The Spatial Agency of the Catacombs: An Analysis of the Interventions of Damasus I (305-384)

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The Spatial Agency of the Catacombs:
An Analysis of the Interventions of Damasus I (305-384)

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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Abstract

Damasus I (305-384) ascended to the office of the Bishop of Rome after a bitter and bloody battle with Ursinus in 366 CE. The violence was a culmination of doctrinal squabbles and power contests which erupted in the Roman church over the course of the fourth century. Damasus engaged in a substantial program of physical renovation and enlargement of martyr sites and personally penned numerous epigrams both extolling the virtue of the honored dead and the patronage of the bishopric. Scholarship related to Damasus and his works is typically narrowly focused, considering motive(s) for his actions, his use of specific architecture and/or materials, the content of his epigrams, etc. This dissertation expands the analysis to synthesize elements of space and architectural theory, sensory theory, and anthropological issues to fully explore the impact of his works related to martyr sites on the minds and bodies of pilgrims visiting such sites during martyr festival.

The bishop’s interventions at the catacomb of Callistus serve as a prime example of his use of architectural features, materials, decoration, and rhetoric to forge a distinct collective memory for visitors to the space – memory that was both manifestly Christian and manifestly Roman. Damasus’ use of materials and architectural features redefined the catacomb as monumental space. His proscription of physical movement and the stunning impact of the performance of his epigrams, combined with the sights, sounds, and smells within the space engaged the visitors’ senses to incite synesthesia and visceral seeing toward an encounter with the divine. These elements--catacomb-as-monument and synesthesia--provided visitors a shared visceral experience, which cemented a message of unity and a distinct collective identity for the fracturing Roman Christian community.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all my boys—human and canine—who always bring out the best in me.
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INTRODUCTION

THE SPATIAL AGENCY OF THE CATACOMBS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVENTIONS OF DAMASUS I (305-384 CE)

The fourth century represents a defining moment in the evolution of the Christian movement. The century began with Roman state persecutions of the Christian cult under Diocletian (284-305) but the emergence of Constantine, who assumed control over the city of Rome in 312, effected a complete reversal of fortunes. Christian adherents were suddenly free to practice, to organize, and even to build lavish basilicas under the patronage of the emperor himself. Despite or perhaps because of these freedoms, doctrinal squabbles and contests for power erupted and threatened to overwhelm the Christian body politic, coming to a head in the episcopal election of 366:

[Damasus] used bribes to rile up all the charioteers and ignorant rabble, and armed with weapons he broke into the Basilica of Julius, and a great slaughter of the faithful raged for three days. Seven days later, in the company of all the perjurers and gladiators whom he had corrupted by paying huge sums of money, he took possession of the Lateran Basilica and was there ordained bishop. By paying off a city judge named Viventius and the Praefectus Annonae Julianus, he arranged for the respectable Ursinus, who had previously been ordained as bishop, to be sent off into exile…Once that had been accomplished, Damasus began to oppress the Romans who were not willing to go along with him, using various types of beatings and bloodshed.1

Although the ancient historians disagree over the success of his tenure as bishop, they agree that Damasus I (r. 366-384) wrested the episcopacy from Ursinus and held sway over the Roman church for eighteen years.

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The controversial nature of Damasus’ appointment to the bishopric is illustrative of a Christian population torn apart by dissensions at home and abroad, a community whose mistrust of one another had reached catastrophic proportions, and whose common past was fragmented in the distractions of the present. Rome’s Christians also suffered from what classicist Dennis Trout calls an “acute identity crisis” as they wrestled with reconciling their monotheistic beliefs to a highly-valued Roman heritage underpinned by polytheism.\(^2\) Despite the drama that surrounded Damasus’ ascension, the Christian pontiff set to work to address these issues in a productive manner by establishing monuments of Christian history at the graves of Rome’s many martyrs to make them well-known and accessible to the people. As part of this process the bishop composed and had inscribed sixty-four known poetic epigrams, the majority of which were written in honor of martyrs and bishops (elogia) installed as epitaphs in the cemeteries that ringed the city.\(^3\) These writings and monuments have been credited with stimulating the cult of the saints in the Roman west and are invaluable testimonies to fourth-century Christianity.

In this dissertation, I interpret the renovated catacombs of Damasus and demonstrate their practical significance for late antique Christianity. The following chapters synthesize the primary evidence and secondary scholarship on the catacombs and Christian martyr festivals to recreate the monuments as they were intended to be experienced. To accommodate the boundaries of this dissertation, I focus on the oldest-known burial ground controlled by the Church, the catacomb of Callistus. My analysis of the late antique physiological response to the

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\(^3\) Dennis Trout, *Damasus of Rome: The Epigraphic Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53. Two of the sixty-four epigrams four were not installed in the catacombs (Epigrams (hereafter EP) 1, 60B, 3, 4) and two others were placed beyond Rome at Portus (EP 67) and Nola (EP 67). An edited Latin collection of the epigrams was composed by Antonio Ferrua, *Epigrammata Damasiana* (Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana (PICA), 1942). While scholarship on the epigrams has advanced since that time, Ferrua’s numbering system remains the standard. The numbers used in this work follow Ferrua’s and are designated as “Epigram” or “EP” followed by the number.
catacomb uses sensory and spatial theory; the psychological or intellectual impact of the experience is read in the monument and interrogated through the phenomenon of collective memory.

Archeologists have excavated the now-barren tombs, scholars have edited Damasus’ epigrams, considered his Latin prose, and debated his intent but no one has considered the bodily impact of the spaces and program of Damasus upon the pilgrim. The consequences of Damasus’ extraordinary acts for Roman Christians can only be fully comprehended when studied in the context of Christian martyr festivals. The tomb of the saint was not to be visited singly but was a specific moment within a larger celebration of processions and liturgical services that proceeded along a prescribed route that led to and through the cemeteries. The processional route thrust visitors into deliberate contact with a variety of tombs and early Christian spaces. Some of these spaces held the bodies of well-known Christians, some divulged names of the otherwise unknown dead, and some were elaborately decorated and featured the epigrams of Damasus. These catacomb interventions and epigrams were designed for more than a stand-alone moment, however; they worked in tandem as part of an overall message to the Roman church.

Interest in the epigrams of Damasus and discussions of his intent have increased in recent years. Scholars classify Damasus’ intentions into one of two very different theoretical ways. The first group of scholars posits that the new bishop’s alignment of himself with these particular individuals was a premeditated attempt to enhance the power of the Roman see in the face of an increasingly powerful local clergy. Evidence supporting this theory includes the

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poetry of Damasus, his choice of venerable martyrs, and his reputation as “ear tickler of matrons” (*matronarum auriscalpius*). The other major theorists credit Damasus with more honorable motives, namely the desire to remedy the identity crisis and to heal and strengthen the Christian community by focusing on *romanitas* or the specifically Roman elements of the religion. These scholars view the pontiff’s acts as an attempt to provide the fourth-century church with a “myth of origins” and a “viable civic [Christian] identity” so paramount in Roman culture. Damasus’ choice of martyrs, his use of the Latin language, and the visible topographical impact of his activities support these claims. Scholars on both sides of this debate recognize the impulse to consolidate the Christian community under the umbrella of the city’s highest ecclesiastical office. Certainly, each of these arguments have merit. A proficient response to the appalling bloodshed of 366 was crucial. Damasus incontrovertibly needed to restore his reputation, the office of the bishopric, and solidarity within Rome’s Christian community.

The most compelling scholarship on Damasus comes from Dennis Trout. Trout sparked my interest in the works of Damasus and the catacombs with his brilliant essay comparing the acts of the fourth-century bishop to those of the Emperor Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE). Because

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5 “Ear tickler of matrons” comes from the anti-Damarian writings in the CA, CSEL 35.1.9.

6 Dennis Trout, “Damasus and the Invention,” 524.

Augustus’ rule came at the end of a prolonged civil war, the new leader needed to tie his
government to the tradition of Rome’s great past to make his rule palatable to her citizens. Augustan Romans, like fourth-century Christians, suffered from an identity crisis as survivors of the Republican fallout who sought to move forward. Augustus met this need for identity by erecting public monuments and commissioning literary works to link Rome’s glorious past with the new “imperial” present. Damasus, like Augustus, created monuments and produced literary works (*elogia*) that were “aesthetically acceptable and conceptually challenging to Rome’s Christian elite” to reify an identity for Christianity that alleviated tensions between “Roman” and “Christian” cultures. In short, Trout argues that Damasus invented Christian Rome. The stark contrast between the unorthodox accession of Damasus to the rank of Christian pontiff and the extraordinary acts of loving care and veneration he demonstrated toward the martyrs, which he enacted through the unconventional environment of the catacombs, prompted my detailed study of the physical evidence as a manifestation of Damasus and his contributions to the Roman church.

The inherent challenge of such a work is the ability to recreate the routes and spaces as they were in the fourth century. Time and historical circumstances have rendered these late antique burial sites barren. Many passages are no longer passable, frescoes are unreadable, bodies have been removed and their markers are no longer present. Walls have been stripped of their coverings by invaders and, later, necessarily conscripted by medieval Romans for use as building materials. Inscribed pieces of marble from the catacombs have been discovered in churches, courtyards, as patches in Roman roads, and flooring in Roman houses. While archeologists have located and mapped many of the underground cemeteries, only a small fraction

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9 Trout, Ibid., 521.
have been examined in an in-depth manner. The catacomb of Callistus and the one-way route from the Crypt of the Popes to the shrine of Eusebius is comparably well-documented, remains accessible, and was definitively connected to church administration from the third century. Its historical identity and Damasus’ extensive works there suggest that is was the earliest of his efforts in the catacombs and, as such, best reflects his motivations and intents. In short, the catacomb at Callistus was chosen for its history as the oldest-known Christian administered cemetery in Rome, for the large number of high-profile martyrs buried there, and for its archeological corpus.

What follows is a recreation of the built environment of select Damasian interventions in the catacomb known as Callistus and a dramatization of the late antique pilgrim experience. To approximate late antique pilgrim awareness and grasp of the renovated sites, the catacomb—from its renovated interior to the epigrams of Damasus—is analyzed through the lenses of architectural spatial theory, sensory (body) theory and anthropological discussions of collective memory within the context of martyr festival. Such a holistic and multidisciplinary approach permits us to view the catacomb through the eyes of a broad social spectrum of late antique Romans who physically and cognitively engaged with the space and the message of Damasus. This dissertation is uniquely a work of synthesis. No other work on the catacombs relates the disparate elements of architectural theory, sensory theory and anthropology to late antique

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10 To call Damasus’ audiences “pilgrims” may seem antithetical for the Christian crowds that gathered in Jerusalem from across the empire were not present in fourth-century Rome. Outside of the interest directed toward the tombs of the apostles Peter and Paul, it was only after the monumental works of Damasus that Rome would become a significant Christian destination. The word “pilgrimage,” is derived from the Latin *peregrinatio* or *peregrinus*—literally translated “journey” and “traveler”—and Maribel Dietz relates that the specialized sense of a religious journey was not used until at least the seventh century. *Maribel Dietz, Wandering Monks, Virgins and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300-800* (University Park, Penn: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005). Late ancient Christians viewed themselves as *peregrini*, travelers passing through on their way from earth to heaven. (See Augustine, *City of God*, 5.16; 14.6, 51,54.) It is in this context that Christians participating in martyr festival approached the grave, as foreigners wishing to make contact with their heavenly homes. This work will use the terms visitors, pilgrims and audiences interchangeably throughout.
peoples participating in martyr festival. Such an approach—as demonstrated on the catacomb of Callistus—establishes a framework for reading other catacombs impacted by Damasus.

**Background and Sources**

**Background**

As monotheistic citizens of a longstanding and venerable polytheistic state, Christians were conflicted by the realities of everyday life. Christianity’s intrusion into centuries-old customs of Roman society produced concerns as to what elite Roman behaviors were acceptable for Christians to practice. Secular education, whose curricula was created by and based upon pagan wisdom and polytheistic ideas of the gods, was essential for success in Roman society. Does a Christian betray his faith by reading pagan texts such as the writings of Virgil, Plato and Aristotle?11 The short rule of Emperor Julian (360-363) exacerbated these concerns for Julian’s actions favored state religions over Christianity. He even issued a law that forbade Christians from teaching secular subjects threatening the livelihoods of many.12

The conflict between Damasus and Ursinus for control of the Roman bishopric exposes a further state of apprehension regarding questions of loyalty and correct orthodoxy that persisted in the near half century since the Council of Nicaea (325).13 Nicaea was a universal meeting of...

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bishops, a watershed event that defined the cult by formalizing the deity. Attempts to understand and explain the triune nature of the Christian God (God the Father, Christ the Son, and Holy Spirit) led to differences of opinion among Christian leaders. At issue in 325 was Christ’s position as both God and man (hypostatic union). Many chose to view the savior as less than the Godhead claiming that Christ was created by God but was not conterminous with God. The council proclaimed Christ to be “one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance (homoousion) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,” but the debate has continued even into the present day. Dissenting groups in late antiquity included the followers of Arius (who denied the equality of God the Father and Christ the Son), the Apollinarians (Christ had a human body but a divine mind and spirit), the Pneumatochians (who denied the Godhead of the Holy Spirit), and the Monophysites (who rejected the humanity of Christ). Arian-leaning emperors such as Constantius II (337-361) intensified tensions between these groups.

A rise in competition among Christian communities also contributed to anxiety within the city’s churches. Congregations and individual families fueled dissent by seeking to parlay the patronage of bishops and martyrs to gain a perceived advantage. Historian John Curran vividly demonstrates how Roman bishops lent their resources and names to ecclesiastical groups in discreet sections of the city. These favored areas featured prominently in the fierce battles

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14 The term “Arianism” has been given to followers of Arius (250-336) who taught that the Son of God (Christ) was a created being and not coequal with God. This doctrine was deemed to be “unorthodox” even heretical yet adherents of this belief persist today. The official church position was established at the Council of Nicaea (325) and refined in subsequent church councils. “Monophysitism” is a term applied to variant forms of teachings which argue that Christ had only one nature and not two. These individuals rejected Christ’s humanity in favor of his divinity. The orthodox position on Monophysitism was established at the Council of Chalcedon (451) which stated that the Incarnate Christ is one Person in two natures (human and divine).

between Damasus and Ursinus. Ursinus took refuge in the basilicas of Julius (r. 337-352) located in Trastevere and in the basilica attributed to Liberius (r. 352-366) while the faction supporting Damasus preferred the titulus of San Lorenzo in Lucina. These sites were chosen by each candidate to justify his claim to the See. Interestingly, Julius and his supporters chose basilicas associated with previous bishops of Rome while Damasus opted for a titulus named for one of Rome’s most legendary martyrs. This suggests that Ursinus was better connected to the elite of the ecclesiastical hierarchy while Damasus' supporters were more connected to the everyday Christianity of the common man. Damasus the plebeian bishop is further supported by the CA writers’ derogatory description of his followers: “charioteers and ignorant rabble…perjurers and gladiators” and again “the gladiators, charioteers, gravediggers (fossores), and all the clergy.”

These are the major challenges to Roman Christianity that Damasus faced when he claimed the see in 366. Those who called themselves “Christian” needed a clear conscience to live and work as citizens within the Roman Empire and they required a sound theological background to diffuse persistent challenges to Nicaean orthodoxy. Their overarching need, however, was to come together as one body as taught by the Apostle Paul: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” The bloody battle between Ursinus and Damasus explicitly revealed the depth of division that had overtaken Rome’s Christian community. Damasus sought to instill camaraderie among believers by appealing to their shared

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16 John Curran, *Pagan City*, 116-157. See also Jacob Latham, “From Literal to Spiritual Soldiers of Christ: Disputed Episcopal Elections and the Advent of Christian Processions in Late Antique Rome” in *Church History*, vol. 81, 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge Journals, 2012), 298-327. Latham argues that the Christian violence in Rome was a way to claim urban space within the city at a time when public processions were not practical. This is in contrast with Constantinople (and other eastern locations) who claimed urban space less violently through procession.

17 The Lateran basilica was the ultimate holy site, where the consecration would take place and where the final authority would reside.

18 CA, CSEL 35.1.5-7.

19 I Corinthians 12:27.
values and by building an increasingly centralized ecclesiastical administration around his flock. These concerns color the extant evidence on the life of Damasus, inform his works and their reception by the city’s Christian community.

Texts

*The Liber Pontificalis (LP) and the Collectio Avellana (CA)*

No late antique *Life* of Damasus exists. Damasus penned no translations of the church Fathers, no commentaries, no theological treatises or other fundamental writings generally attributed to other fourth-century bishops, such as Ambrose of Milan and Basil (330-379). While the pontifical scribe Jerome (347-419) wielded a prolific pen to create works of tremendous longevity, extant sources from the hand of Damasus himself are limited to a smattering of letters, two papal decrees, a synod *relatio*, two *praefatio*, and the sixty-four surviving epigraphic texts.20 Events surrounding the life and work of Damasus must therefore be reconstructed using slim evidence made even more treacherous by the late date (sixth century) and compiled nature of the most prominent sources, the *Liber Pontificalis* (LP) and the *Collectio Avellana* (CA).21

The LP and the CA are both compilations created to promote the papacy in the face of the fifth-century conflict between claimants to the office of Roman bishop: Symmachus (498-514) and Lawrence (498-506). The dispute between Symmachus and Lawrence reached the desk of Emperor Theodoric at Ravenna and the contest spawned several literary forgeries. Thus, as Kate Blair-Dixon has noted, the compilation of these sources are more telling of sixth-century church ideology than they are relevant evidence of fourth-century Roman history; yet some of the

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20 Jerome has been credited with over 150 letters, 24 (many voluminous) old and new testament commentaries, the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, numerous translations, and many other works. For a complete bibliography of his works see the website “Fourth-Century Christianity” http://www.fourthcentury.com/jerome-chart. (Accessed 7/23/2018).

individual sources that make up the CA contain documents datable to the fourth century and are applicable to the time of Damasus. The LP was prepared in ecclesiastical circles to connect the Roman episcopate to the Apostle Peter and to clear up the church’s “official” stance on disputed elections and related schisms. Documentation for the early years of the LP has been traced to the early fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, and the *Codex Calendar of 354* (aka the *Chronographer of 354*, the *Liberian Catalogue*). The compiled LP circulated in the mid-sixth century with two apocryphal letters purportedly exchanged between Bishop Damasus and his scholarly aide Jerome.

The CA collection begins with a document relating the events of 366 (*Gesta*, ca. 380) followed by a second letter (*Libellus Precum ca. 383*) which describes the fallout that ensued. Both condemn Damasus portraying him as solely responsible for the tumult. Penned by disgruntled supporters of would-be pope Ursinus, the CA describes Damasus as a man “corrupted by ambition” (*ambitione corruptus*) whose followers were “perjurers” (*periuri*). The *Gesta* accuses Damasus of using extensive violence and unscrupulous means to secure his position. Following a three-day slaughter at the Basilica of Julius, influential supporters of Ursinus avoided exile by sequestering themselves in the Basilica of Liberius where, according to the *Gesta*, Damasus and his partisans responded as follows:

Damasus and his unfaithful following summoned the gladiators, charioteers, gravediggers (*fossores*), and all the clergy, and with hatchets, swords, and clubs they besieged the basilica…broke down the doors and set fire underneath, then rushed it and ransacked the building…Damasus’ supporters rushed in and killed a hundred and sixty of the people inside, both men and women.

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22 Blair-Dixon, “Memory and Authority,” 76.
24 For the English text of these apocryphal letters, see the introduction to the *Book of Pontiffs*, Davis, 1.
This bold testimony detrimental to Damasus reflects the fear that many congregations had of being marginalized within the Christian cult. Proponents of Ursinus sought refuge in basilicas founded by Julius and Liberius, previous holders of the city’s highest Christian authority, which suggests that they had enjoyed a privileged relationship under previous bishops. Damasus’ circle of supporters were of a different sort for he commanded the city’s most physical and powerful members (gladiators, charioteers, and gravediggers) in addition to the clergy. The eyes of historians are invariably drawn to the meta-narrative of the LP and it is easy to forget that fourth-century Rome actually sheltered self-proclaimed “bishops” from sects such as the Manichaeans, Luciferians, and the Montanists.²⁷ Fourth-century Roman Christianity was competitive.

While most sources record only one bloodletting event, the CA records three. The final skirmish occurred several months later at the church of the martyr Agnes where followers of Ursinus had gathered. Suddenly “an armed Damasus rushed in with his accomplices to lay waste to the sanctuary and massacre a great number.” ²⁸ Just as vilifying is the *Libellus Precum*, a petition from two priests named Faustus and Marcellinus to the Emperor who were unhappy with Damasus’ exile of a colleague to Ostia. In their petition, Faustus and Marcellinus requested imperial intervention against the Roman bishop. The authors of the CA portray Damasus as the ultimate mob boss, so covetous of the highest Christian office that he hired thugs and bribed officials in the name of God to gain what he most desired.

²⁷ For a discussion of these heresies, their pseudo-bishops, and their use of homes and cemeteries see Maier, “Topography of Heresy.”
Later Christian Histories

Christian histories of the late fourth- and early fifth-century also mention Damasus’ election. Each of these historians viewed themselves as continuing the work of the preeminent historian of early Christianity, Eusebius (ca. 260-341), and wrestled with some of the same issues that Damasus and his contemporaries faced—questions of orthodoxy, concerns regarding a resurgence of state religious practices, and literary anxieties related to elite education practices. Christian writers Rufinus (345-410), Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 380-440), and Sozomen (ca. 400-450) set forth Damasus’ controversial accession but confirm him as the rightful holder of the Roman bishopric.29 The Ecclesiastical History of Rufinus of Aquileia, a man forced to flee Rome as a result of a dispute with Jerome, relates that “[Christian] places of prayer ran with human blood,” but points to Ursinus as the villain who with a “riotous and unruly gang which he got together…forced through his ordination as bishop…overturning in his path law, order and tradition.”30 Socrates Scholasticus states that Damasus was elected by the synod but that Ursinus, unable to accept defeat, “caused himself to be clandestinely ordained by some bishops of little note, and endeavored to create a division among the people and to hold a separate church.”31 Christian historian Theodoret (393-466) introduces Damasus through the text of the Roman Synod of 381, describing him only as the man “who obtained the presidency of the church of Rome after Liberius, and was adorned with many virtues.”32 Elsewhere, Theodoret

29 For a recent discussion of these Byzantine writers see Warren Treadgold, The Early Byzantine Historians (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
eulogizes Damasus as “a man of most praiseworthy life and by his own choice alike in word and deed a champion of Apostolic doctrines.” 33 Amidst all the anxieties surrounding Christianity in the fourth century, Damasus’ promotion of Christian martyrs was viewed by these contemporaries as instrumental in strengthening Christianity against both heresy and state religions. Thus, for these ecclesiastical writers, Damasus was effectual as a guardian of orthodoxy.

Secular Historian Ammianus Marcellinus (330-395)

The Roman history of Ammianus Marcellinus, a man who witnessed the Christian communities in Rome and who wrote about them from the position of a curious bystander, echoes many details found in Rufinus’ history. Ammianus depicts both Damasus and Ursinus as men who coveted the bishopric as a prized possession and summarizes the bloodshed: “Damasus and Ursinus, whose passionate ambition to seize the episcopal throne passed all bounds, were involved in the most bitter conflict of interest, and the adherents of both did not stop short of wounds and death.” 34 The Histories of Ammianus preserve the number of dead at 137 Ursinian supporters and notes that “it was only with difficulty that the long-continued fury of the people was later brought under control.” 35 Ammianus was a Greek from Syria who was well-positioned to write his Histories having served in the Roman army under Emperors Constantius II and Julian before coming to Rome around 383. This well-traveled Roman citizen chose to write his works in Latin rather than in his native Greek while residing in the Eternal City. His masterpiece

33 Theodoret, Ecclesiastical History, Quotes from Book V, Chapter II.
speaks disparagingly about the behaviors and actions of the city’s late fourth-century elite including Christian bishops. According to Ammianus, bishops led lives of excess that were detrimental to Roman society for, “when they attain it [the bishopric], they will be so free from care that they are enriched from the offerings of matrons, ride seated in carriages, wearing clothing chosen with care, and serve banquets so lavish that their entertainments outdo the tables of kings.”36 Whether rightful bishop or villain, Ammianus viewed the whole process as an offensive power struggle. Ammianus’ account, while far from objective, was written during the time of Damasus and is based upon eyewitness testimony. Such commentary is evidence that the cult of Christianity was visibly ensconced in elite circles by the latter half of the fourth century.

**Law Codes**

Law codes promulgated in the fourth century also preserve evidence of Damasus’ influence in late antique society. During the rule of Theodosius II (401-460) the Emperor ordered that a complete code of Roman laws be compiled to bring certainty, clarity, and organization to the judicial process. Theodosius’ scholars appended earlier codices (*Gregorianus* and *Hermogenianus*) with the laws of Constantine I onward to create the *Theodosian Code (Codex Theodosianus)* in 438. Damasus is twice-mentioned in the *Theodosian Code* as the leader of the Roman church. The first edict to reference Damasus was read in the churches on July 30, 370 and testifies to the growing influence that the Christian clergy held over Rome’s wealthy widows:

> Emperors Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian Augustuses to Damasus, Bishop of the City of Rome.

> Ecclesiastics, ex-ecclesiastics, and those men who wish to be called by the name of Continents (*continentium*)shall not visit the homes of widows and female wards, but they shall be banished by the public courts, if hereafter the kinsmen, by blood or marriage, of the aforesaid women should suppose that such men ought to

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36 Ibid., 27.4.
be reported to the authorities. We decree, further, that the aforesaid clerics shall be able to obtain nothing whatever, through any act of liberality or by a last will of those women to whom they have attached themselves privately under the pretext of religion… (Theodosian Code XVI.2.20.)

The second law is later (380) and reveals attempts to encourage doctrinal unity among the Empire’s Christian communities:

It is Our will that all the peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans, as the religion which he introduced makes clear even unto this day. It is evident that this is the religion that is followed by the Pontiff (pontificem) Damasus and by Peter, bishop (episcopum) of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity. (Theodosian Code XVI.1.2.)

This rescript attests to the persistent divisiveness that plagued the Christian cult. The Emperors turned to the teachings of Damasus as bishop of the Eternal City to establish orthodoxy. In all, these laws reveal that the Christian movement was very active in Rome but it was far from unified or controlled under a central establishment. Damasus repeatedly sought and received imperial support throughout his tenure because he was forced to defend himself in the face of persistent attacks against his character until his death in 384.


38 Theodosian Code XVI.1.2. Imppp. gratianus, valentinianus et theodosius aaa. edictum ad populum urbis constantinopolitanae. cunctos populos, quos clementiae nostrae regit temperamentum, in tali volumus religione versari, quam divinum petrum apostolum tradidisse romanis religio usque ad nunc ab ipso insinuata declarat quamque pontificem damasum sequi claret et petrum alexandriae episcopum virum apostolicae sanctitatis, hoc est, ut secundum apostolicam disciplinam evangelicamque doctrinam patris et filii et spiritus sancti unam deitatem sub parili maiestate et sub pia trinitate credamus. (380 febr. 27).
These textual sources paint an unflattering picture of late antique Christianity and reveal the difficulties leaders faced in creating and maintaining unity even within one religious culture. They survive as incomplete relics of the past stained by religious, political, and personal invective and institutional posturing. Fortunately, the material vestiges of Damasus’ extensive acts are still accessible and available to the twenty-first century scholar through archeological reports, face-to-face encounters with the tombs, and collections of Latin epigrams preserved both on stones and in manuscripts. They stand in their own rights as physical objects and spaces that communicate without the intervention of personal vendettas. The Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra (PCAS) oversees the preservation and restoration of these fourth-century artifacts. An overview of these sources relevant to understanding of Damasus and his fourth-century audience is the topic of the following section.

Archeological

The Catacombs

The Roman catacombs are underground burial chambers joined by labyrinthine passages that encircle the city (Figure 1). Seventy of these underground cemeteries have been identified as largely Christian and/or Jewish although today only five Christian and five Jewish sites are structurally stable enough to be visited. Roman law prohibited burial inside the city walls so over the centuries cemeteries developed alongside the roads leading into the city. Large populations and the late antique preference for inhumation precipitated Roman innovations in

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39 The PCAS was established by Pope Pius IX in 1852 and charged with preserving and caring for the sacred cemeteries, and given the responsibility for further explorations and studies.
which cemeteries were constructed belowground from volcanic tufa, a soil that is easily manipulated and extremely durable once exposed to air. A professional guild of gravediggers known as *fossores* was responsible for carving the underground galleries into *loculi* (rectangular niches) where the deceased were laid to rest in “communal dormitories.”41 In the early stages of Christian catacomb construction (early third century) *loculi* were hastily carved out in repetitive rows with an eye toward equal treatment of the deceased, sealed with improvised materials, and adorned with minimal decoration.42 There were a variety of graves created within the catacomb including the *loculus*, *arcosolius*—large arched openings that could accommodate at least one decorative sarcophagus and several bodies—and *cubicula* or rooms (Figure 2).

Third century catacombs largely originated as extensions of above ground cemeteries and these were further expanded in the first half of the fourth century. As the catacombs grew, *fossores* developed a more organized layout to the cemeteries. *Loculi* were treated more systematically, being sealed with slabs of everyday terra cotta or expensive marble and better marked to aid in honoring and identifying the deceased. Larger, arched openings—*arcosolia*—occasionally interrupted the columns of *loculi* that filled the gallery walls. The more elite *arcosolia* were often decorated with frescos or mosaic artworks. *Cubicula*, the Latin term for the sleeping rooms in a Roman *domus*, were actual rooms that held an even larger number of bodies and served wealthier families. *Cubicula* were always embellished, and their size and design made them practical for *refigeria*, a long-time Roman tradition in which loved ones commemorated the deceased with a family meal at the grave. Subterranean burials were necessary in late antiquity but Romans still sought to recreate the essence of “home” with a

42 Ibid, 76-77.
heavenly focus (*domus aeterna*). The catacombs were central to Roman life and were especially popular among its Christian community.

Damasus focused less on expanding the cemeteries and centered his energies on modifying and embellishing the graves of the martyrs. Christian liturgy developed around the tombs of beloved martyrs and Damasus’ enlargement and embellishment of the catacombs made large-scale liturgical services at the tomb possible for the city’s Christians. Reconstruction of these spaces is difficult due to topographical changes, ravages of war and nature, and reuse of materials for road and building repairs. Bits and pieces of marble inscriptions, brick columns, terracotta tiles, broken bottles and lamps, and other funerary items now reside belowground, indistinguishable from the remaining catacomb detritus. The catacomb of Callistus was chosen as the focus of this work for the available archeological corpus, its title as the earliest known Church-controlled cemetery in the city, its inventory of martyrs, and the extensive interventions of Damasus performed there.43

**The Callistus Catacomb**

The cemetery at Callistus, located along both the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina outside the walls of the city, is the earliest known burial ground controlled by the church. The cemetery served as the interment site for many of those martyred in the third-century persecutions. Hippolytus (170-235) writes that this ancient catacomb system was associated with the church from the beginning of the third century when bishop Zephyrinus (199-217) appointed

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then-deacon Callistus as custodian and administrator of the catacomb.\textsuperscript{44} The Callistan Catacomb has galleries on four levels stretching for 20 km (approximately 12.5 miles) that hold approximately 500,000 tombs including “an innumerable multitude of martyrs” (Figure 3).\textsuperscript{45} The catacomb of Callistus (among others) continued to be a viable pilgrim site well into the Middle Ages as documented by guidebooks such as the seventh-century \textit{Notitia ecclesiarum urbis Romae}, \textit{De locus sanctuis martyrum}, and \textit{Itinerarium Malmesburiense}, and the ninth-century \textit{Einsiedeln Itinerary}.\textsuperscript{46}

Callistus underwent a significant expansion over the course of the fourth century. Damasus improved access by enlarging stairwell access, gallery passages, and the cubicula that housed these martyrs. He increased visibility by coating the walls with white plaster (for reflective purposes) and by enhancing the natural light that made its way into the underground spaces through coopting and/or adding skylights along the route. Within select cubicula (crypts) he installed luxurious marble revetment, added columns, mosaics, frescoes, and sited large marble placards—some as large as 4 by 8 feet—inscribed with messages to the visitors. The physical evidence demonstrates that audiences moved along a one-way route here which made the martyr shrines safely accessible to larger groups. The linear layout also provided a natural framework around which Damasus could strategically communicate with his audiences (Figure 4).

\textsuperscript{44} Hippolytus, \textit{Traditio Apostolica} in Lawrence J. Johnson \textit{Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources} vol. 1:31-A (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{45} Archeological details pertaining to the catacomb of Callixtus and the Tomb of the Popes from the following main sources: De Rossi, \textit{Roma Sotteranea}; Reekmans \textit{Le Complexe Cemeterial}; Baruffa, \textit{The Catacombs of St. Callixtus}; Fiocchi Nicolai, et. al. \textit{Christian Catacombs}.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Notitia ecclesiarum Urbis Romae} at Clavis Patrum Latinorum (CPL) 2336; \textit{De locis sanctis martyrum} at CPL 2339, \textit{Itinerarium Malmesburiense} at CPL 2337; and the \textit{Einsiedeln Itinerary} at CPL 2338. For more on these manuscripts see Trout, \textit{Damasus}, 61-63.
The one-way route began at the “Crypt of the Popes” (the resting place of many Roman bishops and clergy) before moving groups further into the complex to an early third-century grouping of cubicula dubbed “Cubicula of the Sacraments.” These burial sites predated Damasus. The bishop invested considerably in the papal crypt but left the Cubicula of the Sacraments as he found them. The third and final stage was a small but ornate crypt dedicated to the early fourth-century bishop and martyr, Eusebius.47 This shrine to Eusebius was a creation of Damasus and was personal to the pontiff. Damasus did not leave volumes of correspondence or homiletic texts. His legacy was sculpted in the catacombs. The archeological evidence provides an extraordinary opportunity for encountering the catacomb and receiving the messages of Damasus in the same order that the late antique audience experienced them. An interrogation of the space at Callistus identifies and pinpoints Damasus’ design elements and how they communicated his message to the pilgrim.

In the chapters which follow, I employ archeological surveys to recreate the physical environment of the Callistus catacomb. I then offer an interpretation of the late antique pilgrim’s perception of the spaces by applying tools of sensory theory, spatial concepts, and philosophies of collective memory to them as participants in the ritual context of martyr festival. This process gives us access to the spatial bodies of the visitors. Human bodies “feel” space with their senses and adjust themselves accordingly. In the catacomb bodies were directed here, not there, based upon restrictions and permissions afforded by the space. People ducked when they sensed low doorways, groups spread out in larger spaces, columns signaled approaches. Spatial recreation also provides clues to what engaged the visitors cognitively. Spatial and architectural markers

47 The catacomb site is referred to by scholars as the “Crypt of the Popes.” The term “Pope” (capital P) referring to the Roman bishopric as preeminent is not appropriate for the third and fourth centuries. When referring to the tomb I will use the now-proper title of Crypt of the Popes; when referring to the individuals I will use the lowercase “pope” or “popes.”
act as mathematical formulas in each of the primary segments of the tour, to establish hierarchy and bracket elements to aid in cognitive recognition of important truths. While the catacomb tour worked to direct pilgrim bodies, the experience was interactive. Individuals exerted agency within the parameters of the tour to come to their own conclusions regarding Roman Christianity.

*The History of Christian Archeology*

Archeologists have provided detailed knowledge of several of the catacombs and work is ongoing. For centuries, the numerous catacomb galleries outside of the city walls lay largely forgotten, and the lands were recycled for use as vineyards. On May 31, 1578, workmen were planting vines along the Via Salaria Nuova and dug too deeply uncovering a vast underground cemetery dubbed by Cesari Baronius (1538-1607) “a city beneath the earth--*Roma Sotteranea.*” The discovery was not of prime concern for Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) due to projects already underway to restore the crumbling post-medieval city, the crown jewel of which was the extensive renovations and additions to St. Peter’s basilica in Rome (dedicated 1626).

While attention and resources were being directed elsewhere, a man dubbed the “Christopher Columbus” of the Christian catacombs, Antonio Bosio (1575-1629), methodically applied sources such as the *Acta Martyrum*, liturgies, and knowledge of local vineyard owners to the topography of Rome to uncover entrances to thirty catacombs each identifiable with a Christian martyr. The timing of this discovery was fortuitous because the sixteenth-century Roman church had decreed that the catacombs were “the only physical vestiges of the primitive church” and were called into action in defense against Protestants who claimed “the Roman

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48 The metaphor of mathematical formulas is borrowed from Kathleen Enz Finken who describes reading a space as a mathematical formula in her dissertation *The Programmatic Sources of the Earliest Christian Art: Salvation History in the Catacomb of Callistus*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1998), 71.
church had strayed from the faith and discipline of the first centuries.”

It should be noted that while the catacombs were visibly absent for over a millennium, Art Historian Irina Oryshkevich has shown that the catacombs had never truly been “forgotten.” Oryshkevich demonstrated that the catacombs persistently “cropped up in ecclesiastical histories, in martyrologies…spawned fantastical rumors and tales…despite their alleged abandonment the catacombs never disappeared from human memory.”

Nevertheless, Bosio’s excavations revealed the centrality of the catacombs to early Christianity and scholarly interest at the time focused on the iconography of the sites. Following Bosio’s death, the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), a struggle largely between a weakened Holy Roman Empire and a growing Protestant movement in Germany, further diverted attention and resources away from the catacombs.

With the papacy’s attentions consumed by the Thirty Years War, any activity at the tombs was the work of explorers indifferent to the careful archeological science of Bosio. The wars ended with the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and a period of great missionary endeavors (particularly among the Jesuits) ensued. Interest in the catacombs re-ignited an “inexhaustible mine of relics for export throughout the Catholic world.” Frescos were used by Catholic apologists to provide evidence for the “heroic continuity” of the Roman church.

As the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, aristocratic travelers “on whose whim whatever was spectacular or valuable found in excavations was removed without reference to its associations or historical context.”

Scientific advances of Enlightenment scholarship, coupled with the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the powerful

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52 Ibid, 17
53 Ibid, 25
personality of Napoleon (1769-1821), encouraged the use of new scientific methods of exploration in Rome’s catacombs as well as in early Christian sites throughout North Africa, Asia Minor, and Jerusalem. In the spirit of the times, Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) created the Pontifical Academy of Sacred Archeology (the forerunner of PICA) under the direction of Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894).

Following and extending the methods of Bosio, de Rossi advanced the study of the catacombs by protecting the sites and systematically correlating primary sources and archaeological investigations. Despite the ravages of over 1,600 years of time, vestiges of Damasus’ epigraphic and architectural works remain and have been extensively documented by the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archeology (PICA) in Rome. Under de Rossi’s guidance and with the geological expertise of his younger brother, Michele Stefano de Rossi (1834-1898), a more complete and exhaustive picture of the catacombs emerged.54 W. H. C. Frend credits de Rossi with being “among the first scholars to realize the importance of spreading his knowledge to the people.”55 By the end of the nineteenth century, interest in the sites had intensified. The indefatigable de Rossi’s work was monumental in size and importance. Upon his death, three of de Rossi’s students, Josef Wilpert (1857-1944), Orazio Marucchi (1852-1931), and Enrico Stevenson (1854-1898), continued his work and produced a comprehensive synthesis of the underground cemeteries. Despite the restrictions imposed on archeology by the Second World War, studies resumed under such prolific Pontifical Commission scholars as Antonio Ferrua (1901-2003), Louis Reekmans (1925-1992), and Aldo Nestori. They continue to this day.56

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54 Michele Stefano de Rossi provided the geological analysis of the catacombs excavated by de Rossi including the plan of the catacomb. His work is included in La Roma Sotteranea. He would go on to be instrumental in developing a branch of studies in seismology in Europe.

55 Frend, Archaeology, 79.

56 For a nice historiographical summary of Christian archeology in the Roman catacombs, see Fiocchi Nicolai, et. al., The Christian Catacombs, 9-69.
Epigraphy: Inscriptions

Perhaps the most informative data to come from the catacombs is contained in the more than 40,000 surviving inscriptions, dating from the third to the fifth centuries, including the engraved poems of Damasus. While interest in the catacombs increased during the Counter-Reformation (ca. 1559-1610) an official papal collection of Christian lapidary was not officially created until the rule of Benedict XIV (1750). Benedict selected a hall in the Vatican Library to house known Christian sarcophagi and inscriptions taken from catacombs and cemeteries, private homes, public places, and even church pavements where they had been re-utilized as spolia over the centuries. In 1842, de Rossi embarked upon a compilation of all known inscriptions at the behest of Pope Pius IX. De Rossi’s death prevented a complete cataloguing of these inscriptions, and it was not until 1922 that a collection of Roman epitaphs recommenced under Angelo Silvagni (1872-1943). The task was later continued by Antonio Ferrua, preeminent scholar of archaeology and epigraphy, author of 400 books, collections and articles, and leader of the controversial expedition that brought to light what are believed to be the tomb and bones of St. Peter during the 1940’s. Today epigraphical work is being carried out by Danilo Mazzoleni under the auspices of the Società Romana di Storia Patria and PICA. The collection of known epigrams was recently completed and is known as the Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores (or ICUR) and has recently been made available online as a searchable database.

Today, extant epigrams of Damasus are scattered throughout the city. The largest collection is safely on display in the Vatican Pio Christian Museum; others reside in basilicas such as the epitaphs for Eutychius (EP 21, S. Sebastian) and Agnes (EP 37, S. Agnes Outside the Walls). Trout counts thirty-eight “more or less fully legible verse texts” of which two were non-epigraphic, two were set up outside of Rome, four were written for contemporaries, and six or seven were announcements that marked building projects. Thirty-four of Damasus’ inscriptions were preserved through medieval manuscripts. Fourteen of these are partially preserved in stone, the rest have been lost. Trout relates that another twenty-nine inscriptions are known from stones, mostly fragmentary. I conducted my own research on-site between 2009 and 2017, visiting five catacombs still open to the public and poring over the Vatican Museums’ holdings of sarcophagi, inscriptions, and catacomb artifacts (Pio Christian Museum and Library). The inscriptions are so large and magnificent that they demand notice even outside of the confined space of the catacombs (Figure 5).

Inscriptions were a powerful and common means of communication in the Roman world. Indeed, Trout notes that at this time Roman imperial society was engaging in “a public relations campaign waged through the inscription of Latin verse,” a practice which “unfolded in the same

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years that Damasus was making his way through the ranks of the Roman clergy.”

Jacques Fontaine likened Damasus’ style as imitative of ancient eulogies written on the tombs of Rome’s great men, albeit with a Christian slant, and this imitation became the new tradition within Latin poetry. Damasus designed each epigram with an eye toward his audience, even creating a new font specifically for his epitaphs. The late Stanley Morison (1887-1967), designer of the “Times” family of fonts (Times and Times New Roman), identified Damasus’ font as “Romano-episcopo,” a modified version of the pure Roman script common to imperial markers (old square capital proportions). Damasus became known for this font which was engraved on costly marble slabs by Rome’s most-sought after artisan, Filocalus, to create oversized billboards which he installed into the small and confined spaces; their hulking presence in the conspicuous underground sites were most certainly visually provocative.

Not only were these late antique inscriptions physically stunning but when read aloud by a trained lector would have imparted a “dynamic quality” to the site. In his *elogium* in honor of Tarsicus, for example, Damasus drew out his audience by addressing them directly: ”You who read, whoever you are, recognize the merit…(EP 15)” Romans, like those targeted by Damasus in his epigrams, were trained listeners due to an estimated literacy rate of 10-15% among Roman males. Historian John Bodel points out that the impact of the spoken word

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64 Trout, *Damasus*, 111-112.

65 Nicholas Everett, “Literacy from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages c 300-800 AD” in The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy, David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance eds, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009),
common to late-ancient peoples is “not naturally felt by modern readers accustomed to a more passive reception of the written word.” Inscriptions always possess an extra-textual function. Not only do they visually entice and define vertical and horizontal spaces, their words identify and convey meaning to a site while the cadence of a lector’s performance heightened the message. The epigrams of Damasus represent his voice. As inscriptions, they reveal “what was considered appropriate to communicate or to record in inscribed writing on a particular object in a particular place at a particular time.” As literary works the inscriptions provide evidences of Damasus’ education and rhetorical abilities, Roman cultural influence on the Christian religion, and the growing reverence among Christian adherents for their Roman ancestors—martyrs and bishops.

*Epigraphy: Graffiti*

Archeologists, beginning with de Rossi, have also attempted to decipher and preserve the many graffiti etchings placed by catacomb visitors around the sacred sites. While in modern-day America graffiti, outside of certain street art, is viewed as a punishable crime, there is no hint in the ancient sources that such public markings were considered an offense in Roman society. Rather, graffiti served as an act of communication that crossed all socio-economic boundaries giving a voice to rich and poor alike. Graffiti placement provides proof of access and is evidence of the writer’s intent and frame of mind.

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362-385, quote 363. Everett bases this on Max Harris’ work and defines literacy as the ability to both read and write. Max Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

66 Bodel *Epigraphic Evidence*, 18.

67 Ibid., 24-26.

68 Ibid., 34.

69 Allison Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). This work is a manual for everything “written” in the Roman world. Cooley discusses the epigraphic culture (including graffiti) and provides technical information on collected sources of Latin epigraphy and how to read them. Jennifer A. Baird and Claire Taylor eds. *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011) focus on the context in which graffiti is inscribed. This compilation of essays considers graffiti as a form of writing practice and the authors seek to illuminate the relationship between the act of writing and the physical and
A. Baird and Claire Taylor recount that scholars underuse graffiti as a historical resource because there are no standards for collecting and classifying the texts and images. Graffiti have been variously categorized according to their content or subject, by the surfaces on which they were placed, and even by the techniques by which they were produced (incised or painted). In some cases, archeologists have separated the painted from the incised or omitted them altogether. Baird and Taylor approach graffiti from a contextual angle arguing that the placement of the graffiti determines its message. Writings placed in or on public buildings and along city streets, for example, would be interpreted differently from graffiti publicly inscribed at or near temples. Consider, too, markings privately engraved on religious shrines in the home, inventory counts, messages placed in the domus by visitors, and etchings on objects such as pots or bricks.  

First-century graffiti uncovered along the streets of Pompeii include painted political slogans, endorsements, and business advertisements. Most interesting are the graffiti used to engage a broader audience in dialogue such as this sentiment uncovered in three different locations in Pompeii: “I am amazed, Oh wall, that you have not fallen in ruins, you who support the tediousness of so many writers.”  

For Romans, “the act of writing something down was intrinsically powerful, and was a key component in the relationship between Romans and their gods, being equally true of monumental inscriptions, graffiti and curse-tablets.” Graffiti laid down in the dark underworld of the catacombs tended to be placed around doorways or on walls

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71 *CIL* IV.1904, 1906, 2461, 2487): ADMIROR O PARIENS TE NON CECIDISSE RVINIS QVI TOT SCRIPTORVM TAEDIA SVSTINEAS. This graffiti was placed in a public area on three different buildings in Pompeii and by three different scriptores. As quoted in Peter Keegan ““Blogging Rome: Graffiti as Speech Act and Cultural Discourse” in Baird and Taylor, *Ancient Graffiti*, 6.

near skylights. Messages run the gamut including pleas from devotees to the martyr to mediate on their behalf, simple symbols marking religious belief, statements of theology, and proclamations of membership in the Christian community. For purposes of this work, “graffiti“ refer to any marks made in or around the tombs apart from formal markings placed upon a loculus cover, marble tablet or other official marker.

By making a (semi)permanent physical mark, the individual articulated his or her voice so that in speaking legibly their experience was authenticated and made memorable, tangible, if only to them. These marks are less public than graffiti aboveground but, as Allison Cooley remarks, “What matters is the fact of commemorating rather than the expectation that the text will be read.” While inscriptions were written with an audience in mind, graffiti is more spontaneous and personal. Graffiti in large clusters, such as those discovered at the Crypt of the Popes (Figure 6), alerts visitors to the significance of place and testifies to an accord of persons who believe in the efficacy of etching a name, verse, image or somehow leaving one’s mark in proximity to the sacred. Peter Keegan remarks that graffiti clusters are a “window on the memory-traces of contiguous social engagements at specific moments across variously defined historical periods.” Distances of time and space melt away creating a great crowd of witnesses to this hallowed area, witnesses past and present. Like the epitaphs, many of these etchings have been preserved in ICUR.

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74 Peter Keegan, “Blogging Rome,” 171. Keegan views graffiti as memory traces and promotes examining graffiti as such to identify and understand their makers and intended audiences. Keegan’s focus is primarily on the graffiti markings at Pompeii but the questions he raises in analyzing various graffiti are helpful here.
75 The ceaseless efforts of the brothers Giovanni Baptiste and Stefano de Rossi, who deciphered, copied, and recorded all visible etchings surrounding the doorway of the Crypt of the Popes, are preserved today in the (ICUR) searchable online at: http://www.edb.uniba.it/search/basic (accessed 07/23/18). The de Rossi brothers also made available their notes of the findings in the works known as La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana. De Rossi, La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana / descrittà ed illustratà v.2, “Appendice, Lettura dei Graffiti” 381-388. De Rossi’s nineteenth-century work is available in its entirety online at
The archeological and textual evidence work together to identify Christian spatial practices in the Eternal City. Space contains both a physical and a social component. A society’s spatial practice is evidence of how inhabitants view their environment and how they perceive their role within it. Damasus physically conceived of and produced monuments of Rome’s Christian past but the community’s perception of these spaces could have been something different altogether. The material and textual sources detailed above permit a recreation of the physical Callistan monument (or a facsimile thereof) and visitor movement. The increased accessibility afforded by his interventions and the prevalence of graffiti strongly suggest that Roman society was responsive and receptive to these fourth-century monuments.

**Plan of this Work**

This work begins by chronicling the life and work of Damasus as Roman bishop, his architectural acts, and his epigrams within their late antique context. Chapter Two establishes the tenets of sensory theory, theories of space, and the phenomenon of collective memory necessary to gain useful insight into individual perception and movement within the catacomb environment. These theories also help in uncovering the messages of Damasus and their embodiment as part of this experience. A Prelude follows the chapter on theory. The Prelude is a fictional account of Roman Christians participating in the martyr festival honoring Sixtus during the episcopate of Damasus. The fictional narrative is grounded in historical knowledge, archeological reports, and personal visits to the site and is intended to extricate the modern reader from his or her twenty-first century sensibility in order that the reader might better engage

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with the realities of life that confronted fourth-century peoples. Pilgrim procession to the cemetery of Callistus and progression through the catacomb is recreated and interpreted through the framework of Lefebvre’s architectural theories (monumental space) and sensory (body) theory to demonstrate the dynamics of the catacomb-as-monument.

Chapter Three follows with a scholarly exposition of the spatial and sensory impact of critical tour elements upon late antique bodies and pilgrim response. The unique underground environment heightened human sensing while its spatial properties prompted bodily movement and posture. The architectural properties and materials, symbols, and the written word—particularly the written word of Bishop Damasus as pastor of the Roman church—together shaped pilgrim experience and collective memory. The dissertation concludes with an epilogue that summarizes the work and communicates additional topics for consideration.

Despite their bedraggled state, the catacombs are storehouses of early Christian history whose evidence is not immediately apparent. Archeological reports furnish many, though not all, of the missing physical characteristics but fail to capture the context and the impact of the spaces on late antique visitors. The texts provide insight into the background of the monument and suggest intent and purpose. But archeology and text alone result in an analysis bereft of energy and emotion. It is only when the sensory experiences of procession within the recreated monument is explored that its significance to late antique peoples can be realized. The epigrams must be heard as oratory, the interplay of light and dark must be felt, the cost of procession must be realized. This dissertation establishes a foundation and a roadmap for extracting the valuable testimony of late antique Roman Christianity lying in Rome’s subterranean archives.
CHAPTER 1
THE LIFE AND WORKS OF DAMASUS I

The one who, walking, subdued the bitter waves of the sea,
Who prevails upon the decaying seeds of the earth to live,
Who is able to unbind the fatal chains of death after the darkness,
Who is able to present a brother to his sister Martha a second time
for a higher purpose,
I believe you will make Damasus to rise up after he is ashes.\(^{77}\)

These are the final words of Damasus, the testimony he chose to leave behind. No
mention is made here of his eighteen-year service as Rome’s highest ecclesiastical leader (r.366-
384). Rather, Damasus fixed his memory upon the power of Christ, the singular hope of all
Christians. In truth, a simple recounting of Damasus’ full and tumultuous life is elusive; the
most specific sources (the LP and the CA) are fifth- and sixth-century compilations each seeking
to justify their respective positions regarding the office of Roman bishop. Still, the glimpses of
Damasus provided by the LP and the CA, in conjunction with the Histories of Ammianus,
Jerome’s De viri illustribus, and the scant collection of documents attributed to Damasus,
provide an interpretive framework which the architectural and epigraphical works of Damasus
can fill.\(^{78}\) Indeed, it is the interventions of Damasus in the cemeteries which are the most reliable
and effective witnesses to the full life of this extraordinary—yet elusive—man who figures so
prominently in late antique Roman Christianity.

The bibliography on Damasus has grown significantly over the last fifteen years. The
dated biographies of M. Rade (1882) and Father Orazio Marruchi (1907) were only recently

\(^{77}\) EP 12. Author translation. *qui gradiens pelagi fluctus conpressit amaross, vivere qui prestart morientia semina terrae, solver qui potuit letalia vincula mortis, post tenebras, fratrem post tertia lumena solis ad superos iterum martae donare sorori, post cineres damasum faciet quia surpere credo.* Latin text in Trout, Damasus, 105-106.

superseded by the scholarship of Ursula Reutter (1999 and 2009) and Dennis Trout (2016). Reutter’s 1999 dissertation-turned-book is an exhaustive compilation of the sources (Latin and Greek) relating to Damasus with German translation and commentary. Reutter reads Damasus as an arrogant, yet spiritually deep man, whose rule strengthened the papacy and established the office’s future trajectory by joining the emperors and the ancient Roman tradition to Christianity. Dennis Trout’s Damasus includes a concise bibliography and updated historiography on the pontiff while highlighting the analytical features of Damasus’ Latin verse. The following discussion consolidates scholarship on this Christian leader alongside the primary evidence to situate Damasus’ pontificate within the framework of the tumultuous fourth century which provides context for his writings and other acts related to the catacombs.

**Damasus (305-384)**

**Early Life and Controversy Surrounding His Succession**

The LP relates that the family of Damasus hailed from Spain, “*natione Spanus*.” The future pontiff grew up in the church as the son of a long-term ecclesiastic, Antonius, in a church of St. Lawrence “advancing from here--notary, reader, deacon, priest” (*exceptor, lector, levita,*...
35

sacerdos) (EP 57.1). Little else is known about the family outside of the epithets which Damasus composed for his mother Laurentia (EP 10) and sister Irene (EP 11). Laurentia’s epitaph is poorly preserved but reveals that she lived a long life, “sixty years after her covenant” (sexaginta deo vixit post foedera). Scholars interpret covenant (foedera) to be either a vow of chastity or a vow taken upon the death of Damasus’ father. In the epitaph written for his sister Irene, Damasus states that he was honored to have been entrusted with her care (dederat mihi pignus honestum). Who entrusted her to her brother is unclear but it seems the most likely answer is that Damasus served as the family patriarch upon his father’s death.

A young Damasus would have witnessed the battles between Constantine and Maxentius and understood the tensions in Rome over the rise of Constantinople, the “New Rome.” He would have grown up being regaled with tales of the persecutions and having participated in martyr commemorations because the recent horrors of martyrdom would have remained fresh on the minds of the adults around him. Indeed, Damasus knew details of the martyrdom of Marcellinus and Peter because their executioner told him about their torments when he was just a boy (percussor retulit damaso mihi cum puer essem) EP 28. While Damasus’ father experienced the final days of the Great Persecution, his son lived in a world in which pagan and Christian alike experimented with a new world order.

