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Imperator Novus:

**Charting the transfer of Rome's imperial past
to the papacy's eighth century present**

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Classical Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Studies

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Abstract

When did Roman imperial iconography become part of the position of pope? This thesis will highlight the eighth century as a time of notable change in papal authority and identity. The developing papacy — in competition with rival contenders for Rome's past — produced two key documents that portrayed the pope as an inheritor of the Roman Empire. In these sources, the bishop of Rome took on an entirely new identity as an *imperator novus*. While the eighth century continued, the pope gradually appeared increasingly imperial, concluding with a coronation that crowned emperor and pope, alike.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Saint Peter's Square looks ready to burst, packed with pilgrims and Roman residents alike. Frozen marble visages of long dead saints surround the square, pondering the crowd below. Countless eyes watch the March sky for traces of smoke as crimson-clad cardinals cast ballots behind the sealed doors of the Vatican. Under the masterfully painted ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, an election is underway. The conclave is on its second day and four separate ballots have already been held to decide on a new pope. As the sea of spectators shifts in the illuminated square, Jorge Mario Bergoglio appears on the balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica. Now called Pope Francis, he delivers his first speech to millions of ears tuning in from around the globe. @Pontifex proudly wrapped up the event by tweeting "HABEMUS PAPAM."¹

How did the bishop of Rome grow his influence to adopt the special distinction of pope, alongside the responsibility of leading the entire Roman Catholic Church? These are the undercurrents that directed my research into the history of the papacy and set off the findings that will populate the rest of this thesis. The description above of the 2013 papal conclave is a demonstration of the enduring and seismic influence the pope wields in our modern moment. Yet, the story of the papacy is by no means a recent development, with roots going back to the first followers of Christ. Unraveling the path the bishop of Rome took to today would be an Odyssey.² Rather than attempting to take that treacherous, lengthy trail through centuries of gradual developments, we will take a more navigable course by looking at a key juncture. What follows is an analysis of a specific

¹ Laura Nelson, "Pope Francis I: First tweet is 'HABEMUS PAPAM FRANCISCUM,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 2013, 1.

² Eusebius, *The Church History*, trans. Paul Luther Maier, (Kregel, 2007).

time period —the eighth century. Many pieces were in motion at this point, with old powers failing, while newer political entities were just being born. The eighth century was a time of a series of political upheavals that were quietly taken advantage of by the still-developing papacy. In the span of 100 years, the map of Italy would be redrawn, and several important players would actually be erased. During this time of great change, it is my contention that the pope fully stepped into his carefully curated position as the inheritor of Rome and an *imperator* of a borderless empire, poised to impact events throughout subsequent global powers with his influence.

On Christmas Day of 800 CE, our journey along the growth of papal authority in the eighth century concludes with a coronation for two.³ We will revisit this snapshot in time after highlighting the domestic roots of the papacy, noting key political powers of the day and exploring both the Donation of Constantine and letters from Pope Hadrian that reflect the developing Imperial mindset and signaling from the pope. Ultimately the pope, as a result of pushes from rivals and pulls toward the afterglow of Roman Imperialism, began to truly embody the manufactured identity of an *imperator novus* in the eighth century.

What is a pope, really?

More than anything, the pope is a composite of roles and identities. There was no pre-planned path to a single title. Rather, pope after pope grafted and absorbed new terms, responsibilities, and honorifics. It seemed that hardly anything was off limits, as the papacy would repurpose everything from domestic terms of endearment to senatorial titles. *Imperator novus* is an identifier that does not appear in the sources I reviewed.

³ John O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 65.

Instead, it is a lens I created, through which we should view the papacy during the eighth century. It highlights the increasingly imperial actions of the papacy as they tapped each of their adopted identities for authority in a century of great change.

Meanwhile, the core purpose of the pope has remained remarkably similar, despite being magnified many times over in its scope. The name “pope” comes from *papa*, meaning “grand old man.” Originally it was a non-exclusive term that any seasoned bishop could lay claim to.⁴ The bishop of Rome was a *papa* to guide newly converted regions and those with less experience. In this sense, Rome’s bishop was a model, expected to demonstrate what a properly functioning church should look like.⁵ Beyond the increased fanfare and prestige, the modern bishop of Rome, the only pope, very much still fulfills this role. Priests to cardinals across the globe can expect leadership and direction from the Vatican. This, in essence, is what a pope is — a leader and interpreter of the Catholic faith. Yet, clearly there is more to the modern interpretation of this role.

The pope of today has autonomy over a sovereign state, Vatican City; manages the state’s wealth, which is around \$10 to 15 billion; and is the spiritual leader to 1.3 billion people around the world.⁶ Furthermore, wielding a sort of spiritual bully pulpit, the bishop of Rome can draw public attention to issues ranging from climate change to geopolitics. A striking example of this is Pope Benedict XVI speaking to the United Nations about the role of the Catholic Church in broadcasting moral universalism.⁷ And

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 114.

⁵ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 114.

⁶ Carol Glatz, "Vatican Statistics Show Continued Growth in Number of Catholics Worldwide," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 26, 2021. &

Tamila McDonald, "The Vatican and Pope Francis' Net Worth," *AllThingsfinance*, March 2018.

⁷ Ian Fisher and Michael M. Grynbaum, "Pope Benedict XVI stresses human rights at UN speech," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2008.

while recent scandals within the Vatican may have rocked the organization's unquestioned moral superiority, the pope still speaks from a position that is unique and more complex than other world leaders, in terms of the spiritual weight it carries. Furthermore, far from everyone who hears the pope's words is a Catholic, yet the fact that they still hear the words at all is significant and demonstrates the volume with which he broadcasts. These observations allow us to modernize our "grand old man" definition of the papacy, by noting the elevated range in communication, increased material holdings, and internationally recognized leadership of a sovereign state.⁸

Any study of the modern papacy would be inadequate if it did not note the many Imperial Roman titles and customs that have grown around the pope. *Pontifex maximus* is as strikingly Roman as it is papal. Originating during the days of the Roman Republic as the supreme priest, the *pontifex maximus* was the highest authority on questions of religious law. Among the responsibilities of this post were the administration of lower magistrates, establishment of new religious spaces, and leading rituals. The papacy later adopted the title by the end of the fourth century and it endures to today.⁹ Furthermore, we can see echoes of the Roman *pontifex maximus*' responsibilities within the modern papacy, from establishing churches to heading an extensive religious administration. Part of said administration is the Roman Curia, essentially a series of agencies within the Vatican that help the pope run the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ The origin of this group's title clearly refers to the *curia*, the meeting location for the Roman Senate from the

⁸ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 114.

⁹ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "pontifex," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified September 8, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pontifex>.

¹⁰ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Roman Curia," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified May 15, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Curia>.

republic into the empire.¹¹ In fact, even the hierarchy of the church is similar to the Roman Empire. It is customary for the next pope to be chosen from a relatively small council of influential elders in the church that manage their own regions, known as cardinals. Meanwhile, influential military figures that oftentimes had connections with the defunct imperial senate arose from this council of elders to lead the empire as well. These initial observations inform our definition of pope, adding an imperial, Roman element to our definition of an influential, loud-spoken, and grand old man. There are also older titles worth examining that are connected to family structure.

Domestic Origins

The Roman church is inseparably bound to the domestic space from which it originated. The Christian faith in Rome did not start as a single centralized church — or even as a common community. Rather, countless house churches ran themselves and acted as the staging ground for a much more Christian Rome.¹² In fact, a massive house church stretches beneath the site of the present basilica SS. John and Paul.¹³ This is a physical representation of Rome's transformation from paganism to Christianity within the domestic sphere, and highlights the organization of these early domestic places of worship. Administrating a religion from a home with little to no revenue and a government that ranges from indifferent to oppressive is a challenging task. Any religious system will have deep connections with where people live. After all, questions surrounding how to live ethically will naturally involve where people eat, sleep, and

¹¹ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "curia," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified May 15, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/curia-ancient-Roman-government>.

¹² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 11.

¹³ Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 56.

spend time with family. One might think that prior to conversion, Roman households were radically different, likely stained with sacrifice and occult ritual. However, pagan practice of household gods paradoxically translated to monotheistic, Christian practices with ease. Instead of any specific family god, Christian households found a patron saint to display images of and pray to.¹⁴ Interestingly this swift adoption speaks to the relationship between religion and culture. The pagan practices were obviously informed by religion and resulted in cultural practices. Meanwhile, the new Christian model, plastered over the old, seems to be informed by the existing culture and impacts religious practices. All of this to be said, adoption of Christian practice was rapid in the fourth-century Roman households, especially at the wealthier end of society.¹⁵ Considering how important Christianity was in households, how did the bishop of Rome weigh into the everyday domestic lives of Romans?

There is a compelling argument among scholars that the Roman household is where the papacy solidified their grip in Roman society. In Professor Kristina Sessa's book, *The Formation of Papal Authority*, she writes extensively about Christianity, the Roman household, and how the bishop of Rome fits between the two. After an effective dissection of the Roman household, professor Sessa dives into its impacts on the papacy, writing that,

What gives these developments historical significance in the long term is that expertise in household management gradually became tied to the office of the bishop and embedded within the institution of the Roman church. Of the five bishops listed previously only Gregory had a senatorial pedigree and was a former public official. His extraordinary facility with domestic administration and his signature development of the discourse had much to do with his own background as an aristocratic *paterfamilias*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 56.

¹⁵ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 55-56.

¹⁶ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 277.

Professor Sessa's point harkens back to Christianity's roots in house churches, but takes it a step further by working in familial and estate management. Earlier in her book, she wrote that public reception — and even professional development of an individual — could be deeply impacted by how one ran their household. Part of effectively running a domestic space was managing estates and leading an ethical and religious *domus*.¹⁷ Both of these metrics have obvious parallels with the pope's efforts and in particular, the papacy of the eighth century. During this time period, the bishop of Rome would come into more property than ever before and squeezing revenue out of these lands would not only afford him more protection, but now bear on how the public judged him. Lastly, professor Sessa points out that, "In fact, domestic religion was carried out through the very social hierarchies that defined the domestic sphere."¹⁸ Tying Christianity to a domestic hierarchy could have impacts beyond the household. Professor Sessa actually posits that leaders in the church and households were brought "... together thereby creating the possibilities for episcopal leadership in Rome Italy and beyond."¹⁹ These points indicate that there was both an existing domestic hierarchy, and that the Roman household and the Roman church were growing closer.

The Roman household is a piece of papal authority and is important for understanding the impact of women on the papacy. Our earlier *papa* definition for the pope originally comes from the Greek *παππας*, "father."²⁰ Applying the Greek *παππας* to the church's *papa* indicates that we should take the Roman church to be a household of

¹⁷ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 35.

