

**AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY
CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM, BEING THE
DESCRIPTION OF A SERIES
OF FOURTEEN COMPOSITIONS FROM
FRESCO-PAINTINGS, GLASSES, AND
SCULPTURED SARCOPHAGI**

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An Introduction to Early Christian Symbolism, Being the Description of a Series of Fourteen Compositions from Fresco-Paintings, Glasses, and Sculptured Sarcophagi by William Palmer

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WILLIAM PALMER

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AN INTRODUCTION
TO
EARLY CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM,

BRING THE DESCRIPTION OF A
SERIES OF FOURTEEN COMPOSITIONS
FROM
FRESCO-PAINTINGS, GLASSES, AND SCULPTURED SARCOPHAGI;

WITH THREE APPENDICES:

SELECTED AND ARRANGED

BY WILLIAM PALMER, M.A.
Late Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford;

AND PAINTED BY SIGMUND BOSST, OF ROME.

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PREFACE.

OF the Fourteen Compositions described in the following pages, the first alone occurs as a whole in the "Catacombs" (in the Cemetery of S. Callistus): and it was this which suggested to the Author the idea of putting together other Compositions in a somewhat similar form, like triptychs, with a systematic arrangement of subjects.

The Paintings and Glasses of these fourteen Compositions exhibit to the eye the Christianity of the third century, though possibly some one or other of them may belong to the second, and several of them certainly belong to the fourth. Such as belong to the fourth, if later than the accession of Constantine but still contemporary with the tombs at which they occur, are distinguishable by the *aureole* round the heads of the figures, and sometimes by other signs, such as the presence of the monogram, or the presence or vicinity of dates and names of Consuls, &c. But paintings not contemporaneous, added in the fourth century, or later, near tombs which were specially honoured, after the Cemeteries had

ceased to be in general use, and even after they had been rifled by the barbarians, are easily known, both by traces of alterations made in the crypts or galleries where they occur, and also by a marked difference of style and costume in the paintings themselves.

The sculptures from Christian sarcophagi at Rome (and in two instances from sarcophagi at Arles), which have also been used in these Compositions, represent the symbolism of the fourth and fifth centuries. Such sculptures on sarcophagi hold the same place in the crypts of the first Basilicas founded under Constantine and his successors, as the fresco paintings and glasses hold in the "Catacombs" of the first three centuries.

The symbolism of the paintings, glasses, and sculptures is absolutely the same, though in the fourth century slight variations and additions become noticeable in the treatment of details. A limited number of subjects, eighteen or twenty perhaps, are repeated over and over again; so that when once the general principle running through all, and the Christian application of each subject is known, it is easy to recognise them, however they may be varied or abbreviated.

After the sculptured sarcophagi there follow in order of time the mosaics of the churches of Rome and Ravenna, beginning from the fifth century; but of these, beyond one or two incidental allusions, no use has been made in the present work.

The reader will wish to know how far the parts of the Compositions described are in themselves and in the style of their reproduction to be depended upon as copies from the originals referred to. Care therefore has been taken in describing each to give information on this head.

As regards the separate paintings and sculptures grouped together in each Composition, the drawings of them have mostly been taken from the plates of Bosio and Aringhi as reprinted by Bottari (Roma Sotterranea, 3 vols. fol., A. D. 1737—1754). The glasses may all be found in the complete Collection recently published by the living antiquary P. Garucci. In a few cases, as for parts of Compositions A, D, F, K, L, and M, it was necessary to have recourse to the Catacombs; but many of the other paintings selected were already familiar to the artist, Signor Bossi, who had copied them for some one or other of the living antiquaries of Rome, comparing the plates of the Roma Sotterranea with the originals, and taking notes of the colouring. One or two are from fac-similes of the originals in the Christian Museum of the Lateran. In some cases, again, the published engravings have preserved representations the originals of which have disappeared since the time of Bosio; and wherever any one of these has been inserted, the colours have been added from the analogy of other similar paintings. In the case of sculptures and glasses

there could be no need, for the sake of colouring at least, of any re-examination of the originals.

As regards the idea on which the separate paintings, glasses, and sculptures have been selected and grouped together, this belongs only to the writer, who is far from wishing to suggest that the early Christians painted their doctrines about the tombs of martyrs *systematically*, or for the purpose of *teaching*. The truth is, that when they first made small chambers or crypts opening out of the galleries of their cemeteries, and afterwards multiplied such crypts for those of their dead that were likely to attract living visitors, it was natural for them to paint these chambers, and the arched tombs cut in them, in the same style which was used by the heathens their contemporaries; only instead of mythological or other heathenish subjects they substituted, in the compartments of their ceilings, and on the walls, and within the archings over their tombs, paintings of their own, congenial to their own belief and feelings. Their souls being full of certain ideas which had a true mutual relation one to another, and which altogether formed one coherent system, it was likely enough that what they painted or sculptured about the same tomb or sarcophagus, or in the same crypt, should sometimes take the form of a composition. In point of fact, the first, the most comprehensive, and the most complete of the series of Compositions about to be described actually occurs as

a whole in the Cemetery of S. Callistus; and in several other cases also, as in B 1, C 3 *b, c*, F 1, G 3 *e*, H 1, I 1, and N 1, distinct *compositions* occur, though on a lesser scale. Still, speaking generally, the arrangement of the Compositions in the present work is no more to be ascribed to the early Christians, than the scientific classification of plants in an herbarium, or of living creatures in a zoological work, is to be ascribed to nature. Such arrangements, however, are useful; and, far from giving any false or perverted notion of the separate parts, they teach at a glance, by the comparison and juxtaposition of groups, what would not be seen at once, nor so clearly, if each representation presented itself separately, as in a purely antiquarian Collection.

The Author returns his thanks to the Rev. Fathers MARCHI and GARUCCI, the Chevalier DI ROSSI, the Rev. Mr. NORTHCOTE, and others, from whose kindness he has obtained assistance or information.

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