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*with compliments*

ROBERTA RIZZO, *Papa Gregorio Magno e la nobiltà in Sicilia*. (Biblioteca dell'Officina di Studi Medievali, 8.) Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 2008. Paper. Pp. 378.  
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Over two hundred of the surviving letters of Gregory the Great concern Sicily, and this book, based on an exceptionally close reading of them, shows what such a body of evidence can teach us concerning the nobility of that island. The study is informed by a good deal of prosopographical acumen, and due attention is paid to earlier bodies of material useful for comparison, such as the letters of Symmachus. A series of chapters moves through the topics of economic dynamics, political participation, careers in the church, social power, and religious practices, before a final chapter that evaluates relations between Gregory and the nobility of Sicily. Hence, while it is based on a limited body of material, the range of issues with which the book deals gives it a surprisingly wide interest.

We find ourselves in a world of local landowners whose numbers had recently been augmented by senators who had left Rome to live in a part of Italy free of the depredations of the Lombards. In opposition to some scholars, Rizzo brings out well the buoyant situation of such people amid the fortunate conditions of the island, where wealth continued to be raised from the land as had long been done. In some respects their world was changing toward a situation Rizzo sees as typically feudal, in which the status of nobility would be thought of as arising from the possession of land rather than from adherence to the senatorial order or the possession of honorific titles. Yet, as far as we can tell from Gregory's letters, the nobility in Sicily still relied on a work force entirely made up of unfree *manicippia*, unlike the Roman church, whose large estates in the island were worked by *coloni*, who would have paid rent, alongside slaves. This is a sharp dichotomy, beside which I found myself wanting to set the case of a *colonus* known from the first story in Gregory's *Dialogues* who lived on a villa owned by a patrician in Samnium and who was wealthy enough to host a party and possess a *manicippium*. In any case, Rizzo proposes, on the basis of slaves having frequently been stolen, that Sicily was experiencing a shortage of labor at the time. Traditional forms of benefaction persisted on the part of nobles, although their generosity was now frequently directed toward churches. The building projects they undertook are the subject of discussion that may have serious implications for the role of the laity in church affairs; in passing, it is suggested that the family of Cassiodorus founded a monastery at Taormina. Such a favorable environment allowed the senatorial families to play a role in politics that was exceptional in western Europe at that time. Some of their political concerns were ecclesiastical, and we learn of the depressing caliber of Sicilian bishops, many of them uninterested in providing the pastoral care that Gregory held to be central to the job of a bishop. Another problem was that of lawless behavior in the countryside, often perpetrated by the thuggish agents of various churches, to which female landowners, especially widows, may have been particularly vulnerable. One Januaria, who went all the way to Rome to seek Gregory's help, is presumably to be identified with the *religiosa femina* of that name on whose behalf Gregory was active nine months later, and Rizzo makes the interesting suggestion that her troubles led her to retire to an ascetic life. The problems caused in a family when one of its members adopted the monastic life are also illuminatingly discussed.

It may, however, be worth remembering that many of Gregory's letters were triggered by things that had gone wrong and that they sometimes reflect his management of unforeseen crises; the quotidian reality may have been less dramatic than such evidence may suggest. The author is more keen than I would be to see Gregory as belonging to the *gens Anicia*; and even if he did, I am not sure that such membership would have been significant. Perhaps Rizzo is a little too prepared to detect the influence of St. Benedict in Sicily and to give credence to later traditions concerning him. But this is a thoroughly professional and thought-provoking study, which time and time again puts together a large number of discrete pieces of evidence to form a pattern that makes one see things in a new way.

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