The fisherman’s anchor: establishing papal authority in Peter’s grave (2nd-8th centuries)

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Abstract

From its earliest beginnings, Peter’s grave or confessio has been an important place in Christian culture and tradition. In the first centuries it seems that the bishop of Rome did not exert particular influence over the cult site. In the year 800, however, both the confessio and the pope featured prominently in Charlemagne’s imperial inauguration ceremony that took place in St Peter’s basilica. By means of discussing a number of pivotal moments or episodes in the history and development of Peter’s grave, we will demonstrate how the confessio gradually came to fulfil the role of a physical and symbolical anchor in the representation of papal authority.

1 An extended version of most of the results discussed in this article will be published as two separate articles in D. van Espelo, M. Humphries, G. Vocino (edd.) Through the Papal Lens. Shaping History and Memory in Late Antique and Early Medieval Rome, 300-900 in the Translated Texts for Historians: Contexts series of Liverpool University Press (forthcoming). For a description of the project from which the results presented here are emerged see http://www.ru.nl/oikos/anchoring-innovation/project-descriptions/project-xi-popes/.
The culmination of a new long-standing tradition of the founders of the Christian faith in Rome – especially of the apostle Peter – was Charlemagne’s coronation in Saint Peter’s in 800. The emperor was not only crowned by Peter’s self-declared successor, the pope, but this was done in front of the confessio, the place of the grave of Peter in the basilica devoted to him. Pope Leo III’s contemporary biography in the Liber Pontificalis, a collection of Roman pontifical biographies dispersed from the Lateran, famously records the proceeding of the events as follows:

‘Then with his own hands the venerable bountiful pontiff crowned him with a precious crown, and all the faithful Romans seeing how much he [Charlemagne] defended and how greatly he loved the holy Roman church and its vicar, at God’s bidding and that of St Peter, keybearer of the kingdom of heaven, cried aloud with one accord: ‘To Charles, pious Augustus crowned by God, great and pacific Emperor, life and victory!’ Three times this was said in front of St Peter’s sacred confessio, with the invocation of many saints, and by them all he was established as Emperor of the Romans.²

² Liber Pontificalis (hereafter LP), Life of Leo III, trans. R. Davis, The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis). The Ancient Biographies of Nine Popes from AD 715 to AD 817 (Liverpool, 2007), pp. 190-192. The Latin reads: Tunc universi fideles Romani videntes tanta defensione et dilectione quam erga sanctam Romanam ecclesiam et eius vicarium habuit, unanimiter altisona voce, Dei nutu atque beati Petri clavigeri regni caelorum, exclamaverunt: ‘Karolo, piissimo Augusto a Deo coronato, magno et pacifico imperatore, vita et victoria!’ Ante sacram confessionem beati Petri apostoli, plures sanctos invocantes, ter dictum est; et ab omnibus constituitus est imperator Romanorum. Liber Pontificalis, ed. L. Duchesne, Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, Introduction et Commentaire II (Paris, 1886-1892; republished by C. Vogel in 1955-1957), pp. 7-8. Who these acclaiming Romans were precisely and with how many they attended the ceremony remains unspecified, but the LP report hints at a substantial number of both laymen as well as clerics, as earlier in the text, the Roman senate, and all leading Roman men and priests (reliquis sacerdotes seu optimates Francorum et Romanorum) already passed in revue.
In this ceremony, the acclamation of the faithful Roman witnesses, performed in front of Peter’s sacred grave, combined with the invocation of saints and, of course, God’s and Peter’s approval, seem to have been the most constitutive acts. One could even contend that the Apostle Peter is presented here as the most important witness of all; not because he manifested himself through a miraculous epiphany or anything of the sort, but because the entire event was staged at his shrine.

The choice for St Peter’s church as setting is not so self-evident as we may nowadays perceive it to be. Charlemagne’s inauguration was the first imperial investiture that occurred in Western Europe since 476 AD, but never before had this involved such an extensive ceremony, let alone in St Peter’s, let alone involving the pope. Moreover, the Lateran basilica, and not St Peter’s, served as the papacy’s cathedra. St Peter’s, as a church situated outside the city walls, was therefore consciously selected to house this event. In the centuries before Charlemagne’s coronation, the place of Peter’s grave had slowly but surely received its place as one of the most authoritative physical locations in the Western world.

