From Queens to Slaves

From Queens to Slaves:
Pope Gregory's Special Concern for Women

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

Some of the material for this book was taken from my recent work on *Pope Gregory and the Brides of Christ*,[1] that is, the abbesses and the nuns (with several new additions)[2] and much of the introduction, which provides the historical setting for this work. It appears with a few changes, as the background did not require major alterations during the reworking. Most of the book, however, is totally new and has never been discussed before by any scholar, whether male or female.[3] It will cover the many women of all sorts, rich and poor, aristocratic and plebeian, intellectual and simple, who appear once or several times in the fourteen books of the Pope's letters. Unlike in my work on the nuns, for this work I shall not be including the original Latin text for the letters that are used, as it has appeared in the recent and reasonably accessible edition of the Latin letters by Dag Norberg.[4] The English version of all of these letters used in this book can be seen in my recent translation of the complete *Registrum*.[5]

Although many books have been written in recent years on the monks and on their monasteries at the time of Pope Gregory, who certainly did all he could to provide them with reliable abbots and suitable accommodation and long-term provision of food and water and farms for upkeep, yet only three of his letters concerning abbesses, nuns or convents have ever been

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[1] *Pope Gregory and the Brides of Christ*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009.

[2] There are ten new references to nuns, and three to abbesses.

[3] That is, scholars who have worked or are working on the nuns or women in general or on Pope Gregory.

[4] Dag Norberg *S. Gregorii Magni Registrum Epistularum Libri XIV*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1982. The Latin would make the book unnecessarily lengthy.

[5] John R. C. Martyn *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, 3 volumes, PIMS, Toronto, 2004. This work should be on the shelf of every mediaeval scholar, according to an expert on this period (Prof. Constant Mews, review of *Letters of Pope Gregory*, in *Parergon*, 23, 2006, pp 157-159). A copy of this work was sent to the present Pope, and is being kept in his private library, he informed its author. In mediaeval times, the works of Pope Gregory the Great were far more popular than any of the earlier works in Anglo-Saxon and French libraries, to judge from the libraries of Fleury-sur-Loire and of Worcester Cathedral.

discussed by the many scholars who have worked on nuns, or on Pope Gregory, or on women in general, until my work on the nuns appeared in print in 2009. It revealed another thirty-three letters concerning nuns, abbesses and convents, some extremely significant, and yet they had never been discussed before.[6]

Pope Gregory also sent some really important and most interesting letters to his eminent female acquaintances. For example, in a very long letter to the Emperor's erudite sister, Theoctista,[7] he included a full-page discussion of marriage, and after it another full-page on baptism, two important topics at that time, as they are now. Some of these aristocratic women had become close friends over many years, especially those who were living in Constantinople and in Italy and Gaul. A few of these letters have been looked at by scholars, but never as a whole, never compared with each other, or as part of a totality. And likewise the aristocratic women of Italy and the Eastern Empire, some of whom have been of interest to historians, have never been discussed and compared as a group.

By contrast, a few misbehaving women and unacceptable marriages and many widows who are over-demanding, will provide a very different picture, and will show the extraordinary patience of the Pope, as he sorts out legal problems and conflicting evidence, and tactfully deals with awkward petitions and very demanding petitioners, and on one occasion, with a very rude letter from an aristocratic ex-nun.

For readers who know little about the greatest of all Popes, or about the very interesting mediaeval period when he was active, I am including a brief and updated biography, and likewise an historical background for the period of history when Pope Gregory lived and played such a major part, based on the background which I included in my recent book on the nuns. For this work, however, an index has been added, to help scholars to track down various personalities and activities, and there is a bibliography for those scholars and students who want to read more widely in these fields.

It might interest some readers to learn that the son of the great Boethius, Flavius, was the father of the Pope's very dear friend, Lady Rusticiana, whose wealthy family lived in Constantinople, and was very close to Pope

[6] A few references to abbesses and nuns were missed by me, admittedly, from my first analysis of the *Registrum*, and are included in this book, one of them a nun who greatly offended the Pope.
[7] Letter 11.23. See below.

Gregory's heart. One of his last letters urged the family to cross over to Rome, for survival in their Italian property, but they left it too late, and as leading courtiers they were soon butchered, it seems, by the unsavoury usurper to the throne, Phocas, once he had butchered the Emperor and his family.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical period that covers the surprisingly fast spread of convents and monasteries both in Europe and the East is almost commensurate with the life of Pope Gregory the Great, from about 540 to about 620, especially during the last fourteen years when he was the Pope (590-604). His adult life was spent almost entirely in Rome, but during the later part of the pontificate of his predecessor, Pope Pelagius II, he acted as the Pope's emissary in the royal court of the Emperor in the golden city of Constantinople. During this period, there were no fewer than five Emperors in the East, Justinian (527-565), Justin II (565-578), Tiberius (578-582), Maurice (582-Nov. 22nd, 602), and the military thug and usurper, Phocas, who murdered Maurice and Queen Constantina and their large and pious family, soon after his troops had taken over in 602. After a disastrous reign, he was belatedly overthrown by his successor, Heraclius, in 610.

The official links between Rome and Constantinople were becoming increasingly important, whether military or religious, and it was fortunate that the new Pope had been accepted as a member of the royal family, as godfather of young Theodosius, the eldest son and heir to the throne. In his last year as papal legate, he stayed at the palace in Constantinople, as an accepted member of Maurice's family.[1] This helped greatly in the cooperation between Rome and the Emperor on virtually every major matter. Scholars have wrongly seen acrimony in their exchanges of letters, where in fact irony and humour disarm possibly different views, as over a ban on soldiers becoming monks, and even over the title 'ecumenical' patriarch, adopted by the patriarch John 'the Faster', that did not seem at all important to Maurice, facing wars in Persia and in the North. There is a big difference between two family members having a disagreement, and a bitter dispute between two powerful men, fighting for supremacy. Unfortunately, because the Emperor had to face well-equipped

[1] See letter 11.27 below to Theoctista, the Emperor's sister, where he says: 'You know that when I was staying in the royal city at your Lordship's palace, many people used to come and see me.' There was only one royal palace in Constantinople.

invaders both over the Danube and in Persia, he was unable to answer the Pope's appeals for troops and generals to resist the growing threat of the brutal 'swords' of the Lombards, a recurring nightmare for the Pope. But the Emperor's wife, Constantina, and her sister, Theoctista, both sent large amounts of gold to help the Pope repair the damage caused by the lack of trained troops, as he paid ever larger sums to ransom the Lombards' Italian victims and to bribe them not to sack Rome, and it was left to him to patch up belated peace terms in 598, without signing them, so as to stay neutral. He never showed pleasure in sorting out his mercenary troops or in dealing with the military embassies from Gaul or from the Lombards. He was a man of peace.

