

Anchoring authority in Saint Peter's grave

Imperial and ecclesiastical politics at the *confessio* from Antiquity to the early Middle Ages

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Nowadays, the 'Vatican' is synonym for the Catholic Church, of which Saint Peter's basilica is the symbolical as well as physical landmark of Catholicism worldwide. Forming the core of the church, the grave of the apostle Peter is the unequalled anchor for religious authority in the Christian world. The periods of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages witnessed the development of this once modest site on the outskirts of Rome into the focal point for religious and political power.

It is most probable that the earliest veneration of Peter at the Vatican Hill, the place in Rome where he was allegedly buried, was generated spontaneously by Christians asking for mediation of the apostle. In the beginning of the fourth century, however, the Roman emperor Constantine (306–337) constructed a basilica at the very location, thus enhancing the cult site with an imperial stamp of approval. It was a conscious attempt of the emperor to use the grave of the most famous and most Roman apostle for his own political purposes, which does not deny a 'sincere' adherence to the Christian cult and the apostle.¹

At the same time, the bishop of Rome, Sylvester (314–335), is also likely to have been involved in the building process of St. Peter's.² The Roman bishop may have advised the emperor on all kinds of practical matters. Sylvester certainly did not dispose of the funds necessary to construct such a huge building, let alone to decorate it, but undoubtedly had better knowledge of the theology and cultic practice of the Christian faith. Moreover, since the Roman emperor was only incidentally in Rome, we therefore may assume that the bishop was in charge of supervising the building and the activities

1 The date of the construction of old Saint Peter's (consistently called Saint Peter's in this contribution) is generally considered to have been between 321–329, see Krautheimer/Corbett/Frazer 1977, p. 272–278. Bowersock has argued that the basilica was not built by Constantine but by his son Constantius: Bowersock 2002.

2 See e.g. McKitterick 2013, p. 115, and Gem 2014, p. 61.

deployed in it.³ It may even be suspected that Sylvester advised the emperor to decide on which saint should be selected as the dedicatee of the first Christian memorial.

Sylvester and his staff evidently had an obvious self-interest in the choice of Peter, since the growing ambitions of the Roman bishop were legitimized mainly by his claim to be the successor of the apostle as leader of the Christian Roman community. Peter's burial place thus functioned as a physical and symbolical anchor for political authority of the Roman episcopate. As the case of Saint Peter's makes clear from the start, the use of such an anchor was not exclusive: both emperor and bishop could profit from it, albeit for different reasons and with different motives.

After his imperial usurpation and a decade of unrest, Constantine was still working on establishing firm political ground for his rule and had to strengthen his position in view of his competitor reigning in the East, Licinius (308–324). Sylvester had to make clear to both secular and Christian Romans, including the authorities, that his own importance should not be ignored and that he should be considered the leader of the Christian community in Rome.⁴ A few years earlier, the emperor and the then bishop Miltiades (310–314) had discovered their mutual interest in the construction of the first monumental church in Rome (and the world), the *Basilica Salvatoris* or *Constantiniana* (also called the Lateran). Adjacent to this church, an episcopal palace was built.⁵ This pioneering cooperation between the imperial and episcopal administration demonstrated their capability of constructing a large, public monumental building near the centre of Rome in an innovative architectural form, with an equally innovative function. Now, emperor and pope joined forces once again as both realized the potential of the apostle Peter's most famous place of worship as a cornerstone for their own power.⁶

With an emperor possibly not (yet) profoundly interested in Christian doctrine and a bishop depending on external support, the two men could easily share their anchor. Things became more complicated, however, when Constantine left the empire to his sons. Although the emperors still visited Rome only occasionally, the fact that the em-

3 The Roman elites' influence in Saint Peter's was probably restricted since they mostly adhered to traditional, mostly pre-Christian, cults and were thus at this point not likely to be interested in the functioning of the basilica. Some of them were, however, as is most famously testified by the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, prefect of Rome, who died in 359, found near the apostle's grave, see e.g. Cameron 2002. The role and interest of the elites (and also of the ordinary faithful) in Peter's basilica and the apostle's grave in particular will be discussed by Dijkstra in a contribution in the forthcoming volume *Through the Papal Lens* (Liverpool University Press).