Damasus’ Rome underwent significant topographical transformations with the rise of monuments such as the great triumphal arch and the massive basilica of Constantine (complete with a towering statue of the emperor) adjacent to the ancient forum. He and his family would

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83 EP 57.1, Translation Trout, Damasus. No church structure has been found near the location of the basilica of St. Lawrence in Damasus where this poem was placed so that the exact location of his father’s ecclesiastical career is uncertain.
84 The poor condition of Laurentia’s epitaph requires scholars to complete the lines. See Trout’s discussion about the various options in Damasus, 101.
85 For a discussion of this passage see Trout, Damasus, 104, n 9-13.
have navigated streets and sidewalks blocked by the construction renovations of the Circus Maximus. They would have been largely immune to the commonplace roar of the crowds emanating from the numerous amphitheatres and circuses in the city. Indeed, Damasus’ home was most likely located in the shadow of the republican era Theatre of Pompey and a the Flamian Circus. Damasus’ father would have attended meetings in the Lateran Palace, Christianity’s new administrative center, and the family would have marked time according to the Christian calendar (Easter, martyr festivals) marking the rise of the great basilicas as they processed to the cemeteries outside the city walls. Damasus would also have known of the ongoing catacomb expansions necessary to accommodate the desire for burial near the martyrs (next to the martyr “ad sanctos” and behind the martyr’s grave “retro sanctos”). Damasus spent his formative years in a society struggling to reconcile the traditions of Rome’s polytheistic history with a new era in which imperial favor and patronage was increasingly directed toward the monotheistic Christian sect. Still, religious freedom was not unfettered for imperial favor was ephemeral. Beneficiaries of Constantine’s largess one day could easily become victims of imperial perniciousness the next for the office itself was transitory. Roman Christians were cognizant that this state of affairs was always open to negotiation as it hinged upon the person of the emperor.

86 For Rome’s Circus Maximus see Jacob Latham, Performance, Memory and Processions in Ancient Rome: The Pompa Circensis from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Lathan provides a descriptive narrative of the ritual procession of the gods to the Circus (the pompa circensis) on race days and of the site in general. See especially 228-230.
87 Of course, crowd noise could, at times, be exceptionally moving. Roman games and the various circus teams developed political affiliations so that the events could resonate with political fervor. See Latham, Performance, 229.
88 The Basilica of Lawrence in Damasus was built over stables which served the Green Circus faction near the Theatre of Pompey. Scholars postulate that it was originally part of his family’s residence and even that Damasus’ family was economically involved in the Circus organization. Trout, Damasus, 188-189.
Damasus followed his father into ecclesiastical service but his path propelled him into the episcopal court of Liberius during a particularly discordant period of Arian tensions. The eastern churches were embroiled in a battle between proponents of Nicaean orthodoxy and the followers of Arius and this ideological cancer reached Rome in the mid-fourth century when the city’s Christian community found itself forced to take sides between the Alexandrian Bishop Athanasius (296-373), vocal proponent of Nicaean orthodoxy, and the Arian Emperor Constantius II (337-361). Bishop of Rome Liberius refused to denounce Athanasius and was forced into exile in 355; Constantius then appointed the deacon Felix as his replacement to head the city’s Christian community. This imperial appointment in lieu of a local election provoked Christian loyalties and left the community unsettled. This uneasiness is visible in the later contest between Damasus and Ursinus. The writer of the CA questioned Damasus’ loyalty to Nicaean orthodoxy because he supported the imperial appointee Felix over the church-elected Liberius.

Liberius’ actions while in exile complicated matters when, in a desperate move to return to Rome, he recanted his support for Athanasius and wrote to many eastern bishops pleading for their intervention. His strategy (and the pressure exerted upon Constantius by the local ladies to return Liberius to his post) was effective and, in 358, Constantius called Liberius to a synod where he signed the third Creed of Sirmium, a blasphemous document by Nicean standards, that

89 LP 39.
90 The Alexandrian Bishop Athanasius was driven into exile five separate times due to his strong and, at times violent, stand against Arianism. In 339 he was forced to flee to Rome where he established supporters among the western churches
91 Sources for Liberius include: LP 37; CA at CSEL 35:1-4; Ammianus Marcellinus 15,7, 6-10. Later writers include Theodoret 2,14; Sozomen, Bk 4,8, 11,15,23. Curran provides an excellent compilation of the sources on Liberius’ life in Pagan City and Christian Capital, 129-137.
92 Cum Libério Damasius diaconus eius se simulat proficisci. unde fugiens de itinere Romam redit ambitione corruptus. CSEL 35.2.
93 Theodoret 2,14.
declared the Son to be subordinate to the Father and forbade the use of the term “substance” in all its forms. Liberius’ signature permitted him to return to Rome but upon arrival he was refused entrance to the bishop’s palace at the Lateran and forced to find refuge in the extramural basilica of Constantina, sister of Constantius. By 362 Liberius had regained his See and, in 366, shortly before his death, he reaffirmed his position as a proponent of Nicaean orthodoxy which he further claimed for the western church. Liberius’ weakness and wavering damaged the episcopacy and this carried over into the Damasus-Ursinus debacle.

The LP states that Damasus was ultimately elected bishop over Ursinus by “a council of sacerdotes” who “confirmed Damasus because he was the stronger and had the greater number of supporters.” Ursinus and his followers protested this election, a protest that culminated in the deadly battles that took place both before and after Damasus’ election on October 1, 366. Damasus had to contend with these detractors throughout his career including a charge of adultery levied against him around 378. This accusation was designed to gain the ear and support of the emperor Gratian (r. 367-383) whose predecessor, Valentinian, had unleashed imperial indictments against senatorial families for similar charges in the preceding decade. Damasus was exonerated by Gratian and, subsequently, by a Roman synod of forty-four western bishops whose number included the stalwart Ambrose.

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96 PL 8:1406; 8:1372; 8:1381. For a more positive view of Liberius see Marianne Saghy, “Martyr-Bishops and the Bishop’s Martyrs in Fourth-century Rome” in *Saintly Bishops and Bishop’s Saints*, John S. Ott and Trpimir Vedriš eds., Series Colloquia 2 (Zagreb: Hagiotheca, 2012), 13-30. Saghy claims that Liberius was a popular pastor based upon certain epitaphs that seem to honor him. 18-21.
97 LP 39.1.
98 Jacob Latham argues that the CA and other sources describe the contested episcopacies of the fourth through the sixth centuries in military language. “From Literal to Spiritual Soldiers of Christ,” 298-327.
99 Ambrose shares more information related to the many schismatics who fought Damasus throughout his episcopate. *Ep extra collectionem* 7.
100 LP 39.3.
In the end, the Roman congregation elected a leader with local connections. Damasus was arguably the most popular candidate and it is not unreasonable to believe the LP’s claim that he had the largest number of supporters. The CA itself suggests that Damasus had friends in all kinds of places: gladiators, charioteers, gravediggers (fossores), and all the clergy.”\(^{101}\) Despite his outspoken enemies, Damasus possessed a loyal following and his episcopacy was lauded by many in Rome.

Damasus and the Late Antique Episcopate

*The Office of Bishop*

The ecclesiastical office whose holder is commonly referred to as “bishop” was not a Christian invention. Historian Claudia Rapp relates that the title “episcopus” (or “episkopos” in Greek) simply means “overseer” and was used to designate all high officers in both secular and religious collegia during late antiquity.\(^{102}\) The term appears in the New Testament seven times and Rapp notes that in the earliest Christian communities the episcopus headed a group of deacons (presbyteroi) in a role that was primarily administrative.\(^{103}\) Some of these early passages referred to the office in the plural (episkopoi) which infers that the office was not yet

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\(^{101}\) CSEL. 35.1.7. “tunc Damasus cum perfidis inuitat arenarios quadrigarios et fossores omnemque clerum...”


\(^{103}\) The passages are Acts 1:20; Acts 20:28, Philipians 1:11, Peter 2:25, 1 Timothy 3:1, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:5-9.
centralized under one individual. Eamon Duffy, historian of Christianity, notes that by the end of the first century bishops were increasingly important as a guard against false teachers.¹⁰⁴

The role of bishop gained authority over the course of the second century. Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 107) wrote letters advising churches to unite around their bishops. He recommended that bishops oversee priests and deacons and hold both pastoral and liturgical responsibilities. The bishop was to be an exemplar of Christian conduct to ensure the respect and cooperation of his flock.¹⁰⁵ Rapp advocates the use of “bishop” from this point onward as it is used in the “connotation of the monopiscopate at the head of a structured ecclesiastical hierarchy.”¹⁰⁶

The earliest text for liturgical practices in Rome is the *Apostolic Tradition* (author unknown although most credit its authorship to Hippolytus of Rome ca 236), a document that exists only in pieces within other church manuals. The *Apostolic Tradition* describes the bishop as the one charged with ministering to the community, praying for them as their spiritual representative, and holding the same authority as the apostles (who held both institutional and spiritual authority) to forgive sins. Rapp remarks that this text “affirms that the appointment of the bishop is based upon the consensus of all.”¹⁰⁷ It should be noted here that the sixth-century LP is careful to demonstrate the fulfillment of this requirement in its record of Damasus (LP 39.1). Another third century document, the *Didascalia* which hails from Syria, testifies to the increasing role of the episcopate, asserting that the bishop was a representative of Christ, his

¹⁰⁴ Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*, 10
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 29.
community, and their sins before God. Thus, the office of Christian episcopus was increasingly centralized and viewed authoritatively by the end of the third century.

Imperial patronage of Christianity in the fourth-century greatly increased the authority and duties of bishops in the cities. Constantine and his successors placed bishops over civil courts which heard and ruled on disputes involving charges brought by (or against) parties that included at least one Christian. Manumission of slaves could also be legally processed through the bishop’s court and the bishop’s decision was enforceable by civic authorities. Bishops rose up from every level of Roman society but, as the office became increasingly lucrative (and service in imperial administration became increasingly onerous), bishops in the major cities in particular were, more and more, chosen from the educated elite. Bishops were useful to emperors as servants of the imperial government who not only exerted oversight of the Christian population but who also served the emperor as a “counterweight to the influence of other prominent groups in Roman society, such as senators and military commanders.” The fifth-century compilation of imperial laws, known as the Theodosian Code (Codex Theodosianus) demonstrates how emperors used bishops to maintain peace. For example, an edict of Theodosius I exhorts Romans to abandon doctrinal disputes and to practice the religion “which it is evident that Pope (pontifex) Damasus and Peter, bishop (episcopus) of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity, followed.” As leaders the bishops could influence their followers and theoretically, unlike secular leaders, bishops did not aspire to be emperors. Note that the

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108 Ibid., 32.
109 Van Dam, “Bishops and Society,” 358. Codex Theodosius i.27.1.2; iv.7.1 (manumission). See also The Church Histories of Sozomen 1.ix.
110 Van Dam, “Bishops and Society,” 357.
111 Codex Theodosianus XVI.i.2, aka. “De fide Catholica”. More recent scholars such as Claudia Rapp have acknowledged the civic role required of Roman bishops. See Claudia Rapp, Holy Bishops; Peter Brown, Power and Persuasion; Drake, Constantine and the Bishops.
imperial use of *pontifex* to describe the highest Christian leader parallels the use of the term in Roman secular religions where the title *pontifex* designated the chief leader of each cult.

By the episcopacy of Damasus a bishop’s duties had become quite extensive. The office was “a lifetime of service and devotion,” both civic and religious. Bishops were to oversee the celebration of the liturgy and preaching, as well as administrative tasks such as the selection and supervision of clerics, administration of finances, management of charitable foundations and service to the community as an imperial representative. The mechanism of episcopal governance was still in its evolutionary stages in the mid-fourth century; regardless, the sheer volume of these tasks would have required Damasus to staff and oversee a large administrative organization to carry out these duties to free up his time and energies for such extensive involvement in the cemeteries.

*Roman Primacy*

Modern peoples struggle to disassociate the late antique Roman pontificate from the supreme role within the universal church that the bishop of Rome or pope asserts today. The supremacy of the Roman bishop evolved over the centuries and has its justifications in the scripture of Matthew 16 as well as in the city’s role in the martyrdoms of both Peter and Paul, key apostles of Christ. Following Peter’s profession of faith Jesus replied:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:17-19)

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112 Van Dam, “Bishops and Society,” 345.
Tradition asserts that both Peter and Paul were martyred while in Rome during the rule of Emperor Nero (ca. 64). Proponents of Roman primacy contend that the Roman church was surely Christ’s because Peter spent his final days in the city.\textsuperscript{114} In the early church, the Roman episcopate was largely acknowledged to have a status of “primacy,” the “first among equals,” among the four major sees—Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch—Christian communities notably established by apostles of Christ. This alignment is supported by a letter written by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch to the Roman church (107) in which Ignatius characterizes the authority of the Roman body as “preeminent.”\textsuperscript{115} Likewise, Irenaeus of Lyons deferred to Rome in recommendations for refuting heresies (\textit{Contra Haereses}, ca. 180) calling the Roman congregation “that great and illustrious church founded and organized at Rome by two glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, and to the faith declared to mankind and handed down to our own time through its bishops in their succession.”\textsuperscript{116} As Duffy points out, Irenaeus’ claims have no basis in fact. Still, early Christians accepted this idea of Roman primacy and highly valued their association with Peter and Paul as evidenced by the second century shrines placed within the city (Peter at the necropolis at the Vatican, Paul’s on the Via Ostia) datable to ca. 150 and the one-time sanctuary of the apostles uncovered at St. Sebastian.

Roman Bishop Stephen (254-257) firmly believed himself to hold greater authority as a result of his office. His claims are preserved in a letter of Bishop Cyprian of Carthage (200-258):

“I am right to be indignant with Stephen for his open and conspicuous folly, since he who brags so loudly of the seat of his episcopate and who insists that he holds his succession from Peter, on whom the foundations of the church were laid, is

\textsuperscript{114} The tradition of Peter and Paul’s deaths occurring in Rome under Nero’s persecution is questioned by Brent D. Shaw in an article “The Myth of the Neronian Persecution” in \textit{Journal of Roman Studies},105, 73-100.
introducing many other rocks and building many new churches, as long as he supports their baptism by his authority.”

While Rome held place of honor due to its association with Peter and Paul’s deaths, its supremacy was not universally accepted at the end of the third century.

Duffy points out that over the course of the fourth century the Roman bishops “began to model their actions on the procedures of the Roman state.” Indeed, acts of Constantine I placed administrative responsibilities on the bishops and greater authority was given to the bishop of Rome. This organizational structure encouraged bishops throughout the western empire to seek advice from the Roman see. The advice rendered was known as a decretal and it served a purpose similar to an imperial rescript in that it established a legal precedent. Damasus was the first bishop of Rome to issue a decretal. The four major sees enjoyed primacy based upon their role in imperial governance, but the organizational equilibrium was shaken by Constantine’s new Christian capital, Constantinople.

As Constantinople grew in importance and prominence, so did its churches. This shifting of fortunes created much anxiety among the western bishops. The tipping point came when an eastern synod was called in Constantinople in 381. Emperor Theodosius I called the synod to deal with disputes among the eastern congregations regarding questions of succession in the episcopates of Antioch and Constantinople. In addition, the Arians and Macedonians (a new threat, also known as the “semi-Arians”) persisted in challenging the conclusions of Nicaea. It was not the complex nature of these issues that struck a nerve back in Rome but Canon Three

117 Cyprian, Ep, LXXV, tr. Shotwell and Loomis, 415.
118 Duffy, Saints and Sinners, 40.
119 Shortly before his death, the bishop of Tarragona in Spain had written Damasus requesting information regarding the order of day-to-day life in the church. Damasus’ death prevented his response but his successor, Siricius (r. 384-399) responded in the form of a decretal.
120 This new challenge originated from a Macedonian group who claimed that the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, was inferior to the Father and Son.
of its creed which stated: “The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honor after the Bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is New Rome.” While the creed acknowledged Rome’s primacy, the council’s justification said nothing about the eternal city’s ties with Peter and Paul.

Shaken by what they perceived to be a loss of status, Bishops of the western empire, led by Damasus, rose up in protest and wasted no time in calling a Roman synod (382). The Christian leaders issued the following rejoinder:

The holy Roman church…obtains first place (primatum) on account of the evangelists and from the voice of our Lord and Savior who said “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it; and I give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever you will bind upon the earth will be bound even in heaven, and whatever you will have released upon earth will be released in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

Added to this is the connection of Paul the most blessed of the apostles, the “vessel of election,” who did not turn away, like those talking nonsense about heretical doctrine, but at one time and in the same lifetime together with Peter who struggling died a glorious and agonizing death with Peter in the city of Rome under Nero; and together they set the Holy Roman Church apart to Christ the Lord and gave preference to the city of Rome among each and every other in the whole universe by their presence and venerable triumph.

Therefore the first see of the apostle Peter is the church at Rome “having neither spot nor wrinkle nor anything of this sort” (Ephesians 5:27). Moreover, the second see is Alexandria having been set apart by the name of the blessed Peter for his disciple Mark together with the evangelist himself having been directed to Egypt by the word of truth proclaimed and brought to perfection through his glorious martyrdom. The third honored see of Peter most blessed of apostles is truly being held by Antioch because before Peter could come to Rome he dwelled in Antioch and (it is in that place that) the name of Christians first appeared new among the Gentiles (Acts 11:26).122

121 The entire Creed is available online in English, Greek and Latin at: http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/constantinople_canons.htm.
This rather lengthy excerpt of the response by Damasus and his western colleagues leaves no doubt regarding their convictions on the importance of the Roman church in Christian history. Thus, while there was an administrative reason for elevating the Roman bishop, the honor accorded to Rome in the fourth century extended further than mere organizational channels.

Contemporary testimonies to the importance of the Roman see include Jerome who claimed that Damasus possessed the “chair of Peter and the faith that was praised by the lips of the Apostle…upon that rock I know the church is built.”123 Likewise Ambrose, the newly appointed bishop of Milan which had become the de facto capital of the western empire, regarded the Roman church as the “Head of the whole Roman world” on account of the “sacred faith of the Apostles,” “for from thence flow all the rights of venerable Communion to all persons.”124 The Roman see carried an aura of reverence due to its apostolic connection. Damasus saw significance in his role as Peter’s successor, but his authority was certainly not complete, nor did Damasus desire it to be. Despite the tendency of scholars to assign power-hungry motives to Damasus, the primary source evidence reveals that, while others sought his authority and counsel, the Roman bishop persistently refused to intervene in eastern affairs: Damasus demonstrated a lack of ambition to be supreme pontiff.125

Individuals from the east attempted to draw Damasus and the west into their various conflicts. Damasus’ reluctance to act as supreme pontiff is most vividly evidenced in two

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124 Ambrose, Ep XL, online at http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/fathers/ambrose_letters_02_letters11_20.html#Letter11, (02/02/2017). This letter was written to Emperor Gratian in 381 to support Damasus against Ursinus whose persistent attacks against the Roman bishop were sowing discord even in his city several hours north of Rome.
125 Damasus has been accused of promoting the universal authority of the Roman church, largely based upon the earliest known papal rescript (decree) to the bishops of Gaul regarding church disciplinary matters. Trout, *Damasus*, 15. I assert that Damasus viewed himself to be preeminent in the west but not in the east. Diefenbach views the epigrams as a promotion of the primacy of the Roman church. Steffen Diefenbach, “Urbs and Ecclesia,” in *Rom in der Spatantike*, 193-249.
epistles from Bishop Basil of Caesarea (330-379) to an unnamed individual—perhaps Damasus—entreats the addressee to support him in his fight against the growing “heresy planted long ago by Arius.”\textsuperscript{126}  Basil’s frantic missives described the Arian movement as having gained strength to the point that “the champions of right doctrine have been driven by calumny and outrage from their churches.”\textsuperscript{127}  Basil sent other entreaties to the body of western bishops requesting aid, letters of support, and envoys to help him in his battle against heretical Christian movements. Most important to Basil was the struggle taking place in Antioch, identified by the \textit{De explanation fidei} as the third most primary see, for the right to hold the episcopal office there (ca 370).\textsuperscript{128}  There is no evidence that Damasus responded, nor did the other western bishops seem to be inclined to get involved in the ongoing conflicts of the eastern church. If Damasus viewed himself as preeminent in spiritual affairs he surely would have responded to these cries for help. Instead, Damasus’ involvement in controversies outside of the Roman west was largely limited to intervention at Antioch in support of his “dearly beloved brother Paulinus” (the ultimate victor for the episcopate of Antioch who served from 362-388).\textsuperscript{129}

Two extant letters were written by Damasus to Paulinus. In the first letter (\textit{Per filium meum}) Damasus counseled the new pontiff to only readmit into the fellowship of the Antiochian church those schismatics who first “signed the creed which was confirmed at Nicaea by the pious will of the Fathers” (EP 3).\textsuperscript{130}  In the second (\textit{Tomus}) Damasus once again pointed Paulinus to Nicaea, this time he included an addendum of anathemas put forth by western councils (377-

\begin{footnotes}
\item[126] Basil, Ep. X.
\item[128] An English translation of Basil’s requests to the western church can be found in Shotwell and Loomis, 636-657.
\item[129] It should be noted that Jerome was a proponent of Paulinus and may have influenced Damasus on this issue.
\item[130] Damasus Ep. III To Paulinus, PL XIII, 356-357.
\end{footnotes}
Damasus similarly advised Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, to follow the Nicaean Creed. In 378 Damasus wrote to a group of eastern bishops thanking them for supporting him and exhorted them to keep the laws of Nicaea. All of the evidence from Damasus’ correspondence with the eastern church shows that he consistently blunts any personal authority by referring the addressees to the findings that came out of the Nicaean Council.

The exact reason for Damasus’ refusal to get involved in eastern affairs is unknown. The exile that accompanied Liberius’ interference in the Alexandria dispute may have taught Damasus to focus on responsibilities at home. The significant number of epigrams he composed in honor of exiled bishops demonstrates an enhanced sensitivity to exile. Shotwell and Loomis argue that Damasus’ refusal to aid Basil and the eastern church was his greatest failure. “The bonds that might have riveted them to him in life were never forged. The greatest opportunity that had come to a Roman bishop beneath the government of the Empire came to Damasus and he let it slip.” Perhaps Damasus was too involved in the catacombs to concern himself with eastern affairs, or perhaps he feared the dangers of sea travel. Regardless, Damasus’ refusal to get involved benefitted the Roman congregation in that his time and energies were permitted to be freely directed toward his activities in the Christian catacombs.

While the claim of Roman supremacy had not been certified, Roman supremacy was innately regarded as demonstrated by the desire of Basil and others to gain Damasus’ approval and support. It would be the fifth century and the pontificate of Pope Leo I (440–461) before the primacy of Rome would be aggressively identified as supreme. Leo’s claims were bolstered

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131 Damasus, Ep IV to Paulinus.
132 Epigrams in which exile is mentioned or inferred: EP 18.8 *exilium*, EP 40.6 *finibus expulsus patriae est*, EP 42.4 describes the clergy’s return *pro reditu cleri Christo*.
133 Shotwell and Loomis, 628.
by the additional burdens which the Roman church undertook to administer and to protect the city. In 452 it was the Christian bishop and not the city’s prefect who approached the formidable Attila the Hun outside of the city to plead for mercy. Attila, perhaps because of Leo’s arguments but more likely because of the tumultuous death of his brother required his attentions, turned back leaving Rome in peace. In 455, however, Leo was unable to deter the Vandal armies of Gaiseric. While Leo gained a concession that Rome would not be burned, the Vandals looted the city for fourteen days. Such an enhanced public role for the leader of Rome’s Christian community supported convictions of Roman supremacy.

Bishop Gregory I (540-604) was likewise compelled to take on the many infrastructure and social needs of the city. The senate was weak and their economic base much eroded. Many aristocratic families had left for opportunities closer to the emperors. Italy’s lands had been greatly depleted by Byzantine Emperor Justinian’s (527-565) recent reconquest of the region. Gregory was able to repair the aqueducts, feed the starving, ransom refugees, and pay and provision the soldiers because the Roman church was the largest landowner in the western empire at that time. To protect the church’s assets and ensure their effective use Gregory reorganized and greatly enhanced the workings and efficiencies of the church’s patrimony. At the same time he forged bonds of “patronage, persuasion and liaison with the local churches and civic administration which enormously strengthened his grip over the churches of Italy and beyond.”

T.F.X. Noble explains that “the services provided by the church’s government and the patrimonies [established as an endowment for the poor] were, then, two factors that contributed to the papacy’s preeminence in Italy.” Through it all, Gregory claimed the authority of the Roman church as the see of Peter. Judith Herrin notes that Gregory did not have

135 Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*, 64.
a “preconceived notion,” he had no “master-plan to build up Roman supremacy,” but his act strengthened the administrative function of the church and greatly enhanced its network of bishops as leaders of their Christian communities. This organizational relationship which elevated the Roman see would carry forward into the medieval church.137

Bishops succeeding Gregory I found themselves engaged in a diplomatic race to protect Rome and the church from both the Byzantine emperors and the Lombard kings. The shifting political boundaries of the sixth and seventh centuries required the bishop (now pope) to negotiate treaties with their Byzantine and Germanic overlords to preserve the patrimony of the Roman church. Just as distressing were attempts by the Byzantine emperors to control religious policy, most particularly Justinian II’s attempt to force disciplinary canons on the west in 692 and Leo III’s initiation of iconoclasm in 726. The Roman pontiff consistently enjoyed the loyalty and protection of the people when he stood counter to the will of Constantinople.138

Political instability in Constantinople and increased Arab threats in the east weakened the Byzantines while encouraging the Lombard kings to move deeper into the peninsula. In 751 the Lombard King Aistulf conquered Ravenna which brought them closer to Rome at the same time that a weakened Byzantium withdrew its protection.139 Rome found itself to be a free, autonomous duchy, a republic without a strong defense. The Roman pontiff had always been able to manage the Lombard threat but this time Stephen II (xxx-xxx) felt compelled to seek help. He turned to the kingdom of the Franks and its new ruler Pippin (xxx-xxx) for protection. The authority of the Roman bishop was unquestioned as he stood in the gap between the Lombards and what passed for the Roman state.140

137 Herrin, *Christendom*, 182.
139 Herrin, *Christendom*, 371.
140 Noble, *Republic*, 52.
A personal alliance was created between Pippin and Stephen in which Stephen consecrated Pippin as king in exchange for Pippin’s promise to “maintain the rights of St. Peter [the Roman church] and in particular to restore to the leader of the Apostles those church lands conquered by the Lombards.”\textsuperscript{141} The family of Pippin, which became known as the Carolingians, was elevated to elite Roman status as the princes Charles and Carloman were invested the title of \textit{patricius Romanorum} and elevated spiritually. Pippin and his wife were proclaimed \textit{spiritalis compater} and \textit{comater} respectively. Their sons became spiritual sons of the pope.\textsuperscript{142} This turn of events not only elevated the Frankish royal family but it also enhanced the figure of the Roman bishop. Stephen’s success in obtaining protection for Rome and Frankish recognition of Stephen as the caretaker of St. Peter boosted the image of the Roman bishopric. Furthermore, the new relationship fed the Carolingian love of Rome at a time when Christian missionaries were attempting to purge nescient Christian practices in Francia and beyond. The result was an enhanced liturgy based directly on the Roman model. Coincidentally this also strengthened Roman practices by forcing Romans to reevaluate their own liturgical processes.

The alliance between Rome and the Carolingians was renewed and enhanced in 800 when Pope Leo III (r. 795-816), in physical danger from enemies within the city, moved to elicit a more permanent alliance. Charlemagne (r. 771-814), son and successor to Pippin, paid a visit to Rome to celebrate the 800\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Christ’s birth. Einhard (xxxx), friend and biographer of Charlemagne, shares that during this visit Leo surprised Charlemagne with an elaborate ceremony in the Basilica of St. Peter’s. The pope, as heir to the Apostle Peter, consecrated Charlemagne and replaced the title of “\textit{patricius}” with “\textit{imperatoris et augusti},”

\textsuperscript{141} Herrin, \textit{Christendom}, 374. \textit{Lives of the Eight-Century Popes} 1.448; Royal Frankish Annals 754.
\textsuperscript{142} Herrin, \textit{Christendom}, 374.
“Emperor and Augustus” of Rome.” Einhard said that “Charlemagne cared more for the church of the holy Apostle Peter in Rome than for any other sacred and venerable place.”

The result of Leo’s consecration of Charlemagne, a proven and valiant warrior, demonstrates that the western view held the bishop of Rome to be owed prime status in the church. Successors to Charlemagne and subsequent rulers of the west also claimed this title and, in varying degrees, responsibility for the church of the Apostle Peter. The primacy of the Roman bishop was formally declared in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) when they declared the Roman church to hold supremacy over all Christendom: “Renewing the ancient privileges of the patriarchal sees, we decree with the approval of the holy and ecumenical council, that after the Roman church, which by the will of God holds over all others pre-eminence of ordinary power as the mother and mistress of all the faithful.”

Acts of Damasus, Bishop of Rome

In 366 the official headquarters of the Roman episcopate stood on the southeastern edge of the Caelian hill just inside the walls of the city, not on Vatican Hill, and the Christian pontiff’s job description centered upon care for his local flock. Damasus’ first years in office were spent fending off persistent attacks against his authority. Despite the exile of Ursinus (367), his followers “stood firm, conducting services throughout the cemeteries of the martyrs without clergy (CA 1.12).” Damasus responded to this with another bloody conflict in the cemetery of

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143 Einhard, The Life of Charlemagne, 3.28. Notker the Stammerer (840-912) also penned a later biography of Charlemagne (ca. 884). For his more detailed, but chronologically distant, account of Rome Charles the Great 1.26.
144 Einhard, The Life of Charlemagne, 3.27.
Agnes. To formalize his accession, a Roman synod was called, a “solemn celebration” of Italian bishops, which the authors of the *Gesta* suggest enjoyed only limited participation. Damasus failed to secure their support in condemning Ursinus (CA 1.13). Ursinus returned to Rome in October 367 only to be exiled once again in December of that same year, this time by order of Emperor Valentinian, where he would remain until 371. This brief reprieve gave Damasus time to focus on the official duties of his office and provided him an opportunity to plan and organize his personal crusade of memorializing the city’s notable Christians. Christianity operated at the pleasure of the sovereign and, while the attacks against him would haunt him until his death, Damasus effectively walked the tightrope of imperial good will and consistently enjoyed imperial protection from his detractors.146

**Negotiating Secular Religion**

Bishop Damasus served as the official liaison between the Christian population and the emperor during a period of religious tensions. In his last major work, classicist Alan Cameron (1938–2017) stridently declared that there was no concerted movement by Rome’s pagan community in opposition to Christianity. “There was no pagan revival in the West, no pagan party, no pagan literary circles, no pagan patronage of the classics, no pagan propaganda in art or literature, no pagans editing classical texts, above all, no last pagan stand.”147 But tensions did exist. Christian verse invectives, ecclesiastical homilies, and imperial laws attempting to ban pagan sacrifice and to segregate Pagan and Christian cults all reveal anxieties within Christian and governmental circles.148

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146 Interestingly, Blair-Dixon has identified Damasus’ imperial connections as one of the motives behind the prominence afforded the anti-Damasian letters by the compiler of the CA.; Blair-Dixon, “Memory and Authority,” 73.
147 Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, 801.
148 *Theodosian Code* xvi.10.10-12; In fact, Cameron claims the invective known as *Carmen contra paganos* (Poem Against the Pagans) was composed by Damasus shortly before his death. Dennis Trout’s recent analysis of the poetry has failed to confirm or refute Cameron’s thesis and the verdict is still out. Variables clouding the issue
The traditional state religions of Rome remained active despite imperial patronage of Christians and their sacred sites.\textsuperscript{149} In 357 Constantius II, son and successor to Constantine, paid a much-hyped visit to the city, the pomp and circumstance of which was recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus.\textsuperscript{150} Reigning Emperors had always served as the High Priest or \textit{Pontifex Maximus} of all Roman religions and it was in this capacity that Constantius, a professed Christian, visited the chief temples, authorized the appointment of priests, and granted funds for sacred (pagan) ceremonies. Most famously, however, on this same visit, Constantius authorized the removal of the highly symbolic Altar of Victory from the Senate house where it had stood for over three hundred years. The removal of Victory suggests that Constantius was convinced that it was politically necessary to act in a manner that benefited both Pagan and Christian constituents.

Victory was a winged goddess who held classical symbols of victory—a palm branch and a laurel wreath—in her hands and who was associated with great moments in Roman history (Figure 7). The statue in question entered Rome in 272 BCE as part of the spoils of war following the Republic’s victory over the Hellenistic mercenary Pyrrhus in Tarentum (southern Italy). Augustus installed this prize in the Curia in 29 BCE to commemorate his defeat of Antony and Cleopatra where she remained, a symbol of Roman greatness. Thus, the statue and altar were intimately tied to a proud Roman history. Victory would be returned and exiled several more times under imperial orders from emperors Julian (360-363) and Gratian (367-383).


\textsuperscript{150} Ammianus, \textit{The Later Roman Empire}, XVI.10.
respectively. Gratian took the additional step of withdrawing state subsidies from pagan activities in Rome and this took place during the pontificate of Damasus.\textsuperscript{151}

Members of the senate dispatched an embassy to plead with Gratian to restore both Victory and the state subsidies, but the group was refused an audience (ca. 382).\textsuperscript{152} In 384 the Roman senate authorized then-prefect Symmachus (335-402) to try again, this time they approached Gratian’s successor the young Emperor Valentinian II (371-392). Ambrose, who had taken up the role of spiritual adviser to the emperors, wrote to Valentinian advising the young emperor to follow the examples of his father (Valentinian I) and brother (Gratian). In his epistle Ambrose painted a picture of a senate divided along religious lines and claimed that restoration of the altar would place the “whole number of Christian senators” in danger. He alleged that Christian senators were so fearful of religious persecution that they had approached Damasus declaring their stand against the Altar:

Kind, holy Damasus the Bishop of the Roman church, chosen by the judgment of God, sent me a document which the Christian senators in large numbers had presented, declaring that they gave no commission of the sort, that they did not agree or consent to such petitions of the heathen, and they threatened that they would not come either publicly or privately to the Senate if such a decree was made.\textsuperscript{153}

Ambrose is certainly embellishing his story and dropping names to gain the emperor’s support. While Christian senators likely approached Damasus with their concerns, Ambrose’ larger claim, that persecution was eminent, lacks any other evidence. In fact, Damasus and Symmachus seem

\textsuperscript{151} This claim has been disputed by Rita Lizzi Testa who argues that only the Vestals were affected by Gratian’s actions. The Vestals were targeted for their extensive financial resources. See her arguments at “Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins and Priestly Colleges: Reconsidering the end of Roman Paganism” in Antique Tardive, 15 (Brepols: Brepols Publishing, 2007), 251-262. See also, Cameron, The Last Pagans, 33-51; 341-342.
\textsuperscript{152} Symmachus, \textit{Relatio} 3.2
to have had an amicable relationship for when the Prefect was accused of mistreating Christians, he cited the “praiseworthy bishop” as a witness of his innocence.\textsuperscript{154} The Altar of Victory affair demonstrates a state of religious anxiety negotiated by both Christians and Pagans but it also reveals that such negotiations took place through appropriate administrative channels (prefect and bishop). The Altar of Victory affair is the only evidence of Damasus’ involvement with secular matters including Roman religions. The toughest battles that Damasus faced were against those who called themselves “Christian.”\textsuperscript{155} His solution to these challenges hinged upon increased centralization underneath the umbrella of the Roman papacy.

\textbf{Fending Off Heresy and Schism}

The emancipation and imperial patronage of Christianity was accompanied by rising heretical sectarianism which threatened to dilute the faith by pulling believers toward unorthodox (anti-Nicaean) doctrines. It also emboldened and encouraged would-be leaders (schismatics) to break away from the loose hierarchy of churches within the Christian movement and to pursue their own agendas. Heretical movements generally began in the east and it was in the eastern church that most of the doctrinal battles were waged. As Christianity matured into a global concern, its organizational structure evolved to mimic divisions of the imperial government; that is, the organization was largely divided between the eastern and western regions. As the century progressed, the peoples of each segment of empire grew increasingly distinct and independent from each other. This division is visible in the reluctance of western bishops to travel east despite Basil’s requests, and the west’s poor representation at both the Council of Nicaea (325) and the second so-called ecumenical conference held in Constantinople in 381.

\textsuperscript{154} Symmachus, \textit{Relatio} 21.3.
\textsuperscript{155} Recent scholarship argues that internal threats were more powerful stimulants to Damasus’ behavior than any threat of paganism. Robert R. Chenault, “Beyond Pagans and Christians: Politics and Intra-Christian conflict in the Controversy over the Altar of Victory,” in \textit{Pagans and Christians}, 46-63.
The records show that over the course of his pontificate Damasus issued declarations and took definitive stands across the empire against groups who preached a gospel antithetical to Nicaean Christianity including the Arians, Apollinarians, Sabellians, Macedonians, and Photinians. 156 Briefly, the Apollinarians viewed Jesus as having human body, lower soul (seat of emotions) and a divine mind. The Sabellians argued that the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) were not three persons but three functions of a single deity. Macedonians denied the full personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit, and the Photinians renounced the personhood of the Holy Spirit, viewing it as a celestial virtue. In each instance, charismatic teachers were putting forth positions that denied the full Trinitarian godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The existence of these groups demonstrates that while the role of Christ headlined the Nicean council of 325, the Holy Spirit’s role in the Trinity was equally problematic. The battle for religious correctness caused Damasus to lend his support to episcopal candidates who professed Nicaean orthodoxy in elections at Milan (Ambrose over the Arian Auxentius), Antioch (Paulinus), Alexandria (Peter) and Constantinople.157 But the pontiff’s interference in eastern matters was limited to a few letters written to influence groups toward the conclusions of Nicaea.

Closer to home, schismatics—sects opposed to the central church and its bishop—were the greatest threat. Prominent among these were the supporters of Ursinus, followers of Lucifer, and the rigorist Donatists and Novatianists. Each of these groups claimed their own man to be the “bishop” in Rome.158 These rival ideologies flourished, in part, by taking root in private domestic spaces and in the cemeteries. Harriet O Maier and others argue that it was the presence of these groups that compelled Damasus and his successors “to make the presence of the official

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156 Damasus and the Apollinarians PL 13:348, Theod 5.10. These sects are specifically called out in the proceedings of a Synod in 378 PL 13:356, 357, 575; PL 56:684; Theod. 5.1; see also Reutter, Damase, 368.
157 See Reutter, Damasus, on Damasus and his use of theology to demonstrate his claim to power, 449-450.
church increasingly felt in the more public cemeteries.”  

The works of Damasus in the cemeteries of Agnes and Hippolytus support their assertions.

The CA relates that the followers of Ursinus were in the habit of secretly meeting at the cemetery of Agnes.  

Damasus exerted authority over the tomb of Agnes by installing an epigram that he had composed in honor of the martyr (EP 37).

Legend has it that a short time ago her holy parents reported that,  
When the trumpet had sounded its mournful music,  
The girl Agnes suddenly abandoned her nurse’s lap.  
Willingly she trod under foot the threats and madness of the savage tyrant  
When he wished to burn her noble body with flames.  
Despite her slight strength she vanquished the immense terror  
And set loose her hair to flow over her naked limbs—  
Lest a mortal countenance, doomed to perish, see the temple of the Lord.  
O kindly saint, worthy of my veneration, holy glory of modesty,  
I pray, renowned martyr, that you favor the prayers of Damasus.  

This poem is the only known elogium composed by Damasus for a female martyr suggesting that his consideration of Agnes was out of character for the pontiff and should be construed as an act against the Ursinians. The bishop insinuates himself into the space as a devotee of the martyr, entreated Agnes to intercede for him (“Damasi precibus faveas precor inclyta martyr”). This interference was both personal and professional: not only did he evict his very public enemies from their meeting place but he trumped Ursinian loyalty to the martyr.

Damasus’ actions at the grave of Hippolytus were directed toward the Novationists who frequently congregated at the tomb of their eponymous founder (d. 257) nearby.  

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160 CA 1.12.


162 In particular, Charles Piétri, R. Giordani, and Gabriel Bertonière point to Damasus’ decision to honor the grave of Hippolytus (d. 235) as a bid to draw the Novatianists back into communion beneath the umbrella of the Roman papacy (EP 35). Charles Piétri, “Damasus Évêque de Rome” in Saecularia Damasiana, Studi di Antichità Cristiana,
legalistic sect had tentacles throughout the empire in opposition to the organized church who they claimed were soft on sinners. Novationists refused fellowship with those who were guilty of such sins as adultery, murder, or even entering into a second marriage. It has been suggested that the tomb of Novatian, as well as that of Hippolytus, had also become a “rallying point for his Ursinian and Luciferian opponents.” The Luciferians were strict partisans of Nicaean orthodoxy who disapproved of leaders in the church who refused to take a hard line against Arian Christians. The Luciferian faction in Rome was so disruptive that Damasus turned to Bassus, a secular judge, for help (to no avail) (CA 2.84-85). The record also asserts that Damasus removed Luciferian priest Macarius from the city for assembling without papal consent (CA 2.79-81).

The tomb of Hippolytus would have been hard to miss following Damasus’ renovation and installation of his official *elogium* (EP 35).

Hippolytus, when the tyrant’s commands were bearing down, is said To have steadfastly remained, a presbyter, in the schism of Novatus. At that time when persecution’s sword cut at our mother’s pious innards, When, devoteed to Christ, he sought the realms of the righteous,

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39 (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia Cristiana, 1986), 31-58. For other scholars who support the idea of St. Lawrence as a tool to combat the cult of Hippolytus, see Gabriel Bertonière, *The Cult Center of the Martyr Hippolytus on the Via Tiburtina* (BAR International Series 260, 1985), 26-32. Also, R. Giordani, “Novatiano beatissimo martyri Gaudentius diaconus fecit” *Contributo all’identificazione del martire Novaziano della catacomba anonima sulla Via Tiburtina*, in *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, LXVIII (1992), 233-258. Kate Blair-Dixon, “Damasus and the Fiction of Unity: The Urban Shrines of Saint Laurence” in *Ecclesiae urbis: atti del Congresso internazionale di studi sulle chiese di Roma* (IV-X secolo), Roma, 4-10 settembre 2000, 335-352. Novatianism was born from the Decian persecution (249-250). After the persecution had ended, many of the individuals who had renounced their Christianity to avoid punishment pled to be forgiven and allowed back into the fellowship of the church. Many in the church refused their petitions and refused them re-admittance including the Roman presbyter Novatian and his supporters. This rift persisted into the later fourth century.

Novatianists were followers of the anti-pope Novation (200-258) who lost the election to Cornelius in 251. Their views on the Holy Spirit, as apart from God and Christ, and their determination to have a “pure church” caused them to be considered a heretical group. Cyprian Ep 73,2,1 and Eusebius *History of the Church*, 6-7.


For the appeal of the Luciferian priests Faustinus and Marcellinus to the emperors see CA 2 and 2a (Imperial response).

While the details of Damasus’ decoration here is unknown outside of the epigram installation, a fifth-century inscription credits Damascus with renovation work (ICUR 7.19936). For Hippolytus see Gabriel Bertoniere, *The Cult Center*. 
(and) the people asked where they might be able to assemble,
It is reported that he told all to follow the universal faith.
Having thus confessed, he won the right to be our martyr.
These things, which he heard, Damasus relates; Christ verifies all.\textsuperscript{167}

Damasus presents Hippolytus as a convert to the universal faith ("\textit{catholicam dixisse fidem sequerentur ut omnes}"). These verses specifically highlight the Novatian schism ("\textit{scisma...novati}") and promote Hippolytus as a worthy role model. Once again, Damasus interjects himself marking his information and the space as authorized by none other than Christ himself ("\textit{probat omnia XPS}").\textsuperscript{168}

Visitors to the tombs of Hippolytus and Novatian would have also passed in the shadow of the shrine of Lawrence, Rome’s legendary martyr, whose grand basilica had been funded by the patronage of Emperor Constantine and also by Damasus.\textsuperscript{169} When the late antique poet Prudentius visited Rome in 405 and participated in the martyr festival of Hippolytus he admired the structure: “…there stands close by another church, renowned for its princely decoration…”\textsuperscript{170} Thus, the pilgrimage route navigated by followers of Novatian, devoted enemies of Damasus, was shrouded in the authority of the organized church and the imperial family and their heroes were indirectly invalidated by Damasus, usurped by the shrine to Hippolytus.

The life of Damasus reveals that late-antique Christianity was anything but unified. Damasus navigated challenges of orthodoxy by consistently appealing to the conclusions of

\textsuperscript{167} Translation, Trout, \textit{Damasus}.
\textsuperscript{168} EP 35. Prudentius echoes Damasus’ claim in \textit{Peristephanon} XI.19-39. He goes on to tell a mythical story of Hippolytus’ martyrdom which he claims to have viewed in a painting. Scholars have found no further evidence to commend it (XL.40-124). As Trout notes, Hippolytus and Novatian could not have been contemporaries and Damasus “purposefully overwrote the history of doctrinal strife in the early third-century community with a tale of contrite reintegration.” \textit{Damasus}, 146.
\textsuperscript{169} Sylvester, LP 34.
\textsuperscript{170} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon} XI.215-230 for the full description of the Basilica of Lawrence.
Nicaea. He countered challenges to his authority in Rome by laying claim to the clout of the martyrs. Once established in office, Damasus spent his tenure in the pursuit of Christian unification or concord.

**Concord:** *Concordia Apostolorum*

Material evidence dating from the third through the fifth centuries is witness to a movement commonly called “*concordia apostolorum,*” or harmony of the apostles. This suggests that achieving unity was an ongoing and biblically-driven endeavor.¹⁷¹ Artifacts of embossed gold glass, carved sarcophagi, and frescoes depicting the apostles Peter and Paul positioned side-by-side as role models for peace were produced during this period (Figure 8). Peter and Paul are widely known for their disagreements as recorded in the Christian scriptures. In Acts 15 Peter and Paul each address the Jerusalem council with differing opinions regarding the necessity of circumcision for the Gentile converts. In a similar vein, Paul tells the Galatian Christians that he “opposed him [Peter] to his face” for his different treatment of Jews and Gentiles which Paul calls “hypocritical” (Galatians 2:11-14). In spite of these clashes, Peter and Paul were able to negotiate their differences. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 Peter defends Paul’s writings as writings of Godly wisdom “which ignorant and unstable people distort.”¹⁷² J. M. Huskinson’s research into *concordia apostolorum* in late antiquity notes that images including both Peter and Paul were certainly in production in the third century whether in frescos or on sarcophagi, but the emphasis on peace among fellow apostles and the brotherhood of Peter and Paul assumed its greatest importance from 350 onward, a timetable that fits the episcopacy of Damasus.¹⁷³

¹⁷² All versions of scripture taken from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible unless otherwise noted.
Certainly the theme of concord was popularly recognized by the audiences who visited the catacombs.

Historian of Roman Christianity, Charles Piétri, argues that Damasus had *concordia apostolorum* in mind when he composed no less than seven epigrams dedicated to twinned saints: brothers Felix and Adauctus (EP 7), Nereus and Achilleus (EP 8), Peter and Paul (EP 20), Felicissimus and Agapitus (EP 25), Marcellinus and Peter (EP 28), Felix and Philippus (EP 39), and Protus and Hyacinthus (EP 47). Exigencies of burial may certainly have contributed to the doubling up of honors. Three of the seven twinned commemorations were actual brothers (EP 7, 39, 47). Felix and Philippus (EP 39) were two of Felicitas’ seven sons likely martyred and buried together in the cemetery of Priscilla and it would have been prudent to relate their venerable merits on one epitaph, to honor them together at their tomb. Still, the material evidence and the foundational significance of twinned figures in Roman culture—brothers Romulus and Remus—supports Pietri’s theory that Damasus sought to connect with his audiences using a familiar and accepted motif of brotherly love.

The epigrams of Damasus also support a preoccupation with unanimity. Messages of concord resonate in the epigrams honoring the heroic qualities of peacemaking bishops (Eusebius, EP 18; Hippolytus, EP 35; Marcellus, EP 40). He encourages empathy by his palpable presentation of the humanity (a very relatable quality) of the martyrs: 1) innocence “a guiltless boy (EP 44),” 2) victimhood “through the accusation of another (EP 40),” and 3) the shared “Romanness” of his audience “the singular glory of the Roman people rejoices in them (EP 25).” The appeals of Damasus to the humanity of his audiences helped to personalize the

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174 Felix and Philippus are recorded in the Codex Calendar of 354. Trout tracks down an early fifth-century *passio Felicitas* that describes their murder. Trout, *Damasus*, 157. Their eldest brother Januarius (EP 24) was laid to rest and honored separately in the cemetery of Praetextatus.

encounter, encouraged ties among hearers, and enhanced the memorable aspects of the experience for participants.

**Broadening Episcopal Control**

The result of Damasus’ actions while negotiating secular religions, fending off heresy and schism, and promoting concord was an expanded reach of the episcopate over both the topography and the psyche/intellectual control of Roman Christianity. Scholars have accused him of overreaching. Many view his actions as motivated by self-promotion. J. Guyon argues that Damasus chose martyrs famously patronized by Constantine (Lawrence, Peter, Paul, Sebastian, and Agnes) to elevate himself as leader of Christianity and the office itself to an esteemed position within Roman culture. It seems, however, that Constantine would have left his honorary monuments in the hands of his local representative, the bishop, to oversee and maintain the sites. The LP credits Bishop Sylvester (314-335) with receiving the funds and carrying out the wishes of Constantine. Certainly, the administration and care of these imperially-favored holy sites would have remained in the hands of the local bishop. Further, Damasus did not limit his program to well-known martyrs but also commemorated other lesser-known Christian dead in grand style. Damasus expanded episcopal control over the city to protect the religion from heretical teachers, rivalries among bishops and clergy, and repeated attempts by families and congregations to lay claim to select martyrs (privatization).

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178 LP 34.

Curran’s topographical mapping of Roman Christianity vividly illustrates the influence of local congregations in Christian affairs. The battles between Damasus and the Ursinians were fought at sites associated with previous bishops: the basilica of Julius in Trastevere (337-352), the basilica of Liberius (352-366) on the Esquiline, and the cemetery of Agnes on the Nomentana also associated with Liberius.180 The basilicas served as command centers for the Ursinians and the cemetery of Agnes became their meeting place following the consecration of Damasus. The faction of Damasus met in the church “in Lucinis,” precursor of St. Lawrence in Lucina, near his home.181 The consecration of Damasus was held at the official site of the bishopric, the Lateran. The sequence of events leading up to the accession of Damasus reveal a heightened territoriality among Roman churches which extended into the cemeteries.

Local congregations also played a role in the rise and longevity of schisms and heretical movements in the city.182 Heretical figureheads found sanctuary in homes which also served as meeting places to promote anti-Nicaean doctrine. Privatization of select martyrs were attempts to gain legitimacy and favor within the Christian community. Damasus weakened these claims and marked ecclesiastical control over the martyrs by inserting the official arm of the church at the grave. Curran describes the acts of Damasus as “an appeal for solidarity” which the pontiff achieved by providing Rome’s Christians with “a suburbium populated by the city’s own saints and martyrs.”183 As Figure 1 so vividly demonstrates, the expanse of this suburbium, the extended reach of the episcopal arm, is stunning.

180 Curran, Pagan City, 137-155.
181 CA 1.5.
183 Curran, Pagan City, 154.
Other Considerations and Complaints

The extent of Damasus’ acts begs the question of motive and scholars have assigned several reasons for his accomplishments.\textsuperscript{184} Theories extend beyond charges of self-promotion. Damasus has been condemned as a misogynist whose primary goals included the removal of all women from key roles in both the church and in martyr cult. Nicola Denzey casts Damasus in the role of a villain in her work \textit{The Bone Gatherers}.\textsuperscript{185} She argues that Damasus neglected to venerate women and notes instances in which female martyrs were usurped by male shrines claiming that “Damasus literally reinscribed Christianity with meaning while simultaneously obliterating the role of the women bone gatherers.”\textsuperscript{186} Denzey’s observations that Damasus chose to invest his energy and resources to promote lesser-known male martyrs at the Catacombs of Priscilla (Felix and Philip) and Domitilla (Nereus and Achilleus) while seemingly ignoring the established shrines of Prisca and Petronella are insightful.\textsuperscript{187} Her intense dislike of Damasus, however, who she describes as “history’s bloodiest and most despotic pope,” mars her scholarship as do other proclamations made with no substantive evidence.\textsuperscript{188}

More broadly, Richard Krautheimer (1897-1994) suggested that Damasus’ acts were compelled by a need to “defend the standing of Rome and her church against the claims of the east.”\textsuperscript{189} Fourth-century Rome, the Eternal City, found itself in growing competition with

\textsuperscript{184} While the pursuit of motive is beneficial, it is not the sole focus of this dissertation. This work synthesizes the architectural, anthropological, and historical elements of Damasus’ works to demonstrate their impact upon his contemporaries.


\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 203.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 196-197.

\textsuperscript{188} One particularly declarative paragraph demonstrates Denzey’s writing style: “The Ursinians and other rivals of Damasus despised the pope not so much for those martyrs he promoted, but for those he willfully neglected: Damasus blotted out many of the city’s local martyr traditions. He cannily picked and chose which martyrs had to be venerated following a logic that served his own ends…” (emphasis mine). Denzey includes a rare footnote here but its lone content is a 1910 \textit{History of the Early Church} by L. Duchesne.

Constantinople, the new so-called Christian capital of the eastern half of the empire. Krautheimer suggested that the visibility and material prominence of fourth-century Christian basilicas was a manifestation of anxieties regarding Rome’s increasing loss of status.\(^{190}\) It follows, then, that Damasus’ lavish works were part of this movement. Indeed, the epigrams disclose a degree of uneasiness regarding Christianity’s origins which were firmly planted in the east (Jerusalem). The pontiff acknowledged the eastern origins of several of Rome’s martyrs while claiming them for Rome by the merits of their blood having been shed in the west on behalf of its peoples. The city’s Christian community would have relished such affirmation of Rome’s importance in Christian and world affairs.

While the large basilicas constructed in the cemeteries might have enhanced the visible and material prominence of the city, the major works of Damasus were discreet, largely hidden away beneath the cemeterial monuments of Rome, accessible only to those who chose to submit themselves to the incommodious ordeal. The epigrams, however, do reveal traces of anxiety regarding the east. The most powerful and direct example is found in the following epigram written in honor of the apostles Peter and Paul (EP 20):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{HIC HABITASSE PRIVS SANCTOS COGNOSCERE DEBES} \\
&\text{NOMINA QVISQ(ue) PETRI PARITER PAVLIQ(ue) REQVIRIS.} \\
&\text{DISCIPVLOS ORIENS MISIT, QVOD SPONTE FATEMV;} \\
&\text{SANGVINIS OB MERITVM CHRISTVMQ(ue) PER ASTRA SECVTI} \\
&\text{AETHERIOS PETIERE SINVSA REGNAQVE PIORVM:} \\
&\text{ROMA SVOS POTIVS MERVIT DEFENDERE CIVES.} \\
&\text{HAEC DAMASVS VESTRAS REFERAT NOVA SIDERA LAVDES.}
\end{align*}
\]

Here, you ought to know, first lived the saints,
Whoever seeks the names of Peter and also of Paul.
Disciples, the east sent them, that we freely confess.
But by the merit of their blood they followed Christ through the Heavens
And sought the ethereal shores, the kingdom of the pious.
Rome deserved better to watch over her new citizens.

\(^{190}\) Krautheimer, *Rome*, 40.
Let Damasus relate this as your praise, new stars.\textsuperscript{191}

In this epigram Damasus acknowledges the eastern origins of the apostles but asserts that Christ led his choice apostles to Rome; Rome deserved nothing less. The eastern empire figures into two other epigrams. The epigram that welcomed visitors to the catacomb of Callistus points out that many of the martyrs were “sanctified confessors who were sent to us from Greece” (EP 16). Another honoree, Hermes, is also significant for his Greek origins (EP 48). These epigrams reveal a perceived need to legitimize the Roman church through its connection with the east and to prove its religious foundation to be apostolically ordained. These goals run parallel to the city of Rome’s secular need to bolster its position in world affairs.

