

Between Expiatory Religious Processions and Individual Escapes: Responses to Bubonic Plague Epidemics in the *Historiae* of Gregory of Tours and Paul the Deacon

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Article abstract

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Abstract

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Résumé

Cet article a pour but d'explorer les réponses individuelles et collectives aux épidémies de peste en Italie et en Gaule mérovingienne entre le milieu du sixième et le septième siècle à travers les récits de deux auteurs chrétiens latins : Grégoire de Tours (538/539-594) et Paul le Diacre (c.720s-c.799). Dans un premier temps, l'article se concentre sur les récits de Grégoire sur la peste, en soulignant le contraste qu'il offre entre les évêques qui ont pu gérer les épidémies de peste grâce à des pratiques religieuses individuelles et/ou collectives et ceux dont les efforts se sont avérés inadéquats. Ensuite, l'article examine le récit de la peste de Paul, en soulignant les difficultés posées par son vocabulaire ambigu et ses préoccupations personnelles et théologiques. Enfin, il analyse l'épidémie de peste romaine de 590, qui est racontée à la fois par Grégoire et par Paul. L'article tente de comprendre comment les deux auteurs ont perçu et évalué les réponses à la peste dans des contextes culturels et politiques différents et quelles étaient les différences et les similitudes entre leurs rapports sur la peste romaine de 590.

In the last two decades, research on the Justinianic Plague (c.541–c.750)¹ has increased considerably. A comparison between the studies from 1975 to 1999 cited in Dionysios Stathakopoulos’s 2000 article and the critical review of the main academic publications from 2000 to 2018 presented in the same journal by Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai in 2019 reveals a substantial growth of interest in the topic since the beginning of the new millennium.² Nevertheless, it is only recently that the twentieth-century historiographical interpretations concerning the Justinianic Plague and its key features — extensive chronology, high death toll, and wide geographical spread — have been systematically problematized.³ According to critics of this paradigm, instead of studying the Justinianic Plague as a “pandemic with its own agency, seemingly uniform effects across Eurasia, and an out-sized causal force” through a global level of analysis, future research efforts should move toward a micro level of analysis that focuses on how individuals and local communities “attempted to mitigate, explain, or resolve plague outbreaks within their own systems of beliefs and cultural norms.”⁴ This approach would also produce a shift in the understanding of plague accounts in historical texts. As Kristina Sessa has noted in relation to the study of environmental history in Late Antiquity, it is only through a cultural approach that highlights the importance of human experience that literary sources can no longer be read as empirical facts or neutral records. Conversely, they should be placed in their broader context, which includes not only the physical word but also “pre-existing belief systems, social relations, economic structures, and power relations.”⁵ Scholarship has extensively investigated the early medieval authors’ accounts from both the Eastern Roman Empire and Western Europe on how individuals and specific groups perceived and responded to the First Plague Pandemic.⁶ Despite these valuable studies, more meticulous comparative research considering different geographical areas as well as sociocultural contexts is needed. The main advantage of this method is to compare plague accounts written by authors from different backgrounds and historical contexts, thus underlining both similarities and variations on plague responses by specific communities. Moreover, this approach sheds light on how plague epidemics can be understood and judged differently according to authors’ goals and perspectives.⁷ To partially address these issues, the current article aims to explore individual and collective responses to plague outbreaks in Italy and Merovingian Gaul between the mid-sixth and -seventh centuries through the narrations

of two Latin Christian authors: Gregory of Tours (538/539–594) and Paul the Deacon (c.720s–c.799). While Gregory is commonly recognized as “the major literary source for plague in Western Europe,”⁸ less interest has been devoted to Paul’s plague narrative. This may be partially explained by the fact that while Gregory’s knowledge about plague epidemics was based either on personal experience or eyewitness testimony, Paul’s plague accounts are derived from earlier historical sources, including Gregory’s plague reports. However, Paul’s writings should not, as I will argue, be considered a mere duplication of earlier authors’ texts. Rather, his ability as a narrator includes in a careful selection, revision, and critical reinterpretation of materials to create an original work that could fulfill both his own narrative purposes and those of his eighth-century readers.⁹ Comparing Paul and Gregory’s accounts on plague epidemics can be useful to understanding how the two authors perceived and evaluated plague responses within different cultural contexts and the differences and similarities between their reports on the 590 Roman plague.

The methodological approach of the present study consists of comparing accounts of the bubonic plague,¹⁰ focusing on those in Gregory’s *Ten Books of History* (*Decem libri historiarum*)¹¹ and Paul’s *History of the Lombards* (*Historia langobardorum*)¹² but not excluding minor plague reports in other writings. This article will explore word choice, literary style, and models in the two texts. These accounts will also be contextualised in relation to the historical framework in which they were produced (sixth-century Merovingian Gaul and eighth-century Lombard Italy) and, most importantly, the authors’ biographies. The results obtained from this study should be examined while considering another important factor: the interpretation of early medieval plague accounts. Indeed, the sources analyzed were undoubtedly influenced by the purposes of authors, who did not hesitate to attribute personal meanings and interpretations to these events. Therefore, a critical literary analysis of the texts will be used to highlight each author’s literary agenda. Finally, instead of attempting to determine whether these documents offer a description of what actually happened, they should be considered an opportunity to examine the beliefs of a specific community about plague epidemics.

The present article begins with a brief biography of Gregory, followed by an overview of the representation of diseases and their remedies in the *Decem libri historiarum*. Next, Gregory’s plague accounts will be carefully analyzed, stressing the clear contrast he

offers between bishops who were able to manage plague epidemics though individual and/or collective religious practices and those whose efforts proved inadequate. The investigation then turns to Paul's testimony, beginning with some background information on his life and the *Historia langobardorum*. After examining his plague narratives in detail, highlighting the difficulties posed by his ambiguous vocabulary and his personal and theological concerns, the final section of the article explores the Roman plague outbreak of 590, which is recounted by both Gregory and Paul.

The role of the "good shepherd" in Gregory of Tours's plague narratives

Born in Clermont (in modern-day Auvergne), Gregory¹³ was educated first in letters and, after his father's death (c.548), in theology under the supervision of his paternal uncle Saint Gallus, bishop of Clermont, and under Gallus's successor Saint Avitus. During his youth, Gregory suffered from poor health. After overcoming a serious illness of which Gregory believed that Saint Illidius had cured him, Gregory took a vow at the saint's tomb to enter the clergy (this likely occurred before 551). The experience affected him deeply: The themes of illness and healing by the saints appear frequently in all his writings.¹⁴ He served as a deacon in Clermont until 573, when he was chosen as bishop of Tours. At that time, as a result of its peripheral political location, this region was exposed to numerous dangers.¹⁵ Gregory spent most of his career in Tours and died in 594, leaving his most complex and extensive work, the *Decem libri historiarum*,¹⁶ unfinished. Divided into ten books, the text begins with a history of the world from Creation until 397. It then proceeds to chronicle Merovingian history up to 591.¹⁷

