Anchoring Pontifical Authority: A Reconsideration of the Papal Employment of the Title *Pontifex Maximus*

It is a common assumption that the title of supreme priesthood or *pontifex maximus* is included in the official papal titulature, and it has been supposed that the Roman bishop adopted it from the Roman emperor in late antiquity. In fact, however, it was probably not until the fifteenth century that the designation was first used by the papacy, and it has continued to be part of papal representation ever since. The title was deeply rooted in the Roman imperial past. At several stages in papal history the papal agency felt the need to draw back (again) on this ancient, traditional title and managed to successfully (re-)introduce the title by anchoring it in the cultural biography of the papacy.

Introduction

Since Antiquity, the interplay between the Roman bishops and secular rulers has been subject to continuous transformation and renegotiation, as both groups continually reverted to established traditions in order to sustain legitimacy and pre-eminence. At the same time, however, modes of representation had to be innovative in order to appeal to contemporary tastes, needs, and expectations. Anchoring these novelties in tradition was a convenient means of implementing, and reinforcing, the desired effect, and tracing these processes of embedding the new in the familiar offers us the possibility of understanding cultural, political, and religious transformation. An outstanding example of this kind of “anchoring innovation” is that of Roman episcopal titulature, as can be

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demonstrated by looking at the employment of the title *pontifex maximus* at various constitutive stages in papal history.²

Although this title is well-known among classicists and theologians alike, its use is not self-evident, since there is no register of papal titulature in canonical laws or records. It is not even included in the unofficial yet generally acknowledged list of papal titles in the *Annuario Pontificio*. Yet although the papacy has never stipulated it in its titulature, it is nevertheless applied ubiquitously to represent the (modern) pope, and the idea that the Roman bishops themselves held the official designation of *pontifex maximus* thus remains widespread well into our times.³ This may be partly the result of the overwhelming quantity of magnificent ecclesiastical edifices in Rome, such as the Lateran, with their equally copious inscriptions featuring *P. MAX.* or variations thereof. Reinforced by recent examples such as coins and public inscriptions of popes including Benedict XVI and John Paul II, the impression that emerges is of *pontifex maximus* as a title that has belonged to the official standardised nomenclature of the popes for many centuries. Moreover, since the title was employed by the Roman emperors, it is also found abundantly on buildings from classical Antiquity, papal use of *pontifex maximus* consequently even induces imperial connotations. In fact, these evocations are so striking that it is a common yet unfounded assumption among the public and even some scholars that the Roman bishops took over the title from the emperors during Antiquity.

Although papal titulature has deservedly received scholarly attention, the mechanics that underlay the process of when and how the title *pontifex maximus* became so firmly embedded in the cultural biography of the papacy have remained unstudied so far. This article, therefore, aims to analyse some of the most pivotal moments in history and historiography pertaining to the employment of the title in Rome’s episcopal past. By doing so, it will enhance our understanding of the complex interactions of religious authority and society from a historical perspective.

**Background: (Late) Antique Use of the Title Pontifex Maximus**

Most modern authors assume that the Emperor Gratian discontinued the title as part of his anti-pagan measures in the year 381 CE, and that the bishops of Rome, at some point, assumed and regenerated it in a Christian

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2. “Anchoring Innovation” as a concept is the new research agenda of OIKOS, the National Research School in Classical Studies, the Netherlands. It is being developed with the financial support of Leiden University, Radboud University, the University of Amsterdam, and the University of Groningen. For the concept of “anchoring,” see the website http://www.ru.nl/oikos/anchoring-innovation.

context. Recently, however, Alan Cameron has convincingly argued that it was not abandoned by Gratian at all. Instead, according to Cameron, it remained in imperial use well into the early Middle Ages in a different form as the emperors renamed the position while retaining it.10

As the high priest and principal member of the College of Pontiffs (the Collegium Pontificum) the pontifex maximus was the highest official in ancient Roman state religion and held the main responsibility of maintaining the “peace of the gods” (the pax deorum).6 As such, this “highest bridge-builder” between the worlds of gods and men carried a substantial degree of both religious and, especially from the reign of Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE) onwards, political authority. During Augustus’ reign and that of his successors, the position became a quintessential part of imperial rule and a standard title for the Roman emperors to signify their sacral dignity.8 Two centuries later, a regularised formula for imperial titles that were conferred on each new emperor by the senate, including that of pontifex maximus, had become firmly established.9 This standardised sequence of titulature appeared regularly on imperial monuments in Rome, visible to all.