\textit{Summary: Damasus and the Late Antique Episcopate}

By the fourth century, the office of Christian bishop had evolved into a centralized authority expected to oversee a hierarchy of churches within a cosmopolitan center. Office holders were elected and charged with protecting the faith. Following the empire’s recognition of Christianity, bishops were important servants of the Emperor who served as liaisons between the empire’s Christian populations and the central government. Churches in four cities were accorded exalted status: Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome and Alexandria. The synod held in Constantinople (381) added the church at Constantinople to this list of notable sees. The Roman bishop was highly respected due to the church’s association with the apostles Peter and Paul who gave their lives to found the Roman church as well as for the city’s long and illustrious heritage. While the role of the episcopate had broadened and conversations regarding universal Roman supremacy were ongoing, Damasus’ actions demonstrate a lack of ambition to lead the whole of Christendom.

\textsuperscript{191} Translation from Curran, \textit{Pagan City}, 152.
Bishop Damasus battled ongoing personal attacks and persistent challenges to the Christian community in the forms of heresy and schism. The Christian sect was fracturing due to self-proclaimed Christian leaders who enticed adherents with new or modified theologies, a plight perhaps exacerbated by an influx of new members who were like “infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). While the New Testament scriptures document competing factions to have always been a part of the Christian movement, dissident sects were seemingly emboldened by their religious freedom in the post-Constantinian church. The sources reveal Damasus to be a staunch Nicaean Christian who stood in the gap against apostate factions; but he was also forced to contend with partisanship among even the more established congregations. The story surrounding his election testifies to the diseased state of the Roman church prior to and during his pontificate.

Damasus taught Nicaean orthodoxy, the importance of concord, and the venerable legacy of Roman Christianity. He called upon his official status in the church to oversee and define correct Christianity through the martyrs in opposition to his rivals and to subvert the rising trend of privatization. His architectural works and epigraphic narratives in honor of the martyrs were effective mechanisms with which to address these challenges. At the same time his architectural and epigrammatic works served to bolster the legitimacy of the city and its church against an increasingly dominant imperial east.

**The Architectural Acts of Damasus**

He built two basilicas: one to St. Laurence [Lawrence] close to the Theatre, and the other on the Via Ardeatina where he is buried. At the Catacombs, the place where lay the bodies of the apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, he <dedicated and> adorned with verses the actual tablet at the place where the holy bodies lay. He
searched for and discovered many bodies of holy martyrs, and also proclaimed their [acts] in verses. (LP 39.2.)

The true legacy of Damasus is found in his extraordinary epitaphs and architectural works. Archeological discoveries in the basilicas, the cemeteries, and the catacombs attributable to Damasus surpass in magnitude the claims of the LP. Damasus’ interest in the martyrs is understandable for he grew up in the aftermath of persecution as the son of a clergyman assigned to the basilica of Lawrence who was arguably Rome’s most celebrated non-apostolic martyr. A strong oral tradition supports the popularity of this martyr, a local deacon under Bishop Sixtus who was killed in the persecutions of Valerian (258). The fantastic details of his death were preserved by both Ambrose (ca. 340-397) in his De officiis (II: 28) and by Prudentius (ca. 348-unknown) in Peristephanon Liber (Hymnus II).193

Lawrence was the perfect patron saint and role model for a Roman bishop, a true Roman vir. The tale as recounted by biographers ascribed the highest Roman virtues to the deacon: virtus (courage and bravery), dignitas (worth, position or rank), gravitas (dignity, importance), and pietas (duty, devotion and loyalty).194 Lawrence’s death was a long and agonizing affair in which the martyr was tied to a grill placed on top of hot coals. Having lain on the grill for some time, Prudentius says that Lawrence called out to his persecutors: “This part of my body has been burned long enough; turn it round.” Once turned, the martyr further mocked his tormentors saying “It is done. Eat it up, try whether it is nicer raw or roasted.” Lawrence’s courage was

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192 Translation Davis, LP 30.
thus touted in life but most vividly in death and such courage was the stuff of which Romans were made.  

Lawrence must have been particularly important to Damasus and his family. Not only did his father serve in a church dedicated to Lawrence but the only certain basilica constructed by Damasus inside the city, known as the Basilica of St. Lawrence in Damasus, was endowed with family riches (EP 57). The pontiff intended this edifice to serve as a papal archive: “For the archives, I confess, I wished to found a new building, to add, as well, columns to the left and right, so that they preserve the proper name of Damasus through the ages.” Romans remembered Lawrence as an effective church administrator who generously and purposefully gave to the needy at the risk of his own life and this made him an effective symbol for an ecclesiastical archive. Damasus also honored this Roman martyr by enhancing the deacon’s cult site outside the walls on the Via Tiburtina.

In choosing St. Lawrence, Damasus aligned himself with a venerated Roman saint. Perhaps Damasus saw this as an antidote to the negative press surrounding his tumultuous ascension to the bishopric. Or, perhaps he sought to make amends, a form of penance, by honoring his childhood hero. The values attributed to Lawrence—a worthy deacon who

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195 This version of the legend is found in Prudentius, Ibid., 397-406.
197 Possible motives for Damasus’ choice of Lawrence have been greatly discussed by scholars and varying arguments have emerged. For more information see P. Künzle, Del cosiddetto “Titulus Archivorum” di Papa Damaso, in Rivista di Storia della chiesa in Italia, VII, (1953), 126. For Ferrua, Intorno ad una dedica damasiana, in Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana, XXIV, (1953), 231-235. G. Scalia, Gli Archiva di papa Damaso e le biblioteche
carried out his role bravely and with dignity, who served his God with devotion and who died courageously—made him a ready role model for emulation. Finally, in honoring Lawrence, Damasus fulfilled his filial duty to honor his ancestor, a particularly Roman act.

Damasus embellished other basilicas inside the city walls, leaving his imprint on the *titulus Fasciolae*, and the basilicas Sta. Pudenziana and St. Clemente. A fifth-century inscription discovered in the church of St. Anastasia, located on a western corner of the Palatine hill, credits Damasus with providing a fresco for the ceiling: “Damasus the priest adorned with the honor of a picture the ceiling to which [this] beautiful mosaic now gives ornament.” These interventions inside the city walls represent swift inroads by the monotheistic Christian God into the central fabric of an ancient city built upon a pantheon of gods and goddesses.

Outside the city’s walls, Damasus’ acts far surpassed the efforts of his predecessors. His program impacted sixteen separate sites spanning the circumference of the city. In the years leading up to 366, Bishops had begun extending the catacombs to accommodate an increased demand for interment close to the martyrs (burial *ad sanctos* and *retro sanctos*). Their interventions were minimal compared to the works of Damasus, whose exertions on behalf of the church made large-scale visitation possible; his embellishments also served to honor the dead with a grandeur befitting the most elite of Roman society. Damasus widened the underground passageways, applied masonry to the dark tufa walls which he then painted white, and increased

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199 Cited and translated by Curran, *Pagan City*, 143. Dielh ILCV, 1782. “Antistes Damasus picturae ornarat honore. Tecta quibus nunc dant pulchra metalla decus.” The inscription was placed in the basilica by Bishop Hilarius (461-467).
the lighting to make the saints more accessible to the people. He used precious marbles, pilasters, arches, architraves, openwork *transennae*, and other special touches in addition to his extraordinary marble placards to highlight the importance of the sites. The spaces were produced with great forethought in order that they might accommodate the epigrams and were linked together in a manner that best communicated the city’s Roman Christian heritage. This premeditation is seen in the design at Callistus where Damasus created a safe and purposeful passageway that directed large groups of visitors efficiently along a one-way route through the catacomb (Figure 4).

Curran describes Damasus’ life’s work as “the most significant contribution to the Christianization [of Rome] in the sense of the attentions paid to the topography of the city in the fourth century.” The sites enhanced and embellished included not only those previously honored and patronized by Constantine and earlier bishops; but Damasus also introduced lesser-known martyrs to the Christian community including Eutychius, a martyr whose body was revealed to the pontiff in a dream: “In sleep inducing darkness, a dream agitates the mind, the hiding place that holds the limbs of the innocent one is revealed” (EP 21). The shrine Damasus created for Eutychius became a Christian cult site in the cemetery of the ex Vigna Chiaraviglio. Other new venues include the shrines to local martyrs Felix and Adauctus buried in the Catacomb of Commodilla near the Va Ostiense, and the cemetery of Mark, Marcellinus and Damasus (mentioned in the

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200 Nicolai Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 176-204. Denzey argues that these acts took the martyrs out of the pious hands of the people (particularly the “bone-gathering” women) to bring them under the complete control of the bishop (Denzey, 200-201). This dissertation asserts that Damasus made the martyrs available to the community-at-large to promote unity within the splintering church.

201 Evidence for specific one-way routing is also attributed to the Cemetery *ad duas lauros* on the Via Labicana to access the shrine to Marcellinus and Peter (EP 29).

202 Curran, *Pagan City*, 142; 151-152.

203 EP 21, Author translation.

204 For Eutychius see Trout, *Damasus*, 124 and Carletti, *Damaso e I martiri*. 
LP) constructed in the region between the Via Appia and the Via Ardeatina where Damasus intended to be buried.\textsuperscript{205}

These works in and outside of the city walls would not have gone unnoticed by Rome’s Christian community. The breadth and depth of the Pontifical Commission’s archeological studies substantiates claims that Damasus was intimately involved in the location, decoration, and validation of the burial sites of Roman martyrs. Pontifical Archeologist Nicolai describes the vast new regions added in the fourth century as follows: “The dimensions of the cubicula in some cases were truly exceptional. Lit by large skylights, these cubicula often assumed complex and spectacular architectural forms, imitative of the architecture of the rich mausolea aboveground.”\textsuperscript{206} The funds necessary to pay the skilled fossores to construct these new regions and to bring to life the designs of Damasus most likely came from the coffers of the Roman elite, more specifically, from the accumulated wealth held at this time by many of Rome’s widows. For this reason his enemies called him “ear tickler of the maidens” (auriscalpius matronarum).\textsuperscript{207} Even Ammianus described with distaste the lifestyle of the city bishops in late antiquity as having been “enriched from the offerings of matrons.”\textsuperscript{208} The evidence confirms that wealthy widows were eager to spend their excess wealth in support of the local bishop and his compelling projects.

\textsuperscript{205} While the LP describes Damasus’ burial in a basilica he constructed on the Via Ardeatina (LP 39.2), the tomb of Damasus has yet to be verified. See Vicenzo Fiocchi Nicolai. “Una Nuova Basilica a Deambulatorio nel comprensario Della Catacombe di S. Callisto a Roma” in \textit{Akten Des XII Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie}. Bonn 22-28 Sept 1991 (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia Cristiana, 1995), 783-784.

\textsuperscript{206} Indeed, some of them were created specifically for the exclusive use of aristocrats such as the Regione di Sotere in the catacomb St. Callistus as discussed in Nicolai, Bisconti, and Mazzoleni. \textit{The Christian Catacombs}, 42.

\textsuperscript{207} “Ear Tickler” CA I.5-6; I.9. For female patronage in late antiquity see Elizabeth Clark, “Patrons, Not Priests: Gender and Power in Late Antique Christianity” in \textit{Gender and History} 2 (1990), 252-264. Also Julia Hillner, “Families, Patronage,” 225-261. For a damning account of Damasus and female patrons see Nicola Denzey, \textit{The Bone Gatherers}, 176-204.

\textsuperscript{208} Ammianus Marcellinus, \textit{Histories}, XXVII 3.14.
Kim Bowes calls Damasus the “first successful fundraiser among the new Christian elite” and asserts that his success lay in offering the wealthy (especially wealthy widows) a “personalized endowment system to which they held the strings.”\textsuperscript{209} His vision must have captivated the imaginations of the many Roman women who opened up their pocketbooks to him. The empowerment of these women on a more public stage than their local neighborhood meeting houses (tituli) not only provided the finances necessary to build Christian monuments but also limited “the financial independence of titular clergy,” the previous beneficiaries of these funds.\textsuperscript{210} No doubt these women were honored to play a role in the monumentalization of the Christian martyrs. The physical interventions they funded provided a direct and tangible link between Roman Christians, their memories, and the presence and power of the martyrs and, by extension, the divine.\textsuperscript{211} While the memory of martyrs Agapitus and Felicissimus (for example) was preserved by their listing in the Depositio Martyrum of the Roman Calendar (Codex 354), the enhanced tomb on the Via Appia gave them accessibility, relevance, and memorability.\textsuperscript{212} The elevated spaces constituted a physical manifestation of the oral narratives which, when authorized and annotated by the epigrammatic messages of Damasus, worked to shape “official” histories of the Roman church.

\textsuperscript{209} Kim Bowes, Private Worship, 70.
\textsuperscript{210} Bowes, Private Worship, 70-71. The term titulus (plural tituli) was the manner in which local Christian meeting sites were identified. “Tituli” is a legal term that refers to the owner’s name which was inscribed upon the structure. These owners were often the donators of these properties. Constantine inaugurated the building of large, public basilicas for Christian purposes but tituli continued their local ministries which over time competed with the desires of the Roman bishop. Titular clergy are those church leaders who served in these local or neighborhood-based churches.
\textsuperscript{211} The power of Early Christian art is discussed by Elsner in “The Role of Early Christian Art,” 71-99. While the catacombs are not traditional works of art, Elsner’s comments are easily applied to them as spatial monuments.
\textsuperscript{212} Agapitus and Felicissimus are marked for annual commemoration on August 8.
The Epigrams of Damasus

The epigrams of Damasus were the pièce de résistance of the crypts. The tone of his letters, his knack for writing poetry, and his very electability to the episcopal see demonstrate that he was classically trained in the Latin language. Jerome credits Damasus with “a splendid talent for composing verses” reporting that his bishop had “published many short compositions in hexameters.”²¹³ (Of course Jerome’s words should be taken with a grain of salt as the bishop was his patron.) Scholars have roundly criticized Damasus’ prose in comparison with classical standards, but today his work is recognized as part of a fourth-century “renaissance” of Latin verse especially tailored to and molded by spatial aesthetics such as the underground tomb.²¹⁴ It was anticipated that the epigrams would be read aloud in typical Roman oratorical fashion. The impact of the epigram on audiences was intensified by the skill of the reader and the physical confines and episcopal design of the catacomb.

Major themes within the epigraphic corpus are, unsurprisingly, theologically centered on the power of Christ, visions of heaven, and reminders of resurrection. Christ is most personal to Damasus. He is the star of the pontiff’s personal epithet (EP 12) and Damasus credits Christ in the dedicatory inscription at the Basilica of St. Damasus (EP 57). Damasus persistently spoke of resurrection and directed his readers’ eyes to heaven in all of the catacomb spaces. A resurrected Adauctus “rushed to heaven, a victor” (EP 7), the deacons of Sixtus “won an aetherial home and the realms of the righteous” (EP 25), and in general “the kingdom of heaven seized their exalted spirits” (EP 16). “The palace of heaven holds” the body of Protus (EP 47), and Christ “will

²¹³ Jerome, De viris, 103. His rather lengthy letter to Eustochium is Ep. 22.22 in the same collection.
come again from heaven” (EP39). Jacques Fontaine notes that late antique Christian inscriptions were “perennial liturgies carved in stone: animated by their authors but also constantly revived by the readers [hearers].”\textsuperscript{215} Thus Damasus anticipated that his words would be unfading and instructive for both contemporary and future generations of Romans. Their permanence meant that each time a pilgrim visited the tomb they would see and hear the words; however, personal application would metamorphose over time as individuals seeking answers for real-world problems would read new nuances in the phrases to accommodate their present needs.

Other pertinent themes within the epigraphic corpus relate to Damasus’ disquietude over the church’s divisiveness and concerns regarding the damage that exile of bishops had caused the community. Indeed, these themes are frequently found together. Exile was often an emperor’s first recourse when divisiveness became violent. Damasus tells us that Bishop Marcellus was exiled by order of the emperor over the “fury…hatred…discord, quarrels, sedition, slaughter” (EP40) that broke out among Christians in Rome. He lauds Marcellus for his truthfulness (\textit{veridicus}) and steadfast endurance of exile. Eusebius is similarly honored (EP 18). Eusebius found himself embroiled in controversy over treatment of the lapsed but endured his exile with joy. Note that these bishops stand in stark opposition to Liberius who recanted Nicaean Christianity while in exile in order to return home and regain the Roman See.

Damasus suggests personal connections to martyrs Eutychius (EP 21), and Marcellinus and Peter (EP 28) introduced above. Eutychius visited the pontiff in a dream which initiated a quest for the martyr’s body: “He is sought; discovered he is venerated; he offers support; he furnishes all things. Damasus has highlighted his merit; you venerate his tomb.” The epigram honoring Marcellinus and Peter tells the tale of a young Damasus who encountered their

executioner. The executioner shares with the boy Damasus how he was commanded to “sever” the necks of the men in a “wild thicket” where the bodies would never be discovered. It is in the tale of Marcellinus and Peter that Damasus reveals the assistance he received from Lucilla who provided a place “to set your most holy limbs.” This gem of evidence provides a brief glimpse into the important roles played by women in the cult of the saints.

Underlying all of these anecdotes was the message that Christianity was a legitimate and venerable Roman religion (*romanitas*). Damasus employed several techniques to attain this goal. First and foremost is his choice to compose the epitaphs solely in the Latin language, Rome’s mother tongue. Second, Damasus incorporated well-worn words, phrases, and metrical styles from popular classical literature in service of the martyrs. Third, the epigrams were set out in imperially-styled cenotaphs symbolic of an established authority. Finally, Damasus crafted the narratives surrounding the martyrs by saturating them with word-pictures of Roman triumph. These techniques cast Christianity into a familiar, and somewhat comfortable, Roman framework. Damasus spoke the language of his audience. The following discussion focuses on the poems as literary vehicles. Keep in mind that despite the skill with which the epigrams were crafted, their effectiveness was greatly enhanced by their physical placement in the catacombs and by the oratorical skill of the reader.

The Latin Language

Damasus’ most salient choice in this process was the decision to write the epitaphs exclusively in the Latin language. In choosing Latin, Damasus broke from the Roman church’s traditional practice of using Greek for ecclesiastical markers—the language of the apostle Paul, early bishops and martyrs, the language of the Septuagint, many New Testament authors, and the language of the major ecumenical councils. Maura Lafferty views this as one way that Damasus
promoted Christian *romanitas* for it “allowed Damasus to identify his church with traditional
Roman culture, to appropriate its values and prestige, and to claim a share in the aristocratic life
of the city for the rulers of the Roman church.”

For any new collective identity to envelope
the city’s Christian population it would necessarily be framed within the Latin tongue. Latin was
familiar, approachable, and accessible. It “sounded” like Rome, it “looked” like Rome and it
“reverberated” with quintessential Roman pride.

Scholars debate the substantive role played by Damasus in the Latinization of the western
liturgy. Massey Shepherd credits Damasus with Latin liturgical rites based upon the LP’s
assertion that it was Damasus who ordered that “the psalms should be sung day and night.” He also points to the influence that Damasus’ poetry had on his near-contemporary Prudentius in
the *Peristephanon*. Alternately, Jaś Elsner argues that Christian elements were being
commissioned by and for elite Romans in Latin prior to the pontificate of Damasus. Elsner cites
the *Codex Calendar of 354* and the sarcophagus of Junius Bassius (d. 359) as evidence of this
trend. He asserts that Christians were already applying *romanitas* to the religion and, therefore, a
Latin liturgy was most likely already an independently established practice in the city.

Whatever the origins of the Latin rites, Damasus’ inscriptions and his commission of Jerome to
reproduce the gospels in Latin attest that Roman Christians preferred their vulgar tongue to
Greek and he intended to accommodate their desire.

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218 LP 39.5.
219 Elsner, “The Role of Early Christian Art,” 71-99. The Bassus sarcophagus was created for a high-ranking Roman Senator, Prefect and Christian. It is adorned with contrasting scenes, both pagan and Christian, and represents Christian attempts toward *romanitas* prior to the reign of Damasus.
Co-opting the Classics

Damasus incorporated in his Latin epigrams well-known elements of Roman literature to further capture the minds of his audiences.\(^{220}\) Trout views this practice as an attempt to Christianize the Roman aristocracy by crafting verses “that might be aesthetically acceptable and conceptually challenging to Rome’s Christianizing elite.”\(^{221}\) Fontaine maintains that adopting elements from Roman epic permitted Damasus to create Christian heroes of the martyrs in the vein of Rome’s heroic past.\(^{222}\) The most frequently copied works were authored by Vergil. Vergil’s epic tale the *Aenead* which tells of the (mythical) founding of Rome was standard reading for Latin learners; its stories were well known among literate and illiterate alike. Damasus largely followed Vergil’s rhythmic pattern, dactylic hexameters (or “heroic verse”), where the first syllable of each line is read as long followed by two short syllables:

\[
_\text{uu } _\text{uu } _\text{uu } _\text{uu } _\text{uu } _\text{uu }
\]

Like a popular melody, this meter was familiar to the Romans who would have been able to follow the lector with ease even to anticipate the next inflection. Roman intimacy with the movement in heroic verse would have also enhanced their responses to key moments in the epigram and, as Fontaine noted, the frequent coincidence of syntax and hexameter between Damasus’ works and his classical predecessors would have resulted in a rhythmic pattern helpful in memorization.\(^{224}\)

Fontaine demonstrated the breadth of narrative movement accomplished by Damasus in the *elogium* to Eutychius (EP 21). In this poem the meter accelerates, and tension builds as the

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\(^{221}\) Trout, “Invention,” 521-522.

\(^{222}\) Fontaine, “Damase poete Theodosien,” 138.


\(^{224}\) Fontaine, “Damase poete Theodosien,” 138.
severity of the persecutions increases: broken pottery “testarum fragmenta” forestalls sleep, hunger pains increase with the denial of food “alimenta negantur,” fear and despair climaxes in the depths of the dark dungeon “mittitur in barathrum,” the body covered in blood from his wounds mark certain death “omnia sanguis vulnera quae intulerat morits metuenda potestas.” This barrage of escalating punishment ends abruptly with a scene of sleep-bringing night “nocte soporifera,” temporary relief for the hearer before the drama crescendos again as Damasus seeks the body, locates its hiding place, and provides the shrine for proper veneration of the saint. The poem ends with a command to venerate his tomb “venerare sepulchrum.”

In addition to meter and a powerful vocabulary, Damasus composed some of his works in a style that Latin scholar Michael Roberts calls “the jeweled style.” Nearly a decade after Fontaine, Roberts recognized that late antique Latin writers favored an approach to writing whose origins are found in a classical oratory technique known as ekphrasis. This rhetorical device sprinkles a text with brilliant gemstones (words) strategically manipulated and juxtaposed by the poet to achieve the greatest impact upon his audience (hearers) using a minimum of words. The jewels do not tell the entire narrative rather their evocative meanings impress key images upon the mind of the hearer making the message more vivid, memorable, and meaningful. Roberts’ work did not speak to Damasus directly, but the jeweled style appears in several of the epigrams to convey an otherwise lengthy narrative in only a few short lines of prose.

One example of Damasus’ implementation of the jeweled style is the elogium of Pope Marcellus (EP 40). In this work Damasus describes mounting civil unrest as follows:

HINC FUROR HINC ODIAM SEQUITUR, DISCORDIA LITES
SEDITIO, CADES, SOLVUNTUR FOEDERA PACIS

Hence fury, hence hatred follow, discord, quarrels,  
Sedition, slaughter, the bonds of peace dissolve.\textsuperscript{226}

These few words paint a panorama of increasingly heinous actions and reactions from anger to murder to the complete societal dysfunction. The vivid vocabulary read with rhetorical flourish would further incite a physiological response in the hearer. While Fontaine contributed great insight into the meter and powerful word choices employed by Damasus, Roberts’ further refinement of the jeweled style permits an enhanced grasp of the poetry’s impact on the human senses essential to this dissertation. The epigrammatic poetry of Damasus must be considered as oratory.

Damasus composed poetry using the metrical conventions of the Roman classics and a powerful vocabulary artfully arranged to encourage audience participation in the shrines. He further engaged the pilgrims by incorporating excerpts, clauses, and word combinations familiar and recognizable to the average Roman in order to provoke cognitive bonding with the martyr’s story. Reutter demonstrates how the pontiff echoed earlier poets by using phrases in a manner that both subverted and recalled the original context. For example, she points to Damasus’ use of the phrase \textit{vincula rupi} (I broke the chains, EP 59) also used by Vergil in the \textit{Aenead} to describe escape from death (\textit{Aenead} 2.134; 12.30) and \textit{carnificumq(ue) vias…mille nocendi}” and (executioners with a thousand ways of doing harm, EP 21) and “\textit{felle veneni}” (vials of poison, EP 46) to stimulate the hearers to the severity and widespread possibilities of severe punishment (\textit{Aen.} 7.338ff; \textit{Aen.} 12.857).\textsuperscript{227} The phrase \textit{cineres adque ossa} (ashes and bones) in EP 3 provoked reminders of a plundered Troy (\textit{Aen.} 5.787). These uses of Vergilian phrase were

\textsuperscript{226} EP 40. Translation, Trout, \textit{Damasus}.  
\textsuperscript{227} Reutter, \textit{Damasus}, 148-162.
made more effective when they reappeared in the same position in Damasus’ hexameters as they appeared in Vergil such as the phrase “ex hoste tropaeum” (in EP 15.4, 60b.11, 59.2) which was placed in the same line position as it appeared in Vergil’s Georgics 3.32. Only once did Damasus borrow an entire line from Vergil: “Non haec humanis opibus, non arte magistra…” (EP 4.)\textsuperscript{228} Here, as in all other cases, Damasus co-opted Vergil’s line regarding the power of the gods (Venus, Aen. 12,427) to demonstrate the power and authority of Christ (Matthew 16).

The poetry presents Christian content in secular terms. For example, the Aeneid states that the gods grant the reward of life (di...praemia reddant) while Damasus supplant’s Vergil’s gods with Christ (Christus, reddit qui praemia vitae) (EP 17). Both the heroes of Vergil and the martyrs carry their trophies (ex hoste tropaea) (Georgics 3.32; EP 16). The gods of Vergil and Ovid dwell in “regia caeli” (Vergil, Aen. 7.209-210; Ovid Metamorphosis 1.257, 1.198) which is also the dwelling place of the martyrs (EP 16, 25, 47). Reutter states “it is clear that Christian ideas can be imperial-Roman concepts. The view that the soul of the martyrs comes directly into heaven by the merit of their martyrdom is clothed in the language and thought-world of the pagan poets.”\textsuperscript{229} Damasus reveals himself to be a dyed-in-the wool Roman steeped in the classical culture of his day. His work discloses a preoccupation with the classical works of Vergil, the Aeneid in particular, but scholars have also identified allusions to other authors in the corpus of Damasus’ writings.\textsuperscript{230} Like any good storyteller, he communicated his Christian

\textsuperscript{228} Translation, author. The full phrase as used by Damasus in EP 4 is “Non haec humanis opibus, non arte magistra sed prestante petro cui tradita ianua caeli est, antistes Christi conposuit Damasus” (Not by human power, not by a master’s skill…but on account of Peter…to whom heaven’s door was entrusted, Damasus, bishop of Christ, arranged these things.”

\textsuperscript{229} Reutter, Damasus, 155-157.

\textsuperscript{230} Trout, Damasus; Reutter, Damasus Bischof; and Fontaine “Damase poete Theodosien” each demonstrate many instances within the epigrams in which Damasus’ echoed earlier poets with phrases that both subverted and recalled the original context.
message to the people using examples that would resound with Roman audiences in some meaningful or emotional way.

Physical Presentation

Damasus presented the Latin verses to his audience on imperially-inspired marble tablets in line with cultural norms of his day. The epigrams were visually stimulating and no expense was spared. In addition to the costly blocks of marble, Damasus commissioned the talented artisan Furius Dionysius Philocalus to carve his messages using a new *romano-episcopo* font seemingly developed for this purpose. This new script exuded familiarity and authority by mimicking the imperial font. The distinctive touches added by Damasus (in particular the curved and sometimes undulant serifs) did not detract from its “Romanness” but made it a script unique to Rome’s Christian community (Figure 9).

The epigraphic markers represented a time-intensive and costly commission, the type of activity associated with prestige and honor enjoyed by the Roman elite. The inclusion of Damasus’ name as Roman bishop advertised his patronage of the martyrs and aligned the site under the authority of the Roman church hierarchy in opposition to attempts of privatization by families and certain congregations. The late antique Latin verses written in classical style, imprinted in Roman font, marking a Roman hero in the name of an elite patron tied and elevated Christianity visually and intellectually with all that it meant to be Roman (*romanitas*).

Triumph

Finally, one of the most powerful marks of Damasian verse is Christian martyrdom cast in the cinematic glory of Rome’s venerable tradition of triumph. Triumph was a city-wide celebration held to honor victorious generals and emperors and which promoted patriotism among the citizens. Festivities included a parade of victors followed by religious sacrifices,
athletic contests, and distribution of gifts to the general population. Damasus incorporated symbolism of this popular cultural event in thirteen of his epigrams. He colored the martyrs as victors processing to their heavenly reward in triumphal procession (triumphos), carrying their awards (trophies (tropaeum) and wearing honorary crowns (coronam). Symbols of triumph enabled the pontiff to position Christian heroes within the framework of Roman culture (romanitas).

The epigrams reflect both parts of Damasus’ heritage—Roman and Christian. The epigrams of Damasus and many of the artifacts that once filled the catacombs now reside in locations such as the Vatican’s Pio Christian Museum and lapidary, where they have been placed for safekeeping. In 2009, during the initial stages of research, I diligently examined every inscription that I encountered, careful lest I miss even one of Damasus’ works. I need not have worried, however, for the tablets of Damasus were immediately evident, even within a large room littered with a sizeable collection of marble tablets. The precise engravings in the neo-episcopal font—the quality of present-day laser-cut stone—and their extreme size caused them to stand out (Figures 9 and 10).

In spite of my modern sensibilities, these “billboards” stood out as important messages from the past. Their impact on fourth-century pilgrims would have exceeded my limited appreciation for the epigrams, however, for Damasus tailored them for his fellow Romans. The marble placards exuded authority and demanded attention in the Roman tradition, the narrative was presented in the native tongue and in the popular literary style of Vergil, and the tale they communicated incorporated celebrated themes of Roman culture such as triumph in the service of teaching theological precepts and ecclesiastical exhortations.
Summary

Damasus was both a Roman and a Christian. He grew up in a Roman Christian household and, as the son of a clergyman, was privy to the function and dysfunction of the church. These experiences made him sensitive to issues of exile, orthodoxy, and enmity within and among Christian congregations. The Roman Christianity of his day was far from idyllic for, as Trout points out, the late antique sources and epigrams reveal traces of “deeper levels of doctrinal discord and neighborhood divisions within Rome’s Christian communities, lay and clerical, fractures far more complex than the electoral schism that dominates accounts of the years 366 and 367.” His contemporary detractors painted him as a ruthless man with friends in all of the worst kinds of places. Yet their testimony reveals that Damasus’ supporters spanned the length and breadth of Roman society.

Intimate moments of Damasus’ life are visible in the family epitaphs, a few extant letters exchanged between Damasus and Jerome in the final years of his pontificate (381-384), and clues are also found in Jerome’s writings. These two Roman males developed an amicable and enduring relationship based upon their mutual love of Christian scriptures. Damasus chided Jerome for failing to respond to questions regarding the five questions of Ambrosiaster: “The letter carrier came back to me yesterday and has no letters from you.” He enjoyed Jerome’s collegiality, “I truly believe that there are no conversations more worthwhile than our debates.”

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231 Trout, Damasus, 9.
232 Damasus’ Ep. 35, 36 (CSEL vol. 54, 265, 1-267, 13 Hilberg). Author translation. Letters between Jerome and Damasus have been preserved in PL 13 Ep. 8, 9; Jerome Ep. 18-21. Other Extant letters of Damasus to Jerome are Ep. 19 in which Damasus asks for an explanation of the word “hosanna” (Patrologia Latina, Ep. VIII; CSEL vol. 54, 103, 6-104, 3 Hilberg). For a discussion of Damasus and Ambrosiaster see Andrew Cain’s “In Ambrosiaster’s Shadow: A Critical Reevaluation of the Last Surviving Letter Exchange between Pope Damasus and Jerome” in Revue d’u’etudes augustiniennes et patristiques vol. 51, no. 2 (2005). Also see Pierre Nautin, “Le premier Echange epistolaire entre Jerome et Damase,” FZPhh 30 (1983), 331-334. There are no extant letters from Damasus requesting Jerome’s expository of Isaiah’s vision (Ep. 18) or his thoughts on the parable of the prodigal son (Ep. 21) but Jerome’s responses indicate that additional discussions were waged between the two. Jerome’s other responses can be found in Principal Works Ep. 20 (hosanna) and Ep. 36 (five questions).
For his part Jerome dedicated his translation of Origen’s two homilies on the *Song of Songs* to Damasus and acknowledged Damasus in his preface to the vulgate gospels.

Jerome was not hesitant to divulge his relationship with Damasus to others in letters to women such as the Roman widows Ageruchia and Asella. In the process he provides us with a glimpse into the daily life of the late antique episcopal court. Jerome described how he had assisted Damasus with “his ecclesiastical correspondence…writing his answers to the questions referred to him by the councils of the east and west…” He considered himself to be indispensable to Damasus as he shared in an epistle to Asella written after Damasus’ death: “My words were always on the lips (mouth) of Damasus of blessed memory” (*beatae memoriae Damasi os meus sermo erat*). The fact that Damasus held the bishopric of Rome, a powerful and influential position in fourth-century Roman society, necessitates that scholars exercise caution in relation to Jerome’s claims; nevertheless, Damasus commissioned Jerome to translate the Greek gospels into contemporary Latin and this suggests that the Christian leader trusted and valued Jerome’s scholarly abilities.

As bishop of Rome, Damasus recognized the primacy of the Eternal City but stopped short of acting as supreme pontiff, preferring to remain at a distance from eastern controversies, and concentrating his energies at home. His standard response to queries from both east and west was to point inquirers to the authority of Nicaea. The greatest challenges he faced were internal to the Christian community of Rome. He persistently stood his ground against heretical

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233 Jerome, Ep. CXXIII.10. Online at CCEL.
235 Jerome’s dedication to Damasus in the translation of Origen’s two homilies on the *Song of Songs* can be found in *Principle Works* 897. Jerome also dedicates his vulgate translation of the four gospels to Damasus. *Principle Works*, 902-904. For more on Jerome, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1974).
movements and schismatic groups. These were the challenges that fueled his works in the catacombs, the church needed to be restored to unity, and the martyrs provided common ground.

The architectural works of Damasus made the catacombs accessible to the people regardless of social status, neighborhood affiliation, or theological leanings. This new built environment publicized and advanced the martyrs who were part and parcel of Rome’s Christian past. The late antique bishop’s modern-day accusers deride his works as self-aggrandizing and chauvinistic, or attach a civic motivation to them. Any criticism is largely due to the pontiff’s use of his office to claim authority over the martyrs. But Damasus can also be construed as an inclusive leader who extricated Christianity from the increasingly divisive acts of neighborhood privatization to level the playing field and ensure that the martyrs were accessible to all.

Damasus’ material contributions were significant. If his earliest supporters were of the plebeian variety (“gladiators, charioteers, gravediggers (fossores), and all the clergy”), his later friends included wealthy Roman matrons who are thought to have financed his vast renovations.236 His works established the official narrative of the early Christian community which he presented in the native tongue using popular literary models saturated with cultural imagery and delivered with rhetorical flourish. In all, Damasus communicated a Christian message to the people using language and examples that resounded with Roman audiences in a meaningful and emotional way.

The catacomb monuments made access to the holy dead possible but a visit to the grave still required considerable effort by the pilgrim. Even today, despite the modern luxury of Rome’s busses (which are only sometimes air-conditioned), reaching the catacombs requires

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236 CA, CSEL, 35.1.7: “tunc Damasus cum perfidis inuitat arenarios quadrigarios et fossores omnemque clerum cum securibus gladiis et fustibus et obseedit basilicam….et graue proelium concitauit. Nam effractis foribus igneque subposito adytum. Unde inrumperet, exquirebat…tunc universi Damasiani irruentes in basilicam centum sexaginta de plebe tam viros quam mulieres occiderunt…” Author translation.
advanced planning and a careful mapping of the journey. Several of the sites, such as the
catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus, are a significant distance from the center of town and would
certainly have required a full day to visit for a fourth century family. The faith and passion of
Rome’s Christians compelled them to undertake the onerous journey outside the city walls and to
overcome the trepidation associated with the catacombs. Audiences did visit the tombs and read
the verses of Damasus. Jerome exhorted the young Christian recluse Eustochium to read “the
writings of Pope Damasus in prose and verse (opus geminatum)” a suggestion which implies that
the epigrams were truly accessible and useful for instruction.

The acts of Damasus influenced others to commemorate the martyrs in verse. Prudentius
was inspired by his visit to Rome in 405 to write about his experiences in what is known as the
Peristephanon Liber (On the Crowns of the Martyrs). His pilgrimage took him to several
Damasian sites inspiring him to write the hymn to Lawrence mentioned above (PS II), to
compose a letter home to Bishop Valerian relating the passion of Hippolytus (PS XI), and to
preserve the passions of the apostles Peter and Paul (PS XII), and Agnes (PS XIV).²³⁷ An
epigram written by Damasus and installed in a church in the Italian village of Nola influenced his
younger contemporary Bishop Paulinus of Nola, to establish a shrine to the city’s miracle-
working priest who had survived imprisonment in the persecutions of Decius in the 250s (EP
59).²³⁸ Damasus’ epitaphs also served as models for other would-be poets. For example, Trout
describes how the authors of an epitaph honoring Bassa (late fourth century) pulled words,

²³⁷ Fontaine draws attention to Damasus’ influence on the tradition and practice of Christian poetry in the west in
Les poèmes épigraphiques, 111-125. See also Anne-Marie Palmer Prudentius on the Martyrs (Oxford: Clarendon
²³⁸ Ferrua, EP 59. As mentioned in Dennis Trout, Paulinus of Nola (Berkeley: University of California Press,
1999), 43. Also see T. Lehmann, “Eine späantike Inschriftenammlung und der Besuch des Päpsten Damasus an
der Pilgerstätte des H1. Felix in Cimitile/Nola,” Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 91 (1992), 243-81. Also
found as part of the Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses für christliche Archäologie (Rome and Münster,
1995), 969-81.
phrases, and metrical conventions from the epigrams and pieced them together to create the
young wife’s epitaph. An epitaph for Eric, composed in the eighth-century at Trier, was
copied from Damasus’ autobiographical epitaph. Indeed, many epigrammatic details of
Damasus are known due to their inclusion in early medieval manuscripts from the seventh and
eighth centuries—Anglo Saxon and Carolingian.

In the Carolingian era (ca. 751) and into the later medieval period Damasus became a
celebrated bishop. Historian Maya Maskarinec writes that vita of Damasus began appearing
from the eleventh century on extolling his sanctity and crediting him with miracles. In
general, the Carolingians had an affinity for everything Roman, from basilicas constructed
according to fourth-century Roman prototypes, to cooption of Roman liturgy, and the transfer of
Roman relics. Krautheimer noted that “among the relics deposited at Fulda between 790-819, at
least half came from Rome” and, as Historian Lynda Coon recognized, these Roman relics were
housed in “newly constructed crypts” which linked “the abbey with the subterranean spaces of
the Roman catacombs.” Carolingian Abbot, poet and Christian exegete Hrabanus Maurus
(780-856) knew of Damasus’ works and the visual aspects of his poetry calls to mind the carved
epigrams of the catacombs. One has to wonder if the tower reliquary constructed by Hrabanus at

239 Dennis Trout, “Borrowed Verse and Broken Narrative: Agency, Identity and the (Bethesda) Sacrophagus of
Bassa” in Life Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi, Jas Elsner and Janet Huskinson
eds. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 337-358, esp. 344-347.
240 Ferrua 12.1; ICUR 10.26653. Trout, Damasus, 106
241 For a concise but informative overview of the manuscript tradition see Trout, Damasus, 63-65.
242 Maya Maskarinec, “The Carolingian Afterlife of the Damasian Inscriptions” in Early Medieval Europe, 23 (92)
(Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 129-160. For medieval vita of Damasus, 155. Texts of the vita see Martius
Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania
Fulda to house the Roman martyrs, complete with commemorative poems, were not inspired by Damasus. 244

A journal article by Maskarinec lays out the extraordinary honor the Caroligian scholars and their successors attributed to Damasus’ works. 245 First, Damasus’ verses were used in travel guides to aid the pilgrims in navigating the city and surrounds as “markers of sanctity,” not to be missed. 246 The marble inscriptions were also a tool used by authors to communicate the city’s monumentality to those who had not been able to see the eternal city for themselves. Second, Damasus’ poetry and script were valued by Carolingian scholars as a model for their classical literary style, particularly for his ability to bridge the treacherous gap between the classical (pagan) and Christian pasts. Many Carolingian inscriptions incorporated phrases copied from or inspired by Damasian verse. The prominent Abbot of Fulda known as Eigil (812-822) famously incorporated verses from Damasus’ works for his own epitaph. 247 Finally, Damasus was regarded in the medieval period as a “trusted mediator, whose commemoration of the saints could provide medieval audiences with a secure bridge to the distant past of the Christian persecutions.” 248 The Carolingians relied so fully upon the authenticity and accuracy of Damasus’ works that three-fourths of the saints honored by the bishop have feast days included in the tenth-century Gregorian Sacramentary. 249

244 Coon, Dark Age Bodies, 33-34.
246 Maskarinec provides a complete listing of manuscripts including travel itineraries that featured the epigrams, 134-136.
248 Ibid., 130.
249 Ibid., 146. The epigram in honor of the Apostle Paul (EP 1) was placed in copies of the scriptures as a preface to the letters of Paul. Maskarinec counts at least ten manuscripts dating from the eighth through the ninth centuries “and many more from the subsequent centuries” that include this poem. See Maskarinec, 141.
The one-way route at Callistus examined in this work is an invaluable opportunity to gaze into the world of late antique Roman Christianity. An interrogation of the space exposes all manner of individuals spanning the social strata of late antique Rome. The life of Damasus frames this creation and aids in a reading of it. The bishop confronted his audiences with lingering memories of pre-Constantinian persecutions and the heavy cost of heresies and schisms. He reminded audiences of their faith, their religious forbearers, and their religious training. Damasus demonstrated Christianity as legitimately connected to a venerable legacy with an emphasis on its Roman and Christian markers. Apprehending Damasus permits us to read his works actively and accurately. Comprehending his works reveals his community. The process followed in this dissertation permits us to access this and other late antique Christian sites. The following chapter turns to a variety of theories and scholarly works necessary to temper modern sensibilities in order that we might grasp the personal and group visceral experiences within the late antique catacombs.
CHAPTER 2
HUMAN SENSING AND SPATIAL AWARENESS: BODIES IN THE CATACOMBS

Humans experience the world through their senses, gathering and assembling sensory input through their eyes, ears, noses, fingertips and tongues. The vibrant red and orange hues in autumn, the cacophony of songbirds, the smell of roasted meat, the smoothness of a river stone, the sweet taste of honey; these encounters would be lost outside of sensory perception. To comprehend the significance of the catacombs for a late-antique audience it is necessary, therefore, to understand the catacomb environment and to uncover elements most likely to impact human senses.\(^{250}\) Roman Christians lived in proximity to the graves of the martyrs, but they desired to apprehend the dead for themselves; the graffiti alone is evidence of the hunger to connect with the divine, to go beyond the narrative and the mediation of the priest. Damasus facilitated access to the dead and his interventions stimulated late-antique Roman senses toward such a connection. Peter Brown calls this “spectaculum” or the ability to sense God, where viewers are “drawn by the deeper imaginative logic of the occasion to participate in the glory of the martyrs.”\(^{251}\) The extraordinary environment of Damasus’ Christian monuments facilitated the “deeper imaginative logic” necessary for *spectaculum* by supplying multisensory stimulants.


\(^{251}\) Peter Brown, “Enjoying the Saints,” 7.
to physically and cognitively guide audiences to the holy. An applied sensory reading of the catacombs activates the space making the experience palpable and alive.

Uncovering the organic nature of human experience in its infinite diversity is a daunting exercise and is not without limitations. Critics of sensory analysis cite the diversity of human experiences—ages, genders, and cultures—as a primary roadblock to an accurate reading of ancient societies. Proponents acknowledge the need to “pay attention to the nuances of sensory perception and experience created by different bodies, cultural norms and memory;” but they assert that by relating phenomenological responses of the body to sensory artifacts—objects, buildings and spaces—it becomes “possible to characterize the interrelationships of people, structures and objects within specific locales and moving between places.”252 Certain fundamental precepts of the human condition permit us to recognize and evaluate the impact of the late antique martyr festival experience on late-antique participant bodies. These include the acknowledged universality of the human body and its sensory response to external stimuli, the affective influence of monumental spaces (sensory artifacts), and the phenomenon of collective memory. Damasus created monumental spaces within the inherently phenomenological landscapes of the catacombs to stimulate the senses of audiences toward touching the holy and to encourage collective memory. Recreating the monument of Callistus and interpreting the space with a sensory focus provides indispensable insights into the fourth century experience.

**Late-Antique Understanding of Human Sensing**

The ancients viewed sensing as corporeal contact. For example, they considered seeing to be a physical process in which virtual contact took place between one’s eye and the object or

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252 Quotes, Betts, “Introduction” *Senses of the Empire*, 3.
objects being viewed. The Greek scientific explanation for sight, accepted by the Romans, consisted of two major theories. Proponents of “intromission” theory argued that seeing occurred because objects continuously emitted images that made contact with the eye. The image entered the eye and was simulated there with the eye acting as a mirror. Those who advocated “extramission” theory contended that the eye was not a passive mirror but an active lamp that emitted rays which reached out and touched the object being seen. Regardless of whether the eye was active or passive, the senses of sight and touch were convergent. To see a flower was to touch the flower and, conversely, to touch a flower was to see the flower. Hearing, too, was considered a physical act. Greek philosophers taught that hearing came about as air, produced by the movement of solid objects, traveled to strike the ear where it resonated to be registered by the brain. The sense of smell was also physical with the odor “touching” the olfactory receptors in the nose. Taste necessarily requires food or drink to touch the tongue. The ancients practiced a hierarchy of the senses favoring sight and sound above the baser senses of smell, taste while touch is implicated in each process. Late antique pilgrims would have been touched bodily by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches encountered along the catacomb route.

Human sensing is so intimate and ubiquitous that the senses naturally lend themselves to the task of communicating difficult subjects or contexts. What audiences perceived would have

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also been read symbolically. Indeed, Professor of Religious Studies David Chidester has demonstrated that religious symbols are grounded in the senses, particularly the senses of sight and hearing.\textsuperscript{256} For example, Christianity is structured around the symbols of word (hearing) and light (sight). God’s voice speaks light into existence (Gen 1:3), Moses experiences God’s voice from within the fire of the burning bush (Ex 3), and Jesus is called the word of God, the light of the world (John 1:1-5). In these examples, seeing and hearing converge symbolically to describe precepts and concepts of truth-claims regarding the Divine.\textsuperscript{257} Hebrew and Christian texts and Christian leaders commonly applied the various senses in their teachings. The Psalmist praised God by exhorting his readers to “taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).” Paul described his missionary role through the imagery of triumphal procession in which “the aroma of the knowledge of Christ” is spread.\textsuperscript{258} In late antiquity, Origen (d. 254) defended Christianity’s allusion to the senses for religious purposes arguing that the senses were the first means of obtaining knowledge.\textsuperscript{259} In his \textit{Confessions}, Augustine battled with himself over the senses as one who struggled with the temptations they offered. In the end, however, he applied each of the senses to knowledge of God:

\begin{quote}
You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.\textsuperscript{260}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{256} Chidester, \textit{Word and Light}, 22.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{258} 2 Corinthians 2:14.
\textsuperscript{259} Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum} 7.37-38. Of course anxious Christian leaders also viewed the senses as a threat to moral order. Augustine, whose \textit{Confessions} are replete with angst over the power his human senses exerted over him lamented “But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and it not patiently content to be in a subordinate place.” Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 10.33.49. In this work I am only concerned with the communication properties of the senses as experienced in the catacombs.
\end{flushright}
Cyril of Jerusalem (315-387) taught his congregation about the deep symbolism inherent in the practice of chrismation (application of perfumed oil after baptism) by associating the sequence of chrismation events with parts of the body and their sensory functions:

And you were first anointed on the forehead, that you might be delivered from the shame, which the first man who transgressed bore about with him everywhere; and that ‘with unveiled face ye might reflect as a mirror the glory of the Lord’. Then on your ears; that you might receive the ears which are quick to hear the Divine Mysteries, of which Esaias said, ‘The Lord gave me also an ear to hear’; and the Lord Jesus in the Gospel, ‘He that has ears to hear let him hear’. Then on the nostrils; that receiving the sacred ointment ye may say, ‘We are to God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved’. 261

Thus, Damasus’ audience was adept at handling sensory language and imagery to more fully comprehend and perpetuate information; it is no surprise that he used sensory imagery in his epigrams to further stimulate his audiences. In the Elogium to Agnes (EP 37), Damasus pricked the ears of those present to hear “when the trumpet had brayed its mournful songs” ("cum lugubres cantus tuba concrepuisset"). Concrepuisset has the sense of crashing, clashing or rattling, a jolting or jarring sound as opposed to a sweet melody. He also exhorts them to see (videre) her virgin body, her loose hair ("profusum crinem") and naked limbs ("nudaque….membra"). Profusum (profundo) has a connotation of pouring out, in this case a young maiden’s hair cascading down over to touch her nude body. Damasus called upon audiences to use their senses, to touch and be touched by the word pictures put forward. Sensory application is both cognitively and viscerally provocative and highlighting sensory moments along the catacomb route at Callistus provides insight into the bodies and minds of late antique Romans.

Sensory processing is necessarily selective. Continually bombarded by stimuli, the senses must pick and choose what is worthy of their focus. While participants approached the catacombs with inimitable life experiences coloring their perception, the ritual setting afforded a common backdrop. John Clarke notes that “by paying attention to who sees the art, where he or she sees it, and under what circumstances, it is often possible to understand a viewer’s attitudes toward what the art represents. The location of a work of art often tells us about the audience and the expectations that the patron had of that audience” (emphasis added).262 Here, the ritual of martyr festival primed participants for the catacomb and framed their experience to create what Jaś Elsner calls “ritual-centered visuality.”263

Elsner examined the travel journals of the late-antique pilgrims Lucian (De Dea Syria or The Syrian Goddess, 2nd century), Pausanias (Periegesis Hellados or Description of Greece, 135-180) and Egeria (Itinerarium Egeriae or The Pilgrimage of Egeria ca. 381). He discovered that while individuals approach ritual events like martyr festival with inherent biases and preconceptions, the conditions of ritual provided a screen of “cultural constructs and social discourses that stand between the retina and the world.”264 Elsner’s pilgrims each interpreted the sites through the schema of the ritual; late antique pilgrims to the catacombs would have likewise interpreted their experiences through the framework of martyr festival designed by Damasus. Following Clarke and Elsner—establishing the audience (who), location (where) and circumstance of late-antique catacomb visitation (martyr festival ritual)—results in a less nuanced reconstruction of the physiological perception of the Damasian spaces by the pilgrim.

264 Ibid., xvii.
Thus, the discussion which follows considers each of the five human senses in the context of late-antique culture and identifies its affective presence in martyr ritual.

Sight

Sight is perhaps the most straightforward of the senses because it is immediately gratifying. Late-antique peoples, whose ideologies were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, privileged the sense of sight. Extant evidence reveals that terms for seeing were used gratuitously to describe the physical world, to communicate deeper insight and understanding of religious or philosophical ideas, and to promote memory. Cicero (106-43 BCE) held that “the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight, and that consequently perceptions received by the ears...can be most easily retained in the mind if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes.”265 Seeing involves more than physical sight. The sense of sight not only discerns physical objects, but also formulates mental pictures, expresses conditions of knowledge and understanding (“I see what you are saying” conveys enhanced comprehension), authentication (seeing “with my own eyes”), and is the sense most commonly used to describe the omnipresence of divine authority (the all-seeing eye). All of these uses of sight are present in Hebrew scripture, the Christian canon, and other non-canonical writings and teachings from Early Christianity.

The use of sight to communicate enhanced knowledge and understanding is very prevalent in Hebrew scripture. Adam and Eve’s “eyes were opened and they realized they were naked.”266 The Psalmists sings “open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” and applied the metaphor of sight when asking for physical strength and protection, “give light to my

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265 Cicero, *De Orationes* 2.87.357 (LCL I:469), as quoted by Frank, *Memory*, 127.
266 Genesis 3:7
eyes.”

“The eyes of the LORD” are used to represent the omnipresence of Yahweh and the measuring rod by which good and evil are determined. “Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD,” while “Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD.” More directly, “the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth” and “may your eyes see what is right” when seeking vindication. Examples of seeing as proof of authenticity in Hebrew scriptures includes the words of the Queen of Sheba who says to King Solomon in 1 Kings 10:7 “But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes.”

In the Christian scriptures the eyes are used to symbolize both physical healing and spiritual understanding. For example, Jesus touched their eyes and said: “According to your faith let it be done to you” (Matt 9:29). The blinding conversion experience of the apostle Paul (previously known as Saul) on the road to Damascus demonstrates the dual role of sight, as Damasus explained in this excerpt from his poem in honor of Paul: “when blind (caecus) he tormented the godly alliance of the venerable church, following the darkness he earned the right to see (cognoscere) true light” (EP 1). Paul’s lack of physical sight mirrored his lack of spiritual understanding of Jesus as the Messiah Christianity claimed him to be. Once Paul gained correct spiritual recognition of Christ his physical eyesight was restored. Damasus’ audience was comfortable in realizing spiritual enlightenment through sight-related imagery.

Georgia Frank’s important scholarship on late antique pilgrim memory notes that fourth-century debates on the nature of Christ encouraged the “important implication of the idea that God assumed a body in the person of Jesus was that God now infused the entire material world,

267 Psalms 119:18; 13:3; 17:2.
268 Genesis 6:8; 1 Kings 11:6.
270 The biblical account of Paul’s conversion from persecutor to preacher is found in Acts 9. Damasus’ poem is EP 1, 5-6. Author translation. Trout shows that this epigram was not epigraphic and its intended siting is unknown. Trout, Damasus, 75-78.
including places, bodies, and objects.” Terms of seeing were increasingly applied to explain perceived religious phenomenon that permitted Christians to “participate in the glory of the martyr.” Frank documents an increasing frequency of individual testimonies in which pilgrims repeatedly mentioned “seeing” the holy. “Christian pilgrims described how sanctity smelled and how it sounded; most of all they testified to how it looked.” These pilgrims to the Levant applied their “eye of faith” to “see” biblical narratives reenacted in the late-antique streets of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The eyes, then, were exercised to see not only what was physically present but to perceive more. Bishop Asterius of Amasea (r.385-410), taught his late-antique audience: “Among the created things, therefore, the eye is worthy of wonder, for when perceiving the entire creation accurately…it explains even God to me.” No single word existed in either Greek or Latin for travel to holy sites (pilgrimage). To compensate for this void in vocabulary, Christian writers such as Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) described their travels using terms of “seeing” (even “seeing with the senses”).

Damasus established a one-way route through the catacombs to focus the eyes of his audience using the natural characteristics of the pit to confine the visitors to areas which he deemed significant. Within this defined area he made use of eye-catching bands of light, arched doorways, decorative frescoes, mosaics and imperially-inspired marble inscriptions (sensory artifacts) to attract the gaze of his audiences. The epigrams themselves called upon the sense of sight. In addition to the elogium in honor of Agnes (EP 37) noted above, Damasus exhorted

271 Frank, Memory of the Eyes, 14.
272 Ibid., 16.
274 Frank, Memory of the Eyes, 99. Gregory of Nyssa as quoted by Frank. Ep. 3.3 (Maraval, SC 363 [1990]: 126-7).
275 Vincenzo Fiocchi Niccolai, Strutture Funerarie ed Edifici di Culto Paleocristiani di Roma Dal IV al VI secolo (Vaticano: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, 2001). 82-83. Archeologists have confirmed the creation of one-way routes in both Callistus and the complex known as Marcellinus and Peter.
visitors to the tomb of Felicissimus and Agapitus to use their eyes: “Behold!” (Aspice) (EP 25).

