

THE SWORD OF GOD:
PLAGUE AND EPISCOPAL AUTHORITY IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WEST

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AMANDA KENNEY
Dr. Lois Huneycutt, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

THE SWORD OF GOD:
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presented by Amanda Kenney,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Lois Huneycutt

Professor A Mark Smith

Professor Dennis Trout

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Introduction

Indeed, I see my entire flock being struck down by the sword of the wrath of God, as one after another they are visited by sudden destruction. Their death is preceded by no lingering illness, for, as you know, they die before they even have time to feel ill. The blow falls: each victim is snatched away from us before he can bewail his sins and repent. Just think in what state he must appear before the Implacable Judge, having had no chance to lament his deeds! Our fellow-citizens are not, indeed, taken from us one at a time, for they are being hustled off in droves. Homes are left empty, parents are forced to attend the funerals of their children, their heirs march before them to the grave. Every one of us, I say, must bewail his sins and repent, while there is still time for lamentation.¹

Gregory, Bishop of Tours (c.538-594), recorded these words of another Gregory (c.540-605), soon to be ordained bishop of Rome, concerning the 590 plague. According to his account, the second Gregory, later to be canonized and known to history as Gregory the Great, spoke these words when calling for three days of communal penance to culminate in a penitential procession. Seven different groups of Romans, whom Gregory the Great organized on the basis of gender, marital status, and lay or monastic vocation, met at seven different churches. The penitents then wound through the streets of Rome to converge into one large mass at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore. The event came to be known as the *letania septiformis* (seven-pronged procession) because of these seven spokes. Gregory of Tours' account has some credibility since his source was his deacon Agiulf, who witnessed the events in Rome, including the procession. Gregory of Tours' *History* related how at least eighty supplicants died during the procession and that once they reached the basilica the pope and the people continued to pray unceasingly.²

¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe. (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 545. For all references in this work, the Latin comes from: Gregory, Bishop of Tours, *Libri Historiarum X*, edited by Bruno Krusch and Wilhelmus Levison, Societas Aperiendis Fontibus (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani), 1951.

² Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 545.

Gregory of Tours did not record a legendary event at the end of the procession that is included in much later sources. Apparently beginning in the Thirteenth Century, accounts of this event included a climactic miracle announcing the end of the plague in Rome. According to the legend, as the seven processions converged, St. Michael the Archangel appeared on top of Hadrian's tomb brandishing a shining sword. He then sheathed his sword, signaling the end of the plague.³ Because of later accounts of this miracle, both medieval Europeans and modern historians have associated Gregory the Great with the First Plague Pandemic beginning in 541. Gregory's miraculous actions survived in hagiography, and this dramatic story became especially poignant for those enduring the Second Plague Pandemic, the first outbreak of which was known as the Black Death, beginning in 1347.⁴

³ Ado of Vienne in his *Martyrology* (c.855) recorded that Pope Boniface IV (550-615) dedicated a church to St. Michael on top of Hadrian's tomb that has been generally accepted for the dating of the addition of the chapel. See Louis Schwartz, "Gargano Comes to Rome: Castel Sant'Angelo's Historical Origins," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 64 (2013), 453-475, for the history of the story and an argument for the inclusion of St. Michael in the story.

⁴ Plague historians delineate three bubonic plague pandemics. This thesis deals with what plague historians term the First Plague Pandemic, which reached the Eastern Roman Empire in 541. The main initial occurrence lasted there until 542, but large outbreaks continued to recur. When speaking of the First Plague Pandemic, it is inclusive of the entire set of outbreaks associated with this event, and normally encompasses the years 541-750. The Second Plague Pandemic considers the entire set of outbreaks that began in Europe with the Black Death from 1347-1351. Therefore, when speaking of the Second Plague Pandemic, historians of medicine consider this period to last well into the seventeenth century. There is also a Third Plague Pandemic that occurred in China from 1855-1959. Modern occurrences of bubonic plague, which is caused by the bacteria *Yersenia pestis*, are successfully treated with antibiotics if caught early enough. Public health policies focusing on control of rodent populations provide more effective management. As of this writing, Madagascar is suffering an outbreak of plague. For more on the linguistic and scientific reasoning for this three pandemic formula, please see Monica Green, "Editors Introduction to Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World," in

Because of this legend, artistic depictions of the Archangel Michael appearing atop Hadrian's Tomb, signaling the success of Gregory's procession, became popular and Hadrian's tomb became known as "Castel Sant'Angelo," or Castle of the Holy Angel.⁵ Modern historians and Latin language scholars have expanded upon this later medieval interest in Gregory's procession, studying the *letania septiformis* from 590, and a plan for a similar procession in 603.⁶ In addition to preserving the miracle, this legend also bolstered later claims of the Roman pontiff to be the leader of Western Christendom. However, historians have yet to venture beyond these issues to explore further Gregory's experience of the plague. Gregory the Great, through both his personal example in organizing and leading the *letania septiformis* and also his advice to other bishops struggling with the same emergency in their districts, provided a model of the appropriate

The Medieval Globe: Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death, edited by Monica Green (Kalamazoo, MI: Arc Medieval Press, 2014), 9.

⁵ One especially famous example of the miracle appears in *Des Belles Heures*, a book of hours made for the Duc de Berry. Additionally, the statue of St. Michael made in 1753 that is on top the Castel Sant'Angelo appears on the cover of the only volume dealing with this plague in the west, Lester Little, editor, *Plague and the End of Antiquity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2008). See Michelle Ziegler, "St. Michael, the Plague, and Castel Sant'Angelo," *Heavenfield: Exploring Early Medieval Landscapes*, May 19, 2012, <https://hefenfelth.wordpress.com/2012/05/19/st-michael-the-plague-and-castel-sant-angelo/> for information from Louis Schwartz, "What Rome Owes to the Lombards: Devotion to Saint Michael in Early Medieval Italy and the Riddle of Castel Sant'Angelo," Session 429, International Congress for Medieval Studies, May 12, 2012, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI. This paper argued that the earliest written account of the legend that Schwartz found dates from the thirteenth century.

⁶ John R.C. Martyn, who translated Gregory the Great's letters into English, has published multiple times on the works of Gregory the Great. Regarding plague, see: John R.C. Martyn, "Four Notes on the Registrum of Gregory the Great," *Parergon* 19:2 (2002) 5-38, which argues that the 603 procession was not about a plague outbreak at all, but rather about the new Emperor.

actions of bishops in response to civic emergencies such as plague.⁷ Gregory would write his influential *Book of Pastoral Rule*, his handbook of instruction for bishops and priests to appropriately care for the laypeople under their charge.⁸

Before relating his deacon Agiulf's eyewitness account of Gregory the Great's speech and the *letania septiformis* in the tenth book of his *History of the Franks*, Gregory of Tours had already recorded multiple instances of plague attacking areas throughout Western Europe in the previous nine volumes. However, Gregory of Tours paid significant attention to Gregory the Great's approach. Gregory the Great ensured the recording of the procession by announcing and completing the procession before his enthronement as Pope. Gregory of Tours' deacon Agiulf turned back to Rome instead of

⁷ I do not argue that Gregory innovated a new practice, but rather that the particular episode of the *letania septiformis* provided an important example. For Gregory the Great as example, research of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity is especially applicable. A monastic at Whitby penned the first known *vita* of Gregory in 713, and consensus is that Bede referred to this manuscript for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. For this *vita* see Francis Aidan Gasquet, *A Life of Pope St. Gregory the Great, written by a monk of the monastery of Whitby* (Westminster: Art and Book Company, 1904), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001924623>. For the cult of saints, Peter Brown remains foundational, see especially Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Lisa Kaaren Bailey has raised the issue of the use of processions in the context of communal penance called for in sermon 25 of the Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon collection from the early fifth century in southeastern Gaul. See Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity's Quiet Success* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 50-51, 91-92, and 101-102. For a more thorough consideration of the context of processions in the city of Rome, see Ida Ostenberg, Simon Malmberg, and Jonas Bjørnebye, editors, *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2016). For the importance of Roman culture in the late antique world, Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). For the tradition of Christian healing see Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁸ See Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, translated by George E. Demacopoulos Popular Patristics Series (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary, 2007).

journeying back to Tours in order to witness the spectacle of Gregory's coronation, and instead first witnessed the announcement speech and the procession itself.⁹ Gregory the Great's method for helping the people of Rome deal with this emergency corresponded to responses in Francia that Gregory of Tours praised. Gregory of Tours himself followed Gregory the Great's example when an epidemic besieged Tours in 591. Over a century later, Bede (c.672-735) recorded the English experience of plague in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c.731). Gregory the Great's role in the foundation of the English church and his continued advice to English ecclesiastical leaders was central to Bede's history. Likewise, as previously noted, Gregory the Great's cult was revered enough in England to have the first *vita* composed there c.713. Gregory the Great's response to plague and his advice to bishops on how to handle this emergency provided an important reference for Christian leaders regarding how to view and appropriately respond to the plague for both the benefit of their flocks and themselves.

This thesis first examines Pope Gregory to show how he responded to the plague in Rome as well as how he advised both the public and his bishops to respond when threatened by plague in order to establish an ideal ecclesiastical response to the plague. Many scholars have written about the life and writings of Gregory the Great. These works discuss Gregory the Great as a leader marking the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, closely examine Gregory's writings, or discuss Gregory's expert administration, missionary activities, or reforms.¹⁰ None of these writers, however,

⁹ Agiulf had been to Rome and was returning home to Tours when he learned of Pope Pelagius's death and decided to return. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 547.

¹⁰ For example, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, 476-752* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books, 1979) who argues that the

considers Gregory's response to plague, despite the Castel Sant'Angelo miracle's importance to his later cult. Furthermore, no one has considered his views on health and illness as context for his understanding of the bishop's role in a civic emergency. In order to do this in the context of plague, I focus on three sources that explicitly illustrate his answers to these questions. First, the *letania septiformis* itself, as preserved in Gregory of Tours' narrative, recorded the pope's immediate response to the crisis of plague in Rome, his first action after his appointment as pontiff. This response included fasting and rogations by all of the members of the Roman Christian community. In addition to this source are two letters from the surviving collection of Gregory the Great's correspondence that especially illuminated his views on the bishop's role in times of plague. Gregory composed these letters to two different bishops, Aregius in Gap, France, and Dominic in Carthage, North Africa, approximately a year apart. Each letter

ascendancy of the papacy was less about the construction of a papal monarchy than a series of historical accidents; Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1991) who argues that Gregory's roles as monk, preacher, and pope provide the historical context to understand his thinking about each of these roles; R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great, The Early Church Fathers*, edited by Carol Harrison (London: Routledge, 2005); and George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). Although none of these works discuss plague, illness, health, or healing, this thesis's argument of Gregory the Great's position that the bishop must concentrate on the living rather than the dying and dead somewhat nuances Demacopoulos' argument, and Straw's before him, that asceticism was the driving force of Gregory the Great's papacy. The closest consideration to plague appears in religious studies. For example see Kevin L. Hester, *Eschatology and Pain in St. Gregory the Great: The Christological Synthesis of Gregory's 'Morals on the Book of Job'* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), which relates Gregory's experience of pain and eschatology to his relationship with Christ in order to explore Gregory's understanding of Christ. See Chapter 1 for further discussion of both of these points. See Jamie Kreiner, *The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) for important context of hagiography in this period.

specifically advised the bishop on how to minister to his flock during a time that plague raged in their districts.

The standard that Gregory proclaimed provides important context against which to evaluate the various responses recorded by Gregory of Tours in Francia and Bede in Britain. After establishing the ideal encapsulated in Gregory the Great's response to plague, I examine Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in order to glean both their understandings of disease, medicine, and cure, and also their opinions of how people should respond to epidemic illness. Because their histories provide the only narrative history of their kingdoms during their lifetimes, both Gregory of Tours and Bede were widely read and became standard texts for medievalists. Although they encountered what is generally agreed to be the same illness, Gregory of Tours and Bede offer distinct understandings of illness in general and how to respond to such a virulent epidemic in particular.¹¹

Gregory of Tours belonged to a Gallo-Roman elite family that had many members serving in ecclesiastical roles throughout Francia. As soon as he became Bishop of Tours

¹¹ Both Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* have been mined extensively for historical information because of the dearth of narrative histories in this period. In general, because of this initial focus on these sources, scholars have in many cases moved beyond these sources. For this time period, this results in extensive use of archaeology. The material record has especially come to the fore in England, where rescue archaeology and the policy of rewarding amateur metal-detectorists for their finds has provided a rich record. Rescue archaeology remains a significant contributor to archaeology throughout the areas discussed for this paper. In addition, scholars also consider a wider variety of texts than the histories. In England, this results in Anglo-Saxon studies focusing for the most part on later Anglo-Saxon England, the date of many surviving manuscripts. In Francia, this frequently involves using sources from outside of the kingdom, such as Gregory the Great's letters, or shifting the discussion to Carolingian memory of the Merovingian past, again because of the dates of surviving manuscripts.

in 573, Gregory began composing a long list of literary works, including the *History of the Franks*. Gregory had a special relationship with St. Martin of Tours, and wrote books of his miracles as well as the miracles of other saints. In addition, like many of his contemporaries, Gregory of Tours also wrote commentaries on scriptures. His *History* stands apart because of its secular focus, although many scenes retain a moral tone and highlight the success of people to whom Gregory was connected by family or other personal relationship. Many of the miracles described in the *History* concern Gregory's relatives, such as St. Gall, bishop of Clermont and Gregory's uncle. Additionally, Gregory's role as bishop shaped his narrative. He passed judgment on the various actions of bishops throughout Francia and depicted their political concerns as leaders of their communities. Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* remains the only history of Francia for the period he wrote, 573-591.¹²

Scholars have deeply mined Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* for insights into Merovingian Gaul. Much of our understanding of Merovingian political history comes courtesy of this work.¹³ Social historians have likewise used his testimony, often

¹² Henri Leclercq, "St. Gregory of Tours," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07018b.htm>.

¹³ See for examples Paul Fouracre, *Frankish History: Studies in the Construction of Power* (London: Routledge, 2013) and Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1992). While they talk about pastoral leadership, he does so within the context of the ascendancy of the cult of saints in Gaul as secular leaders took roles as bishops. While Gregory of Tours, and his extended family, certainly belong in the story of this transformation, Van Dam's book focuses on political changes and power as motivation, while, in contrast, this thesis looks to reveal Gregory of Tours' understanding of his responsibility as bishop in these times of crisis, and therefore complicates the interpretation of actions based on their political outcomes rather than motives, which are rather problematic in historical narratives. The most comprehensive studies on the Merovingians remain: Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (London: Routledge, 1993); Edward James, *The Franks* (Hoboken,

supplemented with archaeological information, to glean information about Merovingian life.¹⁴ However, medicine, health, and healing have been almost overlooked outside of hagiographical accounts of miraculous cures. Gregory of Tours understood disease to be an instrument of God's will, which He used to punish those who had sinned but had not rectified their behavior. Gregory revealed this overarching perception of disease whether talking about an individual illness or a widespread pestilence. Coexisting with this understanding was a practical approach to illness that recognized its natural aspect and revealed characteristics of early medieval medical care involving doctors, medicines, and other treatments, as well as supplication to God. Those ailments for which the doctors had no effective treatments could only improve through the grace of God. Therefore,

NJ: Blackwell, 1988); and Patrick J. Geary, *Before France & Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁴ For social history see, for example: Giselle de Nie, *Views from a Many-windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481-751* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Isabel Moreira, *Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Guy Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Yitzhak Hen, *Roman Barbarians: the royal court and culture in the early Medieval West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007). For archaeological information see Guy Halsall, *Early Medieval Cemeteries: An Introduction to Burial Archaeology in the Post-Roman West* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1995); Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Ian Wood, *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003). Also, Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity*, translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings and Jeanine Routier-Pucci, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), deals with burial in the late-antique world more generally, and also provides specific information on Rome.

once treatments had failed, acts of penance and supplication to God, usually through one of his saints, were the only hope for improved health.

In contrast to individual illnesses, as Lisa Kaaren Bailey has shown in her study of penance in late-antique Gallic sermons, civic catastrophes, especially the swift and numerous deaths of the plague and other epidemics, required the entire community to come together in immediate atonement to God for sins.¹⁵ Within this context, because of the threat to the community accompanying the disruption of an epidemic, the bishop's leadership through the calamity was crucial for saving the souls of the populace. The bishop should be concerned for his flock, pray for mercy for them, chastise each as necessary to ensure commendable behavior, and organize communal acts of penance. These actions functioned to assure each a place in heaven should they die of the plague if the bishop did not accomplish the main goal of safeguarding the entire community from God's wrath and stopping the plague.

Over a century later, in 731, instead of talking about bishops like Gregory of Tours, Bede focused on individual reaction to the plague. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is the single history to survive from early Anglo-Saxon England. Bede was a monk at Jarrow, in the kingdom of Northumbria in Anglo-Saxon England. Like Gregory of Tours, Bede wrote lives and miracles of saints and commentaries on scripture in addition to his *History*, which was the last of his works completed before his death in 735.¹⁶ However, in contrast to both Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours, Bede was

¹⁵ Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity's Quiet Success*, 51.

¹⁶ Herbert Thurston, "The Venerable Bede," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), www.newadvent.org/cathen/02384a.htm.

pursuing a monastic vocation at the time of his writing, which could have influenced his ideals on reaction to catastrophic illness. Rather than considering the earthly concerns of a bishop responsible for his community, as a monk, Bede's focus was on heaven.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* depicted the response to the outbreak of plague there in 665. Scholars have only recently begun to look at Bede's presentation of plague. In addition to John Maddicott's article in *Plague and the End of Late Antiquity*, Michelle Ziegler recently analyzed Bede's account of plague in his *Life of St. Cuthbert*.¹⁷ The limited historical scholarship of this period in England focuses on, or exclusively considers, the archaeological record or law codes.¹⁸ Most new scholarship on Anglo-Saxon England outside of these areas focuses on the later period, when the written record is more complete. These studies may reveal ideas reflective of an older oral

¹⁷ See John Maddicott, "Plague in Seventh-Century England," in *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, edited by Lester Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Michelle Ziegler, "Plague in Bede's Prose Life of Cuthbert," in *The Sacred and the Secular in Medieval Healing: Sites, Objects and Texts*, edited by Barbara Bowers and Linda Migl Keyser (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁸ For examples regarding archaeology see Edward James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2001); Robin Fleming, *Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise 400-1070* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010); and Tom Williamson, *Environment, Society and Landscape in Early Medieval England*, Anglo-Saxon Studies, edited by John Hines and Catherine Cubitt, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2013). Fleming only mentions plague to argue against burials demonstrating any indication of plague occurring. James mentions plague once, on page 174, when talking about Egbert, who Bede tells was in a Irish monastery when plague hit there. For examples regarding Anglo-Saxon law see Patrick Wormald, *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998); Stefan Juranski, *Ancient Privileges: Beowulf, Law, and the Making of Germanic Antiquity* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006); Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012); and Stefan Jurasinski, *The Old English Penitentials and Anglo-Saxon Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

tradition, but the inadequacy of early sources that could sufficiently corroborate or contradict the later conclusions prohibits any confirmation of this.¹⁹

In Bede's representations of the response to the seventh-century plague outbreak, he shows processions to be desperate responses of those hopeless people who do not recognize the blessing inherent in a swift death and early freedom from earthly sufferings. His monastic vocation could have contributed to his focus on the individual's perspective of plague. Another important factor to consider regarding his light treatment of bishops dealing with plague is an episcopal crisis in England during the plague. The high mortality rates of English bishops may conceal the fact that these bishops remained among their people, or may only testify to the potency of the attack. Either way, the disease crippled the English bishops as a group, even requiring a trip to Rome so that someone could invest new bishops. Therefore, while he revealed that some ecclesiastical leaders did follow the example of Gregory the Great, because of its different focus, his account provided much less insight into the role of bishops or other ecclesiastical leaders in responding to this catastrophe. Instead, Bede praised those who gracefully accepted their end, and lamented the weakness of those who succumbed to fear and pled for God to spare them.

¹⁹ For studies of Late Anglo-Saxon England applicable to the present inquiry see Lori Ann Garner, *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); Victoria Thompson, *Death and Dying in Later Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo Saxon Studies, edited by John Hines and Catherine Cubitt (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2012); Nicole Marafioti, *The King's Body: Burial and Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2014); Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016); Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2017).

