

University of Nevada, Reno

Gregory the Great's Rivers:
Environment and Hagiography in Sixth Century Italy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in
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ABSTRACT:

Gregory the Great has been the focus of many studies that discuss the transition of Italy from late antiquity to a medieval period. He was witness to the dissolution of the infrastructure of empire in the Italian peninsula, shifting and redistribution of populations after the Lombard invasion, and the increased need for the pastoral care of bishops in these new settlements. Hemispheric climate change and the first plague pandemic also stressed the population of Italy. It is under this social and environmental upheaval that Gregory writes his hagiography collection, the *Dialogues*. In this thesis I argue that Gregory's ecological literature is reflective not only of the seemingly apocalyptic environment that Gregory lives through, but of a current of cultural change as well. In looking at the destruction of natural world through Gregory's fluvial literature and relevant palaeoclimatological records, this study identifies how Gregory's landscape changes when human agents (bishops) and natural agents (rivers) come into conflict, and how that may be reflective of the peninsula's historical climate changes in the sixth century. Gregory identifies the natural world, in this case rivers, as a powerful force of change that is challenged by bishops and their responsibility to protect the communities they serve. These conflicts between bishops and their local rivers are central to Gregory's attempt at depicting how pre-Christian and Christian elements function in an environment under such social, political, and climatological stressors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

AASS: Acta Sanctorum, Life of St. Theodore of Lucca, BHL 8087.

Dialogues: Gregory the Great, and Adalbert de Vogüé. *Dialogues*. Cerf, 1979. All translations are from Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. by Odo John Zimmerman. Washington, DC, Catholic University Press, 1959., unless otherwise noted.

Etymologia: *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, et al., Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Historia Francorum: Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1976).

Homilies: John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, trans. Robert C. Hill. Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1990.

Historia Langobardorum: Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, Sources of Medieval History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).

Registrum: Gregory the Great, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, trans. John R.C. Martyn. (PIMS, 2004).

LALIA: Late Antique Little Ice Age

Moralia: Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job*, trans. Brian Kerns OCSO. (Cistercian Publications, 2014).

INTRODUCTION:

Gregory the Great ascended to the papacy in 590, and at the end of the sixth century he began to write his *Dialogues*, a compilation of saints' lives centered in the Italian countryside. In this collection, Gregory takes a moment to describe the environmental and societal changes that had just taken place:

“It was not long after this vision that wild hordes of Lombards unleashed from their own native land descended on us. The population of Italy, which had grown vast, like a rich harvest, was cut down to wither away. Cities were sacked, fortification overthrown, churches burned monasteries and cloister destroyed. Farms were abandoned, and the countryside, uncultivated, became wilderness. The land was no longer occupied by its owners, and wild beasts roamed the fields where so many people had once made their homes. I do not know what is happening elsewhere, but in this land of ours the world is not merely announcing its end, it is pointing directly to it. Our seeking after the things of heaven must, therefore, be all the more urgent, since we know that the things of earth are quickly slipping from our grasp. It would have been our duty to despise the world even if it had smiled on us, delighting our souls with prosperity. But now, struck as it is with countless scourges, worn out with adversity and daily lamenting its woes, what other message does it din into our ears but that we should cease loving it?” (*Dialogues* III.38)

Gregory's description of the “ravaged” Italian countryside in the *Dialogues* is chilling.¹ What was previously familiar to him, the expansive agriculture, the growing monastic communities, the interconnected settlements of Italians with their robust cultural past, all of it, has been completely changed by the conquest of the Lombards of the peninsula. Gregory centers himself and his own perception of the landscape by saying, “I do not know what is happening elsewhere,” and then proceeds to tell his reader, his assumed fellow Italian, that “in this land of *ours*” the world has not only announced its own end but is “pointing directly toward it.” Gregory tells his reader exactly how he perceives the Italian landscape at the end of the sixth century.

¹ This passage of Lombard destruction is present in many accounts of the sixth century. For more on Gregory's specific interpretation, see: Joan Margaret Petersen and Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in Their Late Antique Cultural Background* (PIMS, 1984).

This land has been ransacked, its native communities destroyed, and is literally announcing to its own people, who rely on it for food, water, and shelter, that that its prosperity has come to an end and that they should look toward something else to provide for them instead. Gregory supposes that this “other thing” is the Christian God, that the end of times might be coming soon, and it is high time to prepare for it. This personified land in the *Dialogues* is surrendering the care of its people into the hands of the Christian God.

This is but one example of how Gregory depicted his natural world, and the *Dialogues* contain many more. In this study, I am interested in what these descriptions of the landscape tell us about the changing perceptions of the natural world in the Italian peninsula through the lens of Gregory the Great.² By approximately 540, the Gothic kingdom that ruled Italy had collapsed, the Byzantine campaign to retake the entire peninsula had failed, and any semblance of a uniform political culture in Italy was gone. Subsequently, the Lombards, arriving to the peninsula in waves, emerged as a new ruling class and replaced the remnants of the western Roman political system with a smaller network of local polities.³ In dissolving the earlier western Roman political system, the Lombards also dissolved the main form of economic revenue: taxes in the form of the *annona*, or grain dole. As the Lombards stopped collecting this form of taxation and abandoned other forms of Roman administration, many bishops in Italy

² For more on the political, social, and economic transformations in Italy, see: Chris Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000* (Michigan, 1989)., and Cristina La Rocca, ed., *Italy in the Early Middle Ages, 476-1000*, The Short Oxford History of Italy (Oxford, 2002). Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy: AD 400-1000* (Cambridge, 1998). Shane Bjornlie, “Law, Ethnicity and Taxes in Ostrogothic Italy: A Case for Continuity, Adaptation and Departure,” *Early Medieval Europe* 22, no. 2 (2014): 138–70. T. S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy, AD 554-800* (British School at Rome, 1984).

³ For more on Lombards and their integration into the peninsula, see: Walter Goffart, “The Lombards as Latecoming “Guests”” in *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584* ed. Carl Erdmann (Princeton, 1981): 176-205., Chris Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000* (Michigan, 1989)., and Cristina La Rocca, ed., *Italy in the Early Middle Ages, 476-1000*, The Short Oxford History of Italy (Oxford, 2002). Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy: AD 400-1000* (Cambridge, 1998).

took up administrative responsibilities in their own cities, from the collection of a grain tax themselves to providing pastoral care to even fighting off barbarian interlopers.⁴ Rural towns and parishes consolidated because of changes in settlement patterns and Lombard invasions, the strife in Italy was palpable.

This was the world Gregory the Great ascended to the papacy in in 590 CE, a position he would hold until his death in 604 CE. He expanded the political and religious reach of the papacy, as it assumed civic responsibility for the people in the city of Rome, managing public works like aqueducts and administering the grain dole.⁵ Gregory also dedicated significant efforts to converting the Lombards in Italy from paganism and Arianism, correcting theological issues of the Three Chapters controversy in Lombard sees, and defending the city of Rome from Lombard invasion.⁶ Gregory also encouraged evangelization in the British Isles and was a strong proponent of pastoral care.⁷ Gregory played an important political and religious role in both the Latin West and the Byzantine East, both as a result of his personal connections to Constantinople and the political hold the empire had over the parts of Italy he resided in. Therefore, to write about sixth century Italy is to write about a culture that is reexamining and reconciling within itself. It is this repurposing of peoples and cultures after the exit of a monolithic power from the peninsula that scholars term the “start” of the medieval period in Italy.⁸

⁴ Marios Costambeys, “Settlement, Taxation and the Condition of the Peasantry in Post-Roman Central Italy,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9, no. 1 (2009): 92–119.

⁵ George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, 2015), 106.

⁶ George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, 2015), 107.

⁷ George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, 2015), 109.

⁸ For a more extensive look at the historiographical debate in the late twentieth century surrounding Gregory the Great’s handling of Lombard invasions see: Claude Dagens, *Saint Gregoire le Grande* (Paris, 1977)., Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of Good* (London, 1980)., and T. S. Brown *Gentlemen and Officers* (Rome, 1984). For questions discussing the fluid cultural identity of Gregory himself, see George Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015)., Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: 2000)., R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge, 1997).

This study focuses predominantly on Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* because it is one of the earliest efforts to organize and create a hagiographic world in a Christian Europe. The *Dialogues*, along with the work of contemporary hagiographer Gregory of Tours, champion a world filled with saints beyond martyrs.⁹ The first section discusses the role of the natural world in the *Dialogues*. Gregory uses the *Dialogues* as an opportunity to preserve the Italian landscape through means of this religious narrative. Gregory's sixth century Italian peninsula is one that is reflective of historical hardship, but also maintains an air of hope. Gregory presents us with a rich and imaginative world where humanity interacts with nature in ways that make space for the divine to show itself and intercede. Locations are made holy by saints' performing miracles in them, and the natural world bends itself to the power of the divine through the actions of saints native to Italy. Whenever the natural world and the Christian faithful come into conflict, the power of God is made manifest in these saints, and they deliver the faithful through hardship.¹⁰

The second section looks specifically to the disaster literature of rivers in the sixth century. Sixth century river narratives are contextualized with similar narratives from early Christian writings. These are followed by a discussion of flood narratives written by Gregory's contemporaries and later medieval historians of the period. More and more paleoclimate evidence suggests that hemispheric changes brought increased rainfall and more disastrous

⁹ For more on establishing hagiographic literature in the late antique and early medieval West, see: Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), Robert Bartlett, *Why can the dead do such great things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, 2015), Claudia Rapp, "The origins of hagiography and the literature of early monasticism: purpose and genre between tradition and innovation," in *Unclassical Traditions, Volume I: Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity* ed. Michael Williams (Cambridge 2020): 199-130., and Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great*, (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁰ For more on questions of readership, authorship, and purpose of Gregory's *Dialogues*, see Judith McClure, "Gregory the Great: Exegesis and Audience" (Dissertation D. Phil, Oxford, 1978). Francis Clark's work, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues* (Brill, 1987), discussing the authorship has been largely discredited. Paul Meyvaert's "The Enigma of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*: A response to Francis Clark," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39, (1988): 335-381., provides a well-grounded rebuttal to Clark's arguments of authorship.

flooding to Italy during the sixth century.¹¹ In addition to climate change, this study also discusses the pre-Christian and Christian influences on Gregory's natural world through an ecocritical lens, ending with a discussion of his two main river narratives.

The conclusion is a survey of the scientific literature regarding climate in the sixth century and the various approaches other studies have taken toward interpreting its climate and the environment. Writing about climate and environment in Italy at the end of the sixth century requires an understanding of the histories written about the "decline and fall" of the Roman empire. This is then followed by a discussion of the collaborative work of both historians and climate scientists. These collaborations allow for both better substantiated claims about changing societies and also the opportunity to integrate scientific evidence into historical studies. The section ends by discussing one such microregional study located in central Italy. By juxtaposing the questions that the scientific study poses with the questions posed earlier in this study, I propose that new evidence, while compelling, might not always provide the answers cultural historians ask of it.