4 Sylvester was even brought before an imperial tribunal *a sacrilegis accusatus* (*Constitutio Valentiniani imperatoris* 11, *Patrologia Latina* 13, p. 583); an event that is otherwise unknown, see Pietri 1976, p. 168.

5 Leadbetter 2002.

6 A lot more can be and has been said about potential motives and practical matters concerning the erection of Saint Peter's. In our opinion, however, the peculiar qualities of the burial place were the major decisive factor.

peror Constantius II (337–361) favoured Arian Christianity cannot but have damaged the relationship with the Roman bishop, as is illustrated by an intriguing incident crucially involving Peter's grave.⁷ It concerns an open clash between the bishop and emperor and is mentioned by Athanasius in his *Historia Arianorum* (35–7). It is hardly a coincidence that this confrontation took place at Peter's tomb. At the same time, it is the first political event in the basilica of which a testimony remains, although the building must have been in use for a considerable period of time at that moment.⁸

Athanasius wrote at the end of 357 during his third exile, and not accidentally, at a time when Liberius was also banished. The *Historia Arianorum* is the continuation of Athanasius' *Apologia secunda contra Arianos*: in the second edition of the latter text Athanasius had tried to defend himself in order to avoid yet another exile. His attempts were in vain, and in his work Athanasius heavily criticizes the emperor Constantius. Given the tensions surrounding Athanasius and his well-known strength of character, the source has to be treated carefully, but it does reveal a particular role of Peter's grave.

Athanasius recounts a mission by the eunuch Eusebius to bishop Liberius (352–366) in 355. Eusebius, *praepositus sacri cubiculi* or grand chamberlain of the palace in Constantinople, acted on behalf of Constantius.⁹ The bishop is asked to subscribe to the emperor's measures in favour of the Arians, and consequently, against Athanasius. Liberius refuses this request, however, in a probably fictive speech in which he refers to the apostle Peter twice (*Historia Arianorum* 36). Athanasius describes how the eunuch reacts furiously, and goes to Saint Peter's (§37):

“And the eunuch was grieved not so much by the fact that *Liberius* did not sign, but because he found him hostile towards his heresy. He forgot that he stood for a bishop, threatened him fiercely and left with the gifts. And he committed an outrage, foreign to Christians and even more daring than (*is usual for*) eunuchs: indeed, in imitation of the transgression of Saul, after he had left for the shrine of Peter the apostle, he dedicated the gifts to him (*ἀπελθὼν εἰς τὸ μαρτύριον Πέτρου τοῦ ἀποστόλου, τὰ δῶρα αὐτῷ ἀνέθηκεν*). But when Liberius came to know this, he became very angry at the person who watched over the place (*τὸν τηροῦντα τὸν τόπον*) and had not hindered him (*the eunuch*): and he threw them (*the gifts*) away as an improper offering (*ὡς ἄθυτον θυσίαν*). And this infuriated the castrate even more”.¹⁰

7 For the relationship between Liberius and Constantius see Pietri 1976, p. 237–268.

8 The only earlier event recorded to have taken place in Saint Peter's is a service in which Ambrose's sister Marcellina took the vow of virginity, in 353 (see Ambrose's *De virginibus* 3,1,1).

9 Date: Portmann 2006, p. 230 (note 222). Portmann offers a German translation of the text. In the passage cited below, he points to the Biblical parallel of 1 Samuel 13.7–13. The passage is briefly mentioned in Spera 1998, p. 5.

10 Translation: author (Dijkstra).

The intervention of Liberius makes clear that he either feared the power of the gifts placed in proximity to the apostle, or considered the gifts an intrusion of inimical objects in his territory. In other words: he realized the importance of Peter's *confessio*, just as the eunuch, who went to the apostle in the first place. Eusebius turned the gifts for the bishop to his ultimate predecessor Peter and thus tried to fundamentally undermine the bishop's authority, whose authority was based on his succession of that same apostle. Both bishop and emperor clearly realized the political and religious potential pertaining to the apostle's tomb.