Like *The History of the Franks*, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* also disclosed an understanding of disease as a natural phenomenon that was God's tool. Also, like Gregory of Tours, Bede mentions medical procedures in passing, indicating their normalcy and his acceptance of the practice.²⁰ Therefore, just as Gregory had shown regarding Merovingian medical practices, Bede differentiated between maladies that medicine could address, and those beyond the abilities of doctors. Bede equated plague, because of its virulence and speed of death, with the will of God. Because of these characteristics, and reinforced by this association, plague stood apart from other types of illness. Medieval doctors had no remedy, which is why Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours showed bishops especially led the response in the form of penance.

In stark contrast to Gregory of Tours' presentation, however, Bede presented God using this tool of plague for more than a punishment. In Bede's narrative, many holy people fall ill. Even when the victim sought medical attention, as Aethylthryth of Ely with her plague bubo, Bede interpreted these illnesses as blessed opportunities for suffering to cleanse the soul in preparation for heaven. It is in this mindset that he

²⁰ Anglo-Saxon medicine has its own historiography that does not frequently incorporate Bede. Rather, much of this research examines surviving medical texts that were copied down in the Tenth Century, and therefore, this scholarship deals with Late Anglo-Saxon England. While scholars agree that these texts reflect an older oral tradition, the lack of written testimony to medical practice in earlier centuries, such as those that Bede depicted, has left medicine in this period less explored. For the most comprehensive treatment of the texts themselves, see Stephen Pollington, *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plant-Lore and Healing*, (London: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000). For the interpretation of these texts for how Anglo-Saxons understood illness and healing see Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo Saxon Studies, edited by John Hines and Catherine Cubitt, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); and Shirley Kinney, "Anglo- Saxon Medicine: Cures or Catastrophe?" *Primary Source* II:II (2012), 37-42.

included as miracles incidents of a saint ending the suffering of the sick by releasing them to paradise rather than curing their bodily ailment.

The First Plague Pandemic entered western scholarship in response to the Pirenne thesis. Henri Pirenne, in his posthumously published *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937), argued for general cultural continuity in that period that we know now as “late antiquity.” According to Pirenne, the rapid advance of Islam, culminating in the eighth century when it transformed parts of the Mediterranean into Muslim-controlled areas, caused a break in cultural patterns that stretched back a thousand years, as well as disrupting communications and trade between Byzantium and the west. The isolated west went on to develop a history separate from its Mediterranean roots. It was the advent of Islam, then, that ultimately led to the “real” fall of Rome in the west.²¹ One of many responses to this Pirenne thesis called for the investigation of plague in late antiquity. Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, in their work *Mohammed, Charlemagne & the Origins of Europe*, argue on the basis of archaeological evidence that the break that Pirenne noticed actually occurred much earlier.²² They document severe disruption of economic links and civil institutions, as well as depopulation of urban areas, especially in the Greek east. Instead of occurring contemporaneously with the spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, the disruption occurred in the sixth century, which was the time of the First Plague Pandemic.

²¹ Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001).

²² Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne & the Origins of Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

These findings opened the way for further exploration of the First Plague Pandemic. Part of the earlier neglect of this topic is because of the types of sources that remain. Most of the records that survive from this period were the works of various ecclesiastics, including the sources considered here. In most circumstances, the information that appears in these accounts can be verified or discounted by looking at other surviving evidence, such as charters or archaeology. Each of these groups of evidence is subject to the whims of historical survival. In addition, because of better records preserved from the Second Plague Pandemic archaeologists and historians expect certain types of records and administrative responses to plague, and hesitate to discuss plague if no records of these responses remain. This later plague pandemic occurred throughout Europe, intermittently from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. Writers such as Boccaccio and Daniel Defoe, whose works were widely distributed, catalogued the chaos of these later plague outbreaks. From these sources, we see how Early Modern Europe struggled with the burial of its victims, resorting to plague pits, and how civic authorities attempted to intervene through sanitation legislation and government employed medical personnel.²³ The lack of these records for the First Plague Pandemic has on occasion led to the dismissal of the possibility of plague occurring in certain populations.²⁴

²³ For one of the most studied primary accounts in English, see Daniel Defoe, *Journal of a Plague Year*, edited by Cynthia Wall, (London: Penguin Classics, 2003). Regarding secondary scholarship, see note 9. For Boccaccio's famous fictional account, an accessible edition is Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, edited and translated by G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

²⁴ See for instance for England Robin Fleming, *Britain After Rome*, Edward James, *Britain in the First Millenium*, and Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For other areas see Ian Wood, *The*

Scholarship into the more famous later plague brings difficulties to the study of the First Plague Pandemic. First, and most important, is the growing realization among historians that disease is not merely a microbe that causes illness, but rather the social construction around that illness. Therefore, even if the same microbe attacked sixth-century Europe and fourteenth-century Europe, the diseases as witnessed and experienced by the people of the time would be different, creating a different experience of disease.²⁵ Even though scholars are beginning to recognize this difference, historians continue to respond to the sixth-century plague as they once did to the fourteenth-century plague.

Before research pointed out advances, such as public health policies, made by late medieval and early modern communities during the Second Plague Pandemic, many viewed the medieval societies suffering from the disease as backwards and superstitious. In general, this was part of the grand narrative history that consigned roughly 1,000 years to the dark ages between the light of antiquity and its revival in the Renaissance. The assumptions of medieval people as religiously dogmatic, ignorant of basic natural understanding of illness, or superstitious have dominated plague scholarship. Because of our modern understanding of disease structured by germ theory, many moderns view many alternate approaches to disease, some of which persist in the modern world, as ineffectual and only believed by those ignorant of modern science. In response, scholars

Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751 (London: Routledge, 1993); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); and Lester Little, editor, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*.

²⁵ One of the best treatments of this distinction comes from Justin K. Stearns, who looks at Christian and Muslim understandings of plague and leprosy in Early Modern Spain to understand ideas of contagion. See Justin K. Stearns, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

who study the Second Plague Pandemic focused their scholarship on refuting the assumptions that medieval people were backward by showing these types of advances, and thereby reinforced the idea that people before these advances were more backward and less “modern.”²⁶ Current scholarship on the Second Plague Pandemic continues to refine the understanding of the transformation of civic structures and institutions, usually on a micro-historical scale, or looks to extend the understanding of the Second Plague Pandemic as a global phenomenon.²⁷ Scholarship into Early Medieval medicine, for instance microbiologists’ testing of a remedy in *Bald’s Leechbook* finding that it cured

²⁶ For secondary scholarship that refutes these claims regarding the Second Plague Pandemic by referencing initiatives in public health or epistemological knowledge gained, see Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2013); Bryan Lee Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004); Ann G. Carmichael, “Plague Legislation of the Italian Renaissance,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 57 (1983): 508-25; Jo N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

²⁷ For examples of micro-histories see for example J.L. Stevens Crawshaw, *Plague Hospitals: Public Health for the City in Early Modern Venice* (Oxford: Ashgate, 2012); Kristy Wilson Bowers, *Plague and Public Health in Early Modern Seville* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013); Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2013); Linda Clark and Carole Rawcliffe, editors, *Society in an Age of Plague The Fifteenth Century XII*, edited by Linda Clark (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2013); and I.H.H Fay, *Health and the City: Disease, Environment and Government in Norwich, 1200-1575* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2015).

For examples of the globalization of the topic, see Monica Green, editor, *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, The Medieval Globe, edited by Carol Symes (Kalamazoo, MI: ARC Medieval Press, 2015) and Nukhet Varlik, editor, *Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean, Black Sea World*, edited by Erin T Dailey (Kalamazoo, MI: ARC Medieval Press, 2016).

the anti-biotic resistant modern ailment known as MRSA, has begun counteracting these biases and thereby offering deeper consideration of the First Plague Pandemic.²⁸

It is from these assumptions that many scholars, expecting to see the responses familiar from the Second Plague Pandemic, readily dismiss early medieval responses to plague in the former Western Roman Empire. Even those scholars who have defended their later medieval counterparts of the fourteenth century gloss over earlier experiences of plague, or do not mention them at all in their studies.²⁹ The fact that most of the remaining sources for the First Plague Pandemic are ecclesiastical and depict marvelous religious responses to the plague only furthers the divide between the experiences of the

²⁸ For one synopsis see Alan Lenhoff, “Was an Ancient Medicine a Remedy for MRSA?” *Medical Laboratory Observer* 47:5 (2015): 4.

²⁹ Contributing to this problem is the frequent approach of moving historical arguments backwards. Currently, much of the intellectual tradition cited for the Second Plague Pandemic has a foundation in the translation movement originating in Toledo in the twelfth century. While most scholars agree that a memory of the First Plague Pandemic survived into the time of the Second Plague Pandemic in Islamic lands, a similar, unbroken tradition has not been traced in the west. Scholars have not yet explored any alternate method through which knowledge of the plague passed from the early medieval West to the fourteenth century. Unfortunately, such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this project, but I hope to address this issue in future work.

One reason for the memory in Islamic lands, in addition to the preservation of classical medical texts, may be because the First Plague Pandemic was still occurring during the time of Mohammed and therefore Islamic religious tradition also includes the prophet’s advice on contagion and how to respond to plague. According to Stearns, many Islamic scholars explored the difficulty of reconciling the prophet’s teaching that contagion does not exist, because if it did then something other than God would be acting, and this would lead to polytheism, with empirical evidence of the spread of certain diseases. The advice on plague was to stay in a place with plague if you are there, but if you are not, then do not travel there. Christian holy texts do not include similar advice, likely because of their composition before the outbreak of the First Plague Pandemic. See Stearns, *Infectious Ideas*, 2011.

First and Second Plague Pandemics.³⁰ Despite these assumptions, a close reading of these sources reveals that medieval writers simultaneously understood illness as a natural phenomenon while also accepting that the same illness was one of God's tools to exercise his will by punishing or rewarding people on earth. In addition, by framing questions in response to critiques formed from modern assumptions, scholars contribute to a divide between their exploration of the disease and the experience and understanding of those experiencing the disease, the historian's subjects.

Modern scholars have differed on whether the plague that swept Europe in the later sixth century, often referred to as "Justinian's Plague," was the modern disease known as bubonic plague or something else entirely. Currently two scientific studies of graves in modern Germany have confirmed the presence of *yersenia pestis*, the bubonic plague contagion, in the West at this time. As noted by Michelle Ziegler, these graves did not contain any identifying characteristics to suggest plague victims were interred there. They were double graves, but location, grave goods, and all other characteristics matched the other graves in the cemetery.³¹ The graves looked exceedingly normal. Therefore, in the absence of the plague pits common to Early Modern Europe, aDNA testing is

³⁰ Such examples fill the pages of this thesis. Each of the considered sources, with the exception of the two letters from Gregory the Great to his bishops, includes fantastic imagery of miraculous intervention regarding the plague. Modern scholarship that analyzes responses to the First Plague Pandemic that are comfortable to modern audiences, such as the microhistories cited above for the Second Plague Pandemic, do not exist. In addition, the Scholastic intellectual tradition cited for the source of these responses during the Second Plague Pandemic emerged many centuries after the First Plague Pandemic.

³¹ Michelle Ziegler, "Plague in the Sixth-Century Bavarian Landscape," 53rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 2017.

currently the only way to confirm that bubonic plague existed in an area at a specific time. This testing is expensive and inconclusive as it may not always detect *yersenia pestis* in all plague deaths, especially at such a distant time.³²

Retrospective diagnosis is a difficult endeavor that requires many accidents of historic preservation, discovery, and modern funding for expensive scientific tests. For our purposes, it matters little whether these regions suffered from bubonic plague or another equally devastating epidemic. Regardless of the biological agent, Gregory of Tours' words make clear that the people in these communities experienced death on a scale unprecedented in living memory. For the purposes of this thesis, I will accept the medieval terminology of *pestilencia*, *peste*, or *lues*, which both Gregory as well as Bede used to describe the disease that they recorded.

It is within the context of these discussions on archaeological evidence and plague that modern interpretations of archaeological evidence from the early medieval period must be understood. For instance, the effect of the plague on other of the English kingdoms in this period is difficult to reconstruct because much of the information available for daily life comes from archaeological evidence. Plague does not leave obvious signs of its infection in bodily remains, nor did it otherwise mark the landscape, except occasionally in the necessity for mass graves. Even when evidence of disruption could have been because of plague, there is not currently enough evidence anywhere in the British Isles to declare positively that plague was behind the change. John Maddicott and Robin Fleming, both well-known for their historical work's interdisciplinary

³² aDNA testing refers to ancient DNA testing and requires the survival of DNA in archaeological samples, as well as the survival of *yersenia pestis* DNA in the same sample, and its successful extraction.

engagement with archaeological evidence, disagree on the interpretation of early Anglo-Saxon burial information, demonstrating the ambiguous nature of this archaeological evidence.³³

Therefore, because of the difficulties with archaeological records and limited scholarly inquiry, I start at a basic level. I revisit some of the most widely used histories written in this time period to ask new questions about how late antique people recorded the plague. There have been a few articles written about plague in these countries, nearly all included in the collected volume edited by Lester Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750* (2008). This work covers the entire Mediterranean, from Syria to Spain. In addition, each article on the former Western Empire focuses on a single area defined by later national borders. The vast majority of these articles, as a first foray into the topic, also ask questions with quantifiable answers such as: Where did the plague hit? When? How did it disrupt lives?³⁴ This study, instead, considers the idea of

³³ Many communities in what would become England dissolved in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, often after long periods of decline. Maddicott offers plague as one of many possibilities, but one that has not been sufficiently considered. Others have posited resettlement of population, either to nearby settlements or onto lands better suited for farming. Fleming, in her seminal study, specifically compares Thirlings, Yeavinger, and Mucking, to argue for a newly emerged system where each village specialized in providing certain supplies to their lords. In this ‘landscape of obligation,’ each failure of a settlement required an adjustment in order to provide the specific goods previously obtained from those communities. See John Maddicott, “Plague in Seventh-Century England,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750*, edited by Lester K. Little, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 171-214; and Robin Fleming, *Britain After Rome: The Fall and Rise 400-1070*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

³⁴ See Little, editor, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*. For specifically the Latin West, see 7. Alain Stoclet, “*Consilia humana, ops divina, superstitio*: Seeking Succor and Solace in Times of Plague, with Particular Reference to Gaul in the Early Middle Ages,” 135-149; 8. Michael Kulikowski, “Plague in Spanish Late Antiquity,” 150-170; 9. John Maddicott, “Plague in Seventh-Century England,” 171-214; and 10. Ann Dooley, “The Plague and

plague. How did these authors understand plague? How should one act when there is plague? Is it like any other disease? Therefore, rather than unearthing the plague, I use the plague as a tool through which to analyze how these medieval authors understood crisis, illness, disease, healing, and ecclesiastical leadership.

In the first chapter I examine Gregory the Great's model and advice to bishops dealing with plague in their dioceses. I argue that Gregory preferred the bishop to actively engage with the living and focus his attention on the saving of as many souls as possible before they succumb to death. His choice of a penitential procession involving all of the people of Rome accomplished this goal by ensuring that all the people involved had the opportunity to repent their sins. The desire to actively aid in the salvation of souls may also provide insight into Gregory's chastisement of Aregius in his letter to that bishop. Rather than being among his people, Aregius focused his attention on personal asceticism and prayer on behalf of his community, a role Gregory may have felt better fit a monk than a bishop. Repeatedly Gregory the Great advises the bishops to pray for God's grace in their role of governing the souls under their care.

In the second chapter, I analyze Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* in order to glean information regarding disease and health in the Merovingian world and also to use this context to better understand Gregory's perception of the plague and how people should respond. Gregory saw the plague as a manifestation of divine will, but also

Its Consequences in Ireland," 215-230. In addition, see Michelle Ziegler, "Plague in Bede's Prose Life of Cuthbert," in *The Sacred and the Secular in Medieval Healing: Sites, Objects and Texts*, edited by Barbara Bowers and Linda Migl Keyser (New York: Routledge, 2016). For disruption in the early-medieval period, Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), remains unparalleled in exhaustive research into various contacts among European and Mediterranean areas.

inferred that plague had a natural component whereby it spread facilitated by human action. Gregory of Tours' comprehension of illness was complex, with distinction between individual illness and a catastrophic illness attacking entire communities. First, I examine this hierarchical understanding and explain the place of plague within it.

Although Gregory saw plague as something different than more mundane illness, he condoned responses in line with the practical healing process of his time. I argue that Gregory of Tours was more flexible than Gregory the Great about how a bishop should respond to plague, so long as that bishop stayed with his people and sought to intervene with an angry God on their behalf. Unlike Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours praised both bishops who organized group penance and those who privately prayed on behalf of their diocese.

Lastly, in the third chapter, I examine Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* for the same purpose. I analyze instances of plague and other illnesses in his account to find reference to typical responses to illness. Like Gregory of Tours, Bede recognized plague as a more severe and universal disease than mundane sickness. I argue, however, that Bede differs from both Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great in his understanding of plague in significant ways. Unlike either Gregory, Bede focused on how the individual should accept the will of God regarding the outcome of a plague outbreak rather than performing penance or praying for survival. In part because of this different perspective, I argue, Bede does not praise leadership, other than leadership by the moral example of embracing death.

By looking at three prominent figures during this period, we can better understand how plague was experienced by people in Late Antiquity. Gregory the Great, Gregory of

Tours, and Bede shared certain concepts about illness, health, leadership, and faith.

Despite these many shared ideas, each of these individuals prescribed different actions.

The underlying beliefs that contributed to each interpretation also contributed to how each of these medieval authors, their people, and even their countries were remembered.

The Sword of the Angel:

Gregory the Great to Bishops in Time of Plague

In 590, Rome suffered from a severe outbreak of bubonic plague. Pope Pelagius II, after eleven years as pontiff, succumbed to the disease. The next pope, Gregory, later canonized and known as St. Gregory the Great, inherited chaos in the former capital of the Roman Empire. Famously, his first response was to organize a fast, reminding the Romans that “a penance lasting only three days wiped away the long-lived sins of the men of Nineveh.”³⁵ He then announced that “the sword of this dire punishment hangs over us already,” and explained his plan for an intricate penitential procession to demonstrate the repentance of the people of Rome and to assuage God’s anger against them.³⁶ Only then did he reveal his complete plan for assuaging God’s anger. After the fast, all Romans would come together in a *letania septiformis* (seven-pronged litany) to demonstrate their penitence.

Gregory the Great's involvement in Justinian's Plague entered medieval legend because of the miracle of the Archangel Michael appearing on top of Hadrian's tomb. At the culmination of the joining of seven processions into one, with Gregory in the lead, the angel sheathed his sword, signaling the end of the plague in Rome, which led to the renaming of the tomb to Castel Sant'Angelo. This chapter explores Gregory's perspective on this plague through his letters, and argues that Gregory's use of a Bible story may have

³⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 545. See Jonah 3:5-10 for the Biblical reference.

³⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 545.

linked Gregory, the First Plague Pandemic, and the image of the angel lowering his sword together in the memory of this plague in the Latin world.

Bishops contemporary with Gregory worried more about immediate difficulties in caring for their people than the plague as an historic occasion. Recurring outbreaks of plague in the former Roman Empire were particularly disruptive to daily life. The First Plague Pandemic, popularly known as Justinian's plague, caused civic disruption throughout the Mediterranean world. Gregory provided a compelling model for bishops dealing with these civic emergencies. In addition to being Pope, an office with emerging authority at this time, many surviving accounts testify to the esteem that contemporary religious leaders had for Gregory. Therefore, just as Gregory's procession entered history, his approach would have provided a compelling model for bishops during a time of civic emergency that accompanied plague.

Gregory's surviving records do not include his plans of the original *letania septiformis*. However, Gregory of Tours preserved the eye-witness account of his deacon, who had journeyed to Rome from Marseilles after hearing about the death of the previous pontiff.³⁷ In addition, the plan from a similar procession in 603 remains among Gregory's preserved letters.³⁸ These records provided a complete plan for the procession and a catalogue of the groups of people involved. At the time of the procession, the streets of Rome were flooded from torrential rains, necessitating a particularly circuitous route for

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 543-547.

³⁸ Pope Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, edited and translated by John R.C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), appendix 9.

the seven processions.³⁹ Lisa Kaaren Bailey argued that these forms of communal penance in the Late Antique world were meant to elide the diversity of the audience.⁴⁰ I argue instead that, within the context of plague and flood, the universal nature of the crisis rendered those differences less relevant, and the communal nature of the procession recognized this aspect of the crisis while admitting the relevance of certain categories. Gregory's manner of separating the various penitents by age, sex, marital status, and vocation recognized various differences of the populace, and ascribed specific meaning to each group with their specific starting church and route, rather than eliding them.