In the fourth century, Constantine the Great (r. 306–337) and his Christian successors continued this official titulature, despite the obviously pagan connotations that were now attached to the pontifex maximus. It had evidently become an inseparable element of imperial representation. It has been suggested that the Christian emperors might have maintained the title purposefully to ensure that they could interfere in church politics.10 At the same time, the bishops of Rome and those of other places would commonly be called pontifex, an early Christian-Latin translation of the Greek ἄρχιερεύς as it is used in

7. For the etymology of the word pontifex (probably derived from pons and facere) see F. van Haeperen, Le collège pontifical (3ème s.a.C.–4ème s.p.C.) (Brussels and Rome: Brepols, 2002), 11–45. Also Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, vol. X 1, 2672, lin. 44–51, s.v. pontifex.
8. See, for example, Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” 356–60; J. Rüppke, Fasti sacerdotum (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 1601–16 and Van Haeperen, Le collège pontifical.
9. M. Peachin, Roman Imperial Titulature and Chronology. A.D. 235–284 (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1990), 1 and on 7: “Hence, when we speak of official titulature, only those titles voted for an emperor by the senate come into question.” Imperator Caesar (name) Pius Felix Augustus pontifex maximus tribunicia potestate (iteration) consul (iteration) pater patriae proconsul. See 2–8 on how and when this titulature became standardised.
10. Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” 360. Cameron does not refer to Van Haeperen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” who, among others, suggests that the pontifex maximus could only use—or be asked to use—his position when he was in Rome, which the Christian emperors of the fourth century seldom were. Hence they did not bother to abandon the title of pontifex maximus, see 138–39. Similarly: J. Martin, “Pontifex maximus,” Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche 8 (2009): 416. Rüppke, Fasti sacerdotum, 1601–16, however, argues that the function of pontifex maximus had already ceased to have practical implications in the third century. J. Rüppke, From Jupiter to Christ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), does not offer new insights and omits Cameron entirely.

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the Bible and in the Jewish tradition to designate, among others, Christ. It became a synonym for *episcopus*, to designate the bishop’s position in the church, although it also had some other usages.\(^{11}\)

Clearly, *pontifex* was a rather neutral term without any strictly pagan connotations. *Pontifex maximus*, however, was different, since it explicitly referred to the head of state religion during Rome’s pagan past. This is probably what led bishop Gelasius (r. 492–496) and other contemporaries to assume that it must have been employed exclusively by pagan emperors and had been discarded by their Christian successors.\(^{12}\) It is unsurprising, therefore, that the title came under discussion in Late Antiquity. It is in the pagan Byzantine historian Zosimus’ (c. 490s–510s) account of the Emperor Gratian’s reign (r. 375–383) that we encounter the first pivotal moment in the history, or, rather, historiography, of the term *pontifex maximus*:

As soon as each [emperor] assumed supreme power, the priestly robe was brought to him by the *pontifices* (ποντίφικες) and he was styled *pontifex maximus* (ποντίφεξ μέγιστος). All the earlier emperors were apparently happy to accept the honour and to use this title, even Constantine (who, when he came to the throne, turned aside from the true path in religion and embraced the Christian faith) and all his successors, including Valentinian and Valens. But when the *pontifices* brought the robes to Gratian in the usual way, he rejected their request, considering it impious for a Christian to wear such garb.\(^{13}\)

This passage has given rise to the notion that Gratian had indeed refused to accept the title, resulting in its permanent omission from imperial nomenclature.\(^{14}\) Zosimus’ report, however, is the only testimony to this event. Pointing out in detail the alleged historical errors and antiquarianistic character of this passage, Cameron has argued that there is little truth to this account. In response to this argument, Lellia Ruggini has asserted that Zosimus is more trustworthy as an historian than Cameron has been ready to admit.\(^{15}\) Ruggini agrees, however,

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11. Van Haeperen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” discusses different usages of the word *pontifex* and concludes, 159: “Ce terme peut s’appliquer à tout évêque et n’est en rien réservé au siège épiscopal roman.”

12. Cameron includes more references, including Gelasius. Cf. Schieffer, “Der Papst als Pontifex Maximus,” 304–5 and Van Haeperen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” 153. Tertullian’s use of *pontifex maximus* is clearly ironic, see De pudic. 1, 6, discussed by, for example, Van Haeperen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” 144.

13. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 4.36; translation from the Greek provided in Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” at 343–44, which is partially based on the translation provided by Zosimus, *New History*, trans. with a commentary by R. T. Ridley (Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982). For literature on the pun in the last lines of the passage, which we have omitted from our citation, see Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” 375–76.

