

Pictures, books, and the illiterate: Pope Gregory I's letters to Serenus of Marseilles

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Analyses of medieval art-theory often assert, correctly, that one of the preeminent doctrines of the artistic image's role in western Christendom during the Middle Ages was the notion that pictures are valuable since they function as do books, and thereby help to teach the illiterate.¹ The first decisive, western statements to this effect are found in two letters sent by Pope Gregory the Great to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles at the end of the sixth century,² while variations on the concept appear in a multitude of Latin writings throughout the rest of the Middle Ages, including in the decrees of the sixteenth-century Council of Trent which responded to the Protestant Reformation. Pope Gregory's remarks to Serenus of Marseilles were originally identified as the 'classic' expressions of medieval western image-doctrine by Ernst Kitzinger, in a 1954 article concerning the origins of the Byzantine controversy over icons, and several scholars have indicated their agreement.³

The primacy of Gregory's comments in the history of western Christian views on the function of the artistic image has meant that they are very often mentioned in discussions of medieval western attitudes towards images; from a purely negative perspective, any questioning or refutation of the concepts that images may be compared to books and that they teach or help to teach uneducated viewers has tended to take the two letters to Serenus as its principal target.⁴ For this and other reasons remarks in the two letters have sometimes been misconstrued or loosely paraphrased in ways that leave them open to misinterpretation. Ideas which Gregory did not overtly espouse, and words and phrases that he did not use, are at times explicitly or implicitly attributed to him. Occasionally therefore he is accredited with having stated that pictures are the 'Bibles of the poor';⁵ yet this is in fact a phrase that is associated with artistic depictions only much later, and needs to be differentiated from Gregory's own references to pictures as the 'books' and 'writings' of the illiterate. Also erroneously assumed, as will be demonstrated shortly, are that the letters to Serenus necessarily forbid all forms of image-worship, that their

comments on the function of images were clearly meant to apply to a variety of types of artistic representation,⁶ and that Gregory's concern in writing to Serenus was specifically with images of the saints.⁷ Finally, neither of the two letters seems to offer a solid foundation for the idea that, to Gregory's mind, the artistic depiction could teach its subject-matter to a viewer who was totally ignorant of what was represented – as though without any previous insight into the identity of the persons or events represented, the beholder could grasp the basic substance of what the artist intended to convey.⁸

If western medieval doctrines of the role and nature of artistic images, their development over the course of centuries and their relationship with eastern systems of thought, are ever to be better understood, or more narrowly if the evolution in the west of the doctrine that images are books which teach the illiterate is ever to be fully comprehended, it is vital to give the actual substance of Gregory the Great's advice to Serenus more careful consideration than it has yet received. The following is meant as a contribution along these lines. It does not try to answer every question that the two letters to Serenus raise; most notably, there is no attempt here to explore how Gregory's teachings might have affected the actual circumstances of artistic production in his day.⁹ Rather, the aim is simply to subject the letters to a closer reading than they generally earn when their doctrine of images is discussed, and in the process to demonstrate to some degree the subtlety of the thought they reveal. As will be seen, if any one, outside influence on the doctrine of images that Gregory enunciated to Serenus can be identified it was Augustine, yet even in drawing on writings by that Church Father Gregory formulated arguments concerning the function of pictures in churches which, in the final analysis, were unprecedented in either eastern or western Christendom. Although he may well have been aware of earlier and contemporary teachings on this issue, in the east as well as in the west, there is no evidence that his ideas about the function of images were directly influenced by any other authority

except Augustine. Hence there is no reason to assume that they were not chiefly the product of his own thinking, based partly, perhaps, on his own observations of the role played by the frescoes and mosaics that so richly decorated some of the churches in sixth-century Rome.¹⁰

Moreover, as will also be seen Gregory's concern in developing his arguments had as much to do with pastoral concerns as with doctrine, despite the significance of his letters to later teachings on images in the medieval west. The initial incentive for him to write to Serenus, in 599, came from news which reached Rome that the bishop of Marseilles, without seeking any advice from Gregory, had taken it upon himself to destroy artistic representations in his diocese. This was a bishop who, on several occasions in his career, had his hand slapped by Gregory for behaviour that Rome found of questionable propriety.¹¹ The fact that Gregory was forced to send a second letter to Marseilles about images, in 600, is evidence Serenus was someone who not only did not look to the pope for guidance, but was so insubordinate as to reject it when it was offered. Furthermore, by the time the second letter was written Gregory had been informed that Serenus' actions had caused a split between the bishop and other Christians in the city, one which meant that as bishop Serenus could no longer lead his flock effectively. It was probably that realization which led Gregory to word his second letter so as to remind Serenus of his pastoral responsibilities more pointedly than the pope had in his first letter, while still presenting the same basic position on the role and value of images.

I

A study of Gregory's teachings on images in the two letters to Serenus demands, to begin with, careful examination of their contents. The following translations of the entirety of the first letter and the relevant section of the second sacrifice style whenever necessary in order to remain as faithful as possible to the Latin texts.

Letter no. 1 (July 599):

That we have written so late to your fraternity is not the result of laziness but excessive duties. But let us commend to you in all things the bearer of the present [writings], our most beloved son, Cyriacus, father of a monastery; let nothing delay him in the city of Marseilles, but may he, comforted by your holiness and with God's protection, hasten to our brother and co-bishop, Syagrius.

Meanwhile I note that some time ago it reached us that your fraternity, seeing certain people adoring images, broke the images and threw them from the churches. And certainly we praise you for your zeal lest something manufactured be adored, but we judge that you should not have destroyed those images. For a picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books. Therefore your fraternity

should preserve those things and prohibit the people from adoring them, so that persons ignorant of letters may have something whereby they may gather knowledge of the story and the people may by no means sin through adoration of a picture.

(Quod fraternitati uestrae tam sero scripta transmittimus, non hoc torpori sed occupationi deputate. Latorem uero praesentium dilectissimum filium nostrum Cyriacum monasterii patrem uobis in omnibus commendamus, ut nulla hunc in Massiliensi ciuitate mora detineat, sed ad fratrem et coepiscopum nostrum Syagrium cum sanctitatis uestrae solacio Deo protegente proficiscatur.

Praeterea indico dudum ad nos peruenisse quod fraternitas uestra quosdam imaginum adoratores aspiciens easdem ecclesiis imagines confregit atque proiecit. Et quidem zelum uos, ne quid manufactum adorari possit, habuisse laudauimus, sed frangere easdem imagines non debuisse iudicamus. Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi qui litteras nesciunt saltem in parietibus uidendo legant, quae legere in codicibus non ualent. Tua ergo fraternitas et illa seruare et ab eorum adoratu populum prohibere debuit, quatenus et litterarum nescii haberent, unde scientiam historiae colligerent, et populus in picturae adoratione minime peccaret.)¹²

Letter no. 2 (October 600): the first sentences of this letter (lines 1–15 in the CCSL text)¹³ chastise Serenus for having suggested that the first letter had been forged by its bearer, Cyriacus (evidently a ploy by Serenus to avoid obeying its precepts), and that its instructions did not come from Gregory.

But since you hesitate to think the warnings [of the previous letter] salutary, it happens that you are guilty not only in your actions but also in your questioning [of what the pope earlier wrote]. For it had indeed come to us that, aflame with thoughtless zeal, you destroyed images of holy persons with this in the way of excuse, that they [the images] should not be adored. And certainly we in every way praise the fact that you forbid them to be adored, but we condemn you for having broken them. Say, brother, what priest has ever been heard to have done what you did? If nothing else should this not restrain you, so that having scorned your other brothers you believed that you alone were holy and wise? For it is one thing to adore a picture, another through a picture's story to learn what must be adored. For what writing offers to those who read it, a picture offers to the ignorant who look at it, since in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it they read who do not know letters; whence especially for gentiles a picture stands in place of reading. You in particular, who live among gentiles, should have heeded to this, so that while you burned incautiously with proper zeal you did not generate scandal in savage minds. Thus that should not be broken which has been set in churches not for adoration but only to instruct the minds of the ignorant. And since the ancients reasonably permitted that stories of holy persons be depicted in venerable places, if you had based zeal on

careful thought, you doubtless could have obtained in a healthful manner even those things that you desired and not dispersed the flock that had been gathered but instead gathered the one dispersed, so that the name of pastor would deservedly excel in you, [and] the condemnation of dispersor would not have fallen [on you]. However since you incautiously pursued these things, your mind in a tumult, it is said that you thereby scandalized your sons, so that the greatest part of them withdrew themselves from your communion. How may you lead erring sheep to the lord shepherd, therefore, you who do not manage to hold onto those you have? Accordingly we urge you now to strive to be solicitous and to restrain yourself from being so presumptuous; and with sweetness, every exertion and every effort to hasten to recall the souls of those whom you know to be separated from union with you, their father.

For the scattered sons of the Church must be gathered together and to them it must be shown, by the testimonies of sacred scripture, that it is not permitted to adore any manufactured thing, since it is written: 'You will adore your Lord God alone and him alone will you serve'; and then it must be added [that], since you had seen that the pictures of images – which had been made for the edification of ignorant people, so that those ignorant of letters who gazed at [the depiction of] a story might learn what has been said – had become the focus of adoration, you were therefore aroused such that you ordered the images to be broken. And to them it must be said: 'If you wish to have [images] in a church for this instruction, for which images were made in ancient times, then in all ways I permit them to be made and possessed.' And indicate that what displeased you was not the sight of the story revealed through the witness of a picture, but that adoration which had inappropriately been exhibited to the pictures. And soothing their minds by these words call them back into harmony with you. And if anyone should desire to make images by no means forbid it, yet avoid completely adoring images. But let your fraternity carefully warn [them], so that from the sight of a past deed [depicted in a picture] they feel the burning of compunction and prostrate themselves humbly in adoration solely of the omnipotent, holy Trinity.

We say all these things in love both of the holy Church and of your fraternity, however. Therefore do not let my reproof dissuade [your fraternity] from its zeal for righteousness, but may it preferably be aided in its application to a pious dispensation.