Thus, my project seeks to tell the story of the ever-changing sixth century from one perspective and one place in time: from that of a native Italian, cognizant of the social, political, and environmental pressures on his world. Gregory the Great is the pope, born into a senatorial family in the city of Rome, and thus his perspective represents the cultural attitudes of a highly educated Christian elite. However, because of his position, he is the de facto leader of the Italian

¹¹ For more on the environmental history of the medieval period and hemispheric change in late antiquity, see: Ellen Arnold, "An introduction to medieval environmental history." *History Compass* 6, (2008): 898-916., Ulf Büntgen et al., "Cooling and Societal Change during the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to around 660 AD," *Nature Geoscience* 9, no. 3 (March 2016): 231-36., Richard Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, (Cambridge, 2014)., Adam Izdebski and Michael Mulryan, *Environment and Society in the Long Late Antiquity* (BRILL, 2019)., Michael McCormick, "History's Changing Climate: Climate Science, Genomics, and the Emerging Consilient Approach to Interdisciplinary History," ed. A. Bruce Mainwaring, Robert Giegengack, and Claudio Vita-Finzi, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 251-73.

peninsula both religiously and politically. Gregory's life is extraordinary by any measure, but in the *Dialogues* he attempts to tell stories beyond it that still speak to the experience of living in the peninsula during this time of uncertainty. It is Gregory's perspective on how these communities coped with changes to climate, ecological degradation, and pandemic that might offer us new ways to navigate our own uncertain future.

This study is situated at the intersection of early medieval / late antique hagiographical studies, medieval environmental history, and premodern paleoecological work. The renewed interest in the cult of saints in the late twentieth century is intrinsically tied to the cultural turn. Peter Brown's studies, beginning with "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," reimagine the cultural context of the charismatic holy figure, discussing the distinct role of the holy figure.¹² His following study, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* discusses the formation of devotional practices that distinguish Christianity from earlier religious practices.¹³ Brown's studies suggested the late antique period is not one of destruction and decay, but of a rich culture, reinvigorated by implementing structures of Christianity within the falling structures of the Roman empire. While Peter Brown explores the lives of saints, Patrick Geary's *Furta Sacra* focuses on the creation of saints' cults after their death. In looking at *translatios*, Geary's readings discuss how relic theft could legitimize or destroy saints' cults and the social and cultural ramifications that followed.¹⁴

¹² Peter Brown. "The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

¹³ Peter Brown 1935, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages-Revised Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

The historiography regarding Gregory the Great in the twentieth century is extensive. I will discuss a few major works here. Jeffrey Richards published *Gregory the Great: Consul of God* in 1980, the first monograph devoted exclusively to the life of Gregory the Great in English since 1905.¹⁵ In it, Richards explores Gregory's *Romanitas* in an attempt to understand him in the context of a disintegrating western Roman empire. Following Richard's work, R.A. Markus explores Gregory in two monographs: *From Augustine to Gregory the Great* (1983) and *Gregory the Great and His World* (1997).¹⁶ Markus situates Gregory in the context of Byzantine world, citing the intermixing of East and West during the sixth century Italy, as it continues to see itself as a distinct part of an Eastern Roman Empire.¹⁷ Markus continues with a discuss of the rhetoric in Gregory's letters to Constantinople and the presence of imperial protocol.¹⁸ Markus' efforts firmly situate Gregory as a cultural representative of both eastern and western Roman empire. Carole Straw's monograph, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (1988), is a thorough study combining historical, literary, and anthropological techniques to discuss the thought of Gregory the Great as well as to contextualize his thought in the greater world of Christian spirituality.¹⁹ Her focus on Gregory's religious writings illuminate a distinct Gregorian theology that carries on through the middle ages.

The most recently published monograph on Gregory, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (2015) by George Demacopoulos distinguishes itself from earlier

¹⁵ See Frederick Holmes Dudden's *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought (In Two Volumes)* (1905)

¹⁶ R. A. Markus, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, (Variorum Reprints, 1983); R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge, 1997).

¹⁷ R. A. Markus. *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. (Variorum Reprints, 1983) 21.

¹⁸ R. A. Markus. *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. (Variorum Reprints, 1983), 26.

¹⁹ Carol Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*. (University of California Press, 1988).

Gregorian authors by following a more holistic approach to understanding Gregory's life.²⁰ The thesis of the monograph in its most basic terms is that when Gregory was bishop in Rome, he maintained ascetic theological qualities, a desire for pastoral care, and acted as a praetor for the city of Rome itself. When analyzed more closely, Demacopoulos' thesis is much more complex than a tripartite dissection of a great man. He argues that threads of Gregory's ascetic religiosity impacted how he approached pastoral care, and that both his asceticism and pastoral mentality influenced his diplomatic actions as bishop in Rome. Also encompassed in this argument is Demacopoulos' desire to create an approach to Gregory that intertwines his theological world with his diplomatic one. Because earlier Gregorian scholarship can be so specialized, Demacopoulos' framework is heavily indebted many earlier Gregorian authors he references. He begins his introduction with a thorough historiography of the scholarship of Gregory the Great in the second half of the twentieth century.

There has also been much written about the environmental history of the medieval early medieval, pioneered by Paolo Squatriti.²¹ In his first monograph, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy*, Squatriti discusses how water was integrated into the lives of early medieval Italians. By looking at mills, aqueducts, rivers, baths, and other sources water, Squatriti demonstrates how early medieval Italians made use of water. His most recent monograph, *Landscape and Change in Early Medieval Italy: Chestnuts, Economy, and Culture* is a cultural

²⁰ George Demacopoulos. *Gregory the Great, Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome*. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

²¹ Paolo Squatriti, "Water, Nature and Culture in Early Medieval Lucca," *Early Medieval Europe* 4 (1995): 21–40; Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy: AD 400-1000* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Paolo Squatriti, ed., *Working with Water in Medieval Europe: Technology and Resource-Use*, (Brill, 2000); Paolo Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory," *Speculum* 85, no. 4 (2010): 799–826; Paolo Squatriti, *Landscape and Change in Early Medieval Italy: Chestnuts, Economy, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

history of the use of the chestnut from antiquity through the medieval period.²² Squatriti tracks cultural attitudes toward consumption and usage of the chestnut through his use of literary texts. Squatriti's work is at the core of both this study and world of early environmental history at large.

This study of water in the sixth century as reflected in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* would be incomplete without a general discussion of the scientific literature discussing weather and climate in the Mediterranean during the late antique and early medieval period. This subject has been approached from a variety of angles in both the sciences and environmental history, from broad sweeping studies like Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* to temporally and regionally specific studies like the recent "Beyond One-Way Determinism: San Frediano's Miracle and Climate Change" by Zanchetta et al.²³ This renewed interest in the role of changing climate and natural disasters in antiquity stems from innovative dating methods and other scientific advances, which have grown more specific, as well as interdisciplinary collaborations between paleoscience teams and historians. Such studies benefit from using both environmental proxies and historical proxies to produce evidence to support their claims about the late antique environment. Many of these newer studies also discuss the impact that changing climates and natural disasters have on human society as well. However, some of these claims could be further elaborated on, as often they are limited by the structure and genre of a scientific article. This is where such scientific teams benefit greatly from the role of environmental historians.

²² Paolo Squatriti, *Landscape and Change in Early Medieval Italy: Chestnuts, Economy, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

²³ Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017).; Zanchetta et al., "Beyond One-Way Determinism."

Environmental historians are in a position to better contextualize and elaborate on the cultural and societal claims that can only be touched upon briefly in a scientific publication.

This section argues that the most productive way of analyzing the simultaneous changes in culture and environment at the end of Late Antiquity now would be to conduct further micro-regional studies.²⁴ As mentioned before, many previous studies of changing climates in antiquity have discussed such claims on a continental level, identifying a cooling event known as the “Dark Ages Cold Period,” “Early Medieval Cold Period”, or the “Late Antique Little Ice Age.” Although each contain different date ranges, each periodization argues that there exists an extended period of some type of cooling during the early medieval period. Specifically the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA), the most recent iteration of this cooling period, spanned from 536 to approximately 660.²⁵ In this article, Büntgen et. al argue the LALIA is a period of significant cooling that effected Europe and Asia. The argument places at its center dendrochronological evidence from the Russian Altai and European alps but refers also to other temperature-sensitive climate proxies (ice-cores, tree rings, speleothems, lake sediments, marine sediments, glacier dynamics, and historical documentation) from the western coast of North America to Iceland to North Europe, and finally to North and Central Asia. With this as evidence, Büntgen concludes that generally cooling climates did occurring during this period,

²⁴ I am not the first person to suggest that more micro-regional studies would benefit our understanding of the period. See also: Paolo Squatriti, “The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory,” *Speculum* 85, no. 4 (2010): 799–826; Edward M. Schoolman, Scott Mensing, and Gianluca Piovesan, “Land Use and the Human Impact on the Environment in Medieval Italy,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 49, no. 3 (November 1, 2018): 419–44.

²⁵ See: Büntgen, U., W. Tegel, K. Nicolussi, M. McCormick, D. Frank, V. Trouet, J. O. Kaplan, et al. “2500 Years of European Climate Variability and Human Susceptibility.” *Science* 331, (2011): 578–82., Büntgen, Ulf, Vladimir S. Myglan, Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, Michael McCormick, Nicola Di Cosmo, Michael Sigl, Johann Jungclauss, et al. “Cooling and Societal Change during the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to around 660 AD.” *Nature Geoscience* 9, (2016): 231–36., and Peregrine, Peter N. “Climate and Social Change at the Start of the Late Antique Little Ice Age.” *The Holocene* 30, (2020): 1643-1648 for more work on establishing the Late Antique Little Ice Age.

sustained by the possibility of cooling effects after three volcanic eruptions in 536, 540, and 547 in addition to a significant solar minimum, causing the LALIA.²⁶ The article then argues that such a cooling event could account for shorter growing seasons, crop failure, famine, and plague in the Mediterranean in the mid-sixth century. Suggesting that environmental distress could have contributed to the collapse of the Roman empire during the mid-sixth century is not a new idea, but Büntgen's paper provides climatological evidence for such an argument.²⁷

Büntgen's analysis received challenges from proponents of the Dark Ages Cold Period, who wrote a short response to the original LALIA article.²⁸ In this article, Helama et. al argue that Büntgen's range of climate proxies is too broad for the specific claim of the Late Antique Little Ice's date range and spatial extent. This article also dismisses the severity of the volcanic eruptions cited by Büntgen. In addition, Helama proposes that this cooling period fits within the confines of the Dark Ages Cold Period, and published a literature review of 114 paleoclimate papers supporting the Dark Ages Cold Period, as initially proposed by H. H. Lamb in 1982.²⁹ The Büntgen team then publish a response to this challenge, arguing that his team makes greater use of historical documents as proxies, defends their inclusion of volcanic eruptions, and challenges the concept of the Dark Ages Cold Period predominantly on the proposed narrative that a pejorative "Dark Ages" implies.³⁰ Although both teams are making broad claims about understanding climate in the Northern Hemisphere during late antiquity, they are important both

²⁷ This idea was also addressed as a part of a climate determinism argument in Gibbon Edward Esq, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire - Volume the First*, 1776.

