ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Consul of God

The Life and Times of Gregory the Great

Jeffrey Richards

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Gregory the Great, whose reign spanned the years between 590 and 604 A.D., was one of the most remarkable figures of the early medieval Papacy. Aristocrat, administrator, teacher and scholar, he ascended the throne of St Peter at a time of acute crisis for the Roman Church. *Consul of God*, first published in 1980, revises the traditional picture of Pope Gregory. It examines how he organised the central administration of the Papacy and his unremitting war on heresy and schism. Gregory also pioneered a new pastoral tradition in learning, promoted monasticism, and trained the episcopate.

Jeffrey Richards demonstrates that Gregory was both a conservative and a pioneer, and just as his reign looked forward to the medieval world it also looked back to a vanishing world of imperial unity. He was thus the last representative of those Roman senators whose fortitude and energy he emulated, earning the epitaph 'Consul of God'.

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For Colin Tyson, Mike Harris, Joe Bettey,
who taught me my first history

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The Darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou, who changest not, abide with me

Henry Francis Lyte

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Introduction

Gregory the Great was one of the most remarkable figures of the early medieval world. Aristocrat, administrator, teacher and scholar, he ascended the throne of St Peter as Pope Gregory I at a time of acute crisis for the Roman church and for Italian society. The invasion of the Lombards had fragmented the imperial province of Italy and posed a very real threat to the existence of the Roman church. Despite ill-health and overwork, Gregory took on the burdens of the papacy with all the fortitude and energy of the old Roman senators whose last representative he was, a fact recognized by his epitaph, which called him "The Consul of God'.

In a very real sense his reign (590–604) marks a watershed in the shadowy period during which the ancient world became the medieval world. Gregory himself fascinatingly embodied all the contradictions and implications of that watershed. A devoted adherent of the Eastern Roman Empire and a tireless supporter of imperial efforts to maintain and extend their frontiers, he nevertheless considerably advanced the power and prestige of the papacy both in Rome itself and in the West in general, thus anticipating the time when the papacy came to inherit the mantle of the old Roman Empire.

His achievements were prodigious. He reorganized and paid minute attention to both the central administration and the estate administration of the papacy. He drew up a detailed code of practice for and supervised the elections of Italian bishops. He sent out the missions which converted the English, and waged unremitting war on heresy and schism. He popularized a new Western pastoral tradition in learning to replace the complex theological tradition of the East. His writings were immensely influential in both East and West. The first monk to attain the papal throne, he devoted his life and much of his writing to forwarding the cause of monasticism. In a very real sense, then, Gregory was both Roman and Christian, both conservative and pioneer, and just as he looked forward to a medi-

eval world of monastic orders, emergent Western European states, and a monarchical papacy, he also looked back to the vanishing world of imperial order, discipline and unity, in which Roman church and Roman Empire were one and undivided.

There has not been a biography of Gregory the Great in English since 1912, and F. H. Dudden's magisterial two-volume biography, published in 1905, still remains the standard work on his pontificate. The breadth of Dudden's scholarship and the clarity of his vision remain undimmed by the passage of time, and there are substantial parts of his work which it is still impossible to improve on. But there has been a considerable amount of research on various aspects of Gregory's reign since 1905, and it is now perhaps time for a fresh appraisal, which can take account of the new insights.

The basic sources remain the same. There are Gregory's own writings: his letters, his exegetical works, his *Homilies* and *Dialogues*, and his handbook for bishops, the *Regula Pastoralis*. The early Middle Ages produced four biographies of him: the brief account in the *Liber Pontificalis*, dating from the mid-seventh century; the eighth-century lives by the Anonymous Monk of Whitby and the Lombard Paul the Deacon; and the ninth-century life by John the Deacon. There are chronicles, saints' lives, letters and laws and, on the particular subjects of the Lombards and the English, two medieval masterpieces, Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Apart from Gregory's own writings, however, all these works are post-contemporary and all therefore have to be handled with care. Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, written by an exact contemporary of Gregory the Great's and embodying some eye-witness reports from Gregory's Rome, provides an invaluable source against which the later accounts of Gregory's early life can be tested.

This book grew out of my work for a previous book, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages 476–752* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) and is in a very real sense a companion piece to it. *The Popes and the Papacy* was essentially a study of what went on and why in the 'smoke-filled back rooms' of the Lateran in the Dark Ages, an account of the changing and developing nature of the institution and of the men and events which shaped its destiny. This book concentrates squarely on one of the most important and best-documented of those men. There is, therefore, inevitably some degree of overlap

between the books but I have tried to make it constructive and illuminating rather than repetitious.

In *The Popes and the Papacy* I rendered all but a handful of place names (Rome, Naples, Milan, Genoa) in Latin. I have extended the use of Italian place names slightly in this book – for instance, Spoleto, Palermo, and Rimini – to enable readers to get their geographical bearings, but most of the place names remain in Latin, for the very important reason that they help to convey something of the feel of a world still rooted in its Roman past. Rhegium was not yet Reggio di Calabria, nor had Urbs Vetus become Orvieto. By the time the names had changed, that old world of the imperial Roman past to which Gregory clung had passed irretrievably away.

