*Christianisation in Sicily (IIIrd-VIIth Century)**

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In Sicily the sector of life dedicated to the sacred must have been globally very large, as may be inferred from the notable mass of local hagiographic traditions which have survived the frequent destructions, together with archaeological and epigraphic evidence (especially from the earliest period). However, it is no easy task to delineate the chronological sequences, to determine the frequently elusive topography, or to arrive at a clear understanding of language or significances, owing to the density of the material and its amorphous condition, which studies have only begun to decipher in some limited sectors. Therefore I shall limit myself to pointing out certain specific features and to proposing some new questions, even though they do not always find adequate answers.

Religious life in pre-Arab Sicily may be substantially divided into three phases, which correspond, unsurprisingly, to three source areas, each of them quite consistent in quality, and, in the case of literary texts, in the close affinity of their narrative schemes.

* The present paper corresponds to the first section of a larger research about «I caratteri originali del cristianesimo in Sicilia», which will be published —fully-documented in sources and bibliography— among the Reports of the *Sesto Convegno Int. di Studio, «La Sicilia rupestre nel contesto delle cività mediterranee», Catania-Pantalica-Ispica, 8-12 Sett. 1981* (now in print). The actual topic was developed in two seminars, at Berkeley (Ancient History Group, Dept. of Classics; Thomas More-Jacques Maritain Institute, 21st May 1982) and Chicago (Dept. of Classics, 24th May 1982). I wish to thank here friends and colleagues for their helpful cooperation and criticisms, in particular P. Brown, A. Momigliano, R. Kaster, P. White. I also had the opportunity of profitable discussions about problems very close to the present ones in a *table ronde* at the École Française de Rome about «Christianisme et paganisme en Italie et en Afrique» (22nd Oct. 1981, in collaboration with A. Mandouze and Ch. Piétri), and in a seminar at Macerata (Istituto di Storia Antica, Facoltà di Lettere, 29th January 1982; I take here the opportunity to express my gratitude to L. Gasperini for his kind invitation).

1. A first period which may be called Roman-Sicilian, from the Christian origins to the age of Gregory the Great. I shall concern myself solely with this phase, because there is no specific research, either partial or global, on the period.

2. This is followed by a period which I would call Byzantine-Sicilian, from the seventh to the ninth century. In this phase the local ecclesiastical structures are strengthened according to the extent to which they are «Byzantinized» (a century after the «reconquest» of Justinian). Parallel to this, the biographies of bishops assume importance for the first time. Set in the context of urban life, they are revealed as closely linked to the high Byzantine bureaucracy, and as extremely loyal to Constantinople, which confers on them great honours (*Lives* of Zozimos of Syracuse, Leon of Catania, Gregory of Agrigento, etc.): the understanding of the significance of these *Lives* has been enhanced by noteworthy contributions from Évelyne Patlagean (1964) and Cyril Mango (1973).

3. In the third, Italo-Grecian, period (from tenth to eleventh century) the bonds between the Greek society of Sicily and Byzantium first slacken and are then cut. The local inhabitants, both Greek and Sicilian, gather round the charismatic figures of countless holy monks of Calabrian-Sicilian origin who seem to oppose any imposition of worldly power (Byzantium, the Arabs, or the Church). Their biographies, transmitted in manuscripts through an intricate tradition, are now receiving useful pioneer studies (André Guillou, Vera von Falkenhausen).

So we shall consider now the Roman-Sicilian period from the origins to the seventh century.

The early years of the seventh century, in fact, witness a phase in which the Byzantine conquest is already established in the island in a pattern which reveals many differences with respect to the Roman and Gothic ages. However, in a religious setting the effects of these changes are at this time perceptible only in a conservative tendency towards a greater rigidity in certain structures. The religious and ecclesiastical situation in the sixth century thus presents itself for analysis as a sort of infra-red photograph of realities which had built up in the preceding two centuries and reveals the fundamental directions and previous trends.

