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THE TRANSFORMATION OF POPE VIGILIUS

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Vigilius, opponent and successor of Pope St. Silverius, had a stormy pontificate in Rome and Constantinople in the mid-6th century, during which time the Monophysite heresy (which held that Christ had only one nature, the Divine) was doing violence to the orthodox Faith. Vigilius came into office as a virtual puppet of the Roman Empress, Theodora, but, for all his weakness, he is a special sort of proof of the Divine protection of both Church and papacy. For despite deals he made before becoming Pope, he would not bend to Monophysitism once elected, and he suffered greatly as a result. The study below brings together the pertinent data to unfold a tale which historians have missed for centuries, and which makes an important contribution to ecclesiological apologetics.



VERYWHERE WEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE, THE EARLY SIXTH CENTURY IN Europe was the time of the barbarian. By the year 527 the kings of the Ostrogoths in Italy and the Visigoths in Spain were degenerate boys incapable of ruling; the kings of the Franks were murderers of their own kin, even little children; the kings of the Vandals of Africa were weaklings enervated by luxury obtained through a century of robbery; the rulers of the Britons were the men of blood and iron excoriated by Gildas the monk as the worst enemies of their own people.¹ There remained the

Emperor, who still called himself Emperor of Rome, though he and his predecessors had exercised no authority in the Eternal City for more than half a century. He was a Christian and orthodox. When he donned the purple the eyes of all civilized men in Christendom were fixed on him, their only temporal hope. His name was Justinian.

Justinian was well educated, highly intelligent, reflective, complex yet withal, of tremendous capacity for sustained hard practical work, combining two talents rarely found associated: both an excellent administrator and a very competent lay theologian. He was both devious and autocratic a ruler with an instinct for survival. One could rarely feel sure what he was thinking. What he lacked in physical courage-and it was much-he made up in relentless determination and perseverance.² Such a man, in the highest temporal office in Christendom, could not fail to have an immense personal impact on history. His times are almost invariably termed "the age of Justinian."

What is more, Justinian had a wife who is one of history's most remarkable-and mysterious-women. She placed her own mark on the world as no woman of the world-excepting, thereby, the saints-had done since Cleopatra, whom she resembled in more ways than one. The daughter of a bear-



Pope Vigilius

keeper, she was brought up to be a prostitute, a trade she plied for some years. Then she underwent what seemed to be a conversion, wrought in her by Monophysite heretics (Christians who did not believe that Christ was truly human, declaring that he had only a divine nature). She met Justinian. The reserved, erudite, hard-working ruler fell passionately in love with her. He insisted on marrying her, changing the laws forbidding a man such as he to marry so far below his station. Theodora was solemn, intense, imperious, fearless. Her most characteristic words, recorded by the great historian Procopius, were those by which she induced Justinian to save his throne (and hers) during the Nika riots in Constantinople in 532, when thousands were demanding his overthrow: "Reflect whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you will not prefer death to safety. I agree with an old saying that 'Empire is a fair winding-sheet.'"³

Everything in Justinian's and Theodora's natures—so different yet often so complementary—aroused in them a cold intense hatred of the barbarism engulfing the Western world, along with a determination to reestablish to the full the great empire which the barbarians had sundered and ravaged. This restoration became the supreme purpose of Justinian's life.⁴ His great general Belisarius first reconquered Africa from the Vandals, then landed in Sicily, where he was joyously received by citizens recalling and contrasting the glories of the Roman empire with the anarchy of the Ostrogothic barbarians after the death of their great king Theodoric in 526.⁵

Meanwhile the Church and the Pope in Rome, as always in the world but not of it, were beset on every side by dangers such as that Church has rarely experienced in all the two thousand years of its history. In the heart of the age of Justinian, for no less than twenty-four years—531-555—one man stands at center stage of a drama that ranged from Heaven to Earth: Vigilius.

VIGILIUS: BACKGROUND

Probably ordained deacon when quite young, he came from a family prominent in Roman government service, his father having been praetorian prefect and his brother prefect of the city of Rome. He and his family had influence both at the Gothic court and with the old Roman senatorial aristocracy. Vigilius was intensely ambitious, eager for office and for gold. He was tall and distinguished in appearance, but as the years passed he grew fat.⁶ From all we hear and know and can presume

and imagine of him, he resembled no type familiar in our experience quite so much as the successful lobbyist and influence peddler, caricatured with paunch and cigar, who knows every man's weaknesses and uses that knowledge to get his way, who would deal with any man, however evil or untrustworthy, for a favor for himself or for his client.

