1
Introduction

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Behold the relics of Rome, the image of her pristine greatness! Neither time nor the barbarian can boast the merit of this stupendous destruction: it was perpetrated by her own citizens.
(Petrarch, 1304–1374)

Nothing, it would seem, so evokes a consciousness of history, of time and change, than the monuments of ages past, which by their very time-boundedness comment upon old and new, then and now. Thus, Petrarch's lament over Rome's fallen glory festered in Gibbon to a more bitter condemnation of the culprits of decline.[1] The Emperor Augustus himself boasted that he "left in marble that which he found made of brick."[2] He also left therein a bit of historical commentary seen from the optimism of progress. Yet such imperial quips too evince the sense of change, of old and new, which the monuments themselves evoke. "Laugh, O Caesar," exclaimed Martial, mocking relics of a past glory, "at those kingly wonders, the pyramids."[3]

We may contrast the awe of nineteenth-century romantics, neoclassicism falling on the heels of Gibbon as poets and antiquarians alike rediscovered that past glory. Lord Byron felt its tug as he contemplated the ruins of majestic Sounion (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto II, 86):

> Save where some solitary column mourns
> Above its prostrate brethren of the cave;
> Save where Tritonia's airy shrine adorns
> Colonna's cliff, and gleams along the wave;
> Save o'er some warrior's half-forgotten grave,
> Where the grey stones and unmolested grass
> Ages, but not oblivion, feebly brave,

While strangers only not regardless pass,
Lingering like me, perchance, to gaze and sigh "Alas!"

With the first blush of archaeological discovery came newly found antiquities in increasing numbers. Egyptian statuary and Greek marbles awed and inspired, and yet stirred the emotions of mutability and human finitude. In Shelley, like Byron or Keats, the refrain echoes:

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever
From creation to decay.[4]

It is in retrospect that human consciousness labels and interprets such change as progress or decline. But such is perhaps the natural inclination of self-conscious historical retrospection, which looks to the past for "landmarks" to the present.

Landmarks of Early Christian History

Finding such landmarks in earliest Christian history is a difficult task, but one that is more and more in demand with the greater availability of texts and monuments to be examined and interpreted. In a series of lectures entitled "Landmarks of Early Christianity," the church historian Kirsopp Lake essayed a self-critical sentiment toward such a task:

> At first sight the historian of religions appears to be faced by a number of clearly distinguished entities, to each of which he feels justified in giving the name of a separate religion; but on further consideration it becomes obvious that each one of these entities has been in a condition of flux throughout its history. Each began as a combination or synthesis of older forms of thought with comparatively little new in its composition; each ended by disintegrating into many elements, of which the worst disappeared, while the best were taken up into new life in some new religion.[5]

The historian looks for landmarks that chart a course of development in discernible stages in order to posit description and analysis of that development.

Establishing these landmarks becomes the first step in interpretation. It is much like the archaeologist who, after sifting through jumbled, seemingly indistinguishable, remains of human activity, delights in the discovery of an ashlayer. Rather than some macabre perversity, this delight in finding signs of destruction is in the recognition that it marks clear stages of ending and beginning; a clear break in occupational history and stratigraphy. It is a landmark from which other historical developments, both before and after, can now be discerned more clearly. Yet, as Lake correctly observes, such landmarks are not always evident, either in the history of religions or in social history and archaeology. Indeed, in many cases what pass for landmarks of human history are rather symbols of larger developmental courses or phases, and are often imposed by retrospective consciousness. There are few ashlayers in the history of early Christianity, and the scholar is left to ponder the best ways to mark off its development. Still, monuments stand to the changes that have occurred and call out for attempts to hear them.

The basic landmark that will be the focus of this study is the beginning of Christian church building and the establishment of an institutionalized religion in the Roman world. Religion is more than a message, and the appeal of the early Christian movement did not lie in its offer of salvation alone. There were savior gods aplenty in the Graeco-Roman world, and many a cult following to promote them. The competition and interaction of religions occurred in the social world as well as the intellectual. The history of the early Christian movement cannot be written without addressing the fact that growth, worship, theology, ethics—in short, every aspect of religion in human experience—were centered in communal experience, in assembly. The Christian movement did not begin as a separate religion but as one of several reforming currents in first-century Judaism. By the fourth century, however, it had become an official religion of the Roman state.