Damasus employed a phrase of Vergil “erepta ex oculis” (snatched from the eyes) to dramatize how Proiecta, a young bride and daughter, was quickly and forevermore lost to her parents (EP 51).\(^{276}\) Erepta is visceral as it conveys a brutal and unexpected force the impact of which shocks the heart and gut of the hearer. Damasus influenced pilgrim eyes to see – physically, cognitively, or metaphorically—what he desired them to see.

**Hearing**

Despite late-antique society’s predilection for sight, the social order often functioned more practically through hearing. As the Proiecta epitaph demonstrates, the ability to “see” Proiecta’s abduction required individuals to first “hear.” Carol Harrison, Professor of History and Theology, favors the sense of hearing, arguing that late-antique culture was auditory, receiving and disseminating information primarily through the acts of speech and hearing.\(^{277}\)

The vocabulary of auditory sensing is also found in scripture as an important component of Christian faith. “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”\(^{278}\)

Sounds striking the ears of the visitors within the catacombs would have included the auditory recitation of the liturgy and the reading of the epigrams, as well as the ambient sonority of distant voices and shuffling feet, the sparking and sputtering of lamps and other less ascribable noises (aka, white noise).

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\(^{276}\) Little is known about Proiecta (d. 383) but there is no indication that she was a martyr. This epitaph seems to be a personal gift of Damasus to the family of Proiecta or, possibly, was commissioned by the family. See Trout, *Damasus*, 180-182.

\(^{277}\) Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Harrison takes offense at Cox Miller’s claim of a “material turn” occurring in the fourth century. “Early Christians had always been firmly and freely implicated in the body and the senses,” 229. This is a rather minor point, however, as both scholars recognize the importance of sight in the creation of memory.

\(^{278}\) Romans 10:17.
The sense of hearing demands more from the participant than sight for while vision is immediate, listening requires “mental reflection, recollection and appropriation.” What is heard is often “full of gaps and depend[ent] upon the hearer’s active participation and response to capture it, as it happened, in time and space.” This interactive quality required late-antique citizens to participate in anamnesis (remembering what had gone before) and mimesis (active participation and repetition in the present). The impact of noise was greater when the words were rhetorically crafted.

A powerful and essential skill for late antique Romans to possess was the ability to influence others through public speaking. At a time when the printed word was hand-copied at great expense and the population largely illiterate, liturgical services were the only extended encounter of scripture and martyr narratives for many Romans. The fourth-century trend which Roberts has labeled the jeweled style (Chapter 1) used the tools of rhetoric called leptologia (detailed description using “enumerative sequences and short clauses”) and variatio (“placement and ordering of words”) to create a text whose words and/or clauses play off each other as “brilliant, multicolored flowers or jewels.” This style of writing employs both senses of sight and hearing to turn “listeners into spectators,” to incite a “subjective, sometimes emotional, response” to heighten comprehension in the hearer and to aid in memory. This style efficiently communicates a story with few words or phrases that convey a provocative image, yet

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279 Harrison, Art of Listening, 5; Chidester, Word and Light, 9.
280 Harrison, Art of Listening, 30; Chidester, Word and Light, 7.
281 Harrison, Art of Listening, 232.
283 Patricia Cox Miller, Corporeal Imagination Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 9. Harrison makes the argument more pointedly (in critique of Cox Miller’s work) by applying ekphrasis to the “illiterate majority,” 35.
the information obtained from these few words seems so complete as to carry the feeling of
exhaustivity.284

The first century rhetorician Quintillian taught his students that an effective story told in
this rhetorical style will “move our hearers to tears by the picture” presented:

For the mere statement that the town was stormed, while no doubt it embraces all
that such a calamity involves, has all the curtness of a dispatch, and fails to
penetrate to the emotions of the hearer. But if we expand all that the one word
"stormed" includes, we shall see the flames pouring from house and temple, and
hear the crash of falling roofs and one confused clamour blent of many cries: we
shall behold some in doubt whither to fly, others clinging to their nearest and
dearest in one last embrace, while the wailing of women and children and the
laments of old men that the cruelty of fate should have spared them to see that day
will strike upon our ears. Then will come the pillage of treasure sacred and
profane, the hurrying to and fro of the plunderers as they carry off their booty or
return to seek for more, the prisoners driven each before his own inhuman captor,
the mother struggling to keep her child, and the victors fighting over the richest of
the spoil. For though, as I have already said, the sack of a city includes all these
things, it is less effective to tell the whole news at once than to recount it detail by
detail.285

Quintillian encouraged his students to use words to incite the sensory imaginations of an
audience. “Flames,” “crash,” “wailing,” “hurrying,” each one produces an associated adrenaline
response, a physiological reaction that impacts the heart or gut—“a kick in the stomach”—of the
hearer. The “mother struggling to keep her child” provokes a mental image of a distraught
mother, arms straining against a wriggling child determined to escape her grasp. Other imagined
sounds augment the scene such as shouting, wailing, and the shrieks of distraught individuals.
The “jewels” invoke the senses of the hearer—touch the hearer—and incite their minds to
viscerally imprint key images in the brain.

284 Roberts, Jeweled Style, 40-41.
285 Roberts references Quintillian in Jeweled Style, 38-65. Quintillian, Institutio Oratoria 8.3.68-69. Tr. H.E.
The jeweled style was introduced in Chapter 1 and Damasus’ use of this rhetorical tool was demonstrated through his epigram honoring Marcellus (EP 40). The bishop also turned to the jeweled style to honor his family’s favorite martyr, St. Lawrence (EP 33):

VERBERA CARNIFICES FLAMMAS TORMENTA CATENAS
VINCERE LAURENTI SOLA FIDES POTUIT.

Scourgings, executioners, blazing flames, instruments of torture, chains the faith of Lawrence alone was able to defeat.286

As illustrated here, Damasus related the passion of Lawrence through the jeweled style using only ten evocative words. The reading of this epigram impacts both ears and eyes through the enumerative sequences of single, highly descriptive words that are both semantically related (all are forms of torture) and grammatically and syntactically equivalent (all nominative plural). Damasus also effects parallelism of sound: “Carnifices,” “flammas,” “catenas.” When read aloud these words produce an audible hissing symbolic of hot flames (or evil serpents) that strike the ear, producing mental pictures of chaos, flames and tortured screams all of which generate tension in the hearer. Damasus then resolves this tension with the single hiss of fides in the following line, simple faith permits triumph over them all. What is heard is visualized. The vocabulary is enhanced by the auditory elements of the epigram (the sssss’s) permitting the visitors to relive the martyrdom of Lawrence viscerally as a spectator. The rhetorical message of Damasus at the honoree’s tomb required the pilgrims to exercise their aural sensibilities which provoked cognitive activity and heightened their ability to “participate in the glory of the martyrs.”

Ambient noise, too, was part of the pilgrim experience. Such sounds are subtle, often only registered by the subconscious ears. Hearing was integral to navigation and the positioning

of the body in the dark underground. Shuffling feet, coughing, sniffling and sneezing, echoing voices, the hissing of the lamp were no doubt comforting reassurances of other persons nearby, of illumination, and of interpretations of place. Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), proclaimed that “silence itself, in a place of worship, has its music.”287 He cites the work of ear, throat and nose specialist Alfred Ange Tomatis (1920-2001) in this regard:

Hearing plays a decisive role in the lateralization of perceived space. Space is listened for, in fact, as much as seen, and heard before it comes into view. The perceptions of one ear differ from those of the other. This difference puts the child on alert, and lends volume and physical density to the messages it receives. The hearing thus plays a mediating role between the spatial body and the localization of bodies outside it.288

My personal experience in the catacombs bears this out. The dark and labyrinthine spaces provoked my body. I labored to see the sights and to stay in contact with my group. When visibility was lost my ears amped up their activity as I strained to hear footsteps or voices, listening intently and then measuring the distance of our separation. My body then responded to the perceived distance by either stepping up the pace or relaxing it. The human body functions by accommodating and guiding the body in space as registered by the senses. Pilgrim movements and postures were determined not only by the catacomb’s visual properties but were also coordinated by the space’s acoustical characteristics.

Smell

Like sight and sound, the ancients considered the sense of smell to be a tactile experience between the sensing subject and the odor-emitting object. What is inhaled is invisible, and not always traceable to the source of the odor, yet the olfactory sense reveals tangible space; odors

287 Lefebvre, Production of Space, 225.
288 Ibid., 199-200. Alfred Ange Tomatis is widely acclaimed in the medical field of ear, nose and throat studies. He is the father of the “Tomatis Method” which emphasizes the function of listening to maximize learning skills and the electronic ear to enhance the ability to hear.
just “are, and they say what they are in all its immediacy.” The invisible yet powerful nature of smell prompted Nemesius of Emesa (late fourth century) to proffer that “smell, has been invented by Nature for this reason, that nothing capable of being known should evade our perception.” The invisible nature of smell makes inference to the divine a natural fit. Susan Ashbrook Harvey states, in religion “scents served to demarcate space, objects, and actions through which human-divine relation was negotiated in the liturgy.” Odors may also linger, extend the encounter, and serve as a memory marker for future recall.

Scriptures included analogies of smell to communicate certain concepts and Harvey enumerates an abundance of olfactory images employed in Christian apocryphal and pseudepigraphical narratives. Spices and aromatics were often identified with paradise, and pleasant smells signified nearness to or something received from God. In the canonical scriptures Paul applied the sense of smell to knowledge of God in his second letter to the Corinthian church: “But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ” (emphasis mine). Prayers of the saints are described as incense in the Revelation: “The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God’s people, went up

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289 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 198.
290 Nemesius, *Nature of Man* 6.27.
292 For practical uses of aromatics see Beatrice Caseau’s survey of incense practices in the Roman world in which she demonstrates that aromatics were an intimate part of everyday Roman life outside of religious purposes and had important roles in medicine, air purification, and pleasure activities. Likewise, Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, describes how spices were burned to clean and freshen household air, myrrh was a common presence in burial rites, and incense is mentioned to treat a variety of medicinal problems, 34. Caseau, * Euodia: The Use and Meaning of Fragrances in the Ancient World and Their Christianization (100-900 AD)*, PhD diss. Princeton University, 1994.
293 Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, 54.
294 2 Corinthians 2:14-16.
before God from the angel’s hand.” Christian teachings used scent to epitomize holy space, knowledge of God, and petitions to the Divine.

As a practical matter, Romans used incense in everyday living to purify their homes while the use of incense, perfumed wine, scented oils, flowers, wreaths, and animal sacrifice were ubiquitous in Roman religious practice. Incense use, however, was controversial in third-century Christian communities. The close tie between smell and the pagan divine made such ingredients questionable for Christian purposes. Tertullian feared that even incidental inhalation of such smells “implicated a person as participating in their offering.” That some Christians capitulated to imperial demands to offer incense in honor of the state gods or the genius of the emperor made incense increasingly dangerous in the minds of many believers. Their perceived betrayal of Christian monotheism resulted in the apostates being labelled turificati or “incense burners.” The natural correlation between the burning of incense and official Roman state activities and the stigma attached to the turificati seem to have restricted large-scale Christian use of incense for liturgical purposes.

Archeologists have discovered a large variety of containers (identifiable as censers) throughout the former Roman Empire yet there exists no evidence, archeological or otherwise, of incense use in the catacombs. Evidence (largely from the eastern empire) includes Egeria’s letters describing her Jerusalem pilgrimage in 381 and numerous writings of Ephrem the Syrian. The LP, that problematic sixth-century source, suggests that fourth-century Roman Christianity included incense in worship based upon Constantine’s gifts to the Lateran, St.

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295 Revelation 8:3-4. See also Revelation 5:8b.
296 Here Ashbrook Harvey, Scenting Salvation, 44.
298 Caseau, “Euodia,” 33; Censors have even been recovered in large numbers near former Roman military camps. A survey of Caseau’s research on these containers is contained on 21-28.
299 The earliest reference to incense use in public worship comes from the east and the account of Egeria ca. 381. See Ashbrook Harvey, Scenting Salvation, for a complete listing, 57-98. Ephrem of Syria, 339-341.
Peter’s and the shrine to St. Paul which included a censer (a standing container for burning incense) as well as aromatics such as balsam, cloves and other unspecified spices. A gift of items used for incense is also recorded for the basilica of Marcellinus and Peter which Constantine constructed next to the tomb of his mother Helena. Assuming church services at the time of Constantine incorporated scent into the liturgy, of these sites, only the basilica of Marcellinus and Peter is associated with a catacomb. Based largely upon this evidence, scholars point to the era of Constantine as the turning point in which incense became an explicit part of the liturgy in which “prayers, private and public, then the liturgy itself and every occasion of Christian ceremony became drenched in the fragrance of incense.” While not factually proven, it is reasonable to assume that aromatics (incense or other) were utilized in the crypts in some manner, whether as part of the official liturgy or merely to ameliorate foul odors.

Exactly what odors would have been encountered by late-antique visitors to the catacombs is difficult to assess. The natural environment of dirt (tufa) walls emanated dust, and the damp underground conditions generated prevailing odors of both stale and humid air. Burning lamps introduced smoke into the space and olfactory presence of decaying flesh was undoubtedly also present, especially in the newer portions of the complex. Audiences of the Catacomb of Callistus during the martyr festival of Sixtus which took place in early August would have encountered the odors of hot, sweat-soaked bodies offset by personal aromatic sachets or oils. An odorous bouquet of dead bodies mingled with the fragrant spices used in their preparation for burial would have been especially prevalent in the newly expanded regions. The use of incense in liturgical rites (indicated by the presence of altars in some of the martyr crypts)

300 LP 34:12, 13, 18.
301 LP 34: 27.
302 Ashbrook Harvey, Scenting Salvation, 58.
is unclear but probable. The many biblical, apocryphal, and patristic references to spiritual aromas provide evidence that Damasus’ pilgrims, seeking to connect with the holy, relied upon their olfactory sense to become attuned to the divine.

Taste

The Jewish philosopher Philo (1 BCE/CE) described taste as “the most slavish of the senses, a servant not to what is beautiful to see or to hear but to the pleasures of the wretched belly.” Taste, touch and smell were considered baser senses for their role in tempting the body toward overindulgence. Taste is most intimate for it requires that the object or objects sensed be physically placed into the mouth and body of the perceiver. Classicist Kelli C. Rudolph describes the gustatory sense as “multimodal,” for “taste incorporates the other senses by making them complicit in the taste experience itself.” Food is a feast for the eyes, the nose and its ability to smell is essential for the appreciation of flavors, and the tactile qualities (crunch, smoothness) give pleasure to the tongue. Aristotle found the combination of taste and touch to be problematic:

It follows that broadly speaking profligacy must be considered to be related to the objects of touch, and likewise it is with pleasures of that sort that the profligate is concerned; for tippling and gluttony and lechery and gormandizing and the like all have to do with the sensations specified, and these are the departments into which profligacy is divided. But nobody is called profligate if he exceeds in regard to the pleasures of sight or hearing or smell; those errors we criticize without severe rebuke, and generally all the things included under the term 'lack of self-control': the uncontrolled are not profligate, yet they are not temperate (emphasis mine).

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Three out of the four profligate actions specified by Aristotle involved the sense of taste. Seeing, hearing and smelling may result in a lack of self-control; the influence of touch on the tastebuds, however, could result in a reckless and wasteful life.

While overindulgence in taste can result in profligacy, taste exercised as part of a bounded religious ritual can alternately produce a heightened sense of spiritual awareness. More practically for this dissertation is the metaphorical association of taste with various activities, spatial elements, and the liturgy within martyr festival.

Damasus’ Mediterranean audiences were steeped in literary tales of relationships between the gods and humans. Sometimes boundaries between the realm of the gods and humans would be crossed with interesting results. Religious studies scholar Meredith J.C. Warren, in an essay on the ancient perception of the sense of taste, notes that there are many instances in ancient literature in which the imbibing of otherworldly food or drink “work[s] to transport the taster across boundaries between realms” a trope Warren has labeled “hierophagy.”

She tells the story of Persephone/Prosperina, a Greek/Latin goddess as portrayed in works of Homer and Ovid. Persephone was kidnapped and held captive in the underworld by Hades. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hades “secretly gave her a sweet pomegranate seed to eat” knowing that this small act would ensure that Persephone would always be bound to the underworld. When Persephone’s mother, Demeter/Ceres, discovered Hade’s trickery she revealed to her unsuspecting daughter that partaking of this seed now required her to dwell in the realm of the underworld with Hades for a third of each year. Williams demonstrates that this trope—transformation by the ingestion of an otherworldly food—is common in Mediterranean

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306 Meredith J.C. Warren, “Tastes from Beyond: Persephone’s pomegranate and otherworldly consumption in antiquity” in Rudolph, *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, 104-119; quote, 104. The adventures of the goddess Persephone (aka Prosperina) can be found in *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and Ovid’s *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses.*

307 *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 371-374.
literature. She points to similar tales in Hebrew literature, specifically Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3) and Ezra’s drinking from the heavenly cup (4 Ezra). While the food in these tales is ingested, Warren shows that in each instance the language used emphasized that the food or drink was tasted.

Taste is difficult to pinpoint within the catacomb experience. The epigrams of Damasus do not emphasize taste. A broad interpretation of the poems reveal only three instances in which taste is suggested. EP 60A, written not for the tomb but as a dedicatory inscription for an unknown baptismal font, is the most explicit:

QVISQVE SITIT VENIAT CVPIENS HAVRIRE FLVENTA:  
INVENIET LATICES SERVANT QVI DVLCIA MELLA;  
SORDIBVS EXPOSITIS PVRGANT PENETRALIA CORDIS,  
CORPORA CVM RENOVANT CHRISTO SERVIRE PARATI.

Whoever thirsts, let him come desiring to drink from these streams:  
He will find waters that contain sweet honey;  
With filth removed, those made ready to serve Christ  
Cleanse the depths of their hearts when they renew their bodies (emphasis mine).308

“Sweet honey” was and is a commonplace phrase to indicate kind or wise words (Psalm 19:10), deliciousness, plenty (Leviticus 20:24), a comforting balm. Here the waters of the baptismal font represent comforts associated with salvation. The other instances in which taste can be inferred occur in EP 40 where he describes the enemy of Marcus and Marcellinus as “bitter” and in his personal epitaph (EP 12) where he refers to Jesus walking on the “sea’s briny waves.” Bitterness and brininess are the opposite of sweet and are used here to describe difficult circumstances.

308 Translation, Trout, Damasus.
Evidence related to taste, therefore, lies outside of the epigrams. Opportunities for tasting food and drink during martyr festival were limited to either the practice of feasting near the tombs (refrigeria) or in observing the Christian rite of Eucharist.

Refrigeria

Communal feasting was an important part of Roman life and the grand circiform basilicas that date from the time of Constantine (two of which were located near the Catacomb of Callistus featured in this work) would have provided a comfortable space for large numbers of Christians to gather at or near the tombs in conjunction with martyr festival. Evidence from archeology, texts, and surviving late-antique artworks is sufficient to conclude that from the third through the fifth centuries Christians partook of funerary meals in the cemeteries. Benches and tables in some of the underground crypts suggest that dining in the restrictive catacomb spaces also occurred albeit on a smaller scale.

Fourth and fifth-century texts provide further evidence of large-scale feasting in the cemeteries at both Christian and non-Christian sites. Bishops across the empire beseeched and admonished their congregations to abandon the excessive drunkenness and ill-advised behaviors that was occurring in the cemeteries and to turn toward appropriate behavior and attitudes at the graves, especially when the occasion was the veneration of a martyr.\footnote{Eric Rebillard points out that much of the evidence against celebrations at the tombs is directed against the secular festivals such as the annual Parentalia. He asserts that Christians were not banned from these secular celebrations, they were to honor their ancestor’s memories, but bishops sought to modify their behaviors and attitudes. The veneration of martyrs was still proscribed. Rebillard, “The Cult of the Dead in Late Antiquity: Towards a New Definition of the Relation between the Living and the Dead” in Rome A.D. 300-800: Power and Symbol—Image and Reality (Roma: Bardi Editore, 2003), 152.} In northern Italy feasting at the tombs was so popular that occasions marked for venerating the dead were regularly abused. Bishop Zeno of Verona (350-380) relates this phenomenon:

> Also displeasing to God are those who are wandering among the tombs, who are offering sacrificial meals (prandia...sacrificant) to the rotting corpses of the dead, who, because of their passion for debauchery and drunkenness, have suddenly produced martyrs for their own purpose in infamous places, with carafes and chalices.\footnote{Zeno of Verona, Tractatus 1.25.6.11. As quoted in Rebillard, The Care of the Dead, in Late Antiquity, tr. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings and Jeanine Routier-Pucci, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 144.}

Here is the profligacy of which Aristotle warned. These provocative words—“rotting corpses,” “debauchery,” and “drunkenness”—were spoken over the purified bodies of the just-baptized Christians and their supporters in his audience. Zeno’s comments relate to general behaviors in the cemeteries, not martyr festival, but they suggest that it had become customary to justify a night of carousing by claiming martyr veneration. Similar sermons were preached by Zeno’s contemporaries across the Empire. Notable Christian leaders John Chrysostom in Antioch and Constantinople (347-407), Augustine at Hippo in Africa (354-430), and Ambrose in Milan (337-
397) echo Zeno’s sentiments and demonstrate the popularity of communal feasting at this
time. A third source that evidences Roman dining practices at the tomb is the many depictions
of diners discovered on late-antique sarcophagi and catacomb wall paintings. Katherine
Dunbabin includes these images in her look at conviviality in the Roman world. The ubiquity
of these banqueting scenes in both Christian and non-Christian contexts testifies to the
importance and popularity of dining together in the Roman world. Scholars debate whether
these dining scenes at the cemeteries are representations of dining in this life or whether they
represent communal meals in the next. They likely have dual meanings; the depiction of this
common, everyday act of dining would prompt comforting memories of home and hope for the
afterlife. These archeological, textual and artistic sources prove that convivial dining was an
important part of Roman funerary practice and can be assumed to have taken place at some stage
of the martyr festival.

Still, what the tongue “tasted” and what it meant to the consumer is as variable as the
individual. Foods depicted in the many subterranean dining frescoes were primarily loaves of
bread, fish on a table, and jugs of wine. Many crypts in the catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter
contain dining frescoes, some illustrating a hot-water heater (authepsa) which Romans used to
heat water that was mixed with the wine. Like church potlucks or family reunions, however,
communal meals in the cemeteries could be counted on to offer the late-antique equivalent of

313 Evidence that feasting at the tombs was getting out of hand: Ambrose, De Helia et ieiuno 17.62; Augustine
Explanation, I on Psalm 48 15; Ep 22, to Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage. Rebillard believes that these church fathers
were not against feasting at the tombs per se, but they were decrying the tendency of Christians to treat this religious
feasting like the Roman parentalia practice, Care of the Dead, 142-153.
314 For evidence of funerary meals see Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality
315 Ibid, 176-177.
316 Regarding the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus see Dunbabin, Roman Banquet, 177-187.
Grandma’s famous strawberry shortcake and Aunt Ethel’s infamous fruit salad. Such dishes would, over time, add to the overall impression and memories of martyr festival. Eating food for nourishment in a communal setting would have strengthened group associations but the celebration of the Eucharist at the tomb would have made the greatest impact upon Rome’s Christian community for the Eucharist brought them into contact with the divine.

**Eucharist**

Christians commemorated Christ with two sacraments—the symbolic meal known as the Eucharist, and baptism, a rite in which the believer is immersed or otherwise anointed with water to demonstrate their union with Christ. Altars testify to the observance of the Eucharist at the grave but there is no direct evidence that baptisms were conducted at the tombs. Christ instructed his disciples to observe the eucharistic meal as a rite of remembrance. The rite is not a meal per se, rather participants receive consecrated bread and wine symbolic of Christ’s crucified body and blood. Bishop Ambrose taught that this “living Bread which came down from heaven, furnishes the substance of eternal life; and whosoever shall eat of the Bread shall never die, and it is the Body of Christ.” Similarly, “For them water flowed from the rock, for you Blood flowed from Christ; water satisfied them for a time, the Blood satiates you for eternity.” Partaking of the Eucharist in the place of the dead, at the threshold of life and death, would have heightened the sacrament’s effect.

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The well-known literary trope described by Williams as found in Greek, Roman and Hebrew texts reflects a Mediterranean culture that perceived of human and divine separated by permeable boundaries. I argue that, just as Persephone’s ingestion of the otherworldly pomegranate seed connected her to the underworld, partaking of the mystical body of Christ (Eucharistic elements) at the holy grave could similarly bind the taster to heaven. To visit the catacomb is to pass through to an otherworldly realm. Partaking of the otherworldly body of Christ in the sacrament of Eucharist connected them to the divine. Further, the act of ingesting the bread and wine “establishes the power of the host; thus, by accepting the host’s food, the guests concomitantly accepts his power.”320 The Eucharist made access to the divine tangible while highlighting and reinforcing the relationship hierarchy between God and man.

Evidence for the affective properties of taste in the catacombs, then, are subtler than the sense of sight and sound because they attach themselves to discreet parts of the catacomb experience such as the communal banquet and the Eucharist. A more active role for taste occurs when it is used metaphorically in conjunction with the liturgy where partaking of the mystical body of Christ permitted the taster to permeate the boundary between heaven and earth.

Touch

For the ancients, the sense of touch was both physical (tactile) and conceived for, as Aristotle argued, “all organs of sense perceive by contact.”321 Aristotle was the first of the philosophers to conceive of touch as a distinct and independent sense:

For without touch it is impossible to have any other sense; for every body that has a soul in it must, as we have said, be capable of touch. All the other elements with the exception of earth can constitute organs of sense, but all of them bring about perception only through something else, viz. through the media. Touch takes place by direct contact with its objects, whence also its name. All the

organs of sense, no doubt, perceive by contact, only the contact is mediate: touch alone perceives by immediate contact.\textsuperscript{322}

In this work, \textit{De Anima (On the Soul)}, the philosopher distinguishes between corporeal contact through the “media” of the senses (sight, hearing, smelling, tasting) and direct physical or immediate contact of the flesh. The prick of a needle inserted directly into the skin is a different sensation that \textit{is felt} immediately while images or rays touching the eyes, for example, is innate. Aristotle argued that it was the sense of touch that separated sentient and non-sentient life, for touch “is the only one [sense] which is indispensably necessary to what is an animal.”\textsuperscript{323} “Animate touch” is “an incipient and highly embodied form of cognition—in the form of awareness of pain and pleasure.”\textsuperscript{324} Only sentient or animate beings can react physically and/or emotionally to being touched.

Touch was powerful in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Touch could contaminate. For example, prohibitions stated that to touch a woman during her menstrual cycle was to be unclean (Lev. 15:19) and touching a human corpse rendered the offender unclean (Num. 19:11). To be unclean was to be relegated as an outcast until the time of purification was complete and included exclusion from temple worship. Perhaps the most famous example of the dangers inherent in touching is the story of the Garden of Eden in the first book of the Hebrew Torah. When questioned by the crafty serpent, Eve exaggerated the command they had been given regarding the fruit from the tree of good and evil. Not content to limit the prohibition to eating, Eve embellished the command to include touch, “you must not touch it, or you will die” (Gen.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{323} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{324} Rebecca Steiner Goldner, “Aristotle and the Priority of Touch,” in \textit{Touch and the Ancient Senses}, 55.
3:3). After taking and ingesting the fruit Even and her husband Adam were banished from paradise (Gen 3).

Recipients and participants in touch are also empowered in the holy scriptures. Isaiah was cleansed when seraphim touched his lips with a live coal empowering him to become an effective prophet (Isaiah 6:7). The prophet Daniel received strength to speak when “one who looked like a man” touched his lips and, later, his body (Daniel 10:15-19). In the new testament Christ accomplished many miracles through touch. Jesus touched eyes, tongues, leprous bodies, ears and hands. Alternately, individuals were healed by merely touching his cloak. As these examples demonstrate, touch was associated with power and the divine with both positive and negative consequences.

Classicist Catherine Conybeare explores Christianity as “the religion of touch.” The senses were thought to be mediators between body and soul but “touch, so profoundly associated with the body, is of all the senses the one most readily converted to the spiritual.” With regard to the gospel accounts, Augustine likened the miraculous properties of touch to the Christian faith:

Believe like this, and you have touched. Touch like this, that you may cleave: cleave like this, that you may never be separated, but may remain in godliness with him who died for us in weakness.

325 The most famous instance of power leaving Christ when his cloak was touched is the woman who had suffered persistent bleeding for twelve years (Matt 9:20). Other examples of touch: Jesus touched eyes in Matt. 20:34, tongues Mark 7:33, leprous bodies Luke 5:13, ears Mark 7:33, and hands Matt 8:15.

326 Note that these instances of touch often are accompanied by speech. For the purposes of this dissertation the sense of touch is treated independently.


328 Conybeare, “Noli,” 178.

Augustine is expounding here upon the bleeding woman who touched Christ’s robe with faith that it would heal her (Matt. 9:20; Mark 5:27-30). The idea that objects can possess power for healing or salvation was commonly held and such relics were pursued in late antiquity. The catacombs were repositories of these power-wielding relics.

Late Antique Practice

Late antique pilgrims desired to touch and be touched by the holy. One of the more informative sources on late-antique pilgrimage is a letter by Egeria to her “sisters” (whose identity is otherwise unknown). Egeria traveled to the Levant to see the lands of Christ between 381 and 384. Her letter is the earliest-known Christian pilgrim itinerary and survives only in part in a medieval manuscript discovered in the monastic library at S. Maria in Arezzo in 1884. It was in circulation and copied up until the ninth or twelfth centuries and is historically significant for the detailed glimpse it provides of the Jerusalem liturgy and of eastern Christianity in the late fourth century. Her account documents the appetites of pilgrims for physical contact with objects deemed to be holy.

Egeria related the events of Easter week in Jerusalem. On Friday, following an early morning service and vigil at the site of the cross, she and her fellow pilgrims gathered for an opportunity to touch the holy relic she called the “Wood of the Cross.” The bishop of Jerusalem held court over the proceedings from his chair which stood behind a gold and silver box that held the relic. The Wood was removed from the box and placed on a table:

As long as the holy Wood is on the table, the bishop sits with his hands resting on either end of it and holds it down, and the deacons round him keep watch over it. They guard it like this because what happens now is that the people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table. They stoop down over it, kiss the Wood, and move on. But on one occasion (I don’t know when) one of them

331 Codex Aretinus VI, 3. Scholars have determined that the characteristics of this manuscript indicate it was copied in or around Monte Cassino, Italy between the ninth and twelfth centuries.
bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away, and for this reason the deacons stand round and keep watch in case anyone dares to do the same again. Thus all the people go past one by one. *They stoop down, touch the holy Wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes, and then kiss it, but no one puts out his hand to touch it.* Then they go to a deacon who stands holding the Ring of Solomon, and the Horn with which the kings were anointed. These they venerate by kissing them…

The excerpt reproduced here clearly demonstrates the desire of Christians to *touch* the holy—whether with the hand or forehead or lips. Egeria’s narrative beautifully demonstrates late-antique understanding of sight as a tactile exercise (whether intromission or extramission) and how sight served as a conduit for touching the holy: “*They stoop down, touch (tangentes) the holy Wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes, and then kiss it…*” Egeria specifies that touching the relic with the hand was forbidden. She then describes three forms of touching that did occur: forehead, eyes, and lips. This sequence of encountering the relic is interesting. Certainly, the pilgrims would have glimpsed the relic with their eyes *before* touching it with their foreheads, but Egeria starts her narrative with the forehead. The touching of the forehead is an homage, an act of submission before the holy. It is the contact between the eyes and the relic that enables true communion, that precipitates the interaction between the holy relic and the soul of the pilgrim. Only then does Egeria describe kissing the relic and this is a respectful farewell to mark her departure. Note further that the ring of Solomon and the horn of anointing were kissed only. “*Touching*” the sacred with the senses validated the act of pilgrimage for late-antique Christians.

Modern day prohibitions against physical touching of historical artifacts such as those in the catacombs likely did not exist in the fourth century. Thus, it stands to reason that the walls, inscriptions, mosaics, and other elements in the catacombs were subjected to human hands.

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Certainly, those who carved their initials or Chi-Rho symbols on the walls touched them. Individuals would have felt the rough and uneven floors on the soles of their feet, their outstretched arms would have been used to brace themselves in poorly lit passageways and heads and shoulders, no doubt, brushed low-hanging doorways or other protrusions. Damasus’ audience would have touched hallowed objects such as the mosaics and frescoed images framed within *arcosolia*, carved images that narrated familiar stories on the sides and tops of sarcophagi, grooved crevices whose engraved words lent authority and official status to the site, the smooth cool surfaces of the marble walls, and even the press of Eucharistic elements on the lips and tongue.

Damasus further engaged the pilgrim with verbal images of martyrs engaging in or impacted by the sense of touch. In EP 8, *elogium* of Nereus and Achilleus, the soldier martyrs are “throwing down (*proiciunt*) their shields” to take up and carry (*portare*) the triumphs of Christ.” In other epigrams the sword cuts and severs (*seco*) (EP 17, 28, 31), the martyr is seized or snatched away (*rapio*) (EP 17, 25), the victims dig their graves with their own hands (“*vos alacres vestris minibus fodisse sepulcra*”) (EP 28), and the tomb holds (*retinet*) (EP 32). The physical space of the catacomb and its objects were a conduit through which late-antique Romans made contact with the holy and this occurred via human sensing. The pilgrim experience in the Roman catacombs can be resuscitated by recreating the environment encountered in martyr festival and measuring the various ways it “touched” Damasus’ audiences.

Finally, space is perceived tangibly when the body is impacted by smells, sounds, and gestures performed in relation to objects which fill space. The body “feels” the narrowing of

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333 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 198-200; 215.
gallery walls, the need to stoop through diminutive doorways. The spatial body is discussed later in the section on monumental space.

Pilgrim bodies (animate beings) in the catacombs would have touched and been touched in a myriad of ways. The presumption of particles contacting the eyes, nose, or ears created an expectation of connection with the space and all it represents. More immediate and perhaps more powerful was the tactile stimulation of physical encounters with the rough-hewn walls, the weight and design of the oil lamp in the hand, the coolness of the marble plaques, the uneven floor on the soles of the feet, or other idiosyncratic feature of the catacomb. These sensations are still experienced today. The modern pilgrim stumbles on the uneven flooring, contorts the body to move through tight or low-hanging passageways, and grazes the tufa walls for bracing or to steady himself.

Visceral Seeing and the Corporeal Imagination

Practically speaking senses are not experienced individually as if in a vacuum. The human body processes numerous sensory stimulants at any given moment, the culmination of which may produce a visceral response in the perceiver. “Visceral” refers to a bodily response that proceeds from instinct (the senses) rather than the intellect and is characterized by coarse, base, emotions. Sounds are heard, odors are smelled, and images are seen but visceral experiences are noises, odors and images intensified. Patricia Cox Miller describes such a process as “visceral seeing” and argues that such intensification occurs by the stimulation of one’s “corporeal imagination.”

To recreate the catacomb experience it is essential to consider the combined sensory responses of the pilgrim. Damasus created or renovated the underground spaces to attract

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334 Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*, 11. This idea of “seeing” the holy was first put forth by Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*. 
audiences. The theory of visceral seeing propounded by Cox Miller is useful for situating late antique audiences in the catacombs. Hagiographic texts and images of late antiquity, Cox Miller argues, captivated audiences by luring them into the performance through implicating their senses with the narrative. The involvement of the senses gives them “cognitive status” and materially engages the intellect.335 One example given by Cox Miller is found in the hagiography of Thekla. A child with a diseased eye was playing in the sanctuary grounds of the monastery among consecrated birds. “At the order of the saint herself—one of the birds, a crane, pecks at the child’s diseased eye with its beak, and the eye is healed.”336 Upon hearing or reading this tale one cannot but help to wonder at the diseased eye and recoil at the painful pecking Thekla imposed upon the child to heal the eye. In other words, one cannot help but engage corporeally, viscerally, with the text. Visceral seeing” involves corporeal responses to sensory stimuli whether from images, texts, readings, even objects that so occupy the viewer that any boundary between him and the object is weakened and the individual’s “reality is invaded by a surreal presence.”337 In the example of the child, the words of the hagiography leap off of the page, the scene is acted out in the corporeal imagination as if happening in real time. Less graphic but equally significant for Egeria was her visceral reaction to the wooden relic. The relic held greater power and significance for her based upon its narrative which identified the wood as the very cross of Christ.

Damasus’ audiences would have also reacted viscerally to elements they encountered in the catacomb. One such visitor, Prudentius (348-413) shared his experience with visceral seeing at the grave of Hippolytus in his work the Peristephanon Liber. Prudentius discloses the

335 Cox Miller, The Corporeal Imagination, 14.
337 Ibid.
stimulation of his corporeal imagination by a picture (*picta*) that hung above the tomb of the martyr:

…above the tomb is depicted a lively likeness, portraying in clear semblance Hippolytus’ bleeding body as he was dragged along. I saw the tips of the rocks dripping, most excellent Father, and scarlet stains imprinted on the briers, where a hand that was skilled in portraying green bushes had also figured the red blood in vermilion. One could see the parts torn asunder and lying scattered in disorder up and down at random. The artist had painted too his loving people walking after him in tears wherever the inconstant track showed his zigzag course. Stunned with grief they were searching with their eyes as they went, and gathering the mangled flesh in their bosoms. One clasps the snowy head, cherishing the venerable white hair on his loving breast, while another picks up the shoulders, the severed hands, arms, elbows, knees, bare fragments of legs. With their garments also they wipe dry the soaking sand, so that no drop shall remain to dye the dust; and wherever blood adheres to the spikes on which its warm spray fell, they press a sponge on it and carry it all away.\(^{338}\)

In this lengthy excerpt, Prudentius’ eyes see the painting in significant detail. Rather than a stripped-down description of what the image was about, however, he permits his imagination to fill in other details, information that he could not have possibly “seen” in the painting.\(^ {339}\) These moments stand out by their descriptive nature. The “loving people,” “stunned with grief” “searching with their eyes,” “cherishing the venerable white hair on his loving breast,” and the “warm spray” of blood are all figments of Prudentius’ corporeal imagination. Note that Prudentius brought these extended details together using his senses of sight and touch, giving his senses cognitive status and engaging his intellect.

\(^{338}\) Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XI.125-146. Translation...  
\(^{339}\) Paula Hershkowitz discusses this work of Prudentius in *Prudentius, Spain, and Late Antique Christianity: Poetry, Visual Culture, and the Cult of the Martyrs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
Visitors to the catacombs certainly experienced visceral seeing. Damasus appealed to his audience’s corporeal imaginations in several epigrams including the Elogium of Eutychius (EP 21).\textsuperscript{340}

\begin{verbatim}
EVTYCHIVS MARTYR CRVDELIA IVSSA TYRANNI
CARNIFICVMQ(ue) VIAS PARITER TVNC MILLE NOCENDI
VINCERE QVOD POTVIT MONSTRAVIS GLORIA CHRISTI
CARCERIS INLVVIEM SEQVITVR NOVA POENA PER ARTVS
TESTARVM FRAGMENTA PARANT NE SOMNVS ADIRET
BIS DENI TRANSIERE DIES ALIMENTA NEGANTVR
MITTITVR IN BARATHRVM SANCTVS LAVAT OMNIA SANGVIS
VVLNERA QVAE INTVLERAT MORTIS METVENDA POTESTAS
NOCTE SOPORIFERA TVRBANT INSOMNIA MENTEM
OSTENDIT LATEBRA INSONTIS QVAE MEMBRA TENERET
QVAERITVR INVENTVS COLITVR FOVET OMNIA PRESTAT EXPRESSIT
DAMA VSVS MERITVM VENERARE SEPVLCHRVM
\end{verbatim}

The martyr Eutychius demonstrated the glory of Christ because he was able to overcome equally the cruel orders of the tyrant and the executioners’ thousand ways of doing harm.

A new punishment against the limbs of the body accompanied the filth of prison.

Shards of pottery were laid out [for his bed] lest sleep approach; twice six days passed, food is denied; he is cast into the abyss; holy blood washes every wound which the terrible force of death had advanced.

In sleep inducing darkness, a dream agitates the mind the hiding place that holds the limbs of the innocent one is revealed.

He is sought; discovered, he is honored; he is cherished; he provides all things.

Damasus has pronounced his merit; you venerate his tomb!\textsuperscript{341}

Damasus’ allusion to classical works would have been meaningful to his audience but it is his appeal to the senses that permit a visceral response to the poetry. Visceral seeing was sparked not only by the descriptive, jeweled style of Damasus’ prose but also by the pace in which it was...

\textsuperscript{340} This epigram has been much evaluated by Latin experts Jacques Fontaine and Dennis Trout as evidence of Damasus’ Latin skills: Jacques Fontaine, \textit{Damase poete Theodosien}, 131-135. Dennis Trout, \textit{Damasus}, 18-19; 122-124. Damasus demonstrates here his familiarity with a wide range of classical poets (as well as his contemporaries Juvenecus and Proba).

\textsuperscript{341} EP 21. Author translation.
intended to be read. The tortures of Eutychius are presented metrically as a barrage of
punishments—placed in a filthy prison, lies upon pottery shards, starved, bleeding wounds and,
finally, death. Damasus relieves the tension by slowing the meter to end, like the denouement of
a climactic film, with sleep and death.

These words of Damasus conjured up images in the minds of hearers. Prisons were dark,
enclosed spaces (impacting the senses of sight and touch). “Filth” evokes dirt, dust, feces, and
detritus left behind by other prisoners—bits of clothing, pieces of leather, inedible food scraps
(the senses of sight, smell and taste). The visceral nature of the narrative is exacerbated by
submitting the martyr to a new torture, pottery shards, which would have been abrasive and have
pierced the skin making movement painful if not impossible (the sense of touch). Time passes
and the discomfort grows as the very visceral result of starvation, with its intendant growling and
roiling of the stomach, lightheadedness and general loss of mental capacity and physical activity
breaks the martyr down even further. The climax occurs as the body’s inability to overcome the
bleeding wounds ultimately ends in the “dreadful power of death.” Damasus slows the rhythm
and softens the rhetoric with the advent of “sleepbringing.” The picture painted here of
Eutychius’ prison cell was similar to the dark, enclosed spaces viewed along the catacomb route.
The meter and he words chosen by Damasus to relate Eutychius’ story intended to incite a
visceral response in his audiences.

Art Historian James Elkins explains the phenomenon as follows: “pictured bodies are
expressive in two largely opposite modes: some act principally on the beholder’s body, forcing
thoughts about sensation, pain, and ultimately death; and others act more on the beholder’s mind,
conjuring thoughts of painless projection, transformation, and ultimately metamorphosis”

342 Trout, Damasus, 19.
Elkins’ words pertain to the visual arts but, as demonstrated above, seeing involves more than physical sight. The epigram in honor of Eutychius works viscerally because it forces the audience to think about the sensations of pain and discomfort in a heightened manner before softening the rhetoric in Eutychius’ eventual release (metamorphosis) in death. The visceral nature of this account would have captured the audience’s attention both bodily and cognitively making them witnesses to the very tortures endured by Eutychius. The ability to identify enhanced sensory moments of visceral seeing exposes preeminent themes of and intended purposes for the late-antique experience at the tombs of the martyrs.

An important distinction must be made between “visceral seeing” and the Latin word “visceral” (viscera). “Visceral seeing” is a process that occurs when the senses are stimulated to see more than is literally present. Visitors to the catacombs would have participated viscerally in the experience, the narratives would have come alive, the spaces and/or relics would have become significantly more than inert objects. The phrase is a modern one to describe the phenomenon. For the Latins, however, the phrase “visceral seeing” did not exist. Latin writers used variations of the word “viscera” to describe the flesh of the sacrificial animal “viscera qui tauri” (Ovid, Fasti 3.803), the womb of the Vestal Silvia that bore Rome’s famous twins Romulus and Remus “viscera Romanae conditor urbis erat” (Ovid, Fasti 3.24), the erupting bowels of Mt. Aetna “viscera montis erigit eructans” (Vergil, Aeneid 3.570), the flaming hot body of a dying Emperor Valentinian (364-375) “quoniam viscerum flagrante compage” (Res Gestarum 30.6), and the painful deep wounds inflicted upon the martyr St. Cassian “quam qui profunda perforatat viscera“ (Prudentius, Peristephanon Liber IX.60).

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The pontiff incited his audiences viscerally through his epigrams, but when Damasus used “viscera” he did so in the Latin way to accentuate the violence of persecution and the depth of damage it inflicted on the church body: *Tempore quo gladius secuit pia viscera matris*” (At that time when the sword pierced the holy flesh of the church).[^344] The particular pairing of “viscera matris” is uncommon, however Ovid used this phrasing to describe the merging of the earth’s waters in the “shady bowels of Mother Earth (Tellus)” (*qui se condiderant in opacae viscera matris, Metamorphoses* 2.272-274). Authors used viscera when referring to a deep wounding and/or a division of body parts such as the kidneys of sacrificial animals. Late antique audiences would have experienced the catacombs viscerally (visceral seeing) but their concept of “viscera” was more sanguinary.

**Synesthesia**

The theory of visceral seeing identifies the phenomenon of corporeal imagination, a useful tool in recreating the late antique Roman experience. A more heightened state of engagement is the occurrence of synesthesia. Synesthesia is a clinical term for a condition in which some individuals regularly experience multiple sensory stimuli simultaneously, for example they relate that they can see sound.[^345] But synesthetic moments also happen to every man in everyday life. Synesthesia is an extraordinary event in which two or more senses “converge and interpenetrate,” paradoxically playing off of one another to create a “more intense, transcendent, and unified experience.”[^346] Synesthesia encourages *spectaculum* and is often communicated through intensified language. Examples include a description of the color

[^344]: Damasus applied this exact phrase in five of his epigrams. Specifically: EP 17.1 (Sixtus); 31.1 (Tiburtius); 35.3 (Hippolytus); 43.1 (Elogium of the Sixty-two Martyrs); and 46.3 (Saturninus).


blue as loud (convergence of sight and hearing) or an odor as sweet (convergence of smell and taste).

Early Christians used synesthesia symbolically to teach Christian religious concepts such as the depiction of Christ as both word and light, a crucial distinction for Christians still debating the Son of God’s nature. Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) instructed participants of the Eucharist to adore the bread by applying it to their eyes before eating it quoting the Psalms: “taste and see.” The antistructure of applying bread to the eyes (the eyes cannot taste and by covering them up they can no longer see) opened up new possibilities for contemplation and understanding for Theodore’s congregation. The antistructure inherent in synesthesia defies the conventional order of the senses to shock an individual’s sensibilities thereby escalating the cognitive experience.

Instances of synesthesia tend to be identified and related through texts, but the stimulation is not limited to hearing and sight. The catacomb atmosphere offered sight, smell, sound, taste, and tactile encounters which, in concert, could incite a synesthetic experience. The essentially individual nature of synesthesia makes it impossible to identify definitive moments within the catacombs. Potential stimulants of synesthesia are readable, however, by considering certain design elements. Damasus’ strategic use of light, authoritative inscriptions and architectural elements such as arches, marbles and columns installed belowground are conspicuous markers of interest. The unique characteristics of the catacomb environment contribute to a heightened sensory state, optimal conditions for both visceral seeing and synesthesia.

347 Chidester, Word and Light, 92. Theodore Catechetical Homilies XVI.27-28; Psalm 33:8.
Sensory Recap

Late-antique peoples viewed all sensory perception as a physical act in which what is perceived “touches” the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body. The intimate and universal role of the senses make them valuable tools in teaching and communicating. The role of the eyes extended past the physical to understanding and authenticating the spiritual. Pilgrims used their eyes to metaphorically see more than was physically present; they testify to this by describing their encounters at sacred sites as “seeing the holy.” The play of light and darkness in the catacomb in conjunction with the material enhancements to the subterranean space would have sparked the corporeal imaginations of Damasus’ audiences to conceive of “more.”

Hearing is a cognitive activity in which words are converted to mental images and sounds are measured. Damasus’ epigrams, especially those written in the jeweled style, prompted mental images and incited visceral responses in his hearers. Ambient noise and echoes aided the pilgrims in comprehending and navigating the dark and winding terrain of the catacombs. The sense of smell is immediate and its mostly invisible nature made the olfactory sense the one most associated with the presence of the divine. Christian literature documents the importance of odors for pilgrims seeking a connection with the divine. The natural odors of dust, dampness, and dead bodies treated with aromatic spices would have been ubiquitous in the subterranean catacomb and would have lingered on the pilgrim bodies long after they had exited the space.

Evidence for the affective properties of taste in the catacombs is less obvious, most commonly connected to discreet acts within the catacomb experience such as the communal banquet and the Eucharist. A more powerful role for taste occurs when it is used metaphorically and/or adjectivally to prompt understanding and memory on a visceral level. The sense of touch has both a physical (tactile) and a visceral component and touching the holy was the goal of late-
antique pilgrims. Visitors to the catacombs would have touched the physical walls, sarcophagi, mosaics, and other material objects. They would have tasted the Eucharistic elements on their lips and tongues and perceived space tactiley as they moved throughout the tour.

Sensory stimuli that provoke corporeal imagination create the ability to see viscerally. Even more intensive encounters occur when the senses play off one another paradoxically in synesthesia. Visceral seeing and synesthesia aided the visitors in interpreting the catacomb and making the divine palpable. The enhanced cognitive and sensory states of visceral seeing and synesthesia make these experiences a powerful mechanism and hook for memory. At Callistus, Damasus fashioned a monument out of the processional spaces and esteemed graves to facilitate a connection between Roman Christians, their religious heritage, and the holy.

**Spatial Characteristics: The Catacomb-as-Monument**

The catacombs were monuments to Roman Christianity. The ancient Roman writer Varro (116-27 BCE) wrote in his treatise on the Latin language (*De lingua Latina*) that the origin of the term “monument” (*monimentum* or *monumentum*) comes from those “monuments (*monimenta*) which are on the tombs and that follow the roadside,” which “remind passers-by that they themselves were mortal and that the passers-by are as well. From this, the other things that are written or done to preserve memory are called monuments.”

The “tombs that follow the roadside” were well-known to the audiences of both Varro and Damasus. Ancient Roman cemeteries lined major arteries that led into and out of cities advertising the names of powerful families and providing the last words of the deceased. Varro further marked the connection between the Latin words *monimentum* (monument), *meminisse* (to remember), *memoria* (memory), *monere* (to remind, admonish, advise), and *manere* (to remain) to show that the idea

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348 Varro, *De lingua Latina* 6.49.
behind *monimentum* included all these meanings. Today, monuments tend to be physical constructions such as statues, buildings, or plaques whose intent is to remind, admonish, advise, warn, teach or commemorate a notable person, action or event. The spatial theories of sociologist Henri Lefebvre provide a frame of reference with which to establish and analyze the catacombs as monumental spaces. Spatial theory has accumulated a large number of scholars but the works of Lefebvre ground them all. Spatial theory is but one tool used in this work for interpreting the catacomb; therefore, I have chosen to center the reading of space around the lens of Lefebvre for its foundational role in modern spatial theory.

The Constitution of Monumental Spaces: Henri Lefebvre and Monuments as “Lived Social Spaces”

Lefebvre believed that every society produced its own social space which did not inhere in geometric forms or mental processes but was “lived by people with bodies and lives in their own particular urban context.”

Social space, he explains, is a *practical* relationship between individuals and the dialectic interactions they encounter with space and its surroundings. Once produced, social spaces are *coded* by their social usage and thus, societies can be apprehended through the *decoding* of their “social space.”

Damasus’ works and the use of ritual in the cemeteries surrounding the city marked these areas as social spaces. It follows then that deciphering the interactions of late-antique Christians within the tombs and passageways of the Roman catacombs permits the modern scholar to apprehend the past.

The spatial theory established by Lefebvre identified three “moments” of space: “perceived,” “conceived,” and “lived.” Perceived space is where everyday activity takes place, the material, concrete and taken-for-granted space of daily life such as the areas taken up by

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349 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 143.
350 Ibid., 31, 34.
Roman roads and markets. Conceived space is abstract and mental, “conceptualized and discursively constructed,” Romans conceived of their city as universal as revealed by the colloquialisms “all roads lead to Rome,” and “eternal city.” Even the well-known architectural forms of arches and vaults were perceived as symbols of universal Rome. Conceived space is intellectual space that inheres in a system of signs. The catacombs are full of such signs that mark them as both Roman and Christian. Roman architectural forms frame the ceremonial spaces while symbols such as the Chi-Rho and frescos of biblical narratives speak a Christian message.

The third moment of architectural space is “lived space” (Lefebvre’s “social space.”) Lived space is the most complex, dynamic and intimate of spaces, incorporating the material aspect of space (perceived), the scientific and mental ideas of space (conceived), and the body to create a “direct lived experience, a bodily-embedded understanding of space and place.” The body and its senses are the mechanisms required to achieve this moment of space. Lived spaces are social spaces that engage individuals both physically (proscribing or prescribing movement) and cognitively (recognition and reading of monumental characteristics). The Roman catacombs became lived space much like the secular Roman basilica and its offspring the Christian basilica. The basilica form was known (perceived) as a place to conduct business. Individually, however, basilicas were conceived of as secular or religious, based upon details such as statuary (Emperor Constantine in the basilica of Maxentius), traffic flow (the transept of St. Peter’s), inscriptions, or other décor incorporated into the structure. The catacombs were a place to bury the dead but

352 Ibid, 7.
Damasus turned them into a ceremonial Christian space by installing architectural elements, official epigrams, and proscribing movement throughout.

Lived spaces can take various forms. Lefebvre distinguishes between the lived spaces of “buildings” and “monuments.” Buildings are functional, monuments are extraordinary. Buildings are the “prose of the world” while monuments are its “poetry.” As poetry, monuments permit participants to encounter sensory ways of living such as “loving, feeling, thinking, taking pleasure, or suffering.” Buildings are “everyday life,” monuments are “festival.” To Lefebvre’s mind buildings are spaces where power dominates. Buildings force a “brutal condensation of social relationships” so that “significant oppositions and values” are reduced. Monumental space, on the other hand, condenses social space so that the monument becomes a metaphor for society; for “the authority of the sacred and the sacred aspect of authority are transferred back and forth, mutually reinforcing one another in the process.” Monuments mask power “beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought.” They condense social space, in effect leveling the playing field of power. When processing through the catacomb-as-monument, the secular social barriers that ruled life aboveground for male and female, master and servant, or patron and client were temporarily displaced as Romans participated together in procession as Christians.

Properties of Monuments

The spaces renovated by Damasus meet the qualifications of monumental space as defined by Lefebvre, namely: monuments have a durable physical presence; engage their audiences bodily (physically and cognitively); are complex communicative devices; suspend

353 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 224.
354 Ibid., 223, 227.
355 Ibid., 225.
356 Ibid., 143.
time; and foster communal identity and consensus. In their simplest forms, monuments serve as
reminders, yet by their very nature the memories (symbols, signs, ideologies) they preserve and
the lessons they teach are “selected.” This selection dispenses with other potentially important
(competing) memories. The messages being communicated may instruct, warn, encourage
and/or provide answers and are always a balance of official and vernacular narratives. The
memories and messages of the Roman catacomb shrines represent those of their architect,
Damasus, but are necessarily negotiated with an eye to ensure that they are intelligible and
meaningful to his perceived audience.357 Each of these properties (durable physical presence,
complex communicative devices, physical and cognitive engagement, timelessness, communal
identity and consensus) is found in the Roman catacomb routes established by Damasus. The
following discussion expounds upon these qualities and demonstrates their applicability to the
catacombs at Callistus, the pilgrimage site investigated in detail for this work.

