

Bishops in the mirror. From self-representation to episcopal model: the case of the eloquent bishops, Ambrose of Milan and Gregory the Great*

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Around the year 877, the priest Andrew of Bergamo was busy abbreviating and updating his version of Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*. When dealing with the rebellion of the three elder sons of Emperor Louis the Pious (814-840) in 833, Andrew recalled how Lothar I tried to make excuses for himself by shifting the blame onto Angilbert II (824-859), the Frankish archbishop of Milan. Brought in the presence of the king, the prelate only slightly bowed his head and greeted him, but refused to prostrate himself out of reverence for the honour of his church. Lothar could not help but comment: 'You behave yourself as if you were saint Ambrose'. This resulted in Angilbert's caustic reply 'I am not saint Ambrose, but neither are you the Lord God'.¹ A wry retort, but certainly one befitting a haughty Milanese archbishop. Asked to win back Louis the Pious's favour, Angilbert travelled to Francia where the emperor honourably received him and asked his advice on the right behaviour to be held against enemies. Resorting to the Bible, Angilbert reminded him that one shall love his enemies and do good to them (Luke, 6, 27), otherwise he would put in jeopardy the salvation of his soul. Imprisoned by an angered Louis the Pious, the Milanese archbishop was later

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¹ Andrew of Bergamo, *Historia*, ed. L.A. Berto (Padua, 2002), p. 43: *Tunc imperator dixit "Sic contines te, quasi sanctus Ambrosius sis". Archiepiscopus respondit: "Nec ego sanctus Ambrosius, nec tu dominus Deus"*.

brought in front of some learned men (*sapientes*) whom he skilfully convinced of the righteousness of his words. The emperor had no choice but to accept the verdict and perform an act of humility: he put his hand on the ground, asked forgiveness and pardoned his son.²

Around the same years a new life of Ambrose was written at the request of a Milanese archbishop, whose name we do not know.³ The promotion of the memory of the prestigious holy bishop was indeed a key point in the political programme of the Carolingian metropolitan bishops of Milan. Andrew of Bergamo only had to evoke the name: through Lothar's words, Ambrose was brought forward as the authoritative frame of reference for Angilbert II's haughty conduct in front of the Frankish emperors.

In the dedicatory poem introducing the *Vita Gregorii I papae* (BHL 3941-3942), written between 873 and 875 by the Roman deacon John Hymmonides, the author directly addresses the person who commissioned the writing, Pope John VIII (872-882), with the following words:

Receive, venerable shepherd, these Romulean triumphs,
receive the deeds of your saint Gregory.
He who excelled in acts, words and blessed writings
as the splendour of the golden-haired sun shines throughout the world.
His model and honour shall be a mirror for you, his life a path through the world
if you want to reach eternal priesthood.

² Andrew of Bergamo, *Historia*, p. 43: *manum in terra ponens, veniam petivit et gratiam filii sui reddidit.*

³ I shall come back to this text, the *De vita et meritis sancti Ambrosii* (BHL 377d), and its context of writing in the last section of this article.

For he who does not follow the footprints of such a bishop
shall not be bishop before God, but rather a beast in hell.⁴

The life of Gregory the Great was thus presented by John Hymmonides as a *speculum*, a mirror, providing his papal commissioner with a model and a path that a worthy bishop (*praesul*) – who, in this case, happened to be the head of an ecumenical Church – should follow. The adherence to the model would secure God’s approval of the holder of the episcopal office and would eventually reward him with eternal bliss.

As Andrew of Bergamo’s record and John’s poem clearly show, St Ambrose (d. 397) and Gregory the Great (d. 604) constituted a frame of reference for their Carolingian successors in Milan and Rome. To a certain extent, the two Church Fathers had much in common: they were both exegetes, hagiographers, preachers, epistolographers, and more importantly they both set the rules for the duties and the morality of ecclesiastical office-holders.⁵ From this point of view, it is no wonder that their lives, their deeds and their writings became models for later bishops. A less predictable point of convergence concerns the Carolingian revival

⁴ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, PL 75, coll. 59-60: *Suscipe Romuleos, Pastor venerande, triumphos, / Gregorii sancti suscipe gesta tui. / Qui notuit factis, verbis, scriptisque beatis, / ut jubar auricomi solis in orbe cluit. / Forma, decus, speculum tibi sit, via, vita per aevum / si cupis aeternum ferre sacerdotium. / Nam qui non huius sequitur vestigia praesul / ante Deum praesul non erit, imo pecus.*

⁵ Ambrose wrote three books on the duties of the clergy, known as *De Officiis*, ed. M. Testard, CCSL 15 (Turnhout, 2001); Gregory entrusted to four books his *Liber regulae Pastoralis*, ed. B. Judic, F. Rommel and C. Morel, 2 vols. (Paris, 1992).

and promotion of their cults and memory in the cities where they held their office, which culminated in both cases with the writing of two new Lives.

Ambrose's and Gregory's episcopal identity and memory underwent a dynamic, diachronic, multi-layered process of reshaping and refashioning. One prominent feature emerges through this process: the pivotal connection between speech and power that laid at the very foundation of the two churchmen's undertakings. Both bishops deployed their eloquence to establish and maintain a fruitful dialogue with the most influential personalities in their world, above all the emperors with their courts and the intellectual and ecclesiastical elites.⁶ Centuries after their deaths, during the reign of Louis II (844-875), the *regnum italicum* was again the place of residence of the emperor and his court, turning a peripheral kingdom into a centre of gravity within the Carolingian empire.⁷ As Italian episcopal leaders found themselves at the fore of the political scene, their skills as eloquent speakers – able to counsel the emperor appropriately, as well as to participate in and moderate the dialogue among the most powerful agents of their time (Frankish rulers, the pope, foreign prominent churchmen) – became even more essential. The writing of the Carolingian Lives of Ambrose and Gregory the Great, building on a long tradition focusing on the learnedness of their speech and their special connection to emperors, should be understood and assessed against the peculiar political background of the *regnum italicum* under Louis II's rule.

⁶ On episcopal mastery of speech in the late antique world see C. Rapp, *Holy bishops in late antiquity. The nature of Christian leadership in an age of transition* (Berkeley, 2005), pp. 260-273.

⁷ F. Bougard, 'La cour et le gouvernement de Louis II (840-875)', in R. Le Jan (ed.), *La royauté et les élites dans l'Europe carolingienne (du début du IXe aux environs de 920)* (Lille, 1998), 249-267.

The article shall analyse three different stages of representation: the first part is dedicated to self-portrayal, the second deals with contemporary testimonies of Ambrose's and Gregory's episcopates and the last shall focus on the Carolingian reshaping of their memory as examples of life and morality to be presented to bishops.

