

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN ROME.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ROME FROM A PAGAN INTO A CHRISTIAN CITY.^[1]

The early adoption of Christianity not confined to the poorer classes.—Instances of Roman nobles who were Christians.—The family of the Acilii Glabriones.—Manius Acilius the consul.—Put to death because of his religion.—Description of his tomb, recently discovered.—Other Christian patricians.—How was it possible for men in public office to serve both Christ and Cæsar?—The usual liberality of the emperors towards the new religion.—Nevertheless an open profession of faith hazardous and frequently avoided.—Marriages between Christians and pagans.—Apostasy resulting from these.—Curious discovery illustrating the attitude of Seneca's family towards Christianity.—Christians in the army.—The gradual nature of the transformation of Rome.—The significance of the inscription on the Arch of Constantine.—The readiness of the early Church to adopt pagan customs and even myths.—The curious mixture of pagan and Christian conceptions which grew out of this.—Churches became repositories for classical works of art, for which new interpretations were invented.—The desire of the early Christians to make their churches as beautiful as possible.—The substitution of Christian shrines for the old pagan altars at street corners.—Examples of both.—The bathing accommodations of the pagan temples adopted by the Church.—Also the custom of providing public standards of weights and measures.—These set up in the basilicas.—How their significance became perverted in the Dark Ages.—The adoption of funerary banquets and their degeneration.—The public storehouses of the emperors and those of the popes.—Pagan rose-festivals and their conversion into a Christian institution.

It has been contended, and many still believe, that in ancient Rome the doctrines of Christ found no proselytes, except among the lower and poorer classes of citizens. That is certainly a noble picture which represents the new faith as searching among the haunts of poverty and slavery, seeking to inspire faith, hope, and charity in their occupants; to transform them from things into human beings; to make them believe in the happiness of a future life; to alleviate their present sufferings; to redeem their children from shame and servitude; to proclaim them equal to their masters. But the gospel found its way also to the mansions of the masters, nay, even to the palace of the Cæsars. The discoveries lately made on this subject are startling, and constitute a new chapter in the history of imperial Rome. We have been used to consider early Christian history and primitive Christian art as matters of secondary importance, and hardly worthy the attention of the classical student. Thus, none of the four

or five hundred volumes on the topography of ancient Rome speaks of the basilicas raised by Constantine; of the church of S. Maria Antiqua, built side by side with the Temple of Vesta, the two worships dwelling together as it were, for nearly a century; of the Christian burial-grounds; of the imperial mausoleum near S. Peter's; of the porticoes, several miles in length, which led from the centre of the city to the churches of S. Peter, S. Paul, and S. Lorenzo; of the palace of the Cæsars transformed into the residence of the Popes. Why should these constructions of monumental and historical character be expelled from the list of classical buildings? and why should we overlook the fact that many great names in the annals of the empire are those of members of the Church, especially when the knowledge of their conversion enables us to explain events that had been, up to the latest discoveries, shrouded in mystery?

It is a remarkable fact that the record of some of these events should be found, not in church annals, calendars, or itineraries, but in passages in the writings of pagan annalists and historians. Thus, in ecclesiastical documents no mention is made of the conversion of the two Domitillæ, or Flavius Clemens, or Petronilla, all of whom were relatives of the Flavian emperors; and of the Acilii Glabriones, the noblest among the noble, as Herodianus calls them (2, 3). Their fortunes and death are described only by the Roman historians and biographers of the time of Domitian. It seems that when the official *feriale*, or calendar, was resumed, after the end of the persecutions, preference was given to names of those confessors and martyrs whose deeds were still fresh in the memory of the living, and of necessity little attention was paid to those of the first and second centuries, whose acts either had not been written down, or had been lost during the persecutions.

As the crypt of the Acilii Glabriones on the Via Salaria has become one of the chief places of attraction, since its re-discovery in 1888, I cannot begin this volume under better auspices than by giving an account of this important event.^[2]

In exploring that portion of the Catacombs of Priscilla which lies under the Monte delle Gioie, near the entrance from the Via Salaria, de Rossi observed that the labyrinth of the galleries converged towards an original crypt, shaped like a Greek Γ (Gamma), and decorated with frescoes. The desire of finding the name and the history of the first occupants of this noble tomb, whose memory seems to have been so dear to the faithful, led the explorers to carefully sift the earth which filled the place; and their pains were rewarded by the discovery of a fragment of a marble coffin, inscribed with the letters: ACILIO GLABRIONI FILIO.