Things could not have been more different in the first century, when the apostle Peter died (possibly in Rome). Although clear references to Peter’s death in Rome are entirely lacking in the earliest and most authoritative Christian sources such as the New Testament, a site where he was thought to be buried was acknowledged relatively early. A famous passage in Eusebius’ Historia ecclesiastica seems to indicate that a monument or at least a place of burial for Peter at the Vatican was already known around the year 200.3

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3 There is a fierce and ongoing discussion on the historical reliability of the legend about Peter’s death in Rome, see e.g. O. Zwierlein, Petrus in Rom. Die literarische Zeugnisse. Mit einer kritischen Edition der Martyrien des Petrus und Paulus auf neuer handschriftlicher Grundlage (Berlin/New York, 2010). For the Eusebean reference see Historia ecclesiastica 2.25.7.
Archaeological evidence leads us even further back to around the year 140: by that time, one grave on the cemetery at the Vatican hill – a place which is now directly beneath the altar of Saint Peter’s – was adorned with a more monumental outlook. Moreover, the construction of a small square in front of it, the so-called _Campo P_, testifies to a modest pilgrimage activity at the site: the square could accommodate 30 to 40 people at once. A graffito with the name of Peter confirms his presumed presence at this place. With the pavement of _campo P_, the grave of Peter was marked by a structure with possibly three niches: this construction is indicated as the _aedicula_. The exact outlook of the _aedicula_, however, is disputed: the reconstruction provided by the original excavation report is certainly not correct. The third niche, for example, is hypothetical since we do not know at all what the upper part of the monument looked like.  

Despite the uncertainties, all this does indicate that the traditions about Peter’s final resting place at the Vatican were strong enough to ensure that a rather popular grave existed, to which mainly – but not only! – Roman Christians came to visit. Some rich individuals or a group of people thought the original humble grave worthy of embellishment and spent quite a sum of money on this. There is no indication whatsoever for ecclesiastical involvement in the site at this stage, but it seems reasonable to assume that the Roman bishop was aware of changes at the grave of one of the most popular martyrs in Rome.

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4 Nothing remains of the tomb. Only some bones have been found, which were claimed by the Vatican to be Peter’s. More importantly, a graffito was discovered that contains the name of Peter and maybe a larger inscription, with two clumsily drawn heads. For a critical survey of the excavations and finds, see H.G. Thümmel, *Die Memorien für Petrus und Paulus in Rom. Die archäologischen Denkmäler und die literarische Tradition* (Berlin/New York, 1999).

5 The graffiti _ad catacumbas_ include some inscriptions that were created by non-Roman visitors, see L. Spera, ‘Ad limina apostolorum. Santuari e pellegrini a Roma tra la tarda antichità e l’alto medioevo.’ in: C. Ceretti (ed.), *La geografia della città di Roma e lo spazio del sacro. L’esempio delle trasformazioni territoriali lungo il percorso della Visita alle Sette Chiese Privilegiate* (Roma, 1998): 1-104, here pp. 18-20.
The emperor Constantine undertook much effort to build a basilica for Peter over the grave at the beginning of the fourth century. This means that by this time a Petrine tradition was firmly rooted in this area, which functioned as an anchor to the Roman Christian community, that found its most important saint in the fisherman Peter. However, the basilica of Saint Peter’s was as much (if not more!) a monument to commemorate Constantine as it was a monument to remember the apostolic roots of the Roman parish.\footnote{Constantine clearly built the basilica not only out of reverence for the apostle, but also as a monument celebrating his emperorship, in particular his victory over the Sarmatians in 322. His name was visible on inscriptions and he might have been depicted with Peter and Christ on the arch separating the nave from the transept. Probably, the construction of Saint Peter’s started in the 320s and was for the main part finished in 333. See R. Gem, ‘From Constantine to Constans: the chronology of the construction of Saint Peter’s basilica’, in: R. McKitterick, J. Osborne, C. M. Richardson and J. Story (eds.), Old Saint Peter’s, Rome (Cambridge 2014), 35-64.}

Constantine’s choice for the spot at the Vatican confirms the old traditions about Peter’s grave there; if not for reasons of tradition, building an impressive basilica under difficult circumstances at this place outside the city walls should not have been particularly attractive for a Roman emperor. The first Christian emperor, however, chose to anchor his legitimacy in the grave of Peter at a time when he had just defeated his co-emperor and competitor Licinius and when the catholic side of Christianity favoured by the emperor was certainly not the only Christian group with universal pretentions. Although Constantine started building the Lateran slightly earlier, Saint Peter’s was the first imperial church to be devoted to a specific saint. For this innovation, Constantine needed a place of irreproachable reputation.