¹⁸ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 55.

¹⁹ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 281.

²⁰ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "pope," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified March 2, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pope>.

its own, with the pope as the figurehead. For the papacy, building on the existing hierarchies that these households have created through Pagan — then Christian — practices was helpful. Constructing an identity as a family-centric figure was a huge priority for *imperator*, like Augustus.²¹ In fact, the term *pater* — “father” — had a dual role, existing in the Roman government and family structure.²² Adopting familial terms was also effective in an intimate way. Tying the pope to familiar figures in the lives of Christians with terms of endearment like — *παππας* — is a way of connecting him to a broader audience.

Both the patriarchal structure of the Roman household, and the power the *pater* wielded within it, were a valuable source of papal authority, and determined how women were encoded within papal history. Women were essential in running the Roman church’s institutions and property management, creating an outsized impact on papal power.²³ This is an effect that is not superficially seen in the male-dominated coronation we will examine, but helped make it possible. Furthermore, aristocratic women strengthened the fifth century Church with large donations. Melania the Younger is a famous case of such generosity, and she donated much of vast her wealth to religious causes, which at its height included a mega-estate, at least 8,000 slaves, and a grand *domus* on the Caelian Hill.²⁴

The focus of this thesis is admittedly gendered and discusses the history of a particularly patriarchal figure, and while women are largely sidelined in this paper, they were deeply impactful in the papacy’s story. Ultimately, the pope’s additional identity as a

²¹ Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook*, (1517 Media, 2013), 13-42.

²² Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "pater patriae," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified August 9, 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pater-patriae>.

²³ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 124.

²⁴ Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy*, 38-59.

pseudo-father for the Roman people is more of a gemstone in the crown of an *imperator novus*, rather than its own right to rule. To see where this crown originated, we must dig into the pope's own origins.

History of the papacy prior to the eighth century

Perhaps the most apt place to begin unpacking the history of Rome's bishop is to start with the first, Peter the Apostle, whose involvement in Rome — alongside Paul the Apostle — was aggrandized by later members of the Roman church. Arriving in Rome between the spry ages of 55-59, as sources vary, Peter discovered an already established Christian church in Rome.²⁵ This goes against the *status quo*, which places Peter and Paul as the founders of the Roman church and its later Catholic form. In fact, it is more likely that the two were only minorly involved in the early Roman church, but were lionized by later Catholic figures hoping to establish stronger ties between Christianity and Rome by connecting apostles to the Roman church's origin.²⁶ The evidence for this association-building is vast and examples range from the enshrinement of Saint Peter's tomb within the Vatican, to naming a basilica after him, and even crowning him as the first pope. This thickens the mystery surrounding the growth of papal authority and the importance of their identity crafting. In fact, if Peter's identity as the first bishop was also a product of later Roman church manufacturing, this is a great example of authority being invented rather than inherited. The reason for Peter and Paul's limited involvement in the Roman church is the aforementioned domestic structure of Christianity within Rome throughout the first and part of the second centuries. In the time before the two apostles

²⁵ Michael Grant, *Saint Peter: a biography*, (Barnes and Noble, 1994), 150.

²⁶ Grant, *Saint Peter*, 149.

arrived, Christianity had developed as many scattered house churches, as opposed to a single unified community. Thus Peter's actual role was not as the bishop of Rome as we have thus far described him, but was more nebulous and ill-defined.²⁷ It is more challenging to act as the head of an administration and interpreter of faith to numerous communities that have had time to develop and differentiate themselves, instead of a single church structure with subordinate branches. Considering this unsteady start, why is it that Rome — and the slightly less contentious bishops after Peter — have gone on to take such a prominent position within the Catholic Faith?

The answer to this question lies with the actions of a watershed figure that despite not being a pope, led the Roman church to newfound heights. By the mid-second century a single papal leader had emerged with at least a tenuous grasp on the different parts of the community.²⁸ This is important, because as time went on and the faith grew, decisive leadership would be essential in situating the Roman church as an important player in Christianity and the eventual head of Catholicism. Rome had an advantage among other churches in questions of leadership and belief due to its designation as an apostolic church, that is they claim a close relationship with both Saint Peter and Paul.²⁹ Yet, this distinction would ultimately be only part of the church's claim to authority. The other would be the initial might and then afterglow of the Roman Empire. Beginning by preventing further state-sponsored persecutions with the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity an officially tolerated religion, Emperor Constantine would go on to shape the future of the faith for better and worse. Constantine, going by the title *koinos episkopos*, or “common bishop”, would position the Roman church for future dominance,

²⁷ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 11.

²⁸ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 15.

²⁹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 15.

while simultaneously planting the seeds for their eventual Orthodox rivals in Byzantium. By bringing many church officials together to decide on issues at the first council of Nicaea and founding several churches, Constantine acted as far more of a pope than the bishop title he claimed.³⁰ In fact, the frequent calls to Constantine by future popes reveal that he was a figure they desired to identify with. It is easy to understand why: his actions were seemingly far more papal than anything we have proof of Saint Peter doing in Rome. He also uplifted several contemporary popes. Constantine's gift of Lateran's future site to Pope Miltiades and his invitation for the Council of Nicaea to Pope Sylvester brought them into the fold on important matters and gave them valuable land.³¹ It is during and after Constantine that Rome appears to transition from a place of persecution to a position of power. Without Constantine's sponsorship, it is unlikely that we would see so many Roman titles and references from subsequent popes.

Even further in the fourth century is when the bishop of Rome began to repurpose *pontifex maximus*. Beyond the already discussed connotations of the title, the chronology of it reflects the final piece in our definition of the pope. As rival sects of Christianity emerged, Arianism, which contended that Jesus was strictly mortal, stood as particularly popular in the eastern portion of the empire.³² This hinted at the largely religious divisions that would never end between East and West Christendom. In response to Arianism, the Roman church elected a series of anti-Arian popes, one of whom was named Damascus and ruled from 366-384.³³ Likely recognizing the growth of rival interpretations of the faith as a danger to the authority of the Roman church and its

³⁰ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 26-29.

³¹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 31.

³² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 29.

³³ O'Malley *A history of the Popes*, 36.

bishop, Damascus took action. It was under his time as pope that the term *pontifex maximus*, a term with no Greek counterpart, was refurbished for papal use.³⁴ Broadcasting an exclusively Roman title emphasized that questions of faith were, themselves, exclusively Roman matters, as well. Returning to our definition of a pope from earlier, we can round out our distinctly Roman, communicative, example-setting, and grand old man with an inventive spirit to boot. This adoption of prior imperial Roman authority would not only be reflected in future centuries, but accelerate and come to a climax in the eighth century.

The Eighth Century

This thesis will examine the eighth century by looking into the political powers that shaped it. At the center of this analysis will be the Franks and Byzantines, but the Lombards and Abbasids had a significant effect on the papacy's efforts to become an *imperator novus*. Two primary sources regarding papal identity — The Donation of Constantine and letters from Pope Hadrian — will be connected to their most relevant eighth century powers. The section will begin with the Lombards, who are a good starting point for many of the changes the papacy underwent.

The Lombards

The first state that harbors relevance to our focus is the Kingdom of the Lombards. Oddly enough, the modern papacy owes a significant amount of gratitude to Lombard aggression, as their raids were, for all intents and purposes, a catalyst for papal authority. The Lombards arrived in Italy in 568 CE at the tail end of a period of great

³⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, "pontifex."

movement for several bands of people traditionally labeled as barbarians by the Romans.³⁵ They were a Germanic tribe with their capital in Pavia, but ambitions for all of Italy and would go on to be a constant source of concern to the bishop of Rome for several centuries. Under the self-ascribed accolade, the Lord of Italy, the kings of Lombard staged invasions that would take them from Milan in 569 CE to the gates of Rome, several times, and in the blink of an eye.³⁶ Prior to their Catholic conversion, the Lombards were Arian, which did not contribute favorably to the Roman church's opinion of them. Being of the Arian interpretation was not unusual for Germanic groups, aside from one in particular, which will become relevant later on.³⁷ Despite the commonness of the Arian interpretation in Germanic groups, it did little to temper the heretical first impression that the Lombards left on the Roman church. Ultimately, the legacy of the Lombards is not in the lands that they conquered or their own lasting contributions in the physical world. Rather, there is one thing they should be remembered for: pressure.

Today there is no sovereign Lombard state in Northern Italy, but there is Vatican City. How is it that Lombard attacks built up the papacy, rather than obliterated it? In the centuries following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Rome was no stranger to invasion. The city endured raids from Visigoths, Huns, and even debatably, the Byzantines. However, what made these attacks bearable was that they were acute affairs that ended in brief violence, a payout, and then relative peace. The Lombards were different: they were after land, not gold.³⁸ In prior raids, a leader was needed to both negotiate with aggressors and facilitate the delivery of the ransom they levied. The

³⁵ Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, (University of California Press, 2004), 15.

³⁶ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 43.

³⁷ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 15.

³⁸ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 39-43.

Byzantines were distant and not suited for this role — we will discuss them further later on. Their absence placed the responsibility squarely on the pope, who emerged as the defender of Rome. With the burden of the city's defense came the boon of elevated authority that only seemed to grow as raids continued. Yet, while a raid every century might slowly expand papal power, it pales in comparison to the impact of the Lombards. Having an ever present, existential threat in the north that not only refuses to leave, but ruthlessly expands, increases the need for leadership to guide the city of Rome to a safer standing. This is a role that the papacy eagerly stepped into, reminiscent of the emperors of old who were also tasked with the city's protection. However, the Roman church was not a traditionally powerful institution. There was no large military force for them to call on. The bishop of Rome's strength was not in muscle, but in speech. Careful diplomacy, less-than authentic documents, and identity-building would help a series of popes persuade another, massive eighth century power to conquer the Lombards. The Lombards certainly gave the papacy motive to grow stronger and project the image of an emperor, but the Franks made it possible.

The Franks I

The Frankish Kingdom shared several key attributes with the Roman church that would make a partnership more palatable than other potential allies. The Roman church is firmly rooted in Imperial Roman tradition. However, they are not alone in their use of symbols and iconography. Countless nations have repurposed Roman tokens to build identity. The United States' eagle and senate readily come to mind. The Franks also attempted to draw a connection to Rome, but in a way that gives them a simultaneously

fraternal and elevated position. Frankish myth claims that they descended from a Trojan prince named Francio that, like Aeneas, was descended from Priam, fled Troy, and led his people to a new home in Western Europe.³⁹ This is a strategic claim that does several things at once: It gives the Franks an origin that can be used for subsequent nation building and to bridge any rifts that begin to form between people, as time passes on. By having Trojan forbearers, the Franks have an ancestral bond with the Romans, putting them on equal footing and validating any machinations that they might have at ruling previous Roman holdings. Lastly, there is nuance in their selection of Francio as opposed to Aeneas. They have an identity that is unique from Rome and can argue that they are actually better suited to rule. Instead of just being peers, they are potentially superior.

