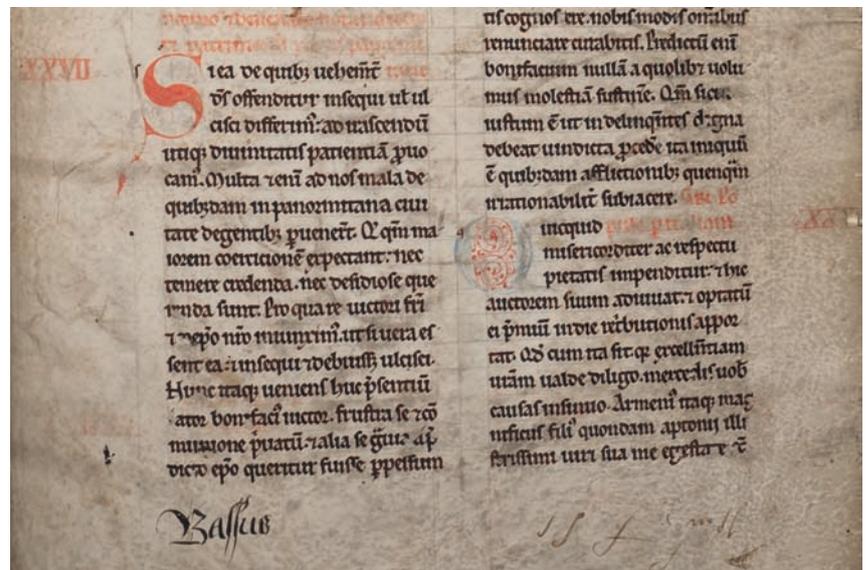


# A Gregorian manuscript in the Ian Potter Museum of Art

John R.C. Martyn

In about 1000<sup>1</sup> a very interesting illuminated manuscript that probably held copies of all of the letters of Pope Gregory the Great was created. Five centuries later, 41 of these letters, from books two, three and four, were removed from the manuscript, which did not survive. These 41 letters at some stage became part of the renowned library of Saint Michael's College in Tenbury, England, where in 1939 they were bound in a thick leather spine with linen on boards for covers. The resulting slim volume was bought in 1975 by the University of Melbourne from the London rare book dealer, Alan G. Thomas, and can now be read in the University's Ian Potter Museum of Art.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Gregory, the favourite pope of today's Benedict XVI, lived from about 540 to 12 March 604. For his last 14 years Gregory was a highly successful pontiff, despite his severe illnesses. As godfather of Theodosius, the eldest son of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, in whose palace he had stayed for several years, he brought the church and state together for the first time. A fine scholar and brilliant administrator, he played a major part in establishing the orthodox faith in Sardinia, Gaul, England, Sicily and Spain. Evidence of this extraordinary achievement, and of his wide-ranging reforms and



his determined effort to help the helpless and stamp out corruption and violence, can be seen in his beautifully written letters, sent throughout the Christian world. Brought up by his mother and three maiden aunts, while his father was busy looking after the church's finances and large family estates in Italy and Sicily, he was the only pope to do all he could to help nuns, who appear in 36 of his letters. Scholars have regularly written chapters on Gregory's special support for monks and monasteries, but never on the nuns; only two of those letters have ever been discussed.<sup>3</sup> Fourteen books

of Gregory's letters have survived, and they provide a fascinating picture of that important period. Most of these 855 letters are personal, and many are written in fine Ciceronian Latin.

Over the centuries the Melbourne manuscript had fallen apart it seems, and in about 1600 several folios, or double pages, had been extracted from the manuscript, many of them unused and possibly thrown away. This was done by a group of musicians, who used the ones they kept to wrap around their musical scores, some of which later become part of the collection of the library at St Michael's College in Tenbury.<sup>4</sup>

**Previous page:** Detail showing inscription 'Bassus' at bottom of page, and initial letters 'S' and 'Q.' Scribe and illustrator unknown [probably French], c.1000, Copies of 41 letters by Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604), black ink with historiated initials in red and blue ink, on vellum, bound in a modern leather and linen on board cover (c.1939) with front-matter enclosing modern correspondence and brief commentary; two previously pasted-in letters removed; height 34.6 cm. Reg. no. 1975.0096, purchased by the Department of Classics, 1975, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

