English Visitors to Rome in the Middle Ages

From the seventh century onwards Rome attracted from Britain faithful pilgrims and churchmen with business to transact

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With the decline and fall of the Roman Empire the city of Rome dwindled and decayed. It had owed its wealth and prosperity to political power, and when that power was lost life ebbed away from it. But decayed though it was, it was not dead. It took on a new role as a religious centre. Spiritual power succeeded worldly power; the capital of the Empire became the centre of the Western Church. In the Middle Ages embassies and individuals came to Rome as they had done in the days of her secular greatness, but now they came on ecclesiastical business. Moreover, Rome was the place of martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul and of numerous lesser saints, the goal of pilgrims hoping to acquire merit and free themselves from the stains of this world.

After Pope Gregory’s mission had done its work, and the Saxons had adopted Christianity, they were second to no other nation in devotion to the see of Rome and to the holy places of the city. Bishops and monks, kings and commoners, undertook the arduous journey across Europe to Rome. They went to settle disputes, to obtain instruction in the rules and rites of the Church, or, in the case of Archbishops, to receive from the Pope the symbol of their office, the pallium. Above all, they went in order to visit and perform acts of devotion at the spots hallowed by the bodies of the Apostles and martyrs.

The earliest of these visits was that of Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid, the former of whom was to become known as founder of monasteries at Wearmouth and Jarrow and the latter as a controversial bishop much involved in ecclesiastical disputes. They left England together in 653, and for both of them further visits followed later. Benedict went to Rome no fewer than six times. On his first visit his purpose was to see in person the burial places of the Apostles and to worship there, though at the same time he made a study of the rules of the church at the fountain head of authority. His last two visits were connected with the needs of his monasteries; he brought back books, relics, and pictures, and, on one of the two occasions, no less a person than the choirmaster of St
Peter's to teach his monks the Roman method of chanting. Wilfrid's first visit was for purposes of study; then, after his appointment to the see of York, the disputes in which he was involved brought him twice to Rome to put his case before the Pope.

For Wilfrid Rome was the centre of the ecclesiastical world. For others it was a place where one could retire from the world and pursue a life of devotion. Some of the Saxon kings relinquished their thrones to end their lives there. In 688 Caedwalla, King of the West Saxons, abdicated and went to Rome for baptism, dying, as indeed he had hoped to do, soon after the sacrament was administered. His example was followed by his son and successor Ine, and by Conrad of Mercia, who gave up his kingdom in 709 and went to Rome, where 'he remained until his last day in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving at the thresholds of the apostles'.

It was not only clerics and kings who made the journey to Rome. Under the year 720 Bede records that 'many of the English people, nobles and commoners, men and women, rulers and ordinary citizens, were in the habit of visiting Rome inspired by the divine love'. The spirit that inspired them did not exclude more worldly feelings. When pilgrimage was so popular, it is not surprising that some of those who set out failed to live up to their pious professions. Indeed, the conduct of some of them was so scandalous that in 747 Archbishop Boniface wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury suggesting that pilgrimage to Rome should be forbidden to women, because very few remained uncorrupted; there were, he claimed, hardly any towns in Lombardy, France, or Gaul in which there was not an unfaithful wife or a prostitute of English race.

The city now had little of the grandeur and amenity of imperial Rome. The population had declined, and much of the area within the old city walls was given over to grass and ruins. The low lying regions of the town were unhealthy, and to the hazards of the journey might be added those of disease and pestilence when the pilgrim had reached his goal. Yet even in its decadence Rome remained impressive, with its spectacular relics of antiquity like the Colosseum, and its great basilicas outclassing anything Saxon England had to show. Above all, it provided every incentive to devotion. There were stations to be undertaken, visits, that is, to churches and holy places, with masses and devotional exercises, and there was a brisk trade in relics. There were itineraries, or guidebooks, setting out the cemeteries, shrines, and oratories, and the order in which each could be visited. At first the catacombs, the early Christian burial places along the roads outside the walls, were the main centres of devotion; after the mid-eighth century the devotional round was confined to the churches in the city. One itinerary records some pre-Christian monuments, but does no more than name them. Otherwise the documents of the period show not the slightest interest in the pagan past. The fame of Rome as the holy city sanctified by the blood of the martyrs had completely eclipsed its old fame as the mistress of the world, the centre of a great empire.