Gregory's chronicle of the events of his time, including the plague epidemics that struck Gaul in the sixth century, is certainly far from a disinterested account devoid of personal interests.¹⁸ His narration clearly reflects his literary agenda. According to Martin Heinzelmann, Gregory's *Decem libri historiarum* presents a vision of history modelled on pedagogical principles and inscribed within a biblical perspective. This vision is intended to illustrate the consequences of sin in the lives of individuals and to praise or condemn their actions according to Christian ethical principles. For example, kings were to be depicted as positive or negative according to whether they pleased God and whether they behaved correctly in relation to their bishops.¹⁹ Within this narrative framework, plague epidemics are understood as unfa-

vorable circumstances that can nonetheless heighten (or destroy) the prestige and reputation of individuals depending on how they behaved during an epidemic. Finally, Allen Jones has asserted that Gregory “expected readers to study, compare, and contrast the details about particular people’s actions, characters, and deaths, which done they might realize the need to repent of their own sins and implore the likelihood of salvation.”²⁰

In his *Decem libri historiarum*, Gregory exposes his understanding of medicine, disease, and remedies against both mundane maladies and epidemics, including what he calls “inguinal epidemics,” which Michael McCormick has identified as outbreaks of bubonic plague.²¹ Conversely, Eric Faure has claimed that “the passages mentioning the plague and the references to *lues inguinalis* do not necessarily indicate with certainty the presence of bubonic plague in a given area.”²² Therefore, it has been argued that it would be more judicious to refer to plague epidemics in more general terms, because it is not always clear which of the three forms of plague — bubonic, pneumonic, or septicemic — was present during an outbreak. Nevertheless, according to several historians, it is possible in some cases to hypothesize (but not demonstrate with certainty) the presence of bubonic plague on the basis of both the symptomatologic descriptions provided by authors²³ and the occurrence of precise terms to reference it.²⁴ Finally, it is important to remark that historians have frequently debated whether Gregory’s plague accounts were reliable or not.²⁵ To overcome this issue, I suggest that the collective penitential practices Gregory reports should be interpreted in light of his narrative aims. It is less useful to explore whether these rituals were effective and performed exactly as he describes. Rather, Gregory’s accounts reveal his beliefs about how clerics and bishops *should respond* (or *should have responded*) to plague epidemics.

In Gregory’s view, all kinds of illnesses, from the most common to plague epidemics, were usually divinely caused. However, in some cases, he does not state clearly whether the death of an individual or a group from illness is due to sinful behaviours or other causes. In most of the episodes reported in *Decem libri historiarum*, both personal and collective illnesses are interpreted as punishments for transgressing God’s law.²⁶ Therefore, holy intervention, both individual and collective, is required to cure the disease. Moreover, in Gregory’s texts, disease outbreaks and other natural disasters (such as floods, eclipses, and earthquakes) could also be understood as apocalyptic omens result-

ing from human sins. Nonetheless, Gregory's narrative seems to focus on the need to repent and correct morally wrong actions rather than on identifying and describing apocalyptic signs. Indeed, he highlights the importance of the religious and liturgical measures implemented by the episcopal authority during plague outbreaks. These interventions included expiatory processions, penitential litanies, vigils, and prayers.²⁷

Gregory's plague narratives include two models of bishops. The first is the ideal model of the "good bishop" or "good shepherd," a leader who is concerned about the fate of his flock and who implements a series of remedies (from individual prayer to collective acts of penance) in an attempt to appease God's wrath or at least to ensure the salvation of the souls of every member of the community. The second model is the "inadequate bishop"; this leader is unable to protect his flock in times of need or, in the worst case, abandons it. The first example of the "good shepherd" that Gregory describes is Saint Gallus, bishop of Clermont (*sed.* c.525–c.551). Thanks to his numinous powers, Saint Gallus succeeded in saving his hometown from a severe plague outbreak that struck several regions of Gaul between c.543 and 547.²⁸ Gallus beseeched God to save his flock from the disease. In a dream, God revealed that he would spare Clermont from the plague thanks to his prayers. The next day, the saint instituted a litanic procession that was subsequently performed annually. In the middle of Lent, all the residents of the town walked to the "*basilicam beati Iuliani martyris*" at Brioude, which was sixty kilometres from Clermont, singing psalms as they went.²⁹ The days of prayer and fasting had a positive effect, and the people of Clermont remained healthy throughout the bishop's lifetime. Although Gregory praises Gallus's role in guiding his flock to collective penance, it was the bishop's supplication that appeased God's wrath against the sinful people of Clermont: Without Gallus's efficacious intercession, God would not have spared the city. Moreover, Gregory has personal reasons for highlighting the virtues of this heroic "good bishop": Although this is not explicit in the text, Gallus was Gregory's uncle and the mentor who educated him from around the age of ten, after his father's death.³⁰

In 571, during the episcopate of Cautinus (c.554–571), Gallus's successor, the city of Clermont was again struck by a severe outbreak of plague.³¹ At first, Cautinus decided to flee and take refuge in Brioude — apparently, he lacked Gallus's courage — but he finally returned to his cathedral for Easter and died of the plague shortly

afterwards. Unlike Bishop Cautinus, the fearless priest Cato refused to flee and remained in the city during the epidemic to perform funerals for the victims of the disease, but this choice eventually cost him his life. Finally, Gregory admits that Cato's inclination to help others counterbalanced his *superbia* (pride).³² This subtle note on Cato's *superbia* is explained by a significant event that occurred shortly after Gallus's death. At the beginning of Book IV, Gregory records that, after Gallus's passing, Cato immediately arrogated the title of bishop, even though he had not yet been officially enthroned.³³ In the end, another candidate, Cautinus, was consecrated bishop thanks to the support of King Theudebald (c.535–555). Despite this negative characterization of Cato in *Decem libri historiarum* 4.7, Gregory's narrative quickly shifts to depict Bishop Cautinus in an even worse light,³⁴ accusing him of behaving so wickedly that he was loathed by everyone.³⁵ Gregory does not clarify why Cautinus returned to his cathedral for Easter after his initial flight from the plague in 571, although this decision may have been motivated by the plague outbreak in Brioude, where Cautinus had sought refuge. Similarly, Gregory fails to mention that Cautinus probably left Clermont to lead the annual procession to Saint Julian's shrine.³⁶ Furthermore, in *Martyrdom and Miracles of the Martyr Saint Julian*, Gregory admits that he himself fled Clermont for Brioude during the plague of 571³⁷ — likely accompanying the “bad bishop” Cautinus. However, in *Decem libri historiarum*, Gregory explicitly avoids acknowledging that he himself failed to personify the heroic model of the good cleric. Instead, it was Cato who, until his death, fulfilled his priestly duties. In this context, while Cautinus's death seems to be caused by his misconduct, Cato's death should not necessarily be understood as a divine punishment. On the contrary, just before he died, Cato had the opportunity to purify his soul from *superbia* and consequently join God in heaven because of his merits.

In contrast to Bishop Cautinus, Salvius, bishop of Albi (574–584), like a good shepherd (*bonus pastor*), refused to flee the city when his flock was decimated by a plague epidemic in 584.³⁸ Facing imminent judgement, he urged the few survivors to pray constantly, keep doing their vigils, and perform good acts in order to obtain the eternal peace if God should decide to recall them from this world. Gregory concludes his account with the death of Salvius, who demonstrated his holiness on that occasion as well: Realizing that his death was imminent, he prepared his own sarcophagus, washed his own body, and placed himself in his shroud, where he died in blessed contempla-

tion.³⁹ As described by Gregory, the bishop's death seems to represent a divine reward instead of a punishment.