The musicians inscribed the corresponding voice-parts at the bottom of these folios, namely *medius*, *tenor*, *contratenor maior*, *contratenor secundus*, and *bassus* (see example on previous page). Five musical part-books were wrapped up with these fragile folios; a sixth, that of the *superius*, may have been part of the set.<sup>5</sup> The *superius* (uppermost) had the highest voice in a polyphonic composition, the term coming into common use when music began to be published, and each part-book had to carry some identification. But the term *medius* was also sometimes given to the highest part-book of a set, especially in liturgical sources, as may have happened with this manuscript. Part-books contained music for only a single voice (or instrument), unlike complete scores and choir-books that were standard for ensemble music in the 16th to 17th centuries. A basic set varied from just two to as many as ten, four being the usual number.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all of the folios used by the musicians are damaged at the top (see example opposite), having been on the outside part of the roll of music, their thin skins most exposed to human hands, other manuscripts or rodents. There are one or two holes, large or small, at the top of eight of the folios, where the script can no longer be read. The musicians' lack of

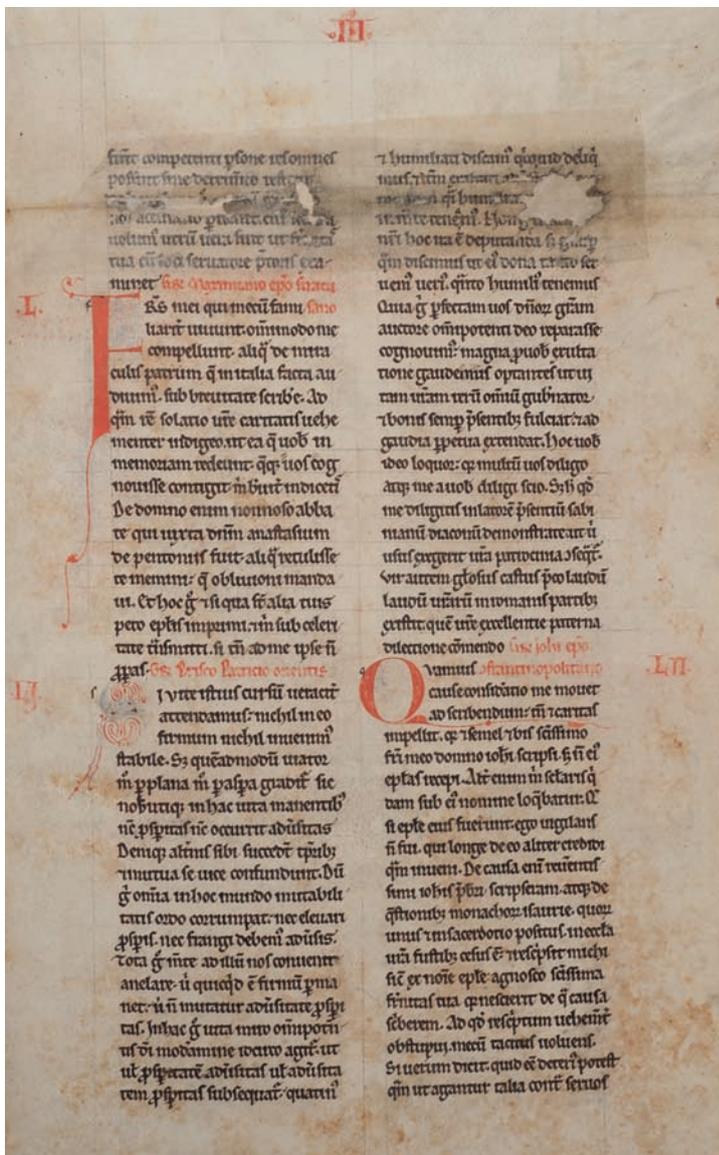
respect for the Gregory manuscript is hard to explain. It may have been poorly bound in the first place and was breaking up as suggested by 1600, after excessive use, possibly due to the great popularity of Pope Gregory's works, which included the only life of Saint Benedict. However, the way the folios were used as wrappings suggests that they were extracted from a pile of unbound early letters, gathering dust on a library shelf.

The script is quite attractive, although its many abbreviations make it hard to read. It is a late minuscule script, from a scriptorium in Gaul, possibly Luxeuil or Avignon or Paris, great centres for the copying of manuscripts at that time, where Gregory's letters and other splendid works were admired and well known in monasteries and convents. There are no cursive elements and the letters are well rounded, and certainly not yet descending into the thick, black lettering of the Gothic script. Also the freelance artist's delightful love of decoration and quixotic variations in lettering suggests that he was working in a well-endowed scriptorium in France, perhaps in Paris, rather than in northern Europe or England.

