Rome

Jewish Beginnings

Immigrants from the East were prolific in the biggest metropolis of the Roman Empire. Juvenal (fl. ca. 100) joked (*Sat.* 3.60–65) that the waters of the Syrian river Orontes flowed into the Tiber, carrying eastern rhythms, music, and customs with them. The city of Rome is Greek, he complained. The majority of the city's inhabitants were not born in Rome, as Seneca (ca. 4 BCE–65 CE) observed (*Helv.* 6; cf. Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 3.6.). And what was true for the city population as a whole applied even more to the early Roman Jews and Christians. In Rome "all detestable and appalling things from all over the world come together," Tacitus (ca. 55/6–post-113 CE) regretted, with particularly the Christians in mind (*Ann.* 15.44.3).

Pompey (106–48 BCE), who had conquered Judaea in 63 BCE, had deported crowds of Jews to Rome as slaves. Soon, at the latest under Augustus, they were freed. At their manumission, most of them gained Roman citizenship and bequeathed it to their offspring (cf. Philo, *Legat.* 155, 157). In addition, imported Jewish slaves and freed slaves continued to stream into Rome through the imperial household and other large households such as that of Marcus Agrippa (64/3–12 BCE) and the Roman legate Volumnius (Lampe 2004b).

Volumnius had resided in Syria in 8 BCE as Augustus's personal emissary; King Herod (r. 37–4 BCE) enjoyed his friendship (Josephus, *B.J.* 1.535–538, 542; *Ant.* 16.277–283, 332, 351, 354). It is likely that this Volumnius brought Jews from the East to Rome and was the patron of those freed slaves and slaves who (or whose children) founded the Roman synagogue of the Volumnenses in the first century CE (*CIL* 6.29756; *CIJ* 1.343, 402, 417, 523). Marcus Agrippa had been active as Augustus's emissary in the East in 23–21 BCE and later, in 17–13 BCE, as general governor of the Eastern provinces. He had also maintained a close friendship with Herod the Great and had even sacrificed at the Jerusalem temple. Josephus describes him as friendly toward the Jews (*Ant.* 15.350–351; 16.12–16, 21–26). In all likelihood, the Jews who in the first century CE founded the Roman synagogue of the Agrippesioi (*CIG* 9907; *CIJ* 1.503, 425, 365) were his freed persons and slaves (and their offspring). In the same way, the emperor's household, which had branches all over the empire, transferred Jewish domestics to Rome. In the first century CE freed and enslaved Jewish members of the imperial household founded the Roman

synagogue of the Augustesioi (*CIL* 6.29757; *CIG* 9902–9903; *CIJ* 1.284, 301, 338, 368, 416, 496). Many of the founders of these three synagogues, as freed slaves and children of freed slaves, were Roman citizens.

Three areas can still be identified where Roman Jews resided in the first century CE (Lampe 1989, 26–35; 2003a, 38–47). Many lived in Trans Tiberim (Trastevere), the crowded quarter west of the Tiber River across from Tiber Island. Others of poor economic means settled in the climatically unhealthy valley of the Appian Way outside the Capena Gate. Other Jewish groups lived in the northeast, where in the first century CE they founded a synagogue in the vicinity of the Viminal Gate, close to a fruit merchant's store. They probably also started the first Jewish catacomb (Villa Torlonia), on the Via Nomentana, northeast of the city as early as the first or second century CE, as radiocarbon dating suggests (Rutgers et al. 2005). It is unclear whether the Viminal Gate synagogue was identical with one of the synagogues already mentioned.

All three residential locations lay outside the Republican Wall, and the synagogue at the Viminal Gate was outside the sacred city limits, the *pomerium*.[10] The Egyptian cults, with which the Romans often associated Judaism, were banned from the *pomerium* as well.

For the first century CE, we know of at least two other synagogues existing in Rome besides the ones discussed: the synagogues of the Vernaculi (*CIJ* 1.318, 383, 398, 494) and of the Hebrews (*CIG* 9909; *CIJ* 1.510, 291, 317, 535). Another inscription mentions a synagogue of the (He)rodioi (*CIJ* 1.173). Although its existence cannot be documented for the first century CE, its name at least allows for the possibility that, already in the first century CE, Jewish slaves and freed persons of the Herodian royal household founded a synagogue for themselves in Rome. A branch of the Herodian household was located in Rome. Herod Antipas and Herod Agrippa I, for example, son and grandson of Herod the Great (r. 37–4 BCE), were raised and educated in Rome. In Romans 16 a possible Christian link to the Herodian household in Rome may be discerned (see below).