The examples provided here illustrate the crucial role of the prototypical figure of the "good bishop" in Gregory's plague narrative. In one case — probably because no bishop was present in the city — Gregory ascribes this ideal role to a king, Gunthramn (c.532–592). When a severe epidemic broke out in Marseille in 588 and rapidly moved up the Rhône, finally reaching Saint-Symphorien-d'Ozon (south of Lyon), the king, "*acsi bonus sacerdos providens remedia*" (like a good bishop was for providing remedies), ordered the entire people to assemble at the church and engage in prayer.⁴⁰ The king also organized penitential litanies, fasts, vigils, and almsgiving.⁴¹ On this occasion, Gunthramn is similar to a saint whose incessant prayers likely succeeded in stopping the epidemic — there are no reports that the epidemic spread northwards — although Gregory does not state this clearly as he does in the case of Gallus. Perhaps he omits this subtle detail for a specific reason: Even though Gregory admired Gunthramn for his piety, his generosity to the Church, and his consideration for the ecclesiastics, the *Decem libri historiarum* provides a multi-faceted account of the king who, at times, exhibited extreme cruelty, weakness, and incompetence in handling complicated political and family affairs.⁴²

Another case in which Gregory does not clearly express to his readers a subtle detail is the story of Theodore, bishop of Marseilles (582–591). While the plague was spreading through the city of Marseilles in 588, Theodore returned from the court of King Childebert (c.570–596) and took up residence in the abbey of Saint-Victor, across the city harbour from the initial outbreak. During the entire epidemic, he devoted himself completely to prayer and vigils so that God would stop the epidemic.⁴³ Gregory reports that the plague ceased after only two months, and the inhabitants, who had previously fled in droves, could return to their homes. However, the disease struck again, and all those who had returned died. In *Decem libri historiarum*, Bishop Theodore faces numerous misfortunes, and he is generally portrayed as a good but powerless bishop who is obliged to follow the orders of the Austrasian court. At the same time, he is depicted as pious and holy man,⁴⁴ and he demonstrated this devotion when the plague struck the people of Marseilles in 588. However, as Michael McCormick has argued, Gregory also reports (indirectly) that, when the plague broke out in Marseilles, Theodore returned to the place (*locum*), that is, Saint-Victor, a compound located in a safer area outside the city.⁴⁵

Considering Gregory's sympathetic treatment of Bishop Theodore, it is not surprising that he refrains from explicitly stating that Theodore avoided the city when his flock needed his help. The bishop of Tours does not openly lie to his readers — only people familiar with the topography of Marseilles would notice this subtle point — he simply prefers to focus their attention on the religious measures implemented by Theodore.

At the end of the sixth century, Gregory of Tours presented a recurring pattern of responses to plague epidemics, which includes both the intercession of a "good shepherd" to appease God's wrath and the performance of collective expiatory rituals and processions. Gregory judges the success and failure of religious remedies according to his personal, pastoral-theological purposes. In doing so, he transforms plague epidemics into opportunities to praise or blame specific individuals or communities.

"For as common report had it that those who fled would
avoid the plague": Paul the Deacon's plague narrative

Paul the Deacon was born in Cividale del Friuli.⁴⁶ During the first period of his life, he was a frequent visitor to the mid-eighth-century Lombard court: He was educated in Pavia at the court of King Ratchis (744–749/756–757) and later served his successors Astulf (749–756) and Desiderius (757–774). He also became the preceptor of Adelperga, the daughter of the last Lombard king, following her to Benevento when she married Arechis, duke of Benevento (758–787). Paul likely decided to become a monk at the monastery of Monte Cassino during his sojourn in southern Italy. Around 782/783, presumably as a result of his brother's imprisonment for his participation in Duke Hrodgaud of Friuli's 776 revolt against Charlemagne, who by 774 ruled the Lombard kingdom, Paul went to the Frankish king's court to plead for his brother's release. After an initial period of dissatisfaction, the deacon became one of the most important intellectuals in the Carolingian court, where he remained until 786/787. He finally returned to Italy and then retired to Monte Cassino, where he probably composed the *Historia langobardorum*, his masterpiece that apparently remained unfinished due to author's death.⁴⁷

The *Historia langobardorum* recounts the history of the *gens Langobardorum* from their mythical origins to the death of the Lombard King Liutprand (743). It also presents a series of historical digres-

sions on the major events in the Eastern Roman Empire, the Frankish kingdom, and other minor regions. The text is structured into six books and mixes historical accounts with a variety of different materials, including mythical episodes, legends, epitaphs, poems, epistles, biographical anecdotes, geographical and ethnographic digressions, and descriptions of natural disasters. The *Historia langobardorum*'s complex structure reflects the author's intricate narrative style,⁴⁸ which combines the careful selection of excerpts with critical revision of the original sources to create a coherent, completely original narrative for his audience. In this regard, it is important to stress that the *Historia langobardorum* does not present a single viewpoint (pro-Lombards or pro-Franks).⁴⁹ Consequently, as Lidia Capo has recently suggested, it would be more fruitful to assume that Paul wrote his work for a wide audience, which certainly included the Lombard-Beneventan community but did not completely exclude the Carolingian world.⁵⁰ Finally, Christopher Heath has argued that Paul's *Historia langobardorum* "reveals a sense of his personality and his own responses to events and individuals."⁵¹ As a cleric, Paul's worldview was naturally influenced by Christian tradition. It is probable that his experience at Monte Cassino also played an important role in shaping his ethics and value system, but this does not flatten his personality to that of a monk interested solely in prayer and contemplation.⁵²

The two infectious diseases most frequently mentioned in the *Historia langobardorum* are the plague and dysentery (*desenteriae morbus*).⁵³ Generally, Paul's descriptions of epidemics are quite vague, and it is difficult to establish with absolute certainty whether they refer to epidemics of plague or outbreaks of other contagious diseases such as smallpox or measles.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the reported symptoms makes it possible to pinpoint a few episodes in the text that seem to describe plague outbreaks.⁵⁵ For example, in *Historia langobardorum* 4.4, Paul mentions that a plague outbreak (*pestis inguinaris*) devastated Ravenna, Grado, and Istria around 591.⁵⁶ A few chapters later, he reports that an epidemic (*pestis gravissima*) struck Ravenna and other coastal populations again (*rursum*) in c.600.⁵⁷ In the latter case, even though Paul's terminology is quite imprecise, the reference to the same geographical area and the use of the term *rursum* to emphasise the continuous temporal relationship between the two outbreaks implies that the epidemic in c.600 was quite probably the plague.⁵⁸

In examining Paul's plague narrative, three factors need to be taken into account. Firstly, even though the eschatological perspective

and the Christian idea that disease outbreaks are a divine punishment for human sins are not entirely absent from the text,⁵⁹ plague epidemics are mostly represented as historical events, part of a chain of subsequent episodes. Paul usually specifies the chronological time, geographical area, and severity of the illness, but he generally does not introduce any “positive” or “negative” models of bishops to his readers. Secondly, unlike in Gregory of Tours’s narrative, *Historia langobardorum* describes only three episodes of epidemics extensively; the others are only briefly mentioned.⁶⁰ Finally, the outbreaks that are included reflect Paul’s religious sensibility and political vision. By expressing positive or negative judgments about individuals’ behaviour during past plague epidemics, he seems both to express his personal opinions about the present and to provide suggestions and lessons for his readers.

