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The *Liber pontificalis*

Text and Context

Introduction

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK, *ROME AND THE INVENTION OF THE PAPACY*, uses the word 'invention' in the original Latin sense of *inventio* (discovery), as well as the more recent one of an original creation with a function. I intend it to be a more evocative, or even provocative, word than 'formation' or 'development'. Indeed, I shall not be offering a straightforward history of the early medieval papacy in this book. Instead, my theme is the power of a text, with an extended case study of a particular text that charts the history of the early medieval papacy, namely, the *Liber pontificalis* or 'book of the pontiffs'.

The *Liber pontificalis* is the set of biographies of the popes starting with St Peter, first written by members of the papal administration in Rome in the sixth century and subsequently extended at various stages until the pontificate of Pope Stephen V at the end of the ninth century.[1] Quite apart from the importance of this text's evidence concerning the history of early medieval Rome, the *Liber pontificalis* is also a remarkable example of the self-representation of a particular institution in the form of an historical narrative. My concern in this book, therefore, is the way the *Liber pontificalis* constructed the popes and disseminated a particular representation of their history, their role, and of the city of Rome itself, within western Europe in the early middle ages. The *Liber pontificalis,* after all, is the only extant early medieval narrative history actually

[1] The definitive modern edition of the *Liber pontificalis* is L. Duchesne (ed.), *Le* Liber pontificalis: *texte, introduction et commentaire,* 2 vols (Paris, 1886–92, repr. 1955), hereafter *LP* I and II.

written in Rome. It is also the text in which most people in early medieval Spain, Gaul, North Africa, the British Isles, and even in Italy itself, would, or at least could, have read about Christian and contemporary Rome without ever having seen it. Set against the background of the wealth of sophisticated theological, pastoral, and exegetical treatises, letters, and sermons produced by the popes who form the subject of the *Liber pontificalis,* the text is remarkably selective in its representation of Rome and its bishops. For that reason, as well as the particular agenda of its contents, the text potentially had a key role to play within early medieval Europe in forming perceptions and shaping the memory of the city of Rome and of its bishops.[2]

The *Liber pontificalis,* in contrast to all the other texts emanating from Rome and the popes, is oddly laconic and formulaic and leaves out an extraordinary amount, known from other categories of evidence, relating to both general historical context and specific papal careers. The text's very oddities and omissions, however, need recognition, attention, and explication, not least because it was so widely disseminated within Italy as well as north of the Alps. I shall explore, therefore, the problematic relationship between reality, representation and reception, and the papacy itself as orchestrator of a new understanding of the Bishop of Rome both within and beyond the city.[3] Certainly, papal primacy, the apostolic succession, and doctrinal orthodoxy are major themes of this period. The churches, mosaics, frescoes, and inscriptions of Rome, as well as less conventional historical evidence in the form of liturgy and canon law, augment and complement the representation of the popes in the *Liber pontificalis;* all have generated specialist discussion. Consequently, I aim to offer a cross-disciplinary study of the sacred and the secular, and to invoke a range of different categories of historical evidence: textual, visual, and material. All this evidence needs to be set against the background of the ideological agenda developed in the *Liber pontificalis.*

[2] I offered preliminary comments about Frankish perceptions of Rome in McKitterick 2006.

[3] On the question of personal involvement of the popes see below, pp. 8–9 and 36.

Before I introduce the text and an outline of the historical context in which it was produced, it may be helpful to present a brief account of the principal themes that have emerged from the modern scholarship on late antique and early medieval Rome and the popes.