An English scholar, Edmund Horace Fellowes (who served as honorary librarian of Saint Michael's College, Tenbury, from 1918 until

1948) at some point before 1927 sent the folios to the deputy keeper of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum, John A. Herbert, for him to examine. But Herbert retired in 1927 and the folios were overlooked, remaining at the museum until a successor, Eric Millar, wrote to the Tenbury librarian in 1937 asking what he wanted to do with them.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Fellowes considered donating them to the British Museum, an offer the museum would have gladly accepted,<sup>8</sup> but apparently the folios were returned to Tenbury, as in July 1939 they were bound together in a leather and cloth cover, together with some of the correspondence between Fellowes and the British Museum and other modern notations.<sup>9</sup> This bound volume next appeared in 1975 for sale in the catalogue of Alan G. Thomas, a London rare books dealer.

At that time I was taking senior students in a palaeography course each year in the Classics Department at the University of Melbourne, at a time when funds were available for the purchase of individual folios, including some illuminations, and of ancient pottery. The Gregory letters were bought by the University at this time. These folios now form part of a significant group of Latin manuscripts in the University's

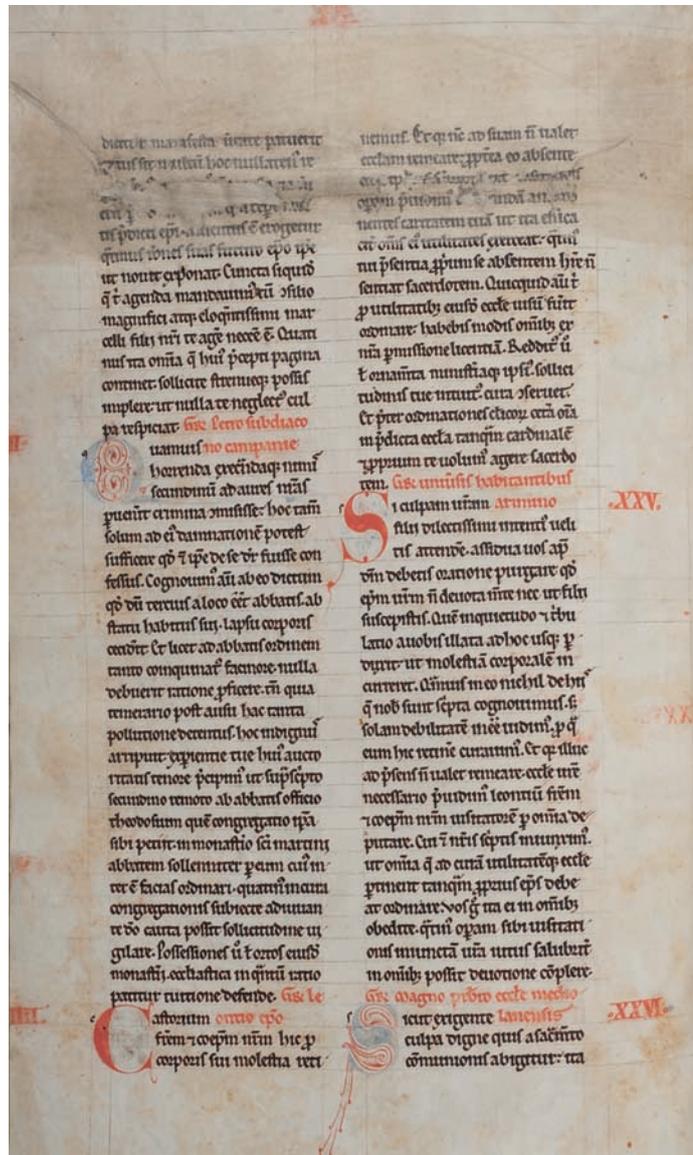


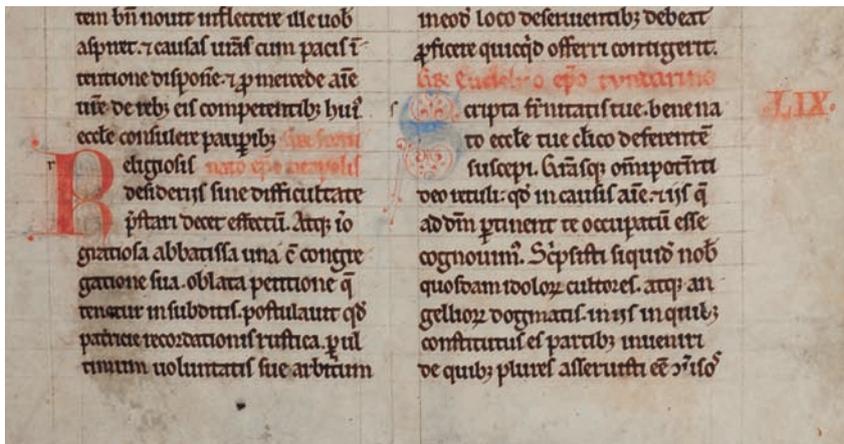
Classics and Archaeology Collection, which is located at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Asked to translate all of this material from Latin into English, I had no trouble until I got to the Gregory letters. To make things easier, I checked the Baillieu Library for a version of them, but there was no sign of one, in fact there was nothing in any modern language in any library that covered them all. Although short of time, I translated what turned out to be some very interesting material, but written in complex Latin. The sequel was a strong request from colleagues in medieval history for an English version of all of Gregory's other letters. Nearly five years later I had completed this mammoth task, and all the letters appeared in three volumes, nearly 1,000 pages altogether, printed by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.<sup>10</sup>

For a talk on the subject 'Pope Gregory: Author of the *Dialogues*', that I delivered at a conference of the Australian Early Medieval Association held at Monash University in September 2009, I analysed letter III.50 of the Melbourne volume. In this letter to Maximian, an old friend from their years together in Constantinople, Gregory asks his vicar of Sicily to remind him of some miracles he had