Another shared trait between the Franks and the Roman church was faith, itself. Many Germanic peoples were successfully converted to Christianity, but this did not make them proper followers in the eyes of the Roman church. This is because groups like the Goths and Lombards followed the Arian form of Christianity.⁴⁰ Considering this was an era rapidly building toward the conflicts of religion that would characterize the medieval landscape, it is understandable that the rift between Arians and Catholics was a sizable one. Yet in this regard, the Franks and papacy were on the same page, as neither were under the Arian persuasion. As early as 496 CE the Frankish king, Clovis, was converted by the bishop of the region to Catholicism.⁴¹ The importance of this development is less apparent in any division between the Franks and other Germanic groups, and more so in the common cause it placed between them and the Roman church.

³⁹ Andrea Giardina has written extensively regarding Frankish claims of Trojan descent in the essay "Le origini troiane dall'impero alla nazione," In the journal *Spoletto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* 45 (1989). Barbero notes the first source written on Trojan origins is a chronicle from 660 CE attributed to Fredegarius. Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 13.

⁴⁰ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 14.

⁴¹ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 14-15.

Their conversion tied them to the bishop of Rome for interpretations of faith and the administration of their churches. These realms certainly garnered authority and a working relationship with the pope but other levies would be needed to build the military alliance the papacy so desperately needed with the Franks.

Surprisingly, the shared characteristics between the Roman church and the Franks may have been a solid foundation, but their partnership slowly grew over the course of several kings and popes. The first pope to recognize the value of deepening Frankish ties was Pope Gregory III, who twice — from 739-740 CE — dispatched embassies to Charles Martel with offers to make him consul and patrician if he fought off the Lombards. Martel, himself, had emerged as leader of the Franks and — followed by his son and grandson — would deliver the papacy to the very heights it proclaimed itself to be worthy of. What is particularly interesting are the titles of *consul* and *patricius* that Pope Gregory III extended in return for aid, which ultimately did not entice Martel enough to intervene at this point.⁴² Nonetheless, the fact that the pope felt he had enough power to grant Imperial Roman titles is monumental in charting how the papacy crafted their identity as an *imperator novus*. The pope is not offering Christian honors or sainthood in return for help. What the pope is offering is something uniquely Roman: titles that his Byzantine counterparts are choosing to not use. Nor is the pope revealing his entire hand at this point in time by offering Martel the position of full-scale emperor. Instead, Martel would be equivalent to the aristocrats that supported and oftentimes became popes, themselves. This preserves the role of emperor and defender of Rome to continue being *de facto* papal. We will again see the papacy bestowing imperial Roman titles toward a Frankish king, but on a grander scale.

⁴² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 58-65.

While Martel held off on combating the Lombards, his descendants would, much to the Roman church's delight, take a different tack. Charles Martel died in 750 CE and the seed was sown for his son Pepin the Short to negotiate with a series of popes. It was with Pepin that things began to gather speed after Pope Stephen II crossed the Alps to meet him in Ponthion in 754 CE. The two world leaders were finally in the same room and established a series of landmark agreements. Pepin promised to aid Rome if called upon, set aside large land holdings to become the Papal Estates, and was anointed patrician of the Romans by Stephen.⁴³ It is clear to see that, from the Roman church's perspective, this was everything they could want: protection from the Lombards, lands under their exclusive jurisdiction, and the Franks occupying a post bestowed by the papacy and thereby subservient to it. Surely some bargaining chip was deployed to get this many concessions from the Franks?

Primary Source I: An Eighth Century Forgery

A famous document, with a less than honest history, reveals the identity the papacy was attempting to craft as an *imperator novus*, beginning with the very first line. The Donation of Constantine likely appeared in Rome around the mid-eighth century and is widely known as a forgery. The supposed gift, written in Latin, claims that Constantine offered jurisdiction of the entire Western portion of the Roman Empire to the papacy, alongside the imperial crown.⁴⁴ The timing of the document's origin is as interesting as the colossal claims it makes. Placing the creation of this donation to shortly before or after Pepin's own donation seems fitting, meaning it was likely written under or by Pope

⁴³ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 58-59.

⁴⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 73-74.

Stephen II.⁴⁵ After all, Constantine's purported promise gave the papacy the authority that they needed to accept the vast lands that Pepin offered to Stephen.⁴⁶ Shockingly, the Donation of Constantine was considered legitimate until it was soundly proven fictitious during the 15th century.⁴⁷

However, what does the document actually say? Ernest F. Henderson translated the work in his 1910 book, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*. The letter begins,

In the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity, the Father, namely, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine in Christ Jesus, the Lord I God our Saviour, one of that same holy Trinity,-faithful merciful, supreme, beneficent, Alamannic, Gothic, Sarmatic, Germanic, Britannic, Hunic, pious, fortunate, victor and triumpher, always august:...

Immediately, the alleged author of the document is made clear, illuminated by his many glowing titles. The Roman church, the real author, has also made sure to couch Constantine between references to the Holy Trinity, while emphasizing his dedication to the faith. The papacy is attempting to do two things at once. First, they want to both adopt the mantle of emperor so they can make themselves more imperial; but they also want to make the role of emperor more rooted in Christian faith. After all, if it becomes a requirement to be a spiritual leader to rule, then who better to rule Rome than the head of the Roman church? The section above is directed at accomplishing the latter. Portraying the emperor as a follower of the faith and member of the church has its benefits. If

⁴⁵ Translation by Ernest F. Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, (London and New York: G. Bell & Sons, 1910), 319-329.

⁴⁶ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 59.

⁴⁷ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 74.

⁴⁸ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

completely adopting the imperial throne fails, then at least the emperor has to be obsequious to the papacy in questions of faith and, subsequently, their own interests.

Another noteworthy part of Constantine's introduction is its inclusion of peoples he defeated — counting the group “Hunic” — among others.⁴⁹ The group would be infamous after the fourth century, but was not studied by historians — and thereby known to Roman elites — until at least 395 CE.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Constantine himself was born around a time in the 280s CE and lived until 337 CE.⁵¹ These times are clearly inconsistent with one another. A document that the emperor had supposedly written bestows him with military victories over a group that is unknown at this point in time. What is much more likely is that the papacy, holding Rome's sackages fresh in mind — and vividly remembering Attila — wanted to assert dominance over the Huns and other peripheral threats on the frontiers. This is made possible by ascribing the rule of the Huns to Constantine as a way station, who is now gifting all of his holdings to the papacy. The transfer of authority that the papacy is angling for with the Huns applies to every group listed in Constantine's titles. It is no coincidence that so many of these groups were part of the movement of Germanic peoples in the later part of the Roman Empire. If the papacy were to rule over these peoples, rather than be invaded by them, they would have to re-establish the imperial boundaries that they so desire. Their partnership with the Franks will make it possible to reconquer these groups, but they are laying the justification for it through Constantine. Finally ending Constantine's bevy of honors is the term “always august”.⁵² This is yet another indicator of the link to the chain that runs

⁴⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁵⁰ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Hun," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified March 12, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hun-people>.

⁵¹ J.F. Matthews & Donald MacGillivray Nicol, "Constantine I," Encyclopedia Britannica, March 13, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-I-Roman-emperor>.

⁵² Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

from papacy to Constantine and then to Augustus. If Constantine is entitled to all of these honors, which he will ultimately transfer to the papacy, then there is a great deal to be gained for the pope in lionizing the first Christian emperor.⁵³ The papacy's efforts to ascribe their identity to those that came before is by no means an isolated phenomenon; it is an undercurrent throughout all nations and individuals.

Reading further on, the letter now switches focus and describes its recipient. The supposed recipient of the letter is Pope Sylvester and in the course of describing him emphasizes the dominance of the Roman church in Christian affairs. Sylvester, who sat in the seat of Saint Peter from 314-331 CE, appears to have primarily contributed a legacy of far-fetched legends. It is well known, but ultimately a myth, that he cured Constantine of leprosy or was a large sway on his decision to become Christian.⁵⁴ The Donation's description of the pope seems less grounded in reality and more so honeyed. It goes as follows,

...to the most holy and blessed father of fathers Sylvester, bishop of the city of and to all his successors the pontiffs , who are about to sit upon Rome and pope, the chair of St. Peter until the end of time - also to all the most reverend and of God beloved catholic bishops, subjected by this our imperial decree throughout the whole world to this same holy, Roman church, who have been established now and in all previous times-grace, peace, charity, rejoicing, long-suffering, mercv, be with you all from God the Father almighty and from Jesus Christ his Son and from the Holy Ghost... our father Sylvester, the highest pontiff and the universal pope... which we have learned from the aforesaid most blessed father and our confessor, Svlvester the universal pontiff; and then at length announcing the mercy of God which has been poured upon us....⁵⁵

At first glance, the description is notably longer, but also goes beyond Sylvester to describe the Roman church as well. The frequent superlatives are a credit to Sylvester

⁵³ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁵⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 31-32.

⁵⁵ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

and contrast Constantine's own introduction, which while glowing, did not seem to consider him the most of anything. Instead, these adjectives went to the bishop and the church, especially when describing their sphere of influence. Critically, the term pope is specifically tied to "...the chair of St. Peter until the end of time...."⁵⁶ It is the Roman church's — rather aggrandized — history as an apostolic church that qualifies the pope. That is, only a pope elected in Rome is canon. This is an important rule for the bishop of Rome that does not necessarily exist until someone says it enough, as is being done here. The *ad infinitum* portion is helpful for the papacy as well and will be echoed in the next document we examine. The Donation also specifies its audience to include "...God beloved catholic bishops...", who, themselves, are commanded by the Roman church.⁵⁷ The emphasis on catholic bishops might encompass Byzantium and Rome alike at that point in time, but highlights the Arian Christian rift from earlier, and foreshadows the eventual break between East Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The document then goes from narrowing who it is for to grossly expanding it to "...throughout the whole world to this same holy, Roman church..."⁵⁸ Together, we can take these statements to mean that anyone, anywhere, that wants to be a part of the official Christian faith, is subject to the Roman church. On the other hand, the global claim means that everyone, faithful or not, has to at least respect what the rest of the decree contains. The phrase "...universal pontiff..." carries this claim further.⁵⁹ Not only is the pope exclusive to Rome and at the head of the Roman church, but he is in fact the head of every church.

