

## The Catacombs of Città Vecchia, in the Island of Malta.

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THE limestone terraces in the vicinity of Città Vecchia, the ancient capital of Malta, are honeycombed with rock tombs. Many of them are of a Phœnician type. According to Diodorus Siculus and Strabo the Phœnicians were the first colonists of Malta. 'The twin islands of Melita and Gaulos lay immediately in the way of the Phœnician adventurers. They became Phœnician settlements. . . . They were sites, not of mere factories, but of independent Phœnician communities' (Freeman, *History of Sicily*, vol. i.).

From these tombs Phœnician inscriptions, coins, statuettes, sarcophagi, and pottery of an archaic form have been recovered. The human remains found in them are more or less entire skeletons.

In the same district another type of tomb exists in considerable numbers, which have been found to contain ornamented pottery of a classical form, articles in metal, Greek and Roman coins, and inscriptions. In such tombs the human remains are generally charred bones and ashes, contained in urns.

But the most interesting and elaborate of the rock tombs of Malta consist of catacombs, similar to those of Rome, Naples, and Syracuse, though excavated on a smaller scale than these. No adequate description of the Malta catacombs has yet been published in England. They are briefly referred to in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (9th edition, vol. v.), *s.v.* 'Catacombs,' but the author of the article has evidently not seen them personally, and falls into the mistake of saying that they contain 'no vestiges of painting, sculpture, or inscriptions.' The same author (Canon Venables) has but a single sentence regarding them in Smith's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, vol. i. p. 316, art. 'Catacombs.' Even the new volume (xxx.) of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, art. 'Malta,' has only a slightly fuller account of them, based on Caruana's recent explorations and opinion.

The following description of these catacombs is the result of repeated visits to the sites themselves,

and a somewhat minute study of the ancient and modern evidence regarding them.

There are catacombs in at least three other districts of Malta, but those to be dealt with at present all lie in close proximity to the outskirts of the town of Città Vecchia, and consist of seven sets, each separate from its neighbour. Their modern names are as follow:—(1) St. Paul's, (2) St. Agatha's, (3) St. Venera's, (4) St. Cataldus, (5) Virtù, (6) St. Maria della Grotta, (7) L'Abbatia. Three of them—the first, second, and last named—have been explored and surveyed within recent years. The others are still blocked up with débris, and remain unexplored up to the present: an investigation of them is much to be desired. Painstaking monographs on those which have been opened up and examined have been compiled by a learned Maltese, the Rev. A. A. Caruana, D.D., to whom much credit is due for his labours, and to whom I am indebted for many facts discovered by him during his investigations.

The largest, and probably the oldest, of the Città Vecchia catacombs, is the one adjacent to the parish Church of St. Paul there, and it may be taken as typical of the rest. It is mentioned by Commendatore Abela in his *Malta Illustrata* (1647), and by Mons. Onorato Bres in his *Malta Antica Illustrata* (1816), neither of whom, however, was able to explore it fully. In 1894 this interesting place was thoroughly examined and measurements of it taken. It occupies an area of about 2590 square yards, and has two entrances, one large and prominent, and the other narrow and secluded. The latter passes through a primitive rock tomb, on the wall of which were discovered the remains of a partly decipherable Phœnician inscription. Beyond this lies the catacomb proper, a network of passages cut in the soft limestone rock, with two central crypts of considerable size. The passages are lined with *loculi*, some large enough to hold three bodies, some for one full-grown person, and some for children. But the distinctive feature of this and the neighbouring catacombs is a series of arched tombs (*arcosolia*), of elaborate construction. Each arched tomb consists of an oblong platform

of rock about four feet high. On each of its four sides the platform is surmounted by an open arch, forming one piece with its base and with the rock roof above. The platform itself is sometimes a plain flat surface, hollowed into a sepulchre underneath, whose opening is a small square doorway in the side. More frequently the flat surface above is excavated into a coffin-shaped receptacle of two or three compartments, each with a crescent-shaped cavity for the head. The rock coffin thus formed was doubtless closed by an inscribed slab on the top, but such covers have all disappeared. In some of the Città Vecchia catacombs these arched tombs have sides ornamented with carved mouldings and the roof with circular scale-shaped patterns. The sepulchres in the catacomb of St. Paul are estimated to number over 900. The two crypts in the same catacomb present some interesting features. The largest has at either end a raised platform of rock, containing a shallow circular excavation, whose edge is raised and plastered, except at one point, where there is an opening. It has been asserted that this is the lower part or bed of a handmill for grinding corn. As the excavation is plastered, and the stone out of which it is cut is exceedingly soft and friable, this explanation of its purpose is not satisfactory. It is apparently too shallow and small for a baptistry, but was evidently intended to contain water. Dr. Caruana's hypothesis is that it was a basin used in connexion with washing the bodies of the dead (cf. Ac 9<sup>37</sup>) before they were placed in winding-sheets and committed to the adjacent tombs.