It seems, then, that one of the best ways to see this historical progression is in the development of the place of assembly and church building. In the beginning of the movement, the followers of Jesus met in the homes of members. According to Acts, the primitive Jerusalem community gathered "from house to house" (Acts 2.46; 5.42; cf. 12.12). The domestic "upper room" (Acts 20.8) perpetuates the tradition of Jesus' Last Supper (cf. Luke 22.12; Acts 1.13). It is likely that the author of Luke-Acts has idealized or romanticized the picture somewhat, and this may in some ways reflect the first self-conscious historiography.[6] Yet, the earliest Christian sources confirm the basic elements; Paul regularly addressed letters to and from "the church in the house [*bē kat' oikon ekklēsia*] of so-and-so."[7] Recent studies have shown how this "house church" setting conditioned the nature of assembly, worship, and communal organization. It was first and foremost an urban phenomenon. The constituency and social location of Pauline communities reflected the character and conditions of urban households and other private domestic activities.[8] It is most significant, moreover, that the place of assembly was unchanged from its original domestic function. There were as yet no church buildings. At this stage the house church was primarily a social phenomenon of the history.

Within three centuries, however, the situation, and with it the character of assembly changed radically. In sharp contrast to the catch-as-catch-can house churches depicted in Acts stands the monumental church building. One is seemingly random and informal; the other is hieratic and fixed. From the fourth century onward the basilica (the epitome of Christian church architecture) became a norm of style. Patronage by the emperor Constantine and his mother Helena Augusta account for the proliferation of monumental church buildings both at Rome and in the Holy Land.[9] Besides endowing new construction, they also supported the restoration and renovation of existing buildings in basilical style.[10] This monumentalization under the aegis of Constantine offers the historian a landmark for many facets of development in early Christianity.[11] The Christian basilica took its place alongside the monumental public architecture of the state, the imperial fora and palaces, and the temples of the gods. At the same time one cannot help but notice the enormous differences within the Christian movement marked by the changes of the architecture of the fourth century from the period of origins.

In the history of Christianity, then, two landmarks stand out from the architectural tradition: on one side the house church of the Pauline period; on the other, the basilica of the Constantinian age. One marks the period of primitive beginnings and sectarian identity; the other, an age of emergence into the mainstream of Roman society and acceptance as a state religion. The landmarks themselves present few problems of recognition on the surface. Through their overt contrast they are identifiable, measurable signs of change. But historical refinement and sophistication also show them to be symbolic moments in a more gradual process of change. For as Lake would call us to observe, neither stage is unique in and of itself for its own time. The problem for the historian, then, is reconstructing in more detail the subtle lines of development, the process of change, with an eye toward both social and historical components.

Both the process and the time period of development from house church to basilica are crucial to understanding the history of earliest Christianity. It was the period of formation and crystalization of most aspects of worship, theology, ethics, and organization, during which the Christian movement came to have its recognizable shape and identity. It was the period during which Christianity achieved a unique self-definition away from Judaism, and further internal self-definition with regard to heterodoxy and orthodoxy. By some it is viewed as a period of triumph and maturation toward the great Church of the early medieval era. By others it is viewed as a period of decline and apostasy from the pristine purity of the New Testament. Fundamental changes in the nature and setting of Christian assembly, therefore, are of more significance than for the development of architecture alone. They are inextricably tied to all aspects of Christian practice, precisely because assembly and worship were at the center of the religious experience as well as the social expansion of the movement.

Archaeology and Christian Architecture

Generally, the development of church building has been the province of historians of art and architecture, and only secondarily of use to social and intellectual historians. Despite New Testament references to household assemblies, since the Renaissance the normative character of basilical planning has served as the starting point for discussions. Investigations of architectural development were predicated on static conceptions of aesthetic and style, with little or no consideration of critical issues from the earliest periods, before there was a Christian architecture.[12]

Much of the raw material for this discussion came from the burgeoning archaeological discoveries at Rome and in the Near East during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Post-Renaissance neoclassicism and aesthetics were bolstered by the emergence of the Roman school of early Christian archaeology, associated especially with the name of Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–1894).[13] This period brought initial exploration of both the catacombs and subterranean levels beneath churches and cathedrals. Indeed, many of the basic discoveries of early Christian antiquities that continue to be discussed were brought to light at this time. While basic issues and theories had been debated for several centuries, the archaeological field was opened up afresh with profuse new discoveries commencing at the end of the nineteenth century, and new shape and definition were given to the raw data and the critical interpretation of that data.[14]

