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Inventing Peter in Late Antiquity

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Even if one knows very little about the papacy, one is likely to be familiar with the connection between Peter the Apostle and the Church of Rome. This connection, of course, is based upon the legendary notion that, sometime after the narrative details in the Book of Acts, Peter traveled to Rome, helped to spread Christianity there, and then passed on his personal authority to a successor, which initiated a chain of successions, giving rise to what we call the papacy. Historians, of course, can identify a host of problems with this legendary account – challenging everything from the historicity of Peter's visit to Rome to the idea that there was a single, undisputed leader of the Roman Church (i.e., a pope) prior to the mid- or late second century.[1] But, given that this was only one of a number of competing apocryphal narratives concerning the Apostle Peter in the early Church (many of which say nothing of a Roman journey), it is rather remarkable that the pro-papal, Petrine narrative gained such currency by the late sixth century that it was accepted as an assumed truth, even by those churches, like Constantinople, that actively competed with Rome for preeminence.

This chapter will explore the theological, political, and practical means by which Peter the Apostle became increasingly connected to the city of Rome and especially the Roman bishop, by the late sixth century. The argument is that escalations in the claims of papal authority in this period, particularly those that were rhetorically justified by a connection to the historical Peter, were typically aspirational in nature and that they often emerged as a direct response to local or international humiliations. Indeed, the great paradox of the late-ancient claim of papal primacy, based as it was upon the Petrine

1 For an overview of the current scholarly debate regarding the possibility that the historical Peter went to Rome, see Otto Zwierlein, *Petrus in Rom: Die literarischen Zeugnisse* (Berlin, 2010). See also Michael D. Goulder, "Did Peter ever go to Rome," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57(4) (2004): 377–96.

connection, is that it had to be imposed on the rest of the Christian world because it was not at that time generally accepted. If late-ancient Christians had acknowledged the authority that Roman bishops claimed (e.g., the right to determine dogmatic teaching, the right to serve as the supreme appellate court for convicted clerics, the right to appoint/approve bishops in other jurisdictions, etc.), there would have been no reason to develop rhetorical justifications of it, Petrine or otherwise.

The Transformation of Papal Historiography

Prior to the 1930s, historical studies of the papacy were polemically driven by both Roman Catholics and Protestants who sought to justify or critique the papacy as an ecclesial institution.[2] Erich Caspar's two-volume *Geschichte des Papsttums* went a long way towards freeing the historical study of the papacy from ideological and/or theological confession. While Caspar's volumes were an important step in applying a more objective historical–critical methodology, they nevertheless reflected an anachronistic teleology for the early papacy in that the development of the papal institution was narrated in terms of what it would become in the later Middle Ages, rather than as it was during late antiquity. For Caspar as well as Walter Ullman who followed him, the "rise of the papacy" was an uninterrupted move from strength to strength.[3]

An important shift in the study of the papacy came in 1976 when Charles Pietri published *Roma Christiana*, a two-volume work that incorporates the insights of archaeology and ritual studies, which greatly expand our understanding of the papal institution and its development beyond what can be known from an investigation of theological texts. Building on this methodological move, the critique to the "rise of the papacy" narrative began in earnest at the close of the twentieth century with a burst of shorter studies by scholars in multiple disciplinary fields who were able to show that the Roman Church in late antiquity often functioned as a constellation of religious factions rather than as a unified body under the uncontested leadership

2 See, for example, F. C. Baur, "Die Christuspartie in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen und paulinischen Christenthums in der ältesten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom," *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 4(3) (1831): 61–206; Carl Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums* (Mohr, 1895).

3 Erich Caspar (ed.), *Geschichte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zur Höhe der Weltherrschaft*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1930–33). Ullmann was a steadfast defender of the papal institution as an essential element in the development of European civilization during the Middle Ages. Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of the Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power*, 3rd ed. (London, 1970).

of a single bishop. For example, the Symmachian/Laurentian schism (which separated the Christians in Rome from 498 to 514 between two rival papal claimants and their supporters) offers ample evidence of the extent to which the Roman Church could be bitterly and violently divided more than a half-century after Pope Leo's famous invention that the Roman pontiff was the "heir of St. Peter."[4] Additional studies showed that individual popes, once thought to be instrumental to the development of papal strength, were, in fact, dogged by dissenting clerical groups and lay aristocrats who either ignored or rejected claims of papal privilege.[5]

This chapter builds on this more recent scholarly trajectory by assessing the ways in which the most important feature of the rhetoric of papal authority – the Petrine claim – evolved and was received during the late-ancient period. By situating this rhetoric within its political, historical, and theological contexts, this chapter further challenges the historiographical narrative of an ever-powerful and ever-assertive late-ancient papacy that carried the Church into the Middle Ages.

The Earliest Connections between Peter and the Papacy

To understand the narrative connection between the Apostle Peter, the city of Rome, and the Roman bishop, it is important to take note of the way that a variety of independent elements – legends, rituals, and physical spaces associated with Peter – coalesced over a 200- to 300-year period to give birth to the Petrine legend with which we are all now familiar.

Given the ancient and widespread association of Peter with the city of Rome, it is important to recall that the New Testament makes no explicit connection between the Apostle and the ancient capital. Neither Acts nor the Epistles of Paul makes any mention of Peter's present or future travel to Rome. Even the two epistles attributed to Peter fail to make any clear statement that he journeyed to Rome. To be sure, many scholars believe that 1 Peter's concluding remark, which sends greetings from "Babylon," is a

4 See, for example, Eckhard Wirbelauer, *Zwei Päpste in Rom: Der Konflikt zwischen Laurentius und Symmachus (498–514)* (Munich, 1993).

