Chapter Thirteen

A COOPERATIVE CORRESPONDENCE:

THE LETTERS OF GREGORY THE GREAT*

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Of all of Gregory’s writings, there is perhaps no passage more striking than in the prologue to his Dialogues, where he paints a vivid, wistful picture of his present life as pope in a near poetic nautical metaphor:

Indeed my troubled mind recalls how once it was in the monastery . . . but now, in pastoral duties, endures the agitations of worldly men . . . And so I weigh what I now bear, I weigh what I have lost; and when I look upon what I have surrendered, what I bear is made heavier. For look: now I am struck by the waves of a great sea, and in the ship of my mind I am hammered by the winds of a fierce storm, and when I recall my previous life, as if I have sighted the shore with a backward glance, I sigh. And what is still harder to bear, as I am savaged and roiled by immense waves: I now can scarcely see the harbour I left behind.

This passage underlines Gregory’s fond memories for his time spent at his monastery on the Caelian hill, “the happiest time of his life”, contrasted with the weight of papal duties, which Gregory feels he bears alone. Yet Gregory did not pilot the little boat of the papacy all by himself. Like the popes that preceded him, and those that followed, the success of Gregory’s “voyage” was dependent, far more than usually realized, on the abilities

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of numerous colleagues. Their legacy is hidden, but a careful study of the letters produced by the papacy offers a glimpse of where they worked, who they were, and what abilities they possessed. Such an investigation also allows us to make a broader assessment of education, and the functioning of the papacy, in Rome c.600 than would be possible looking at Gregory alone.

Latin Prose-Rhythm

It is a seemingly arcane feature of Latin prose style that will offer the most help in identifying the men behind Gregory, namely Latin prose-rhythm.³ Prose rhythm was a rhetorical embellishment that involved arranging words at the end of sentences into particular rhythmical patterns. By Gregory’s day, it had a very long history in Latin literature: prose-rhythm had been used by Latin writers since before Cicero, who himself used rhythm extensively while also describing its practice in detail in his De oratore.⁴ In antiquity, the rhythm was based on syllable quantities (“longs” and “shorts”, represented here as – and ñ), much like classical Latin poetry. A favoured cadence might be nōstrā dīrēxĭmūs, a double cretic (– ñ – repeated). In Late Antiquity, cadences came more and more to be based on word accent, in conjunction with, or instead of syllable length: hence nōstra dīrēximus above came to be understood as an accentual pattern of two word accents, each followed by two unaccented syllables (óooóoo).⁵ This accentual system of rhythm is now known as cursus, and a few patterns of word-accent came to dominate: these are known as velox (óoooóóo, e.g. ultima pervenisse), planus (óooóó, e.g. causa nascatur), tardus (óooóoo, e.g. nostra direximus), with some authors also using tri-spondaicus (óoooóóo, e.g. corda vagarentur). Despite these changes, prose-