In *Historia langobardorum* 2.4, possibly drawing on the chronicle of Secundus of Trent (d. 612), Paul describes the severe plague outbreak that struck various Italian provinces, including Liguria, during the patrician Narses’s military campaign in Italy (565–571). According to Paul, the plague — which has symptoms that include a very high fever, the formation of glands (*glandulae*) in the groin and other sensitive parts of the body, and death within as little as three days — and other evils affected only the Romans and Italy as far as the borders with the Alaman and Bavarian people.⁶¹ On that occasion, no “good shepherd” stepped in to stop the plague, so the only way to escape death was to flee the towns and villages, taking refuge in isolated places. The scenario he describes is extremely grim:

Everywhere there was grief and everywhere tears. For as common report had it that those who fled would avoid the plague, the dwellings were left deserted by their inhabitants, and the dogs only kept house ... You might see villas or fortified places lately filled with crowds of men, and on the next day, all had departed and everything was in utter silence. Sons fled, leaving the corpses of their parents unburied; parents forgetful of their duty abandoned their children in raging fever.⁶²

This account stresses not only the breaking of all bonds of familial love (*pietas*) between parents and children, who prioritized saving themselves over caring for or burying their relatives, but also the desolation of urban centers and farms. This latter remark of Paul’s presents some similarities of ideas and terms with Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*,⁶³

but with one substantial difference: While the pontiff attributes the general desolation to the Lombard invasion of Italy, Paul attributes the abandonment of the towns to the plague that preceded the invasion. Although the Lombards' arrival in Italy is not presented as entirely positive in *Historia langobardorum*,⁶⁴ Paul's deliberate adaptation of the Gregorian text and his focus on the general devastation and people's selfish behaviour during the plague outbreak may allude to a particular connotation of the epidemic described. In Book II, Paul establishes a strong connection between the "pious," "Catholic," and "generous"⁶⁵ Narses, the Lombard king Alboin, and the Lombards: Once Narses defeated the Goths and freed the Romans, the latter, ungrateful to their liberator and envious of his wealth, began to complain to Constantinople that Narses's rule was oppressive.⁶⁶ In response, threatened by the emperor and empress, Narses sent messages to the Lombards urging them to take possession of Italy, promising that they would find it a rich land. In his commentary on the *Historia langobardorum*, Christopher Heath points out that "the unjust reaction of the Romans to Narses allows the narrative to prepare the reader for the definitive occupation of Italy by the Lombards. Thus the legitimate rule of Italy passes from the Romans to Alboin and the Lombards."⁶⁷ In light of these considerations, one may suggest that the plague that struck only the Romans (and Italy) could be attributed to their ingratitude towards their liberator, Narses; as a result, no human or divine intervention could save them from the illness. The Romans' misconduct is also underlined in Paul's description of the broken bonds between members of families and the community; their selfishness prevents them from helping each other in times of difficulty. Perhaps, in this account, Paul wanted to argue that the Lombard king Alboin had legitimately taken control of Italy from the ungrateful Romans.

During the summer of 680, a severe epidemic (*gravissima pestis*) afflicted the city of Rome and the Ticino area, including the Lombard capital, Pavia.⁶⁸ Although Paul's description of the disease is ambiguous, several scholars have argued that this epidemic was probably plague.⁶⁹ In May, before the plague started, a series of dark omens occurred, including a lunar and a solar eclipse.⁷⁰ According to Paul, disease claimed a high number of victims in Rome. Those living along the Ticino were forced to take refuge in the mountains, and the cities were abandoned to wild vegetation. Shortly after, two angels (one good and one bad) appeared to the inhabitants of Pavia; the bad angel struck the doors of houses with a hunting spear to indicate the number

of deaths that would occur the following day in that house. However, one day, it was revealed to one resident that the epidemic would not end until an altar to Saint Sebastian the Martyr had been erected in the church of Saint Peter in Vincoli. Indeed, as soon as the relics of Saint Sebastian had been brought from Rome and the altar had been built, the *pestis* ceased.

Paul's account of the 680 *pestis* echoes that in the *Liber Pontificalis* in the section devoted to the biography of Pope Agathon (678–681).⁷¹ To this report, Paul adds the episodes of the two angels and the transfer of the bones of Saint Sebastian from Rome to the church of Saint Peter in Vincoli. In that same year, Pope Agathon dedicated an altar to Saint Sebastian in Rome's eponymous church of Saint Peter in Vincoli.⁷² It is likely that the altar dedicated to Saint Sebastian in Rome, like the one in Pavia, was built to obtain the saint's protection from the epidemic, even though it is unlikely that the cult of Sebastian played an anti-pestilential role during this period. Indeed, although numerous studies have concluded that Paul's account of the 680 *pestis* is the earliest evidence that Saint Sebastian's cult invoked him for protection from the plague,⁷³ an increasing number of historians have begun to doubt that this belief was extant during the seventh century.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that Paul attributes the cessation of the epidemic to the saint's miraculous intervention. Finally, this plague outbreak also seems to establish a strong connection between Rome and Pavia, represented by the simultaneous building of two altars dedicated to the figure of Saint Sebastian. Indeed, "on a moral level the plague's end must have signaled heaven's approbation of the Roman-Lombard alliance."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Paul's account overlooks the construction of the altar in Rome. Perhaps he was not informed about this event. Alternatively, Paul may have deliberately omitted this fact since at the time he was writing the *Historia langobardorum*, the relations between the Lombards of Benevento and the pope were very tense. Indeed, as Lidia Capo has suggested, Paul's *Historia langobardorum* presents a critical stance in the face of the anti-Lombard papal propaganda of his time.⁷⁶

The last episode described more extensively by Paul is the one concerning the Roman plague of 590. On this occasion, Pope Gregory the Great implemented a series of remedies to tackle the disease. At first glance, Paul would seem to portray the pontiff as the ideal model of the "good shepherd" described in the *Decem libri historiarum*. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis reveals substantial differences between Paul's portrayal of Gregory the Great and that of Gregory of Tours.

Gregory the Great and the Roman plague of 590

In 590, a severe plague outbreak struck Rome so suddenly that victims often died shortly after realizing they had contracted the disease, although there were some who got sick but recovered. This dramatic event was recorded by Gregory of Tours,⁷⁷ whose report is based on the eyewitness account of his deacon, Agiulf, and later by Paul the Deacon in *Historia langobardorum* and in the *Life of Saint Gregory the Great (Vita sancti Gregorii Magni)*.⁷⁸ Even though the accounts of the Roman plague of 590 in Paul's two texts are closely related, he provides a more extensive description of the Roman epidemic in *Vita sancti Gregorii Magni*. This description mirrors the one provided by Gregory of Tours in almost every detail, apart from some minor differences. For example, Paul provides an extended description of the consequences of the flooding of the Tiber and highlights the desolation caused by the plague:

Gregory of Tours:

The river Tiber so flooded the city of Rome that ancient temples were destroyed and the store-houses of the church were overturned and several thousand measures of wheat in them were lost ... Upon his [i.e., Pope Pelagius's] death a great mortality among the people followed from this disease.⁷⁹

Paul the Deacon:

The turbulent Tiber flooded, and its waters flowed through the city walls and lay over a great part of the region, destroying the walls of many ancient houses. Also, because of this violent rush of water, the granaries of the Church were overturned and many thousands of measures of wheat were lost ... After his [i.e., Pope Pelagius's] death there was such an epidemic among the people that, as they died, the homes of the city were left vacant.⁸⁰