Rome and the *Liber pontificalis* in Modern Scholarship

The *Liber pontificalis* has been a constant resource for historians, art and architectural historians, and archaeologists since the nineteenth century, so I can only offer a brief and highly selective indication here of the wealth of scholarship that it has precipitated. My own understanding of the *Liber pontificalis* and its significance has benefitted enormously from the pioneering work of Giovanni Battista de Rossi, Louis Duchesne, and Theodor Mommsen in the nineteenth century.[4] More recently, studies focussed on specific aspects of the *Liber pontificalis* itself, such as those of Herman Geertman, Lidia Capo, Clemens Gantner, and Andrea Verardi, have helped to expose some of the problems of the text.[5] From the second half of the twentieth century, many excellent studies of the 'transformation of Rome in late antiquity' and the physical, topographical, and ideological impact of Christianity have appeared, in which Charles Pietri and his successors at the École française de Rome have been prominent.[6] A number of German scholars have greatly enhanced our understanding of the political and ecclesiological roles of the popes of the late eighth and the ninth century in particular, alongside many important contributions to the documentation of the institutional development of the papacy in the comprehensive scholarly biographies of the Italian *Enciclopedia dei papi,* and anglophone scholarship made since the 1970s, by Peter Llewellyn, Jeffrey Richards, and Tom Noble, among others.[7] Over the past two decades of this century in particular, John Curran's study of late antique Rome as *Pagan City and Christian Capital*

[4] Rossi 1864–77; Duchesne 1877 and *LP* I, pp. i–cclxii; Mommsen 1898.
[5] Geertman 1975, Geertman 2004, Geertman (ed.) 2003, Capo 2009, Gantner 2014, Verardi 2016.
[6] Pietri 1976, Blaudeau 2012b; Inglebert 1996.
[7] Borgolte 1995, Scholz 2006, Herbers 1996, Hartmann 2006, Hack 2006–7, Bray and Lanza (eds.) 2000, Richards 1976, Llewellyn 1974b (2nd ed. 1996), Noble 1984.

and William Harris's edited volume on the 'transformations' of late antique Rome were followed by the collaborative volumes on Rome and Constantinople edited by Lucy Grig and Gavin Kelly, on *Rome the Cosmopolis* led by Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolf, further volumes of collected papers on late antique Rome and its bishops, a set of incisive studies on the urban fabric by Robert Coates-Stephens, and Hendrik Dey on the Aurelian Walls.[8] All have presented new perspectives and new interpretations of both the material and documentary evidence. Nevertheless, the greater proportion of the scholarly literature on Rome as a city is concerned with the imperial city and late antiquity. Edwards and Woolf stress, for example, that

> Rome remained the cosmopolis because the power invested in it was still of use, because its claims to epitomize the empire were well worth defending to groups with the power to do so … Rome the City was so deeply inscribed on the master texts of empire that it could never safely be erased; New Rome on the Hellespont indicates the power of empires, but the survival of Old Rome on the Tiber shows the limits of that power.[9]

Certainly art historians have charted the transformation of the city after that, in the wake of Richard Krautheimer's monumental *Corpus basilicarum Romae* and *Rome: Profile of a City,* though even Krautheimer was more concerned with the fourth, fifth, and twelfth centuries than with the period in between.[10] In the more recent work of such art historians and archaeologists as Herman Geertman, Sible de Blaauw, or Franz Alto Bauer, however, the transformations of the early middle ages have at last been given prominence.[11] Here the *Liber pontificalis* has been drawn on more critically as a source about particular buildings in Christian Rome, though the principal emphasis of all three scholars has been on the reigns of Popes Hadrian I and Leo III between 772 and 816.

[8] Curran 2000, Harris (ed.) 1999, Edwards and Woolf (eds.) 2003; Grig and Kelly (eds.) 2012; Cooper and Hillner (eds.) 2007, Behrwald and Witschel (eds.) 2012, Rapp and Drake (eds.) 2014, especially Ward Perkins 2014, Salzman 2014; Dunn (ed.) 2015; Coates-Stephens 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003b, 2006, 2012, 2017; Dey 2011.
[9] Edwards and Woolf 2003, p. 19. [10] *Corpus;* Krautheimer 1980/2000.
[11] Geertman 1975, 2004, Blaauw 1994a, and Bauer 2004.

