

Extract from Professor Mark Humphries on *The Church in Italy*

# THE CHURCH IN ITALY

## Bishops, cities, and the making of Christian Italy

Since its conquest by the **Romans** in the fourth and third centuries BCE, Italy was one of the most densely urbanised regions of the Mediterranean, so it should occasion little surprise that the earliest Christian communities there were to be found in cities and that this urban network formed the basis for the long term development of Christianity in the region.

Already by the third century, so Eusebius records, the Christian community at Rome was large and possessed an elaborate **clerical** hierarchy. At the beginning of the fourth century, some centres yield evidence that implies large Christian communities: at Aquileia in the north east, for example, a massive and sumptuously decorated church can be dated firmly to the age of **Constantine**.

Through the fourth and fifth centuries, the evidence, much of it archaeological, suggests that most cities acquired a Christian **cathedral** that gradually came to dominate the urban landscape, while suburban **martyr shrines** came to dominate the approaches to cities. This is not to say that the countryside remained untouched by Christianity. Rural shrines, such as those of St Felix at Nola and of the Archangel Michael at Monte Gargano, both in southern Italy, show that by the end of antiquity

Christianity was establishing firm roots outside the cities. Nevertheless, the essentially urban basis of Italian Christianity dictated the way in which the religion developed there. In many cities, Christianity provided a new outlet for the civic ambitions of communities, for example through the promotion of **cults** of local martyrs and **saints** (see [The Development of the Cult of the Saints](#)).

On occasion, the emergence of a powerful **bishop** could lead to one centre prevailing over its neighbours. Thus, in the late fourth century, northern Italy was dominated by the figure of bishop **Ambrose of Milan** (374-397). By a variety of means — such as voluminous correspondence, the appointment of favoured candidates to neighbouring **bishoprics**, personal visits, the dissemination of the cult of saints, and the exploitation of connections at the imperial court (often resident at Milan) — Ambrose established himself as leader of north-Italian Christianity. After his death, however, Milan's influence began to wane, which suggests that Ambrose's achievement was largely a personal one, and did not represent the creation of formal ecclesiastical administrative structures.



**Pilgrim flask of St. John the Evangelist.**

Origin/Date: Byzantine, 550-650

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### Key:

**Interactive glossary terms**

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**Professor Mark Humphries**  
Swansea University