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978-1-107-61546-5 - The History of the Islands of the Lerins: The Monastery,
Saints and Theologians of S. Honorat

A. C. Cooper-Marsdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps surprising that a historical account of the home of Vincent of Lerins has never, so far as we are aware, been presented in a monograph to English readers. It is of course a part of the history of monasticism, as the rise of monasticism is a part of the history of religious development. But Lerins has its own special interest. The theme that we have in hand does not require more than some brief remarks by way of introduction. The reader will however be helped towards its more perfect understanding if we commence by giving a short review of the outward history in which the establishment of the monastic institution at Lerins finds its setting. The student of early and mediaeval history will scarcely require even this, but there will we hope be readers of this book who will at least be glad to be reminded of the main parts of that history, treated at length in the graphic and eloquent pages of Gibbon¹, and in the vivid narrative of Professor Dill². And though the history of monasticism has elsewhere been ably treated, a short essay or résumé may likewise prove acceptable, while those who desire more than can be said in these pages may be referred to works where an attractive theme is treated with a power to which we make no pretensions³.

The foundation of the monastery of Lerins probably dates from A.D. 410 at the commencement of a period of special historical interest. In the opening years of the 5th century barbarian hordes began to pour over the province of Gaul in a

¹ *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire.*

² *Roman Society in the last century of the Western Empire.*

³ See Bibliography.

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[More information](#)

great desolating stream. The remarkable series of alien immigrations which has been called the "Völkerwanderung," was altering the face of the Roman Empire; startling social movements characterised this period; immense changes were working themselves out through the whole of the 5th and 6th centuries, during which the monastery was at the height of its fame, and again in the 7th and 8th, when its brilliant prosperity showed signs of decline.

This history, however briefly put, of the external and internal condition of the world at least serves to explain the motives which impelled men to withdraw to quiet houses of religious life, and enables us to understand why an Empire seemingly so strong and so advanced in civilisation as that of Rome, could be overcome by barbarous invaders, and fall before their assaults, making social life hard and all but intolerable to the "quiet in the land." It was like a huge and splendid oak tree, immense in girth and grand to look upon, but in reality rotten to the core. Economical abuses were enormous; fraud and greed were everywhere triumphant; firm administration was almost unknown. The old heathen systems of religion were falling into decay and even much of the current Christianity was enervated and corrupt. This partly answers the question which men were then asking, why is the Empire, now that it is Christian, going to pieces? There was indeed a belief widely current among the pagans of this disastrous period that all the heaped up calamities of the time were a consequence of, and a punishment for, the rejection of the gods of their forefathers.

The great S. Augustine sought to refute this delusion when he wrote of another city "not made with hands," the spiritual city of the Church of Christ¹, and this famous work was "a theology of history, a comprehensive attempt to justify the ways of God to man," and as the writer reviews the old world of Graeco-Roman paganism, he exposes its weakness and denies that the decay of the Empire was due to the progress of Christianity. He called his treatise "the city of God." At such a crisis, "civitas" meant more than a city. In his great conception, S. Augustine portrayed an Empire of God, that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

had no distinctions of race and religion, of civilisation or barbarism, but which shared the inspiration of faith and law and life that was common to all alike.

Orosius also, a presbyter of Tarragona wrote his seven books of history¹, in which he showed that there is a Providence in human affairs, but he seems to infer that the state of the world was not unsatisfactory and therefore in his optimistic view there was no enigma to be solved. This attitude of his was probably due to the slight but transitory improvement under Honorius in 417 A.D. It was Salvian who with a truer perception faced and solved the enigma. His book made a profound impression, and to this day it is a valuable source of information as to the inner life of the dying Empire. We shall refer to this work in a subsequent chapter.

Alaric.

We do not purpose attempting to trace, in any detail, the successive incursions of Teutons and Slavs, of Goths and Huns, of Vandals, Lombards and Franks². The interest of all this history gathers round certain great names; as of Alaric and Stilicho, Genseric, Attila and Theodoric. Alaric was the first barbarian to win a kingdom. The Visigoths and Ostrogoths, who were merged in one Gothic Empire in the 4th century under Ermaneric, were pressed by the Huns and checked by Theodosius. The Goths, who might have proved a valuable assistance to the Empire, if the sons of Theodosius had been firm and energetic, raised their independent standard, boldly avowed their hostile intentions and spread their hordes from the shores of Dalmatia to the walls of Constantinople. They made Alaric their leader, and his first blows were struck at the Eastern Empire. He made a secret treaty with the ministers of Constantinople, and gained the control of arsenal and taxes, as well as a strong strategic position. He next turned his thoughts westward, for the fame and wealth of Italy tempted him. He thought he heard a voice calling, "Alaric, brook no

¹ *Historiarum Libri VII*, "de Cladibus et Miseriis Mundi."