⁵⁶ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁵⁷ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁵⁸ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁵⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

Beyond presenting him as a global leader, the document goes on to paint Sylvester as an essential part of Constantine's conversion, alongside the rest of Rome's.

A passage from the text reads,

For we wish you to know, as we have signified through our former imperial decree, that we have gone away, from the worship of idols, from mute and deaf images made by hand, from devilish contrivances and from all the pomps of Satan; and have arrived at the pure faith of the Christians, which is the true light and everlasting life. Believing, according to what he-that same one, our revered supreme father and teacher, the pontiff Sylvester- has taught us, in God the Father, the almighty maker of Heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord God, through whom all things are created; and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and vivifier of the whole creature.⁶⁰

The section describes several key steps away from paganism. The likelihood that all of these happened immediately after Constantine's conversion, or by the proposed time of the letter, is unlikely. Imperial Roman administration was often infused with religious rituals, going all the way back to Augustus, of whom there is a famous statue depicting the emperor as a hooded priest, prepared for pagan ritual.⁶¹ It is unlikely that these ingrained ceremonials were dispensed with so quickly by Constantine. Many of his visual symbols and imperial iconography actually remained pagan, but eventually had Christian elements added, as well.⁶² More importantly, the rejection of idols was a development ascribed entirely to Sylvester, who is called a "teacher."⁶³ Here we have another sign that points toward the letter's fabrication. A pope who is most famous for merely receiving this letter seems an unlikely choice for a teacher to an emperor. Constantine, with the entirety of an empire at his disposal, certainly had other choices. Despite Diocletian's best efforts, there were likely still Christians within the imperial administration. In fact,

⁶⁰ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁶¹ Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts*, 13-42.

⁶² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 26.

⁶³ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

when Constantine rose to power, Christianity was the empire's most populous religion.⁶⁴ It seems more natural for Constantine to turn to one of these figures, someone he may already know, to learn more about the faith. On the other hand, if anything it is detrimental to place himself in the hands of the bishop of Rome by crediting him for his conversion. This would do exactly what the papacy is attempting by chipping away imperial power and passing it to themselves.

In fact, a potent section for the papacy subjugates Constantine entirely, while conferring saintly status of Sylvester. It reads,

...to those same holy apostles, my masters, St. Peter and St. Paul; and, through them, also to St. Sylvester, our father,-the chief pontiff and universal pope of the city of Rome,-and to all the pontiffs his successors, who until the end of the world shall be about to sit in the seat of St. Peter....⁶⁵

The original Latin reading, "...*dominis meis*...", is a step beyond the teacher role Peter and Paul have occupied throughout the document.⁶⁶ Being a master to the emperor helps apostle and pope alike, of whom the latter is essentially an heir. Throughout the letter, Sylvester is called "...*summo pontifici et universali papa*...", a prestigious title in its own right.⁶⁷ It is a clear call back to the title *pontifex maximus*. However, the two terms above entitled the pope to both range and height. Where a *pontifex maximus* is all encompassing, he does not have the spiritual standing that *summo pontifici* exudes. The title seems to convey the rise above paganism contained in the earlier portion of the document. The papacy, not wanting to sacrifice the reach that *maximus* seems to contain, also frequently employs the phrase "...*universali papa*...."⁶⁸ If we merge these titles, the

⁶⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 26.

⁶⁵ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁶⁶ Angus Graham, "CONSTITUTUM CONSTANTINI," The Latin Library, accessed November 1, 2001, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/donation.html>.

⁶⁷ The Latin Library, "CONSTITUTUM CONSTANTINI."

⁶⁸ The Latin Library, "CONSTITUTUM CONSTANTINI."

pope has spiritual authority on high, but the responsibility of using that authority across the globe. Lastly, this section further builds Sylvester up by calling him a saint, in the same breath as Peter and Paul. The papacy is built around these two. An important part of maintaining the authority that foundation grants is equating the apostle and pope as much as possible. This trend will continue in several other sections we discuss.

The letter eventually takes on a more narrative focus, explaining Constantine's path to the faith and emphasizing the dominance of Rome in Christian affairs. The reader first hears about Constantine's leprosy and some comically horrific pagan attempts to cure it.⁶⁹ The more insidious pagan Roman priests look, the better for Christian Roman priests. After Constantine enters a dream, the story then continues,

...the apostles St. Peter and Paul appear, saying to me: "Since thou hast placed a term to thy vices, and hast abhorred the pouring forth of innocent blood, we are sent by, Christ the Lord our God, to give to thee a plan for recovering thy health. Hear, therefore, our warning, and do what we indicate to thee. Sylvester - the bishop of the city of Rome - on Mount Serapte, fleeing thy persecutions, cherishes the darkness with his clergy in the caverns of the rocks....⁷⁰

Including the Apostles Peter and Paul is strategic. It is a dream sequence in which any figure can appear, unbound by distance or mortality, but Peter and Paul are the ones who show. Traditionally, in stories of divine dream intrusion an angel or God himself appears to the dreamer.⁷¹ Constantine gets neither of these, instead he is met with the two most Roman apostles. Two figures whose journeys ended in Rome, but who had only just begun their eternal residence in the city. Their appearance elevates the Roman church's

⁶⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷⁰ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷¹ David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 149.

own importance by putting these apostles on a higher plane and reminding the audience of their inherent bond to Rome.

Turning to the reason for the dream itself, Constantine's leprosy is its own powder keg of meaning. Healing is a common feature of many New Testament stories, especially when it is conditionally given in response to a correct moral choice or acknowledgment of a mistake. In Constantine's case, the path to being saved from leprosy is only revealed after refusing human sacrifice.⁷² Elevating Constantine is in line with what the document was attempting earlier, making the position of emperor Christian in nature. If Constantine is a figure reminiscent of early Christian protagonists, this infuses the imperial throne with a similar saintly status. Giving the emperor leprosy, as opposed to a physical trauma, is also a clear reference to the New Testament. Jesus's famous curing of lepers is what the document is pointing to. Drawing a parallel to Christ makes Sylvester's eventual purification of Constantine all the more impressive.⁷³

Another important function of the document is its exploration of Saint Peter and his relationship with the papacy. As the Donation continues with Constantine's story, it describes Saint Peter. It says that,

... (I) learned that by the kindness of St. Peter himself I had been entirely restored to health: I together with all our satraps and the whole senate and the nobles and all the Roman people, who are subject to the glory of our rule -considered it advisable that, as on earth he (Peter) is seen to have been constituted vicar of the Son of God, so the pontiffs, who are the representatives of that same chief of the apostles....⁷⁴

The section demonstrates how Peter is more than just an apostle to the Roman church. Peter is highlighted in the first line as the reason why Constantine, "...had been entirely

⁷² Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷³ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷⁴ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

restored to health....”⁷⁵ With this we can see the letter hoping to hold two things true at once: The first being that Sylvester can be credited with initiating healing, but that Peter is also to be credited. The contention is solved by reading further into the passage and hearing the phrase, “...the pontiffs who are representatives of that same chief of the apostles....”⁷⁶ The document is conveying that the Roman church is Peter, himself. Thereby, any papal efforts are extensions of Peter’s will, but also belong to the popes, themselves. Accordingly, Sylvester arranged and executed the healing, but Peter gave him the ability to do so. Even if the rest of the Christian world accepted this relationship, other concessions would still be needed for a church hierarchy with the pope at the top. The Roman church must also convince others of Peter’s dominance over the apostles. However, establishing a baseline chain of succession from Peter to pope is nonetheless essential for their authority. The document emphasizes Peter as “...chief...” to get at the above issue.⁷⁷ As one of twelve apostles, Peter is not the only one that Christian churches could lay claim to as a founder. Rather than attempting to undercut other apostolic churches, the Roman church elected to nip the issue in the bud by making their chosen apostle the most important. Lastly, it is no accident that both Peter and Paul appeared in the dream. The Roman church had connections to two apostles to exploit, further promoting their role as a leading church in the faith.⁷⁸

The Donation of Constantine then moves from specifying where their authority in the church comes to describing where it reaches. The document states,

And we ordain and decree that he shall have the supremacy as well over the four chief seats Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem, as

⁷⁵ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷⁶ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷⁷ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁷⁸ O’Malley, *A history of the Popes*, xv.

also over all the churches of God in the -whole world. And he who for the time being shall be pontiff of that holy Roman church shall be more exalted than, and chief over, all the priests of the whole world; and, according to his judgment, everything which is to be provided for the service of God or the stability of the faith of the Christians is to be administered...

This establishes the Roman church as the lone arbiter of what is canon in Christianity. As the pope is described to be "...chief over, all the priests of the whole world..."⁷⁹ This sweeping responsibility is bolstered by including Constantinople, their newfound rival, as one of their own full-scale "...chief seats..." of power.⁸⁰

Yet, the Papacy's introductions and redrawing of their own prominence in Christianity is overshadowed by the colossal gifts of the Donation itself. By the time the Donation was written in the eighth century, Christianity had gone from residing beneath the streets in the catacombs to dominating said roadsides with elaborate basilicas.⁸¹ Their holdings were about to grow monumentally to include large swaths of secular lands, as well. This would all be thanks to Pepin, whom they would need to convince to be so generous.⁸² The Donation provided an opportunity to set a precedent that the papacy could wave in the face of their Frankish patron. It decrees,

...And on these churches for the endowing of divine services we have conferred estates, and have enriched them with different objects; and, through our sacred imperial decrees, we have granted them our gift of land in the East as well as in the West; and even on the northern and southern coast;-namely in Judea, Greece, Asia, Thrace, Africa and Italy and the various islands: under this condition indeed, that all shall be administered by the hand of our most blessed father the pontiff Sylvester and his successors.⁸³

⁷⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁸⁰ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁸¹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 73-74.

⁸² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 58-59.

⁸³ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

With Rome's unquestioned rule of the Church constructed, the document moves to promise secular territory. Lands and estates from, "...Judea, Greece, Asia, Thrace, Africa and Italy and the various islands..."are vaguely transferred to the papacy.⁸⁴ With these regions guaranteed to the church by an emperor too dead to object, the papacy invented leverage. Subsequently, asking for some chunks of land in Italy would seem modest, a request that Pepin would be hard-pressed to refuse.

