

VI. *A Letter from Mr John Monro to the Publisher, concerning the Catacombs of Rome and Naples.*

SIR,

THE Catacombs are an obscure argument. I have seen those of *Rome*, I have seen those of *Naples*, and as they say there are Catacombs in the Neighbourhood of all the great Towns of that part of *Italy*, I had been glad to have seen them where-ever they are. They are an obscure argument indeed ; but perhaps the greatest obscurity about them is, that a matter that has so much exercis'd the Pens of the Moderns, shou'd be totally neglected by the Ancients : Neither the name nor the thing is found in the latter, whereas among the former, Antiquaries and Travellers are full of them. All they into whose way they come, think they do nothing if they do not exhaust them before they leave them ; they take all their dimensions, measure their height, their breadth and their length ; they survey all the little rooms, search every hole and corner, criticize nicely on the quality, and calculate the age of the poor Painting and Inscriptions, and make excursions into other arguments, to find out the end for which they were made. The Catacombs are a narrow Gallery dug and carry'd a vast way under ground, with an infinite number of others going off it on all hands, and an infinite number of little rooms going off the principal, and them too. Those commonly shew'd Strangers are those of *San Sebastiano*, those of *San Lorenzo*, those of *Sant Agnese*, and the others in the Fields

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a little off of *Sant Agnese*. They take their names from the Churches in their neighbourhood, and seem to divide the circumference of the City without the Walls between them, extending their Galleries every where under, and a vast way from it, so that all the ground under, and for many miles about it, is said to be hollow. Now there are two sorts of Authors that run into extravagance on this subject; the one will have them made by the Primitive Christians, adding, that in the times of Persecution they liv'd, held their Assemblies, and laid up the Bodies of their Martyrs and Confessors in them. This is the account that prevails at *Rome*, and consequent to it there are men kept constantly at work in them. As soon as these Labourers discover a Repository, with any of the marks of a Saint about it, intimation is given to the Cardinal Treasurer, who immediately sends men of probity and reputation to the place, where they find a Palm painted or engraven, or the Cypher *Xp*, which is commonly read *pro Christo*, or a small round projection in the side of the Gallery, a little below the Repository; what is within it is carry'd to the Palace. Many of these projections we have seen open, with pieces of the Vials in them; the Glass indeed was tinctor'd, and 'tis pretended that in these Vials was conserv'd the Blood of the Martyrs, which was thus laid up nigh their Bodies, towards the Head, to distinguish them from those of the others that were not call'd to the honour of laying down their lives for the faith of the Gospel. After the Labourers have survey'd a Gallery, they do up the entry that leads into it; thus most of them are shut; nor are more left open than what is necessary to keep up the trade of shewing them to Strangers, which they say is done to prevent what has often happen'd, I mean peoples losing themselves in these subterraneous Labyrinths; by this conduct depriving us of the means of knowing

knowing whither and how far they were carry'd. To this 't may be justly excepted, that allowing the Catacombs to be proper for the end for which they are presum'd to be made, and that the Christians of that age were in a capacity of making that convenience, for themselves to live and assemble in below ground, at a time when 'twas so very unsafe to appear above it; yet to suppose that a work of that vastness and importance cou'd be carry'd on without the knowledge of the Government, is to suppose the Government asleep, and that that was actually done under its nose, that must necessarily have alarm'd it, had it been attempted on the frontiers of the Empire.

The other sort of Authors give indeed a mighty Idea of the Catacombs, represent them as a work of that vastness, that the Christians in the persecuting times had not number enough to carry it on; but then most unadvisedly with the same breath they confound them with the *Puticuli in Festus Pompeius*, where, at the same time that the Ancient Romans us'd to burn the Bodies of their dead, the custom was, to avoid expence, to throw those of the Slaves to rot.

