

THE PAPACY AND THE NEW KINGDOMS IN THE 12TH CENTURY: THE MEDIATION OF THE MONKS, CANONS, AND BISHOPS

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Abstract: *This study explores the relationship between the papacy and the new European kingdoms in the twelfth century. It argues that both were emerging powers engaged in mutual processes of legitimation. The papacy relied on monarchs for political and military support, while kings sought symbolic legitimacy from the Roman Church. Papal universalism and «imperialization» strengthened its ideological authority. At the same time, monarchies increasingly developed autonomous forms of power and legitimacy. Religious actors such as bishops, legates, and monastic networks played a key mediating role. The paper emphasizes negotiation, conflict, and adaptation rather than linear centralization. It ultimately highlights a dynamic reconfiguration of political and ecclesiastical structures in medieval Europe.*

Keywords: *ecclesiastical mediation; imperialization of the papacy; papal monarchy; political legitimacy; twelfth-century Europe; western kingdoms.*

Resumo: *Este estudo explora a relação entre o papado e os novos reinos europeus no século XII. Sustenta que ambos constituíam poderes emergentes envolvidos em processos mútuos de legitimação. O papado dependia dos monarcas para apoio político e militar, ao passo que os reis procuravam legitimidade simbólica junto da Igreja de Roma. O universalismo papal e a sua «imperialização» reforçaram a sua autoridade ideológica. Paralelamente, as monarquias desenvolveram, de forma crescente, modalidades autónomas de poder e de legitimação. Atores religiosos como bispos, legados e redes monásticas desempenharam um papel mediador fundamental. O estudo enfatiza dinâmicas de negociação, conflito e adaptação, em detrimento de uma visão de centralização linear. Em última análise, o presente ensaio destaca uma reconfiguração dinâmica das estruturas políticas e eclesásticas na Europa medieval.*

Palavras-chave: *mediação eclesiástica; imperialização do papado; monarquia papal; legitimidade política; Europa do século XII; reinos ocidentais.*

The Normans of Southern Italy did not have much luck with the Church of Rome. They had to deal with a Church that was becoming more aware of itself and strengthening its position. Not that the Church of Rome had any better luck with the Normans, of course, since it had to deal with a power that was gradually growing stronger... In short, it was a relationship between emerging forces, each new in its own way. Emerging and anxious, because they were in desperate need of affirmation (Cantarella 2014, p. 378).

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We can extend this judgment to all the new kingdoms that appeared on the stage of Western history in the 12th century at a time of profound transformation of both the papacy and secular forms of power, with a sudden acceleration in the metamorphosis of all these subjects and the awareness they were developing of themselves and their margins of action. The new kingdoms and the papacy obtained much of what they needed at that precise stage in their history: the popes found on several occasions in the monarchs, primarily in the Normans of southern Italy, the military power they had dramatically lacked since they could no longer draw it from the emperor, who until then had exercised through his military potential the advocacy function of the Apostolic See that came to him from his status as *patricius Romanorum*, nor from the Roman aristocracy, now drastically reduced in comparison with previous centuries with regard to its ability to intervene in the election of popes and control them during their pontificate (D'Acunto 2021). The young European kingdoms, for their part, were able to draw fundamental symbolic resources from an institution, the Roman Church, which, regardless of the processes underway to assert its renewed self-awareness, had for centuries been the most authoritative source of legitimacy in the entire West.

This demand for legitimacy on the part of the kingdoms was based both on the universalism claimed by the papacy in relation to the primacy of Peter and on the imperialization of this institution, which began in the mid-11th century, where by imperialization we mean the process by which the Roman Church, thanks to the Donation of Constantine, declared itself heir to the Roman Empire and absorbed its universal dimension, with obvious repercussions on the strictly political level (D'Acunto 2022). These dynamics constituted the ideological basis for the growing protagonism of the Apostolic See in its relations with the kingdoms.

