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

David J. Patterson*

Abstract: In 589 a great flood of the Tiber sent a torrent of water rushing through Rome. According to Gregory of Tours, the floodwaters carried some remarkable detritus: several dying serpents and, perhaps most strikingly, the corpse of a dragon. The flooding was soon followed by plague and the death of a pope. This remarkable chain of events leaves us with puzzling questions: What significance would Gregory have located in such a narrative? For a modern reader, the account (apart from its dragon) reads like a description of a natural disaster. Yet how did people in the early Middle Ages themselves perceive such events? This article argues that, in making sense of the disasters at Rome in 589, Gregory revealed something of his historical consciousness: drawing on both biblical imagery and pagan historiography, Gregory struggled to identify appropriate objects of both blame and succor in the wake of calamity.

Keywords: plague, natural disaster, Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great, Asclepius, pagan survivals, dragon, serpent, sixth century, Rome.

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

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

² This early bubonic plague pandemic has long been overshadowed historiographically by the more infamous “Black Death” of the 14th c. On the earlier pandemic, see *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. L. K. Little (New York 2007); and J. C. Russell, “That Earlier Plague,” *Demography* 5.1 (1968) 174–184. On its effects in Italy, see M. Rouche, “Grégoire le Grand face à la situation économique de son temps,” *Grégoire le Grand*, ed. J. Fontaine (Paris 1986) 43–44.

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

This remarkable chain of events—a series of calamities that began with flooding and the appearance of a dragon, and culminated in plague and the death of a pope—leaves us with puzzling questions. Why should a sixth-century bishop have associated serpents and a dragon with the *clades*—the divinely rendered disasters—of flooding and pestilence, and what particular significance could someone like Gregory have imagined in such a narrative?⁴ For a modern reader, Gregory’s account, apart from its dragon, reads as nothing so much as the description of a natural disaster, or a series of them—events all too familiar in our own age (and, we might imagine, any other). We send, or request, international aid in the wake of devastating hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes; we anticipate, plan for, and debate climate change and global pandemics with trepidation; and we listen with concern to reports of tornadoes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.⁵

A growing number of historians have recently demonstrated an increased interest in the historical study of natural disasters.⁶ Ted Steinberg has sought to articulate the complex social, legal, political, and religious ramifications that make even the term “natural disaster” anything but straightforward.⁷ Natural disasters are frequently labeled “acts of God,” a categorical definition with crucial implications for insurance companies. In the pre-modern period, “acts of God” were assumed to be punishments meted out for human sin, the retributive results of divine anger and judgment.⁸ Steinberg argues that the modern equivalent is, in contrast, more often morally inert, removing blame rather than assigning it. It is seen as a product of random and unpredictable natural forces, rather than the visitation of divine wrath elicited by specific human wrongdoing. Put another way, to label something an act of God

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

⁵ The language of natural disaster is frequently employed in contemporary political discourse; see J. Hannigan, *Disasters Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (Malden 2012).

⁶ The cause of this increasing interest is itself a compelling question. See M. Juneja and F. Maelshagen, “Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies: Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives,” *Medieval History Journal* 10.1–2 (October 2007) 7: “... contemporary experiences of major disasters inspire innovation in the field of disaster research, which reflects a modern constellation between disaster and society wherein societies rely on scholarly and scientific expertise.”

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

⁸ See, for example, Justinian I, *Corpus iuris civilis, Novellae* 77:1.1, ed. R. Schoell (Berlin 1912) 382, which forbade swearing, blasphemy, and homosexuality, on the grounds that such acts resulted in famines, earthquakes, and pestilence.

is to shift its cause away from human agency and political will. Steinberg follows this logic to its cynical conclusion, observing that such a shift of emphasis allows preventable catastrophes and poorly managed disasters to escape the taint of social or political culpability. Consequently, in the wake of a tragedy such as Hurricane Katrina, the category of “natural disaster” becomes problematically amoral. After all, if the disaster was “natural” in origin, how could government officials—or anyone for that matter—be held accountable for its devastating effects?⁹

The interest in natural disaster among modern historians has increasingly been echoed by medievalists. Important studies include Christian Rohr’s investigation of the earthquake of Carinthia in 1348, and an analysis of ice core samples by Michael McCormick and Paul Dutton that seeks to understand early medieval climate forcing caused by volcanic eruptions.¹⁰ Lester Little and others have sought to draw attention to newly discovered bacteriological evidence that can shed light on ancient plague pandemics.¹¹ Much of this valuable research has revolved around novel methodological approaches that help reveal the climatic, seismographic, or epidemiological landscape of the past through the study of material remains. Occasionally, such studies have sought to either verify or disprove medieval reports of natural phenomena, such as the massive landslide and flooding in 563 at Geneva described by Gregory of Tours in the fourth book of his *Histories*.¹² A recent study of Lake Geneva’s sediment (using high-resolution seismic reflection profiles) determined that Gregory’s account was remarkably accurate.¹³

Paolo Squatriti, however, has called for caution, noting “the optimistic view that postclassical literary accounts match the findings of scientific historical climatology is not always warranted.”¹⁴ In particular,

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

¹⁰ C. Rohr, “Man and Natural Disaster in the Late Middle Ages: The Earthquake in Carinthia and Northern Italy on 25 January 1348 and Its Perception,” *Environment and History* 9.2 (2003) 127–149; M. McCormick, P. Dutton, and P. Mayewski, “Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe, A.D. 750–950,” *Speculum* 82.4 (2007) 865–895.

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

¹² Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* (n. 1 above) 163–164.

¹³ K. Kremer, G. Simpson, and S. Girardelos, “Giant Lake Geneva Tsunami in AD 563,” *Nature Geoscience* 5 (2012) 756–757.

¹⁴ P. Squatriti, “The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory,” *Speculum* 85.4 (2010) 803.

Squatriti casts doubt on the severity of the flooding at Rome in 589. Though evidently memorable for Gregory of Tours and later writers, the incident, he argues, should not be used as evidence of a generally deteriorating climate during the period, since the memorialization of this flooding ultimately had more to do with medieval authors' "literary purposes" than its actual severity.¹⁵ Squatriti suggests that new forms of proxy data increasingly available to paleoclimatologists (for example, tree ring data, evidence of glacial advancement or retreat, mud and pollen deposits, etc.) must be divorced from the evidence provided by ideologically motivated medieval narratives; the tendency toward a sort of "confirmation bias" should be avoided.¹⁶ One could interpret this to mean that we should not take early medieval narrators at their word, particularly when they set out to describe catastrophes. Yet, is it possible, instead, to rely on purely scientific evidence that can cast new light on what "really happened"?

Though valuable, such an approach—if taken in isolation—can leave unresolved the question of how people in the early Middle Ages themselves perceived, responded to, and "enacted" natural disaster.¹⁷ As mentioned above, it is commonly asserted that floods and earthquakes, epidemics and famine were understood in the Middle Ages as the products of human sin and divine judgment.¹⁸ Yet a simple formula of sin followed by divine judgment and retribution is too limited to explain entirely the diverse and multivalent depictions of natural disasters visible in the sources. Are there more complex ways in which such events

¹⁵ Ibid. 820.

¹⁶ See Squatriti (n. 14 above) 808.

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

¹⁸ In addition to Justinian's admonition that the populace should abstain from sin in order to prevent pestilence and other such punishments (n. 8 above), see also a later, Carolingian example of such logic, found in Heito, *Visio Wettini* 25, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH, *PLAC* 2 (Berlin 1884) 274, trans. R. Pollard: "When [Wetti] asked why such a great number of people died as the plague raged, he [sc., the angel who had appeared to him in a vision] said, 'It is a punishment for sins, for the world is heaped high with wrong.' Significantly, in Wetti's vision the Church bears much responsibility both for divine punishment and its avoidance; Wetti's angelic visitor subsequently emphasizes the importance of the divine office, which should be celebrated "with all correctness and diligence, in the proper order, without any encroachment of laziness or negligence." Rulers could similarly be held liable for the moral health of their realm. Cf. R. Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible: Sins, Kings and the Well-Being of the Realm," *Early Medieval Europe* 7.3 (1998) 345–357. For more on disease in particular as a punishment for sin, see S. Zimmerman, "Leprosy in the Medieval Imaginary," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38.3 (2008) 561–562; D. Stathakopoulos, "Crime and Punishment: The Plague in the Byzantine Empire, 541–749," *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. L. K. Little (New York 2007) 106.

could be understood, represented, and indeed *used*, by medieval authors?

