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*Roman pavement along the Appian Way,  
site of several catacombs.*

# THE HIDDEN PEARL

## Rome's Catacombs and the Earliest Known Image of the Mother of God

*by Mother Nectaria McLees*

For most of us, the catacombs of Rome lie jumbled together with hazy childhood images of Pompeii, the Coliseum, and more memorably, the chariot race of Judah Ben-Hur. Typically overlooked in the tourist-round of classical ruins, renaissance churches, and crowded museums, the rare package-tour catacomb offering is a hurried twenty-minute viewing before lunch, but for the pilgrim to Rome there is an alternative. For a more thorough exploration of these exquisite remnants of the early Church, you need only time and a map. A local bus, for example, drops passengers off outside the old city walls on the ancient Appian Way, from where one can follow at leisure the old pilgrims' routes through the grassy meadows that link the underground churches and sepulchers of three major catacombs. Others lie hidden within the bustle of modern Rome, but each catacomb is a world apart, a unique, timeless setting for the rich treasure of the infant Church.

There are more than forty known catacombs grouped in a circle around the walls of old Rome, a series of underground cemeteries that once accommodated more than 6,500,000 graves. If their immense galleries (sometimes five stories deep) were laid out end-to-end, they would stretch 600 miles. Although 20th century film and romance literature has portrayed these cavernous underground "cities of the dead" as secret hiding-places for persecuted Christians, they were, in fact, grave sites well-known to Roman magistrates, constructed and maintained according to Roman burial law. Unlike the pagan Romans who generally practiced cremation, the city's Christians, believing in the resurrection of the body at the Second Coming, began burying their dead in these soft, easily dug, volcanic tufa galleries, which could be expanded

indefinitely by galleries leading from one floor to the next. Large tracts of land for above-ground cemeteries were unfeasible – Rome had been ringed for centuries by a series of noble estates belonging to senatorial families and wealthy merchants, and the catacombs allowed Christians access to burial vaults that could be easily reached on foot or by horseback from Rome.

Linen-shrouded bodies of the reposed were laid in narrow rectangular tombs carved out of the gallery walls, the openings then sealed with inscribed marble or terracotta slabs. Individual monuments and family sepulchers were highly decorated and between the empty tombs one can still see small openings for the oil lamps that once illumined the passages.

Early Christians freely celebrated memorial services and feasts in the catacombs and, except during the most bitter persecutions, the bodies of martyrs were given over to their families and friends for burial, just as Joseph of Arimathea had asked for and received the body of the Lord. Underground memorial vaults may on occasion have been used for liturgy, but this does not seem to have been a frequent Christian practice.

After Emperor Constantine and the triumph of Christianity, the burial of Roman Christians in the catacombs came to an end as the newly Christianized city set aside tracts of land for above-ground burials. The underground tombs became sanctuaries, living museums memorializing the early church, and pilgrims flocked to Rome to be present at services for the apostles and martyrs. Later centuries saw large churches, and even basilicas, carved out of the soft ground in honor of the saints buried there. As late as the seventh and eighth centuries, we know of *itinerari*, pilgrims' guides from late antiquity that described the burial places of these early Christians, as did St. Jerome in the fourth century:

“When I was a boy in Rome being instructed in the liberal studies, on Sundays, with others of my own age, I used to wander about the sepulchers of the Apostles and martyrs; and I often went into crypts dug out of the depths of the earth which have along the walls, on each side as you enter, bodies of the dead...”

The “peace of Rome,” the secure springtime of the Christian Empire, was not to last, and Romans watched with horror as Goths and Lombards began their centuries-long assault on the Eternal City, repeatedly sacking the countryside catacombs for valuables. The Roman Church regularly restored and embellished its catacombs until the early 800's, when, in order to save



*Christ as the Good Shepherd, Catacomb of St. Callixtus, early third century.*



*Appian Way, 1920s.*

the graves of the martyrs from desecration, succeeding popes orchestrated the most massive disinternment in history, moving entire “cities of the dead” to churches inside the city walls. Relics and remains were brought into the city by the cartload, and when the famous Roman Pantheon was converted to a church in 609 A.D., 28 wagon-loads of bones were placed in the crypt, and 2,300 bodies in the nearby church of St. Prassede.

With the translation of relics, feast-days and memorial services began to be celebrated in the city’s basilicas and churches, the underground cemeteries eventually forgotten. For six hundred years, the entrances to all but one ruined site lay abandoned and overgrown, unknown to the Christian world.

“On May 31, 1578,” writes H. V. Morton in *A Traveller to Rome*, “a man digging for *pozzolana* [a volcanic ash], in a vineyard near the Via Salria, broke into a tunnel and found himself in a world of the dead. He saw a narrow, rock-hewn passage lined on each side with tomb niches, and as he ventured inside he found the gallery to be intersected by others leading on into a labyrinth. His discovery amazed Rome. The men of that time were more excited by the thought that a city of the dead existed unsuspected beneath their feet than by the fresh and beautiful world of early Christianity which had emerged after its long entombment: the funeral lamps, the glass chalices with portraits of St. Peter and St. Paul, the pictures of the Good Shepherd, the touching epitaphs. Much was to be destroyed, scattered and lost forever before men valued the wonderful resurrection of the innocent childhood of the Christian faith.”

The underground city that this sixteenth-century Roman had stumbled upon was the Catacomb of Priscilla, named for a woman of the senatorial Acilii family, whose memorial is inscribed in her family sepulcher. Within the municipal boundaries of modern Rome, the galleries of this “Queen of the Catacombs” extend over eight miles and once accommodated 40,000 burials, including seven early Roman popes who were laid to rest here from 309 to the mid-sixth century. Saints were also buried here, including Aquila and Prisca, mentioned by St. Paul in his epistles, and Pudenziana and Prassede, the daughters of Pudens and contemporaries of the apostles, to whom two of the oldest churches in Rome are dedicated.