Monastic women and the priests of the first region began at the church of the holy martyrs Marcellinus and Peter.⁴¹ The priests of the second region led the children from the church of the holy martyrs John and Paul.⁴² The priests of the third region escorted

³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 545. For more information regarding this procession and its impact on Christianity in Rome see the work of Jacob Latham, especially Jacob Latham, "Inventing Gregory 'the Great': Memory, Authority, and the Afterlives of the *Letania Septiformis*," *Church History* 84:1 (March 2015), 1-31, and Jacob Latham, "The Making of a Papal Rome: Gregory I and the *Letania Septiformis*," in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, edited by Andrew Cain and Noel Lenski (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 293-304.

⁴⁰ Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity's Quiet Success* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 51.

⁴¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. This church is close to the catacombs of these two martyrs on the Via Labicana. For its history see "Parrocchia Santi Marcellino e Pietro al Laterano," *Diocesi Di Roma*, http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?page_id=188&ID=40.

⁴² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. This church may have remained damaged from the sack of Rome by Alaric I (410) and an earthquake in 442, because Pope Pascal I restored it in 824. It is on the Caelian Hill. For its history see Adriano Prandi, *The Basilica of Saints John and Paul on the Caelian Hill: After the Restorations and Archaeological Explorations Promoted by His Eminence, Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York and Cardinal Titular of the Basilica* (Vatican City, 1958).

the married women from the church of the holy martyr Clement.⁴³ The monastic men and priests of the fourth region all marched from the church of the holy martyrs Protasius and Gervasius.⁴⁴ The widows and priests of the fifth region advanced from the church of St. Euphemia.⁴⁵ The clergy and the priests of the sixth region began their procession at the church of the holy martyrs Cosmas and Damian.⁴⁶ Finally, the laymen and the priests of the seventh region gathered to process at the church of the protomartyr Stephen.⁴⁷ All of these groups were to come together at the basilica of the Virgin Mary and appeal to God for mercy.⁴⁸ As the penitents wound through the streets, Agiulf, Gregory of Tours'

⁴³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. The basilica di San Clemente al Laterano at this point was a basilica converted from a home of a Roman nobleman in the 4th century. For its history see *Basilica San Clemente*, <http://basilicasanclemente.com/eng/>.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. Pope Innocent I (402-417) dedicated this church, which was later changed to the basilica of San Vitale in honor of the saints' father. For its history see "Parrocchia Santi Vitale e Compagni Martiri in Fovea," *Diocesi Di Roma*, http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?page_id=188&ID=35.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. Very little information remains readily accessible about this church. A small entry occurs at the bottom of an entry for a different church dedicated to the same saint. See "Sant'Eufemia" *Churches of Rome Wiki*, <http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Sant%27Eufemia>.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. Pope Felix IV (526-530) rededicated the Library of Peace in the Forum of Vespasian as the basilica of Santi Cosma e Damiano. For its history see "Arte e Storia," *Basilica dei Santi Cosma e Damiano Roma*, <http://www.cosmadamiano.com/>.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. For its history see "Parrocchia Santo Stefano Protomartire," *Diocesi di Roma*, http://www.vicariatusurbis.org/?page_id=188&ID=143.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546. This is the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. For its history see *The Papal Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore*, http://www.vatican.va/various/basiliche/sm_maggiore/index_en.html.

deacon, reported that eighty victims of the plague collapsed and died en route.⁴⁹ At this point the narrative of Gregory of Tours came to a halt, with only the parting information that the Pope did not stop preaching, and the people did not stop praying.

That was the end of the story until the legend of the Castel Sant'Angelo extended the narrative to include a dramatic ending. Louis Schwartz has attempted to trace the history of this legend and only found a written version dating from the thirteenth century.⁵⁰ According to this legend, the culmination of the act of penance was not the continued preaching and praying, but occurred when the seven columns joined together into one massive throng of people, with Gregory at the lead. The suffering multitude witnessed the Archangel Michael standing atop Hadrian's Tomb and holding a shining sword. Before the gathered penitents, St. Michael sheathed his sword, signaling the end of the plague. In commemoration of this event, Hadrian's Tomb became widely known as the *Castel Sant'Angelo*, or Castle of the Holy Angel.

Gregory's extensive writings allow for much further analysis of his experience of plague than currently exists. This analysis illuminates his view of the role and responsibility of the bishop in times of crisis and offers insight into possible origins of the legend of the Castle of the Holy Angel. For this study, I focus on two of Gregory's letters from the *Registrum Epistularum* that advise bishops how to navigate through the

⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 546.

⁵⁰ See Louis Schwartz, "Gargano Comes to Rome: Castel Sant'Angelo's Historical Origins," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (July 2013) 453-475 and Louis Schwartz, "What Rome Owes to the Lombards: Devotion to Saint Michael in Early Medieval Italy and the Riddle of Castel Sant'Angelo," Session 429, International Congress for Medieval Studies, May 12, 2012, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, and its write up Michelle Ziegler, "St. Michael, the Plague, and Castel Sant'Angelo," *Heavenfield: Exploring Early Medieval Landscapes*, May 19, 2012.

catastrophic plague. While a complete collection of Gregory's letters existed in the ninth century, the surviving register of letters, the *Registrum Epistularum*, includes 854 letters gathered from the complete collection in three different groupings. These 854 letters, arranged into 14 books and numbered chronologically within those books, consist of both letters dictated or penned by Gregory himself, and also stock letters matching forms or verbiage from the period before his pontificate.⁵¹ He sent the letter now catalogued as 9.220 to Aregius, bishop of Vapincensis (Gap) in Gaul, in July 599 and letter 10.20 to Dominic, bishop of Carthage, in August 600. While Gregory mentions plague in passing on multiple occasions, these two letters are especially enlightening to this study for three reasons. First, they comprise the most sustained considerations of plague in Gregory's extant letter collection.⁵² Secondly, the specific rhetorical examples that Gregory used here mirror both the later legend of the Castel Sant'Angelo and also his speech declaring the three day fast and the following penitential processions. And last, in each of these

⁵¹ I use Pope Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, translated by John R.C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004). He followed the critical edition by Dag Norberg in 1982 for the Corpus Christianorum Series. I have consulted this version of the Dag Norberg text: Pope Gregory I, *Registrum Epistolarum*, translated by Pierre Minard (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991). The letter numbers reflect the book number and then the position of the letter within that book. These have become standard for identifying particular letters in Gregory's extensive surviving correspondence.

⁵² For instance, see letters: 1.17 where Gregory blames current plague on the Lombards' Arianism; 5.44 where Gregory quotes Luke 21:10-11 regarding plague and the apocalypse to argue that end times were near; 9.232 where Gregory tells of news of plague in Africa and the East; and appendix 9, which is the 603 declaration for another *letania septiformis*.

letters, Gregory specifically advised bishops who were currently coping with death on an extraordinary scale within their flocks.⁵³

Bishops, including Gregory, attributed the mass devastation that accompanied the plague to the wrath of God. Because plague was a calamity inflicted by an angry God, it was a scourge that could only be countered by religious supplication. As the religious leader of the secular community, the bishop's role was to orchestrate this response. Gregory's advice to two bishops struggling under the most dire of circumstances offers valuable insight into the papal understanding of the role and responsibility of local bishops in addressing civic emergencies. These letters reveal that Gregory believed that a bishop's concern for his people required that the bishop share their sufferings, but also that a good bishop remembered the transitory nature of this life. Additionally, like a good shepherd, the bishop's main concern should be his responsibility to care for his flock during their journey. Therefore, he must be moderate in grief, and demonstrate to the faithful the hope inherent in Christian death, thereby directing the living to correct behavior so they might merit heaven.

The first bishop that Gregory instructed regarding administering to his flock during an outbreak of plague was Aregius, Bishop of Vapincensis, now the city of Gap, in southern France. Aregius, a member of a Gallo-Roman aristocratic family, was legendary for his piety. His biographer, Probus, describing his holiness, recorded that he

⁵³ Given current information regarding the First Plague Pandemic and Gregory's description of the mortality in these regions, it is likely that these were outbreaks of plague caused by *yersenia pestis*. See introduction regarding my approach to retrospective diagnosis.

would find Aregius praying, doused in light, and floating in the air.⁵⁴ In later times, Aregius became better known as St. Arey. Later remembrances of St. Arey include a modern French commune named after him and record of the route of a yearly procession in his honor being amended by an ordinance in March 15, 1788.⁵⁵

Aregius had been in Rome to request Gregory's permission for himself and his archdeacon to use a specific type of liturgical garment known as dalmatic.⁵⁶ While waiting in Rome for a decision that was delayed by Gregory's busy schedule, Aregius learned of the illness of his people and rushed to his bishopric.⁵⁷ Gregory specifically attributed Aregius's hurry home to his grief, which is the theme of Gregory's letter.⁵⁸ According to Gregory, Aregius's grief was immoderate.⁵⁹ Citing the danger that a bishop's grief could undermine the faith of his flock in the solace of the Christian

⁵⁴ Abbé Paul Guérin, *Les Petits Bollandistes* (Paris: Bloud et Barral, 1888), 602-606. Also see Joan Carroll Cruz, *Eucharistic Miracles and Eucharistic Phenomena in the Lives of the Saints*, Charlotte (NC: TAN Books, 1987).

⁵⁵ Timothy Tackett, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 207.

⁵⁶ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689. Dalmatics, a kind of tunic, are a specific kind of liturgical vestment. This is one example of the papacy extending its control over rights and rituals occurring in bishoprics throughout the West.

⁵⁷ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689. Gregory uses the Latin *infirmetas* for illness in this instance.

⁵⁸ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689-90. "that grief which had long oppressed you did not let you concentrate on what you deserved and on what you wanted to request"

⁵⁹ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689-90. "I exhort you to have a rest from grieving and to stop being sad. For it is improper to be addicted to the tedium of affliction over them, as we must believe that they have reached the true life by dying." This is one of many passages referred to in order to support the idea that Gregory's thought included influences from Roman Stoicism. See Martyn's footnote 638.

afterlife in heaven, Gregory admonished Aregius,⁶⁰ and warned that excessive grief also threatened his ability to perform his duties of caring for the living.⁶¹

The format of Gregory's letter revealed his approach to his bishops as a relation of mentorship. Gregory begins his letter by relating to Aregius's grief.⁶² Gregory's choice to begin his letter with empathy for the suffering of his bishop speaks to his value on compassionate leadership. Only after communicating personal understanding of Aregius's grief did Gregory begin to console and then chasten his bishop. The main consolation for grief that Gregory provided is the promise of an eternal life, and the freedom of the soul that comes with death. Gregory used himself as an example, advising that he himself found consolation by remembering the afterlife, further communicating empathy with his bishop.⁶³ Even the Pope must occasionally recall, because he appropriately cares a great deal for his flock and therefore shares in suffering, that no matter how onerous their suffering, it is transitory, rewarded upon death. Only then, after

⁶⁰ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689-690.

⁶¹ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689-90. "And so, dearest brother, considering this reason, we should take care, as we have said, not to be afflicted over the dead, but to bestow affection on the living, for whom piety may be advantageous and love fruitful."

⁶² Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689-90. *Quam de amissione vestorum vos hominum habuisse cognovimus...* "The affliction of your Fraternity, which we learnt you suffered over the loss of your people, provided such a reason of grief for us, as love has made us one out of the two bodies, that we felt our heart particularly pained by your tribulations."

⁶³ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689. "how fitting it is to bear sadness with patience and not to grieve for a long time over death, in the hope of another life."

this sympathy, did Gregory exhort Aregius for his prolonged grief, reminding him that “it is improper to be addicted to the tedium of affliction over them.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, Gregory pointed out that prolonged grief may only be justified if those grieving do not know about the life that awaits Christians after their deaths. Since the bishop not only knows about the joy waiting in the afterlife, but also has the responsibility to communicate this belief to his flock, Aregius’s immoderate grief is especially dangerous. As Gregory puts it:

But we who know this, we who believe this and teach it, ought not to be too sad over their deaths, in case what has an appearance of piety among others may be more a cause of blame for us. For in some way it is a sort of distrust to be tormented by grief contrary to what anyone would preach, as the apostle says: ‘We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.’⁶⁵

In such a time of crisis, there was a very real danger that immoderate grief would undermine this most important Christian belief in the better life waiting in heaven when it was needed the most by the faithful. A bishop, therefore, as model for the community, should not demonstrate excessive grief, because ultimately a display of grief would

⁶⁴ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689.

⁶⁵ The passage that Gregory quoted is 1 Thessalonians 4:13. In this biblical letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul directed them to comfort each other with these words when grieving for the dead. He reminded them that at the end of times, the dead will go with God first, only then followed by the living. He then consoled them with the information that while the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, they would be prepared. Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689. Gregory’s focus on eschatology is famous, and recurs in works about him. In addition, his views on the subject have been used, mostly in theses and dissertations at this point, to explore other topics. For example, regarding conversion strategies in Darius Oliha Makuja, *Eschatology and Inculturation: The Missionary Strategy of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604)* Ph.D. dissertation, St. Louis University, 2006, and to explore Gregory’s understanding of the devil in Charlotte Emily Kingston, *The Devil in the Writings and Thought of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604)* Ph.D. dissertation, University of York, 2011. These inquiries have yet to extend to the plague.

discourage the flock. If even a bishop succumbed to the suffering of this world, then there remained no hope of heaven for his flock that would be strong enough to surpass the current grief.

However, what is this display of grief to which Gregory responds? There is little information to glean an answer to this important question. I suggest that this display of grief may be another interpretation of the extreme piety that Probus recorded. Gregory's admonition was for Aregius to be among the suffering living, but he did not indicate what the saintly man was doing instead. It is possible that he was in private prayer. The extreme prayer that Probus recorded, though not uncommendable, would have limited the time and effort that Aregius would have been among the sick and frightened populace. In both of these letters to bishops, Gregory recommended that they pray, but not directly for the plague to end, reminding Dominic in another letter written a year later that "it is the worst kind of madness not to want a sinner to desist, in the interests of justice, while unjustly wanting God to stop exercising his vengeance on him."⁶⁶ Instead, bishops must be active among their people, castigating, encouraging, and consoling as appropriate. The prolonged and intense prayer of an acetic, as recorded by Probus, would have taken Aregius away from his most important duty as bishop.

To Gregory the Great, the only appropriate response to plague for a bishop is to do all possible to ensure that his flock, if they died, did so ready for entrance to heaven. Gregory's advice for prayer to Aregius was to pray only for divine grace in fulfilling his duties as bishop:

⁶⁶ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730.

In all of these matters the assistance of divine grace is needed, let us implore the clemency of almighty God with continual prayers, that he may grant us the will and the power to carry out this task, and may direct us along that path with the fruit of good work, as he bears witness that he is the shepherd of the shepherds, so that we can implement all of it through Him, without whom we cannot attain anything.⁶⁷

He echoed this direction when advising Dominic, whom he did not chastise for excessive grief:

Pray for the clemency of almighty God, asking that He would grant us to be worthy of showing these matters, and would mercifully prick the hearts of the people to carry them out, so that as we perform our actions for our salvation in fear of God, we may deserve both to be snatched from impending evils and to come to heavenly joys, led by His grace, without which we can do nothing.⁶⁸

Gregory clearly judged a bishop by his actions as shepherd to his sheep rather than as holy ascetic. Since he had also been a monk, he praised these endeavors, but frequently lamented how his role as bishop of Rome required him to manage earthly affairs.⁶⁹ Therefore, if Aregius' prayer was the source of Gregory's admonishment, even though it would have been commendable to Gregory of Tours as holy, it did not fulfill Gregory the Great's view that the role of bishop required a specific kind of responsibility of leadership of the community. Of course, there are innumerable actions that would display immoderate grief for which Gregory the Great may have rebuked Aregius in this letter, since the form of immoderate grief is unspecified.

Therefore, when Gregory reminded Aregius of the many needs of his flock, he also exhorted him to be among them to be able to address each sheep. Members would

⁶⁷ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689.

⁶⁸ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 729.

⁶⁹ This is a theme throughout Gregory's letters to friends and fellow churchmen.

need specific and personalized guidance depending on their circumstances. Gregory provides a list that communicates a small overview of the vigilance and wisdom the office of bishop required, especially during these times of crisis:

Let us hasten to profit those we can by reproving, by exhorting, by persuading, by soothing and by consoling. Let our tongue be a nourishment for the good and a sting for the wicked. Let it restrain the proud, appease the angry, stir up the indolent, inflame the idle with encouragement, persuade those holding back, soothe the bitter, and console those despairing, so that we may show the path of salvation to those on their way, as we are said to be their leaders.⁷⁰

Specific people under the care of the bishop must be met in their personal situation and the bishop must understand what approach would best restore each person to the path to salvation. Given the extreme circumstances of an outbreak of a disease with such a high level of mortality, some of these behaviors were likely extreme, and the bishop therefore required extra vigilance and strength to provide the extraordinary support his flock required.

In addition to seeing to the practical needs of their flocks, bishops also had to ensure that their care of their flock met divine standards for leadership. As part of the earthly responsibility bestowed on a bishop, failure to appropriately guard his sheep results in divine punishment, whether on earth or in the afterlife. Once again, Gregory explicitly reminded Aregius of this danger: “And if error should ever lead a sheep astray from the flocks entrusted to us, and off the beaten track, let us strive with total exertion to recall it to the Lord’s sheepfolds, so that from the name of pastor that we bear, we may obtain no punishment, but a reward.”⁷¹ Such a steep responsibility is not to be borne

⁷⁰ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689.

⁷¹ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689.

alone, but may only be accomplished with divine grace. Therefore, a bishop's duties include "continual prayers"⁷² in order that God may direct and support the bishop in these endeavors. However, pastoral care must accompany these continual prayers, or the direction and support would be wasted. Only after the majority of the letter addresses the difficulties of the epidemic in Gap and provides support, encouragement, and direction to Aregius's most pressing concerns does Gregory address his actual business with the bishop. The issue of the dalmatics and an upcoming synod are of secondary importance to compassionately addressing the struggles Aregius was experiencing in the face of a plague outbreak in his bishopric.

In his letter the next year to Dominic, bishop of Carthage, Gregory repeated the advice he had given to Aregius. However, Dominic did not receive Gregory's censure for immoderate grief. This letter has been more widely studied than the one to Aregius, to the extent that it was included in a 2013 sourcebook for students of the Middle Ages.⁷³ Rather than comforting a bishop suffering from immoderate grief, Gregory's own grief overwhelmed this letter, even while he directed Dominic to have hope and help the living. Once again, Gregory advised that the focus for the bishop should be on the active management of the living, administering to each of the people under his care individually so that they may be prepared and worthy to enter heaven. Gregory continued his mentoring approach in his letter to Dominic. Just as in his letter to Aregius, he began with

⁷² Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, 9.220, 689.

⁷³ See Barbara Rosenwein, *Reading the Middle Ages: Sources from Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic World, Second Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 9-10.

empathizing with his correspondent.⁷⁴ He went on to share his belief that the ongoing troubles were heralds promised before the apocalypse, specifically noting pestilence in the list of harbingers.⁷⁵ However, this time the commiseration in grief persisted throughout Gregory's discussion of the ongoing suffering. This grief was a human weakness further contributing to suffering, but one that Gregory could not escape, despite his earlier chastisement of Aregius. He emphasized this weakness by using language that paralleled the cause of the grief, thereby transforming the victims from those who suffer with plague to those who survive, telling Dominic, "but because the nature of our infirmity is such that we cannot refrain from grief over those dying, let the teaching of your good Fraternity be a consolation for those in trouble."⁷⁶

Not only is death a release of the soul to the better life in heaven, but Gregory argues that swift death from disease is especially merciful: "Even the kind of death we

⁷⁴ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 729. "We have already learnt how great a plague has spread through parts of Africa, and because not even Italy is free of the impact of disaster, the groans of our grief have been doubled." Gregory uses *lues* here to refer to plague. This term literally means "that which is not bound," but commonly referred to a plague, pestilence, or infection. See Perseus Word Study Tool for the literal meaning: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=lues&la=la>. When speaking of Italy, Gregory says it is not free of *cladis percussio*.

⁷⁵ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 729. See note 61. For this Gregory uses *pestilentia*.