5 See, for example, Marianne Sághy, "*Scinditur in partes populus*: Pope Damasus and the Martyrs of Rome," *Early Medieval Europe* 9(3) (2000): 273–87; Dennis E. Trout, "Damasus and the Invention of Early Christian Rome," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33(3) (2003): 517–36. See also the collection of essays in *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900*, ed. Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner (Cambridge, 2007).

coded reference to an author writing from Rome. But that interpretation has been challenged by Otto Zwierlein, who credibly suggests that "Babylon" could just as easily refer to exile broadly as it could to Rome specifically.[6]

Beyond the New Testament, there are some very early Christian texts that offer possible confirmation of a Petrine mission to Rome. The oldest of these sources is a letter, known as *First Clement*, which was sent by someone in Rome to Corinth in the final years of the first century.[7] Near the conclusion of that text, the author refers to Peter's bearing witness to the faith. Is this an explicit reference to Peter's martyrdom (with possible knowledge that he had been killed in Rome) or an affirmation of Peter's proclamation of the Gospel? The Greek could be interpreted either way, but whichever way one translates this term determines whether or not one then thinks that the text might connect Peter to Rome specifically.

Another early document that is sometimes taken as evidence that the early Christians believed Peter to have gone to Rome is the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Romans.[8] Ignatius (d. *c*.110) composed the letter in anticipation of his arrival and impending martyrdom in the capital. He differentiates himself from Peter and Paul in that, whereas they, as apostles, had the authority to issue commands, he can only make requests of his Roman readers. Does Ignatius mention the authority of Peter and Paul when writing to the Romans because he understood them to have been active in the Roman community (something that later generations of Christians would widely believe)? Or does Ignatius invoke the Apostles because they were widely regarded as authorities within the whole Christian community? Like *First Clement*, apologists for a "Roman" Peter are convinced that this letter provides evidence for their position. But it is just as easy to be skeptical of a connection.

According to Zwierlein, clear testimony to the tradition that Peter was associated with the city of Rome does not start until the middle of the second century, beginning with Justin Martyr (d. *c*.165).[9] In Justin's telling, Simon Magnus, the villain of Acts 8, came to Rome and spread heresy. Peter, as the opponent of Simon and defender of Orthodoxy, subsequently came to Rome to confront Simon and protect Roman Christians from false teaching. In the generations after Justin, this connection between post-biblical apostolic activity and the need to assert "orthodox" teaching would be a prominent

6 Zwierlein, *Petrus in Rom*, 7–10.
7 *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, *I Clement. II Clement. Ignatius. Polycarp. Didache*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA, 2003).
8 Ibid.
9 Zwierlein, *Petrus in Rom*, 128–33.

and powerful feature of the narratives that bound Peter to the city of Rome and, eventually, to the Roman bishop. Indeed, not only did the struggle with heresy (particularly those traditions associated with Gnosticism) lay the foundation for the Petrine Roman narrative, it also provided the context for the emergence of a Roman mono-episcopate that would be retroactively attributed to the first century and confirmed through outside voices like that of Irenaeus of Lyons.

Although the earliest documents provide little in the way of a clear connection between Peter and Rome, a variety of apocryphal apostolic Acts (such as the *Acts of Peter*, the *Martyrdom of Peter*, and a text from a collection known as the *Pseudo-Clementines*), which were produced in Rome and elsewhere between the late second and late fourth centuries, went a long way towards building the popular belief that Peter was martyred in Rome. More than anything else, the Petrine apocrypha emphasize Peter's ability to perform miracles and protect the Christian community from false teachers. Thus, they clearly attest to the pervasive late-ancient understanding of Peter as a powerful Christian figure and they can be seen to provide an important narrative baseline for subsequent papal appropriations of Peter's legacy. At this point in the development of the Petrine story, however, it is important to observe that these accounts ignore Peter's authority vis-à-vis other apostles and they make no reference to the so-called Petrine privilege of Matthew 16, which granted Peter alone the right to bind and loose sin.

Of all these texts, perhaps the most interesting for our purposes are a collection of documents known as the *Pseudo-Clementines*, which were pseudonymously attributed to Clement of Rome, a successor to the Rome See after Peter's death, who is also the supposed author of the letter *First Clement*. Although still a subject of debate, it is generally assumed that the *Pseudo-Clementines* were written in Palestine during the early to mid-fourth century.[10] They include a collection of treatises (attributed to the Apostle Peter) set within a background narrative that details the circumstances by which Clement came to be Peter's disciple and traveling secretary. The surviving corpus includes twenty homilies, a long treatise known as the *Recognitions*, an introductory letter (from Peter to Clement), and a concluding letter (from Clement to James of Jerusalem). With the exception of the concluding letter, all of the texts view Jerusalem as the center of the Christian world and

10 For an overview of the texts that comprise the *Pseudo-Clementines* as well as the scholarly debates surrounding their composition, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX, 2008), 193–229.

deal exclusively with the churches of Palestine and Syria. And, apart from establishing Clement's identity as a citizen of Rome, the ancient capital is never mentioned in either the homilies or the *Recognitions*. As for Peter, the *Pseudo-Clementines* emphasize his apostolic ministry – founding and building dozens of local churches across Syria and Palestine – but they say nothing of a trip to Rome, his martyrdom, or his establishment of the papacy.

Of course, the concluding letter, from Clement to James of Jerusalem, which has been transmitted with the corpus since the late fourth century, offers a rather different account of things. That letter presents itself as authored by Clement shortly after his elevation to the See of Rome (interestingly, he claims to be Peter's first successor, not the third). Much of the letter is a word-for-word account of a speech by Peter in which the apostle validates Clement's qualifications as the Bishop of Rome. The text also details an elaborate ceremony in which Peter invests Clement with apostolic authority in concert with the entire ecclesial assembly (both ordained and lay). In short, what we find in the Pseudo-Clement's *Epistle to James* is one of the earliest elaborations of a Petrine legend that brings together for the Bishops of Rome a narrative claim to Peter's authority in a way that differentiated the Roman See from other sees and the Roman bishop from other bishops.