This is not all, the *Roman* Christians, say they, observing at length the great veneration that certain places gain'd by the presence of Relicts, resolv'd to provide a stock for themselves; entring therefore the Catacombs, they made in some of them what Cyphers, what Inscriptions, what Painting they thought fit, and then shut them up; intending to open them again upon a Dream or some other important incident. The few that were in the secret of this Artifice either dying, or as the Monks, who were the only men that seem to have had Heads adapted to a thought of this quality, were subject to so many removes, being transported to other places, the contrivance came to be forgot, and those Galleries continu'd shut, till Chance, the Parent, often

of great discoveries, open'd them at last. Thus they conclude, the remains of the vilest part of Mankind are trump'd up in the Church for the Bodies of the most eminent Confessors and Martyrs.

To leave the latter part of this tale to shift for itself as well as it can, either the Catacombs are not that great work they are represented to be, nor to be found every where about the City, or 'twas very improper in *Festus Pompeius* to call them by the little name of *Puticuli*, and so confine them to one place only, that I mean unknown now without the *Esquilin-Gate*. Indeed the characters of the places are so very unlike, that one wou'd wonder how a common Burying place, where in holes Bodies were thrown together to rot, came to be confounded with Repositories cut in the face of a long Gallery, one over another, sometimes to the number of seven, in which Bodies were singly laid, and handsomely done up again, so that nothing cou'd offend the view of those that went in, especially with the little rooms of the fashion of Chappels, that have all the appearances of being the Sepulchres of people of distinction.

The Remark, *Puticulos Antiquissimum sepulturae genus appellatos, quod ibi in puteis sepirentur homines*, is that of an Etymologist, that would be now thought to speak against all the property of Language, if he apply'd the name to our Graves or Vaults, to which it may with more justice and reason be apply'd, than to the Galleries of the Catacombs, and the rooms that go off them. What the particulars were is not difficult to define, after what we have seen so often. When the Persecutors spilt the Blood of so many Martyrs, they us'd to dig holes perpendicularly in the ground, and to throw their Bodies promiscuously in them; of this the memory is still conserv'd, Churches being built in the
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places where the holes were made, and little Monuments erected over the holes themselves, to which the name of *Putei* is continu'd to this day.

This is the true notion of the *Puticuli*, holes dug perpendicularly in the ground to throw Bodies indifferently and without any decency in; and according to the argument this ought to be the conduct of the Ancient *Romans*, with respect to their Slaves, as implying simplicity and the care to avoid a greater expence; but then what's all this to the Galleries and Chambers of the Catacombs, where decency and distinction of quality is nicely observ'd; and that, if they were look'd after, and kept in better repair, would be without dispute the noblest Burying-place this day in the world. As often as they fall under my consideration, I cannot forbear thinking they were made for this end by the ancient *Romans*, and made in consequence of these two ancient opinions, that the shadows hate the light, and love to hover about the place where the Bodies are laid, they appear so easy and decent a resting place for the one, without the least fear of being ever disturb'd, and at the same time there is provided a noble and a vast convenience full of variety for the others, to space themselves freely and with pleasure in.

I think 'twill not be deny'd, that laying up the Bodies in Caves was the original way of disposing of the dead; this was that of the *Phenicians*, and as they were the men that with their Colonies peopled the Western parts of the World, 'tis more than probable they carry'd it along with them whither soever they went. Afterwards, as men grew great and powerful, they erected noble and magnificent monuments for themselves above ground; at length others of inferiour degree imitated them, all leaving room enough and excluding the light: but then interring as we do now in the open air, or in Temples, was never the manner till

till Christianity brought it in. Of the whole we have many instances, and *Il Signior Abbate Bencini*, Bibliothecary of the *Propaganda*, a Gentleman of good ancient Learning, assured me in the conversation I had with him on this argument, that on the great Roads in most parts of *Italy* little Catacombs have been and are still found under ground, and that 'twas the custom to build little Houses over them. This, and the testimony of the Labourers whom I consulted on the matter, made me abandon an opinion of which I was once fond, that the Catacombs are of the nature of our Gravel-pits, as old as the City itself, and yet out of them was taken the *Puzzolana*, the famous Ingredient in the *Roman Mortar*. The same learned Gentleman added, relating to the marks of a Martyr, that they don't conclude much; that the so fam'd Cypher X^p was in use among the Ancients long before Christianity begun: And when I ask'd him what the meaning of it might be among them, return'd, that 'twas compos'd of the two *Greek Letters X P*, under which something mystical was comprehended, but that he met with no Author that gave account what the mystery was.