⁷⁶ Here Gregory uses *infirmitas*, which means weakness to refer to the weakness of humanity because of its experience of temporality. Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730. Gregory's focus on eschatology is famous, and recurs in works about him. In addition, his views on the subject have been used, mostly in theses and dissertations at this point, to explore other topics. For example, regarding conversion strategies in Darius Oliha Makuja, *Eschatology and Inculturation: The Missionary Strategy of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604)* Ph.D. dissertation, St. Louis University, 2006, and to explore Gregory's understanding of the devil in Charlotte Emily Kingston, *The Devil in the Writings and Thought of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604)* Ph.D. dissertation, University of York, 2011. These inquiries have yet to extend to the plague.

hope for is a consolation, when we consider how horribly others perish. What terrible losses of limbs and what great cruelties we have seen, for whom death was the only remedy and life was a torment.”⁷⁷ Gregory insists that, as long as the victim is in a suitable relationship with God, swift death by diseases such as the plague is preferable to the prolonged physical suffering of other ailments. Bubonic plague brings an especially quick death, and Gregory himself described the swiftness in his address to Rome prior to the *letania septiformis*:

Indeed, I see my entire flock being struck down by the sword of the wrath of God, as one after another they are visited by sudden destruction. Their death is preceded by no lingering illness, for, as you know, they die before they even have time to feel ill. The blow falls: each victim is snatched away from us before he can bewail his sins and repent.⁷⁸

Contrast this description with Gregory’s personal suffering of frequent debilitation by gout, which he often laments in his letters.⁷⁹ Many other chronic ailments, or fatal ailments that progressed much more slowly, were familiar to Late Antique audiences. In addition to disease, Gregory could be referring to any number of different forms of prolonged suffering, from violence through war, to chronic malnutrition, to birth defects or congenital disabilities.

For Gregory, the swift death brought on by plague could be God’s mercy for the faithful who had prepared their souls appropriately. He reminded Dominic that “we should strengthen our accounts that we must present at His judgment, with the zeal of good deeds and tears of penitence, so that for us such great blows should not be the

⁷⁷ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 545.

⁷⁹ This is a theme throughout Gregory’s letters to friends and fellow churchmen.

beginning of damnation but, by the favor of His grace, provide the benefit of purification.”⁸⁰ Therefore, not only should the bishops themselves be sure to prepare their souls better by doing good deeds and doing penance for sins, but also, as leader of the faithful, the bishop’s job included ensuring that the members of his flock had likewise prepared their souls. It is within this framework that Gregory’s *letania septiformis* should be understood. If the soul were unprepared, without good deeds or penance, then rather than a merciful swift departure for paradise, death quickly ushered it into the bowels of hell. If a bishop had not provided the opportunity for his followers to perform these key actions, then he likewise had sinned and risked damnation, as Gregory spelled out to Aregius.⁸¹

In his letter to Dominic, Gregory the Great further stresses the mercy of this death by plague by drawing on instances of plague in the Bible. The story of the wise King David’s choice for his people bolsters the idea of God’s mercy even in the face of His wrath:

When David was allowed to choose what kind of death, did he not refuse famine and the sword, and chose that his people should fall dead beneath the hand of God? Gather from this how much grace there is in those who die from a divine blow, when they die through that choice that was certainly offered to the holy prophet as a gift. Therefore, let us offer thanks to our Creator in all adversities and trust in his compassion, bearing all things with patience, because we certainly suffer less than we deserve.⁸²

⁸⁰ Gregory uses *nobis percussions*, referring back to his reference to David, but also reinforcing the divine nature of the plague as a beating from God, with multiple blows. Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730.

⁸¹ Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 9.220, 689.

⁸² Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730. This choice occurs after David fights the Philistines. See 2 Samuel 21-23. The choice is 2 Samuel 24:11-15. Gregory’s use of this specific story, as well as his references to “the sword of the wrath of

In the Bible story, David took a census of Israel and Judah in order to determine his kingdom's military strength, which demonstrated a lack of faith in God's protection of his people during battle.⁸³ David then became appropriately contrite about ordering this census, after which God presented him with a choice through his seer, Gad.⁸⁴ These choices were three years of famine, three months of flight before his enemies, or a pestilence in his land for three days.⁸⁵ This matches the reference Gregory made in his letter. However, in the Vulgate text, David said only: "I am in a great strait: but it is better that I should fall into the hands of the Lord (for his mercies are many) than into the hands of men."⁸⁶ David chose God to punish the people rather than allow them to be at the mercy of men because he expected God to be more merciful than other men.⁸⁷

God" in his speech calling for the *letania septiformis*, may have contributed to the ultimate form of the legend of the Castel Sant'Angelo.

⁸³ 2 Samuel 24:1-9.

⁸⁴ 2 Samuel 24:10-12.

⁸⁵ 2 Samuel 24:13.

⁸⁶ 2 Samuel 24:14. "artor nimis sed melius est ut incidam in manu Domini multae enim misericordiae eius sunt quam in manu hominis" The English is from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate, and the Latin from the Vulgate. See www.latinvulgate.com for the online version of these texts.

⁸⁷ Despite Gregory's assertion, it appears that David left the choice between famine and plague to God. Additionally, the comparison with David's choice subtly references Italy's ongoing invasion by the Lombards, which Gregory often lamented as its own punishment from God inflicted on the people of Italy.

God sent pestilence to Israel.⁸⁸ After 70,000 men had died, God stopped the plague as David seemed to expect that he would, because of his mercy. The specific manner that God inflicted the pestilence was revealed when the Bible explained the end of the plague: “And when the angel of the Lord had stretched out his hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord had pity on the affliction, and said to the angel that slew the people: It is enough: now hold thy hand.”⁸⁹ The angel of the Lord, unnamed in the Old Testament, stretches out his hand to destroy David’s people. God ultimately spared Jerusalem, just as he would later spare Rome. The Vulgate did not include reference to a sword, but Gregory’s own speech, preserved by Gregory of Tours, used the metaphor of the sword cutting down the people multiple times. In addition, Michael’s role of leading God’s armies in the book of Revelation would have contributed to the militaristic association that included a sword.⁹⁰

In Samuel, the angel’s hand stopped at the threshing floor of Areuna the Jesubite. David then, at the direction of God through Gad, buys the threshing floor in order to “build an altar to the Lord, that the plague, which rageth among the people, may cease.”⁹¹ Despite Areuna’s offer to donate the land to the king, David insisted on compensating

⁸⁸ 2 Samuel 15. And the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel, from the morning unto the time appointed, and there died of the people from Dan to Bersabee seventy thousand men. / immisitque Dominus pestilentiam in Israhel de manu usque ad tempus constitutum et mortui sunt ex populo a Dan usque Bersabee septuaginta milia virorum

⁸⁹ 2 Samuel 24:16 “Cumque extendisset manum angelus Dei super Hierusalem ut disperderet eam misertus est Dominus super adflictione et ait angelo percutienti populam sufficit nunc contine manum tuam”

⁹⁰ Revelation 12:7-9.

⁹¹ 2 Samuel 24:21. “Aedificem altare Domino et cesset interfectio quae grassatur in populo”

him for the land. He then built the altar “and offered holocausts and peace offerings: and the Lord became merciful to the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.”⁹² And with this, 2 Samuel ends. Later, this space became the site for Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem, or Temple Mount, a site still sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Although the legend of the Castel Sant’Angelo was not contemporary with Gregory, it reflected Gregory’s use of this story of David and the plague in Israel and mirrored it in many ways. The deaths of the Israelites that succumbed to the pestilence were quick, with only three days for the pestilence to rage. In addition, God and the angel were interacting with David throughout the epidemic, underscoring both the immediacy of death and also the interaction between the earthly and the divine. The legend of St. Michael appearing on Hadrian’s tomb also included interplay between the earthly and heavenly realms, with death and its remedy nearly coexistent. Both David and Gregory offered forms of sacrifice to appease the Lord’s wrath – David in the form of burnt offerings, and Gregory in the form of penance. Gregory the Great himself provided the parallel to David’s plague both in the references to the sword in his speech to announce the fast and *letania septiformis* and also in the biblical reference in the letter to Bishop Dominic. The multiple parallels between David’s story and the legend of the Castel Sant’Angelo suggest that this Biblical description of pestilence became intertwined with Gregory and the *letania septiformis* in Rome. In addition, this association strengthened the primacy of Rome as holy land, and therefore the supremacy of its bishop.

In his letter to Dominic, Gregory does not quote the end of David’s story, which at first may seem surprising since it provided direction for religious leaders whose people

⁹² 2 Samuel 24:25. “Obtulit holocaust et pacifica et repropitiatus est Dominus terrae et cohibita est plaga ab Israhel”

suffered from a plague. This could be in part because Gregory's advice for bishops is different than David's actions that ended plague in the bible story. Just as he had coached Aregius, Gregory advises Dominic to tend practically to the needs of his flock through direct correction:

Suggest to them that they will keep the good things promised to them, so that when strengthened by a most certain hope, they may learn not to grieve over the loss of temporal things, in comparison with the gift they are going to receive. Let your tongue restrain them more and more (as we also believe) from the perpetration of wicked deeds, and let it make known the rewards for good deeds and penalties for bad ones, so that those who are less fond of goodness may at least be afraid of evil things, and may hold themselves back from those deeds that ought to be punished. For to commit acts worthy of whipping while placed amid whips is to show great insolence towards the person punishing you, and provokes him in his fury to even sharper anger. And it [sic] the worst kind of madness not to want a sinner to desist, in the interests of justice, while unjustly wanting God to stop exercising his vengeance on him.⁹³

The difference between David and Gregory, and the bishops he advised, is that David's sin caused the plague upon his people, while Gregory and his bishops saw the plague as divine punishment for their people. God incited David in order to be able to punish his people through David's sin. Therefore, Gregory and his bishops must be extra vigilant in order to meet their responsibilities as bishops in this most difficult test and lead their brethren on the correct path. Based on the example in Samuel, should the bishops fail their followers, they would further provoke the wrath of God, and therefore worsen the suffering of their people.

Gregory continued to mirror his advice to Aregius, urging Dominic to remember that he can accomplish such a difficult task only with God's help. For this reason, rather than praying for God's forgiveness, he should avoid sinning in his role as leader by

⁹³ Here Gregory uses *flagella* to work with his imagery. Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730.

asking for God to stop the punishment of his people when they remained sinners and instead pray to God for guidance and help in directing his flock back to God's grace. According to Gregory, the ultimate responsibility for the faithful's salvation lay with their bishops. Only with the help of God's grace could these bishops recognize and implement the appropriate response to each individual. The bishop must ensure each soul performed good deeds and was appropriately penitent for the sins that led to this communal punishment, thereby ensuring their swift transport to heaven and relief from earthly suffering and divine punishment.

Gregory's advice to Dominic and Aregius demonstrated his concern about struggles of bishops administering to flocks in grave danger from the plague. This danger was not death, but rather the spiritual health of both the bishop and the laypeople under his charge at the time of their death, which would determine their eternal life. Gregory himself provided a compelling model of the active leader in a time of crisis for bishops dealing with these civic emergencies. His implementation of the three day fast followed by the intricate *letania* demonstrated that such calamities required the strong spiritual shepherd to best minister to the suffering, maintain civic order, and, God willing, end God's punishment of his sheep.

I argue that, just as Gregory's actions would have encouraged bishops to lead processions during the plague, his use of a Bible story both in his speech calling for the penitential fast and procession and in his letter to Dominic may have linked Gregory, the First Plague Pandemic, and the image of the angel lowering his sword together in the memory of this plague in the Latinate world. Therefore, Gregory's approach would have provided a compelling model for bishops and influenced the way in which history

remembered his own leadership. Through an examination of Gregory the Great's own actions in the face of plague paired with letters to these two bishops facing the same emergency, we are able to capture a deeper understanding of Gregory's view of the role of bishop as leader of the populace through shared adversity.

The Sword of the People:

Gregory of Tours on Bishops and their Flocks

Gregory of Tours (538-594) was among the first narrators of a history that depicted the response to plague in the former Western Roman Empire. Gregory differentiated between outbreaks of the plague and other forms of illness. His *The History of the Franks* indicated that sickness could represent the anger of God toward individuals. Through his relation of various illnesses and cures, he illuminated many medical practices of his day, which provide context for the reaction to plague. More widespread epidemics, including incidents of bubonic plague, were a communal ill announced by larger signs from God. Gregory of Tours spoke of earthquakes, landslides, comets, and other phenomena, all of which he termed *prodigia*, or prodigies, that foretold the coming of plagues.⁹⁴ These signs indicated God's displeasure with his people.

This chapter will explore three interrelated concepts that come through in Gregory's narrative. First, Gregory's understanding of illness provided fundamental context necessary to interpret his depictions of plague. *The History of the Franks* revealed not only Gregory's own understanding of disease, but also the interpretations of others who viewed disease differently than Gregory. Gregory reveals both medical practice of his time and also how different individuals reacted to having an illness, mundane or deadly. Only after exploring these concepts fully will I then explore Gregory's perception of plague within this context of illness. Gregory revealed that widespread plague is a

⁹⁴ For some examples see Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 295-296, section V.33, titled *De Prodigis*. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 306, section V.41, titled *De legatis Calliciensibus ac prodigiis*

punishment by God against an entire community. The appearance of prodigies demanded action to assuage God's anger. This action varied in its form depending on the decision of the bishop, but these religious leaders often organized an appropriate communal penance as part of an appeal for divine protection. Gregory, as a bishop himself, testified to the crucial role that bishops played in their communities.

Throughout his *History*, Gregory underscored the necessity for good episcopal leadership at all times. Because of the communal and spiritual nature of the cause of the plague, the need for good religious leadership was decisive in times of plague. Therefore, this chapter ends with a consideration of Gregory's view of appropriate episcopal leadership and how that manifested during outbreaks of plague. Gregory's depiction of plague offers insight on his idea of episcopal leadership, which complements other examples in his history where he revealed these beliefs. In Gregory's view of plague, the specific response mattered less than the presence of a bishop who determined the appropriate plan for the community. Therefore, his text praised those bishops who stayed with their flocks despite their own peril, and lambasted any who fled the community. As long as the bishop, as religious leader of the community, remained with that community, Gregory applauded whichever manner of response to the plague that the bishop chose in order to lead his people.

Gregory of Tours was born c. 538 in Clermont-Ferrand into a prominent Gallo-Roman family with members holding many ecclesiastical positions in Late Antique Gaul. Gregory himself was Bishop of Tours from 573 until his death in 594. He wrote his *History of the Franks* over many years and documented events both in the distant past and those within his memory and in which he frequently appeared as an important actor.

In the past, historians have frequently interpreted this work as a simple account, and thereby automatically presumed its accuracy.⁹⁵ Gregory's *History* famously revealed interpretations and judgments of individuals and their actions. Scholars have continually mined Gregory's *History* to discover his perceptions on various subjects, but have yet to discuss his experience of plague.⁹⁶ Yet, it is clear that *The History of the Franks* offers an unparalleled opportunity to glimpse Justinian's plague through the eyes of a direct witness who freely communicated his ideas concerning the proper understanding of and response to this pandemic.

People living in the sixth century, like people everywhere, suffered from a variety of diseases. Most of these illnesses assailed only a few at a time. Gregory's *History of the Franks* revealed his understanding of disease, medicine, and cure, which applied to both plague and more mundane maladies. Gregory's understanding of everyday illnesses provides context against which to examine his approach to the plague. Throughout the work illnesses of all kinds were divinely caused, even if there was a natural aspect to a particular disease. For contained diseases, those who were struck by the disease were often presented as victims of God's displeasure. However, other individuals and groups

⁹⁵ For an example of this view of Gregory see Henri Leclercq, "St. Gregory of Tours," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

⁹⁶ For current scholarship see for example Alexander Callander Murray, editor, *A Companion to Gregory of Tours* Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, edited by Christopher M Bellitto (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity 550-850*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Fourth Series, edited by Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser, editors, *Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Ellen F. Arnold, "Rivers of Risk and Redemption in Gregory of Tours' Writings" *Speculum* 92:1 (2017), 117-143.

suffered and died without Gregory providing any indication that they were sinful or that God was punishing them. These examples especially provide clues to the contemporary practice of medicine and the earthly aspects of the concept of disease. But for most of the cases of illness in *The History*, Gregory revealed an understanding that disease was a sign of God's will and therefore a person could only hope for a cure through God, by means of whatever instrument He chose.

Gregory indicated that personal sickness was often a punishment for specific actions of an individual. One poignant example occurs in Gregory's narration of a dispute that happened c. 580 between Nantinus, Count of Angoulême, and Heraclius, bishop of Angoulême. Nantinus's uncle had retired from rule of the county to join the church as a bishop. A priest, Frontonius, fatally poisoned the uncle in order to usurp the bishopric. The count, Nantinus, attacked Heraclius, a bishop brought in from Bordeaux, for protecting his uncle's murderers. During this feud, the count occupied estates that his uncle had willed to the church, killed laymen and priests, and destroyed church property. Heraclius died, as Gregory noted "reaching the end of his earthly journey," but Nantinus did not escape punishment for attacking the bishop.⁹⁷ While suffering from dysentery, Nantinus cried out in feverish agony:

'What torment is this! I am being burned by Bishop Heraclius! It is Bishop Heraclius who is torturing me! It is Bishop Heraclius who is summoning me to judgement! I confess my guilt! I admit that I wronged him in the most unpardonable way! I beseech him to stop tormenting me with this awful pain and let me die!'⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.36, 300.

⁹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.36, 300.

However, Nantinus never performed penance for these sins of transgression. Therefore, he did not receive the peace for which he implored. Gregory indicated that when Nantinus was approaching death, “his body became so black that you would have thought that it had been placed on glowing coals and roasted,” signifying that his punishment continued after death.⁹⁹

Gregory’s narrative illuminated other curative practices in Merovingian Gaul even while revealing the flexibility of this single construction of illness as punishment from God. Gregory only differentiated between the types of diseases by describing their symptoms, but his description of events included occasional descriptions of some medical practices of the period. He told of how St. Tetricus had a wound of the blood, possibly a stroke.¹⁰⁰ Those in charge of his care did not directly appeal to God, but rather called the doctors. However, as Gregory notes, “The doctors applied their poultices, but they did no good.”¹⁰¹ Once the doctors had unsuccessfully attempted to heal the saint, the practical consideration of his replacement took over the narrative. No miraculous cure awaited this man, despite his sanctity.

Small details regarding medicine creep into the periphery of Gregory’s stories. Gregory revealed that courts had their own cadre of physicians because he spoke of the fall of Marileif, who had been the chief physician at the court of King Chilperic.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.36, 300.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.5, 260. “Interea beatus Tetricus a sanguine sauciatur”

¹⁰¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.5, 260.

¹⁰² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VII.24, 407.

Gregory also indicated that foreign herbs were available. When telling about the recluse Hospicius of Nice, Gregory mentioned that Hospicius fed from the roots of Egyptian herbs during Lent, first making tea and then eating the herbs themselves. Gregory related that merchants brought these herbs to the hermit, but the trade must have been larger than this individual, because Gregory told that “hermits are greatly addicted to these” herbs.¹⁰³ While these particular herbs do not seem to be strictly medicinal, their continued availability suggests that other required herbs would be available through the same merchants and trade routes.

Everyday items from a holy place could also be used as medicines. This middle practice between pure medicine and religious supplication provided the basis for many miracles and a way to extend a saint’s influence geographically.¹⁰⁴ For example, St. Martin cured St. Vulfoaic the Stylite of Koblenz of a skin ailment. Koblenz is over 400 miles from Tours, but Vulfoaic benefitted from oil that he had brought from St. Martin’s church. When his body became covered with malignant sores, he “anointed [his] whole body with this oil,” and then went to sleep.¹⁰⁵ When he woke, his sores were cured.

Often these maladies could improve with other types of holy intervention on an individual level. Gregory related instances where rogations were used for healing. As bishop of Tours, home of St. Martin of Tours, Gregory would have facilitated and

¹⁰³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.6, 333.

¹⁰⁴ See Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) for a more thorough discussion of middle practices between Christian and Latin medicine and Germanic folk belief.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VIII.15, 447.

witnessed many acts of healing. He wrote multiple works that focused on these miracles, but occasionally one also appeared in his *History*. One such example concerns Roccolen, who suffered from jaundice. A procession carried him, behind a cross and accompanied by chants and banners, from the cathedral to the church of St. Martin.¹⁰⁶ This intervention also often occurred at the hands of living holy religious men, who performed charitable acts of healing as part of their service to their community.¹⁰⁷ For instance, in his text, Gregory mourned the passing of Julian, a priest living at the monastery of Randan near Clermont-Ferrand. Julian had healed those who sought his help for ailments ranging from blindness to quartan fevers to demonic possession.¹⁰⁸ His story also highlights the everyday sufferings that the population endured. Julian himself had also suffered from feet swollen because of dropsy, which Gregory attributes to standing longer than his bodily strength permitted.¹⁰⁹

Another tale revealed that cataracts plagued many, but suggested that surgery was not available to remove them. Leunast, Archdeacon of Bourges suffered from cataracts to the point that he lost his sight completely. Gregory tells that he sought the help from a number of doctors. Only after these professionals were unable to help him recover his sight did Leunast appeal to St. Martin. St. Martin's church in Tours would have been a journey of about ninety miles from his position at Bourges, suggesting a long journey for

¹⁰⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.4, 258-259.