So profound were some of these new discoveries, that they fundamentally reshaped basic assumptions about Christian architecture made by (among others) the most influential church historian of the early twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack (who died in 1924).[15] Albeit concerned with social issues, Harnack was primarily an intellectual historian and theologian. He professed little competence in primary archaeological data, and relied on the prevailing architectural theories of his generation. The essential problem of this early scholarship was that no early church buildings were known that could be securely dated prior

to Constantine. Indeed, some that were dated to this early period (such as churches at Rome and the basilica at Emmaus) were found to be quite erroneous.[16] New discoveries prompted fresh approaches and solutions to the perennial issues.

Two areas of archaeological work conducted after World War I proved to be especially important. The first began with new work to refine and expand analysis on the subterranean levels beneath the oldest churches at Rome. This project was led by Richard Krautheimer beginning in 1934, and continues to the present.[17] The singular achievement of Krautheimer and his school has been the comprehensive scale of analysis brought to bear on each archaeological site as its use is traced from earliest strata of pre-Christian construction to the building and rebuilding of medieval basilicas in successive styles. Each case, then, becomes (to whatever degree possible) a stratigraphic archaeological record of that particular building site. In this process a more cautious and thoroughgoing assessment of traditional or legendary claims for earliest Christian usage at certain sites has been attempted. Especially important are the claims, from tradition or from earlier archaeological sites at Rome, that some represent pre-Constantinian house churches or church buildings going back to as early as the first century C.E. The most notable case in this regard is the Basilica of San Clemente, which traditionally is thought to be the property donated for a church building by Clement of Rome, who died around 95 C.E. Krautheimer's work makes it possible to assess these traditions more carefully and to bring into sharper focus the archaeological progression of the site (from Republican buildings to Christian basilicas, layered on top of one another and continuing through the Baroque period).

Even more interest was precipitated by the discoveries at Dura-Europos (a Roman garrison on the Syrian frontier) beginning in 1921–1922.[18] In 1931 a house was unearthed that had been renovated for use as a place of Christian assembly. Because of the destruction of that city in Sassanian incursions of 256 C.E., the Christian edifice is securely dated and remains both the earliest and most completely known pre-Constantinian church building. Due to these unique circumstances the joint

archaeological expedition of Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters yielded evidence for the physical shape of the building and its renovation for Christian usage.[19] Perhaps more than any other modern discovery the Dura Christian building has precipitated new emphasis on pre-Constantinian church buildings and reopened the question of development from the earliest house church period.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that on the same street at Dura two other cultic facilities were found that had been renovated from private houses. One was a mithraeum, the sanctuary of the romanized cult of the Persian god Mithras. The other was a heavily decorated synagogue, by far the most extraordinary discovery, causing scholars to rethink traditional assumptions about the origins and development of the synagogue and Diaspora Judaism.[20] It was at first a house, and only through subsequent renovation had taken on more of the trappings of a formal synagogue structure. In many ways, then, the development of a normative synagogue architecture through the fourth century paralleled (rather than preceded) that of Christian church building. Interestingly enough, the earliest strata of possible Christian occupation beneath San Clemente also indicated that the building was immediately next door to a house which had a small Mithraic establishment installed in the ground-floor cortile. From the archaeological evidence, the earliest Christian activities can hardly be disengaged from those of the immediate social context. Significantly, in all three cases at Dura, the initial renovation for religious usage did nothing to transform the basic domestic character of the existing building, yet, the Dura Christian building was no longer used as a residence after renovation. It had become a church building in some more formal sense. It cannot, therefore, be pushed back as an example or model of the house churches of the New Testament period. There are difficulties in trying to date the archaeological evidence back to the first or second century at San Clemente and numerous other sites as well. Thus, these discoveries require fresh assessment within the framework of the landmark development from the house church to the basilica, and suggest that we cannot look at the Christian evidence in isola-

tion from the religious use of private architecture in the larger Roman environment.

