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A Companion to Gregory the Great

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LEGACY OF GREGORY THE GREAT IN THE LATIN WEST

Constant J. Mews and Claire Renkin

Gregory the Great, the first monk to become pope, was such an admired figure in the Latin West that it is not easy to delineate the extent of his influence. Revered as the last of the great Latin fathers of the Church, there was scarcely a library, whether monastic or non-monastic, that did not have a reasonable collection of his writings. His popularity undoubtedly had much to do with the accessibility of his writing. He was not a philologist like Jerome or an argumentative theologian like Augustine, and never composed polemical treatises against any specific individual. Some might find inspiration in the serious tone of his Moralia on Job, a virtuous gentle unfamiliar with the Law of Moses, a work in which he reflects on the trials of life. Others might prefer the more conversational character of his four books of Dialogues with Peter the Deacon about the miraculous lives and visions of charismatic monks in Italy, Book 2 of which is totally devoted to St. Benedict, or his Homilies on the Gospels in which he explored exemplary figures in the gospels. Popes and ecclesiastical administrators might focus on his correspondence or his Pastoral Care as providing guidance on how a bishop should attend to the needs of his flock. Some imagined him as the archetypal pontiff, who established the authoritative text and music of both the Mass and divine office. For many, Gregory became a symbol of papal authority, whose image could easily be manipulated. For those who studied his writings, however, he was an inspirational preacher, able to use vivid images to illuminate the transitory nature of human experience and our longing for the divine, manifest through penitence of the heart.

Whereas much has been written about Augustine's contested influence on Christian theology, much less attention has been given to analysing Gregory's pervasive impact on the literature and art of medieval Christendom.\(^1\) The popularity of Gregory's writings is borne out by the

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\(^1\) See however Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr., Kees Dekker, David F. Johnson (eds), Rome and the North: the Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe (Paris—Leuven, 2001).
Gregory's Reputation Prior to 780

Gregory's preaching and homilies on scripture circulated quickly in Italy, even during his lifetime, among those committed to asceticism. In a letter to John, subdeacon of Ravenna, written in January 602, he hints at the problems brought by the fame that his writings had already achieved. Claudius, an abbot of Ravenna, had taken down comments on the Prophe-

cets, the Books of Kings, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs, but in a way that disregarded his original intention. In the same letter, Gregory complained that Bishop Marinianus had his Moralia on Job read out in public at vigils, when "it was not a work for the general public, and it produces an obstacle rather than assistance for ill-educated listeners." He suggested that a commentary on the psalms would have been more helpful. Even more embarrassing was his fear that its text was faulty. Gregory was similarly upset that a copy of his Liber Pastoralis, intended for the edification of bishops, had been given to the emperor and that a translation into Greek had already been produced, that he had not been able to check.

The vast number of surviving copies of the Moralia in Job (over 500, not counting the many abbreviations made of the work) attests to its enduring popularity, even beyond the heyday of its influence within monastic circles in the 11th and 12th centuries. Gregory's method of identifying three levels of interpretation—the historical foundation of Job's life, its allegorical significance as foreshadowing that of Christ, and its significance as a guide to behaviour (moralitas)—was of enormous influence in shaping medieval exegetical tradition. The term Moralia that he chose for the work had been much used by Ambrose, but not Augustine, who had been very critical of a commentary on Job produced in the 5th century by Julian of Eclanum, a supporter of the British monk, Pelagius, for emphasising human effort rather than divine grace. While Gregory never sided with the extreme arguments attributed to Pelagius, he was closer to Cassian than Augustine in the way that he combined emphasis on both free will and grace and avoided invoking the notion of original
sin, except to say that it had been wiped away in baptism.\textsuperscript{11} Although Cassian incurred criticism from fervent Augustinians like Prosper of Aquitaine and the author of the influential \textit{Decretum Gelasianum}, falsely attributed to him in the early 6th century to Pope Gelasius I, his writings were still revered by monks in the 5th and 6th centuries, notably by Benedict of Nursia, who anticipated Gregory in combining an ascetic example with respect for Roman stability.\textsuperscript{12} Although Augustine had introduced a new awareness of human frailty and continuing dependence on divine grace, Gregory combined Stoicism with an ascetic tradition shaped by Ambrose and Origen, which emphasized how prayers, penance, and intercession of the righteous could help bridge the gulf between man and God. Through their action, the repentent could be helped to achieve union with God.

Gregory's support for asceticism did not meet universal favour in the Roman Church. His promotion of monks to positions of influence may explain the relatively brief and muted account of his life in the \textit{Liber pontificalis}, a collection of papal biographies that reflects the viewpoint of senior clergy at the Lateran, the mother church of Rome.\textsuperscript{13} According to a tradition transmitted by John the Deacon in the period immediately following Gregory's death, while famine was raging, certain people in Rome started to burn his writings, accusing him of plundering the papal treasury (presumably because he was more concerned with feeding the poor than building new churches). Peter the Deacon responded by observing that such action was useless as his writings were already being widely copied, and that he had seen the Holy Spirit speak to him in the form of a dove.\textsuperscript{14} In the early 8th century, the anonymous Whitby author of the first known \textit{Life of Gregory} reported a similar story in relation to a dove appearing while he composed the homilies on Ezekiel. The Whitby author claims that Gregory was so critical of the way his successor, Sabianus (604–08), neglected the poor that he warned him through visions and eventually caused his death by kicking his successor in the head.\textsuperscript{15} By contrast, the \textit{Liber pontificalis} praises Sabianus for “filling the Church from the clergy”—a phrase that can only make sense as a silent rebuke to Gregory's policy of promoting monks. While Boniface IV (608–15) is mentioned as supporting a monastic way of life, Deusdedit (615–38) is singled out more enthusiastically as a pope who “loved the clergy much, and recalled priests and clergy to their former places.”\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{Whitby Life} (which survives in a single copy) and the \textit{Liber pontificalis} provide opposing views on the continuing tension between monastic and clerical forces during the early decades of the 7th century.

