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A Bishop Faces War: Gregory the Great’s Attitude towards Ariulf’s Campaign on Rome (591-592)*

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ABSTRACT:

From the Germanic invasions of 406-409 onwards, the Church and its bishops developed a major role in the civic organization against external enemies; and this is especially true at a time in which the Roman army could not face the many barbarian hordes who wandered along the imperial West. The ecclesiastical authorities protected their cities, and not only by means of their moral appeals but also by assuming the military defense itself.

That was the case of Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome in a very difficult moment, menaced by different Lombard armies and abandoned by the scarce Byzantine troops, which were compelled to fight the enemy at really disadvantageous conditions. Thus, Gregory managed to arrange the defense – supplying food for their fellow citizens, organizing the walls guard, appointing urban leaders – and he even sets himself up as the main ‘strategist’ of the imperial forces in the Roman Duchy as some letters prove. Aside from many quotations concerning civic defense, the epistles 4, 27 and 28 of the second book of the Registrum will be especially analysed in the light of new historical evidences drawn from recent studies. Since the military aspects of Gregory’s pontificate have often been neglected when studying his role and achievements in sixth-century Italy, we expect to provide a different vision of a well-known pope whose actions throughout the war – especially in the campaign of 591-592 – revealed an unusual performance.

In the only letter from Columbanus¹ to Gregory the Great, the abbot of Bobbio addressed the bishop of Rome as speculator, a term which designated a ‘sentry’ or a ‘scout’, a soldier, in short, who kept watch on the enemy’s movements in

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Studia Patristica LXIX, 297-303.
classical Latin. Indeed, as Christine Mohrmann stated, this word was soon adapted by the Christian patristic to a theological meaning which defined the leader of a religious community, expected to take charge of its pastoral care as well as its secular affairs, a role and a function easily identifiable with the figure of the bishop. We know about many prelates who assumed responsibilities concerning military matters to defend their cities against Germanic peoples, and not only by means of their moral appeals.

And this additional episcopal function, starting from the great invasions onwards, was especially true in the sixth-century Italy due to the awful combination of the long-lasting Gothic War (535-553) and the scattered settlement of bellicose Lombards (568-774), a period considered as a lacrimabile bellum by John of Biclar. At the time of Gregory’s pontificate, after more than sixty years of continuous plundering, the old ruling class which formed the core of the civic administration had vanished or even disappeared in most of the Italian cities and it was often substituted by ecclesiastical authorities; imperial bureaucracy focused on Ravenna and frequently neglected other important cities; Byzantine army was seldom sufficient to control an extensive territory and to counteract the many Lombard raids which broke its frontiers; and when Gregory was apocrisiarius at Constantinople in 584, pope Pelagius II requested him to convince the emperor Maurice to send a magister militum or a dux to defend Rome, an evidence that the City lacked a capable commanding officer and was also military unassisted at this moment. Thus, it is logical that local population turned to the Church – namely, its bishops – in order to develop a major role in the civic organization against external enemies.

That was certainly the case of Gregory the Great, who became prelate of Rome after the bubonic plague that struck the City had killed his predecessor, and shortly before the Lombard armies ravaged the outskirts of the ancient capital and besieged the Aurelian Walls. From the very beginning of Gregory’s pontificate, he had to deal with a really fierce foe in very difficult circumstances, but he managed to arrange passive defense and also, as we will see, to coordinate offensive actions with the imperial commanders around Rome. For he was born to a wealthy senatorial family and had been praefectus Urbis some fifteen years

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3 Pelagius II, Ep. ad Greg. diac. (Gregorii I papae Registrum epistolarum, ed. Paul Ewald – Ludwig M. Hartmann, MGH epp. 2 [Berlin, 1899], 441): ‘loquimini ergo et tractate pariter, quo modo nostris celeribus possitis subuenire periculis, quia ita coaugustata est respublica, ut, nisi Deus piissimi in corde principis impetraret, ut insita sti misericordia suis famulis largiatur et super illam diacoposin uel unum magistrum et unum ducem dignetur concedere, in omni simus angustia destituti, quia maxime partes Romanae omni praesidio vacuatae uidentur et exarchus scribit nullum nobis posse remedium facere, quippe qui nec ad illas partes custodiendas se testatur posse sufficere.’
before, and as such, he had enough formation and experience to arrange urban defense: in a few words, he knew exactly what had to be done — or what could be done. And this is extendable to other Italian zones whose bishoprics were overseen by the pope; over these zones, he felt completely authorized to demand any action to the ecclesiastical — but also civilian — dignities.