¹⁰⁷ See Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁰⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.32, 227.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.32, 227.

the archdeacon. Once there, Gregory indicated that Leunast “stayed two or three months, fasting continually and praying that he might be able to see again.”¹¹⁰ He only began to see on St. Martin’s feast day, at this time July 4th.¹¹¹ His next actions reveal that this cure was not a total restoration of his sight, but rather some improvement. Gregory lambasted Leunast because once he began to see “he went off home and consulted a Jew, who bled his shoulders with cupping-glasses, the effect of which was supposed to be that his sight would improve.”¹¹² However, instead this remedy resulted in him again losing the sight that he had gained. In Gregory’s opinion, Leunast’s lack of faith in the hope of continued improvement with the help of St. Martin resulted in this reversion to blindness, and was the reason that continued supplication to St. Martin proved ineffective. Leunast never regained his sight.¹¹³

Often these maladies could improve with intervention from the hands of holy religious men, who performed charitable acts of healing as part of their service to their community.¹¹⁴ For instance, in his text, Gregory mourned the passing of Julian, a priest living at the monastery of Randan near Clermont-Ferrand. Julian had healed those who sought his help for ailments ranging from blindness to quartan fevers to demonic

¹¹⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.6, 263.

¹¹¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VIII.1, 433.

¹¹² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.6, 263.

¹¹³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.6, 263.

¹¹⁴ See Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

possession.¹¹⁵ His story also highlights the everyday sufferings that the population endured. Julian himself had also suffered from feet swollen because of dropsy, which Gregory attributes to standing longer than his bodily strength permitted.¹¹⁶

Gregory provided a glimpse into other concepts of illness and healing through his censure of Queen Austrechild. She died of dysentery during a pandemic, but not before condemning her doctors to death for their ministrations.¹¹⁷ Gregory relayed her words as blaming the medical treatments for her death, and requesting this wrong not to be left unavenged:

I should still have some hope of recovery if my death had not been made inevitable by the treatment prescribed for me by these wicked doctors. It is the medicines which they have given me which have robbed me of my life and forced me thus to lose the light of day. I beseech you, do not let me die unavenged.¹¹⁸

Gregory never revealed the reason that Austrechild blamed her physicians, and I cannot otherwise find record for this blame. Rather than supporting Austrechild's assertion that the doctors had poorly performed their art, Gregory called her a wicked woman and compared her request to one made of Herod.¹¹⁹ Just as Salome requested the head of John the Baptist after Herod had publicly vowed to grant any wish, Austrechild demanded that the king avenge her death and make an oath swearing to this act. Just as Salome's request had done to Herod, Austrechild's demand likewise put the king in a position where he

¹¹⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.32, 227.

¹¹⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.32, 227.

¹¹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.35, 298.

¹¹⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.35, 298.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.35, 298.

must perform the action, regardless of its justness.¹²⁰ When the king fulfills this wish, slaying the physicians after Austrechild's death, Gregory declared that "all those who had any sense at all knew this was a wicked act," thereby declaring the doctors not responsible for Austrechild's death.¹²¹ Ultimately, recovery depended not on the doctors, but on God's will, of which their ministrations could only be instruments.

However, Austrechild's request made sense according to Germanic understanding of injury. While only one aspect of Germanic notions of justice during this period, the idea of injury from an outside agent explains actions like Austrechild's, which appear when the sick identify a specific earthly source for their suffering.¹²² In illness, just as in other injury, if sufferers perceived the cause of their misfortune to be something earthly, then they expected compensation from the earthly agent or vengeance against the person causing the misfortune. The most explicit example to demonstrate this Germanic understanding of how to correct injury appeared in various Germanic law codes that have survived.¹²³ While they deal with types of injury distinct from illness, such as one party

¹²⁰ See Mark 6:21-30

¹²¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.35, 299.

¹²² See Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) for the most in depth discussion of Germanic concepts of outside agents causing disease. Compare also Germanic law codes and studies on the same for another perspective on Germanic ideas of reciprocity. See footnote below.

¹²³ See, for just a few examples, Katherine Fischer Drew, editor and translator, *Law Codes of the Salian Franks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Katherine Fischer Drew, editor and translator, *The Burgundian Code: Book of Constitutions or Law of Gundobad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). Great Britain Attenborough, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings Edited and Translated* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922, Reprinted by Forgotten Books, 2012).

physically harming or killing another, these codes from Anglo-Saxon England to Burgundy detailed systems in which injury occurred through the fault of specific earthly actors with specific and detailed requirements for recompense. Therefore, blame shifted from the sufferer to another earthly culprit, and those suffering sought recompense externally, through restitution provided by others for their share of the blame. In contrast to the penance characteristic in Christianity, Germanic demands for vengeance expressed the person's loss as caused by events external to themselves, which therefore required recompense from a guilty party. This concept of injury and justice, when applied to illness, clarifies Austrechild's blame of the doctors' because of her perception of injury at their hands. The same concept is also the foundation for the later practice, which modern audiences often consider peculiar, of English courts prosecuting animals, man-made objects like carts, and even natural objects like trees for crimes.¹²⁴

Gregory recorded another instance that reflected this Germanic understanding of illness as injury from another earthly party when relating how Queen Fredegund sought outside fault for the death of her infant son Theuderic. After the child died, in her grief, the queen destroyed any item that belonged to or reminded her of her deceased son. Fredegund ordered that Parisian housewives whom she blamed for his death be arrested for witchcraft.¹²⁵ After extreme torture, the women confessed to sacrificing Theuderic to save the life of Mummolus the Prefect. Also under torture, Mummolus confessed that the

¹²⁴ See Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1898) for a complete history of this evolution in England.

¹²⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.35, 365. "maleficiis et incantationibus"

Parisian women had made unguents and potions meant to help him win favor with the king and queen. However, Gregory did not relate that Fredegund ever accepted any personal guilt or performed any penance in this instance, but instead documented how she looked for outside perpetrators to blame. Gregory indicated that the queen had long hated Mummolus, insinuating that these actions could have had political motives in addition to grief.¹²⁶ Gregory made clear his distaste for this entire episode, noting that in truth Mummolus shared his knowledge of an herbal cure for dysentery with a visitor to his home, and that Queen Fredegund “blew up into a frenzy” when she was told about his knowledge of this protection.¹²⁷ Despite his personal censure, through this episode we can see that Gregory acknowledged that others also sought magical solutions to a variety of problems as well as that he expected that lay individuals, not just doctors or religious men, would presume to have some knowledge of medical treatments.¹²⁸

Gregory revealed both common medical treatments and a brief glimpse of folk understanding of disease when describing an epidemic. Because of pain and the fact that

¹²⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.35, 365.

¹²⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.35, 365. “maiore furore succenditur”

¹²⁸ For scholarship on healing and magic in Merovingian Gaul, see Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, edited by Peter Burke and Ruth Finnegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and important responses to Flint by Giselle de Nie, “Caesarius of Arles and Gregory of Tours: Two Sixth-Century Gallic Bishops and ‘Christian Magic’” *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Doris Edel (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 170-196 and Ian Wood, “Pagan Religions and Superstitions East of the Rhine from the Fifth to the Ninth Century” *After Empire: Towards an Ethnology of Europe’s Barbarians*, edited by Giorgio Ausenda (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 253-279.

they were vomiting up yellow or green matter, “the country-folk imagined that they had boils inside their bodies,” while others believed the illness to be caused by poison.¹²⁹ Because of the varied understandings of what caused the illness or what the symptoms were, people sought different remedies. Gregory related that “many recovered their health by drinking herbs which are known to be antidotes to poisons.”¹³⁰ For the others who believed that they had boils inside their bodies, Gregory sympathized, saying “this is not as silly as it sounds, for as soon as cupping-glasses were applied to their shoulders or legs, great tumours formed, and when these burst and discharged their pus they were cured.”¹³¹ Once again we see cupping glasses as a medical treatment, suggesting their use was common for a wide range of ailments.

Ultimately, Gregory made clear his opinion of those who put their faith in earthly medicine, especially after it had failed and a supernatural cure had been sought. He averred that because he had written an entire book on the miracles of St. Martin, in *The History* he would simply “add what happened to certain sceptics, who, after witnessing a God-sent miracle, would have recourse to earthly remedies, for Saint Martin’s power is shown just as much by the punishment meted out to fools as it is by the grace accorded to those who have been cured.”¹³² This obvious disdain for earthly cures nevertheless disclosed a continuing medical tradition in Merovingian Gaul. Also, the examples provided, such as that of Leunast above, instead hint that Gregory’s disdain is not for

¹²⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

¹³⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

¹³¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

¹³² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, V.6, 263.

those who first seek help from doctors, but rather for those who appeal to a saint after doctors have failed, and then return to the doctors that were unable to help before. How Gregory thought people should react to illness depended on the underlying religious reason for the ailment. Most often, this religious reason for illness was the sin of the sufferer.

Gregory of Tours demonstrated part of the flexibility of the concept of personal sin as the source of physical ailment when he related instances where illness struck a related group of people. Often the group illnesses that Gregory depicted were punishments that not only afflicted the sinner individually, but also extended to that sinner's family and supporters. Rathar, a Duke whom Childebert sent to Marseilles to investigate a matter, instead of investigating the issue as ordered, attacked Bishop Theodore and "pillaged the possessions of the church, kept some for himself and locked up the remainder under seal."¹³³ By attacking the bishop and plundering the resources of the bishopric, in Gregory's view, Rathar attacked the entire community of Marseilles that the bishop led. Therefore, the divine punishment attacked Rathar's entire household:

No sooner had he done this than a mortal illness attacked his servants, so that they developed a high temperature and died. Rathar's own son succumbed to the disease, and he himself buried the boy in a suburb of Marseilles, weeping bitterly as he did so. There was such an epidemic among his household that when they left the city it was thought unlikely that he would reach his home alive.¹³⁴

By attacking his servants and child, Gregory implied that the disease mimicked Rathar's own transgression against the community at Marseilles. Rathar was responsible for the safety and well-being of his dependents. Servants and children were some of the most

¹³³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VIII.12, 442.

¹³⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VIII.12, 442.

vulnerable populations, and therefore their demise undermined Rathar's ability to protect his household, just as Rathar's actions had undermined Bishop Theodore's ability to protect his community. Rathar leaves the scene, scurrying home in disarray, without Gregory recording any demonstrable act of reparation for the wrongs committed.

Gregory distinguished universal illnesses, like epidemics, from localized illnesses, even if the localized illness afflicted an entire household as it had with Rathar's household. God often announced the coming of truly catastrophic pestilence with prodigies. Prodigies were usually cataclysmic natural phenomena such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and landslides. Gregory recorded additional prodigies as varied as extra suns in the sky and bleeding bread.¹³⁵ However, epidemics announced by prodigies could still indicate punishment of prominent individuals and, because of their sins, the punishment extended to the communities that they led. Gregory detailed a severe eruption of dysentery that "spread throughout the whole of Gaul" in 580.¹³⁶ He described the symptoms and sufferings of the people, including grieving for the loss of cherished children.¹³⁷ Gregory placed the true blame for this misery at the feet of the Merovingian kings, saying that the epidemic spread "while the kings were quarrelling with each other again and once more making preparations for civil war."¹³⁸ When the illness attacked the royal children, Gregory attributed these words to Queen Fredegund:

¹³⁵ For some examples see Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.33, 295-296. Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.41, 306.

¹³⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

¹³⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

¹³⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 296.

God in his mercy has endured our evil goings-on long enough. Time and time again He has sent us warnings through high fevers and other indispositions, but we have never mended our ways. Now we are going to lose our children. It is the tears of paupers which are the cause of their death, the sighs of orphans, the widows' lament.¹³⁹

In order to rectify sinful behavior, which was necessary to prevent further punishment of herself and her household, Fredegund threw tax requests into the fire, announcing that greed for riches was why the royal couple was now losing “the most beautiful of our possessions,” their children.¹⁴⁰ Despite their sacrifices, both of their children afflicted with the disease died during the outbreak. However, Gregory specified that this repentance was not merely momentary, but endured after the children's deaths by noting that “from this time onwards King Chilperic was lavish in giving alms to cathedrals and churches, and to the poor, too.”¹⁴¹ Gregory did not provide any information about why Fredegund would act so differently in this case than she did later when the death of her son prompted the torture of suspected witches. Other leaders received Gregory's censure for inappropriate responses to this scourge. However, this condemnation is for the lack of upright behavior or failure to make restitution for sins rather than expressing any concern over the manner in which anyone rectified sinful actions. Any penance was good, but further sinning, which included failing to make repentance for prior sins, received Gregory's censure. In this particular case, Fredegund repented for sins against her people,

¹³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 297. Fredegund may or may not have spoken these words, but seems to have thrown the tax receipts into the fire, judging from Gregory's later reference to this event. Additionally, this response is quite different than the later response Fredegund had to the death of a child. See below. Therefore, Gregory's attribution of these words to Fredegund is suspect.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 297.

¹⁴¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 298.

who were the same people suffering from the catastrophe. Because of Fredegund's focus on her child rather than these other sufferers, which she compounded by her unconscionable level of taxation, Gregory's implication is that her punishment was for failed leadership.

However, these widespread epidemics could also indicate more generally God's displeasure with the entire community. Gregory disclosed that a dreadful disease decimated Tours and Nantes in April 591. Gregory did not explicitly say so, but because he was Bishop of Tours at this time, he would have helped organize that community's response to this crisis. He credited rogations, fasting, strict abstinence, and almsgiving to the poor as the remedies through which "the wrath of God was turned aside and things became better."¹⁴² These acts of penance by the entire community for their sins indicated his belief that this illness reflected God's displeasure and punishment and demonstrated the community's sincere remorse for its sins to an angry God. That Gregory believed that processions effectively combatted larger epidemics is evident in his organization of some in response to this outbreak of illness in 591.¹⁴³

Bubonic plague was one of many epidemic diseases presaged by prodigies that announced God's anger. In Gregory's account, the people knew plague from lesser types of illness because prodigies announced all instances of plague, like other epidemic illness. Before the plague devastated Auvergne in 571, Gregory recorded that shining lights appeared around the sun, making it appear as if there were multiple suns in the sky. According to Gregory, this prodigy occurred multiple times before the plague hit. In

¹⁴² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.30, 592.

¹⁴³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.31, 592.

addition, a comet appeared for an entire year, and at two separate churches, birds flew inside and smothered all the lamps.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, before plague appeared in Viviers and Avignon in 590, a bright light appeared over many lands during the night, and multiple occurrences of fiery globes illuminating the night were also reported.¹⁴⁵

Gregory also implied that the end of a specific outbreak could be difficult to gauge. His narrative abounds with examples of those trying to flee the pestilence being struck down after returning when they believed their homes to be safe again, thereby demonstrating that running from the plague benefitted no one. Plague ravaged Narbonne, and Gregory pointed out that “some three years had passed since it first gained a hold, and then it seemed to die out. The populace which had fled now came back, but they were wiped out once more by disease.”¹⁴⁶ In his story about how the plague arrived in Marseilles in 588, he made evident both the swift attack of the disease and the futility of physically leaving the city. He chronicled the arrival of the disease on a cargo ship, noting that “some time passed and then, like a cornfield set alight, the entire town was suddenly ablaze with pestilence.”¹⁴⁷ Because of the lapse of time between the arrival of the pestilence and the precipitous outbreak, Gregory implied that some had time to escape. Gregory related that after two months the plague outbreak in Marseilles in 588 “burned itself out.”¹⁴⁸ The people who returned after this thought they had escaped, but

¹⁴⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.31, 225-226.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.23, 581-582.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.33, 364.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 510-511.

¹⁴⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 511.

Gregory insisted that “all who had come back died.”¹⁴⁹ Gregory declared that this pattern repeated at Marseilles “on several occasions later on.”¹⁵⁰ Therefore, because the time of one’s death was divine will, any attempt to flee from such disasters could not be any more successful than staying in the plague-ridden city. Even if they survived when they fled, that was also divine will, and ultimately only a temporary reprieve.

Overall, Gregory preserved multiple instances of bubonic plague ravaging Francia over nearly fifty years. In 543, the plague raged in Arles, but Clermont-Ferrand was spared.¹⁵¹ Gregory did not explicitly record an attack of plague in Clermont-Ferrand in 551, but he did indicate its occurrence because the angel that spoke to St. Gall in 543 indicated that God would not spare Clermont-Ferrand when plague returned in eight years.¹⁵² In 571, Gregory lamented the plague in Auvergne, specifically mentioning that Lyons, Bourges, Chalon-sur-Saône and Dijon were decimated and that there were casualties at the monastery of Randan, near Clermont-Ferrand.¹⁵³ In 584, Gregory noted that a number of districts were decimated, but he only provided some details regarding Albi and specifically mentioned that the plague ravaged Narbonne “most fiercely.” Marseilles and Saint-Symphorien-d’Ozon, a village near Lyons, succumbed in 588,¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 511.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 511.

¹⁵¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 199-200.

¹⁵² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5 199-200.

¹⁵³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.31, 226-227.

¹⁵⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.21, 509.

and likewise Viviers and Avignon in 590.¹⁵⁵ Gregory also documented that additional outbreaks of bubonic plague occurred in Italy. King Guthram mentioned an outbreak in Italy in 588 as one reason for not providing military assistance there during his embassy with Gregory.¹⁵⁶ Gregory's deacon also provided an eyewitness account of the famous seven-pronged procession that Gregory the Great organized in Rome in response to a devastating outbreak there in 590.¹⁵⁷

Gregory also seemed to understand plague as a natural phenomenon that could be spread by humans, both of which were the instruments enacting God's divine will. The one story Gregory disclosed of how the plague came to Francia presented this natural understanding. In 588 the plague arrived in Marseilles:

A ship from Spain put into port with the usual kind of cargo, unfortunately also bringing with it the source of this infection. Quite a few of the townsfolk purchased objects from the cargo and in less than no time a house in which eight people lived was left completely deserted, all the inhabitants having caught the disease. The infection did not spread through the residential quarter immediately. Some time passed and then, like a cornfield set alight, the entire town was suddenly ablaze with pestilence.¹⁵⁸

In this account, plague comes with cargo from Spain into the port of Marseilles. Anyone who purchased any goods from the Spanish ships caught the illness. According to Gregory, it took time for the illness to spread from one household to overtake the residential quarter at first. But he described a sudden catastrophic outbreak that did overtake the residents. Despite the foggy nature of his description of the spread of the

¹⁵⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.23, 582.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.20, 508.

¹⁵⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.1, 543-547.

¹⁵⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 510-511.

illness among the population, Gregory thought that this plague clearly had human origins. Plague was physically present on the ship and adhered to the items that people purchased from its cargo. The view that plague was both natural and sent by God fits within a common medieval framework of understanding the natural world. God used phenomena to punish, just as he used other components of His creation, the natural world, to send signs to the faithful. For epidemics, the religious response fell under the duty of the bishop. Therefore, *The History of the Franks* addressed what individuals should do when confronted by illness and advised them on how to recognize a good bishop, from whom they should seek guidance through peril. First I will explore examples where Gregory revealed his view on how bishops should lead. Then I will examine how in times of plague Gregory combined these ideas of leadership with allusions to Biblical referents such as David's reign and the plagues of Egypt.

Gregory's acclamation of various bishops throughout *The History* demonstrated the qualities and actions necessary for a good bishop. Gregory praised Nicetius, Bishop of Lyons, for his upright moral character:

He was remarkable for his saintliness and chaste in his behaviour. He offered to all men, as far as in him lay, that loving kindness which the Apostle told us to show to everyone wherever possible. In his heart was to be seen the Lord Himself, who is true love. If ever he was angry with anyone for some misdeed which he had committed, as soon as the offender had mended his ways, Nicetius would treat him as if nothing had ever gone wrong between them. He chastised those who had erred, but he forgave the penitent.¹⁵⁹

Control of one's emotions dominated this picture, with the bishop never showing anger, no matter the offense. Gregory's senatorial heritage may have contributed to this stoic ideal, since stoicism had a long history with the Roman elite, but it was also prominent in

¹⁵⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.36, 230.

the Christianity of this period. Nicetius rather stood in for the entire community with his forgiveness of penitential offenders. Gregory made this role of administrator of divine justice more direct by esteeming both Nicetius's chastisement and forgiveness as circumstance required.

