

ADVERSUS PAGANOS:
DISASTER, DRAGONS, AND EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY
IN GREGORY OF TOURS

by

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed that, in the early Middle Ages, those phenomena which modern readers might recognize as “natural disasters” were instead interpreted as divine punishments resulting from human sin. The appropriate response to such phenomena thus involved individual and collective penance. This thesis investigates one particularly inscrutable account of a “natural disaster” recorded by Gregory of Tours in Book 10 of his *Histories*: a catastrophic flood of the Tiber River that was followed by an outbreak of pestilence at Rome. The flooding was accompanied by striking *signa* and ominous portents: the corpse of a dragon was washed downstream together with several serpents. The calamity not only destroyed church property but also claimed the life of Pope Pelagius II.

I conclude that Gregory’s description of these events indeed confirms the notion that calamities readily construed by modern readers as natural disasters were seen in the late sixth century as divinely ordained punishments. Yet Gregory’s interpretation of the disasters befalling Rome is also quite complex; the dragon and serpents, I conclude, represent the pagan god Asclepius, and thus form part of a complex interpretive framework drawing upon pagan historiography and the works of Christian apologists. Through this interpretive framework, Gregory sought to reveal the immediate causes of Rome’s divine punishment, the logic behind Pelagius’ death, and the appropriate or ideal role of “the good bishop” or “good shepherd”—represented in this instance by Gregory the Great—in providing succor and ameliorating the effects of a punishment wrought by God.

Preface

An article based on research conducted for this thesis will appear in *Comitatus* 44 (2013).

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For my parents and my sister.

Introduction

In 589, a great flood of the Tiber River sent a torrent of water rushing through the city of Rome. According to Gregory, a contemporary bishop of Tours with contacts to the south, the floodwaters carried with them some rather remarkable detritus: several dying serpents and, perhaps most strikingly, the corpse of a dragon.¹ The flooding was soon followed by a visitation of bubonic plague, which had been haunting Mediterranean ports since 541.² After Pope Pelagius II succumbed to the pestilence, he was succeeded by another Gregory, “the Great,” whose own pontifical career began in the midst of what must have seemed truly an *annus horribilis* to the beleaguered Roman populace.³

This remarkable chain of events—a series of calamities that began with flooding and the appearance of a dragon and culminated in plague and the death of a pope—leaves us with puzzling questions. Why should a sixth-century bishop have associated serpents and a dragon with the *clades*, the divinely rendered disasters, of flooding and pestilence, and what particular significance could someone like Gregory have imagined in such a narrative?⁴ For a modern reader, Gregory’s account, apart from its dragon, reads as nothing so much as the description of a natural disaster, or a series of them; events all too familiar in our own age (and, we might imagine, any other). The language of natural disaster is frequently employed in contemporary political discourse: we send, or request, international aid in the wake of devastating hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes; we anticipate, plan for, and debate climate

¹ Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* (DLH) 10.1, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH, *SRM* (Hannover 1951) 477. Gregory’s word here is *draco*, which can evoke a large serpent, a dragon, or the devil. I will return to his word choice and its parallels in greater detail below. On Gregory and his works in general, see Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge 2001) and Walter Goffart, “Gregory of Tours and the ‘Triumph of Superstition’” in idem, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Notre Dame 1988) 112–234.

² This early bubonic plague pandemic has long been overshadowed historiographically by the more infamous “Black Death” of the fourteenth century. On the earlier pandemic, see Lester K. Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750* (New York 2007); and Josiah C. Russell, “That Earlier Plague,” *Demography* 5, 1 (1968) 174–184. On its effects in Italy, see Michel Rouche, “Grégoire le Grand face à la situation économique de son temps,” *Grégoire le Grand*, ed. Jacques Fontaine (Paris 1986) 43–44.

³ On Gregory the Great, see Robert A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (New York 1997).

⁴ Gregory describes the flooding and pestilence at Rome in 589–590 as *clades*. On the early medieval discourse of *clades*, or “disasters perceived as a punishment from God,” see Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge 2009) 39 n. 139, 151–154, 165, 174–178.

change and global pandemics with trepidation; and we listen with concern to reports of tornadoes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.⁵

Ted Steinberg is among a growing number of historians who have recently demonstrated an increasing interest in the historical study of natural disasters.⁶ Steinberg has sought to articulate the complex social, legal, political, and religious ramifications that make even the term “natural disaster” anything but straightforward.⁷ Natural disasters are frequently labeled “acts of God,” a categorical definition with crucial implications for insurance companies. In the pre-modern period, “acts of God” were assumed to be punishments meted out for human sin, the retributive results of divine anger and judgment.⁸ Steinberg argues that the modern equivalent is, in contrast, more often morally inert, removing blame rather than assigning it. The modern “act of God” is a product of random and unpredictable natural forces, rather than the visitation of divine wrath elicited by specific human wrongdoing. Put another way, to label something an act of God is to shift its cause away from human agency and political will. Steinberg follows this logic to its cynical conclusion, observing that such a shift of emphasis allows preventable catastrophes and poorly managed disasters to escape the taint of social or political culpability. Consequently, in the wake of a tragedy such as Hurricane Katrina, the category of “natural disaster” becomes problematically amoral. After all, if the disaster was “natural” in origin, how could government officials—or anyone for that matter—be held responsible for its

⁵ On the political and international dimensions of such discourse, see John Hannigan, *Disasters Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (Malden, MA 2012).

⁶ The cause of this increasing interest is itself a compelling question. See Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen, “Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies: Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives,” *The Medieval History Journal* 10:1–2 (2007) 7: “...contemporary experiences of major disasters inspire innovation in the field of disaster research, which reflects a modern constellation between disaster and society wherein societies rely on scholarly and scientific expertise.”

⁷ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Toronto 2000).

⁸ See, for example, Justinian I, *Corpus iuris civilis, Novellae 77*:1.1, ed. Rudolf Schoell (Berlin 1912) 382, which forbade swearing, blasphemy, and homosexuality, on the grounds that such acts resulted in famines, earthquakes, and pestilence: “*Propter talia enim delicta et fames et terrae motus et pestilentiae fiunt, et propterea admonemus abstinere ab huiusmodi praedictis illicitis, ut non suas perdant animas.*”

devastating effects?⁹

The interest in natural disaster among modern historians has increasingly been echoed by medievalists. Important studies include Christian Rohr's investigation of the earthquake of Carinthia in 1348, and an analysis of ice core samples by Michael McCormick and Paul Dutton that seeks to understand early medieval climate forcing caused by volcanic eruptions.¹⁰ Lester Little and others have sought to draw attention to newly discovered bacteriological evidence that can shed light on ancient plague pandemics.¹¹ Much of this valuable research has revolved around novel methodological approaches that help reveal the climatic, seismographic, or epidemiological landscape of the past through the study of material remains. Occasionally, such studies have sought to either "verify" or disprove medieval reports of natural phenomena, such as the massive landslide and flooding in 536 at Geneva, described by Gregory of Tours in the fourth book of his *Histories*.¹² A recent study of Lake Geneva's sediment (using "high-resolution seismic reflection profiles") determined that Gregory's account was remarkably accurate.¹³

Paolo Squatriti, however, has called for caution, noting "the optimistic view that postclassical literary accounts match the findings of scientific historical climatology is not always warranted."¹⁴ In particular, Squatriti casts doubt on the severity of the flooding at Rome in 589. Though evidently memorable for Gregory of Tours and later writers, the incident, he argues, should not be used as evidence of a generally deteriorating climate during the period, since the memorialization of this

⁹ These effects may be distributed differently among various socioeconomic groups, reinforcing the idea that natural disasters are hardly apolitical, not only in terms of their causes (for example, climate change), but also in terms of their lasting effects. In addition to Steinberg, see Jeremy I. Levitt, *Hurricane Katrina: America's Unnatural Disaster* (Lincoln 2009).

¹⁰ Christian Rohr, "Man and Natural Disaster in the Late Middle Ages: The Earthquake in Carinthia and Northern Italy on 25 January 1348 and Its Perception," *Environment and History* 9, 2 (2003) 127–149; Michael McCormick, Paul Dutton, and Paul Mayewski, "Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe, A.D. 750–950," *Speculum* 82, 4 (2007) 865–895.

¹¹ Lester K. Little, "Life and Afterlife of the First Plague Pandemic," *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Lester K. Little (New York 2007) 19.

¹² *DLH* 4.31, ed. Krusch and Levison, 163–164.

¹³ Katrina Kremer, Guy Simpson, and Stéphanie Girardclos, "Giant Lake Geneva Tsunami in AD 563," *Nature Geoscience* 5 (2012) 756–757.

¹⁴ Paolo Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory," *Speculum* 85, 4 (2010) 803.

flooding ultimately had more to do with medieval authors' "literary purposes" than its actual severity.¹⁵ Squatriti suggests that new forms of "proxy" data increasingly available to paleoclimatologists (for example, tree ring data, evidence of glacial advancement or retreat, mud and pollen deposits, etc.) must be divorced from the evidence provided by ideologically motivated medieval narratives; the tendency toward a sort of "confirmation bias" should be avoided.¹⁶ One could interpret this to mean that we should not take early medieval narrators at their word, particularly when they set out to describe catastrophes. Is it possible, instead, to rely on scientific evidence that can cast new light on what "really happened"?

Though valuable, such an approach—if taken in isolation—can leave unresolved the question of how people in the early Middle Ages themselves perceived, responded to, and "enacted" natural disaster.¹⁷ As previously mentioned, it is commonly asserted that floods and earthquakes, epidemics and famines were understood in the Middle Ages as the products of human sin and divine judgment.¹⁸ Such an interpretation finds ample support in the *Histories*; Gregory recounts an outbreak of pestilence at Tours in 591 that receded once the people had engaged in collective penance (fasting and "rigid abstinence") and rogations had been instituted.¹⁹ Yet a simple formula of sin followed by divine

¹⁵ Squatriti, "The Floods of 589," 820. It is worth noting, however, that scholars also doubted the severity of the 563 tsunami at Geneva as reported by Gregory, though such doubts were later shown to be unfounded (see n. 13 above).

¹⁶ Squatriti, "The Floods of 589," 808.

¹⁷ On "enactment," which refers to the practices or performances that constitute an object (such as a disease), see Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham 2002).

¹⁸ In addition to Justinian's admonition that the populace should abstain from sin in order to prevent pestilence and other divine punishments (n. 8, above), see also the later, Carolingian example of such logic found in Heito's *Visio Wettini*, 25, ed. Ernst Dümmler, MGH, *PLAC* (Berlin 1884), 2:274: "*Interrogante eo, cur pestilential grassante tanta populi numerositas interiret: 'Inmensitate,' ait, 'criminum mundo peccante peccatorum punitio est, et signum a domino est denuntiatur, praesagio suo demonstrans mundi terminum cito venturum.*" (Trans. here and below by Richard Pollard: "When [Wetti] asked why such a great number of people died as the plague raged, he [sc., the angel who had appeared to him in a vision] said, 'It is a punishment for sins, for the world is heaped high with wrong; it is also a sign announced by the Lord, showing by this harbinger that the end of the world is soon to come.'") Significantly, in Wetti's vision the Church bore great responsibility for avoiding divine punishment; Wetti's angelic visitor subsequently adds, among other things, that the divine office should be celebrated "with all correctness and diligence, in the proper order, without any encroachment of laziness or negligence." Like the *ecclesia*, rulers too could be held responsible for the moral health of their realm. Cf. Rob Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible: Sins, Kings and the Well-Being of the Realm," *Early Medieval Europe* 7, 3 (1998) 345–357; Marita Blattmann, "'Ein Unglück für sein Volk': Der Zusammenhang zwischen Fehlverhalten des Königs und Volkswohl in Quellen des 7.-12. Jahrhunderts," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 30 (1996) 80–102. For more on disease as a punishment for sin in particular, see Susan Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, 3 (2008) 561–562; Dionysios Stathakopoulos, "Crime and Punishment: The Plague in the Byzantine Empire, 541–749," *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Lester K. Little (New York 2007) 106.

¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.30, ed. Krusch and Levison, 525.

judgment and retribution is too limited to explain entirely the diverse and multivalent depictions of natural disasters visible in the sources. Are there more complex ways in which such events could be understood, represented, and indeed *used*, by early medieval authors?

In order to explore this question, I will begin by asking how a sixth-century Frankish bishop, Gregory of Tours, was able to construct narratives about events that—for a modern reader—might readily be categorized as natural disasters.²⁰ I will ask not only how and why such an event might occur, according to our episcopal narrator, but also what actions and rituals constituted appropriate responses, and who ought to perform them. In pursuing these questions, I will focus on one particularly inscrutable account found in the tenth book of Gregory's *Histories*: the flood and subsequent epidemic at Rome in 589–590, sketched above. This episode represents an attempt by Gregory to shape the perception and understanding of a disaster.