His epistolary is full of data concerning this supervision: he appointed uir clarissimus Leontius as curator of Nepi; he ordered the soldiers of Naples to obey as their commander Constantius, the only military officer remaining in the city; Agnellus of Fondi and Januarius of Cagliari were required to organize the surveillance of the walls and to compel every citizen to fulfill their guard duty; Benenatus of Misenus received some funds to build — or restore — the urban castrum together with comes Comitaticius; some troops had to be evacuated from the monastery of Agnela at Naples — where they were housed — by Fortunatus, the bishop of the town; Gregory requested to collect a large amount of grain from the Roman Church estates in Sicily to feed their fellow citizens — and the soldiers who protected them, one might suppose; finally, he described himself to the empress Constantina as sacellarius of the Roman garrison, which may be interpreted as if the Holy See had at any time payed the salary of the troops stationed in the Vrbs.

We also know of two diplomatic agreements carried out by Gregory alone: the truce accorded in 592 with the Lombards in Tuscany — probably subordinated to Auiulf —, and the peace treaty of 594 by which Agilulf lifted the siege of Rome and withdrew his army in exchange of 500 pounds of gold, an annual tribute that would assure that no hostility would come from Langobardia maior; according to the legend, the latter took place in the steps of the Vatican’s basilica and does remind us the famous embassy of Leo the Great before Attila. Besides, his skillful competence in diplomacy — and his special relationship with Theodelinda too — revealed really useful for the signing of the cease-fires of 599 and 603 between the exarchs Callinicus and Smaragdus on the one side, and Agilulf on the other.

All these examples and many more do nothing but confirm the leadership of Gregory throughout his episcopate in every field of society, also in the military.

4 See respectively: Gregory the Great, Ep. 2,10 (Gregorii Magni Registrum epistularum [libri VIII-XIV, Appendix], ed. Dag Norberg, CChrSL 140 [Turnhout, 1982], 97); 47 (138f.); 8,19 (539); 9,11 and 196 (572f. and 750-2); 122 (673f.); 208 (767); 1,42 and 70 (49-56 and 78f.); and 5,39 (314-8).


6 Gregory the Great, Ep. 9,44,66 and 68 (602f., 621f. and 624); see Paul the Deacon, Hist. Lang. 4,20 and 28 (123 and 125f.). Concerning Agilulfus and Theodelinda, see PLRE 3A, Agilulfus, 27-9, and PLRE 3B, Theodelinda, 1235f.
Nevertheless, his implication went beyond the ‘usual’ functions in 591-592, during the Byzantine defense against the incursion of Ariulf’s troops deep inside the ager Romanus — what will be the future Duchy of Rome. Lombard army devastated Fondi, Velletri, Preneste and Passo Corese, and captured Narni, Sutri, Pontericcioli, Bomarzo and Perugia, the key stronghold which connected Ravenna and Rome through the via Amerina: the City was virtually surrounded.7 At this point, Gregory undertook the task of coordinating the strategy and disposition of imperial forces together with Velox, Maurice and Vitalian, the three magistri militum responsible to defend the area, and possibly also with Castus,8 commander of the urban garrison, yet his arrival in Rome before July 593 is not clear. These individuals and the facts related appear in three epistles — 4, 27 and 28 — of the second book of the Registrum, which will be especially analysed in the light of new historical interpretations drawn9 from recent studies.

We can remark four relevant aspects about military organization in these letters: the evidence of epistolary exchange, regular enough to allow a good coordination among the Byzantine commanders and centralized by Gregory, as it seems; the consignment of supplies and the sending of reinforcements; the tactics to be used depending on the enemy’s movement; and the presumed condition of some mentioned troops.

Concerning the first point, we document indeed these three epistles10 addressed to Velox — 2, 4 — and Maurice and Vitalian a pari — 2, 27 and 28 —,

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7 Gregory the Great, Ep. 1.8 (16); 2.2.4,27 and 28 (90f. and 114f.); 2.13 and 42 (99f. and 130f.); 3.13 and 14 (159-61); and 3.20 (165f.). See also: Lib. pont. 66 (Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire, I, ed. Louis Duchesne, 2nd ed. [Paris, 1981], 312); and Paul the Deacon, Hist. Lang. 4.8 (118). Regarding Ariulf, see PLRE 3A, Ariulfus, 119f.