First, monuments assert a physical presence, they are durable and their imperishability is
understood as a “will to power.”358 Durability includes the materials used in the construction of
the monument and even the site chosen; size, however, is not a prerequisite for durability. The
physicality of the Callistan catacomb-as-monument is compelling, durable and vast: carved from
the very earth, an extensive warren of levels and mazes. The fact that they are still passable
1,600 years after the fact is a testament to their durability. The materials used to construct the
honorary tombs at Callistus also proclaimed durability for their lavish multi-colored marbles and
mosaics, labor-intensive frescos, and magisterial inscriptions.

357 Robin Jensen, “Early Christian Images” in Picturing the Bible, The Earliest Christian Art (New Haven, Conn:
Yale University Press, 2007), 84.
358 Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 221.
The pedigree of Callistus—the oldest known Christian controlled cemetery and final resting place for many of Rome’s martyred—and its geographical position along the Appian Way—the primary artery into the city from the port at Puteoli—also enhanced its durable character. Christians further knew the Appia as the route by which the Apostle Paul entered Rome around 65 CE. In the fourth century this location conferred both gravitas for its historical context and contemporary pertinence on account of the recent additions of an extensive villa and circus of Maxentius (278-312) and the Constantinian constructions of large circus-shaped basilicas (the Basilica of Mark (ca. 336) and Basilica Apostolorum (ca. 320). Each of these colossal structures were adjacent or visible from the cemetery of Callistus. Thus, the durability of this catacomb-as-monument inhered through its large physical presence, elite materials, and symbolically significant siting.

Another characteristic of monuments is that, as lived spaces, they engaged participants bodily by proscribing movements and gestures and cognitively through signs and symbols inherent to the hallowed places. Participants in lived space develop “spatial bodies,” bodies that perceive the space physically, orient themselves, and move about the area based upon the restrictions of dimension and other spatial properties (symmetry, asymmetry, axes, planes, or peripheries). Spatiality is affective, binding bodies to its symmetries and rhythms as the physical or sensory reality of monumental space “stretches outwards around bodies: that is, around each

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360 Constantine is generally credited with either constructing or patronizing significant Christian basilicas in and around the Via Appia and Ardeatina areas. The Basilica of Mark is mentioned in the LP (LP 35.3) while the construction dates of the Basilica Apostolorum (renamed in the seventh century to the Basilica of Sebastian) are less certain. See Richard Krautheimer’s Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romanorum, 5 vols. (Vatican City/New York: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia Cristiana/Institute of Fine Arts, 1937-77). Here, vol. 2, no. 2, 202. Most recently see Monica Hellström, “Constantine’s Circiform Funerary Basilicas in Rome” in Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome, Michele Salzman, Marianne Saghy, and Rita Lizzi Testa eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 291-313. For the villa complex of Maxentius see Alfred Frazer, “The Iconography of the Emperor Maxentius’ Buildings on the Via Appia,” in Art Bulletin 48, No. 34 (Sept-Dec., 1966). 385-392.
body and around the connections between bodies, and extends them into places affected by opposing qualities.”

In short, catacomb visitors could “feel” and were driven by the space.

The Science of Spatial Bodies

Late antique visitors would have “felt” the space as a result of human physiology. The somatosensory system (sensory network) informs “us about objects in our external environment through touch (i.e., physical contact with skin) and about the position and movement of our body parts (proprioception) through the stimulation of muscle and joints.”

In proprioception, receptors in the muscles of the human body convey movement to the brain with information used to recognize the position of the body in space. This cognitive awareness on a subconscious level is what gives the body balance. Pilgrims in the catacombs would have been aware of their bodily positions relative to the low-hanging passageways; they would have adjusted their arms and legs automatically to balance on the uneven ground. The information obtained by the somatosensory system informs kinesthesia or the body in motion.

In her essay “Motion Sensors,” Classicist Helen Slaney suggests a kinesthetic mode of historical inquiry—walking through the space as a participant by considering one’s own sense of movement within the context of the culture. This speaks directly to the catacomb experience. She describes the process of kinesthesia as a sixth sense of the human body which “constantly monitors its own internal condition through its somatosensory system, which processes information about movement, orientation, balance and exertion.”

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361 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 226.
364 Helen Slaney, “Motion Sensors: Perceiving movement in Roman pantomime” in *Senses of Empire*, 159.
365 Ibid 159.
automatically but the messages it relays—pain, falling, dizziness, fatigue—are received and acted upon by the body. The bodies of catacomb visitors would be aware of their bodies’ position in space “conditioned by custom, habitus and the meanings attached to certain sensations.”

Slaney uses textual evidence in conjunction with the somatosensory body to attempt to demonstrate how a kinesthetic analysis might bring to life the Hellenistic art of pantomime:

Dance, for the dancer, involves a continuous stream of sense impressions other than sight. In conjunction with haptic information such as pressure or tension, the faculties of balance, spatial awareness, kinaesthetic judgment, muscular endurance and nervous responsiveness come into play.

While an exact replication of pantomime is impossible, considering such things as the actor’s leaps and falls, muscle strains, gasping lungs, and various body postures processed by the human somatosensory system makes such a historical event come alive resulting in a more intimate grasp of the classical theatre culture. The tool of kinesthesia can be similarly applied to the late antique catacomb experience by paying special attention to spatial characteristics and sensory clues of the catacomb-as-monument.

Visitors to the catacombs were directed spatially along a one-way route through the underground labyrinth and propelled along by means of binary opposition to direct pilgrim movement (Figure 4). Bodies were nudged forward, gestures were proscribed, and distances were measured by opposing elements of ascent and descent, right and left, entry and exit, light and dark (Lefebvre’s “rhythm of signs and symbols.”) The somatosensory systems of the visitors would have registered the uneven floor, the coolness of the subterranean air, the grazing

366 Ibid 160.
367 Ibid 159.
368 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 143.
of a knee, rough and smooth walls against the palm. Noses crinkled in response to smoke, bodies migrated near light sources. The kinesthetic body would have bowed down to accommodate restricted passageways. Spatial characteristics and architectural elements, extraordinary room proportions, columns, vaults, luxurious materials, frescoes, mosaics, and imperial inscriptions all served to draw visitors physically by enticing them toward sites of significance. Considering these physical challenges greatly enlivens and enhances our reading of the catacomb-as-monument.

Cognitive Bodies

Visitors to a monument are also engaged cognitively. Horizons of meanings inhere in monuments: “levels, layers and sedimentations of perception, representation and spatial practice which presuppose one another, which proffer themselves to one another, and which are superimposed upon one another.” Columns and vaulted ceilings, skylights, luxurious materials, mosaics and frescoes, and décor extraordinary in a subterranean setting along with symmetrical layouts not only provoked physical engagement but also served to spark cognitive interest. In the Crypt of the Popes, for example, the large arched doorway leading into the burial chamber hinted at the importance of the space while the relatively commodious and vaulted room, symmetrically framed by loculi (along both sides of the crypt, two columns of three loculi on each side, twelve loculi in total) provided palpable cues to guide visitor interest (Figure 18). The spatial layout directed their focus to read the site and the most venerated tomb of Sixtus centered on the back (focal) wall. The formal inscriptions of Damasus, the addition of an altar with its Eucharistic elements, and the use of elite marble in the crypt’s décor provided further cues for interpreting the site.

369 Ibid, 226.
Other objects routinely inscribed or embedded within catacomb spaces also served as cognitive stimulants such as symbols painted or etched on tomb enclosures (Chi-Rho, dove, monograms), absorptive epitaphs, story-book images (Orpheus, Jonah, shepherds), personal artifacts (small toys, vases, coins), and even sculptural statuettes (busts, the good shepherd). The contrast of light against the dark subterranean environment would have awakened memories from catechetical teachings for Jesus was the light of the world. The catacomb-as-monument was a fertile communications device and Damasus provoked interest and recognition, teaching his audiences in the process through his use of a one-way path, hierarchy of space, and select architectural elements which permitted a more sophisticated refinement of pilgrim movement and narrative organization.

Timelessness

To move through the space is to move through time. Time is momentarily suspended in the monument as past, present and future events coalesce in the memorial to create or support a particular narrative. In his elogium to Tarsicius at the cemetery of Callistus, Damasus spans the distant past of the apostles, the recent past of Tarsicius’ murder, and the present-day visitor (EP 15):

PAR MERITVM QVICVMQ(ue) LEGIS COGNOSCE DVORVM
QVIS DAMASVS RECTOR TITVLOS POST PRAEMIA REDDIT.
IVDAICVS POPVLVS STEPHANVM MELIORA MONENTEM
PERCVLERAT SAXIS, TVLERAT QVI EX HOSTE TROPAEVM:
MARTYRIVM PRIMVS RAPVIT LEVITA FIDELIS.
TARSICIVM SANCTVM CHRISTI SACRAMENTA GERENTEM
CVM MALE SANA MANVS PREMERET VVLGARE PROFANIS,
IPSE ANIMAM POTIVS VOLVIT DIMITTERE CAESVS
PRODERE QVAM CANIBVS RABIDIS CAELESTIA MEMBRA.

Jesus the light, John 8:12, “iterum ergo locutus est eis Iesus dicens ego sum lux mundi qui sequitur me non ambulabit in tenebris sed habeit lucem vitae.”
You who read, whoever you are, recognize the equal merit of the two
to whom Damasus the bishop has dedicated this inscription after their rewards.
The Jewish people stoned Stephen when he was instructing them
on a better course, he who carried off the trophy from the enemy:
the faithful deacon first laid hold of martyrdom.
When a raving gang was pressing holy Tarsicius to reveal to the uninitiated
the sacraments of Christ that he was carrying,
he wished rather to release his spirit, struck down,
than to betray the heavenly limbs to mad dogs.\textsuperscript{371}

Here Damasus reenacts an event in Roman Christian history making witnesses of his visitors.
The violent first-century death of the proto-martyr Stephen, the martyrdom of the faithful third-
century Roman Tarsicius, and the contemporary (fourth-century) acts of Damasus are all vividly
brought to mind in the shrine. Note that this is also a teaching moment as Damasus reminds the
hearers of the sanctity of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Other techniques used by Damasus to integrate present and past include addressing his
catacomb audience personally in the present tense (“\textit{quaeris}” meaning “you seek”), and
impressing upon his hearers the imminence of the martyrs whose earthly bodies lay “\textit{Hic}”
(here).\textsuperscript{372} More specifically, because the catacomb was a “holy space” it filled an important role
in identity. R. A. Markus states that holy spaces “served to assure the Christians of a local
church of its continuity with its own, heroic, persecuted past, and the universal church of its
continuity with the age of the martyrs.”\textsuperscript{373} The catacomb-as-monument linked the Roman
Christian past to the present to create a narrative of religious heritage. The space reflected the
sense of an idyllic coterie of Roman Christianity in which each participant belonged, comrades

\textsuperscript{371} EP 15, Translation Trout, \textit{Damasus}. For the story of Stephen see Acts 6:8-7:60. The narrative of Tarsicius is
known only through this epigram. A statue of Tarsicius was created by the sculpture Alexandre Falguière (1831-
1900) and today can be found in the Musée d’Orsay museum in Paris.
\textsuperscript{372} Ferrua’s index reveals that the term “hic” was incorporated in at least nine of the epigrams. 10.1; 11.2; 16; 17.2;
20.1; 28.9; 31.4; 32.3; 34.3.
moving forward under the direction of Bishop Damasus. LeFebvre describes this phenomenon of monumental space a “collective mirror.” 374

_A “Collective Mirror”_

Visitors to the catacomb-as-monument came from diverse backgrounds and experiences and would have included bishops, clergy, deacons, laymen, men, women, young and old, all socio-economic classes, ages and genders. Participants see themselves in the reflection cast off by the monument as part of a membership. The subterranean ordeal would have made strange bedfellows of this socially heterogenous assembly forced to rely on and assist each other as both spectators and participants in the narrative. An experience like this that occurs outside one’s comfort zone inspires camaraderie and consensus. When it takes place as part of ritual, ritual-centered visuality (introduced above) enhances the ability to see communally. Christian audiences, in particular, were prepared for ritual viewing having intentionally submitted “to the liturgical rule book of a holy site in order to be offered its sacred experience.” 375 Elsner notes that their submission extended to the divesting of self from “all the social and discursive elements that distinguish his or her subjectivity.” 376 Thus, a grouping of like-minded individuals anticipated a shared experience, they were primed and ready to interact. The monument lends itself to the collective experience for, as social scientist Steve Pile explains, “monuments make space incontestable both by closing off alternative readings and by drawing people into the presumption that the values they represent are shared.” 377 Intentional participation in concert with the message of the monument effectuated communal thinking among participants.

374 LeFebvre, _The Production of Space_, 220.
375 Elsner, _Roman Eyes_, 23. Quote, 13.
376 Elsner, _Roman Eyes_, 25.
Summary: The Catacomb-as-Monument

Like all monuments, the catacomb-as-monument reflects a negotiated narrative of the world it represents. It communicates power and authority, it transcends the passage of time, it erases and replaces traces of death, violence, and social practice in the construction of a narrative. The catacomb-as-monument was lived space that engaged bodies physically and cognitively. Damasus’ late-antique monuments were durable, complex communication devices that suspended time and fostered communal identity and consensus.

In what follows, this dissertation demonstrates that the catacomb at Callistus was well-sited, physically vast, and majestically furnished. It plunged the visitors into a subterranean world rich with stimulating sensory and spatial properties and incited their corporeal imaginations. Ritual and the physical layout of the catacomb framed pilgrim expectations and augmented the authority of the site. Communal practice influenced individual subjectivity by making a more rigorous approximation of the late-antique experience possible. While individual interpretation and memory (literal memory) would have varied, the catacomb-as-monument was a powerful anchor for mooring Roman Christian identity and its official stories became the “interpretive authority” for collective memory. The catacomb-as-monument reified memory for Rome’s Christian community by providing sensory stimulating spaces, objects, gestures, and images upon which memories could adhere.378

Collective Memory

This dissertation locates late-antique Christian collective memory—the memory held by a group or collective also known as “social memory,” “cultural memory,” and “popular

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378 Pierre Nora“Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire.” in Representations 26 (1989), 7-25. Halbwachs argued that social interactions within specific contexts such as a monument shaped memory.
memory”—at the catacombs of Rome. Historian Robert R. Archibald describes memory as the narrative that we create for ourselves around the sensory impressions we receive for ordering the world around us. Memory gives meaning to existence, makes a distinction of and binds “individuals together as neighbors, communities, and even larger groups.” Individual memory is part and parcel of collective memory, but individual and group memory are not one and the same.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’ (1877-1945) work on collective memory brought the topic to the forefront of scholarly debate. Collective memory is essential, he said, for “society can live only if its institutions rest on potent collective beliefs.” Halbwachs emphatically argued that memory is acquired, recalled, recognized, and localized in society. Memory “settled” when it attached “to an event, personality or locality.” But collective memory is not a factual repetition of details for it is necessarily distorted in the reconstruction: “there are surely

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380 Ben-Amos and Weissberg, Cultural Memory, 10.


385 Ibid, 200.
many facts, and many details of certain facts, that the individual would forget if others did not keep their memory alive for him.”\textsuperscript{386} Further distractions include the organic nature of human emotions, selective recall, and trauma. Memory may also be distorted by the group in its attempt to leave out divisive elements and/or to accommodate past events or ideas to the present culture.\textsuperscript{387} Thus, collective memory is a compilation of a group’s individual reminiscences which is subject to variations over time.\textsuperscript{388}

A crisis of memory occurs when “the past is not shared, when it lacks people or accessible places that confirm it, the past is less meaningful.”\textsuperscript{389} The fourth-century Roman church, caught up in a whirlwind of change, feared forgetfulness. Newer generations were losing sight of the triumphs, trials and tribulations upon which the church had molded its personality and purpose. The formerly persecuted Roman bishops enjoyed new accommodations in the Basilica of St. John (the Lateran) and local congregations found themselves in new building programs as basilicas of significant size replaced the humbler \textit{tituli} of long tradition. Imperial patronage elicited broader interest in Christianity as a religious option and, while new faces were welcomed, the intrusion of sustained change upon the past shifted the worship dynamic giving rise to uneasiness among church members. Rome’s Christian community needed a way forward that connected the pre- and post-Constantinian church. The sense of pride

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{386} Ibid, 182.
\textsuperscript{387} Indeed, the “facts” that Damasus presented in the monument were not exact but were an \textit{interpretation of} Christian events, a negotiated version of Rome’s Christian history.
\textsuperscript{388} Halbwach’s claims have been the topic of discussion for many years. Most provocative were concerns regarding the preservation of history. Pierre Nora was especially concerned about Halbwach’s emphasis on the importance of persons and localities in memory preservation. If “collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time,” then what happens to memory when the group dies, the venue becomes overgrown, and the time is decades or centuries past? What happens to “history?” The importance of place for anchoring memory, whether physically or mentally, has been regarded as genuine. Halbwachs’ contribution to collective memory theory brought attention to cultural practices and the use of artifacts by cultures to preserve and support group memory and identity. His theory is useful for thinking about the shifting perspectives that make up what is knowable about the past. Here, it draws attention to the agency of the tomb.
\textsuperscript{389} Archibald, “Personal History,” 80.
\end{footnotes}
and loyalty attached to the sufferings and hardships that punctuated the narrative of pre-
Constantinian Christianity was missing in the post-Constantinian era. Fourth-century believers
suffered from an embarrassment of riches and rising consternation and doubt among its members
regarding the legitimacy of both their own and each other’s faith.

The Christian memory crisis seriously threatened the group’s religious identity and their
relationships with each other. Roman Christians, a generation removed from the persecutions,
needed memory reinforcement to preserve and reinvigorate the institution’s sense of self, “to
situate themselves temporally and topographically” in the panorama of Rome’s history and to
come to grips with their present social order. This memory needed to begin with the
individual for “if the past is entirely mediated by professionals and cannot be personally
confirmed, it loses credibility.” Damasus created a locus for Christian memory and
professionally installed a medium of memory to reanimate the past for individuals. The
framework he enacted within the catacomb proscribed movement, presented visual stimuli, and
incorporated a spoken narrative via the epigrams. By erecting a boundary around the narrative
Damasus limited the potential for significant distortions in collective memory. While individual
reactions to the stimuli would vary, core elements to be remembered would be common.
Further, confrontation with the space by visitors gave credibility to the historical narrative of the
catacomb-as-monument and to a collective memory of Roman Christianity.

The vacillating nature of collective memory means that it is transitory. To extend the
viability of Christian collective memory it needed to be conveyed and sustained by the group in
what Anthropologist Paul Connerton describes as “performative commemorative

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390 Castelli, Martyrdom, 12.
391 Archibald, “Personal History,” 80.
Anthropologists Climo and Cattell agree noting that “memories are not stored solely in the brain, but in the body and bodily practices.” The need for physical participation was nicely met by the practice of martyr festival. Physical participation in martyr festival supplied the commemorative performance that Connerton argues is essential to retention. “If you build it they will come” might work for a fictional movie premise but for Damasus’ masterpieces to exert a strong influence over and become commonplace among Rome’s Christian community there needed to be regular, repeated interaction with the site. Martyr festival made the participants active agents in memory creation and this would have enhanced the longevity of collective memory.

The sensory-filled environment of the catacomb-as-monument would have encouraged visceral seeing, even synesthesia, and stimulated human emotions which would have resulted in a trenchant collective memory. Collective memory is organic, ever evolving to fit its contemporary audience. The memory held by the group may change from year to year but its efficacy holds up because the ritual site stands as a common memory framework, “the interpretive authority for present actions and events.”

Chapter Summary

Lefebvre’s biographer Eric Smith calls lived space a “complex reservoir of social meaning and action: a potent role for space.” It is the capacity of the universal human body to

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392 Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-14, 17. Connerton is extending Pierre Nora’s claim that living memory must be kept alive and this is accomplished by the institution of rituals and commemorations.

393 Climo and Cattell, Social Memory and History, 19.

394 Climo and Cattell describe the influence of emotions and memory’s susceptibility to distortions in Social Memory and History, 13-14.

395 Dorothy Noyes and Roger D. Abrahams. “From Calendar Custom to National Memory” in Ben-Amos and Weissberg, 77-98; Here, 85.

operate in and experience the world that makes sensory analysis an appropriate exercise for studying the catacombs as lived space. Monumentality and collective memory are affected by the senses. Investigating the catacombs as lived space reveals the late-antique society that created and participated in them. The catacomb-as-monument established by Damasus contained symbols, architectural features, artwork, inscriptions, and subterranean oddities making it a heightened sensory environment. Late-antique visitors would have touched and been touched by the space which would have incited corporeal imagination and led to visceral seeing. The Roman bishop organized the sensory experience through the one-way routes, jeweled-style epigrams, strategic lighting, decoration, column installations, and liturgical accoutrement. In certain instances, these sensory stimulants might have come together to intensify the experience through synesthesis. Instances of synesthesis are especially powerful in the creation of memory.

While individuals retained personal memories and recollections of their underground experiences, group participation resulted in a collective memory of the event or events. This collective memory was important, ne essential, for the health of the Roman church. What follows is an in-depth analysis of the sensory and spatial elements that late-antique visitors would have encountered in the catacomb of Callistus along the route of the popes. Engaging in such an intimate way with the spaces reveals key narratives in late-antique Christianity and exposes the teachings of Bishop Damasus.^{397}

PRELUDE
MARTYR FESTIVAL OF SIXTUS: VIII IDES AUG, IN THE THIRD CONSULATE OF
GRATIAN
(August 6, 374)

NOTE: The following is a fictional account compiled using historical knowledge of events surrounding Christian martyr festival at or around the bishopric of Damasus. Paula Fredrickson, historian of ancient Christianity, argues that to prevent our knowledge of a society’s subsequent history from distorting their lives, historians must affect a “willed naïveté” of their subject’s future. The intent of this prelude is to illuminate the real experience of Damasus’ audience as free of modern influence as possible. This fictional narrative will set the stage for the historical analysis which follows.

The breeze from the window was a refreshing start to what would surely be another hot and sticky August day in Rome. There was little time to enjoy it though for today was the Festival of Sixtus, and Julia was scheduled to meet her family and friends at titulus Sabinae where they were to gather for the procession to the cemetery of Callistus, burial ground for many residents of the Aventine. Julia dressed quickly, putting on her coolest tunic and most comfortable sandals in anticipation of the long walk outside the city. Grabbing a jug of water along with some bread and cheese to provide sustenance for the long day ahead, she set out toward titulus Sabinae located just a few blocks away.

399 Callistus is one of two cemeteries that held the bodies of individuals from the Aventine (region I), the other being the cemetery of Domitilla. See Peter Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries, tr. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Lampe is Professor of New Testament at the University of Tübingen, Germany.
Individuals and families greeted one another as they made their way toward the church. Julia located her grandmother, her ava, Nana, and other members of her family and moved toward them. As she drew near the aula, Julia was reminded of the stories her grandmother had shared, of the days before Emperor Constantine, when titulus Sabinae had been confiscated, its songbooks and copies of the scriptures destroyed. As she joined her family, the presbyter called everyone together for a brief assembly where the congregants—men on one side, women on the other—sang a few hymns, prayed and listened to a short sermon of exhortation regarding the faith of the Bishop Sixtus whose life was being celebrated that day. As they were dismissed, families reconnected and moved outside onto the streets toward the Clivus Publicus and Via Appia which would lead them to the cemetery.

The normally quiet streets of the Aventine were bustling for, in addition to the congregation of titulis Sabinae, the hill boasted four other Christian meeting houses: titulus Priscae across from the temple of Diana for which the Aventine was named, titulus Balbinae on the hill’s southeastern slope, and tituli Anastasiae and Fasciolae which anchored the hill on either end alongside the valley and the Circus Maximus (Figure 1). The Aventine had a rich religious history. In addition to the temple of Diana it supported a large Mithraem and its northwestern slope was home to the temples of Iunonis Reginae, Minerva, and Luna. The band of Aventine pilgrims passed near the Baths of Decius whose waters came from the oldest aqueduct in Rome, the Aqua Appia. The aqueduct was otherwise invisible to the naked eye for it passed beneath the hill.

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400 Traditio Apostolorum 18 describes congregations segregated by sex.
The Santa Sabina contingent was forced to yield to traffic as they neared the Via Appia proper—one of the busiest thoroughfares in town—which was already crowded with shoppers, vendors, and laborers all going about their daily business. Julia attached herself to Nana’s side as the crowd intensified. “Tell me again Nana, tell me about those days before.” “Those days” were the days when Christians were punished, even killed, for refusing to offer state sacrifices. Nana laughed, “Again, Julia?” In reality she was secretly pleased at her granddaughter’s interest although remembering was often difficult. Nana’s own father, a Roman Senator, had died as a result of Diocletian’s persecutions and the family had been shunned within their own social circle because of their monotheistic beliefs. Julia had never been forced to live under the fear of persecution but Nana’s generation remembered and they knew that it only took a change of leadership to bring everything crashing down around them once more. The freedoms and benefits enjoyed since the reign of Constantine had served as a sweet balm on those old wounds, but it was only a few years ago, under the imperial rule of Julian (360-363), that the fear of repression once again tormented Christians throughout the Empire. Julian had revived imperial support for state religious practices and his summons of all Christian bishops was met with much apprehension. When he banned Christians from teaching rhetoric and literature it seemed as if the time of Diocletian was again upon them. 403 Tensions had lessened following Julian’s death, but the scars would always remain, and the future was always uncertain. It was important to instruct and remind the younger generation about their history.

Nana recounted her story and the queue continued to grow as the group left the neighborhoods behind for the more commercial streets of the vicus publicae and the via nova.

403 Ammianus Marcellinus, Later Roman Empire, 22.5; 22.11.
To their left stood the Circus Maximus and beyond that, the great Palatine hill and complex created by Domitian over a century ago. The city’s monumental skyline of triumphal arches, imperial basilicas, the Colossus amphitheater and the Claudian aqueduct looked down on them. The breezes that reached the Aventine were stifled here in the valley. As they passed through the old republican gate, the Porta Capena, the crowds and street noises increased. The via Appia was lined with historical monuments of past Roman successes, which were increasingly crowded out by insula whose fronts housed a variety of shops. Plazas bustled with market activity and the pilgrims found themselves competing with wagons and merchant carts for passage on the city streets. The excited chatter of children and barking dogs occasionally pierced the air. Shouts and laughter drifted down from the magnificent public baths of Caracalla. Rome’s famous fountains, and porticoed courtyards beckoned, offering refreshment. It was a beautiful day to be a Roman. Intent upon their destination, Julia and her group ignored these enticements and pushed on toward the city walls. The aroma of blooming sweet jasmine was increasingly replaced by wafts of garlic and onions, intermingled with the stench of animal dung and the pungent odors of human bodies. The porta Appia appeared as they passed beneath the Aqua Antonina, the aqueduct that supplied water to the Caracalla baths. Large homes stood near the city walls, having taken over the lands used during the Republican era as cemeteries. Lines to exit the city had slowed due to the large number of Christians processing to the cemetery today. Despite the heat and the crowds Julia and her entourage had high spirits: Today was a dies natalis, a holiday, a time to remember and to pay respects to venerable ancestors while enjoying a respite from daily city life; an opportunity to go outside the walls and embrace fresh air and green spaces.
The cemetery of Callistus was located within a strip of land bordered by the ancient Appia to the east and the Via Ardeatina to the west, near the third mile. As Julia emerged outside of the walls her eyes glimpsed the great Temple of Mars and cemeteries with their monuments extending as far as the eye could see. Mausolea of prominent Roman families lined both sides of the Via Appia, their imagines peering down upon the group (Figure 12). This extramural area of the city had experienced much construction over the last fifty years. In addition to the villa of Emperor Maxentius (complete with its own circus) two colossal basilicas, legacies of Emperor Constantine and his sons, now towered over the cemeteries proper. These new basilicas provided protection from the elements for those who visited the graves but their distance from the tomb of Sixtus made them impractical for Julia’s group. Julia recognized the Basilica of Marcus, standing off to the right along the Ardeatina. The other basilica, the Basilica Apostolorum, was located further down the Appia at the former burial site of the great biblical apostles Peter and Paul. Indeed, this thoroughfare had Christian significance as it was this very lane by which the apostles entered Rome all those years ago. The tomb of Sixtus was ahead, marked by a trichora.

Julia and her companions followed the crowd and turned toward the trichora whose size was only slightly larger than some of the large family mausolea in the cemetery (Figure 13). It

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404 Lucrezia Spera states that the complex of Maxentius was built in the same period as the ambulatory basilicas. “The Christianization of Space along the via Appia: Changing Landscape in the Suburbs of Rome” in *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (January, 2003), 23-43; Maxentius, 31.

405 Travelers to Rome arriving by ship disembarked at Puteoli and followed the Appian Way into the city.

406 The trichora is a particularly “Latin” structure, documented as early as the first century, and formerly associated with the emperor. Briefly, a trichora or triconch architectural style has three arms, each arm containing an apse. The Callistus complex today has two trichora, an eastern and a western structure. The entrance to the crypt of the popes is through the eastern trichora. The present-day trichora dates from the restoration of Leo III (795-816) and later additions. For more on trichora, see Irving Lavin, “The House of the Lord: Aspects of the Role of Palace Triclinia in the Architecture of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages” in *The Art Bulletin*, vol 44, no. 1 (March, 1962), 1-27. Also, Paolo Lino Zovatto, “Origine e significato della trichora-martyrium, l’esempio di Concordia” in *Palladio* (Roma: Istituto poligrafico e Zecca della Stato, 1965.) 7-34.
was a longtime Roman custom to enjoy *refrigerium* at the grave on the *dies natalis* of the deceased and during the *Parentalia* festival each February. Wealthy Romans celebrated in large family *mausolea*, some equipped with kitchens. More recently, those who could afford it chose to build their family tombs adjacent to the new basilicas to take advantage of their shelter and to be buried close to the martyrs. A large group was already clustered around the entrance, so the Santa Sabina contingent settled in to wait. While the green spaces of the cemetery and the shadows cast by the *mausolea* were cooler than the city’s streets, the overhead sun and August heat and humidity were only occasionally relieved by a slight breeze. Finding a shady area in which to rest, Julia helped her grandmother get comfortable and pulled out the bread and cheese to enjoy while they waited. Occasional vendors, hoping to pad their pockets with *sesterces*, passed through offering a tempting array of nuts, wines, cheeses and fruit. Friends and family took advantage of this opportunity to rest, catch up on the latest news, and make new acquaintances. Nana’s descriptions of earlier visits to the catacombs and the promise of the cooler subterranean spaces caused their excitement to grow.

In due time the large crowd dissipated as group after group made their way into the *trichora*. Once the congregation of *titulus Sabinae* was granted access, Julia ensured that she was placed in a group with Nana to help her grandmother navigate the long stairwell and uneven floors of the catacomb and to guarantee that her expert grandmother would be nearby to answer her many questions. Julia had never attended the *dies natalis* of Sixtus. The church under Bishop Damasus had begun renovating the catacombs making it easier for Christians to visit the graves of the martyrs and everyone was anxious to witness the tombs for themselves. As a small child, Julia had spent many hours on her grandmother’s lap listening to Nana tell stories from the scriptures. Daniel and the lion’s den, the three Hebrew boys who survived the blazing furnace,
Noah’s magnificent ark and the variety of animals that he had saved, Jonah’s adventures in the belly of a fish, and Jesus’ many miracles were all favorites of Julia. “You will recognize many stories from the Bible depicted in the cemetery,” Nana promised.

Julia was pleased to see that their guide for the tour was a young man named Marcus, from the Vitaly family, long-time fossores, who made their living by constructing and maintaining the many tombs in the Callistian cemetery. Marcus’ family members were long-time gravediggers with great expertise in underground construction. As part of their trade they served as administrators of the Callistus cemetery, selling space to bereaved families and assisting the poor to ensure that everyone had a decent burial in the Christian tradition. Marcus’ expertise would ensure a safe and educational experience. She felt comfort in his presence. After a short introduction and safety warnings, oil lamps were distributed among group members and positions staggered to ensure even distribution of the light in the dark tunnels below. The vast and poorly lit underground cemetery required that everyone remain close together. With the sound of music in the background, Julia grabbed Nana’s arm and they began the descent.

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407 Fossores were laborers who controlled the cemeteries. Burial spaces were purchased from the fossores who constructed the space by carving out the soil (tufa). Originally considered to be inferior clergy, the upsurge in Christian burials during the fourth-century and the growth of the cult of saints meant that by the early fifth century fossores were powerful corporations. This corporation included artists who decorated the tombs. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, eds. F.L Cross and E. A. Livingstone 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), sv. “Fossores.” The bibliography on fossores is brief. E. Conde Guerri, Los ‘Fossores’ de Roma Paleocristiana (estudio iconográfico, epigráfico, y social), (Roma: Città del Vaticano: Pontificio istituto di archeologia Cristiana, 1979). Also Jean Guyon, “La vente des tombes à travers l’épigraphie de la Rome chrétienne (IIIe, VIIe siècles) : le rôle des fossores, mansionarii, praepositi et prêtres” in Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité, tome 86, no1. (1974), 549-596.

408 Epigraphic evidence exists that suggests that fossores often controlled the larger cemeteries although there does not appear to be any fixed rules regarding this. Epigraphic evidence suggests that in some cases at least the fossores sold loculi and arcosolia at prices which they determined. It seems that the fossores were also responsible for artworks whether as executioners or as contractors of the various jobs. There is no clear evidence that fossores were part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Charles Pietri, Roma Christiana, 131-134.

409 Modern-day visitors to Callistus still gather in the trichora to meet their guide, obtain instructions, and gain historical background information before processing through the complex. Special religious services, such as observance of the Eucharist, are held in the catacomb spaces upon request.
Into its hidden depths a downward path shows the way by turning, winding steps, with the help of light from a source unseen; for the light of day enters the first approach as far as the top of the cleft and illumines the entrance; then as you go forward easily you see the dark night of the place fill the mysterious cavern with blackness, but you find openings let into the roof far above, so as to throw bright rays down into the chasm.\textsuperscript{410}

As they descended into the dark unknown, Julia was reminded of the story of Aeneas, founder of Rome. Aeneas had fled the burning city of Troy but upon discovering that his dear wife had failed to escape he returned in search of her. Wandering the dark streets, blinded by smoke and the lingering flames of destruction, Aeneas was struck with horror at the conditions of this once proud city. “The walls and gloomy gates whence forth I came, I first revisit, and retrace my way, searching the night once more. On all sides round horror spread wide; the very silence breathed a terror on my soul.”\textsuperscript{411} She suddenly shivered and chill bumps rose up on her arms. The group cautiously progressed, step by slow step, down the newly-expanded stairwell. Despite recent renovations, the steps were still steep, rough underfoot, and of inconsistent heights causing their bodies to press against the rough walls for added support. The passage was dark making for a slow descent although white plaster coating applied to the walls afforded some reflection of light. Julia was momentarily struck by a wave of claustrophobia but Nana, sensing her discomfort patted her arm reassuringly and directed Julia’s attention to a spot of light which marked the foot of the stairs. Julia understood, that light was their goal.

The group collected itself at the bottom of the stairs before continuing; several dark hallways radiated from the landing, but the direction of the tour was clearly marked by the width of the main gallery and its white walls. A few active and fearless young boys darted in and out of the dark side galleries, hopping out in the hopes of scaring those in the back of the line. The air belowground, while cool, was heavy with moisture and thick with the smell of dust. A rumble of muffled voices was audible, emanating from above as if from another world entirely. Julia’s claustrophobia seemed not to phase Nana. Indeed, Nana seemed pleased by what she was seeing and commented that the gallery was surprisingly commodious. Upon closer inspection Julia noticed that indeed, the gallery was high, two stories perhaps, and *loculi* towered above them in columns and rows, stacked one upon another as far as the eye could see. Stretches of darkness were broken by shafts of light that filtered down through small openings above. Friends had warned Julia that at times the passages were so small that you had to squeeze sideways while ducking your head in order to pass. That did not seem to be the case here at Callistus and for that she was grateful. Despite the intermittent light and reflective white walls of the new and improved passageway, Julia felt the darkness and unfathomable depths of the cemetery closing in on her. How far belowground they were! Her mind was racing, her imagination running amuck; the unknown mocked her. Julia hugged Nana’s arm closer to her side and moved on, keeping pace with the lamplight and keeping her eyes fixed on the precious beams of sunlight that filtered down from above.⁴¹²

⁴¹² Prudentius, again pulling from Vergil, describes the disconcerting nature of being underground. “However doubtful you may feel of this fabric of narrow halls running back on either hand in darksome galleries, still through the holes pierced in the vault many a gleam of light makes its way down to the hollow interior of the disemboweled mount, and thus underground it is granted to see the brightness of a sun which is not there, and have the benefit of its light.” (*Pe XI To Bishop Valerian on the Passion of the Most Blessed Martyr Hippolytus*, 163-168). Today electrification of the catacombs has made the darkness less intense; still, the confining, poorly-lit space constricted by dark twists and turns stretch out in a seemingly unending maze, striking the less adventuresome with trepidation.
Nana had shared many stories with anyone who would listen about the difficult time of the persecutions and had definite opinions about the politics that had enveloped the church since the rule of Constantine. When the current bishop of Rome, Damasus, was elected to the episcopal see, the people were divided to the point that civil war had broken out within the Christian community. Although Damasus was elected with Emperor Valentinian’s approval, questions remained as many did not trust him. Damasus’ work here and in other cemeteries around the city had been well-received, however. While the preceding bishop, Liberius, had been a good man, his involvement in eastern affairs had monopolized his energies to the detriment of the local church. Bishop Damasus’ attentions to the Roman congregations and the history of the church had endeared him to many of Nana’s friends who had helped fund the many catacomb improvements. Nana was pleased with the enlarged, one-way pathway that permitted their large group to move through the catacomb in a comfortable and orderly fashion. Still, conversation was muted with everyone deep in thought, caught up in the reality of being underground surrounded by hundreds of tombs which encroached upon them on every side and, at times, below their feet.

The catacomb complexes were vast, and they grew larger every year. Marcus shared that Callistus in particular was one of the fastest growing cemeteries in Rome as underground connections were being made among the many cemeteries lining the Appia and the Ardeatina. New graves were also being excavated every day. The many levels and passageways he mentioned were intimidating. “So many graves,” Julia thought, “how difficult it must be to locate the sites of your loved ones!” Her mind reeled as she tried to take in everything around her. Flickering flames from the small oil lamps did little to dispel the darkness but a miasma of burning oil and musty dust mingled with the occasional fetid odor of decaying flesh assaulting
their senses. Some members in the group held sachets of spices, flowers, bottles of perfume, or other aromatic to their noses. These served a dual purpose as many would be placed as an offering at the graveside. She noted that while the air was certainly cooler than aboveground it seemed heavy as if the tufa and the dust had joined with the humidity to encase her body.

Surprisingly, the hundreds of tombs representing a century of dead Romans actually eased some of the tension that had accompanied the descent. Countless loculi lined the gallery, their openings sealed with marble or terra cotta panels. Upon closer inspection, Julia noted that the enclosures bore a variety of identifying markers. The loculi were marked by paint, some were crudely scratched, others carved by an amateur’s hand. Still others, for those who could afford it, were professionally executed to produce elegant, very legible and more durable epitaphs. Their messages also varied. While many were marked simply with abbreviated names and dates, others contained verses and/or included images; the smaller loculi held the bodies of children and were especially poignant. Julia also noticed small objects--toys, jewelry, glittering gold glass, and other items personal to the deceased--inhered in the mortar that sealed the grave (Figure 14). The familiar nature of the messages on the tombstones and the visible relics personalized the dead and served as sobering reminders of man’s mortality. Marcus paused and pointed to a group of graves whose deaths took place during the time of Diocletian’s purges, made conspicuous by the palm branches (symbol of triumph) and the initials MR on their epitaphs.


Group members scrutinized the *loculi* for other messages and symbols. “Agrippina gave up (her soul to God), Entered into the light…Buried on the ides of…”415 “Light” meant heaven, a reward for Christians. Nana pointed out the Chi-Rho or labarum, made famous by the Emperor Constantine who had adopted the intertwining of Chi and Rho, the first two Greek letters in Christ’s name as his personal symbol of victory.416 Victory of the martyrs, the hope of heaven, and Jesus Christ as the source of that hope were the prevailing themes the group observed as they passed along the gallery.

*Arcosolia* garnered the most attention. Individuals strained to examine the décor of the large arched openings which interrupted the flow of the *loculi*. Many included elaborately carved sarcophagi, beautiful frescoes and, at times, light-catching mosaics. As they approached one of these large openings Nana pointed out a small sarcophagus, the size of a small child, positioned on the *arcosolium’s* side wall (Figure 15).417 This was most certainly a family site but only a few tombs were in residence, one of which was the child’s sarcophagus. The enclosure had the appearance of being unfinished for the small burial casket was incomplete with no name engraved on the nameplate and the child’s likeness had yet to be carved out of the rough form. The stories depicted on it, however, were well-known having been learned as part of the catechism. A friendly competition broke out as group members came together in an attempt to interpret the scenes (Figure 15). Julia recognized a rather large Daniel standing between two small lions and Christ resurrecting Lazarus.

415 ICUR IV, 11196, as quoted in Baruffa, *Catacombs*, 49.
417 Note that while the small sarcophagus pictured was discovered in the Callistan region and its artistic details are true, its placement in the catacomb is fictional.
Nana pointed out yet another sarcophagus that held various depictions of Jesus in the act of performing miracles. The scenes included the marriage banquet in which Jesus turned the water into wine, Jesus with his disciples, and once again, Jesus with Lazarus. At this very dark time in the life of this family, the casket with its images represented their hope in heaven and faith in the power of Christ.

With heightening anticipation the band of pilgrims approached a conspicuously well-lit area, so luminous that Julia could see dozens of graffiti marks left by previous visitors. Names, initials, even short verses had been carved in the recently white-washed walls. Julia and Nana searched for familiar marks made by family and friends and attempted to interpret the etchings as they waited to enter the Crypt. Someone produced a knife and added his initials and a Chi-Rho to the wall. While many of the marks were of a perfunctory nature consisting of merely the names or initials of the person, others reflected individuals who were greatly burdened. Indeed, many of Julia’s acquaintances thought that the tombs of the martyrs held miraculous powers. It was interesting but sobering to see the diversity of visitors to the tombs and to read their petitions. “Sancte Siste in mente habeas in orations Aureliu Repentinu” (O St. Sixtus, remember in your prayers Aurelius the Repentant). Some were simply unreadable. Such communications were common aboveground but placed here, in the dark recesses, they appeared more intimate. Some of the writers expressed great sorrow such as “Felici PBR peccator” (Priest Felicio, a sinner). An image on the lower left side of a man working in the field labeled “armen” (cultivator) caught Nana’s eye (Figure 16). Having spent much of her childhood and young

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418 ICUR, IV, 9521. “Sante svste in mente habeas in horationes avreliu repentinu sancte svste….repentinum”. Aurelius’ communication was written in Latin using the Greek letter “Є” in place of the Latin “E,” a common practice in late antiquity. Another invocation, SANCTE XVSTE, has been dated by De Rossi prior to the work of Damasus.
419 ICUR IV, 9524. This could be construed as formulaic and from a later date (390-425); however, of the total inscriptions preserved in ICUR, only twelve use the term “peccator.”
married life on a villa in Etruria, she was drawn to this image of country living. Julia’s eyes recognized a monogram, “Marcia,” the name of her friend. The illumination and the prevalence of graffiti marked this tomb as significant. Indeed, it was the Crypt of the Popes, the resting place of Sixtus, and the focus of the tour.

Stepping through the large arched doorway was somewhat surreal. While the urge to leave the dark passageway was acute, to pass into the crypt seemed to require commitment. Julia did not know what that commitment was but she felt strongly that she would be changed by what she encountered inside. Light from the gallery extended into the cubiculum by means of a transom (window) which had been carved out in the wall above an arched doorway. The threshold to the room was painted and prominently marked by the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ (Figure 17). Julia knew immediately that the space was a Christian space. People passed slowly into the cubiculum for it seemed as if they were stepping into a private world. The room was a high vault lined with loculi, six on either side. The light from the skylights at the back of the room seemed surreal, like heavenly sunlight. Its subterranean reach permitted them to take in the luxurious materials which embellished the space. Multi-colored marble covered the floors and lined the walls, white and brown and gray, reminiscent of wealthier homes in Rome. A corridor was visible on the left which Julia later discovered led to the cubiculum of the martyr Cecilia. Julia’s eyes took in the beauty and light of this chamber, hidden away from everyday life. She recognized the great contrast between this room and the dark and labyrinthine spaces from which they had just emerged. As she inhaled the fragrance of incense emanating from the

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420 ICUR IV, 9524 “Armen” comes from the Latin arator, aratoris, a masculine noun.
421 Kristina Sessa asserts that these rooms were called “cubiculum” for their parallel to the private sleeping quarters in the Roman household. She further suggests that this association with privacy enhanced the perception of intimacy in the crypt. “Christianity and the Cubiculum,” 180-181.
422 Note that the specific colors and types of marble along with any frescos or other adornment are simply lost to us forever. The space was so destroyed by marauders and scavengers that nothing remains except for the marble platform which likely held an altar, broken epitaphs, and shattered columns (Figure 18).
altar she was struck by the fact that the echoing sounds of the gallery were quieted here. Greek and Latin names marked the marble plaques which sealed the *loculi* containing the bishops and deacons buried there: Pontianus (230-235), Antherus (235-236), Fabian (236-250), Lucius I (253-254), Eutychian (275-283) and, on the back focal wall, the grave of Sixtus II (257-258). A hush fell over the group as they realized they were here, in the presence of the holy martyr Sixtus and the bodies of men who had shepherded the Christian community during the dark third century.  

The tomb of Sixtus was prominent, positioned to be visually centered within the arched doorway, the marble columns on their high bases and the *epistyliorum* which connected them, the altar and the epigram which fronted it (Figure 19). Eucharistic elements and all the accoutrements for worship (lamps, golden cups, silver lavers) were in view on and around the altar, a large lighted lamp hung overhead and other lamps were placed in wall niches around the grave to complete the scene. Having taken in these details, Julia’s eyes were drawn expectantly to the extraordinary marble plaques engraved in what might have been official imperial script as it resembled the many monumental engravings that stood in the Forum. These words would provide an explanation of this space. She trailed her finger along the precise lettering; the size of the epigraphs was astounding, nearly as tall as Julia and spanning the width of the wall. Once the group had filed into the crypt and had a chance to view their surroundings, a lector proceeded to read one of the epitaphs aloud (Figure 20):

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HIC CONGESTA IACET QVAERIS SI TURBA PIORVM
CORPORA SANCTORVM RETINET VENERANDA SEPVLCRA
SYBLIMES ANIMAS RAPVIT SIBI REGIA CAELI
HIC COMITES XYSTI PORTANT QVI EX HOSTE TROPAEA
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423 Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-16. The presence of a good shepherd image in the Crypt of the Popes has not been proven.

424 The *epistyliorum* is Latin for what we call the architrave. Basically it is the cross beam that rests on the columns (Lewis and Short). Vitruvius *Ten Books on Architecture*, 3.5.8 and 10.2.12.
HIC NUMERVS PROCERVM SERVAT QVI ALTARIA XPI
HIC POSITVS LONGA VIXIT QVI IN PACE SACERDOS
HIC CONFESSORES SANCTI QVOS GRAECIA MISIT
HIC IVVENES PVERIQ(ue) SENES CASTIQ(ue) NEPOTES
QVIS MAGE VIRGINEVM PLACVIT RETINERE PVDOREM
HIC FATEOR DAMASVS VOLVI MEA CONDERE MEMBRA
SED CINERES TIMVI SANCTOS VEXARE PIORVM

If you are seeking them, a great number of saints lie assembled here,
These venerable tombs hold fast the bodies of the saints,
The kingdom of heaven seized their exalted spirits.
Here lie the companions of Sixtus bearing trophies won from the enemy.
Here lie many great men who watch over the altar of Christ.
Here is placed a priest who lived during a long time of peace.
Here the sanctified confessors who were sent to us from Greece.
Here young men and children, the aged and their virtuous descendants
Who were pleased to wisely retain their chastity.
Here I Damasus confess I desired to bury my body
But I feared to disturb the sacred ashes of the blessed dead.⁴²⁵

The silence was replaced by voices in intimate conversations as the formidable
significance of this cemetery penetrated their minds. “Hic” (here)? These words of Bishop
Damasus removed any doubt regarding the authenticity of the space. So much violence and
heartbreak. The litany of Christians--men, women and children including many martyrs, whose
bodies were laid to rest here--was very sobering yet somehow exhilarating. Julia felt as though
the orator’s words were personally directed to her (“quaeris,” you seek).⁴²⁶ She was reminded of
the scripture in Hebrews in which the writer challenged his readers to “remember the days” of
persecutions, of hardship, of suffering, and she thought of her great grandfather who had died
professing his Christian faith.⁴²⁷ Everyone present knew of someone within their circle of
intimates who had experienced suffering for their faith and the litany of martyrs and confessors
brought these to mind. The city’s lineage of Christian heroes was even traceable to the apostles

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⁴²⁶ “Quaeris” is a second-person singular verb as opposed to the plural verb which Damasus could have used. This
indicates a desire to reach individuals on a more personal level.
⁴²⁷ Hebrews 10: 32-34.
Peter and Paul. Indeed, Rome had experienced its share of suffering in the name of the Christian faith.

The victorious language in the epigram evoked a heavenly triumph. Julia felt as if she and her cohort were spectators to a celebration of saints processing to their heavenly rewards. While Roman triumphs were largely a thing of the past, depictions of the celebrations were still visible on the monumental arches in the city center. Nana had been a child when the Senate had honored Emperor Constantine with the erection of a great arch in the city center. Others in the group had participated in the adventus of Emperor Constantius when he visited the eternal city in Julia’s childhood. She pictured in her mind’s eye the laurel wreath trophies and the joyous atmosphere that permeated that occasion. She could “see” the wreaths of victory, not on the heads imperial soldiers or emperors but crowning the heads of the Christian victors, “in white robes, holding palm branches in their hands,” approaching the throne of God. The bright light of heaven above filtered through the subterranean darkness. As the orator performed the epigram, Julia envisioned the procession of those seized spirits moving up to heaven. Each pilgrim desired to experience the triumph of the martyrs with the aid of Christ, “possit quid gloria Christi” (what Christ’s glory can achieve). The prominent signature of Bishop Damasus marked the experience as both contemporary to the lives of the participants and as an authentic sacred place where an encounter with divinity was possible.

The reader quieted the crowd and launched into a recitation of the other epigram, this one related the story of Sixtus’ martyrdom (Figure 21):

428 Constantius visited Rome in adventus in 357.
429 Revelation 7:9.
430 Peter Brown discusses the deeper goal of late-antique peoples. While the preachers of the day exhorted their audiences to follow the example of the martyrs, Brown argues that what the people really wanted was to share in the original “death-defying moment of ‘glory’ associated with God’s triumph in the saint.” In “Enjoying the Saints,” Brown cites Damasus’ phrase “possit quid gloria Christi” as evidence of this belief, 9. Damasus used this phrase in the epigrams to Paul (EP 1.7) and for the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus (EP 8.9).
At a time when the sword severed the sacred innermost parts of our mother [church],
the bishop buried here was teaching heavenly commands.

Soldiers, arriving suddenly, seize the sitting rector:
The congregants offered up their necks to the dispatched soldiers.
When the esteemed leader recognized this, he preferred to lift up the palm of victory,
the leader himself, of his own accord, willingly offered up his own neck,
impatient, lest their savagery be injurious to another.
Christ, who rewards the gifts for life, revealed the good work of the shepherd,
Christ himself watches over the numerous of the flock.\textsuperscript{431}

Although the tale of Sixtus’ martyrdom was known to Julia and many of the other
visitors, the recitation of the ghastly details at the site of the murder elicited exclamations
throughout the room as the story was retold. Sixtus was arrested and murdered here, on this very
spot! Nana’s skilled story-telling had never elicited such a profound sense of acknowledgement
nor did it give rise to the visceral stimulation of being here, where it all took place. It was as if
the years had dropped away and the execution was taking place before them. The room became
energized by the reader’s voice beating to the drum of rhythmic hexameters. As the crescendo
and decrescendo of the cadence progressed Julia saw vivid images of soldiers bursting in upon
the frightened congregation, violently seizing the bishop and striking him down. She found
herself seeking an exit as the room became excruciatingly small. What courage Sixtus and his

\textsuperscript{431} EP 17. Author’s translation.
congregants possessed, how brave to have offered themselves up as a sacrifice! Nana declared heatedly that it was the Emperor Valerian who had ordered this attack on the Christians of Rome and the arrest of Sixtus’ for sacrifice to the demons! The group became mute in their reflection. Julia breathed a quick prayer of thanksgiving that she lived in this time of peace.

The silence that followed the reading was broken by the pastor who exhorted the group to follow the example of these Christian ancestors. “Once again,” the pastor taught “we see that rewards are given to those of strong faith. The power of Christ watches over us. We have no need to fear death.” Individuals sought to place their hands on the tomb of Sixtus and the epitaph itself to make contact with the martyr. Those who had brought offerings, some of flowers, grain, wine, and oils, placed them next to the sepulcher, many simultaneously petitioning the martyr for aid. These very personal manifestations of grief and sadness enhanced the solemnity of the occasion. As order somewhat resumed, the catechumens were led out of the room, Holy Scriptures were read, and psalms were sung in preparation of the partaking of bread and wine, Christ’s body and blood, in the rite of the Eucharist.

The rite of Eucharist began and ended with prayer. Julia had been a Christian long enough to know the general order of the liturgical recitation. “Being mindful, therefore, of those things which he endured for our sake, we give thee thanks…” The priest pronounced the bread and the cup, a thanks offering to God, then requested that the group partaking of them be “strengthened for piety, may obtain the remission of their sins, may be delivered from the devil and his deceit, may be filled with the Holy Ghost, may be made worthy of thy Christ, and may

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432 The Liber Pontificalis records that “He was arrested by Valerian and taken to sacrifice to demons. He spurned Valerian’s instructions. He was beheaded and with him six others.” LP 25.2. A Letter of St. Cyprian seems to indicate that Sixtus was murdered in the cemetery: “But know that Xistus was martyred in the cemetery on the eighth day of the Ides of August, and with him four deacons.” (Ep. 79.1) Online at: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.iv.lxxxi.html. Accessed 8/21/13.
obtain eternal life upon thy reconciliation to them, Lord Almighty.” The prayer then turned toward requests for God’s aid for the universal church, the clergy, the king and army, holy persons, the local church, the city of Rome, the enemies of Christians, the catechumen, the weather, and “those who are absent on a just cause.” “Let us be mindful of the holy martyrs that we may be thought worthy to be partakers of their trial.” The priest then ended the lengthy prayer with an exclamation of praise “For to thee belong all glory, worship, and thanksgiving, honor and adoration to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and always, and for everlasting and endless ages,” Julia and the other Christians present responded “Amen.” The priest replied, “The peace of God be with you all” to which the congregants replied “and with thy spirit.”

Julia remembered her time as a catechumen and how the sacraments had seemed so mysterious. Her teacher had described how Christ directed his disciples to remember him, how his words had changed the bread into his body, the wine into his blood. Only the baptized could partake of the bread and wine of Eucharist and that in communion. Participation was not to be undertaken lightly. Individuals were to examine themselves and deal with any broken relationships or personal sins before partaking of the ritual elements.

The priest presiding over the altar took the consecrated bread and imitated Christ’s actions at the last supper by giving thanks, breaking the bread and saying, “Take and eat; this is

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433 Select phrases taken from the *Apostolic Constitutions* (Eucharist) Book VIII, which preserves the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (170-236) tr. Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church*, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) and from a sermon of Ambrose, *On the Sacraments* IV.V.24-28. The *Apostolic Constitutions* contains three different, lengthy prayers, two of which follow the order listed here. It is reasonable to assume that the rite as celebrated in this location under these circumstances was modified to fit the occasion.

my body.” When celebrated within the basilicas, the bread was distributed according to a strict order. If the bishop were present he would partake first followed by the presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, readers, singers and any ascetics. Women always came next, in order by deaconesses, virgins, and widows. Children were last. Everything was carried out orderly and reverently. In the foreign crypt where Sixtus’ body lay the order was less formal. The words and actions took on heightened significance in this special place. As the priest distributed the Eucharistic bread and wine, Julia and Nana were each deep in thought. While men and women were relegated to separate seating areas in regular worship, here the limited space prohibited such segregation and this was somewhat disconcerting.

