John Moorhead, *The Popes and the Church of Rome in Late Antiquity* [Routledge Studies in Ancient History 8], Routledge: New York 2015, xii + 321 p., ISBN 978-0-415-88365-8.

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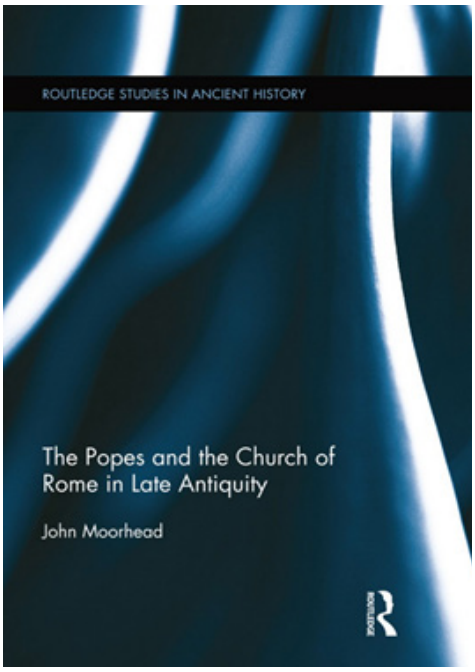

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The book of John Moorhead appears to be using a linear chronolo‌gical scheme and to follow the *Liber Pontificalis* as main reference line. In fact, it draws a far more complex picture, utilises a vast array of sources and offers an image of the Roman bishopric and of the Church of Rome in the world of Late Antiquity.

The book is organized following the succession of the Roman bishops as guiding line, beginning with the influential Leo I (440-461) and ending with Zacharias (741-752). The period is a defining one in the history of the Roman Church, during which it established its role in the European history, its institutional structures, its ideology and its allegiances.

The papal institution is presented, through the biographies of the successive popes, in its social and political environment and the influence of the different factors is outlined beginning with the election of the new Roman bishops. Different powers were involved in different periods in this process, from the Ostrogothic kings of Italy to the emperors in Constantinople, together naturally with the ecclesial structures of the local Church and the senatorial elite of the City (mainly in the 5th century). Once elected, the pope assumed his duties with the help of an administrative system that became more and more complex in time. The image of the deacons – who played quite an important role in the Roman Church in the 5th and 6th centuries – as a cultivated and socially active group is remarkable, and one realizes why they were in a natural way the best qualified to occupy the pontifical throne in that period.

The progressive specialization of the Roman Church is followed by Moorhead along two main lines: the increasing complexity of the liturgy, assumed more and more by the clergy, and the consequently changing role of the laity in the context. The laypeople, and even less so the women, are not often present in late antique sources, and yet the author demonstrates the necessary insightfulness to follow them as they founded the titular churches of Rome, honoured the martyrs and promoted them as patrons of cities. As the clergy increasingly assumed the central space of the churches, the laypeople were confined to the lateral chapels of the ecclesiastical space, where they again found the representations and relics of already familiar saints and martyrs. Here are the origins of the prominence of the cult of saints in the medieval Church to be found. Not least, the presence of laity in an increasingly clerical Church is acutely observed in the family relationships of the popes – the author sees beyond the hieratic image the sources give us about the Roman hierarchs.

The next circle where the author follows the late antique popes is the city of Rome. Their presence in the city itself is almost ubiquitous, as expected: they built and decorated churches, chapels and palaces, but they also transformed the Pantheon into a place for Christian worship and by that they brought Christianity into the centre of old Rome. In spite of this evolution,

paganism was still present in the ancient capital, not only in the festival of Lupercalia, condemned by pope Gelasius (492-496), but also in various non-Christian ritual practices and beliefs that can still be observed in the 8th century.

The papal presence in Rome is described not only with regard to architecture and urbanism, but also in relationship with the people. Whereas the aristocratic families participated, up to a certain point, in the designation of the pope and served as a recruiting milieu for some of them, like Leo I or Gregory I, the plebs looked to the pontiffs for the free subsidies that were previously granted to them by the Roman emperors. The *diaconiae* became a permanent institution of the Roman Church in this period. The bishop of Rome took over from his Imperial predecessors not only the care for the poor, but also the defence of the city, for which they endeavoured, from Innocent I, who bargained with Alaric, to Zacharias, who negotiated successively with the Lombard king Liutprand and with the Frank mayor of the palace Pippin, more than three hundred years later.