1. Doctor and Pastor

If the filter of the sources does not allow us to look directly at the 'man behind the office', they nonetheless provide us with precious insights on the 'man in the office'. In the very first lines of the *De officiis*, Ambrose made a straightforward statement about what he believed to be his most significant responsibility as the bishop of Milan:

I shall not appear presumptuous, I trust, if I adopt the approach of a teacher when addressing my own sons [...]. No longer is it possible for us to escape our obligation to teach: reluctant as we are, it has been laid upon us as part of the responsibilities which priesthood has brought us, for 'God gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, others evangelists, and yet others pastors and teachers' (Eph. 4, 11). [...] My wish is only to attain to the attention and diligence towards the divine Scriptures which the apostle ranked last of all among the duties of the saints. [...] I was snatched into the priesthood from a life spent at tribunals and amidst the paraphernalia of administrative office, and I began to teach you things I had not learnt myself. The result was that I started to teach before I had started to learn. With me, then, it is a matter of learning and teaching all at the same time, since no opportunity was given me to learn in advance.⁸

⁸ Ambrose, *De officiis*, ed. M. Testard, I, 1, trans. Ivor J. Davidson (Oxford, 2002): *Non adrogans videri arbitror, si inter filios suscipiam adfectum docendi. [...] Cum iam effugere*

To Ambrose, a bishop was first and foremost a teacher in charge of the instruction of both the clergy and the flock under his care. Ambrose did not describe himself as an apostle, nor as a prophet, an evangelist or even a shepherd. He dismissed all these figures as too lofty for himself, and made a claim about the duty of teaching instead. His *officium docendi* was grounded in the holy Scriptures, which Ambrose perceived as an entirely new domain of learning. Born in a prominent senatorial family, the Milanese bishop had received a sophisticated education in the liberal arts, had carried out his profession as an advocate in the *praefectura pretorii* of Sirmium and had subsequently been appointed as governor of an Italian province.⁹ He had also been close to the Neo-Platonists, whose philosophy had proved to be a valid hermeneutic tool for him to unravel the complexity of the Scriptures.¹⁰ In Ambrose's view, however, all these

non possimus officium docendi, quod nobis refugientibus imposuit sacerdotii necessitudo: Dedit enim deus quosdam quidem apostolos, quosdam autem prophetas, alios vero evangelistas, alios autem pastores et doctores. [...] Tantummodo intentionem et diligentiam circa Scripturas divinas opto adsequi quam ultimam posuit apostolus inter officia sanctorum [...]. Ego enim, raptus de tribunalibus atque administrationis infulis ad sacerdotium, docere vos coepi quod ipse non didici. Itaque factum est ut prius docere inciperem quam discere. Discendum igitur mihi simul et docendum est quoniam non vacavit ante discere.

⁹ On Ambrose's life see N.B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian capital* (Berkeley, 1994). His education and civic career are also mentioned in his earliest hagiography, cf. Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen, *Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Ambrogio, Vita di Agostino* (Milan, 1975), 3-5, pp. 56-60.

¹⁰ P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur saint Ambroise. "Vies" anciennes, culture, iconographie* (Paris, 1973), pp. 9-24.

different areas of expertise were inadequate: his new career as a bishop started, by his own admission, with a new process of learning and teaching.¹¹

Ambrose's own monumental literary output proves his commitment to the *officium docendi*. Wielding his authority over the city where the imperial court resided at the time, the reach of his teaching was wide: he was interrogated on scriptural, doctrinal and moral matters by fellow bishops, clerics, catechumens, friends and public high officials. He also lived in close proximity to emperors and, as a consequence, his duties as teacher and advisor naturally gained political relevance, as many of his letters and sermons show. The memory shaped around Ambrose and his episcopate largely depended on his attitude towards rulers, which the Milanese bishop himself considered to be highly representative of the duties of the head of a church. The tenth book of his epistolary (*ein politisches Buch* according to the description by its editor Michaela Zelzer) and the funerary orations Ambrose wrote and pronounced for Valentinian II (d. 392) and Theodosius I (d. 395) deeply shaped the late antique and medieval understandings of the fields of action pertaining, on the one hand, to the men in charge of the *ecclesia* and, on the other, to those taking care of the *res publica*.¹² Faith and

¹¹ On the close association between learning (*discere*) and teaching (*docere*) as part of the duties of the clergy see N. Adkin, 'Jerome, Ambrose and Gregory Nazianzen', *Vichiana* 4 (1993), 294-300. Cf. the letter addressed to the newly elected bishop Constantius in which Ambrose instructed him on the duties of his office, summarised in the imperatives *admone, edoce, hortare*, see Ambrose, *Epistula 36*, ed. O. Faller and M. Zelzer, II (Vienna, 1990), pp. 3-20.

¹² M. Zelzer, 'Zu Aufbau und Absicht des zehnten Briefbuches des Ambrosius', in *Latinität und alte Kirche. Festschrift für R. Hanslik* (Vienna, 1977), pp. 351-362; M. Zelzer, 'Linien der Traditions- und Editions-geschichte der ambrosianischen Briefe am Beispiel des zehnten

religion are the prerogatives of the church and its leaders, the bishops; the *palatium* and the *ecclesia* were thus defined by Ambrose as two separate places where qualitatively distinct actions took place.¹³ Ambrose claimed for the *ecclesia* a complete independence from public authority, but the same cannot be said for the ruler: the emperor was within, not above the church, as the Milanese bishop stated with humility, but also with steadfastness.¹⁴ As a member of the church, the emperor himself was placed under the moral and spiritual responsibility of the bishop: making sure that the head of the *res publica* took no wrong decisions was part of the wide range of episcopal duties, though undoubtedly one of the thorniest. Ambrose gave a powerful demonstration of that when he imposed a public penance on Theodosius for the massacre of innocents in

Briefbuches und der *Epistulae extra collectionem*', *Anzeiger der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien*, 117 (1980), 208-230; M. Zelzer, 'Zur Komposition der Briefsammlung des hl. Ambrosius', *Studia Patristica*, 18:4 (1990), 212-217. On the relation between Ambrose and Theodosius see N.B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, pp. 291-360.

¹³ Ambrose only unwillingly discussed religious affairs in the emperor's *concistorium* as he openly stated in his letters, see *Epistulae* 75 and 75a, ed. M. Zelzer, III (Vienna, 1982), pp. 74-81, 82-107. In Carolingian times, these separate spaces will be brought together in the notion of the *sacrum palatium* where the ruler, surrounded by his bishops, could discuss religious matters, see M. de Jong, 'Sacrum palatium et ecclesia. L'autorité religieuse royale sous les Carolingiens (790-840)', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 58:6 (2003), 1243-1269.