Early medieval Rome has also been the object of attention from other perspectives, such as doctrinal disputes, the cult of saints and martyrs, the diversity of the city's monasteries, the social and political role of the aristocracy, economic life, ceremonial, and the evolution of the liturgy.[12] Many of these developments have been associated with the history of particular buildings, notably San Clemente, Old St Peter's, the Lateran, Santa Maria Antiqua, Santa Maria Aracoeli and the Capitol, the Pantheon (Santa Maria ad martyres), Santa Prassede, and San Paolo fuori le mura, all of which have attracted concentrated and expert appraisal.[13] The physical city as well as the idea of Rome and its immense cultural capital, therefore, have prompted imaginative scholarly studies.[14] The second millennial celebrations of the city of Rome, furthermore, precipitated a host of studies, drawing in particular on new archaeological evidence and recent excavations, some of which are still in progress, especially the work of Roberto Meneghini and Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani, the outstanding collaborative volumes edited by Federico Guidobaldi and Alessandra Guiglia Guidobaldi, and the current archaeological project on the Lateran led by Ian Haynes and Paolo Liverani.[15]

Despite these excellent studies, the *Liber pontificalis* has still all too often been treated as a straightforward repository of a series of brief portraits of particular popes that offer a wealth of information about the church buildings and monuments they patronized in the city, with details simply extracted as corroborative evidence and considered in isolation

[12] I cite here only the more recent: Chazelle and Cubitt (eds.) 2007, Maskarinec 2018, Sotinel 2010, Salzman, Sághy, and Lizzi Testa (eds.) 2015, Leal 2016, Hansen 2003, Machado 2019, Delogu and Paroli (eds.) 1993, Marazzi 1998, Costambeys 2000, Ferrari 1957, Sansterre 1983, Baldovin 1987, Ó Carragáin and Neuman de Vegvar (eds.) 2007, Page 2010. See also Chapters 4 and 5 below.

[13] Guidobaldi 1992; McKitterick, Osborne, Richardson, and Story (eds.) 2013; Bosman, Haynes, and Liverani (eds.) 2020; Andaloro, Bordi, and Morgantin (eds.) 2016; Bordi, Osborne, and Rubery (eds.) 2020; Bolgia 2017; Moralee 2018; Camerlenghi 2018; Marder and Wilson-Jones (eds.) 2015.

[14] Bolgia, McKitterick, and Osborne (eds.) 2011.

[15] *Roma nell'alto medioevo* 2001; *Roma fra oriente a occidente* 2002; Meneghini and Santangeli Valenzani 2004; Guidobaldi and Guiglia Guidobaldi (eds.) 2002; Bosman, Haynes, and Liverani (eds.) 2020.

from their textual context. But no narrative history from the early middle ages can be regarded as an unproblematic source of facts, even if it might occasionally yield useful information. The *Liber pontificalis* needs to be considered in its entirety and all its complexity of purpose, as well as in its detail and in the historical context of its production, diffusion, and reception.

In past studies of the early medieval papacy the focus has tended to be on the period up to the beginning of the sixth century, and embracing the careers of Pope Leo I (440–61) and Pope Gelasius I (492–6) and all the excitement generated by the Laurentian schism and election of Pope Symmachus (498–514);[16] a few make the leap to Pope Gregory I (†604).[17] Papal letters, some of which have been labelled 'decretals',[18] sermons, theological works produced by these popes and their contemporaries, and the records of their debates in surviving conciliar material from the great church councils of the fifth and sixth centuries,[19] all delineate an apparently powerful institution with eloquent protagonists and a wide network of correspondents. New studies of particular popes such as Leo I, Gelasius I, and Gregory I have emphasized these writings and what they reflect of the pastoral and administrative roles of the Bishop of Rome.[20] Despite the markedly unenthusiastic and short entry about Pope Gregory I in the *Liber pontificalis* itself, which records little else besides a short list of his writings and his mission to the English, too many studies have assumed Gregory's own career and attitudes can be generalized as representative of all the early medieval popes.[21] An obvious factor is the sheer volume and quality of Gregory's own writings, widely disseminated in medieval Europe.[22] A seductive influence on

[16] Wirbelauer 1993.
[17] Markus 1997; Neil and Dal Santo (eds.) 2013.
[18] On the problem of the transformation of papal letters into papal decretals and decretal collections in the context of canon law see Dunn 2015b and Zechiel-Eckes 2013. More generally on papal letter collections see Jasper and Fuhrmann 2001, Allen and Neil (eds.) 2015, Dunn (ed.) 2015, D'Avray 2019, and below, pp. 151–7.
[19] See, for example, the translations by Price 2005; Price (ed.) 2009; Price, Booth, and Cubitt 2014.
[20] Salzman 2013; Neil and Allen 2014; Sessa 2012; Allen and Neil (eds.) 2013.
[21] A notable exception was Peter Llewellyn, who discussed the negative implications of the *Liber pontificalis* biography of Gregory I in Llewellyn 1974a.
[22] Usefully surveyed in Straw 1996, and see also Thacker 1998.

