

Who wrote the life of Leo IV? Gratian, the *superista*, and his network

by Maddalena Betti

The life of Leo IV included in the *Liber pontificalis* is a valuable text for reflecting on the Roman aristocracy during the years of the Emperors Lothar I and Louis II. It contains numerous episodes in which Roman *proceres* appear alongside the pontiff or are depicted as the main protagonists of the events. In this paper, I have analysed the possible targets of these representations by highlighting the “aristocratic” involvement in the process of writing papal biographies. The study led to a consideration of the role played by the *superista* Gratian as the focus of the network constituted by elite papal officials. Hence, it provides evidence on the relations maintained by Gratian’s elite with emperors and pontiffs; the ways in which the elite was formed, and the strategies deployed to ensure its social pre-eminence in spite the succession of pontiffs.

Middle Ages; ninth century; *Liber pontificalis*; Pope Leo IV; Pope Benedict III; Roman aristocracy; Gratian *superista*.

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Abbreviations

- MGH, AB = *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. G. Waitz, Hannover 1883 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 5).
LP = *Liber Pontificalis, Texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vol., ed. L. Duchesne, Paris 1886-1892.
MGH, Epp. V = *Epistolarum Tomus V*, ed. E. Dümmler et al., Berlin 1899 (MGH, Epistolae Karolini aevi, 3).
MGH, Conc. III = *Die Konzilien der karolingischen Teilreiche 843-859*, ed. W. Hartmann, Hannover 1984 (MGH, Conc., 3).
RI I, 4, 2, 1 = J.F. Böhmer, *Regesta Imperii I. Die Regesten des Kaiserreichs unter den Karolingern 751-918 (926-962)*, Band 4: *Papstregesten, 800-911*, Tl. 2: *844-872*, Lfg. 1: *844-858*, ed. K. Herbers, Köln-Weimar-Wien, Böhlau 1999.

1. *Preliminary notes on the pontificate of Leo IV (847-855)*

The biography of Leo IV¹ included in the *Liber pontificalis* conveys the idea of a pontiff who revived the authority of the Roman Church by playing the role assigned by biographers to the papal office². Furthermore, in several passages, the biographers see a connection between the pontificate of Leo IV and that of Leo III, considered as a high moment of the pontifical institution, maybe because of the relationship that the pontiff is supposed to have established with Charlemagne (in complete disagreement – this choice – with part of Charlemagne’ advisers who expressed veiled concerns about the figure of Leo III)³. Therefore, they explicitly relate the pontificate of Leo IV to that of Leo III, alluding to a dark parenthesis, dominated by popes who were unable to guarantee the security of the city and its territory, and who prepared the ground for the desecration of the basilica of the Prince of the Apostles by the Saracens (846)⁴. Whereas, in the life of Leo IV, it is the pope himself who, in the same way as a Roman emperor, displays practices which are typical of late Roman imperial practices (he is alleged to have distributed money to the people and luxury gifts to the *proceres*), with the aim of restoring the Aurelian walls, building a new fortified centre near Civitavecchia (Leopolis), establishing a community of Corsicans in the centre of Portus and, above all, taking the initiative to fortify the Vatican (Lothar and his brothers are in the background, as backers and not creators of the *Civitas Leoniana*)⁵. Within the context of this last monumental undertaking, an allusion is made to Leo III’s plan to fortify the site of the basilica, which was left to decay, and to the foundations already erected, which were dismantled by unidentified men⁶.

¹ On the pontificate of Leo IV, Marazzi, *Leone IV* and the Herbers monograph, *Leo IV*.

² Edition in LP, vol. 2, pp. 106-134. On the Life of Leo IV in the *Liber pontificalis*, Herbers, *Leo IV*, pp. 18-48.

³ The bad reputation of Leo IV emerges, for instance in the personal correspondence between Alcuin and Arno, archbishop of Salzburg, Costambeys, *Alcuin, Rome*, pp. 268-271. On the ambiguities of the relationship between Charlemagne and Leo III, see Schieffer, *Charlemagne and Rome* and Becher, *Die Reise Papst Leos III*.

⁴ On this subject see Betti, *The Two Versions of the Life of Pope Sergius II*, p. 191.

⁵ On the foundations of Leo IV, see Marazzi, *Le «città nuove»*, pp. 257, 261-262, 266-268.