¹⁴ Ambrose, *Epistula* 75a, ed. M. Zelzer, III, pp. 106: *imperator enim intra ecclesiam non supra ecclesiam est. [...] Haec ut humiliter dicimus ita constanter exponimus.*

Thessalonica in 390, an act that did not directly entail ecclesiastical or doctrinal matters, but affected the salvation of the emperor's soul.¹⁵

Ambrose was later to be remembered as an eminent *defensor ecclesiae*, a saint, a *confessor* and a Father of the Church. These different representations relied heavily on the charismatic and authoritative image Ambrose channelled through his writings. Yet, it was only as a teacher, a *doctor* that the Milanese bishop wished to present himself. In his view, the *officium docendi* defined him as a bishop and it was under this big umbrella that exegetical analysis, doctrinal teaching, moral guidance, correction and admonition were brought together.

Two centuries later, in Rome, a member of another prestigious senatorial family was raised to the episcopal see.¹⁶ Like Ambrose, Gregory the Great had received a traditional education in the liberal arts and had first taken up a public career, which had led him to the office of

¹⁵ Cf. Ambrose, *Epistula 11 extra collectionem*, ed. M. Zelzer, III, pp. 212-218. Theodosius's penance was soon perceived as one of Ambrose's major achievements. Mentioned in Ambrose's earliest hagiography, this episode is given much more emphasis in the Church History written by Theodoret of Cyr and translated into Latin in the so-called *Historia Tripartita*, see Cassiodorus-Epiphanius, *Historia Ecclesiastica Tripartita*, ed. W. Jacob, CSEL 71 (Vienna, 1952), IX, 30; cf. Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii*, 24, p. 84. After the shocking act of public humiliation performed by Louis the Pious in 822, the memory of Theodosius's penance was repeatedly brought forward as an authoritative example precisely via Theodoret's account, cf. P. Tomea, 'Ambrogio e i suoi fratelli. Note di agiografia milanese altomedievale', *Filologia mediolatina*, 5 (1998), 182-183.

¹⁶ For a detailed presentation of Gregory's life and works see S. Boesch Gajano, *Gregorio Magno. Alle origini del Medioevo* (Roma, 2004).

praefectus urbis. He had then embraced an ascetic life, but Pope Pelagius II (579-590) chose him to hold again a public office, this time to serve in the church as a deacon and papal ambassador (*apocrisarius*) in Constantinople. When in 590 Pelagius fell victim to the plague, Gregory was elected to the episcopal see and, like Ambrose, initially tried to shirk this responsibility.¹⁷ The tension between Gregory's active political and ecclesiastical engagement and his longing for a contemplative monastic life is well known, but when it comes to specific episcopal duties, Gregory was quite straightforward: a bishop is first of all a shepherd called to plead for God's mercy on behalf of his people.¹⁸ In the synodal letter announcing his ascension to the Roman see, he described how a bishop (*rector*) should be:

I consider indeed that one must be vigilant and take all care that a bishop (*rector*) is pure in thought, outstanding in action, discrete in silence, useful with his speech, very close to individuals with compassion, more uplifted in contemplation than all others, allied with those doing good through humility, but upright with the zeal of justice against the vices of wrong-doers.¹⁹

¹⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Historiae*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison (Hanover, 1951), pp. 477-481. The newly elected pope indeed expressed his reluctance to accept the episcopal office, see for instance Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, ed. P. Ewald and L. M. Hartmann (Berlin, 1891), I, 3 (September 590) and 4 (October 590). This late-antique common *topos* of humility was already present in the third-century Life of Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage martyred in 258, see Pontius the Deacon, *Vita Cypriani*, ed. A.A. Bastiaensen, 5, pp. 14-16.

¹⁸ Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, I, 24: *nam quid antistes ad Dominum nisi pro delictis populi intercessor eligitur?*

¹⁹ Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, ed. L. Hartmann (Berlin, 1891), I, 24, p. 29, transl. J. R.C. Martyn (Toronto, 2004): *Perpendo quippe, quod omni cura vigilandum est, ut rector*

Declaring his personal understanding of the episcopal office, Gregory particularly insisted on the need of correspondence between action and speech: the words spoken by a bishop should be mirrored in his behaviour and deeds.²⁰ Preaching is thus presented as a key episcopal feature: the skills in speaking are quintessential in order to give voice to an otherwise dumb herald (*praeco mutus*).²¹ A similar understanding of his personal mission as bishop of Rome can be found in his *Liber regulae pastoralis*, written at the beginning of his pontificate. It has long been argued that this spiritual and moral treatise was conceived as a textbook that bishops were supposed to receive on the day of their consecration, but recent research has shown that this text was also intended as an elaborated rhetorical justification for

cogitatione sit mundus, operatione praecipuus, discretus in silentio, utilis in verbo, singulis compassione proximus, prae cunctis contemplatione suspensus, bene agentibus per humilitatem socius, contra delinquentium vitia per zelum iustitiae erectus. On the juxtaposition between silence and speech in early Christian times, see I. van Renswoude, ‘Licence to speak. The rhetoric of free speech in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages’, (PhD dissertation, Utrecht University, 2011), pp. 87-136.

²⁰ Gregory further illustrated his understanding of the episcopal duties – preaching above all others – in one of his homilies on the Gospels specifically written to be pronounced in front of an assembly of bishops, see Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, XVII, pp. 116-134.

²¹ Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, I, 24, p. 32: *Praeconis quippe officium suscipit, quisquis ad sacerdotium accedit, ut ante adventum iudicis, qui terribiliter sequitur, ipse scilicet clamando gradiatur. Sacerdos ergo si praedicationis est nescius, quam clamoris vocem daturus est praeco mutus?*

his own election, which in turn suggests that the audience Gregory had in mind was most likely larger than a merely episcopal *milieu*.²²

In the first book of the *Regula pastoralis* Gregory underlined, as Ambrose had done before him, that bishops are first and foremost bound to the duty of teaching and learning.²³ The following three books focus on the contemplative qualities of the ideal bishop, on the skills required to adjust his message to different audiences and finally on the personal aspiration to perfection. Although he never explicitly states it, the portrait Gregory drew in the *Regula Pastoralis* narrowed down the window for episcopal recruitment to a specific social group, that of the intellectual elites of his time, in whom could be found both the necessary competences and the cultural requirements for the office.²⁴ In the cultural toolkit of Gregory's ideal bishop, the art of speech played an important role, especially as a hermeneutic device for the comprehension and the communication of the divine truth harboured in the holy scriptures.²⁵ Yet, despite its usefulness, the art of speech was dismissed by Gregory in several occasions as vanity and pointless artificiality.²⁶

²² For a new assessment of the *Regula pastoralis* and further bibliographical references see G. E. Demacopoulos, 'Gregory's model of spiritual direction in the *Liber regulae pastoralis*', in B. Neil and M. J. Dal Santo (eds.), *A companion to Gregory the Great* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 204-224.