Up to this point, our *imperator novus* has assured administrative control and actual territory to govern, but what about defense? Any future invaders marching on Rome, or the novel Papal Estates, would certainly have to consider the Frankish threat of retaliation. However, the Donation of Constantine adds another layer of protection by continuing on and adding to the authority of the papacy. A priest in charge of an army seems odd. After all, a general that turns the other cheek will likely have a tough time winning any conflict and will lose significant moral integrity by being a conduit to conflict. Clearly, another distinct identity as a commander would be necessary and something a successful general, such as Constantine, could provide. The letter arms the papacy with military symbols of an *imperator* and thereby grants the authority to muster and command their own troops. The Donation explains,

...we concede and, by this present, do confer, our imperial Lateran palace, which is preferred to, and ranks above, all the palaces in the whole world; then a diadem, that is, the crown of our head, and at the same time the tiara; and, also, the shoulder band,-that is, the collar that usually surrounds our imperial neck; and also the purple mantle, and crimson tunic, and all the imperial raiment; and the same rank as those presiding over the imperial cavalry; conferring also the imperial sceptres, and, at the same time, the spears and standards; also the banners and different imperial ornaments, and all the advantage of our high imperial position, and the glory of our power.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁸⁵ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

The papacy and Frankish relationship was groundbreaking, but a recent development at the penning of this document. There were times before the Franks that the Roman church had to navigate city defense, and the papacy undoubtedly wanted to plan for times after, as well. An army of their own was in order. Thereby, “imperial cavalry,... spears and standards,... and banners” would all be assets in repelling any future assaults.⁸⁶ The iconography of this offer is noteworthy as well. Here the *imperator novus* truly steps from the papal imagination and into our own. Although he remains an image and the document cannot physically offer soldiers, it can still set the stage for the pope to have the military authority of a commander. Bristling with cavalry and spearmen, we have a pope zealously commanding with a “...scepter...” and “...diadem...,” the very same that Constantine or Augustus himself would wield.⁸⁷ Clad in the iconic imperial colors of purple and crimson, the pope is a commander in his own right that is capable of defeating foes without calling for aid. He occupies a “...high imperial position...” with the ease of a true *imperator*.⁸⁸ This is an identity that achieves the papacy’s wishes by being an armed, intimidating power toward would be threats. Yet, the document continues to confer even more advantages.

By the eighth century, the Roman legions of Constantine were long gone, but being aware of this, the papacy included a work around in the Donation. As much as heavily armored legionaries excited the imaginations of the Roman church, they would have to accept what they could find in building their own army. Accordingly, flexibility

⁸⁶ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁸⁷ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁸⁸ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

would be needed to designate any new army of sellswords as a Roman fighting force. The document states,

And we decree, as to those most reverend men, the clergy who serve, in different orders, that same holy Roman church, that they shall have the same advantage, distinction, power and excellence by the glory of which our most illustrious senate is adorned; that is, that they shall be made patricians and consuls,-we commanding that they shall also be decorated with the other imperial dignities. And even as the imperial soldiery, so, we decree, shall the clergy of the holy Roman church be adorned. And even as the imperial power is adorned by different offices-by the distinction, that is, of chamberlains, and door keepers, and all the guards,-so we wish the holy Roman church to be adorned. And, in order that the pontifical glory may shine forth more fully, we decree this also: that the clergy of this same holy Roman church may use saddle cloths of linen of the whitest colour; namely that their horses may be adorned and so be ridden, and that, as our senate uses shoes with goats' hair, so they may be distinguished by gleaming linen; in order that, as the celestial beings, so the terrestrial may be adorned to the glory of God...⁸⁹

Bringing in frontier peoples as soldiers to fill gaps in a fighting force was not unheard of. In fact, during the late stages of the Roman Empire, as much as a quarter of the Roman army were born from beyond the borders of the empire.⁹⁰ However, their commanders and patrons are what tied these soldiers to Rome. They are the ones who gave orders, relayed information from the capital, and were ideally laying the groundwork for said mercenaries to one day be citizens. By establishing the upper echelon as "...patricians and consuls..." the pope hoped that they would gain the same ability to employ and transform soldiers from across the Mediterranean.⁹¹ Part of reorienting recruits would be matching the papacy's symbolically laden actions with symbolic clothing. To this effect, the document gives permission to adorn clergy

⁸⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹⁰ Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425*, (Oxford Classical Monographs, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 148-152.

⁹¹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

members, a rather loose distinction, as “...as the imperial soldiery....”⁹² Logically, anyone working for the Roman church is, hypothetically, a clergy member — even a sellsword. After all, it would not be too much of an abstraction to label defending Saint Peter’s as a religious duty. This subtlety provides an avenue for the papacy to have its own imperial army, one befitting an *imperator novus*. Furthermore, similar to the invention of a *summo pontifici*, the Donation likens the Roman church to the empire when discussing standard clothing, but still finds a way to elevate the church above the pagan past. On one hand the pope is fit for the crimson and purple of an emperor, but on the other he ought to “...use saddle cloths of linen of the whitest colour....”, an honor that could extend to any clergy deemed worthy to wear white by the pope himself.⁹³ The luminous color clearly draws parallels to the divine as the righteous, angels, and Jesus often appear in white garb.⁹⁴ However, there is a part of the offer that the pope strategically refused.

The Donation of Constantine eerily foreshadows Charlemagne’s own coronation, several decades after the document’s creation. After promising large amounts of land, imperial honors, and his own compliance, there is still more that Constantine can extend to the pope. The Donation reads,

We also decreed this, that this same venerable one our father Sylvester, the supreme pontiff, and all the pontiffs his successors, might use and bear upon their heads—to the Praise of God and for the honour of St. Peter—the diadem; that is, the crown which we have granted him from our own head, of purest gold and precious gems. But he, the most holy pope, did not at all allow that crown of gold to be used over the clerical crown which he wears to the glory of St. Peter; but we placed upon his most holy head, with our own hands, a tiara of gleaming splendour representing the

⁹² Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹³ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹⁴ John A. Tvedtnes, "Priestly clothing in Bible times," In *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. by Donald W. Parry (Deseret Book Company, 1994), 678-691.

glorious resurrection of our Lord. And, holding the bridle of his horse, out of reverence for St. Peter we performed for him the duty of groom; decreeing that all the pontiffs, his successors, and they alone, may use that tiara in processions.⁹⁵

Shockingly, the crown from Constantine's "...own head..." is not the biggest claim of the Donation.⁹⁶ Instead, this crown helps build up to that titanic offer, although this attempt to transfer the emperor's crown should not be ignored – nor will it be the last time we see the crown. The pope's refusal – it could be argued – stems from showing modesty, but this is much less likely than a more calculated alternative. The choice is not between the imperial crown or a bare head. Instead, it is between the imperial crown or a papal crown. A refusal of the former signifies the dominance of the latter. It is also a feat for the papacy to have told an emperor "No". Doing so was explicitly refusing his charity, while also making their own request for a different crown, entirely. How this papal crown was placed will ripple forward in time as Constantine put the crown "...upon his most holy head, with our own hands..."⁹⁷ The pope receiving this papal crown is a clear signal of transfer, while setting a precedent. A very similar ceremony will take place at the close of the eighth century, in which the papacy will dust off that imperial crown that they refused, despite *de facto* wearing it, and offer it to another, keeping the papal crown for themselves. Yet, a crown is much more than the rare material it might be made of, it's a symbol of rule. The estates the Donation has promised so far are sizable, but not an empire. The document concludes by resolving this ambiguity.

The climax of the document is a momentous territorial transfer that is as unlikely as it is vast. Constantine's offer already includes churches across the Roman Empire,

⁹⁵ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹⁶ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹⁷ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

alongside estates to raise revenue and help said churches flourish. These are considerable in their own right, but Constantine's next inclusion makes them redundant. As he states,

In imitation of our own power, in order that for that cause the supreme pontificate may not deteriorate, but may rather be adorned with power and glory even more than is the dignity of an earthly rule: behold we-giving over to the oft-mentioned most blessed pontiff, our father Sylvester the universal pope, as well our palace, as has been said, as also the city of Rome and all the provinces, districts and cities of Italy or of the western regions; and relinquishing them, by our inviolable gift, to the power and sway of himself or the pontiffs his successors-do decree, by this our godlike charter and imperial constitution, that it shall be (so) arranged; and do concede that they (the palaces, provinces etc.) shall lawfully remain with the holy Roman church.⁹⁸

In a flash, Constantine is alleged to have signed away the former core of his empire and the potential revenues from "...all the provinces, districts and cities of Italy or of the western regions...."⁹⁹ Disregarding the believability of this act, we are looking at exactly what the papacy desired, which is likely why they included it. An empire all their own is now in papal hands. In theory, they now possess the seat of the former capital and all of Italy as a buffer around the eternal city. Alongside the territory, the papacy has claimed the imperial symbols, military, and divinity from the emperor to wield against their detractors. Even more amazing is that, during the Donation's eighth century creation, none of these possessions existed anywhere besides in the heads of the papacy and those they managed to convince. Later, they would levy several small armies and Julius II, elected in 1503 CE, would even launch military campaigns as "...warrior pope...."¹⁰⁰ However, these facts pale in comparison to what has been described in the document above and were much later developments than our time period of late antiquity. Anyone reading the Donation would envision the papacy as an influential, miraculously

⁹⁸ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

⁹⁹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

¹⁰⁰ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 177.

powerful ruler with the military and right to rule of an emperor as famous as Constantine himself. In many ways, they would be right, if the promotion someone invents leads others to treat them with that level of deference then their authority has become real. The papacy concluded the Donation of Constantine by discussing the Byzantines.

The already distant relationship between the papacy and the Byzantines is seemingly severed in one of the document's concluding sections. Establishing a new emperor does little to eliminate the old that is ruling what he believes to be the real continuation of the Roman Empire.

The territorial claims that the document makes are considerable – but attainable – as the eighth century revealed. Yet, laying a claim to Byzantium could be a bridge too far and would likely not be taken seriously by anyone beyond the Roman church. To solve this complication the Donation says,

Wherefore we have perceived it to be fitting that our empire and the power of our kingdom should be transferred and changed to the regions of the East; and that, in the province of Byzantium, in a most fitting place, a city should be built in our name; and that our empire should there be established. For, where the supremacy of priests and the head of the Christian religion has been established by a heavenly ruler, it is not just that there an earthly ruler should have jurisdiction.¹⁰¹

Rather than attempting to absorb the Byzantines, the papacy assures their independence by making the leader of Rome have to be a "...heavenly ruler..."¹⁰² The pair, going from partners to full-scale rivals, would have ample opportunity to vie for the throne to both Christendom and Rome. However, turning back to the Franks –the likely target of this document – its effect was striking.