In November 589, some unusual events occurred in Rome, foreshadowing the coming outbreak. The river Tiber flooded, damaging ancient buildings as well as the church granaries where thousands of bushels of grain were stored, causing famine. The flood also spawned swarms of snakes (*multitudo serpentium*) and an enormous dragon (*magnus draco*), which died shortly afterwards. The flooding was soon followed

by a plague outbreak — called the “inguinal” plague (*clades inguinar-ia*)⁸¹ — that killed Pope Pelagius II (579–590). At first glance, these events could be considered catastrophic. Nevertheless, in Gregory of Tours’s account, the 589 flood and the subsequent plague ought to be interpreted as portents that served “as the pivot of a divinely favored period that consolidated Gregory the Great’s position in Rome.”⁸²

While the population of Rome was afflicted by the disease, Gregory the Great preached an eschatologically inflected sermon that both *Decem libri historiarum* and Paul’s *Vita sancti Gregorii Magni* reported entirely. Paul’s version was almost certainly drawn from the version mentioned by Gregory of Tours, who likely used a copy of the sermon given to him by his deacon, Agilulf. Moreover, according to McCormick, the Gregorian sermon is undoubtedly authentic, as the pontiff’s *Registrum epistolarum*⁸³ preserves a slightly revised version dated August 603 that was preached by Gregory during another epidemic in Rome in 603.⁸⁴ The comparison between the version of the sermon contained in the *Decem libri historiarum* and the one in the *Vita sancti Gregorii Magni* clearly shows that Paul quoted almost verbatim the bishop of Tours:

Gregory of Tours:

Dearly beloved brethren, those scourges of God which we fear when they are still far off must terrify us all the more when they are come among us and we have already had our taste of them ... Indeed, I see my entire flock being struck down by the sword of the wrath of God, as one after another they are visited by sudden destruction.⁸⁵

Paul the Deacon:

Beloved brethren, it is proper that the scourge of God, the very approach of which we ought to fear, we should at least fear when it is present and known by experience ... Behold all the populace is struck by the sword of divine wrath and one by one the people succumb to sudden death.⁸⁶

The passage attributes the outbreak to the sword of the wrath of heaven (*caelestis irae mucrone*): The supreme judge has decided to punish those who are guilty of evil deeds and of forgetting the divine law. The heavenly judge’s punishment is death, inflicted through a contagious disease. The only way to save the soul, since no one could do anything to heal the body, was genuine conversion, which consisted

of repentance, weeping, unceasing prayer, and good works. By persevering in these practices, the people of Rome would obtain from the merciful God the pardon for their sins. The supreme judge would save them from damnation, which consists not in the loss of earthly life but rather in the loss of eternal life.⁸⁷

Gregory the Great's sermon also contains some interesting details about plague mortality, such as the fact that death occurred rapidly, sometimes even before symptoms appeared. As McCormick persuasively suggests, this peculiarity "points to the presence of the pneumonic form of plague alongside the bubonic, inguinal mortality mentioned by Gregory of Tours."⁸⁸ This assumption seems plausible in light of subsequently reported events. The pope-elect organized a litany procession that involved the entire population of Rome. The people were divided into groups, and each group was told to start the procession at a specific church. Then, all the people of Rome, chanting the *kyrie eleison*, gathered in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore to pray. Shortly thereafter, as confirmed by the testimony of the deacon Agiulf, eighty individuals suddenly fell to the ground, dead;⁸⁹ the pope and his flock continued to pray. This gathering of a large number of people in a confined space for a long time caused the sudden death of many faithful, likely because the deadly pneumonic plague was able to spread more rapidly in the crowded, poorly ventilated church.⁹⁰ Even though many perished during this intense communal prayer led by Pope Gregory the Great, both Gregory of Tours and Paul the Deacon imply that these liturgical measures had a positive impact, and the plague finally ceased.

Paul's account of this episode in *Historia langobardorum* is considerably briefer than that recorded by Gregory of Tours. Paul's record is limited to a brief summary of the main events of 590; it does not include the sermon that the bishop of Rome preached to his flock. Moreover, in *Historia langobardorum*, Paul seems to place more importance on the political aspects of Gregory the Great's career, highlighting the pope's ability to manage the complex sociopolitical situation in Italy at the end of the sixth century.⁹¹ In contrast, *Vita sancti Gregorii Magni* focuses on Gregory's exemplary moral conduct and religious life. The staging of the litany during the Roman plague of 590 seems to highlight once again the pope's sanctity, while the sermon he preached, which includes a series of insightful and edifying reflections, would prove his ability as a preacher. This seems to be confirmed by the author himself; indeed, after reporting Gregory's sermon, Paul explicitly states that

he quoted it to show how perfect Gregory's preaching was from the beginning.⁹² In other words, the Roman plague outbreak is portrayed as a difficult situation that was overcome thanks to Gregory the Great's intercession, thus enhancing his reputation as a preacher. Paul quoting Gregory of Tours almost verbatim could be explained by the fact that he wanted to convey Gregory's positive portrayal of the pontiff to the readers of *Vita sancti Gregorii Magni*, among whom were likely members of the Carolingian cultural elite.⁹³

Finally, in Paul's narrative, Gregory the Great's religious response to the plague does not seem to adhere to a standard pattern of collective response to other outbreaks; furthermore, the pontiff's exemplary behaviour in this case does not reflect a standard heroic model as it does in Gregory of Tours's chronicle. In other words, in Paul's plague narrative, bishops are not presented as positive or negative role models — with the exception of Gregory the Great — in relation to plague epidemics or to other events. This lack of attention to the positive or negative role of bishops during plague epidemics could be explained by the fact that Paul's plague narrative generally does not have the goal of enhancing or undermining the power of a particular bishop (or, more generally, of a particular individual). Except for the three specific cases investigated in this paper, plague epidemics in Paul's *Historia langobardorum* are extremely briefly and superficially described. They are simply depicted as prodigious events among others.

Conclusion

This article has explored individual and collective responses to bubonic plague outbreaks reported in the histories of Gregory of Tours and Paul the Deacon. Gregory views the plague as an expression of divine wrath in response to human sins and therefore attributes a central role to the episcopal authorities, whose duty it was to guide their flocks. According to Gregory's accounts, the bishop's virtue was the key factor in averting divine punishment. However, the repentance of the entire community was equally important; this repentance was expressed in collective expiatory rituals and processions (such as rogations, litanies, and vigils). Moreover, Gregory perceives the plague as an unfavorable event that can nevertheless be transformed into an opportunity to increase (or possibly decrease) the prestige and authority of a bishop. The failure and success of bishops' efforts in times of plague are judged according to Gregory's personal, pastoral-theological pur-

poses. Finally, among the plague responses described in his *Decem libri historiarum*, Gregory indicates that fleeing the disease is ineffective. On the one hand, Gregory narrates that those who returned to their homes believing they were safe were subsequently struck down by the disease, such as the citizens of Marseille in 588. On the other hand, he severely criticizes bishops who fled their cities — which, it seems, they not infrequently did. One example of this is Bishop Cautinus, who eventually died of the plague.