Chapter One

The World of Gregory the Great

In the year of Our Lord 554 a man saw a dream fulfilled, and a nation witnessed the beginning of a nightmare. The man was the emperor Justinian I, who cherished the bright vision of restoring the lost Western provinces to the Empire's bosom. His armies had crushed the Vandal kingdom of Africa, had annexed part of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, and had finally extinguished the life to which the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy had clung with such unexpected and costly tenacity. In his capital city of Constantinople from his palace on the shores of the Bosporus, Justinian issued the *Pragmatic Sanction*, which officially re-established direct Imperial rule over Italy, ending seventy-eight years of barbarian dominion. It was a moment of supreme triumph, to be fleetingly savoured before harsh reality supplanted the rose-tinted dreams of imperial revival, for 554 was not so much a new beginning as an agonized delaying of the inevitable triumph of the barbarians in the West. Justinian was himself the last Latin-speaking ruler of a Roman Empire whose powerhouse was Constantinople, whose heartland was Asia Minor, whose culture and sensibility was Greek, and whose interests and preoccupations would shortly turn decisively eastwards. He never visited the ancient capital which had given the Empire its laws, its system of government and its very name – a magical name still, though it barely concealed the reality of a run-down, depopulated and decaying city, fever-ridden and famine-prone. The restoration of imperial rule in the West never extended to Frankish Gaul, Anglo-Saxon England or the bulk of Visigothic Spain, and, with wars in the Balkans and with Persia dominating the councils of the Empire, Italy became little more than a backwater – historic certainly, but removed from the mainstream of imperial policy and strategy.

Before many years had passed, the people of newly 'liberated' Italy

were to find themselves living in a nightmare, as plague, famine, war and death, the veritable four horsemen of the Apocalypse, stalked that unhappy land, stilling the rejoicing and inducing the belief that the world's end was at hand. It must all have seemed a dramatic and ironic contrast to the enlightened rule of the Arian and barbarian Ostrogothic kings, under whom the old Western Roman Empire had enjoyed something of an 'Indian summer'. The Ostrogoths had preserved the old Roman administrative system intact, practised religious toleration, enforced law and order, encouraged peace and prosperity, stimulated a cultural revival, and worked for harmony between Goths and Romans. Despite this, there was still for many Italians an overwhelming affinity with the Roman Empire in the East, which now alone embodied their Roman heritage, their Imperial traditions, in some cases even their kith and kin. Strong religious, intellectual, cultural and family ties bound the Roman aristocracy to the East. A doctrinal schism with the East had created an illusory sense of unity between the Ostrogoths and their Roman subjects. But the ending of the schism by the emperor Justin I and his nephew and eventual successor Justinian removed even this.

So the Gothic kingdom fell, largely unlamented. But there was to be a rude awakening for those who had not thought through the implications of the imperial reconquest. The old days of Roman hegemony in the secular sphere were gone forever. The senatorial aristocracy collapsed, undermined by massacre, bankruptcy and migration to the East. The old administration was dismantled and a new provincial government created, based on Ravenna, staffed by Greek civil servants and headed by an Eastern military governor, soon to be called the exarch. The Arian church was suppressed and its property handed over to its Catholic counterpart. But the Roman church lost the freedom of action it had previously enjoyed, and was now expected to toe the imperial line in matters of the faith. The twenty years of war accompanying the imperial reconquest had taken a heavy toll on the life of Italy. Rome was besieged three times, and in 546 was actually captured by the Gothic king Totila, who restrained his men from wholesale slaughter but evacuated the entire Roman population for forty days to permit unimpeded plundering. Other great cities suffered similarly. Naples, taken by the imperial forces, was given over to pillage and massacre. Milan, taken by the Goths, saw its walls razed, its male population slaughtered and its female population enslaved and handed over to the Burgundians.

The country areas were no better off. The provinces of central Italy were ravaged, plundered and fought over from end to end, and in the ensuing famine some 50,000 people died in Picenum alone. The provinces were not only subject to attack by Goths and imperialists, but were also invaded and devastated by the Franks. The extensive rural estates of the Roman church were so badly ravaged that in 560–1 Pope Pelagius I reported: 'After the continuous devastations of war which have been inflicted on the regions of Italy for twenty-five years and more and have scarcely yet ceased, it is only from the islands and the places overseas that the Roman church receives some little revenue, however insufficient, for the clergy and the poor.'[1] The population was reduced to eating acorns, and in some cases even to cannibalism.

The wretched Italians suffered as much at the hands of their Byzantine 'liberators' as they did at the hands of the Goths. The logothete Alexander, a man with a fearsome reputation for raising revenue for the state, was sent to Italy to screw out of the Italians all debts owed to the Gothic treasury. Imperial army commanders plundered and profiteered to enhance their own private fortunes. Indeed, one of them, Conon, disposed of so much of the Roman grain supply for his own profit, that he was murdered by his starving soldiers.[2]

This was the world into which Gregory the Great was born. He first saw the light of day at the height of the war. He was in his teens when the war ended, and he grew to manhood in its bitter aftermath. He was born and apparently brought up in Rome during some of its darkest hours. He never knew it in the days of its glory. As recently as 500 the African monk Fulgentius of Ruspe, visiting Rome, had declared: 'How wonderful must be the heavenly Jerusalem, if this earthly city can shine so greatly.' In the Ostrogothic period, under the patronage and favour of the barbarian kings, life in Rome had continued much as under the emperors. The Senate met regularly, and the great aristocratic families, like Gregory's, maintained their handsome villas and large establishments. Games were held in the circus. Free grain was distributed to the people. Schools flourished. There was a glittering social and cultural life. The war ended all that. The three sieges of Rome had been accompanied by famine, disease and considerable suffering. Large areas of the city were destroyed by fire. Many citizens were ruined. Pope Vigilius appealed to God to preserve 'the integrity of the faith and the security of the Roman name', and the prayers he composed at this time paint a gloomy

