



Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine

Graydon F Snyder

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Early Christianity emerged from obscurity to dominate the Roman world: that story, told and retold, continues to fascinate historians and believers. From literary remains scholars have fashioned a reasonably coherent portrait of Christian leaders and their teachings, their controversies, and their struggles with the imperial power. But the religion of ordinary Christians is not so well or easily known; they have left us no literary record of their faith and their hope, their marrying and their dying, their worship and their common life. Scholars relying on literary evidence have little to say of daily life in the Christian church before the "peace" of Constantine halted the persecution of Christianity in the empire. "It is only in nonliterary data," Graydon Snyder writes, "that one can catch a glimpse of what actually happened." Before the publication of "Ante Pacem there was no introduction or source-book for early Christian archaeology available in English. With his book Professor Snyder has performed an incalculable service for students of early Christianity and the world of late antiquity. He analyzes in one lavishly illustrated volume every piece of evidence that can, with some degree of assurance, be dated before the triumph of the emperor Constantine at the Milvian Bridge in 312CE thrust the nascent Christian culture "into a universal role as the formal religious expression of the Roman Empire." Previous assessments have interpreted early Christian artifacts using the literature of the "church fathers" as a template. The method of the so-called "Roman school" presupposed a continuity of Christianity from its beginning through the later church, so its proponents attempted to harmonize the nonliterary evidence with late tradition. However, the early church artifacts that first appeared about 180 were derived from the culture of the empire. From then until about 313CE, "the early Christian Church gave to the Mediterranean world a religious alternative of considerable depth that was expressed in activities and symbols that were readily understood by that culture," according to Professor Snyder.

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