In Paul the Deacon's plague accounts, although the plague and other diseases are sometimes attributed to divine punishment, this theological perspective is not always explicitly stated. Instead, Paul narrates epidemics historically by positioning them in a broader chain of events. He only describes three outbreaks of plague in detail, and all of these cases are related to the author's religious sensibility and political vision. Like Gregory, Paul evokes religious remedies for plague outbreaks, as in the case of the outbreak in Pavia in 680. However, in general, Paul devotes little or no attention to these episodes, with the exception of the litany during the Roman plague of 590. Both Gregory of Tours and Paul present detailed accounts of this event. However, while the bishop of Tours seems to elevate Gregory the Great as the most perfect example of his ideal of the "good shepherd," Paul's plague narratives present no recurrent pattern of collective responses to plague epidemics, nor does he suggest that a bishop's intercession is always needed to appease God's wrath. Although Paul sometimes indicates that religious or liturgical measures could stop an epidemic, flight seems to be the only other solution available to the population.⁹⁴

More generally, the two case studies offer a partial perspective on how people discussed plague outbreaks. Among these plague responses, it seems that not all were considered appropriate or effective. Some were deemed praiseworthy, as in the case of collective expiatory rituals led by a saint. Other behaviours could be perceived as inappropriate and could provoke violent comments from the author and his readers. In most cases, positive or negative judgements on plague responses depended directly on the author's specific interests. Consequently, they could vary according to the situation represented and the presence of specific personalities or communities within it. For example, the positive judgment of Bishop Gallus's actions during the 543 plague is intended both to enhance the prestige of Gregory's family and to criticize the behaviour of Gallus's successor, who was unable to protect his city. Moreover, the effectiveness of plague

responses could be determined by a combination of individual and collective efforts. In general, documents do not always explicitly report whether such measures were truly successful,⁹⁵ although authors tend to emphasize if an individual or a community they consider worthy of God's forgiveness succeeds in tackling the plague.

Jo. N. Hays points out: "Part of the question 'how was the epidemic perceived?' [and, thus, how people responded to it] must surely be the further question, 'perceived by whom?'"⁹⁶ Indeed, most (although not all) of our understanding of the defensive measures implemented against the First Plague Pandemic in Western Europe depends on the texts and documents produced by an elite group of Latin Christian male authors. No narratives exist that present other viewpoints. Furthermore, the present investigation has only examined the writings of two members of this narrow circle. These writings provide only a partial perspective on the complex issue of how people in early medieval Western Europe perceived and responded to plague outbreaks. Moreover, this examination excludes other Latin writers' accounts of the plague, such as those of Bede the Venerable. Gregory and Paul are temporally (sixth and eighth centuries) and geographically (Gaul and Italy) distant from each other; they also lived in completely different political and cultural contexts. Their histories were chosen for this study because these differences mean that a comparison of their accounts can enrich our understanding of how perceptions of and responses to plague outbreaks in Western Europe changed over time. More comparative research in this area is needed to better clarify how Latin authors from different times and places depict individual and collective responses to plague epidemics in the former Western Roman Empire. These studies could also benefit from a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical research with data provided by science. This collaboration, however, "must be on the terms of every discipline involved, with history — including its critical approach and ability to contextualize past work — centrally represented."⁹⁷

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Endnotes

- 1 In this article the term “Justinianic Plague” is used to refer to the entire time frame of the so-called First Plague Pandemic.
- 2 Dionysios Stathakopoulos, “The Justinianic Plague Revisited,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 24 (2000): 256–76; Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai, “The Justinianic Plague: An Interdisciplinary Review,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 43, no. 2 (2019): 156–80. For a general updated bibliography on the First Plague Pandemic, see the bibliographical references in Eisenberg and Mordechai’s article.
- 3 Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe: The Case of the Justinianic Plague,” *Past and Present*, 244, no. 1 (2019): 3–50; Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai, “The Justinianic Plague and Global Pandemics: The Making of the Plague Concept,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (2020): 1632–67.
- 4 Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai, “The Justinianic Plague and Global Pandemics,” 1635, 1665.
- 5 Kristine Sessa, “The New Environmental Fall of Rome: A Methodological Consideration,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 12, no. 1 (2019): 246.
- 6 On the Eastern Roman Empire, see: Mischa Meier, “The ‘Justinianic Plague’: The Economic Consequences of the Pandemic in the Eastern Roman Empire and Its Cultural and Religious Effects,” *Early Medieval Europe* 24, no. 3 (2016): 267–92; Anthony Kaldellis, “The Literature of Plague and the Anxieties of Piety in Sixth Century Byzantium,” in *Piety and Plague from Byzantium to the Baroque*, eds. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), 1–23. On Western Europe, see: Alain J. Stoclet, “*Consilia humana, ops divina, superstitio*. Seeking Succor and Solace in Times of Plague, with Particular Reference to Gaul in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Little K. Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135; Jo N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease Epidemics and Human Response in Western History*, rev. ed. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 19–37.
- 7 Sally Shockro, “Apocalyptic Disease and the Seventh-Century Plague,” in *Trauma in Medieval Society*, eds. Wendy J. Turner and Christina Lee (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2018), 320–40. For example, Sally Shockro has demonstrated that in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England, Bede

- the Venerable and other authors attempted to reinterpret the experience of the plague in a more positive light. The disease was no longer a sign of guilt to be ashamed of but a sign of being chosen by God and thus an honour.
- 8 Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 13.
 - 9 Christopher Heath, *The Narrative Worlds of Paul the Deacon Between Empires and Identities in Lombard Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 253–57.
 - 10 The episodes in question do not always explicitly mention the presence of buboes. Nevertheless, it is possible to hypothesize (but not demonstrate) the presence of bubonic plague from other details reported by authors.
 - 11 Hereafter *DLH*.
 - 12 Hereafter *HL*.
 - 13 On Gregory’s life, see: Alexander C. Murray, ed., *A Companion to Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016); Kathleen A. Mitchell and Ian Wood, eds., *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2002); Martin Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 - 14 Martin Heinzlmann, “Gregory of Tours: Elements of a Biography,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 32–33.
 - 15 During Gregory’s episcopate, the city of Tours was ruled by four kings of three different Frankish sub-kingdoms. On the political situation from 573 to 594, see Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), 89–91.
 - 16 Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum libri X*, eds. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 1.1 (Hanover, 1951).
 - 17 Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 52–70. As Helmut Reimitz has argued, Gregory’s *DLH* does not narrate the “history of the Franks” because in the text, the Franks never represent the whole political or social framework of Gaul or the Merovingian kingdom.
 - 18 On this topic, see: Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 112–234; Alexander C. Murray, “The Composition of the Histories of Gregory of Tours and Its Bearing on the Political Narrative,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 63–101.
 - 19 Martin Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society*, 89.
 - 20 Allen Jones, *Death and the Afterlife in the Pages of Gregory of Tours: Religion and Society in Late Antique Gaul*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 110.