For Gregory, I will argue, the death of Pelagius II and the destruction of church property in the flooding of 589 served as signs of God's displeasure with the *ecclesia*. Seeking to understand this evident wrath, Gregory cast a wide interpretive net. The dragon of the Tiber River was an allusion to Asclepius, the serpentine Greek god of healing, whom Ludwig and Emma Edelstein once characterized as “the foremost antagonist of Christ” in late antiquity.²¹ Asclepius had famously made a home on the Tiber Island in the third century BCE, at which time, according to pagan historians, he delivered Rome from a great pestilence. This ancient tradition casts Gregory's description of the dramatic expulsion of a dragon from the Tiber in 589—immediately preceding an outbreak of pestilence—in a new light. I suggest that, from the perspective of our Gallic narrator, God's wrath had at least two evident targets:

²⁰ For the sake of concision, the term “natural disaster” will be used throughout to indicate those phenomena with which modern readers might associate it, such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics. The term is therefore used to connote its modern meaning, though, as I hope to demonstrate, for Gregory and his contemporaries the same phenomena could carry quite different associations.

²¹ Ludwig and Emma Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* 1 (Baltimore 1945) vii. James Charlesworth suggests that “in some centers of Western culture Asclepius was the most revered of all gods” by the first century CE; *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven 2010) 163.

Asclepius himself (possibly employed here as a representative object of idolatrous worship and simultaneously a demonic figure drawn from biblical imagery), as well as the negligent *ecclesia*, which had failed to adequately suppress the worship of idols during a time of considerable upheaval and uncertainty. Gregory's account is thus multivalent; both interpretative and didactic, it refers at once to biblical imagery and pagan historiography.

Asclepius

The narrative reveals that, like Orosius writing more than a century earlier, Gregory of Tours implicitly sought to resist alternative ways of understanding disaster.²² More specifically, with his serpent corpses and dragon, Gregory seems to refer to, and reject, pagan (and thus “bad”) historiography, in the guise of Asclepius. The association between Gregory’s dragon and the pagan cult of Asclepius has been briefly suggested by Alain Stoclet, though he does not explore how (or for what purpose) Gregory arrived at this peculiar association, nor what its implications may be. For Stoclet, “[the] reptilian exodus signifies that [Asclepius] and his minions are deserting the city.”²³ While I agree with Stoclet’s identification, I would argue that, rather than deserting the city, Asclepius is being flushed out of it. Further, if the dragon is indeed Asclepius, we are left wondering as to the identity of his serpentine “minions.” The answer likely lies in the multivalent nature of Gregory’s interpretation, as we will shortly see.

How did Gregory of Tours, a sixth-century Gallic bishop, become aware of the pagan historiography describing Asclepius’ journey to, and salvation of, Rome? It has been suggested that vestiges of the pagan cult of Apollo Medicus (a hypostasis of Asclepius) could still be seen at Paris in the late sixth century. In the eighth book of his *Histories*, Gregory relates the curious tale of two bronze effigies—that of a serpent and that of a rat—discovered not long before in a clogged drain in Paris.²⁴

Gregory writes:

²² Gregory follows in the footsteps of Orosius in several important ways, as we will see; Karl F. Werner, “Gott, Herrscher und Historiograph. Der Geschichtsschreiber als Interpret des Wirkens Gottes in der Welt und Ratgeber der Könige (4. bis 12. Jahrhundert),” *Deus qui mutat tempora: Menschen und Institutionem im Wandel des Mittelalters*, ed. Ernst-Dieter Hehl, et al. (Sigmaringen 1987) 1–32, describes a uniquely Christian sub-genre of historiography originating with Orosius, which sought to describe the history of creation from its beginning, and to illustrate the active nature of God’s judgments at work in the world.

²³ Alain J. Stoclet, “*Consilia humana, ops divina, superstitio*: Seeking Succor and Solace in Times of Plague, with Particular Reference to Gaul in the Early Middle Ages,” *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Lester K. Little (New York 2007) 138–139.

²⁴ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 8.33, ed. Krusch and Levison, 402–403.

It used to be said that this town [Paris] was, as it were, a hallowed place from of old, and that no fire might have mastery over it and neither snake nor rat might appear there. But not long before, when they were cleaning out a drain by the bridge and removing the mud that choked it, they had discovered a brazen serpent and a brazen dormouse. They took both away, and ever afterwards serpents and dormice innumerable were seen, and the city began to suffer from fires.²⁵

Gregory's account suggests that Paris had once been considered a sacred space, immune to the ravages of fire and the depredations of rats and serpents. Yet since the recent removal of the aforementioned bronze figures, the bishop of Tours reports, the city had become overrun with all three. The brevity of this passage, and its distant tone, create the impression that Gregory was merely conveying a remarkable story, one that had in turn been conveyed to him by some unknown source. For Alain Stoclet, however, the bronze effigies represent remnants of the cult of Apollo Medicus, ostensibly a tutelary deity of the ancient city, and a hypostasis of Asclepius.²⁶ With the onset of plague, Stoclet suggests, such extinct healing cults may have experienced a brief— or perhaps merely potential— resurgence. The growth of the cult of the Virgin Mary may have been one result, acting as a Christianized substitution amenable to popular sensibilities.²⁷ Yet there is little firm evidence that the bronze effigies in Gregory's account were actually cultic or religious objects rather than mere talismans. Indeed, the episode suggests that in Merovingian Gaul there were still those who adhered to the ancient homeopathic dictum that "like cures like" (or its apotropaic extension: like repels like). The belief that a

²⁵ "Agebant enim, hanc urbem quasi consecratam fuisse antiquitus, ut non ibi incendium praevaleret, non serpens, non gliris apparuisset. Nuper autem, cum cuniculum pontis emundaretur et coenum, de quo repletum fuerat, auferretur, serpentem gliremque aereum repperierunt. Quibus ablatis, et glires ibi deinceps extra numerum et serpentes apparuerunt, et postea incendia perferre coepit." Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 8.34. English translation adapted from O.M. Dalton, *History of the Franks* 2 (Oxford, repr. 1967) 358. Where English translations are provided, they are generally Dalton's with only minor adjustments.

²⁶ Alain Stoclet, "Entre Esculape et Marie: Paris, la peste et le pouvoir aux premiers temps du Moyen Âge," *Revue historique* 301 (1999) 710ff.

²⁷ Stoclet, "Entre Esculape," 730–731.

talismanic image of a pest could repel that very same pest has a rather long history; for example, the bronze scorpion crafted by Apollonius of Tyana, used to protect Antioch from actual scorpions.²⁸ Indeed, the discovery at Paris may very well have evoked in Gregory's mind a talismanic example more ancient still: that of the biblical brazen serpent, the curer of snake bites.²⁹

Though it remains possible that the bronze effigies unearthed at Paris were cultic or religious objects (representing Apollo Medicus and his associated animals), there is little firm evidence on which to stake such a claim. Indeed, Gregory's own words cast doubt on this interpretation. According to the bishop of Tours (or his unknown source), the effigies *had* been effective in their ostensive task; for after their disposal, the city was plagued with large numbers of fires, rats, and serpents. This suggests that, at least in Gregory's estimation (or that of his sources), the objects held precisely the talismanic function ("like cures like") described above. It cannot, therefore, be argued with any degree of certainty that Gregory was aware of a cult of Apollo Medicus—or its vestiges—in Paris. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated through a survey of the surviving literary evidence that Gregory was aware (by way of textual sources if nothing else) of the Asclepian cult at Rome, and its storied history in that city.

By tracing the narrative of Asclepius' arrival in Rome through the works of both pagan and Christian authors, therefore, I will evince intertextual links between Gregory's account and earlier historical narratives. These include the works of Arnobius the Elder, Lactantius Firmianus, Orosius, and Augustine of Hippo, four late antique authors who each composed historical invectives or apologetic treatises *adversus paganos*, the products of an earlier age. To a greater or lesser degree, each addresses the charge (leveled by pagan critics) that the Christians were responsible for the increasingly severe and

²⁸ Stoclet, "Entre Esculape," 713.

²⁹ Numbers 21.4–9.

frequent disasters that befell the Roman empire in its waning years.³⁰

In reference both to Roman antiquity and to late antique apologetic debates, Gregory draws implicit connections between the pagan past and (for him) contemporary calamities in a way that reveals something of his historical outlook. Where it may be tempting to see discontinuity, Gregory evidently sees a continuous project of Christian historical narrative.³¹ Yet the continued relevance to Gregory of these historical apologetic narratives *adversus paganos* leads to a further suspicion: that Gregory, writing in the late sixth century, evidently still felt that there were those who might turn to alternative sources of succor in the face of devastating calamities like that experienced at Rome in 589–590. In late antiquity, the cult of Asclepius had been perhaps the last to persist in standing against the new faith; Asclepius was worshipped as both a healer and a savior, and his miraculous deeds were similar to those of Christ. It is not surprising that, as Edelstein argues, “apologists and Church Fathers had a hard stand in their fight against Asclepius, in proving the superiority of Jesus, if moral reasoning alone was to be relied upon.”³²

Asclepius, in the guise of the divine serpent, also had a long a history of being conflated with the figure of Christ—as we will soon see—and thus may have presented one particularly viable “alternative source” of succor. This does not mean that organized religious worship of his cult continued into the sixth century in Gaul or Italy, nor does it suggest that rival systems of belief could have presented any serious threat to Christianity in Gregory’s era.³³ But neither is it tenable, I suggest, to fully accept the negative conclusions of Yitzhak Hen, among others, who argue that paganism—or perhaps more accurately, “folkloric culture”—was utterly peripheral in Merovingian society. After all, as late as the

³⁰ The sack of Rome in 410, in particular, provoked pagan criticisms that prompted Augustine’s monumental response, *The City of God*. On the sack of Rome, pagan-Christian debates, and the development of Augustine’s great treatise, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised ed. (Berkeley 2000) 285–304.

³¹ On Gregory’s conception of historiography, see Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 104–115. On his narrative sensibilities, see most recently Sam Collins, “The Written World of Gregory of Tours,” *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources*, ed. Jason Glenn (Toronto 2011) 45–55.

³² Edelstein and Edelstein, *Asclepius 2*, 135–136.

³³ Nevertheless, Alain Stoclet speculates on the possible persistence of vestiges of the cult of Apollo Medicus—who may also be identified with Asclepius—in sixth-century Paris; idem, “Entre Esculape,” 699–746. In contrast, see Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul* (Leiden 1995) 154–206, for what Hen sees as Gregory’s general lack of interest concerning pagan survivals.

end of the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris could still refer to the Tiber Island as “the island of the serpent of Epidaurus.” Though the site was probably in use as some sort of prison by that time, Sidonius at least knew of the island’s earlier fame and significance.³⁴ Such cultural memories were everywhere; indeed, public signs of pagan cults could still be seen in the Gallic countryside as late as the mid-seventh century.³⁵

Drawing on theories of hegemonic and suppressed cultural logics, I will suggest that—at least in times of heightened fear and uncertainty such as might accompany disastrous flooding and pestilence—ecclesiastics like Gregory felt pressed to demonstrate that episcopal power and authority were not only efficacious in the face of disaster, but were in fact the most powerful and legitimate sources of succor available to the people. It is for this reason, I contend, that Gregory takes special care to emphasize the practices and rituals through which Gregory the Great was able to ameliorate the effects of the disaster. This efficacy is portrayed in stark contrast to the futility and impotence of folkloric beliefs, represented in Gregory’s account through an allusion to a salvific narrative from the pagan past. For Gregory, Asclepius appears not as a savior, but as an elicitor of God’s wrath.

³⁴ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae (Ep.)* 1.7.12, ed. Christian Leutjohann, MGH, *AA* (Vienna 1887) 8:12.

³⁵ Elphège Vacandard, “L’idolâtrie en Gaule au VIe et au VIIe siècle,” *Revue des questions historiques* 65 (1899) 424–454.

Pagan survivals?

At first it may strike us as counterintuitive to search for “pagan” or folkloric understandings of natural disaster within the context of Christian narratives.³⁶ Yet, as Bernadette Filotas and Jean-Claude Schmitt have observed, medieval texts that seem to represent a purely ecclesiastic worldview may in fact be “products of an encounter between different cultural logics,” including that of folkloric culture.³⁷

We must nevertheless acknowledge that folkloric belief and myth generally had little place within the totalizing cosmogony of Frankish Christianity. Geoffrey Koziol has convincingly argued that, for the Carolingians at least, “there could be no multiple, equi-valent stories about the world.”³⁸ It is true that the preponderance of ecclesiastic texts from the period makes it difficult to access “cultural logics” that may have existed outside of clerical culture.³⁹ Nevertheless, the coexistence of multiple ways of understanding the world could not be entirely elided even by the Carolingians, whose stubborn disinclination to describe myth did not preclude their condemning it.⁴⁰ Nor can the Carolingians be seen as representative of all early medieval attitudes. As Koziol notes, contemporaneous Anglo-Saxon kings and clerics exhibited an entirely different, and entirely more lenient, attitude toward folkloric culture and

³⁶ On some of the difficulties (and benefits) of searching for “popular religion” or pagan survivals in ecclesiastic texts, see Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto 2005) 18–20; Geoffrey Koziol, “Truth and Its Consequences: Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. Stephen O. Glosecki (Tempe, AZ 2007) 71–103; in addition to Yitzhak Hen’s *Culture and Religion*, see also his “Paganism and Superstition in the Time of Gregory of Tours: *Une question mal posée!*” *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Ian Wood and Kathleen Mitchell (Boston 2002) 229–240.