The idea that the pope was the true emperor (Fuhrmann 1985-1986) played a fundamental role in the process that took shape between the pontificates of Leo IX (1049-1054) and that of Boniface VIII (1294-1303) and led the papacy to assert «its new position of centrality within Western Christianity, based on two decisive elements: superiority over all ecclesiastical structures and all secular powers, and the universality of its function» (Bagliani 2012, p. 67). Mary Stroll has rightly pointed out that first Callistus II and then Innocent II accompanied a feverish activity of symbolic production with an equally intense series of initiatives aimed at transforming the palace and the Lateran Basilica into the functional and control center of the Church, as demonstrated by the celebration of the councils of 1123 and 1139 within the walls of that building so steeped in references to the antiquity of the Apostolic See. In particular, Callistus II preferred to be represented as the heir of Constantine and Sylvester I rather than as the successor of Peter. For this reason, he insisted on the role of the basilica (known as the Constantinian basilica) and the Lateran palace at the

expense of St. Peter's and the Vatican area, in line with the *imitatio imperii* pursued by the «Gregorian» papacy. Innocent II had himself buried in front of the Lateran palace and not in St. Peter's, and moreover in the porphyry sarcophagus decorated with scenes of triumphs that had belonged to Hadrian and was located in Castel Sant'Angelo (Stroll 1991, pp. 34, 185). In the rest of the 12th century, the role of the pope in the imperial coronation ceremony was emphasized, demonstrating a hierarchy that was unbalanced in favor of the pontiff. The fresco depicting the coronation of Lothair in 1133, now lost, which Innocent II had painted in the Lateran, highlighted the emperor's subjugation to the pope, provoking the anger of Barbarossa, who saw the image in person in 1157.

The distant origins of this imperialization of the papacy were already present in the thinking of a «pre-Gregorian» such as Pier Damiani, despite the fact that historiography considers him a supporter of the perfect balance between *regnum* and *sacerdotium*. According to this leading figure of the 11th century, a single pope is at the head of the entire world, while there are many kings, each within the limited boundaries of his own kingdom, and since every emperor prostrates himself at the feet of the pope, the latter, as king of kings and prince of emperors, surpasses all living beings in honor and dignity:

unus omni mundo papa praesideat, reges autem plurimos in orbe terrarum sua cuiusque regni meta concludat, quia quilibet imperator ad papae vestigia corrui, tanquam rex regum et princeps imperatorum cunctos in carne viventes honore ac dignitate praecellit (Petrus Damiani, Briefe 3. (no. 91-150), no. 108, p. 188).

While *emperors* are now reduced to a small crowd («quilibet imperator»), anonymous and insignificant, only the pope is distinguished by his uniqueness, which is not recognized in emperors. His power, as «rex regum et princeps imperatorum» («king of kings and prince of emperors»), has now exclusively absorbed one of the typical characteristics of imperial authority that make it universal: it is a power superior to other kingdoms and even to *other emperors*. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the monarchs of the new kingdoms did not have a uniform attitude towards the use of imperial terminology. For example, while William the Conqueror never used the title of *imperator*, even though the Anglo-Saxon sovereigns had adorned themselves with it in their documentation, his contemporary Alfonso VI of Castile and León called himself *Imperator Hispaniae* (Sirantoine 2013).

Within this imperial conception of the papacy since the age of Alexander II, the Apostolic See had resorted to the terminology of *fidELITas* and the establishment of feudal ties (Zerbi 1948).

Ovidio Capitani rightly noted that proclaiming oneself or calling *oneself fideles* cannot take on a specific feudal meaning, in the strict sense, with the recognition of particular obligations: as usual, it would be wrong to load technical-legal meanings onto language that essentially expresses the essential obligation of a Christian towards the Church of Rome and towards the pope, who is its head (Capitani 2002).

Nevertheless, it was precisely the elasticity of feudal terminology that opened up wide spaces for dialogue, conflict, and negotiation with the kingdoms, which provided the Apostolic See with objectively «imperial» margins for action.

