

# Invented, interwoven and interplayed. The tomb, the tomb and the tomb. The evolution of the bishop-martyr Calixtus' cult in late-antique Rome

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## 1. Introduction

If one can trust the only extant but obviously toxic account, the *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, — and one can trust, as I argued elsewhere — bishop Calixtus of Rome had a quite turbulent life: A fugitive bankrupt slave, sentenced to die at the mines of Sardinia, freed by favourable circumstances, the manager of the first collective cemetery became finally bishop quite precisely 1800 years ago. A late 5<sup>th</sup> century *passio* attests him a similarly turbulent death: The persecutors, after failing to starve him to death, tied a stone to his neck and threw him into a well. Further evidence suggests, the turbulences did not end with his burial. Rather, it marks the beginning the cult of a saint.

## 2. The Beginnings

Everything began with the end of Calixtus' earthly life. The *Refutatio omnium haeresium* composed after his death implies that he was not killed in persecution, as later sources suggest and the scholarly world often and willingly repeats. [SLIDE!] Excavations in the 60ies show that he was buried in a small hypogeum at the via Aurelia, today known as the Catacombs of Calepodius. The burial was, likely the first in the complex, hardly triggered by urgency due to the persecutions. That means not only that it was a conscious choice but also decision against the community “κοιμητήριον” he managed, known as the Catacombs of Calixtus.

The personal pay-off by the *Refutatio* remains the only extant account for more than a century. The silence might be surprising in the light of the otherwise rising cult of the martyrs. In Rome are, however, the developments extraordinary or even paradox. On one hand, archaeological evidence, like the red wall at Vatican necropolis, the Triclia at Sant Sebastian, or the crypt of the popes at Sant Calixtus attests continuous veneration of some local martyrs. On the other, the written records are more than rare. For instance, only three authentic martyr's acts survived from the pre-constantinian period. What is even more odd, is that those martyrs are omitted from the earliest extant lists of Roman martyrs, the so called *Depositio martyrum*, compiled around 336. But that is not the only shortcoming of the collection. Many

famous martyrs known from other sources, for instance the martyr-bishops Fabianus or Cornelius both died in the great persecutions, are also omitted, alike the martyrs commemorated at *tituli* churches.

Scholars considers the silence as a lack of interest among Christians of Rome towards their own heroes in faith. Hence, in the case of Calixtus is not as much the silence appears to be surprising, but the fact that he was actually recorded on the *Depositio*. Particularly, because he is the first one on that list after the apostles Peter and Paul. Despite the silence of the literary sources, archaeological evidence implies that the tomb itself played a crucial role in the initiation and formation of the cult. Although the beginnings remain in the dark, it served as warrant of his memory and slowly became the physical focal point of small scale commemoration. The installation of a *mensa oleorum* in front of the tomb suggest a relative early, late 3<sup>rd</sup> century customisation to meet cultic needs. [SLIDE!] The regularly performed liturgical celebration at the tomb confronted the compiler or compilers of the *Depositio martyrum* with a (*fet à-kompli*). Most likely, the ongoing cultic activities triggered the inclusion of Calixtus into the calendar of Roman martyrs and not, like the martyrs of Damasus, the other way around. With the inclusion, Calixtus was “officially canonised” as a martyr.

### 3. Bishop Julius and the (Re)Invention of Calixtus

Nearly simultaneously to the compilation of the festal calendar, bishop Julius I. of Rome (337-352) succeeded Peter on the episcopal throne of Rome. The *Catalogus Liberianus*, which was completed roughly a year after his death, attests him extensive building activities within and outside of the Aurelian walls. [SLIDE!] Although two out of the three “*basilicae*” he endowed in the suburbs cannot beyond doubt be connected to martyrs, it seems that he nonetheless intended to promote cultic activities around Calixtus. He endowed a *basilica* at his tomb and another in Trastevere *iuxta Callistum*. The latter one was known later as *titulus santissimi Iuli et Calisti* and today as Santa Maria in Trastevere. But there is more to come. Instead of joining the long-standing tradition of his predecessors, Julius decided to find his final resting place nearby “his” patron-martyr, as the *Liber pontificalis* testifies. The intention cannot be overlooked: Julius wanted to be buried *retro sanctos*. And not simply *ad* any random *sanctos*, but Calixtus. The strive of Julius to put the tomb of Calixtus as a landmark on the slowly forming Christian map of the suburbs as well as the promotion of his memory *intra muros* is hard to overlook but difficult to explain. The temporal proximity between Julius’ strive for “digging up” some martyrs and the first fixation of the martyr’s calendar is in any case likely not a coincidence. Maybe, Julius was already prior to his episcopate