³⁷ Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Religion, Folklore, and Society in the Medieval West,” *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. Lester K. Little and Barbara Rosenwein (Malden, MA 1998) 377.

³⁸ Koziol, “Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” 76.

³⁹ Schmitt, “Religion, Folklore, and Society,” 379.

⁴⁰ Koziol, “Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” 77: “Even as they condemned these and innumerable other ‘superstitions’ in long lists of prohibited practices, even as they preached against them, cut down sacred trees, engaged in tests of power with pagan gods, Carolingian writers did not explain the practices or recount the beliefs in any way that resembles a coherent story—that is, a myth.” For an example of this phenomenon, see Agobard of Lyons, *De grandine et tonitruis*, ed. Lieven Van Acker, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (Turnhout 1981) 52:1–15. Agobard reports with much derision on the superstitions of his flock, many of whom had recently been blaming a disastrous harvest on *tempestarii*, or weather wizards. Such “folk beliefs,” if not strictly pagan in the sense of organized religious worship, were nonetheless troubling (and exasperating) to the rancorous bishop, who wasted no time in correcting his flock; though in doing so, he provides frustratingly little useful information for the modern historian seeking to understand popular religion. On what can be gleaned, see Paul. E. Dutton, “Thunder and Hail over the Carolingian Countryside,” in idem, *Charlemagne’s Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York 2004) 169–188. Cf. Rob Meens, “Thunder over Lyon: Agobard, the *Tempestarii* and Christianity,” *Paganism in the Middle Ages: Threat and Fascination*, ed. Carlos Steel et al. (Louvain 2012) 157–166.

“pagan survivals.”⁴¹ Further, he argues that a novel and characteristic obsession with notions of *veritas* and *falsitas*, absolute truth and corollary falseness, lay at the center of Carolingian reforms, pointing, as an example, to Charlemagne’s oddly soul-searching interrogation of his subjects and himself, “Are we *truly* Christian?”⁴² As Koziol notes, it is difficult to imagine such a question passing the lips of a Merovingian king.⁴³ If we can find reference to folkloric culture even within the rigidly totalizing corpus of Carolingian Christianity, are we not all the more likely to find such alternative cultural logics lurking at the margins of earlier, Merovingian texts? Historians of both periods must be attentive to internal variation, rather than placing blind faith in the unanimity of *christianitas* as espoused by clerical authors.⁴⁴ By endeavoring to read Gregory’s narrative against its clerical grain, we can begin to unearth subterranean tensions; we may find, indeed, that the substrates of folkloric culture are most visible to us at those precise moments in which they are being suppressed.⁴⁵

We need not conflate folkloric culture with “pagan survivals,” narrowly conceived. Yitzhak Hen has convincingly demonstrated that just as paganism was not a serious rival to Christianity in Merovingian Gaul, neither did it represent any sort of organized religious movement. The assumption that Merovingian society was “Christian by name, but pagan in practice” surely needs to be discarded; paganism may have existed on the margins of Merovingian society, but it was certainly not its defining characteristic.⁴⁶ Even so, numerous references to pagan survivals persist in sixth-century texts, perhaps most notably in the ardent sermons of Caesarius of Arles.⁴⁷ Gregory’s own *Histories* and *Vitae patrum*

⁴¹ Koziol, “Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” 82.

⁴² “*Quod nobis dispiciendum est, utrum vere christiani sumus.*” *Capitula tractanda cum comitibus episcopis et abbatibus* 9, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH, *Capit.* (Hannover 1883) 1:161–162. For a discussion of this passage, see Koziol, “Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” 88.

⁴³ Koziol, “Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” 88.

⁴⁴ Schmitt, “Religion, Folklore, and Society,” 379.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Hen, “Paganism and Superstition,” 230.

⁴⁷ On Caesarius of Arles, see William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (New York 1994). On Caesarius’ attitude toward paganism, see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA 2003) 150–154; see also Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, 1: “Caesarius set the tone for the Christian polemic against pagan survivals; generations of medieval missionaries and pastors repeated his themes and echoed his very words. It

contain a great many references to paganism and folkloric beliefs; and in an epistle to the Austrasian queen Brunhild, Gregory the Great urged the Merovingian regent to prevent her people from making sacrifices, worshipping trees, or displaying the heads of sacrificed animals.⁴⁸ Even those annual ceremonies of collective piety and penance, the rogations—which we will soon have occasion to analyze further—likely had their origin in the pagan festivals of *Robigalia* and *Ambarvalia*. As Geoffrey Nathan notes, this is not merely an observation of modern historians, but is attested as early as the tenth century.⁴⁹

Those scholars who, like Hen, have been skeptical of large-scale “pagan survivals” into the Merovingian period are certainly aware of these examples, and have not dismissed them completely. Hen rightly insists, however, that these offhand allusions do not seem to refer to “a specific religion which operated in Gaul side by side with Christianity,” nor “to any priest or priestess of those supposed pagan religions.”⁵⁰ Yet while Hen’s conclusions may be sound, it is important to distinguish between organized pagan worship, constituting a serious threat to Christianity (which can safely be dismissed), and a stubborn folkloric tradition that gave clerics occasional cause for annoyance, concern, or even alarm. Such traditions may have been, as Hen suggests, marginal to everyday life in the Merovingian world. Yet natural disasters, as extreme events, could have served to bring such marginal beliefs to the fore in a way that particularly promoted ecclesiastic anxiety and necessitated an episcopal response.

The source of this anxiety would lay not only in the myriad (and thus erroneous) interpretations that might be called upon to explain extreme events, but also in the possibility that people could seek relief or aid indiscriminately, from *any* available source—including that of folkloric culture—in times of

would be difficult to overstate his importance for the history of the relations between the early medieval Church and popular culture in Western Europe.”

⁴⁸ Gregory the Great, *Registrum Epistolarum* (*Ep.*) 8.4, ed. Dag Norberg, CCSL (Turnhout 1982) 140a:521. On Gregory’s attitude toward paganism and idolatry, see Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 80–82; on his strategies of conversion, see George Demacopoulos, “Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1:2 (2008) 353–369.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Nathan, “The Rogation Ceremonies of Late Antique Gaul: Creation, Transmission and the Role of the Bishop,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 49 (1999) 275–303.

⁵⁰ Hen, “Paganism and Superstition,” 231.

great upheaval. It would not be surprising if natural disasters provided particularly fertile ground in which the seeds of doubt and misgivings might grow, allowing folkloric culture to proffer alternative explanations and sources of comfort amid great fear and uncertainty. In the sixth century, natural disasters therefore may have provided especially uneasy moments for ecclesiastics, who sought to ensure that these events—so extreme by nature—did not afford an opportunity for “wrong belief” or misguided interpretations to take root and develop among the desperate populace. For Gregory, a flood would have threatened not only human lives, but also—should people turn in a moment of doubt and weakness to alternative explanatory models, or non-Christian sources of *auxilium*—human souls.

This fear would not have been a new one. That calamitous events could provide pagans with fodder for criticism, or cause Christians to question their faith, was a central motivating concern of the Iberian priest Orosius’ famous *Historiae adversus paganos*, completed before 418.⁵¹ Orosius undertook this work at the behest of his mentor, Augustine of Hippo, whose own *De civitate Dei* explored similar territory (albeit from an infinitely more complex theoretical perspective). The *Historiae*, written in the wake of the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410, sought to reveal the active role that divine judgment played in historical events. It evidently enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages; 245 manuscript copies survive, fourteen of which date to some time before the ninth century.⁵² Orosius certainly exerted a direct influence on Gregory, who openly lists him among his sources for the *Histories*.⁵³ This historiographical indebtedness is suggestive when we recall that Orosius was ostensibly writing for a mixed audience of pagan and Christian readers, with the intention of proving to both that disastrous events had not been

⁵¹ Santo Mazzarino, “The Judgement of God as an Historical Category,” in idem, *The End of the Ancient World*, trans. George Holmes (New York 1966) 58. On Orosius, see Werner, “Gott, Herrscher und Historiograph,” 7–18. See also Jocelyn N. Hillgarth, “The *Historiae* of Orosius in the Early Middle Ages,” *De Tertullian Aux Mozarabes*, ed. Louis Holtz, J.-C. Fredouille, and M.-H. Jullien (Paris 1992) 161–170.

⁵² Hillgarth, “Orosius in the Early Middle Ages,” 160.

⁵³ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 1, *Praef.*, ed. Krusch and Levison, 5: “Orosius too, searching into these matters with the utmost diligence, collects the whole number of years from the beginning of the world down to his own time.” On Gregory’s sources, see Benedikt Vollman, “Gregor IV (Gregor von Tours),” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. Theodor Klauser et al. (Leipzig 1983) 12:895–930.

increasing in frequency or severity in the Christian era.⁵⁴ Aside from providing another model for understanding historical disasters as divine punishment for sin, Gregory's familiarity with Orosius' text may also have introduced him to the narrative of Asclepius' arrival and veneration in Rome.⁵⁵

Orosius describes the pagan god's journey from Epidaurus in order to criticize the belief, absurd in his mind, that Asclepius had saved Rome from disaster in the past and might do so again in the future. This scornful recollection was prompted, of course, by pagan critics (those "*alieni a civitate Dei*") who suggested that the empire's conversion to Christianity—and a concomitant loss of the protection of pagan deities like Asclepius—had clearly led to increasing turmoil.⁵⁶ In response, Orosius sought to cast history as a register of God's judgments. Fortunate events, he would argue, resulted from divine favor, while disasters were a consequence of God's displeasure in the face of human sins. Orosius sought to formulate an exclusively Christian interpretation of the disasters that plagued late imperial Rome, while simultaneously denigrating pagan deities and the divine protection they ostensibly provided.

Writing more than a century later, Gregory echoes this interpretive model at several points, as in his *De virtutibus S. Juliani*, which explicitly states that a pestilence "fell upon" (*ingruentibus*, as though from heaven?) the people because of their increasing sins.⁵⁷ As Giselle de Nie has noted, such events for Gregory do not *happen* so much as they *appear* (*apparere*), often being described as prodigies (*prodigia*) or signs of God's ongoing involvement in the affairs of the world. They reveal the fact of divine anger

⁵⁴ Theodore E. Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," in idem, *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Eugene F. Rice, Jr. (Ithaca, NY 1959) 327–328.

⁵⁵ That Gregory acknowledges his use of Orosius' text in the prologue to the *Histories* makes his familiarity with the Asclepius narrative nearly certain. As I will argue below, Gregory may also have been familiar with other Christian sources containing the narrative of Asclepius' journey from Epidaurus to Rome.

⁵⁶ Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos (Historiae)*, ed. Karl Zangemeister, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 5* (Vienna 1882). In his *Praefatio*, Orosius makes his purpose clear: "You (sc., Augustine) had instructed me to write against the arrogant wickedness of those who are strangers from the city of God [...] These men, as they do not look to the future and have either forgotten or are ignorant of the past, besmirch the present as a time particularly full of evils, far beyond those which are always with us, and do so for this reason alone: because Christ is believed in and God worshipped... while their idols are worshipped the less." This translation is adapted from that of A.T. Fear, *Orosius: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Liverpool 2010) 32.

⁵⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Liber de passione et virtutibus sancti Iuliani* 46a, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, *SRM* (Hannover 1885) 1(2):132.

and signal possible further retribution.⁵⁸ At one point, beholding what could only have been the northern lights in the skies above Carignan, Gregory remarks, “This was a great sign, and filled us with fear. For we expected that some plague would be sent upon us from heaven.”⁵⁹ Later, in October 590, Gregory again describes what seems to be the aurora borealis, this time in connection with other portents: an earthquake, an eclipse, and flooding, all of which precede outbreaks of bubonic plague in Viviers and Avignon.⁶⁰ This interpretive mode is not necessarily incompatible with another, more eschatological view also espoused by Gregory, particularly in the latter portion of his *Histories*—namely, that disasters like flooding and pestilence may signal the beginning of the end of days.

The apocalyptic theme of Gregory’s work becomes increasingly pronounced over the course of its tenth book, as when Gregory reflects on a recent earthquake in Antioch and the arrival of plague and famine in Gaul. Of these phenomena Gregory remarks, “these are ‘the beginnings of sorrows’ according to the statement of the Lord in the Gospel: ‘there shall be pestilence and famine and earthquakes in divers places...and there shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and they shall show signs and wonders in heaven so that they will even deceive the elect’; just as such things are happening now.”⁶¹ Gregory follows these remarks with the story of one such false Christ. For Heinzelmann, “such individuals being a clear product of social circumstances, since epidemics and famine regularly generate social unrest and religious movement, Gregory’s comments demonstrate to modern minds a surprising lack of understanding of this situation.”⁶² I would suggest that, on the contrary, Gregory was all too aware that the arrival of false prophets and false idols would inevitably result from desperate circumstances. His insistence that such phenomena represent apocalyptic omens is an effort to warn

⁵⁸ Giselle De Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam 1987) 28.