Altogether, inscriptions mention about fourteen Roman synagogues in imperial times. All these Jewish congregations in Rome were independent units and only loosely connected with one another. This fractionation was different from the situation in Alexandria, where the various synagogues constituted one political body.[11] Later, Roman Christianity would be organized with a similar fractionation (see below).

10. For a similar situation in Philippi, see Acts 16:13.

11. For Rome and Alexandria, see Lampe 1989, 367–68; 2003a, 431–32.

A fifth household with Jewish freed slaves worth mentioning was a Valerian one. A Roman inscription (*CIL* 6.27948) names a freed slave, Valeria Maria, of the first century CE, who was Jewish or Jewish-Christian. According to *1 Clement* (63.3; 65.1), Valerius Biton, a Valerian freedman or son of a freedman, was a prominent Christian in Rome, born in the 30s or 40s and still alive in the 90s. It is tempting to assume that the Christian Valerius Biton came into contact with the Christian gospel through Valerian Jewish-Christian freed persons such as Valeria Maria. Was she a close relative? New epigraphical material is needed to answer this question.

Despite the uncertainties in the patchy Valerian source material, at least it can generally be surmised that Jewish Christianity found one of its paths from the Syrian-Palestinian East into the city of Rome through some of the aforementioned Roman households, through their Jewish slaves, freedpersons, and their descendants.

Authors such as Suetonius cast more light on the scene. Jewish-Christian immigrants from the eastern part of the empire infiltrated one or several of the Jewish synagogues in Rome sometime in the 40s CE, most likely at the end of that decade. At that time, the apostle Paul still lived in Antioch, and the radius of his Christian mission had not reached farther than 500 km (Gal. 1:17, 21; 2 Cor. 11:32–33; Acts 9:22–25, 27, 30; 11:25–26; 13–14). It was not before 49–50 CE that Paul founded his famous congregations in Galatia, Macedonia (Philippi; Thessalonica), and Greece (Corinth). Preaching about Christ, the Jewish-Christian immigrants in Rome stirred up turmoil within the synagogues and attracted the attention of the Roman officials. The key

9.2 The Valerii and Possible Jewish Connections

When we look for a pagan Valerian aristocrat who had a connection to the Syrian East and to the Jewish people, the Roman rhetorician Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus (ca. 64 BCE–13 CE) comes to mind. In 29–28 BCE he served as governor of Syria. Earlier he had demonstrated a friendly attitude toward Herod the Great (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.384; *B.J.* 1.284; cf. 1.243). Unfortunately, we do not know whether or how this Valerian-Syrian connection may have preconditioned the existence of Jews and Christians in later first-century Valerian households in Rome. Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus was not a direct patron of Valeria Maria or Valerius Biton.

The same is true of Valerius Gratus, the predecessor of Pontius Pilate as prefect of Judaea in 15–26 CE (Josephus, *Ant.* 17), and even more of the republican senator Lucius Valerius, who had shown a friendly attitude toward the Jews (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.145).

persons in this inner-Jewish argument were expelled by Claudius's administration in 49 CE (Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4; Orosius, *Hist. pag.* 7.6.15–16; cf. Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 60.6.6–7). As noted already in the introduction to this chapter, among those forced to leave were the Jewish Christians Aquila, an immigrant from Pontus, and his wife, Prisca (Acts 18:2) (Lampe 1998c). Aquila and Prisca, free tentmakers who ran a workshop in Rome, were among the first Christian activists in the city. It is unknown where or how they had made contact with the Christian message; they could have done so even in the synagogues of Rome itself.

Following the disruptive events of 49 CE, and no later than the mid-50s at the time of Paul's letter to the Romans, the Christians began meeting separately from the Jewish synagogues. The majority of Roman Christians by then were of non-Jewish descent, although many of these Gentiles may, before their baptisms, have been loosely connected with Jewish synagogues as (uncircumcised) sympathizers with Jewish monotheism. In 64 even Nero (r. 54–68) could distinguish the Christians from the Jews in the city.

Despite separation from the worship of the synagogues, the Roman Christians maintained many Jewish traditions and influences in their thinking and teaching. The *First Epistle of Clement* and the *Book of Hermas* exemplify this well. Social contacts between Christians and Jews in the city continued, as the Christian slave Callistus demonstrated in the 180s when he operated a bank with Christian and Jewish customers decades before he became bishop (Hippolytus [attrib.], *Ref.* 9.12) (Lampe 1989, 282–83; 2003a, 335). In the second century a group of Jewish Christians still observed the Torah (Justin, *Dial.* 47), withdrawing fellowship from other Christians who did not, but probably maintaining contact with non-Christian Jewish synagogues. Cultural exchanges between Jews and Christians (in the fields of theology, art, or catacomb architecture) existed throughout the second and third centuries.

