Chapter I
The Break in Hellenic Culture in the West

Research by P. Courcelle has established that, as early as the fifth century A.D., Greek was no longer known in Spain, Britain or Ireland. In Africa the break is marked by the Vandal conquest, and in Gaul it occurs at the beginning of the sixth century. In Italy the last generation which knew Greek was that of Boethius (d. 525) and Cassiodorus (d. ca 570), and in Rome itself by about 600 not even the most famous of the Greek Fathers were still read. For example, it is recognized that Pope Gregory the Great (590–604), though he came from a great Roman family and had been papal nuncio in Constantinople, did not know Greek. In the seventh century it proved


2. H. STEINACKER, Die römische Kirche und die griechischen Sprachenkenntnisse des Frühmittelalters, Mitteil. des Inst. für Österr. Geschichtsforschung, 62, 1954, pp. 28–66, with detailed bibliography. Nevertheless it should be remembered that even in the middle of the seventh century the Library of the Holy See contained some Greek texts and that, when required, "notaries" were capable of translating a passage from them. At the Lateran Council in 649, convened by Pope Martin I to condemn monothelitism, the bishop of the Italian town of Tempse requested that the works "of St Dionysios, bishop of Athens" should be brought to the meeting, because the monothelite patriarch of Alexandria, Kyros, had quoted a phrase from them, the sense of which needed checking. On the pope's order the chief of the notaries,
very difficult in Ravenna, the capital of the Byzantine Exarchate of Italy, to find someone able to conduct the correspondence in Greek with the court in Constantinople. In the library of Isidore of Seville there were some translations of the Greek Fathers, of Origen and John Chrysostom, but Isidore had no direct knowledge of Greek culture, secular or sacred, through the original language. Gregory of Tours did not know a word of Greek, neither did Fortunatus, bishop of Piotiers (530-609), who admitted he knew nothing of Plato and Aristotle, and neither did the Irish saint, Columbanus.

We are indeed dealing with a disaster. Only a few fragments