The role of administrator of divine justice was part of the bishop's role as protector of his community and intercessor for that community with other forces. When recognizing the holiness of Maurilio, Bishop of Cahors, in addition to applauding his charity to the poor and exhaustive knowledge of biblical texts, Gregory praised Maurilio for protecting "the poor of his diocese from the hand of unfair judges."¹⁶⁰ Sometimes these unfair judges included royalty. Gregory tells that Maroveus, Bishop of Poitiers, gave envoys from King Guntram (532-592) a hostile reception. This rejection resulted in an attack from the army that culminated in the breaching of the city walls. Gregory told how even in these circumstances Maroveus continued to protect his people: "When he saw that he was at their mercy, Maroveus broke up a chalice which he had among his church vessels, melted it down into coins and so ransomed himself and his people."¹⁶¹ Maroveus organized both the resistance to the secular power, and also the ultimate process of peace after resistance proved futile.

This protection from secular powers more often took the form of managing those relationships on behalf of the town. Gregory noted nonchalantly how "King Childebert decided to accept the invitation of Sigimund, Bishop of Mainz, to celebrate Easter Day in

¹⁶⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.42, 306.

¹⁶¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VII.24, 407.

that town.”¹⁶² By inviting the king to eat in their town, the bishop brought attention and honor to his bishopric and ensured continued good relations between his bishopric and the king. While hosting the king would have increased the bishop’s prestige, it also provided benefit to his community as a whole. Because of the bishop’s relationship with the secular ruler, the community had an avenue for requests, exemptions, or other signs of favor. In this sense, the bishop was the symbolic figure of the entire community, personally cultivating relationships and power in order to best benefit his people.

Gregory provided another example of the bishop as intermediary with secular rulers for the benefit of the community regarding the tax assessments that Queen Fredegund later threw into the fire. Maroveus of Poitiers, who had stood against the army of King Guntram, sent to King Childebert to have tax inspectors sent to Poitiers after Guntram despoiled it. Gregory seemed to condemn Maroveus for calling these inspectors, noting that “many of those who were on the tax lists had died, and, as a result, widows, orphans and infirm folk had to meet a heavy assessment.”¹⁶³ By pointing out that the reassessment harmed people who the bishop was responsible for protecting, Gregory suggested that Maroveus misused his connection with secular rulers because his actions harmed his people. Also, he did not mention that a portion of these tax assessments would have gone to the bishop, who likely needed them in order to make repairs to communal buildings. Gregory revealed that those groups that he mentioned were relieved of their burden since “the inspectors looked into each case in turn: they granted relief to

¹⁶² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.28, 514.

¹⁶³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.30, 515.

the poor and infirm, and assessed for taxation all who were justly liable.”¹⁶⁴ However, Gregory credited the inspectors for this justice rather than Maroveus. This condemnation became even clearer because it was juxtaposed with Gregory’s own actions.

Gregory took a different approach when these same assessors arrived in Tours. He chastened them by referring to Lothar and Fredegund’s act of throwing the last assessments in the fire. This chastisement reminded them that when the Tourangeaux swore fealty to King Charibert, he promised that there would be no new taxes levied. Gregory’s censure resulted in Charibert throwing these tax lists into the fire as well, sparing his people any change in taxes.¹⁶⁵

Gregory’s admiration for Nicetius, Bishop of Lyons, was not solely because of his moral character. Through his commendation of Nicetius, Gregory provided details on the wide practical responsibilities of the bishop running estates, applauding how Nicetius “gave alms freely and he himself worked very hard. He gave his full attention to the erection of churches and the building of houses, to the sowing of his fields and the planting of his vines; but none of these things distracted him from prayer.”¹⁶⁶ Successfully managing a bishopric required giving to the poor, seeing to the construction of homes and churches, and agricultural production on the bishopric’s lands. Often these responsibilities disappear behind rhetoric praising holy behavior and direction of the faithful, but these practical actions ensured the bishop and his people flourished.

¹⁶⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.30, 515.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.30, 515.

¹⁶⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.36, 230.

Gregory of Tours applauded bishops who continued their duties in times of plague. According to Gregory, the most important factor in the preservation of the people was the bishop's decision to remain among his flock. This special advocacy was the only action that Gregory praised directly, even in miraculous events. However, his narrative also clearly indicated that bishops who stayed with their flocks could ensure neither their own or their flock's survival.

Gregory first mentioned plague in book four of his *History of the Franks* where we also see a sixth-century version of David's actions referenced by Gregory the Great. In Gregory of Tours' narrative, the prayers of the pious bishop stop the plague, and God shows signs of his mercy when the community performs rogations.¹⁶⁷ The prayers of the pious bishop mirror David's construction of an altar and performance of offerings himself on behalf of his community. This type of action contradicts Gregory the Great's teaching that the bishops should not pray for God to stop punishing their flocks, but instead the bishop should take leadership action to ensure that his people performed proper penance to correct their sin against God. Rather, St. Gall prayed for mercy on behalf of his people, performing what Gregory the Great termed "the worst kind of madness not to want a sinner to desist, in the interests of justice, while unjustly wanting God to stop exercising his vengeance on him."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 200. This is Gregory's uncle, not the more famous Irish monk that lived in Switzerland. For more information on this St. Gall see "St. Gall" *Catholic Online* (2017) http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=650. For the namesake of the famous Swiss monastery see Albert Poncelot, "St. Gall," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 6 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06346b.htm>.

¹⁶⁸ Here Gregory uses *flagella* to work with his imagery. Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great* 10.20, 730.

Gregory of Tours' story of how St. Gall (489-553) protected his flock from plague during his time as bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, in the province of Arles, also used another powerful Biblical allusion.¹⁶⁹ First, we learn that "Saint Gall was anxious not only for himself but more especially for his flock."¹⁷⁰ Gregory repeatedly insisted that the mark of a good bishop is concern for his people. This concern was fundamental to the appropriate care of souls, any laxity of which would result in the punishment of the bishop in addition to the sinner who the bishop insufficiently governed. In response to this anxiety, St. Gall prayed. He did not pray for advice, since as a good bishop he knew the guidance was to stay with his flock. Instead he implored "that he might not live to see his diocese decimated."¹⁷¹ St. Gall learned that his prayers were answered when he had a vision where an angel spoke to him:

'You do well, Lord Bishop,' said the Angel, 'to pray to God in this way for your people. Your prayer has been heard. As long as you live, you and your flock will be free of the plague and no one in this region will die because of it. At the moment you have, then, no need to be afraid; but when eight years have passed the time will really come for fear.'¹⁷²

The delay of God's wrath and subsequent punishment was tied to the goodness of St. Gall, and therefore expired when St. Gall died, leaving the people of Clermont-Ferrand to be slaughtered upon his death.

Only after this message direct from heaven did St. Gall organize a community response in the form of rogations. Rogations refer to processions usually done as an act of

¹⁶⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 199.

¹⁷⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 199.

¹⁷¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 199.

¹⁷² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 199-200.

penance for the entire community. Gregory related how in Clermont-Ferrand the entire community “journeyed on foot in the middle of Lent to the church of Saint Julian the martyr, singing psalms as they went.”¹⁷³ According to Gregory, the community received its own sign of protection, “Suddenly before men’s very eyes signs appeared on the walls of houses and churches. The inscription was recognized by the country-folk who saw it as a tau.”¹⁷⁴ The tau sign was the Greek letter τ, or tau, which was associated with the Hebrew letter ט, taw. Christians believed the Hebrew taw to be the sign that the enslaved Hebrew people painted on their doorways with lamb’s blood so that the Angel of Death would spare their children during the last of the ten plagues of Egypt described in the Old Testament book of Exodus.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, sixth-century Christians also saw the tau, which has the shape of a cross, to be the ultimate symbol of human redemption. The importance of the tau symbol would not have been missed by any witnessing the miracle, including the country-folk.¹⁷⁶

Despite this powerful response to the rogations, Gregory maintained that it was St. Gall’s prayers that saved the people of Clermont-Ferrand. According to Gregory, the most important factor in the preservation of the people of Clermont-Ferrand was St.

¹⁷³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 200. (IV.5)

¹⁷⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 200. (IV.5)

¹⁷⁵ Exodus 12:1-14

¹⁷⁶ "tau, n.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/198133?redirectedFrom=tau> (accessed May 25, 2017). The Hebrew taw more closely resembled a cross in Early and Middle Hebrew and was transliterated as the Greek tau and Latin T. See Jeff A. Benner, “Hebrew Alphabet Chart,” in *Ancient Hebrew Research Center Online*, 2017, http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/alphabet_chart.html.

Gall's decision to remain among his flock. This special advocacy was the only action that Gregory praised directly, saying, "In my opinion it was no small grace which was able to bring it to pass that the shepherd who stayed to watch did not see his sheep devoured, because God preserved them."¹⁷⁷ However, he also reported that this reprieve was temporary. Gregory's attribution of the miracle sparing the community specifically to St. Gall and the promise of salvation preceding the rogation raises the question – why have rogations at all if the saint had already assuaged God's anger through his prayers?

Processions remained an important part of civic life from Roman times.¹⁷⁸

Gregory documented the coronation of Maurice as the new Roman Emperor in Byzantium in 583. Just as important as the diadem, the purple, and the imperial robes of office was the procession to the Hippodrome.¹⁷⁹ Processions for celebrations also extended to ecclesiastical matters, such as when Gregory mentioned the procession for the feast day of the Resurrection in 588.¹⁸⁰ Other instances of recording communal memory also called for rogations. For instance, part of the ritual of funerals and the related expression of grief is to engage in a procession. Gregory noted the display of public grief for Chlodobert, son of Chilperic and Fredegund: "The whole populace bewailed his death: they walked behind his funeral cortège, the men weeping and the

¹⁷⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.5, 200.

¹⁷⁸ See Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481-751* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Lisa Kaaren Bailey, *Christianity's Quiet Success* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) and Ida Ostenberg, Simon Malmberg, and Jonas Bjørnebye, editors, *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2016).

¹⁷⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.30, 359.

¹⁸⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.20, 509.

women wearing widow's weeds as if they were escorting their own husbands to the grave."¹⁸¹ Therefore, just as in these various examples, the aspect of communal penitence and public display of God's protection provided necessary and important public witness to the miracle wrought by St. Gall. It was within this same context that rogations were an established means of demonstrating communal penance.

However, even the most conscientious bishop could not ensure that his flock would survive the plague. Its next appearance in Gregory's *History* occurred in 571, also in Clermont-Ferrand, this time when Cautinus was bishop. During this time, a priest named Cato died of the plague after staying in the city, burying the dead, and "with great courage continuing to say mass."¹⁸² Gregory contrasted this commendable behavior with that of the bishop, who should be the exemplar. Rather than continuing to minister to his people, Cautinus fled the city. His flight did not provide escape from the plague, however. Gregory highlights this fact, testifying that Cautinus caught the plague and died of it upon his return.¹⁸³

In sharp contrast to the episode where St. Gall's pious entreaties saved Clermont-Ferrand, the city experienced cataclysmic misery in 571. Although Gregory's description was brief, the horror was tangible:

When the plague finally began to rage, so many people were killed off throughout the whole region and the dead bodies were so numerous that it was not even possible to count them. There was such a shortage of coffins and tombstones that ten or more bodies were buried in the same grave. In Saint Peter's church alone on a single Sunday three hundred dead bodies were counted. Death came very

¹⁸¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* V.34, 298.

¹⁸² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.31, 226.

¹⁸³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.31, 226.

quickly. An open sore like a snake's bite appeared in the groin or the armpit, and the man who had it soon died of its poison, breathing his last on the second or third day.¹⁸⁴

The numerous dead exhausting the available tombstones and coffins would be especially traumatic to Christian sensibilities that relied on proper funeral rites, burial, and care for the soul after death in order to achieve salvation. Christian doctrine regarded the final judgment to include the physical reanimation of the body.¹⁸⁵ Also, by describing the dead as too numerous to count, Gregory of Tours suggested that the victims suffered a loss of their individuality in death. Both of these aspects regarding the disruption of normal death rites extended the torment of the plague beyond death and into the afterlife.

To fulfill the role of bishop required leadership through these times of crisis. In addition to merely staying in a place where plague arrived, if a bishop was not in his city when an outbreak of plague occurred, he should return to lead the faithful. The attack at Marseilles in 588 provided an example of such a bishop. Bishop Theodore "came back and took up residence in Saint Victor's church together with seven poor folk who remained at his side."¹⁸⁶ Like St. Gall, Theodore spent the entire onslaught in prayer at St. Victor's church, imploring for relief for his people.

Presence was crucial, but not sufficient. Gregory provided an illustration of the dangers to leaders if they provided poor religious leadership in the form of the vision of Sunniulf. Sunniulf became abbot of Randan, a monastery near Clermont-Ferrand, in 571 after the previous abbot succumbed to plague. Gregory describes Sunniulf as holy and

¹⁸⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.31, 226.

¹⁸⁵ See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines: Fifth Edition* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 474.

¹⁸⁶ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 511.

humble, but insufficiently directive with his monks. This inattention changed after Sunniulf had a vision in which men were thrown into a river of fire “like so many bees entering a hive.”¹⁸⁷ He learned that these men were abbots and bishops. Each man suffered to the extent of his laxity, some submerged to the waist and others to the chin, those present declaring that “from this bridge will be hurled headlong anyone who is discovered to have been lacking in authority over those committed to his charge.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, the plague posed the danger to religious leaders of everlasting torment in the afterlife, something to be feared as even more severe than death.

Gregory commended St. Salvius, later also known as St. Suave, for many pious acts and miracles. Gregory specifically documented Salvius’s admirable behavior during an outbreak of plague in Albi in 584. Salvius was in his tenth year as Bishop of Albi when this trial appeared. Despite losing nearly all of his parishioners, Salvius actualized the ideal of the bishop in times of crisis, staying in his see at Albi.¹⁸⁹ Like other bishops who remained to perform their duties as bishop, Gregory commended him for refusing to leave the city despite the many casualties. Salvius continued to minister to the few remaining members of his flock, instructing them to “pray unceasingly, not to relax in their vigils and to concentrate their minds and their bodies on doing only what was good.”¹⁹⁰ Despite his actions as a good bishop and his saintliness, Salvius died during the

¹⁸⁷ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.33, 227.

¹⁸⁸ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IV.33, 228.

¹⁸⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VI.33, 364, and VII.1, 388.

¹⁹⁰ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VII.1, 389.

epidemic, revealing that although the disease was a communal punishment for sin, plague did not only strike the wicked.¹⁹¹

Gregory related that others could also perform some of the services that Gregory the Great assigned to bishops without condemning the bishops for dereliction of duty. For instance, bishops did not lead all rogations. Gregory acknowledged that bishops normally organized acts of contrition, which often served as acts of penance, saying that King Guntram, “like some good bishop providing the remedies by which the wounds of a common sinner might be healed,” organized rogations and a fast in Marseilles in response to the epidemic there in 588. Gregory’s praise of Guntram for performing the duties of a bishop is especially interesting since Gregory also commended Theodore, bishop of Marseilles at this time. Theodore returned to Marseilles, but remained in the church with his small group of companions, praying for the deliverance of the city. In these actions of organizing the community in response to the plague, King Guntram performed a function normally allocated to bishops, but also acceptable for kings to perform because each position bore the responsibility of leadership. Shortly thereafter Gregory directly identified King Guntram with the role of bishop because “he seemed so anxious about all his people that he might well have been taken for one of our Lord’s bishops, rather than for a king.” In his concern for the people under his care, Guntram transformed into a bishop, who was not merely a leader of men, but a shepherd of souls, actively concerned about and responsible to God for the well-being of his flock. To further underscore the holy nature of this king, Gregory then provided an example of common people treating

¹⁹¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* VII.1, 389.

Guntram as a source of healing, telling of a woman who brewed tea using threads from Guntram's cloak. The tea cured her son, who had been ill with a quartan ague.¹⁹²

Gregory provided a moral of the dangers for the souls of the flock should there be a lack of ecclesiastical leadership, whether by bishops or surrogates such as Guntram. Without proper leadership, the common people could easily go astray. Gregory denounced a charismatic man, who many common people declared to be a saint. These people remained so convinced of the holiness of the man who Gregory declared "an Antichrist" that Gregory lamented that "those whose mind he had so far deranged by his devilish devices that they believed in him never recovered their full sanity."¹⁹³ However, this charlatan acted in ways that would have been praised if performed by any holy person sanctioned to lead the populace. People brought their sick to be healed, he gave any gifts to the poor, and he had the gift of prophesy. This particular preacher drew large crowds, appealing to a wide audience as Gregory admitted that "even priests in orders" endorsed the man.¹⁹⁴ Gregory admonished the purported holy man because "he began to rob and despoil those whom he met on the road, giving to the poor and needy all that he took."¹⁹⁵ This theft completely excluded the man from the company of the holy and demonstrated his incapacity to fulfill the role of bishop.

Gregory of Tours revealed that plague was only one of many dangers facing sixth-century Frankish communities. However, its severity provided a special test for the

¹⁹² Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* IX.22, 510.

¹⁹³ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.25, 585-586.

¹⁹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.25, 585.

¹⁹⁵ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks* X.25, 585.

leadership of bishops. Those who fled abandoned their flocks to die, but did not escape death themselves. Gregory specifically mentioned multiple accounts of those who fled dying upon their return. Therefore their cowardice only delayed their fate, yet they exposed their true lack of faith and risked torment in the afterlife for dereliction of their duties to those put under their care. Gregory's only censure was for those who did not uphold their responsibility to their flocks. While Gregory revealed that plague was an indication of the wrath of God, and therefore penance was required, he praised any response the local bishop chose in the face of such calamity. Ultimately, Gregory's focus was on the personal responsibility of the bishops for their respective flocks.

Gregory's openness in accepting any action that a bishop took to protect their people was not merely reflective of his position as a bishop. The multifaceted approaches to health accepted in Merovingian Gaul, as demonstrated in Gregory's *History*, reveals that the varied responses to epidemics mirrored this diversity. Just as God used a variety of earthly instruments to express his displeasure, from earthquakes to illnesses and beyond, there were many ways for the faithful to express their repentance and appeal to God's mercy to end their suffering.

Gregory of Tours' most dramatic relation of an incident of plague included both aspects of the holy man that Gregory the Great's conception split into two separate spheres of responsibility. St. Gall, Gregory of Tours' uncle, performed the intensive prayer to save his flock that Gregory the Great explicitly advised his bishops to avoid. Only after receiving a message of God's acceptance of his prayers and the temporary immunity afforded to his town did St. Gall lead the people in a penitential procession to expunge their sins that these early medieval holy men believed to be the source of the

illness. The miraculous signs from God that appeared to St. Gall's flock announced his holiness. However, Gregory of Tours' account lacks a similar divine signal for the pope at his procession.

The Sword of Heavenly Pity:

Bede on Mercy and Plague in Anglo-Saxon England

The history of plague in Anglo-Saxon England is not as well documented as in other Christian lands. Historians in places such as Justinian's Empire or Gregory's Tours followed the documentary tradition of Thucydides in recording accounts of these plagues with believable experiences of the devastation. However, it is clear that bubonic plague devastated the British Isles in 664.¹⁹⁶ Bede (672-735), in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, provided information on his perspective of plague and other illnesses as well as how to cure these ailments. Like Gregory of Tours, Bede ascribed the plague and other illnesses to divine will. Also like Gregory of Tours, Bede provided clues to contemporary medical practices, in Bede's case seventh and eighth-century Britain, and demonstrated an understanding of illness as having natural qualities. Therefore, like Gregory's, Bede's *History* revealed an understanding of illness as natural phenomena through which God exercised his will, even though this depiction never explicitly appeared in Bede's account. Bede first describes plague hitting the British Isles in the fifth century. His description of this plague aligned with the descriptions of Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours. However, Bede's interpretation of the plague of 664 diverged significantly from these other epidemics, likely because of his personal links with the holy victims of this particular pandemic.

¹⁹⁶ For the *Ecclesiastical History* I use this English translation: Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B Mynors, translators, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969) with reference to the Loeb Latin edition: Bede, *Historical Works*, translated by J.E. King. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, first edition 1930). Regarding the translation see the introductions to both editions and the Loeb edition for the Latin *pestilentia*, which simply means pestilence.