picture of the city, living under the constant threat of attack, fearful of treachery, oppressed by sickness and want.[3] With the end of the war, a deadly melancholy settled on Rome. The aristocratic households had been largely broken up, and many of the aristocrats emigrated to Constantinople to find fortune and favour at the imperial court. The games ceased; the organized education system collapsed; the grain dole became irregular and was ultimately terminated; the Senate gradually ceased to function. Many of the most famous buildings in Rome were deserted, damaged or decaying, and the city, bearing all the scars of its years of maltreatment, became a prey to fever, flooding, famine and plague. When he became pope, Gregory observed sadly: 'I have taken charge of an old and grievously shattered ship.'[4] Rome had become a city of ghosts and memories, a crumbling relic of lost imperial splendour. St Benedict of Nursia prophesied its gradual and inevitable dissolution: 'Rome will not be depopulated by the barbarians but will be worn out by tempests, lightning, storms and earthquakes.' Gregory accepted the truth of this, writing in 593: 'The secret meaning of his prophecy has become clearer than light to us who observe the walls broken to bits, houses overturned and churches destroyed by whirlwinds. More often all the time we see Roman buildings, wearied by old age, collapsing into ruins.'[5] This is not mere rhetoric, for Gregory records one such occurrence in 590: 'Two days ago by a sudden whirlwind ancient trees were uprooted, houses destroyed and churches overthrown to the foundations.'[6]

But as the imperial standards were being firmly planted in the city he loved, Gregory can have had no inkling of the calamities that were about to burst upon her. Almost simultaneously Italy was subjected to the twin horrors of barbarian invasion and the return of the plague.

Barely fifteen years after the official reinstatement of imperial rule in Italy, as the province still counted the cost of the decades of exhausting and destructive warfare, the Lombards struck. They were a ferocious barbarian race of Germanic origin, living in Pannonia, organized in clans, ruled by an elected king, and for the most part adherents of Arian Christianity. Paul the Deacon gave the following description of them, as they were depicted in a late-sixth-century mural in the royal palace at Modicia:[7]

They shaved the neck and left it bare up to the back of the head,

> having their hair parted from the forehead and hanging down from the face as far as the mouth. Their garments were loose and mostly linen, such as the Anglo-Saxons are accustomed to wear, decorated with broad borders woven in various colours. Their boots were open almost to the tip of the big toe and were kept together by crossed laces. But later they began to wear trousers, over which they put waterproof woollen leggings when they rode.

Legend had it that the unpopular Byzantine governor-general, Narses, faced with disgrace and dismissal, had called on the Lombards to leave their inhospitable Pannonian homeland and take over the rich and fecund land of Italy, backing up his suggestion with samples of fruit and other alluring Italian produce. This seems inherently unlikely; it is not recorded until at least twenty years later and is not mentioned at all by the most reliable contemporary authorities (Marius of Aventicum and Gregory of Tours).[8] But it rapidly gained currency and entered the mythology. The likelihood is that it was shifts in the balance of power in the Balkans, and in particular the arrival of the Avars, constituting a new and dangerous threat to the Lombards, which prompted them to seek safer, softer and richer pastures.

Their shrewd, ruthless war-leader, King Alboin, led the Lombards into Italy in 568, and they carried all before them, sweeping through the largely undefended north unopposed. In September 569 the old imperial capital of Milan opened its gates to them and Alboin assumed the title 'Lord of Italy'. By 571, they had completed the conquest of the Po Valley and were sweeping southwards into Umbria and Tuscany. Then suddenly in 572, at the height of his triumphal career and soon after he had taken the surrender of Pavia, which had held out for three years, Alboin was murdered by his wife, Rosamunda, who, having failed to secure the throne for her nominee, fled with the royal treasures to the imperialists at Ravenna. Alboin's successor, King Cleph, was himself murdered within two years and the Lombard chieftains decided against electing a new king. Instead the Lombard horde divided itself up into thirty-six separate duchies, based on the already conquered cities. Of this period Gregory of Tours, a contemporary, writes: 'Once they had occupied the country, they wandered all over it for seven years, robbing the churches, killing the bishops and subjecting everything

to their dominion.'[9] Their advent was certainly marked by atrocities. Gregory the Great records several in his *Dialogues*: 400 captives slaughtered in one massacre, 40 peasants in another and a group of Valerian monks in a third.[10] Paul the Deacon says: 'In these days many of the noble Romans were killed from love of gain, and the remainder were divided among their "guests" and made tributaries, paying a third part of their produce to the Lombards.'[11] In fact, comparatively little is known of the condition of the Roman population in Lombard Italy. But the most likely conclusion is that the great landowners either fled, were killed or were reduced to economic subjection, the peasants carrying on much as before, tilling the soil and serving new masters. For the principal interests of the Lombards were hunting and warfare, and they retained their clan organization, geared for war and supplied with food and labour by the native population.[12]

By the time the kingship was suspended in 574, the initial impetus of the Lombards had spent itself. But they had effectively gained control of half of Italy. They ruled most of the old northern province Italia Annonaria, with the exception of the coastal areas of Liguria (centred on Genoa), Istria-Venetia (centred on Grado), and Aemilia (centred on Ravenna and the Pentapolis). In Suburbicaria, they established control over the central spine via two powerful and important duchies based on Spoleto and Benevento from which they effectively dominated the Italian interior. Imperial rule was maintained in the duchy of Rome and in the coastal areas around Naples, Rhegium, Hortona, Sipontum and Tarentum. In effect the imperial province of Italy had been reduced to a series of coastal enclaves, linked by sea. The islands of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica remained untouched, but they were organized separately and not part of the exarchate of Ravenna.