The issue of the feudal subjection of the kings of Sicily to the Apostolic See, which has been addressed several times from a legal point of view, should, in my opinion, be resolved more convincingly in terms of the political analysis of the forces at play, which sees the balance constantly tipping in favor of the Norman monarchs of the Mezzogiorno, who derived the necessary legitimacy from this theoretical dependence without, however, intending to meet the expectations of popes eager to give real effect to that vassal relationship in order to gain recognition of their dominion over the Italian peninsula (Deér 1972, pp. 87-88; Robinson 1990, pp. 376-377).

The belated oath of allegiance to the pope sworn by William II in the last year of his life, in 1188 (Deér 1972, p. 254), demonstrates how much the royal power in the new monarchies had matured and how cumbersome a vassalage bond had become, essentially emptied of its legitimizing function and a source of tension and ambiguity with the papacy. For this reason, the Norman king sought in every way to «reduce the external forms of the feudal relationship, which were perceived as unbecoming to royal dignity» (Zerbi 1948, note 20), obtaining, limited to his person, exemption from homage and, for his successors, dispensation from the obligation to swear *allegiance* to each new pope.

The new representation of kingship, which increasingly followed Western rather than Byzantine models, was presented by the Normans of southern Italy as «a special relationship with God and with the churches» (Delogu 1983, p. 209), from which the sovereign expected nothing, considering his own beneficence as a form of thanksgiving for the exaltation bestowed upon him by God. Architectural complexes such as S. Maria la Nuova in Monreale, which combined the church and the royal residence, made these concepts visible (Tramontana 1986, p. 205). The cosmic order in which royal power was embedded did not provide for its further growth through the intercession of the papacy and the bishops, since a «privileged relationship of mutual honor» existed between God and the king (Delogu 1983, p. 211), which in fact rendered the mediation of the Apostolic See unnecessary.

Fanny Madeline's studies have clarified how, in the new kingdoms between 1066 and 1216, the foundations of royal power changed and the «feudal» kingdoms themselves, until then deeply rooted in power systems based on liturgical rituals and

biblical representations of the *ministerium regis*, tended to become autonomous from the role assigned to them by the Church (Madeline 2022, p. 39). A phase began that was characterized by a new «temporalité politique» typical of the new kingdoms, with the transition described by Michel Sennelart from the typically medieval *regimen* to the concept of government (Senellart 1995, pp. 40-42). With the era of struggles with the papacy to establish the limits and effects of its supremacy in the temporal sphere now over, in all the new kingdoms the ability of sovereigns to derive their power and legitimacy not from the Church but from the strengthening of their monarchical and administrative power and from the community of the kingdom profoundly changed the meaning of rituals and symbolic hierarchies (*Communitas regni* 2019).

This extremely turbulent and nuanced picture can hardly be reduced to doctrinal disputes over the primacy of one power or another, but it becomes much richer and more complex if we extend our investigation to the organizational implications that this dialectic conditioned, while being heavily influenced by it. If we consider the actors involved from an institutional analysis perspective for the period that interests us here, what stands out first and foremost is the homogeneity of the basic orientations and stabilization strategies pursued by the papacy, by the Empire and by the kingdoms, both in terms of *Leitideen* and in terms of the instruments aimed at creating bodies capable of exercising their hegemony no longer in the form of a higher coordination of local powers, but rather as the result of an attempt at centralized control of economic resources, as well as of the apparatus of officials responsible for their management and the performance of judicial functions; all accompanied by the restructuring of the symbolic systems closely related to all these realities. In this regard, Giovanni Tabacco aptly spoke of «the need for constructive rationality that was expressed in the ecclesiastical-monarchical structure of the papacy and in the growing political discipline of the various regions of Europe» (Tabacco 1983, p. 23).