²⁸ Samuli Helama, Phil D. Jones, and Keith R. Briffa, "Limited Late Antique Cooling," *Nature Geoscience* 10, no. 4 (April 2017): 242–43.

²⁹ Lamb, Hubert H. "The early medieval warm epoch and its sequel." *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 1 (1965): 13-37., and Samuli Helama, Phil D Jones, and Keith R Briffa, "Dark Ages Cold Period: A Literature Review and Directions for Future Research," *The Holocene* 27, no. 10 (October 1, 2017): 1600–1606.

³⁰ Ulf Büntgen et al., "Reply to 'Limited Late Antique Cooling,'" *Nature Geoscience* 10, no. 4 (April 2017): 243–243.

because these studies provide further evidence of climate cooling of some type, and because they represent two different narratives that both scientists and historians reflect when they write about climate and environment during this period.

As mentioned previously, the idea that an anomalous climate corresponds with the fall of the Roman empire, or really any significant social, political, or cultural change, is entrenched in our historical literature, beginning with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Much prior to the publication of the Büntgen/Helama exchange, Squatriti commented extensively on the role that paleoclimate studies might play in informing early medieval environmental history and their incorporation of this same deterministic perspective for the period after the end of the Roman empire. Squatriti argues that such paleoclimate studies (in his scholarship he only refers to the "Dark Ages Cold Period," "Early Medieval Cold Period," and the "Vandal Minimum") are difficult for early medieval historians to use because of the lack of specificity of the proxy data in comparison to the very specific events detailed in the historical sources.³¹ When working with the limited written sources in late antiquity, even more sparse in the sixth century where both Squatriti's work and mine are situated, it is increasingly difficult to corroborate a climate proxy with a specific flood or plague outbreak, thus Squatriti's initial hesitation toward uncritical integration of climate studies. His second critique of such studies is in the presentation of the "cooling" narrative itself. Many of the climate proxies used in these studies come from northern Europe or Asia but are used to make assumptions about the climate of the entire northern hemisphere. That in and of itself is not problematic, but the narrative of a "cooling" Europe is often presented from the perspective of modern northern European climate anxieties, where colder and wetter is considered a negative change in climate. However, a colder, wetter season in the Mediterranean

³¹ Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages," 803.

is not detrimental, and possibly a positive when it comes to agricultural growth.³² The “Dark Ages Cold Period” cannot be a universal moniker for changing climates because of how a change brings about different effects in different parts of Europe, and more microregional studies would help contextualize these large climate events.

These issues have presented themselves in environmental history studies published recently as well. As mentioned previously, many of the research groups involved in paleoclimate research or ancient DNA research will include a historian of the period as well. In addition to publishing with the research team’s scientific article, a historian might publish a second article that contextualizes the paleoscience with literary sources, numismatics, material culture, architectural evidence, or any other methodology common to the field of history that might not make it into the specifics of the scientific article. “How many climate scientists can scan the meter of Ausonius’ allusive poetry... How many philologists can assess tree rings’ testimony on precipitation patterns?”³³ A historical article is an opportunity to contextualize conversations across disciplines. For example, Michael McCormick’s 2013 book chapter uses dendroecological evidence to redate the poet Ausonius’ *Mosella*, pointing to reconstructed precipitation anomalies.³⁴ And while moving the date of a poem by a year might seem inconsequential, McCormick’s integration of dendrochronology as a source for cross-referencing his own philological approach opened the door for late Roman and early medieval environmental science to rely on paleoscientific evidence as a trump card for their humanistic endeavors.

³² Squatriti, 808–9.

³³ Michael McCormick, “What Climate Science, Ausonius, Nile Floods, Rye, and Thatch Tell Us about the Environmental History of the Roman Empire,” in *The Ancient Mediterranean Environment between Science and History*, ed. William V. Harris (BRILL, 2013), 62.

³⁴ McCormick, 68.

The further integration of paleoscientific evidence into the study of the late Roman period occurs in Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire* (2017).³⁵ Harper's monograph, while tantalizingly written, makes bold claims regarding the role of climate change, disease outbreaks, and the purported resilience of the Roman empire. Harper argues that the Roman empire relied both on the "Roman Climate Optimum," which maintained a mild, wet climate for abundant agricultural production, and a lack of rampant disease to support an empire that had a population bursting at the seams. He identifies both the Justinianic Plague and the Late Antique Little Ice as the two defining moments that ended the Roman empire complete. However, his monograph completely ignores sources (textual and scientific) that contradict this seemingly deterministic narrative he tells with this monograph. In a three-part response, John Haldon and members of the Princeton Climate Change History Research Initiative challenge the maximalist position that Haldon takes in his study, citing evidence to the contrary regarding the "Roman Climate Optimum," the second and third century plagues, and the severity of the Justinianic Plague.³⁶ Although there have been serious doubts about the validity of Harper's maximalist argument, since its publication, there has been much discussion about how historians of the late Roman and early medieval period can use such paleoscientific evidence.

The discussions that scholars are having in the field of environmental history right now are not new. However, what scholars are interested in debating are the ways in which scientific

³⁵ Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, The Princeton History of the Ancient World (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017).

³⁶ John Haldon et al., "Plagues, Climate Change, and the End of an Empire: A Response to Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* (1): Climate," *History Compass* 16, no. 12 (2018): e12508, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12508>; John Haldon et al., "Plagues, Climate Change, and the End of an Empire. A Response to Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* (2): Plagues and a Crisis of Empire," *History Compass* 16, no. 12 (2018): e12506, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12506>; John Haldon et al., "Plagues, Climate Change, and the End of an Empire: A Response to Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* (3): Disease, Agency, and Collapse," *History Compass* 16, no. 12 (2018): e12507, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12507>.

evidence is wielded in historical studies. As interest in the topic of the “decline and fall” of Rome has increased over the past few years, debates over methodology have resurfaced as well. One school of thought is highly invested in using a materialist and determinist bent in their analysis, claiming that the integration of paleoecological proxies allows them to make strong claims that often disregards any other evidence that contradicts it. In her methodological review of environmental history of late antiquity, Kristina Sessa argues that we must integrate this physical understanding of the natural world and the non-human agents within it into the study of late antiquity.³⁷ We cannot dismiss the cultural element from the study of late antiquity entirely, as the study of language, of written sources, also produce valuable constructions of historical reality. Climate has a cultural history that is tied with its physical history.

Thus, the integration of palaeoecological sources into the work of late antique and early medieval historians should be done with great care. They provide new perspectives into the late antique and medieval world not always present in our written sources and can speak to how social and environmental change might work hand in hand. However, not all questions posed by late antique and early medieval historians, even those of the environment, can be answered by relying on such palaeoecological sources as their primary source base. As Sessa touched upon earlier, literary sources represent a perspective that reflect the cultural milieu of the author; if a palaeoecological source cannot corroborate the literary source, it does not invalidate the worth of either the palaeoecological record or the written source, it simply means that they represent different perspectives on the happens of the time. Integration of literary and palaeoecological sources is best used when they both help answer the same question the historian poses. This story

³⁷ Kristina Sessa, “The New Environmental Fall of Rome: A Methodological Consideration,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 12, no. 1 (2019): 211–55.

acknowledges the extensive palaeoecological work that has been done for late antique and early medieval Italy. However, the bulk of my arguments involve cultural and religious perceptions of the environment that are not influenced by the palaeoecological record.

PART 1: NATURAL WORLD OF GREGORY THE GREAT

Gregory is sometimes referred as the first medieval pope, and his papacy is often credited with ushering Europe out of the influence of the late Roman Empire and into the medieval period.³⁸ How scholars label Gregory is highly dependent on the social and political context they choose to situate him in. It is difficult to clearly define what constitutes “Rome,” “empire,” or “culture” at the time. Jeffrey Richards’ study focuses on Gregory’s political accomplishments in the West, arguing that his papacy is an extension of a Roman empire in the West whose infrastructure no longer exists, but whose milieu continues through the political actions of Gregory and his *Romanitas*.³⁹ Haldon defines Gregory and the subsequent period as eastern Roman until well into the seventh century.⁴⁰ Some scholars categorize Gregory as having one foot in the East and one in the West, and others, like Dal Santo go so far as to call him the pope of Byzantine Rome.⁴¹ Gregory’s papacy inhabits a liminal space that is Italy at the end of the sixth century, thus making products of his papacy an ideal place to look for elements of transition.

Although sorting Gregory into a strict identity category might not be useful, it is important to acknowledge that Gregory did seem himself as a Roman. However, by Gregory’s

³⁸ Gregory is credited with beginning a change in spirituality at the end of the sixth century that embodies a “medieval” mindset. His hagiographical writings establish the cult of Benedict of Nursia, and with it, further legitimizes monasticism in Italy. His theological writings only highlight what was “nascent” in earlier patristic writings. His theology is one with a renewed emphasis on personal suffering and apocalypticism, which would continue to be influential in medieval religious mentality. For more on this, see Carole E. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, (University of California Press, 1988); G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great*, (Cambridge, 1986).; Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*, (Oxford, 2000).

³⁹ Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London, 1980).

⁴⁰ John F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ See: R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge, 1997)., Matthew Dal Santo and Bronwen Neil, *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Brill, 2013)., and Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints’ Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

lifetime, the definition of *Romanitas*, or “Romanness,” had changed significantly since the early years of the empire. By 590, the emperor no longer sat in Rome but in Constantinople, and any semblance of Roman imperial political structures remained only in places under Byzantine control, like Ravenna, Rome, and Sicily.⁴² But there remained significant Roman cultural elements in Gregory’s upbringing. Scholars conjecture that Gregory received a senatorial education, where he would have been exposed to literary tropes of classical Latin poetry and prose, even though he rarely cites classical authors in his writing.⁴³ As for how Gregory engaged with the remaining structures of Roman imperialism, both Markus and Demacopoulos argue that Gregory’s language and approach to the relationship between ecclesiastic and imperial authority demonstrate that Gregory is keenly aware of his role in a kind of Roman empire. The empire the Gregory finds himself in exists not as a shadow of its former self but in transition, moving further away from what was recognizably Roman.⁴⁴

The *Dialogues* are Gregory’s only surviving piece of hagiography. As the title suggests, it was written in the “dialogue” style, in which he, Gregory, narrated various saints’ lives to his interlocutor, Peter. Peter will occasionally interrupt to comment on the splendor of the miraculous works or to ask about the theological implications of certain actions, intentions, or miracles of the saints. This gave Gregory the opportunity to provide direct instruction to his audience on matters theological through the interlocutor. Thus, the instructional nature of the *Dialogues* is clear. Another function of the *Dialogues* is to preserve the memory of the lives of early medieval Italian saints. While the lives of saints in the *Dialogues* are rather short, the life of

⁴² George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, 2015)

⁴³ Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London, 1980).