As Julia moved to take the bread from the priest he uttered the words “the Body of Christ.” Julia responded “Amen,” (namely, “it is true.”) The priest responded, “what your tongue confesses may your heart hold fast.” “The Blood of Christ,” the priest intoned, “poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” Julia again answered “Amen.” As Julia partook of the offering the sweet smell of the incense seemed to represent its mediation to heaven where Christ stood at his heavenly altar. She waited in silence as the process was repeated for each one present, listening to the lector’s voice as he sang the thirty-third Psalm.

With the bodies of bishops and deacons lining the crypt on all sides, the light reflecting from above, the luxurious and colorful décor of lamps and marbles, the formal inscriptions, and the womb-like enfolding nature of the space, Julia felt transported, protected, in the embrace of heaven. Partaking of this holy sacrament in an environment of death made the sacrifice of Christ and the examples of the martyrs more potent yet strangely comforting.

435 The Roman practice was to have the bread used by the city’s churches for Eucharistic observance consecrated by the bishop and then distributed among the city’s churches so that all Rome’s Christians would partake of the same elements.
“How great a sacrament this is!” the priest exclaimed. “In partaking of this sacrament we are obeying the directive of Christ to continue it in memory of him until his return. We call to mind his most glorious passion, his resurrection from hell, and his ascension into heaven!”

While the participants pondered the vision of Christ in triumphant procession the priest turned his gaze up, toward the light, be a conduit to the altar of heaven itself, and said, “we offer you this spotless sacrifice, this spiritual sacrifice, this unbloody sacrifice, this holy bread and the cup of eternal life. We beseech and pray that you accept this offering upon your altar on high through the hands of your angels, just as you deigned to accept the gift of your just son Abel and the sacrifice of Abraham our Father and what the high priest Melchizedek offered to you.”

The closing prayer was an exhortation to peace. “…unite us with those that are consecrated to thee in holiness; confirm us in the truth by the assistance of thy Holy Spirit. Reveal to us the things of which we are ignorant; supply to us the things in which we are defective; confirm us in the things in which we already know. Preserve the priests blameless in thy worship; keep the kings in peace, and the rulers in righteousness; the air, in a good temperature; the fruits, in fertility; the world, in an all-powerful Providence.” A Deacon then directed them to “bow down to God, through his Christ, and receive the blessing.” As everyone bowed down, the priest prayed over them and when he was finished, the Deacon instructed them to “depart in peace.” They were permitted a brief glimpse of Saint Cecilia’s grave before they were quickly escorted back into the gallery. Others were waiting.

Marcus directed the group through the Crypt of the Popes and back into the gallery from which they had come. They turned left and moved deeper into the complex. Julia acknowledged a friend in a group awaiting entrance into the papal crypt. The contrast between the illuminated
crypt of Sixtus and the dark gallery was considerable.\textsuperscript{436} It seemed strange to not retrace their steps and return to blue skies and terra firma right away! As they progressed Marcus explained that this was the “first area,” the oldest tombs of the underground Callistan complex. Some of these tombs were over 100 years old, datable to the early third century. They continued deeper into the catacomb moving between columns of \textit{loculi} and \textit{arcosolia} which served as a cadence for their movement. Skylights served as caesuras. Group members strained to take in their surroundings. Words and symbols begged to be noticed, scenes carved onto sarcophagi were intellectual enticements, while small trinkets embedded in the mortar brought them back to the human element of the moment. Julia and her cohort tried to take it all in without becoming separated from the tour—no one wanted to get lost down here!

Symbols of Christ were visible everywhere. In addition to the Chi-Rho and Good Shepherd, Julia recognized \textit{ichthus}, alpha and omega, and the anchor of hope.\textsuperscript{437} These were often combined. The dove with an olive branch represented the soul in eternal peace yet other depictions of the dove stood for the Holy Spirit who descended upon a newly baptized Jesus.\textsuperscript{438} Orante figures represented the dead at peace. Perhaps because they had just partaken of the Eucharist, images of this sacrament (loaves of bread, pitchers for wine and water, grapes) also stood out to her.

One very small grave drew Julia in. Its inscription read “Sweet Daughter Cipriana, Rest in Peace. She lived ten months.”\textsuperscript{439} The diminutive grave was discomfiting. Cipriana’s parents

\textsuperscript{436} This area is outlined by Galleries L and C (east and west) and Galleries A and B (north and south). See Figure 4.

\textsuperscript{437} Christ in fish symbols (Greek acrostic for “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior”), Greek letters Alpha and Omega (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet which stands for Christ, the beginning and end of all things [Revelation 22:13]), and the anchor, symbol of hope as relayed in Hebrews (“We have this hope as an anchor for our lives” [Hebrews 6:19]).

\textsuperscript{438} Matthew 3:16.

\textsuperscript{439} “\textit{Cipriana filia dulcis in Pacis, vixit menses X}.” (Dated 290-325; ICUR 9752). All inscriptions discussed here were discovered in the lower region of the Callistan complex.
must have been well-off for the grave was closed with marble and the words had been professionally inscribed. Graves like Cipriana’s were mixed in alongside tombs with hand-etched sentiments on marble, professionally engraved markers, and epitaphs painted on marble or even inexpensive terra cotta tiles. Another tomb was enclosed by marble, hand-etched, and prominently marked the Christian symbol of Christ. It read “Augerine [rests] in my God and in Jesus Christ.”

Nearby was the final resting place of another believer “Sweet Sofronia, you shall always reside with God.” Of course, not all the tombs contained young victims. Some commemorated individuals who had enjoyed a relatively long life such as Marcianus:

“Marcianus passed away in November on the day of Mars (Tuesday). [He lived] sixty-one years and seventeen days. Rest in Peace.”

The bits of information provided by these sentiments provoked Julia’s desire to know more about their stories.

The Santa Sabina contingent was becoming more comfortable and adept at translating the many epitaphs. A flash of light caught Julia’s eye as the flame from a lamp reflected off a glass ornament embedded in the mortar of one of the sepulchers. The smooth texture of the glass felt cold beneath her fingers and she strained to see what image decorated the ornament. Borrowing an oil lamp she held it up to the round glass and recognized a praying figure labeled “S Agnes,” one of Rome’s foremost martyrs. Like the inscriptions, the gold glass prompted Julia to contemplate the woman who merited this marker on her grave. An occasional voice and sounds of music drifted down the hallway reminding Julia that she was not alone and she was comforted by that thought.

440 Dated 300-350; ICUR 9659.
441 Dated 300-399; ICUR 10195.c.
442 Dated 300-399; ICUR 10010.
At the end of the gallery a stairwell opened up on the right. One part of Julia wanted to exit this uncomfortable world that had her senses on edge while the other did not want the adventure to end. The occasional voice, chorus, even distant footsteps made its way through the catacomb and helped to fill the space surrounding them but the invisibility of the noise-makers amplified the vastness of the catacomb. Marcus shunned the stairwell and directed the group away toward the whitewashed walls of yet another gallery. This section, he said, served as the final resting place for many of Rome’s Christian ancestors who lived during a relative time of peace (early third-century) (Gallery A [Figure 22]). Upon closer inspection, Julia realized that this area was decidedly different, for even the ceiling had been whitened and embellished with painted lines and garlands of greenery and florals. Six cubicula opened up on the right side of the hallway, loculi and arcosolia filled the wall on the left. An ornamented skylight brought relief and even permitted a glimpse of the sky above. The gallery’s proximity to the stairwell-not-taken facilitated some circulation of air to refresh them, a welcome respite to the clammy, dust-infused atmosphere. The pastoral aura of the hallway, its illumination, and the glimpse it provided of the world above was soothing in this subterranean location.

Enhanced illumination meant that the loculi were more visible. The various markers revealed tantalizing clues to the lives of the deceased. Nana pointed out images of a physician’s tool, a carpenter’s saw, a merchant’s scale, wine sellers standing next to their iconic large barrels, a dry measure of grain and the baskets of a baker, and the symbols of church leaders such as “IVLIANVS PRESBYTER”. These were the tombs of a variety of everyday people.

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443 Lefebvre discusses monuments possessing “acoustical properties.” “In cloister or cathedral, space is measured by the ear.” He calls this “Architectural volumes.” “It is in the ‘non-visible’ that bodies find one another.” The Production of Space, 225.
444 There were originally six of these cubicula but sometime in the fourth century one was destroyed or cut off to create access between the Crypt of the Popes and the tomb of Cornelius (Figure 4).
445 IVLIANVS PRESBYTER (dated 326-375; ICUR 9944). Baruffa, Catacombs, 78.
Nana remarked that the diversity of the dead matched the array of the living within our own local congregation.

The most captivating element of this hallway was the six large rooms that lined the right side of the space. Turning her attention to them Julia realized that each one was very similar in appearance. The order and likeness of these spaces tucked within the ornamented gallery suggested that they were constructed as a unit. She recalled Nana’s stories from childhood in which she had visited this site. Indeed, Nana was excited and anxious to see them again. Marcus encouraged his charges to more closely inspect the interior of the cubicula challenging them to translate the many scenes inside.

It was immediately apparent that these rooms were significantly smaller than the papal crypt as Julia and Nana were forced to duck their heads to negotiate the low and slightly domed ceilings. The lack of ambient lighting was disconcerting at first.\(^{446}\) Once their vision acclimated to the environment they found that the white plaster from the gallery extended into the cubiculum and that delightful frescoes of familiar scenes from Old and New Testament scriptures had been arranged on each of its four walls (Figure 23). Julia’s eyes were drawn to the center of the dome and the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Red and green lines ran away from the Good Shepherd medallion toward the sides, framing various birds and floral elements on the ceiling before spilling over onto the walls where they served to tie the composition together (ceiling to the walls) and to subdivide the walls into manageable visual segments. To Julia, the ceiling resembled a canopy billowing in the breeze, the canticum David came unbidden to her mind:

\[
\text{Dominus pascit me nihil mihi deerit} \\
\text{In pascuis herbarum adclinavit me} \\
\text{super aquas refectionis enutrivit me}
\]

\(^{446}\) This account describes cubicula designated as A3 by de Rossi.
The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in pastures of green,
He leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  

The room was balanced by two *loculi* cut into each wall. These *loculi* framed several images painted above, beside and below them. The room became so crowded with curiosity seekers that even though the added illumination from their lamps was appreciated, movement about the room was difficult. The smoking wicks further deteriorated conditions but Nana and Julia, intent on examining the space, stood their ground inside the tomb until the crowd dissipated and they could read the artwork more closely.

As they studied the scenes and organization of the *cubicula* a number of narratives emerged. Nana directed Julia’s gaze along the lines of the ceiling to an image at the top of the back wall. “Look,” she said, “follow the path that leads from the good shepherd; it leads to the prophet Jonah!” Indeed, the artist had created a “road” that led down onto the walls on each side where he had placed three different scenes from the life of the Hebrew prophet Jonah, a popular bible character. “Julia,” Nana said excitedly, “the creator of this fresco is demonstrating the connection between Jonah and Christ!” She then recited Christ’s words: *sicut enim fuit Ionas in ventre ceti tribus diebus et tribus noctibus sic erit Filius hominis in corde terrae tribus diebus et*

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*tribus noctibus.* (“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”)\(^{448}\)

The adventures of Jonah were taught to catechumen and scenes of sailors, stormy seas and mythical sea creatures were common in Christian and non-Christian arts. Jonah was a foreshadowing of Christ.\(^{449}\) Both Christ and Jonah were sent by God to preach repentance, each were “buried” for three days and three nights (Jonah in the belly of a great sea monster, Christ in the tomb), and each were brought back to life. God provided salvation for the Ninevites through Jonah, and salvation for all mankind through Christ. Glancing around the room, Julia recognized Jonah reclining beneath the vine provided by God to comfort his recalcitrant prophet, the dramatic moment when Jonah was thrown overboard by the sailors, and when the great fish spewed him out onto shore (Figure 24).

In addition to Jonah, Julia noted other characters from Hebrew and New Testament history represented in the cubiculum. These illustrations of Christian teachings also followed the traditional catechism which used Hebrew stories to explain the gospels. Scenes from the gospels included the dining scene on the back (focal) wall (Figure 25). Centered beneath the reclining prophet Jonah were seven male figures seated on a couch (three on each side of the sigma table, one in the middle). Eight baskets of bread (in two groups of four) were placed next to an oval platter of fish on each end. To the right of the meal scene Julia recognized a depiction of the Sacrifice of Isaac from the book of Genesis. In this portrait the artist had captured God’s intervention and provision of a suitable offering (a ram), with Abraham and Isaac praying just prior to the sacrifice. The unthinkable act of child sacrifice was disconcerting to entertain and

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\(^{448}\) Matthew 12:40.

Julia reflected on her teacher’s explanation of this event, namely that Isaac’s willingness to be sacrificed served metaphorically as an image of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. To the left of the dining image a female orant stood with Christ behind a fish and a loaf of bread. This fresco surely represented the miraculous feeding of more than five thousand from the gospels, but where were the crowds? The final images on the back wall were of fossores. These must be the artisans responsible for the creation of these tombs. The pickaxes held by each of these men were angled and flanked the biblical scenes as if to direct viewer attention to the center (Figure 23).

Intrigued by the combination of narratives and the artist’s inexact reproduction of the biblical accounts, group members practiced their recall of biblical knowledge in an attempt to decipher the stories as presented in the room. Only the scenes of Jonah’s life contained single events faithful to the Hebrew account. A rising crescendo of voices echoed throughout the chambers as people questioned the individual depictions and the overall intended meaning of this wall: “Fossores, Abraham and Isaac, Jesus with loaves and fishes and an orante, Jesus and half of his disciples in a meal scene?” Perhaps conditioned by the Eucharistic celebration just observed, one woman declared “It is the Last Supper!” “But there are only six figures with Christ,” someone replied, “even if you discount Judas, there should be eleven other figures.” “Did they eat fish at the Last Supper?” asked yet another. The discussion continued as each scene was studied and opinions were proffered. Julia understood that because the image had been painted in a tomb amidst a mixture of Hebrew, Gospel and present-day images the meal scene was meant to represent the Christian family of those buried here observing the funeral custom of refrigeria. Nana had another idea. “You must look at the entire wall,” she said. “When you consider the images holistically there is a theme of provision. God provided shelter for Jonah, the sacrificial lamb for Abraham and Isaac, Jesus provided sustenance for the
multitude, and the *fossores* provided the tomb for the deceased and their families. This would mean that those sitting around the sigma table represent the deceased, in heaven, provided for in abundance and at rest.” Discussions continued in this vein as the other walls were similarly dissected by the now-voracious minds of the group.

Scenes on the side walls continued the pattern of mixing Hebrew and Gospel stories. Daniel survived the lions’ den, Lazarus was brought back from the dead, Jesus was baptized, the paralytic healed. All of these were familiar from the catechism. Turning to leave, Julia was confronted with additional paintings that flanked the exit. On the right was Moses striking the rock to provide water for the Israelites in the wilderness. Water stood in opposition to the bread provided for the multitude on the back wall. To her left was an image of a scroll-wielding Christ elevated and seated beside a woman who was drawing water from an overflowing well. “The Samaritan Woman” Nana declared. “It could be Jacob meeting Rachel for the first time,” another conjectured. Julia tended to agree with Nana recalling that Jesus had spoken to this woman using water as a symbol of eternal life. While this water provided only temporary satisfaction, Jesus offered himself as the water that would enable her to “never thirst again.”

“But what about the scroll?” another asked. The counterpart to this across the cubiculum was the scene of Abraham, Isaac and the ram: water versus meat?

The priest, who had joined them at some point during their lively debate, joined his voice to the discussion: “Dear friends,” he said, “the provision of water on this exit wall complements the provision of sustenance on the focal wall. Notice that Christ is the central figure, both literally (in the ceiling center) and figuratively (in the water, bread, and sacrificial meat). Did

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450 John 4:14.
you not notice, too, that the signs of Christ marked the papal crypt? The power of Christ spans the whole of history, from the ancients to our present day.”

Julia felt a kinship with these Christian dead and with others in their pilgrimage group. It was somehow comforting to realize that she was just one among generations of others who believed in Christ. Viewing the biblical acts in this isolated/unique environment caused her to see them differently. She could have easily recited the stories before, but she now understood them in a more complete manner. Marcus announced that they had to move on, there was more to see!

The remaining rooms along this third-century gallery were similarly decorated. Compared to the strong reverential and dramatic tension of persecution and triumph in the Crypt of the Popes, these cubicula were quiescent, the tension was resolved. In the Cubicula of the Sacraments the drama had been subdued under the beneficent gaze and provision of the Good Shepherd. The fish and the loaves had been provided, Abraham’s sacrifice secured, Daniel had survived the den of lions, Lazarus had been raised, and Christ sat with competent authority over all. Discussions of these images, the stories they were meant to portray and the messages that they communicated would continue long after they departed the catacomb.

Julia reflected on the Christians who had constructed this gallery and buried their dead within its spaces. These individuals lived in a more peaceful time, an interlude before the imperial persecutions. Nana, who was born much later than these Christians, called this the time of the “Good Old Days.” A time when energies were best directed toward living according to the scriptures instead of competing for political power and spiritual favor. Before, the
Ecclesiastical History records, ‘increasing freedom transformed our character to arrogance and sloth,’ and before ‘we began envying and abusing each other.’

It was time to move on and Marcus directed them to the end of the gallery and into what appeared to be a newly excavated passageway which they later learned would connect this first area to a more contemporary section of the Callistan complex. The newness of these passageways was evident, not the least because their surfaces were largely intact and because the few graves they encountered were shiny and clean, some even appeared to have fresh mortar around the marble or terracotta coverings. The odor of decaying flesh and funerary unguents was also much stronger here.

Standing out along this newly created corridor was a small sarcophagus nestled into the wall. The sarcophagus was relatively new, certainly made for a small child, and was covered with scenes from scriptures. The diminutive size and complex design cried out to be noticed. Like the Cubicula of the Sacraments, the coffin contained characters from both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Julia recognized Daniel and the lions as told in the Hebrew scripture Daniel in which the prophet Habbakuk had been dropped into the den by an angel of God with a miraculous provision of bread to hold off the hungry lions. The bread held by Habakkuk was marked with the monogram of Christ symbolizing the Eucharist which the group had just partaken. The artist had also included on the sarcophagus Noah releasing a dove from the ark from the deck of the floating ark, the miracle at Cana in which Jesus turned the water into wine, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. These all served as symbols of Christian doctrine. The floating ark represented baptism and new life, the bread and wine stood for the sacrament of the

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451 Eusebius, The History of the Church, 8.1.
452 Baruffa, Catacombs, 77.
453 Daniel 14: 30-42. This is an apocryphal story which scholars have dated to the second century BCE.
Eucharist of which they had just partaken, and the raising of Lazarus spoke to the promised afterlife. Most striking, however, was the lack of any inscription or other identifying markers on what would have been a child’s sarcophagus. The child’s likeness was conspicuously absent, neither had his or her name been carved into the tablet. The blank surface of the tablet was disconcerting. What would cause a family to not more prominently mark the grave of their child?

Hurrying to catch up after her short reverie, Julia joined the band of pilgrims moving more purposefully now, their bodies negotiating the varying widths of the gallery walls and the rough and uneven path beneath their feet. Marcus led them through what seemed to be a new section of the catacomb as fewer tombs occupied the walls around them. The dry, textured walls were oppressive without graves to distract the pilgrims from their subterranean adventure. Still, the reflective coating reassuringly confirmed that they were on the correct path. One gallery, then another, Julia’s imagination ran wild and unfettered and her claustrophobia threatened to return. The sounds of their own shuffling feet, heavy breathing, and sputtering lamps became oppressive in their isolation, the smoking wicks suffocating in the stale environment. “How far belowground are we?” she thought. “Where is he leading us?” “Surely the tour is almost at its end!” After what seemed an eternity, Julia heard the faint sounds of singing echoing up from some unknown chamber. The safety implied by the nearness of others rejuvenated Julia’s spirit.

At last, Marcus ushered them into a larger hallway where their eyes were greeted with an expanse of light and the now-familiar expanse of graves. Even more extraordinary was the large number of *arcosolia* that lined this hallway. These *arcosolia* symbolized a more affluent clientele. In the near distance a large swath of light bisected the darkness. Upon closer inspection Nana pointed out that this light marked not one but two significant rooms on either
side of the passageway, the Crypt of Eusebius (d. 308), on the right, and the Crypt of Gaius (282-295), on the left. Like the Crypt of the Popes, numerous markings had been left on the adjacent walls. The Crypt of Gaius was very large, larger than the Crypt of the Popes. An altar was visible in front of the focal wall. This space looked as if it could accommodate an entire church for worship and Eucharistic celebrations.\textsuperscript{454} New graves had been prepared nearby, no doubt some wealthy family had purchased the rights to be buried near this martyr. Despite its large size, this crypt was modestly decorated in comparison to the papal crypt and no official inscriptions or other handiwork of a bishop was apparent.

Somewhat surprisingly Marcus directed them into the smaller room across the hall whose walls were richly decorated (Figure 26). A \textit{titulus} placed above the largest of the graves announced that this space was the burial site of Bishop Eusebius.\textsuperscript{455} That this grave was on the side wall and not the central focus of the room was puzzling. This martyr was not familiar to the group and curiosity abounded. As in the Crypt of the Popes, rays of light from the gallery spilled over into the room by means of a large window cut above the entrance. Visibility was also enhanced by the light which bounced from another distant skylight located at the very back of the crypt into the space via a slightly-curved ceiling (Figure 26.) Julia was surprised to glimpse

\textsuperscript{454} The LP describes Bishop Gaius (282-295) as a member of the family of the emperor Diocletian, who served as bishop of Rome for eleven years, four months and twelve days. It credits Gaius with various organizational enhancements to the Roman church such as dividing the region among the deacons, and establishing a method for advancement through church orders. “Fleeing from the persecution of Diocletian he lived in the crypts and was crowned with martyrdom eight years later.” It goes on to state that it was a woman, Susanna, who was responsible for this honor. Gaius is also listed in the Calendar of 354 in the listing of the Roman bishops but is not included in the martyr lists. Little else is known about Gaius outside of his tomb in the cemetery of Callistus. Archeologists have estimated that the crypt could hold sixty persons for worship services. Archeologists have estimated that the Crypt of Gaius had a capacity of around sixty persons for church services. Bisconti, \textit{The Christian Catacombs}, 93.\textsuperscript{455} Archeologist Louis Reekmans’ extensive analysis of the Crypt of Eusebius uncovered many details of this site despite its despoiled condition. \textit{Le Complexe Cemeterial du Pape Gaius Dans la Catacombe de Calliste} (Roma: Pontifical Institute of Christian Archeology, 1988). The crypt of Eusebius appears to have been less susceptible to pillaging than the Crypt of the Popes. While the walls have been largely stripped, bits of marble remain in isolated areas of the room.
the actual sky through this remote window. “How odd,” she thought, “the world above seemed so far away yet was so terribly close.”

The small crypt drew them in with open arms due to its tri-conch shape (reminiscent of the trichora at the entrance) and dazzled them with its luxurious décor which made it appear as an oversized treasure box.\textsuperscript{456} The room was broken up by large arcosolia which dominated each of the three walls. Their arches were carved into the rounded form of an apse. Most striking were the lunettes which were each richly decorated with multi-colored mosaics—red, green, blue-green, and yellow ocher.\textsuperscript{457} Geometric prints, genies, and other iconic figures were manifest in the variegated tesserae. No two arcosolia were the same. The Chi-Rho symbol of Christ surrounded by the garland and laurel wreath of victory incorporated in one of the mosaicked arches was immediately apparent.

The ceiling of the multicolored room was divided into sections by frescoes of red and blue octagons which made it appear coffered. Surrounding and within the coffers were carefree images of stylized flowers, birds, a basket, and other bucolic images. Unlike the Cubicula of the Sacraments which featured the Good Shepherd in the center of the ceiling, here the Good Shepherd held sway over the room in a fresco at the apex of the back wall, where the prophet Jonah normally stood. Jonah was nowhere to be found. The link of Jonah to the Good Shepherd was no longer necessary, the Good Shepherd was present. Hebrew scripture was replaced by Christ who was no longer looking down from heaven but present; this room represented heaven. Christ was welcoming, standing in a pasture facing forward wearing the short tunic of the

\textsuperscript{456} This crypt was a tri-conch, a popular style of the fourth century in which three walls were endowed with an apse.
\textsuperscript{457} Although little remains of the original work, Reekmans was able to identify several tesserae in red, green, blue-green, and yellow ocher. A reading of the imprints remaining in the stripped mortar allowed Reekmans also to discern a central medallion in one of the arches depicting the chi-rho and surrounding garland or wreath, \textit{Le Complexe Cemeterial}, 140.
everyman, his lambs by his side. Yet the rich colors in conjunction with the stream of light that spilled into the room from the large skylight seemed to transform this underground chamber into the throne room of heaven.

Indeed, the room was reminiscent of heaven. The floor was beautifully laid in white marble with gray veining and Bishop Damasus had covered the walls with three horizontal rows of white marble revetment, porphyry and black lava outlining each band. A skirting board of africano (black with spots of red, beige, white, and gray) delineated the transition from wall to floor. Despite its vaulted shape, the attention given to the rich colors and the luxurious materials caused the crypt to feel more intimate in striking contrast to the statelier marble enclosure of the Crypt of the Popes and the simple white stucco that coated the walls of the Cubicula of the Sacraments.

Inspired by the scene, Nana began to recite a passage from the Apocalypsis Iohannis:

\[
\text{Et dixi illi domine mi tu scis et dixit mihi} \\
\text{Hii sunt qui veniunt de tribulatione magna} \\
\text{Et laverunt stolas suas et dealbaverunt eas in sanguine agni} \\
\text{Ideo sunt ante thronum Dei} \\
\text{Et serviunt ei die ac nocte in templo eius} \\
\text{Et qui sedet in throno habitabit super illos} \\
\]

\[
\text{Quoniam agnus qui in medio throni est reget illos} \\
\text{Et deducet eos ad vitae fontes aquarum} \\
\text{Et absterget Deus omnem lacrimam ex oculis eorum.}
\]

These who have come out of the great tribulation; They have washed their robes, and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God And serve him day and night in his temple; And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence… For the Lamb at the center of the throne Will be their shepherd; ‘He will lead them to springs of living water.’
‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

Nana’s words struck those present as the utterance of a prophet. Indeed, the persecuted laid to rest here were perched before the very throne room of heaven. Christ, the good shepherd, will guide them in triumph to their heavenly reward.

Eyes eagerly sought information from the large inscription, seemingly oversized for such a small space. The epitaph and associated sarcophagus stood out for their size (occupying over half of the wall) and solitary position on the western wall. (Figure 27) This poem written by Bishop Damasus intrigued Julia because of its extraordinary layout which included lines of text above, below, left and right of the central verse. Bishop Damasus’ name was very visible at the top and on the left-hand side as patron of the saint. The stone was also marked by the signature of the celebrated scribe, Filocalus, which declared him to be a friend and supporter of the bishop. Their attention having been piqued, Julia and Nana leaned in to hear better the reading of the epigram. This shrine was different, unique, a curiosity, and Eusebius’ story was not well known. The lector called for silence and proceeded to read aloud (Figure 27):

DAMASVS EPISCOPVS FECIT

HERACLIVS VETVIT LABSOS PECCATA DOLER,
EVSEBIVS MISEROS DOCVIT SVA CRIMINA FLERE,
SCINDITVR IN PARTES POPVLVS GLISCENTE FVRORE.
SEDITIO CAEDES BELLVM DISCORDIA LITES.
EXTEMPLO PARTIER PVLSI FERITATE TYRANNI,
INTEGRA CVM RECTOR SERVARET FOEDERA PACIS.
PERTVLIT EXILVM DOMINO SUB IVDICE LAETVS;
LITORE TRINACRIO MVNDVM VITAMQ(ue) RELIQVIT.

EVSEBIO EPISCOPO ET MARTYRI

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458 Revelation 7:14-15, 17.
459 Unfortunately, the actual artistic composition of the sarcophagus is unknown.
460 Filocalus, the artist and scribe responsible for the inscriptions and the surviving Codex Calendar of 354, would have been known within Roman circles who could afford to have books copied, monuments erected, or professional grave markers created.
Heraclius prohibited the lapsed and sinners to grieve,
Eusebius taught the wretched ones to weep on account of their crimes.
The people were being separated into factions in the swelling rage.
Insurrection, bloodshed, warfare, mutiny and lawsuits followed.
Forthwith, when the bishop was observing the peace treaties in their entirety,
the tyrants struck both men together with savageness.
A joyful Eusebius endured his exile because God had determined it;
he relinquished his life and this world from Sicilian shores.

IN HONOR OF EUSEBIUS, BISHOP AND MARTYR

Engraved by Furius Dionysius Filocalus, friend and supporter of Pope Damasus

461

The rhetor sobered the crowd with these words. The crescendo of offenses—“Seditio,
caedes, bellum, discordia, lites”—and their outcomes—“peccata dolere,” “crimina flere,”
“gliscente furore”—overwhelmed his hearers. As these vicious words rolled off the tongue of
the speaker, an increasingly irrational fear threatened to grip the group. These words were all too
familiar in light of recent events: The exile of Bishop Liberius and continuing power struggles
among the followers of Arius and their detractors, the civil unrest that followed Bishop
Damasus’ ascension to the Roman See, and the recent ruling of the Roman Synod which
condemned the Apollonarians and its leaders Eustathius, Apollinaris, and Timothy.462 The
grievous recognition that these offenses continued in the present generation was more onerous
here, at the throne room of heaven, and this caused consternation among the group. Despite the
freedoms Christians now enjoyed during this time of peace and prosperity, divisions continued to
plague Rome’s Christian community.

Still, Julia felt a surge of hopefulness. The Crypt of Eusebius testified to the past and related to the present while pointing toward the future. Eusebius overcame the dissension, persevered in teaching repentance and forgiveness, and triumphed in exile trusting in God’s sovereignty while looking toward his heavenly reward. Julia’s eye was drawn again to the image of the Good Shepherd. Christ had been represented throughout the tour along the length of the galleries and in each crypt. Symbols marked the graves of the deceased in a variety of formats while Christ held sway over each individual room. They had celebrated the body of Christ in the Crypt of the Popes, observed Christ in action in the images of the cluster of crypts they had visited, and now Christ stood triumphant at the gate of heaven, the mosaics his crown. It was the forgiveness of Christ that gave salvation and the power of Christ that sustained the martyrs in their stand against the tyrant, that enabled generations of Romans to live out lives of faith, and that allowed Eusebius to live joyfully in persecution. Rewards awaited each believer: crowns of victory and a heavenly triumph. Another quotation from scripture came to mind:

*Ideoque et nos tantam habentes inpositam nubem testium, deponentes omne pondus, et circumstans nos peccatum, per patientiam curramus propositum nobis certamen: aspicientes in auctorem fidei, et consummatorem Iesum, qui pro proposito sibi gudio sustinuit crucem, confusione contempta, atque in dextera sedis Dei sedit. Recogitat eum enim qui talem sustinuit a peccatoribus adversum semet, ipsos contradictionem: ut ne fatigemini, animis vestris deficientes.*

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.\(^{463}\)

\(^{463}\) Hebrews 12:1-3.
The panorama of Christian and Roman history they had just witnessed--the examples of courage and suffering in persecution, the faith of the patriarchs, Christ’s fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures, the intimacy of the early Roman community, and the destructive power of division--found its denouement at the throne room of heaven. The group departed the crypt quietly, humbly, yet with hope surging in their hearts and minds. The power of Christ ensured a heavenly afterlife.

Ready to return to the blue sky she had witnessed through the skylight, Julia reached for Nana’s arm and they ascended the nearby stairwell. As they negotiated the rough and uneven steps toward the light above, group members left the past behind them and returned to a new day, changed by what they had experienced belowground. Birdsong and the white noise of the crowds greeted them as they emerged from their underground sojourn. The daylight was offensive to Julia’s eyes at first, but the fresh air soft against her skin and in her lungs was welcome. As their vision adjusted to the sunlight, Julia and Nana began the long trek back into the city and to their homes on the Aventine. This day would be replayed many times as friends gathered in the churches, on the streets, and in the domus.
Visitors to the Callistan catacombs arrive by Bus 118 when they explore the Eternal City today, a relatively slow way of travel considering the route only runs two times per hour. Tour groups can pick up the bus outside of the Baths of Caracalla where it proceeds through the walls at the Porta Appia, continues along the Via Appia proper, and stops a short walk from the complex. In the fourth century, festival procession was a natural and affective aspect of any Roman holiday. Walking was the primary form of transportation, and the distance from city center to the catacombs was significant. Participation in the martyr festival honoring Sixtus meant that Julia and her companions had to commit to a full day of walking, waiting, and walking some more. Their physical exertion would have been equaled by the cognitive stimulation that engagement with the catacomb-as-monument required. Every encounter—from the procession through interaction with the catacomb—was informed through the mediation of human senses. Martyr festival provided the means and Damasus orchestrated the arena essential for a truly visceral experience. This chapter unpacks key aspects of the martyr festival narrative to demonstrate the physiological impact of calendar custom and the Callistan monument on late-antique Christians.

**Martyr Festivals and Procession**

The majestic city disgorges her Romans in a stream; with equal ardour patricians and plebeian host are jumbled together, shoulder to shoulder, for the faith banishes distinctions of birth; and equally from Alba’s gates the white-robed troops deploy and pass on in long lines. Loud sounds of rejoicing rise from diverse roads leading from different places…everyone in happy mood with wife and dear children and eager to get quickly on the way. Scarcely can the broad plains hold the joyous multitudes; the close-packed company sticks fast even in the wide spaces. For these great throngs the cavern is clearly too confined, for all the wideness of its mouth.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁴ Prudentius records the procession in which he participated in the city on the feast of Hippolytus (August 13). *Pe XI*, *On the Passion of the Most Blessed Martyr Hippolytus*, lines 199-218. English translation taken from
This poetic musing comes from the Christian writer Prudentius who visited Rome as a pilgrim between 400 and 405 CE. His personal encounter with the catacombs proved to be fertile ground for his love of storytelling which, when combined with his classical training and adoration of the martyrs, resulted in a collection of works known as the Peristephanon Liber (Crows of Martyrdom).\footnote{Prudentius, Liber Peristephanon (Pe), Loeb Classical Library, vol II, H. J. Thomson tr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).} His visit to Rome inspired four hymns or letters whose main characters—Lawrence, Hippolytus, Peter and Paul, and Agnes—were eulogized by Damasus in epigram.\footnote{Malamud, A Poetics of Transformation, has demonstrated that Prudentius is not merely writing down his memories or the official martyr narrative in his poetry. Instead, he fuses Christianity and classical idiom in these works. Regardless, Prudentius’ work is useful for framing our visit to the catacombs.} Prudentius conveys a palpable excitement as he sets out with the large crowd along the Via Tiburtina toward the grave of Hippolytus on his feast day (August 13). Surely his excitement was a common response of the church to martyr festival. His experience demonstrates that Roman Christians were acting out a variation of traditional Roman festival practices in which the dead were visited at the tomb on the anniversary of their death or, in the case of the Christian martyr, on the anniversary of their new life (\textit{dies natalis}).

As a fast-growing minority group living within such a religious city, fourth-century Christians were still feeling their way through the public “coming out” of their religion. Over the course of the century Christian martyr festivals were celebrated by a growing and diverse “Christian Family,” so that they resembled state religious festivals which were large and noisy events.\footnote{Lawrence (Pe II), Hippolytus (Pe XI), Peter and Paul (Pe XII) and Agnes (Pe XIV). For Prudentius in his late-antique social, cultural and religious culture see Paula Hershkowitz, \textit{Prudentius, Spain and Late Antique Christianity: Poetry, Visual Culture, and the Cult of the Martyrs} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).} The Roman Calendar of 354 documents thirty-six days of remembrance associated with the Christian church—twelve honoring bishops and twenty-four in remembrance of

\footnote{Ambrose, \textit{De Hela et ieiuno} 17.62; Augustine \textit{Explanation, 1 on Psalm 48} 15; Sources for Chrysostom, Zeno of Verona, \textit{Tractatus} 1.25.6.11.}
martyrs—and provides the date and site of Sixtus’ commemoration examined here, August 6 ("VIII idus Aug. Xysti in Callisti.")\textsuperscript{468} Certainly Rome’s Christians intended to remember their spiritual forefathers well before the papacy of Damasus, but the acts of Damasus made possible the excitement and large crowds witnessed by Prudentius.

Martyr festivals did not originate with Damasus. Commemoration became public decades before Damasus’ bishopric. Martyr festivals were a vehicle for Christians, who shared common religious beliefs and goals, to come together in a public forum to proclaim Christianity as a legitimate and Roman religion. Roman affinity for festivals and processions was instrumental in Damasus’ ability to create a visceral catacomb experience. As a calendar custom, martyr festivals ensured regular, repeated commemoration of Christian heroes. When audiences participated in the annual martyr festival of Sixtus, the narrative of the martyr, the message of Damasus, and the role and person of the bishop were reinforced in their minds.

The act of procession played a significant role in Roman society and this translated to Christian martyr festivals as well. First, bodily movement along the streets physically connected participants to the city while making a claim to its spaces. In martyr festival, footsteps connected personal homes and \textit{tituli} to the day-to-day spaces of the city, city spaces to Christian centers, Christian centers to the city walls, and the city to the extramural memorials of the martyrs. The pilgrim path marked the streets of the Eternal City by “remapping” and superimposing “[Christian] coordinates of meaning on official cartographies.”\textsuperscript{469} Procession filled the city with

\textsuperscript{468} The martyr anniversaries listed in the Calendar of 354 were not public festivals (\textit{feriae publicae}). Sundays (\textit{dies solis}) and other Christian high holidays were accepted as festal days by the emperors. Collegia and \textit{familia} would treat martyr anniversaries as \textit{feriae}. Richard Lim, “People as Power: Games, Munificence and Contested Topography” in W. V. Harris ed. \textit{The Transformations of the Urbs Roma in Late Antiquity} (Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archeology, 1999), 277.

Christian “sites, sounds, and activities.” The very public movement through the city’s streets *en masse* served to dramatize “the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life” to create a Christian identity of place for the recently liberated Christian faction. It proclaimed Christianity present and claimed the streets for Christian purposes.

At the same time, by practicing religious acts according to secular formulas and carrying them out within the Roman cityscape, Christianity proclaimed itself to be Roman. The processional route taken by the fictional visitors took participants through streets packed with and overshadowed by basilicas, aqueducts, places of commerce, commemorative statuary, temples, baths, fountains, exedras, porticos, and courtyards. These acted as “connective architecture,” lynchpins, that physically and cognitively connected Roman participants to the graves of the martyrs while also reinforcing the very Roman nature of the activity (Figure 11). Damasus’ audiences moved toward the cemetery with a common purpose shrouded by monuments of imperial greatness as Roman Christians.

This phenomenon was not unique to Rome. Extant sermons of John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch and Patriarch of Constantinople, document Chrysostom’s use of homilies and processions to extend Christian control over public spaces in Antioch and Constantinople. John Baldovin speaks directly to Christian procession as “a most intentional act” that ensures

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472 For procession as a way of claiming space see Jacob Latham, *Performance, Memory and Processions*.
473 Glenn Bowman voices this sentiment of “connective architecture” with regard to Orthodox Greek pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In Bowman’s example the Orthodox Christians converge in the Holy Land from all over the world to be united in Christ through pilgrimage. I am arguing that this same idea is at play among the newly-liberated Christian community of late-antique Rome. “The Image of the Holy Land,” in *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 111. For “cognitive way” see Carruthers, *Craft*, 51.
“the topographical arrangement of the Christian buildings [are] a vital factor in urban life.”

The act of procession—a longstanding tradition in Roman culture—visibly displayed and practiced in public spaces for a Christian purpose gave rise to Christian attitudes of *romanitas* so that Christianity became *Roman* Christianity.

A second important function of procession is its service as a sensory stimulant. The fictional pilgrims struggled against the bright sunlight and the heat of an August day. The group was forced to negotiate crowded streets, they listened and engaged in conversation, heard the vendors hawking their wares and the shrieks of children at play. They smelled the sweet blooming jasmine, the aromas of frying sausages and stews simmering in the *thermopolia*, and the animal dung that littered the street. These sensory stimulants would have been experienced in varying degrees by participants and would have naturally coalesced in their minds as part of the day’s festivities to add color and texture to their mental tapestries. Sensory impact makes experience both personal and memorable. These sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile components of martyr festival in conjunction with the spatial properties of the catacomb-as-monument worked together to promote visceral seeing and sparked the inspiration of synesthesia. Because late-antique audiences sensed their world tactilely (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching) their processional experience was physically imprinted upon them.

A final consequence of procession is that it encourages community. This was more than an individual endeavor, for the act of procession was also communal—undertaken communally and remembered collectively. Martyr festival participants from a broad spectrum of Roman

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476 Dorothy Noyes and Roger D. Abrahams, “Calendar Custom,” 77-98.
society celebrated conviviality undergirded by their shared religious ideology and purpose. As the selection from Prudentius illustrated, procession granted an opportunity for men, women, and children to walk and worship together in an unsegregated environment. His claim that “faith banishes distinctions of birth” is likely an exaggeration for affectation, as individuals certainly sought out family and friends from their own social milieu to keep them company along the route. Nevertheless, martyr festival afforded opportunities for men and women (“wife”), children (“dear children”) and individuals in varying stages of Christian maturity (white robes of new converts or catechumen) to worship together. His pronouncement is evidence of the power of procession to evoke attitudes and feelings of inclusion, of kinship, of sameness among participants—_communitas_.

The group from Santa Sabina shared a reverence toward the martyrs and their common adventure of visiting the catacomb would have heightened their sense of _communitas_ and overshadowed Roman mores to produce the great fiction of equality that Prudentius’ narrative suggests. Such an active and public demonstration of solidarity of purpose functions as a formal expression of _consensus omnium_, the agreement of all. For this day and this purpose, the affinity of kinship is tacitly present and this feeling of consensus will follow the pilgrims belowground as well. The duration and degree of such attitudes (_romanitas_ and _communitas_) evoked by procession likely varied over time and place, but procession brought the city’s

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478 Prudentius’ mention of the white-robed individuals is the best evidence available for baptism as part of martyr festival in Rome. Following baptism, participants were given white robes to put on as a symbol of their new life. No distinctive baptismal font has been discovered in the catacombs so if baptisms were conducted as part of martyr festival they would have been performed prior to the procession to the cemeteries.
479 Joseph Sciorra, “We Go Where the Italians Live:” Religious Processions as Ethnic and Territorial Markers in a Multi-ethnic Brooklyn Neighborhood” in _Gods of the City_, 319. Sciorra’s study focuses on the religious processions so integral to Italian Americans in their struggle to preserve their heritage.
480 Sabine MacCormack, _Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 18. MacCormack is discussing the act of _adventus_ but the same principle applies here.
Christian community together physically for a time and ideologically over time in their collective memories.

According to Ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957) ritual procession, such as the martyr festival of Sixtus, has three constituent parts—separation, liminality, aggregation.\textsuperscript{481} First, pilgrims processed away from their everyday lives in the city toward the cemeteries. At the cemetery, the \textit{trichora} served as a liminal space acting as a portal through which visitors moved from the “everyday world in which the sacred is encountered piecemeal and partially, to enter a world where historical time and space yield in significance to sacred time and space.”\textsuperscript{482} Peter Brown describes this liminal experience as “passing an invisible frontier,” leaving “a world of highly explicit structures for a ‘liminal’ state.”\textsuperscript{483} “Liminal spaces” are transitional moments between here and there. To pass through a threshold or limen is to transition from the world that exists on one side of the doorway to whatever world waits on the other side. The catacomb, as a whole, was liminal space that separated individuals from the outside world. Within this limen, however, late antique pilgrims negotiated additional thresholds (limen within limen) as they moved into the worlds of Sixtus, of the early third century church, and of Eusebius. Gennep’s third stage, aggregation, occurred when the catacomb pilgrims passed through the final threshold at the exit stairwell to reenter the everyday world.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983) further recognized in liminal space—that act of surrendering the body to the threshold—an effective phenomenon he called “social antistructure;” where one’s social standing is replaced with sameness.\textsuperscript{484} Liminal spaces level

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{482} Christopher McKevitt, “San Giovanni Rotondo and the shrine of Padre Pio” in Eade and Sallnow, 92.
\bibitem{483} Peter Brown, \textit{Cult of the Saints}, 42.
\end{thebibliography}
the playing field. Upon passing through the limen, each and every visitor would be subjected to the same spatial restraints, illumination, and dangers that were part and parcel of subterranean exploration. Sharing the experience, being in the liminal space together, required equitability which would have encouraged feelings of kinship and generated an atmosphere of camaraderie.

The Roman penchant for calendar customs made Christian martyr festival a natural extension of Roman life. Christians processing to the catacombs on festival days publicly proclaimed their legitimacy, their movement wove together the secular and religious aspects of their lives to create a new topography of a Christian city. Rome was Christian, and Christianity was Roman. Procession stimulated the senses in preparation for what was to come and encouraged an atmosphere of conviviality and communitas that overshadowed traditional social mores. In processing to the catacomb, the pilgrims separated themselves from the everyday world to stand at the threshold of the saints. The camaraderie established in procession would continue as they crossed the threshold into the catacomb-as-monument. There is a vulnerability in passing through the limen; to cross the threshold is to offer oneself up to transformation. To participate in martyr festival at the catacomb was an implicit acknowledgement of the martyr and acquiescence to the authority of the Roman bishop as sponsor and organizer of the event.

The Catacomb-as-Monument

Martyr festival procession served to bring the city’s Christian community together, primed and ready to experience spectaculum. Immersion in Damasus’ catacomb-as-monument fixed in the visitors sustained shifts in attitudes of romanitas and communitas. The Callistan Catacomb reified Christian history by encapsulating the qualities of monumental space (lived

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485 Here the term “catacomb-as-monument” is meant to include the complete physical entity: the visible above-ground trichora marking the entrance, the stairwells providing entrance and exit, and the complete underground matrix of galleries, loculi, arcosolia, cubicula and crypts.
space): it had a durable physical presence, engaged its audiences bodily (physically and cognitively), perorated as a complex communicative device, suspended time, and fostered communal identity and consensus. These qualities are unique but not distinct; rather they are intertwined. Damasus’ deliberate one-way route created in the Callistus monument was designed to be both logistically practical and corporeally stimulating to culminate with Christ at the throne room of heaven. It had a clear spatial structure with a starting-point and end-point with the route plainly marked with light-colored walls and enhanced lighting. The route negotiated a large portion of the “first area” of the Callistan complex, outlined by galleries L and C (east and west) and galleries A and B (north and south) (Figure 3). This “first area” is the oldest section of the catacomb, its historical core. The tour’s direction was clearly marked along gallery L and then along gallery A. Callistus’ assortment of spatial characteristics and sensory elements related ekphrastic narrations of Christian history and stimulated Christian pilgrims to exercise their corporeal imaginations to see the divine. Callistus is not the only catacomb to be laid out in a one-way route; archeologists have also identified this pattern in Damasus’ development of the catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter. The repetitive use of a one-way layout attests that the design was intentional and useful in the quest to encounter the holy.

The monumental properties embodied in the catacombs influenced the pilgrim’s ability to see the divine. The durability of the cemetery at Callistus ensured the surplus value of the site. (Recall that surplus value is a prerequisite for visceral seeing.) The catacomb conveyed durability through its topographical location on the historically significant Via Appia, its

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proximity to the recent influx of imperial building activity, and its impressive Christian pedigree as the oldest church-controlled burial site. But most of all, the catacomb-as-monument manifested durability through its sheer size and physical makeup.\textsuperscript{487} This earliest-known Christian cemetery in Rome was physically long-lasting and vast: carved from the very earth, an extensive warren of levels and mazes. Physicality demonstrates a commitment on behalf of the builder and is difficult to ignore.

Anthropologist Edward Brunner argues that such physicality in a monument “lends credibility, power, and immediacy to the story” being told.\textsuperscript{488} The physical scope of the catacomb displays power. The \textit{trichora} that anchored the subterranean site to the landscape symbolized elite opulence and privileged hospitality, an intimate gathering place reserved only for friends, clients, and family members.\textsuperscript{489} It marked the space as noteworthy, as aristocratic, elevating the status of the Christian family (pilgrims) who held invitations by virtue of their religious leanings. The credibility, power and immediacy of Christianity’s presence in the cemetery was amplified many times over as the pilgrims persistently submitted themselves to the depth and breadth of the catacomb-as-monument. The credibility of the Christian space was further enhanced by the materials used in the construction of the honorary tombs. Lavish multi-

\textsuperscript{487} In the fourth century this location conferred both \textit{gravitas} for its historical context and contemporary pertinence due recent constructions such as the extensive villa and circus of Maxentius (278-312) and the Constantinian-era constructions of large circus-shaped basilicas (the Basilica of Mark (ca. 336) and Basilica Apostolorum (ca. 320)) all of which were adjacent or visible from the cemetery of Callistus.


\textsuperscript{489} The architectural form known as a trichora is an expressly Roman imperial type so-named because its footprint consists of three apses (Figure 13). The word “\textit{trichora}” is Latin and its earliest mention dates to the first century. By the fourth century the \textit{trichora} had become assimilated as a room (\textit{triconch}) in the homes of many of Rome’s elite most often as a \textit{triclinia} or dining space. \textit{Triconch} rooms are also attested in floorplans of fourth and fifth century Roman villas such as the \textit{Piazza Armerina} in Sicily. The \textit{Piazza Armerina}’s footprint incorporated two \textit{triconch} spaces, one in the southern end of the villa’s elaborate bathhouse while another, much larger and more ornamented, was installed in the southeast corner of the property. The function of this larger space is presumed to have served as a dining space. This larger triconch space was elaborately decorated with beautiful mosaics depicting the exploits of Hercules. R.J.A. Wilson, \textit{Piazza Armerina}, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983). Wilson has identified several other Roman villas whose floorplan included at least one trichora/triconch, two additional villas have been uncovered in Siciliy, another in the Lake Garda region of Northern Italy.
colored marbles and mosaics, labor-intensive frescos, *spolia* (recycled architectural elements), and magisterial inscriptions all spoke to wealth, longevity and power.

Titular liturgies, martyr festival procession, and the commitment to pass through the liminal threshold of the trichora have prepared the pilgrims to encounter the sacred. Light at the foot of the stairwell impelled them forward. The skylight overhead not only provided illumination for Damasus’ audiences but it also put them in mind of divinity. Romans in general viewed light when it accompanied “moments of accession and arrival” to be supernatural.\(^{490}\) How much more, then, would the ritually-primed Christians recognize the light as divine. These audiences were well-conditioned to applying the senses toward understanding spiritual concepts. Perhaps the most common symbol of divinity in Christian thinking is captured in this verse: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”\(^{491}\) The presence of light in an otherwise extremely discomfiting darkness would have prompted a salvific reminder of God as presented in the scripture.

The monument guided Julia and her companions physically and cognitively in other ways as their senses reacted to the spatial properties, architectural features, applied aesthetics (frescoes, mosaics, decorative materials), symbols, graffiti, written epitaphs, and the public missives of Damasus contained within it. The following analysis of pilgrim visceral responses to the monument is presented in a linear manner—galleries (in aggregate), Crypt of the Popes, Cubicula of the Sacraments, Crypt of Eusebius—in accordance with the one-way design of Damasus.

\(^{491}\) 1 John 1:5.
Moving About the Galleries

The galleries acclimated the visitors to the underground environment and acted as connective tissue for the tripartite tour (Crypt of the Popes, Cubicula of the Sacraments, and Crypt of Eusebius). Their walls furnished anecdotes of early Christian lives as a “warm-up” to the main attraction and prepared the participants for spectaculum by eliminating the boundary between the sacred past and the secular present. Julia and her fellow Christians gained “spatial bodies” in their descent, bodies that became “immediately subject to the determinants of that space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions, axes and planes, centres and peripheries, and concrete (spatio-temporal) oppositions.”

Bodily postures and attitudes were dictated by tight passages that required turning, ducking, or otherwise flattening the body. Larger spaces allowed limited freedom while more restrictive spaces forced bodily postures characteristic of humility (flattening of the body) and clemency (an inclined body). The rows and columns of loculi only occasionally broken by arcosolia or cubicula openings set the tempo and marked their progress. Light emanating from the skylights further cued pilgrim movement and focus. Spatial properties of binary opposition nudged their bodies forward, proscribed their gestures, and measured the distance: ascent and descent, right and left, entry and exit, light and dark (Lefebvre’s “rhythm of signs and symbols”).

The catacomb-as-monument fully engaged the physical bodies of the pilgrims.

The gallery space was tangible as participant bodies “felt” the narrowing of the gallery walls and the need to contort their frames as they moved throughout the monument. It is important to note that these grave-lined galleries were not staged by Damasus outside of the widening and lightening of the spaces. Pilgrim spatial bodies engaged in response to sensory

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492 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 195.
493 Ibid., 143.
data, “refined and minute energies,” within the monument.\textsuperscript{494} The ambulating bodies “felt” the cool moisture, the rough walls, the impact of funereal smells even as they absorbed the phrases, images, and symbols along the route. They made contact with rugged and uneven steps, coarse walls that could be dry and dusty or moist with condensation, repressive darkness, cool air thick with humidity and redolent with molecules of dust, the aromas of spices and oils—the bouquet of the dead. Sounds such as muted echoes of footsteps and the jarring sound of voices deeper still in the bowels of the catacomb were clues to spatial movement. Entombed in the earth, surrounded by the dead, every sensory organ operated on high alert. The catacomb environment presented a unique sensory experience.

This heightened sensory awareness is documented in the writings of both Prudentius and Jerome, each of which resorted to using episodes from the Roman literary masterpiece Vergil’s \textit{Aeneid} to communicate their experience in the underground cemeteries.\textsuperscript{495} Echoes served as acoustical mirrors that evidenced the physical presence of another (life or object).\textsuperscript{496} The rows and columns, pattern of darkness and light, and the sounds of human life that echoed toward the fictional visitors put in mind the boundaries of the monumental space and made them hyper-cognizant to their surroundings and the dangers that separation from the group might pose. Imagination would have been stirred by the claustrophobia-inducing qualities of the towering weight of tombs, earth, and the dark recesses creating a compulsion to flee, but this impulse would have been blunted by an overwhelming desire to take in the incredible relics of Roman history that surrounded them and by their desire to encounter the sacred. The catacomb-as-

\textsuperscript{494} Ibid, 213. Lefebvre’s socialist focus describes bodies as being fueled by “alimentary and metabolic” energy on the one hand and sensory data on the other.

\textsuperscript{495} See Trout, “Invention,” 521-524. This fusion of Christianity and classical thought is also apparent in extant writings of other fourth-century authors including Damasus who relied on Vergil, Ovid and other classical poets to communicate through his epigrams.

\textsuperscript{496} Lefebvre, \textit{The Production of Space}, 225.
monument engaged and heightened the senses in a manner that triggered the imaginations of the visitors.

The tombs that lined the galleries were intrinsic to the catacomb environment and served as a testimony to the past. Movement through the space connected the visitors with that past. Visitors acquired a rapport with the objects that filled the space and adapted their gestures to the monument’s coordinates. While “wearing” the sensual realities of this cool, humid, dusty and gloomy environment, late-antique pilgrims would have also been impacted by the symbolic shapes of the *arcosolia* and *cubicula* (small rooms), and the diminutive graves that held the bodies of children along with their personalized epitaphs (Greek and Latin). The epitaphs, artworks, and grave objects made the mass of Roman dead real and imminently relatable on a personal level. Each epitaph recounted a story and some revealed more about the deceased than others. “MARCO IN PACE” is a brief but poignant epitaph that suggests a heaviness in which the burden of words was too much. The epitaph, “PRISCUS IN PACE, AUXANUSA,” was supplemented with images of the good shepherd shouldering his sheep and a dog standing expectantly beside him. This not only evokes the good shepherd as a symbol for Christ but the canine, unusual in Christian art, piques the viewer’s curiosity; perhaps the dog was a household guardian?