8 Castus is expressly mentioned in Gregory the Great, Ep. 3.51 (196f.), dated in July 593, but there is a sentence which may be related to him in id., Ep. 2.27 (113): ‘tamen et hic, in quantum Deus adiuvaret, contra eum fallitius noster gloriosus magister militum paravit se’. See also PLRE 3A, Castus, 274-5.

9 The first specific studies concerning Gregory the Great’s implication in war affairs were brief and lacked of a suitable military context: Jules Doizé, ‘Le rôle politique et social de saint Grégoire le Grand pendant les guerres lombardes’, in id., Deux études sur l’administration temporelle du pape Grégoire le Grand (Paris, 1904), 3-29; and Mario Gatti, ‘Le lettre militari di Gregorio Magno’, Nuova Antologia 268, s. 6, 184 (1916), 204-8. From that time on, several interesting studies have been published, although they do not specifically or not only deal with the role of Gregory the Great: Bernard Bavant, ‘Le duché byzantin de Rome. Origine, durée et extension géographique’, MEF RM 91 (1979), 41-88, 54-66; Thomas S. Brown, Gentlemen and Officers: Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy (AD 554-800) (Rome, 1984), 53-5; Francesco Borri, ‘Ducis e magistri militum nell’Italia esarcale (VI-VIII secolo)’, Retti Medioevali 6 (2005), 1-46, 5-7 and 18-21; Giorgio Ravegnani, ‘Le unità dell’esercito bizantino nel VI secolo tra continuità e innovazione’, in Stefano Gaspari (ed.), Alto medioevo mediterraneo, Reading 3 (Florence, 2005), 185-205, 194-202; and Enrico Zanini, Le Italie bizantine. Territorio, insediamenti ed economia nella provincia bizantina d’Italia (VI-VIII secolo), Munera 10 (Bari, 1998), 51-76 and 223-85, for the new archaeological evidences.

10 Gregory the Great, Ep. 2.4,27 and 28 (92f. and 113-5). See also: PLRE 3B, Mauricius 2, Velox and Vitalianus 3, 854f., 1367 and 1379f., respectively.
which are dated in September 591 and June 592, respectively. They may be in relation not only to two different stages of Ariulf’s campaign, but also to two areas of conflict, probably following the route from the Duchy of Spoleto to the Northwest limits of Rome’s territory. Moreover, two of the addressees – Velox and Maurice – had previously sent a letter to the pope and so had Aldio – tribunus or comes of an unknown city – informing about the enemy’s position; there is also a vague mention of certain homines uestri – of Maurice and Vitalian – who were certainly messengers of the magistri. So it would seem that communication and therefore strategical coordination11 of the imperial forces in Rome was assured, and that Gregory collaborated so closely with the army that one may think that he acted like one of them.

Secondly, we record a mention of at least one consignment of supplies12 requested by Maurice and Vitalian, but we know nothing about its nature. On the other hand, sending of reinforcements12 is mentioned twice: some milites who should be sent to Velox awaited in the City due to the concentration of Lombard troops nearby, and they only departed when a letter of the magister recommended it so; furthermore, Gregory expressed his anxiety to Maurice and Vitalian about the soldiers dispatched to them because of the information given by Aldio.

In the third place, the tactics to be used. It is really astonishing finding out a bishop writing about how to attack the enemy’s forces taking advantage of his movements with the aim14 of inflicting maximum damage. For this was

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11 Gregory the Great, Ep. 2,27 (113): ‘sed Aldio uir magnificus post aduentum hominorum uestrorum nobis scripsit quia in proximo tam Ariulfus esset, et timuimus ne milites qui ad nos diriguntur in manus eius inciderent.’ See PLRE 3A, Aldio, 40-1. We also document exchange of letters between Gregory and the three magistri militum in all these epistles: ‘epistula uestra’; ‘gloriae uestrae suscipientes epistulas’; and ‘gloriae uestrae per filium nostrum Vitalianum (...) uerbo et scripto mandauimus’. And we even verify a letter from Ariulf: see note 15.