How could this happen? There are perhaps three reasons. First and most important, the imperial government was wholly unprepared for the invasion. Italy seems to have been very weakly garrisoned, and the governor, unwilling or unable to act, simply dug himself in at Ravenna and sat tight. Decisive countermeasures were not immediately forthcoming. Justinian had died, and the throne was now occupied by his eccentric and unstable nephew Justin II, who finally went mad in 574. Only then, with the emergence as regent of the capable general Tiberius Constantine, did the government act. An army of mercenaries led by Justin's son-in-law, Count Baduarius,

was dispatched to Italy in 575, only to be annihilated by the Lombards. This disaster effectively prevented the government from taking any further direct military action in the West and allowed the Lombards to secure their acquisitions.

The second reason for the speed of the province's collapse was the plague. Having already devastated the East, the plague arrived in Italy in 543, returning in the mid-560s and the early 570s. It was accompanied by severe famine, and the *Liber Pontificalis* recorded that many cities surrendered to the invaders because of starvation.[13] Famine, plague and war had undermined the Italians' strength to resist. Their will to resist was perhaps further reduced by the ill feeling resulting, particularly in the north, from the condemnation of the 'Three Chapters'. The emperor Justinian, in a bid to conciliate the Monophysite heretics, had arranged for the condemnation of certain writers and writings, which were collectively known as the 'Three Chapters'. Many Catholics felt that this condemnation impugned the validity of the Council of Chalcedon, which had defined the basic tenets of the faith. The West was solidly opposed to condemnation, and yet Justinian persuaded successive popes, Vigilius and Pelagius I, to endorse the condemnation. The archbishops of Milan and Aquileia, the two senior churchmen of the north, had gone into immediate schism from Rome, and Pelagius I, arriving in Rome from Constantinople, had been hard put to it to find anyone willing to consecrate him. Eventually, with the aid of the imperial authorities in Italy, the pope had persuaded the centre and the south of Italy of the condemnation's validity. The north, however, remained unreconciled. This purely theological controversy was overtaken by the political catastrophe of the Lombard invasion. For many Catholics in the north the rule of an Arian ruler may have seemed preferable to that of a heretical pope and emperor. Certainly many bishops hastened to come to an accommodation with the Lombards, with the result that regular episcopal succession and continuity was maintained in many north Italian sees.

Justin II's successors, Tiberius Constantine (578–82) and Maurice (582–602), preoccupied with crises in the East and the Balkans, were unable to spare any additional troops for the Italian front. Even when the Italians themselves raised money, some 216,000 *solidi*, to pay for troops, and sent it to Constantinople in 577 with a high-powered embassy, headed by the senior surviving member of the Senate, the former praetorian prefect Pamphronius, the emperor could only give

him the advice to use the money to buy the services of dissident Lombard dukes or to purchase help from the Franks. These expedients became the twin pillars of imperial policy in Italy, and they sometimes achieved success. The Lombard duke Droctulf came over to the imperial cause *circa* 585 and recaptured for the Empire the important port of Classis. The emperor Maurice paid the Frankish king Childebert 50,000 *solidi* to invade Lombard Italy, which he did on four occasions (584, 587, 588, 590). The Romans, however, signally failed to take advantage either of the fact that the Lombard thrust had been weakened by the suspension of the kingship, or of the Frankish invasions, until 590, thereby reinforcing the impression, given by the evidence, that they were militarily incapable of doing so. Indeed, the main result of the Frankish threat was the revival of the kingship. The Lombards saw the need for undivided command again and elected as their king in 584 the young warrior Autharis, son of their last king, the murdered Cleph, and he repaid their confidence by crushingly defeating the 588 invasion.

While the kingship was suspended the great Lombard dukes Farwald of Spoleto and Zotto of Benevento maintained the aggressive advance in the centre and the south of Italy. In 579 Farwald besieged Rome. Pope Benedict I died during the siege, and Pelagius II was elected and installed as his successor immediately, without waiting for the arrival of imperial confirmation as was the custom. The city held out and Farwald turned north, capturing the port of Classis.[14] Zotto of Benevento besieged Naples in 581,[15] and although he did not take it he did destroy Aquinum and capture Venafrum, whose clergy fled to Naples.[16] He also destroyed the monastery of Monte Cassino, whose monks fled to Rome, carrying with them St Benedict's original copy of his Rule. The date of this event is uncertain. The years 570, 577, 580, 581 and 589 have been variously proposed, but all that can be said with certainty is that it occurred between 570 and 590.[17]

The threat to Rome in these years was very real. Although the Lombards withdrew without taking the city in 579, they remained an ever-present menace. Despairing of imperial help, Pelagius wrote in 580, urging the Frankish Bishop Aunacharius of Auxerre to prevail on the Frankish kings to come to the aid of the beleaguered city of Rome.[18] Although they eventually came in 584, the Lombards bribed them to go away again.[19] The threat to Rome remained, and Pelagius

graphically described the state of affairs there, in a letter to Gregory, then his envoy in the imperial capital, in October 584:[20]

> So great are the calamities and tribulations we suffer from the perfidy of the Lombards in spite of their solemn promises that no one could adequately describe them. . . . The Empire is in so critical a situation that unless God prevails on the heart of our most pious prince to show his servants the pity he feels and to grant them a commander or a general, then we are lost. For the territory around Rome is completely undefended and the exarch writes that he can do nothing for us being unable himself to defend the region around Ravenna. May God bid the emperor to come to our aid with all speed before the army of that impious nation the Lombards shall have seized the lands that still form part of the Empire.

Pelagius' letter contains the first known reference to the exarch of Ravenna. The emperor Maurice took steps which in effect recognized the fact of Lombard conquest when he organized the provincial government of Italy into the exarchate, a militarized frontier province, consolidating what remained of Italy into a defensive unit. The governor of Italy had previously been a prefect, but he was now superseded by the exarch, who wielded supreme civil and military power within the province. In 584 or 585 the fiery Smaragdus, a capable general and organizer, was appointed exarch, perhaps the first,[21] and almost immediately concluded a three-year truce with the Lombards in order to consolidate his position.[22] The expiration of the truce was followed by the recapture of Classis by imperial forces, but in 589 Smaragdus went insane and was replaced as exarch by Romanus. The arrival of Romanus was the signal for the long-awaited imperial counteroffensive. The emperor had at last been able to provide troops. He sent back to Italy the Lombard mercenary general Nordulf and his men, who had been serving in the East, and they placed themselves under the orders of the exarch. A plan was concerted with the Franks for a joint attack. Three Frankish columns entered Italy, taking and destroying many fortresses, and Romanus wrote to Childebert thanking him for sending his armies to 'liberate' Italy.[23] Romanus immediately launched his own attack in the Po Valley, capturing Modena, Altinum and Mantua. Parma, Rhegium and Placentia were surrendered by their Lombard dukes, and Gisulf, son of Duke Grasulf of Friuli, 'a young man anxious to prove himself

better than his father' (as Romanus put it), came over to the Empire with his army. Several other frontier cities were captured by Nordulf and another general, Osso, for the Empire.[24] Unfortunately, however, the imperial and Frankish forces did not effect the expected junction. The Franks found themselves unable to engage the Lombards in pitched battle, for they retreated into their fortified cities and refused to come out, Autharis himself sitting tight in Pavia. After three months, the Frankish army found itself seriously weakened by famine and dysentery, and the Frankish commander Duke Chedin, encamped near Verona, concluded a ten-month truce with Autharis and withdrew from Italy.

Each side blamed the other for the failure of Franks and imperialists to join forces, and Romanus wrote bitterly to Childebert, complaining that he had been on the point of joining Chedin.[25] With the support of his cutters on the river, they could then have besieged Pavia and taken Autharis, 'whose capture would have been the greatest prize of victory'. He went on: 'If they had only had a little patience, today Italy would be free from the hateful race and all the wealth of the unspeakable Autharis would have been brought into your treasury; for the campaign had reached such a point that the Lombards did not consider themselves safe from the Franks even behind the walls of their cities.' He urged that Childebert should send another army under generals more worthy of his trust. He suggested that they attack at harvest time, so that the enemies' crops could be destroyed, that they concert their routes and dates with the imperial troops, and that they refrain from plundering and pillaging the Romans. But Childebert had had enough of Italy and concluded instead a treaty with the Lombards. Autharis, having thus survived the greatest test of his rule, albeit with territorial losses, died in Pavia on 5 September 590. Poison was suspected, but it is more likely that he succumbed to the plague, which was again ravaging Italy.[26]

The plague had become as much a fact of Italian life as the Lombards; indeed, the Lombard invasions coincided with the first great plague pandemic. As far as can be computed from the scattered references, it subsisted from the 540s to the 760s. It seems to have originated in Ethiopia, whence, carried down the Nile, it struck in Egypt in 541. It spread through the East like wildfire, carrying off some 300,000 of the population of Constantinople in 542–4, according to the chronicler Evagrius.

The historian Procopius, an eye-witness of the outbreak in the Eastern capital, penned a graphic description of its effects.[27]

> The fever was of such a languid sort from its commencement and up till evening that neither to the sick themselves nor to a physician who touched them would it afford any suspicion of danger. . . . But on the same day in some cases, on the following day in others, and in the rest not many days later a bubonic swelling developed. . . . Up to this point everything went in about the same way with all who had taken the disease. But from then on very marked differences developed. . . . There ensued with some a deep coma, with others a violent delirium, and in either case they suffered the characteristic symptoms of the disease. For those who were under the spell of the coma forgot all those who were familiar to them and seemed constantly asleep. And if any one cared for them, they would eat without waking, but some also were neglected and these would die directly through lack of sustenance. But those who were seized with delirium suffered from insomnia and were victims of a distorted imagination; for they suspected that men were coming upon them to destroy them, and they would become excited and rush off in flight, crying out at the top of their voices. And those who were attending them were in a state of constant exhaustion and had a most difficult time. . . . And in those cases where neither coma nor delirium came on, the bubonic swelling became mortified and the sufferer, no longer able to endure the pain, died. . . . Death in some cases came immediately, in others after many days; and with some the body broke out with black pustules about as large as a lentil, and these did not survive even one day, but all succumbed immediately. With many also a vomiting of blood ensued without visible cause and straightway brought death.

The plague attack lasted four months on this occasion. People died in droves. Heaps of corpses lay unburied in the streets and the stench of death pervaded the city. In the wake of pestilence came famine, and still more citizens were carried off. The imperial capital literally came to a standstill.