Outside Rome, Italy was the nearest area of interest for the Roman pontiffs, and their activities are followed from the organization of the suburbicarian churches to that of the incompletely known *domuscultae* in the 8th century. However, the peninsula was in Late Antiquity controlled or coveted by several other powers, from the Ostrogothic kings and Byzantine exarchs residing in Ravenna, to the Lombard dukes and kings, and we see the bishops of Rome trying to maintain a sometimes very fragile equilibrium between them and their own interests and agendas.

At the highest level of European policy during Late Antiquity, the relations of the Roman Church are outlined in two main directions. The first is Western Europe, where a new world was in the making after the fall of the Roman Empire, a world in whose emergence the popes had a decisive influence. Augustine of Canterbury was sent by Pope Gregory I to Britain, with instructions to accommodate the local customs to the Christian teaching – a missionary method that was to be used again by the Jesuits in Asia during the Counterreformation – and he organized the English Church following the Roman provincial model. The Churches established by Willibrord and Wynfrith in the Frankish realm were strongly linked to the Roman Church, following it in teaching and ritual. Those missionaries established a strong connection between Rome and the kingdom of the Franks, which was to become its new political patron in the 8th century. Between the Roman Church and all these local communities not only missionaries, but also relics, books, pilgrims and preachers circulated permanently, bringing the Roman culture to the new born European kingdoms. This Church enjoyed a privileged position in medieval Europe, to quote Henri Pirenne, not only because it was Christian, but mainly because it was Roman.

The other orientation of the Roman Church's relations observed in the book is the East, i.e. Byzantium. The relationship between the, leader of Christianity (recognized, at least honorifically) and the (in this period only) Christian Empire was far from linear and John Moorhead skilfully reveals all its intricacies. The reader is introduced to the difficult political relations the Roman bishops had with the emperors in Constantinople. Sometimes interested, rarely trusted, allies against the "barbaric" Goths or Lombards. The attempts of the successors of Constantine to integrate the Roman Church into the symphonic political construction of Byzantium evince quite a large range. Perhaps the best example is emperor Justinian. He was most probably the main actor in approaching Pope Hormisdas under the reign of his uncle Justin, envisaging to end the Acatian Schism in 519. Justinian's efforts to reconcile the Eastern theological party with the teaching of Chalcedon –in an important measure also that of Pope Leo I –employed the Theopaschite theology rejected by Rome. I incline therefore to follow in this respect the opinion of Chadwick[1], that the approach was rather political, rather than that of Moorhead (p. 62), who sees Justinian as truly believing that the theology of the Roman Church was to be followed. Whatever the reason, the schism was overcome, but Justinian proved himself soon a very uncomfortable patron for the Roman Church. Popes Silverius and Vigilius were soon to see, or rather suffer, the consequences of the Imperial patronage. The first was deposed by Belisarius, the conqueror of Italy, in order to allow Vigilius to accede to the Roman *kathedra*, only to be himself arrested and brought to Constantinople to give canonical approval to Justinian's theological ideas in the controversy of the Three Chapters. Thus, the relationship of the Roman Church with the Byzantine Empire reveals itself to be quite complex, ranging from brutal interventions of the exarchs of Ravenna to sending icons and liturgical books to Constantinople as gifts. The popes supported sometimes the imperial policy and opposed it in other occasions, but there was one aspect where they consequently upheld their opinion and that was in the matter of doctrine. Even if Pope Honorius was confused through the intricacies of Byzantine theology into approving Monotheletism, we see the Roman bishops generally maintained a consequent theological line. The complicated relationships with the Eastern Empire are further outlined in their evolution towards the turning point in the 8th century, when the Roman pontiffs searched another political protector in the North, in the Frankish kingdom, as Byzantium became more and more incapable in defending Italy from Lombards.

This political and cultural act, through which the Roman see turned from its old allegiance to the successors of Constantine towards the new kingdoms of Europe, marks the end of the period discussed in the book of John Moorhead. After going through it, the reader has a comprehensive image of a not easily approachable period in the history of the Roman Church. The author delivers what he promised in the title: a complex image of the Church of Rome and of its pontiffs in Late Antiquity.

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[1] CHADWICK 2001, 610. See also MEYENDORFF 1968, 47.