In the period of Gregory the Great there is no trace yet of the legend asserting the apostolic origins of Syracuse and Taormina thanks to the missionary work of Marcianus and Pancratius respectively. The legend maintains that they were sent from Antioch by the apostle Peter, well-provided with sacred images, after he had consulted Paul and the other apostles of the Pontus and of the Cilicia. There is no doubt that the local worship of Pancratius was long standing: he already appears as bishop of Tauromenium in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* (Vth-VIth century), while references to his devotion are particularly plentiful in the *Registrum* of Pope Gregory. But the apostolic legend as found in the *Vita et Passio Pancratii*, written as a romance by a supposed disciple, Evagrius, has been

shown to be a forgery of the late eighth century. It has elements of the iconoclastic controversy and is permeated with references to the onomastics, topography and ecclesiastical organisation of a late period, and is intended to support the growing autonomy of the Sicilian episcopates after the severing of dependence on Rome in the time of Isaurian emperors. Thus it is only for that period that the *Vita Pancratii* may be considered a historical document of real interest.

The traces of the spread of Christianity in Sicily, in fact, are no earlier than the third century, when Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, with reference to a letter sent to him by the Roman priests and deacons concerning the *lapsi* immediately after the death of Pope Fabian (251 a.D.), mentions a similar message enclosed with his and intended for Sicily (thus on the same Rome-Africa sea route): clearly, there must have been Christian communities already organized on the island. The archaeological evidence seems to support the same point, as the earliest catacombs (Santa Maria del Gesù at Syracuse, explored from 1965 on, dates back to 220/230 a.D.).

In western Sicily it is with Palermo, in fact (one of the busiest ports of call on the Rome-Africa route), that one finds the most authentic links of the tradition related to Saint Agatha. The legend had it that the virgin Agatha was arrested in Palermo at the time of Decius. She was then taken to Catania and suffered martyrdom under the governorship of Quinctianus (who was later punished by God when he drowned in the river Simetus while on his way to confiscate the possessions of the Saint in the Palermo surroundings). Various *Lives* of Agatha, both Greek and Latin, claim, in some cases, that she was a resident of Palermo, and in others of Catania. In this latter city she was venerated very early as the patron Saint, after her veil, which had been carried in a procession, saved the city from a disastrous eruption of Etna. But all these biographies stem from the *Panegyric* by Methodios, the well-known patriarch of Constantinople, who was of Sicilian origin and who put an end to the iconoclastic conflict. Methodios gave his speech when already an old man, after 832; but, although he was writing in such a late period, he himself stated that he had been scrupulously faithful to earlier texts (i. e., to the older *Passiones*). In any case, there is no doubt that the veneration of Agatha precedes that of Lucia, which was already well-established in the fourth century. Indeed the devotion of Lucia for the holy relics of Agatha and her pilgrimage from Syracuse to the martyr's burial place in Catania (followed by the miraculous cure of Lucia's mother) are used in the *Passio* to account for the vocation of the young and rich woman and her subsequent martyrdom in 304. This chronology is supported by the mention of Lucia in the *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* and also by the dedication of a church in Ravenna in 385, desired by bishop Ursus (who was of Sicilian origin).

Now one may see in the bi-polarity of the tradition concerning Saint Agatha, centered at one and the same time on Palermo and Catania, an exemplary reflection in a religious context of the tendency of the Sicilian area to gravitate towards two centres, northern Africa and the eastern Mediterra-

nean. Such gravitation is very clear in these centuries both in the economic and the cultural spheres, centered as it is, with different results, on the western and the eastern sectors of the island.