⁴⁴ See: Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints’ Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2012); George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, 2015); and *Registrum* 1.25

Benedict of the Nursia encapsulates the entire second book. Gregory continued with the theme of illuminating the lives of Italian saints in the fourth book of the *Dialogues*, but the tone of the narrative and the subject of the miracles shifts toward death, dying, and life after death. Although he changes the thematic element of the final book of the *Dialogues*, the saints' lives still function as a reflection of a politically and environmentally tumultuous time in Italy.⁴⁵

However, the author's intention cannot be the only lens through which scholars should analyze a source. Hagiography is a complex genre to work with, as it retains vivid historical, literary, and religious elements. Gregory's piece is heir to a rich tradition "notorious for being a literary genre where facts and the historicity of locating the actors and places in the text in chronologically configured time and space are of the least concern to the author."⁴⁶ In "preserving" the lives of early medieval Italian saints, Gregory writes in a tradition that is interested in "how the saint exhibited ... unique characteristics of sanctity common to all saints of all times."⁴⁷ It is in this "how" that the regurgitated *topoi* take on cultural significance, and in this case, Gregorian significance. The *Dialogues* are a unique source in this aspect, as Gregory identifies himself as both author and narrator of these stories, and thus the "how" of his saints reflects his personal understanding of the world around him. It is through understanding the "how" that we can understand more about Gregorian *mentalites*.

It is also important to keep in mind that medieval hagiography as a genre always functions in the context of religious life. At the base level, medieval hagiographies are biographies of saints intended to create a record of a particular saint's life in order to recognize

⁴⁵ John Moorhead, "Taking Gregory the Great's Dialogues Seriously," *The Downside Review* 121, no. 424 (2003): 197–210.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Everett, "The Hagiography of Lombard Italy." *Hagiographica* 7 (2000): 49-126.

⁴⁷ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta sacra*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 18.

popular cults, to create an institutional record of a local, oral history, or to give credence to some local traditions. This is known as the *vita*. While there is a tradition of writing other laudatory works for great or popular figures in the Late Antique or early medieval period in the form of the panegyric, the panegyric is often reserved for the praise of military or political leaders who already occupy an elevated status in society, not for the humble monk who spends most of his days in prayer. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that the *Dialogues* include predominantly *vitae* of the saints that it discusses, and that it is told in dialogue form, which is uncommon for much of the hagiography as a genre.

Scholars have discussed the purpose and audience of the saints' lives in the *Dialogues*. Gregory began writing the *Dialogues* in 593 and finished by 594, at the urging of his monastics and clerics near the papacy.⁴⁸ Gregory moves away from stories of martyrs, and replaced them with ascetic and monastic models that are adopted by later medieval authors of hagiography.⁴⁹ In addition to this subject change compared to earlier hagiography, the audience of this work might change as well. While these clerics might have been the motivation for writing the *Dialogues*, scholars have argued that its emphasis on an alternative, rustic form of sanctity make it appealing to a more popular audience.⁵⁰ The *Dialogues* have many instructional elements and Gregory might have intended for them to be an evangelical tool.⁵¹

Hagiography is a literary product of its society, embodying religious norms and historical narratives that are valuable to the culture that produces it. Therefore, hagiography is a rich place to begin a study Gregory's perceptions of the sixth century peninsular environment. Because

⁴⁸ Carole Straw. *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*. (University of California Press, 1988), 67.

⁴⁹ R. A. Markus. *Gregory the Great and His World*. (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62.

⁵⁰ R. A. Markus. *Gregory the Great and His World*. (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62.

⁵¹ William McCready. *Signs of Sanctity: Miracles in the Thought of Gregory the Great*. (PIMS, 1989).

Gregory the Great is interested in establishing a tradition of saints located in Italy, the landscape itself plays a very important role in the various saints' lives found in the *Dialogues*. Gregory's interlocutor, Peter, begins by telling Gregory he has never heard of any miracles performed by any person in Italy, saying, "This land of ours has undoubtedly produced its virtuous men, but to my knowledge no signs or miracles have been performed by any of them," to which Gregory replies: "On the contrary, Peter, the day would not be long enough for me to tell you about those saints whose holiness has been well established and whose lives are known to me either from my own observations or from the reports of good, reliable witnesses." (*Dialogues* I.Prologue). Gregory then continues to tell the stories of holy men and women that are deeply rooted in the Italian landscape itself, establishing within the world of the *Dialogues* an environmental imagination that reflects the world that he is a part of.

When Gregory establishes a physical location for a miracle to take place, that location becomes associated with the sanctity of the holy act itself.⁵² In the second chapter of the *Dialogues*, Gregory describes the tormenting that St. Benedict endures while in the wilderness. Peter then asks him: "Now that you have finished explaining [Benedict's trials], please tell me where the holy man settled after his departure. Do you know whether he performed any more miracles?" (*Dialogues* II.8.10) Gregory then goes to describing the founding of Benedict's monastery at Monte Cassino. When he first arrives to the summit of the mountain, Benedict destroys an altar dedicated to Apollo and cuts down the trees in the sacred grove, replacing one holy site with another (*Dialogues* II.8.11). The devil, who had followed Benedict from his time in the wilderness now to Monte Cassino, was greatly angered by the destruction of the pagan

⁵² Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

temple and as a result, causes Benedict and his monks significant problems during the construction of the abbey. However, Benedict proves that his God-given powers are more powerful than the devil, as he bans the devil from holding down difficult rocks, and after the devil collapses a wall and crushes a young monk, Benedict ensures he survives the incident (*Dialogues* II.10-11). From then on, Monte Cassino becomes a sacred location, and by associating Benedict's miracles with the location of the monastery he creates, Gregory ties wonderworking to the physical location of the land itself, creating a sacred ground.

The concept of sanctifying the natural world in Gregory's *Dialogues* goes beyond just sanctifying the physical landscape. Although the physical landscape can be made holy, it is also the location of environmental stress, invasion from outsiders, and host to the first plague pandemic. It does not provide the kind of pastoral protection necessary to support its native people, thus leaving the perfect opportunity for the divine to demonstrate its own powers to protect. Holy men and women interact with the natural world in ways that showcase their ability to produce miracles.⁵³ Miracles, in and of themselves, are not necessarily natural, but the power that miracles represent are a challenge to the natural order.⁵⁴ This divine power is a disruptive element in nature in all of Gregory's stories, both negatively and positively. The power of the divine can provide resources to make the land more hospitable, like when Benedict produces a stream from dry rocks near his monastery (*Dialogues* II.5), or it can make the natural world subservient to the human actor, like when Felix asks serpents to guard his vegetable garden

⁵³ R. A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 36, no. 1 (1985): 92.

⁵⁴ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A history of Europe from 400-1000* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196.

(*Dialogues* I.3) or when Menas the hermit would scare away bears from his beehives with only a small wooden cane when normally large swords would not scare them (*Dialogues* III.26)

In so many of these stories, the natural world and human needs come into conflict. The natural world is not always an antagonist, but it is not where the characters in Gregory's *Dialogues* can look for salvation. Gregory says of his natural world: "But now, struck as it is with countless scourges, worn out with adversity and daily lamenting its woes, what other message does it din into our ears but that we should cease loving it?" (*Dialogues* III.38) Clearly, Gregory is pointing his readers toward focusing on the salvation of their souls and the second coming of Christ. But perhaps it is not that the entire world is coming to an end, in the traditional sense of a Christian apocalypse, but that the Italian peninsula as he previously understood it, is coming to an end.

The world that Gregory lives in is one of constant change, and that is reflected in his *Dialogues*. His saints live in a natural world that can be both hostile and of great use to them. By making use of the landscape, these saints lay claim to the natural world in ways that legitimize the power of the Christian God by using their thaumaturgical powers. The world of Gregory's *Dialogues* becomes more clearly Christian when his saints engage with the natural world and perform miracles. Within the hagiographical world there is clearly tension between the pre-Christian or non-Christian elements in the Italian landscape. It is in how his saints deal with these pre-existing elements in the landscape that highlight how Gregory might have perceived the changes surrounding him at the end of the sixth century.

PART 2: GREGORY AND THE ROMAN WORLD

“About five years ago, the Tiber here at Rome flooded its banks. Rising above the height of the city walls, it inundated large sections of Rome. The Adige River at Verona, too, was in a state of flood at this time, and its waters reached the Church of St. Zeno, Bishop and Martyr. The doors of the church stood open, yet the water did not flow inside, even though it continued to rise until finally it reached the windows close to the roof. Having mounted to that height, the water blocked the doorway completely. It was as if the liquid were turned into a solid wall. The large crowd of people in the church at the time had no way of getting out, surrounded as they were on all sides by a solid mass of water. The prospect of death by hunger and thirst began to frighten them, but, on going up to the door, they found that they could draw water for drinking even though, as I said, it stood in a solid mass all around them, as high as the windows but without seeping into the church. One could draw from it for ordinary use, yet it had lost its ordinary power of flowing like a liquid. So it stood in front of the church to make manifest the power of the holy martyr. It kept its natural qualities in order to benefit the people, yet discarded them in order not to flood the church.” (*Dialogues* III.19.2-3)

In one of many examples where Gregory’s *Dialogues* reflect the ecological state of the peninsula, Gregory describes the massive flooding occurring in the year of 589, both on the Tiber in Rome, and elsewhere in Italian river systems. Although there are a few flood stories in Gregory’s *Dialogues*, this is the only place where he mentions the Tiber flooding explicitly. Instead of choosing to focus on the river that flows through the city of Rome, he instead tells us the story of the Adige, the river running through Venice. In this story, the thaumaturgical power comes from the intercession of a deceased saint who already has a small cult following. This flood, like many other tragic accidents of nature in the *Dialogues*, is yet another opportunity for the divine to showcase its own powers. In this case, instead of stopping the flood or immediately reversing its effects, the divine intervention is to change the state of matter of the water entirely. This water exists in multiple states, in solid and liquid form, defying natural laws. Although Christian miracles often defy natural laws, Gregory uses this change of state to demonstrate that disaster still exists in some form in his miraculous world of the *Dialogues*.

This story is one of many in which Gregory brings together the miraculous and the natural world. Sometimes playful, sometimes rowdy, and sometimes eerily still, nature in Gregory's *Dialogues* reflects the political and environmental distress of the period by integrating these events into the *vitae* he retells. In Gregory's environmental imagination, Goths, monks, Lombards, nuns, ascetics, and hermits all share the common landscape of Italy. They wrangle with the landscape and engage with the fantastical to/for Gregory's audience, and in preserving their narratives, Gregory preserves this engaging ecological moment in time. The *Dialogues* is a thaumaturgically heavy text, relying on the success of miracles to create for itself a Roman Christian landscape, one which Gregory, as its author, ultimately has authority over. He is invested in creating a piece of hagiographic literature that preserves the holy narratives of the peninsula that demonstrates the land that he lives on is still a part of the narrative of salvation history.