Gregory's reputation was promoted with particular zeal by monastic friends and correspondents far away from Rome, like Leander, archbishop of Seville (c.534–c.601), to whom he dedicated his \textit{Moralia} on Job in 584. Leander's younger brother, Isidore (c.560–636), would influentially present Gregory as equal to Augustine in reputation.\textsuperscript{17} Not all of Gregory's writings circulated quickly. The fact that the \textit{Dialogues}, presented as recording his conversations with Peter the Deacon about the ascetic fathers in Italy, are not mentioned by Isidore or in the earliest recension of the \textit{Liber pontificalis} has been used by Clark as evidence for the work not having been compiled until the 670s (expanding on otherwise unknown authentic writings of Gregory).\textsuperscript{18} Yet these omissions make more sense as reflecting the work's slow diffusion, a process that Clark correctly observes. Sometime in the 670s, Taio of Saragossa travelled to Rome to find a copy of Gregory's \textit{Moralia} that had once been sent to Leander, but could no longer be located. He reports that he found what he was looking for not in

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\textsuperscript{14} John the Deacon, \textit{Vita Gregorii} (PL 75:2210–222A).


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{LF} 67–71. Trans. Davis, pp. 64–65 (ed. Mommsen, pp. 163, 164); "Hic [Sabianus] ecclesia de clero implevit... [Deusdedit] sacerdotes et clerus ad loca pristina revocavit."

\textsuperscript{17} Isidore, \textit{Carmina} 12 (ed. José María Sanchez Martín, CCSL 19a [Turnhout, 2000], p. 225); "Quantum Augustino claras tu Hippone magistro / Tantum Roma nasi praeside Gregorio."

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The legacy of Gregory the Great in the Latin West

The founder of that abbey, Molua, composed a Rule that was reportedly shown to Gregory in Rome, earning his respect. His biographer claims that such was the bond between the two men that Molua knew in a vision when Gregory was made pope, while Gregory was shown in a vision when Molua himself passed away. Several other Irish monks are recorded as visiting Gregory in Rome, some several times: Abban, ordained by Gregory; Barra, first bishop of Cork; and Lásraín of Leighlin, whom Gregory reportedly made an apostolic legate. A detail of how St. Carthage (d. 637) visited Molua carrying two books in scetchos (a rare word for book-satchels, deriving from Greek terminology) hints at how book learning began to spread in Ireland, stimulated by such contacts with Rome. St. Carthage, a friend of Comgall of Bangor (who ordained Molua), is reported as wanting to travel to Rome during the 590s, although nothing is said about his ever having succeeded in this goal. The Moralia, along with certain writings of Augustine, were used by an Irish monk (himself called Augustine) within the De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae, dedicated in 655 to various churches, including that founded by St. Carthage at Lismore, c.655/6.

This work, the first biblical commentary produced in Ireland, integrated the scientific learning implicit in the Moralia, as well as of Augustine, into its presentation of scripture. Gregory, the only pope to be identified by also be the author of an anonymous commentary on the Catholic Epistles (ed. Robert E. McNally, Scriptores Hiberniae Monaci 1, CCSL 308B [Turnhout, 1973], pp. 1–90).


name in the Irish saints’ Lives, indirectly promoted the flowering of literacy in 7th-century Ireland.

The fact that Gregory made only passing reference to the Rule of Benedict in his Dialogues, never mandating its observance, reflects his awareness of the multitude of monastic rules then in circulation. Initially, Benedict’s Rule was combined with others, such as that of Columbanus (c.543–615), who left Comgall’s foundation at Bangor c.590 to establish many significant abbeys in Gaul and northern Italy, notably Luxeuil and Bobbio. Through his influence, the abbey of Fleury was founded c.630, according to a later witness, as a place where monks could live “according to the Rule of the most holy Benedict and lord Columbanus.”

Yet Benedict’s reputation, and thus Gregory’s authority, started to be transformed c.660, when its abbot, Mommmulus, commissioned another monk, Auil, to acquire the remains of Benedict and Scholastica from the abandoned foundation at Monte Cassino. While the monks of Fleury would remember this theft as a heroic gesture, they were accused of committing sacrilege in letters attributed to Pope Vitalian (658–72). Pope Zacharias (c.741–52) later repeated his demand for their return.

The official view maintained at Monte Cassino, however, at least by the 8th century, was that Benedict’s relics had ever been taken. The enduring controversy between the two abbeys over who held Benedict’s remains illustrates how monks in both Gaul and Italy were keen to present themselves as promoting the vision of Gregory the Great.

