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THE BASILICA AND THE TOMBS NEAR THE
PORTA MAGGIORE.

The beautiful subterranean basilica discovered last year under the railway line by the Porta Maggiore as the result of a landslide (*The Times Literary Supplement*, November 15) has aroused much interest and become the subject of eager conjecture. From the first official report by Professors Gatti and Fornari it appears that the walls and pillars were constructed of a concrete of selce which was poured into pits sunk in the virgin soil, while the vaults and arches were set on

centering formed of the same soil. The nave and aisles were then excavated as soon as the concrete had hardened. The concrete, in which no fragments of tiles are found, must be assigned to the period before Tiberius; and this date is confirmed by the character of the *opus reticulatum* of the flue-shaped channel that protected the sky-light or *lucernarium* of the vestibule. Thus the basilica, which from the resemblance of its decoration to that of the so-called "Latin tombs" had been conjecturally assigned in the first instance to the second century, turns out on a critical examination of its building material to belong to the earlier decades of the Empire. This tallies satisfactorily with the theory put forward by Fornari in explanation of the purpose of the basilica and of the mystery that surrounded it. He points out that the site is close to the burial ground of the *gens Statilia*, where was found many years ago the marble urn with a scene from the Eleusinian mysteries (Museo delle Terme) which since its first publication by Contessa Ersilia Lovatelli has become the corner stone of our knowledge of Eleusinian initiation. But not only does the celebrated urn afford certain evidence of a connexion between the *familia* of the Statilii and the religion of the "mysteries," but one of the *liberti* buried in the Statilian columbarium bore the significant name of *mystes*. Moreover, according to a lurid story told by Tacitus (*Annals* XII, 59), one member of the family, T. Statilius Taurus, a man of fabulous wealth and consul of the year 44, was accused of extortion and especially of magical practices at the base instigation of Agrippina, the wife of Claudius, who coveted his famous gardens—*pauca repetundarum crimina ceterum magicas superstitiones*. Before the Senate had had time to pass sentence the unfortunate man took his own life. The mystical scenes depicted on the gleaming white walls of the basilica, symbolic of the sorrows and trials of this life and of the joys and punishments of the next, are precisely what malevolent or ignorant persons might misconstrue as having an unholy significance, adducing doubtless as a further proof of guilt the secrecy of the

approach, as to a sanctuary where prohibited rites were performed. It remains to note that what was first interpreted as an altar against the wall of the apse is, according to Gatti, a *cathedra* or *thronus*, forerunner of the Episcopal chair of Christian basilicas.

The tombs found last year in the Viale di Santa Croce have now been made accessible and where necessary reconstructed from the actual fragments. Their type is that of the small *aediculae* much in fashion in Rome towards the close of the Republic, with façades successfully imitating in tufa those of the rock-cut tombs of Asia Minor and Etruria. The portraits, which are cut in deep relief (so deep as to give a first impression of being in the round), appear as if placed in an arched niche intended to recall the *armaria* of the wax *imagines*. The inscriptions have now been carefully published by Fornari. Since my last report a fourth sepulchral chamber, of which the façade, however, is almost entirely destroyed, has been found on the same line of tombs.

Thanks to the generous gift of 20,000 lire from one of the large Roman banks, the work of disengaging from its sordid surroundings the little Republican temple of *Fortuna Virilis* and of reopening its portico, which was decided upon last year, has now been seriously taken in hand.

The clearing out of the *Domus Aurea* of Nero is being proceeded with under the able direction of Professor Munoz. The delicate beauty of many of the newly recovered paintings and their perfect preservation are astonishing; especially attractive is a series of small panel pictures with figures relieved against a deep but brilliant blue background, and another with traces of gilding still fresh upon them. It is, however, to a certain extent disappointing that all these pictures are on a very small scale and that no large wall-paintings comparable in importance to those of Pompeii, Herculaneum, or of the House of Livia on the Palatine, have so far come to light.

In another letter I will deal with matters outside Rome and beyond.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

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