

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

THE CATACOMBS OF ROME AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE CATACOMBS

In the year 1578 certain workmen accidentally discovered one of Rome's old subterranean cemeteries. This proved to be the rediscovery of the catacombs that had been lost for centuries.

Antonio Bosio gave thirty-six years to the investigation of these catacombs. Then in the nineteenth century further research was done by Giovanni Battista de Rossi. In more recent days Professor Paul Styger has undertaken a new investigation using scientific techniques, and some of the earlier results have been revised. 1

The nature and extent of the catacombs. The catacombs were dug along a number of the chief streets leading out of the city of Rome. De Rossi estimated that if the galleries were made into a straight line, they would extend more than 550 miles; 270,000,000 cubic feet of earth have been displaced in excavations. There are in the catacombs narrow passageways with graves on both sides, and it has been estimated that there are two million graves. 2

Character of the soil in the catacombs. The construction of the catacombs was made possible by the favorable geological formation at the city of Rome. Where there was sand, excavations were impracticable. The stone was used for building material. But there was much granular tufa, which could be cut easily but held up well, and drained because of being porous. The presence of this tufa was what made the cutting of the catacombs feasible. Most of the excavation work was done by a guild of diggers, who are pictured in wall paintings with the tools they used in digging. 3

Jewish catacombs. When the early Christians made use of catacombs for burial of their dead, they were probably following a Jewish custom. Six old Jewish cemeteries of this kind have been discovered at Rome. The oldest Jewish catacomb had burials in it in the first century A.D. The characteristic seven-armed candlestick or lampstand is always found in Jewish catacombs.

Some of the rooms connected with these burial places have paintings on the walls. These include representations of the scroll of the law, as well as the candlestick. 4

Time during which Christian catacombs were in use. The Christians made use of the catacombs as a burial place from the first to the fourth centuries. The oldest inscription of a Christian character is dated A.D. 72. When Christianity became the state religion of the empire, then it was no longer necessary to use the catacombs as a burial place. 5

Twofold nature of the catacombs. The catacombs were originally made to serve as burial places, but when the early disciples of Christ were persecuted, they began to seek refuge in these catacombs, and so they became a place of worship. Several of the passageways run from burial places to small chapels. These chapels were no doubt first used for burial services for the dead, but came to be chapels for worship when it was not safe to have a meeting above the ground. These are some of the oldest places for Christian worship that have been preserved for us. 6

The catacomb was thus the Christian cemetery. But it was more than this; the catacomb, in fact, was the very cradle of Christianity. While the populace of the great capital amused itself at the baths, or grew weary with horror at the Colosseum, the little society of early Christians, driven underground, waited, not without songs—the songs of children mainly, we are told—beside their tombs in their burial places. Gradually these grew outside the city about certain villas along the Appian Way. 7

Christian inscriptions contrasted with heathen. The value of the catacomb inscriptions is seen when we contrast what the Christians left as their testimony with characteristic heathen inscriptions. Here are some samples of Christian testimonies:

Weep not, my child: death is not eternal.

Sweet Simplicius lives in eternity.

Gemella sleeps in peace.

Sweet little daughter, Severa, beloved by her parents and servants . . . her body rests here in peace until it shall rise again in God. . . . The Lord will re clothe her with spiritual glory.

She was borne away by angels.

He reposes in the Lord Jesus.

Aurelius Ampliata and his son Gordian to Aurelia Boni-fatia, his incomparable wife, a woman of true chastity who lived 25 years 2 months 4 days and 2 hours.

Peter, a most sweet adopted son in God. 8

The following are examples of inscriptions concerning the death of Roman unsaved people of the same period of time:

Farewell, farewell, farewell.

The cruel fates . . . have placed me, snatched away, in the infernal bark.

I Procope, lift up my hands against the god who snatched me away [being] innocent.

What I have eaten and drunk I have with me; what I have foregone I have lost.