Gregory was accorded particular reverence in 7th-century England because of his role in promoting its evangelization through monks sent from Rome, in particular to Augustine of Canterbury. English monks, who dominated cathedral cloisters to an extent never found on the continent, preserved particular respect for Gregory, recalling the feast of his priestly ordination, as well as his feast day. In 667, Pope Vitalian sent holy relics of Gregory, Peter, and Paul, to Oswiu of Northumbria, to affirm respect for Roman authority, just after the synod of Whitby had declared in favour of its liturgical practices over those favoured by many Celtic churches, especially in the northern parts of Ireland and Britain. The first Life of Pope Gregory to be composed was produced not at Rome, but at Whitby, in the early 8th century, drawing on traditions transmitted by Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus, and certainly emanating from Rome.

Gregory’s name only started to be invoked in Rome as an authority for liturgical practice some decades after his death. Our earliest witness to this may be an addition made to a copy of the Liber pontificalis about Pope Honorius (625–38), observing that he had “confirmed a decree of Gregory on the Antiphonal and order of offices and psalms” so as to ensure some uniformity between monastic liturgy in Rome (presumably at St. Peter’s) with that of churches elsewhere in the city, reducing the liturgy at Easter and Pentecost to three readings and psalms, as in the Roman Church, “because of the displeasure of the people.” A 7th-century description of St. Peter refers to this decree, outlining its liturgical instructions for the city of Rome, Bede (c.672–735) never mentions that Gregory composed an antiphonary, and reports his instructions to Augustine that he should adopt whatever liturgical customs were appropriate, not just the Roman customs in which he had been raised. Yet even though Bede does not

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31 Vitalian, Ep. 5–9 (PL 187:1057B–68A); Philipp Laffé and Wilhelm Wattenbach, Regesta pontificum Romanorum, 2 vols [Leipzig, 1888], xii267–70, nos. 2029–24, reprinted by way of Giovani Domenico Mansi, Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio (Florence, 1759–99), ii, 16–23, from Epitome chron accurum Cassinianum (attributed to Anastasius the Librarian), ed. Ludovico Antonio Muratori, Rerum Italicarum scriptores 1/1 (Milan, 1733), pp. 355–56, from an unknown manuscript. While the authenticity of these letters of Vitalian has been questioned, because they occur within a clearly fictitious account of how the relics were returned to Monte Cassino in the 8th century, the fact that they run counter to traditions at both Fleury and Monte Cassino argue against their having been forged by one or other abbey. Jacques Hourlier, “La lettre de Zacharias,” Studia monastica 21 (1979), 241–53 argues that the letter of Pope Zachary, which repeats the claims attributed to Vitalian, is authentic. For further discussion of the complex bibliographical surrounding this debate, see Mews, “Gregory the Great, the Rule of Benedict,” 31–32.


36 Descriptio Basilicae Vaticane 20 (eds Valentini and Zucchi, Codice topografico 3420a).

37 Bede, HE 1.27 (eds Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 80–89).
explicitly acknowledge Wilfrid's claim that he was responsible for introducing Roman antiphonal chant practice, he does report that Roman chant was introduced by disciples of Gregory, suggesting a connection in his mind.\(^\text{38}\) That Gregory was interested in liturgical reform is shown by a letter, not preserved at the Lateran, but certainly authentic, in which he criticized ostentatious soloist deacons as unspiritual, and sought to have chant performed by a choir of clerics no higher than the rank of subdeacon, as if he wished to implement a monastic style of choir.\(^\text{39}\) John the Deacon later claimed that Gregory had established schola cantorum (certainly in existence by the late 7th century) at both St. Peter's and the Lateran, as well as having revised the liturgy of Pope Gelasius.\(^\text{40}\) An account of the liturgy of the monasteries attached to the basilica of St. Peter (Ordo Romanus XIX), likely to be from the late 7th century, mentions Gregory as one of a number of popes who contributed chant to the cycle of the liturgical year.\(^\text{41}\) This Ordo also refers to monks attached to St. Peter's as observing the Rule of Benedict, which prescribed the Roman practice of singing through the psalter, punctuated with appropriate antiphons, once a week. In 735, Egbert of York mentions that he studied "the antiphony of Gregory" in Rome, when he travelled there to receive the pallium, pronouncing it to be the same as that which had been introduced into England by Augustine of Canterbury.\(^\text{42}\) Gregory's authority was synonymous with correct observance of the Roman liturgy, at least for pilgrims coming to St. Peter's.

\(^\text{38}\) He refers to several singers who taught chant after the manner of Rome, including a certain James at York; Eddi, Wilfrid's biographer, and Maban of Hexham, taught "by the successors of the disciples of St. Gregory in Kent," IE 2.20, 4.2, 9.29 (eds Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 208, 234, 539). But see Eddi, The Life of Bishop Wilfrid, ch. 47 (ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave [Cambridge, 1957], p. 86).

\(^\text{39}\) Gregory, Epp. 1.539 and 5.578 (ed. Paul Ewald and Ludwig M. Hartmann, 2 vols, MGH Epp. 1-2 [Hanover, 1891-99], 1353 and 365). They do not occur in Norberg's edition of Gregory's letters, based on the registrum Lateranense, suggesting that its clerics may have not wanted to remember these reforms, likely preserved at St. Peter's (as implied by the vision of Tido), Norberg (CCSL 1400-1407) comments that there are authentic letters of Gregory outside the Register, referring to idem, In Registrum Gregorii Magni studia critica 1-2 (Uppsala, 1937-97). See also Lucia Castaldi, "I'archivio Lateranense e le trasmissione delle opere di Gregorio Magno" in Gregorio Magno e l'invenzione del medico, ed. Luigi Giovanni Ricci (Florence, 2006), pp. 67-71.