¹⁰¹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

¹⁰² Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

The Franks II

In the aftermath of the many agreements between Stephen II and Pepin, the Franks made good on their promises and twice invaded Italy in 754 CE and 756 CE to drive the Lombards from the lands Pepin had promised to the papacy. Fortunately for Stephen and his replacement, Pope Paul, the second Lombard defeat stuck for more than two years.¹⁰³ It is tricky picking what is most fascinating about this arrangement: The allotment of land or the protection of said land? Taking land is common; it frequently incites and accompanies conflict and drives slower forms of war, like colonization. Gifting it, on the other hand, is certainly less frequent, but not unheard of. Promises to others are easier for a military power to make than to enforce, where there are no resources they gain from the conflict and instead only bear costs. In theory, this would make the Frankish defense of the papacy more fascinating than their allotment of land to it, but this is not the entire picture. Attacks on the Lombards were expenditures, but also granted security and at least some property to the Franks. Furthermore, as we will see, an independent Lombard Kingdom would not endure much longer after 756 CE.¹⁰⁴

If the collaboration of Pepin and Stephen set the stage for the papacy's rise in the eighth century, then the relationship between Charlemagne and Hadrian would be the end of Act II. After a general period of stagnation with the Franks and then internal disorder, the Roman Church found relief in the papacy of Pope Hadrian. Ruling from 772-795 CE, he entered the role of Saint Peter with experience managing the church, having worked as deacon under two prior popes.¹⁰⁵ In the first year of his reign, Hadrian enjoyed a similar welcome as some of his predecessors by being besieged at Rome by the Lombards. The

¹⁰³ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 59-62.

¹⁰⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 69.

¹⁰⁵ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 68.

Franks were again called upon by the papacy for aid, and this time Charlemagne – Pepin’s son – was the one to answer. The Lombards were soundly defeated in 773 CE, their holdings in Northern Italy now permanently under Frankish and papal rule.¹⁰⁶ The Lombards would pose no serious threat to the bishop of Rome going forward, but would always remain a piece of the papacy, literally and figuratively. There is the actual land to consider, which had previously been part of the Lombard Kingdom and was then dubbed “Papal Estates”, but the memory of the Lombards is also significant. War horns and glistening spears bearing down on the former Imperial capital would never be far off in the minds of future popes. The land they had gained would need to be tightly monitored and enemies warded off before an army was even raised. Posture would be more important than ever following the defeat of the Lombards. Calling back to our *papa* from earlier, if invaders only faced a grand old man guarding the remaining wealth and spolia of Rome, they would be less than intimidated. Meanwhile, attacking an *imperator*, like Augustus or Caesar, certainly holds more fear.

The Franks would still prove helpful, even after the Lombards, in crafting this identity. Charlemagne visited Saint Peter’s for Easter in 774 CE, which kicked off a personal and symbiotic relationship with Pope Hadrian. On the itinerary for the visit was reviewing the promises of Pepin. Charlemagne not only renewed, but even added to his father’s territorial offer.¹⁰⁷ Both the king and pope benefited from this partnership. Charlemagne was elevated by being backed by an institution firmly rooted in former Roman prestige, while the papacy received new lands and safety. However, the importance of Hadrian’s and Charlemagne’s personal relationship cannot be understated.

¹⁰⁶ O’Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 69.

¹⁰⁷ O’Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 69.

There would be bumps ahead, but in all likelihood it was partially due to his opinion of Hadrian that Charlemagne would remain devoted to the bishop of Rome. Following their initial meeting in April of 744 CE, the pair would go on to accomplish several important developments, deepening ties. Among these was the reformation of the Frankish church and the repair of many structures in Rome. Hadrian ensured that walls, and even the ancient aqueducts, were finally given the maintenance that centuries of abandonment made necessary.¹⁰⁸

Despite the closeness Pope Hadrian and Charlemagne shared, it would be under a more controversial pope that the papacy and Franks would become closer than ever. Pope Leo III will be the final pope we discuss and is an integral part of the papacy's ascendancy in the eighth century. In fact, Leo will be the main advocate for Charlemagne's coronation as emperor, which I will argue was a joint affair, crowning the papacy as well. Leo, despite a series of coups, would have a lengthy rule as pope from 795-816 CE. He started in the Roman church as a simple priest with no powerful relatives. Importantly, the aristocracy to which he was an outsider, would frequently prove hostile to his rule.¹⁰⁹ In 799 CE, fortune was not in Leo's favor as his detractors seized him during a procession, beat and almost maimed him. He would go on to flee the monastery where he briefly recovered, arriving before Charlemagne in Paderborn, begging for help.¹¹⁰ Usually, participants of a coup prepare a list of justifications as to

¹⁰⁸ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 70-71. Rising from relative obscurity through service to achieve a high office is an interesting parallel to a prior figure. Diocletian, of all people – infamous for his persecution of Roman Christians – rose to the rank of emperor through military experience, rather than birthright. This is a comparison that holds true to other popes and emperors of modest background, alike. That being said, neither system – imperial nor papal – were egalitarian, and the power of the aristocracy would terrorize Leo for the length of his reign. Jean Cousin, "Diocletian," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified January 1, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian>.

¹¹⁰ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 71.

why it was necessary. In Leo's case, he was charged with a series of crimes, including perjury and adultery. To attempt to satisfy both parties, Charlemagne sent Leo back to Rome until it was clear that he, himself, needed to resolve the matter. It was decided that Leo would take an oath and purge himself on December 23rd of 800 CE.¹¹¹ From this series of events, it is clear that Leo's reign began with a less than steady start. In fact, two days before Charlemagne's coronation, he appears to be the furthest thing from an emperor of old, a fugitive kept alive merely by Charlemagne's potential plans for the battered bishop of Rome. However, this is not the entire picture, nor is it an accurate conception of an emperor. Was even Caesar, arguably Rome's first emperor if not the position's very foundation, not rumored to have been abducted by pirates? Moments of vulnerability do not disqualify one from occupying the role of an *imperator*. Several of the popes we have already discussed started their time as bishop of Rome by paying ransoms to Lombards and others under the threat of death and violence. We also cannot forget the lands still under papal control or his guidance on Catholic matters of faith within Western Europe.

The Byzantines

Turning to Eastern Europe, "Better late than never" is a pithy way of summarizing the different relationship the Roman church had with the Franks versus the Byzantines. Large rifts had begun to form between the Roman church and the Byzantines. As far back as 537 CE there was bad blood. Emperor Justinian's reconquest of Italy led to Rome having her aqueducts cut in a subsequent siege by Ostrogoths, a massive blow to the city

¹¹¹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 71-72.

and a likely cause for a dramatic shrinkage in population.¹¹² Furthermore, Constantinople had become preoccupied by defending its other borders, and in 751 CE Ravenna, the exarch of the Byzantines, fell to the Lombards, erasing the last vestiges of Byzantine control in Northern Italy.¹¹³ Although not exactly physically helping in the conflict, the papacy was quick to sound the alarm on the Lombards. All the way back in 578 CE, Pope Gregory, then a deacon, desperately entreated the Byzantines for six years on a mission to secure assistance in combating the Lombards. Although no aid was provided, these efforts were not entirely in vain as it tipped off the papacy as to how the Byzantines viewed Rome, a city that would be great to reconquer if possible, but estranged by geography so as to be an elective, rather than necessary to defend.¹¹⁴ In fact, Peter Brown has written extensively on the history of the Byzantines in the eighth century. In his 2013 book, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Professor Brown writes,

In the eighth century the Byzantine empire had almost collapsed, only to remake itself into a new state in such a way that it would endure for centuries as a major power in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Without the Iconoclast emperors and their willingness to jettison much of the cumbersome legacy of the later Roman empire, Constantinople would almost certainly have fallen to the Muslims long before 1453.¹¹⁵

Having been seemingly abandoned by the Byzantines, the Catholic Franks were a natural second choice for the Roman Church, as described above. However, the Byzantines did take notice of the bishop of Rome's newfound partnership with the Franks. At the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, Pope Hadrian's envoys brought news of Charlemagne and his actions in conquering the Lombards to the Byzantines, who, for their part, were

¹¹² J.B. Bury, *A History of The Later Roman Empire From Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. To 800 A.D.)*, (Adolf M. Hakkert, 1966), 392.

¹¹³ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 405.

¹¹⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 45-46.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 396.

unamused with what they saw as some uncivilized king playing at empire building.¹¹⁶ Even earlier, when that same king's father had carved up the reconquered lands from the Lombards between himself and the papacy, rather than donating it back to the Byzantines, they were more than just unamused.¹¹⁷ Eventually, rather than a part of the empire, or even as an ally, the Byzantines began to see the papacy as a rival.

An important aspect of the bishop of Rome's titles and customs are how they stood in stark contrast to those of the Byzantines. Their rivalry and divide emerge in competing terms that were even uttered in different languages. At the same time that we saw the papacy repurposing *patricius* in Latin, the emperor of Byzantium called himself in Greek *basileus ton Romaion*, “emperor of the Romans,” and had since the split of the Roman Empire, a slightly less conflicted title, at second glance.¹¹⁸ Greek – the court language of Constantinople – was rather commonly spoken, especially by common people, and is not automatically un-Roman, especially at the time of the title's inception. However, as time would go on, Roman officials would continue to create terms in Latin, while the Byzantines used Greek. Leading to Byzantine titles standing in stark contrast to papal terms like *pontifex maximus*. Meanwhile, the final joint custom that the papacy and Byzantium shared – an election formality for the new pope – came to an end with Pope Leo III's ascension. Typically, when a new bishop of Rome came to power he sent a letter and the standard of Rome to the *basileus ton Romaion*. Leo by contrast sent these honors North to the Franks, rather than East to the Byzantines.¹¹⁹ In a way, we can take this as the final break from the Byzantines, despite the established split of Catholicism and Eastern

¹¹⁶ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 405.

¹¹⁷ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 62.

¹¹⁸ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 76.

¹¹⁹ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 81.

Orthodox that occurred later. A papacy that does not report to the emperor/empress in the East, runs independent elections, and has outsourced its protection to a North Germanic kingdom, is hardly united with Constantinople. How, besides distance, did the Byzantines lose their grip?

It would be remiss to discuss Rome and Byzantine relations without mentioning the Iconoclastic Controversy. A major source of disagreement for different Christian denominations and a topic of several ecumenical councils, the treatment of religious images is an ever-present question for Christianity and beyond. Yet through several centuries, the Byzantines found themselves on all sides of the issue. Beginning in the fourth century, images of saints and holy persons took an increasingly important position in Christian churches. This would continue until the reign of two emperors who took the concerns of iconoclastic thinkers to heart and began large-scale movements to remove, often by smashing, any icons of holy persons from 730-787 CE.¹²⁰ Understandably, to go from a place of veneration for an object to crushing it is a huge shift, and many changes had to happen in those four centuries between loving and destroying. What should be extracted is the impact that this religious pendulum had on the Romans, who were watching from across the Mediterranean. To the Romans, it all looked like rank heresy and did more to further divide the Roman and Byzantine churches.¹²¹ Clearly, other factors were also at play to distance the powers, as noted above, but this difference in idol treatment was harnessed by leaders on both sides of the sea to define themselves as separate. During the reign of Empress Irene – who began ruling as regent for her son in 780 CE – the Byzantines would again switch positions. Going to great efforts to call a

¹²⁰ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 388-391.