The same disease with the same symptoms and the same catastrophic effects reached the West in 543 and thereafter ravaged Italy and France in some ten successive waves, generally with a respite of

several years in between outbreaks. Gregory records details of some of the delirious visions experienced by plague victims. One small boy, who had been wicked in life, saw the emissaries of the Devil, in the form of blackamoors, coming to carry him off. A young monk in Gregory's own monastery felt himself being devoured by a dragon. A soldier, at the height of his fever, had a remarkable vision of a bridge of the dead, spanning a river black, smoking and noisome, but leading to mansions of gold amid green and pleasant fields. Those who had been good in life passed safely across, those who had been evil were plunged into the murky waters.[28] The ravages of the disease were crippling. In the 590s, for instance, its effects were so serious in Rome that there were scarcely enough men to guard the walls and scarcely anyone, lay or cleric, who was strong enough to carry out his ordinary duties.[29] There can be little doubt that the plague constitutes one reason why the Lombards found conquest so easy. The Lombard historian Paul the Deacon discerned this: 'The Romans then had no courage to resist because the pestilence which occurred at the time of Narses had destroyed very many in Liguria and Venetia.'[30] Gregory too, discussing the destruction of Aquinum by the Lombards, explicitly linked it with the plague.[31]

The 545 outbreak chiefly affected southern France. There was, however, a much more serious attack on Italy in the mid-560s during the governorship of Narses, when Ravenna, Istria, Liguria and Rome were stricken.[32] Coming immediately after the end of the Gothic war and on the eve of the Lombard invasion, it was doubly serious. It returned in the early 570s, accompanied this time by a serious famine, which so affected Italy that, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, many cities surrendered to the invading Lombards to avoid the rigours of want.[33]

The plague was back again in the 590s, this time in the aftermath of unprecedented floods which swept Italy in the period 589–91. They washed away part of the walls of Verona and inundated large parts of Rome.[34] Contemporary eye-witness reports spoke of sea-beasts being stranded on the coast near Rome.[35] The inevitable corollary of this was a revival of plague at Rome and at Portus. By September 591 it had reached Narnia, and by 592–3 it had arrived on the east coast, to devastate Ravenna and Istria in an outbreak as severe as that in the time of Narses.[36] On top of all this came an exceptional drought which gripped Italy for much of 591, suggesting high temperatures which can only have quickened the spread of the

pestilence.[37] There was barely a respite before it returned again, sweeping through Ravenna and the east coast in 598 and assaulting Rome in the summer of 599.[38]

The cumulative effect of this pandemic must have been staggering. Specific figures of mortalities are rarely given, but it has been estimated that something like a third of the population was carried off.[39] The initial onset of the plague fastened on a population weakened by years of war, and in its turn it led to famine and depopulation, the precursors of the next round of plague. It seemed an unending cycle of decay.

The psychological effect of the apparently unending onslaught of plague and war was immense. For many religious people, including Gregory himself, they were the scriptural precursors of the Apocalypse. There was a strong stimulus to monasticism, as men and women abandoned the world and took to the cloister in large numbers to prepare their souls for the next life. For many others, the constant plagues and wars provided a powerful stimulus to primitive superstition.

The characteristic state of the ordinary man in the Middle Ages, as of his late antique counterpart, was one of fear – fear of the plague, fear of invasion, fear of the tax-collector, fear of witchcraft and magic, fear above all of the unknown. In the West, although for two centuries worship of the one God had officially replaced worship of the many, the old gods retained their hold on the minds of the rural population at least. In the country areas of Western Europe, paganism was pervasive and deep-rooted. Christianity was the religion of the cities and the Establishment, ironically perhaps, in view of the fact that it had started as a subversive, lower-class faith. The hierarchy, the upper classes, the educated, were in general Christian. In large measure, paganism had been driven from the cities, where the grip of the ecclesiastical and secular authorities was strong, and where the reach of the law was immediate.

The sentimental attachment of part of the Roman population, including the aristocracy, to the last surviving pagan festival, the Lupercalia, in which half-naked youths, decked in goatskins, ran through the streets striking the women to confer fecundity on them, brought down the wrath of Pope Gelasius in 495. He blamed the decline of Rome on such survivals, and the Lupercalia soon disappeared, to be replaced by a Christian festival, the Purification of the Virgin, on the same date.[40] Nevertheless, a nest of magicians, led by

a senator Basilius, was discovered in Rome early in the sixth century. Its leader escaped from prison and cheekily took refuge in a Valerian monastery until he was unmasked, returned to Rome and there burned alive.[41] There is a marked decline in the evidence of paganism in the cities after this, though it did crop up from time to time, as in 599 when a priest in Rhegium was found to have an idol in his house.[42]

Central to a consideration of the popular mind at this time is the role of 'the holy' in society.[43] The ordinary man attributed his troubles, whether disease or harvest failure or war, to the exercise of evil spirits. He sought to propitiate them and he venerated whatever he thought possessed the power to combat them, be it trees, stones or holy men. The church took the view that evils were either a judgment from God, which had to be patiently borne, or the work of the Devil, 'the old enemy', who with his legions was constantly abroad, setting snares for unwary mankind, stirring up strife and tempting and taunting the righteous. For good Christians, these demons were none other than the old gods worshipped by man in the days of his error and now revealed as the acolytes of Antichrist. This is why in one of Gregory's stories they meet in one of their old haunts, a ruined temple of Apollo.[44] The Devil was everywhere and could take any shape he wished in order to work his wicked ways. Gregory records him appearing as a serpent, a black bird, a black boy and a foul monster. One had to be terribly careful or suffer the consequences. An unhappy nun, taking a quick snack, swallowed a little devil sitting on a lettuce leaf and had to be exorcised.[45]

For many people, the best defence against misfortune, whether it was caused by the Devil, the forces of Nature, or the unknown, lay in the hallowed practices of paganism. The age-old sacred places of the pagan cults – the groves and pools and mountain tops – retained their mystical potency. The magicians and soothsayers who prophesied and healed and exorcised according to arcane lore and unchristian ritual flourished. Church councils legislated regularly against pagan practices throughout the Dark Ages, and the surviving sermons of crusading bishops in Italy, Spain and Gaul from the fifth to the eighth century, Maximus of Turin, Caesarius of Arles, Martin of Braga and Eligius of Noyon, all record the details of these practices in similar, sometimes identical, terms.[46] They reveal how every aspect of country life was permeated by the old ways, what the sources of supernatural power were, and the full extent of the problem the