The same is true for the narrator of the event, Athanasius. He enlarges the case to Biblical proportions by comparing the eunuch Eusebius – representative of the emperor – to King Saul. In 1 Samuel 13.7–13 it is described how Saul decides to make an offering to God in order to prevent his men from mutiny, although he had promised to wait for the prophet Samuel. When Samuel appears he reproaches the king: Saul can no longer remain the king of Israel. With this comparison, Athanasius actually denies Constantius' right of emperorship.

Beside this rhetorical ornament, the story also includes information on some practical issues concerning the *confessio*. Apparently, the guard was not able to prevent the eunuch from leaving his gifts nor did he dare to remove them himself, probably because of the hierarchical difference between the two men.¹¹ Incidentally, this is the first reference to the personnel working at Saint Peter's, which, given the size of the basilica, must have been more numerous than the poor guard who fell victim to Liberius' anger.¹²

The event should not necessarily be taken as an indication of the weakness of the Roman bishop's power in administering the memorial, since the bishop had the authority to remove Eusebius' offerings.¹³ Unfortunately, we are not informed as to how Liberius heard of them, nor about the exact spot where the gifts were deposited. Most likely, however, the gifts were left in front of the shrine, visible for other visitors and therefore all the more harmful to the bishop's image. Votive offerings at the grave of

11 Or otherwise he had not noticed what happened, which seems rather unlikely. In general, guards or priests in religious buildings seem to have had only little authority in late antiquity and did not watch visitors closely as is nicely illustrated in a poem probably from the fourth century (*Anthologia latina* 1,21), see Focardi 1998.

12 However, Sozomenos' *Historia ecclesiastica* 9,10,4 mentions only one φύλαξ τῆς ἐκκλησίας in the text of the *Sources Chrétiennes* (based on the edition in the GCS series no. 50). The older *Patrologia Graeca* edition (PG 67, colon 1617), apparently cited (in Latin!) by Thacker 2014, p. 141, has a plural.

13 Pace Thacker 2014, p. 141. McLynn 2004, p. 253–254 interprets the incident as an example of the uneasiness felt by bishops when an emperor entered a church. In his *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* (2.4.1–2), Optatus of Milevis suggests that the catholic bishop could deny heretic adversaries to approach Peter's grave, but it is unclear whether Optatus' assumption is based on reliable testimony or mainly part of his rhetoric. The treatise is dated to 364–367.

Peter are attested from the period before the construction of the basilica already and they continued to be given in later times (see below).¹⁴

An even larger significance of the basilica in ecclesiastical politics is visible from the fifth century onwards, when Saint Peter's became an anchor for episcopal power in several elections. The two competing candidates tried to find the most suitable basis for power in Rome. In 418, after the death of Zosimus, Eulalius (418–419) held the Lateran, the official seat of the Roman bishop: Boniface (418–422) marched to Saint Peter's after his consecration, obviously in order to control access to the grave of the alleged founder of papal power. Later, when he had to leave Saint Peter's on orders of the emperor, Boniface went to that other grand memorial of a martyr-apostle closely associated with Peter, Paul. Even more striking is the case of Symmachus (498–514) and Laurentius (498–499), in which the former barricaded himself in Saint Peter's for several years (app. 501–506), while the latter was the officially recognized bishop.¹⁵ From his Petrine home base, Symmachus succeeded in obtaining imperial support, and eventually Laurentius was removed from the papal See. A few years later, Symmachus made very clear that he understood the symbolical significance of the apostle Peter. In a letter to the emperor Anastasius (491–518), he condemned the imperial opposition to his authority by claiming Peter's personal intervention on his behalf and asked rhetorically whether Anastasius dared to withstand Peter's power, because he was an emperor.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Roman emperors after Constantine also showed their interest in the *confessio*, although the sources are rather reticent on this aspect. At the one famous visit of an emperor that took place under the rule of the Constantinian dynasty – that of Constantius II in 357 – the emperor might have visited Saint Peter's and prostrated before the grave of the apostle, but this can only be inferred from two general remarks in John Chrysostom that suggest that around the year 390 such an act was normal.¹⁷ Maybe even more important, and in a way more permanent, was an experiment by the emperor Honorius (395–423), who built an imperial mausoleum adjacent to the church.¹⁸ It was one of the most direct imperial appeals on the authority of the apostle Peter, but given Honorius' absence from Rome it might not have influenced the bishop's control