This was the man who, Pope for seventeen years and prisoner for ten of them, saved the Church of Christ in his time.

The politicizing of Papal elections, which had begun with the long contest over the choice of Pope Symmachus (498-502), had by this time reached such proportions as seriously to endanger the Papacy. Many of the devices of modern machine politics were beginning to be used. Votes were bought, sold, and traded; meetings were packed and railroaded.⁷ Pope Felix III had seen these tactics used at his own election in 526. He knew that the disordered conditions that had rapidly developed in Rome after Theodoric's death that year, and the continued existence and growth of the division between pro-Gothic and pro-Constantinople factions in Rome, would assuredly produce much more and worse when he died, unless some fundamental change in Papal electoral procedure was made. Therefore Felix III decided, in a sharp break from all Papal tradition and practice and in contradiction to canon law for other bishops, to name his successor while he still lived and reigned.⁸

Pope Felix III's chosen successor was Boniface, a Roman of German ancestry. When Felix died in 530, his body was hardly cold before the controversy he had feared and sought to avoid by the procedure of appointing his successor broke out all the more fiercely. The priests of Rome occupied the Lateran basilica. Sixty out of the sixty-seven of them proceeded to an election in defiance of Felix's order. They elected Dioscorus, an Alexandrian Greek refugee from Monophysite persecution, who was probably the ablest cleric in the Church at that time, much superior by any human standard to the obscure descendant of barbarians whom Pope Felix had selected. The few Roman clergy who remained loyal to his memory met in the nearby Basilica Julia to consecrate Boniface II that same day.⁹

What might well have been one of the most damaging schisms in Papal history was averted by the sudden death of Antipope Dioscorus in October, less than

a month after his pretended election. Boniface II was then recognized by all. Late in December he held a synod at Rome which anathematized Dioscorus' memory and required the sixty priests who had voted for him to acknowledge their fault and pledge never to repeat it. The next year, at another synod in Rome, Boniface II proclaimed the continuation of the appointment method of designating a successor to the incumbent Pope and announced his choice for his own successor. It was Vigilius.¹⁰

The meager records of the time give no hint of the reasons for this choice. but in light of Vigilius' later record, we may well presume that personal doubts about him played at least as large a part as canonical and procedural scruples in the sudden surge of opposition to the ideal of an incumbent Pope appointing his successor which now broke about Boniface II. Be that as it may, within a few months Boniface felt compelled to hold a third synod on the succession issue, at which he nullified all the proceedings of the second-dramatized by actually burning its records-and restored the old electoral system. Vigilius, to what must have been his bitter shame, had to give way.¹¹

The next year (532) Pope Boniface II died. All the evils which he and Felix III had feared under the old electoral system came to pass in the campaigning for his successor. The bribery of electors was on so large a scale and so openly scandalous that the moribund old Senate of Rome arose from its historical deathbed to issue its very last known decree, graven in marble in the court of St. Peter's, declaring contracts for votes in a Papal election in exchange for money to be sacrilegious. The beneficiary of this badly tainted election-though it seems he was a compromise candidate not personally involved in the worst of the scandals-was the parish priest of St. Clement's on the Caelian hill, who had been a loyal supporter of Boniface II. He changed his pagan name of Mercury to John upon his consecration, becoming Pope John II.¹²

If Pope John II's origins and background were as humble as his clerical circumstances would indicate, we may well imagine the frustration and bitter resentment of the well-born, well-connected Vigilius who had once been designated for this succession. We may also presume-as everything in Vigilius' character, record and circumstances at the time suggests, though there is no specific evidence of it-that Vigilius was one of the un-

successful candidates whose operations led to the Senate decree, spending much money in vain to secure the office to which he had earlier been the heir apparent.

Pope John II died in 535, when an invasion of peninsular Italy by the army of Belisarius was imminent. The new Pope, Agapetus, was called by orthodox Christians in Constantinople to come to their aid, since Anthimus of Trapezus, a secret Monophysite and special favorite of Empress Theodora, had been installed as Patriarch of Constantinople and had invited the leader of the whole Monophysite movement, ex-Patriarch Severus of Antioch, to come to the imperial city where he had been received with the greatest honor.