² *Italy and her invaders*, 8 vols. Thomas Hodgkin, D.C.L., Clarendon Press. *The Dynasty of Theodosius*, by the same author, and *The beginning of the Middle Ages*, by Dean Church.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

delay, thou shalt penetrate to the city¹." He entered Italy in A.D. 400, and ten years later Rome was captured and sacked. The City of the Seven Hills had never in 800 years been entered by a foreign foe. It was called the "Eternal City" and was thought inviolable.

Stilicho.

The name of Stilicho stands out prominently among the defenders of the decaying Empire. To his care Theodosius had intrusted his son Honorius who ruled the Western Empire. Stilicho, loyal to his trust, would have gone to the assistance of Constantinople at the time of Alaric's invasion, but received a mysterious message, "Let Stilicho withdraw the legions of Honorius within the limits of his master's Empire." In the advance on Italy, Stilicho was once more at hand to guard his trust, and at the battle of Pollentia compelled the invader to retire for a time; but the loyal soldier's influence began to wane. He lost the confidence of his troops and forfeited the trust reposed in him by his king. His friends would have made him their king, but he hesitated, and his hesitation cost him his life. While he sat pensive and sleepless, a Gothic warrior entered his camp at midnight to assassinate him. Stilicho managed to escape, but a warrant for his execution was obtained, and he was called in his last moments a traitor and a parricide, and was put to death in A.D. 408.

Attila.

The conclusion of the first half of the 5th century witnessed the warlike prowess of Attila, king of the Huns, whose life was crowded with curious and romantic incidents. He entered Gaul in A.D. 451. Half a million men, "obedient to his nod," moved westward carrying devastation and destruction everywhere. The allied forces of the Empire and the Goths met this enemy of European civilisation and of Christianity at Chalons in A.D. 451. In a conflict fierce and obstinate, in which the number of slain was enormous, Attila could boast no victory, for it was

¹

Rumpe omnes Alarice, moras. Hoc impiger anno
Alpibus Italiae ruptis, penetrabis ad Urbem.

Claudian, *de bello Getico*, 545-6.

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Saints and Theologians of S. Honorat

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

a drawn battle. This and the death of Attila freed Western Europe from the barbarism of the Huns. The power of his kingdom was broken up, for only a man of genius in war and skilful in administration could sustain it.

The Vandals under Genseric.

The blow that might have fallen through Attila was only temporarily delayed; it fell four years later in A.D. 455. The Vandals, who were the most savage of the Teutonic invaders, had been allies of the Empire for more than 200 years. They ravaged Spain and Northern Africa under "the terrible Genseric" whose name ranks with those of Alaric and Attila as agents in the destruction of the Empire. He was a man of inordinate ambition, and, as is commonly the case with those of this character, was troubled by no scruples in seeking to justify this passion. In A.D. 455 he arrived at the city gate, where he was met by Leo and his clergy. To them he promised protection, but the promise was not kept. The city was pillaged, and the sceptre of the great world conquering power was broken, and the spell of Empire departed.

Theodoric.

The Ostrogoths were vassals of the Huns and had fought on the side of Attila at Chalons. After his death they recovered their independence under the leadership of Theodoric who was destined to make a name in history and romance, and is, more by way of distinction than from his possession of supreme genius, called "the Great." In A.D. 488 he led his people forth, and fought his way to the confines of Italy. He consolidated his conquests and devoted a reign of 33 years to the duties of civil government. While he adhered to his Arian creed, he strove to show equal justice to all, and never attempted to enforce his own religious views upon his subjects, for as he wisely said, "We cannot impose religion by command, since no one can be made to believe against his will¹." He was king of the Goths and of the West, and was the first to establish a

¹ Religionem imperare non possumus, quia nemo cogitur ut credat invitus Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 2, 27 (*Patrol.* 69).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

state in which Goths and Italians were united in amity, though unlike in manners and customs, in religion and language, and his successful administration is sufficient testimony to his vigour and wisdom.