In order to explore this question, I will begin by asking how a sixth-century Frankish bishop, Gregory of Tours, was able to construct narratives about events, which, for a modern reader, might readily be categorized as natural disasters.¹⁹ I will ask not only how and why such an event might occur, according to our episcopal narrator, but also what actions and rituals constituted appropriate responses, and who ought to perform them. In pursuing these questions, I will focus on one particularly inscrutable account found in the tenth book of Gregory's *Histories*: the flood and subsequent epidemic at Rome in 589, sketched above. I will argue that this episode represents an attempt by Gregory to shape the perception and understanding of a disaster.

For Gregory, the death of Pelagius II and the destruction of church property in the flooding of 589 served as signs of God's displeasure with the *ecclesia*. Seeking to understand this evident wrath, Gregory cast a wide interpretive net: the dragon of the Tiber River was likely an allusion to Asclepius, the serpentine Greek god of healing, whom Ludwig Edelstein once characterized as "the foremost antagonist of Christ" in late antiquity.²⁰ Asclepius famously made a home on the Tiber Island in the third century BCE—at which time, according to pagan historians, he delivered Rome from a great pestilence in the midst of desperate circumstances. This ancient tradition sheds new light on Gregory's description of the dramatic expulsion of a dragon from the Tiber in 589—an expulsion immediately preceding an outbreak of pestilence. In Gregory's estimation, God's wrath had at least two evident targets: Asclepius himself, as well as the negligent *ecclesia*, which had failed to adequately suppress the worship of idols during a time of considerable upheaval and uncertainty. Gregory's account is thus both interpretative and didactic; it refers at once to pagan and Christian imagery and historiography.

The narrative reveals that, like Orosius writing more than a century earlier, Gregory implicitly sought to resist alternative ways of

¹⁹ For the sake of concision, the term "natural disaster" will be used throughout to indicate those phenomena with which modern readers might associate it, such as earthquakes, floods, and epidemics. The term is therefore used to connote its modern meaning, though, as I hope to demonstrate, for Gregory and his contemporaries the same phenomena could carry quite different connotations.

²⁰ L. and E. Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore 1945) 1:7. For J. H. Charlesworth, the evidence suggests that "in some centers of Western culture Asclepius was the most revered of all gods" by the 1st c. CE; *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven 2010) 163.

understanding disaster.²¹ His calamitous narrative, and in particular its references to flooding, serpents, and plague, is an allusion to, and rejection of, pagan history, one that has yet to receive adequate attention. The association between Gregory's dragon and the pagan cult of Asclepius has been briefly suggested by Alain Stoclet, though he does not explore how (or for what purpose) Gregory arrived at this peculiar association, nor what its implications may be. For Stoclet, "[the] reptilian exodus signifies that [Asclepius] and his minions are deserting the city."²² While I agree with Stoclet's identification, I would argue that—rather than deserting the city—Asclepius was flushed out of it. Moreover, if the dragon were Asclepius, we are left wondering about the identity of his serpentine “minions.” The answer likely lies in the multivalent nature of Gregory's interpretation, as we will see.

By tracing the narrative of Asclepius's arrival in Rome through the works of both pagan and Christian authors, I will evince intertextual links between Gregory's account and earlier historical narratives. These include the works of Arnobius the Elder, Lactantius Firmianus, Orosius, and Augustine of Hippo, four late antique authors who each composed historical invectives or apologetic treatises *adversus paganos*, the products of an earlier age. To a greater or lesser degree, each addresses the charge (leveled by pagan critics) that the Christians were responsible for the increasingly severe and frequent disasters that befell the Roman empire in its waning years.²³

In reference both to Roman antiquity and to late antique apologetic debates, Gregory draws implicit connections between the pagan past and (for him) contemporary calamities in a way that reveals something of his historical outlook. Where it may be tempting to see discontinuity, Gregory evidently sees a continuous project of Christian historical

²¹ Gregory follows in the footsteps of Orosius in several important ways, as we will see. K. F. Werner, “Gott, Herrscher und Historiograph. Der Geschichtsschreiber als Interpret des Wirkens Gottes in der Welt und Ratgeber der Könige (4. bis 12. Jahrhundert),” *Deus qui mutat tempora: Menschen und Institutionem im Wandel des Mittelalters*, ed. E. D. Hehl, et al. (Sigmaringen 1987) 1–32, describes a uniquely Christian sub-genre of historiography originating with Orosius, which sought to describe the history of creation from its beginning, and to show the judgments of God at work in the world.

²² A. J. Stoclet, “*Consilia humana, ops divina, superstitio*: Seeking Succor and Solace in Times of Plague, with Particular Reference to Gaul in the Early Middle Ages,” *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. L. K. Little (New York 2007) 138–139.

²³ The sack of Rome in 410, in particular, led to pagan criticisms that gave rise to Augustine's monumental response, *City of God*. On the sack of Rome, pagan-Christian debates, and the development of Augustine's response, see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised ed. (Berkeley 2000) 285–304.

narrative.²⁴ Yet the continuing relevance to Gregory of these historical and apologetic narratives *adversus paganos* leads to a further suspicion: that Gregory, writing in the late sixth century, still felt that there were those who might turn to alternative sources of succor in the face of devastating calamities like that recently experienced at Rome in 589. In late antiquity, the cult of Asclepius had been perhaps the last to persist against the new faith; Asclepius was worshipped as both a healer and a savior, and his deeds were similar to those of Christ. As Edelstein notes, it is not surprising that “apologists and Church Fathers had a hard stand in their fight against Asclepius, in proving the superiority of Jesus, if moral reasoning alone was to be relied upon.”²⁵

Asclepius, in the guise of the divine serpent, also had a long history of being conflated with the figure of Christ, and thus may have presented one particularly ready alternative source of succor. This does not mean that organized religious worship of his cult continued into the sixth century in Gaul or Italy, nor does it suggest that rival systems of belief could have presented any serious threat to Christianity in Gregory’s era.²⁶ But neither is it tenable to accept fully the negative conclusions of Yitzhak Hen, among others, who argue that paganism—or perhaps more accurately, “folkloric culture”—was utterly peripheral to Merovingian society. After all, as late as the end of the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris could still refer to the Tiber Island as “the island of the serpent of Epidaurus.” Though the site was probably in use as some sort of prison by that time, Sidonius at least knew of the island’s earlier fame and significance.²⁷ Such cultural memories were every-

²⁴ On Gregory’s concept of historiography, see Heinzlmann (n. 1 above) 104–115. On his narrative sensibilities, see most recently S. Collins, “The Written World of Gregory of Tours,” in *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources*, ed. J. Glenn (Toronto 2011) 45–55.

²⁵ Edelstein (n. 20 above) 135–136.

²⁶ Nevertheless, A. Stoclet, “Entre Esculape et Marie: Paris, la peste et le pouvoir aux premiers temps du Moyen Age,” *Revue historique* 4.123 (1999) 691–746, speculates on the possible persistence of vestiges of the cult of Apollo Medicus—of whom Asclepius was a hypostasis—in 6th-c. Paris. In 8.33 of his *Histories* (see n. 1 above), Gregory relates the discovery of two bronze effigies – that of a rat and that of a serpent—in a clogged Parisian drain, which were promptly discarded. Though these objects could possibly have cultic associations with Apollo Medicus, it seems equally likely that they were merely protective talismans, following the homeopathic dictum that “like cures like.” For example, Apollonius of Tyana crafted a bronze scorpion to protect the city of Antioch from scorpions. For Gregory, a more pertinent example may have been that of the biblical brazen serpent (Num, 21.4–9), which cured snakebite. According to Gregory, it used to be said that Paris was free of rats, snakes, and fire, but that after the disposal of the talismans it was plagued by them; implying, I suggest, that they were understood as repellent talismans rather than cultic objects associated with Apollo Medicus.

²⁷ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 1.7.12, ed. C. Leutjohann, MGH, *AA* 8 (Vienna 1887) 12, alludes to Asclepius’s tenure on the Tiber Island, but does not directly mention

where; indeed, public signs of pagan cults could still be seen in the Gallic countryside as late as the mid-seventh century.²⁸

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

PAGAN SURVIVALS?