For Bede, rather than being solely God's instrument to punish, illness could also be a blessing for good people by providing cleansing through suffering and ultimately release into paradise. Since Bede considered the plague to be a blessing from God, he obscured the role of religious leadership in his account in contrast to Gregory of Tours' focus on religious leadership in the face of God's wrath. Bede explains survival of the pestilence in terms of moral imperfection of the survivor rather than a sign of divine favor or forgiveness of prior sins. Since Bede considers that each person should gladly accept the fate that God decreed, whether survival or death from plague, the role of episcopal leadership during such times of crisis became background information rather than the center of the story. He often noted, however, that many survivors later embraced pastoral vocations, actively involved with souls that needed correction rather than continuing their pursuit of a monastic vocation. Bede's reimagining of plague as a blessing instead of a curse undermined the essential framework for understanding of health and wellness in both the ancient and early-medieval worlds. His explanation of recovery from illness as a moral imperfection was counter to prevailing concepts that intrinsically linked spiritual and physical well-being, and therefore recovery to from physical illness to spiritual health and illness to spiritual infirmity.

Bede's understanding of illness included the expectation of medical treatment by physicians and some amount of faith in medicines such as poultices and herbs. To be considered effective, medical treatments of poultices, amulets, or ingested herbal concoctions were accompanied by prayers, contact with holy people, and often included Christian objects. Many of these miraculous cures resulted in the conversion of the

afflicted to Christianity since it demonstrated the Christian god's power. These displays of God's might also reinforced beliefs for those who had already converted.

Bede wrote many years after the plague struck Anglo-Saxon England, and over a century after Gregory of Tours. Bede made no mention of Jewish doctors or of cupping glasses, which both feature multiple times in Gregory of Tours' account. Therefore, despite the ecclesiastical, cultural, and trade connections between Britain and the continent, there may have been some level of divergence between British medical practices and continental practices. While it could have been a practice that Bede failed to mention, this silence compared to the prevalence of the practice in Gregory of Tours account suggests that the practice at least may have been less common, if not non-existent, in Britain by Bede's time. Conversely, Bede may have been less concerned with medical responses because of his view of recovery from illness being completely God's will and because of the distance between the event and his history.

In addition, the individuals that Pope Vitalian (580-672) sent to England during the plague would have brought other traditions with them. Bede related that Vitalian initially chose Hadrian, who came to be known as St. Hadrian of Canterbury (d.710), to go to England and become Archbishop of Canterbury. Hadrian recommended two different people, the second, Theodore of Tarsus (602-690), took the role of Archbishop of Canterbury. Bede noted that Hadrian hailed from North Africa and was fluent in both Latin and Greek. Theodore was born in Asia Minor and was also fluent in both Latin and Greek. Additionally, Theodore's hair had to be grown and tonsured again in the western style, and Pope Vitalian also required Hadrian to accompany Theodore to ensure that he

taught western instead of eastern doctrine.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, Theodore likely had some knowledge of Greek medicine, and would have brought some of this information with him. Additionally, Bede's Northumbria experienced significant influence from the Irish monastic movement that preserved Greek knowledge for many centuries.

Theodore of Tarsus authored a penitential manual during his archbishopric in which he displayed knowledge of current medical practices. For instance, when discussing the use of animals, Theodore allowed the eating of hares noting, "it is good for dysentery; and its gall is to be mixed with pepper for [the relief of] pain."¹⁹⁸ In addition, Theodore drew a distinction between natural and supernatural prescriptions in one specific case, prohibiting the spiritual portion of the cure: "One who is possessed of a demon may have stones and herbs without [the use of] incantation."¹⁹⁹ It is unclear whether this restriction would also extend to the common practice of blessing the herbs themselves.

Some of these systems saw practices aimed at spiritual health, such as penance, as linked to the body. Contemporary literature such as penitential manuals described ecclesiastics with a worldly calling as physicians of souls. Bede also implied that clergy could possibly heal the sick when he outlined the duties of clergy that visited villages:

"For the priests and the clerics visited the villages for no other reason than to preach, to

¹⁹⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.I, 328-333.

¹⁹⁸ Theodore, "The Penitential of Theodore," *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents* edited by John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 208.

¹⁹⁹ Theodore, "The Penitential of Theodore," 207.

baptize, to visit the sick, in brief to care for their souls.”²⁰⁰ While it at first seems that Bede indicated only that the holy men should preach, baptize, and visit the sick, his indication that all of these things constituted caring for souls revealed a larger meaning. Preaching cured souls by ensuring the people’s spiritual health through their knowledge of correct action and the word of God. Baptizing cured souls by removing prior sins and accepting the souls into God’s grace. Visiting the sick cured souls by correcting spiritual ills. Curing the soul would also cure the afflicted body.

Preparing souls for death was especially important because the true life was everlasting. Views of the afterlife appeared to those who were sick and about to die, showing the soul what awaited them, whether good or ill. Bede tells of an unnamed monk who “lived an ignoble life.”²⁰¹ After falling ill and reaching the apex of his suffering, he called for his fellow monks. He related to them a vision of hell in which he saw the torments of Satan, Caiaphas, and the others who prosecuted Christ. Next to these supreme sinners he saw “a place of everlasting damnation prepared for me.”²⁰² While Bede did not reveal what exactly this particular monk had done, his placement at the bowels of hell declared it to be truly awful.

These visions were not solely for those who needed curing of their soul. The well-prepared soul was sometimes given glimpses of heaven. Bede recorded these visions accompanying the deaths of various holy people in the *History* in order to further underscore their holiness. This holiness was sometimes heightened by the appreciative

²⁰⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXVI, 310-311.

²⁰¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.XIV, 504-505.

²⁰² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.XIV, 504-505.

suffering brought about by illness. For instance, Abbess Hild of Whitby suffered a long illness before her death. When she died, a pious nun in a daughter house saw a vision of Hild ascending to heaven: “She seemed to see the roof of the house rolled back, while a light which poured in from above filled the whole place. As she watched the light intently, she saw the soul of the handmaiden of the Lord being borne to Heaven in the midst of that light, attended and guided by angels.”²⁰³

Also like in Gregory of Tours’s *History*, earthly physicians appeared in relation to miraculous cures in Bede’s *History*. One of the miracles that happened with Cuthbert’s relics was the cure of the monk Swidbert “whose eyelid was disfigured by an unsightly tumor, which grew daily larger until it threatened the loss of the eye.”²⁰⁴ Bede tells of the deliberations of various physicians over what to do about this monk’s ailment. First the physicians put salves and plasters on the eye. When these measures failed, they debated the merits of surgically removing his eyelid. The intervention of St. Cuthbert’s relics restored the eye, and his body was found incorrupt after being buried many years.²⁰⁵

Æthelthryth (c.636-679) was a daughter of King Anna of East Anglia and a famous saint who founded the important double abbey at Ely. Her translation, recorded to support the abbey’s promotion of her as an incorrupt saint, revealed the presence of professional practitioners during this time. The fact that there was a physician in attendance to testify to the incorrupt nature of her body speaks to professional medicine existing this early in Anglo-Saxon history. While the surviving medical textbooks were

²⁰³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XXIII, 136-137.

²⁰⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XXXII, 448-449.

²⁰⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XXXII, 448-449.

first written down in the early tenth century, when Anglo-Saxon society supported trained doctors who were well versed in herbalism and classical theories of health and illness found in these medical texts, examples such as this one testified to their reliance on an earlier empirical tradition.²⁰⁶ Some scholars have further supported this claim that the information in the medical texts came from an earlier oral tradition by analyzing the synthesis of pagan and Christian components within the cures themselves.²⁰⁷ For instance, Shirley Kinney has examined two cures that add Christian rituals to traditional cures to argue “that Christians in Anglo-Saxon England used medicine as a means to promote the spread of their religion into areas that had held onto their Germanic or pagan backgrounds by integrating Christian themes into the native folkloric and medical practice.”²⁰⁸ Karen Jolly provided the most thorough examination of this new worldview that emerged from integration of pagan and Augustinian understandings of the body that dominated Roman Christian thought on the subject. From this perspective, Germanic pagan and Christian understandings of the body were in many ways not mutually exclusive, so a synthesis resulted that was neither completely Germanic, nor the same as the Christian tradition that informed it, but yet remained firmly Christian in belief.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ See Stephen Pollington, *Leechcraft: Early English Charms, Plant-Lore and Healing* (London: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2000) and Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

²⁰⁷ For a full discussion of this historiography, see Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England*, 1996.

²⁰⁸ Shirley Kinney, “Anglo-Saxon Medicine: Cures or Catastrophe?” *Primary Source*. Vol II Issue II. Spring 2012, pp. 37.

²⁰⁹ Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England*, 1996.

As we have seen, Gregory of Tours believed oil from St. Martin's tomb to be an effective cure. Bede likewise expected dust that had contact with a saint to provide miraculous cures. In one case he related the power of St. Oswald by declaring that "many sick people had been healed by the soil of the floor on which the water, used for washing his bones, had been poured out."²¹⁰ The abbess Æthelhild took some of this dust to her abbey where it later was used to exorcise a man experiencing a seizure.²¹¹

Another story Bede related highlights the thin line between medicine and miracle. Bede told about a Scottish scholar stricken with plague. He begged his companion, an Irishman who shared this story with Bede, for any relic of St. Oswald to cure him, because he had studied the word of God, yet had lived sinfully, and he pledged to rectify his behavior if given more time. His companion chanced to have a piece of the pike upon which Oswald's head was stuck. A chip of this wood was placed into holy water and drunk by the repentant plague victim, which cured him.²¹²

Jolly specifically examines the practice of ingesting Christian holy materials and rituals as middle practices between pagan and Christian. One such example concerns a cure that requires writing scripture on a plate, and then literally washing the words into wine to be consumed by the sick.²¹³ The medical texts also recommend that herbs have masses said over them, or be placed on an altar in order to be effective in curing. However, on the spectrum of healing that Jolly outlined, the use of a relic instead of

²¹⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XI, 248-249.

²¹¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XI, 248-249.

²¹² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XIII, 252-255.

²¹³ Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England*, 119.

written words from scripture moves this cure closer to a miracle requiring a divine intercessor rather than being a cure that could be provided by earthly physicians.²¹⁴ The splinter of wood consumed within holy water formed a direct link with St. Oswald, who was believed to be physically present in his relics. In a similar fashion, decades earlier Gregory of Tours had celebrated the curative powers of St. Martin, and detailed miraculous cures occurring when a petitioner ingested dust from Martin's tomb.²¹⁵

Caedmon lived on the lands of Whitby when St. Hilda was abbess, taking care of animals. According to Bede, God miraculously endowed him with the gift of song and poetry after a dream one night. When Bede described Caedmon's death he revealed how Caedmon's home monastery of Whitby dealt with the ill and the dying. Caedmon suffered from an illness for fourteen days, but was able to speak and walk during this time. On the night that Caedmon knew he was going to die, he asked his companion to send him a nearby house. This house was the place "to which they used to take those who were infirm or who seemed to be at the point of death."²¹⁶ Bede recorded Caedmon's companion's surprise that Caedmon should go to this place since he did not seem to be at death's door. The companion's reaction demonstrated that this infirmary was reserved for the most dire of cases, and therefore Caedmon's request to go there while able to walk and speak was especially notable.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Anglo Saxon England*.

²¹⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Lives and Miracles*, translated by Giselle de Nie (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015).

²¹⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XXIV, 418-419.

²¹⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XXIV, 420-421.

Bede records multiple other instances of plague in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* that reveal his views on how one should respond emotionally to an epidemic. Bede's depiction of this pandemic broke from the tradition of responses to plague reflected in the works of Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours. This becomes even more notable when juxtaposed with Bede's account of an earlier epidemic in the fifth century. According to Bede, this plague was the initial event that led to the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes settling England. This plague, which must have occurred between 447 and 449 based on the dates of surrounding events chronicled, came as divine punishment to the degenerate Britons. The Britons successfully repelled "barbarian" invaders that had pillaged the land.²¹⁸ Once the land was no longer being ravaged, "there was so great an abundance of corn in the island as had never before been known."²¹⁹ With such bounty, and no immediate threat of invasion, all the Britons, whether Christian or pagan, fell into extreme vice. Bede did not explicitly say that the plague comes as retribution, but implied it by painting the victims as sinners:

In the meantime a virulent plague suddenly fell upon these corrupt people which quickly laid low so large a number that there were not enough people left alive to bury the dead. Yet those who survived could not be awakened from the spiritual death which their sins had brought upon them either by the death of their kinsmen or by fear of their own death.²²⁰

Following the plague, the Britons sent for the Saxons to help defend against the renewed attacks of the barbarous peoples. Both the attacks of the barbarous peoples and the Saxons to whom the Britons appeal for help are subsequent punishment from God for the

²¹⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.XIII, 46-47. "barbaros"

²¹⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.XIV, 48-49.

²²⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.XIV, 48-49.

unrepentant Britons. With this invitation Germanic tribes began to settle in England, an event that Bede interpreted as divinely ordained and facilitated by the punishment of sinners with plague. This punishment was also in God's plan to bequeath England to the Germanic tribes for better stewardship. Therefore, even while God punished sinners, he rewarded another group, in this case the pagan Germanic tribes that settled in Britain. The implication is that, like Gregory the Great's response to plague, the people should have been repentant of their sins to assuage God's anger. Because of their failure to do so, the Britons were already dead spiritually, and the epidemic only made their bodies reflect the state of their souls. That the fallen did not receive proper burial also attested to this spiritual death, and reflected their souls' insufficient preparation for the afterlife.

Bede provided a glimpse of his general perspective of how good Christians should view death when he praised Gregory the Great. Bede specified that part of Gregory the Great's holiness was because "even though still imprisoned in the body, he was able to pass in contemplation beyond the barriers of the flesh. He loved death, which in the eyes of almost everybody is a punishment, because he held it to be the entrance to life and the reward of his labours."²²¹ Bede acknowledged the difficulty of truly favoring death for most people. Yet that difficulty made those who did accept death even more holy.

When Bede wrote his *History* in 731, his interpretation of the plague of 664 diverged from his presentation of the long-distant plague of the fifth century. Bede was born less than ten years after this traumatic event, and also famously "by the faithful testimony of innumerable witnesses" sought information from eyewitnesses of events in

²²¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.I, 124-125.

his *History* when possible.²²² Although Bede continued professing a divine origin for plague for the outbreak in 664, the personal links among himself, his sources, and the victims of the seventh-century plague required a new interpretation of God's will that accounted for the death of highly respected ecclesiastics. It seems that Bede could not possibly see the death of holy monks and nuns as evidence of God's wrath on them or on society, so he was forced to come up with an alternate explanation. Therefore, Bede transformed the plague from a scourge to punish the wicked into a divinely willed blessing of death. Accepting this death joyfully, as with any other death, elevated the holy. Therefore, the religious leaders that Bede analyzed the most were not those who ministered to their followers through a crisis. Rather, Bede focused on those who accepted divine will for their personal fate, which accounts for his lack of focus on ecclesiastical leadership. Since this was divinely sanctioned death as reward rather than death as punishment, it was not a crisis. Just as Gregory the Great had pointed out in his letter, plague had the mercy of bringing a swift death. It was within this context that Bede presented those who led their communities in acts of penance or who prayed for survival as insufficiently accepting God's will.

Bede's heroes were from a variety of religious vocations, rather than being identified mainly in the role of bishop. Some of the individuals who provided miraculous cures had been kings in life. Additionally, Bede's *History* indicated that there was no strong distinction between bishop and abbot in Anglo-Saxon England. As just one example, Bede talks of the saintly bishop Cedd. While fulfilling his duties as bishop, Ethelwald, king of the Deirans, donated land to Cedd on which Cedd should found a

²²² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.Preface, 5.

monastery. Bede described the location Cedd chose as “amid some steep and remote hills which seemed better fitted for the haunts of robbers and the dens of wild beasts than for human habitation.”²²³ This setting recalled the setting of the desert fathers’ sufferings in wild and remote areas of the desert. Of course, Bede may have stressed this fluidity since he was a monk rather than a bishop himself.²²⁴

Part of this focus on monastic response was also likely because of monks stepping in to episcopal roles because so many bishops, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, had died. So many ecclesiastics died in this epidemic that Wighard was sent to Rome with gifts in 664 so that he could obtain permission to ordain others in England. In his seminal article on plague in Anglo-Saxon England, John Maddicott analyzes how plague besieged the ecclesiastical population. Bede’s narrative depicted depopulated monasteries, where populations were annihilated with only the rare survivor. Likewise, Maddicott determined that at least two and possibly four of the eight seventh-century bishops died of the plague, noting that, even though it was not a large population sample, “a death rate of 25-50% is strikingly high, and considerably higher than that among the

²²³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXIII, 286-287.

²²⁴ Gregory the Great likewise founded monasteries, but the continental practice differed from the Anglo-Saxon one of monastic bishoprics, where monks staffed the secular positions within the church as well. See Simon Coates, “The Role of Bishops in the Early Anglo-Saxon Church: A Reassessment” *History* 81:262 (1996): 177-196 for more information on monastic bishoprics as well as a thorough discussion of the problems in determining information regarding bishops monastics composed the surviving sources.

episcopate in 1348-1349, when the sole plague death among the seventeen bishops was that of Thomas Bradwardine, archbishop of Canterbury.”²²⁵

Bede’s depiction of Wighard’s journey demonstrates that Bede’s description of plague was less obviously physical than Gregory of Tours’ description. When Gregory the Great was to ordain Wighard as archbishop, Wighard only barely made it to Rome. According to Bede, “not long after Wighard had explained the object of his journey, he and almost all the companions who had travelled with him [were surprised by pestilence and carried off].”²²⁶ This demise marked Wighard as a holy man worthy of the archbishopric, even while it created practical difficulties for the papacy and the Anglo-Saxon church. However, Bede did not indicate that the plague followed Wighard, but rather that the travelers were surprised by pestilence. Therefore, this episode also revealed that Bede may have seen the epidemic raging in Britain as separate from the pestilence that destroyed Wighard and his companions in Rome. Unlike Gregory of Tours, who documented the pestilence arriving in Marseilles with cargo from an infested ship, Bede did not clearly envision the possibility that the plague would travel with Wighard, his companions, or their possessions.

Even though Bede did not speak of bishops leading the faithful in penance to ward off the plague, or at least prepare their souls for death, he did depict some events that mirrored Gregory of Tours’ testimony of plague in Merovingian Gaul, and even

²²⁵ John Maddicott, “Plague in Seventh-Century England,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750*, ed. Lester K. Little, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 178.

²²⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.I, 330-331. “Postquam itineris sui causam praefato pape apostolico patefecit, non multo post et ipse et omnes pene qui cum eo advenerant socii, pestilentia superveniente deleti sunt” [] reflects my translation of this portion

Gregory the Great's penitential procession. According to Bede, however, individuals and communities who used their agency to seek health declared their own weakness or sinfulness. Bede's *History* suggested that the correct spiritual response for those who led an upright life, as demonstrated by its heroes, was to piously suffer, then succumb with grace. Conversely, only those who had reason to fear damnation should seek to be delivered from the pestilence, and then only to rectify the specific shortcoming. Individuals should rejoice in or fear plague just as any other death, since it was an admission to paradise or hell. Additionally, the suffering inherent in death by plague better prepared the soul, through its suffering, for the afterlife. This stance followed logically from the coupling of ideas of the plague as divinely sent and the Christian virtue of submission to divine will.

Likewise, Bede revealed that Anglo-Saxons relied on physical medicine to help cope with the onslaught of plague. The testimony of Æthelthryth's physician at her translation provides one specific approach of Anglo-Saxon medicine to address the plague in the highest levels of society. When she was ill, her physician lanced a large plague bubo on her neck. At her exhumation, her physician was in attendance and was able to testify that the place had healed and there remained nothing but the smallest scar, declaring her bodily restoration while in the tomb. We learn that despite the depicted acceptance of divine fate, as evidenced by her vision that she would die by plague, she still received medical treatment. The doctor testifies:

During her illness, she had a very large tumour beneath her jaw. 'I was ordered,' he said, 'to cut this tumour so as to drain out the poisonous matter within it. After I had done this she seemed to be easier for about two days and many thought that she would recover from her sickness. But on the third day she was attacked by her

former pains and was soon taken from the world, exchanging pain and death for everlasting health and life.²²⁷

Even the most holy sufferers received medical attention and treatments meant to cure the ailment, or at least prolong life or relieve suffering. Therefore, despite Bede's implication that suffering was accepted stoically by holy people, those same people still took measures to minimize this suffering.

