Chapter Four

Gregory the Great and Monasticism

Barbara Müller

Gregory the Great is connected with some very important aspects of monasticism. His relationship with the movement of Benedict of Nursia stands at the beginning of the development of what became the very influential Benedictinism. Gregory, as the first monk to become pope, also directed ecclesiastical policy for fourteen decisive years in a manner that was, at least in part, shaped by his monastic ideals. Finally, it is Gregory’s numerous writings, which deal with his regulation of monastic affairs as well as his attitude to being a monk, that give a unique insight into the diverse nature of monastic life during the 6th and early 7th centuries.

Gregory the Monk in the Context of Monastic Tradition

Gregory was not the first of his family to turn towards the monastic life. He himself mentions three of his aunts on his father’s side, Tarsilla, Gordiana, and Aemiliiana, who lived as virgins dedicated to God according to a strict rule in their own house—presumably the family home—as a religious community. Gregory’s aunts, then, belong to a line of women of the Roman senatorial aristocracy that can be traced back to the second half of the 4th century, who lived mainly in the family home in a monastic fashion under a private or public vow. As an example of commitment to their

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2 HEv. 38.15 (CCSL 141:374): “Tres pater meus soreores habuit, quae cunctae tres sacrae virgines fuerunt... Uno omnes ardore conversae, uno eodemque tempore sacraeae, sub distictione regulari degentes, in domo propria socialm vitam ducebat.” See also: Dial. 417 (SC 265:68–70).

3 See Jenal, Italia ascetica atque monastica, 1:31–32; 266.
vocation, however, Gregory could only instance Tarsilla and Aemiliana; Gordiana’s religious fervour cooled and she turned progressively towards the world and especially towards the steward of her estates—the women do not appear to have given up all their worldly goods—whom she later married.\(^4\) The sisters appear to have prayed so intensely that the skin on Tarsilla’s elbows and knees became as hard “as a camel’s”.\(^5\) At much the same time as Gregory, shortly after his father’s death, his mother Silvia also took up the monastic life. She entered the convent Cella Nova near the basilica of St. Paul. In doing so she chose a way of life that was, at the time, common for older aristocratic widows.

On his own conversion to the monastic life which occurred in about 574, Gregory goes into detail in only one passage in his works. In the dedication of his commentary on Job to his friend Leander of Seville, written at least twenty years after the event, Gregory describes his lengthy struggle to realize the “grace of conversion” (\textit{conversionis gratia}).\(^6\) Self-critically, he admits that he had too long allowed ingrown habits to restrict him (\textit{inolta me consuetudo devinxerat}).\(^7\) The restraining habit that he cites is his office as prefect of the city of Rome, which he had undertaken in patriotic enthusiasm combined perhaps with a certain amount of vanity. The death of his father Gordianus delivered the final impetus for giving up his worldly career and taking up the religious life.

In about 574 Gregory used the fortune of his late father to found seven monasteries, six in Sicily and one in Rome.\(^8\) He converted his family home, at the foot of \textit{Mons Caelius} on the \textit{clivus Scauri}, into a Roman monastery, dedicated to St. Andrew the Apostle, and entered it himself.\(^9\) Gregory was never the abbot of his monastery. His biographer, John the Deacon, interprets this as showing Gregory’s preference for a subordinate role.\(^10\) How many monks there were in Gregory’s community is unknown. The first abbot of St. Andrew’s monastery was Valentius, an abbot who had fled

\(^4\) \textit{HEv.} 38:15 (CCSL 141:376).
\(^5\) “camelorum more”, \textit{HEv.} 38:15 (CCSL 141:375); cf. \textit{Dial.} 4.17.3 (SC 265:70); in \textit{Dial.} 4.17.1 Gregory speaks of “virtute continuae orationis” (SC 265:68).
\(^6\) \textit{Mor. praef.} 1 (CCSL 1431).
\(^7\) \textit{Mor. praef.} 1 (CCSL 1431); on the Augustinian language and the corresponding parallels in content, see Claude Dagens, \textit{Saint Grégoire le grand. Culture et expérience chrétiennes} (Paris, 1977), pp. 297–98.
\(^8\) Gregory of Tours, \textit{HF} 10.1 (MGH SSRM 1:1477–78).
\(^10\) “cum subesse mallet”, John the Deacon, \textit{Vita Gregorii} 1.6 (PL 75:65B).