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G. R. Evans  
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## INTRODUCTION

## GREGORY'S LIFE

Gregory sometimes speaks of his personal anxieties and preoccupations in contexts where he reveals some details of his circumstances. In the letter he sent to Leander, bishop of Seville, sometime after 595,<sup>1</sup> with a copy of the *Moralia in Job* which he had begun to compose while Leander was with him in Constantinople during the period after 579, he tells him of the difficulties he has been facing. He complains that it is far from easy to live spiritually as he would wish when he has so many responsibilities. He had felt it his duty to obey the then Pope's request<sup>2</sup> that he should come out of the monastery he had founded and live in the world and work for the Church, first as Deacon, afterwards as an emissary of the Pope in Constantinople; and now as bishop of Rome himself; he talks of the loss of monastic quiet, of his experience of the tensions of public life for the Christian; he recollects how he first came to expound the book of Job to the little circle of Latin-speakers who were with him at Constantinople. In the *Dialogues*, written soon after he became Pope in 593–4, he describes how the brothers who live with him in his household (*familiariter*) have pressed him to write for them some account of the miracles performed by holy men in Italy (*D*: I, Prol.9). He had told some stories of this sort in the Homilies on the Gospels which he had preached a year or two earlier,<sup>3</sup> and he had continued to preach to a popular audience on Sundays and feast days.<sup>4</sup> As he thinks about the saintly lives of others, he reflects sorrowfully on the way in which his own pursuit of holiness has been made more difficult by the loss of peace and leisure for contemplation since he became Pope. In the Homilies on Ezekiel, his awareness of the imminent danger of the Lombard invasion is rarely far from the surface of his mind.

<sup>1</sup> On the dating of this letter, see *CCSL*, 143.vi.

<sup>2</sup> J. Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London, 1980), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> A. de Vogüé, *SC*, 251, p. 59, n. 15, gives a series of parallels between the *Dialogues* and the Homilies on the Gospels.

<sup>4</sup> P. Batiffol, *Saint Grégoire le Grand* (Paris, 1928), p. 149.

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Compared with the wealth of autobiographical detail and the intimacy of Augustine's *Confessions* this is meagre. But it is no less a genuinely felt statement of his feelings on Gregory's part for being in rather general terms and for being frequently repeated in his writings without such reference to time and place. Gregory had a capacity for generalising from his own experiences to what he regarded as spiritual commonplaces, truths of the Christian life which would be useful to others. In this he is closer to Augustine than the lack of a Gregorian *Confessions* would suggest. But while Augustine's interest, active bishop though he was, lay above all in communicating the insights he had gained into the workings of his own mind and heart in the light of his Christian faith, Gregory the administrator and preacher and rector of the Church had his attention perforce turned rather more outward, and his constant theme in these autobiographic passages is the need for a duality of endeavour in the living of a fully Christian life. Except in his letters, he says little beyond this about the events of his life, and the earliest *Vita* was written in the first or second decade of the eighth century by a monk of Whitby in Northumbria.<sup>5</sup>

What follows is a summary of the principal events, intended to serve as a list to be referred to in later chapters. Biographical and historical studies are listed in the Bibliography.<sup>6</sup>

## PRINCIPAL EVENTS OF GREGORY'S LIFE

Born in Rome, c. 550, of wealthy parents of senatorial rank, Gregory grew up in his father's house on the Caelian hill, received the education usual for his rank, and became a member of the civil service.

The Lombard invaders were meanwhile passing down into north Italy; by 571 they had conquered the valley of the Po and by 572 they had seized Benevento and Spoleto. By 573 Rome itself was in danger. In 573 Gregory was Prefect of the City, the highest civil dignitary in Rome, president of the Senate with supreme civil jurisdiction within a hundred miles of Rome, in charge of grain supplies, aqueducts, sewers, finance.

In 574 he sold his patrimony in Sicily and founded six monasteries there. He gave the rest of his patrimony to the poor. He kept his father's house on the Caelian and established it as a monastery for himself and some

<sup>5</sup> B. Colgrave, ed., *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Kansas, 1968); see pp. 56–9 on the relation between Bede's account and that of the Whitby writer.

<sup>6</sup> On Gregory's life, see Dudden; P. Batiffol, *St Gregory the Great* (London, 1929); and more recently and for a bibliography, Richards, *Consul of God*.

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brothers, dedicated to St Andrew. There he lived not as abbot but as a plain monk.

In 579 Pope Pelagius (or possibly his predecessor) took him from the monastery and made him seventh Deacon, with practical responsibilities for the welfare of the Christian community in Rome.

C. 579 the Pope sent him as his secretary to Constantinople, to try to make the Emperor understand the danger in which Italy stood and to persuade him to send help; the Emperor's Exarch at Ravenna was giving no assistance.