However, Gregory's *Dialogues* extend beyond simply establishing a hagiographic literature of the peninsula in the sixth century. They also demonstrate the cultural tensions present in his own society. At the heart of many of his stories are the tensions between late ancient and Christian understandings of the natural world. Elements of nature are signs or portents of the future in one aspect, and in another are metaphorical events intended to be read for their exegetical nature, leading to the ultimate portent: the second coming of Christ. And the driving force demonstrating this tension is the antagonistic relationship between human and non-human agents shaping the natural landscape in the *Dialogues*. This tension can be seen throughout Gregory's *Dialogues*, but in this thesis the focus is specific to how his depictions of water and rivers embody this tension. Rivers, and water more generally, are some of the more dynamic natural entities in Gregory's writing because of the immediate effects on the natural

landscape that water can have. Changes can be dramatic, capable of changing the landscape in an instant. The flooding rivers in Gregory's *Dialogues* also reflect the historical flooding of the sixth century Italian peninsula. Because of its power, flooding water can engage in miraculous or disastrous wonderworking. The environmental power of water makes it a rich place to explore the cultural change in Gregory's writings, and thus my work will continue to focus on the historical role water and rivers played in Gregory's Italy, and by extension, his *Dialogues*.

In order to understand why Gregory's flooding literature is culturally significant, it is necessary to contextualize it within both the historical sixth century flooding and the literature that precedes it.⁵⁵ The flooding of rivers in ancient Rome was a common occurrence. The major river systems of the Auser (modern Serchio), Padus (modern Po), and the Tiber were subject to frequent and destructive flooding, causing significant distress to those living on or around its banks. When looking toward postclassical flood accounts, such accounts often only report the Tiber flooding for a few days and then quickly returning to normal water levels.⁵⁶ However, ancient Rome maintained the civil infrastructure to deal with flooding, as managing water was a public good, maintained by imperial jurisdiction.⁵⁷ The city of Rome itself had a sewer system intended to drain water from the streets back into the Tiber, took on building projects to raise the ground levels of lower elevation parts of the city, and built canals and channel modifications to divert water away from the river before it reached the more vulnerable areas of the city.⁵⁸ Water

⁵⁵ See Giovanni Zanchetta et al., "Beyond One-Way Determinism: San Frediano's Miracle and Climate Change in Central and Northern Italy in Late Antiquity," *Climatic Change* 165, no. 1 (March 20, 2021): 25.

⁵⁶ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 66.

⁵⁷ Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy: AD 400-1000* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 70.

⁵⁸ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 169, 178, 181.

management of this scale had disappeared by the sixth century, perhaps a reason for the increased depiction of floods in the literary record.⁵⁹

EARLY CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF FLOODS:

Floods were not only an important physical occurrence, but a notable metaphysical tool for early Christian writers. Although significantly destructive, floods were only disastrous in as far as they made life difficult for those living near a river's banks. The fluvial literature of the sixth century would have been a part of a Christian literary tradition that involved water miracles as grand as Noah's globe-destroying flood and Moses' parting of the Red Sea. Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologia*, discusses the nature of flooding. In it, he differentiates between two different types of flooding: civilization-ending kinds of flooding, like that of Noah, and expected flooding of rivers, that when "swollen with unusual rains, overflow to a degree that is beyond what is normal in duration or magnitude, and cause widespread destruction, they too are called floods. One must bear in mind, however, that when rivers rise higher than normal, they not only bring destruction in the present moment, but they also signify something yet to happen."⁶⁰ Isidore of Seville does not write about flooding rivers as though they are some kind of insurmountably catastrophic event. They cause "widespread destruction," yes, but whatever apocalyptic nature might be associated with flooding is more likely to be tied to whatever omen is associated with the flooding as opposed to the occurrence of the flood itself. The commonplace flooding of a river, a lowercase "f" flood, can't be directly compared to the great Flood of Noah or some of the other civilization-destroying floods that Isidore of Seville mentions, a capital "F" Flood.

⁵⁹ Paolo Squatriti, *Water and Society in Early Medieval Italy: AD 400-1000* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 72.

⁶⁰ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney, et al., (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283.

This distinction between a flood of exegetical proportions and those of every day rivers can be seen in the writing of other early Christian authors such as Ambrose, Augustine, and John Chrysostom when they write on the biblical flood. Much of their exegetical descriptions of the Great Flood was not interested in explicating either the hydrology of the flood or seriously engaging in the literature of disaster. They are instead interested in reading Noah's Flood for its signs of the coming of Christ, identifying the floodwaters with that of baptism, and finding in the construction of the ark prefigures of the crucifixion. However, in his *Homilies on Genesis*, John Chrysostom emphasizes the devastation and destruction of the biblical Flood: "That was not an idle reference in the words "everything on dry land"; instead its purpose was to teach us that while others perished, the just man with everyone in the ark alone was saved" (*Homilies* 25.20). Chrysostom's exegesis emphasizes the physical extent of the Flood disaster, and while both the Flood and commonplace flooding causes destruction and could contain signs for the future, the destruction of the entire world is not on the same scale of destruction as the destruction of the fields on the river's edge. Although the scope and destruction of flooding in the sixth century differs from the biblical accounts, these floods serve as a metaphorical and literary model for the subsequent river literature of the peninsula. In this perspective, flooding in the natural world can still be a symbol or a metaphor for something while still being subject to the power of a Christian God.

Gregory was witness to some of the more catastrophic water-related events for Rome during the sixth century, and his writing is often considered representative of a definitive transition from the late Roman to the early medieval period.⁶¹ His hagiographical writing in

⁶¹ See: Paolo Squatriti. "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian microhistory." *Speculum* 85, no. 4 (2010), 799-826., and Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

particular is cited as a transitional work, moving away from the late antique focus on martyrs and ascetics in the desert, and instead focused on local saints and their ties to their communities.⁶² Because many of these communities were agricultural communities, their relationship to their landscape, and to the riverscape, was important. However, it is in his exegetical writing and papal letters that we find depictions of water similar to those of earlier patristic works.

For example, fond of the shipwreck analogy, Gregory often found ways to demonstrate that inclement weather was a way bring one's soul closer to the Lord. A more philosophical treatment of the relationship between weather, water and the divine can be found in his *Moralia on Job*, where Gregory addresses uncharitable weather: "Open your eyes and see that is it for *our correction* that the hoped-for rain does not come when the earth is parched, the sky is dark, the air is dry, and the heat of the sun increases" (*Moralia* 6.12.14). In Gregory's exegesis, poor weather and natural disasters are not an unlucky twist of fate, but for the "correction" of human souls, intended to draw them closer to God. Thus, when Gregory records significant flooding events in his *Dialogues*, such events are not examples of the failure of the divine to protect believers, but instead as opportunities for Christians to deepen their faith.⁶³

Although shipwrecks (both literal and metaphorical) appear throughout Gregory's letter collection, one of the most notable examples of this shipwreck analogy occurs in the letter Gregory writes to his friend, Leander of Seville, where he addresses his writing of the *Moralia on Job*:

"I should have liked to have replied to your letters with total application, if the hard work of my pastoral care were not wearing me out in such a way that I would prefer to weep

⁶² Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.)

⁶³ Paolo Squatriti, "The Floods of 589 and Climate Change at the Beginning of the Middle Ages: An Italian Microhistory," *Speculum* 85, no. 4 (2010), 822-823.

than say anything. Your Reverence with your vigilance understands this even in the very text of my letter, when I speak without care to the person whom I love so dearly. For in this position I am being shaken by such great waves of this world, that I can in no way direct my ship into port, a ship old and rotting, which I undertook to control through God's hidden plan. Now waves crash into me from the front, now foaming waves swell up in the sea on my side, now a storm attacks me from the rear. And in the middle of all this I am confused, and I am forced now to direct the udder into the same adversity, and now to deflect threatening waves away to one side, with the ship's curving flank. I groan because I know that through my negligence, a bilge water of vices is rising, and that the tempest violently accosts me, and at this very moment the rotten planks give the sound of shipwreck. Weeping I recall that I have lost the placid shore of repose, and I look with sighs at the land that I nevertheless cannot reach, as the winds of duties blow against me. So if you love me, my very dear brother, stretch out the hand of your prayer to me in these waves, so that as you aid me in my troubles, you may stand stronger in your own troubles also, by way of payment in exchange.” (*Registrum* I.41)

Water and inclement weather continue to be a theme in Gregory’s writings. When looking to his letter collection, the *Registrum*, Gregory connects his own struggles of the soul with being a ship stuck at sea. His ship is one that is old and rotting, likely a reference to his ascent to the papacy and subsequent control of the Church due to God’s greater plan for him.⁶⁴ There are waves that overwhelm the ship from all sides, and Gregory remains in the middle of all of this, confused. Despite his greater efforts, the work of the papacy causes him to groan and weep, and he feels that he will never reach the “placid shore of repose” because the “winds of duties” will continue to blow him back toward the temperamental sea and his duties as the bishop of Rome. At the end of the section, Gregory asks Leander to “stretch out the hand of [his] prayer” in a sincere demonstration of friendship and solidarity.

The waters of the sea are characterized differently from the neatly controlled freshwater of the lakes, rivers, and springs of Gregory’s *Dialogues*. Instead, the waters are towering, nearly

⁶⁴ Gregory’s preference for the monastic lifestyle and reluctance to assume the papacy is well documented throughout his letter collection.

engulfing Gregory's metaphorical ship and keeping him from finding those moments of peace and repose that his soul so ultimately longs for. No divine element is going to step in to spare Gregory from the "foaming waves" or the approaching storm. This storm comes upon him like the in the *Moralia*, "for [his] own correction," as he fights the "bilge water of vices" and "the winds of duties." Gregory finds his work as pope not as spiritually fulfilling as his time in a monastery, as other studies have mentioned, and his displeasure in his administrative role is made clear here.⁶⁵ Gregory reflects his personal struggles in the tumultuous weather, perhaps a reflection of changes in weather in Italy in general.

Although Gregory writes weather and water in a more traditional metaphorical register for the *Moralia* and the *Registrum*, the genre of hagiography requires more flexibility from this traditional exegetical mode. Therefore, it is possible to say that Gregory's *Dialogues* include increased fluvial/alluvial work because of the possibility that changing hydrological patterns in Italy during the period were happening. For a better understanding of the cultural ramifications of increased fluvial activity, it is appropriate to look toward the greater corpus of river literature of the sixth century Italian peninsula.