"Bad Press"

In 64 CE a great fire severely damaged ten of Rome's fourteen regions. Nero unjustly accused the Christians of arson, crucifying and burning many of them as torches in the Vatican gardens (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.38–44), thus imposing the traditional punishment for arsonists of being burned alive. Many contemporaries suspected Nero himself of setting the city on fire because he needed space for his construction plans. He designed his new palace, the vast "Golden House," to stretch all the way from the Palatine to the slopes of the Esquiline.

Although the Christians were innocent, the fact that they could so easily be scapegoated shows what a bad reputation they had. They were disliked in

Fig. 9.3. Dedicatory Inscription Marking St. Paul's Tomb in St. Paul's-Outside-the-Walls on the Via Ostiense

the pagan environment because they were as different as the Jews (see, e.g., Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1; Suetonius, *Nero* 16; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.8; Justin, *1 Apol.* 1.1; also Mark 13:13, as a presumably Roman document written only six years later). Paul drastically illustrates this bad reputation under which particularly the early Christian missionaries suffered: "We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Cor. 4:13). Bad press, immigrant status, being an unimportant ingredient in a melting-pot city of people from all over the empire—this was early Christianity in the city of Rome.

It is probable that the apostle Peter was among Nero's crucified victims in 64 (*1 Clem.* 5.4; cf. John 21:18–19; Ignatius, *Rom.* 4) (Lampe 2003b). In the mid-second century at the latest—that is, no more than three generations after Peter's death—Christians appear to have identified a simple grave in the Vatican necropolis as Peter's burial place. This, however, is all that can be said in a scientifically responsible way about the history of this tomb prior to 160. Around that year, Roman Christians decorated the simple grave with a modest monument, an *aedicula*, before it gradually became the center of more and more architectural activity. Today the dome of St. Peter's Basilica soars high above it.

According to *1 Clement* 5.4–7 Paul also suffered martyrdom in Rome. At the end of the second century, if not earlier, Roman Christians held that his tomb was located on the Ostian Way (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.7). This has been confirmed by recent excavations at St. Paul's-Outside-the-Walls. Acts, however, stops abruptly before Paul's martyrdom. Acts rather emphasizes that Paul, after his capture in Jerusalem, appealed to the emperor's court in

Rome, able to do so because of his Roman citizenship (16:37–38; 22:25–29; 23:27). Consequently, Paul was brought to Rome, where, guarded by a soldier, he could receive visitors relatively freely and teach in tenement lodging during his dragged-out trial (28:16, 30). Where possible, the author of Acts tried to keep negative sides of Roman rule, such as Paul's martyrdom, from his readers.

Contextual Influences

Topography

Approximately one million people with various languages, customs, and religions from all over the empire crowded Rome in imperial times (Lampe 2005a). Persons who were more well-to-do lived in villas (*domus*), with floor heating, running water, and sewer pipes, or in luxurious apartments. The majority of the population, however, crowded tenements (*insulae*) built of brick and wood. The tenements, five or six floors high, often became deadly fire traps. Most of them had no water or latrines. The ground floors were used as stores, workshops, or storage rooms. The higher one climbed in the tenement houses, the smaller and darker the dwelling units became. Loud noises, foul odors, and crowded conditions were normal. At night, sleep was disturbed by carts clattering under the windows, since Caesar had banned daytime cart traffic from the jammed streets of the city. In the fourth century more than 44,000 entrances to *insulae* were counted in Rome, in addition to 1,791 entrances to *domus*.

The early Christians lived at the periphery of Rome outside the sacred city limits, the *pomerium*: in Trastevere and in the valley of the Appian Way outside the Capena Gate (Lampe 1989, 10—52; 2003a, 19—66; 2004a). Both areas, also settled by Jews, were permeated with immigrants from the provinces who swept into the city via the Appian Way and the Tiber River. People of the lower social strata populated these quarters. Martial (ca. 38/41–101/4 CE) caricatures the typical Trastevere inhabitant as a buffoon trading bits of glass for sulfur matches (*Epigr.* 1.41). Other Christians dwelt on the Aventine Hill, a much-preferred residential area, and still others on the Campus Martius.

On a map, areas infiltrated by Christians in Rome are shaped like a sickle curving around the city center. This was typical for an immigrant Eastern religious group in the capital. In the immediate neighborhood of the Christian "cells," other Eastern cults blossomed, venerating gods such as Sol of Palmyra, the Syrian Hadad, Atargatis, Simios, and Iuppiter Dolichenus, or Isis, Sarapis, Mithras, and Cybele.

