery of Domitilla, and once in that of Callistus. One on the ceiling in Domitilla, apparently from the second century, is especially rich. It represents the mysterious singer,



AGAPÆ OR LOVE-FEAST. (FROM CRYPT OF CALLISTUS. THIRD CENTURY.)



RESTORATION OF SAME.

seated in the center on a piece of rock, playing on the lyre his enchanting melodies to wild and tame animals — the lion, the wolf, the serpent, the horse, the ram — at his feet and the birds in the trees. Around the central figure are several biblical scenes,— Moses smiting the rock, David aiming the sling at Goliath, Daniel among the lions, the raising of Lazarus. The heathen Orpheus — the reputed author of monotheistic hymns (the *Orphica*), the center of so many mysteries, the fabulous charmer of all creation — appears here either as a symbol and type of Christ himself, or, like the heathen Sibyl, as an antitype and unconscious prophet of Christ, announc-

ing and foreshadowing him as the conqueror of all the forces of nature, as the harmonizer of all discords, and as the ruler over life and death.

THE SACRAMENTS.

Two sacraments are represented, the Lord's Supper and Baptism. The Lord's Supper was first celebrated in connection with the Agapæ or Love-Feast, in imitation of the Jewish Passover. A picture in the Catacombs exhibits the Saviour in the midst of the disciples reclining around the table, instituting the Holy Communion.

Of baptism there are several pictures. The catechumen stands in water or rises out of the water, while the baptizer stands on the shore, completing the act or helping the baptized. River baptism, or, as the "Teaching of the Apostles" has it, baptism "in living (running) water, was the favorite mode in the first three centuries, in imitation of Christ's baptism in the Jordan. In the age of Constantine special baptisteries were built."



THE GOOD SHEPHERD. (FROM CRYPT OF LUCINA.)



ORPHEUS.

THE PRAYING WOMAN.

A WOMAN in praying posture frequently appears on the walls of the Catacombs. Roman Catholic

archæologists see in that figure the earliest representation of the Virgin Mary praying for sinners; others interpret it as the mother church, or as both combined.

THE SCULPTURES.

THE works of sculpture are mostly found on sarcophagi. Many of them are collected in the Lateran Museum. Few of them date from the ante-Nicene age. They represent in relief the same subjects as the wall-pictures, so far as they could be worked in stone or marble, especially the resurrection of Lazarus, Daniel among the lions, Moses smiting the rock, and the sacrifice of Isaac.

Among the oldest Christian sarcophagi are those of St. Helena, the mother of Constantine (d. 328), and of Constantia, his daughter (d. 354), both of red porphyry, and preserved in the Vatican Museum. The sculpture on the former probably represents the triumphal entry of Constantine into Rome after his victory over Maxentius; the sculpture on the latter, the cultivation of the vine, probably has a symbolical meaning.

The richest and finest of all the Christian sarcophagi is that of Junius Bassus, Prefect of Rome A. D. 359, and five times consul, in the crypt of St. Peter's in the Vatican. It was found in the Vatican cemetery (1595). It is made of Parian marble in Corinthian style. The subjects represented in the upper part are the sacrifice of Abraham, the capture of St. Peter, Christ seated between Peter and Paul, the capture of Christ, and Pilate washing his



BAPTISM OF A BOY.
(CRYPT ATTRIBUTED TO POPE CALIXTUS.)

hands; in the lower part are the temptation of Adam and Eve, the suffering of Job, Christ's

entrance into Jerusalem, Daniel among the lions, and the capture of St. Paul.

EPITAPHS.

"Homely phrases, but each letter
Full of hope, and yet of heart-break,
Full of all the tender pathos
Of the Here and the Hereafter."

To perpetuate, by means of sepulchral inscriptions, the memory of relatives and friends, and to record the sentiments of love and esteem, of grief and hope, in the face of death and eternity, is a custom common to all civilized ages and nations. These epitaphs are limited by space, and often provoke rather than satisfy curiosity, but contain, nevertheless, in poetry or prose, a vast amount of biographical and historical information. Many a graveyard is a broken record of the church to which it belongs.