Christian church faced. The old gods of forest, fountain, river, mountain and sea were still venerated. Lighted candles were placed at sacred springs, trees, and crossroads. Bread was cast into fountains; charms were hung on trees. Laurel was placed over doors, and libations poured into the hearth. Offerings were made to mice and moths to keep them away from the crops. Horoscopes were cast; divination was employed to tell the future. Magicians and wise women were consulted in cases of illness. Charms were worn, and magic herbal potions were mixed to ritual incantations. The names of the old gods were invoked in daily speech, and the days of the week were still named after them. Certain days were regarded as unlucky; eclipses were feared; special significance was attributed to chance meetings, false steps, the sudden flight of birds, and a person's sneezes.

From the profound to the trivial, paganism dominated everything. The preachers were particularly incensed by the celebration of the start of the year on the kalends of January, when there was immoderate feasting and drinking, lubricious singing and dancing, the exchange of gifts, and fertility rituals in which men dressed as women or as animals, in skins and beast-heads. The preachers were even more outraged when in some areas the peasants transferred these trappings to church services, converting them into drunken bacchanals. In some cases even the local priest found it prudent to join in rather than oppose the traditions of his flock, and the Galician hermit St Valerius in the second half of the seventh century recorded coming across a secret pagan ceremony at dead of night in the depths of the forest, with chanting, gyrations, horned beasts, and the local priest presiding.[47] The peasants for their part participated in both Christian and pagan ceremonies. As Gregory himself protested to the Frankish queen Brunhild in 597: 'We exhort you to restrain the rest of your subjects under the control of discipline from sacrificing to the heads of animals, seeing that it has come to our ears that many of the Christians both resort to the churches and also – horrible to relate – do not give up their worshipping of demons.'[48] The canny peasants were simply taking advantage of two different sources of supernatural power in a sensible form of double insurance.

Although there is rather less detailed evidence for Italy in the sixth and seventh centuries than for Gaul and Spain, the situation was clearly the same. Not all peasants were pagans. Forty of them died during the Lombard invasions for refusing to worship the pagan

idols of the invaders.[49] But Cassiodorus assumed as a matter of course that the peasants would be pagans, and urged his monks, as one of their duties, to convert the peasants from worshipping the sacred groves.[50] St Benedict of Nursia found on top of Monte Cassino a shrine to Apollo where sacred groves grew and sacrifices were made. He cut down the groves, destroyed the idol and turned the temple into a chapel to St Martin.[51] The nearby villagers were converted from idol-worship by a sustained campaign of evangelization.[52] Yet fifty years later the peasants of Campania were still worshipping trees, causing Gregory to take action to stop them,[53] and the peasants of Lombardy were still at it in 727 when King Liutprand legislated against the worship of trees and fountains and the consulting of soothsayers.[54]

The countryman remained close to the fundamentals of life, and his faith reflected this. The worship of those conventionalized divinities, the pallid, civilized adulterers of Mount Olympus, had only masked the deeper primeval rites of Man the Farmer. Ever since the first plough broke the first furrow and the first seed grew up into the light, his religion had been dictated by the rhythms of the seasons, by the unending cycle of planting, germinating and reaping, by the eternal verities of birth, death and renewal, by the warding off of dark forces and the propitiation of the beneficent powers of fertility and harvest. Not all the disapproving decrees of church councils or the puritanical sermons of a gaggle of sainted preachers could reshape the spiritual and psychological profile of agrarian society.

Opinions on how to deal with the recalcitrant peasants varied. St Caesarius of Arles wanted to beat it out of them: 'Chastise them most severely . . . so that they who are not concerned about the salvation of their soul, might fear the wounds of the body.' St Martin of Braga believed in the use of persuasion and reasoned argument to win them over. Judging by the evidence, neither worked. But many a saint 'won his spurs' by trying one or other of the methods. In the sixth century Bishop Gallus of Clermont-Ferrand, uncle of Gregory of Tours, discovered a heathen temple near Cologne still in use for miracle cures and pagan feasts. He burned it down and barely escaped with his life from the wrath of the peasants.[55] St Radegund, the Frankish queen, coming across a similar temple on her way to a dinner party, ordered her retainers to burn it down, but they had to fight off the enraged locals before they could do so.[56] The Lombard

stylite St Wulfilach found peasants near Trier still worshipping a statue of Diana with alcoholic celebration and persuaded them by exhortation to demolish it.[57] Even when they were converted peasants might backslide. At the turn of the sixth century, St Columban found at Bregenz in Switzerland a ruined Christian chapel once dedicated to St Aurelia which had been turned into a pagan shrine by the peasants. Columban smashed the bronze images which were worshipped there and converted the peasants afresh.[58]

But there was another, subtler way of dealing with the problem. Christianity had over the centuries become adroit at absorbing many of the most obvious pagan festivals, symbols, holy places and deities. It was official church policy to turn pagan temples into Christian shrines and convert their festivals into Christian celebrations.[59] This was encouraged both by St Augustine of Hippo and by Gregory himself in his famous instructions to Augustine of Canterbury. Pagan wells were renamed for Christian saints. Many of the old pagan temples were converted and reconsecrated as churches, the most famous conversion perhaps being that of the Pantheon in Rome into the church of St Maria ad Martyres by Pope Boniface IV.[60] Yet while persecution could be utilized to weaken the forces of unreconstructed paganism, where the obvious external symbols could be absorbed into the fabric of Christianity and those pagan practices not immediately absorbable could be castigated as the work of the Devil, Christianity could not hope to eradicate so easily a total psychological orientation. So in a world of fear where sorcerers' spells, magic, auguries, oracles and lucky charms had such potency, the Christian church developed an alternative source of magic power, in the Christian holy man and the holy relic.