The sickle shape helps to explain why Nero could so easily accuse the Christians of arson. Not only did they have the bad reputation of being

misanthropes, but also they primarily lived outside the quarters that were affected by the disastrous fire in 64. Those in Trastevere, who could safely watch the fire from the other side of the Tiber, were ideal scapegoats.

Social Aspects

Topography reveals that the lower social strata predominated in pre-Constantinian Roman Christianity, although higher social strata were represented as well. This picture is confirmed by the literary sources. Most early Roman Christians were of very modest means (Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 36.3). This is to be expected, because lower-class people predominated in the city population as a whole (e.g., Seneca, *Helv.* 12.1). Roman Christianity, nonetheless, gradually infiltrated all social levels, even the senatorial. In 96, for example, a relative of the emperor Domitian (r. 81–96), Flavia Domitilla, was banished to an island because her Christian faith did not allow her to acknowledge Domitian as a god (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.4; Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 67.14.1–2).

Christianity entered the Roman upper classes primarily through women. Such gender imbalance, of course, made it difficult for aristocratic Christian women to find Christian spouses of equal rank (Hippolytus [attrib.], *Ref.* 9.12.24; *ILCV* 157–58 and 224 [third century]; Barbieri 1952, no. 2183). Callistus (bp. ca. 217–ca. 222) tried to find a solution by allowing Christian aristocratic women to live together with Christian men of lower social status without legal marriage. As bishop, he sanctified these relationships and the offspring resulting from them. Because they were not legally married, these women did not lose their high social rank (which was advantageous for the church). Callistus's decision also motivated them to avoid mixed marriages with pagan men of equal rank (which again was advantageous for the church).

With time, the average social position of the Roman Christians rose. In the first century socially elevated Christians were still few. Some Roman Christians even sold themselves into temporary slavery in order to raise money for the poor in the church (*1 Clem.* 55.2). It was not until the 90s that we hear about "wealthy people" among the Roman Christians, without, however, learning what "wealthy" or "rich" specifically means. Nevertheless, from the second century onward, well-off Christians were able to raise respectable sums for charity. At the turn of the second to the third centuries, not only the needy but also the church's office holders could be paid from these donations. In the last twenty years of the second century, under Commodus (r. 180–192) and Septimius Severus (r. 193–211), a fair number of generous imperial freed slaves and several Christian senators and women of senatorial rank belonged to Roman house-churches. A significant number of Christian senators are documented again in about 258. We are able to name almost

forty pre-Constantinian Christian members of the senatorial class, most of them in the third century, with two-thirds of them being female. Forty is about 0.3 percent of the fifteen thousand senatorial individuals in the first three centuries. But the actual number presumably was higher than forty, with our prosopographical evidence being more accidental than representative (Lampe 1989, 94–103; 2003a, 117–26).

Parallel to this development within the church, the Roman senate itself, from the 190s onward, was composed of many more members from the Eastern provinces than before; the percentage of senators from those provinces jumped to almost one-third under Septimius Severus alone. It is tempting to suppose that this increase in the number of senators from the Eastern provinces also helped to push up the number of senators in the Roman churches. Prosopographically, we know of a Christian senator Astyrius from Syria-Palaestina in the 260s and of members of the senatorial class from Phrygia and Lycaonia. Senators from the provinces had to invest at least a quarter of their capital in Italian real estate, and one of their residences had to be in Rome. Thus Christian senators from the Eastern provinces both sat in Roman church services and played roles in their provincial churches, which made them influential links between Roman Christianity and the churches of the East.

The gradual rise of the average social status of Roman Christians mirrors the development in the society of the Roman Empire as a whole. In the second century the number of members of the higher social strata generally grew steadily, while the number of slaves decreased.

What, then, is different from society in general? Does the social history of early Roman Christianity exhibit anything special that is not reflected in the pagan environment? At least one point is worth mentioning. Those first-century Christians who sold themselves into slavery in order to support the needy of their church demonstrated an extreme solidarity among members of lower social strata that is rare in Roman society. Only the upper classes of the pagan empire presented themselves as fairly consolidated groups, above all the senatorial class, while the lower strata lacked a collective consciousness and supraregional cohesion. The early Christian representatives of the lower social levels, however, exhibited exactly this: a supraregional solidarity and a sense of belonging together in spite of ethnic and geographical distances. Christianity here contributed to the social integration of the whole Roman society.