(Sed dum monita salubria pensare postponis, contigit ut iam non solum actu uerum etiam esses interrogatione culpabilis. Perlatum siquidem ad nos fuerat quod inconsiderato zelo succensus sanctorum imagines sub hac quasi excusatione, ne adorari debuissent, confringeres. Et quidem quia eas adorari uetuisses ominino laudauimus, fregisse uero reprehendimus. Dic, frater, a quo factum sacerdote aliquando auditum est quod fecisti? Si non aliud, uel illud te non debuit reuocare, ut despectis aliis fratribus solum te sanctum et esse crederes sapientem? Aliud est enim picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid

sit adorandum addiscere. Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes uident quod qui debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt; unde praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est. Quod magnopere a te, qui inter gentes habitas, attendi decuerat, ne, dum recto zelo incaute succenderis, ferocibus animis scandalum generares. Frangi ergo non debuit quod non ad adorandum in ecclesiis sed ad instruendas solummodo mentes fuit nescientium collocatum. Et quia in locis uenerabilibus sanctorum depingi historias non sine ratione uetustas admisit, si zelum discretionis condisses, sine dubio et ea quae intendebas salubriter obtinere et collectum gregem non dispergere, sed dispersum potius poteras congregare, ut pastoris in te merito nomen excelleret, non culpa dispersoris incumberet. Haec autem dum in hoc animi tui incaute nimis motu exsequeris, ita tuos scandalizasse filios perhiberis, ut maxima eorum pars a tua se communione suspenderet. Quando ergo ad ouile dominicum errantes oues adducas, qui quas habes retinere non praeuales? Proinde hortamur ut uel nunc studeas esse sollicitus atque ab hac te praesumptione compescas et eorum animos quos a tua disiunctos unitate cognoscis paterna ad te dulcedine, omni annisu omnique studio reuocare festines.

Conuocandi enim sunt diuersi ecclesiae filii, eisque scripturae sacrae est testimoniis ostendendum quia omne manufactum adorare non liceat, quoniam scriptum est: 'Dominum Deum tuum adorabis et illi soli serues'; ac deinde subiungendum: Quia picturas imaginum, quae ad aedificationem imperiti populi factae fuerant, ut nescientes litteras ipsam historiam intendentes, quid dictum sit discerent, transisse in adorationem uideras, idcirco commotus es, ut eas imagines fragi praeciperes. Atque eis dicendum: Si ad hanc instructionem, ad quam imagines antiquitus factae sunt, habere uultis in ecclesia, eas modis omnibus et fieri et haberi permitto. Atque indica quod non tibi ipsa uisio historiae, quae pictura teste pandebatur, displicuerit sed illa adoratio, quae picturis fuerat incompenter exhibita. Atque in his uerbis eorum mentes demulcens eos ad concordiam tuam reuoca. Et si quis imagines facere uoluerit, minime prohibe, adorare uero imagines omnimodis deuita. Sed hoc sollicite fraternitas tua admo- neat ut ex uisione rei gestae ardorem compunctionis percipiant et in adoratione solius omnipotentis sanctae trinitatis humiliter prosternantur.

Cuncta uero haec et amore sanctae ecclesiae et tuae fraternitatis loquimur. Non ergo ex mea correptione frangatur a zelo rectitudinis, sed magis adiuuetur in studio piae dispensationis.)¹⁴

Thereafter the letter of 600 discusses a rumour that Serenus has been receiving men with bad reputations.

II

Several points must be made concerning the above texts. First, it should be observed that neither letter uses any term besides 'adoration' (*adoratio*, *adorare*) to designate the worship which, as Gregory apparently understood it from his sources, had been bestowed on the works of art

destroyed. As the second letter indicates this was a word that Gregory associated particularly with the reverence due to God alone. The same adoration as was owed to God, Gregory apparently believed, was being rendered to the pictures in Marseilles. The significance of this will be discussed later.

Second, while Gregory accuses Serenus of having destroyed 'images' or, in the later letter, 'images of holy persons' (*sanctorum imagines*), every explanation given in both letters of why works of art should be safeguarded makes it clear that the pope was concerned not with static portraits of Christ or the saints¹⁵ but with the depictions or 'pictures' of events ('stories') which, he notes, appear on the walls of churches. What Serenus attacked, and what Gregory was intent on defending in these letters, were renderings of holy persons' deeds. Evidently Gregory thought of these pictures as large enough and displayed in such a way on the church walls that they were visible to sizeable gatherings of people, including those whom, the letters claim, 'adore' the works of art. Only artistic productions of the kind just described are compared to writing and said to be read by the illiterate or to be adored. Neither of the two letters is concerned with the function of other forms of artistic creation, such as isolated or smaller portraits of individuals. Although Gregory may well have believed his comments applicable to other types of representations his letters provide no actual evidence of this, and hence for the purpose of analysing his advice to Serenus it would be risky to make any such assumption about his views. Given what we are told in the two letters, we must read them solely as commentaries on the role of large depictions of sacred events set on the walls of churches.

The description of the representations destroyed as ones of *sancti* raises a third problem, first because the term, *sanctus*, was elsewhere used very loosely by Gregory to refer to laity as well as ecclesiastical figures, living as well as dead, including persons from the Old Testament.¹⁶ Indeed the letter of 600 asks whether Serenus thought that it should apply to him. Such an appellation of the persons portrayed in Serenus' churches, then, does not necessarily signify that the pictures only showed episodes in the lives of the saints, though the events represented there must have been ones important in Christian history. They could also have been depictions of Old Testament stories, which are known to have been represented in western churches of Gregory's day and earlier.¹⁷ The best translation of *sancti* as it is used by Gregory to Serenus is probably not 'saints', therefore, which carries a very specific meaning in modern English, but 'holy persons'. Moreover, it is the second letter alone that identifies the pictures' subjects in this manner, while the first letter merely notes that they depict *historiae*. This restriction of the word, *sancti*, only to

the letter of 600 casts further doubt on the assumption that Gregory ever had in mind depictions specifically of the saints' deeds, whether in writing the first letter or the second; for as will be seen further on in this article it is possible that another, very different rationale exists for the later usage of the term.

A fourth concern are the allusions in the two letters to the teaching of the illiterate. Despite the references in both letters to the 'reading' of depictions, as far as the ability of the illiterate to *learn* goes all that Gregory admits in the letter of 599 is that, from pictures, the ignorant or illiterate 'gather knowledge' of the stories represented. The phrase, *scientiam historiae colligere*, is ambiguous, since it may denote the acquisition of greater knowledge about something learned from another source as easily as a process of learning from scratch. The difference is significant; for interpreted in the first sense the phrase implies that the people in Serenus' care either knew something about the events depicted *before* contemplating the representations, or that while they viewed the pictures someone explained to them at least the basic elements of what was represented, such as the identities of the persons portrayed. From this perspective Gregory expected the pictures simply to help the ignorant improve their understanding of things partially familiar to them, not impart to them, unaided, information that otherwise lay completely outside their own store of knowledge. Considering simply the letter of 599, in other words, it is possible to challenge the notion that Gregory held a picture capable of teaching its viewers a totally alien body of information.¹⁸

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the letter of 600, as well. The first reference there to the 'didactic' function of a picture argues that from pictures the ignorant 'learn' about the need to adore God alone: 'it is one thing to adore a picture, another to learn through a picture's story what must be adored'. The point here is not that a picture educates its viewers about its subject – this is simply not what is stated – but that it inspires them to awareness of the adoration which, the same letter later argues, is owed solely to God. It does this, Gregory perhaps believed, because while a representation reminds viewers of a sacred event it fills them with awe for the divine power that made the event happen. Gregory's statement towards the end of the passage quoted from the same letter, that from pictures of stories the ignorant 'learn what has been said' (*quid dictum sit*), may mean that the pictures help to teach them about the stories themselves; yet in this case the verb *dicere* indicates that, to his mind, the stories were transmitted to the same viewers initially or simultaneously through an oral narrative. The instruction that the picture provides is indirect; it involves the improvement of knowledge acquired from the narrative, for instance by implanting it

more firmly in the memory. It is conceivable, moreover, that the antecedent of 'what has been said' is not the stories at all but the second commandment quoted immediately beforehand, which is the primary subject on which Gregory declares that Serenus should *speak*. Then the statement is a reiteration of the earlier assertion, in the same letter, that the pictures teach the ignorant to adore only God.

This leaves only Gregory's remark, also in the second letter, that pictures 'instruct the minds of the ignorant'. But instruct them in what? Or how? The statement is too vague to formulate a specific answer to either question. Possibly the remark alludes back to the suggestion, found slightly beforehand, that pictures assist their ignorant beholders to virtuous behaviour: in pictures the ignorant 'see what they ought to follow'. Certainly nothing indicates that the remark was meant to imply that a picture, by itself, could teach its subject to someone completely unfamiliar with the things represented in it. To interpret any of Gregory's comments to Serenus in this manner, in 599 or in 600, has no solid foundation in the actual contents of his two letters.

A fifth aspect of the vocabulary of both letters that needs clarification are the references to the 'illiterate' (*illiteratus, nesciens litteras*) and the 'ignorant' (*ignorans, idiota*). Today such words, in particular the second group, generally designate people devoid of almost all learning, but in the early Middle Ages they all denoted more narrowly those untrained in how to read or to write. A lack of these skills necessarily followed from an ignorance of Latin, since in the west at the time that was the only language in which writing and reading were widely practised. But while a formal education of this kind was reserved mainly, though not exclusively, to Christians who devoted their lives to the Church, in western European society the majority of the population had traditionally relied on the oral transmission of knowledge. Those unable to read still had access to some education in the Church's doctrine through sermons and recitations of as yet unwritten, vernacular songs, stories, and poetry, not to mention through the clergy's informal commentaries on holy writings and on the pictures of sacred events adorning church walls.¹⁹ Gregory's own belief that the terms he used to designate the illiterate covered varying degrees of lack of knowledge is suggested by his contention, in writing a second time to Serenus, that a picture stands in place of reading *especially* for gentiles. One implication of the remark is that pagans or persons of pagan backgrounds are among those *illiterati* most unacquainted with the written texts of the Church, and coincidentally with Church doctrine.²⁰

Sixth, a difference between the first and the second letters that deserves comment is the choice of terms used to refer to written texts. Whereas the letter of 599 declares

that pictures provide the illiterate with what they cannot read in *codices*, the letter of 600 compares pictures to *scriptura* and a *lectio*. Whether Gregory selected the latter two terms in order to recall their ecclesiastical connotations of sacred scripture and biblical reading will be discussed later, but for now it can be said that both words evoke those meanings more forcefully than does the relatively more general designation of *codices*. Nonetheless they fall short of being such explicit references to the Bible as is the *scripturae sacrae testimonia* that occurs later in the second letter, in relation to the second commandment.