The Papal treasury had been drained by the recent scandalous election expenditures. Agreeing to make the journey to Constantinople, Pope Agapetus had to pawn Rome's church plate just to pay his travel expenses. In his travelling party was Vigilius.¹⁴



In Constantinople, the Pope refused to communicate with Anthimus. "Either you consent to us," Justinian responded, in astonished anger, "or I shall have you carried into exile." Pope Agapetus, bowed by age, stood before the Emperor as so many Popes before and after him have stood, alone, apparently powerless: St. Fabian before Decius, Liberius before Constantius, St. Martin before Constans II, St. Gregory VII before Henry IV, Gregory IX before Frederick II, Pius VII before Napoleon Bonaparte. "I, sinner that I am," said Pope Agapetus in the manner of all his predecessors and successors so placed, "desired to come to the most Christian Emperor Justinian, and I find Diocletian." Then he asked Justinian to summon Anthimus: "Let your bishop confess two natures in Christ." Anthimus would not; and Justinian, who in his worst moments would never abandon orthodoxy when the choice was clearly and inescapably presented to him, admitted that the Pope was right. Pope Agapetus proceeded at once to depose Anthimus for heresy, replacing him as Patriarch of Constantinople by the orthodox Mennas, whom he consecrated himself on March 13. Despite we know not what counter-pressures from Theodora, Justinian consented to the replacement.¹⁵

Vigilius watched it all. The sequel shows that he was not happy with Pope Agapetus' triumph. On April 22, little more than a month after his amazing victory in the heart of his opponent's domain, while he was still in Constantinople and shortly after he had called for a synod there to deal anew with the Monophysite threat, Agapetus died very suddenly. Perhaps it was simply that he was old and exhausted. There may be a more sinister explanation. His death could hardly have come at a more opportune moment for everyone else involved in the drama. We shall never know in this world. His body was put into a leaden coffin and sent back to Rome. Vigilius probably accompanied it.¹⁶

But before Vigilius left Constantinople, Theodora called him to her in secret. She asked him to make her a promise of what he would do if, by her help, he achieved his great ambition of becoming Pope. Under her prodding, he promised to abrogate the Council of Chalcedon and approve the Monophysite faith of Anthimus and Severus. She then promised in her turn to order Belisarius, when he took Rome, to make Vigilius Pope and to give him seven hundred pounds of gold. "With pleasure Vigilius made the promise," we are told, "for love of episcopacy and gold; and after making the promise, he set out for Rome."¹⁷

Early in June 536 Silverius, the son of Pope Ormisdas whose pontificate had ended thirteen years before, was elected Pope. Though there are reports of Gothic pressure on the election, there was no opposition candidate. Silverius was consecrated; then, at the end of the month, Belisarius landed at the toe of Italy and began a triumphal march up the peninsula.¹⁸

THE MAKING OF THE POPE

When Vigilius returned to Rome, he found Silverius installed as Pope. It is not clear whether it was then, or after Belisarius took Rome in December, that a letter from Theodora was conveyed to Silverius peremptorily requesting him to come to Constantinople to undo the work of Pope Agapetus by restoring Anthimus as Patriarch. Whenever the demand came to him, Silverius refused it. "Never will I do such a thing as restore a heretic who has been condemned in his wickedness." Thereupon Theodora wrote to Belisarius: "Find some occasion against Silverius and depose him, or at least send him to us. Herewith you have our most dear deacon Vigilius, who has promised to recall the Patriarch Anthimus."¹⁹

Did Justinian know about all this? Unlikely though it may seem, it appears that he did not. For in that same summer of 536, following the synod which Pope Agapetus had called at Constantinople, which met in May and condemned and anathematized Anthimus, Severus, and other Monophysite leaders, he had issued an edict banning the condemned men from Constantinople and all large cities of the empire and ordering the books of Severus burned.²⁰