Christianity's contribution to the social integration of Roman society as a whole is also true in another respect. Within the realm of the church (although not exclusively there), members of different social strata became extremely close to one another, supporting one another. The *Book of Hermas*, written in Rome in the first half of the second century, paints the lovely image of a vine

climbing up an elm tree, the vine being the poor and the elm the rich in the church. The vine can bear grapes—spiritual fruit—only as long as the elm supports the vine; the unfruitful elm can bring forth fruit only as long as the vine grows grapes among its branches. The different social levels need one another. The donations and alms of the richer Christians raised the social position of those who, without Christian support, scarcely scratched out a living. The church offered subsistence to the needy and in this way, again, contributed to the social integration of Roman society.

Already in the early third century the church also assisted in acquiring burial space in the San Callisto Catacomb (Lampe 1989, 15–17; 2003a, 25–28). Even in the fourth century lower-class Christians predominated there, as is indicated by recent stable-isotope analyses of collagen from twenty-two randomly selected skeletons from different locations in the Liberian region of the catacomb. These simple people ate cheap freshwater fish from the unhealthy Tiber as their major protein supply and were buried in unassuming tombs (Rutgers et al. 2009).

It would be helpful to have more than just fragmentary demographic statistics for pre-Constantinian times. How many Christians lived in the city? In the middle of the third century, Cornelius (bp. 251–253) counted fifteen hundred Christians receiving assistance from the church (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.43.11–12). However, this does not tell us how many Christians of meager means (*pauperes*), who formed the majority in Roman Christianity, lived in Rome. A *pauper*, often translated as "poor," usually did make a very modest living and did not receive subsidies from the church. Thus, the fifteen hundred should not necessarily be equated with the majority in Roman Christianity, and we are left in the dark when it comes to estimating the total number of Roman Christians.

Cornelius also enumerated forty-six presbyters in the city. During the first three decades of the third century about eight hundred Christians were buried in San Callisto (Lampe 1989, 15–17; 2003a, 25–28). However, we do not know by which factors these figures need to be multiplied. Already in the time of Nero, the Roman Christians formed a "large crowd," which constantly grew in the decades to come (cf. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 31.7). In the last quarter of the second century, Irenaeus identified Roman Christianity as the largest Christian unit in the world (*Haer.* 3.3.2); no other city housed as many followers of the new faith. Modern guesses vary between ten thousand and thirty thousand Roman Christians in the mid-third century, while the total number of Roman Jews in early imperial times is estimated between fifteen thousand and sixty thousand. The murky waters of ancient population statistics reflect the limits of our knowledge.

Organizational Aspects

Fractionation. Jewish freedpersons and slaves of pagan households formed their own synagogues, as shown above. Pagan servants of an estate could form an independent religious unit within their household, administering the cult of the Lares or the cult of the master's *genius*. In the same way, Christian freedpersons and slaves of non-Christian masters organized Christian congregations of their own in Rome (cf. Rom. 16:10–11) within the houses and estates in which they lived and worked.

In all these cases the locale of work and living and the place of religious activity were concentric circles. Masters often practiced a religion different from that of their servants (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.44.3; Philemon; 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:9–10; Origen, *Cels.* 3.55; Council of Elvira, *Can.* 41), tolerating the religious plurality within their households, even if the servants were Christian.

In about 56 the apostle Paul, in Romans 16, sends greetings to various congregations in Rome (Lampe 1991), among them:

(i) "those in the lord who are part of Narcissus's domestic staff" and
(ii) "those who are part of Aristobulus's domestic staff" (16:10–11);[12]
(iii) the house-church of Prisca and Aquila;
(iv) the Christians who were together with Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, and Hermas; and
(v) the saints who were with Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas.

If we assume that the fourteen other persons greeted in the chapter did not belong to any of the five Christian groups mentioned above and that the additional people could not have belonged to only one further group, then, in about 56 CE, at least seven different Christian "islands" existed in Rome. Another Christian circle was established when Paul himself, only half a decade later, gathered a group around himself in his Roman rental apartment (Acts 28:16, 30).

The individual groups celebrated their own worship services somewhere in private houses, in apartments, or in workshops. Thus early Christians in Rome formed various house-churches scattered throughout the city. There was no local center or central meeting place for Roman Christianity.

12. Translations by the author. Paul's formulations show that the two masters and part of their domestic staff were non-Christian. Furthermore, Aristobulus's name was very rare in Rome, which probably means that he had immigrated to Rome from the East or even lived in the East, with only part of his household being in Rome. The name Aristobulus was favored by the Herodian family (both the father and brother of Herod Agrippa I, for example, were named Aristobulus). A connection to the Herodian royal household is possible but cannot be proven.