The other victims of the relative freedom allowed to the Lombards were the monks and the nuns in towns quite near to Rome, and the priests, who had to watch their chapels and cloisters engulfed in flames, as they were being dragged off to be ransomed or to be killed. By then how many female survivors had not been beaten or raped? Many of the citizens, rich and poor, were also sold off, with their slaves, whom the Pope welcomed as future monks or nuns. The final problem that was caused by the Lombards' occupation of their lands, Campania especially, was the food shortage in Rome, and its high cost, especially when refugees flooded in, as will be shown in chapter 5 below. Luckily Sicily continued to supply most of the corn grown there for Rome's hungry poor.

One import, however, that was certainly very far from welcome was the virulent plague, which wiped out well over a third of Rome's citizens in 589, including Gregory's predecessor, Pope Pelagius II. Even if it was not the result of rotting snakes that had been washed up by the flooding Tiber that caused polluted air, the flooded river would have destroyed much of the sewage, and that could have helped the disease to spread so widely. As the acting Pope, Gregory had to lead a procession of penitents, and although many died in its progress, he escaped and the plague soon ended.

Gregory was fortunate to have been born in a still secure Rome, in about 540, and to have had parents who were rich aristocrats. His father Gordianus was a senator, and by then was serving, it seems, as a high official in the Church of Rome. They lived in a mansion with a garden in an exclusive part of the city, on the Caelian Hill, opposite the Circus Maximus, and his father owned other properties around Rome, and large estates in fertile Sicily, which young Gregory seems to have toured with

his father.[2] Their wealth enabled him and his brothers to get a sound education in Classical literature and Greco-Roman law and in Greco-Roman rhetoric.[3]

His mother, Sylvia, seems to have had a strong influence on him, with her husband's three devout sisters Tarsilla, Aemilia and Gordiana who appear below, although Gordiana joined ordinary society when her sisters had become nuns. With his mother's sister, Pateria, and no uncles, this suggests that four or five close female relatives were usually around him as he grew up. Scholars have failed to note the effect of a busy and mostly absent father, with important Church duties and properties to look after in Italy and Sicily, leaving so many female carers to look after young Gregory. It may well explain Gregory's special interest in the nuns and their convents, and women in general, and his own surprising decision to become a monk rather than pursue a military or political career, once his father had died.

Before then he had in fact achieved high office in what was left of the old Roman Senate, soon to be dissolved. After filling minor offices, in about 573 he honed his legal skills as chief legal officer of Rome (*praetor urbanus*), and he was then elected as the city prefect (*praefectus urbis Romanae*), the most important position in the city, mainly for the ceremonial parades and senatorial debates, but in charge of the city's defence. More important for his future was his work with Pope Pelagius II, who persuaded him to write letters to bishops of Istria over the 'Three Chapters' dispute, later a wide-spread heresy despite the Pope's regular attacks on it. By 578 he was a deacon, after two very happy years as a monk, but then he was sent overseas to Constantinople, as papal emissary.

Gregory left in about 579 for six years there, acquiring the art of diplomacy as he got to know Tiberius, and later became a close friend of the new Emperor, Maurice, and of his family and his Court officials. He also became friendly with an exile from Seville, a fellow spirit who soon became his closest friend, Leander. For his last four years, as godfather of Maurice's eldest son, Theodosius, Gregory became part of his royal family, even staying in the palace, joining them in their daily prayers and

[2] See my *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, PIMS, Toronto, 2004, vol 1, pp 1-2.

[3] One brother was Palatinus, a patrician, who stayed in Rome to help his brother. The other, unnamed, seems to have lived in Otranto, where Gregory stole his excellent cook. See my article 'Six Notes on Gregory the Great' in *Med. et Human.* 29, 2003, 1-25. For his continued study of rhetoric, see letter 5.53a.

bible readings. His own research was a new elucidation of the book of Job, based on feedback from the monks who had accompanied him to the Court, and from the very bright Leander. But his main purpose as emissary was to get troops and leaders to deal with the aggression of the destructive Lombards. But there were just too many other calls on the Emperor's armies for any help to be given in Italy, except for ransoms.[4]

Finally, in about 585, Gregory returned to his monastery in Rome, converted from the family's large mansion after his father's death, and soon renewed the life that suited his religious zeal and love of biblical research, without any desire, it seems, to take over as its abbot. But when the plague struck Rome in 589, and Pope Pelagius became a victim of it in February 590, the surviving clergy showed no hesitation in electing Gregory as his successor. Besides his political and diplomatic experience, he had shown a passion for a religious life and abstinence, almost starving himself to death, and he had established important links with the throne and with the Eastern Court. He was elected in time to arrange the procession for the plague, and the necessary approval arrived late in August, and he was then consecrated as Pope on September 3rd, 590. Although an ideal candidate, in his early letters he repeatedly claimed his unsuitability and his aversion to the position, although he was filling it with great success right from the start.

Barely two months later the dynamic Agilulf became the new King of the Lombards, ruling from Pavia, and in 591 Duke Ariulf took over as the Duke of Spoleto, a town only a hundred kilometers north of Rome, thus controlling traffic on the Via Flaminia. The Pope had to organize troops and their supplies to remove this threat, with some success, making peace with the Duke in July 592. But a year later, Agilulf was besieging Rome, and the Pope is said to have met him for a parley on the steps of Saint Peter's, and persuaded him to depart. But smaller towns were easier pickings, and it was a great relief when a peace treaty was finally signed by the King and by the Pope's representatives in 598. But the eight long years had done great damage to what was left of the Italian towns, and to the morale of their occupants, and the churches and monasteries had been targeted most of all. For the Pope especially it meant no more dreams of the Lombards' swords, no more queues of captured men and women, and no more expenditure on those almost useless mercenaries.