The Wars of Justinian.

Within ten years all Italy was regained for the Roman Empire by Justinian ruling from the East, the events of whose life were various and important, though it is as a legislator and codifier of the law that his name is best known to-day. He was unweariedly active and inordinately vain; his costly extravagance made an enormous demand upon the people, who groaned beneath the heavy burden of taxation, and his wars weakened rather than strengthened the Empire. Though Italy was regained, it was an impoverished and depopulated country which brought but a small addition of power to the Empire. His reign was also disturbed by a constant succession of border inroads, and the fair prospect was overcast with clouds which presaged the gathering storm that burst upon Italy in the days that followed his death in A.D. 565. Her sufferings, in the midst of turmoil, and revolution, her crimes and factions were at this time greater than those she endured at any other period of her history.

The Lombard Invasion.

During the reign of his successor, Justin II, Italy was invaded by the Lombards, the Italianised name of a Teutonic tribe, called by Roman writers the Langobardi, and described by Tacitus as a race "few in number who held their own against numerous and powerful neighbours by their bravery and love of war." With Alboin their king to lead them, and accompanied by a mixed multitude of barbarians, they descended in A.D. 568 upon this unhappy country, now exhausted by the efforts to conquer the Goths, and meeting with little opposition, they established a kingdom at Pavia which lasted for more than 200 years.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

The Throne of S. Peter.

This outline picture of unrest and disquiet is not without its brighter side, for these eventful centuries of change and decay cover a period of the rise of one throne which showed no sign of decadence, but increased in power and brilliance as others tottered to their fall; it was the throne of S. Peter. S. Augustine's Empire of God was no visionary's dream, but an accomplished triumph, for in all the wanderings of the nations, in the rise and fall of tyrant kingdoms, in dissensions and disorganisation, in the overthrow of civilised institutions and in the spread of heresies, there remains "at every step in the tangled history of these times the wonderful life which the Roman name and the Roman power still kept when it was attacked on every side from without and torn in pieces in every quarter from within¹," and the unity of the Empire was supported by the unity of the Church. "One Church stood beside one Empire," says Archdeacon Hutton, "and became year by year even more certain, more perfect, as well as more strong. In the West the papal power rose as the imperial decayed, and before long came near to replacing it²." The growth of this influence marks the earlier half of the 5th century. The bishops of Rome were consulted and courted by the various parties engaged in the factions and disputes of the East, while the bishops of Eastern sees, the prey of mutual jealousies and rivalries, looked to Rome the representative of the Western Churches with its seat in the most ancient and impressive city of the world. The dignity of the Roman see was greatly enhanced and increased by other circumstances, among which the confusion of the civil power was not the least potent. As the wealth of the see increased, the natural influence of riches was felt, and the bishops were able to keep in touch with the ecclesiastical affairs of distant provinces.

The noble character and remarkable genius of the men who filled the papal chair would suffice to make the era memorable. "Upon the mind of Innocent I," says Milman, "seems first distinctly to have dawned the vast conception of Rome's

¹ See Freeman, *Western Europe in the fifth century.*

² W. H. Hutton, *The Church and the barbarians*, p. 4, Rivington, 1906.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

universal ecclesiastical supremacy." He lost none of the many opportunities of maintaining and extending the authority of the Roman see in all disputes, and of repudiating any conception which narrowed the influence of his office. His successor Zosimus was called upon to intervene in the dispute as to the relative jurisdiction of the sees of Arles and Vienne, and he decided in favour of Arles as it had been founded by Trophimus "sent into Gaul by S. Peter¹." Zosimus is further remembered in connection with the Pelagian controversy, in which he made an important step towards increasing the authority of his see. His circular letter is the earliest instance of a document from Rome being proposed for general adoption as a standard of orthodoxy. Celestine went beyond all precedents in the extension of the power of his see, when he assumed the right to depose Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople. His pretensions were not in this case allowed, for the bishop was deposed not by the mandate from Rome, but by bishops in council. Celestine advanced his claims in another direction at Ephesus where his representatives asserted that Rome's supreme judicature rested upon a prerogative exercised by S. Peter through his successors², and it must in scrupulous fairness be allowed that though the great Churches of the East as patriarchal sees cannot be said to have accepted the decisions of the Roman see as final, it is still a fact that "the impartial Apostolic See of Rome" generally discovered the true solutions to the questions raised in the Eastern Churches, and which divided them. Hence the power grew.