What is needed, then, and what the present volume seeks to offer, is a more comprehensive analysis of the beginnings of Christian development in church building—the progression from house church meetings to basilical architecture. On the one hand this volume is largely concerned with archaeological and documentary collection, to assess the available evidence. On the other hand, it is analytical; it seeks a historical reconstruction and interpretation of the developmental process. From this perspective, it is not an architectural history as such, and the further lines of analysis will sharpen this distinction. It is instead a social history that depends on the most careful reconstruction possible of the evidence (both archaeological and literary) in its historical context.[21]

A catalogue of relevant texts and monuments is assembled in a companion volume (*The Christian Domus Ecclesiae and Its Environment: A Collection of Texts and Monuments*).[22] In addition to both Christian and pagan literary references it includes as much as possible of the Christian archaeological evidence. The types of evidence range from excavation reports on buildings (usually rewritten to reflect the phases of construction history for each site) to inscriptions and papyri. Also included are some selected comparative monuments (largely buildings and inscriptions) depicting the diffusion of Mithraism and Judaism in the Graeco-Roman environment.

By looking at the history of scholarship we see some of the traditional models and issues in the understanding of the beginnings of Christian church building. By integrating new information and perspectives from archaeology and social history, we are able to establish analytical issues for reconstruction. In particular we may examine the environment for patterns of adapting and renovating private buildings for religious and communal usage in greater detail. We focus on the diffusion of the numerous oriental cults in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This offers insights into the way Christianity spread and developed. Of special interest are two such groups. First is the cult of Mithras, one of Christianity's main competitors for official ac-

ceptance by Rome. The second is Judaism itself as it spread in the Diaspora and served as a conduit for the emergence of the Christian movement. These groups offer a social context for the transition from house churches into church buildings, as a barometer for the development of the Christian movement into a major force in the culture of the Roman world.

Notes

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1. Introduction

1. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) chap. 71; cited from the abridged edition by D. M. Low (London 1960) 897. Gibbon says in his own concluding postscript that the same ruins of Rome that prompted Petrarch's comment were the setting and inspiration for his first reflections on the decline and fall (Low ed., 903).

2. Suetonius, *The Divine Augustus* XXVIII.3.

3. Martial (40–104 C.E.), *Epigrams* VIII.36: addressed to Domitian on the completion (in 92 C.E.) of his Palatine palace, the Domus Flavia.

4. Opening line from Shelley's "Hellas" (1821); cf. his "Ozymandias" (1817) and Keats "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" (1817) and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819).

5. Delivered as the Haskell Lectures at Oberlin College for 1919 and published under the title *Landmarks in the History of Early Christianity* (London 1920), the quotation is from p. 1.

6. In Acts 1.13 the term is *hyperōon* while in Luke 22.12 (parallel, Mark 14.15) it is *anagaion* (literally "upper floor"). On the issue of historiographical impulses in Luke-Acts see the discussion in Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Anchor Bible, 2 vols., Garden City, NY, 1981, 1985) I: 3–21, 171–91, and bibliography cited there (I: 259ff.). See esp. Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (2nd ed., London 1958) 299ff. and *The Book of Acts in History* (London 1955) passim; L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts, Essays in Honor of Paul Schubert* (Philadelphia 1966); and most recently the attempt to reclaim Acts as a historical source by Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia 1980) 35ff., but see also Jacob Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis 1984) 13–29. It would seem that Luke-Acts is likely to remain, using Van Unnik's term, "a storm-center in contemporary scholarship."

7. 1 Cor. 16.19; Rom. 16.3–5; Philem. 1–2; Col. 4.15.

8. Edwin A. Judge, *The Social Organization of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London 1960) 58ff.; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects*

of Early Christianity (2nd ed., Philadelphia 1983) 71ff.; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT, 1982) 9ff., 72ff.; Hans-Josef Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 103; Stuttgart 1981) passim.

9. L. Voelkl, "Die konstantinischen Kirchenbauten nach Eusebius," RDAC 39 (1953) 60–64; Gregory Armstrong, "Imperial Church Building and Church-State Relations, A.D. 313–363," *Church History* 37 (1967) 3–17; Deno Genakoplos, "Church Building and 'Caesaropapism,' A.D. 312–365," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 7 (1966) 168ff.; A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (New York 1948) 88, 176ff.; Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT, 1984) 43–58. The major establishments included St. John Lateran and St. Peter's at Rome, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. Others were founded at Nicomedia, Antioch, and the new capital Constantinople (including the Church of the Holy Apostles, Hagia Irene, and the original Hagia Sophia). The major texts for the Constantinian policy come from Eusebius (but include letters from Constantine), cf. HE X.4.37ff.; *Vita Const.* II.45, III.48ff., IV.58; *Laus Const.* IX.12, XI.2, XVIII.