The relative social and economic status of the deceased’s family was discernible in the size and style of tomb (*loculus* versus *arcosolium* versus *cubiculum*), choice of materials (marble versus terra cotta), the method of marking (paint versus etching versus mosaics), and even the relative skill of the inscriber (legibility and correct spelling). Symbols of everyday life such as

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497 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 198-200; 215.
498 ICUR IV, 10012, ca. 300-350.
499 ICUR IV, 10105, ca. 276-299.
animals and tools of trade provided real life connections and encouraged affinities with the deceased. One other funerary practice which enhanced the intimacy of the grave was the addition of “a nastro” inscriptions. These are marks such as the Chi-Rho of Christ, initials or other identifying mark, drawn in the fresh mortar used to seal the loculus.\footnote{Allison E. Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy*, 232. Note that very few a nastro inscriptions remain. Their placement within the mortar means that most of these were destroyed when the graves were emptied.} The proximity of the physical placement of a nastro etching to the actual death and burial of the deceased make them poignant markers of mourning and loss and scholars have regarded them as apotropaic.\footnote{Ibid.}

Epitaphs, artworks and grave objects sparked intimate sensory responses most directly as the pilgrims made contact with their eyes, a personal encounter which authenticated the monument and made its message comprehensible. Specific epitaphs mentioned in the fictional narrative are representative examples taken from ICUR datable to the fourth century and were likely visible to Damasus’ contemporary guests.\footnote{ICUR, s.v. “Via Appia – Coem Callisti,”}

Of course, the Callistan Catacomb contained the dead from all walks of life and numerous faiths. Julia and her companions, however, were primed for Christian ritual viewing (“ritual-centered visuality”) by martyr festival proceedings. Their approach to death was cognitively focused on the victory and hope of the afterlife (heaven) and *Iesus Christus* as the source of that hope.\footnote{Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 22-26.} Themes of the afterlife and confidence in the power and authority of Christ would have seemed ubiquitous. Thus they anticipated and easily recognized artworks on *loculi* covers, *sarcophagi*, and *arcosolia* designs which spoke overwhelmingly to the power of God (Hebrew scripture) and the power of Christ (New Testament) most often communicated through miracle scenes (Figures 15, 23, 24). These late-antique visitors would not have been
content to touch these relics with their eyes. Like the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria (Chapter 2) they would have touched the mosaics and frescoed images framed within *arcosolia*, carved images that narrated familiar stories on the sides and tops of *sarcophagi*, the scratched crevices, the smooth cool surfaces of marble or the rough and earthy face of terra cotta with their eyes and fingers to make contact with the holy dead and to physically verify and confirm the encounter. Interpreting scenes on *sarcophagi* served to reenact the scenes familiar to everyone who had completed catechetical training. Encountering symbols of Christianity in this heightened ritual context recharged their memories and heightened their theological importance. Deciphering the words of an inscription, recognizing a symbol, examining the artistic program of grave objects in the catacomb-as-monument as part of martyr festival incited cognitive activity and enabled the pilgrims to see “more” than what was physically present.

Perhaps the most visceral grave markers were the objects, some of which were obviously lovingly selected to remain at the tomb. Personal jewelry, a favorite doll, imperial coins, and saints’ medallions added another dimension to the visitors’ relationship with the dead (Figure 14). The shiny surfaces of jewelry and metals would have glittered in the lamplight. Most fascinating is the gold glass occasionally embedded alongside some of the graves (Figure 28). Gold glass was visually stimulating when its dazzling presence was revealed by a stray light beam and cognitively engaging as participants examined it for its subject matter. Embossed images of biblical scenes, key biblical characters (Peter and Paul, for example), and representations of saints, martyrs, and bishops were relatable and present the most pointed evidence for personal veneration. Interestingly, a few gold glass medallions depicting Damasus

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himself have been recovered though they are poorly preserved and their provenance is unknown (Figure 29). Within the dark environment belowground glass, jewels, and metal objects would have clamored for attention as their reflective surfaces captured and reflected the light imparted by visitor lanterns, stimulating the pilgrims through their sense of sight.

The physical space of the catacomb and its objects were a conduit through which late-antique Romans encountered the holy past and this is born out in the graffiti laid down outside of the venerated crypts. Messages to the sanctified martyrs, contemporary and future visitors, and to God himself were put down on the gallery walls anterior to each of the major crypts. These graffiti were facilitated in part by the enhanced lighting, in part by the waiting period that certainly accompanied entrance into the crypt, and by the perceived sanctity of the grave. The heightened sensory environment, the active participation, and the narratives of the Christian dead already witnessed by the pilgrims coalesced at the portal to the martyr. The anterior walls of the crypt marked the threshold, the liminal space, that point in ritual events in which individuals find themselves “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.” In liminality the “liminars are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and levelled to a homogenous social state through discipline and ideal.” As the pilgrims waited to pass through the limen to view the martyr, to leave the secular and to enter the sacred, it was only natural, perhaps even compulsory, for them to voice their thoughts, express their hopes, fears and desires before entering into the sacred space. Graffiti writers had the motive, means and opportunity to express themselves before passing through the threshold toward the supernatural.

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507 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94. Note that the originator of the idea of liminality was van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.
The graffiti markings originated from the visitors rather than their Bishop Damasus. As such, they reveal practical insights into the individuals that made up the late-antique church. First, the presence of graffiti reveals that late-antique Christians believed the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Callistus to be a sacred site, a site of surplus value. The diversity of names confirms that literate men and women took part in catacomb procession and sought to leave their imprint on the gallery walls. (Figure 30). These simple statements of names and initials represent a desire to mediate a relationship with the holy, to commemorate their religious experience and to mark their membership in the Christian community (“I was here,”). Physically touching and marking the walls authenticated their experience tangibly and enhanced the memorability of the encounter. The most common graffiti marks are merely names such as “Vitalis,” “Talla,” “Crescena,” monograms such as those of Marcia and Agnes, or symbols such as the chi-rho of Christ.509 De Rossi counted thirty-eight legible names surrounding the doorway of the Crypt of the Popes.

A second insight into late antique Christianity provided by the graffiti is that the fourth-century church was devoted to and believed in the intercessory power of the martyrs. Aurelius Repentinus, for example, invoked Sixtus in graffiti: “O St. Sixtus, remember in your prayers Aurelius Repentinus,” (sante Suste in mente / habeas in horationes/Aureliu Repentinul/sancte Suste {---} Repenti[num]). 510 Aurelius’ communication reflects a fourth-century trend (credited to Damasus) in which Latin grew in favor over Greek in the Roman church. Aurelius wrote in Latin but used the Greek letter “Є” in place of the Latin “E.” Greek and Latin inscriptions are found throughout the catacombs, additional evidence that a cross-section of Damasus’ audiences

509 “Vitalis” (ICUR 9524.2), “Talla” (ICUR 9524.10c), “Crescena” (ICUR 9539.f), Agnes (ICUR 9524) and Marcia (ICUR 9524).
510 ICUR, IV, 9521, Date: 390-425.
were literate. Another anonymous pilgrim petitioned the saints for his or her parents (*pro parente*) and brothers (*fratribus ejus*).\textsuperscript{511} Such petitions to the martyrs were often personal and intimate. “A virtuous mother gave birth to me” (*casta me mater genuit*) and simply “Dear Mother” (*Cara mater*).\textsuperscript{512} Sabatia (mentioned in the fictional tour) marked the entrance with his name and also expressed his devotion in detail by drawing a farmer gathering his crop labeled “ARMEN” which means “cultivator” (Figure 14a). The graffiti’s location outside the Crypt of the Popes coupled with the pilgrim’s use of “armen” instead of the more common “*colonus*” or “*agricola*” presents him as a farmer in life as well as a “cultivator” or devoted follower of the martyr Sixtus.\textsuperscript{513}

The belief in the efficacy of the martyrs was drawn from the New Testament book of Revelation. “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw *under the altar* the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained (Revelation 6:9, emphasis mine).”\textsuperscript{514} According to the Revelation, the martyrs, while physically buried here in the Callistian catacomb, reside under the heavenly altar of Christ and their access to Christ makes them effective intermediaries between Rome’s Christians on earth and heaven. To access the martyr’s body was to gain a conduit to the Divine, something these pilgrims were counting on.

The graffiti placed at the entrance to the Crypt of the Popes also demonstrates a third insight into late antique audiences, namely that they possessed a strong belief in Christ and the hope of an afterlife. “Leonitus, may you live in Christ” (*Leonti v[ias] i in Chr(isto)*) complete

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\textsuperscript{511} ICUR IV 9523.

\textsuperscript{512} ICUR IV 9531.b; ICUR IV 9524.10b

\textsuperscript{513} ICUR IV 9524.18-19. “Armen” comes from the Latin *arator*, a masculine noun.

\textsuperscript{514} *Et cum aperuisset sigillum quintum, vidi subitus altare animas interfectorum propter verbum Dei, et propter testimonium, quod habebant: et clamabant voce magna, dicentes: Usquequo Domine (sanctus et verus), non judicas, et non vindicas sanguinem nostrum de iis qui habitant in terra?* Latin Vulgate (Clementine). Online at http://www.drbo.org/lvb/chapter/73006.htm
with a palm branch (sign of victory). The Chi-Rho (monogram of Christ) was etched numerous times, most visibly here in the center, to the right of “ARMEN,” and two others are discernible in the lower right-hand corner (Figure 16). Both the Chi-Rho symbol and the words (or, due to space limitations, abbreviations of the words) Iesus Christus or, singly as Iesus or Christus, are commonly observed in catacomb epigraphy and graffiti. The ubiquitous presence of Christ throughout the catacomb persistently pointed the viewer to the savior.

Finally, the graffiti at Callistus reveals that fourth-century Romans saw their city as significant in the course of Christian history, specifically that Rome was the “new Jerusalem.” The parallel between the Roman church and Jerusalem was understandable to Rome’s citizens. The late Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007) succinctly summarized what the city of Jerusalem meant in Jewish culture: “Jerusalem is the centre of the world, in the centre of Jerusalem is the tabernacle, in the centre of the tabernacle is the ark of the covenant [presence of Yahweh].” This sentiment could easily be used to describe the attitudes of late antique Romans as well: “Rome is the center of the world (Umbilicus Urbis Romae), in the center of Rome is the church, in the center of the church is Peter [the apostle who received the keys to heaven and hell from Christ himself].” On the right-hand side of the crypt’s anterior wall an individual scratched the message “Gerusale civitas et ornamentum martyrum dei” (O Jerusalem, city and ornament of God’s martyrs!). The actual date of this inscription is unknown but de Rossi places it sometime within the fourth and fifth centuries, after the walls had been whitewashed by Damasus and during the most active period for catacomb visits. This graffiti

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515 ICUR IV 9524.21, Dated to the early fourth century.
demonstrates that Christians viewed Rome as the New Jerusalem spoken of by the apostle John in the *Revelation*:

> And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth was gone, and the sea is now no more. And I John saw the holy city, the *new Jerusalem*, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne, saying: Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them. (*Revelation* 21:1-5, emphasis mine)\(^518\)

This phenomenon is further documented in Rome in the apse mosaic of the Basilica of Prudenziana (ca. 400) which features an enthroned Christ, “I am the Lord, the preserver of the church of Prudenziana” (*Dominus conservator ecclesiae Pudentianae,* flanked by his disciples (plus the Apostle Paul), and backed by the cityscape of Jerusalem (Figure 31).\(^519\) Two figures lean from behind the Apostles Paul (seated to Christ’s right) and Peter (seated at Christ’s right hand) in the process of crowning them as successors. Christ is clothed in gold to represent his divinity. The association of Peter and Paul with the city encouraged the Roman church’s belief that it was directly descended from these super-apostles who had received their marching orders from Christ himself. Recognition of subsequent martyrs worthy of veneration, such as those buried in Callistus, merely enhanced the city’s reputation as preeminent among the churches.

This survey of graffiti discovered in and around the catacomb of Callistus demonstrates that a diverse group of men and women from all walks of life visited the tombs. It speaks to a faith in Christ and the hope of an afterlife. Their words reveal genuine devotion to the martyrs.

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and a conviction that the holy dead could indeed hear their petitions and would intercede on their behalf. There is also a hint that Romans viewed their city as significant as a world center for Christianity. As a cluster, they stand as an accord of persons. The etchings are also indicative of something more; by making a (semi)permanent physical mark, these individuals tangibly articulated their voices so that in speaking legibly their experience was made authentic. In making their mark, late-antique Christians demonstrated their desire to express their Christian profession in a tactile manner not only for the benefit of the deceased but also for the benefit of future readers.

The graffiti reveals a diversity of visitors over time. An invocation to Dionysus was scratched in the wall on the right side of the doorway. This pagan inscription reminds us that Rome’s religious environment did not operate as an isolated pursuit but was a marketplace of religion. Devoted Christians, curious adventurers, reluctant pagan friends and family members, and spiritual seekers would have each processed through the galleries at Callistus over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries. At the other end of the faith and chronological spectrum is the graffiti left by early medieval visitors (late eighth and early ninth centuries in particular). These medieval artists were primarily male and their messages reflect a preoccupation with titles and piety. Early medieval visitors frequently appended their names with the words “presbyter,” “diaconos,” and even “peccator.” “Felix, presbyter, sinner” (Felici PBR peccator). This suggests that during the early medieval period the catacombs were more popular among out-of-town travelers than among Rome’s own residents. Indeed, the rising Carolingian kingdom of this period was preoccupied with Roman culture and Roman religion which, by the ninth century, was strongly identified with Christianity.

520 De Rossi, Roma Sotteranea vol II, tavola XXIX.
521 ICUR IV 9524.01, dated 690-725.
While the graffiti reveals some of the troubles and burdens that late-antique peoples carried with them to the catacomb, there were larger issues as well. Namely, competition among the city’s churches for episcopal favor, contests regarding orthodoxy, as well as anxieties related to imperial governance and the emperor’s ability to influence the status quo. The pilgrims who journeyed to the crypt of Sixtus on his commemorative holiday were more than curiosity seekers. They were looking for relief and seeking answers; they sought to encounter the divine and Damasus would guide them.

The Callistan galleries bound the monument together as a whole. They acclimated the visitors to the catacomb environment, demonstrated early Christianity, and brought participants to the brink of spectaculum. The pilgrims experienced the catacomb-as-monument as “lived space.” They immersed themselves in the unique sensory environment, touched the galleries with their ritually-focused eyes and hands, inhaled it in the damp and dusty air, heard it as a living entity, recognized its message and achieved a rapport with the past as they moved through. Damasus’ audiences associated individually with the deceased’s stories as revealed by the variety of clues (occupations, hobbies, objects) that marked the graves, and there was a harmony in the theological exhortations of heavenly victory and Christ as the source for their hope. Like Prudentius, whose ritually-focused description of the Hippolytus painting discussed in a previous chapter came alive through his corporeal imagination, late-antique participants were bodily and cognitively engaged in the rarefied environment of the catacombs, prepared to enter the most holy place, the crypt of Sixtus.

Beyond the Threshold: The Crypts

Visitors, now acclimated to the galleries, were aroused with an affinity for the Christian dead and fully engaged in the festival experience. Damasus punctuated the one-way route at
Callistus with three distinct and uniquely identifiable points of interest: the singular Crypt of the Popes, the cluster known as the Cubicula of the Sacraments, and the small but impactful Crypt of Eusebius. Each of these sites offered respite from the dark and winding galleries, sustained and incited interest, and enticed the ritually-centered visitors to engage with the holy.

*The Crypt of the Popes*

The Crypt of the Popes was the star of the show, the name in lights used to attract an audience. Damasus’ white-washed walls would have naturally directed visitors to the crypt, but the space that held the popes would have elicited pilgrim interest naturally by virtue of its grand arched doorway, devotional graffiti, large size, enhanced illumination and the rich and extraordinary materials that adorned the room. Centuries of pillage, plunder and natural disasters require modern pilgrims to rely on archeologists to recreate the crypt’s former glory, but some measure of the papal crypt’s impact upon visitors is discernible in the records of Archeologist de Rossi who discovered this legendary space in the nineteenth century: “I saw a magnificent arched doorway leading into an exquisite room [whose] outer walls of the crypt were covered with graffiti in Greek and Latin…This fortuitous clue assured me that I was standing before the noblest and most venerated crypt in the cemetery.” (Figure 18.)

Despite the poor conditions of the crypt, the nineteenth-century discovery created great exhilaration among de Rossi and his workers. Imagine, then, the esteem and expectancy associated with the new and polished crypt by its fourth-century visitors.

Damasus’ guests humbled themselves and submitted to the crypt as they passed through the large arched doorway—the limen—emblazoned with the Chi-Rho monogram of Christ (Figure 17). What greeted them on the other side was a hierarchy of space (symmetry, vaulted

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height, and light), a décor of expensive materials (marbles, mosaics and precious furnishings), architectural elements (composite columns, *transennae*, and altar), and Damasus’ large marble billboards. The Crypt of the Popes situated the pilgrims at heaven’s doorstep and each of these accessories would have informed an aethereal reading of the tomb.

**Hierarchy of Space: The Roman Vault, Symmetry and Illumination**

Peter Keegan writes, “[it is the] physical dimensions of spaces and buildings and the ways by which human actions produce sights, sounds, smells, and haptic sensations that organize experience and meaning” of place.⁵²³ Pilgrim interaction with the Crypt of the Popes was immediately informed by the spaciousness of the room which was amplified by the vaulted ceiling, symmetrical layout, and large skylight (Figure 19). The room was carved out in the style known as the “Roman vault” which produces axial and symmetric spaces, balanced and ordered in appearance. Architectural Historian William MacDonald (1921-2010) described Roman vaulted space as “receptive to the imagined projection of the body’s normal movements and gestures.”⁵²⁴ In other words, vaulted spaces are psychologically freeing in comparison to the abrupt angles and restrictive headspace of flat-roofed structures.

The Roman vault design of the Crypt of the Popes in and of itself was not particularly unique. For example, similar vaults or some variation thereof are predominant among the tombs excavated in the Isola Sacra cemetery at Ostia (first through third-centuries.)⁵²⁵ The larger mausolea at Ostia were constructed as Roman vaults with pedimented facades that resembled a Roman house. This and other evidence suggest that Romans who could afford funerary

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architecture favored this vaulted style and that Christian martyria followed suit. The architectural style of the Crypt of the Popes was not extraordinary, not intended to evoke imperial grandeur; rather, the space is exceptional for its subterranean location, its large arched doorway, and its reflection of heaven and the presence of God.  

The arch form had many symbolic functions in late antiquity. Arches were ubiquitous features visible throughout the Empire where they were used for bracing tall aqueducts and bridges, marking gates in city walls, directing traffic, framing remarkable cityscapes, holding up larger structures such as the Roman colosseum, framing busts of notable ancestors and, most famously, acclaiming notable citizens as part of freestanding trophies such as the triumphal arches of Titus and Constantine (Figure 32). Arches were used publicly but were not commonly incorporated into the domus or in aboveground funerary architecture. At Callistus the arched doorway represented stability (commonly employed to buttress large structures), provided direction (marking portals and major passageways), and framed human focus (aesthetically-pleasing venues, honorary monuments and trophies, busts of ancestors). The arched doorway of the Crypt of the Popes invited visitors to cross over the threshold and to be transformed.

The arched doorway was liminal space, a transitional moment. Pilgrims passed through the limen to find themselves positioned at the lowest point of a Roman vault surrounded by holy paragons of the faith. The imposing height of the ceiling coupled with the length of the room permitted twelve *loculi* to be placed along the sides (six per side). The Greek and Latin names

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affixed to these tombs—Pontianus (230-235), Antherus (235-236), Fabian (236-250), Lucius I (253-254), Eutychian (275-283), and Sixtus II (257-258)—manifested Christian royalty, stalwart fathers of the Roman church. These graves lined the pathway and drew the eyes of the visitor to the resting place of Sixtus and, even higher, to heaven made present in the sun’s rays that streamed through the skylight. As MacDonald so eloquently conveyed, “the vertical axis [of the Roman vault] had commanding direction, and along that the observer could not travel. He was thus fixed in a localized, discrete quantity of space, shaped to surround and protect him for the moment with an illusion of completion and perfection.”  The visitors were affixed in “gestural space,” a term used by Lefebvre to describe as an area that succeeds “in mooring a mental space—a space of contemplation and theological distraction—to the earth.” The pilgrims were sited at the threshold of heaven.

Decorative Choices

The decorative choices of Damasus further encouraged a heavenly interpretation of the space. The marble covering the walls was used extensively in the papal crypt in emulation of the most celebrated homes and public spaces. Marble was preferred by Romans for its pleasing appearance, its light-reflection properties, and its cooling characteristics during the hot Italian summers. Aristocratic mausolea, as an extension of the domus, were often marble-clad structures but families preferred to decorate subterranean levels (often reserved for slaves and servants) with plaster and frescoes to allow personal expression at a lower cost. Thus, the


528 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 216-217.
marble-covered subterranean walls and floors are entirely at odds with normal Roman burial practices and the marble stood in stark juxtaposition to the natural rusty brown walls so characteristic of the catacombs.

While details of the artworks installed here are lost to us forever, archeologists have determined that a mosaic once covered the ceiling adjacent to the doorway and it is likely that the ceiling would have been painted with an octagonal design much like that of the Crypt of Eusebius.\textsuperscript{529} The space must have included a Good Shepherd motif as well similar to those still visible in the cubicula of the sacraments and the Crypt of Eusebius. The number of bishops buried here, shepherds of the Roman church, and Damasus’ affiliation with Rome’s episcopacy made manifest in the epigrams themselves surely supports the argument for a Good Shepherd display as part of the crypt’s original décor. Symbolic elements and luxuries such as these would have bolstered the weight of this space as a mooring site for approaching heaven.

\textit{Architectural Elements}

Damasus drew the eyes and bodies of the Christian pilgrim toward the site’s key objects—the grave of Sixtus and the body of Christ represented in the Eucharist. He accomplished this by installing composite marble columns topped by an architrave to frame and direct the viewer’s gaze (Figure 19). Emeritus Professor of Art John Onians explains that Roman architects employed different column orders in unique ways to emphasize certain areas of a building. Columns were arranged spatially along building façades according to their capital orders (Ionic, Doric, Corinthian or Composite). The more ornate columns, Corinthian and Composite, served to draw the eye and the bodies toward strategic aspects of place such as the

\textsuperscript{529} In the fifth century, Sixtus III (432–440) installed a marble plaque above this doorway on which was engraved the names of all the bishops buried in the Callistan complex. Today only a blank, rectangular indentation remains. (ICUR IV. 9516).
The entrance of a large basilica. The composite capital became identified with Christianity under the rule of Constantine I (ca. 312) beginning with the triumphal arch (Figure 32). Composite columns were also noticeably present at the basilicas of St. Peter, St. John the Lateran, St. Lawrence, and the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, sites patronized by the emperor. At St. Peter’s basilica, the columns marked the tomb of Peter in the form of a ciborium, an architectural form consisting of “an altar canopy supported on columns.” The columns that Damasus added to frame and cover the altar also constituted a ciborium that marked the grave of Sixtus and the body of Christ in the Eucharistic elements.

Damasus fitted this ciborium with cross beams to hold lamps, an altar that would have held liturgical implements for celebration of the Eucharist, and most likely a transennae or open-work screen to separate the altar. All of this framed the tomb of Sixtus and Damasus’ inscriptions. He installed similar ciboria at the crypts of Marcellinus and Peter as well as at the graves of Nereus and Achilleus. Art historian Molly Teasdale Smith notes that there is no documented use of the term ciborium in Christian use until the sixth century. Damasus is also the likely architect of a fountain at St. Peter’s which Paulinus of Nola described as a “cantharus,” which scholars have translated to mean a decorated fountain. EP 3 (Landscaping at St Peter’s) and EP 4 (In the Vatican Baptistery) support this claim.
architectural form was commonly associated with emperors who were often depicted on coins as seated beneath a ciborium sometimes referred to as aedicula ("little houses"). Consequently, some scholars view the ciborium in Christian spaces as representing the throne of Christ. The symbolism of the ciborium, however, is more likely tied to Christianity’s Jewish roots.\footnote{Architectural historians have long tried to define the Christian martyrium, the architectural form that most resembles the crypts of the catacombs. See note 528 above.}

Teasdale Smith locates the origins of the ciborium in the Jewish tabernacle which Christians referred to as the “tabernacle of new law” of Christ.\footnote{Teasdale Smith, 348.} Jerome, Ambrose and Paulinus of Nola each describe the church in the vein of the Jewish tabernacle and compare the role of the bishop to that of the high priest.\footnote{For the full explication of late antique authors and examples see Teasdale Smith, 325-333.} One example is a letter from Ambrose to his friend Felix, Bishop of Como, on the second anniversary of Felix’s episcopacy. Ambrose begins “On that anniversary day…when you enter the second tabernacle which is called the sancta sanctorum…”\footnote{St. Ambrose, Letters, ep. IV, Fathers of the Church Series (New York, 1954), 102-104. As cited by Teasdale Smith, 325-327.} He continues to describe the acts the bishop would perform as if performing them in the tabernacle’s inner sanctum known as the “holy of holies:” incense is burned, the ark of the covenant is present with its contents of manna, the rod of Aaron which now “budded anew in Christ,” the sacred scriptures, and above all, the mercy seat itself where God would speak.\footnote{Teasdale Smith, The “Ciborium,” 91-148.}

The ciborium installed above the eucharistic altar at the Crypt of the Popes marked both the venerated tomb of the martyr Sixtus and the presence of God in the body of Christ.

In late antique Christian thought, Christ and the martyr were each considered to be powerful intercessors based upon their proximity to God. Christ’s heavenly position was to be seated at the right hand of God (Matthew 26:64) while the martyrs held an honorable place of work carried out to channel water away from the tombs (EP 3) while the other seems to be a dedication of the Vatican baptistery (EP 4). For a further discussion of Damasus’ activities at St. Peter’s see Trout, Damasus, 85.
beneath the heavenly altar.  

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained… (Revelation 6:9-11).” To approach the altar, then, was to have the ear of God.

The route taken by the pilgrims to the Crypt of the Popes modeled the Jewish tabernacle in both form and ideology. The tabernacle was a tripartite structure consisting of an outer court, a sanctuary, and an inner room known as the “holy of holies” (Ex 26:33). Each space was smaller than the next as was the number of devout who could enter them. Only the high priest could penetrate the holy of holies and this happened only once per year. 

The holy of holies housed the ark of the covenant, a “visible manifestation of Yahweh,” the “abode of God on earth.” The parallels are many. Christians visited the Crypt of the Popes annually as part of martyr festival. They moved in a similar manner from the outer court of the trichora into the sanctuary of the Crypt of the Popes where they faced the holy of holies marked by the ciborium. The ciborium sheltered the altar which held a visible manifestation of the deity in the Eucharistic elements (the body of Christ).

These elements were strengthened because the divine was made present in the illumination. As previously noted, light represented the supernatural in both pagan and Christian thought. For this ritually-focused Christian audience at the brink of heaven, light would have brought to mind their God (“God is light,” I John 1:5), the life of Christ (“In him was life…the light of men.” John 1:4), and the Word (“Your word is a lamp unto my feet,” Psalm 119:105).

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542 For the outline and narrative of the Jewish tabernacle and its meanings see Mary Douglas, Leviticus, 218-251. The Jewish tabernacle is related in detail in the Hebrew scriptures, see the Hebrew text of Leviticus.
543 John H. Walton, Old Testament ed., NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 158-159. The book of Leviticus details the regulations and procedures associated with the tabernacle. The acts of the high priest on the day of atonement are laid out in Leviticus 16.
The crescendo of events and experiences leading to this moment—liturgical preparation in the local church, the procession enacted in the shadow of Rome’s great architectural achievements, the dizzying descent and associated quickening of the senses experienced along the gallery, devotional graffiti, and the aethereal crypt—culminated at the foot of heaven. The location, vaulted design, and illumination, in conjunction with the luxuriously appointed and canopied altar, incited the senses and substantiated the surplus value of the space. The illusory vaulted design of the Crypt of the Popes connected heaven and earth, making the Divine palpable and _spectaculum_ possible. Participants were ready to receive the historical and spiritual “truths” of Roman Christianity, and the words of their shepherd would guide them.

_Marble Inscriptions_

The two epigrams placed in the Crypt of the Popes were informative and affective. Not only did they relate a narrative, they captivated three of the five human senses: the epitaphs were visually stunning, they were received aurally in oratorical style, and their physical proximity in the space permitted the pilgrim to physically touch the smooth, cool marble and to trace the deep and precise lines of the letters. Visually similar plaques covered the many trophies and monuments which filled the empire—whether small, like the monument commissioned by the Cohort to hail their Emperor Caracalla (198-217) (Figure 33), or large, such as the dedicatory inscriptions of the Arch of Titus Vespasian (Figure 34) and the Arch of Constantine. Rome’s buildings, streets, and cemeteries were full of similarly styled inscriptions designed and presented to gain the attention of passersby.

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545 The Arch of Constantine “To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine Maximus, Pius Felix Augustus, Since through divine inspiration and great wisdom he has delivered the state from the tyrant and all his factions, by his army and noble arms.”
Damasus’ epigrams were intended to attract attention; the pontiff spared no expense in the construction of the epigrams using costly marble and paying the foremost scribe of the day to engrave the plaques. The precision of the epigraph carvings, in modern thought, could only have been achieved mechanically with the use of lasers. No scratching of an awl or awkwardly painted letters here; the exactness of Filocalus’ markings in the modified Roman script produced inscriptions of the highest (imperial) quality. The marble inscription installed within the Roman vault added gravitas to the occasion and authenticated the space, the prestige of the dead buried there, and the patron who tended to their graves.

The inscriptions projected authority visually and their content was persuasive. Aristotle (On Rhetoric) recognized that a persuasive message needed to appeal to its intended audience in three ways. First, the speaker had to convince his audience that he was credible or trustworthy (ethos). Second, the message needed to make an emotional connection (pathos). Third, it needed to communicate a logical argument (logos). The lector’s performance would have energized the space and made witnesses out of the hearers. Historian Lucy Grig states that martyr texts were “made to perform” so that, when performed, the martyr was made present.

The ethos of Damasus was established through his verses in conjunction with the spaces he designed. The pontiff’s rocky ascent to the bishopric gave him the title and a modicum of credibility, but his superior knowledge of the martyr and his ability to locate the martyr’s tomb announced his merit. His labor of love and devotion on behalf of the martyrs was physically visible in the costly and elaborate layout of the overall tour and the martyr crypts. Damasus’ generosity and benevolence were made manifest in the accessibility of the holy site to a larger Christian public. This was a departure from the privatization of martyrs taking place among the

546 Stanley Morrison, Politics and Script, 92-96.
547 Grig, Making Martyrs, 52.
wealthier families, neighborhoods, and individual *tituli* in the later fourth century. This growing competition threatened the very foundation of the religion whose initial congregations who, according to the book of Acts, “were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32). Finally, Damasus advertised his *ethos* by presenting himself publicly, in the epigrams, as patron of the martyrs on behalf of Roman Christianity. This perceived relationship between patron Damasus and the venerable martyrs would have gone a long way to solidify his trustworthiness in the eyes of the people. Balancing this trumpeted relationship is the humility he expresses in his confessed desire to be buried with the martyrs. He respectfully declines this honor (certainly within his grasp as bishop) out of respect for the “sacred ashes of the blessed dead.” When measured against Aristotle’s model of persuasion it seems clear that Damasus established himself as trustworthy.

Individuals under the influence of the rhetor’s performance were already subsumed within a heightened sensory state. *Pathos* ensued as the hearers “witnessed” the event in their mind’s eye. A sermon of Augustine given on the feast day of Cyprian evidences how this could occur. Augustine exhorted his congregation to see (*spectare*) the martyr. “Just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was being read. We were listening with our ears, observing it all with our minds; we could see him competing, somehow or other we felt afraid for him in his deadly peril, but we were hoping God would help him.”

Rhetorical skill and the staged atmosphere of the tomb would have enabled Damasus’ visitors to go beyond mere intellect and to engage (through the active process of seeing and hearing) as witnesses to the persecution of the martyr.

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548 On privatization see Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 32-35.
549 EP 16, 10-11.
550 Augustine Sermon 313A.3; as quoted in Cox Miller, 86.
Congregations were able to see the martyr (spectare) in their agonizing deaths, even viscerally, as if they were spectators to the actual event through the message in Damasus’ poetry. A closer look at the epigrams themselves dissects the pathos and logos in his poetry.

Welcome: “Hic”

The first epigram performed in the Crypt of the Popes was most likely the verse welcoming his audiences “hic” (here) to this holy ground of the Christian faith. The plaque dedicated the catacomb-as-monument and introduced Damasus as patron of the martyrs. The verses validated the sacredness of the cemetery and demanded audience attention by repeatedly driving home the idea that 1) Rome had an abundance of venerable dead and 2) many of these martyrs were laid to rest here. In case the pilgrims somehow missed the heavenly import of the crypt, Damasus painted a picture to guide them: “Here a company of nobles who guard the altars of Christ.”

Hic is a most effective rhetorical tool in the welcome text. Hic was commonly used to identify the deceased at the grave “The Teacher Philargyrus rests here” (Philargyrus paedagogus, hic situs est).\textsuperscript{551} It can also be found on dedicatory inscriptions such as this one that once marked a mithraem in Rome: Hic locus est felix, sanctus piusque, benignus; Quem monuit Mithras mentemque dedit.\textsuperscript{552} But Damasus’ insistent use of the imperative legitimized the site and drove home his arguments. “Here,” “Here lie,” “placed here,” “Here I Damasus,” “what you are seeking is here,” to those listening “here” is an important space. In this epigram, however, hic has an urgency about it that suggests an attempt to create a dialogue with passers-by, a practice commonly employed in above-ground cemeteries.

\textsuperscript{551} Epigraphic data is being preserved digitally at Epigraphic Database Roma, online at www.edr-edrit. Here, EDR071788, 08/06/2014 (A. Scheithauer). Accessed 7/15/2018.

\textsuperscript{552} EDR073778, 10/31/2013 (Sara Meloni). Accessed 7/15/2018.
Roman tombs faced the major roads and waterways leading into the city to ensure that the dead would not be forgotten. Archaeologist Maureen Carroll remarks that many epitaphs addressed the passer-by, “inviting him to stop, read, and reflect on the fate of the person whose life and death was recorded.” One example of such an epitaph is this one discovered on the tomb of Gaius Ateilius Euhodus along the Via Appia outside of Rome. It reads “Stranger, stop and behold this heap of earth on your left. Here are contained the bones of a good man, a compassionate man and a friend of the poor.” Damasus’ use of *hic*, here and in eight other inscriptions, suggests this desire to engage the audience in dialogue.

Finally, *hic* collapses the past, present, and future and it bridges time and space from the persecuted to the contemporary church. The imperial font in the authoritative words of their most senior leader communicated to the pilgrims the confirmation they sought. The predominance and repetition of “*hic*” drove home the significance of the tour and heightened pilgrim anticipation for what lay ahead. Here is the place where heaven and earth met; here is where they could be intimate with the holy dead; here is where the divine could be encountered.

The idea of establishing a dialogue is further supported by the bishop’s use of the personal directive “*quaeris*” (a present verb in the second-person singular “you seek”), an intimate address that strikes through the formality of the crypt. The epigram is inclusive, it welcomes everyone. Damasus provides a diverse list of social, economic and aged holy dead (companions of Sixtus, great men, priest, confessors, children and the elderly) buried nearby whose lives could serve as empathetic role models in situations with which his mixed audiences could relate. Further, the verbs of this epigram are both presently and perfectly active,

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contemporary and weighted with history which, in conjunction with “hic” brings the martyr present. The pious are lying here, “iacet,” these tombs are holding the saintly bodies, “retinent,” the companions of Sixtus are bearing their trophies, “portant,” and these great men are watching over the altar of Christ, “servat.”

Damasus’ use of “numerus” has military overtones and the welcome epigram puts in mind a good old-fashioned Roman triumph held to celebrate great military victories. Romans memorialized their military heritage in grand style on the monument known as the Fasti Triumphales, a large block of marble on which was inscribed the names of triumphal generals from the founding of the city from 753 until 19 BCE. This monument has been called “the single most impressive monument” of Roman triumph in the lives of all Romans and was a source of great pride. Triumphal iconography permeated all of Roman life from the magnificent triumphal arches (such as the arches of Titus and Constantine mentioned above) to everyday objects such as coins (minted with the likeness of the emperor and the symbols of victory), gems, lamps, and silver cups.

Mary Beard’s recent work, The Roman Triumph, demonstrates that triumph remained a popular topic for Latin writers and the prominence of triumphal art and architecture within the city “played an important part in fixing the occasions in public consciousness and memory” throughout the empire and even into modern times. Damasus’ contemporary audience could

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555 Trout, Damasus, 114 n. 5.
557 Roman triumphal arches can still be seen in many areas of the former Roman Empire such as the Arch of Constantine in Rome Italy, the Arch of Trajan in Timgad Algeria, the Arch of Marcus Aurelius in Tripoli Libya, and the Arch of Hadrian in Jerash Jordan. Examples of more recent triumphal arches include the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, France commissioned by Napoleon in the early nineteenth century, the Arch of Triumph erected in Baghdad, Iran in 1989, a pair of hands holding crossed swords, constructed to commemorate the Iran-Iraq war under Saddam Hussein, and the Porta Macedonia arch built in 2012 to celebrate Macedonian heritage with particular focus on their most favorite son Alexander the Great.
558 Beard, Roman Triumph, 61-67.
easily imagine Sixtus and his companions, Christian soldiers, processing in Roman triumph bearing trophies seized from the enemy (*portant qui ex hoste tropaea*), sitting in chariots with the laurel crown being held over their heads—visual moments supported by the many physical examples they encountered every day of their lives. These very Roman scenes and the accompanying emotions of pure joy associated with the return of soldiers who have been absent for far too long come together to create memorable visceral images of Christian triumph. This is a celebration of Roman culture for the church is presented as both Roman and Christian.

Damasus not only directs his sensory-heightened audience to consider the Romanness of their religion but he also emphasizes the universal significance of the Roman church. The epigram provides a link between local believers and the east in the phrase “*Graecia misit*” (sent from Greece), a region that boasted the first Christian communities—"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). Rome merited the sacrifice of these holy confessors; the city was important to the formation and spread of the religion. Damasus incorporates the idea of a universal religion, the kingdom of heaven, and the city’s role therein throughout the tour.

Damasus’ audience needed to connect with such a legitimate past on two levels. First of all, as R. A. Markus has argued, the “fashionable, prestigious and likely to confer worldly advantage” Christianity of the post-Constantinian church resulted in a heightened need for fourth-century Christians “to be able to see themselves as the true descendants of the persecuted church and rightful heirs of the martyrs.”

Secondly, the increasing visibility and activity of Constantinople precipitated an urgency to preserve the Eternal City itself, whose significance was being increasingly located in the past. Damasus fulfilled these needs throughout the tour by

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persistently exhorting them to remember (and to continue to remember) their Roman heroes of the faith, by revealing the fraternity and faith of Rome’s early Christian community (Cubicula of the Sacraments) and, by pointing them toward the heavenly power available to the contemporary church (Crypt of Eusebus) as citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

Finally, the epigram teaches and reassures the visitors by dramatizing the Christian doctrines of resurrection and afterlife. The phrase “sublimas animas rapuit sibi regia caeli” (heaven seized their exalted spirits) provoked visual images of trophy-welding saints being taken up into eternal paradise. This was an affirmation of belief in the power and pax deum. Damasus provided the visitors with a “team” to root for; he gave them a cause to pursue. The bishop’s prominent signature reveals him to be the patron of the martyrs and early bishops, and attempts to justify his succession to the Roman episcopate (ethos). By signing his work Damasus associates himself with the heroic Christian dead and presents himself as mediator between the martyr and the church. Yet, he humbly places himself alongside these pilgrim companions, none of whom are worthy to be buried next to the martyrs. Interestingly, the archaeological evidence reveals that burials ad or retro sanctus were commonplace by the end of the century.560

This first official epigram is a rhetorical device that validates the catacomb of Callistus as a sacred site, brings awareness to the depth and variety of Rome’s Christian martyrs, and introduces important events in Rome’s Christian history. The poem also reveals Damasus’ performance and capability as bishop, his piety toward the martyrs and his skill as a rhetorician (logos). The audience is now immersed in the drama of the catacombs and ready to engage with the narrative of the martyr Sixtus.

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560 Ad sanctus or retro sanctus burials routinely occurred.
Elogium to Sixtus

Damasus did not draw out the suspense but plunged his audience directly into the Crypt of the Popes, the most provocative, notorious and highly anticipated moment of the festival. He immediately grabbed their attention with the welcome epigram and then proceeded to satisfy their paramount need to commemorate the martyr Sixtus. The aggressive and intrusive violence that accompanied Sixtus’ murder and the heinous nature of the deaths of his seven deacons that quickly followed made this martyr memorable and Damasus capitalized on the incident’s notoriety. He confronted the audience with the pathos of the narrative by emphasizing the unexpected brutality and poignant injustice of the act, pointed them toward a heavenly Christ, engaged them in self-reflection, lauded the virtus of the martyr, and cast a favorable light on the office and person of the bishop.

The first line of the epigram sets the stage and establishes the timeline by drawing the visitors back—“At a time when the sword severed the sacred innermost parts of our mother [church]” (EP 17). “At a time” is the late-antique equivalent of “once upon a time.” Damasus is luring their minds eye to witness the initial round of widespread persecutions that took place between 257 and 313. This simple introduction was powerful for there is little doubt that some in Damasus’ audience would have heard fantastical stories from friends, family members or others more closely impacted by the devastation. Modern perspectives of the fourth century increasingly skew toward images of peace and prosperity for the Empire’s Christian families yet the situation was not so clear for Damasus’ audience. While Christians had enjoyed several

561 The fifth century plaque of Sixtus III identified five martyred bishops buried in this crypt as well as fifteen other bishops and deacons (some martyrs) buried in and surrounding the crypt of the popes. One of these deacons was Lawrence, beloved and popularly venerated throughout late antiquity. Damasus’ family was particularly attached to Lawrence (Chapter One). Not only did Damasus provide a short inscription in honor of Lawrence at Lawrence’s burial site at the Basilica of San Lorenzo (EP 33) but Damasus is credited with establishing the Basilica of S. Lorenzo in Damaso in the interior of the city.
decades of relative religious freedom, that freedom was always subject to imperial pleasure. Thus, it was only a short distance to travel between the past, the present, and what could conceivably be the future. The visitors would have no trouble engaging with the topic of imperial persecution.

Having established the context, Damasus presents a peaceful scene with Sixtus teaching an intimate gathering of believers. The calmness of the oratory is then juxtaposed against the violent arrival of the villainous soldiers into the very room in which the fourth-century audience stood. The Crypt of the Popes, like the World Trade Center in New York City on 9/11/2001, was “ground zero.” Proximity to the site of events (“hic,” in the Crypt of the Popes or the memorial in New York City) would have intensified audience reaction. The sounds made by the lector would have heightened the visceral effect as he intoned the bishop’s provocative word choices, “subito” and “rapiunt,” that accompanied the violent insinuation of the soldiers in the small space. The pathos is exacerbated with the hissing alliteration of “militibus missis” and the verbal imagery of a small and helpless band of Christians “colla dedere,” offering up their necks, in voluntary martyrdom.562

Collum (pl. colla), “the neck” was commonly employed in a variety of ways to describe punishment leading to death. To impact the neck implies a permanent, no coming back from, life extinguishing event. Many of the early Christian martyr acts preserved in the Martyrologium Romanum (MR) used collum to describe a martyr’s death. St Zoe, whose dies natalis is celebrated on July 5, was arrested while praying at the tomb of Peter during the time of Diocletian. The MR relates that she was thrown into a dark dungeon, then suspended on a tree by her hair and neck (collo et capillis in arbores suspensa) until she suffocated due to the

smoke. The neck was often tied with a rope or chain attached to a large rock (saxum) before the victim was cast into the river (flumen) or sea (mare). Damasus related the martyrdom of Marcellinus and Peter with the phrase “colla secaret”—their necks were severed (EP 28). Being bound by the neck was to be helplessly and hopelessly captured.

Damasus employed the phrase “colla dedere” twice: here, at the grave of Sixtus (EP 17), and at the grave of sixty-two martyrs interred at the Cemetery of Traso on the Via Salaria Nova (EP 43). Dedere, as used in this context, is the infinitive form of dedo (to yield possession of, give up, surrender), a stronger word than do (to give). Classical authors used this verb to communicate the need “to deliver up or surrender someone or something to the enemy.” The phrase implies a level of indifferent defiance that not only speaks to the courage of the victim but also glorifies the nation or group with which they are affiliated. Here, colla dedere conveys the image of a determinedly pious, courageous and defiant group of people willing to hand themselves over to martyrdom for the cause of the heavenly kingdom. The visitors’ own presence “hic,” in the crypt, mirrored that of Sixtus’ flock. The commonality insinuated them into the drama as part of the eternal and universal Christian community and encouraged self-reflection. Throughout the Callistan tour visitors would be reminded of their liberties and


564 Thrown into the river, the Martyr Florian, MR IV Non Mai, “in Norico ripense loco Lauriaco natale Floriani et principii afficii praesidis ex cuius iussu ligato saxo collo eius de ponte in fluvio Aniso...”. Into the sea, Agathopodes (a deacon) and Theodulus (a lector), MR, Prid.Non.April, “alligator ad collum saxo, in mare demersi sunt.”

565 Lewis and Short, s.v. “dedo.”

566 The intent behind colla dedere is consistent with Hellenistic and Jewish literary texts. Comparisons have been made between Christian, Jewish and Hellenistic works. J. W. vanHenten’s essay “The Martyrs as Heroes of the Christian Peoples. Some Remarks on the Continuity between Jewish and Christian Martyrology, with Pagan Analogies” in Martyrium in Multi-Disciplinary Perspective, ed. M. Lamberigts and P. Van Deun eds. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 303-322. vanHenten illustrates how Christian martyrs were not only heroes but they “functioned analogously as the heroes of a nation,” 307. The “nation” of Christian martyrs being the kingdom of heaven. The gospel of Matthew is replete with the teachings of Jesus speaking of the “kingdom of heaven.” For example, Matthew 4:17; 5:3. Elsewhere, Phillippians 3:20; Revelation 11:15.
encouraged by Christianity’s triumphs; at the same time, they would be required to acknowledge the uncertainties and insecurities of the present state of affairs including their own culpability in contemporary events.

Having given the audience pause to consider themselves in the guise of their third century predecessors, Damasus turned to Sixtus and, by extension, to himself as the current bishop of Rome. The tension temporarily dissolves as Bishop Sixtus, the exemplar, calmly lifts his palm in surrender. The martyr’s response is that of the ideal shepherd. When introduced, Sixtus is teaching heavenly things yet, when he recognizes that his flock is in danger, he moves to ensure their safety by bravely and willingly sacrificing himself for his sheep. He is also loyal to his God for he does not recant his faith but remains steadfast even unto death. Damasus’ association with this revered leader of the early Roman church enhanced his ethos. His reputation was further bolstered by the implied claim that Christ revealed the merit of Sixtus to himself, the current holder of the see (EP 17.8-9).

Damasus’ message was intended for contemporary consumption. The fourth-century church was locked in divisiveness and Damasus needed to bring the flock together to preserve what he considered to be orthodoxy. The epigrams addressed Christian-on-Christian violence and divisiveness in several ways. First of all, Damasus stirred his audiences toward empathy with the flock of Sixtus to cause them to ponder any similarities they shared as part of the universal church. By focusing on their commonalities, the differences that seemed so overwhelming beforehand would recede into the background. Second, the pontiff provided his Christian audiences with a common enemy to rally around for, as Shakespeare noted, “Adversity makes strange bedfellows.”567 There is something about good versus evil that arouses

567 Origin unknown. This is an old proverb most commonly associated with William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Tempest* II.ii.37 “Misery acquaints a fellow with strange bedfellows.” Charles Dickens (1812-1870) also used the
individuals to righteous indignation and convinces the hearers to take a side in the struggle. Third, the knowledge Damasus exhibited and the respect he paid for his predecessors was a traditional display of Roman piety. This piety, combined with an implied personal line of communication to Christ (Christ assigns the reward and displays the merits of the shepherd which Damasus suggests were revealed to him), would have assured the Roman flock that their bishop was properly connected and could be trusted to lead and teach truth in an orthodox manner.

Christ is the central tenet around which the entire religion pivoted and Damasus places the focus on Christ to draw the Christian community toward unity. Despite the tragic outcome of the persecution, Damasus points his hearers to the power of Christ and the hope of an afterlife. While Sixtus the pastor died for his flock he has earned the highest reward (“praemia vitae”) of eternal life with Christ. Trout notes that this reward of life “surpasses the merely secular fama usually allowed to republican heroes the true rewards awaiting Damasus’ martyrs are the ‘praemia vitae,’ a celestial afterlife more reminiscent of the apotheosis reserved for good emperors.”

Sixtus’ bravery in these early stages of imperial persecution in front of congregant witnesses explains his popularity in Rome and beyond--his dies natales even appears in the Syriac Martyrology (ca. 411)!

There is some uncertainty regarding the last phrase of the epigram: “he himself watches over the full number of his flock.” Trout suggests that it is Bishop Sixtus who now watches over the flock from heaven, but this could also be translated as an extension of the previous subject phrase in Pickwick Papers xli, “adversity brings a man acquainted with strange bedfellows.” There are many variations such as “Poverty makes strange bedfellows” and “Politics makes strange bedfellows.”


which is Christ. “Christ watches over the full number of his flock” supports the overall program of the catacomb tour as read through this historical, archaeological and anthropological approach. Christ is the star, the overarching figure, in each of the three stops along the route. As the following analysis reveals, he is present in the Eucharist. In the Crypt of the Popes, his acts are the celebrated message of the Cubicula of the Sacraments, and he reigns supreme in the Crypt of Eusebius. The overall program, then, suggests that it is Christ the Good Shepherd whose overarching gaze watches over the universal flock. The bishops, deacons, and martyrs of being venerated in the catacombs represent a great generation of Romans, a veritable “roll call of faith” (Hebrews 11) for the Roman church.

_The Eucharist_

The audience has been put through the wringer, bombarded with sensory stimulants and subjected to a roller coaster of emotions. The crypt has undergone a vast transformation from a simple funerary complex to the site of a violent murder. The spectacle of Sixtus’ martyrdom has been viscerally inscribed on their minds and their hearts and they have shared in his sufferings. Their focus is now directed toward Christ. Here, in this location so pregnant with history and surplus value, the pilgrims will perform the sacred rite of Eucharistic observance. The pilgrims had been taught that practicing this sacrament connected them religiously both at the local and universal levels, linked them to an ancient (and therefore desired) practice, and moored them to heaven. By including the Eucharistic rite as part of the catacomb visit, Damasus promoted unity and substantiated the historical validity of the religion. Most importantly, the

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570 Philippians 3:10.
572 Ambrose, On the sacraments IV.
sacrament positioned them at the throne room of Christ. Partaking of the rite at the tomb constituted a “performative commemorative ceremony” so that the crypt served as a tangible place for memories to settle.  

Late antique Christians entered into the rite of Eucharist to commemorate Christ’s sacrificial death. This observance was instituted by Christ himself whose instructions are found in all four of the gospel accounts. “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” Outside of the scriptural instructions there was no universal formula for the rite and scholars have determined that individual cities and regions observed the Eucharist in a variety of ways. For example, Ambrose remarks that he desired to follow Rome in liturgical matters, “Ecclesia Romana…cuius typum in omnibus sequimur et formam…In omnibus cupio sequi ecclesiam Romanam,” but admits that Milan’s Eucharistic practice of washing the feet of participants was not followed at Rome. The formula applied in the preceding fictional narrative was pulled from the writings of Ambrose, whose desire to follow the Roman liturgy constitutes the best source for Rome’s fourth-century practice, and the Apostolic Tradition attributed to the third-century Hippolytus of Rome. The extraordinary spatial limitations at Callistus (there was no seating and no opportunity for segregation of the sexes) would have

573 See earlier discussion of Paul Connerton.
necessitated a modified ritual so that the long readings, prayers, and movements preserved in the *Apostolic Tradition* would have been greatly reduced.\(^{578}\)

Celebrating the Eucharist in the Crypt of the Popes would have enhanced unity among the Roman Christians. Groups gathered corporately and the elements were ingested corporately. The bread and wine were always consecrated by the bishop prior to the execution of the rite. This custom originated with Roman Bishop Victor (189-199) who sought to enhance the overall fellowship among the city’s churches by ensuring that the bread and wine were wholly blessed by the city’s highest ecclesiastical authority.\(^{579}\) There was also provision made for the homebound. Deacons would deliver the consecrated bread to the home and in this way the Christian could still participate, in common, with other Christians in the universal rite of the Eucharist. Damasus makes reference to this practice in his epigram excerpted below, honoring the local martyr Tarsicius (EP 15) whose body was also laid to rest in the cemetery of Callistus:\(^{580}\)

\begin{quote}
TARSI CVM SANCTVM CHRISTI SACRAMENTA GERENTEM
CVM MALE SAÑA MANVS PREMERET VVLGARE PROFANIS,
IPSE ANIMAM POTIVS VOLVIT DIMITTERE CAESVS
PRODERE QVAM CANIBVS RABIDIS CÆLESTIA MEMBRA.
\end{quote}

When a raving gang was pressing holy Tarsicius to reveal to the uninitiated The sacraments of Christ that he was carrying,

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\(^{578}\) The *Apostolic Tradition* has been traced to Hippolytus (170-236) who taught in Rome in the early third century. Damasus authored an epigram for Hippolytus’ tomb on the Via Tiburtina (EP 35) and Hippolytus was also the subject of Prudentius’ poem *Peristephanon* XI. Bertonière, Gabriel. *The Cult Center of the Martyr Hippolytus on the Via Tiburtina*. BAR International Series 260, (1985).

\(^{579}\) Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinian*, 385-386. Lampe translates the evidence as revealing Rome’s second-century church to be topographically separate with regard to fellowship and spiritual communion. Victor, he asserts, attempted to integrate this fractionated population and bring standardization and unification Christian practices in the city. This was due, in large part, to increasing dissension over the appropriate dates for celebrating Easter (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, V.24.9-17).

\(^{580}\) While the exact location of his tomb is unknown, some have argued that the deacon’s grave was located aboveground in this first area of the cemetery, possibly in the trichora itself. There are two trichora (eastern trichora and western trichora) in the aboveground portion of the Callistian cemetery. Entrance into the Crypt of the Popes and the first area is through the eastern trichora but most recently Fasola argues that Tarsicius was more likely buried in or nearer to the western trichora. U. M. Fasola, “Indagini nel sopraterra della catacomb si S. Callisto.” *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, 56:221-278 (Vaticano: 1980).
He wished rather to release his spirit, struck down, 
Than to betray the heavenly limbs to mad dogs.  

Tarsicius was a deacon who was attacked and murdered while transporting the blessed Eucharistic elements (*sanctum Christi sacramenta gerentem*) to a local church. The elements physically embraced by Julia’s group would have been consecrated by Damasus as the reigning Roman bishop and viewed as a corporate offering to God mediated through Christ viscerally perceived in the bread and wine via the eyes, in the taste buds, in the words of the priest, and in the fragrance of the incense.

Participation was not to be undertaken lightly, for individuals were to examine themselves and deal with any broken relationships or personal sins before consuming the ritual elements. Physically ingesting the eucharistic elements in the catacomb—pressing the bread and diluted wine to the lips and tongue—was a “performative commemorative performance.” The sacrament was practiced corporately and the act of consuming the eucharistic elements was referred to as “communion.” To practice this rite was to join in common with every other Christian at home and as part of the universal church. In fact, Sheerin notes that “to live without regular reception of the eucharist, by choice or by prohibition, was to be deprived of ‘communion,’ of membership in the Church, and for that ecclesial community, the eucharist was at once the representation, the manifestation, the fact, and the cause of its unity.” Damasus’ incorporation of the Eucharist here was a restorative measure. The pontiff endeavored to

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582 Sheerin, “Eucharistic,” 711.  
583 Ibid 711.  
583 Ibid 712.  
584 Ibid 723.
ameliorate the dissonance within the Christian community by incorporating the sacrament of Eucharist in their catacomb experience.

