



# Journal of Religion & Society

---

The Kripke Center

Volume 4 (2002)

---

Horst Fuhrmann and Detlev Jasper. *Papal Letters in the Early Middle Ages. History of Medieval Canon Law. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001. Pp. 225. \$40.60 (Cloth).*

[1] This second volume in the History of Medieval Canon Law series brings together two essays on the late antique and early medieval papal decretals. Detlev Jasper's contribution, which comprises approximately two thirds of the book, is a study of the transmission and reception of the collections of papal letters from the late Roman pope Siricius (384-399) to Stephen V (885-891) at the end of the Carolingian period. Although shorter, Horst Fuhrmann's essay on the Pseudo-Isidorian corpus is no less important: it provides the first synthesis in English of his research on the complex issues surrounding this collection of forged papal epistles.

[2] Three themes govern Jasper's essay, and the first is the theme of origins. Those unfamiliar with the technical aspects of papal letters will appreciate his initial discussion of the origin and stylistic characteristics of these texts. He explains, for example, the shift in the bishop of Rome's epistolary style in the late fourth century from a fraternal and collegial tone that relied on persuasion and brotherly affection to the aloof and commanding style of imperial rescripts. Jasper is convinced that the oldest extant papal decretal is the letter of Siricius to Himerius of Tarragona. He acknowledges, however, that there has been some debate over the putative letters of Damasus preserved in the *Canones synodi Romanorum ad Gallos episcopos*.

[3] A second theme is the complexity of the avenues of transmission of these letters. Readers will not be surprised to learn that the two best known late antique popes, Leo I and Gregory I, also have the most extensive collection of extant letters and thus the most complex lines of transmission. Furthermore, the letters of some popes would experience cycles of popularity that depended on their contents rather than the popularity of the author. Thus, canonists initially preserved the decretals of Nicholas I (858-867) that treated penitential practice and discipline. During the period of Gregory VII and his reforms, however, there was a renewed interest in the letters, particularly epistle 88, in which he developed his theory of papal supremacy.

[4] The final theme is a corollary to the second theme: the haphazard nature of the preservation of decretals. Thus, while the sixth century prior to Gregory I had no outstanding popes, and Pelagius I was not outstanding even among this group, a significant number of his letters were preserved in the canons because eleventh century canonists preserved the register of the last year of Pelagius's reign. Similarly, the letters of Martin I survive because medieval copyists believed that he was the author of the popular capitula Martini, the work of Martin of Braga and not pope Martin I.

[5] Fuhrmann's essay is divided into four sections. "The Extent of the Forgeries" introduces the reader to the component parts of the Pseudo-Isidorian texts as they were transmitted in the manuscript tradition: a doctored version of conciliar documents (*Collectio Hispana Gallica*), two capitulary collections, and the Pseudo-Isidorian decretals. In "The Purpose of the Forgeries," the reader learns the connection between the dissolution of the Carolingian empire and the vision of ecclesiastical government present in the forgeries: a strong emphasis on the importance of the suffragan bishop and an assertion of papal power to protect provincial episcopal authority and prerogatives against secular powers and metropolitan bishops. The third section, "The Individual Forgeries," is the longest section and it is in this section that Fuhrmann defines Pseudo-Isidore as "Hispana expanded by adding false papal letters" (158). The evidence for his definition follows in the form of a detailed and annotated outline of the structure of the Pseudo-Isidorian work, keyed to the page numbers of Hinsch's edition. Many will find this the most valuable part of the essay. The final section of the essay, "The Origin of the Forgery and its Immediate Influence," reviews the different theories on the geographic location of the forgers' workshop and indicates Fuhrmann's preference for Rheims. He notes that it had surprisingly little influence at first despite the tremendous body of work that the forgers produced. Fuhrmann connects the pontificate of Nicholas I with the emergence of its influence at Rome. His vision of a strong papacy derives in part, Fuhrmann believes, from the spirit of Pseudo-Isidore.

[6] *Papal Letters in the Early Middle Ages* is an important work that scholars of canon law, the papacy, and the medieval church will find useful. It is not a book for those interested in a general history of canon law; books such as Constant Van de Wiel's *History of Canon Law* would better serve such interests. There are two items about this book that make it particularly important. First, it is a healthy reminder to students of the medieval church that the survival and transmission of texts they rely on for their work may not reflect the importance of their authors. The fact that some letters of Pope Zacharias are extant, for example, has more to do with the missionary bishop Boniface, who corresponded with him, than it does with the stature of his papacy. Second, this volume suggests that important figures of the early medieval church receive less attention than they deserve. Nicholas I rightly emerges from Jasper's and Fuhrmann's studies as an influential pope who warrants closer attention and greater publicity. Beyond its relevance for studies in canon law, this volume is reminder that the papacy between Gregory I and Gregory VII would benefit from more careful attention.

Robert E. Winn, Creighton University