²³ Gregory the Great, *Liber regulae pastoralis*, ed. B. Judic, F. Rommel and C. Morel, I, p. 128: *nulla ars doceri praesumitur, nisi intenta prius meditatione discatur*.

²⁴ No surprise Gregory himself sent the *Regula* to Leander of Seville, one of the most prominent intellectuals of his time, see Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, V, 53 and 53a.

²⁵ The homilies on Ezekiel show to what extent Gregory relied on his mastery of speech, see V. Recchia, 'I moduli espressivi dell'esperienza contemplativa nelle Omelie su Ezechiele di Gregorio Magno: schemi tropici ritmi', *Vetera Christianorum* 29 (1992), 75-112.

While rhetorical training was not a highly sensitive topic to Ambrose, two centuries later the *ars loquendi* needed to be kept ‘in check’ and Gregory took particular pride in not using it in his exegetical works.²⁷ Ambrose’s more classicising and stoic-influenced episcopal ideals contrast with the spiritual and ascetic traits highlighted by Gregory the Great. Nevertheless, the doctor and the shepherd shared a pivotal feature: they both heavily relied on their mastery of speech. The dangers of eloquence lay in the shifting balance between truth, verisimilitude and outright lie, an ambivalence of which ancient authors of the calibre of Plato and Quintilian were already well aware.²⁸ Truth came to be even more essential to Christian doctrine and teaching: a correct understanding and expounding of the Word of God was now at stake, something which did not lend itself to compromise. Yet, despite its potential trespassing into sophistry, trickery and falsehood, eloquence still represented a crucial means to a specific end: interpreters and teachers of the divine Scriptures could use it to defend the

²⁶ Gregory even rebuked bishop Desiderius of Vienne (596-611) for teaching grammar, a despicable thing for a bishop who would thus be praising Jupiter and God at the same time, see Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, XI, 34.

²⁷ See the letter-preface to the *Moralia in Job* (Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, V, 53a, pp. 357-358): *ipsam loquendi artem, quam magisteria disciplinae exterioris insinuant, servare despexi. Nam sicut huius quoque epistulae tenor enuntiat, non metacismi collisionem fugio, non barbarismi confusionem devito, situs modosque etiam et praepositionum casus servare contemno, quia indignum vehementer existimo, ut verba caelestis oraculi restringam sub regulis Donati.*

²⁸ The relation between truth and verisimilitude, and the place and purpose of rhetoric within it, have been thoroughly investigated in M. Kempshall, *Rhetoric and the writing of history* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 350-427.

Christian faith and orthodox beliefs as well as to instruct the faithful. Both duties fell first upon bishops. Although neither Ambrose nor Gregory the Great openly boasted about it, in both cases the communicational requirements of their ecclesiastical office could not be prescindend from the art of speech.

2. Doctores secundum saeculum

By means of their office, bishops occupied a key position in a complex and often large social network. Moreover, their duties put them continuously on public display. Their image was consequently reshaped through the perceptions of those who had known them and, more importantly, those who wrote about them. Three authoritative witnesses provide us with insights on Ambrose's episcopate: Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), St Jerome (d. 420) and the Milanese deacon Paulinus (d. after 422).

Augustine met Ambrose in Milan and thanks to the latter's teaching he took his first steps away from Manichaeism. In his Confessions, the bishop of Hippo remembered his earliest impressions of the Milanese bishop:

I responded at first with an affection based not on his preaching of the truth, [...] but on his kindness to me as a person. I brought a technical interest to his discourses with the congregation, not for the motive I should have had, but to see if he lived up to his reputation (*fama*). Was he more or less eloquent than report had registered? Weighing carefully his style, I treated the content with a lofty disregard and approved his easy fluency.²⁹

²⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, ed. J. J. O'Donnell (Oxford, 1992), V, 13, transl. G.

Wills (New York, 2008): *et eum amare coepi primo quidem non tamquam doctorem veri, [...] sed tamquam hominem benignum in me. Et studiose audiebam disputantem in populo, non*

In the next book of the Confessions, Augustine concludes: ‘as for Ambrose, I thought him a prosperous man, as the world judges, respected by the successful’.³⁰

The most distinctive feature that made Ambrose remarkable in the eyes of his contemporaries was his rhetorical skill (*facundia*), a talent that he had brought from the tribunal of law into the church. His excellence in speech earned him a reputation among his contemporaries and once filled with Christian doctrine granted him eternal *fama* as ‘doctor of the truth’ (*doctor veri*), as Augustine put it.³¹

Ambrose’s eloquence was also acknowledged by another eminent witness of his time, St Jerome, who was nonetheless less enthusiastic about the originality of the Milanese bishop’s writings and the appropriateness of his sudden switch from a secular to an ecclesiastical career.³² In a letter to his friend Oceanus, Jerome condemned the election to the episcopal seat of someone who still was a catechumen, which might very well be an allusion

intentione, qua debui, sed quasi explorans eius facundiam, utrum conveniret famae suae an maior minor ve proflueret, quam praedicabatur, et verbis eius suspendebar intentus, rerum autem incuriosus et contemptor astabam et delectabar suavitate sermonis.

³⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, VI, 3: *Ipsum que Ambrosium felicem quendam hominem secundum saeculum opinabar, quem sic tantae potestates honorarent.*

³¹ Augustine was well aware of the dangers of an excessive use of rhetoric, which he denounced in several of his writings, see M. Kempshall, *Rhetoric*, pp. 371-388.