This fractionation, similar to that of the Jews in the city, facilitated a theological pluralism (Lampe 1989, 320–34; 2003a, 381–96). Second-century Rome, for example, saw Christian groups moving in numerous theological directions: Marcionite, Valentinian, Carpocratian, Theodotian, Modalistic, Montanist, and Quartodecimanian teachings. There were Cerdo's followers and house-churches of (what was only later called) the "orthodox" faith. A Jewish-Christian circle existed that still observed the Torah. Some groups exhibited a *logos* theology that was too complicated for lesser-educated Christians. Some circles believed in a thousand-year-long eschatological reign of Christ (millennialism); others did not. Roman Christianity was extremely varied, with the groups often reflecting the original geographical or educational provenances of their members. The house-churches, scattered over the city, were only loosely connected. Some sent portions of their Eucharist to other Christian groups in the city to express fellowship and unity with them. Written material also was shared among the Christian groups in Rome.

On the whole, because of these loose connections the various circles in the city tolerated one another during the first two centuries. With few exceptions, no Christian group labeled another as heretical before the last decade of the second century. Consequently, communication with persons or congregations outside Rome was often coordinated among the groups. As a result, outsiders could perceive the various Roman house-churches as "*the* Roman church."

Late Development of Monepiscopacy. A monarchical bishop who oversaw at least the "orthodox" house-churches in the city, did not come into existence before the second half of the second century.[13] Earlier, the various house-churches were led solely by their own presbyters. The role of monarchical bishop emerged in connection with the needs for a centralized coordination of the foreign contacts of the Roman Christians. The first pioneers and proponents of a monarchical episcopacy were those presbyters who acted as "foreign ministers" of Roman Christianity. Also, the support of the poor called for more centralized structures in order to be effective.

One of the effects of the emerging monarchical episcopate was that the tool of excommunication began to be used more often. It was under Victor (bp. ca. 189–198/9), one of the first monarchical bishops in Rome, that Roman house-churches, regarding themselves as "orthodox," began to excommunicate other groups on a large scale. Victor, supported by Irenaeus, cut the ties to four Christian groups in the city.

13. See Lampe 1989, 334–45; 1998a; 1998b; 2003a, 397–408; 2003c; 2004c; 2005b.

Cultural Aspects

Languages. In the immigrant culture of early Roman Christianity, Greek was used as the main language. It was not until the 240s that the shift to Latin predominated, indicating that the majority of Roman Christians now came from a Latin background. In the second century, while Greek was still the dominant language of the educated Christians in Rome, a rather uncultivated Latin was being used by some lower-class Christian circles. In the first half of the third century, however, Latin and Greek were already equally represented in the Christian catacomb inscriptions.

At the beginning of the third century the Roman Christian lawyer Minucius Felix, a highly educated rhetorician probably of North African origin, composed a Latin dialogue of perfectly elegant style and Ciceronian form. The next important Latin author of the Christian faith in Rome was the presbyter Novatian (ca. 200–258/9). He was a man of profound rhetorical, philosophical, and literary education who skillfully used classical Latin writings; his knowledge of Stoic philosophy seems to have been molded by Seneca. In the 250s the Roman bishop's correspondence was composed exclusively in Latin, but the more educated circles remained bilingual. Both Latin and Greek could still be used as liturgical languages until the fourth century. The funerary inscriptions of the Roman bishops of the third century were also still formulated in Greek. Bilingualism, however, slowly disappeared from the second half of the third century onward. One did not need to be a prophet to predict that this shift toward Latin would open a gap between western and eastern ecclesiastical provinces.

Philosophy. First Clement, written at the end of the first century, exhibits Stoic elements, which probably had reached Roman Christianity via Hellenistic synagogues. Within the Greek-speaking Christian circles of Rome the

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Fig. 9.4. Latin Inscription from Catacomb of St. Sebastian

ambitious assimilation of pagan education—that is, of Greek literature and philosophy—occurred in the second century. The apologist-philosopher Justin (d. ca. 165), for example, bridged Middle Platonism and Christian thought. The Theodotians (followers of Theodotus, an immigrant from Byzantium who taught at Rome in the 190s) explained the Christian faith by means of post-Aristotelian logic. Others, such as Valentinus (fl. ca. 140), were rooted in Platonism. These second-century intellectuals were the first Christians who extensively used and enjoyed the treasure chest of Greek culture and *paideia* (education). They rethought Christian doctrine on the basis of pagan philosophical presuppositions.

Greco-Roman Culture in General. Apologists such as Justin looked for as many points of congruence as possible between Greco-Roman and Christian cultures. They tried to bring the Greek and Christian traditions into a harmonious relationship in order to find a respectable place for Christianity in the Roman political and societal systems. Christians offered their loyal service to the pagan empire. Having insights into the allegedly definitive truth—a truth that Moses and many Greek philosophers had only partially discovered—Christians such as Justin reasoned that they alone could properly assess the actions of governments and the legitimacy of institutions and laws.