A more substantive problem relating to the two letters to Serenus is, finally, the relationship that Gregory understood to exist in Marseilles between the adorers of images (*imaginum adoratores*) and the illiterate or ignorant, including the gentiles. Both letters suggest that the pope viewed the *illiterati* of the city as at most a subset of the persons accused of bestowing adoration on the pictures. The letters are very precise in identifying as illiterate those whom the pictures 'teach' or help to 'gather knowledge', yet not once are these comments combined with the references to the adorers of the pictures so as to demonstrate unquestionably that the adorers are identical with those who learn or gain knowledge from the pictures. In fact the letter of 599 seems to hint that persons guilty of adoration are hindering viewers who could learn from the depictions, that the adorers must be restrained in order to assure that the ignorant have access to them for the correct purposes.²¹

That Gregory conceived of the illiterate as at best one group within a large body of adorers of the pictures is supported by the advice, in his second letter, that Serenus should call together 'the scattered sons of the Church' in order to point out to them 'testimonies of sacred scripture', and explain why he had sought to destroy the pictures. To this gathering he was expected to clarify the boundary between the proper and improper motivations for possessing the works of art, advice which Gregory couches in terms suggesting that, in his view, some of the bishop's supposed listeners were responsible for the pictures' presence on the church walls.²² Ignorant or illiterate members of Serenus' flock were evidently among those whom his iconoclasm had dispersed and probably therefore among those whom he was expected to address – the second letter's warning to the bishop not to 'generate scandal in savage minds' implies that the uneducated were as distraught as anyone over his actions. Yet the all-encompassing tone of 'the scattered sons of the Church', together with the implication that certain of Serenus' would-be listeners helped in the decoration of their churches, reinforce the sense that his foreseen audience was to include not only the illiterate but some relatively educated Christians, as well. Among them may even have been other members of the clergy. If Serenus

was expected to explain to more educated persons the second commandment, then most likely Gregory thought that some, at least, of these learned listeners were guilty of adorning the pictures. Besides these people precisely who, if anyone else, was doing the adoration is not at all certain. Neither letter makes clear to what extent, if any, the illiterate were in fact involved in adoring the pictures; for what had dispersed them along with other members of Serenus' flock, Gregory indicates, was less the bishop's opposition to the acts of adoration than his iconoclasm, and this could have upset those who refrained from adoring the pictures as much as much those who engaged in the activity.

Gregory's perception of 'the scattered sons of the Church' as a group that included *literati* is still more apparent when it is realized that these comments in the later letter parallel the description in Part 3.6 of the pope's *Regula pastoralis* of the proper way for bishops to preach to the wise (*sapientes*).²³ There the recommended method of encouraging virtue in 'the wise' is that of reason and appeal to authority, the same method that the letter of 600 recommends Serenus use when speaking to his gathered flock. Correspondingly, the impact which Gregory held pictures to have on the ignorant, as indicated especially by the second letter to Serenus, reflects the views expressed in the same chapter of the *Regula* on the correct ways to preach to the dull (*hebetes*). To the bishop of Marseilles Gregory maintains that from pictures of the stories of holy persons (*sancti*) the ignorant may be incited to greater virtue, learn to adore God alone, and be 'edified' (*aedificatio*), while according to *Regula* 3.6 the bishop who wants to guide the unintelligent to virtue has to preach the examples set in stories of *sancti*.²⁴ Evidently Gregory held the ignorant or illiterate to count among the unintelligent, and to have the same, limited intellectual capacities attributed to that group in *Regula Pastoralis* 3.6. According to the *Regula pastoralis* even the unintelligent may possess a certain understanding of Christian teachings, though, which the preacher is to 'edify' or 'build up' (*aedificandum*) through the stories he relates²⁵ – just as an *illiteratus* or *idiota* of the early Middle Ages might know some elements of doctrine.

Given that at least some of the worshippers of the pictures in Marseilles were relatively educated persons it is difficult to blame the difficulties faced by Serenus, to any great extent, on a resurgence of pagan sentiment or the expression of 'the naive, animistic ideas of the masses', the reason suggested by one scholar for the growth of image-worship in eastern Christendom.²⁶ The cause of the problems in Marseilles was located partly or totally within the more learned sectors of the population, at least as Gregory perceived the situation, and to that degree he more probably understood the adoration of the pictures there as a misplaced outgrowth of the reverence

even literate Christians naturally felt when seeing depictions of sacred events. What likely also concerned the pope was the danger that such adoration, by the learned, would encourage similar practices further than they might already exist in the illiterate population. It may have been partly to help Serenus to deflect the attention of educated worshippers away from the pictures that Gregory focused solely on their benefits to the ignorant. Although additional reasons will be suggested later for this aspect of the two letters, he was perhaps encouraged to avoid comments on the pictures' potential value to the educated because he did not want to fuel the obviously excessive attentiveness that some of them had been showing towards the works of art.

III

The foregoing examination of the vocabulary of the two letters to Serenus clears the way for dealing with certain larger issues that they raise. First, it is evident now that these texts alone tell us nothing about Gregory's views on the validity and role of other types of artwork besides large-scale pictures of sacred events set in public view on church walls. Had the difficulties with Serenus centred on another kind of artistic production, the pope might have presented some of the same arguments, but it is equally possible that he would have argued in entirely different terms. It is also conceivable that Gregory considered the arguments set forth in his two letters particularly appropriate for dealing with the iconoclastic bishop of Marseilles,²⁷ and that he would have emphasized other ideas – ideas for instance highlighting the value of the same type of artistic production to people other than the illiterate – had he been called upon to defend similar pictures in another location. Nevertheless, his teachings in both letters are clearly presented as statements of general principles about pictorial representations of the kind described. What he said he believed to hold true for all pictures of holy events publicly displayed on church walls, whether or not in other circumstances he would have deemed it beneficial to use the same type of argumentation.

Second, when Gregory wrote that pictures should not be adored – a word that for him referred especially to the honour due to God alone – did he mean simply that they should not receive the honour owed the divine (while presumably other, lesser types of worship could be tolerated), or that any worship given to them was necessarily the equivalent of the reverence properly bestowed on God and consequently unacceptable?²⁸ The one, small clue that he held to the first opinion is provided in the letter of 600. The statement that the depiction of a holy event should cause its viewer to experience compunction and prostrate himself in adoration of the Trinity seems to leave open the possibility that such worship

could take place before the work of art. There is nothing about Gregory's statement that directly denies this, and indeed Gregory may have thought that in churches with walls covered with artistic representations it was difficult for the faithful to prostrate themselves in adoration of the holy Trinity *away* from an image. Given this, he perhaps considered it impractical to forbid image-worship beyond absolute idolatry. So long as the prostrate worshippers did not seek merely to revere the depictions in front of and around them but ultimately, in their thoughts, honoured the unseen divinity, Gregory might have argued, their actions were acceptable.²⁹

Reasons can be proposed why, if Gregory did think that artistic representations of sacred persons or events could be worshipped in this manner, he did not raise the issue with Serenus. For one, Gregory might have feared that defending the suitability of certain types of image-worship would antagonize Serenus, whose taste in general for art was evidently limited. The pope's chances both of convincing the bishop to adhere to Roman lines, and of ending the conflict in Marseilles that so undermined Serenus' ability to operate effectively in his see, would then be diminished. Gregory's concern perhaps that the adoration which educated Christians paid to the pictures impeded ignorant viewers from approaching them would only have added to his reluctance to mention a legitimate form of reverence. It may be significant, too, that the works of art in question apparently bore little resemblance to the earliest icons in the east³⁰ but were large-scale pictures of events in Christian history placed on church walls for public viewing, which, Gregory believed, had the particular function of conveying knowledge of Christian history and virtue to the illiterate. Even if he thought that some artistic representations validly received a certain form of honour, he may have thought that such actions should not be undertaken towards this type of depiction.

IV

The most difficult problem in any effort to analyse the letters to Serenus, however, is to decipher Gregory's various allusions to the ideas that pictures further the knowledge of or educate the illiterate, that they are comparable to written words, and that the illiterate 'read' them as the literate read written texts. These aspects of the two letters have occasionally been cited in the past to show how Gregory's comments resemble earlier writings, primarily Greek, that equate the artistic depiction with the written or spoken word and uphold the depiction's ability to teach the uneducated.³¹ Yet the emphasis placed on similarities between works by earlier authors and Gregory's letters has meant that the important differences between them have usually been overlooked, differences which make it unlikely that any of these earlier

authorities directly influenced Gregory's remarks to Serenus.³² Most noticeably such an approach does not account for the fact that, so far as I know, Gregory is the first Christian writer on art's relationship to words, from the east or the west, who declares that just as a written work may be read by the literate person a picture may be 'read' by the illiterate beholder. In addition, the same type of appraisal has tended to ignore or fail to explain the differences in vocabulary between the first letter and the second.