14 Coins have been found in the grave, see Toynbee 1953, p. 18–19.

15 See Latham 2012 in particular, also Latham 2014, Wirbelauer 1994 and for Symmachus and Laurentius, Pietri 1966.

16 See *Epistula* 10, e.g. 10,7 (ed. Thiel, p. 703): *Meum cogitasti honorem repellere, quem interuentu suo beatus Petrus imposuit. An quia imperator es, contra Petri niteris potestatem?*

17 Liverani 2007, p. 91.

18 Concise overview in Johnson 2009, p. 167–174. Cf. Liverani 2014, p. 31, about the mausoleum of Honorius: "Through this imperial connection and through the authority of the apostle, the basilica of Saint Peter was also the place in which delicate political and religious questions could be raised that interested both the emperor and the Roman bishop."

of Peter's grave. Moreover, Honorius' example was not followed by other emperors. In fact, pope Leo I's (440–461) entombment in Saint Peter's, which constituted the first papal burial there, should be seen as an imitation of this imperial tradition.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in the later eighth century the mausoleum became an emblematic focal point for the bond between the papacy and the Frankish rulers of the Carolingian dynasty when pope Paul I (757–767) turned it into an oratory for Petronilla, the alleged daughter of Peter. She was adopted as patron saint of the Carolingians, and in 758 Paul had the baptismal gown of Gisela, king Pippin's daughter, ritually placed there in order to confirm their spiritual bond of *comaternitas* or co-parenthood.²⁰ Significantly, Pippin's gift of a silver table was placed by the same pope *in sacram confessionem*, in order to creating an everlasting memorial for the Carolingian family in the basilica.²¹

One of the main reasons why the connection of the Vatican with the Roman emperors of the past remained alive was the fact that the basilica became part of the trajectory of triumphal processions from around the year 400 onwards.²² By c. 500–550, an imperial visit to Peter's church did not particularly seem to raise a dust, and was perhaps even a common sight. Visiting Saint Peter's basilica prior to entering the city of Rome proper as part of the Roman *adventus* ritual was, however, a precedent created by the Ostrogoth king Theodoric (475–526) in 500.²³ The triumphal character of the imperial procession thus became infused with an element of pilgrimage.

Religious devotion also incited material contributions by the secular elite, including emperors and kings, whose gifts to the shrine, varying from precious jewels to various liturgical objects such as candlesticks, are also mentioned on occasion.²⁴ Emperor Valentinian III (425–455) especially had the *confessio* lavishly decorated in silver and had precious gifts placed over the shrine.²⁵ Quite a few popes of the late antique world donated substantially to Saint Peter's basilica and to the apostle's shrine, as is testified by

19 McKittrick 2013, p. 111–117; De Blaauw 2016, p. 93–95.

20 Story 2013, p. 269; Letter of Pope Paul I to Pippin, *Codex Carolinus*, nr. 14, p. 511–512. For the bond of *comaternitas* as a spiritual ritual and political tool, see Angenendt 1980.

21 Letter of Pope Paul I to Pippin, *Codex Carolinus*, nr. 21, 522–524. Van Espelo will comprehensively discuss the central role of Peter's *confessio* in the Carolingian-papal bond in a contribution in the forthcoming volume *Through the Papal Lens* (Liverpool University Press).

22 Frascetti 1999, p. 252–266, also on imperial visits outside the context of the *adventus*; Liverani 1999, p. 34–35, and 34–40 for the accessibility of the Vatican.

23 Liverani 2007, p. 92–94, and Liverani 2014, p. 29–30.

24 For instance Duchesne, *Liber Pontificalis* (hereafter *LP*), Life of Hormisdas, I, ch. 10, p. 271–272 (from king Clovis, emperor Justin and king Theoderic). All English translations of the papal lives in the *LP* as given in this article are from Davis 2000 and 2007; the Latin editions used are from Duchesne 1886 and 1892.