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[4] For Maurice's military demands, and some successes, see Michael Whitby *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

Among the areas to which the Pope sent most of his letters about nuns and other women, the island of Sardinia off the west coast of Italy stands out, with eleven letters, and its background is of special interest. But his first contact with the island was on a very small scale, with his mission to convert the Barbarini. In May, 594, this indigenous clan of 'gentiles,' according to the Pope, concluded a pact with the Empire. Their clan had been driven out of Africa by the Vandals, and had settled in the mountains near Cagliari. To convert them, he sent over Bishop Felix and the very capable monk, Cyriacus (letter 4.23), with some other monks, the Pope's *militia Christi*, to spread the good word. The missionaries were ordered to destroy the clan's idols and lead them to the worship of Christ. After twelve months, Gregory sent a report, in June, 595, to the Empress Constantina in the golden city, telling her that the mission had been successful (letter 5.38), although some tribesmen continued to worship idols by paying a fee to a judge, who continued to give them a licence to do so, which shocked the Pope, but reinforced his complaint about the over-heavy taxation, even for the errant judge. In dealing with the imperial authorities, the Pope expected them to look after the spiritual welfare of their subjects, women especially, and in a series of letters (letters 4.23, 25, 26, 27) he strongly urged two dukes, Zabardas and Hospiton, and other noblemen and wealthy landowners of Sardinia, to show this very necessary responsibility.

The key figure behind the letters to Sardinia was Januarius, the long-lived bishop and later archbishop of the island's capital city, Cagliari. He was already bishop of the town when Gregory became Pope in 590, and he outlived the Pope, dying soon after the year 604. The first mention of him is in letter 1.47, when he was the metropolitan bishop of Cagliari, and had crossed over to Rome to ask the Pope to deal with the Byzantine military commander, Theodore, who had assumed the dukedom of Sardinia and was reinstating tax burdens that had been lightened by the Emperor. He had sent over an earlier duke of Sardinia, Edantius, who had ordered the troublesome burdens to be removed, as requested by the Emperor. The Pope complained to the Emperor about Theodore's violent treatment of clergy and civilians, and followed it up with a strong letter to the patrician, Gennadius, the governor of Africa, complaining again about the molestation and bodily injuries inflicted on the clergy of Januarius' church (letter 1.59). Sardinia was part of the province of Africa. At the same time the Pope wrote to Theodore himself, and we shall see this very conciliatory letter, in chapter 4 (a) below. At this stage Januarius was being quite cooperative, and was ready even to travel over to Rome to sort things out with the

Pope, who did all he could to help him. His letters to the Duke's commanders in Africa and Constantinople, who were personal friends, were sure to bear fruit, underlining the importance of his years as papal emissary, making long-term friends in Constantinople.

The landholdings of the Roman See on the island meant that the Pope was well able to watch affairs in Sardinia very closely. In fact, he sent twenty-one letters to the bishop, and mentioned him in five others,[5] and as we shall see, many of these (14 letters) were concerned with Januarius' relationships with various foundations of nuns, and of monks also. Others involved the proper means of administering the holy sacraments (in 6), and the Pope accused the bishop of infringing on Canon Law (in 4).

In 592, after receiving numerous complaints about Januarius, Gregory sent his notary John to make sure he would cooperate, and instructed his 'defender' Sabinus to persuade the difficult old bishop to come to Rome to sort things out (letters 2.41 and 3.36). The Pope flattered him and praised him for his pastoral zeal and always gave him the fullest title possible ('most reverend brother and fellow-bishop'), but delivered some stinging criticisms as well, especially when his nuns were at risk, as we shall see below. But neither his flattery nor his criticisms were effective, and fresh complaints reached the Pope's ears at regular intervals.

Finally, in 598, from what he had heard through his close friend and talented trouble-shooter, Abbot Cyriacus, the Pope went so far as to excommunicate for a month two of the archbishop's advisers (letter 9.1). He told the archbishop that he too should have suffered that punishment, despite his advanced years, for corrupting the young. For on the Lord's Day, before solemn Mass, he had ploughed up the crop belonging to the defender Redemptus, then he celebrated Mass, and then he dug out the boundary stones of the complainant, who owned an estate near Cagliari where their boundaries were at issue. The timing had shocked the Pope. When he wrote to his defender Vitalis, in letter 14.2, he admitted that he would have severely rebuked Januarius, for neglect over the hostelries, but for his advanced age and simple-mindedness and illness, as described by Vitalis. He then discussed the archbishop's long and stressful intervals at Mass, as he forgot the text, which made many doubt whether to receive communion from him. But the Pope defended him, saying that his illness

[5] See letters 1.60, 61, 62 ,81; 2.41; 4.8, 9, 10, 24, 26, 29; 5.2; 8,10,35; 9.1,2, 11,196, 198,205; 10.17; 11.13; 13.4 and 14.2.

did not pollute the blessing of the Holy Mystery, although he should be asked secretly to retire, if he felt an attack coming on, to avoid any embarrassment. We shall see this long, interesting letter below.

Three 'defenders' have been mentioned above, Cyriacus, Sabinus and Vitalis, and a few words are needed on the status of a 'defender' and on his special purpose in life, especially as they were used most of all during this historical period. For a much fuller coverage, see my article on 'Six Notes on Gregory the Great.'[6]

A few 'defenders' had been appointed by Pope Gregory's predecessors, like Ocleatinus (letters 1.55-56) and Constantius (1.63) and a retired Gaudiosus (9.110), given a pension of six gold coins a year through a newer defender, Romanus. But it was very much Gregory's creation, and over forty appear in his surviving letters, appointed by him. Most came from the Roman Church, some of them personal friends of the Pope, like sub-deacon Peter in Sicily, and they all had legal powers and papal authority. When selected, they had to take a solemn oath at the tomb of Saint Peter, swearing to support the Church and the welfare of the poor. An account book was handed over, with a list of property and income. The defender was expected to keep strict accounts of payments and receipts, submitted to Rome for an audit at the end of each financial period. A good understanding of finances and bookkeeping was essential. In letter 2.50, the Pope actually awarded Cyriacus a higher rank among the defenders, due to his impressive account book.