⁶ LP, vol. 2, p. 123.

This represents – as I believe – a firm denunciation on the part of the biographers of Leo IV against the opponents of Leo III, which is a prelude to the revival of the memory of Leo III in Rome⁷.

The ability to revitalise the papal institution during the years of Leo IV's rule, so well highlighted in the life, is reflected in the massive number of papal letters preserved. In the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, 48 letters of Leo IV (the vast majority partial)⁸ are edited by Adolf von Hirsch-Gereuth (1899), extrapolated from the *Collectio Britannica*. The number of letters of Leo IV cannot be compared to the preserved letters of Nicholas I, Adrian II or John VIII. However, it is significant, considering that only three letters of Sergius II, his predecessor, have been preserved and no more than one of Benedict III, his successor. Moreover, the group of Leo IV's recipients is varied and extended (besides Hincmar of Rheims, it includes the *iudices* of Sardinia, Lothar, Charles the Bald, Patriarch Ignatius among others). The epistolary correspondence of Leo IV shows, therefore, an elevated perception of how the papal institution was capable, or supposed to be capable, of intervening in the most different contexts⁹. In addition, there is another relevant element: fragments of Leo IV's letters have also come down to us with statements of principle recognised by posterity as foundational. Many of these fragments originate from the *Collectio Britannica*, the primary repository of Leo IV's correspondence, to be included in both *Collectio Tripartita*, written by Ivo of Chartres, and the *Decretum Gratiani*¹⁰. This further demonstrates the unrest running through Leo IV's pontificate: the definition of new principles, the revival of ideas that had already been formulated, but now proposed in papal decrees for the benefit of a renewed and more competitive representation of the papal institution.

2. *The life of Leo IV: a cumbersome first-person narration*

Let us now return to the life of Leo IV. It is set apart from the lives of his immediate predecessors by the choice of his biographers to introduce brief historical-hagiographical narratives of the pontiff's actions interspersed with the list of his gifts, especially those benefitting St. Peter's, as a compensation for the damage suffered during its sacking by the Saracens in 846, and

⁷ About the possibility that Leo III started fortifying the same area, Gibson, Ward Perkins, *The surviving remains of the Leonine wall*, p. 33. The work of Leo III would have been destroyed because it was seen with suspicion by the Roman aristocrats: erected before the Saracen sacking, it would have appeared as an attempt to erect a personal fortress. After all, Leo III's residence was located close to St. Peter's basilica (see Meneghini, Santangeli Valenzani, *Rome*, p. 221). Similarly, the choice of the couple Marozia-Hugh of Provence to reside in Castel S. Angelo, the most fortified place in Rome, was perceived as "tyrannical" (according to Santangeli Valenzani, *Topografia*, p. 141).

⁸ Edition in MGH, Epp. V, pp. 585-612.

⁹ On Leo IV's letters see Jaspers-Fuhrmann, *Papal letters*, pp. 108-110.

¹⁰ On the tradition of Leo IV fragments circulating in canonical collections after the *Collectio Britannica*, Herbers, *Leo IV*, pp. 493-494.

accounts of building interventions and embellishments in favour of the Roman churches. Leaving aside the account of the neutralisation of the dragon that sowed death in Rome or the miraculous extinguishing of the fire near the Petrine Basilica¹¹, we read about the restoration of the Aurelian walls, a second Saracen expedition stopped in front of Ostia, the construction and dedication of the defensive walls of the Civitas Leoniana, the settlement of a colony of Corsican refugees in Portus, the restoration of the walls of Orte and Amelia, the foundation of Leopolis near Civitavecchia, the Roman Council of December 853, the deposition of the priest Anastasius, and finally the trial of the *superista* Gratian in Rome, in the presence of the emperor¹².

The analysis of these passages drove me to consider the massive presence of the first-person in the narration. I noticed, in fact, a difference between the lives of the preceding popes, where a third-person singular narrative prevails, and the life of Leo IV, in which most narrative sections are often structured in the first-person plural. It is, therefore, the biographers (or the biographer) who introduce in the first-person what they are going to talk about, who explain the reasons for choosing to include a particular narrative, who propose the interpretation of the events narrated, and who repeatedly take the opportunity to laud the pontiff. I think this means definitely something more than the rare use of the first-person plural in other lives, used by editors to vary and order the narrative or to inform the reader that a church or a character has already been mentioned (a stylistic technique then, responding to purely narrative contingencies). In the life of Leo IV, on the other hand, the first-person narration seems to participate in the events and thus in the action of the pontiff. This impression is reinforced by the indication, repeated on several occasions, that at the time of the narration the pontiff is still alive. The first-person narrator thus rises to the dignity of a new protagonist in the life of a pope: there are not only the pontiff, the various social components of the city, the sovereigns, princes, emperors, and on occasion God, but there are also the biographers of the life.