25 Duchesne, *LP*, Life of Xystus III, I, ch. 4, p. 233.

their biographies in the so-called *Liber Pontificalis*. Some had the actual structure of the basilica and/or shrine thoroughly modified, such as the aforementioned Symmachus.²⁶

The grave's architectural setting was most considerably changed by pope Gregory the Great, whose pontificate (590–604) is generally considered to mark the transition from late antiquity to the early middle ages, in order to accommodate the increasing quantities of visitors better in addition to allowing mass to be celebrated above Saint Peter's body (*super corpus beati Petri*).²⁷ Although pilgrimage to the Vatican was an important phenomenon in antiquity already, especially from the sixth century onwards the afflux of pilgrims augmented even further. The sanctuary's new setting probably also allowed relics to be created more effectively and large numbers of pilgrims to be effectively guided around the holy area.²⁸ From Gregory's correspondence with the Western royal aristocracy we learn that Peter's *confessio* and the apostle's relics proved suitable tools for Gregory to articulate of Roman pre-eminence, and this prelate emphatically employed Petrine relics in the diplomatic contacts between the papal See and the elite of the Christian world. Although he was not the first pope to send out relics to secular rulers, it was Gregory who universally adopted the practice.²⁹

Another key element in Gregory's promotion of the Petrine primacy was the systematic practice of solemn oath-swearing at the apostle's tomb (*ante corpus*), a "ritualistic exercise of public submission at the very locus of papal power".³⁰ Invoking Peter's authority in this way was the highest card the pope could play to secure the utmost loyalty and dedication from his agents, such as his Sicilian *rectores*, but it was also employed as a means for delinquents to purge themselves before the apostle, thus proving their innocence.³¹ Using Peter's sepulchre as a physical location to perform such an act, however, was not entirely unprecedented. Pope Boniface II's (530–532) biography reveals that this prelate, "driven by jealousy and malice" gathered a synod in Saint Peter's basilica, and had it approve of a decree which allowed the pope to select a successor of his own choice, the deacon Vigilus. This decree was, in the first instance, reinforced

26 Demacopoulos 2013, p. 102–116.

27 See e.g. Brenk 1995, De Blaauw 1995, and Dal Santo 2012, p. 79; Duchesne, *LP*, Life of Gregory, I, ch. 4, p. 312.

28 De Blaauw 1987, p. 530–534, and 632–633; Spera 1998, p. 49–51; Leyser 2000, p. 300; Alan Thacker notes, however, that Gregory's works may not have been as invasive as is usually assumed given that the altar probably had been directly above the grave since Jerome's time: Thacker 2007, p. 46–48.

29 Tom Noble has pointed out that Symmachus was probably the first pope to distribute Petrine relics: Noble 1994, 527. On Gregory's letters in relation to relics, see Demacopoulos 2013, p. 134–162, Leyser 2000, p. 300–302.

30 De Blaauw 1987, 316–317; quotation from Demacopoulos 2013, p. 140.

31 For instance in a letter to the Ravennese subdeacon John: nr. 11.16 (November 600), p. 277–278; cf. Demacopoulos 2010, p. 337; De Blaauw 1987, p. 316.

by the *sacerdotes* present at the synod, and “with an oath before the *confessio* of Saint Peter”. Soon thereafter, however, doubts as to the document’s licitness arose, and a second synod was held, ruling it unconstitutional. Then, “in front of the *confessio* of Saint Peter in the presence of all the *sacerdotes*, clergy, and senate, he [Boniface] destroyed the actual decree by fire” to render the decree null and void.³² The oath performed by Boniface and the synod therefore served to validate their decision before the apostle, and, ultimately, God. It was also a means to verify the orthodox and canonical nature of the decree and the synod. In this instance, therefore, Peter’s tomb functioned as a locus for authentication where the saint could be called upon as both a judge and witness. Similar uses of the *confessio* as a physical anchor for determining church tradition and orthodoxy can be found with other episcopal synods or clerical gatherings that were kept under the watchful eyes of Peter. Such councils occurred multiple times in papal history, such as the anti-iconoclastic synod held in the pontificate of Pope Gregory III (731–741), that gathered “in front of the most holy *confessio* of Saint Peter’s most sacred body”. It was attended not just by clerics, namely the various bishops, as well as priests, deacons, all the clergy, but was also assisted by “the noble consuls and the rest of the Christian people”³³. The practice of oath swearing may have been an inspiration for Pope Leo III (795–816), who, after being accused of adultery and perjury in 799–800, purged himself in Saint Peter’s with a pledge, although he did so in the *ambo* and not in front of the *confessio* specifically.³⁴ His act of purification was witnessed by a crowd of Frankish and Roman lay and clerical dignitaries, who would shortly thereafter witness Charlemagne’s imperial coronation that famously took place in the same church in 800, by the hands of the indemnified Pope Leo.