³² In a letter to Eustochius written in 381 Jerome praised Ambrose’s *eloquium* as expressed in his treatises on virginity, see Jerome of Stridon, *Epistula 22*, ed. J. Labourt, I (Paris, 1949), p. 133. He later showed a much more negative appreciation on Ambrose’s exegesis, see Jerome of Stridon, *Praefatio in Librum Didymi de Spiritu Sancto*, PL 23, col. 108.

to Ambrose.³³ Yet, despite his doubts, Jerome decided to include the Milanese bishop, who was still living at the time, in his *De viris illustribus*, confirming that Ambrose was indeed, *secundum saeculum*, one of the most renowned men of his time.³⁴

Paulinus, deacon and former secretary of the Milanese doctor, had an entirely different attitude in remembering Ambrose: in a *vita* he composed to honour his memory, he deliberately turned him into one of the pillars of the Latin church. Paulinus was not only giving testimony, but also shaping the memory of a holy bishop.³⁵ Yet, even as a saint, Ambrose's key quality was his eloquence. The first miracle in the *Vita Ambrosii* touches upon his divinely granted sweetness of speech: a swarm of bees was seen going in and out of baby Ambrose's mouth while he was sleeping in his cradle. Echoing Proverbs 16, 24 ('well-ordered words are as a honeycomb'), Paulinus made of the examination of the bees (*examen*

³³ Jerome of Stridon, *Epistula* 69, ed. J. Labourt, III (Paris, 1953), p. 207: *heri catechumenus, hodie pontifex; heri in amphitheatro, hodie in ecclesia; vespere in circo, mane in altari; dudum fautor histrionum, nunc virginum consecrator*. On this letter see N. Adkin, 'Heri Catechumenus, Hodie Pontifex (Jerome, Epist. 69.9.4)', *Acta Classica*, 36 (1993), 113-117. For further bibliography on Jerome's criticism see the recent article by D.G. Hunter, 'The Raven Replies: Ambrose's Letter to the Church at Vercelli (Ep.ex.coll. 14) and the Criticisms of Jerome', in A. Cain and J. Lössl (eds.), *Jerome of Stridon. His Life, Writings and Legacy* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 175-190.

³⁴ Jerome of Stridon, *De viris illustribus*, ed. A. Ceresa-Castaldo (Florence, 1988), CXXIV, p. 224.

³⁵ On the circumstances that led to the writing of the *Vita Ambrosii* see E. Zocca, 'La Vita Ambrosii alla luce dei rapporti fra Paolino, Agostino e Ambrogio', in L.F. Pizzolato and M. Rizzi (eds.), *Nec timeo mori. Atti del Congresso internazionale di studi ambrosiani nel XVI centenario della morte di sant'Ambrogio* (Milan, 1998), pp. 803-826.

apum) the act through which God bestowed upon the infant the capacity to speak of the divine.³⁶ Borrowing a common *topos* used in pagan literature to celebrate gifted orators, the skill that earned Ambrose his worldly *fama* was turned into a divine gift.³⁷ A potentially controversial attribute was thus secured from any possible criticism, which in turn suggests that Jerome's reservations about Ambrose were not an isolated case.³⁸ Eloquence can be used to deceive and dissimulate the truth, which was a common critique addressed to skilled orators in the late antique world in which the church was asserting its power.³⁹ Paulinus

³⁶ Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii*, 3, p. 56-58: *qui infans in area praetorii in cuna positus, cum dormiret aperto ore, subito examen apum adveniens faciem eius atque ora complevit, ita ut ingrediendi in os egrediendique frequentarent vices. [...] Operabatur enim iam tunc Dominus in servuli sui infantia, ut inpleretur quod scriptum est: "Favi mellis sermones boni". Illud enim examen apum scriptorum ipsius nobis generabat favos, qui caelestia dona adnuntiarent et mentes hominum de terrenis ad caelum erigerent.*

³⁷ For an overview of the occurrence of bees-fed infants in Greek and Roman literature see I. Opelt, 'Das Bienenwunder in der Ambrosiusbiographie des Paulinus von Mailand', *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968), 38-44.

³⁸ Paulinus refers to two specific occasions in which Ambrose had been criticised, which both culminated in the death of the saint's detractors (Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii*, 53-54).

³⁹ The same tension can be found in the writings of another late antique Italian bishop: Ennodius of Pavia (d. 521), a professional rhetorician who also renounced its lay status to enter the clergy. The ambiguous status of eloquence in Christian *milieux* is made explicit in the speech Ennodius pronounced in the thirtieth anniversary of Epiphanius, bishop of Pavia (467-498), see S. Rota, 'Teoria e prassi poetica di Ennodio alla luce di Carm. I, 9: modelli classici e cristiani', *Rivista di Filologia e Istruzione Classica*, 136 (2008), 198-227; cf. also F. Bordone, 'Ennodio e la conversione dell'eloquenza. L'*Hymnus sancti Cypriani* (Carm.

painstakingly reshaped the memory of the eloquent doctor Ambrose and drew instead the portrait of a wonderworker, an ascetic and a saint who could be joined to the ranks of the apostles and biblical prophets.⁴⁰ The accent is repeatedly put on the divine inspiration of his sermons: an angel is seen speaking in the saint's ear, suggesting again that *facundia* in itself could represent a weak point. Rhetorical skills made Ambrose famous in his lifetime, but could not grant him eternal *fama* as a holy *confessor*. In the aftermath of his death, his secretary Paulinus took it upon himself to turn Ambrose into a vessel of the divine word in everything akin to biblical figures.

Unfortunately, little information on Pope Gregory's *fama* in Rome can be grasped from contemporary Roman evidence: neither his epitaph nor his short biography in the *Liber Pontificalis* provide us with much information.⁴¹ A contemporary testimony is nonetheless provided by Gregory of Tours (d. 594) who left us with an interesting account of his

1.12H=343V)', in *Athanaeum* 101:2 (2013), 621-667. After all, the art of speech also went hand in hand with heresy, as Augustine's hagiographer explicitly stated in the case of the Pelagians, see Possidius, *Vita Augustini*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen, 18, 1, p. 174: *Adversus Pelagianistas quoque, novos nostrorum temporum haereticos et disputatores callidos, arte magis subtili et noxia scribentes et, ubicumque poterant, publice et per domos loquentes.*

⁴⁰ Ambrose is compared to Elisha and in particular to Elijah, both not afraid to stand up against rulers, cf. Paulinus of Milan, *Vita Ambrosii*, 28, 2 and 47, 3. The same biblical transfiguration into Elijah can be found in Rufinus of Aquileia's Church History, a text predating the *Vita Ambrosii*, see Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. T. Mommsen, *Eusebius Werke* IX, 2/2 (Leipzig, 1908), XI, 15, pp. 1020-21.