I will focus here on the most interesting, as well as the problematic, case of intervention in the narration of the first-person narrator (through the use of the first-person plural). This case is in fact helpful for reflecting on the identity of the group behind the biographers, and more broadly on the Roman aristocracy. This is the section in which the biographers depict the so-called Battle of Ostia, a controversial event because it is not confirmed by other sources, which is said to have taken place during the twelfth indiction of the pontificate (i.e. between 848 and 849), after a further Saracen incursion. This passage had great fortune because it was precisely the battle of Ostia that was regarded as the climax of Leo IV's pontificate. In the 10th century, Flodoard of

¹¹ On the hagiographical episodes in the life of Leo IV, see Herbers, *Le Liber pontificalis*, pp. 91-93.

¹² These are just a selection of episodes. The most remarkable omission is the one concerning the coronation of Louis II in 850, in Rome, known from Frankish sources.

Rheims proposed a very emphatic poetic metaphor of the event in the life of Leo IV in his *De triumphis Christi*¹³. It was later to be the subject of a triumphant iconographic representation in Raphael Sanzio's fresco in the Vatican Rooms *The Fire in the Borgo*, dated 1514, indicating one of the high moments in the history of the papacy.

In the life of Leo IV, the narrative in question is preceded by a passage in the first-person plural in which the editors intervene to explain the appropriateness of including the miraculous events that took place during the twelfth indiction¹⁴: a Saracen fleet arrives in front of the port of Rome (Ostia) and then God intervenes, inducing the Neapolitans, the Amalfitans, the Gaetans and the Romans to rush to Ostia against the common enemy. The pontiff comes on the scene and asks for assurances – receiving them – of the good intentions of the participants; then the pontiff celebrates a mass in Ostia in which he says an auspicious prayer, reported in the text; later he returns to Rome; the naval battle breaks out, but suddenly the wind picks up and disrupts the Saracen fleet. At this point, the narrative is paused and the first-person plural enters again to comment on the sudden rising of the wind as a miraculous event. Paraphrasing the words of the biographers, they are convinced that God wanted to show himself: he allowed the Saracens to get close to their objective and then swept them away through the intercession of Peter and Paul¹⁵. The account goes on to report that many surviving Saracens were killed – again – by «our men» (*a nostris hominibus*), and that others were led in chains to Rome. The fate of the Saracens brought to Rome is the most controversial passage. We first read that the Roman dignitaries (the Roman *proceres*) ordered (*iusserunt*) that many of them be hanged in Ostia; then the first-person plural breaks in again, clearly distinguishing itself from the *proceres*. Paraphrasing again, we read that «we have ordained some to be spared so that they might know our great faith in God and his mercy; and to prevent them from living idly among us, we ordered them to be led as labourers to the building site of St Peter's wall, which we have begun, or to other building sites»¹⁶. The passage ends with a short line, still in the first-person

¹³ Flodoardus Remensis, *De triumphis Christi*, col. 817.

¹⁴ LP, vol. 2, p. 117: «Ea igitur quae inter cetera per sanctissimi praesulis assiduas preces ac lacrimas, Domino auxiliante, duodecima siquidem insistente indictione mirabiliter acta vel gesta sunt, non inutiliter agimus si ob aeternam memoriam huic operi luce clarius inserere studemus, ut quantae sanctitatis in hac erumosa vita viri iste extitit praesentes atque futuri facilius agnoscant».

¹⁵ LP, vol. 2, pp. 118-119: «Deus enim omnipotens, pro certo credimus, hunc ex tesoro suo produxerat ventum, qui eos ad nocendum minime permittebat exire. Super his novis mysticisque miraculis quae nostris, licet non meritis divina ostendere demonstrare nostris est dignata temporibus, semper glorificanda et conlaudanda est veri Dei nostri clementia, qui eos et locum quem desiderabant permisit aspicere, et tamen, ne capere potuissent, virtutis suae potentia longius expulit, multosque postea, non tantum per intercessionem et merita beatissimorum Petri ac Pauli principum apostolorum maris profunditas, verum etiam famis et gladius indesinenter extinxit».