14. This is the conclusion found in all literature up to Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” who also lists several examples, such as B. Croke and J. Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth Century Rome* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1982), 30.


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that Cameron has convincingly demonstrated, by citing examples from the Em-
perors Valentinian III (r. 425–455) and Marcian (r. 450–457), that Christian em-
perors after Gratian did continue to employ the title in official documents, which 
many other historians have simply failed to notice for various reasons. This 
 omission would seem to be due to the fact that the title was transformed into a 
version that better suited the fifth-century Christianised world and its vocabu-
lary, rather than being completely abandoned: pontifex maximus (“highest pon-
tiff”) became pontifex inclitus or inclytus (“honourable pontiff”). While the 
traditional position was officially retained, therefore, its sharp and overtly pagan 
edges were removed to avoid agitating the Christian community. The number 
of examples in which this innovated title surfaces is, however, limited.

While Cameron’s arguments are persuasive, there is some room for interpre-
tation. One of Cameron’s reasons to doubt the veracity of Zosimus’ account is 
the actual replacement of pontifex maximus with pontifex inclitus, which is not 
remarked upon by Zosimus. This replacement, however, does not detract from 
Zosimus’ credibility: his account is trustworthy, but incomplete. Zosimus 
failed to mention this moment of anchoring that took place in the period after 
Gratian’s refusal of the title in 376 (following Françoise van Haeperen and 
others): although the function was abandoned, Roman emperors recognised 
the firmly rooted tradition of the imperial title pontifex maximus. At the same 
time, the imperial administration was aware of the all-too-strong pagan conno-
tations of this title, and for this reason it was decided to change it into some-
thing that was new yet closely resembled the old in order to ensure a 
continuation of the religious authority of the emperor without offending the not-
oriously strong Roman sense of tradition. The innovated title was therefore 
anchored to the old. Maybe Gratian himself decided to do this, despite the fact 
that it might have been incompatible with his recent refusal of the pagan func-
tion. While the exact decision making process may be unclear, the first mention 
of pontifex inclitus is found within four decades of the end of Gratian’s rule, 
and its anchoring of the pontificate in the tradition of Roman emperorship 
was apparent.

Cameron has also brought forward a possible reason that may account for 
the limited visibility of pontifex inclitus: in the later Roman Empire the use 

16. However, in Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, not men-
17. The use of pontifex inclitus was already referred to by H. Leclercq, “Pontifex,” in Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de litturgie, ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1939), 1426, not mentioned by Cameron.
18. In 376 Gratian was in Rome, the only place where the function of pontifex maximus could be assumed: see, for example, Van Haeperen, Le collège pontifical, 166–86. Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” opts for the year 382 (simply Palanque, “L’empereur Gratien,” 45), when Gratian also 
19. See, for example, Van Haeperen, Le collège pontifical, 160 about third-century usurpers of the imperial throne who used pontifex maximus on their coins.
of full imperial titulature became increasingly rare and abbreviations were more commonly applied. As a result, this particular title became less prominently perceptible and it was in addition often omitted from the abridged versions. However, the only two examples that we have of the Emperors Valentinian III and Marcian using their complete titulature, as referred to above, do include the full title pontifex inclitus. Another reason may have been that emperors were increasingly mindful of potential papal sensibilities regarding secular rulers who, in their guise as head of the state cult, styled themselves as pontiffs. This may have resulted in them avoiding the title in public representations and interactions with the papacy.

The notion that Gratian (or any other Christian emperor after him, for that matter) excluded the term from his official nomenclature may indeed be laid aside. Moreover, the shift from maximus (“highest”) to inclitus (“honourable”), two terms unmistakably similar in meaning yet at the same time very distinct in nuance, reveals a fascinating innovation at the hand of the imperial agency.20 While keeping the roots of the title recognisable and reworking it into an updated version, an old term shed some of its ancient Roman connotations and thus was transformed into something more acceptable to the contemporary and increasingly Christianised world. That the process resonated in the Late Antique world and beyond is perhaps best attested by the aforementioned passage in Zosimus’ account and the modern historiographical debate that it has stirred.

Papal pontifices
The synergy of a rising Christendom and papacy and the aforementioned common assumption in historiography that the status of pontifex maximus had disappeared from the imperial records is probably what gave rise to another popular notion which remains unattested in the historical records: that, after Gratian’s assumed renunciation of the title of pontifex maximus, it was subsequently assumed by the Roman bishops and incorporated into a Christian framework.21

As mentioned above, pontifex was in regular use among Latin-speaking Christians from the very beginning, long before Gratian’s rule, as it was a common appellation for any Christian bishop.22 Roman bishops in Antiquity thus also employed the denomination pontifex, but in discussing ideological overtones of pontifex maximus one should carefully distinguish between the two.