Oath swearing in combination with placing written documents on Peter’s *confessio* to have them validated also constituted a key element in the inauguration of bishops, as is testified by the *Liber Diurnus*, a collection of various textual models prepared for the composition of important official documents that date mostly from 680 to 790 and were used by the papal chancery. It contains circa one hundred formulae of which one in particular, probably datable to the late seventh century, is the profession of faith that was drawn up, signed, and read aloud in Saint Peter’s after the new bishop was consecrated.³⁵ Additionally, special prayers were sung in front of the *confessio* during the ceremonial

32 *LP*, Life of Boniface II, ch. 3–4, p. 53.

33 *LP*, Life of Gregory III, ch. 3, p. 20; Duchesne, *LP*, I, p. 416. On the *LP*’s description of synods held in Saint Peter’s as part of papal representation, see McKitterick 2013, p. 100.

34 Duchesne, *LP*, Life of Leo III, II, ch. 21–22, p. 6–7.

35 This specific profession was probably written shortly after the year 682: Duchesne 1891, p. 24–30. It reads: [...] *presentem nostrae professionis paginam per ill* notarium scriptum cum nostrae manus subscriptione coram omnibus relectam in confessione beati Petri apostolorum principis deposuimus, tamquam ipso testificante de puritate conscientiae nostrae* [...]. *Liber Diurnus*, ed. von Sickel, formula 84, p. 102–103.

consecration.³⁶ The bishop’s oath was then deposited in Peter’s *confessio*, as a testimony to the new prelate’s purity of conscience. It is difficult to say when exactly this became common practice, but from the records in the *Liber Diurnus* it appears that it already was current around 700 at the latest, or that it was turning into standard practice around that time. When the Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface (d. 754) was appointed bishop in Rome on November 30th of the year 722, he placed his own oath or *indiculum* with his own hands above Saint Peter’s body (*supra sacratissimum corpus tuum*).³⁷

Just how significant Peter’s sanctuary was in this procedure, as a place where church tradition was safeguarded and the purity of mind was assessed, may be illustrated by an incident during the rule of Pope Constantine (708–715). The newly consecrated archbishop of Ravenna named Felix refused to provide the pope with the customary written *cautiones*, and wrote his own instead. Doubts that had risen in the Lateran as to the archbishop’s righteousness were confirmed as the bonds were found “grimy as if charred by fire” a few days after they had been placed, according to custom, in Peter’s *confessio*.³⁸ As a matter of course, the apostle had detected the impertinence, and Felix, who had lapsed in not following tradition and not sufficiently recognizing Petrine – *in extenso* papal – authority, was subsequently arrested and punished for his presumptuousness.

It would be safe to state that the apostolic *confessio*’s status as a symbolical as well as physical ‘anchor’ for authoritative tradition and as a *locus* where solemn promises were tested and formalized had gained prominence in the course of the centuries. As the early middle ages progress, we see the various aspects pertaining to the sanctuary’s political-religious role touched upon above focalize in the papal representation of diplomatic relations between the Roman episcopate and the Carolingian dynasty of the Frankish realm, the same line of rulers that would produce the first emperor in the post-Roman West since 476, in the person of the aforementioned Charlemagne (768–814). From the earliest moments of rapprochement between the two, Saint Peter’s grave was at the heart of the action. Pope Gregory, for instance, accompanied his written petition for military aid against the Lombards in 739 with the keys to the apostolic tomb, and when in 754 King Pippin (751–768) solemnly promised Stephen II (752–757) to restore lands to the papacy (in the so-called Donation of Pippin) that the Lombards had taken earlier from the papacy, the documents were reportedly placed in or on Saint Peter’s tomb (*in confessione*), in order that the papal successors possess and dispose of the documents