Perhaps one of the most surprising elements of the development of the papal Peter is that the connections were made first by Christians outside of Rome, not by the popes themselves. Indeed, the old surviving episcopal testimony linking the Roman Church's prestige to the supposed historical presence of Peter in the imperial capital stems from Irenaeus of Lyons' (d. ca. 202) late second-century text *Against Heresies*. In that lengthy text, Irenaeus differentiates "orthodox" teaching from heresy on the basis of an "apostolic faith." Irenaeus points to Rome (and elsewhere) as an example of this apostolic teaching, which he believes is assured by the fact that the Church of Rome was established and protected from future error by St. Peter and St. Paul.[11] According to Irenaeus, the best way for the Christians of his own day to guarantee that they adhere to the proper faith is to align themselves with one of the Christian centers, like Rome, which has a clear line of apostolic succession.

It is worth noting that Irenaeus' contemporary in Rome, bishop Eleutherios (d.189), was an ally in the battle against the Valentinians. And if there is any single explanation for why a pre-Nicaean author who did not reside in Rome might affirm or reject Roman ecclesiastical prestige it would be that he did so

11 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.

when and if he found himself in the midst of a theological or administrative debate and he could or could not rely on the Bishop of Rome to be an ally in his cause. This is especially true of Cyprian of Carthage (d.258), who, early in his career, both defended Pope Cornelius (r. 251–53) and implied that Cornelius' authority was preserved by his connection to St. Peter.[12] But later in his career, when Cyprian found himself at odds with Cornelius' successor, he retreated from his previous assertions regarding the link between Peter and the papacy and he resisted efforts by the Roman Church to assert its authority in North Africa.[13] Cyprian's case serves as one of the earliest and best examples of the complicated dimensions and range of possibilities within the Petrine legacy.

One of the first times that the Roman See attempted to assert its authority in an international dispute was in the middle of the fourth century and in defense of its granting of an appeal to Athanasius of Alexandria (d.373), who had previously been condemned by an Eastern synod. The case is complex and its details are beyond the scope of our interests, apart from the fact that it was in this context that a regional council in Serdica decreed in 343 that a foreign cleric who had been condemned by his local Church and had exhausted all local possibilities of appeal could still request an appellate hearing from the Bishop of Rome. Notably, the Serdican canon asserted that Rome's authority to hear this appeal was, in part, based upon the Roman Church's association with St. Peter. While the Serdican claim was widely rejected by other churches at the time, especially in the East, it would eventually become an important precedent that helped to establish the canonical authority of the papacy with respect to its ecclesial leadership within the Roman empire.[14]

From Irenaeus to Cyprian to Serdica, a succession of dogmatic concerns, regional disputes, and pure circumstance enabled a discursive horizon that made possible a series of statements connecting the biblical Peter's presumed authority vis-à-vis the apostles to the Bishop of Rome's desired authority vis-à-vis other bishops. In each of these examples, it is important to observe that the connection between Rome and Peter could be as advantageous for episcopal authorities outside of Rome as it was for the Bishops of Rome themselves. But we might also note that appellate jurisdiction between bishops meant

12 Cyprian, *Epistle* 59, and *On the Unity of the Church*, chap. 4. Note that a number of Cyprian's letters in the critical edition are not the same as the Ancient Nicene Fathers translations (*Epistle 59* is published as *Epistle 54* in the translation).

13 Cyprian, *Epistle* 69.

14 See Hamilton Hess, *The Early Development of Canon Law and the Council of Serdica*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 2002).

very little to ordinary lay Christians. For them, the connection between St. Peter and the Roman bishop was still very much in the making and would involve a rather different process.

It was the gradual transformation of the Roman martyr cult – its rituals and patronage – that led to the broader, more popular association of St. Peter with the papacy. Indeed, although the connections between Peter, Rome, and the Roman bishop had begun as early as the late second century, it was not until the middle of the fourth that the Roman bishops themselves took an active hand in promoting the connection and, when they did so, it was in the form of devotional practice associated with the martyrs. The Christians of Rome had one of the most elaborate (and one of the best documented) martyr cults, which included both public and private dimensions. With the accession of the Emperor Constantine in 312 and especially through his personal patronage, devotion to the martyrs expanded exponentially through the creation of a network of urban and suburban basilicas dedicated to various local martyr-saints, including that of St. Peter, who was now widely believed to have died in Rome. Funding for the expansion, renovation, and decoration of these sites was provided by the imperial family and other members of the aristocracy. It was only later, in the fifth century, that Roman bishops had the resources to contribute to large-scale building and decorative projects, like that of St. Maria Maggiore, which was commissioned by Pope Sixtus III (r. 432–40).

One of the first ways that the papacy took some measure of control over popular martyr devotion was through the promotion of a single festal calendar that assigned specific days of commemoration by the Roman Church that would be officiated by the bishop himself.[15] Indeed, the oldest surviving record that the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul should be commemorated on June 29 stems from a calendar known as the *Depositio martyrium*, which dates to the year 354. The consolidation of the martyr festivals under the Roman bishop's direction took some time and some of the cultic sites remained in the hands of rival Christian factions, particularly during times of dogmatic or political turmoil. For example, during the contested papal election between Damasus and Ursinus in 366, the basilica of St. Agnes and the basilica of Liberii both remained loyal to Ursinus. Some scholars have conjectured that the reason that Damasus in subsequent years spent so lavishly on the renovation of the martyr shrines at the catacombs was to earn the goodwill of a population

15 See Michele R. Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA, 1990), esp. 42–46.

devoted to the martyrs but deeply suspicious of a pontiff who ascended the papal throne through violence and intimidation.[16]