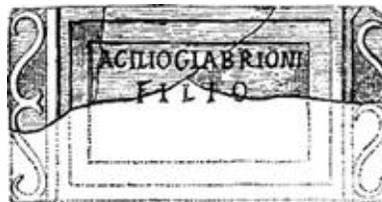


Figure 2 Tablet of Acilius Glabrio.

Did this fragment really belong to the Γ crypt, or had it been thrown there by mere chance? And in case of its belonging to the crypt, was it an isolated record, or did it belong to a group of graves of the Acilii Glabriones? The queries were fully answered by later discoveries; four inscriptions, naming Manius Acilius ... and his wife Priscilla, Acilius Rufinus, Acilius Quintianus, and Claudius Acilius Valerius were found among the débris, so that there is no

doubt as to the ownership of the crypt, and of the chapel which opens at the end of the longer arm of the Γ .

The Manii Acilii Glabriones attained celebrity in the sixth century of Rome, when Acilius Glabrio, consul in 563 (B. C. 191), conquered the Macedonians at the battle of Thermopylai. We have in Rome two records of his career: the Temple of Piety, erected by him on the west side of the Forum Olitorium, now transformed into the church of S. Nicola in Carcere; and the pedestal of the equestrian statue, of gilt bronze, offered to him by his son, the first of its kind ever seen in Italy, which was discovered by Valadier in 1808, at the foot of the steps of the temple, and buried again. Towards the end of the republic we find them established on the Pincian Hill, where they had built a palace and laid out gardens which extended at least from the convent of the Trinità dei Monti to the Villa Borghese.^[3] The family had grown so rapidly to honor, splendor, and wealth, that Pertinax, in the memorable sitting of the Senate in which he was elected emperor, proclaimed them the noblest race in the world.

The Glabrio best known in the history of the first century is Manius Acilius, who was consul with Trajan, A. D. 91. He was put to death by Domitian in the year 95, as related by Suetonius (*Domit.* 10): "He caused several senators and ex-consuls to be executed on the charge of their conspiring against the empire,—*quasi molitores rerum novarum*,—among them Civica Cerealis, governor of Asia, Salvidienus Orfitus, and Acilius Glabrio, who had previously been banished from Rome."

The expression *molitores rerum novarum* has a political meaning in the case of Cerealis and Orfitus, both staunch pagans, and a religious and political one in the case of Glabrio, a convert to the Christian faith, called *nova superstitio* by Suetonius and Tacitus. Other details of Glabrio's fate are given by Dion Cassius, Juvenal, and Fronto. We are told by these authors that during his consulship, A. D. 91, and before his banishment, he was compelled by Domitian to fight against a lion and two bears in the amphitheatre adjoining the emperor's villa at Albanum. The event created such an impression in Rome, and its memory lasted so long that, half a century later, we find it given by Fronto as a subject for a rhetorical composition to his pupil Marcus Aurelius. The amphitheatre is still in existence, and was excavated in 1887. Like the one at Tusculum, it is partly hollowed out of the rocky side of the mountain, partly built of stone and rubble work. It well deserves a visit from the student and the tourist, on account of its historical associations, and of the admirable view which its ruins command of the vine-clad slopes of Albano and Castel Savello, the wooded plains of Ardea and Lavinium, the coast of the Tyrrhenian, and the islands of Pontia and Pandataria.

Xiphilinus states that, in the year 95, some members of the imperial family were condemned by Domitian on the charge of atheism, together with other leading personages who had embraced "the customs and persuasion of the Jews," that is, the Christian faith. Manius Acilius Glabrio, the ex-consul, was implicated in the same trial, and condemned on the same indictment with the others. Among these the historian mentions Clemens and Domitilla, who were manifestly Christians. One particular of the case, related by Juvenal, confirms the account of Xiphilinus. He says that in order to mitigate the wrath of the emperor and avoid a catastrophe, Acilius Glabrio, after fighting the wild beasts at Albanum, assumed an air of stupidity. In this alleged stupidity it is easy to recognize the prejudice so common among the pagans, to whom the Christians' retirement from the joys of the world, their contempt of public honors, and their modest behavior appeared as *contemptissima inertia*, most despicable laziness. This is the very phrase used by Suetonius in speaking of Flavius Clemens,

who was murdered by Domitian *ex tenuissima suspicione*, on a very slight suspicion of his faith.

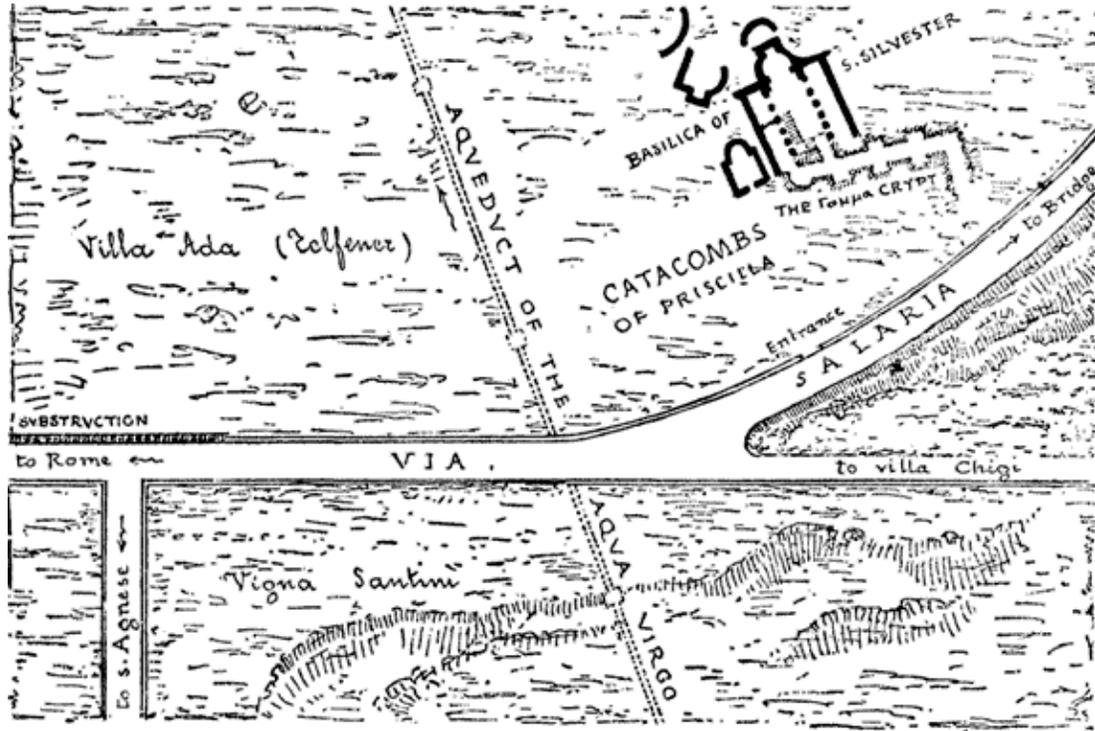


Figure 3 Map of the Via Salaria.

Glabrio was put to death in his place of exile, the name of which is not known. His end helped, no doubt, the propagation of the gospel among his relatives and descendants, as well as among the servants and freedmen of the house, as shown by the noble sarcophagi and the humbler loculi found in such numbers in the crypt of the Catacombs of Priscilla. The small oratory at the southern end of the crypt seems to have been consecrated exclusively to the memory of its first occupant, the ex-consul. The date and the circumstances connected with the translation of his relics from the place of banishment to Rome are not known.

Both the chapel and the crypt were found in a state of devastation hardly credible, as though the plunderers had taken pleasure in satisfying their vandalic instincts to the utmost. Each of the sarcophagi was broken into a hundred pieces; the mosaics of the walls and ceiling had been wrenched from their sockets, cube by cube, the marble incrustations torn off, the altar dismantled, the bones dispersed.