¹²¹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 57.

council between the Christian churches, Irene would hold the Second Council of Nicaea, the last ecumenical council the East and West both hold as canon. What emerged from the council was a break from the sharp iconoclasts and iconophiles, ending destruction and worship, alike.¹²² Another product of the council were the letters Pope Hadrian's envoys brought to it and the implications contained within.

Primary Source II: Eighth Century Letters to an Episcopal Council

Understanding why the papacy manufactured the Donation of Constantine – and its likely effects on the Franks – is invaluable. Yet, there is also a use in seeing different types of documents and how the pope writes back and forth with imperial figures than can actually respond, which is why Hadrian's letters are so important. The many councils and congregations of Christianity were diplomatic battles for leaders in the church and other political bodies to gain or lose status among other powerful figures in the faith. The first seven Ecumenical councils were held in a variety of locations, beginning with the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and ending with the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE.¹²³ There were no physical duels at the conferences evident in my sources, but a different kind of combat was happening among the attendees. These debates on heresy served as an arena in which church figures war ideas against one another, often with political consequences. As a bishop, attaching oneself to a controversial interpretation of faith is a risk. If the council decides that their opinion is the new standard and others are heresy, that bishop has a more powerful standing in the church. Meanwhile, if their idea

¹²² O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 70.

¹²³ Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology*, (Liturgical Press, 1990).

becomes heresy, they lose some status. It is from this backdrop and competitive context that our eighth century letters of interest emerged.

The Second Council of Nicaea was shaped by the powerful personalities who attended it. It occurred in the same place as the first, Nicaea, now İznik, Turkey. It was yet another place for authorities within the Christian world to vie for control. It was attended by bishops from across late antiquity's churches, including both the Latin and Greek speaking parts, which will tie into how many copies of the same letter pope Hadrian wrote. It was an attempt to solve the Iconoclastic Controversy. As touched on earlier, this was a controversy over the veneration of holy images, in their own right, beyond what they metaphysically represent. Pope Hadrian is a key figure in understanding the ambition of the Roman church at this point in time. Pope Hadrian, as we covered, played a key role diplomatically in bringing about the fall of the Lombards in 774 CE and was a pope with considerable resources at his disposal due to Charlemagne's patronage.¹²⁴ However, even without his newfound assets, Hadrian was seasoned and able to negotiate with rivals possessing much more material strength than himself, e.g. armies, resources, and infrastructure. Pope Hadrian was invited to this Ecumenical Council by Irene, to which the bishop of Rome sent two letters in response that were read at the council.¹²⁵ The letters differed slightly as one was in Latin and one was in Greek. However, in both letters, Hadrian exerts the dominion of the Roman Catholic Church over all other Christian branches by using charged and novel language.

¹²⁴ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 69.

¹²⁵ Erick Ybarra, "Comparing the Greek and Latin Texts of Pope Hadrian's Letters Read Aloud at Nicaea 2: Did the Greek Text reject Papal Supremacy and Infallibility?", *Classical Christian Thought*, last modified September, 18, 2021, <https://erickybarra.org/2021/09/18/comparing-the-greek-and-latin-texts-of-pope-hadrians-letters-read-aloud-at-nicaea-2-did-the-greek-text-reject-papal-supremacy-and-infallibility/>

The specific words employed in Pope Hadrian's Latin letter frame the Roman church as a progenitor to every denomination of Christianity, in a clear attempt to carve out authority. This posturing is abundant in a specific section of Pope Hadrian's letter. A translation that I compared my own to was prepared by Henry R. Percival in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*. The Latin letter begins,

...as by a lord, of pious memory, the emperor Constantine and the blessed Helen, who promulgated the orthodox Faith...
And they elevated the sacred catholic and apostolic Roman church (your spiritual mother), and with the other Orthodox emperors, honored it as the head of all churches....¹²⁶

The phrase “...*spiritualem matrem*...,” which is being used to describe the Roman church as a spiritual predecessor, contains multiple messages.¹²⁷ Beyond the sociological impacts of repurposing the feminine word *matrem* for an organization which has a male-centric structure, the meaning of the word is deeply relevant to the identity being generated for the bishop of Rome. Jerusalem might have a deeper religious history and be closer to the areas Jesus preached, while in the eighth century, Constantinople might be more powerful — both economically and physically — but the letter purports that the Roman church is the spiritual birthplace of Christianity. Furthermore, as the “...*caput omnium ecclesiarum*...,” the Roman church reserves all decision making faculties, no matter how much more powerful the Byzantines might be.¹²⁸ After all, a leg might carry the body and outweighs a brain, but it does not decide what it does. We also get a reference to the “...*apostolicam*...” origins of the Roman church.¹²⁹ If there was any doubt as to why

¹²⁶ Translation by Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, XIV, 523-525, In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, (repr. Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955).

¹²⁷ Jacques-Paul Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, (Parisiis, apud Garnier fratres et J.-P. Migne successores, 1879), 1217.

¹²⁸ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1217.

¹²⁹ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1217.

Rome has the benefit of being a progenitor, they are dispelled by directing the reader's attention back to Saints Peter and Paul — nor will this be the last time the letter invokes them.

These apostles occupy a place of honor between both churches and, as we have seen, are key to Rome's identity as the heir to leading the Christian faith. They were indispensable in constructing said inheritance in the Donation of Constantine, but helped in the church's posturing at councils as well. Drawing on this legacy the Greek version of the letter says,

And especially if you follow the tradition of the orthodox Faith of the Church of the holy Peter and Paul, the chief Apostles, and embrace their Vicar, as the Emperors who reigned before you of old both honoured their Vicar, and loved him with all their heart: and if your sacred majesty honour the most holy Roman Church of the chief Apostles, to whom was given power by God the Word himself to loose and to bind sins in heaven and earth. For they will extend their shield over your power, and all barbarous nations shall be put under your feet: and wherever you go they will make you conquerors. For the holy and chief Apostles themselves, who set up the Catholic and orthodox Faith, have laid it down as a written law that all who after them are to be successors of their seats, should hold their Faith and remain in it to the end.¹³⁰

The Greek letter builds on the Donation of Constantine, but also expands the authority it grants. Where in the Donation both Peter and Paul were bedrock figures in the faith, only Peter was denoted as an explicit leader of the apostles. Meanwhile, the letter remarks that Peter and Paul are both “...Κορυφαίοι των Αποστόλων...”¹³¹ To a modern audience, this is not a landmark promotion for Paul, who is the second most well known apostle behind Peter. However, our setting is a church council in the eighth century, where canonical Christianity is still being formed. There is still ample opportunity for other apostles to come out of the fold, which is why Pope Hadrian is making a concerted effort to promote

¹³⁰ Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, XIV, 523-525.

¹³¹ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1218.

Paul throughout the letter. Furthermore, in the Donation of Constantine, we also saw Paul being elevated through his association with Peter, and this seems to merely be a continuation of that lionization.

At the same time, Peter's name alone is deafening with semantic meaning and flows to the very roots of the Christian faith. The following section of the Latin letter makes several direct references to him when it says,

For blessed Peter himself, leader of the apostles, who first presided in the Apostolic seat, he left the rule of his apostleship and pastoral care to his successors, who will sit in the same holiest seat eternally....¹³²

Yet again, Hadrian is clearly enshrining Peter as a founding figure to bolster his own present authority. However, the most notable part of this excerpt is the word "...*perenniter*...."¹³³ This serves as a reminder to the long line connecting the papacy all the way back to Peter. It is a mandate from him to rule into perpetuity. Although at the heart of the document, Peter and Paul are not the only historical figures the letter pays special attention to.

Non-apostolic Roman figures with connections to early Christianity are also sources of authority whom Hadrian employs and with whom he tries to draw parallels. The allusions present in these comparisons are numerous and often less than subtle. The document references two figures: Saint Helena and Emperor Constantine. We have already examined Constantine's relevance to the papacy and the western portion of the Roman Empire. Yet, he is also particularly relevant to the Byzantines, as he founded their capital — Constantinople — on the existing city of Byzantium.¹³⁴ This shift set the

¹³² Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, XIV, 523-525.

¹³³ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1220.

¹³⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Constantine I."

former fishing village on a path to its later prominence and dominance over Rome in the Middle Ages. Helena, herself, was an important figure in early Christianity, is known to have spread the faith, journeyed broadly, and established several churches.¹³⁵ She is also credited with having discovered the true cross, which she brought pieces of to Rome, rather than Constantinople.¹³⁶ This choice has major implications. It indicates that while Constantinople may be fit for an imperial capital, Rome will always be the capital of Christianity. Both figures appear in the phrase... *Constantinum imperatorem et beatam Helenam...*¹³⁷ By inserting Constantine and Helena into a Latin document, a document being provided by a Roman figure, an ownership is being established. This is similar to what we see across time and cultures, an appeal to earlier figures in an attempt to identify, build, and validate power structures. Furthermore, Constantine is a figure of sizable importance to the Byzantines. In referencing him the letter almost boasts that, while Constantine may have founded Constantinople, Christianity in Rome had already been established. There is also an allusion present in all of the Roman Church's calls to Constantine. One section of the Latin letter reads,

...so will your Clemency, that is protected of God, receive the name of another Constantine, and another Helen, through whom at the beginning the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church derived strength, and like whom your own imperial fame is spread abroad by triumphs, so as to be brilliant and deeply fixed in the whole world....¹³⁸

Pope Hadrian is offering Irene and her son an opportunity to be a new Constantine and Helena if they pursue the pope's interests at the council. Interestingly, this seems like a

¹³⁵ Johann Kirsch, "St. Helena," (The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

¹³⁶ Joe Nickell, *Relics of the Christ*, (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 87.

¹³⁷ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1217.

¹³⁸ Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, XIV, 523-525.

double victory for the pope, rather than any sort of exchange. This is especially probative when compared to the Donation of Constantine and is more proof that pope Hadrian can be linked with its creation. The papacy would very much prefer the Byzantines be like the late emperor that promised them so much. Constantine — who allegedly offered the pope the entire western half of his empire, complete independence from the Byzantines, and an imperial makeover — is someone the papacy has completely redefined. If they can extend their conception of this prior emperor to impact the decision making of a current one, all the better.