\(^\text{40}\) John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii (PL 75/841, 906CD).

\(^\text{41}\) On difficulties with the late 8th century date assigned to Ordo Romanus XIX by Michel Andrieu, Les Ordines Romanus du Haut Moyen Age, 4 vols (Louvain, 1931-61), 1330-33, and 8322-27, and the allusions to the Rule of Benedict in the Odes XIV-XX, likely to be a single text, see Mews, "Gregory the Great, the Rule of Benedict and Roman Liturgy," 136-40.

\(^\text{42}\) Egbert, De institutione catholica dialogus 11 (PL 89:441C).

Gregory's reputation only became widely established on the continent as an authority on monastic and liturgical observance during the time of Charlemagne (742-814). Monks were required to follow the Rule of Benedict, making them more clericalized than in previous generations. Only after 780 — just when Egbert's disciple, Alcuin, left York to join the court of Charlemagne — does a preface (Gregorius praeusul) written in the style of Aldhelm give wide publicity in his realm to the notion that Gregory had composed the entire chant for the Mass and the cycle of the liturgical year. Charlemagne's monastic advisors needed to invoke Gregory's authority in plainchant, as they discovered that Gallican liturgical traditions and plainchant differed significantly from those observed in Rome. Monastic chronicles frequently told the story of the crisis engendered by this encounter and Charlemagne's reply that all should go back to the pure "Gregorian" source. The chant subsequently known as "Gregorian" was the result of a complex interaction between Frankish musical theorists, intent on transforming Roman chant according to their understanding of the modes. The so-called "old Roman" style of chant was still observed at the Lateran and some other Roman churches in the 11th century, when it was occasionally recorded in manuscripts and attributed to Pope Vitalian — as if the Lateran clergy refused to adapt to liturgical attributions widely attributed to Gregory the Great in the time of Charlemagne.\(^\text{43}\)

The first Life of Gregory to be written on the continent was that by Paul the Deacon (c.720-c.799), who c.787 became a monk of Monte Cassino, re-established by Pope Gregory II in 717. Paul emphasizes that Gregory was a vessel of the Holy Spirit, directly inspired in his writing about Ezekiel, another great prophet, in an account that would be expanded in the 10th century with details from the Whitby Life.\(^\text{44}\) Only when John Hymnondes, also a Roman deacon, prepared a new Life c.873-76, that drew on archives preserved in Rome, do we get a fuller portrait of Gregory as a great pope, able to establish his imprint on the Latin West. He did so just as John's friend, Anastasius the Librarian, was translating records left by another 7th-century pope, Martin I. They were both seeking renewal of the

\(^\text{43}\) Testimonies gathered by Bruno Stählein, Die Gesänge des abritömischen Graduale (Kassel, 1970), pp. 149-150.

papacy at a particularly difficult time. Most surviving copies of John the Deacon’s *Life of Gregory* were produced in the 11th and 12th centuries, with numbers dropping quite significantly in the 13th and 14th centuries.

John’s account is remarkable not just for the detail it gives about Gregory, based on documents now lost to us, but for its eye-witness account of portraits that he saw in the interior of St. Andrew’s, the family villa of Gregory on the Caen Hill that he converted into a monastery. He reports that in its atrium were two images, one of Gregory’s father, Gordian, standing next to a seated St. Peter and wearing a chestnut-coloured chasuble over a dalmatic, and with a long face, a modest beard, and a serious expression. The other was of his mother, Silvia, wearing a veil across her shoulders, with a round and shining face, demonstrating her beauty even in old age, and carrying a *psalterium* in her left hand, with the inscription: “Gregory made this for Silvia, [his] mother.” John then provides an even more detailed description of another portrait, important because it enabled his readers to imagine exactly how Gregory wanted to be remembered by his monks, through an image certainly more late antique than medieval:

But in an apse behind the brothers’ *cellarium*, Gregory is shown, depicted on a circle of stucco, just and well formed in stature; his face is tempered evenly from the length of his father’s countenance and the roundness of his mother’s, so that it seems to be shaped with a certain fitting roundness; his beard, like his father’s, is somewhat tawny and sparse. His head is large and bald, surrounded with dark hair hanging down below the middle of the ear; two little curls bending towards the right crown a forehead broad and high. The eyes are of yellow-brown colour, not large, but open; the eyebrows arched, long and thin; the under-eyelids full. The nose is aquiline, with open nostrils. The lips are red and thick, the cheeks shapely, the chin prominent and well-formed; in complexion eagle-like and high-coloured, but not yet flushed as happened to him in later life. The expression is gentle, his hands beautiful, with tapering fingers well adapted to writing. He is standing, clad in a chestnut-coloured chasuble over a dalmatic. His left hand grasps a book of the gospels, his right the form of a cross. A modest *pallium* is led from around the right shoulder to under his chest over the stomach, then

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46 See the list of 36 MSS cited by Lucía Castaldo in her prologue to *Johannes Hymnonides Diaconus Romanus*. Vita Gregorii I Pappi: La tradizione monoscritta (Florence, 2004), pp. 191-93.

47 *Vita Gregorii* II 8:3 (PL 75:229B–230A): “Gregorius Silvae matris fecit.”
Mary Magdalene, in Homily 25, delivered at the Lateran in the Octave of Easter, as not just the woman who wept as she stood outside the tomb (John 20:11), but as the penitent woman described by Luke (7:37-50) who shed tears over his feet, and whose sins were forgiven by Jesus because of her great love for him: “Mary Magdalene, who had been a sinner in the city, loving truth, washed away the stains of her fault and the voice of Truth was fulfilled, saying, 'Many sins are forgiven her, because she has loved much.'”