The role of the holy man as mediator between God and man, as the source of supernatural protection, and as the exemplar of the true Christian life of suffering and sacrifice becomes central. Holy men were popularized in hagiography, the characteristic popular literature of the Middle Ages, whose great age lasted from the sixth to the tenth century. It was a literature of miracles and portents, signs and wonders, the exaltation of a Christian source of supernatural power, making a direct and comprehensible appeal to the mentality of the ordinary man. Greek hagiographies of the lives of the ascetic saints of the Egyptian desert had been translated by Dionysius Exiguus at the request of abbots and pious laymen in the early years of the sixth century, and in the middle of the century the future

popes Pelagius I and John III had translated the Greek collection *Lives of the Fathers*, reflecting the growing demand for such reading.

But the holy men of the West found their celebrants in Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great, contemporaries who wrote of the saints of Gaul and Italy respectively, gathering together stories which had been told and retold by their local populations. Gregory of Tours wrote 'The Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs' (*Liber in Gloria Martyrum Beatorum*), 'The Glories of the Blessed Confessors' (*Liber in Gloria Confessorum*), and 'Life of St Martin of Tours' (*De Virtutibus Beati Martini Episcopi*), and Gregory the Great the so-called *Dialogi*, subtitled: 'The Lives and Miracles of the Italian Fathers'. The pope's book is a veritable survey of the wonders wrought by the holy men and women of sixth-century Italy, in their struggles against evil, paganism and the unknown. The heroes of the *Dialogues* raise the dead, cure the blind, the sick, and the leprous, heal the injured, exorcise demons, put an end to hauntings, stop fires and floods, save threatened buildings, fill empty jars with wine and oil, have prophetic dreams and visions and visitations. The holy man, be he monk, bishop or cleric, replaced the pagan oracle and sorcerer as a source of supernatural power, his sanctity deriving from God as a result of his spiritual and ascetic way of life. Gregory of Tours in 'Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs' specifically contrasted their miracles with the so-called miracles of Greek and Latin mythology, the metamorphoses of Jupiter, the rape of Proserpine, the flight of Saturn, which he pooh-poohed.[61] The superiority of the Christian holy men's power to that of the pagan is clearly illustrated by a story in the *Dialogues*.[62] A noblewoman is possessed by a devil and taken to the local magicians, who cast out the devil. But God sends a legion of devils, causing her to shriek and writhe in agony, until she is taken to the noted exorcist Bishop Fortunatus of Tuder, who casts them all out. It is a cautionary tale, but it illustrates incidentally that the first recourse of the afflicted was to the magicians and not to the priest. The magicians are clearly shown to have power, but not as much as the priest, whose power comes from God. According to the *Whitby Life*, magical arts were even used against Gregory.[63] He excommunicated a rich man in Rome for divorcing his wife contrary to the law, and the man hired two magicians to dispose of the pope. They went up to a high place and there summoned up devils who entered Gregory's horse as he was riding to mass. But Gregory made the sign of the cross, cast out the devils, and blinded the magicians. The

magicians revealed the truth of the plot and were subsequently converted to Christianity. The magicians had power, but Gregory, filled with the Holy Spirit, had greater power. Gregory the Great's involvement in this literary movement was crucial, not because it created the mood but because it reflected it, and more important because it gave it the official imprimatur of approval, from the highest level.

The relics of the saints were another source of considerable magical power, the equivalents of the lyre of Orpheus, the anvils of Vulcan and the ship of Aeneas, the cult objects of the old faith. Possessing the body or part of the body of a saint or martyr, or even his clothes, belongings, or objects associated with his torment, conferred considerable éclat on the towns or villages which housed them – so much so that Gregory indignantly refused Empress Constantina's request that he send the head of St Paul, one of Rome's most prized relics, to Constantinople for a church she was building.[64] The possession of relics came to be regarded as essential for the consecration of new chapels, churches, monasteries, even episcopal palaces, to make them power sources, and the papal chancery prepared formula letters to deal with requests for them.[65] Relics also performed miracles. The cloak of St Eutychius halted a drought, the sandal of St Honoratus raised a dead boy, and the tunic of St Vincent saved the city of Saragossa from a besieging Frankish army.[66]

Rome, of course, surpassed everywhere else in the relics league. The Roman church held the bodies of St Peter and St Paul, and catacombs overflowing with martyrs' remains, as well as such treasures as the gridiron of St Lawrence, a piece of the True Cross, and the chains of St Peter and St Paul. They were regularly added to. Gregory himself wrote to at least ten different bishops asking for relics of saints from their dioceses.[67] This made Rome a living, throbbing, central source of supernatural power and encouraged a stream of pilgrims from all over the Christian world. Hostels were built to accommodate the faithful, and when a group of Irishmen checked into one in 633, they found also resident there a Greek, an Egyptian, a Scythian and a Hebrew.[68] There were regular guided tours of the catacombs and cemeteries of the martyrs.[69]

Visiting the tombs of the holy was one thing, however, and possessing a relic was another. There was a generally accepted prohibition in the West on the movement of the actual bodies of the saints, except to preserve them from invading pagans or heretics.[70] But there was a way of getting round this ban, and that was the practice of