HISTORICAL FLOODING IN THE SIXTH CENTURY:

With the exegetical tradition in mind, writers like Gregory found the metaphorical usage of water useful for explaining natural phenomena with salvation history in mind. However, not all Christian depictions of the natural world must function in the exegetical register. As climate conditions changed in the sixth century, representations of water and the natural world increase significantly.⁶⁶ Water is essential to understanding the chaotic and tumultuous period, as

⁶⁵ R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (West Nyack: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁶⁶ Giovanni Zanchetta et al., "Beyond One-Way Determinism: San Frediano's Miracle and Climate Change in Central and Northern Italy in Late Antiquity," *Climatic Change* 165, no. 1 (March 20, 2021)

environmental change seems to exasperate the current socio-political issues of the period. Water is at the heart of every agricultural decision, every city's establishment, many religious rituals, and a seemingly unstoppable instrument of destruction. Therefore, looking to the role of water in many sixth century historical accounts can be used to examine both the cultural and environmental changes occurring here.

Italy is uniquely positioned, as it inherits both the narrative issues that Squatriti mentions and Harper elaborates on when discussing decline and fall, as well as the methodological issues of reliance on proxies that might not be accurate representations of the climate in the peninsula. However, that does not indicate that meaningful advances are not possible, and in the ten years since Squatriti published his article, many paleoscience teams have produced viable climate proxies for the Mediterranean and specific to Italy, furthering conversations regarding the environment. For example, in "Pollen analysis of the ship site of Pisa San Rossore, Tuscany, Italy," Lippi et. al use pollen as a climate proxy to discuss a Roman warm period and increased flooding up to the early sixth century.⁶⁷ Schoolman et. al discuss pollen cores from the Rieti basin in Central Italy and point out anomalies in their data compared to that of the ice cores taken from the Austrian alps.⁶⁸ Most recently, Zanchetta et. al discusses increased precipitation and cooling temperatures from speleothem data from the Apuan Alps in Central Italy.⁶⁹ Squatriti surveys a few more studies of Italy and the Mediterranean in "Barbarizing the *Bel Paese*:

⁶⁷ Marta Mariotti Lippi et al., "Pollen Analysis of the Ship Site of Pisa San Rossore, Tuscany, Italy: The Implications for Catastrophic Hydrological Events and Climatic Change during the Late Holocene," *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 16, no. 6 (August 14, 2007): 463.

⁶⁸ Edward Schoolman, Scott Mensing, and Gianluca Piovesan, "From the Late Medieval to Early Modern in the Rieti Basin (AD 1325–1601): Paleoecological and Historical Approaches to a Landscape in Transition," *Historical Geography* 46, no. 1 (2018): 437.

⁶⁹ Giovanni Zanchetta et al., "Beyond One-Way Determinism: San Frediano's Miracle and Climate Change in Central and Northern Italy in Late Antiquity," *Climatic Change* 165, no. 1 (March 20, 2021): 20.

Environmental History in Ostrogothic Italy” as well.⁷⁰ With the increasing number of highly specific micro-regional studies in Italy, we are gaining a better understanding of how the Italian peninsula functions within the changing climate conversations.⁷¹

There also many historical literary references to the increased flooding during the sixth century, many of which involve the flood of the Tiber river in Rome in 589. The flood caused significant destruction within the city Rome, followed by an outbreak of plague. In a few of these narratives, which I will discuss in depth shortly, Gregory the Great is depicted as a savior for the city, leading processions through the city to banish the plague at the very start of his papacy. Gregory’s intercessory role is emphasized in these accounts to highlight that his leadership of the Church also extended to leadership within the city of Rome as well. As Italy makes its way toward the medieval period, the influence of the Eastern Roman empire becomes lesser and lesser, and the papacy grows to fill that religious and political vacuum. However, important to note that these accounts are not very concerned with the effects of water itself or with damage done by the flood itself. Instead, they are more interested in sensationalizing the outbreak of the first plague that comes after.

There has been a significant uptick in scholarship concerning the first plague pandemic in the past few years. Michael McCormick’s most recent article on plague in Gregory of Tours addresses this passage on flooding specifically, noting how quickly the plague followed the flooding event.⁷² However, none of these references discuss the repercussions of a significant

⁷⁰ Zanchetta et al. 15

⁷¹ Gian Pietro Brogliolo, “Flooding in Northern Italy during the Early Middle Ages: Resilience and Adaptation,” *European Journal of Postclassical Archaeologies* 5 (2015): 47–68.

⁷² Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague and Other Epidemics,” *Speculum* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 38–96.

flooding event in a premodern city like Rome and the biohazardous fallout that remains.⁷³

Because a flood event would cause the Roman sewers to run over, their contents would fill the city with whatever waste products were within. Waste product, garbage of any sort, and cadavers in various states of decay would be around by the floodwaters and float about the flooded parts of the city. And a few days after the flood, the dead humans and animals that drowned would also begin to decompose, in still, unmoving water filled with contaminants.⁷⁴ With this in mind, it is not hard to imagine why authors describing this sixth century flood would be more interested in discussing the particulars of illness instead of the flood.

Gregory the Great is not the only author who discusses flooding in Italy during the sixth century. Contemporary authors, such as Gregory of Tours, writing from Gaul, and the author(s) of the *Liber Pontificalis*, also write about such events. Later authors like Paul the Deacon, writing in the eighth century, look back to the sixth century look to these earlier accounts to build their narratives of Lombard Italy. For these authors, flood and disease go hand in hand. Gregory is at the center of their narratives surrounding this flood, and his role in banishing the pestilence is paramount.

Paul the Deacon. Paul, when writing his *Historia Langobardorum* ensures that this flood account of the Tiber during Gregory's time is preserved.⁷⁵:

“In this outpouring of the flood the river Tiber at the city of Rome rose so much that its waters flowed in over the walls of the city and filled great regions in it. Then through the bed of the same great stream a great multitude of serpents, and a dragon also of astonishing size passed by the city and descended to the sea. Straightway a very grievous pestilence called inguinal followed this inundation, and it wasted the people with such great destruction of life that out of a countless multitude barely a few remained. First it

⁷³ Robert Sallares, *Malaria and Rome: A History of Malaria in Ancient Italy*, (Oxford, 2002).

⁷⁴ For more on this, see *Floods of the Tiber* 143

⁷⁵ Probably taken from Gregory of Tours as well as the *LP*.

struck Pope Pelagius, a venerable man, and quickly killed him. Then when their pastor was taken away it spread among the people. In this great tribulation the most blessed Gregory, who was then a deacon, was elected Pope by the common consent of all.”⁷⁶ (*Historia Langobardorum*, Book III.24)

Although Gregory the Great was himself witness to these catastrophic flooding events, he himself does not write about them. However, many of his contemporaries and future historians of the Lombard period do record his interactions with flooding, the first being his contemporary in Gaul, Gregory of Tours. He writes:

“In the fifteenth year of King Childebert’s reign, on his return from the city of Rome with relics of the Saints, my deacon (Agiulf) told me that the previous year, in the month of November, the River Tiber had covered Rome with such flood-water that a number of ancient churches had collapsed and the papal granaries had been destroyed, with the loss of several thousand bushels of wheat. A great school of watersnakes swam down the course of the river to the sea, in their midst a tremendous dragon as big as a tree-trunk, but these monsters were drowned in the turbulent salt sea-waves and their bodies were washed up on the shore. As a result there followed an epidemic, which caused swellings in the groin. This started in January... The people then unanimously chose as pope the deacon Gregory... The Pope never once stopped preaching to the people, nor did the people pause their prayers.”⁷⁷ (*Historia Francorum*, Book X.1)

Following this section of the *Historia Francorum* is a brief biography of Gregory the Great, followed by a description of the actions Gregory takes to banish the pestilence from the city. Gregory the Great is an important character to Gregory of Tours’ narrative of the flood of 589, because of his education, dedication to monasticism, and personal holiness. Gregory of Tours is also in the business of saint-making, and by preserving Gregory the Great’s role in the post-flooding pestilence event, Gregory of Tours has added another saintly person to his collected.

⁷⁶ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, Sources of Medieval History (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).

⁷⁷ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1976).

Gregory of Tours is no stranger to writing about the role of flooding in the natural landscape. As Ellen Arnold points addresses in her article on the matter, “overall, Gregory has been neglected by environmental historians, in part (I suspect) because the [*Historia*] is viewed as largely dynastic and political. Moreover, works of hagiography have been largely ignored by medieval environmental historians.”⁷⁸ Arnold proceeds to address Gregory’s attention to rivers in the natural landscape of Gaul, pointing toward them as emblems of disaster and portends for the future. She touches on this narrative of the Tiber briefly, referring mainly to David J. Patterson’s reference to ‘calamity’ as a means of rejecting pagan history.⁷⁹ Again, Arnold’s arguments center around a reading of the Gregory of Tours that centers the narratives surrounding rivers and their cultural significance. Arnold brings attention to how an approach to early medieval environmental history can continue to preserve the nuance of these sources without relying heavily on the scientism of other work on the period.

Much of the scholarship that discusses the cultural and religious significance in the imagery in the descriptions of the flood of 589 like to focus on the role that the serpent/dragon plays, often connecting the serpent or dragon to the illness that spread through Rome after the flood. The serpent or dragon described fleeing the river is included in Gregory of Tours’ writings, as well as Paul the Deacon, John the Deacon, and even mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*. On this, Peregrin Horden comments: “But the association of dragons with the linked disasters of flooding and pestilence is noteworthy. (According to Gregory, torrential rains were among the signs preceding the arrival of plague in Gaul.)”⁸⁰ And later he explains the increased

⁷⁸ Ellen F. Arnold, “Rivers of Risk and Redemption in Gregory of Tours’ Writings,” *Speculum* 92, no. 1 (2017): 122.

⁷⁹ David J. Patterson, “Adversus Paganos: Disaster, Dragons, and Episcopal Authority in Gregory of Tours,” *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–28.

⁸⁰ Peregrine Horden, “Disease, dragons and saints: the management of epidemics in the Dark Ages,” in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the historical perception of pestilence* (Cambridge University Press, 1995): 28.

presence of malaria in Merovingian Paris, as a result of the significant flooding events during the period.⁸¹ Other scholars have discussed the relationship this dragon may have to flooding, including David J. Patterson and Alain J. Stoclet who interpret the dragon as banishing pagan ideologies from the West.⁸²

As mentioned previously, the connection between pestilence and flooding is substantial, but Gregory the Great himself does not mention it. Perhaps it has to do with how such pestilence is ultimately resolved. Gregory himself is too close to the perceived solution to the outbreak of pestilence in the city of Rome. If he were to record his own version of the connection between the flood of 589 and the following illness that ravaged the city, it might put into jeopardy the validity other accounts of the supposedly divine role he played. Despite all his literary prowess, Gregory cannot make himself a saint.