Damasus' promotion of the cult of St. Peter at the Memoria Apostolorum (the catacombs) was likely the first explicit initiative by a Roman bishop to sponsor the cult of St. Peter. It is worth noting that Damasus' intervention into the Petrine cult came at a time when the cult had reached a sufficiently mature, albeit disjointed, state such that there were two competing sites that claimed to possess Peter's tomb: one south of the city in the catacombs (Memoria Apostolorum) and the other west of the city on Vatican Hill. Notably, Damasus intervened only at the shrine at the catacombs, not the one on Vatican Hill, because the latter remained off limits to papal influence due to the fact that it was in the possession of the imperial family. In the centuries to follow, however, Peter's supposed tomb and the basilica of Saint Peter that were built above them on Vatican Hill would not only become the privileged site of Petrine cult but they would also become important markers of papal authority and the prime site of papal performance.[17]

Pope Leo I

Probably no individual is more responsible for our contemporary association between St. Peter and the papacy than Pope Leo I, who served as Bishop of Rome from 440 to 461. Indeed, it is Leo who first claimed to be Peter's "unworthy heir," which introduced the notion that the Bishop of Rome inherited Peter's special authority. For Leo, not only did this mean that he, more than any other bishop, had the authority to bind and loose sin (cf. Matthew 16) but it also meant that he was in a unique position to serve as the chief arbiter of theological questions, particularly the Christological debates of his era. Paying close attention to where, how, and why Leo employed this Petrine privilege in his sermons and letters suggests that his utilization of a Petrine authority was more circumspect than we might otherwise assume. Indeed, a careful examination suggests that Leo's Petrine claims typically signaled uncertainty of his position vis-à-vis other bishops or even the rejection of his authority by others.

With respect to Leo's surviving sermons, we find the Petrine topos most prominently displayed in those settings where other (Italian) bishops were

16 See Sághy, *"Scinditur in partes populus."*

17 See George E. Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2013), 34–36.

present. Most of Leo's sermons correspond to a major Christian feast (e.g., Holy Week, Christmas, or Pentecost) for which the audience would have consisted mostly of the laity and lower clergy. Notably, these sermons never explicitly connect Leo's personal authority to that of St. Peter. At the most, Leo's festal sermons gesture to the fact that he and the audience are in the presence of St. Peter (i.e., near his shrine at the basilica on Vatican Hill) and they should therefore commit themselves to the moral and pastoral message that Leo offers.

In fact, of the nearly one hundred surviving sermons in Leo's corpus, only a very few advance Leo's personal authority through a Petrine claim and all but two of those were delivered on the anniversary of his own election, when a large number of Italian bishops would have been required to travel to Rome and show their respect to the Roman bishop. For example, Leo's famous claim to be Peter's "unworthy heir" (*Sermon* 2) was delivered in September of 441, on the first anniversary of his election, in front of a large group of Italian bishops.

The most elaborate defense of Leo's Petrine claim occurs in *Sermon* 3, which was delivered two years later on the third anniversary of his election and which carefully connects his own authority to Peter. In this sermon, Leo begins by linking the stability of the Christian faith to a hierarchical structure that originates with Christ, passes to Peter, and is then shared by those who recognize Peter's authority. Leo reminds his listeners why Peter is the leader of the Apostles by rehearsing the passage from Matthew 16 in which Peter is the first apostle to affirm Christ's divinity and this is then rewarded with the keys to the kingdom of heaven and the ability to bind and loose sin. Leo's final move is to make explicit the link between Peter's authority and his own through a careful exegesis of the Matthew passage. In short, all pastoral care – the leadership of the entire Church – belongs to Peter and Peter's unworthy heir. It is worth noting that the assertion of Petrine privilege in the original anniversary sermon (*Sermon* 2) included no such exegetical or even theoretical justification to be Peter's heir – it simply asserted it.

Although no subsequent sermon in Leo's corpus was ever as thorough in its defense of Petrine authority as the anniversary sermon of 443, the anniversary sermon of 444, as well as a pair of sermons delivered on the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul (another occasion when many bishops would have been in attendance), repeated some of the same features.[18] Perhaps it is even more interesting to note that the sequencing of the sermons that we employ today,

18 Leo, *Sermons* 82 and 83.

which places the six anniversary sermons at the opening of the collection of sermons, was first developed by Leo's Carolingian editors. In other words, it was because the ninth-century editors wanted to demonstrate the antiquity of papal claims to authority that they decided to feature these six sermons by placing them at the outset of the collection. This fact is all the more noteworthy when we observe there is virtually no effort to link Peter's authority to Leo's in the rest of the large collection.

Leo's correspondence drew more frequently on the Petrine topos as a means for asserting his personal authority. Typically, the circumstances that led to Leo's assertion of unique authority related to a question of appellate jurisdiction. Like others before him, Leo claimed the so-called Serdican privilege, which granted the Bishop of Rome appellate jurisdiction for any cleric condemned by any other ecclesiastical court. While the Serdican privilege was an important precedent, by the mid-fifth century, the canons of Serdica had been combined with the canons of Nicaea in the Roman records with the result that Leo and all of his successors believed that their appellate jurisdiction had come not from a regional council (Serdica) but from the most famous ecumenical council of the Church (Nicaea). For the purposes of the present entry, what is perhaps most significant about this is that whenever Leo took the opportunity to assert this Nicaean/Serdican privilege in his correspondence, he typically connected it or explained it in terms of the Roman Church's Petrine authority.

As a general rule, Leo did not assert his Petrine authority when writing to those Churches that had the longest-running connection to the See of Rome: Italy, Illyricum, and Sicily. One notable exception is *Epistle* 16, written to all of the bishops of Sicily in October 447, which is the oldest surviving letter that he sent to the island. In this particular letter, Leo seeks to end the Sicilian practice of baptizing catechumens on Epiphany (January 6), which was also the Greek tradition. The pontiff instructs the Sicilian Church that they should conform to the Roman tradition, which was then baptizing catechumens on Pentecost. Seeking to expand the Roman Church's influence but unsure of the degree of episcopal submission he would receive, Leo repeatedly leans on the Petrine topos as his primary rhetorical strategy for achieving his goals. He informs the Sicilian bishops of the biblical justification of Roman authority (viewed through Christ's instruction to Peter to "feed his sheep") as well as the Petrine basis for Roman liturgical practice.