The Pope also gave each defender a list of special instructions, which covered local circumstances, detailing important issues and the Church's policies. The two long letters to Peter (1.42 and 2.50) show that he was instructed on a wide range of issues, property disputes, sale of cattle, management of hostelries, payments to the poor, building convents and monasteries, helping in legal cases and in making wills, supporting local bishops and imperial officers and providing suitable horses for the papal entourage. Many smaller details appeared also, from a Pope who clearly knew a great deal about the fruitful island of Sicily.

Another very successful defender was Boniface, highly trusted and talented, who became the Pope's 'first' defender, managing Gregory's far-ranging clerical and secular affairs. He also looked after the Church's

[6] In *Med. et Hum.* 29, 2003, 1-7.

assets, and revealed great diplomacy, when posted to Corsica, Corinth and the chaos of Constantinople after Phocas had usurped the throne. Boniface finally became Pope in 608, and preserved good relations with Constantinople established by his mentor, Gregory, and later he became a Saint. But he was one of seven 'first' defenders, who, if the bishop was absent or ill, had the privilege of sitting anywhere in an assembly of clergy, obtaining the privileges of their honour in all things (letter 8.16). With their usual clerical background, the defenders cooperated well with the local bishops and were ready to assist those being badly treated by the authorities, whether they were a cleric or layman, male or female, rich or poor, and especially the poor.

An ambitious priest might benefit from a letter from the Pope, and from special training to become a defender, clearly a very prestigious office, as we see with Vitus, in letters 9.98 and 9.119. After being told by the Pope to act without corruption, with due diligence and with careful consideration, he was handed a list of instructions and an official letter signed by the Pope. For the next two months he served as a priest, impressing the Pope with his true faith and bright mind, who then sent him to a 'school for defenders', with a formal letter of entry. There he was trained in law, finance and religion, ready to appear in courts, with the standing of a judge, dealing with taxes, inheritances and bottomry. The Pope told Romanus that Vitus was incapable of fraud or deceit, and asked him to welcome him with Christian love as an official defender.

These well-trained defenders played a significant part in the Pope's well-orchestrated administration of the many very different and widely spread patrimonies of the Roman Church. Gregory addresses letters or makes references to over forty different defenders, all of whom were enlarging, strengthening and uniting the Church, despite attacks by Lombards, Slavs and Persians and by many schisms. As we shall see, they gave their full support to the Pope's efforts to build convents and protect nuns and other women, acting fearlessly on the Pope's behalf, often without much support from local dukes or bishops or priests. To collect their evidence and record conversations, they had lesser officials to help them, legal clerks and notaries, private secretaries, record keepers, administrative assistants and various other agents. And they seemed to work together harmoniously, often operating in pairs, especially when they were sent to settle a distant provincial mess, or to encourage elderly bishops or legalistic ladies to sort out their problems back in Rome. Despite the comparatively short length of Gregory's papacy, just thirteen and a half years, he achieved great

success in his aim to unite, extend and purify the Catholic Church, mostly due to his talented and hard-working defenders, many of them brilliant men who had been thoroughly trained and were inspired to serve him.

This was especially important when he was really sick, as he was for much of his papacy, not allowing him to visit bishops in person. Scholars fail to appreciate the seriousness and length of the illnesses that plagued him, and how his suffering body still managed to achieve so much in so short a time. When he became a monk he embraced the new life of contemplation, prayer and self-denial, and although he was healthy when he entered his cell,[7] he followed the lead of many hermits and Saints, and subjected his body to strict fasting. Unfortunately it seems that he went just far too far, his fasts so rigorous and so prolonged that they injured his health, and weakened his stomach's resistance, for the rest of his life.[8] His main diet consisted of raw vegetables and fruit, sent to him by his loving mother from Cella Nova on a silver dish, a relic of the family's mansion, and a legend soon grew up, not surprisingly, about that silver dish, gladly given to a beggar who turned out to be an angel.[9]

It was in his letter to his old friend Eulogius, patriarch of Alexandria (letter 10.14, sent in July 600) that Gregory admitted to his very poor state of health. He explains why he could not reply to some charming letters from the patriarch: 'That was due to the extreme nature of my sickness. For look, the second year has now almost ended while I have been confined to my lousy bed,[10] suffering from such painful gout that I can barely get up for the three hours to celebrate solemn Mass on feast days. Soon I am forced by my severe pain to lie down again, so that I may tolerate my torment while shaken by groans. My pain is at times moderate and at times extreme, but neither moderate enough to recede nor extreme enough to kill me. ... I have long been kept shut in a prison of bodily decay.' This suggests that he had been virtually confined to bed with the very painful disease of gout, with stomach upsets, since July 598, which covers all of the 240 letters in book 9. Incidentally, some scholars have argued that

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[7] This was in the mansion where he had grown up as a boy, now the monastery of St Andrew.

[8] See F. Homes Dudden *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thou*ght New York, Russell & Russell, 1967[2], vol 1, pp 118-119. His pious friends Eleutherius and Merulus were not much help, despite their miracles (*Dial*. iv.47).

[9] See John the Deacon *Vita Gregorii*, I, 10.

[10] The *lectulo* in the text could mean 'small bed' but in Latin a diminutive carries emotion, good ('darling') or bad ('lousy'); a Pope would not be in a 'small bed'.

several hundred of the Pope's letters have been lost, proving it with book 9, the only full-length one, with its 240 letters. In fact his illness meant that all the letters in that book, except for the very last few, were barely half a page long, and were clearly dictated - that was one thing he could do from his painful sickbed.