The smaller crypt has a shallow oblong cavity, sunk in the rock floor and fronting a large niche or recess in the side wall, on which there are faint traces of painting. The roof above this cavity is higher than the rest of the roof of the crypt, and is surrounded with an ornamental cornice. Dr. Caruana conjectures that this may mark the place of a *confessio*, on which rested the sarcophagus of a martyr. As far as can be ascertained, all the tombs in St. Paul's catacomb are empty. It is believed that the bones once resting there were transferred, at some unrecorded date, to an early mediæval cemetery which forms part of the precincts of the present parish Church of St. Paul. Abela relates that in 1640 a pit was discovered under a crypt in that cemetery containing a great number of human remains piled in order above

each other. The following inscription was then placed above the spot:—

D. O. M.  
 Vetustissimum Christianorum  
 Ossuarium  
 Temporum Injuria Olim Dilapsum  
 Terraque Obrutum  
 An. Salutis MDCXL Repertum  
 Ne Fidelium Animæ  
 Sacris Carerent Suffragiis  
 Neve Religiosum Deperiret Monumentum  
 Pii Concives  
 Eruere Instaurareq. Curavere.

In connexion with this, the question remains to be discussed: Are the catacombs of Città Vecchia of pagan or of Christian origin and use? They are evidently the burial-places of people who inhabited the neighbouring city. Some facts may be given which seem more or less decisive as to who these people were, and the epoch to which they belonged.

1. The Città Vecchia catacombs are not primitive Phœnician sepulchres. Such sepulchres abound in Malta, both in isolated single examples and in small clusters, but they all have certain well-marked features of their own, which are wanting in the local catacombs. The box-like burial chamber of the Phœnicians, with its small square doorway, is not a characteristic of the catacombs, whose leading types of tomb are either the simple *loculus* or the elaborate *arcosolium*.

2. Few things about early Christianity are more noticeable than the way in which its followers felt themselves to be a community united to each other in life and death by the tie of a common faith. To this the catacombs at Rome and elsewhere bear eloquent witness. And the similar constructions at Malta are large common cemeteries under ground, in which many were laid together, as if members of one society.

3. The burial inscriptions of the Maltese catacombs hitherto explored have, unfortunately, nearly all perished. That such inscriptions once existed is a fact, attested both by Abela and by Niederstedt, in his *Malta vetus et nova*, in which he speaks of the Malta catacombs as follows:— 'Maltam subterraneam voco quod certis speluncis in vivo saxo excavatis, veluti civitas quaedam condita est . . . cujus in parietibus continuo hinc inde sepulturae visuntur ex inciso lapide *nec non vetustissimis characteribus inscripta epitaphia cum defunctorum nominibus*' (B. Niederstedt, *Malta*

*vetus et nova*, Helmstadii, 1660). But Niederstedt neither records in what language the epitaphs of which he speaks were written, nor the contents of a single one of them.

It is not impossible that when the catacombs of St. Cataldus, St. Venera, etc., are explored, some interesting finds may be made. Meanwhile the few surviving inscriptions which have been discovered are all the more important. In the catacomb of St. Paul there is only one which is still extant in a fair state of preservation, but it is a somewhat remarkable one. It was first noticed by the Rev. Gatt Said, rector of the Church of St. Paul's Grotto, who describes his discovery thus: 'Searching our catacombs one fine day, we found, almost by chance, a picture which appears to represent a person who died a martyr.' On the plastered wall of an arched tomb is depicted, in red paint, the figure of a woman sitting with outstretched arms, the hands, apparently bound, resting on a short column. Above the figure is painted the symbol ✱ Above the symbol are inscribed, also in red paint, the letters EYTYXIN(?)H. The first five letters are quite clear, but the sixth and seventh are not so distinct. The slanting stroke of the N appears to be prolonged so as almost to meet the preceding I: thus, IÑ. The name therefore appears to be Eutuchinè, a probable misspelling of Eutuchianè. Eutuchianè would of course be the correct feminine of the masculine Eutuchianos, a name borne by (among others) a bishop of Rome in the third century. If this reading is correct, it is a curious coincidence that, not far from St. Paul's catacomb, a small family cemetery was discovered in 1892, having inscribed on its entrance the single word EYTYXIANOY. Dr. Caruana considers that the figure represents a female confessor with her wrists bound. A replica of the whole is preserved in the museum of the public library at Valletta. The letters above the figure are uncial, and traced in bold broad strokes. Several points in connexion with this inscription may be noticed. First, it is not cut or scratched on the plaster, but written in paint. In the Roman catacombs, according to Northcote, this is a mark of the oldest inscriptions. Next, the inscription is Greek, not Latin. 'Speaking generally,' says the same authority, 'the use of the Greek language on epitaphs of the (Roman) catacombs is a note of antiquity. De Rossi considers that it creates a presumption that the