In 586–90 Gregory was still a papal Deacon.

In 590 bubonic plague struck Rome.

In the same year Gregory was made Pope.

It fell to him to protect the people of Rome against the Lombards, since the civil authorities were taking no action. In 590 the valley of the Po was ruled by Arian Lombards and in 593 the Lombards briefly besieged Rome. During 592–3 Gregory concluded a peace with the Lombards, more or less independently of the Exarch of Ravenna, the Emperor's representative in the West, who failed to take a firm line.

During the last decade of his life Gregory found himself for practical purposes more or less on his own in the management of affairs. He appointed governors to the cities of Italy and organised the financing of the war and supplies; he ran the Church's estates; he conducted diplomacy with the rulers of Europe; he kept order while the Byzantine authorities proved themselves weak and unreliable.

Gregory was ill for much of this period; from 598 until his death in 604 he was largely confined to bed by acute pain, although he got up when he could to celebrate Mass. He worked on indefatigably to the end.

#### GREGORY'S WRITINGS

During his time at St Andrews, Gregory seems to have preached on the first book of Kings, the prophets, Proverbs and the Song of Songs. These lecture-sermons were taken down in the form of notes as they were delivered by one of the monks. Only the material on Kings and two Homilies on the Song of Songs survive.

At Constantinople Gregory began to expound the book of Job; he continued the work when he returned to Rome and the *Moralia in Job* was revised and completed about 591, when he was Pope. At Constantinople he also began to think towards the work which eventually became the *Regula Pastoralis*; the book was finished during the early years of his papacy.

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In 591, when he was too ill to deliver them in person, he composed the sermons on the Gospels.

During the period when the Lombards briefly besieged Rome, Gregory was giving his Homilies on Ezekiel.

The *Dialogues* were composed in 593–4.

In 601 Gregory published his Homilies on Ezekiel in two books.

Throughout the period of his Papacy he was writing letters, mostly on practical matters, but containing a great many statements about his position on the issues with which they are concerned.

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## GREGORY'S WORLD OF THOUGHT

Gregory speaks of the 'Fathers' of the Old Testament, who saw the Creator with 'uplifted souls' (*J*: ix.xxxii.48, p. 489.8). This vision gives them high authority as prophets (*J*: xvi.liii.66, p. 837; ix.xxxi.47, p. 489). He does not attribute the same standing of Fathers to the Christian writers who had gone before him, but he treats a number of them as having some authority. He had a substantial knowledge of Augustine, whom he recommends to one of his correspondents (*Letter* x.16, *CCSL*, p. 845.30, to Innocent, Prefect of Africa, July 600). Among the Greeks, he mentions the Cappadocians Gregory Nazianzen and Basil; he knew of Ignatius of Antioch, Epiphanius, Cyprian, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome and Ambrose.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to judge how common such knowledge would have been. Gregory says that he searched in vain for Eusebius' *Gesta Martyrum* in the Lateran and other Roman libraries.<sup>2</sup> There were evidently difficulties in obtaining certain works. On the other hand, a full picture of the intellectual life of Cassiodorus' day earlier in the sixth century indicates an active sponsorship of authors who were commissioned to write on suitable texts, the collecting of subscriptions to pay for the copying of manuscripts. Cassiodorus could look to a readership among the administrative class for whom his letters were intended, and the monks for whom he wrote his *Institutiones*.<sup>3</sup> But for Cassiodorus, too, much depended upon his good fortune in finding manuscripts. 'It is said,' he reports, 'that holy Ambrose has composed a commentary on the Prophets in his usual elegant style; but I have not yet been able in any way to find it' (*Inst.* i.vii.2, p. 29). He asks

<sup>1</sup> See O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altKirchlichen Literatur*, v (Freiburg, 1932), p. 285; R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, iii (Leipzig, 1913); L. Eisenhofer, 'Augustinus in den Evangelien-Homilien Gregors des Grossen', *Festgabe A. Knöpfer gewidmet* (Freiburg, 1917), pp. 56–66.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. McClain, *The Doctrine of Heaven in the Writings of St Gregory the Great* (Washington, 1956), pp. 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> H. Kirkby, 'The Scholar and his Public', *Boethius*, ed. M. T. Gibson (Oxford, 1981), pp. 51–3.

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his monks to try. He tells them with some triumph that he has discovered an annotated copy of the Epistles of St Paul; the author of the commentary is not named, but it seems to him excellent (*Inst.* 1.viii.9, p. 30). Another copy of the Pauline Epistles has been found, which is said to have Jerome's commentary (*Inst.* 1.viii.8).