Bede mostly presented an idealized memory of those who died and his account revealed that those who remained questioned why they survived. Bede began Book III, Chapter XXVII of his *History* ominously:

In this year of our Lord 664 there was an eclipse of the sun on 3 May about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. In the same year a sudden pestilence first depopulated the southern parts of Britain, and afterwards attacked the kingdom of Northumbria, raging far and wide with cruel devastation and laying low a vast number of people. Bishop Tuda was carried off by it and honourably buried in the monastery called *Pægnalæch*. The plague did equal destruction in Ireland.²²⁸

The eclipse of the sun mirrored the types of prodigies that Gregory of Tours declared to be signs of an impending epidemic and a stunning display of God's wrath. In Bede's context, the signs presaged divine action, but not necessarily wrath. Even so, Bede conformed to a moral interpretation of plague that fit within an existing ecclesiastical conversation. This dialogue came to Britain with Augustine's mission beginning in 597 to Æthelbert, King of Kent. As preserved in Bede's narrative, Pope Gregory advised Æthelbert of the appropriate reaction to calamities that may befall his kingdom:

²²⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.XVIV, 594-595.

²²⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXVII, 310-313. King, editor of the Loeb version, notes that the eclipse occurred on the first of May rather than the third and that the disease is the plague, and was known at that time as the "Yellow Pest," 484. Colgrave and Mynors note that the eclipse occurred May 1, not May 3 as Bede related, 311, and that *Pægnalæch* has not been identified.

So if you see any of these things happening in your land, do not be troubled in mind; for these signs of the end of the world are sent in advance, to make us heedful about our souls, watching for the hour of death, so that when the Judge comes we may, through our good works, be found prepared.²²⁹

Bede's later presentation of plague mirrored Gregory the Great's opinion of the appropriate response to pestilence. In Bede's depiction, saints and other virtuous Christians suffered the plague without panic or disorder. This interpretation occurs naturally when plague is a manifestation of God's will; plague becomes an opportunity to correct action or to cleanse the soul through suffering.

Within this worldview, rather than praying for health, those dedicated to God should prepare their souls for death and embrace the plague. For instance, Bede reported a miracle that occurred when plague ravaged Barking Abbey and many monks were dying. The plague had not yet penetrated the nun's side of the monastery. The nuns emerged after Matins to sing praises to God at the graves of their brethren monks. A divine shaft of light answered the abbess's most pressing question – where shall she bury the nuns when they, too, begin to die?²³⁰ Even miracles for the benefit of an entire holy community contribute to the provision of a proper death and burial rather than a cure or exemption from the plague. This focus on appropriate care for souls into heaven could also explain why modern traces of this pandemic are so hard to see in the archaeological record. Also, later narratives of plague epidemics frequently address the issue of the

²²⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.XXXII, 114-115. See footnote 61.

²³⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.VII, 356-359.

inability of the living to bury the dead appropriately.²³¹ Bede never directly addressed this concern, but the abbess's uncertainty hinted at deeper anxieties.

Bede recounts holy people who prophetically, with divine aid, foretell their own or another's demise because of plague. These figures are always monastics, maidens, or children. The most famous of these is Æthelthryth. Abbess of Ely during the plague, she was said to have predicted both her own death and the number of deaths from her monastery.²³² Famously, in Bede's account Æthelthryth rejoiced in the opportunity for penance offered by plague. In her sentiments we hear echoes of Gregory's guidance to see plague as an opportunity to better align with God:

It is also related that when she was afflicted with this tumour and by the pain in her neck and jaw, she gladly welcomed this sort of pain and used to say, 'I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember that when I was a young girl I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces; I believe that God in His goodness would have me endure this pain in my neck in order that I may thus be absolved from the guilt of my needless vanity. So, instead of gold and pearls, a fiery red tumour now stands out upon my neck.'²³³

Æthelthryth was also one example of the sanctification of particularly holy people who succumbed to the plague and were afterward approached for remedy to illness. These souls were also frequently maidens whose innocence is prominent in their legends.

Likewise, Bede also testified that Æthelberga, a nun who had recently died by plague,

²³¹ See Daniel Defoe, *Journal of a Plague Year*, edited by Cynthia Wall (London: Penguin Classics, 2003) for examples of people dying in their homes without anyone caring for them, bodies rotting in homes and in the streets, and city provision of gravediggers to collect bodies and bury them in pits. Piles of bodies and giant pits for burial remain in the cultural imagination regarding plague.

²³² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XVII, 392-393.

²³³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XVII, 396-397.

relieved the physical sufferings of supplicants. A paralyzed nun asked to be set down next to her body in the posture of prayer, endorsing Æthelberga's sanctity immediately after her death. The nun had long suffered from this malady and petitioned Æthelberga for relief. Bede saw Æthelberga's answer to this request in the paralyzed nun's death twelve days later.²³⁴

If the saintly should bear their malady with grace and thanksgiving, the plague offered an opportunity for the sinful to reform themselves. Bede's view was that those who had repented and performed penance should embrace death, including by plague, but those who remained guilty should stay on earth in order to better ensure an afterlife in heaven. He told of a Scottish scholar who he himself witnessed suffering from the plague.

The scholar lamented:

Nor do I doubt that, after the death of my body, my soul will immediately be snatched to everlasting death to suffer the torments of hell. . . But I have made up my mind, if, by the grace of Heaven I am granted any further term of life, to correct my vicious ways and to devote my whole heart and life to obeying the divine will.²³⁵

The Scotsman then says that he has heard that Oswald takes pity on people. The miraculous cure from ingesting a piece of St. Oswald's pike spared the Scotsman's life so that he could mend his ways.²³⁶

Bede poignantly juxtaposed the correct response with the weakness of doubt in the story of Æthelhun and Egbert, two young English nobles studying in Ireland during

²³⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.IX, 360-363. The cause of death in this case was irrelevant since she had requested relief.

²³⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XIII, 236-237.

²³⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XIII, 236-237.

the plague of 664. When they stayed in the monastery of Rath Melsigi, early one morning, Egbert left to lie with the sick and consider his life. Crying, he sincerely requested to live until “he had had time to make amends for all the thoughtless offences of which he had been guilty during infancy and boyhood and to practise good works more abundantly.”²³⁷ When he next conversed with his friend, Æthelhun laments, “Brother Egbert, what have you done? I hoped that we should both enter into eternal life; but you are to know that your request will be granted.”²³⁸ Æthelhun died the following evening while Egbert lived to be bishop, only dying at the age of ninety.

This example also revealed Bede’s concept of a good bishop. He presented Egbert’s long life as one filled with good works and service, saying “Egbert threw of his sickness, recovered, and lived for a long time afterwards, gracing the office of bishop which he had received by deeds worthy of it. After having lived a virtuous life according to his wish, he recently passed away to the heavenly realms”²³⁹ Bede specified exactly what actions Egbert performed while bishop that were commendable, declaring that Egbert gave much to his people “by the example of his life, the earnestness of his teaching, the authority with which he administered reproof, and his goodness in distributing whatever he received from the rich.”²⁴⁰ Despite the goodness of Egbert’s life, Bede presented it as bittersweet. Egbert could have started his heavenly life much sooner, but his weakness benefitted many people because of his future religious service.

²³⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXVII, 312-313.

²³⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.XXVII, 314-315.

²³⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.XXVII, 314-315.

²⁴⁰ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.XXVII, 314-315.

Bede also commended bishop Chad, whose behavior he described somewhat differently than Egbert's. Bede explained, "So Chad was consecrated bishop immediately devoted himself to the task of keeping the Church in truth and purity, to the practice of humility and temperance, and to study. He visited cities, country districts, towns, houses, and strongholds, preaching the Gospel, travelling not on horseback but going on foot the apostolic example."²⁴¹ The practice of walking the countryside to preach was not often associated with Roman Catholicism, but was a central practice in Irish monastic practice.²⁴² Assigning this Irish monastic practice to a bishop further blurred the lines between monastic and ecclesiastical leadership of the populace in Bede's account.

Since Bede considered the plague to be a blessing from God, he obscured the role of religious leadership in his account compared with Gregory of Tours' focus on religious leadership in the face of God's wrath. Bede must explain survival of the pestilence in terms of moral imperfection of the survivor rather than divine favor, since his preferred outcome for those souls prepared is death and the entrance into paradise it brought. Since each person should gladly accept whichever fate that God decreed, the role of bishop and pastoral leadership became background information rather than the events central to the experience of plague for Bede. This distinction also allowed for posthumous help from religious leaders in some cases, as intercessors with the divine. Bede noted the death of

²⁴¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXVIII, 316-317.

²⁴² Regarding Chad, see Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXVIII, 316-317. Bede's home monastic house was Wearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria. Northumbria maintained ties to Irish foundations throughout the controversy over the dating of Easter. Therefore, Bede applauding an Irish practice was not as unique as it may first seem. Bede often noted whether a certain holy person celebrated the Roman, which he saw as correct, date for Easter. This divergence also came from differences between Irish and Roman practice.

Chad's brother Cedd at Lastingham from the plague during 664.²⁴³ Bede presented one of the most poignant examples of death by plague as a blessing and a survival because of spiritual infirmity when he tells how about a group of monks who came to Lastingham after Cedd's death:

When the brothers who were in his monastery in the kingdom of the East Saxons heard that the bishop was dead and buried in the kingdom of Northumbria, about thirty of them came from that monastery, wishing to live near the body of their father or, if the Lord so willed, to die and be buried there. They were gladly received by their brothers and fellow soldiers in Christ, but another attack of the pestilence came upon them and they all died, with the exception of one small boy, who was preserved from death by the intercession of Cedd his [spiritual] father. After a long time devoted to the reading of the scriptures, a moment came when he realized that he had not been baptized.²⁴⁴

Cedd demonstrated his power by working such a merciful miracle as the intercession, not for the holy brethren, but for the salvation of one lone boy. Bede presumed that Cedd knew the rest of the monks to have souls appropriately prepared for the afterlife, and that they would begin their time in paradise. Bede unraveled the mystery of the anomaly of this lone child, who would not have sins for which to atone, with the help of hindsight. Cedd, God, and the plague knew what earthly witnesses did not. The boy later discovered that he had not been properly baptized, and therefore his survival was a manifestation of Cedd's wisdom and God's mercy. Rather than beginning eternal damnation, the child corrected the fault he was unaware he had, and went on to counsel others as a priest, saving even more souls, rather than continuing a monastic vocation. The survivor becoming a priest reflected a larger theme of Bede's discussion of survivors. As we have

²⁴³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXIII, 288-289. Bede noted that the four brothers from this family all being in the church, and two as bishops, was an exceptional occurrence. The four brothers Bede discussed are Cedd, Cynebill, Cælin, and Chad.

²⁴⁴ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXIII, 288-289.

seen with both Egbert and the child, Bede often noted survivors as having a future pastoral vocation, actively involved with souls that needed correction rather than their continued pursuit of a monastic vocation.

Bede related other episodes in England that did not match his ideal. These episodes demonstrated that other individuals and communities acted under different ideals in their responses to the plague. Many of these responses echo those praised by Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great. Others, such as apostasy and debauchery, reflect concerns Gregory the Great cautioned bishops to correct and Gregory of Tours condemned. Bede presented each of these English examples in a way that reinforced the inferiority of these choices, even those that the Gregories had praised. Angels begrudgingly granted the foolish wishes of those who requested they be spared the plague's devastation. This mercy of life was often negotiated through the intercession of saints, who were displayed as indulgent to weak men when Bede saw no spiritual lack in the survivors.

At least one religious community made a choice to seek mercy and deliverance from the pestilence through communal acts of penance, as led by their monastic lords. While the scenario echoed actions enacted by Gregory the Great with his *letania septiformis* and praised by Gregory of Tours in the case of St. Gall, Bede's tone did not reflect awe at a miracle, but rather indulgence of those too weak to accept death. Plague arrived at Selsea in Sussex, and many died. Joining the ranks of prophetic innocents, a little boy promised to the monastery, in bed sick from the plague, saw a vision of Peter. All of the monks and the people tied to the monastery's land had decided to keep a fast in hope of avoiding the plague. Peter told the boy of the death of King Oswald, who later

became a saint. Peter advised that because of Oswald's request and the community's demonstration of piety, the others would be restored to health. Peter instructed the community to come together and pray in thanksgiving while breaking their ongoing fast. The boy died shortly after conveying this important message.²⁴⁵ Therefore, only through the specific, miraculous intervention of St. Oswald, presented as an indulgence ceded to his favored dependents, did God spare the community from extermination by the plague. No miraculous signs appeared to the community from heaven, as in the case of St. Gall's intercession for his community at Clermont-Ferrand. Instead, Bede saved the miraculous vision to one who would die from the plague.

A brief glimpse of another popular response to the plague emerged through Bede's depiction of what must have been an exceedingly disruptive episode. When the plague ravaged Essex in 665, the East Saxons, who were first converted with their king Saeberth in 604, resorted to pagan rituals and deities for protection. Bede bemoaned this conversion but acknowledges that "both the king himself and number of the people as well as of the nobles, loving this present life and not seeking after the life to come, or even not believing any such life at all, began to renew their temples which stood desolate and to worship idols, as though they could thereby be protected from the mortal sickness."²⁴⁶ Bede's omission of the details of this episode raises many questions, but some information can be gleaned from his short entry. Lay people, including kings and nobles, looked to the gods they had forsaken in their conversion to Christianity to save them from the plague. This followed the formula of conversion stories where the people

²⁴⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.XIV, 377-381.

²⁴⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXX, 322-323.

follow the god of their king, whether pagan or Christian. It likewise mirrored stories of conversion where the Christian God protected an individual or group when their pagan god could not. In this case, the Christian God had not protected the people from the plague, so they sought other gods that may respond to their pleas.²⁴⁷ There are other possible reasons for this action, including the belief that the old gods were punishing their people for their rejection. Ultimately, the motives for the “relapse” remain shrouded.

Bede merely declared this upheaval quickly resolved, but at the same time revealed that bishops were actively doing things that Gregory the Great had specifically declared necessary in times of plague. Bede simply remarked that Bishop Jaruman encouraged the people of Essex to return to Christianity so that “as a result they either abandoned or destroyed the temples and altars they had erected, they reopened the churches, and rejoiced to confess the name of Christ which they had denied, choosing rather to die believing that they would rise again in Him than to live in the filth of unbelief among their idols.”²⁴⁸ Once again, Bede omitted any information regarding the perspective of the people undergoing the test of faith. However, even Bede did not suppose that God would spare or protect the converts. Rather, Christianity only offered hope after death. Additionally, the phrasing “to live in the filth of unbelief among their idols” also suggested a possibility that the pagan gods could protect their followers from plague. In Bede’s account, plague’s test of Christian faith proved too arduous for the

²⁴⁷ This is a common trope in conversion literature, usually with God aiding a pagan king in battle, after which the king, and usually his people, all convert. This was the formula that Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-339) attributed to the conversion of the emperor Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in his *Vita Constantini*, the composition of which was interrupted by Eusebius’s death.

²⁴⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.XXX, 322-323.

relatively recent Anglo-Saxon converts, but ultimately they became better Christians through this test. According to Bede, those that slipped into apostasy came to realize that temporal survival should be secondary to the soul's experience in the afterlife.

In many ways, the vignettes of Bede's *History* in which individuals suffered, died, or survived the plague reflect Christian understandings of spiritual disease as depicted by Gregory of Tours the century before. However, because Bede and those he interviewed personally knew and respected many who died and he was reflecting much later, when he had survived long past their deaths, these deaths required a new interpretation of God's will. Because so many holy men and women were victims, Bede could not fathom that the catastrophe was God's punishment on a sinful people. Logically following this interpretation, he developed an alternate explanation that denigrated the survivors as less holy or weak in the face of death. Recollecting these stories and the memory of those who were lost to the devastation of the plague possibly renewed the survivors' enduring experience of questioning their survival. In these remembered stories, the dead took the spotlight. This shift in focus away from the episcopal concerns of Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours delegated religious leaders that led the communities during the emergency into the background of the story.

Conclusion

Revisiting Gregory the Great's *Registrum Epistolarum*, Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*, and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* to specifically examine their depiction of plague and how it disrupted communities reveals fresh perspectives on disease and the role of ecclesiastical leadership in times of crisis. Despite the fame that each of these authors maintained through the Middle Ages and into modernity, scholars have not explored the way their works present experiences of the plague. In part, this is an accident of historiography. When Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse argued that the break between the ancient and medieval worlds occurred earlier than the rise of Islam, they were willing to suggest plague as creating similar effects. Since then, the study of this Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages has become more nuanced, and like other historical eras, historians pose questions of continuity and change. Therefore, it is time to take a more nuanced view of the First Plague Pandemic. Since the publication of the article collection edited by Lester Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750*, scholars have begun exploring what we can know about this plague, often using quantitative methods.

In contrast, this thesis has begun the process of exploring what people in Late Antiquity understood and recorded about the illness that they experienced. As an initial foray into the topic, it is necessarily limited in scope. I have only analyzed the most famous histories of Bede and Gregory of Tours, mostly ignoring their other works. I have also not explored other historians that comment on plague, such as Paul the Deacon, Procopius, John of Ephesus, or Evagrius Scholasticus. Part of this choice was deliberate. While scholarship is still developing, there are more numerous and in depth studies of

plague in the East, in part because of different types of documentation available there.²⁴⁹ The rest is because of the limits of the thesis format, and I hope to rectify some of these omissions in later inquiries.

However, I chose to examine these specific sources as an important foundation for further analysis. Gregory the Great's centrality in the memory of the First Plague Pandemic requires any exploration of the topic in the former Western Roman Empire to consider his insights on the matter. While there are many works of his yet to be mined for this topic, the letters I chose offered clearly and concisely his opinions of how bishops should respond to the devastation of plague in their communities both personally and professionally. Since both Gregory of Tours and Bede held Gregory the Great in the highest esteem and related some of his actions in their *Histories*, these opinions offer both context for his own actions in Rome in 590, and also an ideal with which to compare the accounts offered by Gregory of Tours and Bede.

Despite this obvious reverence, both Gregory of Tours and Bede diverged in their advice of how to respond to plague. Gregory of Tours also considered bishops essential, but supported a wider range of responses by bishops than Gregory the Great. Gregory the Great demonstrated that he viewed the office of bishop as an active office that required direct interaction to best serve each Christian under his care. Gregory of Tours praised both direct action in the form of rogations, but also praised more indirect action, such as praying to God for mercy. Gregory of Tours even declared this direct prayer superior in the case of St. Gall, whereas Gregory the Great insisted that praying for an end to the

²⁴⁹ For the most recent scholarship on plague in the Byzantine world see especially the work of Dionysios Stathakopoulos, including his monograph *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: A Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics* (London: Routledge, 2015).

torment without rectifying the sin of the people was madness. Bede diverged even further, offering the possibility that plague could be a blessing that cleansed the sufferer of sin and prepared them for a swift entry into heaven.

Revisiting their testimony of Justinian's plague in the sixth and seventh centuries reveals that Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours, and Bede shared many ideas on illness, disease, healing, and leadership. Each saw plague as distinct from regular illness, accompanied by omens, and each interpreted the plague itself as the work of God. Despite this shared belief, each author responded to these portents differently. Gregory the Great urged other bishops, through his own example and through his correspondence, to tend to the souls of the living so they would be appropriately prepared should it be the hour of their death, and so they might possibly be spared God's wrath. Gregory of Tours also believed the bishop to be essential for the people of their bishopric to have any hope in the face of such a calamity. However, rather than a standard response, Gregory of Tours allowed for individual pious action by bishops. Some prayed for God to spare their people and others led processions so the people could demonstrate their humility and perform penance. Gregory praised both responses because they demonstrated the bishop's concern for this flock, even though Gregory the Great indicated that God judged a bishop by whether any of his flock strayed from the correct path. Bede instead censured responses focused on penance as either weakness or a failure of faith. Bede interpreted God's action of sending plague not only as a demonstration of His wrath, but also as a tool with which to bless the holy. Therefore, each person should ensure his upright standing with God, and then rejoice at any opportunity for suffering and release from the constraint of earthly existence.

Other insights into possible seeds that influenced how later medieval people remembered the early medieval era hide within this overarching context of Christian responsibility in the face of devastation. Gregory the Great's legend, tied with the miracle at Castel Sant'Angelo, like all legends, was forged by the interaction of many factors over time. My close examination of his words reveals how his rhetoric may have been one of these factors that influenced the ultimate form of his legend. In addition, the powerful imagery of St. Gall's miracle of interceding with God to spare his town from the plague very explicitly drew on biblical examples.

Discovering each of these views offers insight into whether this plague was remembered, and if so, how. Each account continued to be widely read, even until the present day. In addition, each related the actions of multiple people who gained sainthood in relation to their sufferings in time of plague. Further examining the corpus of these authors and others will prove to be an important supplement to historical, archaeological, and biological scholarship. It will also contribute to our ability to understand the First Plague Pandemic in its own context and therefore more completely as a disease.

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