12 Id., Ep. 2,27 (113): ‘et de sollicitudine uestra multum gaudui sumus, et nos ea quae scripsistis parata fuerunt.’


what Gregory proposed to our three commanders; we read: ‘uos a dorso eius ita sicut uiros fortes condece laborate’, and this was to be done whether Arnulf went to Ravenna or to Rome in order to retain his march; the same is repeated in another epistle but with the indication ‘quomodo consueuitis’, then considering it an usual practice; and finally, there is an appeal for plundering the duke’s territory if he headed Rome. The case of Sovana deserves special mention, for the city presumably surrendered to the Lombards as the same Arnulf had informed the pontiff. This time, Gregory behaved like a furious defender of the Empire: he ordered the commanders to verify if it was true, and if not, to take some hostages – ‘obsides dignos’ – and make them swear a new oath to Constantinople; but if Sovana betrayed his loyalty, he left the decision in the hands of the officers, who could do whatever they considered proper – ‘quicquid utile rei publicae iudicaueritis’. Definitely, these recommendations have nothing to do with the Augustinian concept of ‘just war’ and clearly implies the admission of the darkest side to justify that dirty war, ‘the lesser of two evils’ it is said. And we may also wonder whether Gregory could have even read – or got to know – one of the handbooks of Byzantine strategy, the Strategikon, written – probably but not surely – by Maurice, the same emperor whom Gregory knew well since his stay at the capital of the Empire.

Lastly, the condition of the above mentioned troops. Reinforcements sent to Velox either needed some practice or their moral was too low to be ready for war, as one may infer from the pope’s words. Besides, Velox had to free the pass to three Germanic personages with no rank assigned – Adobin, Alain

15 Gregory the Great, Ep. 2,28 (114): ‘undecimo autem die mensis Iunii Ariulfus hanc epistulam quam uobis direximus transmisit. Et ido relegentes eam uident si in fide sua Suansenses quam rei publicae promiserunt perstiterunt. Obsides dignos de quibus possitis confidere ab eis percipite, et insuper denuo sacramentis obstringite, reddentes eis quod loco pignoris sustulistis, et serpentibus uestris eos sanantes. Si autem manifestissime cognoveritis eos cum Ariulfu de sua subdizione locutos fuisse uel certe obsides ei dedisse, sicut nos Ariulfi epistula quam uobis direximus dubios reddidit, salubri consilio prætractantes, ne in aliquo anima uestra uel nostra de sacramentis grauetur, quicquid utile rei publicae iudicaueritis.’


17 Book IV of Strategikon is devoted to ‘Evêôpòi and describes several kinds of ambushes depending on the battle conditions and the enemy fighting traditions: Das Strategikon des Maurice, ed. George T. Dennis, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 17 (Wien, 1981), 192-207. In this book, we also find some Greek expressions parallel to the Latin a dorso – το τόποι or ὁμιληθεῖαι, among others –, which may be an evidence that Gregory knew the Strategikon or that he was at least familiar to usual military terms.

18 Gregory the Great, Ep. 2,4 (92): ‘nunc vero utile uisum est ut aliquantii illic milites transmigrantur, quos gloria tua adnomere et hortari ut parati sint ad laborem studeat.’ It could also be argued that they may be recruits, perhaps of local origin. See also note 13.
and Igilidus Grisingus, seemingly Lombards and adscribed to Maurice – for they could operate at their initiative; they also travelled with their respective familiae, a term which has given rise to different interpretations. Vincenzo Recchia\textsuperscript{19} has recently regarded them as ‘servi della Chiesa’, suchlike condottieri serving the Holy See as messengers to coordinate military actions who would become this way pontifical soldiers \textit{avant la lettre}. But I do agree with a previous explanation by Thomas S. Brown\textsuperscript{20} who suggested a condition of ‘new style duces’ for these three captains and thought that they were included into the regular Byzantine army with their own bands of warriors as many Lombards had done before.

To conclude, I would like to quote just few lines of the letter 2.27,\textsuperscript{21} talking about those above mentioned attacks from behind: ‘\textit{speramus enim in omnipotentis Dei virtutem et in ipsius beati Petri principis apostolorum, in cuius natale sanguina effundis desiderant, quia ipsum sibi contrario sine mora inueniet.’ Gregory’s attitude towards Lombards evolved and achieved a certain degree of normality – certainly not with Ariulf, it was only so with Agilulf and Theodelinda and later with Arichis –, but Gregory wished the worst for the nefandissima gens at the beginning of his episcopate. Indeed, that is not what one may expect from a pope – to shed blood on the \textit{dies natalis} of the patron saint of his City –, but setting himself up as the main ‘strategist’ of the imperial forces in the Roman area during this time, he probably spared lives and goods to his fellow citizens. Thus, from a practical point of view, we may say that, fortunately, Rome had got Gregory.

\textsuperscript{19} V. Recchia, \textit{Gregorio Magno} (1996), 279-81. See also \textit{PLRE} 3A, Adobin, Aloin and Igilidus Grisingus, 16, 49 and 558, respectively.
\textsuperscript{21} Gregory the Great, \textit{Ep.} 2.27 (113f.).