Whereas the Bishops of Rome had asserted at least some measure of authority in Italy, Illyricum, and Sicily for centuries, papal influence in Gaul, if it existed at all, had been more theoretical than actualized prior to the fifth

century. Leo's most dramatic intervention in the Gallic Church concerned a dispute between Hilary, the Bishop of Arles, and neighboring bishops who believed that Hilary had over-asserted his authority in the region. For our purposes, what is most noteworthy about this complicated affair is the way in which Leo employs the Petrine topos to justify his intervention in the dispute and to insist that the bishops in Gaul accept his decisions. Leo's summation of the entire affair (contained in *Epistle* 10) dramatically employs St. Peter as a proxy for Leo's own interests and positions. Those who respect Leo's authority are said to respect St. Peter; those who reject the authority of Roman intervention insult St. Peter. But perhaps the most interesting element of the letter is that Leo acknowledges that not everyone is persuaded of the connection between St. Peter and the Roman Church's international authority. To compensate for this, Leo both escalates his rhetorical assertions (anyone who disagrees with Leo's verdict disagrees with Peter) and defends the very connection between Leo and St. Peter. Leo's admission that the Bishop of Arles has been unmoved by the Petrine appeal instructs us that many papal claims to authority in late antiquity were aspirational in nature; they did not necessarily evince broadly held views or actualizable power.

Leo's correspondence with the Eastern Church, particularly as it engaged in the Christological debates, also employed a Petrine rhetoric, but in different patterns from his letters to Latin-speaking audiences. The specifics of the Christological debates are well beyond our scope, but it is worth noting that when Leo first became embroiled in the Eutyches/Flavian squabble in 447 he refrained from asserting any Petrine privilege.[19] Leo supported imperial intervention in the matter, including the emperor's bid to host a council in 449. To this end, Leo sent a flurry of letters (including his famous *Tome*) announcing his decision to send representatives who would articulate his own Christological views.[20] In one of these letters, *Epistle* 33, to the bishops assembled at the Council, Leo chose to present the entire theological question in terms of accepting or rejecting the "teaching of St. Peter," which was nothing other than Leo's own position.

19 Eutyches and Flavian were clerics from Constantinople who entered into a theological dispute over the proper way to interpret the Christological statements of the Council of Ephesus in 431. Flavian, who was the Archbishop of Constantinople, presided over a synod that condemned Eutyches. Eutyches appealed that ruling to Leo in Rome. Ultimately, Leo sided with the theological view of Flavian but the affair became more complex when the "Robber" council of 449 completely ignored Leo's interventions and adopted a theological position opposed to Leo's view.

20 Leo, *Epistles* 26–32. Leo's *Tome* is technically *Epistle* 28 and is his most precise theological statement on the dual nature of Christ. Ultimately, Leo's *Tome* would provide a foundation for the definition of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

When Leo learned months later that this "Robber Synod" had barred his representatives, ignored his letters, and adopted a Christological position at odds with his own, his response was swift and multifaceted, employing every feature of his Petrine authority that he could muster. Between 449 and 454, there is a direct correlation between the assertiveness of Leo's Petrine rhetoric and the weakness of his own position vis-à-vis the recipients of his letters. For example, whenever Leo had a neutral or positive relationship with a correspondent, he avoided any reference to Petrine authority. But in those cases when Leo was writing to critique something that had occurred or whenever he knew that his authority was more in question, he was far more likely to employ the Petrine language.[21]

Leo's involvement in the Christological controversy offers a fascinating episode in the historical development of the Petrine topos for papal ends and especially the way in which it both was and was not embraced by the broader Church. On the one hand, Leo did ultimately succeed in securing international support for his Christological vision. And perhaps his greatest rhetorical victory in this respect was the affirmation that his own position was that of Peter's – the *Acta* of the Council of Chalcedon report that the assembled bishops universally cried out "St. Peter has spoken through Leo."[22] On the other hand, the very same council presented Leo a stinging defeat in that it affirmed that the See of Constantinople was equal in rank to Rome because it was "new Rome." Not only did this declaration, crystallized in Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, reject Roman preeminence, it also, indirectly, acknowledged that a city's ecclesial rank was directly tied to its imperial standing, which was precisely what the Petrine claim was meant to undercut – the notion that the Roman Church's initial position of prominence had been the result of its proximity to imperial power.

Gelasius

If Leo was the pontiff most responsible for connecting the Roman Church's authority to the legacy of St. Peter, Gelasius, who served as the Bishop of Rome from 492 to 496, made the most elaborate claims about the implications of that connection. Not only did Gelasius develop new, more robust, articulations of ecclesial preeminence, he also produced the most decisive

21 See Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter*, 62–70.

22 See Charles Joseph Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church*, vol. 3, *AD 431 to AD 451* (Edinburgh, 1883), 317.

statement of the superiority of the Church vis-à-vis the state prior to the ninth century. While it is not surprising that Gelasius has long been significant for the advocates and detractors of papal power, it is only recently that scholars have begun to understand that many of his assertions of Petrine and papal authority were more aspirational than real.[23]

Gelasius' altercations with the emperor Anastasios (Roman Emperor, 491–518) were a frequent subject of historical study in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but a series of more recent historical studies have revealed the fact that Gelasius also faced opposition in the Roman senate and even among the Italian clergy.[24] In large part, this was because the old Roman nobility continued to enjoy hegemony in Italian political, cultural, and religious life after the ascendency of Christianity and the empire's re-centering in Constantinople. The integration of the local aristocracy into the clerical ranks was a part of the process by which a more powerful papacy would ultimately dominate those facets of Roman life, but this process was far from complete at the end of the fifth century, when members of the Roman senate and other secular elites continued to dictate much of the cultural and religious life of the city.[25]

