

Kristina Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xv+323. ISBN 9781107001060.

This is an innovative and important book that recalibrates our understanding of the early Roman episcopacy by focusing our lens on the *domus*, the household, as a crucial site for the intersection of Christianity and Roman life. Specifically, Sessa demonstrates that Roman bishops in the late-ancient period sought to exercise moral and material influence within the discourse of estate management (*oikonomia*) and that it was this discourse that opened the door, so to speak, for Roman bishops to assert their authority over a previously autonomous and private space. Resisting more traditional studies that emphasize the theological and/or political components of the so-called “rise of the papacy,” this is a cultural history whose singular focus is the complex matrix of aristocratic and clerical households where Roman bishops increasingly inserted themselves and did so with varying degrees of success.

Sessa’s study is divided into seven well-conceived chapters. Following a useful overview of the ancient concept of *oikonomia* in the Introduction, Chapter One surveys the particular attributes of late-ancient Italian households, emphasizing the authority of the *paterfamilias* in all affairs, including the religious, even after the penetration of Christianity into Rome’s elite households. Chapter Two details the diverse ways that Christian authorities began to re-conceptualize the idea of domestic stewardship by drawing on Biblical and other pastoral associations that recalibrated the elite householder as an earthly trustee of God’s dominion. Chapter Three describes the Christian bishop as a *paterfamilias* in his own right—a kind of diocesan steward of God’s household.

It is in Chapter Four and Five, however, that we arrive at the heart of Sessa’s interest. It is here that she completely upends the typical way of thinking about the growth of papal influence. In Chapter Four, she elucidates the ways that the Roman bishops began to position themselves as uniquely qualified domestic mediators—persons who could resolve ethical questions related to the household, to marriage, to property management, and, especially, with respect to the oversight of household religious activities. Chapter Five offers a nice complement to that investigation by showing the ways in which Roman bishops asserted themselves into the domestic affairs of other Italian clergymen, many of whom would have been elite householders in their own right.

The payoff for Sessa’s methodological innovation is most apparent in her revisionist explanation of the early sixth-century papal fiasco otherwise known as the Laurentian schism, which is the focus of Chapter Six. Rejecting all previous interpretations that sought to cast the affair as a division based on theological or imperial politics, Sessa argues instead that the controversy was a contestation over stewardship, succession, and clerical sexual discipline. “In short, the causes of the Laurentian schism were *domestic* and revolved primarily around debates over the ideal relationship between *oikonomia* and episcopal authority” (213). While that characterization admittedly does not account for

all aspects of the dispute (e.g. the debate over the proper dating of Easter), it is a stunning and compelling reconsideration of the entire episode. Sessa's command of the sources and the thoroughness of her argument and evidence, in fact, make this the most important treatment of the Laurentian schism to date.

Chapter Seven follows, then, with a fresh consideration of the *Gesta Martyrum*, a notoriously difficult-to-categorize collection of Roman *vitae* that amassed over hundreds of years. Sessa argues that, despite their apparent simplicity of style, these texts reveal complex, social, ritual, and political dynamics between the Roman bishop and the elite householders of Rome. She examines a handful of these texts to show how Roman bishops are described as being invited into elite households where they engage in a series of domestic negotiations that are asymmetrical but nevertheless voluntary. Despite the fact that these bishops began to exercise their authority within the elite households, there were still areas of the *domus* that were off limits to bishops (such as the *cubiculum*). This is particularly noteworthy, she contends, because other clerics (deacons, priests, and holy men) were invited into those spaces—a distinction and raises fundamental questions about the competition for religious authority within the Roman clergy.

This is a cultural history of exceptional quality. Sessa has an excellent command of a wide range of sources, both literary and archeological, and she is impressively conversant with an enormous body of European scholarship on late-ancient Italy and its bishops. Her subtle appropriation of critical theory is evinced by her useful categorization of estate management as “discourse,” which, in turns, allows her a methodological space for describing the multiple and overlapping domains in which culture exists and reveals itself.

If one was to offer a critique, it might be directed at the methodological presupposition that a cultural history must necessarily discard sources that are presumed to be overtly theological in their content. Sessa never states that explicitly and Chapter Two does, certainly, incorporate the Biblical and pastoral conceptualizations of stewardship. But, I wonder if Sessa's rejection of previous theological explanations for the rise of the papacy might be better directed more specifically at the fact that they were fundamentally flawed because of their anachronisms and because of their limited purview, not because they considered theological explanations or evaluated sources that were more theological in their content. While Sessa is absolutely right to note that previous studies of the early papacy that emphasized theological concerns failed to account for the kind of insight that she is providing, she implies by omission that a large body of source material is somehow less relevant to the kinds of questions that she is asking. I suspect, on the contrary, that she might find in Leo's sermons and, especially, in Gregory's *Moralia* that this theological material would prove to compliment and further nuance the myriad of sources she has considered in detail.

In sum, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy* is an extraordinary achievement of creative and careful scholarship. It fundamentally alters the way that we conceive of the gradual development of papal authority during the late ancient period by

compellingly demonstrating the extent to which Roman bishops gained their authority through pre-existent structures and discourses that were a fundamental part of Roman life. In doing so, Sessa has established herself as one of the foremost experts of the late-ancient papacy.

GEORGE E. DEMACOPOULOS
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY
CO-FOUNDING DIRECTOR, ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN STUDIES CENTER
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY