

2019

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Courtney E. Bowers

La Salle University

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Recommended Citation

Bowers, Courtney E. (2019) "Pepin, Power and the Papacy: The True First Holy Roman Emperor," *The Histories*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol4/iss2/3

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II

Pepin, Power, and the Papacy:
The True First Holy Roman Emperor
By Courtney E. Bowers



Church and State have long found themselves intertwined in Western Civilization. The rise of the Roman Catholic Church precluded the importance of any other religion and created a juggernaut that rulers sought to subjugate to their will. After the fall of Rome, the Western World needed a new force in which to believe-- a steadfast leader-- and so the Church took up this promontory role. As such, the Church was one of the preeminent forces in shaping the medieval world and the lives of the people living under its complex and somewhat chaotic systems.¹ The Popes were the leaders of this Catholic powerhouse and were gaining power not only as spiritual and moral leaders but also as visages of God's temporal power upon earth. It would be through the aid of the Frankish Kings that the popes would gain the power and prestige that would make them both formidable spiritual and temporal rulers and corrupt politicians. Only once they were able to break away from the constraints of the Eastern Empire and assert their affiliation with the Western rulers could they expand to become such a center of power and control. So too did the Western rulers simultaneously benefit from this alliance of wills and the subsequent pooling of resources. This union would become official (and termed as such) with the coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor. However, Charlemagne's father Pepin was also crowned by the pope as a protector and officer of the Church in the ritualistic ways of the Old Testament. So too did his "donation" of the land that would become the Papal States cement the temporal alliance of the Church and the Franks. It is then the purpose of this paper to explore the idea that it is indeed Pepin and not Charlemagne who was truly the first Holy Roman Emperor due to his status as *patricius Romanorum*, his papal coronation, his power over Church reform and his permanent donation of territory to the popes.

Medieval society was emerging from the ashes of the imbroglia following the fall of the Roman Empire as a relatively cogent structure. There had been a gradual evolution away from centralization into small farming and the might of lords and barons, but now the progression led towards a re-centralization of power and consolidation of loose or

¹ H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages 395-814*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), i.

warring factors.² France led this trend, starting with Charles Martel. He set about subjugating the various territories surrounding him. Moss relates how he [T]riumphed successively over all obstacles. Using, unlike his father, the Austrasian power, he quelled the Neustrian dissidents, reduced the Aquitanians to submission, restored the eastern frontiers in a series of successful campaigns, and in 732 routed the Arab forces on the field of Poitiers, following up his victory, five years later, by an expedition into Provence.³

He also fortified what he had conquered; "Charles confiscated land and redistributed it, perhaps to support a cavalry elite who might be deployed rapidly to meet threats from the north, the east or the south."⁴ The Merovingians had been a dynasty of intrigue and chaos, in which alliances were constantly made and broken until they had become no more than shadow kings. Martel used these shadow kings to his advantage, setting them up as acceptable fronts in the various provinces while he gradually acquired influence in and defeated other territories.⁵ His sons Pepin and Carlomann would use the same trick as mayors of the palace when they came into their own power and pursued their policies of reform and power consolidation.

Since the fourth century, there had been growing split between the Western and Eastern Catholic Church. Until this point, although there were some disagreements and difference, the two churches were largely the same and united. The Eastern Church had flourished while the Roman world fell, and so the Western Church had always looked to the East for support. But with the growing power of the papacy and reemerging structure of civilization in the West, the Roman Church was gaining enough strength to stand on its own. A serious set of quarrels between the two branches began after the reconquest of Italy by Justinian in the sixth century. The final breaks would not come until the alliance made with the Franks through Pepin and Charlemagne in the eighth and ninth centuries, though it can be speculated that even without these two dynamic characters the split was inevitable.⁶ Even though the Western Church was gaining strength, it was still greatly in disarray, especially in the kingdom of the Franks before the reforms of Pepin and Carlomann. "The confusion caused by the civil wars was reflected in the state of the Church; in the divided realm no general councils could be held, and the bishops were embroiled in the political discord."⁷

Into this violent world Pepin was born in 714 A.D. He was the son of Charles Martel and Chrotrudis and baptized a Catholic. Nobel tells that, "Pepin had a brother, Carlomann, who was at least fifteen in 722, a sister, Hiltrud, and a half-brother, Grifo, by his father's second marriage to the Bavarian Swanahild."⁸ He received an education at the

² H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages 395-814*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), i.

³ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms Under the Carolingians, 751-987*, (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1983), 32.

⁵ Margaret Deanesly, *A History of Early Medieval Europe*. (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1969), 282.

⁶ David Harry Miller, "The Roman Revolution of the Eighth Century: a Study of the Ideological Background of the Papal Separation from Byzantium and Alliance with the Franks," in *Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 36, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), 79-133.

⁷ Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, 201.

⁸ *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. John Reese Strayer, ed. "Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin," 501. Three bastard half-brothers named Bernhard, Hieronymus, and Remedius are also mentioned.

famed St. Denis until he was sent to Lombardy have his hair cut in 735.⁹ He was sent specifically to the court of King Liutprand, who held a close relationship with Martel despite quite a few conflicting interests.¹⁰ This ritual was highly symbolic of Pepin's passage into manhood and in effect not only made Pepin "Liutprand's adoptive son,"¹¹ but also united the two peoples. He married Bertrada of Laon, a distant relative, in 749 and through this gained wide holdings in the Moselle region. She would bear him two sons: Charles in 747 and Carlomann in 751, as well as Gisela, a daughter.¹² As a ruler, he was cautious but ambitious. "It was Pepin, son of Charles [Martel], who finally accomplished the reduction of Aquitaine. His conquest was deliberate, successful, and permanent. More statesmanlike than his father, he took care to conciliate the Church by studied favours, and to form a loyal party among the Aquitanians themselves."¹³

Pepin and Carlomann split the territories of their father upon his death in 741. Carlomann took Austrasia, Thuringia and Alemannia while Pepin took Neustria, Provence and Burgundy. Together, they called synods (the first in eighty years) and issued capitularies (the first since 614).

They also issued diplomas in their own names, styling themselves 'dukes and princes of the Franks.' Rebellions in Aquitaine, Bavaria, Saxony, and Swabia, due in part to a reluctance by these peoples to submit to the mayors in the absence of a king and in part to the machinations of Grifo, led the brothers to put the Merovingian Childeric III on the throne in 743.¹⁴

Together, they worked as a powerful team. Still, Pepin proved to be the more power-hungry and shrewd of the two. Six years after he came to power Carlomann retired to Monte Cassino to become a monk and further the religious reforms he and Pepin had started during their reign together. He made a mistake though, entrusting his two sons to Pepin, who refused to share power with them and usurped Carlomann's territories.¹⁵

Pepin decided circa 750 that he no longer wanted Childeric III to rule in his stead as the last of the Merovingian puppet kings. Pepin ingeniously used the Church to grant him his wish. He sent two of his most prominent missi, Abbot Fulrad of St. Denis and Bishop Burchard of Wurzburg to Pope Zacharias. They were instructed to question the Pope "concerning the kings in Francia who had no royal power, and whether this was fitting or not." Zacharias responded that such a situation offended the divine order and urged that Pepin be made king.¹⁶ So in November of 751, the assembly chose Pepin as their king and St. Boniface, acting as papal legate, anointed him in the tradition of the ancient Old Testament Kings. This was an extremely important move, loosely allying the Frankish kingdom with the Church and solidifying Pepin's power. Carlomann then intervened, spurred by Aistulf, the Lombard king (in whose realm Monte Cassino was located). Aistulf and the Pope had been fighting, and "when Pepin became king in 751,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Harry Miller, "The Motivation of Pepin's Italian Policy, 754-768," *Studies in Medieval Culture* 4, (1973): 46. This was a turnaround from the poor relations during the Merovingian period, and most of the problems still centered on Bavaria.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. "Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin," 502.

¹³ H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages 395-814*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 200.

¹⁴ *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. "Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

th[ere] was an obvious element [of] growing alliance between Pepin and Rome. In order to deal with this situation, Aistulf began negotiations with Carlomann to break up the alliance between Pepin and the papacy.”¹⁷ Tensions in Europe were beginning to rise, and the Church found that it needed to focus on the West if it wanted to stay afloat.

In 753, a new pope, Stephen II, found himself and his lands threatened by the king of the Lombards, and so approached the most accessible ruler, Pepin, for support. Technically, Stephen was a Byzantine subject, and the land of Rome belonged to the Byzantine Emperor Constantine V. However, Constantine was not able to at all aid Stephen because he was considered a heretic in the West due to his iconoclasm.¹⁸ The Pope had been instructed to negotiate with Aistulf¹⁹ and his Lombards, but he was soon left with little choice but to appeal to the Frankish kingdom. Pepin was soon made *patricius Romanorum* and was bound to help Stephen, who had crossed the Alps begging the King for his aid. Pepin did his best to force Aistulf to restore the papal lands voluntarily, even offering to pay, but it was not to occur. Pepin invaded Pavia in the spring of 753 and Aistulf’s forces fell quickly. Terms of peace were settled upon,²⁰ but as soon as Pepin left Aistulf reneged on his agreement, refused to give Pope Stephen his territories and began to invade the territory of Rome itself. Pepin again defeated him in 756, and this time “took one-third of the Lombard treasure-trove, forced Aistulf to swear obedience to the previous treaty, and revived the annual tribute paid by the Lombards to the Merovingians.”²¹

The question of Pepin’s donation comes into play here. The lands were never Pepin’s to donate, but the Church and scholars have long credited him with the Church’s accrue-ment of temporal power in Italy. In 754 Pepin had been crowned as King of the Franks by Pope Stephen himself, again bolstering their alliance and giving Pepin power to rule over the Church. After the Second Peace of Pavia, Pepin left one of his most prominent abbots Fulrad of St. Denis to travel to the various cities in the Lombard-controlled lands and receive both their keys and their hostages. These tokens were taken as signs of submission to the Pope.

“His work completed, Fulrad deposited at the Confession of St. Peter a document detailing the cities and territories given to the people. Thus, the term “Donation of Pepin” should be used to refer to the latter document of 756 and not to the Promise of Quierzy or to the written instrument, if one existed, of the First Peace of Pavia.”²²

In all truth, the lands were restored to the Emperor of the East and not to the Pope, but it was the Pope who took dominion over them. Pepin acted to repay Stephen for his work in

¹⁷ Miller, “The Motivation of Pepin’s Italian Policy,” 46.

¹⁸ *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. “Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin.”

¹⁹ Miller, “The Motivation of Pepin’s Italian Policy,” 46. What is interesting is that going against the Lombards cannot have been an easy decision to make. Since Martel, the Lombards and the Franks had live in relative peace and King Liutprand had even symbolically adopted Pepin. This shows something of a ruthless side to the King of the Franks, which seems necessary in anyone who sets about empire building.

²⁰ *Ibid.* “Ravenna, the Pentapolis, Narni and Cecano, and all that fell into their territories were restored to the pope. Aistulf paid 30,000 solidi, gave up forty hostages to Pepin, and swore never to leave Frankish overlordship.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, s.v. “Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin,” 503. The Promise of Quierzy was from the first treaty between Aistulf and the Pope that had been abandoned and was now enforced.

making Pepin the undisputed King of the Franks, “and when a Byzantine representative protested about Pepin’s conduct, the king replied that he had acted for the salvation of his own soul and for love of St. Peter.”²³

The significance of both the coronations of Pepin must be taken into consideration. The first coronation was done at the behest of Pepin and by the choice of the people. The style of biblical kings was especially important; it made the kingship both holy (and so untouchable by outside forces) and formed an alliance between the popes and the Franks.

Significantly, it was not the Carolingians themselves who began to depict themselves as elect, but the popes. Almost simultaneously with the anointings of Pippin in 751 and 754 and his elevation to the kingship, papal letters to Pippin began to incorporate comparisons between Moses and David and Frankish kings.²⁴

“The unction demonstrated that God’s grace was with the ruler who had been appointed by the pope”²⁵ – extremely important for such religious and superstitious times. When Stephen then bestowed the title of *patricius Romanorum* on Pepin, it became a cementing of these two western powers. This signified the Roman Church’s willingness to break: “granting [Pepin] that east-roman title which the imperial Exarch of Ravenna, as the representative of the Byzantine emperors, was wont to bear.”²⁶ Now the Pope had broken with the East and with the Lombards, and so relied totally on the Frankish kingdom to support him. This break was revolutionary: “the papacy was one of these eminent institutions in the fabric of the emerging European power structure, and, therefore, one of the most important of the developments of the period was the gradual exodus of the papacy from the political penumbra of the Byzantine state.”²⁷ The second coronation in 754 only exacerbated this condition and allowed Pepin new levels of power of which a medieval ruler had never attained.

