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VIGILIAE CHRISTIANAE

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Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome

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SUSAN WESSEL

BRILL

Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome

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Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language

Editors

J. den Boeft – Bart D. Ehrman – J. van Oort
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Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome

by

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For my parents

Raphael, fresco c. 1514, Vatican, "The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila"

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACO	*Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, 4 vols. in 27 parts, ed. E. Schwartz (Berlin, 1914 sqq.); J. Straub (1971); R. Riedinger, Series Secunda (Berlin, 1984–1992)
AHC	*Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum*
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. (Berlin, New York, 1972 sqq.)
ATA	eds. A.D. Fitzgerald, J. Cavadini, M. Djuth, J.J. O'Donnell, F. Van Fleteren, *Augustine Through the Ages: an encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999)
Bury	J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian*, v. 1–2 (New York, 1958)
CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnhout, 1953 sqq.)
CPG	*Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, ed. M. Geerard, (Turnhout, 1974–1987)
CPL	*Clavis Patrum Latinorum*, 2nd ed., ed. E. Dekkers (Turnhout, 1995)
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Vienna, 1866 sqq.)
CTh	*Codex Theodosianus*, 2 vols. in 3 parts, eds. T. Mommsen, P.M. Meyer (Berlin, 1905); Eng. tr., C. Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (New York, 1969)
DOP	*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
Fastes	ed. L. Duchesne, *Fastes Épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule* (Paris, 1907–1915)
GCS	*Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*
Jaffé	ed. P. Jaffé, *Regesta Pontificum Romanorum ab condita ecclesia ad annum post Christum natum MCXCVIII* (Leipzig, 1885)
Jalland	T. Jalland, *The Life and Times of St. Leo the Great* (New York, 1941)
JEH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
Joannou	P.-P. Joannou, *Fonti, Discipline générale antique*, (IIe–IXe s.) (Rome, 1962)
Jones	A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602*, v. 1–2 (Baltimore, 1964)
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	*Loeb Classical Library*
Liber pont.	*Le Liber pontificalis*, Texte, Introduction et Commentaire, ed. L. Duchesne, 2 vols. (Paris, 1886, 1981)
Mansi	*J.D. Mansi, Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, 31 vols. (Florence, Venice, 1759–1798)

MGH AA	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores antiquissimi*, 15 vols. (Berlin, 1826 sqq.)
NPNF	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 28 vols. (Buffalo, NY, 1886–1890)
ODB	*The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. Kazhdan et al., 3 vols. (New York and Oxford, 1991)
PG	*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1857–1866)
PL	*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1841–1864)
PLS	*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, *Supplementum*, ed. A. Hammam
PLRE	*The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, ed. A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1971–1992)
Quasten	J. Quasten, *Patrology* i–iv, (Allen, Texas, 1995)
RevSR	*Revue des sciences religieuses*
RHE	*Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*
RSR	*Recherches de science religieuse*
SC	*Sources Chrétienne* (Paris, 1924 sqq.)
SP	*Studia Patristica*
TU	*Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur. Archiv für die griechisch-christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1882 ff.)
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* (Giessen, Berlin)

INTRODUCTION TO LEO THE GREAT AND THE LATE ROMAN WORLD THAT WAS HIS STAGE

1. *The study of Leo the Great*

What was it about Leo that made him 'the Great'?[1] A distinguished public career as the bishop of Rome (pope, 440–461), a respectable rhetorical education, and a literary production consisting of eloquent sermons and letters placed him among the Roman *intelligentsia*. His intellectual achievement, however, was not of the same order as the greatest Christian minds of the western empire. He did not match the breadth, subtlety, and complexity of thought that was characteristic of Ambrose (d. 397), Jerome (d. 420), or Augustine (d. 430). Nor was he responsible for developing the tradition of spirituality that distinguished the work of the monastic leader John Cassian (d. 435) and his colleagues in southern Gaul. His ideas were dependent upon and embedded in those of his predecessors and contemporaries, making it difficult to distinguish his original contribution from the intellectual and social fabric of the times that influenced him. Given these shortcomings, I might be forgiven for considering the possibility that Leo's accomplishments did not merit the title 'the Great'.

Yet even such a dogged critic of the rise of Christianity as Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) recognized that "[t]he genius of Leo was exercised and displayed in the public misfortunes", and that he "deserved the appellation of Great by the successful zeal with which he labored to establish his opinions and his authority, under the venerable names of orthodox faith and ecclesiastical discipline."[2] Leo's greatness resided for Gibbon mainly in his worldly successes. How, then, should we

[1] I shall refer to Leo alternately as bishop and as pope, the latter being merely an honorary title until the beginning of the seventh century, when it was used formally to designate pope Boniface III in 607. Leo was one of only two popes to receive the title 'the Great', the other being Gregory the Great (pope, 590–604).