Take, for example, the continuation of the pagan Lupercalia festival, which on at least one occasion set members of the local aristocracy in direct opposition to Gelasius. The suppression of pagan cults in the city of Rome by the Emperor Gratian in the year 382 CE may have forced a retooling of the festival, but the rite continued and did so without morphing into a Christian ceremony. It is Gelasius, in fact, who provides the most comprehensive extant evidence that the festival remained popular among the inhabitants of Rome and funded by the local aristocracy.[26] Interestingly, the pope's interest in the event was not just about his effort to suppress a pagan festival, it was also about his need to deflect increasing criticism about a member of the clergy as well as his own leadership. In advance of the celebration, Gelasius was informed that a theatrical mocking of the Roman clergy was going to be

23 See, for example, Peter A. B. Llewellyn, "The Roman Clergy during the Laurentian Schism (498–506): A Preliminary Analysis," *Ancient Society* 8 (1977): 245–75; Neil B. McLynn, "Crying Wolf: The Pope and the Lupercalia," *Journal of Roman Studies* 98 (2008): 161–75; see George E. Demacopoulos, "Are All Universalist Politics Local? Pope Gelasius I's International Ambition as a Tonic for Local Humiliation," in *The Bishop of Rome in Late Antiquity*, ed. Geoffrey D. Dunn (Farnham, 2015), 141–54.

24 See Llewellyn, "The Roman Clergy during the Laurentian Schism," 255; McLynn, "Crying Wolf," 161–75.

25 Peter A. B. Llewellyn, "The Roman Church during the Laurentian Schism: Priests and Senators," *Church History* 45(4) (1976): 417–27.

26 Gelasius, *Tractate* 6.

added to the ceremony, on account of the fact that a local priest had been caught in an adulterous affair. Not wanting to be the target of drunken buffoonery, Gelasius threatened to excommunicate the patrons and participants (all Christians) if they did not suppress the public criticism of the clergy.[27] In the end, however, the pope could do nothing to stop the event, nor was he able to diminish the standing of the Roman senator Andromachus who was responsible for it. What we know of the Lupercalia affair stems from a single genre-defying Gelasian treatise that Thiel catalogues as *Tractate* 6 and the *Collectio Avellana* transmits as a letter.[28] Neil McLynn has argued that the treatise should not be construed as a direct assault of the local aristocracy but rather as a kind of internal, face-saving document for the clergy, who might have grown frustrated with Gelasius' inability to protect them from public mockery.[29]

Turning to Gelasius' correspondence, *Epistle* 30 offers the most detailed – if ambiguous – insight into the relationship between the pontiff and the local clergy. It also offers one of the most elaborate invocations of the Petrine topos in his corpus. Although catalogued as a letter, the document is best described as a partisan transcript from a previous legal proceeding in which a local bishop, Misenus, is restored to his previous dignity after having endured a long period of excommunication. Misenus had been the Bishop of Cumae during the tenure of Pope Felix III (r. 483–92) and was serving as papal ambassador to Constantinople in 484 at the height of the altercation with Acacius (Archbishop of Constantinople, 472–89). Misenus made the career-ending mistake of validating Acacius' orthodoxy, thus undermining Felix's hard-line stance against the Eastern Church. Ostensibly, *Epistle* 30 offers a transcript of the conciliar restoration of Misenus' clerical standing. But the document also offers some surprising, indirect evidence of clerical opposition to this restoration. It also presents a chorus of clerical papal affirmations in a Petrine key. With respect to the former, the letter notes that only 80 percent of the local clergy were present for the hearing. As Kelly observes, given that 100 percent participation was customary for such events, it is noteworthy that such a significant percentage of the clergy opposed Gelasius' effort to restore the discredited bishop.[30]

Perhaps the weakness of Gelasius' clerical support helps to explain why *Epistle* 30, as a subsequent partisan account of the hearing, offers such a

27 Gelasius, *Tractate* 6.1.
28 See Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter*, 75–80.
29 McLynn, "Crying Wolf," 174.
30 J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford, 1986), 48.

remarkable rhetorical affirmation of papal authority by Petrine means. For example, the text claims that the assembled bishops declared in unison twenty times, "Christ hear us, give Gelasius a long life!" which was followed ten times by "Do what our Lord Peter does!"[31] Later, near the conclusion of the document, the same affirmations are repeated, but this time they are coupled with the declaration by the bishops: "We acknowledge you as the Vicar of Christ!" and "We see you to be the Apostle Peter!" *Epistle* 30 is, in fact, the oldest extant text affirming the papal title "Vicar of Christ."[32] The second addition, linking Gelasius to Peter, is perhaps less grandiose but no less rhetorically significant. Indeed, it is precisely because Gelasius is "Peter" that he is able to "loose" the sin of Misenus.

Gelasius is likely best known for his letter, *Epistle* 12, to the Roman Emperor Anastasios, which included a provocative distinction between priestly and imperial authority. Gelasius rather famously argues that while God has provided both means of authority, the priestly is ultimately more important because even emperors need the sacraments for their salvation. While the pontiff's musings about secular and priestly authority are significant in their own right, we should not lose sight of the fact that Gelasius' main concern is that the emperor is interfering in the affairs of the Church by supporting a heretical position. Not only should the emperor refrain from asserting theological positions, he should especially refrain from doing so if he is not going to follow the lead of the Bishop of Rome. Indeed, Gelasius asserts that he is the *pontifex* of priestly authority – a mirror image to the emperor's leadership of the imperial government.