At first it may strike us as counterintuitive to search for “pagan” or folkloric understandings of natural disaster within Christian narratives.²⁹ Yet, as Bernadette Filotas and Jean-Claude Schmitt have observed, medieval texts that seem to represent a purely ecclesiastic worldview may in fact be “products of an encounter between different cultural logics,” including that of folkloric culture.³⁰

We must acknowledge that folkloric belief and myth generally had little place within the totalizing cosmogony of Frankish Christianity. Geoffrey Koziol has convincingly argued that, for the Carolingians at least, “there could be no multiple, equi-valent stories about the

the narrative of his journey from Epidaurus: “... capite multatus in insulam coniectus est serpentis Epidauri...” According to Sidonius, a prefect of Gaul named Arvandus (ca. 469), was sentenced to death and taken “to the island of the serpent of Epidaurus,” which presumably was home to a prison by that time—or at least had structures that could be used for holding prisoners. The reuse of pagan priestly dormitories for prison cells would not be surprising.

²⁸ E. Vacandard, “L’idolâtrie en Gaule au VIe et au VIIe siècle,” *Revue des questions historiques* 65 (1899) 424–454.

²⁹ On some of the difficulties and benefits of searching for “popular religion” or pagan survivals in ecclesiastical texts, see B. Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature* (Toronto 2005) 18–20; G. Koziol, “Truth and Its Consequences: Why Carolingianists Don’t Speak of Myth,” *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. S. O. Glosecki (Tempe 2007) 71–103. In addition, see Y. Hen, “Paganism and Superstition in the Time of Gregory of Tours: *Une question mal posée!*” *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. I. Wood and K. Mitchell (Leiden 2002) 229–240.

³⁰ J.-C. Schmitt, “Religion, Folklore, and Society in the Medieval West,” *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, ed. L. K. Little and B. Rosenwein (Malden 1998) 377.

world.”³¹ It is true that the preponderance of ecclesiastic texts from the period makes it difficult to access any “cultural logics” that may have existed outside of clerical culture.³² Nevertheless, the coexistence of multiple ways of understanding the world could not be entirely elided even by the Carolingians, whose stubborn disinclination to describe myth did not preclude their condemning it.³³ Nor can the Carolingians be seen as representative of all early medieval attitudes. As Koziol notes, contemporaneous Anglo-Saxon kings and clerics exhibited an entirely different, and entirely more lenient, attitude toward folkloric culture and “pagan survivals.”³⁴ Further, he argues that a novel and characteristic obsession with notions of *veritas* and *falsitas*, absolute truth and corollary falseness, lay at the center of Carolingian reforms, and he points, as an example, to Charlemagne’s oddly soul-searching interrogation of his subjects and himself, “Are we *truly* Christian?”³⁵ As Koziol notes, it is difficult to imagine such a question passing the lips of a Merovingian king.³⁶ If we can find reference to folkloric culture even within the rigidly totalizing corpus of Carolingian Christianity, are we not all the more likely to find such alternative cultural logics lurking at the margins of earlier, Merovingian texts? Historians of both periods must be attentive to internal variation, rather than placing blind faith in the unanimity of *christianitas* as espoused by clerical authors. By endeavoring to read Gregory’s narrative against its clerical grain, we can begin to unearth subterranean tensions; we may find, indeed,

³¹ Koziol (n. 29 above) 76.

³² Schmitt (n. 30 above) 379.

³³ Koziol (n. 29 above) 77: “Even as they condemned these and innumerable other ‘superstitions’ in long lists of prohibited practices, even as they preached against them, cut down sacred trees, engaged in tests of power with pagan gods, Carolingian writers did not explain the practices or recount the beliefs in any way that resembles a coherent story—that is, a myth.” For an example of this phenomenon, see Agobard of Lyons, *De grandine et tonitruis*, ed. L. Van Acker, CCCM 52 (Turnhout 1981) 1–15. Agobard reports with much derision on the superstitions of his flock, many of whom had been blaming a disastrous harvest on *tempestarii*, or weather wizards. Such “folk beliefs,” if not strictly pagan in the sense of organized religious worship, were nonetheless troubling (and exasperating) to the rancorous bishop, who wasted no time in correcting his flock—though in doing so he provides frustratingly little information for the modern historian. On what can be gleaned, see P. E. Dutton, “Thunder and Hail over the Carolingian Countryside,” in *idem*, *Charlemagne’s Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York 2004) 169–188.

³⁴ Koziol (n. 29 above) 82.

³⁵ “*Quod nobis dispiciendum est, utrum vere christiani sumus.*” *Capitula tractanda cum comitibus episcopis et abbatibus* 9, ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH, *CRF* 1 (Hannover 1883) 161–162. For a discussion of this passage, see Koziol (n. 29 above) 88.

³⁶ Koziol (n. 29 above) 88.

that the substrates of folkloric culture are most visible to us at those precise moments “in which they are [being] suppressed.”³⁷

We need not conflate folkloric culture with “pagan survivals,” narrowly conceived. Yitzhak Hen has convincingly demonstrated that paganism was not a serious rival to Christianity in Merovingian Gaul, nor did it represent an organized religious movement. The assumption that Merovingian society was “Christian by name, but pagan in practice” surely needs to be discarded; paganism may have existed on the margins of Merovingian society, but, as Hen argues, but it was far from characteristic.³⁸ Even so, numerous references to pagan survivals persist in sixth-century texts, perhaps most notably in the ardent sermons of Caesarius of Arles.³⁹ Gregory’s own *Histories* and *Vitae patrum* contain a great many references to paganism or folkloric beliefs. In an epistle to the Austrasian queen Brunhild, Gregory the Great urges the Merovingian regent to prevent her people from making sacrifices, worshipping trees, or displaying the heads of sacrificed animals.⁴⁰

Those scholars who, like Hen, have been skeptical of large-scale “pagan survivals” into the Merovingian period are certainly aware of these examples, and have not dismissed them completely. As Hen points out, however, these offhand allusions do not seem to refer “to a specific religion which operated in Gaul side by side with Christianity,” nor “to any priest or priestess of those supposed pagan religions.”⁴¹ Yet while Hen’s conclusions may be sound, it is important to distinguish between organized pagan worship, constituting a serious threat to Christianity (which can safely be dismissed), and a stubborn folkloric tradition that gave clerics occasional cause for annoyance, concern, or even alarm. Such traditions may have been, as Hen suggests, marginal to everyday Merovingian society. Yet natural disasters, as extreme events, could serve to bring such marginal beliefs to the fore in a way that particularly promoted ecclesiastic anxiety and necessitated an episcopal response.

³⁷ Schmitt (n. 30 above) 379.

³⁸ Y. Hen (n. 29 above) 160ff.

³⁹ On Caesarius of Arles, see W. E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (New York 1994). On his attitude toward paganism, see P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Malden 2003) 150–154; see also Filotas (n. 29 above) 1: “Caesarius set the tone for the Christian polemic against pagan survivals.”

⁴⁰ Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistolarum* 8.4, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL 140a (Turnhout 1982) 521. On Gregory’s attitude toward paganism and idolatry, see Markus (n. 3 above) 80–82. On his strategies of conversion, see G. Demacopoulos, “Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.2 (2008) 353–369.

⁴¹ Hen (n. 29 above) 231.

The source of this anxiety lay not only in the myriad (and thus erroneous) interpretations that could be called upon to explain extreme events, but also in the possibility that people would seek relief or aid indiscriminately, from *any* available source—including that of folkloric culture—in times of great upheaval. It would not be surprising if natural disasters provided particularly fertile ground in which the seeds of doubt and misgivings might grow, allowing folkloric culture to proffer alternative explanations and sources of comfort amid great fear and uncertainty. In the sixth century, natural disasters therefore may have provided especially uneasy moments for ecclesiastics, who sought to ensure that these events—so extreme by nature—did not afford an opportunity for “wrong belief” or misguided interpretations to take root and develop among the desperate populace. For Gregory, a flood would have threatened not only human lives, but also—should people turn in a moment of doubt and weakness to alternative explanatory models, or non-Christian sources of *auxilium*—human souls as well.⁴²

This fear would not have been a new one. That calamitous events could provide pagans with fodder for criticism, or cause Christians to question their faith, was a central motivating concern of the Iberian priest Orosius’s famous *Historiae adversus paganos*, completed before 418, which sought to reveal the active role of God’s divine judgment in historical events.⁴³ Orosius undertook this work at the behest of his mentor, Augustine of Hippo, whose own *De civitate Dei* explored similar territory (albeit from an infinitely more complex theoretical perspective). The *Historiae* evidently enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages; 245 manuscript copies survive, fourteen of which date earlier than the ninth century.⁴⁴ Orosius certainly exerted a direct influence on Gregory, who openly lists him among his sources.⁴⁵ This historiographical indebtedness is suggestive when we recall that Orosius was ostensibly writing for a mixed audience of pagan and Christian readers, with the intention of proving to both that disastrous events had not been

⁴² On ecclesiastic concerns about the potential for pagan resurgence during times of plague, see Stoclet (n. 26 above) esp. 730–731.