This was a world where the materials of Christian scholarship could not be taken for granted, and where Gregory can be seen to be making use of authorities in a way peculiarly of his time. He takes the Bible as his supreme authority and it provided him with material for the bulk of what he wrote and preached. Beneath it stand statements made by the ecumenical Councils, which he takes as the foundation of catholic formulations of doctrine. For the rest, he draws on whatever has been said by earlier Christian authors as he needs it, but so often without acknowledgement that the question of his knowledge of many individual authors remains uncertain. His method was to write in his own words rather than to quote the words of others, because the earlier Fathers did not yet have the status for him that they were to have for later generations. (He was himself to become one of the last of those to whom it was natural to refer as Fathers.<sup>4</sup>) Yet he was not obliged to do so much pioneering thinking as Augustine, and we do not find him struggling with a problem as Augustine does. There is a calmer air, an air of exposition rather than investigation. Gregory could take for granted, if not a library of source-materials, at least an established body of teaching, a full theology whose principles can safely be subsumed in his writings because he can expect his readers and listeners to grasp their essentials.

Secular learning raised a difficulty for those who were the leaders of thought in the Church. Cassiodorus (c. 485–c. 582) recognised great enthusiasm for it; most people believed that it would make them knowledgeable and advance them in life. It grieved him to think that no Christian teaching went on in the public schools of Rome when secular authors were being given such distinguished exposition (*Inst.* 1, Pref.i, p. 3). He himself wanted to see Christian schools where those who studied would be helped to a heavenly not an earthly wisdom. He hoped for a time to be able to raise money by subscription to bring such schools into existence, but he failed to gain enough support. His solution in the end was to set up a school of his own in old age, in

<sup>4</sup> After Gregory, only Bede commonly falls into the class of Fathers for mediaeval authors, until the twelfth century, when a number of *florilegia* include quotations from Anselm of Canterbury, Hugh of St Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux among passages from Augustine, Gregory and other Fathers.

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his monastery of Vivarium, where he provided for the study of both secular and Christian materials. For him there was perhaps no real conflict of purpose between the two. He simply wanted to redress a balance and give Christian teaching its proper place, as something far more important than secular learning, and deserving a substantial section of his encyclopaedia the *Institutiones* to itself.

Others – Jerome (c. 342–420) for example in his nightmare picture of himself as not a Christian but a Ciceronian – had seen a danger here. Gregory, too, seems to have had some difficulties. In his remarks on the Song of Songs he describes the wisdom of the world as a wine which makes the mind drunk because it renders it incapable of understanding humility (*quia ab intellectu humilitatis alienam reddit*) (*In Cant.* 16, p. 18.322–5). The philosophers are drunk with this wine, but the Holy Church despises it and prefers the ‘most humble incarnation of the Lord’s preaching’. In a letter to bishop Desiderius of Vienne, written in 601, Gregory puts forward the same view that secular and Christian learning have different purposes and cannot be reconciled:

A report has come to us that you are lecturing on secular literature to certain pupils. This fills me with such sorrow and profound disgust that my former opinion of you has changed. . . .

For the same mouth cannot sing the praises of Jupiter and the praises of Christ. (*Letter XI.34, CCSL, p. 922.4–9*)

Perhaps it was Desiderius’ position as bishop which made these literary appreciation classes so intolerable to Gregory, for we find him in more moderate vein in his commentary on I Kings, pointing out that although the learning to be obtained from secular books is not directly beneficial to the saints in their spiritual conflict, yet, when it is united to the study of Holy Scripture, men attain to a profounder knowledge of Scripture itself. The liberal arts ought, therefore, to be cultivated, in order that we may gain through them a more accurate knowledge of God’s Word (*In Reg.* v.1, p. 419.13–17). The problem was one of balance, of keeping secular learning which was so much better provided for within the system of education still current in Gregory’s Rome, from becoming more seductive to young Christians than Bible reading. There was still much that was pagan in Gregory’s Christian world, and he can only have seen his responsibility to keep Christian study alive as a working necessity, a continuing battle.

An example of the care with which this had to be done is his discussion of ‘mathematics’. Contemporary *mathematici* were astrologers. Pagan magical practice made use of numbers in various ways.



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Writing on the Star of Bethlehem, Gregory discusses what the *mathematici* say about the *virtus*, the power of constellations, to affect men and events, and tries to show how absurd their argument is. He goes through the signs of the Zodiac, pointing out further foolishnesses.

