POPE DAMASUS AND THE PECULIAR CLAIM OF ROME TO ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL

BY

H. CHADWICK

That the age-long debate regarding the Petrine tradition of the Roman community has now gone far towards being thawed out of the frozen rigidities of past controversy is a notable advance to which Professor Oscar Cullmann’s book on the apostle Peter made an irenic contribution of the first importance. The purpose of this note is to offer him, in salutation, an observation on the background of the sixth line of the famous inscription erected by Pope Damasus at the shrine of St. Peter and St. Paul by the third milestone of the Via Appia on the site now occupied by the church of San Sebastiano. The inscription, which has played so prominent a role in the discussion of the apostolic shrines in Rome, though familiar must be quoted:

Hic habitasse prius sanctos cognoscere debes
nomina quisque Petri pariter Paulique requiris.
Discipulos Oriens misit, quod sponte fatemur;
sanguinis ob meritum Christumque per astra securi
aetherios petiere sinus regnaque piorum:
Roma suos potius meruit defendere cives.
Haec Damasus vestras referat nova sidera laudes ¹.

The inscription begins by informing the pilgrim in search of the remains of the apostles that, although he should seek the apostles’ remains elsewhere, this was once the site of their graves. Damasus is accordingly the earliest extant witness to the story which, with many variants in detail, is consistently told by the late sources—that at the time of their death in the Neronian persecution, the apostles were buried together at the third milestone of the Via Appia, but were subsequently translated to the separate individual sites, St. Peter on the Vatican, St. Paul on the Via Ostiensis. I have argued in another context that this story is best explained as an

aetiological myth which tried to reconcile the awkward fact that there were two rival sites in Rome, each claiming to possess the authentic relics of the apostles.\(^1\) If this is correct, then we may notice in passing that Rome’s embarrassment is paralleled by that of Ephesus where during the third century there were two rival candidates for the grave of the apostle John, one of which was to achieve official recognition.\(^2\)

The meaning of lines 3-6, with its contrast of Oriens misit, Roma meruit, is luminous when set against the background of the long controversy between East and West, going back to the early tensions about Easter but vastly exacerbated by the bitterness of the Arian controversy.\(^3\) In the course of the debate the Eastern bishops had had opportunity to remind Rome that the apostles had come to Rome from the East, and in Damasus’ inscription we see how Rome is forced back from the simple argument from succession (which the Greek churches could employ to equal or even greater effect) and made to rely on the special glory attaching to Rome as the site of the apostles’ martyrdom.

These aspects of the inscription, however, are well known, and it is unnecessary to argue about them again. There remains one further point about the text which has not, to my knowledge, been discussed, and that is the way in which it illustrates the continuity of Roman tradition, both pagan and Christian.

Damasus claims that although the apostles were Orientals, nevertheless Rome has a superior right to claim them as her citizens. They are, so to speak, naturalised Romans and their authority and power has accordingly been transferred from East to West. Is there not more than a distant analogy here with the old Roman to have absorbed and made her own the gods of the peoples of the East whom she had conquered? From Republican times Rome had offered a home to foreign cults.\(^4\) Although technically an alien sanctuary might have no legal position, yet the gods not only of Greece but of Anatolia, Syria and Egypt all found their way to the

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\(^1\) *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. viii (1957), pp. 31-52.

\(^2\) Dionysius Alex. ap. Eus. H.E. vii 25. 16.