⁴³ S. Mazzarino, “The Judgement of God as an Historical Category,” in *idem, The End of the Ancient World*, trans. G. Holmes (New York 1966) 58. On Orosius, see Werner (n. 21 above) 7–18. See also J. N. Hillgarth, “The *Historiae* of Orosius in the Early Middle Ages,” *De Tertullian Aux Mozarabes*, ed. L. Holtz, J.-C. Fredouille, and M.-H. Jullien (Paris 1992) 161–170.

⁴⁴ Hillgarth (n. 43 above) 160.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* 1 (n. 1 above) 5. On Gregory’s sources, see B. Vollman, “Gregor IV (Gregor von Tours),” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, ed. T. Klauser et al. (Leipzig 1983) 12.895–930.

increasing in frequency or severity in the Christian era.⁴⁶ Aside from providing another model for understanding historical disasters as divine punishment for sin, Gregory's familiarity with Orosius's text may also have introduced him to the narrative of Asclepius's arrival and veneration in Rome.⁴⁷

Orosius describes the pagan god's journey from Epidaurus in order to criticize the belief, absurd in his mind, that Asclepius had saved Rome from disaster in the past and might do so again in the future. This scornful recollection was prompted, of course, by pagan critics (those "alieni a civitate Dei") who suggested that the empire's conversion to Christianity—and a concomitant loss of the protection of pagan deities like Asclepius—had clearly led to increasing turmoil.⁴⁸ In response, Orosius sought to cast history as a register of God's judgments. Fortunate events, he would argue, resulted from divine favor, while disasters were a consequence of God's displeasure in the face of human sins. Orosius sought to formulate an exclusively Christian interpretation of the disasters that plagued late imperial Rome, while simultaneously denigrating pagan deities and the divine protection they ostensibly provided.

Writing more than a century later, Gregory echoes this interpretive model at several points, as in his *De virtutibus S. Iuliani*, which explicitly states that a pestilence "fell upon" (*ingruentibus*, as though from heaven?) the people because of their increasing sins.⁴⁹ As Giselle de Nie has noted, such events for Gregory do not *happen* so much as they *appear* (*apparere*), often being described as prodigies (*prodigia*) or signs of God's ongoing involvement in the affairs of the world. They

⁴⁶ T. E. Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," in idem, *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Rice (Ithaca, NY 1959) 327–328.

⁴⁷ That Gregory acknowledges his use of Orosius's text in the prologue to the *Histories* makes his familiarity with the Asclepius narrative nearly certain. As I argue below, Gregory may also have been familiar with other Christian sources on Asclepius's journey to Rome.

⁴⁸ Orosius, *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, ed. K. Zangenmeister, CSEL 5 (Vienna 1882). In the *Praefatio*, Orosius makes his purpose clear: "You (sc., Augustine) had instructed me to write against the arrogant wickedness of those who are strangers from the city of God ... These men, as they do not look to the future and have either forgotten or are ignorant of the past, besmirch the present as a time particularly full of evils, far beyond those which are always with us, and do so for this reason alone: because Christ is believed in and God worshipped ... while their idols are worshipped the less." All translations from A. T. Fear, *Orosius: Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (Liverpool 2010).

⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Liber de passione et virtutibus sancti Iuliani*, 46a, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, *SRM* 1(2) (Hannover 1885) 132.

reveal the fact of divine anger and signal possible further retribution.⁵⁰ In *Histories* 8.17, beholding what could only have been the northern lights in the skies above Carignan, Gregory remarks, “This was a great sign, and filled us with fear. For we expected that some plague would be sent upon us from heaven.” Later, in October 590, Gregory again describes what seems to be the aurora borealis, this time in connection with other portents: an earthquake, an eclipse, and flooding, all of which precede outbreaks of bubonic plague in Viviers and Avignon.⁵¹ This interpretive mode is not necessarily incompatible with another, more eschatological view also espoused by Gregory, particularly in later chapters of Book 10—namely, that disasters like flooding and pestilence may signal the beginning of the end of days. Indeed, the remarkable sights that accompany the disastrous events of 589 could likewise be understood as apocalyptic omens.⁵² Gregory does not explicitly describe them as such, but there is no reason that—in addition to representing divine punishment for sin—these signs might not also have relevance to Gregory’s eschatological sensibilities.

Gregory is not content merely to identify and describe signs and prodigies, however. He also endeavors to emphasize the importance of episcopal action and response—the mobilization of practices or rituals by bishops to ameliorate suffering in the wake of disaster.⁵³ A staunchly positivist historian might ask whether these practices or rituals were actually carried out in the way they are described. While such a historian would likely have little difficulty imagining penitential processions through Rome in the midst of an epidemic, he or she might have problems accepting the *prodigia* accompanying this account, as a result allowing the inclusion of miracles and wonders to cast doubt on the entire narrative.⁵⁴ Additionally, the difficulty of even locating practice and ritual within textual sources (often with their own polemical

⁵⁰ G. de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam 1987) 28.

⁵¹ Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* 10.23 (n. 1 above) 514–515.

⁵² Gregory’s eschatology becomes increasingly pronounced in latter portion of his *Histories*. In 10.25, he reflects with foreboding on the appearance of pestilence in Gaul: “Initia sunt enim haec dolorum iuxta illud quod Dominus ait in evangelio.” On this eschatological theme, see Heinzlmann (n. 1 above) 77–86.

⁵³ On episcopal intervention in times of famine, for example, see C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley 2005) 232–234. See also P. Horden, “Disease, Dragons and Saints: The Management of Epidemics in the Dark Ages,” *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. T. Ranger and P. Slack (Cambridge 1995) 45–76.

⁵⁴ On this point, see R. M. Stein, “Literary Criticism and the Evidence for History,” *Writing Medieval History*, ed. N. F. Partner (London 2005) 67–87.

purposes) has been a subject of debate among medievalists.⁵⁵ For my purposes, however, both the fantastical and polemical character of the narrative in question can prove a help rather than a hindrance; what “really happened” can be subordinated to Gregory’s rhetorical aims as narrator. Whether the events, practices, and rituals that Gregory describes actually happened as we are told is less germane than their having been described as such.

By analyzing the ways in which Gregory felt bishops *could* and *should* respond to extreme events, we move closer to understanding how he was able to make sense of such events, and use them rhetorically. As Roger Ray has convincingly argued, early medieval historians, borrowing a page from their ancient forebears, turned not infrequently to rhetorical *inventio*. The intent of engaging in such literary elaboration, exaggeration, and outright fabrication, Ray argues, was not to deceive, but rather to provide the most persuasive means by which a reader might be convinced to interpret the events described in what the author felt was the correct way.⁵⁶ Seen in this light, Gregory’s narrative becomes less a description of events than an interpretation with didactic overtones.⁵⁷ But how is it possible for modern readers to adopt the interpretive lens through which a sixth-century Gallic bishop would have sought to understand a “natural disaster”? The dragon and serpents of Gregory’s narrative stand out in particular, and although I have argued that they represent the Greek god of healing, Asclepius, it may be useful to ask what *else* dragons could have signified in the sixth-century imaginary.

PESTIFEROUS DRAGONS?

Heinzelmann remarks in passing that Gregory’s dragon and serpents may have been intended as apocalyptic omens.⁵⁸ If so, his reference would not have been without scriptural precedent. The Christian Bible, of course, abounds with serpentine imagery (from its first book to its last), and seems a fitting place to begin any search for the meaning behind Gregory’s symbolism. According to Christine Rauer, “the dragon

⁵⁵ For an overview of this debate, see G. Koziol, “The Dangers of Polemic: Is Ritual Still an Interesting Topic of Historical Study,” *Early Medieval Europe* 11.4 (2002) 367–388; and P. Buc, “The Monster and the Critics: A Ritual Reply,” *Early Medieval Europe* 15.4 (2007) 441–452.