ROMAN CULTURE IN GREGORY'S WRITING:

On the surface, Gregory's writings on the rivers in the natural world are rather different from rivers in Roman literary cultural. Brian Campbell's monograph on the role of rivers in the Roman world gives an apt summary of the cultural power rivers held and Roman perception of rivers. "Nature had looked after mortals very well by giving every river its own source, course, outlet, and limits. They should take account of the religious views of local people, who had honored the rivers close to their homes with sacred rites, groves, and altars. Even the Tiber himself would not take kindly to flowing with his majesty diminished if he were deprived of the

⁸¹ Peregrine Horden, "Disease, dragons and saints: the management of epidemics in the Dark Ages," in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the historical perception of pestilence* (Cambridge University Press, 1995): 71.

⁸² See David J. Patterson, "Adversus Paganos: Disaster, Dragons, and Episcopal Authority in Gregory of Tours," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 44, no. 1 (August 9, 2013): 1–28. And A.J. Stoclet. "Consilia humana, ops divine superstitio: Seeking Succor and Solace in Times of Plague, with Particular Reference to Gaul in the Early Middle Ages" in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750* (2007): 135-149.

tributary rivers.”⁸³ Here, summarizing a section from Tacitus, Campbell demonstrates the interconnected relationship between the Romans and their rivers. They were animated entities, personified and meriting reverence. Sometimes a flood can foretell an important event, and sometimes it can be divine punishment for some transgression.⁸⁴

However, in the stories that Gregory writes in his *Dialogues*, the rivers are not unremarkable elements of the Italian landscape but are instead troublesome to the Christian communities that surround them, more reminiscent of the Roman depictions of rivers. The human agent, the bishops and their Christian communities, come into conflict with the non-human agent, the river. In each of these stories, the bishop, representative of both his community and God himself, prevails, in order to preserve things that the community has worked toward building, whether it be their city walls or crops. Conflict for the purpose of preservation is different from the attitude that many Roman authors took to describe necessary altercations with destructive rivers, which can be much more practical. A river’s anthropomorphic characteristics are ignored in favor of instead discussing the practicalities of building a new canal or cutting down a grove for a new building project.⁸⁵ However, the depictions that do ascribe any animistic characteristics to nature tend to describe this animism in relationship to humans. Rivers are gods, groves are nymphs, and these characters engage with humans in different ways.⁸⁶ Even in

⁸³ *Annales* 1.79. M’ Curius Dentatus (censor in 272 B.C.) had constructed a channel through (sic.) the mountains to connect Lake Velinus with the Nar (Cicerio, *Ad. Att.* 4.15.5). The local peoples now apparently regarded this work as part of the natural setting. In Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 118., and Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (JHU Press, 2007), 218.

⁸⁴ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 119-120.

⁸⁵ Christopher Schliephake and Douglas A. Vakoch, *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, (US: Lexington Books, 2016)., and Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*, Studies in the History of Greece and Rome (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁸⁶ Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*, Studies in the History of Greece and Rome (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

instances where an element of nature has no specific ascribed deity, it can still trick, hinder, or even debate nature. Rarely do these instances require protecting the products of human labor, as in the two episodes of in the *Dialogues*.

However, the association with the divine was not only limited to associating animistic qualities with various elements of nature. Rivers could also mark a religious or political boundary, and flowing water could be used as a protective boundary from or a deterrent for an inconsiderate spirit.⁸⁷ Floodwaters in particular can foretell a momentous event, or can be interpreted as a punishment by the divine for some human transgression, similar to Isidore of Seville's later characterization.⁸⁸ But as both Aldrete and Campbell point out, whether a flood or any other significant water event is influenced by the divine is just a result of which author happens to record it.⁸⁹ Thus, when there seems to be an ambivalence in the Roman recordings of these floods, it is probably a reflection of the conflicting attitudes toward the sources of flooding in the Roman tradition.

ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO GREGORY'S RIVERSCAPES:

Gregory's writings are a product of his cultural environment, and his *Dialogues* are no exception. Within it exist these various tensions between human and nature. Because this conflict is centered in/around the environment, it seems appropriate to do an ecocritical reading of Gregory's rivers. The environmental humanities provide environmental historians with tools to navigate texts like Gregory's *Dialogues*, which not only with historical happenings but with how humans narrate their relationship with nature itself. So much of the current debate surrounding

⁸⁷ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 219.

⁸⁸ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 220.

⁸⁹ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 222.

the changing climate and humanity's relationship to it during late antiquity is attempting to wrestle with where historical narrative and data drive narrative intersect. The environmental humanities, especially ecocriticism, give us an avenue to integrate both forms of narrative while still preserving the integrity of a narrative text.

But how do we identify an ecocentric text? Laurence Buell identifies an ecocentric text which is ripe for an ecocritical reading as one that features a “nonhuman environment” as a presence that suggests “human history is implicated in natural history”, one in which “the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest, “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation”, and some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant.⁹⁰ To say that Gregory’s text is an ecocentric text, with its intention of preserving the stories of the holy men of Italy and the wonderworking they do within the peninsula, is probably accurate. Because within many of his stories, there is a non-human agent that causes significant change in the natural world.

Using an ecocritical new materialist approach toward understanding the role of rivers does not rely solely on a “medieval Christian” or a “Roman” understanding of the role of rivers. The rivers in the *Dialogues* are dynamic entities with the power to change landscapes and continue to run their course today, and therefore using an analytical framework that acknowledges the eternal nature of these rivers is appropriate. This, of course, must be tempered by acknowledging that the source material is hagiographic.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 6–8. For a discussion of how these approaches are used to understand antiquity, see Christopher Schliephake and Douglas A. Vakoch, *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, (US: Lexington Books, 2016).

This more conventional approach to ecocritical work understands nature as a resource that is used by humanity for the purpose of furthering humanity's well-being, sometimes with a Christian justification for doing so. Originally proposed in the work of Lynn White Jr., the "domination of nature" in the Middle Ages, the idea that medieval people conceptualized of their environment as something that should be exploited because of their inherent ownership of it is something that scholars of the medieval period, environment, and religion must reckon with in their scholarship. Although general Christian attitudes toward the environment can hardly be categorized as uniform and consistent, the Lynn White thesis spurred on further discussion about how religious attitudes influence humanity's interactions with the environment.⁹¹

The second approach is newer, pulling ideas from the new materialist school. New materialists argue that agency is not only a feature of humans, but also of the natural world they live in. The world consists of both human and nonhuman agents that, in interacting with one another, create the world's events.⁹² In ascribing agency to nature, nature is then a dynamic force in the material world. Nature and culture "mesh" together and are thus objects of narrative that can interact with each other and human beings.⁹³ Although sometimes Romans do not acknowledge the animistic qualities of their nature, I still believe it is appropriate to say that attributing animistic qualities to nature is accurate.⁹⁴ In my thesis, I argue that Gregory's rivers

⁹¹ For a more in-depth discussion of this highly anthropocentric approach toward ecocriticism in the Middle Ages, see Willis Jenkins, "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): 283–309., and Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' After 50 Years," *History Compass* 13, no. 8 (2015): 396–410.

⁹² Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁹³ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana University Press Bloomington, 2014), 5., and Vittoria Prencipe, "Impervious Nature as a Path to Virtue: Cato in the Ninth Book of *Bellum Civile*" in *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Schliephake and Douglas A. Vakoch (US: Lexington Books, 2016), 132.

⁹⁴ Vittoria Prencipe, "Impervious Nature as a Path to Virtue: Cato in the Ninth Book of *Bellum Civile*" in *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Schliephake and Douglas A. Vakoch (US: Lexington Books, 2016), 135.

are depicted in the spirit of Roman agency, but that agency is ultimately trumped by the powers of the personal agency wielded by bishops as a result of their relationship to the Christian creator God. The miracles that these bishops perform ensure that these rivers can no longer retain their original, unruly spirit, because to do so would be to undo a miracle of God.

THAUMATURGY AS PASTORAL CARE:

Gregory's writings theologically support the concept of the human agent's ability to perform miracles. Dal Santo argues for a more sophisticated *Dialogues*, positioning it in a greater Mediterranean debate surrounding the role of the Incarnation in a saint's ability to perform miracles and the thaumaturgical role saints play in their *post-mortem* miracles.⁹⁵ What Dal Santo points to in Gregory's *Dialogues* is Gregory's understanding of the 'descent' of the Incarnation on saints, effectively 'raising' their human nature to a level at which they had a thaumaturgical power of their own.⁹⁶ Although the saints are not summoning the ability to perform miracles on their own, their powers pass through their humanity, making their ability to perform miracles a part of their humanity. Clearly, the cult of saints still held significant power at the end of the sixth century, as shrines maintained their pilgrims, relics continued to heal, and miracles abounded.⁹⁷

This approach toward the power of sanctity is also seen in the position that bishops take in late antique society. By the late sixth century, most bishops no longer conveyed the mystique of the late antique "holy man," whose charismatic and mystical powers are supported by their

⁹⁵ Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹⁶ Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints' Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63.

⁹⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 45.

ascetic lifestyle. Instead, bishops by the late sixth century were now responsible for both secular and religious leadership of their communities. They are called upon to handle their city's finances and building projects as well as administer pastoral care and preserve doctrine in their community.⁹⁸ As early as the fourth century we see bishops speaking or writing on behalf of their city in imperial matters, addressing the concerns of their diocese.⁹⁹ This element of pastoral care is emphasized in Gregory's other writings, as his *Rule of Pastoral Care* highlights the importance of the bishop's role in maintaining the spiritual health and administrative viability of their diocese. By the end of the sixth century, the bishop is caretaker and representative of his community, and demonstrates his sanctity by example, by being a virtuous man. The two bishops in Gregory's *Dialogues* who engage with the rivers, Fredianus and Sabinus, exercise their power of sanctity only when called upon to help their community. Their reputation as virtuous men is never in doubt, but demonstrations of asceticism, which are more common in earlier accounts of "holy men" engaging with the wilderness, are not present in these accounts.¹⁰⁰

GREGORY'S FLOOD STORIES:

The first story Gregory tells us is of Fredianus, bishop of Lucca, and his encounter with the river Auser (Serchio).¹⁰¹ The Auser river runs through Tuscany and is subject to flooding from rainfall in the Apennines. In the story, the Luchese tell Fredianus of the unruly river Serchio that had become accustomed to jumping its banks instead of flowing along the city wall,

⁹⁸ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, (Univ of California Press, 2013), 7.