When did this wholesale destruction take place? In times much nearer ours than the reader may imagine. I have been able to ascertain the date, with the help of an anecdote related by Pietro Sante Bartoli in § 144 of his archæological memoirs: "Excavations were made under Innocent X. (1634-1655), and Clement IX. (1667-1670), in the Monte delle

Gioie, on the Via Salaria, with the hope of discovering a certain hidden treasure. The hope was frustrated; but, deep in the bowels of the mound, some crypts were found, encrusted with white stucco, and remarkable for their neatness and preservation. I have heard from trustworthy men that the place is haunted by spirits, as is proved by what happened to them

not many months ago. While assembled on the Monte delle Gioie for a picnic, the conversation turned upon the ghosts who haunted the crypt below, when suddenly the carriage which had brought them there, pushed by invisible hands, began to roll down the slope of the hill, and was ultimately precipitated into the river Anio at its base. Several oxen had to be used to haul the vehicle out of the stream. This happened to Tabarrino, butcher at S. Eustachio, and to his brothers living in the Via Due Macelli, whose faces still bear marks of the great terror experienced that day."

There is no doubt that the anecdote refers to the tomb of the Acilii Glabriones, which is cut under the Monte delle Gioie, and is the only one in the Catacombs of Priscilla remarkable for a coating of white stucco. Its destruction, therefore, took place under Clement IX., and was the work of treasure-hunters. And the very nature of clandestine excavations, which are the work of malicious, ignorant, and suspicious persons, explains the reason why no mention of the discovery was made to contemporary archæologists, and the pleasure of re-discovering the secret of the Acilii Glabriones was reserved for us.

These are by no means the only patricians of high standing whose names have come to light from the depths of the catacombs. Tacitus (*Annal.* xiii. 32) tells how Pomponia Græcina, wife of Plautius, the conqueror of Britain, was accused of "foreign superstition," tried by her husband, and acquitted. These words long since gave rise to a conjecture that Pomponia Græcina was a Christian, and recent discoveries put it beyond doubt. An inscription bearing the name of ΠΟΜΠΟΝΙΟC ΓΡΗΚΕΙΝΟC has been found in the Cemetery of Callixtus, together with other records of the Pomponii Attici and Bassi. Some scholars think that Græcina, the wife of the conqueror of Britain, is no other than Lucina, the Christian matron who interred her brethren in Christ in her own property, at the second milestone of the Appian Way.

Other evidence of the conquests made by the gospel among the patricians is given by an inscription discovered in March, 1866, in the Catacombs of Prætextatus, near the monument of Quirinus the martyr. It is a memorial raised to the memory of his departed wife by Postumius Quietus, consul A. D. 272. Here also was found the name of Urania, daughter of Herodes Atticus, by his second wife, Vibullia Alcia,^[4] while on the other side of the road, near S. Sebastiano, a mausoleum has been found, on the architrave of which the name URANIOR[UM] is engraved.

In [chapter vii.](#) I shall have occasion to refer to many Christian relatives of the emperors Vespasian and Domitian. Eusebius, in speaking of these Flavians, and particularly of Domitilla the younger, niece of Domitian, quotes the authority of the historian Bruttius. He evidently means Bruttius Præsens, the illustrious friend of Pliny the younger, and the grandfather of Crispina, the empress of Commodus. In 1854, near the entrance to the crypt of the Flavians, at Torre Marancia (Via Ardeatina), a fragment of a sarcophagus was found, with the name of Bruttius Crispinus. If, therefore, the history of Domitilla's martyrdom was written by the grandfather of Bruttia Crispina, the empress, it seems probable that the two families were united not only by the close proximity of their villas and tombs, and by friendship, but especially by community of religion.

I may also cite the names of several Cornelii, Cæcili, and Æmilii, the flower of Roman nobility, grouped near the graves of S. Cæcilia and Pope Cornelius; of Liberalis, a *consul suffectus*,^[5] and a martyr, whose remains were buried in the Via Salaria; of Jallia Clementina, a relative of Jallius Bassus, consul before A. D. 161; of Catia Clementina, daughter or relative of Catius, consul A. D. 230, not to speak of personages of equestrian rank, whose names have been collected in hundreds.