After the Norman conquest to the end of the Middle Ages journeys were constantly being made from England to Rome by churchmen with business to transact or suits to plead at the Papal court. Three such visits will serve as examples. In 1144 Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester and brother of King Stephen, was in Rome attempting, without success, to obtain metropolitan status and independence from Canterbury for his see. Later in the century Giraldus Cambrensis went on a similar mission; he was in Rome three times between 1199 and 1203 in the hope of obtaining recognition of the metropolitan status of St David's and confirmation of his appointment to the see. The Pope was sympathetic to Giraldus, but nothing resulted from the lengthy hearings of his case, and in the end he had to give up the struggle. The third example illustrates the hazards that attended a visit to Rome. There was a bitter dispute between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the monks of his cathedral church. The monks appealed to Rome and in 1186 sent a delegation headed by their prior to put their case. The matter was delayed by the death of the Pope, who had favoured the monks' cause,
by the election of a successor who was less favourably inclined, and by his death shortly afterwards. The next Pope supported the monks, but now 'a horrible pestilence resulting from the excessive heat of summer and the various affections of the air, which appeared after St John Baptist's day, caused such devastation in Rome to the inhabitants and particularly to foreigners, that several thousands of clergy and people breathed their last'. The cause of Canterbury, says the monk who records these events, was now left to God only; of so many monks and friends to their cause only one monk survived and he was a sick man.

Churchmen on missions to the Papal court did not normally record their impressions of the city, and perhaps one would not expect them to have done so. On the other hand proceedings at Rome were long drawn out, and there must have been plenty of time for sightseeing; it would be surprising if Giraldis Cambrensis, who had shown so keen an interest in the Roman remains at Caerleon while on his tour of Wales, was blind to the more impressive ruins at Rome. Henry of Blois certainly had an interest in classical antiquity, for it is recorded that while in Rome he purchased some ancient statues and had them sent to Winchester. He is thus the first example, and an isolated one, of a type we associate with the eighteenth century rather than the Middle Ages, the English collector of classical works of art in Rome.

About the time that Henry of Blois was in Rome, in the mid-twelfth century, a new guide to the city was compiled, *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, which remained the standard guide until the fifteenth century. Though uncritical and far from well informed it shows an interest in pre-Christian antiquities absent from the earlier itineraries. Guided by this handbook the visitor would wonder at 'the marvels of Rome', but he would see its past through a glass darkly. One Englishman, however, was not content with the *Mirabilia* and saw more clearly than most of his contemporaries. There is an interesting account of Rome, probably dating from
He is particularly interested in statues, and has an eye for their artistic qualities. Most remarkable are his reactions to a statue of Venus, apparently to be identified with one now in the Capitoline Museum. He has no inhibitions about admitting the fascination it had for him. ‘This statue, of Parian marble, is finished with such marvellous and inexplicable skill that it seems more a living creature than a statue. She seems to be blushing at her nakedness, and her face is suffused with reddish colour. . . . Because of its marvellous beauty and a kind of magic charm which it had I was forced to revisit it three times, though it was two miles from my inn.’ The admiration that Gregory expresses for this antique nude is more what one would expect to find in the sixteenth century than at the time of his visit.

Gregory was exceptional. The common attitude, one of credulous acceptance of traditional legends, is illustrated by an anonymous account of a visit by an Englishman in 1344. He describes what was called the Palace of Nero, which he says has a cellar ‘Supported by thirty marble columns, into which ran wine from Naples, five days away, by a road in the fashion of an aqueduct, piercing mountains, which Virgil built with art on columns supporting arches, on the top of which ran wine as in a trough and, between mountains, in valleys corresponding to the intervals’. More valuable than the nonsense he got from the guides are his personal impressions of St Peter’s as it then was:

‘Then we advanced and entered a certain court before the doors of the church, which are sumptuously constructed, and there sit sellers of jewels; and then lie open the doors of the church, which is the largest of all churches in the world: with five roofs and four rows of columns, 100 feet wide, and as long as a crossbow will shoot, as I figure, and with many chapels on the side. If one loses his companion in the church, he may seek for a whole day because of its size and because of the multitudes who run from place to place venerating shrines with kisses and prayers, since there is no altar at which indulgence is not granted.’