Once the splendid basilica had been erected over Peter’s grave, the place became decidedly more attractive to people looking for legitimacy. Soon after the construction of the basilica, the Roman bishops attempted to have a finger in the proverbial Petrine pie. As a defender of the Nicean, catholic interpretation of Christianity, the Roman bishop Liberius (352-366) saw himself confronted with a
request on behalf of the eastern emperor Constantius, who supported the Arian case and was opposed to Athanasius, a fervent criticaster of the Arians. Constantius sent his eunuch Eusebius to pope Liberius. Liberius, however, refuse to subscribe to the emperor’s pro-Arian measures and declined the imperial gifts. After this blatant insult, the eunuch went straight to the basilica devoted to Peter. Our source for these events, which, admittedly, is probably not entirely without bias, is Athanasius’ Historia Arianorum (35-37). It reports:

Τὴν γὰρ παράβασιν τοῦ Σαούλ μιμησάμενος, ἀπελθὼν εἰς τὸ μαρτύριον Πέτρου τοῦ ἀποστόλου, τὰ δῶρα αὐτῷ ἀνέθηκεν. Ἀλλὰ μαθὼν ὁ Λιβέριος, πρὸς μὲν τὸν τιμοῦντα τὸν τόπον καὶ μὴ καλύσαντα, μεγάλως ἤγανάκτησεν αὐτὰ δὲ ὡς ἀθυτὸν θυσίαν ἀπέδριψε, καὶ τούτῳ μᾶλλον εἰς ὀργήν ἐκίνηε τὸν θλαδίαν.

“But in imitation of the transgression of Saul, after he (Eusebius) had left for the shrine of Peter the apostle, he dedicated the gifts there to him (the apostle). But when Liberius heard this, he became very angry at the person who watched over the place and had not hindered him (the eunuch): and he threw them (the gifts) away as an improper offering. And this infuriated the eunuch even more.” (HA 37)

This passages illustrates that the bishop of Rome, Liberius, had the ambition to control access to the shrine of Peter. At first sight, his authority at the place seems to have been limited. However, the status of the imperial eunuch of an emperor may have impressed the guard, who apparently was alone, and did not dare to prevent the eunuch from donating the offerings. Clearly, though, the bishop did have sufficient authority to be able to immediately remove the gifts after he had heard of

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7 Cf. the discussion in A. Thacker, ‘Popes, emperors and clergy at Old Saint Peter’s from the fourth to the eight century.’ in: R. McKitterick, J. Osborne, C. M. Richardson and J. Story (eds.), Old Saint Peter’s, Rome. (New York, 2014): 137-156, here p. 141
the incident. This remarkable event strongly suggests that the originally imperial construction of the basilica was being claimed by the Roman bishop. This leads us to conclude that two of the main powers in fourth century Rome, those imperial and ecclesiastical, understood the symbolic value of the place as an anchor for political (and religious) authority. 8 The conflict between Liberius and Constantius was only the first recorded occasion in a long sequence of events in which the grave of Peter was the centre of controversies.

It is not until the *sixth* century, however, that a permanent papal *clerus* became attached to St Peter’s.9 For another reason also, the sixth century represents another pivotal ‘moment’ or period, rather, in papal history, as it witnessed the completion of the first edition or version of the already mentioned *Liber Pontificalis* by anonymous clerics working at the Lateran around 535 AD. This series of papal biographies emphatically starts with Peter as the first Roman bishop in line, mentions his burial place, and then goes on to describe his episcopal successors who had occupied the see until the moment of compilation. Probably due to the Gothic Wars in Italy, continuation was paused for about a century, but from around the 640s onwards, the papal biographies were recorded on a contemporary basis. This first 6th century compilation of papal biographies, as Rosamond McKitterick has demonstrated on various occasions, had a specific purpose: to rewrite the history of Rome from a papal perspective. This can be demonstrated not just by its contents but also by the shape and form that was chosen for these papal lives, as they were cast in the genre