Paragraph 9 is perhaps the most important for our present purpose because it affords Gelasius an opportunity to assert his Petrine prerogative in its fullest form. Addressing the obstinacy of the Eastern Church directly, Gelasius argues that it is absurd to think that the authorities of the Eastern Church, men who harbor and conspire with heretics, could possibly interpret the teaching of St. Peter more effectively than the Apostolic See. "True teaching," Gelasius claims, is "Peter's teaching" and vice versa.[33] Gelasius' argument functions like a syllogism: (1) orthodoxy is enshrined in the teaching of St. Peter; (2) the Apostolic See, more than any other see, remains faithful to that teaching; therefore (3) the Apostolic See is the guardian of orthodoxy.

31 Gelasius, *Epistle* 30.
32 Ibid.
33 Gelasius, *Epistle* 12.9.

Epistle 12 effectively acknowledges that neither the emperor nor the Eastern bishops were going to defer to Gelasius on the theological issues associated with the Acacian schism. With this in mind, we might interpret Gelasius' assertions in paragraph 9 as an attempt to mask his own recognition that the Eastern bishops do not accept the claims of a Roman monopoly on Orthodoxy. But one additional thing to consider with this epistle is that the emperor was not the only reader of the letter – it would have been disseminated and read in Rome where the assertions of Petrine privilege might have had a little more currency. In other words, it is conceivable that Gelasius' Petrine posturing in *Epistle* 12 allowed the pontiff to assert for his domestic audience that foreign bishops and the emperor himself (Gelasius' "son," according to the text) took their theological cues from the heir of St. Peter. Whatever role the letter may have played in Gelasius' Eastern diplomacy, it allowed the pontiff to conjure an illusion of international respect that no other domestic authority (lay or ecclesiastical) could equal. And by the ninth century, when Carolingian archivists went hunting for proof of papal power, they found in Gelasius their most useful source.

Gregory

Without question, Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) was the most sophisticated and nuanced all of the late-ancient Roman bishops. Thus, it is not surprising that his engagement with the legacy of St. Peter and his use of the Petrine privilege was more creative and nuanced than that of his predecessors. More than anything – and true to form – Gregory used the traditions surrounding St. Peter to his own pastoral and theological ends. To be sure, Gregory could employ a Petrine discourse when it suited his diplomatic needs, but those needs were almost always determined by a broader pastoral vision.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Gregory's handling of the Petrine legacy is the sharp contrast between the lack of emphasis on Peter's authority in the pontiff's theological works and the treatment of Peter's authority in Gregory's correspondence. Gregory's theological corpus is substantial and includes several biblical commentaries, the *Book of Pastoral Rule*, and a collection of saints' lives, known as the *Dialogues*. None of these works offers a theological justification for Peter's authority. This is not to say that Gregory ignores Peter in his theological works, but rather that Peter functions in Gregory's theological works as a historical and literary resource in the service of pastoral purposes, rather than ecclesiological or diplomatic ends.

More often than not, St. Peter functions as an example of saintly living – his humility, his repentance, his willingness to lead when called to do so, etc. Indeed, Peter is saintly, in Gregory's hands, not because he is the leader of the Christian community, but because he leads the faithful with no concern for his personal prestige.

One aspect of Gregory's Peter that really differentiates him from his papal predecessors is the willingness to emphasize the biblical Peter's shortcomings. In the *Moralia in Job*, there are nearly a dozen occasions where Gregory exposes one of Peter's various faults for the purpose of emphasizing a theological point about the value of vigilance, humility, or pastoral leadership. At various points, Gregory suggests that Peter has a carnal mind, misunderstands the purpose of the transfiguration, fails to comprehend why the Gentiles do not need circumcision, and, of course, denies Christ three times.[34] His purpose, of course, is not to denigrate Peter specifically, but to use the apostle's failings, and especially his rehabilitation, as an opportunity to promote Gregory's own larger pastoral goals. Even so, given the precedent of Leo and Gelasius, it is noteworthy that Gregory's theological works demonstrate no need to link Peter's authority to that of the Roman Church or to the pontiff himself as Peter's heir.

It is in Pope Gregory's massive correspondence – the largest surviving collection from the ancient world – where we find the Petrine legacy more conventionally employed. But here, too, we discover a more nuanced and creative use of the Petrine traditions. Take, for example, the way in which St. Peter appears in the letters that Gregory sent to the island of Sicily. Among other things, we learn from this collection that prior to embarking upon a clerical or administrative appointment in Sicily, Gregory's agents were obliged to swear an oath at the tomb of St. Peter.[35] Employing the physical space of Peter's tomb represents an important expansion of the way that Petrine authority could be used as an instrument of papal power and exclusion. Whereas Leo and Gelasius had loaded their Petrine arsenals with mostly rhetorical weapons, Gregory added the ritualistic exercise of public submission at the very locus of papal power – the tomb of St. Peter.

Elsewhere in the Sicilian correspondence, we also learn of the ways in which Gregory used his Petrine authority to scrutinize clerical behavior and reinforce Roman jurisdiction. During Gregory's tenure, his agents brought six of Sicily's thirteen bishops to Rome for trial for a variety of

34 See, for example, Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, 3.20, 8.54.92, 29.22.42, and 9.24.54.
35 Gregory, *Epistle* 1.70.

alleged crimes. Even in those cases where the pontiff found the accused bishop innocent, he was still required to swear an oath of innocence at the tomb of St. Peter.[36] Another way that Gregory subtly reinforced Rome's jurisdiction over the island was by requiring the bishops of Sicily to gather every year on the feast of SS. Peter and Paul and every third year the same bishops were expected to travel to Rome for the commemoration. Gregory dispensed with Leo's tradition of having subordinate bishops assemble on the anniversary of his own election, noting that there was no reason to pursue such "ostentatious vanity."[37]