- 21 These descriptions correspond to *Lues inguinaria*, *Morbus inguinaris*, and *Cladis inguinaria*. Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague and Other Epidemics,” *Speculum* 96/1, no. 49 (2021): 62.
- 22 Eric Faure, “Did the Justinianic Plague Truly Reach Frankish Europe around 543 AD?” *Vox Patrum* 78 (2021): 457.
- 23 For example, in *DLH* 4.31, Gregory provides a symptomatologic description of the disease, which is characterized by the appearance of sores — described as “*vulnus in modum serpentis*” (a wound the shape of a serpent) — in the groin or armpit, death within forty-eight to seventy-two hours of the emergence of symptoms, and delirium (lose of *sensus*). This description may suggest the presence of the bubonic plague.
- 24 The linguistic criterion is presented in Jean Biraben and Jacques Le Goff, “La Peste dans le Haut Moyen Age,” *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 24, no. 6 (1969): 1491–92. The authors have created a typology in the Latin that is still used today to determine whether or not an account written by a Latin author describes a plague epidemic. They have also pointed out that the adjectives *inguinaris* or *glandolarius* would indicate the presence of bubonic plague.
- 25 Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 88–96; Eric Faure, “Did the Justinianic Plague Truly Reach Frankish Europe,” 431–50. Michael McCormick has recently pointed out that Gregory accounts are reliable, even though his knowledge was limited to certain areas of Gaul and his chronicle is not exempt from manipulations related to his pastoral-theological concerns. On the contrary, Eric Faure has claimed that Gregory’s accounts of the plague outbreaks of 543 appear doubtful.
- 26 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 5.36, 242. Regarding personal sickness, for example, Nantinus, Count of Angoulême, was stuck down by a fatal dysentery for attacking Heraclius, bishop of Angoulême, and for causing significant destruction of church property and killing numerous priests. God punished the count with the disease, but he never repented or atoned for his sins, and Nantinus died in excruciating pain.
- 27 Lisa K. Bailey, *Christianity’s Quiet Success: The Eusebius Gallicanus Sermon Collection and the Power of the Church in Late Antique Gaul* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 111–15. These collective rituals, as Lisa K. Bailey demonstrates in her study of penitential processions in late antique Gaul, could be used to mitigate plague outbreaks (or, more generally, any natural catastrophes).
- 28 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.5, 138.
- 29 Gregory of Tours, 138.
- 30 Martin Heinzelmann, “Gregory of Tours: Elements,” 20.
- 31 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.31, 165–66.

- 32 Gregory of Tours, 165–66.
- 33 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.7, 139–40.
- 34 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 4.12, 142–43. Cautinus is portrayed as addicted to alcohol, poorly educated, and easily flattered. He also tried to bury the priest Anastasius alive in order to steal his property.
- 35 Gregory of Tours, 142–43.
- 36 In *DLH* 4.13, Gregory states clearly that Bishop Cautinus continued to conduct the rogations instituted by Gallus. According to McCormick, it is very likely that, in 571, “the procession against plague will have taken place in the week that started with the third Sunday of Lent, 1–7 March,” a period that would coincide with Cautinus’s flight from Clermont. Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 68, 77.
- 37 Gregory of Tours, *Liber de passione et virtutibus sancti Iuliani martyris* 46a, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 1.2 (Hanover, 1969), 132.
- 38 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 7.1, 326.
- 39 Gregory of Tours, 326.
- 40 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 9.21, 441.
- 41 Gregory of Tours, 442.
- 42 As Ian Wood points out, on the one hand, Gunthramn is presented as a model of Christian kingship. On the other hand, “there is another side to Gregory’s portrait, from which the king emerges as a suspicious and not totally effectual ruler.” Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 68.
- 43 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 9.22, 442.
- 44 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 8.12, 379.
- 45 Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 85.
- 46 On Paul the Deacon, see: *Paolo Diacono e il Friuli altomedievale (secc. VI - X); atti del XIV Congresso Internazionale di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, Cividale del Friuli – Bottenicco di Moimacco, 24–29 settembre 1999 (Vol. 1–2)*, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Spoleto, Italy: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2001); *Paolo Diacono. Uno scrittore fra tradizione longobarda e rinnovamento carolingio. Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Cividale del Friuli-Udine, 6–9 maggio 1999*, ed. Paolo Chiesa, (Udine, Italy: Forum, 2000).
- 47 Walter Goffart, *The Narrators*, 344.
- 48 On the use of sources in *HL*, see Christopher Heath, *The Narrative Worlds*, 109–31.
- 49 On the main classical interpretations of *HL* in the historiographical debates, see: Rosamond McKitterick, “Paul the Deacon and the Franks,” in *Early Medieval Europe* 8, Issue 3 (1999): 319–39; Walter Goffart, *The Narrators*, 329–424. For a complex reading of Paul’s *HL* that overcomes the binary of those who claim that it was written for a Lombard audience and those who argue that it was commissioned by the Franks,

- see Walter Pohl, “Paulus Diaconus und die ‘*Historia Langobardorum*’: Text und Tradition,” in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, Band 32 (Wien, Austria: Böhlau, 1994), 375–405.
- 50 Lidia Capo, “Dimensione letteraria e ragioni storiografiche. Il caso dell’*Historia Langobardorum*,” in *I Longobardi a Venezia: Scritti per Stefano Gasparri*, eds. Irene Barbiera, Francesco Borri, and Anna Pazienza, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2020), 66.
- 51 Christopher Heath, *The Narrative*, 256.
- 52 Walter Pohl, “Paul the Deacon—Between *Sacci* and *Marsuppia*,” in *Ego Trouble: Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Richard Corradini, Matthew Gills, Rosamond McKitterick, and Irene van Reenswoude (Wien, Austria: Austrian Academy of Sciences 2010), 111–24.
- 53 On *desenteriae morbus* see Paul the Deacon, *Historia langobardorum* 3.31, eds. Ludwig Bethmann and Georg Waitz, MGH SS rer. Lang. (Hanover, 1878), 111.
- 54 For example, Paul uses the terms *pestilentia* and *pestis* accompanied by adjectives such as *maxima* and *gravissima* to describe epidemics of the plague and those of unspecified diseases. See, for example, *HL*: 2.4; 3.24; 4.14; 5.31; 6.5.
- 55 On epidemics and, more generally, diseases in *HL*, see: Luis R. Menéndez Bueyes, “Medicine, Disease and Death in Late Antiquity Italy: An Approach to the *Historia Langobardorum* of Paulus Diaconus,” *Studia Historica: Historia Antiqua* 30 (2012): 217–51; Innocenzo Mazzini, “La medicina in Paolo Diacono. Contributi alla conoscenza della persona e dello scrittore,” in *Paolo Diacono. Uno scrittore fra tradizione longobarda e rinnovamento carolingio. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Civildale del Friuli—Udine, 6–9 maggio 1999*, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Udine, Italy: Forum, 2000), 313–31.
- 56 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 4.4, 152.
- 57 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 4.14, 160.
- 58 On this inference, see Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 87, n. 250.
- 59 The plague can also affect the enemies of Christianity, as is evident in *HL* 6.47, which reports that the Saracen invaders were severely affected by the pestilence that was provoked by the incessant prayers of the citizens of Constantinople. On the etiology of disease in the Christian context, see Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach, “Sin and the Etiology of Disease in Pre-Crusade Europe,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 41, no. 4 (1986): 395–414.