Gregory also expanded on the Lukan theme in Homily 33, preached in 591 in the Roman basilica of San Clemente. Here he explores the image of God’s unceasing love for his Church, symbolically understood as the Church of the Gentiles, represented by the sinful woman. Images of touching, kissing, anointing, and a love that burns but is not consumed, saturate Gregory’s homily. Visual images rather than theology carry his meaning in a way that would inspire numerous medieval artists.

While various eastern fathers had sometimes confused different Marys, no previous exegete had connected the tears of the sinful woman in Luke to the tears shed by Mary Magdalene for Jesus as she stood over the tomb. For exegetes like Jerome, virginity (above all that of the Virgin Mary) had been the definitive attribute of the bride of Christ. Gregory was extending ideas about perfume and love offered by Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs, and re-asserting an ancient tradition that linked the bride (as in a rubric to the Vetus Latina version of the Song of Songs) to Mary Magdalene as the archetypal bride of Christ.

Gregory’s devotion to Mary Magdalene did not win immediate recognition, except in England, where Bede records her feast on 22 July. It did not become widely popularized until a sermon attributed to Odo of Cluny (d. c.942) brought together all the scriptural passages he could find

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56. Cynthia Hahn makes a similar point about the efficacy of hagiographical narrative in effecting spiritual conversion. See her Portrayed on the Heart, Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth Through the Thirteenth Century (Berkeley, 2001), pp. 31-39.


about her, inspired by Gregory's teaching. Not only did Odo establish the abbey of Cluny, dedicated to St. Peter, as a model of monastic observance, but he was also invited to Rome to restore its monasteries to observance of the Rule of Benedict. Odo's sermon on Mary Magdalene was matched by a series of hymns that he composed in honour of the four saints he considered most important: St. Peter, Mary Magdalene, St. Benedict, and St. Martin. While his respect for Benedict and Martin reflected a careful balance between Roman and Gallican forms of monasticism, his choice of both St. Peter and Mary Magdalene reflected the attention he gave to both figures. Odo helped reinforce Gregory's perspective of the Magdalene as both penitent and bride of Christ.

Gregory's thinking about Mary Magdalene gained further influence through the increasing popularity of her cult in the 12th and 13th centuries. There was a special altar dedicated to her in the choir of the Lateran, according to a description of that church from the early 13th century (which also mentions that her head was found to be missing, presumably stolen). Her relics were more venerated, however, at the abbey of Vezelay, which claimed in the 11th century to have rescued them from an abandoned church in Marseilles.

Just as Gregory evoked the image of Mary Magdalene to communicate an image of desire for God, so he was aware that visual images had the capacity to communicate divine truth. Carolingian debates about images (which extended those taking place in the East) relied on Gregory's thinking about the positive spiritual role played by visual imagery. The originality of his thinking on image-making lies in his discussion of the relationship and cognitive parallels he discerns between visual images and text, both spoken and written. The original sources for later doctrinal formulations are two letters written by Gregory to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, in which he castigates Serenus for destroying paintings in several churches in Marseilles. His reminder to Serenus of his duty to attend to the pastoral needs of his flock, above all in preaching, provides the context for Gregory's thought on the place of visual images in the life of the Church. In the second letter to Serenus, we read: "And then you must add that painted images had been made for the edification of ignorant people, so that, not knowing how to read, they might learn what was said by studying the actual story." Gregory affirms that for the illiterate person the visual image points to that which it signifies. These letters, together with another to the recluse Secundinus, attributed to Gregory, became especially vital in the iconoclastic debates in the Carolingian era in the West. They generated ever more nuanced readings by the 12th century. Honorius Augustodunensis formulated, from the inspiration of Gregory, a formula of the "triplex ratio" (triplex ratio) of images to instruct, to recall to memory, and to incite to devotion. Under the authority of Gregory's name, Greek image theory and an affirmation of the affective role of visual images were absorbed into western thought and practice. Scholars in the past have enlisted Gregory's thinking to justify a range of doctrinal and theological positions on the place of images in Christian devotions and worship. While Celia Chazelle has reminded us that some of the most oft-repeated claims attributed to Gregory, notably about his teaching that pictures were the bibles of the poor, cannot be found in

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61 PL 133:440C-454.
64 Reg. 1229-9 (CCSL 140A/1768).
66 Chazelle, ibid., 146.
these two letters to Serenus, they were inspired by Gregory’s sense of the importance of communicating Scripture to a wide audience.⁷¹

Gregory’s teaching on the didactic and devotional place of sacred images was above all shaped by pastoral concerns. The continued transmission of his thinking concerning sacred pictures throughout the Middle Ages guaranteed that the Latin Church remained faithful (at least in theory) to Gregory’s emphasis on preaching. Visual images, especially narrative cycles of biblical stories and scenes from saints’ lives, kept before the faithful the deeds of the holy. By the late Middle Ages the audience for pictorial cycles extended beyond the uneducated and the laity.⁷² Through all the artistic means at the painter’s disposal—colour, line, and above all gestures and facial expression—the figures depicted reminded the viewer of the spiritual truth in the story before them. Gregory observed this process in his commentary on the Song of Songs: “For just as a picture exists through colours and things, so Holy Scripture exists through words and senses; for he is foolish who ignores what inheres in the colours of a picture, like the things that are painted.”⁷³ Such narrative cycles made the essentials of Christian faith comprehensible to the broadest possible audience. Visual exegesis depended upon artists rendering meaning in human experience.