⁵⁹ *DLH* 8.17, ed. Krusch and Levison, 384: “*Quod signum magum nobis ingressit metum. Operiebamur enim, super nos aliquam plagam de caelo transmitti.*”

⁶⁰ *DLH* 10.23, ed. Krusch and Levison, 514–515.

⁶¹ “*Initia sunt enim haec dolorum iuxta illud quod Dominus ait in evangelio.*” Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.25, ed. Krusch and Levison, 517.

⁶² On what Heinzelmann sees as the overarching eschatological theme of Book 10, see *Gregory of Tours*, 77–86.

others of their danger; it is for this reason that Gregory emphasizes his attempts to “recall from error” those who had proclaimed themselves prophets. Despite the eschatological tone of his remarks, there is no sense of finality or hopelessness. Gregory expressly forbids the alteration or excerpition of portions of his work in the future; this would be an odd enjoinder for someone who truly believed the end of the world was near.⁶³ Nevertheless, the remarkable sights that accompanied the disastrous events of 589 could be understood as apocalyptic omens.⁶⁴ Gregory does not explicitly describe them as such, but there is no reason that—in addition to representing divine punishment for sin—these signs might not also have relevance to his eschatological sensibilities. Despite this, Gregory’s narrative seems to place a much stronger emphasis on error and its correction; not content merely to identify and describe signs and prodigies, Gregory also endeavors to emphasize the importance of episcopal action and authority—the mobilization of practices or rituals by bishops to ameliorate suffering in the wake of disaster.⁶⁵

A staunchly positivist historian might ask whether these practices or rituals were actually carried out in the way they are described. While such a historian would likely have little difficulty imagining penitential processions through Rome in the midst of an epidemic, he or she might have problems accepting the *prodigia* accompanying this account, as a result allowing the inclusion of miracles and wonders to cast doubt on the entire narrative.⁶⁶ Additionally, the difficulty of even locating practice and ritual within textual sources (often with their own polemical purposes) has been a subject of debate

⁶³ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.31, ed. Krusch and Levison, 477: “*Quos libros licet stilo risticiori conscripserim, tamen coniuro omnes sacerdotes Domini, qui post me humilem ecclesiam Turonicam sunt rectori, per adventum domini nostri Iesu Christi ac terribilem reis omnibus iudicii diem, sic numquam confusi de ipso iudicio discedentes cum diabolo condempnemini, ut numquam libros hos aboleri faciatis aut rescribi, quasi quaedam eligentes et quaedam praetermittentes, sed ita omnia vobiscum integra inlibataque permaneant, sicut a nobis relictas sunt.*”

⁶⁴ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 80.

⁶⁵ On episcopal intervention in times of famine, for example, see Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley 2005) 232–234. See also Peregrine Horden, “Disease, Dragons and Saints: The Management of Epidemics in the Dark Ages,” *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge 1995) 45–76.

⁶⁶ On this point, see Robert M. Stein, “Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History,” *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (London 2005) 67–87.

among medievalists.⁶⁷ For my purposes, however, both the fantastical and polemical character of the narrative in question can prove a help rather than a hindrance; what “really happened” can be subordinated to Gregory’s rhetorical aims as narrator. Whether the events, practices, and rituals Gregory describes actually happened as we are told is less germane than their having been described as such.

By analyzing the ways in which Gregory felt bishops *could* and *should* respond to extreme events, we move closer to understanding how he was able to make sense of such events and use them rhetorically. As Roger Ray has convincingly argued, early medieval historians, borrowing a page from their ancient forebears, turned not infrequently to rhetorical *inventio*. The intent of engaging in such literary elaboration, exaggeration, and outright fabrication, Ray argues, was not to deceive, but rather to provide the most persuasive means by which a reader might be convinced to interpret the events described in what the author felt was the correct way.⁶⁸ Seen in this light, Gregory’s narrative becomes less a simple description of events than an act of interpretation with didactic overtones.⁶⁹ It seems implausible that Gregory’s didactic message was intended for a rustic, superstitious audience; he did not mean to correct the flock, but rather the shepherds, and perhaps the Roman *ecclesia* specifically (an institution in which he had previously expressed little faith). Indeed, until the appearance of Gregory the Great in its final book, the *Histories* takes a markedly distant stance toward Rome, which Gregory affords no special privilege.⁷⁰ The glowing description of Gregory the Great in the midst of catastrophic circumstances thus stands in marked contrast to what had come earlier in the *Histories*; this contrast is particularly striking when we look at the treatment of Pelagius II, Pope Gregory’s immediate

⁶⁷ For an overview of this debate, see Geoffrey Koziol, “The Dangers of Polemic: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study?” *Early Medieval Europe* 11, 4 (2002) 367–388; and Philippe Buc, “The Monster and the Critics: A Ritual Reply,” *Early Medieval Europe* 15, 4 (2007) 441–452.

⁶⁸ Roger Ray, “The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions in Pre-Carolingian Historiography,” *The Inheritance of Historiography: 350–900*, ed. Christopher Holdsworth and T.P. Wiseman (Exeter 1986) 67–84. See also Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 87: “For Gregory, the simple, positivist description of an historical event was clearly subordinated to the intended message.”

⁶⁹ Cf. the insightful remarks of Collins, “The Written World of Gregory of Tours,” 45–55.

⁷⁰ See Thomas F.X. Noble, “Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church,” *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Ian Wood and Kathleen Mitchell (Leiden 2002) 145–161. It is notable that Gregory’s description of the events at Rome in 589–590 represent a marked departure from his usual indifference toward the papacy.

predecessor, as we will shortly.

Yet if Gregory of Tours sought an interpretation of the disaster at Rome that held didactic value, how might it be possible for modern readers to access it? Is there any feasible way to adopt the interpretive lens through which a sixth-century Gallic bishop would have sought to understand an event we consider to be a “natural disaster”? The dragon and serpents of Gregory’s narrative stand out in particular as objects in need of symbolic interpretation. Although I have suggested that they represented, for Gregory, the Greek god of healing Asclepius, it may be useful to ask what else dragons could signify in the sixth-century imaginary.

Pestiferous dragons

Heinzelmann remarks in passing that the dragon and serpents in Gregory's account may have been intended to represent apocalyptic omens.⁷¹ This would not be without scriptural precedent. The Christian Bible, of course, abounds with serpentine imagery from its first book to its last, and thus seems a fitting place to begin any investigation into the meaning behind Gregory's symbolism. Christine Rauer notes that "the dragon serves as one of the commonest Christian symbols of evil, functioning as a formidable and monstrous adversary of God, man, and beast alike."⁷² There is certainly much truth to this. Like the infamous red dragon of Apocalypse, the serpent of Genesis could evoke the devil; but unlike the former, it could also symbolize knowledge and sexual desire. Indeed, biblical serpentine imagery is often difficult to categorize, sometimes carrying what appear to be ambiguous or even positive connotations. Nehushtan, the brazen serpent raised by Moses in Numbers 21, for example, was said to relieve the suffering of Israelites who had been bitten by snakes. In 2 Kings 18.4, however, King Hezekiah destroys the serpentine effigy, since "unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it"—a reference to idolatrous worship.

A New Testament reference to this same serpent of Moses occurs in John 3.14–15, wherein the evangelist appears to compare Christ with the snake: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, in order that all who believe in him may have eternal life."⁷³ A scantily attested Christian sect of the third century interpreted these words literally, identifying Christ himself with Moses' serpent. According to the anonymous Pseudo-Tertullian, these "Ophians" in fact "preferred the serpent to Christ," while Epiphanius of Salamis would later assert that they merely believed the two to be identical.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Christ appears to advocate the

⁷¹ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 80.

⁷² Christine Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge 2000) 52.

⁷³ From the Vulgate: "*Et sicut Moses exaltavit serpentem in deserto ita exaltari oportet filium hominis ut omnis qui credit in ipso non pereat sed habeat vitam aeternam.*"

⁷⁴ For a brief discussion of what little is known of the Ophians and related sects—including the Naassenes and Peratae—see Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent*, 469–472.

subjugation of serpentine creatures elsewhere in Christian scripture; in Luke 10.19, for example, he calls on his followers to tread upon them; in Mark 16.18, Christians are bidden to handle serpents without fear.

The handling of serpents without fear would take on literary significance in the early medieval period against the backdrop of a newly flourishing hagiographic topos—that of the saintly dragon-fight, another possible source for some of Gregory’s figurative imagery. More than fifty medieval saints seem to be associated—either through iconography or hagiography—with this topos.⁷⁵ An example can be found in the sixth-century *Vita Marcelli*, usually attributed to Gregory’s friend and contemporary Venantius Fortunatus, in which the eponymous saint calmly subdues and then banishes a pestiferous dragon that had recently been terrifying the populace of a small Parisian suburb.⁷⁶ The hagiographic dragon-fight, according to Rauer, possesses certain recurring themes, several of which are relevant to our concerns: the majority of such episodes are set “during periods of conversion,” in a milieu that includes both Christian and pagan witnesses;⁷⁷ the arrival of the saint is usually preceded by a great catastrophe or destruction precipitated by the dragon;⁷⁸ and typically this destruction comes in the form of disease and mass death (metaphorically described as a result of the dragon’s pestiferous breath).⁷⁹ Further, the saint’s intervention is usually predicated on improving the “deficient spiritual status” of the terrified populace, who may display doubt or “deficient Christian faith”—a faith that is renewed following the dragon’s

⁷⁵ Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, 52.

⁷⁶ Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Marcelli*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, *SRM* (Hannover 1885) 4(2):49–54. This episode has been the object of a well known study by Jacques Le Goff, who explores the relationship between Christianity and folkloric traditions in “Ecclesiastical Culture and Folklore in the Middle Ages: Saint Marcellus of Paris and the Dragon,” in idem, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago 1980) 159–188. More recently, see Horden, “Disease, Dragons and Saints,” 45–76. Horden asserts that the *Vita Marcelli* might provide a glimpse of early medieval public health practices, namely, the bishop’s role in managing epidemics and outbreaks (represented, in this case, by a pestiferous dragon). The authorship of the *Vita Marcelli* has been questioned; according to Antoine Rivet de la Grange, *Histoire littéraire de la France* (Paris 1735), 3:298: “L’identité de nom l’a fait confondre par plusieurs avec le célèbre Venance Fortunat, Evêque de Potiers à la fin de ce VI siècle. Mais il n’est pas possible de se refuser aux preuves qui les distinguent l’un de l’autre,” e.g. the one Fortunatus from the other. Rivet evidently believed the author of the *Vita Marcelli* to be Saint Fortunatus “the Philosopher,” also of Italian extraction and a lesser-known contemporary of Venantius.

⁷⁷ Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, 59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

banishment or taming by the saint.⁸⁰ Indeed, many of the themes associated with saintly dragon-fights evoke elements of Gregory's account; for example, the dragon's home is often located on, or in, a body of water, such as the sea, or—in the case of the Tiber—a river.⁸¹

Since Gregory's serpents and dragon appear just prior to an outbreak of pestilence, it is tempting to infer some connection with the pestiferous dragons so commonly seen in early medieval hagiographic dragon-fights. Yet several crucial elements of the genre are missing from Gregory's narrative, not least of which is the "fight" itself; Gregory's dragon has already died, having been swept out of the city in a torrential flood. No saint has a chance to confront or tame it before it is claimed by the waves. Also peculiar to Gregory's account is the "multitude of serpents" that accompanied the massive dragon. My contention is that both of these aberrant elements are crucial to understanding Gregory's narrative. While Gregory was certainly familiar with, and perhaps drew upon, the topos of the saintly dragon-fight, his interpretation of the events at Rome was at once more wide reaching and more specific. As I have suggested above, several elements of his account strongly suggest an association with the historical narrative of Asclepius' journey to Rome, and the pagan god's salvation of the city in the midst of a third-century BCE epidemic. However, in order to understand Gregory's particular interpretive and didactic aims, it is first necessary to investigate the potential sources of his knowledge of Asclepius.

⁸⁰ Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, 72.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Tracing a narrative

Like Asclepius' journey from Epidaurus to Rome in pagan antiquity, the narrative of the journey itself has followed a sometimes circuitous route. Three pagan authors provide important early accounts. Our first source for the god's *adventus* in Italy is the first-century Roman historian Livy, who leaves a brief report in the extant portions of his *Ab urbe condita*.⁸² From these passages, we learn that around 293 BCE a pestilence raged in Rome. Recourse was made to the Sybilline books, wherein it was discovered that in order to bring relief from the suffering, the divine Asclepius should be summoned (*arcessendum*) from his earthly seat at Epidaurus.