Thus, after a multitude of thoughts about the *Catacombs*, I'm forc'd to take up with this; so natural it is, arising from the sole theory of the place, and falls in so appositely with the Religion and Practice of the Ancients, among whom the *Dii Manes* were the Tutelary Gods of the Country, and *D. M.* at the head of an Inscription, argues the Moles, the Sepulchre, the Monument, &c. was in the primary intention made for and dedicated to the Soul. Upon the same maxims, in foreign expeditions, when a Hero dy'd or was kill'd, as the Body was liable to a quick corruption, and for that reason unfit to be transported entire, they fell on the expedient of Burning, in order to bring home the Ashes, to oblige the *Manes* to follow, that
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so the Country might not be depriv'd of the benefit of its tutelage. This I humbly conceive was the original of Burning, which by degrees became more and more univerfal, till at last the pomp and magnificence of it reconcil'd it to all that were able to go to the length of the expence.

As for the prejudice of the silence of the Ancient Authors in this matter, 'tis easily remov'd, and to be regreted at the same time that the Authors of all Ages too much neglect the customs of their own time. Writing for the satisfaction of their cotemporaries, they think it impertinent to trouble them with the account of what they see transacted every day. By this means the ancient customs, with the time, and reasons of their difuse, are lost with respect to us, and ours with the same circumstances may come to be so with relation to posterity. As the Authors are pleas'd to adopt them for their Children, one wou'd wonder greater care is not taken not to entail visible occasions of complaint on them; nay, one wou'd wonder more, to see these Gentlemen so little ambitious of a future reputation, when they may infallibly assure it themselves, without resigning the present, by transmitting the knowledge of things, the knowledge of which may in a small series of years become otherwise irretrievable; they cannot but observe every day what esteem is plac'd on those Authors, to whom we are forc'd to go, to find in them what cannot be found elsewhere, to compare with the others, in whom nothing is to be found, but what men of Reason are able to find at home.

Upon the whole, the Catacombs I humbly conceive were the Burying-places of the ancient *Romans*; at length the manner of Burning, which they received from the *Gracians*, coming by degrees to prevail universally, they fell under a total neglect. This is the State in which the Primitive Christians must be suppos'd

to have found them ; 'tis not to be imagin'd they cou'd have made any use of them, at a time when 'twas the daily practice to lay up even the depositions of the Slaves in them ; so that either the Christians made no use of them at all, or they never were the burying Place of the Slaves. Now as these are suppositions that naturally destroy one another, one would count it more safe to follow the faint light of a glimmering tradition, than abandon ones self to the conduct of an *Ignis fatuus*, that for ought a man knows is actually misleading him, so I beg leave to call the Testimony of *Festus Pompeius*, that may rather be applyed to any other thing than to the Galleries of the Catacombs, carry'd under ground, they say 20 miles from the City in some places, and no body knows how far in others, and to that vast number of Chambers that go off them. Thus therefore the Christians finding them in a state of neglect laid up the Bodies of their Dead in them ; and perhaps when the persecution was hot, conceal'd themselves and kept little separate Assemblies in their Chambers. At last the Empire turning Christians, they fell again in the old state of neglect, in which they continu'd till upon the reading of, I have forgot what Author that makes mention of them, they came to be look'd into and search'd. What I have writ relates to the Catacombs of *Rome*, those of *Naples* are a quite other thing, of which *per* next. I am,

Sir,

Your most humble Servant,

Marseilles, Aug. 22.

1700.

J. MORO