

Inventing Christian Rome: Ritual under Gregory I

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In the early months of 590 CE, following devastating floods, a plague swept through Rome, killing first, according to Gregory of Tours, pope Pelagius. Even though not yet consecrated as bishop, Gregory I quickly took charge of this apocalyptic-seeming situation by instituting a dramatic penitential procession which would mollify the anger of God. In a homily, Gregory asked his audience to repent before it was too late. In this same sermon, directions were given for a seven-fold litany, *letania septiformis*, to be performed on the following Wednesday at dawn, after three days of prayer.

The clergy, along with the presbyters of the sixth region gathered at *SS. Cosmas et Damianus*; the abbots with their monks and the presbyters of the fourth region met at *SS. Gervasius et Protasius*; the abbesses with their congregations and the first-region presbyters collected at *SS. Marcellinus et Petrus*; children with the presbyters of the second region assembled at *SS. Iohannes et Paulus*; the lay-men with the seventh-region presbyters came together as *S. Stephanus*; the widows and the presbyters of the fifth region congregated at *S. Euphemia*; finally, the married women and the presbyters of the third region convened at *S. Clemens*. From these seven different starting points, each of the seven corteges wound its way through the city to *S. Maria Maior*. This procession, which would be repeated in a slightly modified form in 603, sought to represent Rome in its entirety even as it claimed Rome.

In contrast to two recent and important treatments of the 'Invention of Christian Rome,' which argue for the creation of Christian Rome building upon and making use of the classical past, this procession radically re-imagines a Christian Rome and its Christian(ized) social structure, one wholly, or at least largely, divorced from its ancient roots. The distribution of the procession-participants in this way not only reflected how Gregory I conceptualized Roman society, but also helped make this conceptualization real and effective. In order to participate, one had to accept, however provisionally, the identity given by the organization of the processions. The *letaniae* welded these social identities into specific forms of Christian subjectivity, forging a distinctly Christian collectivity. In short, the *letania septiformis* fashioned a Christian ecclesiastical image of late antique social structure, even as it compelled its participants to accept this image and their place in it.