To the best of my knowledge no unambiguous statement affirming that artistic representations can in any sense educate their beholders or equating their value with that of words, written or spoken, exists from the Christian Latin west before Gregory the Great.³³ In a poem composed in about 400, Paulinus of Nola justifies the pictures in his church in a way that has sometimes been misread as an affirmation of their didactic powers, but as Lawrence Duggan has recently indicated Paulinus does not actually admit that they teach viewers.³⁴ Instead, Paulinus states that the artwork was placed in the church in the hope that the sight would be sufficiently striking to restrain peasant visitors from their otherwise excessive feasting. The pictures are accompanied by explanatory *tituli* that are read aloud among the peasants, the poem also declares, presumably with the totally illiterate listening to those who possess sufficient literacy to do this. Paulinus believes that people who read the 'saintly histories of chaste works' are inspired to virtue by the examples that they set, such that the one who thirsts is quenched with sobriety; hence the peasants who gaze at the paintings in his church forgo their food and drink. Although Paulinus' comments seem to move towards an idea that the pictures are the things being read,³⁵ his words suggest more that he regarded the study of the *tituli* as merging with contemplation of the scenes that they elucidated. He stops well short of Gregory I's distinctive juxtaposition of the illiterate who themselves read artistic representations with the literate who read writings.

As for the Greek-speaking world, several writings prior to Gregory's letters have survived from there that parallel artistic representations with either written or spoken words.³⁶ Basil, for example, equates the effect on listeners of speeches describing deeds of war with that on viewers of depictions of the same deeds, in that both the speeches and the works of art recall the greatness of the heroes of those events and inspire their audiences or beholders to similar displays of strength. 'What the telling of a story reveals to the hearing', he goes on, 'the silent picture places through imitation before the eyes'.³⁷ Nilus implies that the impact of artistic representations on their beholders parallels that of writings on readers when he argues that depictions of biblical stories are particularly beneficial for those who cannot read and are ignorant of

holy scripture, since the uneducated may meditate on representations of the virtuous deeds performed by those who served God and be inspired by their examples.³⁸

A comment by Gregory of Nyssa that is perhaps more helpful for understanding Gregory I is his claim that a depiction of holy deeds is like a book able to speak, such that '... even the silent picture speaks on the wall ...'.³⁹ The notion that pictures are themselves in a sense written words or books underlies the assertions in the pope's letters that the illiterate can read works of art. The similarity between the teachings of the two Gregories appears still stronger when the character of reading in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages is kept in mind: because the activity predominantly involved reading aloud, it generally belonged in the same class of actions as speaking and hearing.⁴⁰ Yet Gregory the Great's emphasis on the paradox of the illiterate who can read suggests forcefully that he thought of their relationship with the pictures on church walls as somehow comparable to the situation of the reader who, through the literary skills that he possesses, actually deciphers written words on his own. For Pope Gregory the illiterate did not passively confront the pictures in the way that Gregory of Nyssa's speaking book and speaking picture imply, whether alone or, as certain scholars have proposed, alongside a teacher who lectured or read aloud to them about the subjects of the depictions.⁴¹ Gregory I's words do not exclude the possibility that the ignorant might need teachers to instruct them in how to read artistic depictions, for instance by familiarizing them with the persons and events represented.⁴² In the end, though, he was convinced that there was something about the pictures on church walls that enabled *illiterati* to engage for themselves in such reading, an activity that when it came to written texts lay beyond their grasp.

In none of the patristic texts just cited does the comparison of pictures to words lead to a clear statement that art can teach, although all of them imply that artistic depictions improve or bring to mind any knowledge viewers may already have of the things represented. A more direct affirmation of the artistic representation's ability to educate is offered by Gregory of Nyssa, who declares in one of his poems that 'the artist teaches much through images'; yet he adds nothing more to indicate exactly what this meant.⁴³ A fourth, early eastern writer who clearly parallels artistic depictions with writings on the grounds that the former teach the less educated population – though without suggesting that viewers 'read' the representations – is Hypatius, archbishop of Ephesus from 531 until ca. 538. In an excerpt from his *Miscellaneous Enquiries* written for Bishop Julian of Atramyntium, Hypatius rebukes Julian for destroying certain depictions in his churches on the grounds that the faithful illicitly worship them, and he offers an explana-

tion of why the works of art should be allowed to remain.⁴⁴ Hypatius declares first that he himself is uninterested in sculpture or artistic representations because he and others like him, presumably meaning literate Christians, possess 'holy writings' celebrating 'the unspeakable and incomprehensible love of God for us men and the holy contests of the saints'.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, he warns Julian, 'we permit simpler people, as they are less perfect, to learn by way of initiation about such things by [the sense of] sight which is more appropriate to their natural development'.⁴⁶ A subsequent passage reaffirms the ability of art, if not to teach the less educated, at least through its beauty to turn their thoughts towards God:

For these reasons we, too, allow even material adornment in the sanctuaries, not because we believe that God considers gold and silver and silken vestments and gem-studded vessels venerable and sacred but because we permit each order of the faithful to be guided and led up to the divine being in a manner appropriate to it [the order], because we think that some people are guided even by these [gold, silver, etc.] towards the intelligible beauty and from the abundant light in the sanctuaries to the intelligible and immaterial light.⁴⁷

No matter how little understanding Gregory I possessed of the Greek language, this is known not to have cut him off entirely from communicating with ecclesiastics and lay aristocrats in the east, both during the six years that he spent in Constantinople as papal legate to the imperial court and through letters after his return to Rome.⁴⁸ It is therefore conceivable that before he wrote to Serenus he had heard the idea that pictures assisted the education of the ignorant being expressed in Greek-speaking circles. As far as the comments of Hypatius go, however, they bear so little resemblance to Gregory's remarks that it seems very unlikely that there is any direct connection between them.

Gregory may have refrained from arguing decisively that pictures can, on their own, teach the ignorant about things previously unfamiliar to them simply on the basis of his personal experience with relatively uneducated lay persons. It is quite possible that his own observations of how the laity interacted with the pictures in Roman churches made him suspicious of any idea that they could learn from such works of art without assistance from members of the clergy. Furthermore, as will be discussed further shortly, Gregory elsewhere expressed his conviction that preaching was the one essential means to instruct the laity.

But this and other aspects of the position adopted in the letters to Serenus may also have been bolstered by the pope's knowledge of a few passages in writings by Augustine, which are concerned with the relationship between artistic representations and the written word. One of these texts occurs in *De doctrina Christiana*, of which

Book 2 deals with signs. While most of this section of the treatise focuses on the signifying capacity of words and letters, at one point attention turns to pictures and statues.⁴⁹ Despite the brevity of the comments on art here it is apparent that in Augustine's belief a depiction had an influence on its viewer reminiscent of that of speech and letters on listeners and readers, even while he thought of a work of art as something inferior. Every such object is a sign, a thing, that is, 'making something else other than itself come to mind beyond the appearance that it bears to the senses', as the opening of Book 2 defines the term.⁵⁰ Like words artistic representations are 'given' signs, ones that do not 'naturally' signify something else (as smoke does a fire) but are made or used by one creature expressly in order to convey a notion of something else to another.⁵¹ In the case of words, Augustine demonstrates that the ability to understand requires knowledge of their significance; unfamiliarity with what the words used in a text signify can impede the reader's comprehension. To understand the meaning of a word may require an explanation from someone 'more skilled', or that its sense be inferred from preceding or following words.⁵²

'Pictures, statues, and other imitative works of this kind' number 'among the unnecessary institutions of men', Augustine declares; yet he claims as well that especially when these works of art are made by skilled artists, 'no one errs when he sees the likenesses, such that he recognizes the things to which they are similar'.⁵³ What he meant by this must have been not that the representations can impart to viewers new knowledge of their subjects, but that when the appearance of an object, event, or person is known it can be readily identified in a depiction, that the representation's visible resemblance to the prototype makes obvious the former's role as sign of the latter. If the work of art is skilfully executed the similarity between sign and thing signified makes recognition inevitable, so long as the beholder is already familiar enough with what is signified to be capable of such recognition.

Interpreted in this manner the passage in *De doctrina Christiana* agrees with another in *De consensu evangelistarum*, which Gregory may have also remembered when writing his two letters. In describing how people might imagine that both SS. Paul and Peter were among those who were closest to Christ while he was alive, despite the fact that Paul never knew Christ in the flesh, Augustine notes that artists often portray the three of them together. But as he continues, 'They thoroughly deserve to err who have sought Christ and his apostles not in sacred books but in pictures on walls; and it is no wonder if in fashioning ideas from paintings they are deceived'.⁵⁴ Even more directly than *De doctrina Christiana* the passage in *De consensu evangelistarum* presents pictures as inferior to words, here especially to the written words of holy scripture. In

Augustine's opinion persons who rely solely on artistic representations to learn Christian truth, without also seeking information from sacred writings, are easily and rightfully misled. The one clear instance of Augustinian influence on the letters to Serenus, though, lies in Gregory's affirmations that the illiterate can read pictures. His understanding of the notion of reading, here, comes directly from Augustine's commentary on the reading of miracles in *Tractatus* 24 of the homilies, *In Iohannis Evangelium*.⁵⁵ Christ's miracles have their own language, Augustine states towards the beginning of *Tractatus* 24.2. As part of his analysis of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand (John 6.5-14) he goes on to declare:

Therefore as we have heard how great this miracle is let us also seek its profundity; let us not merely delight in its exterior, but may we also examine its depth. For that which we marvel at on the outside has something inside. We have seen, we have contemplated something great, glorious, and altogether divine which could not be achieved except by God, [and] on the basis of the thing done we have praised its author. But just as if we saw beautiful letters in some place it would not be sufficient for us to praise the scribe's hand because he made them equal, regular, and beautiful, if we did not also read what he has indicated to us through them, in the same way he who only sees the deed is delighted by the deed's beauty such that he admires its author, but he who understands it in a sense reads it. For a picture is seen in one way, letters are seen in another. When you see a picture there is nothing else to do but to see and to praise; when you see letters this is not everything, since you also feel the urge to read. For when you see letters you say, if by chance you do not know how to read them: What do we think is that which is written here? You ask what it is, even though you already see something. He from whom you seek to know what you see will point out something else to you. He has one set of eyes, you another. Don't you see the forms of the letters in the same fashion? Yet you don't recognize their significance in the same manner. Therefore you see and praise; he sees, praises, reads, and understands. Since therefore we have seen [the miracle], since we have praised [it], let us also read and understand it.