General Belisarius was an honorable man, who had no liking for the sordid clerical intrigue in which Theodora and Vigilius were involving him; but his wife Antonina was with him, he doted on her, and she was a close friend of Theodora. Circumstances made the discrediting and removal of Silverius relatively easy, without getting into theological issues. In February 537 the new Gothic king Witigis was marching on Rome with a large army to try to regain it for his people. Since Silverius had had Gothic support for his elevation to the Papacy, an allegation of his treasonable communication and complicity with the advancing foe would seem credible to many. A letter was forged to show such treasonable communication on Silverius' part. On March 2 the Goths laid Rome under siege; on March 21 Silverius, summoned to the Pincian palace by Belisarius and strongly suspecting what was in store for him, after hours spent in prayer, commended his soul to God and went. He found Antonina sitting on a bed, with Belisarius at her feet. Antonina denounced Silverius; his pallium (the symbol of high episcopal office in those times) was stripped off; he was dressed as a monk and hurried to a ship bound for the isolated, rocky coast of Lycia in Asia Minor, the besiegers not yet having blocked the sea access to Rome. (Even so were the French revolutionaries 1,261 years later to rip the very rings from the fingers of Pope Pius VI—all but the Fisherman's Ring, which they could not get off.) In the room of the degradation, Vigilius sat and watched. Eight days later he was proclaimed Pope by a subservient clergy in besieged Rome, under the pressure of Belisarius. Not all agreed with this action.²¹

A serious problem faces anyone who degrades, humiliates, presumes to depose, or exiles a Pope. Constantius encountered it with Liberius, Constans II with St. Martin, the French revolutionaries with Pius VI, Napoleon with Pius VII. It is this: Where do you put him? Wherever the persecuted Pope goes, if it is anywhere in public, people flock to ask his blessing. He must be closely imprisoned incommunicado, or almost constantly

constantly moved. Patara in Lycia, where Pope St. Silverius was sent, was a poor straggling town, but it had a bishop and a Christian community. They took the abused Pope into their homes and their hearts. The bishop of Patara, of whom no one in the great world had heard before, whose very name remains unknown to history, rose fearlessly to the challenge. He went directly to Emperor Justinian, and said to him: "In the world there are many kings, but there is none like that Pope who is over the Church of the whole world, but is now expelled from his see."²²

Not only is this clear testimony to the acknowledgment of Papal primacy in the Church in the Greek East in the sixth century (a recognition modern historians often deny); it is explicit evidence—the most explicit we have that Silverius had not resigned the Papacy at this time, but continued to regard himself as the rightful Pope, and Vigilius therefore as an Antipope.²³

In response to the appeal of the bishop of Patara, Justinian ordered that Silverius be sent back to Rome for a formal trial—which most certainly he had not yet had. If found guilty of treasonable communication, he was to be banished from Rome, but not otherwise punished; if innocent, he was to be restored as Pope.²⁴

Meanwhile in Rome, it appears that Vigilius wrote to Anthimus and Severus, and to Theodosius the Monophysite patriarch of Alexandria, assuring them of his agreement with them on matters of faith, as he had promised Theodora he would do. Severus died February 8, 538, and Theodosius was removed from Alexandria at the end of 537, so Vigilius' letters—presuming they are genuine—must have been sent in 537, most likely soon after Vigilius' election as Antipope in March.²⁵ By June 537 the Gothic siege of Rome had tightened, to the point of preventing most communication and transportation in and out of the city. It is most improbable that Justinian's order to send Silverius back to Rome for trial could have been carried out at that time, when not even food shipments were getting into the city, or that there would have been time for Silverius to reach Patara, for the bishop of Patara to reach Justinian, for Justinian to issue his order, and for Silverius to get back to Rome between his removal March 21 and late June. Therefore Silverius probably did not get back to Rome until reinforcements called up by Belisarius reopened the way to the city in November, though he may well have returned to Italy before then, and come in with the relieving force. This supposition is

strengthened by the fact that the *Liber Pontificalis*, the primary source for Papal history during this period, gives Silverius a pontificate of one year, five months, and eleven days. Reckoning from his election June 8, 536, this brings us to November 19, 537. According to both our sources for these events, Silverius was delivered by Belisarius to Vigilius and sent off by him to the island of Palmaria in the Tyrrhenian Sea.²⁶ He never was tried. The decision to deal with him in this way was one that had to be effected quickly if at all, since it evaded a direct command of the Emperor, and could only succeed if Silverius were put out of sight before anyone else had a chance to intervene in his behalf. The most probable sequence of events and chronology is therefore as follows (all dates 537):²⁷