It is necessary to reflect on the level of organicity (and I would say on its very existence) of the so-called «program of centralization» of the papacy and on the idea that the bold doctrinal elaborations of the Roman reformers in the mid-11th century initiated an inevitable and coherent process of alignment of the local churches with the model that we simply call «Gregorian» and that this process culminated just as inevitably in the pontificates of Innocent III and Boniface VIII in the so-called papal monarchy. There is no need to further emphasize how profound were the differences in the ecclesiological reflection on Roman primacy of these three popes or the different intensity of their elaboration of the theocratic ideal. The translation of the ideas that we simplify as Gregorian into concrete government practice also had to pass through their slow translation into canonical terms and through the even slower and more troubled acceptance of that legislation in the various kingdoms.

It has been authoritatively stated (Alberzoni 2001) that the evolution of the papacy in a centralistic and monarchical sense during the 12th century is now an established fact in historiography. This process took shape in the ability to give the relationship between the pope and the bishops a single direction, so as to guarantee the apostolic see absolute centrality in the government of the Church, finally curbing the episcopate's customary reference to the sovereign, who until then had been considered not only the source of episcopal investiture itself, but above all the most accredited defender of diocesan ecclesiastical institutions. However, while in central and northern Italy the exclusive competence of the Roman pontiff was established, both as a reference point for bishops and as defender of their prerogatives vis-à-vis municipal governments, in the nearby Norman kingdom of southern Italy and in the other new kingdoms, the papacy's possibilities for strengthening its ties with the episcopate were limited by the bonds that united the bishops with the sovereigns. On closer inspection, in my opinion, it was precisely the particular situation that arose in the newly formed kingdoms and Italian communes between the local ruling classes and ecclesiastical institutions that did not allow the papacy to automatically impose its control over the bishops. The idea of a progressive monarchization of papal power has been widely accepted by historians (Pennington 1984; Morris 1989). But what is a monarchy in the 12th century? In short, what would this transformation of the papacy consist of? What would be the starting point and, above all, the end point of this change? These are not idle questions, since anyone who delves into these issues is bound to wonder whether historiography makes rather casual use of institutional terminology. In particular, we must avoid the evocation of «monarchization» implicitly implying a supposed «statization» of papal authority, according to an interpretative paradigm that sees this institution as a sort of laboratory for the future development of Weberian legal power, rational and based on a bureaucratic administrative apparatus. This approach is equally dangerous if applied to the new kingdoms.

The new kingdoms benefited from the fact that these institutional experiments took place during the 12th century, when the Empire was troubled, at least until Frederick I Barbarossa, by a profound dynastic crisis and the papacy was weakened by repeated schisms that jeopardized its effective institutional continuity and efficiency. Reinhard Elze recalled that a «new king» such as the Norman Roger II had been able to take advantage of the stability achieved through his long reign, compared to the succession of nine popes in the same period 1112-1154 (Elze 1979, p. 28). The instability of the papacy was aggravated by repeated schisms that put the rulers of the new kingdoms in a position of relative advantage, since the various popes vying for the tiara needed their recognition, in exchange for which they were willing to make extensive concessions, especially in terms of legitimacy. The most striking case in this regard is that of Roger II, who in 1130 took advantage of Anacletus II's need for

legitimacy to have himself recognized as king of Sicily. Similarly, but on the other side, that of Innocent, in the Iberian Peninsula, Count Alfonso-Enrico of Portugal, who had broken away from Castilian vassalage, was authorized in 1139 to bear the title of king and in 1143 received his territory as a fief from the pope, swearing allegiance before Cardinal Guido dei SS. Cosma e Damiano (Renzi 2019).