As the Greek god of healing, Asclepius had long been worshipped in classical antiquity, and his cult was likely already present in Italy by the third century BCE (at which time we are told that he was summoned). Evidently, it was not the cult of Asclepius that was "summoned" to Rome, but the god himself. This task could not be accomplished immediately, Livy reports, since the consuls were at that time preoccupied with war; rather, a day of supplication was held until more could be done at some later date. Within a year, a group of legates finally sailed for Epidaurus, where a serpent carrying the *numen* (sc., divinity) of the god conveyed itself aboard the Roman vessel, returning thence to Italy. Upon the serpent's arrival, Livy reports, it slithered ashore on the Tiber Island, where a temple to the god was duly consecrated.⁸³

The journey of Asclepius to Rome is next recounted by the first-century poet Ovid, whose more extravagant description appears in his *Metamorphoses*.⁸⁴ The basic details of the god's journey having been described above, it is only necessary here to note the points on which Ovid's account differs substantially from Livy's. According to Ovid, the Romans, made desperate by pestilence, consulted the oracle at Delphi rather than the Sybilline books; nevertheless, the result was the same. Sailing to

⁸² Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 10.47, 7, ed. Benjamin O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA 1926) 544.

⁸³ Livy, *Periocha* 11, ed. Benjamin O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA 1926) 548.

⁸⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15, 622–744, ed. Rudolf Merkel and Rudolf Ehwald, Teubner (Leipzig 1928) 310–314.

Epidaurus, the Romans faced opposition from the elders of the *polis*, who were reluctant to part with their god. (It seems that Asclepius could not be in two places at once.) In a dream vision, however, Asclepius assured the legates that he would willingly travel to Rome with them in the form of a serpent. Departing the next morning with their divine cargo, the Romans began their journey home. They stopped briefly at Antium, where, perhaps frightened by stormy seas (*asper enim iam pontus erat*), Asclepius abandoned ship to take refuge at a temple of Apollo. After several days of anxious waiting, the serpent finally returned to the ship once the storm had ended and seas were calm, eventually continuing to Rome as a bringer of health (*salutifer*). Ovid also makes reference to a temple of Asclepius on the Tiber Island in his *Fasti*.⁸⁵

The accounts of two additional pagan authors should also be noted. Writing in the first century CE, Valerius Maximus may have based his account on Livy's, though this is difficult to prove with any certainty, since most of the latter's work has been lost.⁸⁶ In any case, Valerius seems to agree for the most part with what is left of Livy's account, though he differs from Ovid in one important respect. According to the latter, Asclepius' brief stopover and refuge at Antium was apparently precipitated by rough, stormy seas, whereas Valerius mentions no storm. A later anonymous author, the pseudo-Aurelius Victor, goes so far as to specify that the seas at Antium were in fact "gentle" (*mollities mare*).⁸⁷ Perhaps this early fourth-century account was concerned to dispel any notion, gleaned from Ovid's version of events, that Asclepius was a god who could be frightened by rough waves. This distinction seems to have important implications for the later Christian reception of the narrative, as we shall see.

Only five Christian authors explicitly discuss Asclepius' journey to Rome: Plutarch, Arnobius the

⁸⁵ Ovid, *Fasti* 1, 290–294, ed. James G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA 1951) 23.

⁸⁶ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 1.8.2, ed. John Briscoe, Teubner (Leipzig 1998) 67–69.

⁸⁷ Anonymous, *De viris illustribus urbis Romae (VIUR)* 22, 3, *Sextus Aurelius Victor*, ed. Franz Pichlmayr, Teubner (Leipzig 1961) 39.

Elder, Lactantius Firmianus, Orosius, and Augustine.⁸⁸ Each of them belongs to the period of late antiquity; one of the earliest, Lactantius, wrote the *Divinae institutiones* between 303 and 311, with possible revisions in 313,⁸⁹ while the latest, Augustine of Hippo, completed *De civitate Dei* between 413 and 426.⁹⁰ Arnobius the Elder, of whom Jerome tells us Lactantius was a pupil, completed his only extant work, *Adversus nationes*, some time shortly before 311.⁹¹ Probably a resident of Sicca in Africa, Arnobius was a recent convert to Christianity, and brought his classical rhetorical training to bear against his former co-religionists late in life. Arnobius' lengthy invective on the Asclepian journey from Epidaurus to Rome begins by casting doubt on the very notion that an enormous serpent (*magnus coluber*) could really be a god, and dwells at length on its vulgar form:

What shall we say then? That Asclepius, whom you extol as an excellent, venerable god, the giver of health, the averter, preventer, destroyer of sickness, is contained within the form and outline of a serpent crawling along the earth as worms are wont to do? [That] he rubs the ground with his chin and breast, dragging himself in sinuous coils; and, so that he may be able to go forward, he draws on the last part of his body by the efforts of the first?⁹²

Interestingly, despite Arnobius' alleged connection to Lactantius, he describes Asclepius rather

⁸⁸ As Plutarch contributes essentially nothing new, I have not included his account here. Writing somewhat later, Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 1.7, ed. Leutjohann, 12, also alludes to Asclepius' tenure on the Tiber Island, but does not directly mention the narrative of his journey from Epidaurus: "...capite multatus in insulam coniectus est serpentis Epidauri..." According to Sidonius, Arvandus, a prefect of Gaul (c. 469), was sentenced to death and taken "to the island of the serpent of Epidaurus," which presumably was home to a prison by that time—or at least had structures that could be used for holding prisoners. The reuse of pagan priestly dormitories for prison cells would not be surprising.

⁸⁹ On Lactantius Firmianus, see A. Wlosok, "L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius," *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike*, ed. R. Herzog and P.L. Schmidt (Munich 1987), 5:375–404. On the difficulty of dating Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*, see Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the *Divine Institutes*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, 1 (1994) 33–52.

⁹⁰ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 301.

⁹¹ George E. McCracken, "Introduction," in idem, *Arnobius of Sicca: The Case Against the Pagans* (London 1978) 12.

⁹² Arnobius the Elder, *Adversus nationes* (AN) 7, 44–45, ed. August Reifferscheid, *CSEL* (Vienna 1875) 4:278–279.

differently than would his pupil—opting for decidedly earthly, animalistic terms. Arnobius’ Asclepius is not a *draco*, devil, or demon, as we will later see him described in Lactantius’ treatise, but a mere snake: a *serpens*, an *asper*, a *coluber*. Arnobius rejects the claim that the snake’s divinity can be proven by the fact that, after alighting on the Tiber Island, it disappeared from sight and could not be found.⁹³ His straightforward retort is that the snake may simply have found a hiding place, as snakes are wont to do. Perhaps the most interesting argument advanced by Arnobius is that Asclepius has failed to protect Rome from epidemics in subsequent ages. It makes little sense, he asserts, that Rome has “over and over again had seasons made mournful by these diseases,” asking, “Where, then, was Asclepius? Why, after temples were built [to him], did he allow a state deserving his favor” to suffer further catastrophes?⁹⁴ Arnobius anticipates the pagan reply that Rome has lost the gods’ favor because of the spread of Christianity. Even if Asclepius and the rest of the pagan gods are displeased with the Christians, argues Arnobius, so in Rome as “in all cities” the righteous have always been mixed with the evil, and thus “it is rather stupid to say that mortals of a later day have not obtained the aid of the deities on account of their wickedness.”⁹⁵

Lactantius, the supposed pupil of Arnobius, probably began work on his *Divine Institutes* at Nicomedia in the wake of rising anti-Christian persecution under the Emperor Diocletian.⁹⁶ According to Jerome, however, he spent his old age in Gaul, residing probably at Trier, a tutor to the “young Caesar”

⁹³ Exactly whose claim is uncertain. It may be that Arnobius is refuting an aspect of Livy’s account that has been lost to us. It is also possible that Arnobius is merely setting up a fictive straw man.

⁹⁴ Arnobius argues that Asclepius, had his power been authentic, would have remedied not only one particular epidemic but also prevented future ones: “*Ubi ergo Aesculapius fuit, ubi ille promissus oraculis venerabilibus? Cur templa post condita sibi que exaedificata delubra diutius aditus habere perpessus est bene merita civitatis luem, cum in id esset aditus, ut et malis mederetur instantibus nec sineret in futurum tale aliquid quod metueretur inreperere?*” Arnobius, *AN* 7, 47, ed. Reifferscheid, 282.

⁹⁵ “*Cum vero res ita sit, ut in magnis populis, nationibus, quin immo et in civitatibus cunctis mixtum sit humanum genus naturis voluntatibus moribus tamque potuerint in prioribus saeculis quam in novellis aetatibus boni simul malique existere, stultum satis est dicere, propter malitias posteror auxilia numinum non meruisse mortales.*” Arnobius, *AN* 7, 48, ed. Reifferscheid, 282

⁹⁶ Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca 2000) 5.

Crispus.⁹⁷ Like Arnobius, Lactantius critiqued the notion of Asclepius’ divinity, questioning the classical traditions on which his cult was based. In his estimation, Asclepius had accomplished nothing worthy of a god. In his original (mortal) form, he was said to have been killed by lightning—proof of mortality for Lactantius, who could not imagine that a god could be killed in such a fashion.⁹⁸ Lactantius’ account of Asclepius’ arrival in Rome is intriguing and may be important for understanding Gregory’s later text. In a passage replete with biblical imagery, Lactantius explains that the lesser pagan gods worshipped by the Romans are in fact fallen angels, and thus demons and servants of the devil.⁹⁹ The idea that pagan gods were actually demons was not an innovation. In the Latin Vulgate, the gods of the nations are called *daemonia* (Psalm 95.5), a translation that follows the Greek Septuagint but veers somewhat in meaning from the original Hebrew, which is better rendered as “idols.” In any case, Augustine certainly embraced this notion, arguing in his *City of God* that, through some “unknown art,” demons were “bound by the chains of their own desires to idols.”¹⁰⁰

For Lactantius, the chief or leader of these demons could be identified as none other than the serpent delivered from Epidaurus to Rome in order to save the city from pestilence. This “archdemon” (devil?) was “carried thither” in his own form, without any disguise.¹⁰¹ Lactantius refers to Asclepius in the same passage as a *draconem...mirae magnitudinis* (dragon or serpent of immense size), evoking biblical imagery;¹⁰² *draco* here can simply mean snake, but it can also suggest the *draco* of Apocalypse

⁹⁷ Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, ed. Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 14 (Leipzig 1896) 80.

⁹⁸ Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* (*DI*) 1.19, 4–5, ed. Samuel Brandt, *CSEL* (Leipzig 1890) 19:71: “*Immo vero quia factum est, apparet hominem fuisse, non deum.*” (Indeed, since it [sc., Asclepius’ murder] was done, it appears that he was a man, not a god.)

⁹⁹ The idea that pagan gods were in fact demons had been attested earlier. For example, see Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 5.2, ed. Paul Koetschau, *Patrologia Graeca* (Paris 1899) 11:1184, which specifies that Apollo and Asclepius are some sort of demons, and inferior to the wise among men. Lactantius, elsewhere in his *Divinae institutiones* (1.7.5–12) repeats this claim, as for example his assertion (1.7.9) that Apollo belongs among the demons rather than the gods.

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 8.24, ed. Dombart and Kalb, *CCSL* 47 (Turnhout 1955). Trans. R.W. Dyson, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge 1998) 352.

¹⁰¹ “*Nam illuc daemoniarques ipse in figura sua sine ulla dissimulatione perlatus est,*” Lactantius, *DI* 2.16, 12–13, ed. Brandt, 169.

¹⁰² “*...siquidem legati ad eam rem missi draconem secum mirae magnitudinis advexerunt,*” Lactantius, *DI* 2.16, 13, ed. Brandt, 170.

12.7, a dragon of immense size, who, together with “his angels” (*et angeli eius*), makes war against the archangel Michael; overthrown, the red dragon and his angelic host fall to the Earth in defeat. Lactantius seems to equate these fallen angels and the *draco* who leads them with the “lesser” or mortal pagan gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon, the leader of whom he identifies as Asclepius.¹⁰³ Indeed, Lactantius asserts that, taking the very form of a *draco*, Asclepius does not even bother to disguise his true demonic shape. As we will see, Lactantius’ imagery and word choice provide possible clues to understanding Gregory of Tours’ puzzling interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome in 589–590.

Before returning to Gregory, however, we must first survey the remaining Christian accounts of Asclepius’ Roman *adventus*. The final two Christian authors to directly address our narrative belong to a somewhat later era. Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine and Orosius found themselves in the midst of particularly calamitous times, and their work addresses the specific concerns of the period. The “eternal city” of Rome, long the symbol of empire and power, was sacked in 410 by a Visigothic army led by Alaric I. Though the city’s real position within the western empire had declined significantly by the fifth century, this symbolically charged catastrophe sent shock waves through the Mediterranean. In distant Jerusalem, Jerome wrote that a *rumor terribilis* had reached him from the West: that Rome, a city that had taken the whole world, was itself taken.¹⁰⁴ The Christians were again held to blame by critics, who argued that the pagan deities no longer protected the eternal city of Rome as they once had, a result of the spread of the new religion. Ensclosed in his episcopal seat in Africa and observing events from afar, Augustine set to work refuting these accusations. The result was his monumental and overwhelmingly influential work *De civitate Dei*, in which he would argue that the sack of the earthly city of Rome was merely another calamity in a long chain of disasters that were only to be expected in the fickle, material world. To those who were citizens of another city—the city of God—the fall of any

¹⁰³ Lactantius, *DI* 2.16, 12–13, ed. Brandt, 169–170.