In August 599, he endorsed this summary of his past two years. It was sent to the wealthy patricians, Lady Italica and Lord Venantius, the latter an old friend and once a fellow monk when they were young. The Pope was extremely sad to hear about their illnesses, and added that 'it is now eleven months since I have only been able to rise from my bed on very rare occasions, just now and then. For I am so afflicted by such great pains from gout and from other terrible trouble, that my life is grievous punishment for me. Every day I faint from pain, and I sigh, hoping for the remedy of death. Among the clergy and people of this city there has been such an invasion of feverous sickness that almost no person, free or servant, has remained suitable for any office or ministry.' The gloomy Pope continues with a jaundiced picture of the blighted world.

In July 595, four years earlier, the gout had not fully developed, a disease that struck Leander in his early sixties and struck the Emperor Maurice, shortly before his murder. But the Pope's stomach was already playing up. That year marked his first really long and autobiographical letter, sent to Leander, in which he tells him: 'Because my troubles weaken my body, even my studies of rhetoric are languishing, as my mind is impaired. For many years have run their course, as frequent pains torment me in my innards, and every moment for hours I grow weary, as the strength of my stomach is broken entirely, and I pant with fevers.' This was mid-summer, a time of great heat and fevers in Rome, where drains and sewers were still in bad repair following the Tiber's flooding in 589. Although no hypochondriac, Gregory came to fear July and August each year, when a fever attacked his weakened stomach and the gout in his legs, but he stayed in Rome. He had continual attacks of fever and gout from September 598 to July 599, and as we have seen, he rarely left his bed thereafter. He saw it as God's plan that while he was suffering, he could understand the suffering of Job, whose book he doggedly interpreted, and finally published as his greatest work of biblical scholarship, his *Moralia*.

This excursus on the Pope's poor health serves to fill in the background to the many letters he wrote about nuns, abbesses and other women, while feeling progressively less and less well. In fact it did not seem to affect his

mind at all, razor sharp right to the end, but it does explain why he could not leave the city of Rome during the last fifteen years or so of his papacy.

The second largest number of letters on this book's topic were sent to Sicily, six in all, four to defenders (1.42 and 2.50 to sub-deacon Peter, 4.6 to Cyprian and 9.54 to Romanus) and two to bishops (4.34 to Leo of Catana and 9.233 to Decius of Lilybaeum). The high proportion sent to defenders shows how important this province was for Pope Gregory, who encouraged his most talented agents to look after it, men who were so well trained and were expected to report back to Rome regularly, rather than rely either on the imperial administration, or on local and often divided bishops, abbots and abbesses. The province's administration was in fact controlled by a praetor, who was answerable to Constantinople, rather than by the usual exarch. But a considerable number of estates belonged to the Church, cultivated by tenant farmers, almost a state within a state. Beside his family's estates in Sicily, used by Gregory to create six monasteries, and his probable experience with the island when a young man on holiday with his father, the Pope was keen to keep watch and protect its all-important corn supply for Rome.

The imperial rulers were a disaster. The first, Justin, was appointed in Sept. 590, and accused of corruption, and was soon replaced by Libertinus in July 593, who was dismissed between April 597 and October 598, and succeeded by ex-consul Leontius, who had been sent over by Maurice to conduct an inquiry into the administration of the island. As a result, the ex-consul publicly flogged Libertinus, but was strongly advised by the Pope to temper justice with mercy. In October 600, Alexander took over. Gregory sent letters to Justin (1.2; 2.29), Libertinus (3.37; 5.53; 9.28), Leontius (11.4) and Alexander (11.8), but he made little impact on these unfortunate Byzantine appointments. At least they did not have to fight a war there, and had little power over the Church's wide domains. From the language point-of-view, although it was in the Latin West and its administrators and lawyers spoke Latin, the remaining people spoke and wrote Greek, as did most of the clergy. In the catacombs of Syracuse, there are 461 inscriptions in Greek and only 44 in Latin.[11]

A further advantage for Sicily was that, unlike its neighbour Italy, it remained free of control by the Lombards, enabling it to become a refuge

[11] See Gerhard Rohlfs *Scavi linguistici nella Magna Graecia*, Roma, 1933, quoted by Jeffrey Richards *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 160, n. 64.

for those fleeing from Italian towns sacked by the invaders. We shall see the effect of this refuge below. It also meant that the major source of Rome's bread, the cornfields of Sicily, were not under alien control, although the grain supply was under constant scrutiny by the Byzantine administrators, like Cyridanus in 598-599 (in letters 9.31 and 9.116), who seemed all too keen to fill the imperial granaries with grain from the Church's granary, which would severely damage the poor in particular, the Pope pointed out. The Emperor had authorized this action, probably without knowing about the Pope's objection.

The most valuable contribution that can be gained from studying Pope Gregory's letters to Sicily is the information therein on the system of agriculture used during the later Roman Empire. The lands controlled by the Church provide the best picture of the system. His letters show extensive landholdings (or patrimony) belonging to the Roman Church, but note that the churches of Milan and of Ravenna also possessed estates on the island, as did the North African Church, it seems. The Roman Church's property was divided into two areas, centred on Syracuse and Palermo, to which two of the Pope's letters were sent. His very first letter was sent to circulate among all of the bishops throughout Sicily, and his second was to praetor Justin, while his very last two letters went to the bishop of Catana and to the notary of Sicily (about monks sharing their beds with women.) To him Sicily was all-important and a close look at Peter's two long letters shows the Pope's great interest in, and detailed knowledge of, that prosperous island. Nearly a quarter of his letters were sent there. The only other contemporary information comes from the life of Saint Gregory, bishop of Agrigento.[12]

The papal patrimony was divided into large landholdings, subdivided into estates, about four hundred in all, their stability shown by their names, often from an owner who had died long before. The estate was then divided into a home farm where a contractor lived, looking after several tenancies, where the tenant farmers were little better off than the slaves who worked the land. The contractors were well off, collecting rents and passing them on to the local defender, for the Pope. The papacy had regulated the short-term contracts with licences, but much of the produce and tax was creamed off by the imperial administration. This could be a heavy burden, and the Pope wrote several letters to ease the pain, while

[12] See Abbot Leontius' *Life of Saint Gregory, Bishop of Agrigento*, translated from the Greek original with introduction and notes by John R. C. Martyn, Mellen Press, Lampeter, 2004.

accepting that some taxes had to be paid. A lot of his letters contained instructions to his defender and to his vicar on the Episcopal bench, as to how they should treat the imperial officers, since he was keen to work in harmony with the Emperor, maintaining the cordial relationship between Church and State. However, if the Church administrators saw evidence of oppression, they were obliged to intervene, with the Pope's blessing.

