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Preview

This attractive volume comprises a total of eleven essays and a solid introduction, and is essentially a highly valuable contribution to the recent historiographical debate on papal influence and power in late antiquity, and the extent to which the bishops of Rome were able to, or aimed to, exercise their authority and claim supremacy within and outside their city. It joins the latest historiography on the Roman bishops and the development of Roman episcopal authority and interaction with other secular and clerical powers. It was published almost simultaneously with John Moorhead’s *The Popes and the Church of Rome in Late Antiquity* (New York, 2015) and it is probably for that reason that Moorhead’s work is not considered in the volume under review. It canvasses an appealing assortment of chapters that almost all analyse one pontificate in particular, and they all expand on the within the wider umbrella theme of the book, that is to what extent the Roman bishop could make his authority count, manoeuvring in three separate but at the same time intertwined spheres of influence, namely within his own church in Rome, with other episcopates, and in relation with the secular civil establishment. These three themes form the connective thread for the three parts in which the book is divided: the fourth, fifth and sixth century, which are subdivided into four, five and two articles respectively. From this point of view, the sixth century is awarded a relatively subordinate role and the volume might have been more balanced chronologically with one or two more essays on this period and perhaps even one on the (early) seventh century. This would have been an appealing addition given the outlook of the book and the themes explored in it, and maybe also because the seventh century is already so frequently left out of the late antique equation in general.

Editor Geoffrey Dunn’s introduction is refreshing in the sense that it does not necessarily strive to present the volume as a forcedly uniform collection of essays, but rather as a continuation of the ongoing discussion on the topics central to the book, underlining that the sources are open to interpretation. At this point it is relevant to note that the introduction elaborates on the general theme of papal authority in and beyond Rome in late antiquity, but some recent publications in this field of study by Mark Humphries on the imperial (symbolical) presence and interplay with papal authority in Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries are omitted from the discussion and the general bibliography.¹ Kristina Sessa’s recent and excellent work has been a source of inspiration to the discussions and subjects broached in the volume.² Dunn’s own viewpoint, brought up in both the introduction and his contribution on Innocent I and the first synod of Toledo, is a very compelling one, namely that the political hierarchy of the Roman provincial system lay at the basis of authority of the Roman bishops over others. Its judicial system gave the Roman bishop Western primacy so it could function as a court of appeals, although increasing geographical distance from Rome progressively impaired the tangible influence that could be exerted. The Roman bishop, following Dunn, could not claim universal primacy in this matter. Nicely framed is the line of
approach, also tangible in George Demacopoulos’ contribution on Gelasius I, that rather pragmatic matters, such as the personal abilities, ascendancy and character of the Roman bishop, often determined the possibilities and limits of papal authority and the realistic opportunity of actually enforcing decisions and ensuring acquiescence. This is something which occasionally tends to be overlooked in modern scrutiny of the sources: what we read of papal instructions or advice in papal letters, the type of source at the core of many, if not most, contributions to the compilation, is not by default a reflection of their de facto implementation.

Certainly, one of the great values of the volume lies in the interpretation of contemporary sources with as little as historiographical predisposition as possible, and this has brought forth a number of individual contributions that demonstrate that there is no single definitive way of understanding late antique Roman bishops. This approach allows for chapters on the same pontificates working from diverse angles, such as the pair on Siricius by Christian Hornung (Siricius and the rise of the papacy) and Alberto Ferreiro (Siricius and Himerius of Tarragona). In the case of the two articles on Gelasius I (492-496) and the reach of his authority by Demacopoulos and Bronwen Neil respectively the items even seem divergent. Demacopoulos persuasively explains that some of what historiography has perceived to be Gelasius’ international claims to authority reflect in fact an engineered rhetorical strategy to impress his domestic Roman audience instead. Neil, however, maintains on the basis of epistolary evidence that, in contrast to his predecessors, Gelasius adopted a distinctly African episcopal model of crisis management in order to personally deal with pressing issues in Italy and beyond, attempting in some cases to enforce adherence. Neil’s analysis is appealing although the actual effects of Gelasius’ activity are not easily and unequivocally ascertained, and although Gelasius was inspired by Augustine of Hippo, the extent to which the former indeed drew on such a quantifiable model of ‘African’ origins remains, at least to my mind, open to debate. Here, the idea that the actual success of Roman episcopal authority was mostly determined by the realistic possibility of compliance, as applied by some of the other contributors, probably allows for the safest premise.

Although of course some of the arguments as presented in the individual articles can be debated, the compilation indeed presents us with (sometimes far-reaching) new interpretations and insights. For reasons of space this review cannot do justice to all of the essays by discussing them in detail individually, but in this respect I find Salzman’s well-argued and insightful piece, in which she successfully and refreshingly counters traditional views on Prosper of Aquitaine being Pope Leo’s ghost writer or secretary, one of the most outstanding contributions to the volume. Thematically it perhaps follows the general outlook of the volume less strictly (i.e. the reach and nature of Roman episcopal authority), but Salzman’s conclusions do tie in well with the wider outline, asserting that the fifth-century papacy was keen to ascertain support from the Western provincial elites that people such as Prosper in Gaul pertained to. Glen Thompson’s discussion of the Roman bishop’s participation in fourth-century ecclesiastical building activity is, different from the other studies in the volume, mostly based on material evidence, on the basis of which he concludes that the Roman bishops were highly involved in the construction of church buildings, though much of this was funded by the local Christian aristocracy and not by the bishop’s private funds. Besides increasing the visibility of Christianity, it also testified to a growing episcopal urban organisation, and the Roman bishops of the second half of the fourth century were evidently regarded as leaders of the urban and regional Christian community.
Although I think the volume is not in the first place aimed to offer a perfectly homogeneous whole, one occasionally gets the impression that some of the authors are not aware of the other contributions and the lines of argumentation presented there. Cross-references, which would have added a bit more coherence to the book, are mostly missing, which feels somewhat like a missed opportunity, especially with regard to articles that deal with the same pope (for instance those of Hornung and Ferreiro). While Philippe Blaudeau’s detailed and perceptive study of the early Liber Pontificalis as a set of texts underlining papal influence in the East and their good mutual relationship is impressive and compelling, he does not seem to be familiar with Michele Renee Salzman’s analysis of the relation between Prosper of Aquitaine and Pope Leo. Where Salzman argues (for instance on p. 119) that, while Prosper was certainly a supporter of papal primacy and Pope Leo’s pontificate, he in fact was not employed by the Roman see as is traditionally assumed, Blaudeau seems (p. 129) to refer to Prosper’s Epitoma chronicon to expand on Pope Leo’s affirmation of papal authority. This does not make any of Blaudeau’s key arguments less valid as Prosper’s work is brought up as a relatively minor consideration, but it might have been avoided.

I noticed a few relatively minor typographical errors and spelling mistakes, but none of grave consequence.  The slight chronological imbalance and the above-mentioned occasional absence of internal connection between the individual studies aside are matters of personal taste and do not detract from the fact that this is a carefully edited book and an insightful volume of overall high-standard quality. It is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the reach of papal authority in late antiquity, and I would recommend it to specialists on the development of the early papacy as well as those more interested in the history of the Christian Church, the city of Rome and the period of late antiquity in general.

Notes:


2. Among others her most recent work: Kristina Sessa, The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere (Cambridge, 2012).

3. For instance patricus instead of patricius on p. 201; ‘Theil’ for ‘Thiel’ on p. 166, note 52; a comma instead of a full stop on p. 182; and the odd bold page number (73) listed in the table of contents