

Civil authority from the chair of Peter: Papal ideology rooted in “the Donation of Constantine”

Why did the papacy introduce royal anointment into western Europe and with it the ideology of theocratic monarchy, against which, in its Byzantine form, the papacy had struggled bitterly since the fifth century? In the long run it must be asserted that the papacy erred in making this innovation; theocratic monarchy became even more troublesome a doctrine to the church in its western form than in its Byzantine form. This was something which could not be seen in the 750s. The fault of Germanic kingship, in ecclesiastical eyes, had been that it was too weak and could give no leadership to society and no protection to the church, not that it was an engine of despotism and a threat to the moral leadership of the church in society. The papacy in 751 finally had the opportunity to put into practice Gregory the Great's programs and to place the Frankish king in debt to Rome. But to do so, it had to overrule strong Frankish traditions and secure the crown for its Carolingian allies. The most certain way of achieving this aim was by the full application of religious sanctions, thereby elevating the head of the Carolingian family to a sacred office. It appeared to be a symbolic, dramatic, and glamorous ceremony that would achieve the desired end of securing the Frankish throne for Pepin but that seemed to offer no threat to papal leadership in western society. Ecclesiastical theorists knew about the implications of theocratic kingship and the royal anointing, but the papacy in the 750s did not expect that illiterate German kings would make use of them in a way that would be disadvantageous to the interests of Rome or even clearly perceive all the implications of the sophisticated doctrines involved.

The papacy was furthermore not concerned about the introduction of theocratic monarchy into western Europe because it had formulated its own ideology of the papal suzerainty over the kings of western Europe, and it obtained from Pepin the apparent recognition of the validity of this doctrine. The idea of papal authority in the western world was formulated in **the famous medieval document, the Donation of Constantine, the best-known forgery in history**. There is some doubt about the date of the authorship of the Donation of Constantine in the form in which it has come down to us. It is probable that the surviving version was drafted in the middle of the ninth century, but there is ample evidence that the original Donation of Constantine, substantially the same document that has come down to us, was drawn up in the papal chancery in the 750s,

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personally presented by the pope to Pepin at Paris in 754, and accepted by the Frankish king as a true statement of the valid powers of the papacy.

The papacy thought it necessary to express its ideology through the medium of **a forged document attributed to the emperor Constantine** because of the nature of legal concepts in the early Middle Ages. The good law was the old law; law was virtually equivalent to custom, and new claims had to have some customary or historical basis. Given also the respect that men in a largely illiterate society accorded written documents, it is easy to understand the propensity of churchmen in the early Middle Ages to forge documents to establish a legal basis for their claims. The forged character of the Donation of Constantine does not convict the eighth-century popes of moral turpitude; the document was merely a legal way of expressing papal ideology. It is furthermore probable that the papacy actually regarded as true the peculiar interpretation of the history of Constantine's reign upon which the Donation was predicated and that is summarized in the prologue to the document. The papal court in Rome was not able to find a copy of the document that they really believed Constantine had issued, so they forged their own version in much the same way as many medieval monasteries forged new copies of genuine charters that had been lost.

The author of the Donation of Constantine drew upon the legend of St. Sylvester, which Gregory of Tours referred to in his *History of the Franks* and which probably originated in late fifth-century Italy, contemporary with the formulation of the Gelasian doctrine. The legend presents in historical-legal form the radical aspect of Gelasius I's concept of the relationship between papal *auctoritas* and royal *potestas*. According to the legend upon which the Donation of Constantine is based, Pope Sylvester I had cured the Roman emperor of leprosy. In gratitude Constantine not only made the bishop of Rome the head of all the priests in the Roman world, but resigned his imperial crown and all his power to the pope. As an example of his servility to Sylvester the emperor nominally performed the office of the papal groom. The generous pope, in turn, restored the imperial crown to Constantine. The emperor, however, abandoned Rome, Italy, and the western world to the pope and took up residence in Constantinople. The doctrine behind this charming story is a radical one: The pope is supreme over all rulers, even the Roman emperor, who owes his crown to the pope and therefore may be deposed by papal decree. The pope has the absolute legal right not only to Rome and the patrimony of St. Peter, but to Italy and the whole western world if he chooses to exercise his claims.