The question is whether the pagan environment was delighted with this offer of service. Not even all Christians thought it wise. Tatian, a student of Justin, sneered at the harmonization of thought. In about 165, although highly educated in Greek culture, Tatian wrote a harsh polemic, *Against the Hellenes*, declaring the incompatibility of Christian faith with Greek philosophy, rhetoric, science, art, and religion.

Pagan Reaction to Christianity. For pagan Romans, a multitude of deities and cults undergirded the order of their multipeopled empire. They therefore tolerated and even welcomed religious and cultic diversity. Philosophically minded pagans, adhering to a nonexclusive philosophical henotheism, speculatively pondered the unity of the divine essence. At the same time, however, these same persons in everyday religious praxis participated in more than one of the many cults. Thus, for pagan Romans the exclusive monotheism of the Christians, which ruled out any other veneration of the divine besides their own, was impious and ungodly. The Christians, consequently, were met with suspicion. They were regarded as potentially dangerous for the Roman order. Every governor, upon their denunciation, could examine Christians and punish, or even sentence to death, those who confessed their belief in Christ and refused to express cultic reverence for another deity or the *genius* of the emperor.

The apologists' writings did not change this legal position, but they probably altered the climate, at least a little. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger (61/2–ca. 113) had labeled Christianity a "superstition" (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.3; *Nero* 16.2; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.8). From the second third of the second century on, however, Christian philosophers such as Justin worked to improve the Christians' image and claimed that Christianity was a respectable and loyal "philosophy," worthy of being received into the Greco-Roman world of *paideia*. The apologists' words usually went unheard, but not always. The pagan authors Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–post-180) and Galen of Pergamum (129–199) indeed began to call Christianity a *sophia* (wisdom) and a "philosophy," although they were not impressed by it. In their eyes, this "school" lacked solid proof and was dogmatically encrusted. However, more and more cultivated and distinguished pagans found their way to the baptismal font during the second half of the second century. Christianity was, albeit gradually and slowly, recognized as a *paideia*.

Educational Processes. The Christian tradition, its doctrines and moral teachings, sometimes fused with pagan cultural elements, was transmitted within the church as a culture of its own. This "*paideia* in Christ," as *1 Clement* (21.8) called it, was taught on three levels:

(i) Independent teachers and philosophers such as Justin or Valentinus gathered circles of students and held lectures. Justin gathered his audience in his rental apartment above the private thermal "Baths of Myrtinus," where he also worshiped with them.

(ii) Presbyters taught their house-church congregations. They also instructed the catechumens before their baptisms. The *Traditio apostolica*, a Roman work from the first half of the third century, ruled which pagan candidates could be admitted to this education and which could not.

(iii) In private homes children were taught by their parents. In the second century husbands often also taught their wives. Only for orphans and widows did the Roman house-churches appoint special woman teachers (Hermas, *Vis.* 2.4.3).

However, Christian instruction of children did not replace secular schools where children learned to read, write, do math, and analyze texts. Christians, consequently, continued to send their offspring to pagan elementary, grammar, and rhetorical schools (cf. Tertullian, *De idolatria*).

Pagan/Christian Assimilation. How much did Christian and pagan cultures amalgamate on the level of ordinary Roman Christians who did not have philosophical or rhetorical backgrounds of higher learning? The life of

ordinary people often is revealed only by combining various source genres. In the case of Roman Christianity, archaeological, epigraphic, and literary sources reveal that many ordinary Roman Christians lived peacefully side by side with their pagan neighbors without any scruples or fear of contact. They often maintained pagan customs, particularly in funerary practices. Even in the post-Constantinian era Christians occasionally felt free to build tombs with openings for libations. According to several graffiti, Christians of the second half of the fourth century practiced libation in the Catacombs of San Sebastiano and of Priscilla. A Christian fresco and a drawing in the Catacombs of Domitilla and of St. Ermete/Bassilla depict the libation ritual as well. This coincides with other third- and fourth-century epigraphic and literary evidence according to which Christians often celebrated meals for the dead (*refrigeria*) at their tombs. Augustine of Hippo (bp. ca. 395/6–430) wrote that Christian meals for the dead did not differ all that much from superstitious pagan ones (*Conf.* 6.2). Christians brought wine with them, and those who honored several tombs in one day ended up coming home tipsy from the cemetery. Paulinus of Nola (bp. pre-415–431), a contemporary of Augustine, complained about the simplemindedness of those Christians who poured wine over graves (*Carm.* 27 [= *Carm. nat.* 9]).