The Catacombs abound in such monumental inscriptions, Greek and Latin, or strangely mixed (Latin words in Greek characters), often rudely written, badly spelt, mutilated, and almost illegible, with and without symbolical figures. The classical languages were then in process of decay, like classical eloquence and art, and the great majority of Christians were poor and illiterate people. One name only is given in the earlier epitaphs; sometimes the age, and the day of burial, but not the date of birth.

More than fifteen thousand epitaphs from the first six centuries in Rome alone have been collected, classified, and explained by De' Rossi, and their number is constantly increasing. Benedict XIV. founded, in 1750, a Christian museum, and devoted a hall in the Vatican to the collection of ancient sarcophagi. Gregory XVI. and Pius IX. patronized it. In this lapidarian gallery the costly pagan and the simple Christian inscriptions and sarcophagi confront each other on opposite walls, and present a striking contrast. Another important collection is in the Kircherian Museum, in the Roman College; another in the Christian Museum of the University of Berlin. The entire field of ancient epigraphy, heathen and Christian, in Italy and other countries, has been made accessible by the industry and learning of Gruter, Muratori, Marchi, De' Rossi, Le Blant, Böckh, Kirchoff, Orelli, Mommsen, Henzen, Hübner, Waddington, and McCaul.

The most difficult part of this branch of archæology is the chronology (the oldest inscriptions being mostly undated). Their chief interest for the church historian is their religious, so far as it may be inferred from a few words.

The keynote of the Christian epitaphs, as

compared with the heathen, is struck by Paul in his words of comfort to the Thessalonians, that they should not sorrow like the heathen, who have no hope, but remember that, as Jesus rose from the dead, so God will raise them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus.

Hence, while the heathen epitaphs rarely express a belief in immortality, but often describe death as an eternal sleep, the grave as a final home, and are pervaded by a tone of sadness, the Christian epitaphs are hopeful and cheerful. The farewell on earth is followed by a welcome from heaven. Death is but a short sleep; the soul is with Christ and lives in God; the body waits for a joyful resurrection,—this is the sum and substance of the theology of Christian epitaphs. The symbol of Christ (*Ichthys*) is often placed at the beginning or end to show the ground of this hope. Again and again we find the brief but significant words: "In peace." "He [or "she"] sleeps in peace." "Live in God" [or "in Christ"]. "Live forever." "He rests well." "God quicken thy spirit." "Weep not, my child; death is not eternal." "Alexander is not dead, but lives above the stars, and his body rests in the tomb." "Here Gordian, the courier from Gaul, strangled for the faith, with his whole family, rests in peace. The maid servant, Theophila, erected this."

At the same time, stereotyped heathen epitaphs continued to be used (but of course not in a polytheistic sense), as, "Sacred to the funeral gods" [or "to the departed spirits"]. The laudatory epithets of heathen epitaphs are rare, but simple terms of natural affection very frequent, as, "My sweetest child"; "Innocent little lamb"; "My dearest husband"; "My dearest wife"; "My innocent dove"; "My well-deserving father" [or "mother"]; A. and B. "lived together" [for 15, 20, 30, 50, or even 60 years] "without any complaint or quarrel, without taking or giving offense." Much commemoration of conjugal happiness, and commendations of female virtues, as modesty, chastity, prudence, diligence, frequently occur also on pagan monuments, and prove that there were many exceptions to the corruption of Roman society as painted by Juvenal and the satirists.

Some epitaphs contain a request to the dead in heaven to pray for the living on earth. At

a later period we find requests for intercession in behalf of the departed when once, chiefly through the influence of Pope Gregory I., Purgatory became an article of general belief in the Western church. But the overwhelming



ONE OF THE ORANTES, OR PRAYING FIGURES. (FROM ST. SATURNINUS. ABOUT END OF THIRD, OR BEGINNING OF FOURTH, CENTURY.)

testimony of the oldest Christian epitaphs is that the pious dead are already in the enjoyment of peace; and this accords with the Saviour's promise to the penitent thief, and with St. Paul's desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Take but this example: "Prima, thou livest in the glory of God, and in the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Philip Schaff.

[The illustrations in this article, with the exception of the flasks and lamps, are copied from "The Catacombs of Rome," by Théophile Roller, by permission of the publishers, V. A. Morel & Co., Paris.]