A difficulty may arise in the mind of the reader: how was it possible for these magistrates, generals, consuls, officers, senators, and governors of provinces, to attend to their duties without performing acts of idolatry? In chapter xxxvii. of the Apology, Tertullian says: "We are but of yesterday, yet we fill every place that belongs to you, cities, islands, outposts; we fill your assemblies, camps, tribes and decuries; the imperial palace, the Senate, the forum; we only leave to you your temples." But here lies the difficulty; how could they fill these places, and leave the temples?

First of all, the Roman emperors gave plenty of liberty to the new religion from time to time; and some of them, moved by a sort of religious syncretism, even tried to ally it with the official worship of the empire, and to place Christ and Jupiter on the steps of the same *lararium*. The first attempt of the kind is attributed to Tiberius; he is alleged to have sent a message to the Senate requesting that Christ should be included among the gods, on the strength of the official report written by Pontius Pilatus of the passion and death of our Lord. Malala says that Nero made honest inquiries about the new religion, and that, at first, he showed himself rather favorable towards it; a fact not altogether improbable, if we take into consideration the circumstances of Paul's appeal, his absolution, and his relations with Seneca, and with the converts *de domo Cæsaris*, "of the house of Cæsar." Lampridius, speaking of the religious sentiments of Alexander Severus, says: "He was determined to raise a temple to Christ, and enlisted him among the gods; a project attributed also to Hadrian. There is no doubt that Hadrian ordered temples to be erected in every city to an unknown god; and because they have no statue we still call them temples of Hadrian. He is said to have prepared them for Christ; but to have been deterred from carrying his plan into execution by the consideration that the temples of the old gods would become deserted, and the whole population turn Christian, *omnes christianos futuros*." [6]

The freedom enjoyed by the Church under Caracalla is proved by the *graffiti* of the Domus Gelotiana, described in my "Ancient Rome." [7] The one caricaturing the crucifixion, which is reproduced on p. 122 of that volume, stands by no means alone in certifying to the spreading of the faith in the imperial palace. The name of Alexamenos, "the faithful," is repeated thrice. There is also a name, LIBANUS, under which another hand has written EPISCOPUS, and, lower down, LIBANUS EPI[SCOPUS]. It is very likely a joke on Libanus, a Christian page like Alexamenos, whom his fellow-disciples had nicknamed "the bishop." It is true that the title is not necessarily Christian, having been used sometimes to denote a municipal officer; [8] but this can hardly be the case in an assembly of youths, like the one of the Domus Gelotiana; and the connection between the *graffiti* of Libanus and those of Alexamenos seems evident. In reading these *graffiti*, now very much injured by dampness, exposure, and the unscrupulous hands of tourists, we are really witnessing household quarrels between pagan and Christian dwellers in the imperial palace, in one of which Caracalla, when still young, saw one of his playmates struck and punished on account of his Christian origin and persuasion.

Septimius Severus and Caracalla issued a constitution, [9] which opened to the Jews the way to the highest honors, making the performance of such ceremonies as were in opposition to the principles of their faith optional with them. What was granted to the Jews by the law of the empire may have been permitted also to the Christians by the personal benevolence of the emperors.



Figure 4 Portrait Bust of Philip the Younger.

When Elagabalus collected, or tried to collect, in his own private chapel the gods and the holiest relics of the universe, he did not forget Christ and his doctrine.^[10] Alexander Severus, the best of Roman rulers, gave full freedom to the Church; and once, the Christians having taken possession of a public place on which the *popinarii*, or tavern-keepers, claimed rights, Alexander gave judgment in favor of the former, saying it was preferable that the *place* should serve for divine worship, rather than for the sale of drinks.^[11]

There can scarcely be any doubt that the emperor Philip the Arab (Marcus Julius Philippus, A. D. 244), his wife Otacilia Severa, and his son Philip the younger were Christians, and friends of S. Hippolytus. Still, in spite of these periods of peace and freedom of the Church, we cannot be blind to the fact that for a Christian nobleman wishing to make a career, the position was extremely hazardous. Hence we frequently see baptism deferred until mature or old age, and strange situations and even acts of decided apostasy created by mixed marriages.

The wavering between public honors and Christian retirement is illustrated by some incidents in the life of Licentius, a disciple of S. Augustine. Licentius was the son of Romanianus, a friend and countryman of Augustine; and when the latter retired to the