⁹⁹ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, (Univ of California Press, 2013), 262.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*, (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1992)., Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, vol. 37 (Univ of California Press, 2013)., and George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, United States: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

¹⁰¹ Gabriele Zaccagnini, "Vita Sancti Fridiani: Contributi Di Storia e Di Agiografia Lucchese Medioevale," 1989.

like it was supposed to. The frequent flooding received both the crops along the banks as well as the native plants. The Luchese had attempted to change the course of the river, but to no avail. Then entered Fredianus, who first spent some time prostrate in prayer and then commanded the river to go to any place where he dragged his hoe. The river complied, flowing into the new channel that Fredianus had dug with his hoe.¹⁰²

To take a new materialist approach to this story, we have two conflicting sources of power, the river and Fredianus, respectively. Gregory acknowledges the tradition of an unruly and unpredictable natural world when describing the actions of the Serchio, as it was “often... accustomed” as though the river has recently taken on a new behavior that the Luchese are ill-equipped to deal with. Because the infrastructure for water management of rivers on a regional scale was not present in late sixth century Italy but had existed previously, to depict the river as having taken on new behaviors would not be out of the ordinary. Therefore, the Serchio’s flooding patterns are unfamiliar, if not unprecedented, as the Luchese do attempt to change the course of the river on their own. It is only with the introduction of Fredianus that any progress is made directing the river away from drowning the crops. Fredianus invokes the Lord in prayer and commands it to follow the course he dug for it. Although a seemingly simple interaction, it is here that Gregory introduces the second agent, the divine agent, and the natural world and the divine come into conflict, leaving the natural agent beaten.

Fredianus’ miracle occurs in three steps: first, he prays to Lord. Publicly praying demonstrates Fredianus’ intercessory abilities. As bishop, Fredianus is the person that connects his community to the divine through prayer and pastoral leadership, and it is this connection to

¹⁰² Grégoire Le Grand and Adalbert de Vogüé, *Dialogues* (Cerf, 1979).

the divine that allows him to perform this miracle.¹⁰³ In the second step, Fredianus orders the river to follow him wherever he goes. Here, Fredianus is speaking both as representative of his community and as an ordained servant of the Lord. He exerts his power as a late sixth century bishop towards the unruly river, forcing it to be tamed.¹⁰⁴ Whatever rustic land the lively Serchio used to flow through on its own whims is now replaced with one where it is confined to its new channel, because to suppose that it would leave would be to suppose that it does not need to listen to the power of the divine as delivered through its human agent. In demonstrating dominion over this river, it can be argued this community is embodying a more “medieval” perspective, as Gregory’s story is ushering in this new “medieval” world that has less tolerance for a nature that is not subject to God.

The story of Fredianus is immediately followed in the *Dialogues* by that of the Bishop Sabinus and the Po river. It is another fascinating combination of late Roman attitudes toward nature and this new emerging medieval attitude. The Po river runs through the north of Italy and is subject to seasonal flooding depending on Alpine rainfall.¹⁰⁵ It runs through many cities in northern Italy, including Piacenza, where our next story takes place. Sabinus, the sitting bishop of Piacenza, received a message from one of his deacons that the Po (Padus) was flooding ecclesiastical land. On hearing this, Sabinus tells his deacon to go down to the river and command it to stop flooding in his name. The deacon laughs. Then Sabinus dictates a letter to his notary, saying “Sabinus, servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, reminds the Po: I command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you not leave from the place of your riverbed and you do not

¹⁰³ Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, vol. 37 (Univ of California Press, 2013), 67.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire*, vol. 1988 (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁵ Marianne S. Goodfellow, “North Italian Rivers and Lakes in the ‘Georgics’” *Vergilius* no. 27 (1981): 12–22.

destroy church lands.”¹⁰⁶ He then commanded the deacon to cast the letter into the river, and once the letter touched the water, the river stopped flooding church lands.

The Bishop Sabinus writing to the letter Po would not seem as outlandish as his deacon implies. It is a common theme in Roman writing to address the river as a living entity with the ability to shape the world around it. Water is an especially dangerous and influential being which can both help and harm a community.¹⁰⁷ Campbell cites dedications and inscriptions to the river Po from the Roman period that imply religious engagement with the river.¹⁰⁸ Although difficult to date precisely, the abundance of these inscriptions implies that the river received religious attention and was often addressed through the written medium. The story of Bishop Sabinus and the letter can be seen as continuing in the vein of this cultural tradition. But Gregory has challenged the folk tradition by Christianizing it, both by acknowledging the agency that the river has in itself and then subjecting it to the agent of the Christian God, the holy saint. The river is no longer “Father Padus” as it was in these early inscriptions, it is simply the “Po” and Jesus Christ receives the honorific instead. Writing to a river in ancient Rome would be to address the river directly, whether or not its divinity, and therefore agency, was outright acknowledged.¹⁰⁹

In both of these stories, two sources of power come into conflict: the power of nature as represented in the river and the power of a monotheistic Christian God through the vehicle of the late sixth century bishop. In these two entities we also see two cultural representations come into

¹⁰⁶ Grégoire Le Grand and Adalbert de Vogüé, *Dialogues* (Cerf, 1979).

¹⁰⁷ Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 159.

¹⁰⁸ Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 131.

¹⁰⁹ Brian Campbell, *Rivers and the Power of Ancient Rome*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 135.

conflict: the animistic natural world of classical antiquity and the natural world that is subject to the power of a Christian creator God. Although both these elements are present, the animistic nature of these rivers is conquered by the power of the God-inspired Christian agent within these saintly bishops. Not only do these bishops represent a Christianizing force over the natural world, but in doing so, they embody their calling toward pastoral care of their communities. In calming and redirecting these waters, these bishops represent the redirection of Christian thought toward a more medieval west.

Although these are the only two saints' lives directed attributed to Gregory the Great, there exists a contemporary saints' life that also puts the Arno river and a bishop at its center, that of St. Theodore, Bishop of Lucca.¹¹⁰ The manuscript is dated to the seventh century.¹¹¹ The *vita* describes Theodore the bishop much in the same way that Gregory characterizes his own bishops who are performing their miracles in an Italian countryside. This Italy is still a place for holy men, as Theodore is an esteemed confessor whose holiness comes after the time of the glorious Apostles and the triumphant martyrs.¹¹² The *vita* follows many known hagiographical *topoi*, describing Theodore being a reflective person of sound mind as well as healing the sick and caring for the poor. However, it is the last section of this hagiography that is of interest, where Theodore performs a posthumous miracle concerning the river Arno.

There was a presbyter by the name of Ansualdo, who was very faithful to the Lord, and spent much of his time in the Church of Theodore the Confessor, day and night. The Arno river awoke from its slumber and began to flood. Ansualdo also woke from his slumber and was swept

¹¹⁰ In earlier scholarship, this *vita* is discussed as derivative of Gregory's *Dialogues* and has not been studied as a standalone work. AASS 327, BHL 8087

¹¹¹ Gabriele Zaccagnini, "Vita Sancti Fridiani: Contributi Di Storia e Di Agiografia Lucchese Medioevale," 1989.

¹¹² *Post gloriosos namque Apostolorum et Martyrum triumphos insuperables*, BHL 8087.

up by the flooding river. He then lifted his eyes up in prayer that he might merit the help of the bishop Theodore. Immediately, Theodore placed Ansulado on his shoulders and saved him from an incoming whirlpool of water by the entrance of the church, because of his devotion. When Theodore had carried Ansulado to safety, he said “I am Theodore who provided you aid for your constant faith and prayer.” After having said this, he disappeared.

Although not a part of Gregory’s collection of holy Italian saints, the bishop Theodore is in good company with the bishops Fredianus and Sabinus. In the stories I discussed previously, the bishops exert their power over the unruly rivers for the purpose of sparing their respective communities from the destruction posed by flooding. In this case, Theodore serves his community of devotees by saving one of them from drowning. We can also extend the same new materialist framework that we used to analyze the previous two stories to this story as well. The river takes on animistic qualities when it is described as “awakening from a slumber” and begins to overflow. It is unruly like the Auser (Serchio) is in Fredianus’ story, as though it has remembered a previous state of power that it held and “awakes” to reclaim it. Theodore’s intervention is possible because in his humanity remains Incarnate and is representative of the power of the divine.

As noted above, sixth century Italy endured a change in climate and culture simultaneously, and that is reflected in the cultural materials of the time, like Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*. “Beyond One Way Determinism” also looks to the cultural material of the sixth century to connect hydroclimate extremes and the increase in miraculous texts involving the

natural world, specifically flooding.¹¹³ This article argues that climate changes resulted in a generally wetter Italian peninsula, and such climate changes occurred simultaneously with significant socio-cultural changes. It looks to a collection of written sources from or describing the natural world of the sixth century to identify this socio-cultural change, which many historians argue is the “dawn” of the Middle Ages. Similar to my study, the article is invested in pushing against earlier “climatic determinism” claims about the sixth century in earlier climate articles and argues that “a (nonhuman) climatic phenomenon assumed agency (i.e. had impact on the society) only through its integration into a complex network of (human) social actors,” essentially arguing that when looking at the effects of premodern climate changes, the effects are rarely linear, and different social and cultural groups can react differently to the same change in climate.¹¹⁴ By using a multi-disciplinary textual data set, Zanchetta argues that such texts can be used to “reconstruct cultural perceptions and societal dynamics related to the climate and environmental change.”¹¹⁵ What is termed a “hybrid network approach” is intended to reconcile the seemingly contradictory results that earlier consilience approaches have produced.¹¹⁶

Clearly, the work of Zanchetta and his team and my thesis come to the same conclusions: literary sources, especially those that are narrative sources, are best used to explore cultural understandings of the natural world and changing climates. While Zanchetta puts forth this interpretive claim regarding literary sources in the sixth century, it points only to the existence of such narratives like Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*, Cassiodorus’ *Variae*, or Procopius’ *Secret History* without providing a companion literary analysis. Because of the paucity of sources that

¹¹³ Giovanni Zanchetta et al., “Beyond One-Way Determinism: San Frediano’s Miracle and Climate Change in Central and Northern Italy in Late Antiquity,” *Climatic Change* 165, no. 1 (March 20, 2021): 25.

¹¹⁴ Zanchetta et al. 15

¹¹⁵ Zanchetta et al. 17

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

refer to the changes in climate during the sixth century in Italy, it is easy to grasp at any mention of climate change in various genres of sources. History, hagiography, and letter registers are all different genres of literature with different conventions for how the natural world functions within them. Each of these literary works are also from completely different cultural groups as well. Ostrogothic Ravenna, Lombard Rome, and the Byzantine Levant are three vastly different cultural spheres despite all being part of the sixth century Mediterranean. However, if the purpose of using these literary sources is to explore cultural understandings of climate changes in Italy, it is important to use non-peninsular sources critically, if we are to use them at all, because they are more likely to reflect the cultural values of the societies that produced them, and not the societies they are writing about. By primarily focusing on the hagiographical sources of Gregory the Great, my thesis is able to explore the cultural practices of one society in-depth in ways that this article and its literary data set cannot.

The climate history of the Italian peninsula from the late Roman to the early medieval period continues to grow as different research groups take different approaches to approaching the period. The literary sources for the period are few and finite, but with the integration of paleoclimate proxies, new micronarratives form for specific locations concerning rainfall, flooding, agricultural production, trade, and much more. Different methodological approaches and datasets allow scholars to see both the maximalist perspectives on climate destruction and determinism alongside more minimalist perspectives from new vantage points. As more and more of these studies are published, more and more micronarratives are added to the greater picture of sixth century peninsular growing pains.

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