The boldness and radicalism of the Donation of Constantine may be explained by the papacy's success in realizing the policy of Gregory the Great. The popes of the first half of the eighth century had secured their independence from Constantinople, effected an alliance with the French monarchy, and apparently gained the moral leadership of

western Europe. The prospects for papal power seemed endless in the 750s. Furthermore, the papacy was encouraged to express its ideology by the fact that the Frankish king officially performed the services of papal groom — he led the pope's horse a few paces in accordance with the Roman emperor's role in the Donation of Constantine. A great ceremony was then held at the church of St. Denis, the royal monastery of France, which, by its dedication to the disciple of St. Paul, symbolized the association between Rome and Paris. The pope anointed not only Pepin but his wife and children and gave the Frankish king the additional title of *patricius Romanorum*, protector of the Romans (that is, of the Roman church), and in fulfillment of this new office Pepin vowed to restore to the papacy the exarchate of Ravenna. The latter territory had fallen to the Lombards in 751, but Pepin swore to return it, not to the Byzantines to whom it had recently belonged, but to the patrimony of St. Peter, in accordance with the Donation of Constantine's grant of all Italy to St. Sylvester and his successors.

In the following year the Carolingian king fulfilled his promise to the pope. He invaded Italy, took Ravenna from the Lombards, and against the futile protests of the Greeks handed it over to the papacy. Before he returned to France in 756, he deposited on the tomb of St. Peter in Rome a document that has been known as the Donation of Pepin, confirming the independence of the patrimony of St. Peter. Thus, by the end of the 750s the papacy had good cause to believe that it had secured the leadership of the first Europe and that the revitalized Frankish monarchy would be a deferential and useful supporter in the creation of a Christian world order.

Yet within three decades of these momentous events in the 750s. it became apparent that the first Europe was taking shape in a way that did not conform to the papal ideology expressed in the Donation of Constantine. Leadership in western Europe was in the hands not of the bishop of Rome, but of Pepin's son, Charlemagne (768-814). The pope more and more found himself taking second place to the Carolingian king. Nor did Charlemagne actually maintain the Donation of Constantine. He had begun by confirming his father's donation, but in the 770s he destroyed the Lombard kingdom and took for himself the title of king of the Lombards. By laying claim to northern Italy, Charles directly contravened the Donations of Constantine and Pepin. Furthermore, the pope was alarmed to find Charles taking seriously the implications of his anointment; Charlemagne's court scholars addressed him as King David, who was the prototype of a sacred king. It appeared that the ideology of theocratic monarchy was emerging in the Carolingian kingdom for much the same purpose as it had developed in Byzantium.

Where the eighth-century papacy had miscalculated was in not understanding that the reformed Frankish church, in spite of its formal professions of loyalty to Rome, would not inevitably be subservient to the papacy. Rather, the bishops and abbots would just

as well ally themselves closely with the Carolingian ruler, who could offer them important positions in his government at court and at least provide them with patronage and security, and if the Frankish king now held a sacred office, if he was *rex et sacerdos*, so much the better; it provided a pretext for the Frankish ecclesiastics' involvement with the monarchy. The papacy had assumed at an educated and thriving Frankish church would look toward Rome; this was its fatal mistake.

The pope had also miscalculated in not making allowance for the rise of a strong personality in the Carolingian family. And no more impressive figure appeared in the early Middle Ages than Charles the Great. He was a prodigious warrior who spent his reign trying to extend the boundaries of his kingdom on all sides. He incorporated northwestern Germany to the Frankish kingdom and, in the course of his conquest, slew thousands of heathen Saxons in a single day without flinching. The nature of Germanic kingship was such that whatever other admirable qualities a king might have, his ability as a great warrior would gain him enormous admiration and loyalty among lay lords who could respect no other qualities except proficiency on the battlefield. But Charlemagne did have other qualities that gained him the fanatical loyalty, devotion, and service of the ablest churchmen not only in his own vast kingdom but even in England and northern Italy.

Altogether, as he appears in the description of his clerical biographer and secretary, Einhard, Charlemagne was an impressive personality. If Einhard occasionally cribbed a line from Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* to describe his master and hero, it is in a certain sense justified, for Charlemagne deserves to stand next to the greatest of the Roman emperors. Although only modestly literate — he did not read Latin well and could barely scratch his name — he had a keen intelligence that he applied to all problems of government. He was the great warrior of the age, but he also took pains to continue the work of Boniface to improve church discipline and further education in the monastic schools of his realm. He recruited the most renowned scholar of the day, the Englishman Alcuin, to improve the Frankish monastic schools, and at his court he surrounded himself with learned and zealous churchmen whose advice he sought and followed.