⁵⁶ R. Ray, “The Triumph of Greco-Roman Rhetorical Assumptions in Pre-Carolingian Historiography,” *The Inheritance of Historiography: 350–900*, ed. C. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (Exeter 1986) 67–84. See also Heinzelmann (n. 1 above) 87: “For Gregory, the simple, positivist description of an historical event was clearly subordinated to the intended message.”

⁵⁷ Cf. the insightful remarks of Collins (n. 24 above) 45–55.

⁵⁸ Heinzelmann (n. 1 above) 80.

serves as one of the commonest Christian symbols of evil, functioning as a formidable and monstrous adversary of God, man, and beast alike.”⁵⁹ There is certainly much truth to this. Like the infamous red dragon of Apocalypse, the serpent of Genesis could evoke the devil—but unlike the former, it could also symbolize knowledge and sexual desire. Indeed, the serpentine imagery of the Bible is sometimes difficult to categorize, often carrying what appear to be positive connotations. Nehushtan, the brazen serpent of Numbers 21, for example, was said to bring relief to the suffering of Israelites who had been bitten by snakes. In 2 Kings 18.4, King Hezekiah destroys the serpentine effigy raised by Moses, since “unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it,” a reference to idolatrous worship.

A New Testament reference to Moses’s serpent occurs in John 3.14–15, wherein the evangelist seems to compare Christ with the snake: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up, in order that all who believe in him may have eternal life.” A scantily attested Christian sect of the third century interpreted these words literally, identifying Christ himself with Moses’s serpent. According to the anonymous Pseudo-Tertullian, these “Ophians” in fact “preferred the serpent to Christ,” while Epiphanius of Salamis would later assert that they merely believed the two to be identical.⁶⁰ In Luke 10.19, Christ calls on his followers to tread upon serpentine creatures, and in Mark 16.18, to handle them without fear.

The handling of serpents without fear would take on literary significance in the early medieval period against the backdrop of a newly flourishing hagiographic topos—that of the saintly dragon-fight, another possible source for Gregory’s interpretive imagery. More than fifty medieval saints seem to be associated—through either iconography or hagiography—with this topos.⁶¹ An example may be found in the sixth-century *Vita Marcelli*, usually attributed to Gregory’s friend and contemporary Venantius Fortunatus, in which the eponymous saint calmly subdues and then banishes a pestiferous dragon that has recently been terrifying the populace of a small Parisian suburb.⁶² The hagio-

⁵⁹ C. Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon: Parallels and Analogues* (Cambridge 2000) 52.

⁶⁰ For a brief discussion of what little is known of the Ophians and related sects—including the Naassenes and Peratae—see Charlesworth (n. 20 above) 469–472.

⁶¹ Rauer (n. 59 above) 52.

⁶² Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita Marcelli*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, *SRM* 4(2) (Hannover 1885) 49–54. This episode has been the object of a well-known study by Jacques Le Goff, “Ecclesiastical Culture and Folklore in the Middle Ages: Saint Marcellus of Paris and the Dragon,” in idem, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago 1980) 159–188. More recently, see P. Horden (n. 53 above) 45–76. Horden asserts that the *Vita Marcelli* might provide a glimpse of early medieval public

graphic dragon-fight, according to Rauer, has certain recurring themes, several of which are relevant to our concerns: the majority of such episodes are set “during periods of conversion,” in a milieu that includes both Christian and pagan witnesses; the arrival of the saint is usually preceded by a great catastrophe or destruction precipitated by the dragon; typically, this destruction comes in the form of disease and mass death (metaphorically described as a result of the dragon’s pestiferous breath). Further, the saint’s intervention is typically predicated on improving the “deficient spiritual status” of the terrified populace, who may display doubt or “deficient Christian faith”—a faith that is renewed following the saint’s taming or banishment of the dragon. Several other aspects of this topos bear a striking similarity with elements of Gregory’s account: the dragon’s home is often located on, or in, a body of water, such as the sea, or—in the case of the Tiber—a river.⁶³

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

TRACING A NARRATIVE

Like Asclepius’s journey from Epidaurus to Rome in pagan antiquity, the narrative of the journey has itself followed a sometimes circuitous route. Three pagan authors provide important early accounts. Our first

health practices, particularly the bishop’s role in managing epidemics (represented in this case by a pestiferous dragon).

⁶³ Rauer (n. 59 above) 59–72.

source for the god's *adventus* in Italy is the first-century Roman historian Livy, who leaves a brief report in the extant portions of his *Ab urbe condita*.⁶⁴ From these passages, we learn that around 293 BCE a pestilence raged in Rome. Recourse was made to the Sybilline books, wherein it was discovered that in order to bring relief from the suffering, the divine Asclepius should be summoned (*arcessendum*) from his earthly seat at Epidaurus.

As the Greek god of healing, Asclepius had long been worshipped in classical antiquity, and his cult was likely already present in Italy by the third century BCE (at which time we are told that he was summoned). Evidently, it was not the cult of Asclepius that was "summoned" to Rome, but the god himself. This task could not be accomplished immediately, Livy reports, since the consuls were at that time preoccupied with war; rather, a day of supplication was held until more could be done at some later date. Within a year, a group of legates finally sailed for Epidaurus, where a serpent carrying the *numen* (sc., divinity) of the god conveyed itself aboard the Roman vessel, returning thence to Italy. Upon its arrival, Livy reports, the serpent went ashore on the Tiber Island (one of two islands on the river), where a temple to the god was duly consecrated.⁶⁵

The journey of Asclepius to Rome is next recounted by the first-century poet Ovid, whose more extravagant description appears in his *Metamorphoses*.⁶⁶ The basic details of the god's journey having been described above, it is only necessary here to note the points on which Ovid's account differs substantially from Livy's. According to Ovid, the Romans, made desperate by pestilence, consulted the oracle at Delphi rather than the Sybilline books; nevertheless, the result was the same. Sailing to Epidaurus, the Romans faced opposition from the elders of the *polis*, who were reluctant to part with their god. (It seems that Asclepius could not be in two places at once.) In a dream vision, however, Asclepius assured the legates that he would willingly travel to Rome with them in the form of a serpent. Departing the next morning with their divine cargo, the Romans began their journey home. They stopped briefly at Antium, where, perhaps frightened by stormy seas (*asper enim iam pontus erat*), Asclepius abandoned ship to take refuge at a temple of Apollo. After several days of anxious waiting, the serpent finally returned to the ship once the storm had ended and the seas

⁶⁴ Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 10.47, 7, ed. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 191 (Cambridge, MA 1926) 544.

⁶⁵ Livy, *Periocha* 11, ed. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 191 (Cambridge, MA 1926) 548.

⁶⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15, 622–744, ed. R. Merkel and R. Ehwald, Teubner (Leipzig 1928) 310–314.

were calm, eventually continuing to Rome and bringing health (*salutifer*) to the city. Ovid also makes reference to a temple of Asclepius on the Tiber Island in his *Fasti*.⁶⁷

The accounts of two additional pagan authors should also be noted. Writing in the first century CE, Valerius Maximus may have based his account on Livy, though this is difficult to determine with any certainty, since most of the latter's work has been lost.⁶⁸ In any case, while Valerius seems to agree for the most part with what is left of Livy's account, he differs in one important respect from Ovid. According to Ovid, Asclepius's brief stopover and refuge at Antium was apparently precipitated by rough, stormy seas, whereas Valerius mentions no storm. A later anonymous author, the pseudo-Aurelius Victor, goes so far as to specify that the seas at Antium were in fact "gentle" (*mollitiam maris*).⁶⁹ Perhaps this early fourth-century account was concerned to dispel any notion, precipitated by Ovid's version of events, that Asclepius was a god who could be frightened by rough waves. This distinction seems to have important implications for the later Christian reception of the narrative, as we shall see.

Only five Christian authors explicitly discuss Asclepius's journey to Rome: Plutarch, Arnobius the Elder, Lactantius Firmianus, Orosius, and Augustine.⁷⁰ Each of them belongs to the period of late antiquity; one of the earliest, Lactantius, wrote the *Divinae institutiones* between 303 and 311, with possible revisions in 313⁷¹ while the latest, Augustine of Hippo, completed *De civitate Dei* between 413 and 426.⁷² Arnobius the Elder, of whom Jerome tells us Lactantius was a pupil, completed his only extant work, *Adversus nationes*, some time shortly before 311.⁷³ Probably a resident of Sicca in Africa, Arnobius was a recent convert to Christianity, and brought his classical rhetorical training to bear against his former coreligionists late in life. Arnobius's lengthy

⁶⁷ Ovid, *Fasti* 1, 290–294, ed. J. G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library 253 (Cambridge, MA 1951) 23.