closely tied to Trastevere or even in the one or other way involved in the organisation of the liturgical activities at via Aurelia. That would at least provide an explanation for his obvious compassion for Calixtus, his interest in the otherwise isolated cult centre and even his idol's inclusion on the martyr's list. In any case, his interventions demonstrate the rising interest in the martyr's cult now also at Rome as well, and mark the first attempt of a Roman bishop, to stimulate a martyr's cult, to take control over *memoria* and instrumentalise it.

#### 4. The development of the cult centre in the Calepodius catacomb

The episcopal promotion of Calixtus was not in vain. His tomb, as one of the first of his kind, became more and more popular among visitors of all sorts. The changing needs forced changed in the subterranean reality, too. [SLIDE!] Maybe already Julius, or not much later, some close by galleries around the venerated tomb were scarified in order to create a voluminous space of ca. 30 sq.'s, the so called *basilichetta*. An additional brick-tuff wall provided further support, was painted in red and decorated with white lines. Between the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> and first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century, [SLIDE!] the surrounding of the tomb was furnished with *opus sectile* and an otherwise unknown Alfius donated a white marble pergola with capitals his name engraved. The construction of a staircase (S<sub>3</sub>) to connect the newly excavated second floor underneath corresponds to the popular fashion of the time, to the burial *retro sanctos*.

#### 5. The invention of the *Acta Martirii Sancti Calixti*

“New cults resulted in new stories”, observed Lucy Grig in context of the rising of literary production linked to the martyr's cult. But as it seems, sometimes old cults needed new stories, too. That is in general true for Roman martyrs and in particular for Calixtus. Then, it is not an exaggeration to claim that by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Rome, nobody had a clue about Calixtus, not to mention how he became a martyr. They only knew for sure that he was one. With the gaining popularity of subterranean shrine “pressure of the street” was also increasing: Visitors of all sorts were more than eager to learn about the life and death of their pious hero. But there was nothing to tell them.

An anonymous *ad hoc* hagiographer interpreted the “signs of the times” correctly, when he composed the *Acta Martirii Sancti Calixti* (BHL 1523), one of the rather early examples of a Roman, so called epic *passio*. Because the hagiographer almost had nothing to go on with, he was forced to exploit the little he had: the tomb, its surrounding, other traditions connected to the toponym “Calixtus” and the local martyr's

calendar. The result was an entirely fictive but vivid novel-like narration about the last weeks of the bishop and his companion. A genuine story, which was filling diligently biographical gaps and masterly explaining quite disturbing oddities. For instance, why is Calixtus buried in the catacombs of Calepodius instead of “his” catacomb at the via Appia? Or another, yet not a less burning issue: Who was Calepodius and what did he have to do with the bishop-martyr? The hagiographer provides surprisingly original but fictional answers to those questions. For that matter, he makes Calepodius, who is otherwise only known from a fragment of an inscription [SLIDE!], to Calixtus’ presbyter. And Calixtus is the one, who recovered his presbyter’s *corpus sanctus* after his execution and buried him “*in cimiterio suo*”, which means, in the catacomb of Calepodius. Once the link between Calepodius and the bishop is established and the toponym of the catacomb is explained, the hagiographer dares to go further and exploits also the local tradition of Trastevere. [SLIDE!] There, he locates the house of a certain Pontianus, where Calixtus spends his last days as well as the well, into which the bishop had finally been thrown. The collegial relationship to and the common destiny with Calepodius as well as the geographical vicinity of Trastevere to the via Aurelia provided finally more than sufficient justification for the final resting place of Calixtus. This proposal is apparently so convincing that modern scholarship simply adopted it as the most likely explanation. It is remarkable that another toponym connected to Calixtus, the actual Catacombs of Calixtus is simply ignored, as it would not exist. In exchange, however, the curtain does not fall with the death of the martyr-bishop. The hagiographer introduces a further presbyter, Asterius. He and his companions are assigned to recover and bury the body of Calixtus. This action turns out to be an offence against the emperor which is rewarded by throwing him into the Tiber. Evidently, the hagiographer did not involve Asterius in order to explain oddities or toponyms, but to cut the last loose end of the story: by letting the body of the presbyter float to Ostia, he leave the problem of his burial to others and without to mitigate the brutality of the persecutors. Nonetheless, Asterius appears to be an authentic martyr, though not of Rome but Ostia. The Martyrdom of Marius and Martha mentions him as well, not as a presbyter but an aristocratic convert. While Asterius is only for a short moment present in the *acta*, the introduction and heroisation of the unknown Calepodius requested severe efforts from the hagiographer. The diligence, however, shoots far behind the target: the *senex presbyter* dominates large parts of the narrative. Calixtus plays, if at all, only a supporting role and doing hardly more than baptising the converts of Calepodius.