(Hoc ergo miraculum, sicut audivimus quam magnum sit, quaeramus etiam quam profundum sit; non tantum eius superficie delectemur, sed etiam altitudinem perscrutemur. Habet enim aliquid intus hoc quod miramur foris. Vidimus, spectavimus magnum quiddam, praeclarum quiddam et omnino divinum, quod fieri nisi a Deo non possit, laudavimus de facto factorem. Sed quemadmodum, si litteras pulchras alicubi inspicereamus, non nobis sufficeret laudare scriptoris articulum quoniam eas pariles, aequales decorasque fecit, nisi etiam legeremus quid nobis per illas indicaverit, ita factum hoc qui tantum inspicit delectatur pulcritudine facti ut admiretur artificem, qui autem intellegit quasi legit. Aliter enim videtur pictura, aliter videntur litterae. Picturam cum videris, hoc est

totum vidisse laudasse; litteras cum videris, non hoc est totum, quoniam commoneris et legere. Etenim dicis, cum videris litteras, si forte non eas nosti legere. Quid putamus esse quod hic scriptum est? Interrogas quid sit, cum iam videas aliquid. Aliud tibi demonstraturus est a quo quaeris agnoscere quod vidisti. Alios ille oculos habet, alios tu. Nonne similiter apices videtis? Sed non similiter signa cognoscitis. Tu ergo vides et laudas; ille videt, laudat, legit et intellegit. Quia ergo vidimus, quia laudavimus, legamus et intellegamus.)⁵⁶

Augustine distinguishes the person who understands a miracle because he 'reads' it from the simple admirer of the deed. The contrast between them parallels that drawn between the person who reads a written text and the viewer of a picture, and that between the literate and the illiterate. While the reader of a miracle resembles the literate reader of a text, the miracle's uncomprehending admirer belongs in the same category as both the beholder of a work of art and the individual who lacks literary skills.

Although in *Tractatus* 24 Augustine points to works of art only as contrasts to writings and miracles, his claim that the comprehending witness of a miracle reads that event much as the literate read written words inspired Gregory's own assertion that the illiterate can read the pictures on church walls in a way that mirrors the educated person's reading of a text. Far more closely than Paulinus' account of the peasant visitors to Nola or Gregory of Nyssa's description of the artistic representation as a 'speaking book', this passage offers a prototype not only for the idea of a parallel between the reading of a written work and of a visual spectacle, but also for the notion of a form of reading within the grasp of the person who cannot decipher letters.

That Gregory was prepared to use Augustine's sermon on John 6:1-14 to establish a parallel between pictures and words is demonstrated by the fourth chapter of his *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, a treatise composed prior to 600,⁵⁷ where some brief references to art's function show the influence of precisely the same source:

For holy scripture is the same in terms of words and meanings as a picture is in terms of colours and things; and he is really too foolish who so concentrates on a picture's colours that he is unaware of the things that are depicted. For if we embrace the words that are spoken externally and pay no attention to their meanings, as if we disregard the things that are depicted, we hold solely to the colours. The letter kills, it has been written, yet the spirit gives life. For just as the letter covers the spirit, thus the chaff covers the grain.

(Sic est enim scriptura sacra in uerbis et sensibus, sicut pictura in coloribus et rebus: et nimis stultus est, qui sic picturae coloribus inheret, ut res, quae pictae sunt, ignoret. Nos enim, si uerba, quae exterius dicuntur, amplectimur et sensus ignoramus, quasi ignorantes res, quae depictae

sunt, solos colores tenemus. Littera occidit, scriptum est, spiritus autem uiuificat. Sic enim littera cooperit spiritum, sicut palea tegit frumentum.)⁵⁸

To approach a picture properly is not only to pay attention to its colours; in Gregory's view this concentration on the artwork's aesthetic attributes amounts to an obtuseness that indeed makes the viewer resemble the illiterate person mentioned in the tractate on John. It is rather to take notice of what the forms shown there represent, just as the reader of holy scripture must be conscious of the true meanings of its words.

This difference between the viewer preoccupied with a representation's colours and the one who is aware of its forms is fundamental to what Gregory meant by the reading of an artistic representation. For the pope such an activity required the viewer to contemplate the forms depicted in the work of art, and thus, in the language of *De doctrina Christiana*, to move from sign to thing signified. It was an activity setting that beholder apart from the one who did not read, who engaged in the mere passive appreciation of something for its aesthetic qualities and failed to seek out its meaning. In Gregory's view, the illiterate of Marseilles were capable not merely of admiring the beauty of the pictures on church walls but of reading them, and consequently of grasping at least something of what they represented. Given that Gregory evidently assumed that the ignorant had some other source of knowledge about the persons or events shown which enabled them to learn from the depictions, he doubtless thought either that they had already heard the stories depicted and hence could simply be presumed to identify correctly the forms displayed (because he believed the representations to bear a close enough resemblance to their subjects); or he thought that someone was available, on the spot, to relate the stories to those viewers and explain what was shown in the representations, and by so doing to teach them to read the pictures on their own.

The primary justification for any assumption on Gregory's part that *illiterati* such as those in Marseilles were already visually literate in the sense just described, already knew the stories that lay behind the pictures and could identify the forms in them, or that they were aided to read the pictures by persons who were, was his conviction that preaching was an indispensable element of the clergy's role. Thus in the *Regula pastoralis*, which circulated widely in the decade before 600,⁵⁹ Gregory not only urges bishops to engage in frequent preaching to their followers but contends that the best way for those preachers to persuade the dull (the category to which he assigned the illiterate) to pursue virtue is by repeating stories of the valour and virtuous behaviour of *sancti*.⁶⁰ The pope reasonably expected that the stories selected as topics for sermons would often include the sacred deeds

represented on the church walls, that preachers would frequently refer to the depictions when narrating those events, that their sermons would clarify what the pictures were meant to reveal concerning the benefits of virtuous behaviour and the glory of God, and perhaps that at other times, more informally than during the delivery of homilies, the clergy would use the pictures as aids to exhort the uneducated who entered their churches. Not art but preaching is the one avenue that the *Regula pastoralis* unambiguously recognizes for communicating Christian doctrine to the ignorant; but as Gregory's two letters to Serenus indicate, the sight of pictures could advance and refresh the illiterates' knowledge of the stories learned from the clergy's sermons and exhortations, and by setting those events before their eyes the depictions could lead them to be more virtuous as well as to adore God alone.

V

That pictures are comparable with writings, can educate in the sense just described, and can be read by the illiterate, are all ideas that Gregory probably thought it was strategically sound to emphasize when it came to handling Serenus. As has already been stated, simply the emphasis on the pictures' value to the illiterate was possibly intended to aid Serenus to restrain the adoration of the more educated Christians under his care. In addition, the teachings noted implied that the pictures on church walls helped to make Christianity accessible to all faithful even in its character as a religion of the written word. In dealing with areas whose inhabitants included *illiterati* and even pagans or recent converts from paganism,⁶¹ to demonstrate that through pictures the writings of the Church were open to everyone rather than simply to the few trained in its language of worship was an especially astute tactic to employ. Gregory may have agreed with Augustine that pictures were 'unnecessary institutions' insofar as preaching offered a superior mechanism for teaching sacred doctrine to the faithful. But he also realized that, given the clergy's duty to draw all persons who came into their churches into one body of faithful, the unifying force of pictures that transformed even the most illiterate viewers into *legentes* of the Christian message was something not to be disregarded. In this respect pictures added a dimension to Christian devotion that no amount of preaching could impart.

Furthermore, an alignment of church pictures with texts distinguished those Christian works of art from the pagan idols that Gregory perhaps feared were worshipped by some of the *gentes* known to Serenus. Whereas the idols belonged to a preliterate culture reliant on the oral transmission of knowledge, the pictures attacked by Serenus were products of a religion for which the written word was a central, characterizing symbol, even if it was

not indispensable to the spread of doctrine.⁶² By declaring the pictures on church walls comparable with writing Gregory suggested not only that they brought the illiterate into contact with something otherwise reserved to the literate. As substitutes for written words the works of art distanced their viewers from the culture of heathen idols and idolatry and in doing so, for those who were former pagans, helped to strengthen their conversion. The emphasis on the illiterate person's ability to read such pictures, either assisted or unassisted, underscored the depictions' capacity to divorce viewers from pagan traditions.

The contention in the second letter that pictures teach the ignorant to adore God alone, a notion not expressed in the letter of 599, also has its strategic side. This is the concept of their function to which attention is directed at the outset of the second letter, whether the *quod dictum sit* later on refers to the second commandment or to the stories depicted in the pictures, and it represents a sharpening of and refinement to the arguments of the first letter that was probably provoked by Serenus' incalci-trance. The second commandment was a scriptural passage which Serenus doubtless held to justify his own actions, and one to which he possibly referred in responding to the pope's first letter.⁶³ By maintaining against the bishop of Marseilles that artistic representations led the ignorant to accept the commandment's truth, Gregory affirmed not only that there were valid reasons for the illiterate to approach pictures. Because the depictions' presence on church walls guided those viewers to render adoration only where it was properly due, it ultimately undermined their potential desire to adore the works of art themselves.

Nothing that has been said so far about Gregory's strategy explains the several, small changes in vocabulary between his two letters, however. In these cases another motivation can be seen at work: In the letter of 600 Gregory altered some of his wording so that, in writing to Serenus a second time, he could bring the bishop to understand that the reading of pictures by the illiterate provided a logical parallel both to the preaching that bishops and other clergy properly undertook towards the unintelligent, and to the study of scripture by the literate and especially the clergy. Again, the changes in vocabulary do not indicate a change in Gregory's views as to how pictures functioned in churches. Rather, the pope sought to spell out in greater detail the reasons for his objections to iconoclasm, to sharpen and clarify some of his arguments, and above all to remind Serenus more clearly of his pastoral duties. Not only Serenus' stubborn refusal to heed the pope's earlier letter may lie behind the letter of 600; it is possible that Gregory did not learn of the split Serenus had caused among Christians in Marseilles, to which the second letter alone refers, until after the first

letter had been sent. The bishop of Marseilles' capacity to lead his flock now seemed more in jeopardy than ever, and in this light it was appropriate to couch advice concerning the role of images in terms that also reminded him with particular force of his pastoral responsibilities. That this goal underlies the letter of 600 is apparent if the letter is compared more closely to sections of Gregory's *Regula pastoralis*, which he may have intended some of his remarks to Serenus to echo.