⁴¹ Cf. *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae. Nova Series*, II, ed. A. Silvagni, (Rome, 1935), n. 4156; *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne (Paris, 1886), p. 312.

namesake's reputation at the time of his election to the papal see. After praising him for his ascetic qualities, the bishop of Tours described Pope Gregory as the most skilled master of the arts of the *trivium* (grammar, dialectic and rhetoric) in Rome – a feature befitting his social identity, that of a member of the senatorial elites.⁴² As it had been the case for Ambrose, his learned speech made him 'famous' in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Only a few years after Gregory's death in 604, Isidore of Seville (d. 636) inserted a short notice about the Roman pope in his *De viris illustribus*. He openly referred to him as the most learned doctor in the entire history of the Church: he was 'so endowed with the light of wisdom through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that there is no doctor equal to him not only in present times, but even in the past'.⁴³ Isidore insisted on Gregory's learnedness and particularly praised his eloquence in the *Moralia in Job* – the same text for which the Roman bishop claimed not to have used any 'ornament of words' – confirming to what extent his *fama* relied on his remarkable mastery of speech.⁴⁴ Although Gregory tried to downplay his rhetorical skills, both Gregory of Tours, who died while the Roman pope was in the fifth year of his pontificate, and Isidore, who wrote some years after his death, agreed on the very same point: the pope who wanted to be remembered as a *pastor*, was actually initially celebrated as

⁴² Gregory of Tours, *Historiae*, p. 477: *litteris grammaticis dialecticisque ac rhetoricis ita est institutus, ut nulli in Urbe ipsa putaretur esse secundus.*

⁴³ Isidore of Seville, *De viris illustribus*, ed. C. Codoñer Merino (Salamanca 1964), XXVII, p. 148: *tantoque per gratiam Spiritus sancti scientiae lumine praeditus, ut non modo illi praesentium temporum quisquam doctorum, sed nec in praeteritis quidem par fuerit unquam.*

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*: *idem etiam [...] librum beati Iob mystico ac morali sensu disseruit, totamque eius prophetiae historiam in triginta quinque voluminibus largo eloquentiae fonte explicuit. In quibus quidem [...] quanta clareant ornamenta verborum, nemo sapiens explicare valebit, etiam si omnes artus eius vertantur in linguam.*

an eloquent doctor, while no immediate attempt – neither in Rome nor elsewhere – was made to turn him into a saint.

Both the late fourth-century Milanese bishop who lived in a Roman empire that was still perceived as a solid structure, and the pope who witnessed the challenging years of transition from ancient to medieval Rome, were acclaimed by their contemporaries for their mastery and learnedness of speech. The ascension to the episcopal *cathedra* meant that in order to be authoritative, bishops needed more than eloquence. An uncontested bishop needed to combine the ‘art of speech’ with divinely-inspired content. He could thus leave a mark in the present to be further developed into ever-lasting memory.

3. *Specula episcoporum*

The tension between the *ars oratoria* and the *munus sacerdotii* strongly affected Ambrose’s and Gregory the Great’s reputation during and after their lifetimes. The reshaping of their memory into models of sanctity to be offered to their successors is a process that shows an astonishing synchrony and a surprisingly comparable agenda. The Carolingian Lives of Ambrose and Gregory are atypical hagiographies: they are very lengthy, learned and unfitting for liturgical practice and they both borrow consistently from other writings, among which the writings of the two Fathers, and in particular their letters.⁴⁵ Furthermore, both Lives were

⁴⁵ For a detailed presentation of the *De vita et meritis sancti Ambrosii* (BHL 377d) and its context of writing see G. Vocino, ‘Framing Ambrose in the resources of the past. Late antique and early medieval sources for a Carolingian portrait of Ambrose’, in C. Gantner, R. McKitterick and S. Meeder (eds.), *The resources of the past in early medieval Europe* (Cambridge, forthcoming); G. Vocino, ‘Il culto dei santi nel regno italico in età carolingia e l’eccezione milanese: la “famiglia santa” di Ambrogio’, in M. Basile Weatherill, M. Beretta

written on episcopal commission. What these Carolingian Lives did not share was success: John's *Vita Gregorii* survives as a complete text in 148 manuscripts, the *De vita et meritis sancti Ambrosii* only in one late ninth-century *libellus*.⁴⁶

In the third quarter of the ninth century, an anonymous Milanese compiler wrote a new biography of Ambrose in which the emphasis is put precisely on the bishop's incisiveness in speech.⁴⁷ The hagiographer refashioned the image of Ambrose as an authoritative counsellor and admonisher of emperors, the only one who succeeded in correcting misbehaving rulers thanks to his *parrhesia*.⁴⁸ Ambrose's *constantia* and *zelum* are thus highlighted as his most remarkable virtues allowing him to play a key role in the late fourth-century Roman empire. The climax of the *De vita et meritis* coincides with the narration of Theodosius's penance, thus making the relation between the bishop and the Christian ruler the pivotal episode of

and M. R. Tessera (eds.), *Ansperto da Biassono: un arcivescovo di Milano al tramonto dell'impero carolingio* (Milan, forthcoming).

⁴⁶ For an overview of the manuscripts of the *Vita Gregorii*, see L. Castaldi (ed.), *Vita Gregorii I papae. La tradizione manoscritta* (Florence, 2004). The *De vita et meritis* is transmitted in a manuscript now at St. Gall (Stiftsbibliothek, MS 569, pp. 3-97).

⁴⁷ Vocino, *Framing Ambrose*.

⁴⁸ Interestingly Ambrose is again explicitly labelled a *doctor*, not a *sanctus* or *beatus*, in the *incipit* of the text, see *De vita et meritis*, p. 51: *Ad laudem et gloriam Salvatoris mundi de vita et meritis eximii doctoris atque institutoris Ecclesiae almi pontificis Ambrosii*.

On the Christian appropriation of the classical tradition of the *parrhesia*, see Van Renswoude, *Licence to speak*; A. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: the development of Christian discourse* (Berkeley, 1991).

Ambrose's life.⁴⁹ The many miracles recorded by Paulinus were omitted (especially those *post mortem*), while the saint was portrayed as an outstanding, charismatic and righteous bishop not afraid to face emperors in order to have them right their wrongs and to defend his church.

Carolingian Milanese archbishops bet on the revival of Ambrose's memory: after all, the Frankish takeover in 774 was an opportunity to re-establish the supremacy of Milan as the first church of the kingdom in opposition to Pavia. Ambrose provided them with a model and an example from the past they could heed, advertise and aspire to, while claiming their legitimacy to act like Ambrose in their own world. Archbishop Angilbert II (824-859) particularly invested in the promotion of the memory of Ambrose through several liturgical actions, such as the elevation of his relics and their reburial in a porphyry sarcophagus placed under a golden altar decorated with episodes of his life.⁵⁰ He was the one who, according to Andrew of Bergamo, not only behaved like his illustrious predecessor in front of Lothar I, but also admonished and forced Louis the Pious to humble himself. He was not the only Carolingian bishop of Milan insisting on the special connection with Ambrose: Tado (860-868) and Anspertus (868-881) also followed the example set by the Milanese *doctor* by playing the part of both imperial counsellors and political mediators.⁵¹ In this context, the *De*

⁴⁹ *De vita et meritis sancti Ambrosii*, ed. P. Courcelle, *Recherches*, pp. 85-91. The compiler is here borrowing word by word from the *Historia Tripartita* (IX, 30).