During his early years as Pope, Gregory interfered in the affairs of the bishops in Sicily more than anywhere else, many of whom had grown fat and slack with the comfort of the island's peace and prosperity. Major reform was necessary. His first step was the appointment of his trusted friend Peter, as his vicar and defender, and in 592 four suspect bishops were sent to Rome to account for their stewardship.[13] There were already several empty Sees, and the replacements came from a group of clergy who enjoyed the Pope's patronage. The most important position was the archbishopric of Syracuse, head of the Sicilian bench of bishops, and in October 591 the Pope selected a close friend from his monastery in Rome, Lord Maximian, to occupy this position, taking over Peter's powers as vicar, and supervising the reforms. Success seemed imminent, but sadly Maximian died, in November 594 (5.20), and the reforms were at risk. But Gregory acted fast, as usual, and in the following February he promoted John, a talented archdeacon from Catana, as the new archbishop, and under his guidance the final reforms, built on those by Peter and Maximian, achieved the quality of permanence. In January 603, near the end of his papacy, Gregory could list the bishops filling so very ably the principal Sees in Sicily, Gregory of Agrigento, Leo of Catana, Secundinus of Taormina, John of Syracuse, Donus of Messina, Lucidus of Leontini and Trajan of Malta. He could have added the dioceses of Lipari, Triocala and Palermo. The once decaying Church of Sicily could at last operate as a well-organized and recognizable unit within the wider Christian Church. This was a major achievement, managed by the Pope with skill, determination and the ability to pick and inspire really talented representatives, as we shall find with his choice of abbesses and his organization of the growing network of convents, especially in the countryside of Sicily.

[13] See letter 1.70. Some were found guilty and others were imprisoned and finally cleared. Gregory of Agrigento was in prison for two years, then tried and only accepted as innocent when the young woman found in bed with him told the Pope she was paid to frame the bishop by a jealous priest, Sabinus.

To Campania, Naples, Luni[14] and Rome the Pope sent twelve letters on the topic of nuns and convents, that is, to the Italians. Unlike Sicily, they had the unenviable task of dealing with the Lombards, a German race with little or no respect for the Italian towns that they had so easily overcome, and for the nuns and monks, who made no resistance. A summary of the Lombard threat and final peace terms have already appeared above, but their special victims in the churches and monasteries justify a fuller analysis of the historical background to Italy during the last thirty years of the sixth century.

In fact the Lombards were the last of the German peoples to invade and settle the western and southern lands of Europe, and their main thrust coincided with Pope Gregory's life. They came through the Predil Pass in the spring of 568, while John III was still Pope. Large in number, well equipped and well led, they cut through all that lay before them, hardly worried by the imperial army, insufficient in numbers, barely trained and badly led mercenaries, and their pay was in arrears. Country dwellers quickly moved behind city walls and fortresses, but Milan fell to the Lombards in 569, and most of Aquileia and Venice fell soon afterwards. By July 579 they had spread right down to Rome, and were besieging the city by November when Pelagius II was being elected as the new Pope. Desperate to obtain relief from looting and pillaging, he sent the Deacon Gregory to Constantinople to obtain troops and an experienced leader to counter the German invaders, but he was finally recalled, almost empty-handed.

The Emperor did create the post of Exarch of Italy, and gave the Pope a few troops, but the main armies were needed nearer home. As we have seen, gold was sent to soften the occupations, and overt bribery was effective, plus some strategic diversions, but it was left to the Pope to do what he could to stop their butchery and enslavements, and to repair the damage, especially to churches and monasteries and convents. In June 595, he wrote to his friend Maurice, in letter 5.36, complaining bitterly over the breakdown in his first peace treaty with the Lombards, which left Rome wide open, when he saw 'Roman citizens with ropes round their necks, just like dogs, as they were led off to Gaul to be sold.' He was blamed, because those inside had escaped and the corn had run out.

[14] Luni (Luna originally) is on the North-western coast of Italy, just north of Pisa.

Early in 591, the Pope had ironically informed John, ex-consul, patrician and *quaestor*, that he, Pope Gregory, had been elected bishop not of the Romans but of the Lombards, 'whose treaties are two-edged swords and whose gratitude is revenge' (1.30). Later, in 594, he told deacon Sabinian to inform the Emperor that if he had wanted to bring about the destruction of the Lombards, that nation would have been led to utter confusion, but being held back by the fear of God, he was not willing to join in the destruction of anyone (5.6). Rather than destroy them, the Pope worked tirelessly to civilize them and to achieve a lasting peace, between the Lombards and the Empire, as we shall see with his letters to Brunhilde and Theodelinda, so that the battered country might have a chance to recover. But this pacifism was unpopular with some, and the exarch Romanus even accused him of treason before the Emperor (5.36), while Gregory claimed to Bishop Sebastian of Resini in June 594 that the exarch's attack had done more damage to his cause than the Lombards' swords had done (5.40). But Gregory persisted in his longing for peace. In September 593 he had enlisted Constantius, archbishop of Milan, as a go-between (4.2), but with no success, yet in October 598, he finally managed to persuade Abbot Probus to join Theodore, the curator of Ravenna, and the Lombard dukes, in concluding a quite acceptable peace treaty (9.11, 44, 68). Gregory refused to sign their treaty, so as to avoid compromising his diplomatic stance of bi-partisanship. But it was clearly the Pope's peace treaty.