¹⁰⁴ Jerome, *Epistulae* 127.12, ed. Isidore Hilberg, *CSEL* (Vienna 1918) 56:154.

earthly *civitas* could only be of slight consequence.¹⁰⁵

Augustine's work was philosophically challenging.¹⁰⁶ In the early Middle Ages it was certainly held in high regard, though that does not mean that Augustine's words were necessarily well understood.¹⁰⁷ He had begun with a rather simple, direct argument for those who could not be swayed by the philosophical reasoning of his greater theological treatise: disasters, Augustine argued, had been a characteristic of temporal history since ancient times. They were not, in fact, becoming more frequent, nor more severe, in the Christian era. A systematic survey of the history of the world from the beginnings of creation to the present day, he felt certain, would surely prove this. The mundane task of actually composing such a history of calamities was subsequently assigned to his student, the Spanish priest Orosius, who dutifully undertook this simpler and more direct argument on Augustine's behalf in the seven books of his *Historiae adversus paganos*.¹⁰⁸

With both Augustine and Orosius, the Asclepian narrative we have been following surfaces yet again. Augustine's tone is sarcastic; when Rome suffered a grave epidemic, he explains, Asclepius was invited to Italy as a "divine physician" (*medicum deum*), since "the frequent adulteries with which [...] Jupiter (who had already been residing so long in the Capitol) had amused himself [...] had perhaps not left him any leisure to study medicine."¹⁰⁹ Augustine's argument echoes that of Arnobius when he points out that Asclepius did little to prevent *later* pestilences; he suggests that the god excused himself from providing treatment during a certain epidemic among pregnant women because he proclaimed himself a

¹⁰⁵ On the composition of Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, see Brown, "Augustine of Hippo," 297–311.

¹⁰⁶ The literature on his theology, philosophy, and later influence is vast and diverse. For example, see Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago 1996); Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*; Allan Fitzgerald, Mark Vessey, and Karla Pollmann, eds., *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God* (Bowling Green, OH 1999); William H.C. Frend, "Augustine and Orosius on the End of the Ancient World," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989) 1–38.

¹⁰⁷ On the aberrant reception of Augustine's thought, see the classic statement by Henri Xavier Arquillière, *L'augustinisme politique; essai sur la formation des théories politiques du Moyen-Âge* (Paris 1955). On the manuscript transmission of Augustine's works, see Michael M. Gorman, *The Manuscript Traditions of the Works of St. Augustine* (Florence 2001).

¹⁰⁸ Augustine could not have entirely approved of the final work, since Orosius' *Historiae* implies that God's judgments can be discerned through historical events. For Augustine, events both fortunate and ill befall the good as well as the evil, for reasons known to God but hidden to us. On this philosophical distinction, see Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," 344–345.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 3.17, ed. Dombart and Kalb, Teubner (Leipzig 1863) 110.

chief physician (*archiatrum*) rather than a midwife (*obstetricem*).¹¹⁰ Orosius' tone is similarly acerbic. Again recounting the story of Asclepius' journey to Rome, Orosius proclaims the futility of the endeavor. "*Quasi vero pestilentia aut ante sedata non sit aut post orta non fuerit,*" he scoffs: "As if plague had not abated in the past, or would not break out again in the future," regardless of Asclepius' residence on the Tiber.¹¹¹ And since Orosius was mainly interested in interpreting historical events as a series of divine judgments, he does not fail to note that, after the arrival of Asclepius in Rome, the consul Gurgus suffered a devastating defeat; evidently the two were related. By juxtaposing Asclepius' arrival and veneration in Rome with the defeat of Gurgus, it seems, Orosius sought to reveal the causes of divine displeasure and its consequences.¹¹²

Since we know from Gregory of Tours himself that Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos* served as source material for his own *Histories*, we can be quite certain that he was familiar with the above passage, as well as similar passages from Augustine's *De civitate Dei*.¹¹³ Therefore, although Gregory's *Praefatio* lists only Christian historians among the sources for his *Histories*, at a minimum he was exposed to the narrative of Asclepius' arrival in Rome by way of Christian apologists. It is possible (though difficult to prove) that, in addition to Orosius and Augustine, he was also familiar with the earlier account of Arnobius. Even more likely, in my opinion, is that Gregory had read—in addition to the above—Lactantius' *Divinae institutiones*, and that his interpretation of the Tiber flood and subsequent pestilence was informed by this reading. In *De cursu stellarum*, Gregory attributes the poem *De ave phoenice* to Lactantius, though his knowledge of the author's other works is uncertain.¹¹⁴ Like

¹¹⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 3.17, ed. Dombart and Kalb, 110. On Augustine's general opinion of the pagan gods, see Mary D. Madden, *The Pagan Divinities and Their Worship as Depicted in the Works of Saint Augustine Exclusive of The City of God* (Washington 1930). See also Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 303, 459–460.

¹¹¹ Orosius, *Historiae* 3.22, 5, ed. Zangenmeister, 188.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ On Gregory of Tours and Augustine, see Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 151.

¹¹⁴ See Arpád P. Orbán, "Nicht jeder *locus amoenus* ist ein Paradies: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung nach Lactantius, *De ave Phoenice* und Gregorius von Tours, *De cursu stellarum*," *Euphorion. Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 85 (1991) 387–396. Gregory of Tours, *De cursu stellarum ratio* (CSR) 12, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, *SRM* (Hannover 1885) 1(2): 411. Gregory here summarizes the wonders of the world, of which the third is "*quod de phoenice Lactantius refert.*" It has been

Lactantius, Gregory describes the immense serpent of the Tiber as a *draco*; Gregory and Lactantius are in fact the only Christian authors to do so.

We must recall, however, that Gregory's *magnus draco* was not the only strange prodigy accompanying the flood. A "multitude of serpents" (*multitudo serpentium*) were also among the detritus washed downstream, perishing in the rough waves and eventually washing up on shore. This recalls a criticism advanced by Arnobius, who (perhaps drawing upon Ovid) had noted that, on his journey from Epidaurus, the divine serpent "avoid[ed] the waves of the sea" (*undas pelagi vitat*), as though a god could fear drowning in rough weather.¹¹⁵ Recall, too, that the anonymous pagan account in *De viris illustribus*, dated to the fourth century, stresses that Asclepius did *not* take refuge at Antium because of a storm, as Ovid had reported, but rather made his way there through expressly *gentle* waves, a rather specific point that the author may have hoped would counter Christian critiques like that proffered by Arnobius.¹¹⁶ Gregory's assertion that the immense dragon and his retinue of serpents drowned in the rough waves of the Tiber could therefore be interpreted as both a statement of God's divine wrath, which had sent the flood to begin with, and an intertextual affirmation of Asclepius' non-divinity.

If Gregory was indeed familiar with Lactantius' *Divinae institutiones*, the immense dragon of his account may be multivalent, referring at once to both pagan history and biblical imagery. By recalling once more that the *magnus draco* was accompanied by a multitude of lesser serpents, we can begin to draw a parallel. This reptilian host, when interpreted through a Lactantian lens, begins to take shape as the host of demons (or fallen angels) of which the serpent Asclepius—really the undisguised *daemionarches*—was chief. Moreover, Apocalypse 12.7, in which the archangel Michael does battle with a *draco* and his host of rebellious angels, provides a striking parallel with Lactantius' assessment of the serpentine Asclepius. That this biblical battle takes place in heaven, and not on earth, did not

suggested that Gregory was working from memory, which may account for the numerous ways in which his synopsis deviates from the poem as it exists elsewhere.

¹¹⁵ Arnobius, *AN* 7, 45, ed. Reifferscheid, 279.

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, *VIUR* 22, 3, ed. Pichlmayr, 39.

necessarily negate its typological appeal for Gregory.¹¹⁷

Gregory had good reason to search for the meaning behind the calamitous flooding and pestilence at Rome. Throughout his writings, he suggests that the disasters frequently recorded usually have causes. Often they are precipitated by some sin having been committed, either by the people in general, or by an individual, particularly a reigning king.¹¹⁸ These disasters can also serve as signs that further divine retribution will follow. The appearance of strange natural phenomena or prodigies frequently precedes the death of a wicked ruler, or foretells a coming disaster in the locality in which it appeared: on comets, Gregory reports that “not always, but most often, [they appear] upon the death of a king or at the time of a great regional disaster.”¹¹⁹ In any case, what is clear is that, for Gregory, disasters and unusual prodigies are shot through with meaning, and may even have didactic value.¹²⁰ On the rare occasion that their meaning and cause could not be readily determined, Gregory openly expresses his puzzlement. In the *Vitae patrum*, for example, he recounts an earthquake that shook Clermont during the episcopate of St. Gallus. Gregory held Gallus in high regard, and thus remarks of the earthquake, “...*sed cur hoc acciderit, ignoramus*” (but *why this happened* we do not know).¹²¹

Given Gregory’s tendency to search for a meaning behind the *calamitates* he records, it is unsurprising that he should seek to develop an interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome in 589–590, particularly in light of their impact upon the *ecclesia*. Further close reading of his account is illustrative; Gregory reports that the floodwaters inundated and destroyed not only ancient pagan temples

¹¹⁷ Defeated by Michael, the dragon and his (now fallen) angels plummet to Earth in Apocalypse 12.9, again calling to mind Lactantius’ “archdemon” Asclepius and his fallen companions. On typology in Gregory of Tours, see Felix Thürlemann, *Der historische Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours. Topoi und Wirklichkeit* (Bern 1974) 88.

¹¹⁸ See De Nie, *Many-Windowed Tower*, 35–38.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *CSR* 34, ed. Krusch, 419: “...*non omni tempore, sed maxime aut in obitu regis aut in excidio apparet regionis.*” See de Nie’s analysis in eadem, *Many-Windowed Tower*, 35.

¹²⁰ On the meanings associated with such disasters and prodigies in the early Middle Ages, see Paul E. Dutton, “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer R. Davis and Michael McCormick (Aldershot 2008) 167–180.

¹²¹ Gregory of Tours, *Liber vitae patrum* 6, 6, ed. Bruno Krusch, *MGH SRM* (Hannover 1875) 1(2):234.

(*aedes antiquae*), but also papal storehouses or granaries (*horrea [...] ecclesia*).¹²² Which ancient temples were destroyed? Gregory does not say, and although it would be tempting to presume that the temple of Asclepius—located in the middle of the Tiber—may have been one likely candidate, he does not provide enough information to make this identification with any certainty. What is most interesting about this passage, however, is not that Gregory specifies that pagan temples were destroyed, but that he also mentions the destruction of church property.

The specific targets of divine wrath would seem to bear careful scrutiny. Gregory reports that an earthquake at Antioch spared one righteous man and his family, “for the right hand of the Lord was a protection to him and to his house in the midst of the unrighteous, and he was saved from peril of death, even as once was [Lot].”¹²³ Elsewhere in the *Histories*, recounting a fire that had burned large portions of Paris, Gregory takes care to note that the flames left churches and sacred spaces—for example, an oratory of St. Martin—untouched: “On the other side [of the Seine] it swallowed up all so fiercely that only the river stayed its course,” the bishop of Tours reports, adding significantly that “the churches with the houses belonging to them were not burned.”¹²⁴ In this particular instance, it would seem that in Gregory’s estimation God’s disfavor was not directed toward the *ecclesia*, but rather toward the merchants of the city, for he records the apparently prophetic words of a Parisian *mulier* who had warned that the merchants’ houses would soon be ignited.¹²⁵

Gregory seldom neglected to note the effect of any given disaster upon properties belonging to the church, an apparently important detail in his mind. Another fire at Bazas wrought general destruction, though “all the sacred vessels were saved from the flames.”¹²⁶ The monumental tsunami at Lake Geneva,

¹²² Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 477.

¹²³ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.24, ed. Krusch and Levison, 517.

¹²⁴ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 8.33, ed. Krusch and Levison, 402.

¹²⁵ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 8.33, ed. Krusch and Levison, 401.

¹²⁶ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 6.21, ed. Krusch and Levison 289.

mentioned earlier, swept away not only men, property, and houses, but also churches.¹²⁷ It is not clear why Gregory left the churches of Paris unscathed by fire while inundating those at Geneva. Perhaps he was merely reporting the facts of each case; even so, Gregory does not neglect to moralize. The destruction of the churches at Geneva is closely followed by an aside concerning the “savage greed” (*saeva cupiditas*) of the thirty monks who had returned, shortly after the tsunami, to search for buried treasure; they were, of course, soon swept away themselves. According to Gregory, the situation at Rome in 589–590 was similar. Here again, the disaster spared no quarter. Unlike the Parisian fire—which leapt from target to target, avoiding that which was holy and sacred—the flooding at Rome apparently struck with great force both city and *ecclesia*.