⁵⁰ It should be noted that the twelve scenes recounting the life of Ambrose were framed on the back side of the altar facing the liturgical celebrant according to the Ambrosian rite. The iconographic programme was thus specifically conceived for the eyes of the bishop, cf. C. Hahn, 'Narrative on the golden altar of Sant' Ambrogio in Milan: Presentation and Reception', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 53 (1999), 167-187.

⁵¹ Vocino, *Il culto dei santi*.

vita et meritis was designed to provide his commissioner, the Milanese archbishop, with a script to follow and a profile to adhere to: legitimised by behaving and acting like Ambrose, his Carolingian successors could aspire to be acknowledged as the primates of the Italian kingdom.

In the same years when the *De vita et meritis* was written in Milan, in Rome the deacon John Hymmonides was working on his *Vita Gregorii*. As had been the case for the Carolingian Life of Ambrose, liturgical initiatives preceded the writing of the text. The biography dedicated to Gregory IV in the *Liber Pontificalis* mentions that around the years 829-831 the pope ‘inflamed with the fire of divine love took the body of St Gregory [...] from the place where it had formerly been buried, and brought it not far from there to another place newly constructed within the church of St Peter, and he decorated his silver altar on all sides with silver panels, dedicated an oratory to his holy name and depicted his apse above with gilded mosaic’.⁵² We know that Angilbert II went to Rome at least on two occasions: for the crowning of Louis II in 844 and in 850 for the trial of Anastasius Bibliothecarius. He might have actually seen the silver altar dedicated to Gregory the Great and then taken the decision to give an even more precious altar, a golden one, to Ambrose.⁵³ The chronological proximity is striking and when dealing with Rome and Milan it should not be overlooked that their long histories were characterised by an on-and-off high-pitched rivalry which was never fully soothed.⁵⁴

⁵² *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, II, p. 74, transl. R. Davis (Liverpool, 1995), p. 51.

⁵³ Parallels have already been made with papal iconographic and architectural programmes, see M. Ferrari, ‘Le iscrizioni’, in C. Capponi, *L’altare d’Oro di Sant’Ambrogio* (Milan, 1996), pp. 145-155.

⁵⁴ In several occasions the Roman pontiffs found themselves at odds with the Milanese bishops, not least in the late ninth century when Pope John VIII excommunicated Anspertus

The ‘art of speech’ plays an important part also in the *Vita Gregorii*. John did not shy away from portraying Gregory as a *facundissimus rhetor*, a label the Roman pope would have found unfitting, to say the least.⁵⁵ An explicit emphasis is also put on Gregory’s concern for keeping a high standard for the teaching of the liberal arts and the promotion of *Latinitas* as reflected both in speech and attire.⁵⁶ The drawing of an image of Gregory the Great as a patron of the arts is particularly telling if we make the connection with the person who commissioned this Life, Pope John VIII, who patronised the intellectual endeavours of both John Hymmonides and Anastasius Bibliothecarius.⁵⁷

of Milan (868-881) who had different views on the right candidate to the imperial crown after the death of Louis II of Italy in 875, see F. Bougard, ‘Ansperto e il papato: una relazione difficile’, in *Ansperto da Biassono*.

⁵⁵ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 81: *nequaquam destitit facundissimus rhetor populo praedicare*.

⁵⁶ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 92: *Tunc rerum sapientia Romae sibi templum visibiliter quodammodo fabricabat, et septemplicibus artibus, veluti columnis nobilissimorum totidem lapidum, apostolicae sedis atrium fulciebat. [...] Quiritum more, seu trabeata Latinitas suum Latium in ipso Latiali palatio singulariter obtinebat. Refloruerant ibi diversarum artium studia, et qui, vel sanctimonia, vel prudentia forte carebat, suo ipsius iudicio subsistendi coram pontifice fiduciam non habebat*.

⁵⁷ On Pope John VIII see D. Arnold, *Johannes VIII. Päpstliche Herrschaft in den karolingischen Teilreichen am Ende des 9. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003) as well as A. Sennis, ‘Giovanni VIII’, in *Encliclopedia dei papi* (Rome, 2000), pp. 28-34.

But the Life of Gregory was aimed at shaping the portrait of a particular bishop, a Roman pope.⁵⁸ To that end, Gregory is at the same time depicted as a monastic moraliser, a reformer of the papal court, the head of the city of Rome, an apostle sending off missions to convert new peoples, a *defensor* of the faith bringing heretics into the fold of orthodoxy and a shepherd watching over his dioceses and parishes. All these duties correspond to the portrait of a bishop with a universal mission placed in a strong eschatological frame.⁵⁹

The collection of Gregory's letters (the *Registrum*), extensively used in the *Vita*, also provided evidence about the pope's close relationship with the emperors, their family and the court.⁶⁰ In the third and fourth book of his *Vita*, John illustrated Gregory's behaviour towards Christian rulers: he presented the opposition to Emperor Maurice (582-602) with a significantly harsh judgement of the emperor referred to as an *avarissimus simulque rapacissimus princeps, cupidissimus ac tenacissimus*, whom Gregory *viriliter contradicit*.⁶¹

⁵⁸ On the political and cultural agenda behind the compilation of John Hymmonides's *Vita Gregorii* see C. Leonardi, 'Pienezza ecclesiale e santità nella "Vita Gregorii" di Giovanni Diacono', in *Renovatio*, 12 (1977), 51-66; G. Arnaldi, 'Giovanni Immonide e la cultura a Roma al tempo di Giovanni VIII', in *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo e Archivio Muratoriano*, 68 (1956), 33-89.

⁵⁹ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 153: *omnes omnino salvare certabat*.

⁶⁰ On the relation with the Eastern empire see M. Dal Santo, 'Gregory the Great, the Empire and the Emperor', in Neil and Dal Santo (eds.), *A companion to Gregory*, pp. 57-81.