20. Cf. Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” 372: “That is to say, in a sense Gratian could indeed be said to have rejected the supreme pontificate, though by redefining rather than by refusing to accept it.”
22. Kajanto, “Pontifex Maximus as the Title of the pope,” 38–42.
Nonetheless, the two terms have been confused at times.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Pontifex} certainly was not exclusively reserved for the pope, and neither was the term \textit{papa} ("father"), as both—and other synonyms—were used for all bishops in the Christian world. Theodosius’ edict \textit{De fide catholica} represents an interesting case because it describes Pope Damasus I (r. 366–384) as \textit{pontifex}, whereas the Eastern patriarch of Alexandria, Peter, is called \textit{episcopus}.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, since the two terms are essentially on a par, it is unclear if a difference in status of the Eastern patriarch of Alexandria, Peter, is called \textit{summus pontifex} ("highest pontiff") was one such variation that surfaced in the wake of these experiments at the end of the fourth century. Since this term was not used exclusively for the Roman bishop, however, it cannot be viewed as a perfect parallel of the more exclusive \textit{pontifex maximus}. Moreover, it did not have any pagan connotations and, as such, it represented a Christian invention.\textsuperscript{26} At what point \textit{summus pontifex} became more or less permanently incorporated in papal titulature as it is used today remains uncertain.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the lack of historical proof, the notion that Leo I (440–461) at some point adopted the \textit{pontifex maximus} title has long persisted in secondary literature.\textsuperscript{28} This misconception might have originated with Ferdinand Walter’s fourth edition of the \textit{Lehrbuch des Kirchenrechts}, published in 1829. In this monumental publication, he refers to an inscription found in the basilica of

\textsuperscript{23} See Kajanto, “Pontifex Maximus as the Title of the Pope,” 41, suggesting that Leclercq’s entry of \textit{pontifex} in the \textit{Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie}, led to confusion between \textit{pontifex} and \textit{pontifex maximus}, as indeed seems to have been the case. Similar confusion can be detected in G. Moroni, “Pontefice,” \textit{Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica} \textit{da S. Pietro sino ai nostri giorni} (Venice: Tipografia Emiliana, 1852), 104–8, who seems to suggest that \textit{pontifex maximus} is used in the \textit{Vita Sancti Godefridi episcopi Abianensi}.


\textsuperscript{25} Kajanto, “Pontifex Maximus as the Title of the Pope,” 42–43.


\textsuperscript{27} The official list of titles of the Pope given in the Annuario Pontificio of 2013 includes “Supreme Pontiff of the Whole Church” (in Latin, \textit{Summus Pontifex Ecclesiae Universalis}) as the fourth title, the first being “Bishop of Rome.” The first edition of the papal yearbook, then called \textit{La Gerarchia Cattolica}, in 1872, already mentioned the same title.

\textsuperscript{28} See n. 8 above; also see Schieffer, “Der Papst als Pontifex Maximus,” 300–1 and Kajanto, “Pontifex Maximus as the Title of the Pope,” 37, who have pointed this out. Fortunately, in more recent scholarly literature the notion has proved less persistent. In popular sources of information, the misconception can be found, for instance, at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontifex_Maximus, which in turn refers to the online \textit{Encyclopedia Britannica} under the lemma “papacy,” http://www.britannica.com/EBechecked/topic/441722/papacy (accessed 14 July 2016), stating: “Leo, one of only two popes accorded the appellation ‘the Great,’ played a pivotal role in the early history of the papacy. Assuming the title \textit{pontifex maximus}, or chief priest, he made an important distinction between the person of the pope and his office, maintaining that the office assumed the full power bestowed on Peter.”
San Paolo fuori le Mura that purportedly carried the name of Leo and the title *pontifex maximus*. At a later stage, in the seventh edition of his work (1839), Walter added that this otherwise unknown inscription was orally transmitted to him by the historian Barthold Georg Niebuhr.\(^{29}\) One original inscription of Leo I that survives is still visible on the San Paolo’s triumphal arch, and this is probably the one to which Niebuhr and Walter were referring. This inscription only features *pontifex*, however, and not *pontifex maximus*. A reconstruction of events therefore suggests that either Niebuhr misinformed Walter, or Walter misunderstood Niebuhr and assumed that the latter meant *pontifex maximus* as opposed to the plain *pontifex*. Another possibility is that the alleged inscription did at some point exist but was destroyed in the fire of 1823.\(^{30}\) Walter’s notion, however rudimentary, was subsequently taken over by other scholars who failed to check the reference.\(^{31}\)