epitaph in question was written before the middle of the third century.' Lastly, it is an extremely simple inscription, consisting of a single word, with a cruciform symbol below it. De Rossi says that simplicity is a main characteristic of the more ancient inscriptions in the Christian catacombs of Rome. 'Often they are bare names, and nothing else. Often, however, symbols of various kinds, and especially those which had a secret Christian meaning, are added to inscriptions of this class, which are to be met with very abundantly in the most ancient parts of the catacombs.' If we may apply these data to this unique inscription in St. Paul's catacomb in Malta, it may, perhaps, be safely concluded that it is a Christian epitaph, and that of an early period, possibly 250-300 A.D. It has probably escaped the fate of the other epitaphs in the catacomb, owing to (1) its obscure and lowly position (in a narrow passage and near the ground), (2) its being painted on a hard, finely-grained plaster, and (3) not being on a movable stone or sepulchral slab, but on a solid wall.

In various spots in the neighbourhood of the catacombs at Città Vecchia a few other Christian epitaphs have been found. On a marble fragment, discovered near the catacomb of St. Venera, are engraved part of the symbol ✱ and the following words:—

... BA IN PACE BIXIT  
VKLS AGUSTAS.

On a lead tablet, found among the rubbish of a wall, is the inscription—

D. M.  
FUFICA CALENE  
CURTIUS OIADVS  
IDOMENO COIVGI  
ECERV. T. VALER...  
BENEMERENTI.

Beneath the inscription is a dove with an olive branch, a common Christian symbol in the Roman catacombs.

On a stone, found behind the Church of St. Publius at Città Vecchia, is this epitaph—

IN .... IACET  
BONE MEMORIE  
BO ..... Q .. BIXIT  
IN ... SEC. LO AN  
NIS LV E. Q .. EBIT  
IN .. CE ... OS. III KAL SE.  
TE. BRE INDICTIO  
NE .... ECIMA.

Adjoining the small catacomb of 'L'Abbatia' is a little family cemetery, which has, on one of its subterranean vaults, this inscription in red paint, as read by Caruana—

RI . . . .  
 . . . . . CV .  
 . IONIS . . . . EPOSITA  
 IN HOC . . . . . CORPOR.

In his *Storia Ecclesiastica Di Malta* (Malta, 1877), Mr. A. Ferris describes what is apparently the same epitaph in a more perfect condition, as it was copied in 1838 by its first discoverers—

NOT  
 N ITO  
 BIXITINPAC  
 PACIMANISTACV  
 ATIONIS P'SITAE  
 INH'CAOCO RECOR .

One of the latest of such epitaphs was found in a sepulchre within Città Vecchia. It is in Greek, and records the resting-place of 'The Venerable Domesticus, Christian and Physician, who died, aged 73, in 810 A.D.'

4. The symbolic decorations of the Città Vecchia catacombs are significant. Comm. Abela mentions having seen on the wall of one of the crypts in St. Paul's catacomb the monogram XP within a raised laurel wreath, and gives an engraving of it in his book. This has totally disappeared, but the palm branch is still to be seen engraved on several of the tombs in the same place. The neighbouring catacomb of St. Agatha contains an interesting crypt, in which mass is still said once a year on the anniversary of the festival of the saint. Its rock walls are decorated with much-decayed frescoes representing St. Agatha, St. Lucia, St. Venera, the Virgin, St. Anthony, St. Blaise, etc. Mrs. Jameson describes the place as follows:—'Among the remains of art relative to St. Agatha may be mentioned the subterranean chapel at Malta. According to a tradition of the island, the ground once belonged to her family. It is carved out of the living rock, and the walls covered with frescoes, containing at least twenty-four figures, nearly life-size, most of them have peeled off the surface, but those which remain are of extraordinary beauty. The style is that of the early Tuscan school; the date about the middle of the fifteenth century, (*Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. ii. p. 233-234).

A similar type of fresco exists in the crypt of the

catacomb of St. Venera, and was also noticed in that of St. Cataldus in Abela's time. In the quaint little catacomb of 'L'Abbatia,' which lies in the side of a rock terrace outside Città Vecchia, there is a fairly well preserved fresco of the Crucifixion and the Annunciation. In the centre is the figure of Christ on the cross, on one arm of which is the word VIKTOR, and on the other MORTIS. To the right of the cross stands the figure of a woman, with the letters MAT. On her right is a figure with the words ANGELUS GABRIEL. To the left of the cross stands a figure with the letters (I)OH, and to the left of this figure a woman, with the letters DOM.