mentioned earlier, as his fellow monks in Rome had pressured him into composing a book on Italian miracles. Based on analysis of other material, this letter had been condemned by an English scholar, Francis Clark, as a forgery. Clark argued that Pope Gregory never wrote the *Dialogues*, mainly because he thought that the letter asks the busy vicar to leave his post, something Gregory would never have requested.<sup>11</sup> I showed that the best reading for the end of this letter was *ipse non proferas* ('but don't bring it yourself'). The *ipse* appeared in a 12th century Cologne manuscript and in the 10th century manuscript fragment now at the Potter, and it makes perfect sense. The other manuscripts read *ad me ipsum*, 'to me myself, where the *ipsum* is superfluous. The pope was joking, ironical, as he often was with his friends.<sup>12</sup> A detail of the folio containing this letter can be seen on page 53.

There may be other interesting readings in these letters,<sup>13</sup> few in number but sent during a very important period in the Pope's life, from 592 to 594.<sup>14</sup> But that will require a lot of collating. Of more interest now are the illuminations, especially those of the initial capital letters. If the original manuscript had survived intact, it would have been

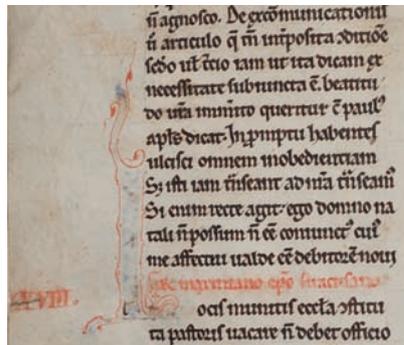




Left: Detail showing capital initials 'R' and 'S'.

Below: Detail showing very ornate capital initial 'L'.

one of the only ones containing religious letters or classical works to have regular or in fact any illuminations, and in this case very quixotic ones. In medieval manuscripts, there are occasionally high quality pictures, but otherwise capital letters of similar nature fit the two lines allotted to them very accurately, without much or any embellishment, and with no variety in lettering. In this manuscript the shapes of the letters are varied, as are the two colours: red and blue. As can be seen in the illustrations on this page and on pages 54 and 56, the painter was a law unto himself, especially where there was room for a long tail; perhaps the artist was the abbot! For the letter 'N' there is a square capital and a curved uncial, for 'S' there is a simple version, an insular version and yet another with a long blue and red tail. Red and blue interchange regularly, and the 'P' varies between a square capital in red and an uncial in blue, while the 'C' looks like a figure '8', one in blue, another red. The 'Q' appears in blue, filled with red filigree, and in red with blue filigree, and the 'F' appears in red as a square capital with blue filigree inside, with a long blue tail. Some of the tails change colour, some are red with blue alongside, some blue with red alongside. Overall, the letters are



plain or filled with filigree, with red or blue colouring or both. The book numbers are noteworthy for their inconsistency, with four red spots around one example, three red spots around six others, but just two on each side of two, and just one on the left side of another. With such a small sample, one must wonder how many striking variations like these appeared in the whole original manuscript, many of them paying no attention to the lines ruled by the scribe, which are clearly visible on each folio.