The biblical narratives lie at the heart of the Christian life. Gregory’s Regula pastoralis made clear the preacher’s duty to educate and lead the congregation to meditation on and identification of the holy lessons of the biblical story. He was aware that painted images have the power to shape what is in the mind.⁷⁴ In the same way, pictures help the illiterate to internalize stories through a process that Gregory calls compunction.⁷⁵ Gregory’s work constantly uses the idea of exempla as a spur to inner transformation. His homilies show him exploiting the centrality of pictorial imagery in his theology and spirituality.⁷⁶ While medieval theologians might draw more heavily on Augustine for discussion of doctrinal concepts, Gregory’s writings were particularly relevant to those creating visual images to communicate scriptural themes.

**Gregory in the Age of Monastic Reform and Early Scholasticism**

Reforming popes, above all Gregory VII (1073–85), also turned more to Gregory’s letters for guidance on governing the Church. They encouraged canonists to scour through Gregory’s writings to find legal precedents that could build a firm and cohesive body of canon law.⁷⁷ The letters of Gregory VII betray a concern with pastoral detail across Latin Christendom that show how much he hoped to emulate his great predecessor, even though the political situation had become radically different. Gregory VII perceived the papacy as a supranational power, independent from the multitude of new Christian kingdoms developing across Europe, from Spain in the West to Poland in the East. The precedent set by Gregory the Great in rebuking clergy and bishops who did not live up to the highest ascetic standards enabled Gregory VII to develop the authority of the papacy in a way that had never been possible in the late 6th century. While Gregory VII would encounter particular resistance from Emperor Henry IV in imposing this vision, subsequent popes in the 12th and 13th centuries would not tire of looking back to the example of Gregory the Great, as moral guide and authority for rebuking those clergy who failed to live up to the standards expected of them.

Gregory’s writings were particularly popular in monastic communities committed to spiritual reform, notably in the Cistercian Order. William of Champeaux (d. 1121), the Parisian scholastic who established the Abbey of St. Victor in 1111, but spent most of his last years at Clairvaux, produced an epitome of the Moralia (not yet edited), preserved at Clairvaux.⁷⁸ This may reflect a personal shift towards a more moral and mystical style of thought than evident in his earlier scholastic teaching. Gregory’s commentary on the Song of Songs, along with that of Origen, seems to have had a particular impact on William of St. Thierry (1070–1148) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who both sought to combine Augustine’s theology of grace with the emphasis on penitence found in both Cassian and Gregory, in

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⁷¹ Chazelle, “Pictures, books,” 198.
⁷³ Cant. (ed. Patrick Verbraken, CCSL 144 [Turnhout, 1963], p. 3): “Sic est enim scriptura sacra in verbis et sensibus, sic scuta picta in coloribus et rebus: et animis stultis est, qui sic pictae coloribus inhereat, ut res, quae pictae sunt, ignoreat.”
⁷⁵ On compunction in Gregory’s writing, as evoked by art, see Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart*, pp. 48–49 with further bibliography.
England. William of Malmesbury (1095–1143), a Benedictine monk and a great historian, produced an anthology culled from various writings of Gregory's, divided into four parts, but focusing attention on their moral instruction. A comment that he makes in introducing his De florationes ex libris beati Gregorii reveals why he found Gregory a continuing source of inspiration:

You can notice that I have called nothing about the solution of the most profound questions, but rather those things which relate to the improvement of life, the knowledge of God, and hope for forgiveness... If anyone objects that these questions are raised in the chapters about resurrection, the torments of hell, and seeing God, let him more appropriately and fittingly turn these things to morality, in which he will see in a mirror what he ought to hope for, what to fear.79

William's remarks suggest that Gregory's eschatological reflections were not acceptable to everyone in the 12th century. By identifying Gregory as a rich source of moral instruction, William was singling out the most enduring aspect of his contribution.

Gregory's allegorical interpretations were beginning to seem old-fashioned to exegetes like Rupert of Deutz, who found new energy in recovering the historical sense of the sacred text, as its initial (although not only) meaning.80 Yet Gregory's core insight that, beyond the historical and allegorical levels of Scripture there lay a typological or moral level, continued to exert influence. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), not attracted by Jerome's scholarly approach to biblical learning, identified with Gregory the Great as someone who had been directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. While Hildegard was more interested than Gregory in the workings of the human body, she shared his profoundly moralistic vision of the meaning of Scripture. A key concept in her thinking was that of viriditas, the green life-force of divine origin that underpinned creation — a term that occurs no fewer than 56 times in his Moralia on Job, but only once in Augustine's City of God.81 Hildegard responded to Gregory's awareness of imagery drawn from nature, as well as his preference for visual over abstract images.