According to Chapter 11 in the second part of the *Regula*,⁶⁴ daily meditation on the 'sacred word' is vital for bishops because it assists them to withstand the deleterious effects of excessive contact with other mortals. It aids the ruler of other men to aspire after compunction, to raise his heart above secular concerns 'through the pursuit of erudition'. This is why, Gregory claims, Paul warns his disciple to 'attend unto reading (*lectio*)' until the apostle's arrival (1 Tim. 4.13).⁶⁵

The allegorical interpretation of the Ark of the Covenant given in the same chapter links the Ark's four golden rings to the four gospels and the staves through them to the clergy who, as strong teachers 'always adhering to the instruction of the sacred volumes, proclaim the unity of the holy Church . . .' (see Exodus 25.12–15). Their preaching brings the Church 'to the unformed minds of unbelievers (*rudes infidelium mentes*)',⁶⁶ but it is hoped that they will also be outstanding in the way they conduct their lives, especially in their unceasing zeal for the reading (*lectio*) of holy texts.⁶⁷ Continued study of the sacred writings allows them always to be prepared when their followers consult them on spiritual matters, Gregory goes on, so that they will not have to learn the appropriate answers as they are needed.⁶⁸

The reading of church pictures by *illiterati* involves essentially the same principles. The comments in the second letter to Serenus that pictures instruct the illiterate who read them recall the statement in *Regula pastoralis* 2.11 that the sacred volumes of holy scripture are a source of instruction to the clergy. The instruction given by the Bible helps bishops to rise above the common masses, avoid sin, and renew their love for their spiritual homeland, while similarly pictures, Gregory declares to Serenus, instruct the illiterate in that they offer models of virtue for their imitation and encourage them to adore God.

To educate the ignorant about what is depicted and its significance is a task of priests and bishops, one accomplished primarily through their sermons recounting the same stories shown in the pictures. But the warning to Serenus in Gregory's second letter to realize that above all others the *gentes* among whom he lives profit from church pictures emphasizes how much the pictures may help him with his own responsibilities, particularly his responsibilities as preacher. Thus it can be placed

alongside the declaration of *Regula pastoralis* 2.11 that the best clergy, the church's 'strong and persevering teachers', through their preaching seek to 'bring the Church to the unformed minds of unbelievers'.

The words *scriptura* and *lectio* may have been chosen over the term, *codices*, found in the letter of 599, also with the pastoral duties of the clergy in mind. In this case the ambiguity of the two words used in the letter of 600 seems intentional, since they recall the holy writings that the clergy should study every day without going so far as to suggest that the Bible, described as *sacred* scripture later in the same letter, constitutes the only text to be associated with church pictures (which might, of course, depict non-biblical scenes such as deeds of the saints). Yet both here and in the letter of 599 with its reference to *codices*, Gregory's failure to specify that the texts in question are biblical cannot be taken as evidence that the pictures concerned were of non-biblical themes. This is simply one of the ways in which he makes his comments into general statements of doctrine, applicable to all pictures of sacred events displayed for public view on church walls and not merely to those attacked by the bishop of Marseilles.

In spite of the parallel between the daily reading which Gregory expected of the clergy and the reading of pictures by *illiterati*, in the end these were activities that Gregory understood, in writing both letters, to operate on different planes. In his belief the unceasing study of sacred texts was of central importance in the lives of bishops and other clergy and might lead them towards greater awareness of the more hidden, allegorical meanings of the passages they read, along the lines of the analysis in *Regula pastoralis* 2.11 of the Ark of the Covenant. But it is never suggested in either letter that the reading of pictures by the illiterate constitutes as crucial an activity as does the meditation on holy writings by the clergy who had the duty of preaching to them. Furthermore, neither letter so much as hints that the ignorant are capable of reading in a picture or correspondingly understanding anything about it beyond the straightforward unfolding of the actions depicted, even if as models for imitation those scenes inspire them to virtue and the adoration of God.⁶⁹ This does not mean that Gregory thought restrictions should be placed on the complexity that artists gave to representations of sacred events; but because the illiterate were people whom he categorized as unintelligent, for whom, according to *Regula pastoralis* 3.6, rational arguments were less appropriate than the stories of *sancti*,⁷⁰ he apparently viewed them as limited in the degree to which they could appreciate the depictions' significance. That remained true no matter the sophistication of the subject-matter chosen for the works of art. As Herbert Kessler has shown in terms of early pictorial cycles such as may have been present in Serenus' churches, the doctrinal messages that

artists sought to convey could attain a degree of subtlety far beyond the grasp of most viewers while the pictures still remained accessible to the uneducated on a lower level of understanding.⁷¹ Accordingly, it would seem, although educated Christians might have been expected to understand most or all aspects of what was represented on the walls of their churches, the clergy were limited in what they could hope to teach the ignorant of the pictures' full meanings.

The remark in the second letter that pictures are made 'for the edification (*aedificationem*) of ignorant people' underscores the idea that the illiterates' reading of church pictures parallels the preaching properly directed towards the unintelligent, preaching which, as *Regula pastoralis* 3.6 indicates, should 'edify' or 'build up' (*aedificandum*) the little heavenly wisdom those listeners may already possess.⁷² The description of the pictures destroyed by Serenus as ones of *sancti* serves in part the same purpose. As was mentioned earlier the term, *sancti*, was one that Gregory generally used quite loosely, and hence the phrase, *sanctorum imagines*, could refer to depictions of events from the Old Testament as much as scenes from the lives of the saints. But Gregory perhaps mentioned *sancti* less with the actual themes of the pictures in Marseilles in mind than in order to remind Serenus again of his pastoral responsibilities towards the ignorant. Serenus is being urged to recognize that the objects he harmed performed a function comparable to that of the stories of *sancti* which, he should remember, he is supposed to preach to his uneducated followers.⁷³ The illiterates' reading of church pictures parallels the clergy's daily study of holy scripture yet occurs on this altogether inferior level, one appropriate to uneducated persons – just as, according to *Regula* 3.6, the appropriate methods of preaching to the wise and the dull stand in parallel yet are geared towards completely disparate intellectual powers.

In Gregory's belief, the inescapable presence of the depictions of holy events set in full view on church walls not only improved their illiterate beholders' knowledge of the scenes represented. By offering models of outstanding behaviour they steered such Christians towards virtue and the adoration of God much as did preachers' frequent repetition to them of the stories represented, and in a way that evoked, though on a far less sophisticated level, the bishops' daily study of the Bible that raised their own hearts above secular concerns. Like the clergy's preaching and more informal commentary that helped bring the illiterate to the point where they could read pictures on their own – where they could recognize the forms depicted in them, understand their significance, and thus in a sense become *legentes* of the Christian word – such works of art provided a mechanism for turning the uneducated away from sin. For this reason, even if pictures were less vital to

the spread of Christian doctrine than was preaching, they could work with preaching to advance the spiritual well-being of the illiterate much as reading scripture did that of the clergy.

The reasons for the preservation of pictures on church walls that Gregory offered to Serenus in both letters, though especially in the second, gave the bishop a solid intellectual foundation not only for following the precepts of Rome but for healing the divisions in his flock. The remark in the letter of 600 that had Serenus acted differently towards the representations in his churches, 'the name of pastor would deservedly excel in you', served only to drive home to him once more how important it was that he remember his pastoral duties, duties set forth so clearly in the *Regula pastoralis*.⁷⁴

NOTES

1 – I wish to thank Professors Peter Brown, Herbert Kessler, and Robert Markus for their willingness to read a first draft of this article and for their helpful comments and criticisms. I am also grateful to Professors Lawrence Duggan, Seth Lerer, and Emmet McLaughlin for conversations that influenced the contents in various ways. Thanks are due, as well, to the organizers of the Patristic, Mediaeval, and Renaissance Studies Conference at Villanova University and to the Committee of Medieval Studies at Princeton University, who gave me opportunities to present related research in public.

Statements on image-doctrine of the kind noted are so widespread that only a sampling of places where they appear can be mentioned here: e.g. Adrian Fortescue, 'Images, veneration of', *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al., vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1910), col. 664–672, at col. 668; Gerhart B. Ladner, 'Origin and significance of the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy', *Medieval Studies*, 2 (1940), pp. 127–149, at p. 147 and n. 116; William R. Jones, 'Art and Christian piety: iconoclasm in medieval Europe', in *The Image and the Word: Confrontations in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (Missoula, MO: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977), pp. 75–105, at p. 78; Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), pp. 114–119; Michael Camille, 'Seeing and reading: some visual implications of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Art History*, 8 (1985), pp. 26–49, at p. 26; Herbert L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative and Church mission in sixth-century Gaul', in *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. H. L. Kessler and Marianna Shreve Simpson, Studies in the History of Art, 16 (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art; Hanover: distributed by University Press of New England, 1985), pp. 75–91, at pp. 75–76; Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 177–178.

2 – All of the scholars named in n. 1 mention Gregory in this context. See also F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 2: pp. 74–76; G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4th series, 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), esp. p. 51. In general Evans' book should be approached with caution, however, as shown in the review by Carole Straw, in *Speculum*, 63 (1988), pp. 654–655. Cf. the interpretation of Gregory's thought about art offered by Johannes Kollwitz, which goes somewhat astray because it is partly based on an eighth-century interpolation to a letter written by Gregory to the hermit Secundinus of Gaul: J. Kollwitz, 'Bild und

Bildertheologie im Mittelalter', in *Das Gottesbild im Abendland*, ed. W. Schöne et al. (Witten-Berlin: Eckart-Verlag, 1959), pp. 109–138, at pp. 109–110. The edition of the *Registrum* of Gregory's letters which I have used is that published in the *Corpus Christianorum* series: Gregory I, *Registrum epistularum*, ed. Dag Norberg, *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, 140–140A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1982), 140A, ep. 9 (209).768; ep. 11 (10).873–876. The interpolated version of the letter to Secundinus is in Vol. 140A, Appendix 10.1104–1111. Since the two letters to Serenus deal with very specific issues and reflect thought expressed in other Gregorian writings, I consider them to count among the pope's personal compositions: see Dag Norberg, 'Qui a composé les lettres de saint Grégoire le Grand?' *Studi Medievali*, 21 (1980), pp. 1–17; cf. idem, *Critical and Exegetical Notes on the Letters of St. Gregory the Great* (Stockholm: Almqvist, 1982).