¹⁶ LP, vol. 2, p. 119: «Quorum Romani proceres, ne multiplicatus numerus videretur, multos prope Portum nostrum Romanum in ligno suspendi iusserunt; aliquantos etenim nos ferro constricti vivere iussimus, pro hac solummodo causam ut et spem nostram, quam in Deum habe-

plural, clarifying the decision to employ the captive Saracens as labourers for major works: due to these benefits – as narrated – they were spared («pro his ideo beneficiis, ut iam enarratum est, eos fecimus reservare»).

Why does the last passage, notably in view of what precedes it, seem controversial to me? Who is the one who decides not to execute all the prisoners of war, as the Roman nobles would perhaps have done – who seem to be strongly related to a military function in this context – but rather to save them for major works promoted by the popes or – one would think – by the leadership of the Roman Church? On a first reading of the passage, I was persuaded that it could be a portion of a letter from Leo IV, partially inserted into the narrative and not completely harmonised with the text, in which the pope told an unknown addressee about the events and gave an account of his decision not to execute all the Saracens, displaying his clemency in contrast to the Roman *proceres* (but the clemency, in the passage, is of God!). I found confirmation of my first belief in the short introduction to the life written by Duchesne¹⁷, although this explanation did not convince me completely. The life of Leo IV, actually, seems to be well devised; interpolations are present, but they are explicitly introduced, such as the already mentioned prayer of Leo IV on the beach of Ostia or the texts of the blessings pronounced for the inauguration of the Civitas Leoniana.

Furthermore, in the life, numerous references are made to the letters sent by the pontiff, conciliar acts drawn up for the Roman council of 853, and privileges issued. Moreover, it is well known that the compilers of the papal lives collected in the *Liber pontificalis* were familiar with the papal letters, compiled at the *scrinium*, and with the administrative documents of the Roman Church (especially those of the *vestiarium*)¹⁸. It seems peculiar, therefore, that precisely the biographers of Leo IV's life do not make explicit reference to a letter from the pontiff and merely insert passages from it into the narrative, alternating between the third-person singular and the first-person plural, which undermines the comprehension of the text and makes the subjects of the action doubtful¹⁹.

This leaves us with another hypothesis: the idea that the first-person plural, which appears on several occasions throughout the passage, is used to

mus, et illius ineffabilem pietatem, necnon et propriam tyrannidem luce clarius scire valuissent. Et post haec, ne otiose aut sine angustia apud nos viverent, aliquando ad murum quae circa ecclesia beatissimi Petri apostoli habebamus inceptum, aliquando per diversa artificum opera, quicquid necessarium videbatur, per eos omnia iubebamus deferri».

¹⁷ LP, vol. 2, p. V: «Le récit de la seconde expédition sarracine a été manifestement tire d'une lettre pontificale».

¹⁸ See Noble, *A new look*, pp. 353-356; Bougard, *Composition, diffusion et réception*, pp. 128-129; Geertman, *More veterum*; Capo, *Il «Liber pontificalis»*, pp. 58-87; McKitterick, *Rome*, pp. 7-16.

¹⁹ Even Veronica Unger, who investigated the use of letters in the lives of the ninth century popes in the *Liber pontificalis*, does not recognise in the passage in question the insertion *ex abrupto* – i.e. without notification to the reader – of passages from a letter of the pontiff. See Unger, *Der «Liber pontificalis» in Kanzlei*, pp. 307-308.

indicate the same subject, namely the editors of the life. This means that not only the biographers' sensitivity is involved in the narrated events, but also their intention to be protagonists of the action, alongside the Roman *proceres*, thus reducing Leo IV's role in the whole issue. The biographers therefore would seem to be the explicit representatives of an exceptional group, which stands out from the rest of the Roman *proceres* by their closeness to the pontiff and their ability to make autonomous decisions, such as employing the Saracen prisoners as labourers on the building sites of major works.