Indeed, almost all the epigraphical and archaeological evidence of the earliest Christianity in Sicily is related to the eastern coast, without any doubt the first point of contact with the new faith. And it is worth pointing out that the distributional patterns of the oldest Christian monuments follow those which, in the self-same areas of Sicily, had characterized the spread and establishment of eastern cults (among them, the Egyptian are particularly well-documented; and Giulia Sfameni Gasparro has recently provided us with maps of this spreading, in ÉPRO collection). Also the hagiographical tradition regarding Euplus, martyr under Diocletian, stems from fourth century Catania. His *Passio* in Greek, transmitted to us in an eleventh century Parisian manuscript, undoubtedly shows traces of great antiquity and authenticity. It consists of two fragments of an interrogation which reveal no knowledge of the fact the Saint is alleged to have been a priest, a fact strongly emphasised in the more recent *Passio* in Latin. These fragments contain elements which may be derived from the public records of the trial, for example, the expression *κύριος ἡμῶν*=«our Lord», referring to the imperial authority; they also mention a *corrector Siciliae*, Calvisianus, whose name is to be connected with the *gens Calvisia*, the owner in Sicily of large estates in the interior between Gela and Agrigento: brick stamps with the inscription *CAL*, and *CALVI* have been found over an area of about 250 square kilometres; and references to a *mansio Calvisiana* appear in itinerary sources of the third and fourth centuries, such as the *Itinerarium Antonini* and the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. As matters stand, one may well be led to reflect on the particularly important role which seems to have been played by Catania in the early vicissitudes of the Christianization; a role which one has no hesitation in linking with the political, economic and urban growth of the city, which became evident from the second-third centuries on, and which more than once gained the attention of the provincial government, based with its offices on Syracuse (another cradle of Sicilian Christianity). Indeed, almost all the late cemeteries and catacombs of Syracuse have been found in the northern suburb, along the road towards Catania: this is an archaeological datum which always emphazises the importance of a road and of the towns linked by that road.

The end of the fifth century provides us with an extensive network of archaeological and epigraphic evidence which bears witness to the depth to which Christianity had already penetrated the interior, following the main communication routes from the eastern coastal centres over the Erean plateau, from Catania to Gela, from Syracuse to Akrai-Kamarina, and to Hybla-Niscemi-Agrigento. To the west of this triangle, the archaeological map of Christian Sicily covers only the territories of Agrigento and Lilybaeum, where Christianity seems to have consolidated itself from the fifth century on, with characteristics which reveal a clearly African origin (in any

case, not absent at this time even in many centres of the south and central-eastern areas): funeral objects such as lamps of African manufacture, found in the late burial grounds of Selinunte and of the village near Piazza Armerina; expressions of sacred art such as the mosaic funeral decorations of Salemi (which exhibit similarities with those of Sidi Abich) and the mosaics of the small basilicas of Carini and Santa Croce Kamarina. One may hear echoes —however attenuated— of the Donatist controversy, such as the anti-Donatist motto *deo gratias* on a bronze lamp from Selinunte. The recurring use of certain names suggests in its turn African influence: an example may be seen in *Ausanius* (the name of a deacon buried at Selinunte, who was probably a member of the clergy of Agrigento; and, later, the name of a bishop of Agrigento, a contemporary of Gregory the Great); or else in names such as *Quodvultdeus*, recognizable in *Covuldius*, the founder ot the basilica of Salemi, or *Golbodeus*, who was one of the companions of Mamilianus, bishop of Palermo, who himself may have been an African priest formerly.

The notable influence of the East and of Africa in the field of religion, however, did not lead to the transfer to Sicily of the fierce heretical disputes which shook these provinces between the third and the fifth century. Montanists, Donatists, Pelagians, Arians, Monophysits —just as the Monotelits and the Iconoclasts in the seventh and eigth centuries— never achieved a firm footing in the island. Some signs of religious dissidence in the fifth and sixth centuries may be discerned only in outlying rural areas, where ecclesiastical control must have been less rigid. In these centuries the traditional superstitions of the most varied nature and origins (Gnostic, «Angelian», Jewish) in fact seem to be slowly pushed out towards the periphery —both topographical and cultural—, taking root with particular firmness in rustic settlements and in the heart of the large estates: it may be seen in the numerous funerary inscriptions in Greek (for example, those at Sofiana in the interior around Gela, or else those scattered along the south-eastern strip of the island between the Ánapo and the Tellaro rivers), as well as the phylacteries influenced by Judaism or Gnosticism, found throughout the countryside and intended to protect the crops (among them, the well-known philactery at Noto, in Greek, placed to keep demons away from the «vinyard of the church of Zosimos»; the amulet in Hebrew found at Cómiso at the beginning of the Ippari valley, or the copper leaf recently discovered in the Mazzarino countryside containing an obscure magic text in Greek, in its turn influenced by Jewish and «Angelian» formularies; the clay amulet containing an «Angelian» formulary, found in the upper Ánapo valley, perhaps in the area of the ancient *massa Pyramitana*, a large estate in Akrai countryside, mentioned in a late-fifth century document from Ravenna). In Sicily, invocations addressed to the angels, especially to Michael and Gabriel, really abound in manifold contexts, orthodox and otherwise: in the magic formularies of the fifth and sixth centuries, as we have seen; but also on burial monuments (for example, in the cemetery area of Aguglia on the plateau between Palazzolo Acreide and Noto); on gold objects and personal