The way the *acta* was invented exemplifies the rich and versatile interplay between the tomb and its surrounding, the existing local tradition or traditions, pilgrimage and literary production. In a creative and original manner, the composition uses the few breadcrumbs still lying around, linking and complementing them with fictional elements. The results reveal more about how the hagiographer imagined the pre-constantinian time, than about the pre-constantinian era itself.

The success of the story is archaeologically tangible. [SLIDE!] Between the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the subterranean shrine had been upgraded with the most advanced pilgrim guide technology. A staircase (S4) had been installed to create a *gradus descentionis et ascensionis*, which resulted in the destruction of the *basilichetta*. The destruction, however, made also room for something new. [SLIDE!] The walls were redecorated with a narrative circle depicting the martyrdom of Calixtus as it is presented in the *acta*. According to style analysis, the paintings were created at the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

## Conclusions

It is time to conclude. From an overall perspective, a constant pattern dominates the development of Calixtus' cult: The interaction between tomb and its visitors in the broadest sense. In this setting, the tomb acts as a hub and it is in continuous interaction with visitors and their various activities linked to or triggered by devotion, like liturgical and other cultic activities, construction works, donations to decorate the shrine, or even the creation of a narrative.

At the beginning, the tomb has a limited but crucial function: to accommodate and preserve the body of the confessor-bishop in times, when the Christians of Rome have shown little interest for their own heroes in faith. Later, it provides the location of the first cult activities at some point of the—probably—late 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The veneration is probably limited to one of the many Christian communities active at Rome and likely remains isolated until the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century. Cultic needs triggered the first intervention, the construction of a *mensa oleorum*. The *status quo* at the tomb were recognised by the official Roman church, when Calixtus was included on the calendar of the Roman martyrs around 336. With this act, Calixtus was recognised as an official martyr and his tomb was included on the map of the collective memory of forming Roman Church. Bishop Julius' activities marked a milestone in the development of the cult of the martyrs on Roman soil in general and that of Calixtus in special. His building activities were not only limited to Calixtus' tomb, but he also “imports”, and probably reinforces an already existing

local tradition at Trastevere. Julius could not resist the attraction and choosing the resting place of his idol also for himself. But not only he felt the attraction: The excavation of the second catacomb level served the popular fashion of *retro sanctos* burials. Prior to that, the tomb was transformed to a monumental subterranean shrine reflecting changes in liturgical needs and paying tribute to the increasing number of visitors. The rising devotion in the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in donations to prettify the tomb, to impress and to attract visitors. They were impressed, but wanted more: to learn about the subject of their devotion, about life and death of their pious hero. An anonymous hagiographer responded to this need by composing one of the earliest extant Roman “epic” *passiones*. The fictive but original story offered an exciting and touching storyline as well as addressed oddities around Calixtus and his tomb. The interaction between the tomb, its visitors, their devotion, cultic liturgical activities, now boosted by a powerful narrative, continued to flourish. Whether political instability or destruction by barbaric invaders, the veneration was never permanently interrupted. Not even an empty tomb set a final end to the cultic activities, when translations set the agenda and the relics from the eternal city, also that of Calixtus, conquer step-by-step Western Europe. As late as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the author of the *Mirabilia urbis Romae* finds it still worth mentioning.