In Saxon times the pilgrims from England had their own quarters in Rome, known as
Schola Saxonum. This was not a school in the modern sense; nor was it, in its initial stages, a hospice; it was rather a settlement or colony, in the vicinity of St Peter's, between the church and the Tiber. Then in the mid-nineth century the Pope built the church of St Mary, known as Sancta Maria Schola Saxonum, and the Saxon settlement developed into an organised community, based on this church, attached to which was a hospice. Eventually this institution fell into decay, and by about 1200 it had come to an end. Its decline after the Norman conquest suggests that pilgrimage to Rome had lost something of its old popularity, and this certainly seems to have been the case for a time. Evidence for pilgrim visits after the Saxon period is scanty before the fourteenth century, though an incidental reference in Giraldus to the numerous pilgrims from Wales, who were in Rome in 1201 when he was there, shows that too much should not be made of the argument from silence. Mass pilgrimages date from the institution of the first Holy Year of Jubilee in 1300, which was followed by others at various intervals until 1450, after which they have recurred every twenty-five years to the present day. Encouraged by the prospect of earning the indulgences proclaimed by the Pope on these occasions, men and women flocked to Rome, from England as from other countries.

After the closing of the old Schola Saxonum, the English had no hospice in Rome for about a century and a half. Probably the lack of such a centre was particularly felt in the Jubilee year of 1350, for it was not long after then that some English laymen resident in Rome acquired some property in the Via Monserrato, and in 1362 this was formally constituted as a hospice for their countrymen, dedicated to the Holy Trinity and St Thomas of Canterbury. It was supported by rents from property in Rome, by donations from the wealthier visitors, and by subscriptions collected in England. Administration was in the hands of a Warden and two Chamberlains, elected annually, and there was a chapel served by eight chaplains. The rule was that apart from the well-to-do, who could claim only bread and wine for three days, visitors were given board and lodging for eight days free of charge. Considerable use was made of these facilities. In the five years from May 1479 over a thousand persons were admitted, and in another period for which records survive, November 1504 to May 1507, the number was 489. Most of these would be pilgrims, but there were other guests, such as the child of twelve

\[\text{Pope Boniface IV dedicates the Pantheon to the Virgin, from a manuscript of 1250}\]
admitted in a state of collapse in January 1505 and allowed to stay until May, or the sailor wounded by thieves and brought in half dead in March of the same year, who remained until he was restored to health. The Welsh were accommodated as well as the English; in April 1506 there were twelve Welshmen from the diocese of Llandaff, and in addition one who is specially mentioned as unable to speak English and consequently attended by an interpreter at the expense of the hospice.

One guest who must have proved rather an embarrassment was Margery Kempe of King’s Lynn, who was admitted on her arrival in Rome in 1414. Unlike many pilgrims, whose devotions one may suspect of having been mechanical and perfunctory, she was distinguished by her extravagant piety. At the hospice she was ‘houseled every Sunday with great weeping, boisterous sobbing and loud crying’; but owing, she claimed, to the slaughters of an English priest she was turned out. She made herself conspicuous in Rome by her loud lamentations over her sins, and by the revelations she received direct from God in visions. The feelings she aroused were mixed. Some, when they heard her cries, thought she was possessed by an evil spirit or afflicted by some sickness; but the general reaction, at least according to her own account, was one of admiration and respect. She was eventually re-admitted to the hospice; but one suspects that the management felt some relief when she left for Jerusalem.

Two guide-books for pilgrims by Englishmen survive from the fifteenth century, one in English by John Capgrave, prior of King’s Lynn, who was in Rome probably in 1450, and one in Latin by William Brewyn, a priest of Canter-
bury, who was there in 1469. Both rely on the Mirabilia for their accounts of the antiquities of Rome; both are primarily interested in the churches and the rewards of piety. Both describe the stations that took place in Lent and Holy Week, when a different church was visited each day; Brewyn gives full particulars of the indulgences to be earned and a detailed account of the relics preserved in the various churches. Neither shows the slightest trace of humanism or of a critical spirit.

By the time they wrote, the revival of learning, whose main centres had been elsewhere, in Padua, Verona, Florence, was beginning to influence Rome. With this ending of the Great Schism and the accession of Pope Eugenius IV in 1431 the city began to recover from its sad state of degradation and to participate in the Renaissance. The admission to the English hospice in 1489 of two well known humanists, Thomas Linacre and William Lily, reminds us that there was by then another Rome than that of pilgrimages, relics and indulgences. Linacre spent several years in Italy studying at Rome and other centres. Lilly was a pilgrim, but of a new type. Returning from Jerusalem, he stopped at Rhodes to learn Greek; and at Rome, where he spent some years, he studied under the leading Roman humanist of the period, Pomponius Laetus, a scholar and teacher with an enthusiasm for classical antiquity. Rome remained an ecclesiastical centre; but it became something more. It became the resort of scholars and antiquaries, of artists, connoisseurs and men of taste, who came not to earn indulgences by acts of devotion but to admire and learn from the achievements of the ancient world.