Traces of other frescoes are visible in the place. Near that just described, a ship and a palm branch are cut in the wall, and there are eight crosses on the adjacent pillars. Dr. Caruana attributes the origin of this catacomb to about the beginning of the fifth century A.D. The paintings mentioned above may be taken as proving, not only that these sites were venerated as holy places in the middle of the fifteenth century, but the then existence of a Christian tradition of a much earlier date in connexion with them.

5. The objects found in the catacombs of Città Vecchia have been chiefly small clay lamps of the same primitive form as those found in Rome, Pompeii, Syracuse, and elsewhere. Excellent specimens of them may be seen in the museum at Valletta and in the Roman house at Città Vecchia. They bear sometimes the image of a fish, sometimes of a peacock or a stag, sometimes a simple cross, and sometimes the monogram XP—all well-known Christian symbols.

6. The names which the catacombs of Città Vecchia bear are all ecclesiastical ones. Even if these titles are only mediæval, the fact that they were then named after various Christian saints points to their already having been regarded as sacred spots, which were linked, in the minds of the inhabitants, with the early Christian history of the locality. The earliest recorded bishop of Malta is Acacius, who attended the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. There is, however, no reason to doubt the possibility of Christianity having gained a footing in the island considerably before that date, nor that there may have been local confessors there who shared in the sufferings of their fellow-believers in other parts of the Roman Empire during the Decian persecution of A.D. 250. For aught that is known

to the contrary, there may have been a Christian community in Malta as early as the period of Antoninus, 138-161 A.D., or even earlier. What the local tradition asserts with regard to a sojourn in the island by St. Venera of Marseilles (fl. 143 A.D.) and St. Agatha of Catania (fl. 249 A.D.) may have a foundation in fact: some Gallican or Sicilian Christians may have fled to the comparatively sequestered Melita in these days of trouble, and 'spoken the word' there with abiding effect. Native legend, indeed, goes farther, and boldly claims St. Paul himself as the first preacher, and Publius as the first bishop, in Malta, in spite of the complete silence of the narrative in the Book of Acts regarding any direct evangelizing or conversions in connexion with the apostle's stay in the island. In the matter of local catacombs, one is on firmer ground, with some tangible evidence and positive data to go by. It is not likely that all memory and knowledge of the places where their forefathers had first worshipped Christ and were laid to sleep in His name would be completely lost among a population proud of their island's accidental connexion with St. Paul, and of the mention of it in one of the N.T. books, and

so tenacious of their Christianity that even the long Saracen occupation of Malta from 870 to 1090 A.D. did not convert them into Mohammedans. It was probably during that period that the local Christian monuments were pillaged and defaced by the Arab conquerors, who appear to have kept the natives of the island in a state of servitude, and to have been heartily hated by them.

One thing may be regarded as certain, namely, that the ancient town of Città Vecchia represents the primitive centre of Christianity in Malta, and that two at least of its present ecclesiastical sites—that of the Cathedral and that of the parish Church of St. Paul—are very closely connected with the early days of Christian faith there. It is around the latter that the catacombs of Città Vecchia cluster most closely.

Thus, taking all the facts into consideration, we may reasonably conclude that, like those elsewhere, the catacombs at Malta are of Christian origin. Their existence is an additional proof of how Christianity percolated even to small outlying spots in the Roman Empire, and sometimes suffered the same vicissitudes in these as in more important places.

## The Original Book of Deuteronomy.

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THE PURPOSE of the present paper is to give a general account and estimate of an important work that has been recently published on the above subject. In this book, whose title is given below,<sup>1</sup> there are no doubt embodied the results of years of study and thought. Mr. Cullen argues very ably in support of a somewhat novel theory.

The Book of Deuteronomy, it has long been felt, is in many ways the key to the Hexateuch. By universal admission it was this book in some form that was read before king Josiah, and that formed the basis of his reforms. It is pretty generally admitted, moreover, that however much of older material it contained, Josiah's law-book

was of recent origin, having been composed either in his own reign or in that of Manasseh. There is more diversity of opinion on the question of the original dimensions of the book. Many critics follow Wellhausen in holding that chapters 12-26 are the kernel of the present Book of Deuteronomy and were originally the whole, and that chapters 5-11 and 1-4 were subsequently prefixed by way of prefaces to new editions. Others, of whom Kuenen and Driver may be named as representatives, decline to separate 5-11 from 12-26, regarding chapters 5-26, along with chapter 28, as substantially a unity, and as having constituted the book found by Hilkiah. They differ somewhat as to the origin of the other chapters in the present Book of Deuteronomy.

Now, Mr. Cullen emphasizes the fact that his inquiry in the work before us is strictly limited to

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of the Covenant in Moab: A Critical Inquiry into the Original Form of Deuteronomy.* By John Cullen, M.A., D.Sc. Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons. Price 5s. net.