ornaments; later —and again with particular evidence— they appear in medieval prayers and exorcisms. The heretical manifestations of this so special devotion to the angels aroused the concern of Pope Gregory: in 593 he was compelled to take unusual measures against groups of «Angelians» who still prospered in the countryside of the Tindari diocese, together with small communities of pagans. These «Angelians» belonged to a sect of eastern origin which Epiphanius of Salamina had already believed to be extinct in the East at the end of the fourth century, but which Pope Gelasius had also had to deal with in 496 for the West. On the other hand, even orthodox religion itself gave great importance to angelic interventions in the miraculous episodes of the Sicilian *Passiones* and of the *Lives* of the holy monks of the island, from the Roman age to the Byzantine. Very ancient dedications of churches to the archangel Michael bear witness to this, as, for example, the dedication of the small basilica of Ctisma, not far from the renowned Hagyrion monastery: in the tenth century this was completely ruined and buried in the forest, so that Saba of Collesano, with his father Stephen and few other monks, was sent to rebuild it and reclaim the land, as his *Life* tells us.

Among all the religious diversities which characterized Sicily in these centuries, only the Jews seem in fact to persist unaltered in an urban context as well as in a rural one, especially in the eastern sector. In the country, Pope Gregory strove to carry out the task of persuading at least the Jewish *coloni* depending on the Roman Church to be baptized. In the town life one sees how Jewish magic, superstition and medicine are a constant structural element in the biographies of the bishops and, later, of the holy monks of Sicily (eighth-tenth centuries), all indeed set in towns.

Thus, the religious *panorama* is quite well defined. Orthodox Christianity is uniformly rooted in all the urban areas with no extraneous elements (except for the presence of a few Jewish families). In the country, on the other hand, one find scattered fragments of dissidence of more or less ancient matrix relegated to those areas less easily reached by the influence of urban life. Evidently, in Sicily, the monolithic and all-embracing nature of the great imperial, senatorial, and ecclesiastic estates directly controlled from Rome was so strong as not to leave any opportunity for other alternatives. The patrimonial structure of the *massae* incorporated into itself both rural communities and the scattered settlements (the latter, in this period, were increasing in the island, as the safety of life in the country was never disturbed until the first Saracen raid in 652, and as the stability of the population did not suffer from the wars, famines, and epidemics which, on the contrary, raged elsewhere). So that Sicily did not undergo a development of the village into a larger unit of settlement (almost a link between the *kóme* and the *pólis*) on the lines of the eastern *metrokomía*, where the ethnic unity and the social cohesion of the village were particularly favourable to the total following of certain spiritual movements, whether they were pagan, Christian, or heretical (as a recent, penetrating contribution by Gilbert Dagron has shown).

For the same reason, most of the markets outside the urban context in Sicily must have been included in the great estates and must have served their needs, at times coinciding with the *stationes* of the public road network. This, in turn, was forming in the late imperial age again in conjunction with the exigencies of the great estates (this can be observed in Piazza Armerina through the epigraphical evidence, for example). I believe this explains another noteworthy absence in the religious life of Sicily at that time: there are no great fairs outside the cities. Elsewhere they took place during the celebrations of the days of Saints locally venerated, and were the occasion for meetings of the type sociologists would now call «liminal» between people of different social extraction and origin, a sort of ceremonial which was sacred and profane at the same time, in which fraternization among the pilgrims was accompanied by the exchange of regional manufactured products. Without going as far as the most famous fairs of Merovingian Gaul, one need only recall the Lucan *conventus* near what is now San Giovanni al Fonte, a place once sacred to Leucothea, which later became a worship centre in honour of the Carthaginian bishop Cyprian, as we learn from Cassiodorus.