modern readers has been exerted by Gregory's role in the conversion of the English to Christianity, augmented by the Anglo-Saxon Bede's presentation thereof in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*). This has led to undue emphasis on Gregory at the expense of his predecessors and successors.[23] The period from the sixth century onwards, moreover, cannot be comfortably rendered as a straightforward and stately progress of papal ideology, the achievement of 'freedom from Byzantium' and the embracing of the protection of the Franks by the second half of the eighth century.[24] In his comprehensive discussion of earlier historiography on the early medieval papacy, Tom Noble wrote the 'obituary' of this kind of linear approach, criticizing the failure to consider particular papal statements in their precise historical context, and the tendency to focus too exclusively on the jurisdictional, political, and diplomatic aspects of papal history. He made a plea for consideration of the historical and institutional contexts in which papal documents were produced, with particular reference to the letters emanating from the papal writing office.[25] Such an emphasis on context is no less important for the *Liber pontificalis,* as we shall now see.

The Text of the *Liber pontificalis*

The title *Liber pontificalis* is an eighteenth-century one, used by Giovanni Vignoli and made standard by Louis Duchesne; manuscripts from the early ninth century refer to it as *Liber episcopalis* or *acta/gesta pontificum urbis Romae*.[26] The distinctive narrative structure of the *Liber pontificalis* takes the form of serial biographies, from St Peter in the first century to Pope Stephen V at the end of the ninth century, 112 Lives in all,

[23] See for example Leyser 2016 and his references.

[24] See further below, pp. 16–24. Moorhead 2015 is essentially a summary of the *Liber pontificalis* up to the middle of the eighth century. The interpretations of the evidence offered in Ekonomou 2007 should be treated with caution. For an alternative view see McKitterick 2016a, 2018c.

[25] Noble 1995.

[26] Paris, BnF lat. 13729; see below, pp. 216–18, and Vignoli 1724–55; compare the rival edition by Bianchini (1662–1729, reprinted in *PL* 127 and 128 (Paris, 1852). A full account of the editions is Leclercq 1930, and see also Franklin 2017, with particular attention to Bianchini's work.

numbered in sequence in most of the earliest manuscripts. Despite this impression of being a single work, it was in fact produced in instalments, the first in the sixth century and covering the period from St Peter up to the author's or authors' own day, and then subsequently extended in continuations. Some of these continuations were constructed retrospectively, as I shall explain shortly, but most of them are contemporary with their subjects.

The original author as well as subsequent authors of the *Liber pontificalis* appear to have been officials within the papal administration, acting on their own initiative or else with papal involvement. Either they worked in the *scrinium,* that is, the archive and office in which the papal letters were written, or in the *vestiarium,* that is, essentially the office responsible for papal finances and assumed to have records of the papal endowments, properties, estates, and expenditure.[27] For access to the documentation on which the narrative rests it is generally thought that there would have needed to be considerable interchange between the two groups, if indeed their personnel were separate in this early period.[28] Analysis of the style of writing and use of the *cursus* or rhythmical prose, which involves a stylized way of ending phrases and sentences with a particular number and length of syllables, has begun to shed some light on the diversity of writers responsible for the various types of document within the papal administration. Pope Gregory I, for example, wrote very few of the letters sent out in his name.[29] Richard Pollard has demonstrated, furthermore, that up to the end of the seventh century almost all papal letters are characterized by the use of *cursus,* while the authors of the papal biographies in the *Liber pontificalis* for the same period do not use it. In the eighth century, however, there is little sign of a familiarity with the rules of *cursus* on the part of the writers of either the letters or the papal biographies, except for the author of the Life of Pope Gregory III and to a lesser extent those of Popes John VII (705–7), Constantine I (708–15), and Gregory II (715–31). A diversity of authorship and of educational background seems clear, though these differences might

[27] See Neil and Allen (eds.) 2014, pp. 11–14 and 127–39, and Noble 1990.
[28] Bougard 2009 at pp. 128–31. See Noble 1985 and McKitterick 2016a.
[29] Pollard 2013.

also reflect varying attitudes towards the appropriateness of a different stylistic register dictated by the genre.[30] Systematic analysis of the Latin of the text may well yield more precise knowledge.