It lasted for just two years, when hostilities resumed, but not for long, as a new treaty was soon drawn up, in 603. From an initial position of weakness, the Pope had managed to achieve an honourable peace between the two parties. The rights of the Lombards to most of the lands that they had conquered were recognized, while the imperial territories in Italy had gained a breathing space. At the same time, Gregory tried to achieve a religious settlement in the Italian peninsular. He first reorganized what remained of the Church in the Lombard territory and then entered into a series of diplomatic exchanges with the Lombard court, especially the two queens, as will be shown below.

Within the life of the Church, Gregory tried to prevent any more setbacks, salvaging what was still viable. How far the Pope succeeded may never be known, but we can glean a lot from his letters to the bishops of two active Sees, Spoleto and Milan. In both cases common features reveal themselves. Where churches had been devastated and lacked pastoral care, he re-established places of worship (9.58), and provided a basis for reorganization (4.22, 37; 9.167). Any wayward monks or clergy who had

fled to Lombard territory, and places where ecclesiastical discipline had become lax, were returned to a new, vigorous state of true observance, as the embers of religious belief were kept burning, and spread widely once there was no persecution.

In his diplomatic dealings with the Lombard court, Gregory started once again at a disadvantage. Their King, Autharit, had forbidden the baptism of Lombard children into the Catholic faith (1.17), but several of the Lombards were Catholics, a few of them occupying influential positions (*Dialogi* 3.19.1). The most powerful of these Christians was the wife of Autharit, Theodelinda, the daughter of Garibaldi, Duke of the Bavarians. When Autharit died, she played a major part in having Agilulf chosen as his successor as King of the Lombards, marrying him in November 590.[15] Unfortunately, she was attracted to the arguments of the Three Chapters heresy. The Pope sent her three letters trying to convince her to reject these schismatics, and encouraging her to support the new orthodox archbishop of Milan. Then during the peace negotiations, he urged her to embrace the orthodox faith and persuade her husband to sign the peace treaty (9.68). But then, late in 603, Theodelinda finally committed herself to Gregory's orthodoxy, having their dear son and heir, Adaloald, baptized according to the Roman observance.

In these dealings with the Lombards, despite almost no help from Constantinople, the Pope proved to be surprisingly successful. He had strengthened what was left of the Roman Church in Lombard lands, and had obtained a truce between the Lombards and the Empire, and he had seen the heir to the Lombard throne baptized, not into the Arian faith, nor that of the Three Chapters faction, but into the true Catholic faith as professed at Rome. Any one of these achievements would have been noteworthy, but for Gregory to have achieved all three, when he was feeling far from well, is quite remarkable.[16]

Only four letters on the topic of nuns were sent to Gaul, but for their background, a brief survey of what was going on there at this time should be included. Three of the letters were sent to Autun, the first (9.225) to Syagrius, its bishop then, over the rape of Syagria (no relative), the second (13.5), to Brunhilde, the Queen of Gaul, who had had a convent built

[15] See Thomas Hodgkin *Italy and Her Invaders*, Oxford, 1880-99, Bk 5: 236, 239, 283, and Paul the Deacon *Historia Langobardorum* 3.30, 35.

[16] Quite a lot of this background has been selected and adapted from the 116 pp long introduction to my *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, PIMS, Toronto, 2004.

there, and the third (13.10), an important letter to its first abbess, the very talented Talasia. The only other letter was sent to Respecta, abbess of a convent in the port of Marseilles. Clearly the Pope wanted to control and reform the errant Church in Gaul, after a successful dry run with the renewal of the true faith in Sardinia. The third such mission was probably also in his head by now, remote and misty England, but Gaul would have to be sorted out first, since it covered the very large landmass lying between Italy and England. And at that time, crossing Gaul without the protection of soldiers, when bearing valuable items for worship, would have been very dangerous, unless the various bishops along the route followed by the monks looked after them with their own retainers in a positive manner.

Compared with Sardinia, Gaul was of course a far more expansive country and the reform of the Frankish Church was a far more complex operation. After the conversion to Christianity and the very successful campaigns of the Merovingian King Clovis, up to his death in 511, it seemed that most of Gaul was Christian, and until recently historians have argued that it had in fact been widely converted, like Henri Muller in 1945, Henry Beck in 1950 and Edward James in 1982.[17] But a very different picture appears in the contemporary history of Gregory of Tours, in the *Chronicle* of Fredegar and in Pope Gregory's letters. About sixty-eight of his letters refer to Gaul, nearly fifty of them on the necessary reformation of its Church.[18] The general picture is of a state intent on feuds within the ruling dynasty, with a corrupted church in decay. As Jeffrey Richards put it: 'Gregory of Tours paints a lurid picture of the Gallic bishops, many of whom seem to have been habitually drunk or wantonly cruel, appallingly lecherous or deeply embroiled in politics and intrigue. The lesser clergy seem to have been little better, and dereliction of duty was rife.'[19] This ties in well with the picture given by Pope Gregory, who shows people over large areas persisting in pre-Christian beliefs, and others with only a

[17] See H. F. Muller *L'époque merovingienne: Essai de synthèse de philologie et d'histoire*, New York, 1945, p. 8, Henry G. J. Beck *The Pastoral Care of Souls in South-Eastern France during the Sixth Century*, Rome, 1950, pp 40-41 and Edward James *The Origins of France: From Clovis to the Capetians, 500-1000*, London, 1982, p. 55.

[18] See Luce Pietri 'Grégoire le Grand et la Gaule: Le projet pour la réforme de l'Église gauloise,' in *Gregorio Magno e suo il tempo, Institutum Patristicum*, Roma, 1991, 1: 109-128.

[19] See Jeffrey Richards *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1980, p. 212.

veneer of Christianity (letter 8.4), and among their clergy, simony was rampant (letters 5.58; 9.219; 11.38 and 13.9, 10, 11).

When Laurence and Mellitus led the second party of monks to convert the English, one of their tasks was to arrange a synod to stamp out this simony (letter 11.51). For the Pope, the Frankish Church was badly in need of reform. But when elected Pope, Gregory would not have known much about Gaul, although he had met the Frankish delegation in Constantinople when papal emissary there. One of them, a patrician Dynamius, received letters 3.33 and 7.33, having administered a small patrimony in Gaul for the Roman Church. But when he became Pope, Gregory had had no direct contact with the rulers or bishops. In the first three years of his letters, only five were sent that referred to Gaul. Two sounded out the Archbishop of Milan, Constantius, about the deviant bishops and the Frankish kings (4,2 and 37), and three were sent to recipients in Provence, but to nowhere else in Gaul (1.45; 3.33; 5.31).