Gregory’s close attention to the specific “targets” of divine wrath at Rome in Book 10 of his *Histories* could arguably be dismissed as mere coincidence, or the basic reporting of facts, if not for some additional details: the flooding was immediately followed by a pestilence, the first victim of which was the Roman pontiff, Pelagius II. Making reference to Ezekiel 9.6, Gregory declares that Pelagius’ death came in fulfillment of God’s pronouncement, “*a sanctario meo incipite*,” (begin at my sanctuary).¹²⁸ Here, the author draws from a passage of Ezekiel in which God has sent forth warriors to slay the people of Jerusalem, a punishment for the worship of idols.¹²⁹ He bids that the slaughter begin at the Temple, where the worship of idols is most egregious.

Why refer to the worship of idols in connection with Pelagius’ death? We cannot dismiss the idea that folkloric culture may have sought alternative sources of divine aid when calamitous events made the Church appear less powerful. We have discussed the possibility of pagan survivals in Gaul, the region from which our narrator wrote of the events that had recently occurred in Rome; yet pagan survivals

¹²⁷ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.31, ed. Krusch and Levison, 164.

¹²⁸ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 477.

¹²⁹ Cf. Ezekiel 8.14: “*Et introduxit me per ostium portae domus Domini quod respiciebat ad aquilonem et ecce ibi mulieres sedebant plangentes Adonidem.*”

were also a reality in Italy. As R.A. Markus notes, in sixth-century Italy such pagan survivals “shaded off into magic, witchcraft, and [other] customs Gregory [the Great] thought ‘idolatrous,’” being practiced by “relapsed” Christians nearly as often as the unbaptized.¹³⁰ Gregory of Tours’ interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome would seem to reinforce the notion that such “idolatrous” practices were indeed a concern for Gallic, as well as Roman, ecclesiastics, and that such concerns loomed large enough to influence his interpretation of an event that, to modern eyes, appears to have been a natural disaster.

Gregory’s interpretation accomplished a dual purpose: it explained Pelagius’ death with reference to Ezekiel 9.6, thereby suggesting that the pope, or perhaps the *ecclesia* in general, had not been sufficiently diligent in suppressing folkloric culture or the worship of idols—a concern that, as we have noted, may have risen in conjunction with the level of floodwaters and pestilence. Yet Gregory’s narrative simultaneously asserts the impotence of such alternative sources of aid. Asclepius, a god of medicine, does not merely flee the city before the arrival of a pestilence; rather, he is literally flushed out of it (exorcised?) in a divine torrent, powerless to save himself or his retinue from the rough, “cleansing” waves. Moreover, these violent waves struck down not only a *draco*, but also a pope. They destroyed not just ancient temples, but also papal storehouses. God’s anger was evidently widespread.

For Gregory, the destruction of church property and the death of Pelagius II implicitly indicated that divine wrath was directed toward the church for permitting, or not adequately suppressing, the worship of idols, an interpretation evidently drawn from biblical precedent (Ezekiel 9:6). Gregory was further able to identify the offending idols or folkloric beliefs through his knowledge of the Asclepian narrative we have been following, and its history centered on the Tiber. The danger of such idols was underscored by Gregory through a typological scheme drawn from Lactantius, who saw a connection between pagan narratives about Asclepius and the biblical archdemon and his host of fallen angels.

¹³⁰ Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 81–82. On pagan survivals in Italy, see idem, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge 1991) 1–17.

The identification of the cause of Rome's divine punishment was only half of Gregory's didactic equation, however. Next, he sought to describe the practices and rituals through which the suffering could *truly* be averted. Blame having been condignly distributed, he was free to turn his attention to the task of illuminating and glorifying the power and efficacy of the cleansed *ecclesia*. More specifically, Gregory's account sought to illuminate the central importance of the "good bishop" (or perhaps more descriptively, the "good shepherd"), whose duty it was to lead the people in the right direction—an important task during a time of such evident corporeal and spiritual peril.

The good shepherd

From atop the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, the archangel Michael—rendered in bronze and sheathing a bloody sword—surveys the Parco Adriano below. The current statue, erected in 1753, replaced an earlier bronze figure of the same subject raised in 1536 (itself a replacement for an even earlier effigy). The legend connected with this statuary is well known, though its provenance is unclear. A particularly intriguing version of this legend is provided by the fifteenth-century Iberian traveller Pero Tafur, who visited Rome in 1436. According to Tafur, the statue atop the Castel Sant'Angelo was erected to commemorate a vision that had appeared in 590 to Gregory the Great as plague ravaged the city.¹³¹ Learning that many Roman citizens—Christians among them—were worshipping some unspecified idol, Gregory organized a procession to the church of Sant'Agata in Suburra, where the idol was reportedly located; upon his arrival, we are told, the idol was miraculously struck down with a clap of thunder. Thereafter, returning to St. Peter's in solemn procession via the Aelian Bridge, Gregory received his famous vision: the archangel Michael, standing atop Hadrian's mausoleum and sheathing a bloody sword. The mausoleum was later renamed 'the castle of the holy angel,' in commemoration of this miracle, according to Tafur.

The insinuations of Tafur's account are clear: Rome's anguish in 590 had been a direct result of divine anger and concomitant punishment. Michael's sword—made bloody by the plague's victims—was sheathed only once their collective sin had been remedied through the intervention of Pope Gregory. This intervention took the form of a communal, propitiatory procession to the site of the alleged

¹³¹ Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures*, trans. Malcolm Letts (New York 1926) 35–36: “They say that there was once a great plague in Rome which lasted for a long time, and it was revealed to Pope Gregory that he should go in procession to a church at one end of the city, called S. Agata in Suburra, where was an idol which was worshipped by the heathen, and even in secret by Christians, for some parts of the heathen rites had survived. As the Pope arrived in procession at the church and came to the idol, a noise like thunder burst from it and it fell in pieces. The Pope, beholding this marvel, made his procession, and as he was returning very devoutly to St. Peter's by the bridge below that castle, an angel appeared in the sight of all with a drawn sword in his hand, all bloody, which sword he cleansed on his mantle and placed in its sheath. This was held to be a sign that God was appeased, and did not desire that more should die. In this manner was idolatry put down, and the castle from that day onwards was named the Castle of St. Angelo. It is so called to this day, and the figure of an angel is set up on it. It was in view of this miracle, and of other mighty and wonderful things which took place in Rome, that Pope Gregory, as I have related, destroyed many of the ancient buildings because they drew the attention of the pilgrims from the holy places [...]”

transgression. Tafur's version of the legend is remarkable in its specificity, going so far as to note the particular sin that had brought divine wrath down upon Rome: namely, the worship of idols. The role of the bishop as shepherd of his flock is here emphasized; in the face of communal sin, it was apparently Pope Gregory's duty to organize, rally, and reaffirm the communal *christianitas* of Rome; to lead the people in penance and the collective renunciation of their sins.

Tafur's account is of course exceptionally late for our purposes, and can be of little use in illuminating the sixth-century version of events provided by Gregory of Tours in his *Histories*. Yet the angelic shrine atop Hadrian's mausoleum certainly predates Tafur; Ado of Vienne, writing in the mid-ninth century, credited Pope Boniface (presumably IV, 608–615) with the construction of the chapel, suggesting an origin early in the seventh century—not long after the events with which we are concerned. Nevertheless, Ado makes no reference to plague or a supposed vision of Gregory the Great.¹³² Indeed, the earliest references to such a vision date to the mid-thirteenth century: Jacobus de Varaigne's *Legenda aurea* and Bartholomew of Trent's *Liber epilogorum in gesta sanctorum* each describe Pope Gregory's miraculous vision (though, perhaps importantly, neither account mentions the pagan idol at the church of Sant'Agata included in Tafur's report).¹³³

Louis Schwartz has recently argued that Michael's chapel atop the Mausoleum of Hadrian likely dates to the eighth century, a product of warming papal-Lombard relations.¹³⁴ Schwartz rejects Ado of Vienne's attribution of the construction to Boniface IV, noting that Ado had a well-known propensity for fabrication. Schwartz also dismisses Gregory's miraculous vision as a later fabrication by thirteenth-century hagiographers ignorant of the chapel's true (Lombard) origin.¹³⁵ He does not address Pero Tafur's early fifteenth-century report, however. Unless Tafur based his account directly on the two

¹³² Ado of Vienne, *Le Martyrologe d'Adon*, ed. Jacques Dubois (Paris 1984) 336.

¹³³ Jacobus de Varaigne, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Giovanni Maggioni (Florence 2007) 2:1106; Bartholomew of Trent, *Liber epilogorum in gesta sanctorum*, ed. Emore Paoli (Florence 2011) 119.

¹³⁴ Louis Schwartz, "Gargano Comes to Rome: Castel Sant'Angelo's Historical Origins," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 64:3 (2013) 453–475, esp. 470–473.

¹³⁵ On the Lombard devotion to St. Michael, see Schwartz, "Gargano Comes to Rome," 463ff.

thirteenth-century sources noted above—less likely given his unique description of an idolatrous cult that provoked Rome’s punishment—there may have been a third source, or at least an orally transmitted legend, from which he derived these unique details. The *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great are one possible source, since they describe the reconsecration of the once-abandoned church of Sant’Agata and the strange prodigies that occurred there afterward.¹³⁶ According to the *Dialogues*, a wild hog was glimpsed weaving through the legs of the assembled congregation as it fled the recently reconsecrated church (representing, according to Gregory the Great, an unclean spirit who had previously made its home there). Thereafter, a great thundering noise was heard coming from the roof of the church for two nights—the sound of the devil’s departure, according to the pope.

Was Tafur inspired by this account from the *Dialogues* to expand upon thirteenth-century hagiographic legends of Gregory’s angelic vision on the Aelian Bridge? Perhaps by weaving the disparate accounts into a coherent narrative, Tafur arrived at his conclusion that Rome’s punishment in 589–590 had resulted from the sin of idolatrous worship taking place at the church of Sant’Agata in Suburra. The remaining possibility—that Tafur simply invented his embellishments—is impossible to disprove. In any case, the effigy of St. Michael and the legend of its origin will remain, for many, the most familiar symbols connected with the disaster of 589–590, and—owing to the statue’s continued imposing presence atop the eponymous Castel Sant’Angelo—certainly its most visible manifestation.

While Gregory of Tours says nothing of his namesake’s supposed vision on the Aelian Bridge, he anticipates later accounts in giving Gregory the Great a central role in the events of 590. The *Histories* describes the new pope’s succession following the death of Pelagius II in some detail, providing the only important early witness to his election.¹³⁷ Indeed, later accounts draw extensively on Gregory’s *Histories*. In the eighth century, Paul the Deacon would replicate this account in nearly every detail, but

¹³⁶ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 3.30, ed. Odo John Zimmerman (New York 1959). This passage is discussed by Henry Howorth; *Saint Gregory the Great* (London 1912) 294.

¹³⁷ The elevation of Gregory the Great is described in Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 477–481.

for the curious insertion of a few words of praise for Pelagius II—perhaps a reaction to the disapproving tone Paul may have detected in his source material (sc., “begin at my sanctuary,” Gregory’s intimation of idolatry).¹³⁸ The image of Gregory the Great which emerges from the *Histories* is that of a reluctant hero; his great hesitancy to assume the papacy is emphasized, though as Markus notes, “resistance to episcopal consecration was a well-established convention, and not only in literature.”¹³⁹ In any case, the deacon was eventually swayed to accept his new position, though there could not have been a worse time to ascend the See of Peter; in the seven months since Pelagius’ death, the pestilence afflicting Rome had not subsided. From Gregory the Great’s own epistles we learn of the disastrous circumstances firsthand: “For behold,” wrote the new pontiff, “all the people [of Rome] are being struck by the sword of heavenly anger, and individuals are destroyed by sudden slaughter. Illness does not lead to death, but death comes before periods of illness, as you see. Each person is struck down and torn away before he is converted to the laments of penitence.”¹⁴⁰ Notably, while he mentions no angelic vision, Gregory the Great’s reference here to a “sword of heavenly anger” (evidently an allusion to 1 Chronicles 21.14–27) may have helped inspire the embellishments of later biographers.

According to Gregory of Tours, the new Roman pontiff responded to this “heavenly anger” by urging his flock to engage in constant communal prayer. Through the streets of the traumatized city, choirs called out in supplication; in the midst of one collective petition eighty people fell dead, according to the bishop of Tours, yet the Roman pontiff’s calls for prayer and repentance did not cease. These practices, as they are described in the *Histories*, reaffirm that in both bishops’ eyes, Rome was in fact suffering in the face of divine wrath. The flooding and pestilence that beset the city in 589–590 was apparently seen as a form of punishment that might be ameliorated or even reversed through penance and other propitiatory practices—but only with guidance; for the church (which could not be without its

¹³⁸ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 3.24, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, MGH, *SRL* (Hannover 1878) 1:104–5.