**First Use of the Title *Pontifex Maximus* by the Papacy**

If Leo I was not the first pope to be called *pontifex maximus*, then who was? A rather isolated reference in Isidore of Seville’s (c. 560–636) *Etymologiae* attests to the fact that the expression *pontifex maximus* in reference to a bishop in general may at least still have been recognised in some parts of early medieval Europe, but in this case it is used only occasionally, as opposed to functioning as the standard form of reference.\(^{32}\) In any case, the honorary status of *pontifex maximus* must have been adopted by the papacy at some point in history, as witnessed by the plethora of inscriptions on the papal edifices and coins from the early Renaissance period onwards. But at what point was it incorporated into papal representational strategies?

The historiography on the absence of the *pontifex maximus* title in Late Antique and early medieval papal contexts is sparse. It was Hilaire Marot who first pointed out that scholars of the past centuries have repeatedly—and

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\(^{29}\) The whole process has been described in detail by Schieffer, “Der Papst als Pontifex Maximus,” 300–302.

\(^{30}\) Cf. Schieffer, “Der Papst als Pontifex Maximus,” 302, also suggesting another explanation: “Sieht man einmal von der recht unwarscheinlichen Möglichkeit ab, Niebuhr könnte (...) eine antike Inschrift entdeckt haben, die in 1000 Jahren zuvor allen Sammlern entgangen wäre, so bleibt nur die Wahl, eine wesentlich jüngere Inschrift, etwa der Renaissance-Zeit, anzunehmen oder aber auf dem Wege von Niebuhr zu Walter ein folgenschweres Mißverständnis zu vermuten.”

\(^{31}\) Schieffer, “Der Papst als Pontifex Maximus,” 301, footnote 7, mentions J. F. Schulte, *System des allgemeinen katholischen Kirchenrechts* (Gießen: Ferber, 1856), 193, as an exception. The influence of reference works is palpable in an article by R. Schilling, “Ce que le christianisme doit à la Rome antique,” *Revue des études latines* 62 (1984): 301–25, who at 321 states, on the basis of Pauly-Wissowa, that it was Leo I who reintroduced the term. Schilling is also the author of an article which we have not been able to trace: it has the promising title “À propos du Pontifex Maximus. Dans quelle mesure peut-on parler d’un ‘réemploi’ par les chrétiens d’un titre prestigieux de la Rome antique?.” Allegedly it is in *Diritto e religione da Roma a Costantinopoli a Mosca*, ed. M. Baccari (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1994), 75–90, but we could not find it there.

erroneously—supposed that the pontifex maximus title was assumed by the fifth-century popes, after it had been discontinued by the emperors of the previous age. He noted that rather it became current in the papal vocabulary from Pope Paul II’s papacy (r. 1464–1471) onwards. Marot’s conclusion was reiterated by Peter Stockmeier. A few years before Stockmeier, historian Rudolf Schieffer had also weighed into the debate, similarly drawing attention to the faulty foundations of postulations about fifth-century papal appropriations of the title. Schieffer looked to the late Middle Ages or early Renaissance as well, identifying Boniface IX (r. 1389–1404) as the first pope to have been described as pontifex maximus.

From a combined epigraphical and philological perspective, Iiro Kajanto has come to a similar conclusion, asserting that indeed pontifex maximus had never been part of papal nomenclature in the ancient or medieval Christian church. Examining inscriptions from the Renaissance, he assumes that the title must have been revived in an epigraphical context for the first time, but without expounding much on the historical context in which this happened. Although some questionable occurrences of the title have been identified for the pontificate of Eugene IV (r. 1431–1447), it is with Nicholas V (r. 1447–1455) that it becomes indisputably fashionable. On the whole, it thus seems safe to state that pontifex maximus was put into use at some point during the culturally dynamic 1400s, tangibly gaining popularity from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards. This prompts a hitherto overlooked question: why was it adopted at that time?

During this time, the Roman Church was plagued by major political and religious upheaval in Europe: popes competed with other claimants for the Apostolic see, and with secular rulers over the ultimate authority within the church. On a cultural level, the Renaissance humanists were active throughout the Italian city states, enthusiasm over the remnants of ancient culture. Of course, imperial remains such as statues and buildings featuring inscriptions were especially abundant in urban Rome, meaning that representations of the ancient emperors as pontifices maximi were readily and ubiquitously visible for people looking to be inspired, such as humanists at the papal court.