Sicilian devotional practice in these centuries also lacks those great pilgrimages towards local centres of worship constituted around famous holy relics, such as the *scrinia* of Saint Agatha or of Saint Lucia: one may contrast this with the attraction exercised by the many sanctuaries of this period in Gaul, in Africa and in Spain, veritable workshops of miracles and exorcisms, theaters where the power of the holy remains manifested itself daily. In Sicily, devotion might be intense, but it was local; a constantly «liminoid» phenomenon (that is optional and individual) rather than «liminal» (that is, ritualized and choral). It, therefore, did not have that dimension which elsewhere, from late antiquity onwards, made it a very particular sort of mass therapy through space. Of course, there were people who, from neighbouring centres or from the shores beyond the Straits of Messina, came to the tomb of Saint Agatha in Catania. Lucia herself came from Syracuse to the shrine in Catania at the beginning of the fourth century (but the spectacular anti-Arian miracles performed by the relics of Saint Agatha are described by Gregory the Great only in relation to the church dedicated to her in the Suburra in Rome). There were people who buried their dearest relatives near the tombs of the martyrs, as if to exorcise death through the nearness to these great Innocent Beings, who had survived unspeakable torments and were for ever present with their miraculous bodies among the living: this was done for instance by the parents of the girl Iulia Florentina, who died at the age of eighteen months at Hybla some time between 314 and 320 raoughly; she was buried at Catania *pro foribus martyrorum*, as the funerary inscription says. There were those who visited the sepulchre of Saint Pancratius at Taormina, such as Elia from Enna in the tenth century, who set off from the Salinae in Calabria. But Sicily was above all a point of departure or of transit for pilgrims bound for Palestine or for Rome. In the fourth and fifth centuries aristocrats and ladies of senatorial rank who had vowed ascetism paused in

their villas on the island before continuing to the Holy Land. And an equal and opposite flow reached Rome and the tombs of the apostles from the East and from Africa, following more or less the same routes which were to be taken several centuries later by the Sicilian and Italo-Greek monks bound for Jerusalem and (it was even a compulsory stopping-off point) for Rome.

Indeed, as recent studies have shown (Victor Turner, Peter Brown), the urban and suburban centres of pilgrimage in the high middle ages of the West were skilfully directed by the local urban nobility (lay and ecclesiastical), «impresarios» of the holy, as Peter Brown puts it, and firmly rooted in the cathedrals and large centres which made up the basis of their power. But in the case of Sicily, its particular historical vicissitudes from the Roman age onward ensured that there was no really important city life, and so it had no urban classes endowed with a decisive power. Here lies, in my opinion, the explanation for another absence which emerges in the devotional life of Sicily in contrast with other areas, such as Italy, Spain, and Merovingian Gaul, for example: the extremely scanty evidence of the transfer of relics. There is some slight reference to it but almost entirely in relation to martyrs from Rome and in the period when the Church was still persecuted. But for Sicily there is no record of those translations and exchanges of holy relics with solemn ceremonies, which elsewhere, from the fifth century onwards, were assuming the apparatus and function which had formerly been typical of the imperial *adventus*. They, too, in fact were domain of the urban upper classes, a reflection of their network of friendships and interrelations, the manifestation of an intricate system of patronage which united the religious and the lay *élites*, often at an international level (recent studies by E. D. Hunt, K. G. Holum and G. Vikan have cast light on these aspects). It is worth noting that the most frequent evidence of the traslation of relics of Sicilian Saints is to be found outside the island, and not due to the local bishops but managed directly from Rome by the Pope himself: Gregory the Great sent relics of Saint Pancratius to the bishops of Milan and of Saintes in Aquitania; he instructed the bishop of Sorrento solemnly to place the *sanctuaria* (that is, the reliquaries) of Saint Agatha in the monastery of Saint Stephen on Capri. Perhaps a «holy commerce» of this kind did exist on the island; but the oblivion which has submerged it only underlines its unimportance for the observers themselves of those times; or else, the unimportance of the observers who are now forgotten, which amounts to the same thing.

The ecclesiastical structure in Sicily was articulated by degrees into numerous episcopal seats, suffragan of the Roman archdiocese and obviously situated in the urban centres of major importance. Between the beginning of the fourth century and the beginning of the sixth, the following seats certainly existed: Syracuse, Lilybaeum, Tauromenium, Palermo, Lipari, Messina, Tindari, and Catania. These were joined some decades later by Agrigento, Triocala, Carini and Malta, and in the seventh century by Leontini, Termini Imerese and Milazzo. Until the seventh century, the priests were mainly of Latin origin, as the names found in inscriptions, and, later, the letters of

Gregory the Great seem to confirm. At the Council of Calcedonia in 451, the bishop of Lilybaeum, Pascasinus, had even to make use of a Greek interpreter.