[2] E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York, 1960), c. 35, p. 491.

evaluate his failure to establish a lasting unity with the eastern orthodox churches, whose rejection of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which Leo orchestrated, was the occasion for the eastern schism? What does it mean for Leo to have established "his opinions and his authority" if that authority was rejected by a significant portion of the churches? Although he was commonly known as the doctor of Christian unity, in the light of his failure to achieve that unity his greatness cannot be measured solely by his objective accomplishments. Viewed in this way, Leo's greatness might seem elusive and his significance incapable of being measured precisely. This does not suggest that his title should be rescinded, but that the measure of his greatness should be viewed through a different lens.

Probing Leo's letters and sermons for his understanding of himself and his mission brings his greatness into sharper focus. From the tenor of his writings it is apparent that he perceived his life as a Roman bishop as being deeply interconnected with the politics and social world of his contemporaries. The words he spoke, the letters he wrote, and the meetings he arranged served his single-minded purpose of shaping that world—a world on the verge of political crisis—according to his theological views. Leo was 'the Great', as I shall argue below, because he confidently brought his model of a compassionate, feeling Christ to bear upon the anxieties that his congregations suffered in the light of the barbarian invasions. Politics and theology coalesced profoundly.

I am not the first to have considered the magnitude of Leo's greatness. Two major studies of Leo, Jalland's *Life and Times of St. Leo the Great* (1941) and McShane's *La Romanitas et le Pape Léon le Grand* (1979), explain his achievement by differently situating its object of study.[3] For Jalland, Leo was a *tour de force* amid a sea of mediocrity, the strength of his character alone having imbued the church organization and the office of the papacy with the confidence and stability that made it thrive during the advance of the barbarian kingdoms and the menacing presence of the Byzantines.[4] He left a legacy of vigorous adherence to the governing principles of the church, which were grounded in the belief that the bishop of Rome physically embodied St. Peter and was his living representative. This assessment was quite different from the short biography

[3] T. Jalland, *Life and Times of St. Leo the Great* (New York, 1941); P. McShane, *La Romanitas et le Pape Léon le Grand: l'apport culturel des institutions impériales à la formation des structures ecclésiastiques* (Tournai, Montreal, 1979).

[4] Jalland, p. 73.

of Leo written by Gore (1897), which viewed the papacy as a truncated institution whose development of one idea, that of government, came at the expense of justice, equity, consideration, humility, freedom, and universal consent, "and had latent in it, even in Leo's day, the prophecy of the Reformation."[5] Jalland could not have disagreed more: Leo's greatness consisted in the strength and honor of his person, by which he decisively assumed the prerogatives of the papal office that he inherited from his predecessors. Papal authority was, nevertheless, problematic for Jalland because no historical evidence supported such wide-ranging authority among the early bishops, the powers that Leo attributed to Peter having "replaced real history with something little short of fantasy."

The possibility that intellectual ideas or 'fantasy', as Jalland put it derisively, could be a positive force in shaping history was explored by McShane. He argued that the spirit of Rome, the principles of *romanitas* that defined the Roman temperament, its *gravitas*, *constantia*, *firmitas*, *disciplina*, *aequitas*, *clementia*, and *severitas*, profoundly shaped Leo's writings, his character, his way of perceiving the role of the church in the world.[6] Embedded in the institutions, cultures, and ideas of the Roman way of life, the Leo that emerges from McShane's study is not the lone genius that Jalland envisioned. He is rather the last great pope of the ancient world whose abiding commitment to everything Roman infused the church organization that he helped fashion with the *romanitas* that he embodied. Leo did not Romanize the church according to McShane, because the church was already a product of the Roman world that was its historical *milieu* and in which its administrative structures unfolded. What distinguished him from the bishops of the late Roman world was his capacity to perceive the church as suffused with the same spirit of Rome that he himself expressed.

Although I am indebted to and influenced by both studies, neither acknowledges what I consider to be essential for understanding Leo's significance. He was profoundly aware that his actions and ideas could respond to the world in crisis. He also understood that the papacy needed to change in order for the western church to expand its author-

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[5] C. Gore, *Leo the Great* (London, New York, 1897), p. 127.

[6] The word 'romanitas' originated with Tertullian, who distanced himself from the ideals that it represented. M. Edwards, "*Romanitas* and the Church of Rome," in eds. S. Swain, M. Edwards, *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire* (Oxford, 2004), p. 188.

ity in the light of the advancing barbarian kingdoms. Strikingly, he effected this transformation not only at the practical level of church organization, but in the more fluid realm of thought and idea. The intellectual and spiritual world that Leo and his contemporaries fashioned, therefore, will be of great interest in unearthing the subtle contours of this transformation.