- March 2 - Goths begin siege of Rome
- March 21 - Pope Silverius arrested and sent to Patara in Lycia
- March 29 - Vigilius proclaimed (Anti) Pope
- April - Pope Vigilius writes to Anthimus, Theodosius, and Severus affirming their (heretical) faith
- May or June - Bishop of Patara protests to Emperor Justinian on Silverius' behalf
- June - Goths tighten siege of Rome, cut communications
- Summer - Justinian orders Silverius to return to Rome for trial
- November - relief of Rome, communication reopened, Silverius returns
- November 19 - Vigilius sends Silverius to Palmaria

On June 20, 538 Pope Silverius, dead of starvation, was buried on the island of Palmaria, where his mortal remains still lie.²⁸ It is his feast day, as a saint and martyr of the universal church. Few saints and martyrs have more richly deserved such honor. Alone, abandoned, forgotten, on an island twenty miles from the coast of Italy, so small as to be a mere dot on the map, he was done to death by the man who would become, after him, the head of the Church of Christ on earth, under the authority of the Christian emperor, who could not be troubled to investigate his fate. Slow starvation is a cruel death, but that Silverius prayed, toward the end without ceasing, for Vigilius we may be morally certain. The impact of those prayers on the future of Vigilius, of the Church and of Christendom, was soon to be felt.

VIGILIUS TRANSFORMED

There is no record or suggestion that Silverius ever resigned the Papacy, except the statement in the *Liber Pontificalis* that his pontificate ended in November 537. Under the circumstances a resignation then seems improbable, for at that time rescue must still have seemed possible; it had come once before. Probably the date simply reflects the memory or record of Silverius' final departure from Rome. As for Vigilius, he could not be Pope until Silverius resigned or died; the Church has only one Pope at a time. But either in November 537 (if Silverius resigned then) or in June 538 when he died) the See of Peter became vacant-and who but Vigilius could fill it? The example of Silverius stood before the world: all men knew, at least in Rome, who had compassed his death (Vigilius was often to be reproached for it in later years).²⁹ Any new Papal election advancing anyone other than Vigilius would mark the man elected for death. There was no choice and no escape. The clergy of Rome, the faithful of the Church, must accept as Pope this man who had martyred his predecessor, who had promised to embrace heresy to gain the Papacy-and collected seven hundred pounds of gold in the bargain. Even if few then knew this last, something of the kind must have been suspected. In all the history of the See of Peter there is no darker moment than this, the Year of Our Lord 538, with Rome in the hands of Theodora's minions while she waited in Constantinople for the fulfillment of the remainder of the promise of "our most dear deacon Vigilius."

She waited. And she waited. Silverius lay in his forgotten grave. There were whispers against Vigilius, but no voice raised openly against recognizing him as Pope. Whether there was the formality of another Papal election we do not know. The great Catholic historian Baronius thought there was; in any case Vigilius was accepted, pope by general consent if nothing else. (There are parallel cases in the very difficult tenth and eleventh century Papal successions.) He was the Vicar of Christ now, no longer the Antipope-one of only four men in

the history of the Church who have gone from Antipope to true Pope. Finally Theodora, growing impatient, got in touch with him. What about his promise? When was he going to restore Anthimus?

Vigilius had to reply. The hour of decision was upon him. The Papacy had been captured by its enemies, sold to the heretics. It has been said of him that he could not have taken the Western Church with him into Monophysitism.³⁰ Would St. Athanasius have thought that future Patriarchs of Alexandria could take his heroic Christian people with them into heresy, against the Holy See? But they did. Would St. Ignatius of Antioch have thought that future Patriarchs of Antioch could take his heroic Christian people with them into heresy, against the Holy See? But they did.

The Holy Spirit hovered close, on wings of fire. Memories of his two predecessors, whom he had known so well, crowded upon Pope Vigilius.³¹ Agapetus before Justinian, saying, "I, sinner that I am, desired to see the most Christian Emperor Justinian, and I find Diocletian," with Vigilius watching; Silverius before Belisarius and Antonina, with the pallium being ripped from his shoulders, and Vigilius watching. He was responsible for the murder of Silverius. He may have been the murderer of Agapetus. Did he ask then for martyrdom, knowing how many sins are washed away when a man sheds his blood for Christ?