To this ability to confer legitimacy and full formal recognition on institutional realities that were still developing and often built on military successes, as was the case with the new kingdoms, the Apostolic See added its particular expertise in validating marriages, which were of crucial importance to those same kingdoms, since marriages were an essential tool both for the internal consolidation and unification of each kingdom and for its position in the system of other kingdoms, as the European aristocracies used marriages to strengthen their alliances at a formal level. The popes took advantage of these specific powers to exert constant pressure on the new kingdoms, since the instruments gradually developed and tested to give concrete content to their supposed «imperial» function, primarily the feudal bond, were continually the subject of exhausting negotiations and more or less latent conflicts that undermined the authority of the Apostolic See, often already weakened by continuous schisms.

The interference of the papacy in the life of the new kingdoms — or rather, what the new kings considered interference, while the popes considered part of the normal functioning of *Christianitas* — also took the form of the exercise of jurisdiction, which offered ample scope for intervention in local affairs. The natural sphere of these interventions by the popes was the internal conflicts of ecclesiastical and religious institutions, while the theme of *ecclesiastical libertas* was used by the popes to interfere in conflicts between ecclesiastical subjects and secular institutions (Libertas 2019; D'Acunto 2024).

Legates and delegated judges — on whom there is now abundant literature (Müller 1997; *Legati e delegati papali* 2012) — represented, at least formally, the Apostolic See in the administration of justice in the new kingdoms. Equally important, however, were the informal emissaries of the popes, who came from the monastic world and, starting in the 12th century, from the canonical world. In this context, Bernard of Clairvaux was only the tip of the iceberg of a large class of religious figures who for centuries had been carrying out their work of assistance in the royal courts in the etymological sense of the term, which derives from *ad-sistere*, to sit beside the sovereigns to advise them (*Monasticum regnum* 2015). The specificity of the phenomenon in the 12th century consisted in the objective increase in opportunities for contact between the papacy and the courts of the new kingdoms, as well as the presence of more or less mature forms of monastic and canonical congregations, which by their nature had a supra-local spread and centralized organizational structures, such as the Cistercians (Cariboni 2024). These new orders and congregations, while not renouncing their

strong local networks, were characterized by increasingly structured relations with the Apostolic See, which in turn took advantage of this to insert itself into the political and religious dynamics of the new kingdoms. The life of Bernard of Clairvaux is a prime example of how the activities of these religious figures took place simultaneously across different kingdoms, acting as a homogenizing factor not only in the nature of the Apostolic See's interventions but also in the reactions that occurred at the peripheral level in the courts in response to those same interventions. Hans Wolter, referring to the situation in the kingdom of France at the time of Louis VII (1137-1180), considering the work of Suger of Saint Denis, went so far as to say that it was not the crown but the French church (especially the new orders and reformist canons) that could rightly be considered the driving force of public life (Wolter and Beck 1983). This judgment, which certainly exaggerated Suger's actual importance, is all the more striking because it already presupposed a monolithic ecclesial subjectivity similar to that of the Church of the contemporary age in the 12th century. As a monk, Suger did not conceive of himself primarily as the representative of the Church in the kingdom of France. On the contrary, he considered his belonging to the kingdom of France not as something separate from his identity as a religious man but as a constitutive element of his being a monk of Saint Denis, that is, of the monastery that for centuries had been chosen by the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Capetian kings as the symbolic place of the monarchy. Compared to this fairly traditional pattern, the novelty of the 12th century was that Pope Eugene III believed he had the right and even the duty to intervene in the relationship between St. Denis, its abbot, and the kingdom. This no longer reactive but active conception of the papacy towards the peripheries, which began in the 11th century, was consolidated after the investiture struggle (Johrendt 2004; *Römisches Zentrum und kirchliche Peripherie* 2008). This does not mean that the sovereigns of the new kingdoms passively accepted these interferences and claims of superior dominion of the Apostolic See over all powers. This brings us to the heart of the problem of relations between the Church and the new kingdoms in the 12th century: did the Gregorian revolution really succeed in desacralizing the monarchy? Colin Morris rightly believes that the gradual development of the *plenitudo potestatis* of the pope, the categorization of kings as laymen and the consequent disappearance of royal unction from the list of sacraments, as well as the exclusion of laymen from episcopal elections, together with the construction of a government apparatus by the kings of England and Sicily, cannot be read as signs of the emergence of a secular state and the desacralization of the monarchy. In fact, despite what Gregory VII claimed, «the God-given power of the king had always been seen as exercised in tandem with that of the priesthood, and kings in the twelfth century continued to use the language of divine authority» (Morris 1989, p. 227). This is demonstrated by the exaltation of royal dignity through new ceremonies and the