My approach derives from the idea of *romanitas* that McShane identified, but also departs from it in recognizing that Leo had in mind something rather different from the secular conception of Rome with which he was familiar. *Romanitas* for Leo was no longer synonymous with the pagan stock of personified virtues, including *iustitia*, *pax*, *fides*, *fortuna*, *concordia*, *salus*, *securitas*, *victoria*, and *pietas*, that the state exemplified and extended to each of its citizens.[7] Because those virtues had failed to protect Rome from the Goths in 410, from the Vandals in 452, and to contain the onslaught of the barbarian migrations, a new set of ideas emerged. Augustine had grappled with the problem in his *De civitate Dei*, by removing divine providence from the unfolding of secular history and postponing the realization of God's 'city' to the endtime. Leo, however, made that 'city of God' real. His comprehensive view of the world borrowed the mechanism of secular *romanitas* and infused it with a Christian content. *Romanitas*, in Leo's hands, was no longer the patriotic idea that Roman culture and institutions were bound together by a political ideology that reached the far-flung corners of the empire. It embodied a Christian interpretation of the world that he incorporated into his ideology of ecclesiastical unity. That is how he responded to the changing political circumstances in which socio-cultural disorder and chaos were the reality of late Roman life.[8]

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[7] F. Paschoud, *Roma aeterna. études sur le patriotisme romain dans l'Occident latin à l'époque des grandes invasions* (Rome, 1967), p. 323.

[8] Under the patronage of the imperial family Leo transformed the architectural landscape of the city: he restored the basilica of St. Peter; he adorned its entrance with a mosaic; he improved the decoration in the interior of its apse; he founded a monastery nearby; and he appointed guards (known as *cubicularii*) to protect its treasury. He decorated the Church of St. Paul with a triumphal arch; restored the roof of the church; and provided for a fresh supply of water for the *cantharus* in the *atrium*. He was also responsible for building the Church of St. Stephen on the *Via Latina*. List taken from Jalland, pp. 51–52. On this imperial and ecclesiastical collaboration, see A. Gillett, "Rome, Ravenna and the Emperors," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 69 (2001), p. 145, n. 54. On the changing topography in the fourth century, see generally L. Grig, "Portraits, Pontiffs and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 72 (2004), pp. 203–230; J.R. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital. Rome in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 116–157; and on the pagan/Christian

During Leo's papacy the Vandals were ensconced in northern Africa, the Suevi in Spain, and the Goths in southwestern Gaul; the Alans and Burgundians controlled the western Alps, while the Anglos, Saxons, and Jutes took Great Britain; the north of Gaul became a Frankish possession, the Ostrogoths occupied half of the diocese of Pannonia (on the western river of the Danube), and the Huns devastated the western and eastern provinces.[9] The result of these dramatic settlements was not only the material devastation that the barbarian presence inflicted upon the land, but a pervasive sense of disorder, as the Roman imperial apparatus gradually receded. Leo, whose letters and sermons never conveyed a message of pessimism or despair, responded to this crisis of order, as well as to the psychological toll it must have taken.

His new way of imagining the world was grounded in his conception of the Passion of Christ: Christ had cured the emotion ('affectus') of human weakness ('infirmitas'), anxiety ('metus'), and suffering by fully participating in and experiencing such human failings on the Cross. Leo preached this message to his congregations on Palm Sunday, 5 April 442, shortly after the Vandals conquered North Africa and ravaged the Mediterranean.[10] The suffering, death, and resurrection of the Christ that Leo envisioned had the potential to erase not only human mortality, but also the everyday human afflictions that were increasingly the result of imperial crisis. This way of construing the Passion suggests that he was deeply interested in the control and understanding of human emotions and suffering and the role they play in the mysterious processes of life and death.

How such an interest inspired Leo's vision of a Christian renewal of Rome[11] at a time of political disorder will be explored by considering his altruistic concern for justice and humanitarian care. His thoughts on christology and the person of Christ; on church organization and discipline; on poverty and the care of the poor; on justice, ecclesias-

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synthesis in the city of Corinth in the late empire, see R. Rothaus, "Christianization and Depaganization: The Late Antique Creation of a Conceptual Frontier," in eds. R.W. Mathisen, H.S. Sivan, *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, UK, Brookfield, VT 1996), p. 305.

[9] This description of the geo-political conditions is taken from C. Bartnik, "L'interprétation théologique de la crise de l'Empire romain par Léon le Grand," *RHE* 63 (1968), pp. 747–748.