This collection, now held by the University of Melbourne, of tenth-century copies of some very interesting letters sent by Pope Gregory late in the sixth century, is an important one, not only for its version of the letters, and its closeness to two early French manuscripts, but also for the artistic embellishment, which included the rubrication of the first

two lines or so in every letter. Their link with the musical part-books of that period is also of interest, as is their provenance during the 20th century. At a later stage I hope to work through the Latin readings in this manuscript with much more care, again collating and evaluating their text against the standard Latin text of Gregory's letters, for an article in an international journal of palaeography.<sup>15</sup>

John Martyn is an honorary principal fellow in the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, and a former associate professor in the Classics Department. A leading expert on the early Dark Ages in Western Europe, he has written and edited many books, particularly on and around Pope Gregory the Great. He has also written widely on the Visigoths of Spain and on the Vandals in North Africa.

#### Notes

- 1 The date is uncertain, but the distinctive abbreviations which help to define the date of such manuscripts vary between the 10th and 11th centuries. See John R.C. Martyn, *The letters of Gregory the Great*, 3 vols, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004, and Adriano Cappelli, *Dizionario di abbreviature latine ed italiane*, Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1966.
- 2 Scribe and illustrator unknown [probably French], c.1000, Copies of 41 letters by Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604), black ink with historiated initials in red and blue ink, on vellum, bound in a modern leather and linen on board cover (c.1939) with front-matter enclosing modern correspondence and brief commentary; two previously pasted-in letters removed; height 34.6 cm. Reg. no. 1975.0096, purchased by the Department of Classics, 1975, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

- 3 See John R.C. Martyn, *Pope Gregory and the brides of Christ*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, which notes in particular Pope Gregory's upbringing by four women.
- 4 These musical part-books became known as Tenbury mss 807–811 (E.H. Fellowes, inscription, July 1939, now bound with Melbourne reg. no. 1975.0096).
- 5 Each musician used two folios (each folio two-sided), and if the *superius* had been part of the ensemble, he would have used two folios that would have covered pages 31 & 32 and 33 & 34.
- 6 I am grateful to Dr Jan Stockigt for her elucidation of these terms.
- 7 Eric G. Millar, Deputy Keeper, Department of Manuscripts, British Museum, letter to the Librarian, St Michael's College, Tenbury, 15 November 1937 (now bound with Melbourne 1975.0096).
- 8 Eric G. Millar, letter to the Librarian, St Michael's College, Tenbury, 27 November 1937 (now bound with Melbourne 1975.0096).
- 9 Fellowes, inscription, July 1939.
- 10 Martyn, *The letters of Gregory the Great*. Melbourne 1975.0096 is included in the list of manuscripts on page viii of the preface to vol. 1.
- 11 See Francis Clark, *The 'Gregorian' Dialogues and the origins of Benedictine monasticism*, Leiden: Brill, 2002. This book repeated the persuasive thesis that Clark had argued with missionary zeal in short articles and in his lengthy work *The pseudo-Gregorian*.
- 12 See Martyn, *The letters of Gregory the Great*, p. 243. See also p. 269, where Melbourne 1975.0096 alone gives the name of the see of Bishop Florentius: Epidaurus, near Dubrovnik.
- 13 A most interesting link has already emerged. One of the key sources for the text is r, which stands for two early manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, 11674 (9th century) and 2279 (10th century). In my first collation of Melbourne 1975.0096, I came across over 60 cases where Melbourne

- 1975.0096 and r combine to present a variant, in some cases the best reading. A few years ago, when I was collating all the main manuscripts of Gregory's letters, I found r almost the most accurate and significant one. Melbourne 1975.0096 was clearly copied from the same French originals, possibly in Paris in the late 900s. Note that for books III and IV, r is the only reliable witness, as the P family, the most important witness, does not cover these two books. A real surprise!
- 14 The letters are II.14, 15, 40, 42, 43, 44; III.7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59 and IV.15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. Of these 19 are incomplete: 11.14, 40, 43, 44; 111.7, 8, 14, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 49, 52, 54, 57, 59; IV.15, 20.
  - 15 Unfortunately the latest edition of Gregory's letters, undertaken by a then very elderly Dag Norberg (*S. Gregorii Magni Registrum epistularum*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), despite being adopted for inclusion in the prestigious *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, has many shortcomings.

