

Press release

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

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In the name of the popes: how the Church shaped Europe

How did Europe become what it is today and what role did the institution of the Church play? As part of the project 'Regesta Pontificum Romanorum' historians of Friedrich-Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) are working together with the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities to comprehensively examine all papal contacts from their beginnings through to 1198.

The official confirmation of the gift of a relic, a pope's authoritative decision in a controversial legal matter or a letter on the occasion of the crowning of an emperor – those are just some examples of the documents that popes in the Early and High Middle Ages, between approximately the 6th and 13th centuries, sent to recipients. The popes' written contact to the Christian world is well documented after 1198, but the messages sent by the Roman popes to rulers, bishops or monasteries throughout Europe via messengers in the centuries prior were only sparsely maintained and not centrally recorded before 1198. This means that these letters, which are spread throughout Europe, having been saved by their recipients, have to be collected.

'To research the rise of the state system in Europe and to investigate the interactions between the Roman centre and the Christian world of the time, an index of papal writings is absolutely necessary,' says project director Prof. Dr. Klaus Herbers from the Chair of Medieval History and Ancillary Sciences at FAU. Documents sent from the papal chambers are not only a source of profound insights, but they also reveal local particularities and the recipients' expectations of the supreme shepherd of the Christian faith.

The project is about more than just the history of an enduring institution: 'It also enables us to understand organisational structures which were created in the Middle Ages and which still shape the face of Europe,' explains Herbers.

The FAU researchers have taken on a considerable task. They are working on a new edition of the definitive work 'Regesta Pontificum Romanorum' by Philipp Jaffé, who first collected papal correspondence in 'regesta' in 1851, followed by a second edition in 1885/1888. In the regesta the contents of papal correspondence are summarised together with their date and place of issuance and the definitive editions. 'With the new discoveries and research of the last 130 years, we assume that there are at least 32,000 documented papal contacts before 1198,' adds Klaus Herbers. Thanks to the FAU researchers, there will be ongoing updates. They have already processed the documents from the time of Peter's arrival in Rome until 604; the first volume comprises over 3100 regesta on 600 pages.

The scholars have revised Jaffé's classic not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively: they are making the results available for systematic searches in the online database www.papsturkunden.de.

In order to create the chronological index of papal documents, the scholars had to become detectives. In addition to their expert analysis of annals, chronicles or collections of church law, they also discovered 'secret sources' which contained hidden references to papal documents, including ones that no longer exist.

‘This provides us with scientifically sound, systematic access to one of the most important collections of European source material,’ says Herbers, ‘and allows us to comparatively and comprehensively view the constitutive role of the papacy in spreading values, procedures, legal concepts and ideas.’

Further information:

Project ‘Papal documents of the Early and High Middle Ages’

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