[10] Leo, *Serm.* 54.4: 'nostrae infirmitatis affectus participando curabat, et poenalis experientiae metum subeundo pellebat.' "He cured the emotion of our infirmity by participating in it; he drove away the anxiety in the experience of suffering by undergoing it." *CCSL* 138a, p. 320, lines 74–76.

[11] R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 127.

tical law, and mercy; on the primacy of Rome; and on the theology of history will be considered. These were the major ideas of Leo's papacy that filled his conception of a spiritual city, ideas that he drew from such distinguished predecessors and contemporaries as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Prosper of Aquitaine (d. after 455).[12] These were the same ideas that made his ideology of ecclesiastical unity both compelling and legitimate. 'Compelling' because the humanitarian vision that these ideas embodied addressed the real needs of a society whose way of life was under siege, and 'legitimate' because his conception of unity was thereby infused with moral content. Through this humanitarian vision, Leo extended the secular idea of Rome as the center of empire to the spiritual idea of the Roman world as the 'city of God'.[13] During a time of political disorder this new way of imagining the world imbued Roman ideas and institutions with a Christian content that could conceivably endure beyond the demise of imperial Rome.

Determining when Leo borrowed these ideas and how he adapted them will serve as a window into his mentality and into that of the late Roman catholic *intelligentsia*, thereby revealing the creativity and relevance of his thought. Beneath this method lies a deeper ambiguity. How and to what extent did Leo resolve the tension between preserving the past that was his theological legacy and transforming it subtly to address the new geopolitical reality that was the condition of life in the late Roman world? Remember that for him and his contemporaries, the very concept of intellectual change was anathema to an ideology committed to the view that change never took place. In a Christian society that valued tradition and maintaining continuity with the past, change and innovation were certainly not qualities prized in a bishop. When intellectual changes did occur, the new ideas were to be expressed in language that made them seem to be consistent and continuous with those from the past.[14] Sometimes, as in the case of the christological controversies of the East, that meant using whatever cul-

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[12] On the transformation of *romanitas* into *Christianitas* in the context of the fourth-century liturgy, see M.K. Lafferty, "Translating Faith from Greek to Latin: *Romanitas* and *Christianitas* in Late Fourth-Century Rome and Milan," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 11, 1 (2003), pp. 21–62.

[13] Of course, Leo himself did not use this phrase of Augustine's, but was perhaps influenced by it in formulating this new way of seeing the world.

[14] E.A. Clark, "Creating Foundations, Creating Authorities: Reading Practices and Christian Identities," in eds. J. Frishman, W. Otten, G. Rouwhorst, *Religious Identity and the Problem of Historical Foundation* (Leiden, Boston, 2004), pp. 564–568.

tural resources were available, including the style, tropes, and methods of argumentation found in the secular rhetorical handbooks, to fashion an intellectual identity that seemed to be continuous with that of its forebears.[15] Other times, as in the case of Leo in the West, that meant using the ideas of his predecessors selectively, choosing only the theological and intellectual traditions that might help him fashion and articulate a nuanced interpretation of the Christian tradition that was fiercely relevant to the political disorder and psychological anxiety that late Romans were facing. Like his contemporaries, Leo believed that continuity and tradition led inexorably to the truth that was the teaching of the orthodox. He shunned innovation as the method of heretics. To break with the past was to invite not only doctrinal falsehood and error, but the same chaos that his way of imagining the world was meant to alleviate. It was to violate the well-forged connections to the past and to undermine one's place in the world in the present. Although Leo was not a rhetorician at the level of Augustine or of such eastern theologians as Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), Gregory Nazianzen (d. 389), Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 394), and John Chrysostom (d. c. 407), he, nonetheless, skillfully maintained those connections with the past. But he also subtly transformed them to serve the purpose of bringing order to chaos and allaying anxiety in the present.[16] Intellectual and theological continuity was achieved not only by the fiction that he told of a unified church, but by making his ideas appropriate to the changing social and political circumstances with which he and his late Roman contemporaries were confronted.

By the final decades of the fifth century, the political upheaval of the imperial administration, as well as the social disorder that ensued, was complete. In the West, the Roman empire had fallen permanently into the hands of the barbarians when the last western emperor Romulus Augustus seceded to the barbarian king Odovacer in 476. Yet the event was not even deemed worthy of mention by the anonymous author(s) of the *Liber Pontificalis*, who described in the most banal terms the episcopacy of Simplicius (pope, 468–483), during whose reign Rome fell: he dedicated several basilicas, he fixed the weekly turns at several

[15] As I have argued in S. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy. The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic* (Oxford, 2004).

[16] What drove his method was a Latin style committed to clarity and accessibility, rather than to the virtuoso methods of argumentation and persuasion that some of his Latin and Greek-speaking contemporaries preferred: his way of using language suggests that he intended to inform and teach rather than to persuade.