The thought of Gregory the Great is recently the subject of a new, important analysis by Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection, Transformation of the Classical Heritage*, 14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). On Gregory's spirituality see also the decisive work of Claude Dagens, *Saint Grégoire le Grand. Culture et expérience chrétiennes* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977).

3 – Ernst Kitzinger, 'The cult of icons in the age before iconoclasm', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 83–150, at p. 132. Scholars who repeat Kitzinger's opinion include W. R. Jones, 'Art and Christian piety', pp. 78–79; Robert A. Markus, 'The cult of icons in sixth-century Gaul', in idem, *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1983), (XII) pp. 151–157, at p. 151, reprinted from *The Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 29 (1978), pp. 151–157; H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', p. 75; J. Herrin, *Christendom*, p. 177. Lawrence Duggan does not indicate agreement but cites other scholars who do, in 'Was art really the 'book of the illiterate'?', *Word & Image*, 5 (1989), esp. p. 227 and n. 5. Earlier much the same opinion was expressed by G. Ladner, 'Origin', p. 147 and n. 116.

4 – Yves Christe, *La Vision de Matthieu (Matth. XXIV–XXV): origines et développement d'une image de la Second Parousie* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), p. 90; L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', *passim*. Cf. Franz H. Bäuml, 'Variety and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Speculum*, 55 (1980), pp. 237–265, at p. 259; M. Camille, 'Seeing and reading', pp. 26, 33, 44.

5 – See e.g. Gerhart B. Ladner, 'Der Bilderstreit und die Kunst-Lehren der byzantinischen und abendländischen Theologie', *Zeitschrift für Theologie*, 50 (1931), pp. 1–23, at p. 19. For further references see L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', n. 95. See also J. Herrin, *Christendom*, pp. 12, 177, who interprets Gregory as defending the 'Bibles of the illiterate'; cf. Pierre Miquel, 'Images (culte des)', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, ed. M. Viller, et al., Vol. 7:2 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971), col. 1503–1519, at col. 1516–1517.

6 – See e.g. J. Kollwitz, 'Bild und Bildertheologie', p. 109, W. R. Jones, 'Art and Christian piety', pp. 78–79, where such ideas seem implied or taken for granted even though they are not emphasized. Cf. P. Miquel, 'Images', col. 1516–1517.

7 – Thus certain translations give 'saints' for *sancti*, which I think (and will argue later) may be misleading: e.g. A. Fortescue, 'Images', p. 668; H. Leclercq, 'Images (culte et querelle des)', in F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, Vol. 7:1 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1926), col. 180–302, at col. 217; P. Miquel, 'Images', col. 1516–1517.

8 – This is the notion that seems to underlie the assertions occasionally made, without explanation, that the letters to Serenus defend the 'didactic' or 'pedagogical' function of images: e.g. J. Kollwitz, 'Bild und Bildertheologie', p. 109; P. Miquel, 'Images', col. 1516–1517; Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, Ser. A, Vol. 31:2 (Åbo Akademi: Åbo, 1965), p. 11.

9 – On the possible connections, for example, between Gregory's

teachings and sixth-century Gallican church painting, see the fine study by H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', *passim* (n. 1, above). In general Kessler is one scholar who has given the relationship between Gregory's maxims and medieval artistic production serious attention.

10 – E.g. old St. Peter's, Santa Maria Maggiore, and Santa Pudenziana, to name just three examples. Gregory's own appreciation of artistic imagery is documented, e.g., in the life of Gregory by John the Deacon (see PL 75:229–230). I am grateful to an unknown reader of an earlier draft of this article for pointing this passage out to me. More generally, I would like to thank this person and another anonymous reader of an earlier draft for their helpful comments and criticisms, which I have taken into account in the preparation of this version of the article.

11 – Not only in the letters on images but also in Gregory, *Ep.* 11 (38), CCSL 140A, pp. 932–934, esp. pp. 933–934 (letter of June 601).

12 – Gregory I, *Ep.* 9 (209), CCSL 140A, p. 768.

13 – Below, following note.

14 – Gregory I, *Ep.* 11 (10), CCSL 140A, pp. 873–876, at pp. 873–875.

15 – As in Gregory's letter to Archbishop Januarius of Caralis (now Cagliari) in Sardinia, where he mentions a cross and *image* of Mary and Christ: Gregory I, *Ep.* 9 (196), CCSL 140A, pp. 750–752, at pp. 750–751.

16 – James Francis O'Donnell, *The Vocabulary of the Letters of Saint Gregory the Great: A Study in Late Latin Lexicography*, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Latin*, 2 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1934), p. 166. O'Donnell does not note Gregory's employment of the same term for Old Testament figures, but in *Regula pastoralis*, 3.2 (PL 77:53B) Gregory refers to Nathan the Prophet as *sanctus*. The *Regula* is printed in PL 77:13–128. A translation is available by Henry Davis, *St. Gregory the Great: Pastoral Care*, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, 11 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950).

17 – As they were, for example, in Rome at Sta. Maria Maggiore and in Old St. Peter's, as well as, according to Paulinus, in his church at Nola: Paulinus, *Carmen* 27, lines 511–541; R. C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus' Churches at Nola: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1940), pp. 60–63.

18 – A few scholars have recently argued that whatever Gregory believed concerning the function of pictures, in practice the ignorant would have needed help in order to understand them: e.g. H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', esp. pp. 85–86; M. Camille, 'Seeing and reading', p. 33.

19 – The need to understand properly Gregory's references to the ignorant has already been pointed out by H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', pp. 85–86. On literacy and illiteracy in Antiquity and the Middle Ages see esp. Herbert Grundmann, 'Litteratus-illiteratus: Der Wandel einer Bildungsnorm vom Altertum zum Mittelalter', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 40 (1958), pp. 1–65. Reprinted in idem, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, 3 vols, MGR Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 25 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1976–1978), 3, pp. 1–66; and more recently Franz Bäuml, some of whose footnotes provide helpful surveys of previous scholarly literature: 'Medieval literacy', *passim* (n. 4, above). A more ambitious study focusing especially on the high Middle Ages but with extensive coverage of earlier centuries is Brian Stock's *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). See also, again with reference particularly to the high medieval period, M. Camille's 'Seeing and reading' (n. 1, above); and more generally J. W. Thompson, *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages*, *University of California Publications in Education*, 9 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939; repr. (New York) 1963).

20 – in regard to the meaning of *gentes* in the second letter to

Serenus, J. W. Thompson writes (*Literacy*, p. 23, n. 86): 'Gregory's use of *idiotae* and *gentes*, here, makes it appear that he had in mind the lower classes and especially the foreign (i.e., the German) element in the population'.

21 – '... et ab eorum adoratu populum prohibere debuit, quatenus et litterarum nescii haberent, unde scientiam historiae colligerent ...' Gregory I, *Ep.* 9 (209), CCSL 140A, p. 768.

22 – 'Atque eis dicendum: Si ad hanc instructionem, ad quam imagines antiquitus factae sunt, habere uultis in ecclesia, eas modis omnibus et fieri et haberi permitto. Atque indica quod non tibi ipsa uisio historiae, quae pictura teste pandebatur, displicuerit sed illa adoratio, quae picturis fuerat incompetentem exhibita ... Et si quis imagines facere uoluerit, minime prohibe, adorare uero imagines omnimodis deuita'. Gregory I, *Ep.* 11 (10), CCSL 140A, p. 875.

23 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:56D–57C. The *Regula* circulated widely in the west beginning in the 590s: J. Herrin, *Christendom*, p. 172.

24 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57A–C. Gregory quotes Heb. 11.36, 37 (at PL 77:57B) to indicate the character of the preaching best undertaken towards the unintelligent: 'Cum uero solis exemplis quosdam trahendos cerneret, in eadem Epistola adiunxit: "Sancti ludibria et uerba experti, insuper et uincula et carceres, lapidati sunt, secti sunt, tentati sunt, in occasione gladii mortui sunt"'. The quotation diverges from the Vulgate, which has *alii* rather than *sancti*.

25 – '... in istis jam aedificandum est quidquid de superna sapientia cognoscitur ...' Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57A.

26 – The phrase comes from Ernst Kitzinger, 'The cult of images', p. 146, who uses it in explaining the rise of image-worship in the east as a movement that began with the lower classes and was gradually taken up by the intellectual elite.

27 – In addition to the one reason just suggested see below, p. 148.

28 – Several eastern iconodulist writers defended the existence of non-idolatrous forms of worship that might be given to representations of sacred persons and events: on this see e.g. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols, Vol. 2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 120–121, 126; Leslie Barnard, 'The theology of images', in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, ed. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1977), p. 10; Pierre Miquel, 'Images (culte des)', col. 1510 (n. 5, above). The interpolated version of Gregory's letter to the hermit Secundinus of Gaul (n. 2, above), which probably dates from the eighth century, discusses a smaller portrait of Christ that the writer encourages the hermit to worship with a type of reverence carefully distinguished from the adoration owed solely to God: Gregory I, Appendix 10, CCSL 140A:1104–1111, esp. pp. 1110–1111. The notion that all worship of artistic depictions was unacceptable is upheld in the *Libri Carolini*. On the teachings of that treatise see my article, 'Matter, spirit, and image in the *Libri Carolini*', *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 21 (1986), pp. 163–184.