While I lived I lived well. My play is now ended; soon yours will be. Farewell and applaud me. 9

What the early Christians believed. The well-nigh universal testimony of these early Christian inscriptions in the catacombs is that these followers of Christ were Bible-believing, wholehearted Christians. There is no indication of any belief in the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory; there is no evidence of a denial of the simple truths of the Gospel; but instead there is a declaration of faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ. 10

DISCOVERY OF INSCRIBED NAMES MENTIONED BY PAUL

Finding of vault used for members of Caesar's household. About a hundred years ago a market gardener was digging in a spot near to the entrance of the Appian Way, when he made the discovery of some slabs of stone that were covering a large-sized vault. An inscription thereon read, "Vault for the Members of Caesar's Household."

The date of this inscription was estimated to be from the beginning of our Christian era to A.D. 66. Included among the names listed were Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Urban, Hermas, and Patrobas—all of which names are given by Paul in Romans 16. Other names from this same chapter also appear on the inscription: Stachys, Philologus, and Julia. It would surely seem that here we have recorded names of companions of the apostle Paul. How significant in this connection are the words of the apostle in Philippians 4: 22: "All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household"! 11

More recent excavations in Rome have revealed similar inscriptions which include other names mentioned by Paul in Romans 16: Apelles, Amplias (believed to be an abbreviation of Ampliatus), Rufus, Alexander, and Nereus. It would seem from these inscriptions that most of the people mentioned by Paul in this chapter were members of Caesar's household, if they are to be identified as Paul's friends. 12

The house of Hermes. One of the sites in the city of Rome that is best authenticated is the "House of Hermes," which would seem to be the Hermas or Hermes Paul mentioned in Romans 16:14. Recent excavation has shown the remains of a house which was a first-century Roman building with tombs next to it. Very early inscriptions were discovered and also some wall paintings. One inscription states that Hermas when he was seventy-five years of age set free his slaves.

It is believed the reason this was done was on account of his conversion to Christianity. The house was erected around A.D. 40 and its ornamentation was pagan in character at first, but later in time it became Christian in character. His change of religion would explain this change in ornamentation. 13

LIGHT FROM POMPEII ON THE TIMES OF THE APOSTLES

The uncovering of a lost city. It was August 24 in the year A.D. 79 that the city of Pompeii was buried to a depth of twenty feet with lava from Mt. Vesuvius. For centuries thereafter the old city was forgotten by men. In 1594 a water tunnel was bored under the "hill" where the city used to be, and workmen found two tablets with inscriptions on them. These relics were passed by.

In 1739 an engineer inspected this tunnel, and it was he who first saw the possibilities of excavating old Pompeii. His methods were crude, but he sank a shaft into the business section of the city and found a wall painting and also the body of a man who was clutching gold coins when death overtook him. These finds excited the workmen, and thereafter random digging continued.

In 1763 a German, J. J. Winckelmann, visited the site of Pompeii, and succeeded in interpreting the relics of the old city so as to make a written record of life in the vanished city. He was opposed in what he did and was murdered four years later.

In 1860 Giuseppe Fiorelli became ruler of nearby Naples, and he put a stop to the careless method of hunting treasures at Pompeii. He instituted a careful, systematic, scientific method of excavation, street by street, and house by house. These methods are still being used there today. The present policy of the excavation director is to restore everything possible at the place where it was found. Thus visitors today may get a remarkable picture of life in that city of long ago. 14

Value of a study of Pompeii. For the student of the Scriptures, it is important to remember that the city of Pompeii was contemporaneous with the apostles. During the twenty years preceding the destruction of the city, all of the synoptic Gospels were written, and also most of the New Testament.

Therefore a study of the life of the city will throw light on the times of the apostles. 15

Pompeii as a city of culture and comfort. There were many fine public buildings, and also very splendid works of art. Three public bath houses have been uncovered. In the homes of the citizens there was adequate plumbing and heating. Marble center-tables were discovered. Pictures of Pompeian dining rooms show the ancient arrangement for eating when reclining on couches. Surrounding the table were these couches, each one made to take care of three people. The position of those reclining is thus described:

The diner rested on his left arm on a cushion at the side nearer the table and stretched his feet out toward the right. Hence the first on the upper couch had what was called "the highest place."