36. Cameron, “The Imperial Pontifex,” 361, with reference to Kajanto in footnote 80. Cf. Van Haerperen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” who, 159, also mentions that the title only became extensively used by the papacy during the fifteenth century.
Rome’s unique ecclesiological environment attracted and harboured intellectuals who were, for the most part, also curialists working for the papal establishment. Contributing to Rome’s characteristic “curial humanism”, these humanists accommodated their scholarly ambitions to Roman traditions in their defence of papal authority. They were also imperialists, who profiled the church and its *Curia Romana* as heirs to the Roman Empire and identified the pope as a new emperor.38

Indeed, the first traces of *pontifex maximus* in a papal context are found in epigraphical sources, where the rebirth of the classical influences that are characteristic of the Renaissance was particularly tangible due to the renewed interest in the classical Latin language and literature.39 Following Kajanto, one could argue that the step from the title *summus pontifex*, which was already in use, to that of *pontifex maximus* was a small one, given the similarity in meaning. Of course, the latter carried ancient imperial associations and traditions that the former did not. Any pagan connotations of the term posed no hindrance—on the contrary. This may be illustrated by, for instance, the use of the title *pontifex optimus maximus*; this title is a curious hybrid form of *Iuppiter optimus maximus*, a classical pagan invocation of Jupiter, merged with *Deo Optimo Maximo*, an invocation of God used by Christian humanists.40

Two potential candidates for the introduction of the title to the public papal nomenclature have briefly passed in review so far: Boniface IX and Nicholas V. In Vincenzo Forcella’s monumental yet notoriously flawed edition of Roman inscriptions, however, we have come across two examples from earlier dates: one is attributed to Alexander II (r. 1061–1073),41 the other to Innocent II (r. 1130–1143).42 Assessment of their context is complicated as both are


41. Forcella, *Iscrizioni* xii, no. 505, at 415, in the San Sebastiano al Palatino: ECCL: HVIC IAM A SAECVLO XI NOMEN ERAT MONASTERIVM S. SEBASTIANI EAM SIQVIDEM ALEXANDER II PONT: MAX: RICHERIO ABB: MONACHORVM COLÉNDAM DONO DEDIT VVLGO AVTEM A SITV P ALLARIA DICEBATVR. Maybe it is on this inscription that H. Tincq, *Les catholiques* (Paris: Grasset, 2008), section 1, 2 based his idea that *pontifex maximus* was exclusively used by Roman bishops from the eleventh century onwards. He also states that the title of *pontifex maximus* was used in the church in general from the sixth century onwards.

42. Forcella, *Iscrizioni* xii, no. 444, at 321 in the Santi Vincenzo ed Anastasio: INNOCENTIVS II PONT. MAX. EX FAMILIA ANICIA PAPIA ET PAPARESCA NVNC MATTAEIA S. BERNARDI OPERA SVBLATO ANACLETI SCHISMATE IDEM AC SVIS CISTERCIENSIVS HOC A SE RESTAVRATVM MONASTERIVM DONO DEDIT ANNO DOM. M. C. XL.
placed on churches that underwent substantial rebuilding in the seventeenth century, and Forcella unfortunately failed to verify whether these inscriptions are original or early modern (re)constructions. Evidence for papal uses of pontifex maximus in epigraphy that antedate the fifteenth century is therefore extremely feeble. In case these are in fact restorations of a later date, they would amount to an appealing case of anchoring and innovation, where seventeenth-century perceptions of papal commemorations were projected onto the medieval popedom of the past.

Boniface IX, born as Piero Tomacelli, became Roman pontiff during the turbulent aftermath of the Avignon papacy which lasted from 1309 to 1377, a time when internal and external strife involving the major political players in Europe was rampant in the church, resulting in a severely discredited Roman see. During the so-called Western Schism (1378–1418) which deepened the political and religious fissures and crippled the Roman Church even further, rival popes posed a serious challenge to the Apostolic authority, causing dissent over the true claimant to the Apostolic see. For the Roman bishop, affirming his position as the one and only true successor of St Peter was of the utmost essence. A politically prudent pontiff, Boniface successfully prioritised reasserting Italian allegiance to the papacy and stood firm in asserting his authority over his rival Benedict XIII. Boniface, therefore, would certainly classify as a perseverant pope, who was eager to propagate his superior position inside and outside Rome. Could these circumstances have incited him to breathe new life into the pontifex maximus title?