⁶⁸ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 1.8.2, ed. J. Briscoe, Teubner (Leipzig 1998) 67–69.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, *De viris illustribus urbis Romae* 22, 3, *Sextus Aurelius Victor*, ed. F. Pichlmayr, Teubner (Leipzig 1961) 39.

⁷⁰ As Plutarch contributes nothing new, I have not included his account here. See also the later allusions to Asclepius by Sidonius Apollinaris (n. 27 above).

⁷¹ On Lactantius Firmianus, see A. Wlosok, "L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius," *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike*, ed. R. Herzog and P. L. Schmidt (Munich 1987) 5:375–404. On the difficulty of dating Lactantius's work, see E. DePalma Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the Divine Institutes," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.1 (1994) 33–52.

⁷² Brown (n. 23 above) 301.

⁷³ G. E. McCracken, "Introduction," in idem, *Arnobius of Sicca: The Case Against the Pagans* (London 1978) 12.

invective on the Asclepian journey from Epidaurus to Rome begins by casting doubt on the very notion that the enormous serpent (*magni coluber*) could really be a god, and dwells at length on its vulgar form:

What shall we say then? That Asclepius, whom you extol as an excellent, venerable god, the giver of health, the averter, preventer, destroyer of sickness, is contained within the form and outline of a serpent crawling along the earth as worms are wont to do? [That] he rubs the ground with his chin and breast, dragging himself in sinuous coils; and, so that he may be able to go forward, he draws on the last part of his body by the efforts of the first?⁷⁴

Interestingly, despite Arnobius's alleged connection to Lactantius, he describes Asclepius rather differently than will his pupil—opting for decidedly earthly, animalistic terms. Arnobius's Asclepius is not a *draco*, devil, or demon, as we will later see him described in Lactantius's treatise, but a mere snake, a *serpens*, an *asper*, a *coluber*. Arnobius rejects the claim that the snake's divinity can be proven by the fact that, after alighting on the Tiber Island, it disappeared from sight and could not be found.⁷⁵ His straightforward retort is that the snake may simply have found a hiding place, as snakes are wont to do. Perhaps the most interesting argument advanced by Arnobius is that Asclepius has failed to protect Rome from epidemics in subsequent ages. It makes little sense, he asserts, that Rome has “over and over again had seasons made mournful by these diseases,” and asks, “Where, then, was Asclepius? Why, after temples were built [to him], did he allow a state deserving his favor” to suffer further catastrophes?⁷⁶ Arnobius anticipates the pagan reply that Rome has lost the gods' favor because of the spread of Christianity. Even if Asclepius is displeased with the Christians, argues Arnobius, so in Rome as “in all cities,” the righteous have always been mixed with the evil, and thus “it is rather stupid to say that mortals of a later day have not obtained the aid of the deities on account of their wickedness.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Arnobius the Elder, *Adversus nationes* 7, 44–45, ed. A. Reifferscheid, CSEL 4 (Vienna 1875) 278–279.

⁷⁵ Exactly whose claim is uncertain. It may be that Arnobius is refuting an aspect of Livy's account that has been lost to us. It is also possible that Arnobius is merely setting up a fictive straw man.

⁷⁶ Arnobius the Elder 7, 47 (n. 74 above) 282, argues that Asclepius, had his power been authentic, would have remedied not only one particular epidemic but also prevented future ones: “Ubi ergo Aesculapius fuit, ubi ille promissus oraculis venerabilibus? Cur templa post condita sibi exaedificata delubra diutius aditus habere perpessus est bene meritae civitatis luem, cum in id esset aditus, ut et malis mederetur instantibus nec sineret in futurum tale aliquid quod metueretur inreperere?”

⁷⁷ Arnobius the Elder 7, 48 (n. 74 above) 282: “Cum vero res ita sit, ut in magnis populis, nationibus, quin immo et in civitatibus cunctis mixtum sit humanum genus na-

Lactantius, too, critiques the notion of Asclepius's divinity, questioning the classical traditions on which his cult was based. According to Lactantius, Asclepius accomplished nothing worthy of a god. In his original, mortal, form, he was said to have been killed by lightning—proof of mortality for Lactantius, who could not imagine that a god could be killed in such a fashion.⁷⁸ Lactantius's account of Asclepius's arrival in Rome is intriguing and may be important to understanding Gregory's later text. In a passage replete with biblical imagery, Lactantius explains that the lesser pagan gods worshipped by the Romans are in fact fallen angels and servants of the devil.⁷⁹ The chief or leader of these was the serpent delivered from Epidaurus to Rome to free the city from pestilence. This "archdemon" (devil?) was "carried thither" in his own form, without any disguise.⁸⁰ Lactantius refers to Asclepius in the same passage as a *draconem ... mirae magnitudinis* (dragon or serpent of immense size), evoking biblical imagery. *Draco* here can simply mean snake, but it can also suggest the *draco* of Apocalypse 12.7, a dragon of immense size, who, together with "his angels" (*et angeli eius*), makes war against the archangel Michael. Lactantius seems to equate these fallen angels and the *draco* who leads them with the "lower," or mortal, pagan gods of the Greek and Roman tradition, the leader of whom he identifies as Asclepius. Indeed, Lactantius asserts that, taking the very form of a *draco*, Asclepius does not even bother to disguise his demonic shape. As we will see, Lactantius's imagery and word choice in this passage provide possible clues to understanding Gregory of Tours's puzzling interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome in 589.

Before returning to Gregory, however, we must first survey the remaining Christian accounts of Asclepius's Roman *adventus*. The final two Christian authors to directly address our narrative belong to a somewhat later era. Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine and Orosius found themselves in the midst of particularly calamitous times, and their work addresses the specific concerns of the period. The "eternal city" of Rome, long the symbol of empire and power, was sacked in

turis voluntatibus moribus tamque potuerint in prioribus saeculis quam in novellis aetatibus boni simul malique existere, stultum satis est dicere, propter malitias posteros auxilia numinum non meruisse mortales."

⁷⁸ Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 1.19, 4–5, ed. S. Brandt, CSEL 19 (Leipzig 1890) 71: "Immo vero quia factum est, apparet hominem fuisse, non deum." (Indeed, since it [sc., Asclepius's murder] was done, it appears that he was a man, not a god.)

⁷⁹ The idea that pagan gods were in fact demons had been attested earlier. For example, Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.2, PG 11.1184, specifies that Apollo and Asclepius "are [some sort of] demons, by far inferior to the wise among men."

⁸⁰ Lactantius 2.16, 12–13 (n. 78 above) 169: "Nam illuc daemoniarches ipse in figura sua sine ulla dissimulatione perlatus est."

410 by a Visigothic army led by Alaric I. Though the city's real position within the western empire had declined significantly by the fifth century, this symbolically charged catastrophe sent shock waves through the Mediterranean. In distant Jerusalem, Jerome wrote that a *rumor terribilis* had reached him from the west: Rome, the city that had taken the whole world, was itself taken.⁸¹ The Christians were again held to blame by critics, who argued that pagan deities no longer protected the eternal city as they once had, a result of the spread of the new religion. Ensclosed in his episcopal seat in Africa, and observing events from afar, Augustine set to work refuting these accusations. The result was his monumental and overwhelmingly influential work *De civitate Dei*, in which he argued that the sack of the earthly city of Rome was merely another calamity in a long chain of disasters that were only to be expected in the fickle, material world. To those who were citizens of another city—the city of God—the fall of any earthly *civitas* could only be of slight consequence.⁸²

Augustine's work was philosophically challenging.⁸³ In the early Middle Ages, it was held in very high regard, though it was not necessarily well understood.⁸⁴ Augustine began with a simple, direct argument for those who would not be swayed by the philosophical reasoning of his greater theological treatise: disasters had been a characteristic of temporal history since ancient times. They were not, in fact, becoming more frequent or more severe in the Christian era. A systematic survey of the history of the world from the beginnings of creation to the present day, he felt certain, would surely prove this. The mundane task of actually composing such a history of calamities was subsequently assigned to his student, the Spanish priest Orosius, who dutifully undertook this simpler and more direct argument on Augustine's behalf in the seven books of his *Historiae adversus paganos*.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Jerome, *Epistulae* 127.12, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 56 (Vienna 1918) 154.