In about 200 a cross and a Christian *acrostichon* (Jesus Christ God's Son Savior) were drawn into the wet plaster of an otherwise clearly pagan mausoleum under San Sebastiano. In other words, Christians buried one or more of their family members close to pagan graves. The same is true for San Callisto: in the surface area above the two original nuclei of this catacomb, pagan and Christian graves still lay side by side in the fourth century. In the third century, in the mausoleums of the Vatican necropolis, several Christians were buried in direct proximity to many pagan graves; the Christians decorated one little mausoleum with a Christ-Helios mosaic, not far from pagan frescoes and mosaics. In and above the two nuclei of the Pretestato Catacomb on the Appian Way, Christian and pagan tombs lay side by side in the third century. Nor did Jews have scruples about burying their dead beside pagans, as the Jewish funerary inscriptions of Ostia show. On the whole, the different groups coexisted peaceably.

In 217 freedpersons of the Christian imperial freedman Marcus Aurelius Prosenes were responsible for an interesting mixture of pagan and Christian elements. Their patron died, and they ordered for him a sarcophagus with a double inscription (*CIL* 6.8498). They juxtaposed a hint at Prosenes's Christianity (almost shyly hidden at the narrow side of the sarcophagus) with little cupids, winged *genii*, and a reference to a deified pagan emperor: *divus Commodus*. Another, clearly Christian, sarcophagus from the mid-third century

similarly shows winged *genii*. On Christian frescoes and reliefs of third-century Rome, biblical figures such as Daniel and Jonah are often placed in traditional idyllic landscapes taken from pagan art. These pagan idyllic motifs frequently dominate the biblical ones, almost camouflaging the latter.

Church officials such as Cyprian of Carthage (bp. ca. 248/9–258) were upset about the intense assimilation of Christianity and paganism in the cemeteries (*Ep.* 67.6). However, ordinary early Christians had reasons to retain or adopt pagan elements. Tertullian points out an aspect that helps to interpret these sarcophagi, frescoes, and reliefs of the third century. According to him, Christian women defended their elegant attire and their jewelry by arguing that this was a sort of camouflage (*Cult. fem.* 2.11). If they did not wear such attire and ornaments, everybody would know right away that they were Christians. Interestingly enough, until the mid-third century the Christians' personal names usually were pagan. Specifically Christian or biblical names usually were avoided. This was also true for Jews both in Rome and in the Diaspora in general. Christians did not want to invite denunciations or molestations by constantly publicizing their faith in daily life.

Ordinary people speak also through our literary sources. The *Book of Hermas* was composed in Rome by a Christian freedman in the first half of the second century. The author betrays only a mediocre education and naively mixes pagan elements into his Christian writing. His Mother Church, an allegorical figure, exhibits features of the Sibyl of Cumae. Materials from pagan erotic novels and light reading are woven into the book. The pagan motif of the "divine beloved" is used without a qualm. Pagan bucolic literature inspires a great many pastoral motifs in the book. Popular Cynic-Stoic elements are picked up; the author, however, erroneously thinks that they are Pythagorean. His book "christens" manifold popular pagan conceptions and motifs. And had it not been for more-sophisticated theologians in the church, this book would have been included in the canon of Scripture by the masses of ordinary Christians who loved it and gladly read it, generation after generation.

The symbiosis of paganism and Christianity can also be shown to have existed within the same family. The following examples from the socially elevated strata are based on archaeological and literary evidence, respectively. The first is an anonymous, private catacomb on the Via Latina that dates from the fourth century. It exhibits gorgeous frescoes of both Christian and pagan contents side by side. In Room 11, soldiers gamble for Jesus's *tunica*, and Jonah is cast into the ocean, while in Room 12 Hercules steals apples from the Hesperides. He kills a hydra and offers Athena his hand.

The second example is the noble family of the *Ceionii* during the end of the fourth century and the first decades of the fifth. Two brothers of this family

married two Christian women of high rank, but they themselves remained pagan. The daughters and granddaughters of these two marriages grew up Christian and also married Christian spouses. But the sons of these two marriages cultivated the old pagan roots of their family, although paganism had been officially suppressed by then. It was the women who gave the family the necessary Christian façade. The example again illustrates Christianity being introduced into aristocratic circles primarily through the women. However, it also shows how difficult it was to infuse these circles with the Christian spirit. Even after Constantine, aristocratic families remained bastions of paganism. Almost all Roman nobles were still pagan at the beginning of the fifth century, at the time of Augustine (*Conf.* 8.2.3). No Roman bishop before the mid-fifth century came from the leading circles of the empire. Even in the sixth century the pagan spirit and secular traditions of the city of Rome tenaciously survived in the Italian aristocracy under a thin Christian veneer.