Gregory's diplomatic efforts among the Lombard, Merovingian, Visigothic, and Saxon aristocracy marked a significant expansion of papal activity in Western Europe. For our purposes, what is most important about these relationships is the way in which Gregory employed the figure of St. Peter and especially a distribution of his relics to achieve his diplomatic ends. For example, when Gregory sought to correct the Lombards or Merovingians with respect to the orthodoxy of their belief – particularly as it related to the Three Chapters controversy – Gregory was quick to assert his theological authority on the basis of Petrine teaching.[38] In fact, over the course of this particular controversy, Gregory learned to drop any mention of the Emperor Justinian and instead to emphasize the papal connection to the hallowed apostle. Gregory similarly harnessed Peter's orthodox integrity as he sought to pressure the Merovingian rulers of Gaul to suppress simony in the Gallic Church. The same rulers were requested to support the papal lands in their region, "out of their love for St. Peter."[39]

Over the course of his tenure, Gregory sent the relics of St. Peter to a little more than a dozen persons, including Merovingian and Visigothic rulers.[40] These relics consisted of filings from the chains that had supposedly bound St. Peter during his imprisonment in Rome. These filings were placed inside of a small key, symbolic of Christ's having granted the keys of heaven to St. Peter. As he distributed the relics to his select group of patrons and clients, Gregory issued various instructions about their care. This distribution of relics was more than a transmission of sanctified objects; it was an act of diplomacy

36 Gregory, *Epistle* 2.29.
37 Gregory, *Epistles*, appendix I.
38 The "Three Chapters controversy" refers to the condemnation of texts and authors at the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, 553 CE). Pope Vigilius attended the council and confirmed its positions, but his participation was coerced by imperial authorities, and many bishops in Northern Italy refused to accept its verdicts.
39 Gregory, *Epistle* 6.5.
40 See Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter*, 150–52.

designed to achieve ecclesiastical goals for the Church of Rome. And they did so by expanding, once again, the way in which the cult of St. Peter could be tied directly to the Roman Church's international engagement.

Of all Gregory's international engagements, none tested the ecclesiological perspective of his diplomatic skill more completely than the showdown with the Bishop of Constantinople over the latter's use of the title "Ecumenical Patriarch." Rather than rehearse the entire affair, let us simply observe the ways in which Gregory employed the Petrine topos in his efforts to rebuff the patriarch personally and attempt to build a consensus for his own position.[41] Beginning in June of 595, Gregory wrote to a number of influential figures about the title: the emperor, the Eastern patriarchs, and to Patriarch John himself. In each of these letters, Gregory employed the Petrine topos, but did so very differently. To Patriarch John, Gregory's reference to St. Peter is very subtle – he is only mentioned once, as an example of apostolic collegiality.[42] When writing to the emperor, however, Gregory maximizes the biblical justifications of Roman privilege and then follows with the assertion that even though St. Peter "received the keys of the heavenly kingdom, was granted the power to bind and loose, and the care of the entire Church and the empire was committed to him, and yet even he is not called the universal apostle."[43] With the patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria, Gregory took yet another approach. After an initial round of letters proved unsuccessful, the pontiff shifted gears to capitalize upon a variety of popular apocryphal traditions connecting St. Peter to St. Mark, thereby joining the three apostolic centers of Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria.[44] Gregory stressed that the Bishops of Alexandria and Antioch should be Rome's natural ally in the effort to curb the unprecedented pride of the Bishop of Constantinople, a city that, unlike theirs, was founded upon imperial rather than apostolic foundations. Even though Gregory's efforts to suppress the ecumenical title ultimately achieved little in terms of concrete action in the East, the affair demonstrates that Gregory, like his predecessors, turned to the rhetorical possibilities provided by Peter's association with the Roman Church when all other diplomatic efforts had failed and Roman prestige was most in question.

41 Gregory objected to John of Constantinople's use of the title "Ecumenical Patriarch" in his correspondence. Gregory contended that it was a title of "pride." See George E. Demacopoulos, "Gregory the Great and the Sixth-Century Dispute over the Ecumenical Title," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 600–21.

42 Gregory, *Epistle* 5.44.

43 Gregory, *Epistle* 5.37.

44 Gregory, *Epistle* 5.41.

Conclusion

By the conclusion of the sixth century, a string of Roman bishops had helped to create a Petrine discourse that stretched and bridged a series of distinctive narratives, legends, and ritual traditions connecting the famous apostle to the city of Rome and especially the Roman bishop who had supposedly inherited Peter's unique authority. To the extent that the development and control of discourse can be seen as a key to social power, then the papal expansion and promotion of the Petrine discourse along self-interested lines should certainly be seen as one of the critical factors that contributed to the papacy's ascendancy over other power structures in Western Europe in the Middle Ages.

What is so fascinating about the period between Leo I and Gregory I is that the development of the Petrine papacy was typically not accompanied by actual papal strength – the escalations in rhetoric did not match actualized or actualizable authority – but instead often occurred because of frustration, humiliation, and internal dissent. It is one of the great ironies of the papal story that its most significant rhetorical and narrative advances were designed to mask its most troubling problems. With time, the papacy was able to minimize and ultimately suppress those humiliations through a combination of self-perpetuating papal biographies and editorial erasure. But it was the invention of a decidedly Roman, ecclesiologically sovereign, dogmatically orthodox, and inherently malleable Peter that ultimately enabled the ascendency of the See of Rome.

It would be interesting to apply a similar methodological approach to the writings and other activities of the subsequent Carolingian advocates of papal power in the eighth and ninth centuries. To what extent was their mining of ancient papal rhetoric and precedent an effort to compensate for contemporary factionalism and resistance to papal claims of authority? Did these authors have any sense of the genuine challenges faced by Leo, Gelasius, and Gregory? And how did these concerns drive the editorial decision-making (and erasure) when they transformed ancient papal papyri archives to vellum, effectively cementing the picture of the late-ancient papacy that we now have?