Pepin used his new power to begin ruling within the Church of the Frankish kingdom. He regulated ecclesiastical affairs and his say was final over that of the synods.²⁸ The Frankish kingdom was fast becoming the only kingdom in Europe with much of the Germanic lands subjugated under Pepin and Italy conquered for the Pope. Pepin and Stephen had achieved almost equal status in that they were both now temporal and spiritual rulers. In the spirit of the Old Testament comparisons and propaganda, the Franks saw themselves as God’s chosen people who had conquered the impious Rome that had once persecuted the early Christians.²⁹ By the time Pope Paul I took the papal seat (757-67), it had become clear that though they “had expressly intended the Franco-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 123-4.

²⁵ Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 18.

²⁶ Miller, “The Roman Revolution of the Eighth Century,” 79.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Miller, “The Roman Revolution of the Eighth Century,” 19. “When an ecclesiastical assembly stated ‘we have decreed...’ it could well happen that the following sentence read: ‘But the lord king says that his will is...’”

²⁹ Hen, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, 235.

papal alliance to be eternal, it was understood that the alliance would have to be renewed with changes of personnel on either side."³⁰

Pepin and the popes were now inextricably bound to each other. The Pope had temporal power only by virtue of his continued alliance with Pepin, and Pepin ruled the Franks due to the support of the papacy. He used this power to keep his territories under control and to legitimize his rule, which had only been gained through a series of usurpations and coups. As *patricius*, he was considered an officer of the Church, ruled only by the Pope, who was the moral head of the West. Combined, these Germanic and Italian lands created an empire the likes of which had not been seen since the fall of Rome. Since the Pope was not a king and only kept the lands through the help of Pepin, it was truly Pepin who was the emperor of this new Western Empire. The breaks with the East made it a Roman based empire, and Pepin had the holy blessings of the papacy. "In the case of royal anointing, the typological parallel with the kings of the Old Testament, and between Israel and the Franks was clear enough, yet royal anointing had a distinctly Roman dimension as well. The papal anointing of Pippin [...] was even seen as a type of "royal investiture."³¹ As such, he was in effect a Holy Roman Emperor, the first of his kind.

The Pope and Pepin seemed to enjoy their new power, but their holds on it were still tenuous:

Pipin's suzerainty over his dominions was accepted, but he had not yet conquered them territorially. The Pope had become the supreme authority not only in Rome but also in the Exarchate, yet both were still nominally a part of the Empire.

Frankish intervention continued to be an uncertain quantity, and meanwhile the Lombard danger to the Papacy appeared likely to revive.³²

It would be left to Charlemagne, son of Pepin, to completely consolidate and solidify power as a Holy Roman Emperor. He married the daughter of the Lombard king, but when he repudiated her in 772 he changed the seemingly dire situation of tenuous power. At the request of Pope Hadrian two years later, he invaded Italy and Pavia surrendered. Desiderius, who had succeeded Aistulf, was with his family carried into captivity and with them the Lombard kingdom ended as an independent nation.

By the time Charlemagne ascended to the throne, most of the foundations of what would become his Holy Roman Empire were set firmly into place. Pepin had been declared "defensor" by Pope Paul I, and Charlemagne would be declared and anointed *imperator Romanorum*. This would absorb the role of *patricius Romanorum*, but the anointing as such gave the role a whole new meaning. The Pope in effect did not just anoint Charlemagne as king as he had for Pepin; he anointed Charlemagne as both king and protector of Rome—he became the emperor of Rome in one swift move.³³ Through his acceptance of this role, he legitimized the "donation" of his father, and had documents drawn up and presented to the Pope on the Wednesday following Easter, 6 April 774.³⁴ It can be speculated that Charlemagne might never have been able to achieve his status as

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

³¹ Hen, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, 138.

³² Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, 219.

³³ Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages; a Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), 151.

³⁴ Ibid., 90.

Holy Roman Emperor without his father's assumption of the role in everything but legal title. Without Pepin's defense, the Church might have fallen under the power of the Lombards and may have stayed united with the Eastern Empire. Without the papal coronation, Pepin could never have unified the Germanic lands and Charlemagne would have started with very little territory to command.

Pepin has been greatly underestimated and undervalued by many historians of the modern world. In his time, he was renowned as a great ruler and Church reformer. His fame, and the entire basis he set for an Empire, has been clouded by the achievements of his son. However, it is really he who created an empire and united it with the Church through his anointing as king, appointment as *patricius Romanorum* and his "donation" of land to the papacy. Because of his work, medieval society was able to flourish under Charlemagne and the papacy became a force with which to be reckoned. His stature may have been small (so gaining him his epithet as "Pepin the Short") but his achievements were enormous—so great that they can only be adequately defined as Emperor.

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