But in June 591, he received complaints from the Jewish communities of Arles and Marseilles that the Catholic bishops were using force to have their children baptized. Gregory called for an end to the practice (1.45), damaging for the faith.[20] This was followed by several other accounts of corrupt practices, as Austrasia and Burgundy struggled for the control of Provençe. The archbishop of Arles, Caesarius, had long acted as the papal vicar in Provençe (just as Maximian did in Sicily), and he was succeeded by Sapaudus (died 586), but after him neither Licerius (bishop 586-8) nor Virgil (588 onwards), had received official letters from Rome appointing them. Gregory sent letter 1.45 to rectify this omission in June 591, and not long afterwards Dynamius presented him (in April 593) with four hundred gold coins, collected from his small patrimony of Provence. Unfortunately all of this Frankish gold was worth far less than that used in Rome, which presented a tricky problem for the Pope.

But by August 595, Gregory had discovered enough about Gaul to enter very actively into Frankish affairs. He sent the priest John and a deacon Sabinian with the '*pallium*' for Archbishop Virgil of Arles, a symbol of great honour normally restricted to archbishops and a few favoured bishops. It was in fact in response to a request by King Childebert (5.58). It confirmed that Virgil was the papal vicar, apparently thanks to royal

[20] For Gregory's unusual consideration for the Jews and their faith, see his letter to Abbess Domina (j).

patronage. The Pope also removed the administration of the papal patrimony of Gaul from the Frankish official, the patrician Arigius (addressed in 5.31; 6.59; 9.212), who had succeeded Dynamius in that key position, and appointed Candidus, a close friend and a totally reliable Roman priest, not a subdeacon or abbot for a change.

Working closely with Candidus, as he had done with Peter in Sicily, the Pope had an ideal agent to play his part in reforming the Church and royal family of Gaul. Both Queen Brunhilde and King Childebert were asked to give their support to this new development (6.,5, 6). Candidus was soon at work, using the diplomacy and tact that he had learnt from his brilliant master, Pope Gregory. But unfortunately Virgil lacked the enthusiasm, or the charisma, or the ability that was needed to carry out the Pope's programme. Also, the archbishop of Arles was held in high esteem, but the real power had moved further north to the See of Lyon, and to bishops who enjoyed royal patronage, like Syagrius of Autun. To succeed, Gregory would have to acknowledge both of these developments, building on the changing circumstances.

To do so, in September 595, he told Candidus to use some of the income collected by him from the Gallic patrimony to purchase young male slaves from England (6.10), who were then trained as monks in Latin and theology, in Rome, most probably in Gregory's old monastery of Saint Andrew. A year later some were no doubt ready to join the first group of monks leaving with the timorous Augustine to convert the English. Since Queen Bertha was a Christian, and worshipped with a Christian chaplain, the task was not too difficult, but few of the locals knew Latin, and interpreters from Gaul were of little use (6.51), showing the Pope's foresight in sending monks who had grown up speaking English, a fact ignored by the venerable Bede.

Before Augustine had reached England, the Pope had written to persons of influence in Gaul, both from the Church and the State, requesting them to assist his monks on their long journey across their country. He was tactful as usual, and his contacts fully supported the mission that he had set in motion, and soon afterwards his old friend, Augustine, had reported on their continuous help. At the same time, Pope Gregory had recommended his agent Candidus to each of his addressees, urging them to help him in raising proper revenue from the Christians in Gaul, to help their poor and destitute in their various domains. In letter 6.10, he had told Candidus to

spend any gold coins he received in Gaul, rather than send them to Rome, which was the normal practice.

The unexpected success of the English mission encouraged him to send another group of monks, led by two excellent agents, the abbot, Mellitus, and the priest, Laurence. As in 596, their crossing of Gaul, both western and northern, was fully supported by an industrious Pope. He wrote persuasive letters to Bishops Menas of Toulouse, Lupus of Châlons-sur-Saône, Agiulf of Metz, Simplicius of Paris, Melantius of Rouen, Aregius of Gap, Virgil of Arles and Licinius (his See is unknown). He also wrote to a patrician of Gaul, Asclepiodatus, to Queen Brunhilde, to young King Theoderic, to Theodebert, King of Austrasia and to Clothar, King of Neustria. By now Gregory was well aware of the changing centres of power in Gaul. For the second group, protective assistance was even more important, as they were carrying priceless bibles, antiphonaries, relics and holy vessels and clothing. As they circulated among the heathen in England, they would have been displaying a small bible that contained multiple little pictures of Christ's life and miracles, and had short and clearly written Latin passages from the gospels, in large uncials, with which the monks could unlock this exciting new message, using their own interpreters to translate it to large numbers of locals.[21]

Although the Gallic bishops refused to give up their independence, and made no effort to satisfy the Pope's persistent demands for a synod to wipe out the curse of simony, they had twice cooperated with his monks, and in 614 a synod was held in Paris where two key decisions were derived from Gregory, but not simony. He also worked well with the Gallic royalty, especially Brunhilde, and would have grieved over her cruel death in 613. For so much of her life she had been so powerful and so successful.

Brunhilde was the daughter of the Visigothic King, Athanagild, and after his death in about 567, she married Sigibert I, the Frankish King of Austrasia, converting from the Arianism of the Visigoths to the Chalcedonian Christianity of the Franks. When Sigibert died, she took over as ruler of Austrasia, and continued to do so through her son, Childebert II, and then through her playboy grandson, Theoderic. With the death of the King of Burgundy, Guntrum, in 592, she took over his lands

[21] The 'Canterbury' bible has survived, miraculously, but not the antiphonary. For these miniatures, see Francis Wormald *The Miniatures in the Gospels of St. Augustine*, Cambridge, 1954, and Christopher de Hamel *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, London, 1994[2] p. 15.