The one next was said to recline “below him,” because lying on the side toward which the first person extended his feet; the man at the outer end of the lower couch was said to be “at the foot.” When in the Gospel of John (ch. 13) we read of a disciple “lying on Jesus’ breast,” the meaning is easily explained by reference to Roman usage; John was reclining in the place next below the Master. 16

Instruments much like modern doctors use were found in the House of the Surgeon. The culture of Pompeii was to some extent higher than many towns in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. 17

Pompeii, as a city of pleasure and sin. The people of Pompeii were very fond of sports. The city had built a large stone theater many years before the city of Rome built its first stone theater. Gladiatorial combats were held often in the amphitheater, which could take care of the entire population of 20,000 persons. Although there are many beautiful paintings from the old city on display, some of them are not shown to the ordinary person, because they are suggestively evil in their nature. Walls of houses facing the street were in places covered with terribly impure and obscene pictures, so much so that when men were excavating, these walls were covered over so as not to allow these pictures to be seen. One man, probably a Jew, had scribbled on the wall one day: “Sodom! Gomorrah!” Pompeii had its barroom very much like modern barrooms. There was a marble counter, and glasses and decanters were in place. Hot lunches were offered with drink. 18

Did Paul ever visit Pompeii? Concerning this interesting question, Cobern had this comment to make:

The town was utterly destroyed a very few years after Paul stopped for an entire week within a few miles of it on his journey to Rome (Acts 28:14). If he visited it, as is very possible, he may have seen the large wall-painting of the Pompeian Venus drawn by elephants in a quadriga . . . and he may have met some of the very men who were a little later in the bar-room . . . drinking at the marble counter on the night of the catastrophe. At any rate the very cash box which was found in its place in the wine room with the bronze and silver coins in it, just as they were received as the fatal eruption began, was probably the same as was being used when the sailors on Paul’s ship ran over from Puteoli in order to see the sights of this famous little city in the year 59 or 60. 19

Interesting wall-scribblings at Pompeii. Two graffiti, or wall-scribblings, found at Pompeii throw some light on Revelation 13:18, where the number of the Beast is said to be 666. One of these reads: “The number of her honorable name is 45.” The other says, “I love her whose number is 545.” Dr. Deissmann says concerning these graffiti, whose date is not far removed from Revelation, that they suggest new riddles, but they also establish the following facts:

- (1) They are concerned with names of persons which names for some reason or other are to be concealed.
- (2) The name was concealed by resolving it into a number. In all probability single letters were given their usual values as numerals and then added together.

(3) The similar numerical riddle in Revelation would not necessarily be Semitic, that is, foreign to Greeks.

(4) In solving the apocalyptic numbers it is feasible to start with the Greek alphabet. 20

1. Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, p. 357.
2. Camden Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament*, pp. 383, 384.
3. Finegan, *op. cit.*, p. 354.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 358, 359.
5. Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 394; Joseph Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, p. 337.
6. Free, *ibid.*, p. 335.
7. J. A. Hammerton, ed., *Wonders of the Past* (New York: Wise & Co., rev. ed. 1937), p. 1091.
8. Camden M. Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 5th ed. revised, 1921), pp. 393, 394.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 393.
10. Free, *op. cit.*, pp. 337, 338.
11. A. Rendle Short, *Archaeology Gives Evidence*, pp. 59, 60; T. W. Fawthrop, *The Stones Cry Out*, p. 279.
12. Fawthrop, *ibid.*, pp. 279, 280.
13. Stephen L. Caiger, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p. 130.
14. Donald and Louise Peattie, "The City That Died to Live," *The Reader's Digest*, Feb. 1954, pp. 29-33.
15. Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
16. August Mau, *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*, 1904 ed., p. 263; Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 375.
17. Cobern, *ibid.*, pp. 373-375.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 375-377.
19. Camden M. Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 5th ed. revised 1921), p. 382.
20. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 276-278. For further material on Pompeii, see Hammerton, *Wonders of the Past* (ed. of 1937), pp. 353-374.

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