Even if one considers the oldest hagiographic traditions —which have been mentioned above— one has the impression of a Sicilian Christianity of a markedly Roman-provincial character even in the first centuries, whatever may have been the original germinating elements, eastern-Greek, or Latin-African. In addition to the onomastics of the martyrs, the elements forming the substance of the *Passiones* themselves suggest this. And one should not forget that these were the few Sicilian Saints received into the Roman martyrology and whose cult therefore achieved a certain diffusion in Rome, in Italy, in Gaul and even in Constantinople with the approval and encouragement of the papacy itself. It was their *Passiones* which were granted admission to the liturgical texts, which, on the contrary, had to exclude a proliferation of other personages, perhaps of a different nature and character, which were then venerated locally but are now forgotten, though sometimes may survive as if fossilized in the residiues of popular piety. Thus one is faced by the fruits of a selectivity which already existed and was already rigorous in those ancient times, and which, however, is significant in itself; all the more so, if one recalls the use made of these hagiographic texts, which were often recited publicly on the occasion of the *natalicia* of the Saints and thus had great social and political importance at the level of collective psychology.

In this context, it would be worth investigating the deep historical and psychological motivations of a very particular feature: the role and importance of female sanctity in Sicily during this period, a role and importance which were unknown to the misogynous Sicilian hagiography of later centuries clearly Byzantine in character). Agatha, Lucia and her mother, Ninfa, and Agrippina are examples; and it is curious that all these Saints never became the patrons of convents but only of monasteries. Perhaps one should consider this is a consequence of the important role in fact carried out by the *pietas* of women of noble families in the development of early Sicilian Christianity. This was really a characteristic of the senatorial aristocracy in late antiquity: it was present both in the pre-Constantinian phase (which may be called the phase of the «sacred in private hands»: martyrs' bodies rediscovered by pious ladies, stolen and concealed on private properties and there secretly worshipped and monopolized in cemeteries which at first were reserved only for the family), and in the later phase of ecclesiastical structuring, through the donation of lands, the foundation of monasteries, charitable works, as well as economic and political support of various kinds (one may take as an example the role of the Valerii family in Sicily through Melania Junior). But perhaps this predominion of female sanctity in the earliest phase of Sicilian Christianity should also be related to the prevalence of cults in the island which were already devoted to female divinities, in an age-old confluence of native, Greek, Punic, Egyptian and eastern elements. We may recall the special diffusion in Sicily of the cults of Anna, Demetra and Kore, of the Venus-

Astarte Ericina, and of Isis (indeed, it has been suggested that the procession of Saint Agatha in Catania reveals traces of the *navigium Isidis*).

At the time of Melania, of Piniano and of Rufinus of Aquileia (their friend and guest in a villa on the Straits, between 408 and 410), voluntary isolation on their Sicilian estates of a certain Christian aristocracy and their *clientes* —an isolation dedicated to a life of contemplation and prayer, to the study of the Scripture and to the translation of sacred works from Greek— had not yet given birth to real monastic institutions on the island. These were exclusively individual undertakings, simple transpositions in a Christian key of the learned *otia* then also practised by the pagan senatorial nobility. The first concrete evidence of a Sicilian monachism is to be found only towards the end of the fifth century in a letter of Pope Gelasius I, and, a little later, in the *Vita* of the future bishop of Ruspe, Fulgentius, who passed through Sicily during his travel from Rome to Alexandria and visited the monastery of Saint Peter as Baias founded by the bishop of Syracuse, Eulalius. And it is significant that Sicilian monachism in its origins is at once seen to be linked to the decisions and control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in absolute conformity with the western model and in sharp contrast with the primitive monachism of Egypt and Syria, which for a long time held itself to be outside ecclesiastical structures and regarded them with a superior and autonomous attitude: whoever becomes a monk «dies» for all that concernes the authorities of the Church and of the world, Nathaniel declares in the *Historia Lausiaca*.