⁸² On the composition of Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, see Brown (n. 23 above) 297–311.

⁸³ The literature on his theology, philosophy, and later influence is vast and diverse. For example, see H. Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago 1996); *Augustine of Hippo; History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, M. Vessey, and K. Pollmann, (Bowling Green 1999); W. H. C. Frend, "Augustine and Orosius on the End of the Ancient World," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989) 1–38.

⁸⁴ On the aberrant reception of Augustine's thought, see the classic statement by H.-X. Arquillière, *L'augustinisme politique: Essai sur la formation des théories politiques du Moyen-Âge* (Paris 1955). For the manuscript transmission of Augustine's works, see M. M. Gorman, *The Manuscript Transmissions of the Works of St. Augustine* (Florence 2001).

⁸⁵ Augustine could not have entirely approved of the final work, since Orosius's *Historiae* implies that God's judgments can be discerned through historical events. For

With both Augustine and Orosius, the Asclepian narrative we have been following surfaces yet again. Augustine's tone is sarcastic; when Rome suffered a grave epidemic, he explains, Asclepius was invited to Italy as a "divine physician" (*medicum deum*), since "the frequent adulteries with which ... Jupiter (who had already been residing so long in the Capitol), had amused himself...had perhaps not left him any leisure to study medicine." Augustine's argument echoes that of Arnobius when he points out that Asclepius did little to prevent *later* pestilences; he suggests that the god excused himself from providing treatment during a certain epidemic among pregnant women because he proclaimed himself a chief physician (*archiatrum*) rather than a midwife (*obstetricem*).⁸⁶ Orosius's tone is similarly acerbic. Again recounting the story of Asclepius's journey to Rome, Orosius proclaims the futility of the endeavor. "Quasi vero pestilentia aut ante sedata non sit aut post orta non fuerit," he scoffs: "As if plague had not abated in the past, or would not break out again in the future," regardless of Asclepius's residence on the Tiber.⁸⁷ Since Orosius sought to interpret historical events as a series of divine judgments, it is not surprising that in his account the inauspicious arrival of the "vile" snake of Asclepius in Rome was followed in short order by the defeat of the Roman consul Gurgus by the Samnites.

Since we know from Gregory of Tours himself that Orosius's *Hist. adv. paganos* served as source material for his own *Histories*, it is fairly certain that he was familiar with the above passage, as well as similar passages from Augustine's *De civitate Dei*.⁸⁸ Therefore, although Gregory's *Praefatio* lists only Christian historians among the sources for his work, at a minimum he was exposed to the narrative of Asclepius's arrival in Rome by way of Christian apologists. It is possible (though difficult to prove) that he was also familiar with the earlier account of Arnobius. Even more likely, in my opinion, is that Gregory had read, in addition to Orosius and Augustine, Lactantius's *Divinae institutiones*, and that his interpretation of the Tiber flood and subsequent pestilence was informed by this reading. In his *De cursu stellarum*, Gregory

Augustine, events both fortunate and ill befall the good as well as the evil, for reasons known to God but hidden to us. On this philosophical distinction, see Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine" (n. 46 above) 344–345.

⁸⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 3.17, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, Teubner (Leipzig 1863) 110. On Augustine's general opinion of the pagan gods, see M. D. Madden, *The Pagan Divinities and Their Worship as Depicted in the Works of Saint Augustine Exclusive of The City of God* (Washington, DC 1930). See also Brown (n. 23 above) 303, 459–460.

⁸⁷ Orosius, *Historiae adversus paganos* 3.22.5 (n. 48 above) 188.

⁸⁸ On Gregory of Tours and Augustine, see Heinzelmänn (n. 1 above) 151.

attributes the poem *De ave phoenice* to Lactantius, though his knowledge of the author's other works is uncertain.⁸⁹ Like Lactantius, Gregory describes the immense serpent carried to sea by the Tiber's floodwaters as a *draco*; Gregory and Lactantius are in fact the only Christian authors to do so.

We must recall, however, that Gregory's *magnus draco* was not the only strange prodigy to accompany the flood. A "multitude of serpents" (*multitudo serpentium*) were also among the detritus washed downstream, perishing in the rough waves and eventually washing up on shore. This recalls a criticism advanced by Arnobius, who (perhaps drawing upon Ovid) noted that, on his journey from Epidaurus, the divine serpent "avoid[ed] the waves of the sea" (*undas pelagi vitat*), as though a god could drown in rough weather.⁹⁰ Recall, too, that the anonymous pagan account in *De viris illustribus*, dated to the fourth century, stresses that Asclepius did *not* take refuge at Antium because of a storm, as Ovid had reported, but rather made his way there through expressly *gentle* waves, a specific point that may have been intended to counter Christian criticisms like that proffered by Arnobius⁹¹ Gregory's assertion that the immense dragon and his retinue of serpents drowned in the rough waves of the Tiber could therefore be interpreted as both a statement of God's divine wrath, which had sent the flood to begin with, and an intertextual affirmation of Asclepius's non-divinity.

If Gregory was indeed familiar with Lactantius's *Divinae institutiones*, the immense dragon of his account may be multivalent, referring at once to both pagan history and biblical imagery. By recalling once more that the *magnus draco* was accompanied by a multitude of lesser serpents, we can begin to draw a parallel. This reptilian host, when interpreted through a Lactantian lens, begins to take shape as the host of demons (or fallen angels) of which the serpent Asclepius—really the undisguised *daemniarches*—was chief. Moreover, Apocalypse 12.7, in which the archangel Michael does battle with a *draco* and his host of rebellious angels provides a striking parallel with Lactantius's assessment of the serpentine Asclepius. That this biblical battle takes place in heaven, and not on earth, did not necessarily negate its typological appeal for Gregory.⁹²

⁸⁹ See A. P. Orbán, "Nicht jeder *locus amoenus* ist ein Paradies: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung nach Lactantius, *De ave Phoenice* und Gregorius von Tours, *De cursu stellarum*," *Euphorion: Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* 85 (1991) 387–396.

⁹⁰ Arnobius the Elder, *Adversus nationes* 7, 45 (n. 74 above) 279.

⁹¹ Anonymous, *De viris illustribus urbis Romae* 22, 3 (n. 69 above) 30.

⁹² Defeated by Michael, the dragon and his (now fallen) angels plummet to Earth in Apocalypse 12.9, again calling to mind Lactantius's "archdemon" Asclepius, and his

Gregory had good reason to search for the meaning behind the calamitous flooding and pestilence at Rome. Throughout his works, he suggests that the disasters he frequently records usually have causes. They are often precipitated by some sin having been committed, either by the people in general, or by an individual, particularly a reigning king.⁹³ These disasters can also serve as signs that further divine retribution will follow. The appearance of strange natural phenomena or prodigies frequently precedes the death of a wicked ruler, or foretells a coming disaster in the locality in which it appeared: “Not always, but most often,” Gregory reports, “it (sc., a comet) appears upon the death of a king or at the time of a great regional disaster/destruction.”⁹⁴ In any case, what is clear is that, for Gregory, disasters and unusual prodigies are shot through with meaning, and may even have didactic value.⁹⁵ On the rare occasion that their meaning and cause cannot be readily determined, Gregory openly expresses his puzzlement. In his *Vitae patrum*, for example, he recounts an earthquake that shook Clermont during the episcopate of St. Gallus. Gregory held Gallus in high regard, and thus remarks of the earthquake, “... sed cur hoc acciderit, ignoramus” (but *why this happened* we do not know).⁹⁶

Given Gregory’s tendency to search for a meaning behind the *calamitates* he records, it is unsurprising that he should seek to develop an interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome in 589–590, particularly in light of their impact upon the *ecclesia*. Further close reading of his account is illustrative; Gregory reports that the floodwaters inundated and destroyed not only ancient pagan temples (*aedes antiquae*), but also papal storehouses or granaries (*horrea ... ecclesia*).⁹⁷ Which ancient temples were destroyed? Gregory does not say, and although it would be tempting to presume that the temple of Asclepius, located in the middle of the Tiber, may have been one likely candidate, he does not provide enough information to make this identification with any certainty. What is most interesting about this passage, however, is not

fallen companions. On typology in Gregory of Tours, see F. Thürlemann, *Der historische Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours: Topoi und Wirklichkeit* (Bern 1974) 88.