10. Eusebius, *Vita Const.* I.42: *nai mēn kai tais ekklēsiais tou theou plousias tas par' eautou pareichen epikourias, epauxōn men kai eis hypsos airōn tous euktērious oikous, pleistos d' anathēmasi ta semna tōn tēs ekklēsias kathēgiasmenōn phaidrynōn* [ed. I. A. Heikel, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig 1902), 27]. Cf. *Vita Const.* II.45; HE X.2.1.

11. In addition to works cited above in n. 4, cf. A. Alföldi, *Constantine and the Conversion of Rome* (New York 1941) 49ff., 96f.; J. Vogt, "Pagans and Christians in the Family of Constantine the Great," in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. A. Momigliano (Oxford 1963) 38ff.

12. F. Deichmann, "Basilika," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. T. Klauser, vol. I (Leipzig-Stuttgart 1941) 1225–59.

13. See Graydon F. Snyder, *ANTE PACEM: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon, GA, 1985) 4f.

14. Ibid., 7ff.

15. Cf. his *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. Moffatt (2nd ed., 2 vols., London 1908) II:88; and my article, "Adolf Harnack and the 'Expansion' of Early Christianity: A Reappraisal of Social History," TSC 5 (1985/86) 97–127.

16. Discussed in White, *The Christian Domus Ecclesiae and its Environment: A Collection of Texts and Monuments*, Harvard Theological Studies 36 in association with the American Schools of Oriental Research (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) (hereafter CDEE), Appendix A, no. 1.

17. Much of the nineteenth-century work was reviewed by J. P. Kirsch, *Die römische Titelkirchen im Altertum* (Paderborn 1918), and may have provided an impetus for Krautheimer's early work, as reflected in his article "The Beginnings of Early Christian Architecture," RER 3 (1939) 144ff., which outlines the task carried forward in his monumental work *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, 5 vols. (abbreviated CBCR hereafter; Vatican City 1939–1965).

18. On the excavations see Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven, CT, 1983) passim; cf. M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and its Art* (Oxford 1943) 58ff.; Ann M. Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos* (Oxford 1973) 1ff.

19. DEF VIII.2, 3ff.; 228ff. See CDEE, no. 36.

20. Cf. collection of essays edited by J. Gutmann, *The Dura-Europos Synagogue, A Re-evaluation, 1932–1972* (Missoula, MT, 1973) passim. See CDEE, no. 60.

21. "The Relevance of Non-Literary Sources," in E. M. Meyers and J. F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN, 1981) 19–30.

22. See note 16, above.

2. The Beginnings of Christian Architecture

1. For discussion of early architectural theories see the survey of E. H. Swift, *Roman Sources of Christian Art* (New York 1951) 12–30; F. Deichmann, "Basilika," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. T. Klauser, vol. I (Leipzig-Stuttgart 1941) 1225–59.

2. The persistence of these theories can still be seen in some popular treatments and a few church histories, e.g., J. Lebreton and J. Zeiller, *Histoire de l'Église Primitive*; English trans., *A History of the Early Church: Volume II, The Emergence of the Church in the Roman World* (New York 1962) 226. There is neither literary nor archaeological evidence of underground meetings to escape persecution. Archaeologically, the so-called underground basilicas have been shown to be of later date, after the persecutions had ceased. In any case it would be hard to project such practice outside of Rome itself. Cf. Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 3rd ed. (New York 1979) 32.

3. K. von Lange, *Haus und Halle* (Leipzig 1885) 270–336.

4. See H. Kohl and C. Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea* (Leipzig 1916) passim.

5. Michael Avi-Yonah, "Ancient Synagogues," *Ariel, a Quarterly Review of Arts and Letters in Israel* 32 (1973) 29–43, repr. in *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology, and Architecture*, ed. J. Gutmann (New York 1975) 95–109. For implications in discussions of synagogue architecture, especially in the Diaspora, see below chap. 4 and L. M. White, "The Delos Synagogue Revisited: Recent Fieldwork in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora," HTR 80 (1987) 133–60.

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Building God's House in the Roman World

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Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians

L. MICHAEL WHITE

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