In two prefatory letters at the beginning of the text, the *Liber pontificalis* is improbably credited to the late fourth-century Pope Damasus (366–84), writing at the prompting of Jerome (*c.*345–420), the patristic scholar. The letters are present in the earliest complete manuscripts,[31] though the oldest of these, now in Naples, is only from the later seventh century.[32] As I explain in more detail below, I am inclined to affirm these spurious letters as part of the original sixth-century composition, perhaps functioning as an inspiring claim about the illustrious initiators of a project subsequently carried out by others.[33] The letters may also be the way the authors signalled papal patronage of the enterprise. The crediting of the text by editors in the early modern period to the ninth-century papal *bibliothecarius* Anastasius has long since been discarded, apart from Anastasius's authorship of the ninth-century Lives of Popes Nicholas I and Hadrian II.[34]

The format of the *Liber pontificalis* is a deliberate recasting of the genre of imperial serial biography to write about the popes, with all the ideological implications such an historiographical choice implies. The structure of the biographies in the *Liber pontificalis* is directly comparable with such assemblies of biographies of Roman emperors as that from Julius Caesar to the Emperor Domitian in Suetonius, *De vita caesarum XII* (*Lives of the Twelve Caesars*), written in AD 119, or the later emperors in the *Historia Augusta* written in the fourth century AD.[35]

[30] On the criteria deployed for the presence or absence of *cursus* as an analytical identifier see Pollard 2009 and Pollard in press.

[31] Schelstrate 1692, I, pp. 369–75 was apparently the first to refute the validity of the Damasan and Hieronymian connection.

[32] Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale IV.A.8; see below, Chapter 6, pp. 185–6.

[33] See below, Chapter 3, pp. 69–70. On the two letters, compare Cuppo 2008, p. 67.

[34] The attribution of the text to Anastasius Bibliothecarius took rather longer to be rejected: but see Herbers 2009, Bougard 2008 and Bougard 2009, and Bauer 2006. See also the comments on the eighteenth-century editions in Franklin 2017 and the forthcoming work on the *Liber pontificalis* at St Denis in the twelfth century by Elizabeth A. R. Brown.

[35] McKitterick 2009. See also Vout 2009.

Despite the considerable variation in the length accorded each topic, there are consistent structural parallels between the contents of the late antique imperial biographical narratives and the *Liber pontificalis* in the formulaic presentation of information about the subject's name, origin, parentage, and career before and after elevation to the imperial or papal throne. These parallels extend to the details about disputed elections and rival candidates, challenges to his authority, public works, patronage, buildings, and religious observance, his length of reign, death, and burial.[36] The parallels can be set out schematically as follows:

SERIAL BIOGRAPHY: STRUCTURAL MODELS

Imperial Lives in Suetonius, *Lives of XII Caesars; Historia Augusta;* Eutropius, *Breviarium; Kaisergeschichte;* Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*	**Papal** Lives in *Liber pontificalis*
Emperor's name and origin	Pope's name and origin
Life before he became emperor	Career before he became pope
Process of becoming emperor, including disputes and rivals	Election as pope, including disputes and rivals
Career as emperor, including rebellions	Career as pope, including challenges to authority
legislation	legislation
public works	public works
buildings	buildings
patronage	patronage
religious observance	religious observance
Death and burial	Death and burial
Length of reign	Length of reign

The *Liber pontificalis* is nevertheless a remarkably novel type of work in its emphases as well as its chief protagonists. It presented a new mode of argument; it created a new genre for subsequent historians of religious institutions to emulate; its adaptation of imperial serial biography implied that the popes were the successors to the emperors as the rulers of Rome; and it offered an alternative and Christian history of Rome.[37] The concentration on the city of Rome, moreover, is in complete accord with the obsession of so many ancient authors with Rome.[38] Just as

[36] For more extended arguments concerning the model provided by Roman imperial biographies see McKitterick 2011 and 2018c.
[37] Sot 1981. [38] See below, Chapter 2, pp. 38, 60–1.