36 Angenendt 1977, p. 65; Benz 1975, p. 358–359.

37 Boniface’s episcopal oath: ed. Tangl, no. 16, p. 28–29.

38 *LP*, Life of Constantine, ch. 2, p. 92.

forever.³⁹ When Charlemagne triumphantly visited Rome twenty years later after definitively conquering the Lombard territories, he first went to Saint Peter's basilica to pay his respects at the *confessio* before being allowed to enter the city of Rome proper, and pope and king ratified their promises to each other *ad corpus beati Petri*. At a later stage, Charlemagne vowed to uphold his father Pippin's assertion as to the restoration of the papal territories, and written versions of the bestowal were placed in the *confessio*.⁴⁰

Given the status of Peter's tomb and the place it had come to occupy in imperial presence in Rome and in the history of the papacy, the choice to stage Charlemagne's imperial inauguration ceremony at Peter's tomb during the celebration of mass on Christmas in the year 800 was premeditated. Pope Leo's biography describes how, immediately after the pope had personally placed a crown on Charlemagne's head:

"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 Saint Peter, key-bearer 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 Saint Peter's sacred *confessio* (*ante sacram confessionem beati Petri apostoli*), with the invocation of many saints, and by them all he was established as Emperor of the Romans"⁴¹.

Afterwards followed an anointing by the hands of Pope Leo. The papal biographer did not fail to mention how the freshly invested emperor, following ancient custom, subsequently donated precious gifts, among others a silver table and golden objects, that were presented *in confessione* and *super altare(m)*.⁴²

Never before had an emperor of the West been instated in Saint Peter's basilica in the presence of a Roman bishop, and Charlemagne's establishment as 'Emperor of the Romans' was thus essentially an innovation anchored in a longstanding institution. Yet

Leo's pontifical biography passed off the ceremonial as something essentially traditional, rooted in the Petrine cult. Under the aegis of the apostle, therefore, new traditions were established and rooted in his sanctuary that formed the heart of the Roman episcopate's headship of the Western Church.

Conclusion

Although the place of Peter's grave was probably first visited for devotional purposes by ordinary Christians without interference by formal institutions, in the fourth century it was definitely appropriated by both the Roman emperor and the Roman bishop. As such, it became a symbolical and physical anchor for legitimacy and authority. Occasionally, conflicts were fought out 'on' the grave, both between bishop and emperor and between competing bishops. Control of and access to the site became a politico-religious instrument of legitimization. As time went on, the apostle's grave more and more became a yardstick by which piety and divine approval were measured, and it came to occupy a central role in papal representation. This development is perhaps most visibly illustrated by the famous inauguration of Charlemagne as emperor in front of the *confessio*; the Petrine tomb was deemed to be the best place for the invocation of imperial tradition. Thereafter, Peter's grave would remain an anchor for authority for centuries to come, until the present day.

39 *LP*, Life of Stephen II, ch. 47, p. 71–72: "As for the keys, both of the city of Ravenna and of the various cities of the exarchate of Ravenna, along with the donation concerning them that their king had issued, he [Fulrad] placed them in Saint Peter's *confessio*; and he handed them over to this apostle of God and to his vicar the holy pope and to all his successor pontiffs for ever, for their possession and management [...]."

40 Duchesne, *LP*, Life of Hadrian I, I, ch. 35–43, p. 496–498.

41 *LP*, Life of Leo III, ch. 23–24, p. 187–189; Duchesne, *LP*, II, p. 7–8: *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 constitutus est imperator Romanorum.*

42 Duchesne, *LP*, II, ch. 24, p. 7–8. Charlemagne may have been following his father Pippin's example as years earlier, he too had donated a silver table that was placed in the *confessio* by Pope Paul: Angenendt 1977, and see note 21 above.

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