Gregory's exegetical programme would be developed most fully in the 12th century by Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), who gave perhaps greater emphasis to its historical foundation, but maintained awareness of its profoundly mystical character. Whereas Gregory never commented on secular authors, and had famously asserted that he would not constrain divine scripture to the rules of Donatus, Hugh defined a programme of study in his Didascalicon that combined secular and sacred learning.82 Hugh sought to explain to his students the vocation of all those classical authors whom Gregory the Great had taken for granted, without diminishing the central importance of those biblical books that he saw as vehicles for grasping divine wisdom. He provided a new structure through which the insights of Gregory the Great could be integrated with those of the other fathers of the Church. Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) would continue this approach, while arguing that the obscurity of some of Gregory's interpretations should not prevent exegetes from going further in their analysis.83

Even Peter Abelard (1079–1142), often thought of as more disputative than contemplative in spirit, was fascinated by Gregory the Great. He singles out the smoothness of his prose, observing that it raved that of pagan authors, just as much as Jerome and Augustine matched the ancients in depth and subtlety.84 In advocating reason, Abelard might seem to question Gregory's much cited comment in his Easter homily that "faith had no merit if it could be proved by reason" — a quotation that opened every version of the Sic et Non to debate the relationship between faith and reason.85 In his Theologia "Scholasticum", Abelard argued against those who used this quotation to provide "solace for their ignorance". He insisted that Gregory was saying that faith could only reside in what was unseen,

79 Hugh Farmer (ed.), "William of Malmesbury's Commentary on Lamentations," Studia Monastica 1 (1962), 283–311, esp. 306: "Illud porro animadvertere potestius me nihil hic de solutione profundarum questionum delirasse, sed ea tanta possidere quin ad amandationem ulter, ad edificationem animae, ad spem umne... Quod si quis forte obiece in capitulis de Resurrectione et tormentis gemitum et utendo Deo questiones utinam, commodius et consultius factur si ad moralitatem ea retinuisset, in quaquiesque sequi speculatur intuebatur quod maxime debebat sperare, quod timere." The De florationes (translated by Farmer in an appendix), occurs only in Cambridge University Library, it.III.20 (omitted except for the preface). I am grateful to Sibylen Samuels for writing this essay to my attention.

80 Wasselbryck observes a shift in Rupert from initial enthusiasm to a more cautious position after 1117, "L'influence de l'églogue de S. Grégoire le grand," 177–81.


85 IEV, 2.26 (CCSL 142:21); see Abelard, Sic et Non 11 (eds Blanche Boyer and Richard McKeon [Chicago, 1976–77], p. 113).
and that the doctrine of the Trinity, known by faith, formulated a set of truths beyond the human eye and only crudely expressed in words.86

In his *Theologia christiana* Abelard repeated John the Deacon's account of Gregory being so moved by a story about the generosity of the Emperor Trajan towards a widow that he wept tears in St. Peter's until he had heard that the emperor had been freed from eternal punishment, even if he had not entered paradise. Abelard related this story about a virtuous pagan to another tale, told by Ambrose, about the Emperor Valentinian who had died before gaining the baptism he desired.87 While Gregory the Great never wrote about Trajan, the story told by John the Deacon and repeated by many writers after Abelard, articulated a sense that Gregory had sympathy for the virtuous pagan, even if he had to remain in limbo rather than enter paradise.88

Gregory the Great and Mendicant Culture 1200–1500

The increasing awareness of the writings of Aristotle in the Latin West during the 12th and 13th centuries inevitably shifted the direction of theology in a scholastic environment away from the contemplative and experiential focus, dominant in a monastic milieu. Yet even if Gregory's writing lacked the abstractions that fascinated scholastic theologians, its imagistic character appealed to preachers in the new mendicant orders, in particular, the Dominicans and Franciscans. It also had a particular impact on visual artists, keen to promote the message of Scripture through the telling image.89 Taddeo Gaddi's fresco of *The Supper in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, which forms part of the decoration of the end wall of the refectory of the Franciscan convent of Santa Croce, Florence, executed c.1330–40, illustrates how Gregorian exegesis could be put to visual effect (Fig. 2). Three other scenes—*The Stigmatization of St. Francis, St. Louis of Toulouse Serving a Meal to the Poor*, and *St. Benedict Rescued from Starvation in the Desert*—appear on either side of the central image, *The Tree of Life. The Last Supper* is depicted underneath.90 The artist visualizes a moment from the narrative of Luke 7:36–50 when the unnamed woman anoints Jesus's feet while he is seated at table with Simon and a disciple. By the 12th century, the central iconographic features of this subject were well-established, so that visual cues such as Christ's triple-nimbed halo and the woman stretched prostrate at Christ's feet enabled a wide spectrum of viewers to recognize the source of the narrative in Luke's Gospel. Such an image performs three functions: it stands alone by recalling a biblical story (thus fulfilling Gregory's requirement that pictorial imagery function mnemonically); it conveys separate moments of the narrative into one (as Gregory himself does when he combines the actions of weeping and kissing as expressions of God's love); the image, like preaching, points towards the mystery of God through our identification with the figures.

Gregory's instructions to Serenus had particular resonance for a 14th century artist: "...that from the sight of a past deed they should feel the burning of compunction and prostrate themselves humbly in adoration solely of the omnipotent, holy Trinity."91 What lessons might the friars viewing Gaddi's images have meditated on as they gazed upon the frescos in their refectory? As for their founder, St. Francis of Assisi, preaching lay at the heart of their religious vocation. Gregory's pastoral theology fused with this commitment to preaching, advocated by all the mendicant orders, in fresh ways in the later Middle Ages. The viewer becomes both witness and participant in the didactic power of the sacred narrative.