construction of churches and monasteries by kings who undertook to protect them and were also concerned to enroll members of their families among the ranks of the saints, with the clear intention of legitimizing their power through the link with the sacred dimension that such kinship guaranteed. Clergy and monks active within the courts of the new kingdoms promoted and often conceived these strategies of institutional consolidation, without this causing them the slightest discomfort with regard to the loyalty they owed to the pope. But then what were the actual changes and lasting results of the so-called revolution of the 11th century? Roman centralization achieved some results only very slowly and in a sinusoidal movement. However, the novelty compared to previous centuries was that the Apostolic See was conceived as the absolute and effective summit of *Christianitas*, whereas in previous centuries the ecclesiastical structure, albeit in different ways and with varying intensity, had been dominated, at least in Italy and Germany, by the Emperor, who called himself *servus apostolorum* and *vicarius Christi*, and in other areas there was still no defined form of codified pre-eminence of the Roman Church over the peripheries of *Christianitas*. Paradoxically, just as this recognition of the supremacy of the Apostolic See was taking place, the number of local church leaders was multiplying thanks to the consolidation of new kingdoms, which in fact and often even in law sought to hinder the progress of Roman centralization, that is, to stop what, seen from the peripheries of the Western Church, appeared to be an unheard-of *novitas*.

The stone guests at the banquet we are describing were certainly bishops. Their alignment with the directives of the Apostolic See was anything but obvious and natural, as one might imagine at first glance. On the contrary, since the early Middle Ages, the bishops had been the main interlocutors of the monarchs, to whom, albeit in different ways and with varying and intermittent intensity, they presented themselves as the summit of a polycentric ecclesiastical hierarchy and, as such, destined to deal with the holders of political power without any intermediation on the part of the papacy.

In Portugal, Roman centralization seemed to be proceeding rapidly when, under Innocent II, an agreement was reached on the organization of dioceses in conjunction with the foundation of monasteries under papal law to defend the recently conquered territories (Renzi 2019). The case of England was quite different, where the agreement with Rome in 1106 preceded the Concordat of Worms by sixteen years, but did not reflect the extremist tendencies of Gregorianism. On the contrary, it confirmed enormous scope for intervention by kings in the choice of bishops and prohibited papal legates from entering the kingdom. Fanny Madeline is therefore right when she points out how wrong it is to think of the transition from a church under royal control to a church under papal control... perceptible both through the control of episcopal elections and through semantic shifts that saw the transformation of the *ecclesia Anglorum* into an *ecclesia anglicana*, now an integral part of the Roman

Church... This story, which also describes, as a corollary, the gradual erosion of sovereign power until the submission of John Lackland, does not sit well with the reality of the exercise of power by the Kings of England and the construction of an increasingly territorial sovereignty (Madeline 2022).

Even William the Conqueror, who had earned the staunch support of Alexander II and Gregory VII, was not a Gelasiusian, but considered himself the head and reformer of the Church of England. This was the «new» normality of relations, in line with which, albeit more explicitly, the Clarendon Constitutions of 1164 would be oriented. All things considered, it is not surprising that the echoes of the «murder of the century» (Duggan 1998), perpetrated on December 29, 1170, in Canterbury Cathedral, reached Italy. The life of Lanfranco, bishop of Pavia, bears clear traces of the «Becket model» (Vauchez 1988, pp. 197-203, 329-346). A century had already passed since Gregory VII's *Dictatus pape*, but the *libertas Ecclesie* still needed its martyrs.

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