A whole series of names of monks, of abbots and abesses, mentioned by Pope Gregory with reference to the monastic communities of Sicily —Urbicus, Caesarius, Iohannes, Viator, Domitius, Bonus, Catellus, Domina, Adeodatus, Adeodata, etc.—, reveals an almost total Latin origin for such personages still at the end of the sixth century, as had already been noted for priests and bishops. Furthermore, in contrast with the most typical Greek-eastern monachism between the fourth and fifth centuries, monachism in Sicily was characterized as a predominantly urban phenomenon, both with regard to location (generally in towns and cities or just outside, as indeed had been the case with pagan santuaries since the Grecian era), and to the links of dependence and control which connected it to the diocesan structures and to the direct supervision of the Church of Rome. At the end of the sixth century the monastic foundations mentioned by Gregory the Great in his correspondence as having already existed for some time or as having recently been founded are very numerous. In fact it was Byzantine Sicily, far more than Italy or any other province, which formed the center of Gregory's policy designed to procure a «Latin» monastic mobilization. This was part of a more ample plan, which was deliberately designed to oppose the process of Byzantinization which in these very Sicilian cities began to become evident at that time, attacking the local distribution of power and even threatening, remotely, to undermine the Latin-Roman framework of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (clergy and monks) through a revival of liturgical, devotional, and

ecclesiastical customs of a Greek nature, which had never been completely put aside. Traces remain in the letters of Gelasius I, Pelagius II, and of Gregory himself as well as in the tradition which later flowed into the *Vita* of Gregory of Agrigento.

However uncertain the location of the monasteries and convents mentioned by Gregory the Great in the various urban topographical contexts may appear today, we know for example that those of Saint Hermes, Saint Maximus and Agatha, the *Praetorianum*, Saint Hadrianus, and Saint Theodorus were all to be found in Palermo, in whose surroundings there was also the convent of Saint Martin. Another monastery dedicated to Saint Theodorus was situated in Messina. Those of Saint Lucia and of Saint Peter *ad Baias*, as well as that founded by the pious noblewoman Capitularia, were near Syracuse. Saint Stephen near Agrigento was a convent. The monastery dedicated to the Saints Peter, Lawrence, Hermes, and Pancratius was near Lilybaeum (Marsala). Saint Vitus had been built on the slopes of Etna in the time of Pope Pelagius II (579-580 a.D.). There was another monastery at Lentini, and two in the diocese of Tauromenium (Taormina), of which one —founded a little before the pontificate of Gregory— is thought to be the first in the West dedicated to Saint Christopher, and the second —Saint Andrew *super Mascalas*— may be recognized in the present-day territory of Màscali on the north-eastern slopes of Etna. There are only two cases in Gregory's papers where mention is made of monasteries situated in the heart of the country: that of Saint George in the *massa Maratodis* and one registered in the *fundus Monotheus*.

I have dwelt on this list of Sicilian monasteries active at the beginning of the seventh century for a precise reason: in the range of Saints to whom monasteries were dedicated, it offers an extremely significant devotional landscape. If one analyses the origins and traditions of everyone of these Saints, one may clearly observe the predominion of a sanctity filtered by Rome, although frequently originating from the provinces (Paul, Andrew, Stephen, Martin, Hermes, Theodore, Adrian); when one finds Saints of local derivation (Agatha, Lucia, Vitus, Maximus) it is preferred to «guarantee» them (as it were) by grouping with them in the same dedications Roman apostles and (or) martyrs. This emphasis (which begins in Sicily only in the sixth century) on holy couples (Peter and Paul, Paul and John, Maximus and Agatha, Adrian and Nathalie, Lucia and Geminianus, etc.) or on groups of martyrs gathered together in a single cult in increasingly great numbers (Peter, Lawrence, Hermes, Pancratius in a monastery of Lilybaeum, as we have seen; Vitus, Euplus, and Pancratius in a church of Messina, again in the age of Gregory the Great; the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in a church of Catania dedicated by the bishop Leo, in the eight century) may have a particular significance. The tendency towards multiple aggregations and the fact that the couples are often made up of a male and a female Saint seems to exclude an explanation of the phenomenon solely as a metamorphosis in Christian terms of «dioscurismus», that is, of the pagan worship of coupled divinities, which