- 60 See Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.4; 4.4; 4.14; 5.31; 6.47. Paul refers to it indirectly in *HL* 1.26.
- 61 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.4, 74. These symptoms may correspond to those of bubonic plague.
- 62 Paul the Deacon, 74. “Erant autem ubique luctus, ubique lacrimae. Nam, ut vulgi rumor habebat, fugientes cladem vitare, relinquebantur domus desertae habitatoribus, solis catulis domum servantibus [...] Cerneret pridem villas seu castra repleta agminibus hominum, postero vero die universis fugientibus cuncta esse in summo silentio. Fugiebant filii, cadavera insepulta parentum relinquentes, parentes obliti pietatis viscera natos relinquebant aestuantes [...] Pastoralia loca versa fuerant in sepulturam hominum, et habitacula humana facta fuerant confugia bestiarum.” All translations by William Dudley Foulke in Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).
- 63 “atque ab omni cultore destitute, in solitudine terra vacat, nullus hanc possessor inhabitat, occupaverunt bestiae loca, quae prius multitudo hominum tenebat.” Gregory the Great, *Dialogorum libri IV* 3.38, in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, 77 vols., ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: Migne, 1862), 316–17. “and the countryside, uncultivated, became a 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.” Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 3.38, trans. Odo John Zimmerman (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 186. On Paul’s use of Gregory in this passage, see Paolo Diacono, *Storia dei Longobardi*, trans. Lidia Capo (Florence: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2013), 426–27.
- 64 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.5, 75.
- 65 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.3, 73.
- 66 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.5, 75.
- 67 Christopher Heath, *The Narrative Worlds*, 163.
- 68 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 6.5, 255.
- 69 This epidemic is denoted as plague in: Jean Biraben and Jacques Le Goff, “La Peste,” 1497 (the authors date the outbreak to 654); Stathakopoulos Dionysios, *Famine and pestilence in the late Roman and early Byzantine empire: a systematic survey of subsistence crises and epidemics* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 359, no. 192. See also Robert Sallares, “Ecology, Evolution, and Epidemiology of Plague,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Lester K. Little (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 282.
- 70 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 6.5, 254–55.
- 71 Theodor Mommsen, ed., *Liber Pontificalis*, MGH Gesta pontificum Romanorum. 1 (Berlin, 1898): 193–94.

- 72 See Gabriele B. Casti and Maria Teresa M. Savini, “Il culto parallelo a S. Sebastiano nelle chiese di S. Pietro in Vincoli di Roma e di Pavia,” *Rendiconti. Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 76 (2003/2004): 345–448.
- 73 Louise Marshall, “Reading the Body of a Plague Saint: Narrative Altarpieces and Devotional Images of St. Sebastian,” in *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage in Honour of Margaret M. Manion*, ed. Bernard J. Muir (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 240. Saint Sebastian was a victim of the persecution of Emperor Diocletian. He was killed with arrows, which in the Greco-Roman tradition symbolize sudden illness, particularly the plague. The pagan association of the plague with the arrows of Apollo was adapted in the Christian context. As a result, Saint Sebastian was assigned the role of protector against epidemics.
- 74 As Sheila Barker argues, “It is far more likely that Sebastian’s efficacious intervention against the plague of 680 was anticipated on the basis of his martyr’s status, his privileged burial near the apostles Peter and Paul, and the miraculous power of his relics and was not due to any particular sanitary application of his cult.” Sheila Barker, “The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian’s Imagery and Cult before the Counter-Reformation,” in *Piety and Plague from Byzantium to the Baroque*, eds. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), 92. See also Gabriele B. Casti and Maria Teresa M. Savini, “Il culto parallelo a S. Sebastiano,” 393, 414–19.
- 75 Sheila Barker, “The Making of a Plague Saint,” 93.
- 76 Lidia Capo, “Introduzione”, in *Storia dei Longobardi*, ed. Lidia Capo (Rome: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1992), XVII.
- 77 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, 477.
- 78 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 3.24, 104–5; Paul the Deacon, *Vita Sancti Gregorii Magni*, ed. Sabina Tuzzo (Pisa, Italy: Edizioni Scuola Normale Superiore, 2002), 11–19. *Vita Sancti Gregorii Magni* is hereafter referred to as *VG*.
- 79 “Tanta inundatio Tiberis fluvius Romam urbem obtexerit, ut aedes antiquae deruerent, horrea etiam ecclesiae subversa sint, in quibus nonnulla milia modiorum tritici periere [...] Quo defuncto, magna stragis populi de hoc morbo facta est.” Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, 477.
- 80 “tanta inundatione Tiberis fluvius alveum suum egressus est tantumque excrevit, ut eius unda super muros urbis influeret atque in ea maximas regions occuparet, ita ut plura antiquarum aedium munimenta deiceret. Qua etiam aquarum violentia horrea Ecclesiae subvesa sunt, in quibus nonnulla modiorum tritici milia perierunt [...] Quo defuncto tanta strages populi facta est, ut passim subtractis habitatoribus, domus in urbe plurimae vacuae remanerent.” Paul the Deacon, *VG* 10, 14–15.

- 81 Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 153–57. The term *clades* generally refers to disasters that are understood as divine punishment.
- 82 Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 18.
- 83 Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistolarum* 13.2, ed. Ludwig M. Hartmann, MGH Epp. 2 (Berlin, 1899), 365–67.
- 84 Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 86–87.
- 85 “Oportet, fratres karissimi, ut flagella Dei, quae metuere ventura debuimus, saltem praesentia et experta timeamus [...] Ecce! etenim cuncta plebs caelestis irae mucrone percutitur, et repentina singuli caede vastantur.” Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, 477.
- 86 “Oportet, fratres dilectissimi, ut flagella Dei, quae metuere ventura debuimus, saltem praesentia et experta timeamus [...] Ecce eternim cuncta plebs caelestis irae mucrone percutitur et repentina singuli caede vastantur.” Paul the Deacon, *VG* 11, 16–19. All translations by Mary E. Jones, “The Life of Saint Gregory the Great: *Vita Sancti Gregorii Magni* by Paul the Deacon: A Translation and Commentary” (master’s diss., Creighton University, 1961).
- 87 On these arguments, see Geoffrey D. Dunn, “‘For it improper to be addicted to the tedium of affliction’: Christian Responses to Pandemic in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” *Vox Patrum* 78 (2021): 404–6.
- 88 Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 87. In contrast to the debilitating symptoms of bubonic plague, pneumonic plague is characterised by sudden death, which may occur even before any symptoms manifest.
- 89 Gregory of Tours, *DLH* 10.1, 477.
- 90 Michael McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague,” 87–88.
- 91 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 4.8–4.9; 4.19.
- 92 Paul the Deacon, *VG* 11, 19.
- 93 Conrad Leyser, “The Memory of Pope Gregory the Great in the Ninth Century: A Redating of the Interpolator’s *Vita Gregorii* (BHL 3640),” in *Gregorio Magno e le origini dell’Europa*, ed. Claudio Leonardi (Florence: Sismel, 2014), 456–60. The oldest manuscript copies of *VG* belong to important cultural centers of the Carolingian era such as St. Gall and Fleury. Moreover, from the late eighth century onward, the Carolingians became very interested in the figure of Gregory the Great and his writings.
- 94 Paul the Deacon, *HL* 2.4, 74.

- 95 See, for example, Gregory of Tours's accounts of Bishop Salvius and Gregory the Great.
- 96 Jo N. Hays, "Historians and Epidemics: Simple Questions, Complex Answers," in *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, ed. Little K. Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35.
- 97 Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, "Rejecting Catastrophe," 1666. This interdisciplinary approach is also adopted in Marcel Keller et al., "Ancient *Yersinia pestis* Genomes from across Western Europe Reveal Early Diversification during the First Pandemic (541–750)," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 25 (2019): 12363–72.