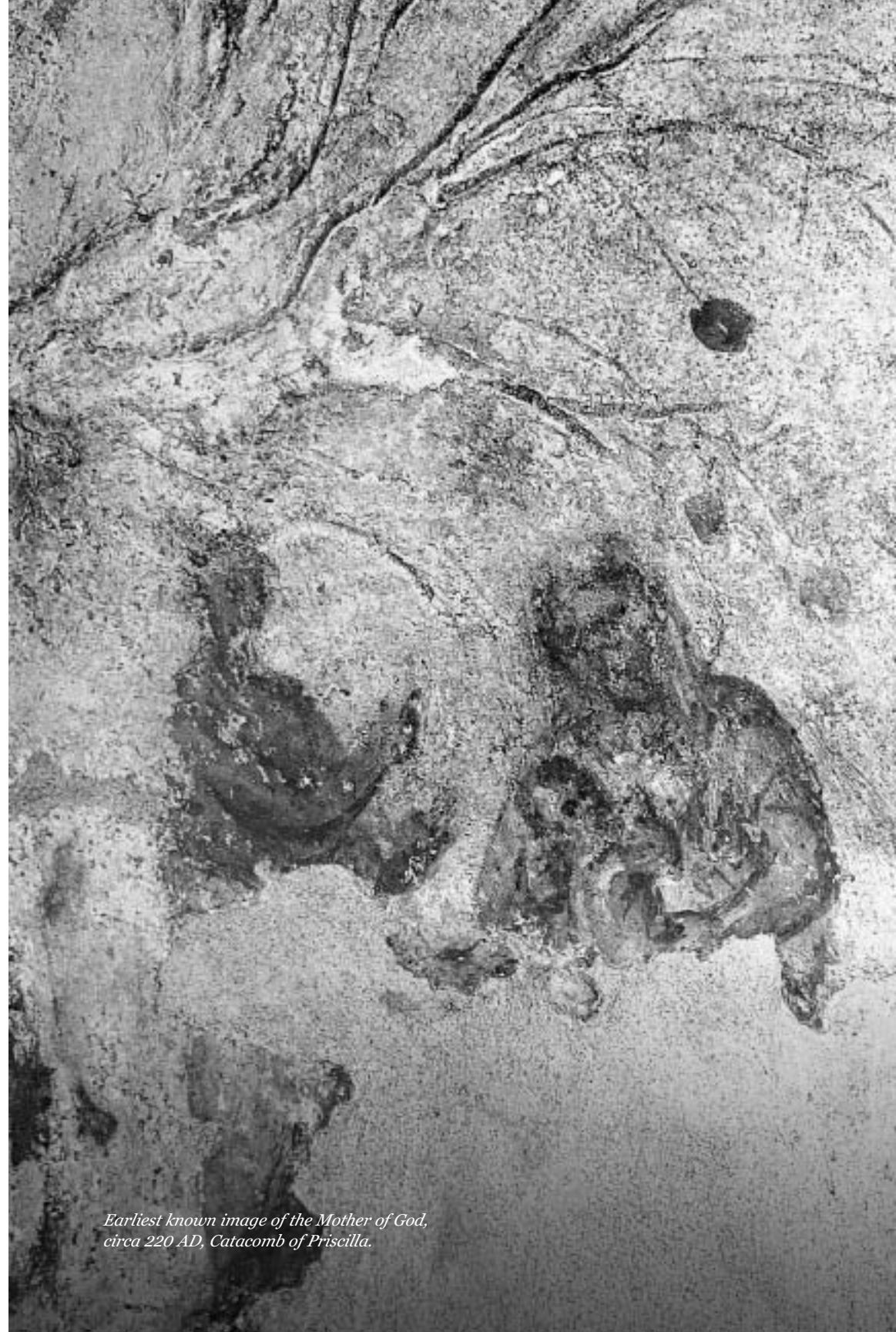
The earliest sepulchers of the Catacomb of Priscilla are on the first level, and include the “Greek Chapel,” which was in use before the end of the second century and was named for two Greek inscriptions carved into the walls. It is in this little-known subterranean chapel that the pilgrim finds one of the chief

treasures of Christian Rome: on the arch of a ceiling vault covered with ornamental frescoes and biblical themes is depicted the earliest known image of the Mother of God. Painted around 220 A.D., the rich pigments have faded through the centuries to warm hues of reddish-orange and umber. In the act of nursing, the Mother and Child face the viewer as if she is presenting Him to the world. Alongside stands the figure of an Old Testament prophet in a tunic and pallium, pointing to a star that hovers above the Virgin. Although some identify the prophet as Isaiah, there is a long-standing tradition that this is Balaam, who, in Numbers 24:17, prophesies:

I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not nigh;  
A star shall come forth out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

Embedded deep within the Pentateuch of the Old Testament, this ancient prophecy is even more poignant because it is made by a pagan seer. This isn't the yearning of a Jewish prophet for his Messiah, but the inarticulate longing of all of fallen humanity for a Saviour. A Saviour who is now among us. ✚

*The Catacomb of Priscilla at 430 Via Salaria, Rome, is one of five catacombs dating from apostolic times that are currently open to the public. A Benedictine convent is attached to the catacomb, which is watched over by the nuns.*



*Earliest known image of the Mother of God, circa 220 AD, Catacomb of Priscilla.*