¹³⁹ Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 13. Despite the humility topos, Markus argues that Gregory the Great in fact felt this reluctance sincerely.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory the Great, *Ep. App.* 9, ed. Norberg, 1102–1103. Trans. John Martyn, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* (Toronto 2004) 3:887.

head, according to Gregory of Tours) now had a worthy leader.¹⁴¹ The eschatologically inflected sermon delivered by the new pontiff before the assembled Roman populace is recounted in the *Histories* in full, an evident mark of approval.¹⁴² The bishop of Tours also carefully enumerated the exceptional qualities of Pelagius' worthy successor: the deacon Gregory came from a leading senatorial family but lived humbly, donating much of his land and wealth to monasteries or the poor, and so on.¹⁴³

Gregory's chief concern is thus revealed; what for a modern reader might seem to be a natural disaster has been, for Gregory, an opportunity to didactically demonstrate the dangers of idolatry (real or imagined), the importance of ecclesiastic vigilance, and the vital leadership of the the "good bishop" in times of disaster—a role for which Gregory the Great could serve as a helpful model. Unlike his predecessor Pelagius—who was evidently found lacking—Gregory the Great did not lead his flock astray, but rather led them in communal penance, apparently the appropriate reaction to flooding and pestilence.

We need not leave the *Histories* for a better glimpse at Gregory of Tours' prototypical "good bishop," a figure so essential to the prevention and amelioration of disasters. When pestilence raged in the Auvergne, for example, Gregory tells us that (then-bishop) Gall feared for his flock more than for his own life. Beseeking God to save them, Gall received a miraculous vision:

¹⁴¹ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 477: "*Sed quia ecclesia Dei absque rectorem esse non poterat...*" [i.e., after the death of Pelagius II].

¹⁴² Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 479. The sermon suggests that everyone might soon be forced to face God's judgment without adequate preparation. Owen Chadwick, "Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great," *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1949) 38–49, attempted to argue that the *Oratio* of Gregory the Great, and indeed, perhaps the entirety of Book 10 of the *Histories*, was a later interpolation. Nevertheless, Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 80 n. 83, forcefully discredits this argument. On the fabrication of speech in Gregory of Tours, see Thürlemann, *Der historische Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours*, 106.

¹⁴³ Here, our narrator's account is not terribly accurate; Gregory the Great's ancestry was indeed senatorial, but hardly of the highest order. It is possible that Gregory of Tours (himself springing from a leading Gallic senatorial family) expected that his great contemporary should be of similar extraction, or perhaps he merely exaggerates for effect. See Markus, *Gregory the Great*, 8.

There appeared to him an angel of the Lord, whose hair and raiment were white as snow, and the angel said to him: “You have done well, O bishop, to thus entreat the Lord on behalf of your people, for your prayers have been heard, and behold, you and your people shall be free from this malady. For while you live, no man in this region shall perish from the plague. Fear not therefore now; but when eight years are gone by, then fear.” From which it was clear that after that lapse of time he should depart from this world.¹⁴⁴

Thereafter, we are told, Gall instituted rogation ceremonies; and while surrounding regions were scourged by plague, Clermont remained salubrious for as long as the bishop lived. Gregory returns to this topic in subsequent chapters; through a demonstration of the relative faults and virtues of Gall’s successors, a sort of parable begins to take shape. The priest Cato, beloved by all the people, immediately arrogated the title of bishop following Gall’s death (since all had assumed he would fill the role). Yet Gregory sounds a note of disapproval: Cato had presumed complete control and seized church property though not yet officially enthroned. Gregory later reports that Cautinus, another candidate to succeed Gall, had approached the king with news of his colleague’s hasty assumption, and had subsequently been rewarded with the bishopric in Cato’s stead.¹⁴⁵

Having established the character of these two figures, Gregory had set the scene for the fulfillment of Gall’s prophetic vision. A further outbreak of pestilence in the Auvergne in 571 brought “such a slaughter [that] the legions of men who fell cannot even be numbered,” according to the bishop of

¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.5, ed. Krusch and Levison, 138: “*Huius tempore cum lues illa quam inguinariam vocant per diversas regiones dsaeviret et maxime tunc Arelatenism provinciam depopularet, sanctus Gallus non tantum pro se quntum pro populo suo trepidus erat. Cumque die noctuque Dominum deprecaretur, ut vivens plebem suam vastari non cernerit, per visum noctis apparuit ei angelus Domini, qui tam caesariem quam vestem in similitudinem nivis candidam efferebat, et ait ad eum: ‘Bene enim facis, o sacerdos, quod sic Dominum pro populo tup supplicas. Exaudita est enim oratia tua; et ecce ! eris cum populo tup ab hac infirmitate liberatus, nullusque te vivente in regione ista ab hac strage deperiet. Nunc autem ne timeas; post octo vero annos time.’ Unde manifestum fuit, transactis his annis eum a saeculo discessisse.*” Translation above adapted from O.M. Dalton, *History of the Franks*, 119.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.7, ed. Krusch and Levison, 139.

Tours.¹⁴⁶ Cautinus immediately fled—though a prudent man, he seemingly lacked Gall’s courage. Cato, in contrast, remained steadfastly committed to the people, staying behind to bury the dead even when more judicious souls might have absconded; thus, Gregory concedes, “if [Cato’s] character inclined somewhat to pride, this charity tempered it.”¹⁴⁷ Cautinus and Cato, though well intentioned, were revealed nevertheless to be flawed; both were equally inadequate bishops. And unlike the good bishop Gall who had preceded them, they possessed insufficient merits to stay the sword of God’s wrath; this time, the people of Clermont would suffer with the rest.

In describing these disasters, Gregory places the emphasis firmly on the role of the bishop. Though Gall had prudently led his flock in collective penance, it was a private plea that had produced his angelic vision and staid God’s hand. Cato and Cautinus, lacking the merits of their predecessor, could only fail where he had succeeded. Without an efficacious intercessor, the people of Clermont would finally pay the price for their collective sins. This didactic narrative, spread over several chapters in the fourth book of Gregory’s *Histories*, parallels the events described at Rome in 589–590. Like Cautinus and Cato, Pelagius II failed to protect his flock from divine punishment, and was himself ultimately struck down; in contrast, Gregory the Great, like Gall, is presented as a good bishop whose merits permitted him to intercede on behalf of his flock. Though for Gregory of Tours the bishop’s own virtue was apparently the most crucial factor in averting divine punishment, Gregory the Great—again, like Gall—is nevertheless described as leading the people in collective penance, so that they, too, might renounce their sins and petition for divine mercy. Thus, while the bishop’s virtues and powers of intercession were seemingly paramount, the collective sins—and collective penance—of the people were not entirely unimportant.

This theme also materializes in the seventh book of the *Histories*, again during an eruption of plague, this time at Albi. Though a majority of the people had already perished, the bishop Salvius, “like

¹⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.31, ed. Krusch and Levison, 165: “*Iam vero adveniente ipsa clade, tanta strages de populo per totam regionem illam facta est, ut nec numerare possit, quantae ibidem ceciderunt legiones.*”

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

a good shepherd” (*tamquam bonus pastor*), refused to abandon his flock.¹⁴⁸ His words of exhortation and warning are reminiscent of Gregory the Great’s: Salvius, we are told, urged those who remained “to be earnest in prayer, to persevere in vigils without ceasing, and in thought and deed to follow after that which is good.” Like Gregory the Great in 590, he warned of imminent judgment, exhorting his flock to “act such that if God wills you to leave this present world, you may enter not into His Judgment, but into His Peace.”¹⁴⁹

In times of disaster, the role of the “good bishop” was in Gregory’s estimation so essential that, in the absence of a bishop, even a king could step in to fill this role. In 588 near Lyon, King Guntram, behaving “as if a good bishop” (*acsi bonus sacerdos*), interceded in yet another outbreak by “providing remedies to heal the scars of a people that had sinned.”¹⁵⁰ What sort of remedies could Guntram, as a king, provide? According to Gregory, he “commanded that everyone should assemble in the great church, and that rogations should be celebrated with the utmost devotion.”¹⁵¹ In this case, it was not only as a king that Guntram was able to lead the people. Rather, like a proper shepherd, “he was so anxious for the entire populace that he might have been taken not merely for their king but also for one of the Lord’s bishops.”¹⁵² Indeed, Guntram’s propitiatory actions mirror those taken in 590 by Gregory the Great in several ways; in his sermon to the Roman people, the new pope would allude to the collective penance of biblical Nineveh, whose citizens fasted and prayed for three days to appease God’s wrath.¹⁵³ In connection with the rogation ceremonies he instituted, Guntram likewise ordered fasting and vigils, and for a three-day period increased his own customary alms. The rogation ceremonies led by Guntram mirror the penitential processions led by Gregory at Rome. Both urged unceasing prayer and were

¹⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 7.1, ed. Krusch and Levison, 326.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: “[...] *vir beatus tamquam bonus pastor numquam ab illo loco recedere voluit; sed semper ortabatur eos, qui relictos fuerant, oratione incumbere ac vigiliis instanter insistere et bona semper tam in operibus quam in cogitatione versare, dicens: ‘Haec agite, ut, si vos Deus de hoc mundo migrare vouerit, non in iudicium, sed in requiem introire possitis.’*”

¹⁵⁰ Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 9.21, ed. Krusch and Levison, 441: “*Sed rex acsi bonus sacerdos providens remedia, quae cicatrices peccatoris vulgi mederentur.*”

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*: “[...] *iussit omnem populum ad ecclesiam convenire et rogationes summa cum devotione celebrare et nihil aliud in usu vescendi nisi panem ordeacium cum aqua munda adsumi, vigiliisque adesse instanter omnes iubet.*”

¹⁵² *Ibid.*: “[...] *non rex tantum, sed etiam sacerdos Domini putaretur [...].*”

¹⁵³ The full account is contained in the Book of Jonah.

prepared to organize a collective penance embracing the entire populace, including themselves. Although Gregory of Tours, throughout his *Histories*, habitually treats the “good king Guntram” as a favored protagonist, he now places the royal figure in a different but equally essential role: no longer merely the “good king,” Guntram is now figuratively clothed in the garb of the “good bishop.” In times of corporeal and spiritual peril, the latter was apparently more essential.

As at Lyon in 588, so at Rome in 590. What for a modern reader might have seemed a “natural disaster” was, for Gregory, a divine message, and an opportunity to illustrate the importance of episcopal leadership in both preventing and ameliorating disasters wrought by divine punishment. This was his most pressing concern; complex allusions to pagan historiography and the works of Christian apologists were offered as interpretive bulwarks, at once both shaping and serving the bishop of Tours’ chief rhetorical and didactic aims.¹⁵⁴ For Gregory, there was much to be learned from disaster.

¹⁵⁴ On early medieval attitudes concerning the relationship between truth, history, and argumentation, see Ray, “The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions.”

Conclusion

In 2012, six scientists and one government official stood before a judge in a makeshift courtroom on the outskirts of L'Aquila, Italy. They were standing trial in the wake of a devastating earthquake that had killed more than 300 people.¹⁵⁵ The scientists, who had downplayed fears of a major earthquake despite several “foreshocks” in the days before the disaster, were charged with manslaughter for failing to provide adequate warning to the public, each receiving a sentence of six years in prison. The “shepherds” had failed to warn their “flock.”

The case has been widely condemned in the international community, and even likened to a medieval witch hunt. The outcry is understandable. After all, how can human beings be held responsible for the effects of a natural disaster, which was presumably caused by random—and thus unpredictable—natural forces? The answer to this question is not always so simple. Ted Steinberg has suggested that more scrutiny needs to be devoted to those political, economic, and social factors that conspire to ensure that, in the wake of natural disasters, certain socioeconomic and racial groups are nearly always affected more than others.¹⁵⁶ The anger and quest for accountability precipitated by such events may in some cases actually be helpful, as when we ask why relief efforts seem slower or less effectual in poorer communities than in wealthier ones. In other cases, such faultfinding questions may be distinctly less productive. What is clear is that the very urge to assign blame is not new, nor does it play out the same way in every time and every culture. Where blame is assigned, where relief is sought: these questions and their answers are complex and reveal much about a society's religious, social, and economic concerns, and even its sense of historical consciousness.

In making sense of the flooding and pestilence at Rome in 589–590, Gregory drew connections between a contemporary disaster and an ancient narrative of pagan historiography. To do so, he

¹⁵⁵ Elisabetta Povoledo and Henry Fountain, “Italy Orders Jail Terms for 7 Who Didn’t Warn of Deadly Earthquake,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2012.

¹⁵⁶ On the concept of “social vulnerability” in historical disaster studies, see Juneja and Maelshagen, “Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies,” 5–6.

addressed and implicitly commented upon fourth- and fifth-century debates between Christian apologists and pagans. His historical knowledge was brought to bear with the ultimate aim of identifying, and didactically demonstrating, the appropriate sources of both blame and succor in the wake of a devastating calamity. Though the modern category of “natural disaster” was unknown to Gregory, in at least a few respects his concerns were similar to those expressed in the makeshift courtroom at L’Aquila in 2012. Such similarities—as well as the many apparent differences—warrant scrutiny. Like Gregory of Tours, contemporary historians have increasingly realized that there is much to be learned from natural disasters. In their aftermaths, such events can help us to understand not only how societies operate, but also the ways in which they struggle to make sense of the sometimes tumultuous world around them.

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