The letter goes further with its historical references by stepping away from specific figures and utilizing a Latin title that has strong historical ties to commanders and emperors. ...*princeps*..., is used to describe Saint Peter, a figure from whom the pope draws authority.¹³⁹ Since there is a direct legacy from Peter to all subsequent popes, *princeps* is being adopted by Hadrian, as well. *Princeps* has deep connotations regarding the Roman Republic and Imperial Rome. The former holders of *princeps* lend it a militaristic dimension, as well. The senators and emperors who employed the term were both commanders and drivers of large-scale conflict. It was utilized by emperors from Augustus to Diocletian and the stretch of time between these two leaders is even coined the *principatus*.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, the emperor Hadrian — with whom pope Hadrian shares his name — ruled within this stretch of time. This pope, who has been a frequent figure across this thesis, has driven change as diplomat, while laying the seeds for an *imperator novus*. It was out of conversations, rather than military action, that he secured land for the papacy, likely with the Donation of Constantine in hand. However, his peaceful

¹³⁹ Mansi, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina prior*, 1220.

¹⁴⁰ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "princeps," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified April 3, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/princeps>.

negotiations resulted in the destruction of the Lombards, adoption of militaristic terms, and paved the way for the papacy's own future conquests. He is a lightning rod and, alongside *princeps*, should be a reminder of the slow but steady absorption of Imperial Rome within the Roman church. The bishop of Rome is seated where the term *princeps* was regularly used to distinguish figures of immense importance and military prowess; it is no accident *princeps* found its way into the letter. With a single word two figures, that of an emperor and that of a pope, are being blended into one novel identity.

Lastly, the fact that the letter was provided and read in two forms, Greek and Latin, is critical in understanding Hadrian's intentions at the Second Council of Nicaea. Rather than sending a Greek letter alone to a conference held in a Greek speaking area, Pope Hadrian enjoined a Latin version, which was read aloud.¹⁴¹ Latin itself carries an inextricable Roman connotation and contains the charged terms above that appear in so many Roman Imperial writings and inscriptions. Additionally, having the letter read aloud forces the largely Greek audience to be exposed to the language, where they could have otherwise skimmed the Latin or exclusively read the Greek version. It also adds a final important element to the imperial papal identity pope Hadrian has constructed. Language is a huge part of one's sense of self and by speaking the same language that Constantine or Augustus would have commanded armies with, this identity carries power in its voice. However, instead of compelling soldiers the words of the pope would be motivating the faithful or intimidating rivals across the Christian world.

Regarding rivals, the Byzantine's own influence in Italy post-Nicaea II would not improve. While the suspected heresy and turmoil that the Iconoclastic Controversy

¹⁴¹ Classical Christian Thought, "Comparing the Greek and Latin Texts of Pope Hadrian's Letters Read Aloud at Nicaea 2."

brought did not help the Byzantines hold Northern Italy, it is not the only reason that they had to abdicate its defense. Internal troubles may have pulled some troops back from the frontier, but there was another reason for the lack of military effort dedicated to Western Europe. Ultimately, Italy was not the only border the Byzantines had to defend. For the whole picture, we need to understand the impact of the Abbasid caliphate, our last major player of the eighth century.

The Abbasids

Rising from the Umayyad dynasty, a piece of which would persist in Iberia for centuries to come, the Abbasid caliphate would grow to include huge swaths of the contemporary Middle East and North Africa. Many historians note that the new caliphate's approach was more cosmopolitan than that of the Umayyads. This multiculturalism has traditionally been held as an asset to the rise of the Abbasids and their state centered in Baghdad, rather than Damascus or Arabia.¹⁴² The leader of the caliphate during our era of interest was caliph Harūn al-Rashīd, who ruled from 786-809 CE.¹⁴³ The caliph has been a subject of frequent orientalism-stained appraisal, commonly associated with impotent prosperity and plushness that unjustly bedevils capable rulers from the Near East in antiquity.¹⁴⁴ Fortunately for the papacy and the Franks, the distance between them and the Abbasids made any sort of conflict mutually disadvantageous. Any sort of land grab against the other would make resupplying and garrisoning troops a logistical nightmare, as the Byzantines and Umayyad holdover in Iberia blocked any sort

¹⁴² Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun Al-Rashid and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–16.

¹⁴³ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 99.

¹⁴⁴ El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun Al-Rashid and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate*, 17-58.

of land route between the Abbasids and Italy. Instead, war constantly raged between the Byzantines and Abbasids, each viewing the other as a potential source of wealth and political triumph.¹⁴⁵ Nor were the Abbasids warm toward the remaining Iberian Umayyads, who considered themselves the true caliphs, but the Abbasids considered renegades. All of this suspicion and neighborly conflict left the participants eager for allies.

With this in mind, we turn back to Harūn al-Rashīd and his relationship toward the Franks and papacy. There is a famous story about Charlemagne receiving an elephant from the Abbasid caliph.¹⁴⁶ The motive behind such gestures is clear. An actual military alliance between the Franks and Abbasids was as improbable as it was terrifying to the Byzantines. Despite the odds, having enemies on the eastern and western frontiers of the Byzantine Empire would stretch an already reeling state to the brink.¹⁴⁷ However, beyond any of the above niceties, the biggest impact the Abbasids have on our subject was keeping the Byzantines preoccupied from dispatching armies to defend the papacy, pushing the bishop of Rome into the arms of the Franks, while embracing imperial bluster. A Byzantine unit away from Anatolia was a unit that could not participate in the constant war that the Abbasid frontier provided.

Coronation for Two

Saint Peter's Basilica is filled with an odd mix of clergy members, Leo III's attendants, Frankish nobles, Charlemagne's own entourage, and — notably — no Byzantines. It is Christmas Day 800 CE and the *imperator novus* is about to crown

¹⁴⁵ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 381.

¹⁴⁶ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 100.

¹⁴⁷ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 101.

another, newer emperor.¹⁴⁸ This political shuffling is unlikely to be accompanied by smoke for any onlookers in the square outside, but it is guaranteed to be just as impactful as the 2013 papal conclave, if not more. A century of careful planning and political jockeying has manifested on this watershed morning for the papacy. This induction is not Charlemagne's alone; rather it acted as a dual coronation. There is a particularly telling image — made sometime from 1325 to 1350 CE — called the “Chroniques de France ou de Saint Denis” that visualizes the event.¹⁴⁹ In it we see Charlemagne kneeling before Leo III. The artist has depicted him as equally surprised alongside the crowd of onlookers, one of whom clutches his chest with reverence and shock. Most notably, there are two crowns present in the picture. As Leo III reaches down to Charlemagne from his position of power, he extends the imperial crown of an emperor toward the Frankish king. Yet, atop the pope's head, is his very own crown — the papal crown. This indicates his prior establishment and adoption of the *imperator novus* identity, which he is now further expanding to encompass the Franks, an expansion that does not give the reins firmly to either party. Ambiguity over which *imperator* had final say within Roman and papal estates would persist through the duration of the Frankish and Holy Roman Empires something which was so irksome to the Franks that the ceremony to crown Charlemagne's son, Louis, had the father crown son, rather than the pope.¹⁵⁰

This coronation for two also calls back to the Donation of Constantine. However, instead of the pope being crowned by the emperor with a papal crown — while refusing the imperial crown — the roles have reversed.¹⁵¹ Instead we have the pope crowning an

¹⁴⁸ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 65.

¹⁴⁹ O'Malley, *A history of the Popes*, 67.

¹⁵⁰ Barbero, *Charlemagne Father of a Continent*, 94.

¹⁵¹ Henderson, *Select historical documents of the middle ages*, 319-329.

emperor with the very crown they seemingly refused, but held onto for just such an occasion. More than anything, the parallels of these events point toward Leo III and Charlemagne being swept on a course charted before either of them came into power. In many ways one can see the ghosts of Pepin the Short and Pope Hadrian animating their successors to fulfill what their close relationship began. Regardless, the end result is still the same: The pope who navigated the challenges of the eighth century — and had acted as a *de facto* *imperator* — emerged with the authority needed to decide who can be an emperor and what that means. For the papacy, in deciding what the identity of an *imperator* means and crowning the party which has been most helpful toward them, they confirmed their own claim to the role. Charlemagne may have left the coronation with a crown placed upon his head, but only the papacy entered Saint Peter's Basilica already wearing a crown from an *imperator*.

Conclusion

The modern bishop of Rome occupies a complicated position of power that has morphed in response to crisis and change. Originally, it was a clerical position of little renown that managed a splintered community and made small inroads in a more intimate domestic setting. Now, the very same bishop speaks directly to billions of people all over the world on matters of humanitarianism and faith, alike. Yet, this role as a global advisor is tempered with deep Roman roots and a history of skillful diplomacy. In the pursuit of security and authority, identity-building would prove key. It is hard to think of a time when said identity-building and negotiations were as critical for papal survival as the eighth century. During this time, the relationship the pope curated with the Franks

would lead to the defeat of the Lombards, independence from the Byzantines, and concluded with a dual coronation that only an *imperator* could provide. This relationship was made possible by the long term rift between the *pontifex* in Rome and the *basileus* in Constantinople. The emperor of the Byzantines, increasingly bogged down by conflict with the Abbasids, had little time to reach across the Mediterranean and establish their authority, and all the while the papacy was building its own.

A series of landmark popes, who were not content to be merely obsequious to the Franks, reached toward the past to craft an elevated position for themselves and command their own future. Two landmark documents exemplify this self-construction. The first is the Donation of Constantine, which despite being fictitious, drove real change. Not only did this document help increase territorial holdings for the papacy, it also helped them step into the role of an *imperator*. The Donation details a generous and complete transfer of all things imperial from Constantine to Sylvester II, as well as all future popes. Anyone reading this document steps away with the mental image of an imperial pope capable of raising military standards, defending Rome, and commanding armies. A letter from Pope Hadrian contains similar attempts at aggrandizing the pope and manufacturing claims to imperial titles like *princeps*. Even when they are speaking with powerful rivals in Constantinople, the papacy writes in a way that places themselves at the very center of Roman and Christian history, while distancing others. This is accomplished with constant references to apostles and other figures that are distinctly Roman. The big-picture actions of eighth century rivals solidified papal authority that had been augmented by its domestic past. Papal authority indeed had its limitations, just as the *imperator* of old had their own. However, this did not stop them from making the

most of a limited hand by projecting a position of strength and imperial descent. Their identity as an *imperator novus* leapt from the page and into Saint Peter's Basilica to conclude a century of steadily rising authority. The fanfare of this dual coronation can still be heard to this day. From those waiting on smoke in Saint Peter's Square to even the faithless, the pope's name is synonymous with Rome and power.

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