In Leo I Rome had a bishop of transcendent genius who made claims far in excess of his predecessors in the see. He was an astute politician as well as a learned theologian. He based his pretensions on unbroken apostolic tradition, and in urging that Alexandria should follow the Roman model he alleged that it would be impious to suppose that S. Mark the disciple would have varied the rules laid down by S. Peter the master³. Leo exercised sway also over Spain and Sicily, and when Hilary, Archbishop of Arles, at a synod held in A.D. 444 deposed Celdonius, and the latter appealed to Rome, Leo welcomed the

¹ Zosimus, *Epp.* 3-5, *Patrol.* 20.

² Labbé, III, 625.

³ *Epp.* 9.

Cambridge University Press

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Saints and Theologians of S. Honorat

A. C. Cooper-Marsdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

opportunity of extending his powers in Gaul. He restored Celidonius, deprived Hilary of the power to hold synods, and influenced the Emperor Valentinian to promulgate a law in which he declared that the Bishop of Rome was the rightful ruler of the whole Church, and that any bishop who neglected a citation to appear at the tribunal of the Bishop of Rome would be compelled to appear by the civil governor of his province. Further developments of the papal power were made by Felix towards the close of the 5th century, when he announced the deposition of Acacius to the clergy and people of Constantinople, and declared that all who sided with the patriarch would be cut off from the Communion of Rome.

The most eminent representative of the 6th century is the great Gregory, who was born in Rome A.D. 540. His homilies describe the depressed state of the Church, which reached its lowest depths at the end of the 6th century. He compared the Church to "an old and violently shattered ship, admitting the waters on all sides, its timbers rotten, shaken by daily storms, and fast becoming a mere wreck¹." Once more it is a time of civil and ecclesiastical decay in which war, disease, and famine devastated the land. Churches were destroyed; the clergy deficient in number as in morality; the princes and nobles sunk in depravity. In these circumstances Gregory showed a marvellous grasp of affairs, keen insight, business instinct, and remarkable tenacity of purpose. Nothing was too minute or unimportant for his close attention. His tolerance was marked by the protection of the Jews in the exercise of their religion, and by his disapproval of coercion. His influence and labours in the conversion of the heathen are too well known to need more than a passing but none the less grateful reference here. To our own island home he despatched Augustine, the provost of his own monastery, with attendant monks, who landed in the island of Thanet in A.D. 597. The rest of the story is too familiar to need recapitulation. His strength of character, his impressive genius, his masterly policy gave him the foremost place among the bishops of Rome, and his greatness is thrown

¹ *Ep.* I, 4.

Cambridge University Press

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Saints and Theologians of S. Honorat

A. C. Cooper-Marsdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

into all the stronger relief by the comparative insignificance of his successors of the next hundred years.

This survey of the secular history of the time and the religious position has not been made without purpose. We are of course not here concerned primarily with the secular life of the centuries during which the monastery of Lerins was a flourishing religious institution, but it is undeniable that the religious life of every age is influenced in its character and form by the secular history of the period, by its prosperity or adversity. It is only by knowledge of the secular history of these centuries that we can form any idea of the world that had to be conquered, and from which many fled. But we must not suppose that monastic institutions, even in their inception, were mere places of refuge, chosen for selfish peace and quiet; rather were they centres of influence, throwing light upon the surrounding darkness. The light may not have penetrated far; still it did penetrate. Recluses were not cowards who could not fight against the wickedness of the world. They entered courageously into conflict with it, and were eager to instruct, to purify, and to conquer. In their chosen retirement they sought the strength necessary for this arduous work. With what results, the great names of bishops, scholars and presbyters mentioned in the succeeding pages who obtained their inspiration from Lerins will we trust amply exhibit.

Again and again might the religious recluse exclaim, "The foundations are destroyed, what shall the righteous do?" And so it was to these "isles of the blest" that men turned in their despair, and it is easy to see how these centuries provided devout natures with a powerful incentive to seek escape from the intolerable oppressiveness, and the great uncertainty of social life. The restlessness of the age impelled men of profound devotion and magnetic influence to go forth fortified by their solitude to guide and rule. There were also, of course, other motives at work. When persecution was not so severe as formerly, there were fewer opportunities of displaying the heroism of confession, and the distinction of martyrdom. Others again, overwhelmed by the corruption of Christian society, and despairing of the success of any attempt to hinder it, sought