Around the year 1400, a marble statue of Boniface IX was erected in the left aisle of the church of San Paulo fuori le mura by the Benedictine monks of the monastery that is attached to the church. Later it was moved to the sacristy and subsequently to the cloister, where it still stands to this day. It is adorned with an inscription featuring the title pontifex maximus (P. MAX.) celebrating the pope’s noble descent. Remarkably, however, Boniface IX’s statue has not been taken into consideration in Kajanto’s work. The text is engraved on the pages of a book held by his enthroned persona. This statue is one of the first examples of this representational mode of a pope seated on a throne. What is problematic is that this dedication was restored in the seventeenth century, as recorded in a second inscription from that period on the statue’s pedestal, which makes it difficult to tell which parts are old or...
new.48 The reference to pontifex maximus could therefore be a seventeenth-century invention. On the pedestal inscription, however, it says pont. opt. max. as opposed to P. MAX. This difference in phrasing suggests that the engraving in the book held by Boniface is not contemporary with the one on the pedestal. The title pontifex optimus maximus would rather fit the even more classicising spirit of later times: therefore, P. MAX. is probably original.49 Given the novelty and connotations of the title, it is reasonable to assume that Boniface himself would have sanctioned its employment. In the event that this inscription on Boniface’s statue does contain the first occurrence of the designation pontifex maximus in the history of the papacy, its employment may perhaps best be understood as a reaction to the competition for legitimacy within the church, and thus as a reinforcement of Boniface’s position as the one and only proper Petrine heir.

Pope Nicholas V, a humanist himself, may also be the unequivocal innovator. Several inscriptions issued in his name contain a reference to pontifex maximus, of which the two earliest date from 1453. One was situated in San Stefano Rotondo’s vestibule, the other (now lost) at the Trevi fountain, which was commissioned by Nicholas as a commemoration of his reactivation of the ancient Roman aqueduct, Aqua Virgo.50 In any case, Nicholas greatly inspired his successors, as there was certainly a great rise in popularity of the title after his pontificate, most visibly so in epitaphs.51 His papacy was also coloured by his humanist endeavours and reconstruction works on great monuments of papal history, such as the Vatican and St Peter’s basilica.52 With the stabilisation of the political state of affairs in Rome and, ultimately, the articulation of the primatus papae as priorities, his magnum opus consisted of diplomatic accomplishments including the abdication of Felix V and the obliteration

48. Yet Forcella Iscrizioni, xii, no. 16, at 14, and Hager, Die Ehrenstatuen, 31–32, have concluded that the inscription is contemporary to Boniface’s time. The inscription on the pedestal is found in Forcella, Iscrizioni, xii, no. 28, at 17: BONIFATIO IX TOMACELLO PONT. OPT. MAX. GRATI ANIMI MOMENTVMA CASINENSI CONGREGATIONE OLM ERECTVM MOX TEMPORAYM INJURIA COLLAPSVM LVCRETIA TOMACELLA COLVMNA PRALLIANI DUX GENTILIV SVO RESTITVIT.

49. We owe this suggestion to Prof. Sible de Blaauw. Additionally, Boniface’s name and family name are spelled differently in the two inscriptions.

50. M. Schraven, “Founding Rome Anew: Sixtus IV and the Foundation of Ponte Sisto, 1473,” in Foundation, Dedication and Consecration in Early Modern Europe, ed. M. Delbeke and M. Schraven (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 147 refers to the inscription at the Trevi fountain as the first example of a pope entitled pontifex maximus, although he erroneously attributes it to Nicholas IV instead of Nicholas V. The inscriptions are listed in Kajanto, Papal Epigraphy, 60–61. Nicholas’ inscription on the Trevi fountain reads: Nicolaus V pontifex maximus post illustratum insignibus monumentis urbem ductum aquae Virginis vetustate collapsam sua impensa in splendidiorem cultum restitui ornari(qu)e mandavit anno Dom(ini) Iesu Christi MCCCLIII pontifecatus sui VII.; the one in the San Stefano Rotondo reads Ecel(es)iam hanc prothomartyris sancti Stephani diu ante collapsam Nicolaus V pont(fex) max(imus) ex integro instauravit MCCCLIII.