Vigilius took pen in hand, and wrote:

Far be this from me, Lady Augusta; formerly I spoke wrongly and foolishly, but now I assuredly refuse to restore a man who is a heretic and under anathema. Though unworthy, I am vicar of Blessed Peter the Apostle, as were my predecessors, the most holy Agapetus and Silverius, who condemned him.³²

The Papacy cannot be captured by the enemies of the faith.



NOTES

1For Britain during this period, see John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (New York, 1973); for France, see O. M. Dalton, *The History of the Franks by Gregory of Tours*, Volume 1: "Introduction" (Oxford, 1927), and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (New York, 1962); for the Ostrogoths, *Thomas Hodgkin, Italy and Her Invaders*, 2d ed., Vols. III and IV (Oxford, 1895-96), though Hodgkin's vivid history is excessively laudatory of the Ostrogoths; for the Visigoths, see E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford, 1969) and H. V. Livermore, *the Origins of Spain and Portugal* (London, 1971); for the Vandals, see Christian Courtois, *Les Vandales et L'Afrique* (Algiers, 1955).

2J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (New York, 1958), II, 23-27; John Chapman, "The Age of Justinian," *Studies on the Early Papacy* (New York, 1928), pp. 216-218.

3Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 27-35, 39-48.

4He formally announced this policy in 536, after his reconquest of Africa and Sicily: "We have good hopes that God will grant us to restore our authority over the remaining countries which the ancient Romans possessed to the limits of both oceans and lost by subsequent neglect" (Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 26).

5Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 159-171.

6Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, IV, 595-171.

7Jeffrey Richards, *The Popes and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages, 476- 752* (Boston, 1979), pp. 119-123; Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, III, 534-535; Erich Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums* (Tubingen, 1933), II, 193-196.

8Hartmann Grisar, *History of Rome and the Popes in the Middle Ages* (London, 1911-12), II, 270-271; Louis Duchesne, *L'Eglise au We siecle Paris*, 1925), pp. 142-145. This act of Pope Felix III is denounced as "uncanonical" and a usurpation of power in almost all histories which refer to it. But the Pope as Vicar of Christ, successor of Peter, and head of the whole Church on earth, makes Church law and can change it at will. There is no permanent constitution of the church, unalterable or only rarely amendable-though there are certain features, such as the sacraments and the existence of episcopacy, which are part of the very nature of the church as established by Christ and therefore can never be abolished. The Pope has unlimited authority to alter or amend any procedures in the Church. In this area he cannot usurp power, because he already has all power, which Christ gave to Peter and to all the apostles, with Peter at their head. Of course this allembreing Papal authority may at times be imprudently used. Felix III's action may have been imprudent, though the circumstances of the time make a better case for it than is generally assumed. But just as a Pope can designate how his successor shall be elected, he can also designate whether he shall be elected, or appointed.

9Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, 123-124; Charles J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1895), IV, 171.

10Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 124-125.

11Ibid.

12Ibid., pp. 125-126; Grisar, *Rome and the Popes*, 274-276.

13Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 172, 377; Ernest Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 386.

14Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 126; Stein, *Histoire du BasEmpire*, II, 386.

15Chapman, "Age of Justinian," *Studies on the Early Papacy*, pp. 223-224; Grisar, *Rome and the Popes*, II, 280; Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* II, 383.

16Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 128, 130. The exact time of Vigilius' return to Rome is not known, but the body of Agapitus is known to have arrived in September; we know that Vigilius did not return until after Pope Silverius' consecration June 8; and we know that Vigilius reached Rome before Belisarius took it in December because after returning there and finding Silverius installed, he went to Naples to meet Belisarius and Naples fell to Belisarius in November, while he was still on his northward march toward Rome (Bury, *Eastern Roman Empire*, II, 177n). It would in any case be reasonable to presume that the senior surviving official of the Papal delegation in Constantinople, which Vigilius as apocrisarius had been, should have returned to Rome with the body of his master; the dovetailing of the known times strengthens the probability of this.

17Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 129-130; Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, IV, 574-575. The fullest account of this arrangement between Theodora and Vigilius is in *Breviarium causae Nestorianorum et Eutyichianorum*, written by Archdeacon Liberatus of Carthage about 560, about 25 years after these events. The relevant passage is

in Chapter 22 of the *Breviarium*: “The Empress calling Vigilus, deacon of Agapetus, importuned him to promise her secretly that if he became Pope, he would abrogate the council [of Chalcedon] and would write Theodosius [the Monophysite patriarch of Alexandria], Anthimius and Severus, and by letter confirm their belief, promising to give the order to Belisarius that he should be ordained Pope, and given the 700 [pounds of gold]. With pleasure Vigilus made the promise, for love of episcopacy and gold, and after making the promise, he set out for Rome.” (*Augusta vero vocans Vigilium Agapeti diaconum, profiteri sibi secreto ab eo flagitavit, ut si papa fierit, toleret synodum, et scriberet Theodosio, Anthimo et Severo, et per epistolam suam eorum firmaret fidem; promittens dare ei praeceptum ad Belisarium, ut papa ordinaretur, et dari centenaria septem. Lubenter ergo suscepit Vigilus promissum eius, amore episcopatus et auri, et facta professione romam profectus est.*) Richards (op. cit., pp. 131-132) regards all this as anachronistic, distorted by Liberatus and the sources for the *Liber Pontificalis*—our two principal extant sources for these events—in light of the subsequent Three Chapters controversy, when many in the West saw Pope Vigilus as promoting Monophysitism by favoring condemnation of the anti-Monophysite “Three Chapters” and Empress Theodora, with her known Monophysite sympathies, as necessarily involved in such an effort. This begs the question of how Vigilus first got the reputation of being pro-Monophysite and a tool of Theodora—characteristics one would not normally expect in a Pope. Liberatus, moreover, wrote well within widespread living memory of these events. It is unjustifiable to reject out of hand contemporary testimony that is not in conflict with other available contemporary evidence, because of some modern theory—in this case, Richards’ belief that only a political contest between pro-Gothic and pro-Byzantine papabili was going on. Stein (*Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 387-388) accepts without question that Theodora was attempting to do what Liberatus tells us she was doing, but regards the attempt as having been impossible from the start because the Western Church would never have followed Vigilus into a confirmation of Monophysitism. For a response to this, see the text.

18Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 128-129; Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, IV, 41-43, 81-82; Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 175n.

19Chapman, “Age of Justinian,” *Studies on the Early Papacy*, p. 225; Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, IV, 221-22.

20Hefele, *Councils*, IV, 194-204; Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 385. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge, England, 1972), pp. 273-275, regards this edict as the decisive turning point frustrating the Monophysite attempt to take over the church; but he places too much emphasis on it alone. Similar edicts by earlier emperors, such as Marcian and Justin I, had been only partially enforced and soon abandoned. The real turning point (which Frend calls a “last effort,” op. cit., p. 276) was Theodora’s attempt to secure the Papacy through Vigilus. The apparent cross purposes at which Justinian and Theodora were working during this period remain, however, an enigma which no historian has been able to unravel. Either they really were operating entirely independently in this matter—which is hard to believe—or Theodora was systematically deceiving Justinian. This seems more likely, but leaves unanswered the question of how she expected to prevail over him in the end, since she could hardly take over the whole Church through her agents without his eventually knowing it. The answer is locked in the mystery of Theodora’s own character, motivations, and ultimate purposes.

21Grisar, *Rome and the Popes*, II, 283-284; Chapman, “Age of Justinian,” *Studies on the Early Papacy*, pp. 225-226; Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 386-387; Bury, *Later Roman Empire*, II, 180-183.

22Chapman “Age of Justinian,” *Studies on the Early Papacy*, p. 226; Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 387.

23A purported letter from Silverius after his exile, condemning and excommunicating Vigilus, is generally rejected as spurious (see *Dictionary of Christian Biography* [DCB] N, 673; it is not even mentioned in most more recent authorities). Richards (*Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 132) says that “Vigilius seems to have been generally recognized as pope, despite the initial reluctance of some of the clergy to recognize him,” but the only evidence he gives is an inscription of June 537 referring to Vigilus as “the most blessed pope.” Any antipope could have done that—and many have! Richards, who does not quote the letter from the bishop of Patara, entirely misses its significance in relation to Silverius’ maintaining his Papacy in exile.

24Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 130. This is further evidence that Justinian was unaware of Theodora’s intrigue to secure the Papacy.

25The authenticity of these letters is contested. Chapman, “Age of Justinian,” *Studies on the Early Papacy*, p. 227, and Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, II, 388n, tend to reject them, while Richards (*Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*) does not even regard them as worthy of mention. Earlier scholars (e.g. Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, II, 576-577, and DCB IV, 1145) generally accepted them. The argument in their favor in DCB IV, 1145 is particularly erudite and impressive,

citing the Catholic Pagi, who pointed out very soundly that Papal infallibility is not involved in this matter since Vigilius in all probability was not yet the true Pope when he wrote the letters, Silverius still maintaining his office in exile). The letters are as well supported by contemporary authority as any of the other events and documents of this critical period in the history of the Papacy; Vigilius had made these same promises in his original agreement with Theodora (see Note 15, above); they sound like just the sort of missives he would have written at this point in his career; and, as Pagi pointed out, they were written before he was Pope, presuming-as is here presumed (see text)-that they were written in 537. For the date of Severus' death see Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* II, 384.

26Bury, *Later Roman Empire* II, 187-189; DCB IV, 672, 1145; Richards, *Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 130-131.

27Authorities as cited in Notes 21-26, above. It must be emphasized that, contrary to insufficiently examined conclusions found in several authorities, there is no specific evidence whatever that Pope Silverius died before June 538, and only the vaguest inferences suggesting an earlier death (see Note 28, below).

28DCB IV, 672-673; J. P. Kirsch, "Silverius, Saint, Pope," *Catholic Encyclopedia* XIII (1912), 793. The *Liber Pontificalis* gives June 20, 538 as the date of his death; it is also his feast day as saint and martyr. The suggestion of Richards (*Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 131) that Silverius starved himself to death, aside from its total lack of support in all contemporary sources, would make Silverius the one and only Pope in two thousand years to have committed suicide.

29Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, IV, 578-579.

30E. g., by Chapman, "Age of Justinian," *Studies on the Early Papacy* p. 224, and Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, 386-387.

31As shown by his references to them both in his letter to Theodora (see Note 32, below).

32The letter is quoted in the *Liber Pontificalis*, "Vita Vigili," pp. 296-297. The translation here given is that appearing in Newman G. Eberhardt, *A Summary of Catholic History* (St. Louis, 1961), I, 272. Its date is not known precisely, but it must have been before Vigilius' formal confirmation, in September 540, of the anathema pronounced upon Anthimus by the synod in Constantinople which had been called by Pope Agapitus before his death in 536. It is very significant that Vigilius waited three and a half years to confirm that anathema-strong supporting evidence for the reliability of our reports of his letter with Richards (*Papacy in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 143) sees as "patently anachronistic" because of his own presuppositions that the original elevation of Vigilius was for exclusively political and not religious reasons. If that were the case, then there is no reasonable explanation for the long delay in confirming the Emperor's own anathema as expressed in his edict enforcing the decision of the synod of 536 (see Note 20, above). It might also be argued that by the time Vigilius wrote the letter he would have known that the Monophysite cause was collapsing and therefore that it was in his interest to break his promise to Theodora. But this is to apply hindsight unjustifiably. In 538 and 539 it was by no means clear whether Justinian's promotion of orthodoxy or Theodora's promotion of Monophysitism would prevail. Vigilius' adherence to Monophysitism could have decisively shifted the balance. The sinister story of Patriarch Paul of Alexandria is most relevant here. Named by Justinian at the end of 537 as an orthodox successor to the Monophysite Theodosius, Paul had been Monophysite before, and according to two ancient sources later became Monophysite again. After a year and a half in office, mostly spent in persecuting his former fellow believers and collecting money, he was removed on a charge of arranging the murder of a deacon, Psois, who appears to have been a double agent for him and for his enemies. (For a full account of this extraordinary affair, see Jean Maspero, *Histoire des patriarches d'Alexandrie* [Paris, 1923], pp. 136-151). Patriarch Paul's time in office exactly coincides with the period when in all probability Vigilius wrote his letter to Theodora, quoted in the text. If Vigilius knew anything at all about Paul, he knew that such a man would change theological sides in an instant if he stood to gain from it. Orthodoxy was hardly triumphing through him.