Practicing the rite of Eucharist in the Crypt of the Popes also reminded participants that their religion was historically significant. Ambrose taught his students that “the Christian sacraments [and by extension, Christianity itself] are older than those of the Jews.” The bishop of Milan began his catechesis on the sacrament of the Eucharist tracing it back to the figure of Melchizedek, the man “without genealogy” (Genesis xx), who made an offering of bread and wine to Abraham, patriarch of Jew and Christian alike. Christ, he asserted, was “born without a father since he was born of a virgin” and “was a priest in the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4). The bread of Christ was also in the manna from heaven that fed the Jews in their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 16:13-15): “Whoever ate the manna has died; whoever eats this Body will receive the forgiveness of sins and will never die.” Damasus’ audiences would have recognized that by partaking of the sacrament they were participating in an ancient and venerable tradition as taught in the catechism.

Finally, celebration of the Eucharist made the Crypt of the Popes a conduit to heaven. The altar became like the holy of holies, accessible only through a blood offering for forgiveness of sins. Eucharist was recognition of Christ’s death offering, the ultimate sacrifice, for the sins of mankind. The people consumed the bread and wine as recognition of the sacrifice for their sins and prayers were directed to the altar of heaven where Christ stood as high priest. Christ, in turn, extended the offering to God. The rite represented a vertical connection to heaven.

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587 This comes from the Hebrew epistle: “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle [altar] that is not manmade, that is to say, not a part of this creation.” Hebrews 9:11.
through which individuals could perform a “participatory imitation of heavenly worship.”

Practicing the sacrament at the tomb reinforced and heightened the connection between the sacrifice of Christ and the martyr’s death and the significance of the event. The crypt would have taken on both reverent and intimate qualities as individuals demonstrated their personal faith corporately at the confluence between heaven and earth.

The enhanced sensory environment of the catacomb complex greatly enhanced Damasus’ ability to induce pathos as he played on his ritually-focused audience, whose leanings toward martyr veneration were already assured and as he accommodated their desire to empathize with their heroes. The jeweled style of the epigrams was also instrumental with word choices (“Hic” and “rapiunt”) and rhetorical inflections serving to stimulate an already sensory-heightened group toward visceral emotional responses. Individuals would have also grasped elements from the epigrams with which they could personally identify. The diverse population of martyrs mentioned in the welcome epigram and the familiar details of a bishop-shepherd sitting and teaching individuals like themselves at the very site (hic) of the horrific event ensured that Damasus would connect on some level with every individual in an audience. Indeed, he even encourages them to connect with himself, a humble devotee who shares their piety toward the martyrs.

The Crypt of the Popes was the climactic moment of the martyr festival and it transported the late-antique visitors to the very portal of heaven. The physical works of Damasus and his oration—complete with vivid word pictures and provocative rhythms—coalesced with individual

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589 Sheerin, “Eucharistic,” 726
corporate investment in Christian worship through the rite of Eucharist to transport suppliants toward *spectaculum*. The spatial characteristics and décor of the space fully heightened the senses to cognitive and intellectual status so that the boundary between viewer and object was weakened and reality was seemingly invaded by the surreal presence of Christ himself. Within this heightened environment the divine was present both in the light (God) and in the Eucharistic elements (Christ) where participants saw the divine with their eyes, touched the divine with their fingers and lips, tasted the divine with their tongues, heard the words of the divine in the scriptures and epigrams, and smelled the divine in the incense. This formula accommodated a vivid amalgamation of the senses in *synesthesia* to create memory, a memory that would be shared among those who experienced the space. Practically, the audience was persuaded to invest themselves in the crypt, to recognize the sanctity of the martyr, to participate in the corporate nature of Christianity, and to recognize the timelessness of their religion and Damasus’ authority to lead the Roman church. Celebration of the rite of Eucharist, a communal act, also cemented the connection between Christians of the past and those of the present.

**The Cubicula of the Sacraments**

The distinct gallery space that comprised the Cubicula of the Sacraments was striking in its uniqueness. The route chosen by Damasus negotiated a large portion of the “first area” of the Callistan complex, outlined by galleries L and C (east and west) and galleries A and B (north and south) (Figure 4). Gallery A was the oldest section of the catacomb and the second stop on Damasus’ preplanned route. It placed the pilgrims in a part of the cemetery over 100 years old. While the overall route was consistently marked with the light-colored walls and enhanced lighting, gallery A was distinctively different from the other areas of the catacomb in several ways. First of all, this gallery sported painted walls *and* a ceiling cohesively decorated in a floral
pattern (Figure 22). It spanned six large cubicula (A1 through A6 in Figure 4) that lined its right-hand side. The comprehensive nature of the space was immediately discernible because a skylight (also decorated) punctuated the center of the space. The symmetry and organization of the gallery was matched in the cubicula which were constructed in similar architectural and artistic styles. These elements taken together created a monumental unit.

Today these cubicula are known as the Cubicula of the Sacraments based upon their frescoes whose depictions of baptismal and communal meals were assigned a purely sacramental value by the Catholic church during the counter-reformation. There were originally six cubicula but A1 was later destroyed to permit passage from the Crypt of the Popes directly to the Lucina region of the Callistan complex. These rooms have much more value than a primer on how to celebrate the sacraments, however, and are historically significant for the insights they provide into early third-century Roman Christianity. For Damasus’ audience they served as a “visual advertisement for dynastic continuity,” evidence of the Roman church’s historical presence and legitimate continuation of a venerable, ancient Judaic tradition.\textsuperscript{591} The violence of martyrdom is temporarily suspended here; the highlight is on Christian teachings. Damasus turned away from the intensity of the Crypt of the Popes and moved his audience into a more pastoral setting where members will personally and corporately engage with the narrative.

The cubicula themselves were modest compared to spacious vault of the papal crypt, with smaller dimensions and little in the way of material adornment (Figure 23). The vaulted and lighted crypt was replaced by cozier spaces with rounded ceilings. Each cubiculum was laid out symmetrically and organized around a central doorway. The modest domes were crowned by a central medallion of Christ as the Good Shepherd and were partitioned by red and green lines

that connected the heavenly Christ with the earthly Christ. Finney likens the ceiling fresco to “a white canopy, a slightly concave field, billowing upward as if a square, windblown linen sheet were tied at its corners,” intended to create an otherworldly effect. These rooms were designed to be read. The painted grid guided the viewer’s gaze from the Good Shepherd to the scenes on the walls from the top down. The paintings of the cubicula of the sacraments are the earliest-known identifiably Christian artworks in the Callistan complex and are comparatively well-preserved. Bisconti notes that these cubicula follow the conventional divisions of domestic spaces with a three-part layout with a simple lower register, a middle register with a figurative frieze (biblical narratives), and an ethereal vault (the good shepherd, birds, vines, cherubs, etc.). This style would have been comfortable, its layout effectual for deciphering the overall message of the crypt.

The novelty of the gallery and its layout was alluring. Once inside the cubiculum the pilgrims’ interest in the narrative representations caused them to persevere despite the dark, crowded, and smoky conditions. The scriptural images incited curiosity and drew pilgrim bodies into and around each room. Late-antique wall art, such as is found in the Cubicula of the Sacraments, was designed to incite deliberation and reflection by requiring viewers to interpret the images and their relationships within the context of the overall room. As noted in the fictional account, the iconographic representations were taken from both Hebrew and Christian scriptures and are decidedly didactic. Each of the six cubicula emphasizes the Good Shepherd who watches over the room from the central medallion at the apex of each ceiling and each

contains several scenes. The images of Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Daniel, and Christ are found throughout and are reminiscent of the ancient roll call of faith presented in Hebrews 11.

The interactive exercise posed by the Cubicula of the Sacraments met with a teachable audience. By this point their bodies were acclimated to the idiosyncrasies of the monument, their senses were heightened and engaged, their minds enveloped in the stories told by the epitaphs, artworks, and objects, and their identity well established as members of a universal Christian faith. They had witnessed the martyrdom of Sixtus and had physically touched his grave. They had offered thank sacrifices to Christ, declared their faith in the Eucharist, stood at the threshold of heaven, and prayed. Contemplative and humbled by the many sacrifices encountered, increasingly comfortable with the ethos of Damasus as patron of the site and shepherd of the contemporary church, these pilgrims were exhilarated, increasingly confident and eager to learn more. This audience would have been anxious to parlay their knowledge and therefore were energized by the scriptural puzzles discovered in these historic chambers. Damasus allowed the space and related imagery to speak for itself here, permitting the viewers to engage with the narrative paintings. The scenes provoked remembrances of the catechism and furnished the people opportunities for discussing their faith. The Cubicula of the Sacraments represented what ideal Christianity could be.

The original intent of these frescoes is not certain. While the counter-reformation movement assigned them a sacramental purpose, Eric C. Smith, scholar of Christian History and New Testament studies, argues these spaces were an act of resistance to the secular world.\textsuperscript{595} Using post-modernist theories, Smith argues that these cubicula are “heterotopic spaces,” a term

\textsuperscript{595} Eric C. Smith, \textit{Foucault’s Heterotopia}. Jaś Elsner also explains the funerary art of catacombs and sarcophagi to be “a significant means of marking a Christian identity of resistance during the years of persecution in the third and early fourth centuries.” \textit{Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman empire, AD 100-450} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 139.
taken from Michel Foucault which means “a space that mirrors, mimics, subverts, critiques, and even polemicizes other spaces.” Smith sees the artworks here as a visual demonstration by the early third-century Christians of a “reified utopian vision” placed here as an act of resistance to the secular world: “[these] spaces that are carefully crafted to arrange and construe the world in a reassuringly predictable, orderly and sympathetic way, in contrast to the world outside, which is unpredictable, disorderly, and often hostile.”

In this view, the banquet scene represents a hidden transcript of a world as they wished it would be. He suggests that these Christian were weary of suffering and were looking for the return of Christ. Smith’s work places the Christians in an antagonistic stance. No doubt the third century creators of these rooms sought to create an idyllic space representing their hope in the power of Christ, but Smith’s argument for a polemical motive for the space goes too far, in part because the period from 210-250 was one of relative peace.

Art Historian Kathleen Finken has interpreted the artistic program of these cubicula as a demonstration of the role of the contemporary church in salvation history. When viewed in this manner, the scenes are to remind viewers of the various epochs of God’s providence and salvation, of the Jews first and then the Gentiles. In A3 specifically, the scenes feature salvation or deliverance from affliction, often from violent and dramatic forms of death: Abraham nearly sacrifices his son, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by a sea monster, Daniel survives the lions’ den, the Israelites are dying from thirst, Lazarus is brought back from the dead, and so

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596 Smith, *Foucault’s*, 18.
597 Christian persecutions surrounding the creation of this organized crypt complex of the early third century include the imperial persecutions of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) in which Polycarp was killed, Septimius Severus (202-210) in which Perpetua was martyred. It is the reign of Decius (250-251) before persecutions return at the imperial level.
New Testament themes feature various acts, attributes and/or parables of Christ: Christ as the good shepherd, scenes of baptism and fishing, healing scenes such as the healing of the paralytic, and the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish accomplished by Christ (the feeding of the 5,000) point to the power of Christ. When read hierarchically, Finken argues, the cubicula taught salvation history to the viewers while implicating themselves in that history. Finken’s view has much to commend it especially considered within the parameters of martyr festival.

Certainly, the sacraments and correct doctrine were important to fourth-century Christians, but a closer consideration of the visual program reveals that the sacramental and doctrinal nature of these images is of lesser importance than their ability to compel audience participation. The images in the Cubicula of the Sacraments consisted of well-known scenes featured prominently in catechetical texts and these same characters are represented in the artistic programs of literally hundreds of late-antique sarcophagi visible in the modern-day Pio Christian museum, part of the Vatican Museum complex. But the scenes as represented in the Cubicula of the Sacraments are incomplete or contain foreign elements which required visitors to fill in the blanks. For example, the meal scene on the back (focal) wall of A3 contains seven male figures (three on each side of the sigma table, one in the middle) seated on a sigma couch behind eight baskets of bread in two groups of four. Upon first glance the scene seemed to represent the Passover meal, the last supper shared by Jesus and his disciples. The number seven, however, is an anomaly. Christ had twelve disciples (or eleven if Judas had already been dismissed).

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599 Finken, _Programmatic Sources_, 191.
600 Ibid., 45.
601 A large number of these late-antique sarcophagi may be viewed today in the Pio Christian Museum located in the Vatican Museum complex in Rome.
602 Matthew 26:20.
Another anomaly is the presence of fish as lamb was the traditional meat of the Passover meal. The inclusion of this area of the catacomb in the tour provoked the Christians to think for themselves and promoted relationships among participants similar to modern team-building exercises.

Jaś Elsner, John Clarke, and Robin Jensen have shown that Romans enjoyed the challenges of interpreting such irregularities, connecting the dots between the physical image and its significance for the site, “the memory and imagination work together to supply the description, explanation, or narrative that the image lacks...” The cubicula of the sacraments were designed for this type of exercise. The choice of images and their placement within each room engaged Damasus’ viewers by provoking them to “supply the organizing matrix” that made both the scene and its relationship with the other images in the space comprehensible. Damasus’ inclusion of these tombs in the Sixtus route was a deliberate attempt to stimulate audience participation and to ground the tour in the historical and theological testimony of Rome’s Christian community. At the same time, the reading of the artworks and viewer participation with the artistic program in the cubicula brought together the “mighty deeds of God in the Old Testament and the Gospels into his or her own time.” Time stood still in these cubicula as past deeds of biblical heroes melded with traces of the early Christian dead, assimilated with the pilgrim’s present engagement and interaction in the space, and projected forward as future hope based upon their faith in the power of Christ as demonstrated in the artworks.

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603 The Passover meal was to include lamb, bitter herbs, and bread without yeast (Exodus 12).
605 Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 81.
The Cubicula of the Sacraments encouraged visceral differently than the Crypt of the Popes. The Crypt of the Popes was affective in its glory while the Cubicula of the Sacraments engaged the pilgrims cognitively. Both stops on the tour drew the pilgrims with their orderly spatial organization and unique décor. But the intended messages and the methods used to engage them were very different. The simple white rooms and frescoes substituted for the luxurious materials, architectural elements and the papal epigrams. Visual interest lay in the artworks whose subject matter stimulated visitor cognitive processing and interaction both with the site and with one another. The scenes were acted out by the spectators themselves as they invested themselves in the site. The lack of marble or other expensive materials also makes these cubicula more comfortable and conducive to camaraderie and group affiliation among participants as they bridged the gap intellectually across time from the time of the ancient forefathers, to the time of Christ, to Rome’s third century church, and to their own day. The interactive didactic exercises also stimulated viewers toward exercising their biblical knowledge, reinforcing their catechetical training, and enhancing their understanding and memorability of the scriptures and Christian doctrines. This second stop on the tour permitted Damasus to implicate his contemporary audience in ancient Christianity, as descendants of great biblical heroes and to reinforce his flock’s knowledge of late-antique theology.

Crypt of Eusebius

The third and final station that marked the one-way route at Callistus was the shrine honoring the fourth-century bishop Eusebius. Eusebius’ grave lay at the confluence of light next to the sizable crypt that held the body of Bishop Gaius (282-295). The sumptuous décor of Eusebius’ crypt and its trichora layout advertised its distinct role in the tour’s overall scheme. In order the reach this space from the historical area, Damasus had to construct two new
passageways, Q3 and Q2 (Figure 4). This extension was a considerable distance to travel and a lack of graves meant fewer distractions and an opportunity for imaginations to wander. What a relief it must have been to return to the now-familiar walls of the dead, to the light that marked the crypts of Gaius and Eusebius and, perhaps most welcome of all, to see the stairwell just beyond them. Like the Crypt of the Popes, the area outside the Crypts of Eusebius and Gaius was marked by an incandescence that extended into the cubicula and exposed graffiti-laden walls. Damasus did not intrude in the larger crypt of Gaius and this is intriguing. Certainly late-antique pilgrims could and would have taken a moment to visit Gaius’ crypt but the lack of a Damasian epigram suggests that this space was ancillary to his message.

The double crypt of Gaius is large enough to hold small services and was equipped with an altar, enhanced lighting and extensive decoration. Burials ad sanctos are prevalent. The LP describes Bishop Gaius as a member of the family of Emperor Diocletian who served as bishop of Rome for eleven years, four months and twelve days. It credits Gaius with various organizational enhancements to the Roman church such as dividing the region among the deacons and establishing a method for advancement through church orders. Gaius is also listed in the Calendar of 354 as a Roman bishop but is not included in the martyr lists. Little else is known about Gaius outside of his tomb in the cemetery of Callistus.

Damasus’ choice to focus on Eusebius rather than the already popular Gaius is curious. One reason could be that because the Crypt of Gaius predates Damasus’ interventions, it was already of significant size and in use as a liturgical site. There would have been no need for Damasus to spend his valuable time and financial resources to bolster this space. Another consideration is that Gaius was not a Christian martyr. Damasus preferred to honor individuals

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606 LP 29.
who had died for (or in the case of bishops, who had been exiled for) their faith. Interestingly, Gaius is a victim of Damasus’ project. Had Damasus created an epigram for Gaius, perhaps his legacy would be more fully preserved.

Whatever his reasoning might have been, the fact remains that Damasus chose to focus his efforts in the room where the body of Eusebius lay. Little is known about Bishop Eusebius outside of this epigram of Damasus. The LP describes Eusebius as a Greek who held the Roman see under the Emperor Maxentius (306-312) and who “found heretics in Rome and reconciled them by the laying on of hands.” 607 His bishopric is also attested in the Codex’s list of Roman bishops and Damasus tells us that he was exiled to Sicily where he died. Like the Crypt of the Popes, the doorway was arched and the enhanced illumination encouraged entry. In addition, the space was seductive in its modest size, unusual layout, remarkable décor, and its Damasian epigram. 608

Damasus greatly modified the skylight to add illumination and to reflect off of the polished marbles and tesserae; the shaft that admitted the sun was slightly curved to enhance its light reflection properties. The construction of this crypt was no easy matter, for to accomplish this expansion Damasus was required to block several overhead galleries. This process forced the removal or obstruction of other, preexisting graves. Monuments, by their very nature, exclude or even erase other narratives. There need not be malicious intent. The obstruction of preexisting graves, like the exclusion of Gaius, demonstrates that Damasus’s interventions were planned and intentioned.

607 LP 32.2
608 The physical attributes of the space and ornate décor detailed in the fictional account were made possible by Archeologist Louis Reekmans’ extensive analysis of the crypt. Reekmans, Le Complexe Cémétique. Reekmans measures the room as 13 feet long, 9 feet wide and 12 feet high.
The unsettling asymmetry of the crypt (Eusebius was buried on the side and not the focal wall) contrasted sharply with the symmetrical complacency of the Crypt of the Popes and the Cubicula of the Sacraments and was a spatial means of provocation. The room’s layout was unique in that each wall sported an *arcosolium* “of exceptionally large dimensions” that reached from a marble floor to the top of each wall (Figure 26).\(^609\) In addition, these *arcosolia* were slightly rounded, each one resembled an apse. This vaulted, apsed room formed a *cella trichora* reminiscent of the aboveground *trichora* through which the visitors had entered the catacomb. The *triconch* shape of the room was surely no accident as it bookended the visitor experience in juxtaposition to the aboveground *trichora* through which the journey began.

J. B. Ward-Perkins traced this style of mausoleum to *triclinia*, the formal dining room of a Roman *domus*, and audience halls discovered in palaces and wealthy villas such as the *Piazza Armerina* in Sicily. *Tricliniae* have also been discovered in family mausolea for the purpose of feasting with the dead (*parentalia*).\(^610\) The two “arms” of the *trichora* are welcoming and enfolding. Historian Paolo Lino Zovato (1910-1971) recognized the *trichora* in secular martyria and palace architecture such as the legendary dining rooms of Nero’s golden palace.\(^611\) The architecture referenced a cosmic symbolism of glorification, a space in which the god-emperor revealed himself. The arched doorway and domed ceiling created a fixed and ordered space with a vertical axis (as in the Crypt of the Popes) to the heavens. This elaborately decorated *trichora* viewed through the ritual gaze of Christian pilgrims, then, supported a celestial reading of the Crypt of Eusebius. The space was both awe-inspiring and welcoming.


\(^{610}\) Ward-Perkins describes the *triconch* space as a “common and widespread form of mausoleum… providing access to several large burials within the limits of a small enclosed space.” J.B. Ward-Perkins, “Memoria, martyrs tomb and martyrs church,” in *VII Inter Kongress für Christliche Archaeologie* (Treviri: 1965), 30.

The monument to Eusebius drew the audience in with its extreme vibrancy and artistic program. No doubt the first stimulus to touch the visitor’s eye was the marble that lined the floor and walls of the room. The polished surfaces of luxurious multi-colored stones—white marble, porphyry, black lava, *rosso antico*, *giallo antico*, and *africano*—would have gleamed in the light. Even more remarkable were the decorated arches and lunettes of the *arcosolia* which were embellished with dazzling mosaics whose *tesserae* would have sparkled in vibrant colors of red, green, blue-green, and yellow ocher. Our knowledge of the iconographic program is not complete.\(^{612}\) Geometric shapes, interlacing circles, and linear patterns are visible as imprints in the remaining mortar. An unidentifiable figure, nearly two feet in height, was centered in the lunette of the focal wall. A Chi-Rho medallion surrounded by a garland or laurel wreath adorned another. The grave that held Eusebius stood out due to its larger size, the oversized and quirky layout of Damasus’ epitaph that fronted it, and a *tabula ansata*, which announced the presence of the crypt’s pre-eminent resident. When exposed to light the room would have dazzled the senses.

The past was also represented here in the frescoes on the ceiling and above the arc on the back wall which were comparatively “old-fashioned,” less ornate and more subdued. The octagonal design and Good Shepherd fresco were third-century contemporaries, painted prior to Damasus’ intervention. Both were pregnant with symbolism for the late-antique audience. In Christian parlance the octagonal design represented the number eight which was associated with the first day of Christ’s resurrection. Ambrose taught the significance as “because on the eighth day, by rising, Christ loosens the bondage of death and receives the dead from their graves.” Similarly, Augustine preached “the day of the Lord, an everlasting eighth day” for the eighth day

\(^{612}\) Reekmans’ examination of the indentions in the mortar left behind from the individual tiles (*tesserae*) provides our only knowledge of the iconographic program.
followed God’s six days of creation and seventh day rest \textsuperscript{613} Late-antique baptisteries were constructed with eight sides as the sacrament signified new beginnings, the final washing away of sin and a new start for Christian converts. Baptism is further associated with heaven as many chose to delay this sacrament until death was assured in final preparations for the afterlife. There is no evidence that late-antique Romans practiced baptism in the catacombs. Thus, the octagonal ceiling put in mind Christ, new beginnings, and the gateway of heaven.

Once again, the Good Shepherd symbolized Christ and his earthly representative the bishop. This shepherd is close to his sheep which stand together beside their protector and provider, he is spatially distinct, holding sway over the room from the apex of the focal wall, the vantage point normally occupied by the prophet Jonah. The good shepherd in the Eusebius crypt was present, Jonah was no longer necessary. Christ no longer looked down from heaven; rather, he stood in the gap at its threshold. Heaven’s light spilled into the room from above striking the rich colors and faceted surfaces of the marbles and \textit{tesserae} to visually transform the underground chamber into the throne room of heaven.

The crypt’s titillating luminosity, bold colors, shimmering mosaics and elite architectural style demanded notice and incited intrigue. The room’s iconographic program (the Chi-Rho and good shepherd) disclosed its Christian character, and the officious grand inscription personalized by Damasus sanctified the space in the name of the city’s highest Christian authority. In a room already filled to the brim with visual stimulants, Damasus’ epigram, wedged in front of the tomb, still managed to provoke the audience with its playful use of script which makes this epigram unique among the bishop’s many poems. The vertical lines of verse joined with the top and bottom “labels” (“\textit{Damasus Episcopos Fecit}” and “\textit{Eusebio Episcopo et Martyri}”) nicely frame

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{613} Ambrose, \textit{On the Sacraments}. Augustine, \textit{City of God}, XXII.30.}
the prose. Filocalus expresses his devotion to both Damasus and the martyr by signing his work on the right-hand side of the plaque—“Furius Dionysius Filocalus, friend and admirer of Pope Damasus, engraved this.” The layout of the verse is a natural provocateur and the bold placement of names, at the end of the pilgrim’s journey and in such a creative manner, validated the authenticity of the overall site while promoting and affirming Damasus as Christianity’s elite patron whose connections included such celebrated individuals as venerable Christian martyrs and artistic great Filocalus.

Damasus leaves his audiences with a dramatic ending. Many of the words in this text are found in Vergil’s Aeneid and therefore were familiar to the late-antique ear. The epigram written in jeweled style was viscerally provocative as performed: “Seditio, caedes, bellum, discordia, lites” are one-word nouns of escalating manners and methods of civil unrest and its results. The rhetor’s lips would have spat “seditio” (organized rebellion), hissed “caedes” (bloodshed), boomed “bellum” (full-blown armed fighting), bounced with unrest “Discordia” (mutiny), and pronounced with finality and resignation the civilized but messy “lites” (legal recourse). Like the earlier epigrams, these grammatically and syntactically equivalent words presented particularly colorful and action-packed images that engaged the hearers and enhanced the site’s memorable qualities.

There is a rhythm of crescendo and decrescendo of action in the poem as well. Grieving and weeping over sins leads to actions that escalate in a climax of furious striking tyrants and orders for banishment. The message in this epigram gains its energy through dualistic elements: rector and tyranni, pulsi and servaret, pacis and feritate all play off of one another forcing the visitor to engage in the narrative by taking sides in the struggle. The events and actions

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described in this epigram would have been uncomfortably familiar to the visitors. Damasus is laying bare the acrimonious disagreements over the lapsed which prompted Emperor Maxentius to exile Eusebius and Heraclius, semi-biographical events that closely mirrored the exile of Liberius and the political violence that shook the city during his own disastrous campaign for the papacy. Damasus’ audience would have recognized itself in these words and realized its contribution to the discord. The striking similarities of this list (“*seditio, caedes, bellum, discordia, lites*”) to the events and reactions that surrounded Damasus’ episcopal accession further suggest his personal angst and acknowledgement of sin. The consequences of his accession were on his mind as he penned this epitaph.

The poem resolves in a decrescendo as Eusebius accepts his fate joyfully and rests in his exile on the shores of Sicily (*litore trinacrio*) before receiving his heavenly reward for faithful service. Strabo tells us that Sicily earned the name *trinacrio* due to its triangular form. Roman audiences would have recognized the phrase for it was taken directly from Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the official unofficial textbook on Roman history. In the *Aeneid*, the *litore trinacrio* was ruled by the Trojan King Acestes, friend to Rome’s mythical founder, Aeneas. Sicily was and is today an extremely fertile area, with natural resources, valuable harbors, and large *latifundia* that produced valuable grain that fed the citizens of Rome throughout its history. Vergil uses *litore trinacrio* when describing a gift of wine from this fertile land from Acestes to Aeneas.

*Vina bonus quae deinde cadis onerarat Acestes
litore Trinacrio dederatque abeuntibus heros.*

The hero [Aeneas] then distributed the wines from the Trinacrian shores which good Acestes had poured into wine jars [for the departing men]
Damasus’ narrative in Vergilian hexameters with Vergilian phrase would have stirred his hearers to associate Eusebius’ exile with Rome’s mythical history. Just as the *litore trinacrio* provided refuge to Aeneus and his men, it served as a place of hospitality for the unjustly-exiled bishop, a precursor to or ante-room of heaven.

Eusebius’ exile lacks the drama of the other martyrs buried at Callistus but he was personal to Damasus. Damasus made the office of bishop (and himself as its current holder) human, relatable, and empathetic characters. In addition, the admirable character qualities which Eusebius exhibited and the relevance of his acts in light of contemporary fourth-century issues made Eusebius an excellent role model of piety which Romans defined through the tale of Aeneas. Damasus lauds Eusebius for acting justly (exhorted repentance), showing temperance (observed the peace treaties), and performing bravely (accepted exile joyfully) while having a right relationship before God (*pietas*) made manifest by his cheerful endurance of exile “because God had determined it.” As the epigram reveals, Damasus saw many similarities between Eusebius and himself. Damasus enhanced the office and reputation of the Roman episcopacy by highlighting the exemplary conduct of its former bishops. At the same time, the similarities between the two leaders—the honored martyr and current bishop—strengthened Damasus’ claim to the see.

The cubiculum holding the body of Eusebius was scarred by the consequences of Damasus’ ambitions. In addition to the galleries Damasus blocked to accommodate the large skylight, Reekmans discovered several graves which had been completely covered over by the marble wall to give dominance to the tomb of Eusebius.  

615 Seven infant *loculi* were erased in creating the episcopal tomb of Eusebius, all but one dated to the late third or early fourth century.

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615 Reekmans, *Le Complexe Cemeterial*, 149.
centuries. An adult-sized *loculis* identified by the inscription “LUCIDA/IN PACE DEP VII K SEPT” was also covered over to make room for Eusebius’ tomb. Any noble motives ascribed to Damasus for his work in the catacombs must be tempered by his apparent lack of concern for individuals he sacrificed for his agenda.

The Crypt of Eusebius was the end of the road for these pilgrims and it held the final words of Damasus. Participants had negotiated many twists and turns, had been provoked, challenged, and inspired. They had stood at the threshold of heaven in the Crypt of the Popes, journeyed into the past, and now stood poised again at the portal of heaven. Heaven is visible in this space. Everything about the room, its triconch shape, luxurious eye-dazzling décor, octagonal ceiling, Good Shepherd fresco, official epigram, message of redemption, and very prominent identification of Damasus as patron (*ethos*) emphasized church order and served to put in mind heaven (*pathos*) and a final glimpse of the divine as an intentional conclusion to the martyr festival (*logos*). Audiences standing in the throne room of heaven were confronted with their sins but, like Eusebius, they could leave the dissensions behind and wait joyfully until that day they could abandon this world for a heavenly one.

**Conclusion**

Martyr festival and the catacomb-as-monument reified Roman Christian history and promoted *romanitas* and *communitas* within the city’s Christian community. Procession permitted inhabitants to physically and mentally connect to and make claims on the city. The catacombs were an accessible locus for martyr commemoration, which greatly enhanced the Christian festival. Participation in common engendered attitudes of kinship and inclusion (*communitas*), intangibles sorely needed by the city’s divisive Christian community. Because

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procession played out on the stage of Roman cultural splendor, Christianity came to emanate Rome itself. Christianity became Roman. Sensory engagement throughout the procession colored the experience with all things Roman. The sights, sounds, and smells of the city assaulted the senses and encouraged memory. Procession led them away from the everyday and deposited seekers at the threshold of another world.

The otherworldly catacombs were efficacious provocateurs of the senses. The natural characteristics of the catacomb made it a hypersensitive environment. The cool, humid, dusty bounded spaces and moments of light and dark filled with testimonies of the deceased compelled the visitors’ bodies and engaged their minds. The testimonies of the deceased and the graffiti writers demonstrated to late-antique Christians the presence of believers outside of their chronological time and beyond their small group. For modern scholars, these sources supply valuable evidence of late antique and early medieval Christianities.

Considerable time, energy and resources went into carving a monumental whole out of the Callistus galleries. Damasus designed the one-way route at Callistus with a purpose in mind. It is interesting that Damasus started with the Crypt of the Popes. Perhaps this enabled those with physical limitations to participate in a small portion of the tour. Those who limited their visit to the Crypt of the Popes would have encountered the holy and been saturated by Roman Christianity. But Damasus provided a more immersive experience for those stalwart souls who sought more.

All three stops along the one-way route—each one of them a monument in their own right—was significant to Damasus. The monuments each represented a different chronological period in the evolution of the Roman church. The passion of the martyrs was followed by a panorama of Christian history. The Crypt of Eusebius dealt with the pilgrims as contemporaries.
In addition, each of the monuments required audience participation in crossing the threshold. The Crypt of the Popes and the Cubicula of the Sacraments imposed additional requirements on the pilgrims—observation of the Eucharist and interactive translation of the frescoes. The act of participation would have enhanced individual and group memory.

Damasus also ensured that Christ was present throughout the program. Observers witnessed Christ in the Good Shepherd, the Chi-Rho, the anchor, the \textit{icthus} (fish), and the Alpha and Omega. He was prominent in the galleries and adorned each crypt. Christ was portrayed pre-incarnate and in action in the Cubicula of the Sacraments in frescos inspired by Christian and Hebrew scriptures. The focus on Christ marked the monumental space and the festival ritual as “Christian” and declared his imperium (command, supreme power, and dominion) and his deity—his substance (\textit{homoousion} or \textit{homoios})—for believers. Damasus lauded the martyrs but they always stood in the shadow of Christ. There was no more powerful place on earth where Damasus’ audience could confront the personhood, the deity, and the spiritual nature of Christ than under the specter of death and in the contemplation of martyr sacrifice.

The Crypt of Eusebius was Damasus’ exhortation to apply the message of the catacomb to their daily lives. The space—diminutive, asymmetrical, arcosolia, triconch, vibrant and artistic—provoked the senses to induce tension. The bishop brought his audience into the contemporary era with a modern martyr and his epigram confronted them with the religion’s—their own—crippling dysfunction. The semi-autobiographical epigram conveyed the ugliness of dissension and its aftermath and convicted contemporary audiences. Damasus wields the gravitas of his office most directly here by declaring himself bishop (“Damasus the bishop made this for Eusebius, bishop and martyr”).
The Hebrew scriptures are missing here. The drama of the poetry coupled with the brilliance of the space resolves in a denouement of heavenly rest. I contend that Damasus designed this space to represent the new heaven as described in John’s apocryphal work:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bridge beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

This final and most intimate setting was gloriously adorned, its iconography and message invoked Christ, new beginnings, and the throne room of heaven. Make no mistake, Damasus wields his episcopal muscle here. While Christ is supreme, Damasus is his earthly authority.

Worn out by their physical and mental involvement and emotionally spent, pilgrims turned again to their senses and followed the beams of light upward through the final threshold out of this supernatural, otherworldly space that connected heaven and earth. Visitors had individually and communally experienced a profusion of visceral encounters and intimacy with the martyrs; they had touched the divine (*spectaculum*). Years of separation had fallen away in the drama that had played out in their present. The extraordinary sensory experience would serve as an ongoing anchor for individual and collective memory.

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EPILOGUE

His [Damasus’] acts, his letters, his metrical inscriptions, all betray the same dry, cold temperament and are all singularly devoid of any spontaneous generosity of feeling, magnanimity of judgment, or breadth of vision.618

A valuable resource for the completion of this work was a 1927 (re-released in 1991) compilation and English translation of primary source texts described as those “on which the historical claims of the Papacy rest,” by James T. Shotwell and Louise Ropes Loomis. While the compilation of English translations of Greek and Latin works were very helpful, the commentary of these early twentieth-century scholars was often provocative. Writing in a time before the many archeological and anthropological insights of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their disdain for Damasus took me aback for, having focused so long on the works of Damasus in the catacombs, the Damasus I have come to know is anything but dry and cold. Damasus has been overwhelmingly characterized as gluttonous for power, a self-promoter, a hater of women, and a champion of episcopal authority. It is time to give Damasus his due. Undoubtedly, Damasus desired to repair and enhance his reputation and bolster his position as bishop of Rome. The extensive placement of his name in the epigrams suggests that his nickname of “ear-tickler” and his relationships with women were, in many ways, self-serving. This spatial and sensory examination of the one-way route at Callistus, however, demonstrates that the pontiff possessed a greater piety and was driven by more noble ambitions than his critics proclaim.

This work charts new territory, in terms of fully exploring a multidisciplinary consideration of Damasus. Notable ‘firsts’ featured here include: the first effort to employ sensory and spatial theories with visceral rhetoric, to examine Damasus’ works; the first to link

martyr festival procession with the catacombs; the first to consider the one-way route through Callistus in detail – recognizing the parallel nature to a three-part sermon; the first to identify the supremacy of Christ embedded throughout the Callistus experience; and the first to physically place the pilgrim bodies in the spaces – and to move them through those spaces.

A fundamental precept of the human condition makes it possible to evaluate late antique reactions to the works of Damasus, namely, all humans interact with their world through their senses. With this truth in place, this work has provided a blueprint for accessing the reactions of late antique audiences to the works of Damasus. For the purposes of this work I chose the Catacomb of Callistus as a test site, but this interrogation method could also be applied to any other catacombs that can be recreated from archeological data. The scope of the work here is appropriate to demonstrate the effectiveness, and necessity, of a multidisciplinary approach to considering Damasus’ work.

Important factors in this analysis include the ability to assign context to interaction with the site. Audiences approached the catacomb-as-monument as part of Christian ritual. Thus, they were ritually-attuned to what they would see; in other words, they were predisposed to read Christianity in the spaces. Further, as a monument, the catacomb tour was preemptive in moving audiences, particularly along the one-way route. In addition, the catacomb environment was an extremely affective space inciting the senses to the point of inscribing the experience on bodies and minds. The catacomb is fertile ground for synesthesia and enhanced memory. Finally, the one-way route at Callistus ensured that modern-day attempts to parallel the pilgrims would

619While finishing up this dissertation, I came across an essay by Historian Gitte Lønstrup Dal Santo, who suggests the importance of bodily reenactments, specifically visits to the martyr graves, on Christian memory. “Rite of Passage: On Ceremonial Movements and Vicarious Memories (Fourth century CE)” in The Moving City: Processions, Passages, and Promenades in Ancient Rome (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). 145-154. My scholarship supplies a holistic and detailed exposition of how bodily reenactments would work. For example, Lønstrup Dal Santo mentions that reciting the epigrams would have an impact on the pilgrims, my dissertation explicates how this would happen using the actual epigrams to demonstrate it.
follow the same sequence; a current scholar can experience what the pilgrim encountered in the proper order. The Callistan catacomb provides an excellent example of the interplay of martyr festival, monumental space, and visceral rhetoric to intentionally guide the visitor (both literally and figuratively.) As such, it serves as a quasi-template for considering other sites and interventions.

The analysis presented in this scholarship greatly enhances our understanding of Damasus and fourth-century Roman Christianity. Damasus was “Roman,” a proud citizen of the Eternal City. While the LP described him as a Spaniard, his material works, his epigrams, and his martyrs—even those from the east—were colored with a Roman brush. His works and his ministry remained focused on the local community; his concentrated work in the catacombs kept him at home to the exclusion of eastern affairs.

Damasus developed a network of supporters from all walks of Roman life. He relied upon the common man (fossores, rabble), his name was attached to superstars (charioteers, gladiators), and he effectively received aid from the wealthy to build his monuments. Similarly, Damasus made it possible for all peoples to petition the martyr, and he exposed all manner of Christian dead to his audiences. While it is reasonable to assume that distinctions of class and gender were present in the Roman Christian community, Damasus’ works certainly reveal a desire and effort to forge unity among his flock. Linking martyr festival procession and the catacomb-as-monument interactions provided a means for Romans of all strata to share a collective experience and generate collective memory, promoting communitas.

Damasus’ own correspondence suggests a staunch stand on Nicaean orthodoxy. Examining the entire route which he designed at Callistus reveals Damasus’ spiritual side and practical evidence of his orthodoxy. While Damasus was a strong patron of the martyrs and
believed in the efficacy of petitioning the martyr, he made Christ the center of the monument.

The arrangement and message in each of the three main stations on the Callistan tour is intentional. The opening act is vivid; as intoned by the rhetor, the violence against the holy is visceral – yet, Christ (and the martyr) emerges victorious. The middle act is pastoral. Visitors are reminded of Christ’s provision and protection throughout the ages. The third act seats Christ on His throne, triumphant. Damasus, pastor and shepherd, guides his flock to the very throne room of heaven. The orchestration of images, words, and proscribed movements reveals the spiritual heart of Damasus and the message he seeks to instill.

Damasus’ investment in time and resources necessary to accomplish his works implies an urgent need to unify the Roman Christian community. His creation of nodes around the city for Roman Christians to gather for a common purpose exposes the division and the danger that he believed was inherent in not acting. The post-Constantinian church, free from overt or imminent imperial persecution, now faced pressures from within. This look into the program at Callistus emphasizes this fact and exposes Damasus’ methods intended to alleviate these tensions.

The analysis performed here has also provided several insights into late antique Roman Christianity. There are indications that Roman literacy was higher than traditional estimates. Damasus’ references to Vergil, extensive use of written billboards, and the presence of graffiti—by male and female authors—suggest a Christian population that possessed at least a minimal degree of literacy. The tour, while conducted by a guide for safety reasons, was not a set narration. Visitors were not passive observers but physically and cognitively interacted with the space and its content. They consumed the Eucharist and engaged in debates. Visiting the catacombs was an immersive and shared participatory experience.
This work illustrates the extent to which Christians had co-opted Roman practices for spiritual purposes. Acts of procession and veneration of the heroic dead are pillars of Roman social practice. Roman architecture delineated the holy graves and Roman topics and phrases told the stories. Adapting these practices to a Christian context displays a willingness and freedom of the fourth-century Christian community to co-opt secular culture for the divine. Indeed, the ritual of Christian procession has been previously identified as a re-mapping of the urban environs in the name of Christ. Their willingness to publicly celebrate their religion in this way testifies that Christians were increasingly comfortable living within Rome’s polytheistic culture.

This analysis also documents in detail the manner in which Christian congregations were compelled to recognize their commonalities, to engage with biblical knowledge, and to comprehend the Roman heritage of their faith. Experiencing the space with the pilgrim makes clear the effect it had in encouraging camaraderie and attitudes of *communitas* among participants. The visceral impact of such an experience created and strengthened collective memory.

This work suggests new lines of scholarship, not only on the life and works of Damasus, but also regarding late-antique Christianity. For example, another catacomb Damasus significantly impacted houses the shrine of martyrs Marcellinus and Peter. Examining this cemetery spatially and sensorially would expose another facet of Damasus’ episcopacy and allow a direct comparison of messages and audiences. Such an analysis could serve three purposes: an examination of the consistency of Damasus’ message (and possible intent), an expansion of our understanding of fourth-century Christianity in general, and due to its proximity to the
mausoleum of Helena, mother of Constantine, an enhancement of our knowledge of the relationship between the imperial household and the church.

There is a tension between the personal spaces of the dead and the seemingly “institutional” takeover of the martyr crypts. Many of the Callistan graves were left unharmed in Damasus’ renovations yet others were closed off or damaged in the work. Further, the personal crypts are also cubicula, so-called for their allusion to the bedrooms of a Roman domus. This suggests that areas of a given catacomb complex were somewhat domestic compared to areas which were more official – loosely defined as those crypts, e.g. the Crypt of the Popes, which were signed by the bishop. Extending this concept, it could be questioned whether the interplay of domestic versus institutional spaces within the Christian cemetery mirrored this same tension within traditional urban spaces – and further, this same tension between traditional domestic tituli and large, institutional basilicas.

Another theme that plays throughout the Callistan tour is Roman triumph. There are many commonalities between the secular practices of Roman triumph and adventus and Christian martyr festival, including procession. The language of triumph is prevalent in Damasus’ epigrams and is found in the scriptures. A close examination of triumph as portrayed in martyr festival and catacomb-as-monument laid against Christian writings would deepen understanding of late antique theology.

This dissertation clearly demonstrates how the various Damasian interventions in Callistus would affect visitors to the complex as part of martyr festival. The result of these effects includes the creation and strengthening of collective memory and communitas – including an enhancement of unity among the Roman Christian community. An obvious follow-up study would assess the long-term persistence of enhanced unity and communitas in the Christian
population. An examination of martyr festival, pilgrimage practices, and the creation/renovation/maintenance of martyr sites between the time of Damasus and the sack of Rome in 410 and beyond would illuminate multiple insights into the early medieval Christian community in and around Rome. Such inquires could include an assessment of the lasting impact of Damasus’ significant ‘initial’ investment, the continuity of Damasus’ programs by subsequent bishops, privatization of martyr sites and bodies (in general, and with a particular focus on egalitarian access to the martyr), and the effects of external political and social forces on the church as the city declined.

Perhaps to best understand Damasus – the Roman, the Bishop, the venerator of the holy dead – it is necessary to consider an autobiographical account, which he detailed in EP 28:

Marcellinus and Peter
an assassin related [the story of] your grave to me, Damasus, when I was a boy:
A mad butcher had given him these orders,
to sever your necks in the middle of the thorn bushes so that no one could recognize and seize your tomb.
He recalled how you had courageously dug your graves with your own hands, afterwards you lay white, concealed beneath the hollow;
Some time later Lucilla, being reminded by your piety resolved to preserve your most sacred bodies in this place.\(^{620}\)

\(^{620}\) EP 28. Author translation.
It is impossible to know the veracity of this account, or its full effect on the boy Damasus. However, it is a very personal testimony, and mirrors the themes Damasus presented to the visitors at Callistus – the visceral savagery of the execution; the loss, separation, and desolation resulting from the hiding away of the holy dead; the nobility and fortitude of the martyrs; the piety of Lucilla; and Damasus’ relationship with the actors in the account. If indeed the account is true—if the boy Damasus was approached by the mad butcher—this could be the impetus which drove his life’s works. Many have constructed a portrait of a cold, calculating churchman seeking to promote himself and co-opt the martyr to ensure his personal legacy. However, it is equally reasonable to picture a boy horrified by descriptions of slaughter yet inspired by the courage of the martyr. Perhaps once the boy gained the ability to affect change he determined that he would honor all martyrs and invite all Romans to celebrate their heritage.
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Figure 33: Monument dedicated to the Emperor Caracalla by the Fifth Cohort of Watchmen. Capitoline Museum. Author photo.
Figure 34: Dedication inscription – Arch of Vespasian. Author photo.
APPENDIX: EPIGRAMS OF DAMASUS

EP 12 – DAMASUS’ EPITAPH, CEMETERY OF MARCUS AND MARCELLIANUS

QVI GRADIENS PELAGI FLVCTVS CONPRESSIT AMAROS,
VIVERE QVI PRESTAT MORIENTIA SEMINA TERRAE,
SOLVERE QVI POTVIT LETALIA VINCVLA MORTIS,
POST TENEBRAS, FRATREM POST TERTIA LVMINA SOLIS
AD SVPEROS ITERVM MARTAE DONARE SORORI,
POST CINERES DAMASVM FACIET QVIA SVRGERE CREDO.

The one who, walking, subdued the bitter waves of the sea,
who prevails upon the decaying seeds of the earth to live,
who is able to unbind the fatal chains of death after the darkness,
who is able to present a brother to his sister Martha a second time
for a higher purpose,
I believe you will make Damasus to rise up after he is ashes

Author Translation
EP 15 – ELOGIUM OF TARSICIUS, CEMETERY OF ST. CALLISTUS

PAR MERITVM QVICVMQ(ue) LEGIS COGNOSCE DVORVM
QVIS DAMASVS RECTOR TITVLOS POST PRAEMIA REDDIT.
IVDAICVS POPVLVS STEPHANVM MELIORA MONENTEM
PERCVLERAT SAXIS, TVLERAT QVI EX HOSTE TROPÆVM:
MARTYRIVM PRIMVS RAPVIT LEVITA FIDELIS.
TARSICIVM SANCTVM CHRIStI SACRAMENTA GERENTEM
CVM MALE SANA MANVS PREMERET VVLGARE PROFANIS,
IPSE ANIMAM POTIVS VOLVIT DIMITTERE CAESVS
PRODERE QVAM CANIBVS RABIDIS CAELESTIA MEMBRA.

You who read, whoever you are, recognize the equal merit of the two
to whom Damasus the bishop has dedicated this inscription after their rewards.
The Jewish people stoned Stephen when he was instructing them
on a better course, he who carried off the trophy from the enemy:
the faithful deacon first laid hold of martyrdom.
When a raving gang was pressing holy Tarsicius to reveal to the uninitiated
the sacraments of Christ that he was carrying,
he wished rather to release his spirit, struck down,
than to betray the heavenly limbs to mad dogs

Translation: Trout, Damasus
EP 16 – ELOGIUM OF THE SAINTS, CEMETERY OF ST. CALLISTUS

HIC CONGESTA IACET QVAERIS SI TURBA PIORVM
CORPORA SANCTORVM RETINENT VENERANDA SEPVLCRA
SVBLIMES ANIMAS RAPVIT SIBI REGIA CAELI
HIC COMITES XYSTI PORTANT QVI EX HOSTE TROPAAEA
HIC NVMERVS PROCERV VM SERVAT QVI ALTARIA XPI
HIC POSITVS LONGA VIXIT QVI IN PACE SACERDOS
HIC CONFESSORES SANCTI QVOS GRAECIA MISIT
HIC IVVENES PVERIQ(ue) SENES CASTIQ(ue) Nepotes
QVIS MAGE VIRGINEVM PLACVIT RETINERE PVDOREM
HIC FATEOR DAMASVS VOLVI MEA CONDERE MEMBRA
SED CINERES TIMVI SANCTOS VEXARE PIORVM

If you are seeking them, a great number of saints lie assembled here,
These venerable tombs hold fast the bodies of the saints,
the kingdom of heaven seized their exalted spirits.
Here lie the companions of Sixtus bearing trophies won from the enemy.
here lie many great men who watch over the altar of Christ.
Here is placed a priest who lived during a long time of peace.
here the sanctified confessors who were sent to us from Greece.
here young men and children, the aged and their virtuous descendants
who were pleased to wisely retain their chastity.
Here I Damasus confess I desired to bury my body
but I feared to disturb the sacred ashes of the blessed dead

Author Translation
At a time when the sword severed the sacred innermost parts of our mother [church],
the bishop buried here was teaching heavenly commands.
Soldiers, arriving suddenly, seize the sitting rector:
The congregants offered up their necks to the dispatched soldiers.
When the esteemed leader recognized this, he preferred to lift up the palm of victory,
the leader himself, of his own accord, willingly offered up his own neck,
impatient, lest their savagery be injurious to another.
Christ, who rewards the gifts for life, revealed the good work of the shepherd,
Christ himself watches over the numerous of the flock.

Author Translation
HERACLIVS VETVIT LABSOS PECCATA DOLERE,
EVSEBIVS MISEROS DOCVIT SVA CRIMINA FLERE.
SCINDITVR IN PARTES POPVLVS GLISCENTE FVRORE.
SEDITIO CAEDES BELLVM DISCORDIA LITES.
EXTEMPLO PARTIER PVLSI FERITATE TYRANNI,
INTEGRA CVM RECTOR SERVARET FOEDERA PACIS.
PERTVLIT EXILVM DOMINO SUB IVDICE LAETVS;
LITORE TRINACRIO MVNDVM VITAMQ(ue) RELIQVIT.

EVSEBIO EPISCOPO ET MARTYRI

FVRIVS DIONYSIVS FILOCALVS SCRIBSIT (VERTICALLY ALONG THE RIGHT SIDE)
DAMASI PAPAE CVLTOR ADQVE AMATOR (VERTICALLY ALONG THE LEFT SIDE)

BISHOP DAMASUS COMPOSED THIS

Heraclius prohibited the lapsed and sinners to grieve,
Eusebius taught the wretched ones to weep on account of their crimes.
The people were being separated into factions in the swelling rage.
Insurrection, bloodshed, warfare, mutiny and lawsuits followed.
Forthwith, when the bishop was observing the peace treaties in their entirety,
the tyrants struck both men together with savageness.
A joyful Eusebius endured his exile because God had determined it;
he relinquished his life and this world from Sicilian shores.

IN HONOR OF EUSEBIUS, BISHOP AND MARTYR

Engraved by Furius Dionysius Filocalus, friend and supporter of Pope Damasus

Author Translation
HIC HABITASSE PRIVS SANCTOS COGNOSCERE DEBES
NOMINA QVISQ(ue) PETRI PARITER PAVLIQ(ue) REQVIRIS.
DISCIPVLOS ORIENS MISIT, QVOD SPONTE FATEMVR;
SANGVINIS OB MERITVM CHRISTVMQ(ue) PER ASTRA SECVTI
AETHERIOS PETIERE SINVS REGNAQVE PIQRVM:
ROMA SVOS POTIVS MERVIT DEFENDERE CIVES.
HAEC DAMASVS VESTRAS REFERAT NOVA SIDERALAVDES

Here, you ought to know, first lived the saints,
whoever seeks the names of Peter and also of Paul.
Disciples, the east sent them, that we freely confess.
But by the merit of their blood they followed Christ through the Heavens
and sought the ethereal shores, the kingdom of the pious.
Rome deserved better to watch over her new citizens.
Let Damasus relate this as your praise, new stars.

Translation: Curran, Pagan City
The martyr Eutychius demonstrated the glory of Christ because he was able to overcome equally the cruel orders of the tyrant and the executioners’ thousand ways of doing harm. A new punishment against the limbs of the body accompanied the filth of prison. Shards of pottery were laid out [for his bed] lest sleep approach; twice six days passed, food is denied; he is cast into the abyss; holy blood washes every wound which the terrible force of death had advanced. In sleep inducing darkness, a dream agitates the mind the hiding place that holds the limbs of the innocent one is revealed. He is sought; discovered, he is honored; he is cherished; he provides all things. Damasus has pronounced his merit; you venerate his tomb!

Author Translation
Marcellinus and Peter

an assassin related [the story of] your grave to me, Damasus, when I was a boy:
A mad butcher had given him these orders,
to sever your necks in the middle of the thorn bushes
so that no one could recognize and seize your tomb.
He recalled how you had courageously dug your graves with your own hands,
afterwards you lay white, concealed beneath the hollow;
Some time later Lucilla, being reminded by your piety
resolved to preserve your most sacred bodies in this place.

Author Translation
Scourgings, executioners, blazing flames, instruments of torture, chains, 
the faith of Lawrence alone was able to defeat. 
Damasus, suppliant, heaps up the high altars with these gifts 
Esteeming the merit of this extraordinary martyr.

Author Translation
Hippolytus, when the tyrant’s commands were bearing down, is said to have steadfastly remained, a presbyter, in the schism of Novatus. At that time when persecution’s sword cut at our mother’s pious innards, when, devoted to Christ, he sought the realms of the righteous, (and) the people asked where they might be able to assemble, it is reported that he told all to follow the universal faith. Having thus confessed, he won the right to be our martyr. These things, which he heard, Damasus relates; Christ verifies all.

Translation: Trout, Damasus
Legend has it that a short time ago her holy parents reported that, when the trumpet had sounded its mournful music, the girl Agnes suddenly abandoned her nurse’s lap. Willingly she trod under foot the threats and madness of the savage tyrant when he wished to burn her noble body with flames. Despite her slight strength she vanquished the immense terror and set loose her hair to flow over her naked limbs—lest a mortal countenance, doomed to perish, see the temple of the Lord. O kindly saint, worthy of my veneration, holy glory of modesty, I pray, renowned martyr, that you favor the prayers of Damasus

Translation: Trout, Damsus
Because the bishop, truthful, demanded the lapsed lament their faults, he was a bitter enemy to all the wretched. Hence fury, hence hatred follow, discord, quarrels, sedition, slaughter, the bonds of peace dissolve. Through the accusation of another, who in the time of peace denied Christ, he was driven from the borders of his homeland by the tyrant’s savagery. These things that he uncovered, Damasus wished to relate in brief so that the people may recognize the merit of Marcellus.

Translation: Trout., *Damasus*
EP 60A – EPIGRAM FOR A BAPTISMAL FONT

QVISQVE SITIT VENIAT CVPIENS HAVRIE FLVENTA:
INVENIET LATICES SERVANT QVI DVLCIA MELLA;
SORDIBVS EXPOSITIS PVRGANT PENETRALIA CORDIS,
CORPORA CVM RENOVANT CHIRSTO SERVIRE PARATI.

Whoever thirsts, let him come desiring to drink from these streams:
   He will find waters that contain sweet honey;
   With filth removed, those made ready to serve Christ
Cleanse the depths of their hearts when they renew their bodies

Translation: Trout, Damasus