⁹³ See de Nie (n. 50 above) 35–38.

⁹⁴ Gregory of Tours, *De cursu stellarum ratio* 34, ed. B. Krusch, MGH, *SRM* 1(2) (Hannover 1885) 419: “... non omni tempore, sed maxime aut in obitu regis aut in ex-cidio apparet regionis.” See de Nie (n. 50 above) 35.

⁹⁵ On the meanings associated with such disasters and prodigies in the early Middle Ages, see P. E. Dutton, “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. J. R. Davis and M. McCormick (Aldershot 2008) 167–180.

⁹⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Liber vitae patrum* 6, 6, ed. B. Krusch, MGH *SRM* 1(2) (Hannover 1875) 234.

⁹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* 10.1 (n. 1 above) 477.

that Gregory specifies that pagan temples were destroyed, but that he also mentions the destruction of church property. This could be dismissed as a coincidence, or the basic reporting of facts, if Gregory did not also note that the flooding was immediately followed by a pestilence, the first victim of which was the Roman pontiff, Pelagius II. Making reference to Ezekiel 9.6, Gregory declares that Pelagius's death was the fulfillment of God's pronouncement: "*a sanctario meo incipite*" (begin at my sanctuary), drawing on a biblical passage in which God has ordered a slaughter in Jerusalem as punishment for the worship of idols.⁹⁸ He bids that the slaughter begin at the Temple, where the worship of idols is most egregious.

Why refer to the worship of idols in connection with Pelagius's death? We cannot dismiss the idea that folkloric culture may have sought alternative sources of divine aid when calamitous events made the Church appear less powerful. Gregory of Tours's interpretation of the disastrous events at Rome in 589–590 would seem to reinforce the notion that such "idolatrous" practices were indeed a concern for Gallic, as well as Roman, ecclesiastics, and that such concerns loomed large enough to influence his interpretation of what we would call a natural disaster. His interpretation accomplished a dual purpose: it explains Pelagius's death with reference to Ezekiel 9.6, thereby suggesting that the pope, or perhaps the *ecclesia* in general, had not been sufficiently diligent in suppressing folkloric culture or the worship of idols—a concern that, as we have noted, may have risen in conjunction with the level of floodwaters and pestilence. Yet Gregory's narrative simultaneously asserts the impotence of such alternative sources of aid. Asclepius, a god of medicine, does not merely flee the city before the arrival of a pestilence; rather, he is literally flushed out of it in a divine torrent, powerless to save himself or his retinue from the rough, "cleansing" waves. Moreover, these violent waves struck down not only a *draco*, but also a pope. They destroyed ancient temples, but also papal storehouses; God's anger was evidently widespread.

For Gregory, the destruction of church property and the death of Pelagius implicitly indicate divine wrath directed toward the church for permitting, or not adequately suppressing, the worship of idols, an interpretation evidently drawn from biblical imagery (Ezek. 9.6). Gregory is further able to identify these idols or folkloric beliefs through his knowledge of the Asclepian narrative we have been following, and its history centered on the Tiber. The danger of such idols is underscored by Gregory through a typological scheme drawn from Lactantius, who

⁹⁸ Cf. Ezek. 8.14.

saw a connection between pagan narratives about Asclepius and the biblical arch-demon and his host of fallen angels.

Following this rather remarkable interpretation of the recent disaster, Gregory turns to a description of the practices and rituals through which he believes the calamitous pestilence can *truly* be lifted. After Pelagius's death, the elevation of Gregory the Great is described in some detail.⁹⁹ According to Gregory of Tours, the new Roman pontiff responded to the disastrous events of 589–590 by urging constant prayer. Through the streets of the traumatized city, choirs called out in supplication. In the midst of one collective supplication, eighty people fell dead, according to Gregory, yet the pontiff's call to prayer and repentance did not cease. Gregory the Great's episcopal response, as depicted by our Gallic narrator, paints the plague and disastrous flooding that beset Rome in 589–590 as the result of divine will. It was apparently a punishment that could be ameliorated or even reversed through penance or other expedient practices—with guidance. For the church, which could not be without a head, now had a worthy leader.¹⁰⁰ The eschatologically inflected sermon delivered by the new pontiff before the assembled Roman populace is recounted by our narrator in full, an evident mark of approval.¹⁰¹ He also carefully enumerates the exceptional qualities of Pelagius's successor: the deacon Gregory came from a leading senatorial family but lived humbly, donating much of his land and wealth to monasteries or the poor, and so on.

Here, our narrator's ultimate purpose is revealed. Blame having been condignly distributed, Gregory of Tours can turn his attention to the task of illuminating and glorifying the efficacy and power of the cleansed *ecclesia* to lead the people in the right direction—an important task during a time of such evident corporeal and spiritual peril. What for a modern reader might have seemed a “natural disaster” has been, for Gregory, a divine message. This is his most pressing concern; complex allusions to pagan history and the work of Christian apologists are offered as interpretive bulwarks, which at once both shape and serve

⁹⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* 10.1 (n. 1 above) 477–481.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 477: “Sed quia ecclesia Dei absque rectorem esse non poterat...” [i.e., after the death of Pelagius II].

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 479. The sermon suggests that all people may soon be forced to face God's judgment without adequate preparation. That Pope Gregory's *Oratio* and perhaps the entirety of Book 10 was a later interpolation has been argued by O. Chadwick, in “Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1949) 38–49. Heinzelmann (n. 1 above) 80 n. 83, refutes Chadwick's argument. On the fabrication of speech in Gregory of Tours, see Thürlemann (n. 92 above) 106.

his chief rhetorical and didactic aims.¹⁰² For Gregory, there was much to be learned from disaster.

CONCLUSION

In 2012, six scientists and one government official stood before a judge in a makeshift courtroom on the outskirts of L'Aquila, Italy. They were standing trial in the wake of a devastating earthquake that had killed more than 300 people.¹⁰³ The scientists, who had been playing down fears of a major earthquake in the days before the disaster, were charged with manslaughter for failing to provide adequate warning to the public, each receiving a sentence of six years in prison. The case has been widely condemned in the international community, and even likened to a medieval witch hunt. The outcry is understandable. After all, how can human beings be held responsible for the effects of a natural disaster, which was, of course, caused by random—and thus unpredictable—natural forces?

The answer to this question is not always so simple. Ted Steinberg has suggested that more scrutiny needs to be devoted to those political, economic, and social factors that conspire to ensure that, in the wake of natural disasters, certain socioeconomic and racial groups are nearly always affected more than others.¹⁰⁴ The anger and quest for accountability precipitated by such events may in some cases actually be helpful, as when we ask why relief efforts seem slower or less effectual in poorer communities than in wealthier ones. In other cases, such faultfinding questions may be distinctly less productive. What is clear is that the very urge to assign blame is not new, nor does it play out the same way in every time and every culture. Where blame is assigned, where relief is sought: these questions and their answers are complex and reveal much about a society's religious, social, and economic concerns, and even its sense of historical consciousness.

In making sense of the flooding and pestilence at Rome in 589–590, Gregory drew connections between a contemporary disaster and an ancient narrative of pagan history. To do so, he addressed and implicitly commented upon fourth- and fifth-century debates between Christian apologists and pagans. His historical knowledge was brought to bear with the ultimate aim of identifying, and didactically demonstrating, the appropriate sources of both blame and succor in the wake of a

¹⁰² On early medieval attitudes concerning the relationships among truth, history, and argumentation, see Ray (n. 56 above).

¹⁰³ E. Povoledo and H. Fountain, "Italy Orders Jail Terms for 7 Who Didn't Warn of Deadly Earthquake," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2012, A4.

¹⁰⁴ On the concept of "social vulnerability" in historical disaster studies, see Juneja and Mauelshagen (n. 6 above) 5–6.

devastating calamity. Though the modern category of “natural disaster” was unknown to Gregory, in at least a few respects his concerns were not entirely unlike those expressed in the makeshift courtroom at L’Aquila in 2012. Such similarities—and the many apparent differences—warrant scrutiny. Like Gregory of Tours, contemporary historians have increasingly noted that there is much to be learned from natural disasters; for in their aftermaths, such events can help us to understand not only how societies operate, but also the ways in which they struggle to make sense of the sometimes tumultuous world around them.