29 – Pope Hadrian I seems to have understood Gregory's comment in these terms, when writing to Charlemagne at the end of the eighth century: Hadrian, *Epistolae*, Ep. 2, in *Epistolae selectae pontificum Romanorum Carolo Magno et Ludouico Pio regnantibus scriptae*, ed. Karl Hampe, MGH *Epistolae*, 5, *Epistolae Karolini aevi*, 3 (Berlin: Apud Weidmannos, 1899), pp. 5–57, at pp. 55–56. However, Hadrian's opinion was coloured by his belief in the authenticity of the interpolated version of the letter to Secundinus (nn. 2, 28, above). Ironically a letter of Aretino to Michelangelo mentioning the later legend that St. Gregory commanded the destruction of pagan statues in Rome, as a means to prevent idolatry, declares that the pope did this because the high quality of those monuments 'deprived the humble images of the saints of their due reverence'. Quoted by

Tilmann Buddensieg, 'Gregory the Great, the destroyer of pagan idols', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 28 (1965), pp. 44–65, at pp. 60–61.

30 – Peter Brown, 'A dark-age crisis: aspects of the iconoclastic controversy', in idem, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 251–301, at pp. 270–271; also published in *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), pp. 1–34.

31 – E.g. H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', p. 76; W. R. Jones, 'Art', p. 79.

32 – One exception to this oversight is L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', esp. pp. 228f (n. 3, above), although Duggan is not concerned with explaining Gregory's departures from the earlier tradition.

33 – Augustine discusses the relationship between pictures and words but without stating that the former teach. His comments, moreover, indicate his belief in the superiority of words. Their influence on Gregory is dealt with below, pp. 8–10.

34 – Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 27, lines 580–595, in R. C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus' Churches at Nola*, pp. 64–65. Most of the passage is quoted by L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', p. 229, from the translation by P. G. Walsh, *The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola*, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, 40 (New York: Newman Press, 1975), p. 291.

35 – Paulinus, *Carmen* 27, esp. lines 585–586, 589–591, in R. C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus*, pp. 64–65.

36 – Günter Lange, *Bild und Wort: Die katechetischen Funktionen des Bildes in der griechischen Theologie des sechsten bis neunten Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1968).

37 – Basil, *Homilia*, 19, in *sanctos quadraginta martyres*, 2, PG 31:507–510; quoted in L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', n. 7.

38 – Nilus, *Epistolarum lib.*, 4.61 (Olympiodoro Eparcho), PG 79:577B–580A; quoted in L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', n. 7.

39 – Gregory of Nyssa, *De S. Theodoro martyre*, PG 46:737D–740A. Discussed in G. Lange, *Bild und Wort*, pp. 32–33.

40 – L. Duggan, 'Book of the illiterate', p. 245; G. Lange, *Bild und Wort*, p. 33.

41 – E.g. M. Camille, 'Seeing and reading', pp. 32–37. Camille tries to reconcile Gregory I's comparison of pictures to writings with his own vision of 'the illiterate and moreover passive audience of most medieval art' (p. 33). This does not apply in terms of understanding the teachings of Pope Gregory, who, as will be shown further below, by no means assumed that the illiterate audience of church pictures was 'passive'.

42 – See n. 18, above.

43 – Gregory of Nyssa, *Carminum Liber I. Theologica, Sectio 2: Poemata moralia*, 33.16, PL 37:929A.

44 – This fragment of the lost *Miscellaneous Enquiries* was originally published by Franz Diekamp, *Analecta Patristica: Texte und Abhandlungen zur griechischen Patristik*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 117 (Rome: Pont. institutum orientalium studiorum, 1938), pp. 127–129. The text was discussed by N. H. Baynes, 'The Icons Before Iconoclasm', *Harvard Theological Review*, 44 (1951), pp. 93–106, esp. pp. 93–95; reprinted in idem, *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1955), pp. 226–239. A full translation and commentary are found in Paul J. Alexander, 'Hypatius of Ephesus: a note on image worship in the sixth century', *Harvard Theological Review*, 45 (1952), pp. 177–184a; reprinted in idem, *Religious and Political History and Thought in the Byzantine Empire: Collected Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), VI (pp. 177–184a); but see the emendations and comments offered by Stephen Gero, 'Hypatius of Ephesus on the cult of images', in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults. Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, 4 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 2, pp. 208–216.

45 – The translation is that of Alexander except for the phrase, 'holy contests of the saints', which Gero proposes based on what he

convincingly argues to be the correct version of Hypatius' text at this point. P. J. Alexander, 'Hypatius', VI (p. 179); cf. S. Gero, 'Hypatius', esp. p. 210.

46 – P. J. Alexander, 'Hypatius', VI (p. 179).

47 – P. J. Alexander, 'Hypatius', VI (p. 180).

48 – Gregory I was able to discuss theological matters with easterners who knew Latin and through Latin translators with those who knew only Greek, as noted by J. Herrin, *Christendom*, pp. 158–159. Herrin as well as most earlier writers have accepted that Gregory had no significant knowledge of the Greek language. Joan Petersen challenged this view, but her arguments have largely been refuted. See her article, 'Did Gregory the Great know Greek?' *Studies in Church History*, 13 (1976), pp. 121–134; also idem, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in Their Late Antique Cultural Background*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Studies and Texts, 69 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), esp. pp. 189–191, together with the review of that book by Paul Meyvaert, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (1986), pp. 112–114; and J. M. Petersen, 'Homo omnino Latinus? The theological and cultural background of Pope Gregory the Great', *Speculum*, 62 (1987), pp. 529–551.

49 – Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, CCL 32 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1962), pp. 1–167. The discussion of pictures and statues occurs in *De doct. Christ.*, 2.25(39), CCL 32, p. 61. Generally on the influence of Augustine on Gregory see, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1 (n. 28, above): *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 350–351; F. H. Dudden, *Gregory the Great*, 2, p. 294.

50 – Augustine, *De doct. Christ.*, 2.1(1), CCL 32, p. 32.

51 – Augustine, *De doct. Christ.*, 2.1(2), 2(3), CCL 32, pp. 32–33.

52 – Augustine, *De doct. Christ.*, 2.9(14)–11(16), 14(21), CCL 32, pp. 40–42, 47.

53 – 'In picturis uero et statu is ceterisque huiusmodi simulatis operibus, maxime peritorum artificum, nemo errat, cum similia uiderit, ut agnoscat, quibus sint rebus similia'. Augustine, *De doct. Christ.*, 2.25(39), CCL 32, p. 61. Directly thereafter he adds: 'Et hoc totum genus inter superflua hominum instituta numerandum est, nisi cum interest, quid eorum, qua de causa et ubi et quando et cuius auctoritate fiat'.

54 – Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum*, 1.10, PL 34:1049. See Rudolf Berliner, 'The freedom of medieval art', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 6th series, 28 (1946), pp. 273–274; also L. Duggan, 'Book of the Illiterate', p. 229.

55 – Augustine, *Homélies sur l'évangile de Saint Jean, XVII–XXXIII, Tractatus 24.2*, in Bibliothèque Augustinienne. Oeuvres de Saint Augustin, 72. Translated into French with introduction and notes by M.-F. Berrouard (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977), pp. 408–411. The passage is also published in CCL 36, pp. 244–245. I am very grateful to Seth Lerer for pointing out this text to me.

56 – Augustine, *Tract. 24.2*, Bibl. Aug. 72, pp. 408–410.

57 – Gregory I, *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum*, CCL 144 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1963). See the editor's introduction (Paul Verbraken), pp. vii–viii.

58 – Gregory I, *Expos. in Cantica Canticorum*, 4, CCL 144, p. 5. One of the few scholars to mention this passage in discussing Gregory's

views on images is H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', n. 9. See also Wesley Trimpi, 'The meaning of Horace's *Ut Pictura Poesis*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 36 (1973), pp. 1–34, at pp. 25–28. Trimpi, who seems unaware of Gregory's debt here to Augustine, links the passage to Horace.

59 – J. Herrin, *Christendom*, p. 172.

60 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57A–C. See above, p. 143.

61 – See J. W. Thompson, *Literacy*, p. 11 and n. 86 (see nn. 19, 20, above).

62 – The term 'preliterate' is taken from F. H. Bäuml, 'Medieval Literacy', p. 243 (n. 4, above). As noted earlier, Christian doctrine was spread orally as well as through writings in the early Middle Ages. On the confrontation of medieval oral and written cultures refer especially to Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (n. 19, above).

63 – As suggested by an anonymous reader (see above, n. 10). Concerning the importance of the second commandment's insistence on the exclusive worship of God both to iconoclastic teachings, at least in the east, and to eastern iconophiles' efforts to differentiate legitimate image-worship from that condemned in the Old Testament, see J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 2, pp. 100, 106–107, 122–125 (n. 28, above).

64 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 2.11, PL 77:48C–50B.

65 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 2.11, PL 77:48D.

66 – '... qui instructioni sacrorum voluminum semper inhaerentes, sanctae Ecclesiae unitatem denuntient, et quasi intromissi circulis arcam portent. Vectibus quippe arcam portare, est bonis doctoribus sanctam Ecclesiam ad rudes infidelium mentes praedicando deducere'. Gregory I, *Regula*, 2.11 PL 77:49A/B.

67 – 'Quia nimirum necesse est ut qui ad officium praedicationis excubant, a sacrae lectionis studio non recedant'. Gregory I, *Regula*, 2.11, PL 77:50A.

68 – '... quia uidelicet cum spiritale aliquid a subditis Pastor inquitur, ignominiosum ualde est si tunc quacrat discere, cum quaestionem debet enodare'. Gregory I, *Regula*, 2.11, PL 77:50A.

69 – Gregory's belief in a threefold sense of scripture is discussed by F. H. Dudden, *Gregory the Great*, 2, esp. pp. 305–310.

70 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57A/B.

71 – H. L. Kessler, 'Pictorial narrative', *passim* though esp. pp. 87–88.

72 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57A.

73 – Gregory I, *Regula*, 3.6, PL 77:57B.

74 – Cf. in the introduction to Part 1 of the treatise: 'Wherefore, before all else, fear must moderate the desire of compassing authority, and when this is attained by one who did not seek it, let his way of life recommend it. Then, too, it is necessary that the rectitude which is displayed in the pastor's way of life should be propagated by the spoken word. And finally, I have only to add that consideration of our own weakness should abase every work accomplished, lest proud conceit empty it of its worth in the eyes of the hidden Judge'. Gregory I, *Regula*, 1, PL 77:13B. Transl. H. Davis, *St. Gregory the Great*, pp. 20–21 (n. 16, above).