The Mass of St. Gregory and Late Medieval Piety

By the 14th and 15th centuries, the current of evangelical dynamism that had given birth to the movements inspired by St. Francis and St. Dominic...
were in urgent need of renewal. Increasingly, heretical groups were questioning the authority of ordained clergy to interpret the word of God, and above all the reality of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi by Pope Urban IV, in response to a request from Juliana of Cornillon in 1266, represented a new move to create a focus of community devotion around the Eucharist, as a living sign of Christ’s presence in the Church. Only in the 14th century, however, did the feast become widely celebrated and miracles reported that served to accentuate the reality of divine presence in the Eucharist.

In this climate of heightened eucharistic piety, Gregory the Great became perceived as the archetypal priest who lived out the sacrifice of Christ through the celebration of the Mass. A core theme of the Dialogues was that celebration of the Mass could liberate a soul from punishment, and create harmony between the visible and invisible worlds. This aspect of his spirituality acquired particular importance in the late 14th and 15th centuries in visual representations of Pope Gregory celebrating Mass and experiencing a vision of the sorrowing Christ (Fig. 3). As Bynum has argued, the “Mass of St. Gregory” was not intended to depict the doctrine of transubstantiation. Rather, its focus was penitential and soteriological. It expands on a core theme of Gregory’s Dialogues: that, through the sacrifice of the Mass, the penitent priest can glimpse an unseen reality, namely the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The artist is thus able to evoke the human suffering of Christ behind the liturgical action of Gregory as a priest. While the doctrine of purgatory had become much more developed than it had been at the time of Gregory the Great, its core theme, that penitent souls had to purge themselves before being worthy of the divine presence, was one that Gregory had helped establish. Only when reformers like Luther urged a return to the Augustinian emphasis on God’s saving grace would Gregory’s teaching about the power of the prayers of the saints fall into disfavour.

While Gregory the Great generated some stories (such as that told by John the Deacon about his admiration for the Emperor Trajan), another tradition started to circulate in the 12th century, equally unfounded, that he was responsible for destroying a whole library of pagan texts. John of Salisbury reports a story in his Policraticus that Gregory’s love for Scripture was so great that he had delivered up the pagan library of the Palatine to the flames. The story, widely repeated by Renaissance humanists, may be connected to another, equally apocryphal, told in the 12th or 13th century by Master Gregory in The Marvels of Rome about a vast bronze image, thought to be of the sun god. Gregory tried unsuccessfully to destroy it, after the destruction of other statues in Rome, but then placed the surviving head and right hand in front of his palace, where it could still be admired. This admirer of Classical Antiquity also claimed, when introducing his account of a naked Venus, “more like a living creature than a statue,” that Pope Gregory had destroyed almost all the marble statues in Rome. In the mind of lovers of antiquity, Pope Gregory had effectively become a symbol of ecclesiastical authority, critical of pagan culture.

Such attitudes, whether hostile or enthusiastic, were not based on profound knowledge of Gregory’s writing. Nonetheless, they reveal the way Gregory’s name had become synonymous by the later Middle Ages with values of religious faith and piety far removed from those of classical antiquity. When sermons were no longer written in Latin, Gregory no longer exercised the same influence as a preacher. In some ways, the temper of the 16th century was more suited to rediscovering the philological expertise of Jerome and the theological introspection of Augustine. Yet Gregory’s writings, printed first in the late 15th century and then many times subsequently, continued to attract attention. Gregory might no longer have been the object of a devotional cult, but he would never be forgotten.

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87 De miraculis 12, in Codice toponografico (eds Valentini and Zucchiatti, 3250); "Nunc vero pascua subiectam de signis sarmorum, quae paene omnes a beato Gregorio aut delectae aut detraetae sunt." Trans. Osborne, pp. 54-56.
88 The first collected edition of Gregory’s Opera was that of Bertholdus Rembolt (Paris, 1518), although many individual works had been published since the Pastoral Care in Mainz, 1460. See Appendix at the end of Ann Kuzdale’s chapter, infra.
Fig. 1  St. Gallen, "Gregory the Great," from The Harley AmboPTHal Justinian, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. Sang. 306, p. 13, c. 950-1000 [photo used with permission].

Fig. 2  Taddeo Gaddi, "The Supper in the House of the Pharisee," detail from the Refectory, Santa Croce, Florence, c. 1330-40 [photo used with permission].
Pope Gregory the Great seems in many ways to have been open to the Greek East. He had, of course, spent several years in Constantinople as papal apocrisarius (579–585/6), though it is difficult to be clear about the state of his Greek language skills. Furthermore, although he is deeply indebted to Augustine, there seems another spirit in his thought and writings that has been associated with the world of eastern monasticism. Carole Straw, in her monograph on Gregory, early on remarks:

This spirit of asceticism from the desert is always a silent partner in his work, leading Gregory in new directions away from Augustine and the Western Fathers. It will often exhibit striking similarities with others of his era also steeped in eastern monasticism, such as Dorotheus of Gaza or John Climacus. This monastic sensibility, the restless vision of the athlete's battle with the devil, left a deep impression on Gregory.

Straw also notes another feature of Gregory's thought that aligns him with eastern thinkers and distances him from Augustine, namely, his concern for hierarchical order. Given this affinity between Gregory and the East, it might be thought that Gregory would have been exceptionally welcome

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1 See Leilba Cracco Ruggini, "Grégoire le grand et le monde byzantin," in Grégoire le grand, eds Jacques Fontaine et al., pp. 83–94.
4 Straw, Gregory, p. 29 and n. 7. She mentions the eastern writers Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor and John Climacus.