undoubtedly had a remarkable diffusion in Sicily (one needs only recall the Palici, the Dioskouroi —widely venerated especially in Syracuse, Agrigento and Tindari— and the mysterious twins invoked in the magic Judaic philactery of Cómiso, still between the fourth and the fifth centuries). It is known that outside Sicily the aggregation of two or more Saints in a unitary cult from the fourth century had served at times to express a search or a desire for harmony in particularly discordant moments or in riotous communities, such as Milan and Rome. Thus it might well be significant that the same tendency becomes noteworthy in Sicily only in that self-same Byzantine period, as if the unifying harmony between Saints of different origins was an emblem of the need for understanding between the local populations and the elements newly immigrated from the Byzantine world, under the hoped-for aegis of Rome, *sedes Apostolorum*.

Thus the Church in these centuries played an extremely effective part in the more general process of Latinization in progress in the island, as well-known studies by A. Ferrua and L. S. Agnello have clearly discerned in the linguistic sphere through an ample epigraphic documentation (which reveals how the use of Greek prevails in Sicily until the fourth/fifth centuries, and then gradually declines between the fifth and the seventh). It is only in the more remote rural areas that, together with a still persisting use of Greek both for toponyms and in funeral epigraphs, one finds Greek-speaking priests, such as Aithales, mentioned in an inscription datable between 394 and 402, who had a church built in the *Ortesianum* estate (a district near Modica, remembered also as the place of origin of the Christian Eutychia, in her burial inscription in Greek at Syracuse).

In any case, the presence of priests in the most cut-of-the-way countryside reveals the consolidation of ecclesiastical institutions well beyond the restricted environment of the town, a consolidation which followed the growing tendency towards scattered settlements. In the catacombs of Akrai, for example, the Latin inscription of the priest Ianuarius recalls the forty years of his ministry in the *fundus Logarianus*. In 592 Gregory the Great was concerned about the monastery of Saint George in the *massa Maratodis*, which was too poor to bear the *onera* imposed by the priest of the estate. In 444 bishop Pascasinus of Lilybaeum mentions a small church in the *vilissima possessio Meltinas* (in the territory of Lilybaeum) in a letter to Pope Leon. The Pope had consulted him about the vexed question of the Easter cycle, and the bishop replied describing a miracle which had occured at the baptismal font there during the pontificate of Zosimus as a confirmation of the rightness of the Alexandrian calculation of Easter (also used in Sicily) and to refute the *error* which had prevailed, on the contrary, in the «western parts». I believe this latter evidence particularly interesting as it provides a concrete example of the prudent mediation of the Sicilian episcopate between the «Latinizing» instructions of the Church in Rome and the deeply-rooted local traditions of Greek origin. It transmits to the summit of the hierarchy, through the usual bureaucratic channels of the papacy, the exigencies of the

general forms of devotion in Sicily, well-set in its customs, while at the same time justifying them by their own miraculous fruits.

Thus the situation of Christianity in Sicily in the first four centuries of its history presents several precise characteristics, and some —equally important— absences. One finds devotion almost entirely attributed to the apostles and to the martyrs (either local or Greek-eastern, but all mediated and approved by patristic or Roman veneration); a mixture of native hagiographic traditions with elements imported from Rome; a predominant influence of the high Roman aristocracy, both in the devotional style (where only the very particular worship of the angels is seen to belong to a different cultural and social matrix) and in ecclesiastical structures, with an exclusivist tendency and a desire for a monopoly which became progressively more rigid and manifest as the first real effects of the Byzantinization of the social fabric begin to be felt.

The particular economic and cultural gravitation of the Christian aristocratic currents of Rome towards the large estates of the island may be correlated with the rather difficult and delayed development in Sicily of the local organization of dioceses, from the beginnings of the fourth century onwards. The dioceses were based on the cities but, at the same time, were conditioned by the weakness of the urban situation, where the *élites* of lay and ecclesiastical government evidently never achieved the independence, the economic strength and the authority sufficient to make the city into a pole of attraction for great pilgrimages, a driving force for interregional religious festivals and for the foundation of prestigious santuaries, as, on the contrary, happened in other regions of Europe in late antiquity.

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