Yet Gregory himself makes free use of number-symbolism; he believes it to be used by the Scriptures themselves. 'What is designated by the number seven except the perfection of active life?' he asks, referring to the text, 'Six years he served and the seventh he went free' (*Ez.* 1.iii.11, p. 39.202–5). Thirteen is the 'perfect age' (*aetas perfecta*), the age of maturity and completeness, for at twelve Jesus sat in the Temple asking questions of the elders, and did not preach, for in his human nature he was a child (*Ez.* 1.ii.3, p. 18.40–2). Again in the Homilies on Ezekiel he speaks of the perfection of the number six (which is the sum of its parts and also the number of days of creation), of the ten commandments and the way in which 60 ( $6 \times 10$ ) rightly (*recte*) signifies the perfection of works, and so on (*Ez.* 11.v.12, p. 285).

What is the difference between astrological mathematical symbolism and that of Gregory? He often notes the 'appropriateness' of a symbolic usage (e.g. *Ez.* 1.ii.9, p. 22.176–7), and here perhaps lies the key. In Scripture the Bible teaches by numbers in such a way that the numbers can be shown to be harmonious with events and to bring out points of note in connection with them. Astrologers say that the lives of men depend upon the stars. But men born at the same time do not have identical lives. It is clear that they are mistaken (*J:* xxxiii.x.9); the absurdity of their claim is as obvious as the crudity of their method. They take the numerical harmony of things to be an entailment of consequences. They hold that there is a causative relation between star-patterns and times and numbers, and the events on earth, and they try to see into the future by means of their art, looking illicitly for truths which God has not chosen to reveal to them. Theirs is, in other words, a wrong use of what Gregory believes to be a genuine scientific method.

Gregory allowed his own scientific curiosity some rein in contexts where he thought it a helpful way to enquire into mysteries. His science is the physics-with-metaphysics of the Greek tradition, moving from the spiritual to the physical world. How, for example, can the Spirit which fills all things be mobile and still? There is no difficulty, Gregory contends, if we remember that this description is adapted to our human understanding; the Spirit is absolutely still in himself; he only seems to be in motion in filling all things (*Ez.* 1.v.10, p. 61.143–6). How could the resurrected body of Christ be both palpable and able to pass through doors; how could it be both solid matter and incorruptible (*Ev.* xxvi.1,

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PL 76.1198)? Here again, the divine power makes things possible for God which are inconceivable to us. Such difficulties can, however, be a stumbling-block to faith. For example, some ask how if Christ raises the dead it can be possible that he died (Ev. VI.1, PL 76.1096). Others ask how spirits in hell can burn in fire, for fire can burn only corporeal things. Gregory tries to explain the mode of the burning (D: IV.29, PL 77.396C). He touches on the theory of vision in explaining how the soul sees (D: IV.6, PL 77.328). He reflects on the comparative density of air and clouds (J: XXVII.xli.68). He considers how the air makes the earth fruitful while the heavens govern the air in its turn (J: IV.xxix.55, p. 199). He makes an effort to do so not only because these matters interest him, but also because he considers it important that no one should have his faith damaged by puzzlement at these apparent paradoxes.

Greek philosophical ideas entered the Latin West by a number of routes.<sup>5</sup> Roman education had long aspired to the Greek in matters of philosophy (taken in the widest sense to include natural science, astronomy and medicine). Cicero had insisted that Latin was, in his own day, already an adequate vehicle for philosophical discourse, against some who doubted it; he believed that Latin now had a vocabulary to match that of Greek.<sup>6</sup> From at least the late second century, Greek thought was being brought together in a series of handbooks and encyclopaedias.<sup>7</sup> As a result of these developments, some general knowledge of Greek philosophical ideas was the common stock of educated Romans from at least Cicero's day. Groups of enthusiasts, like those in Milan in the fourth century when Augustine met them, sought out platonic writings for study and discussion: Manlius Theodorus gave Augustine some of Plotinus' *Enneads* to read, and Porphyry's *De Regressu Animae*.<sup>8</sup> With the decay of Greek in the West some scholars saw a need for translations; Jerome and Rufinus, and later Boethius, did their best to meet it.<sup>9</sup> The question of the extent of Gregory's knowledge of Greek remains a vexed one,<sup>10</sup> but there can be no doubt

<sup>5</sup> R. Klibansky's classic *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages* (London, 1939, 2nd edn. 1950), pp. 21–8, gives a list.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *De Nat. Deorum*, I.iv.

<sup>7</sup> P. R. L. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> P. Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources*, tr. H. E. Wedeck (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 138, 149–223 and 224–70.

<sup>9</sup> J. Petersen, 'Did Gregory the Great Know Greek?', *Studies in Church History*, 13 (1976), 122, and on Jerome's Greek studies, see Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers*, pp. 48–127. On Boethius, see H. Chadwick, *Boethius* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 69–74.

<sup>10</sup> Petersen, 'Did Gregory the Great Know Greek?', 124–34, perhaps overstates her case.