⁶¹ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 160, 180-181 and 183. Cf. Gregory the Great, *Registrum*, III, 65; V, 36. The compromised diplomatic relation with the Eastern empire certainly influenced John's reading of Gregory's letters to emperors Maurice and Phocas. For the historical context of those years and further bibliography see K. Herbers, 'Rom und Byzanz im Konflikt. Die Jahre 869/870 in der Perspektive der Hadriansvita des Liber Pontificalis', in

The rhetoric of free speech here provides the frame for the understanding of Gregory's letter to Maurice (*Registrum* V, 36): the pope repeatedly admonished the emperor with *libertas vocis* and *constantia* especially rebuking him for neglecting the defence of Italy.⁶² Feeling threatened by Gregory's reminder of God's final judgement, the emperor repented and saved his soul from eternal damnation, but could not be spared from death at the hands of Phocas. Borrowing from his *Registrum*, John went on showing how Gregory complied with his episcopal duties towards the new emperor and Empress Leontia by instructing them on the right exercise of Christian rulership.⁶³

The *Vita Gregorii* thus shaped a prestigious model encompassing the wide range of duties belonging to the bishop of Rome, a work that could fittingly be offered as a *speculum*, an example and an ideal against which present-day popes could measure their actions. After all, John's choice to structure his Life in four books, following the example of the *Regula Pastoralis*, could also hint at the moral and didactic function of this writing, especially conceived for a pope who could now look at himself through Gregory's mirror.⁶⁴

W. Hartmann and K. Herbers (eds.), *Die Faszination der Papstgeschichte. Neue Zugänge zum frühen und hohen Mittelalter* (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, 2008), pp. 55-70.

⁶² On the Latin vocabulary of free speech see again Van Renswoude, *Licence to speak*, pp. 40-43.

⁶³ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 185-187.

⁶⁴ John Hymmonides, *Vita Gregorii*, 61: *secundum distributionem ejusdem doctoris, qua librum Regulae pastoralis quadripartita ratione distinxerat, ego quoque illum, qualiter ad culmen regiminis venerit, in primo huius operis libro perhibui; et ad hoc rite perveniens, qualiter vixerit, in secundo disserui; et bene vivens, qualiter docuerit, in tertio designavi; et recte docens, infirmitatem suam quotidie quanta consideratione cognoverit, in quarto conclusi.*

The *Vita Gregorii* is indeed an extraordinary text, and has rightly been acknowledged as such, but it should not be considered unique in the Carolingian panorama.⁶⁵ The strategies employed by its author are comparable and in many respects similar to those behind the writing of the *De vita et meritis sancti Ambrosii*, not least for the stress put on Ambrose's and Gregory's *constantia*. Both hagio-historiographical texts were not conceived as liturgical pieces, but as portraits, *specula*, of authoritative bishops suited to be models and sources of inspiration for present-day ambitious churchmen.

Conclusions

Bishops were expected to live up to high standards. Since the earliest Christian centuries this triggered the need for the definition of models which the holders of the episcopal office could take as both worthy and powerful examples.⁶⁶ Ambrose's and Gregory the Great's self-representations, the testimonies of their contemporaries and their Carolingian biographies show that one particular feature stood out as a required and appropriate episcopal skill: the mastery of speech. Despite the labels Ambrose and Gregory the Great used to describe

⁶⁵ Paschasius Radbertus's *Epitaphium Arsenii* and Hincmar of Rheims's *Vita Remigii* are equally atypical hagiographies concerned much more about the present political situation than the mere promotion of a cult. See M. de Jong, *An epitaph for an era. Paschasius Radbertus and his lament for Wala*, (Cambridge, forthcoming); M.C. Isaïa, *Remi de Reims. Mémoire d'un saint, histoire d'une Église (V^e-XI^e s.)* (Paris, 2010).

⁶⁶ C. Rapp, *Holy bishops*; on late antique episcopal Lives see E. Elm, *Die Macht der Weisheit: das Bild des Bischofs in der Vita Augustini des Possidius und anderen spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Bischofsviten* (Leiden 2003). More particularly on late antique Italy, see R. Lizzi, *Vescovi e strutture ecclesiastiche nella città tardoantica (l'Italia Annonaria nel IV-V secolo d.C.)* (Como, 1989).

themselves as holders of the episcopal office, their *fama* relied first and foremost on their skills as eloquent speakers. And when an episcopal model needed to be shaped for present-day ambitious bishops eager to establish their authority in the Carolingian public arena, the *ars loquendi* was again brought to the fore as an essential skill, a resource to be used to fulfil the manifold episcopal duties.⁶⁷ This feature is particularly prominent in early medieval representations of Italian bishops. Paulinus of Aquileia (787-802), a former *magister artis grammaticae*, was praised by Alcuin himself for his *lingua eloquentiae* and Atto of Vercelli (924-961) entrusted to an artfully and rhetorically-constructed text his message for the reform of tenth-century Italian society.⁶⁸ The mastery of speech was indeed a crucial requirement in the understanding of the word of God, in preaching, in counselling and admonishing as well as in defending the prerogatives of the church. Furthermore, keeping a correct and balanced relation between the *ecclesia* and the *res publica* also rested on the bishop's ability to speak

⁶⁷ The importance of the 'art of speech' in Carolingian times has recently been given new attention, especially in the context of the relation between churchmen and rulers, see M. de Jong, 'Becoming Jeremiah: Paschasius Radbertus on Wala, himself and others', in R. Corradini, M. Gillis, R. McKitterick and I. van Renswoude (eds.), *Ego trouble. Authors and their identities in the early middle ages* (Vienna, 2010), pp. 185-196; in the same volume also M. Garrison, 'An aspect of Alcuin: 'Tuus Albinus' - peevish egotist? or parrhesiast?', pp. 137-152; J. L. Nelson, 'The *libera vox* of Theodulf of Orléans', in C. J. Chandler and S. A. Stofferahn (eds.), *Discovery and Distinction in the Early Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 2013), pp. 288-306; on Agobard of Lyon and Hincmar of Reims, both Carolingian outspoken bishops acting like Ambrose, see Van Renswoude, *Licence to speak*, 172-173, 280-281, 295-336.

⁶⁸ Cf. Alcuin, *Epistola 86*, ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH Epistulae Karolini Aevi*, II (Berlin, 1895), p. 130; G. Vignodelli, *Il filo a piombo. Il Perpendiculum di Attone di Vercelli e la storia politica del regno Italico* (Spoleto, 2011).

appropriately and effectively to rulers: in that respect, Ambrose and Gregory the Great were undoubtedly paramount models. The production of two new ninth-century biographies, dedicated to these exemplary bishops at the demand of their zealous successors, challenges our definition of these texts as 'hagiographies'. Rather, their moral and didactic nature situates them in a grey area at the fringes of the genre known as 'mirrors for princes', for which the Carolingian period was undeniably a golden age.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ N. Staubach, *Rex Christianus. Hofkultur und Herrschaftspropaganda im Reich Karls des Kahlen* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 1993).