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8 The aristocracy also appropriated the place, e.g. by building grave monuments to Saint Peter’s, but time is too short to discuss their role in detail. See e.g. about the meal offered by Pammachius to the poor of Rome: P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West*, 350-550 AD. (Princeton, 2012), pp. 232-5.

of the serial biography, that we know from for instance the imperial biographies in the *Historia Augusta* and Suetonius *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. In this genre, the series of biographies not just represent their respective individual subjects, but also the institute that they represent as a whole. The *Liber Pontificalis*, therefore, while narrating the rise of the Roman episcopate, replaces Rome’s imperial history with that of the Roman church and its bishops. Accordingly, it should be read as a source that firmly roots the papacy’s history in an older existing Christian tradition, with Peter (and his *confessio*) as an important cornerstone.

The *Liber Pontificalis* is a treasure trove when it comes to papal representation and in it, we find valuable information about the development of the physical location and symbolical value of Peter’s *confessio*. At this point, I should probably mention that the use of the term *confessio* is often quite ambiguous, as it is usually unclear what part of the tomb is referred to exactly. It often says, for instance: *in, sub, super, ante* or *ad confessionem*, or it is ‘the holy body of the apostle’ that is referred to, without further specification. Also, although the tomb must have been a rather confined space, we do not precisely know what the *confessio* looked like structurally, and the word *confessio* could refer to practically any ritual space pertaining to the shrine or the crypt. For my current analysis, however, it is not so much the exact location that matters, as I am more concerned with the ideological associations that are rendered by the terminology itself.

A very well-known late sixth-century pope is, of course, Gregory the Great, and it is in his biography (590-604) that we are informed about extensive construction works performed at Peter’s sepulchre. Gregory’s primary goal for the moderations to the shrine seems to have been to allow mass to be celebrated ‘above St Peter’s body’.

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(super corpus beati Petri), also an indication of more regular papal liturgical presence.\textsuperscript{11} Gregory’s rebuilding of the choir raised the altar right above the tomb, which involved the apostle and his confessio more directly in the liturgical celebrations.\textsuperscript{12}

It is, however, especially in the context of the diplomatic relations and discourse with the Carolingian kings in the second half of the eighth century, that the papal employment of the physical and symbolical space pertaining to the confessio seems to reach full momentum, as it surfaces at the most pivotal moments in their shared history that was established in this period. We see this reflected not only in the papal biographies, but also in the papal correspondence that was sent from Rome to the Carolingian court from 739 onwards, and this is the time in which the newly instated Carolingian royal dynasty forged political-religious bonds with the Roman papacy. In their epistles, the popes regularly and specifically refer to the confessio as a place where they pray for the wellbeing of the royal family, and also remind the kings of the promises made and oaths sworn to Peter himself.\textsuperscript{13}

Papal Rome had been harassed and threatened by the Lombards in northern Italy for many decades when the first king of the Carolingian dynasty, Pippin, came to the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Expressing doubts as to the profoundness of Gregory’s alterations, however, Alan Thacker argues that Gregory’s works may not have been as invasive as usually assumed given that the altar probably had been directly above the grave since Jerome’s time: A. Thacker, ‘Rome of the martyrs: saints, cults and relics, fourth to seventh centuries’, in: É. Ó Carragáin and C. Neuman de Vegvar eds., Roma Felix – Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome (Farnham and Burlington, 2007), pp. 13-49, p. 47, and footnote 190 on this page.
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Frankish throne in 751. Pope Stephen II personally came to Pippin to ask for military aid against the Lombards. Pippin agreed to provide military aid to the pope and to restore to the papacy the lands that the Lombards had taken: a promise known as the Donation of Pippin. In return, the pope confirmed Pippin in his kingship by anointing him. The Liber Pontificalis tells us how the documents of this Donation were placed in or on St Peter’s confessio (in confessione) by abbot Fulrad personally, one of Pippin’s most trusted legates, in order that the papal successors possess and dispose of the documents forever.\textsuperscript{14} Twenty-three years later, in 774, Charlemagne gave new life to his father Pippin’s promise that had not been fully fulfilled, by definitively defeating the Lombards and incorporating their kingdom into his own realm. He subsequently visited Rome triumphantly. An important stage during his visit was the confirmation of his father’s donation promise at Peter’s tomb. Ad confessionem beati Petri both pope Hadrian and the king prostrate themselves, thanking the apostle for granting victory. Pope and king, flanked by their loyal magnates, then descended together to the body of Saint Peter (descendentes pariter ad corpus beati Petri) to ratify their promises to each other.\textsuperscript{15} Once Charlemagne’s donation was written out four days later, it was signed by the king and was placed prius super altare beati Petri et postmodum intus in sanctus eius confessio (‘placed on St Peter’s altar and then in his holy confessio’) and then an oath was sworn to adhere to the promises as stated in the document. Subsequently, a copy of that same donation was made to be taken to Francia later, which Charlemagne personally placed intus super corpus beati Petri,