of conciliarism. Large-scale plans for urban renewal of the city were grafted onto the imperial remains as a means to consolidate his rule, and the preservation of Antiquity was high on the pontifical agenda. Nicholas’ endeavours also stimulated research into Antiquity, which included the study of the ancient usage of pontifex maximus, thus contributing to the awareness of the title and its meaning. In Lawrence Duggan’s words, “There is no doubt whatever that Nicholas dreamt on a grand scale about the restoration of Rome to its rightful place as the centre of the Christian world.” It should also be remembered that Nicholas’ papacy witnessed the advance of the Turks in the East, who subjugated Constantinople’s patriarchate, and incorporated it within the Ottoman Empire. Only two years after the fall of the Byzantine capital, quasi-imperial associations evoked by Nicolas’ grave setting in St Peter’s basilica reinforced the idea of papal sovereignty. In short, whether Nicholas or his curialists initiated the revival of the ancient title of pontifex maximus or not, his motives and enthusiasm for applying it can be understood against the canvas of humanist endeavours of the mid-fifteenth century, a time when papal supremacy had to counter other powers in Europe, just as had been the case with Boniface IX some decades earlier.

Ultimately, on the basis of the assembled evidence it is difficult to pinpoint one pontificate in particular to surmise the precise context of the first adaptation of the title. We can, however, understand the general framework of the period in which pontifex maximus gained popularity by applying the concept of anchoring innovation. In all cases, its implementation into a papal framework allowed it to be anchored successfully into the history and future of the papacy, at a time when Roman-based papal authority was no longer self-evident and had to be declared and averred by all means possible. Modeled on an already existing notion, a new tradition was carved out that linked the papacy and the Latin Church to the heydays of the Roman Empire, bestowing upon it an exemplary feature of classical might. Above all things, it was propelled by a desire to reinvent, and it merged the principles of an ancient institution with the reality of fifteenth-century papal Rome. As the “greatest pontiffs,” fifteenth-century popes thus provided impetus to papal authority in a new world order. Adding pontifex maximus to the papal repertoire proved a lasting innovation as it grew to be accepted as a classic hallmark of the papacy in itself, maybe

57. Duffy, Saints and Sinners, 177–84; Schwaig, “Nicholas V.”
emblematised by Julius II (1503–1513), who liked to identify himself as the second Julius Caesar.

**Conclusion**

Augustus, the first Roman in history to combine the novel position of emperor with that of *pontifex maximus*, recalled in his *Res Gestae*: “By the passage of new laws I restored many traditions of our ancestors which were then falling into disuse, and I myself set precedents in many things for posterity to imitate.”

Augustus’ words capture antique Roman society well, where conservatism and innovation proved a winning combination. Similarly, the earliest pope in history to have himself presented as *pontifex maximus* understood the synergy of old and new joined together, and the necessity to have the innovative use of this title embedded or anchored in tradition in order for it to meet with approval from the various groups in society. Thus, the title *pontifex maximus* as appropriated by popes of the past was anchored in the tradition of imperial Roman titulature.

Although we cannot be entirely sure whose pontificate generated its first occurrence, the general framework of fifteenth-century Rome provided the context in which this title could be convincingly anchored. In a time of unprecedented competition not only for the Apostolic successor’s legitimacy but also for the continued prevalence of the Petrine see in Rome, the papacy needed to find ways to anchor its authority more firmly and to emphasise the position of the Roman pope as supreme spiritual power on Earth. Reminiscent of classical Rome, *pontifex maximus* provided opportunities for both. Not only did it have a familiar ring to it, as this title was visible on imperial monuments in Rome, it was only one step removed from the more commonly used designation *summus pontifex*. Used in a papal context, it merged ancient tradition, so ardently sought after by the curial humanists, with contemporary reality and authenticated the exalted position of the Roman bishop as “greatest pontiff” above all other competitors.

That it proved an astute marketing move is palpable from the many representations of popes as *pontifex maximus* that followed, rendering it a familiar papal trait. Centuries of continued and repeated use have ensured its unquestioned continuation. As Van Haepen concludes, it was used “au point qu’il évoque d’abord spontanément aux oreilles de nos contemporains le chef de l’Église catholique.”

The title stuck in the minds of both popes and the onlookers of papal commemorative edifices and other objects. Geared by a series of misinterpretations and confusions in historiography, it is nowadays commonly believed to be part of official papal titulature and will probably continue to be considered as such for as long as the popes adhere to this familiar tradition.

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60. Van Haepen, “Des pontifes païens aux pontifes chrétiens,” 159. Translation: “to the point that it, to our contemporary ears, immediately and spontaneously evokes the head of the Catholic Church.”