\textsuperscript{14} LP, ed. Gundlach, c. 47: Et ipsas claves tam Ravennantium urbis quamque diversarum civitatum ipsius Ravennantium exarchatus una cum suprascripta donatione de eis a suo rege emissa in confessione beati Petri ponens, eodem Dei apostolo et eius vicario sanctissimo papae adque omnibus eius successoribus pontificibus perenniter possidendas adque disponendas tradidit (...).

subtus evangelia quae ibidem osculantur ('over St Peter’s body, beneath the gospels which are kissed there').

A number of actions were thus performed at a number of stages, in various areas pertaining to the confessio. Yet the most important thing here is that the Liber Pontificalis places the confessio right at the heart of the action, as all politico-religious and diplomatic actions were centered around the apostle’s holy burial place, an area that was ritually and liturgically controlled by the Roman bishops. By the second half of the eighth century, therefore, the papacy had thus certainly appropriated full control over the sanctity of the Apostle’s confessio. And we have already seen how, roughly 26 years later, the same Charlemagne was crowned emperor in the same sacred space.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed how the confessio was slowly but steadily appropriated by the Roman bishops. For reasons of time, we had to be selective in the choice of our examples, but nonetheless we hope to have shed some light on the ways Peter’s grave functioned as an anchor for political and religious authority in late antique and early medieval society. Starting out as a memoria for Christian worshipers, it was turned into an imperial locus in the early fourth century. Peter’s grave unmistakably occupied an increasingly central and crucial role in the

16 LP, Life of Hadrian I, trans. Davis, ch. 41-43, pp. 140-142; LP I, ed. Duchesne, p. 498. The Life of Hadrian also mentions (ch 5, p. 125) that Desiderius had sworn an oath on St Peter’s body under Stephen III’s pontificate (768-772) but had broken it. This oath by Peter’s shrine is not recorded in the Life of Stephen III, although negotiations in St Peter’s church are mentioned (cf. chapters 29-30, pp. 104-105; also see footnote 86 on p. 105).

17 In the year 500, king Theodoric had also paid his respects at St Peter’s before entering the city during his adventus as reported in the anonymous source Anonymus Valesianus, cf M. Humphries, ‘Liturgy and laity in Late-Antique Rome: problems, sources and social dynamics’, Studia Patristica 71 (2014), pp. 171-186, at p. 184.
representation of papal authority from especially the 6th century onwards, culminating in the diplomatic discourse between the Carolingian Franks and the Roman bishops. In the papal sources, it is systematically presented as a physical anchor where political, religious and personal relations were sanctioned. I think that the importance of this is underlined by the wide dissemination and circulation of the Liber Pontificalis manuscripts in the Carolingian realm as almost all 8th - and ninth-century manuscripts were produced at Carolingian monastic hubs, and the audience for the biographies was therefore largely Frankish. The Liber Pontificalis as well as the papal letters could therefore be read as papal ‘PR’, and the image of Peter’s confessio as locus of papal authority thus certainly resonated in the Frankish world. Both the employment of the physical and symbolical space of the fisherman’s confessio itself and the papal sources in which its value is communicated thus testify to innovative anchoring in longstanding Christian and imperial traditions.