The hypothesis that such a decision was not made by the pontiff but by others, as expressed by the first-person narrator, remains quite weak if based exclusively on a reading of Leo IV's life. What is certain is that Flodard of Rheims, in his poetic reworking of the life, neglects the mention of the hanging, ordered by the *proceres*, and attributes the decision to spare the Saracens to the *pietas* of the descendants of Aeneas (thus alluding to the entire community of Romans)²⁰. In addition, there is also evidence of the inscription dedicated to the event, among the celebratory epigraphs that had been placed above the doors and posterns that allowed access to the Civitas Leoniana, the text of which has been preserved²¹.

The inscription in question, transcribed by Maffeo Vegio (1407-1458), recalls the Saracens' attempt to make war on the Romans in order to plunder them, giving God the credit for defeating them and the Roman *milites* for capturing them alive. Furthermore, it added that they were forced to work in chains to build the fortification. Leo IV and the Emperor Lothar don't play any role other than marking the time of the event, promoted as a divine miracle²². In other words, it is interesting to note how the authors of these retellings remain ambiguous about the identity of those who decided not to execute the Saracens in order to profit from their labour at a period of major public works. Still, it would have been a good reason to celebrate the pope's clemency.

3. Roman *proceres* in the life of Leo IV

I then wondered whether it is possible to define the physiognomy of the decision-making group that is expressed by the voice of the first-person narrator, and if it could be specified more clearly than simply the Roman *proceres*

²⁰ Flodoardus Remensis, *De triumphis Christi*, col. 817: «servitiis quidam aeneadum pietate iubente servantur, guadentque piis servire ferini». See Jacobsen, *Flodoard von Reims*, p. 159, n. 60.

²¹ On the inscriptions on the walls of the Civitas Leoniana see Scholz, *Politik*, pp. 175-176. See also Marazzi, *La costruzione della «Civitas Leoniana»*.

²² Vegio, *De rebus antiquis memorabilibus*, pp. 381-382: «Verba eius haec sunt. Cum voluisset iterum contra Romanos malevola Saracenorum gens bella excitare ut prius, depraedationesque inferre; quosdam, Deo permittente, maris tempestas absorbuit, quosdam vero Romani milites vivos ceperunt, atque ob laudem aeternamque memoriam, plures ferro vinctos, in hoc tam perhonesto opere diversos perferre labores coegerunt».

who are very present in the life of Leo IV. This task is not an easy one because behind the indistinct term “Roman *proceres*” are hidden segments of an articulated elite, involved in the administration of power, but whose dynamics are little known²³. In the life, facing the persistent Saracen threat, Roman aristocrats took the initiative and promoted the election of Leo IV, who won the consent of the entire Roman community²⁴. The Roman aristocrats then supported the pontiff in his decision to entrust Porto to Corsican refugees in exchange for their loyalty, so that the Corsicans were asked about their needs by Leo IV and his *proceres*. As a result, they were offered the restored *civitas* of Porto and the necessary for survival, again together with his *optimates*²⁵.

As we have already seen, the Roman aristocrats ordered the Saracen prisoners captured alive after the battle of Ostia to be hanged and the Saracen fleet shipwrecked²⁶; the Roman aristocrats then carry out justice by participating in the special *placitum*, convened in the presence of the pope and the emperor, to judge the guilt of the *superista* Gratian²⁷. Lastly, in the life, the biographers repeatedly value the positive relationship between Leo IV and the indistinct group of *proceres*. The pope showers the Roman *proceres* with luxury goods for the inauguration of *Civitas Leoniana*, to honor and enrich them²⁸, like a Roman emperor. Moreover, in the passage relating to the granting of Porto to the colony of the Corsicans, the biographers suggest the reason for this particular benevolence: the pope shows his predilection towards the *pro-defense urbis* Roman *proceres* because they are essential for the security of the city²⁹.

In the life of Leo IV, behind the term Roman *proceres* is represented a group with a strong military outlook – these are the Roman *milites* of the epigraph written above. They were involved in the front line against the Saracens; were behind the sentence of hanging the Saracens captured during military operations; and were involved in military decisions such as that of entrusting Porto to the Corsican refugees. Its members are the *magistri militum* who emerge from anonymity in the life. We read about a Peter *magister militum* to whom Leo IV entrusted the task of organising the transfer of the population

²³ On the Roman aristocracy in the first centuries of the Middle Ages, see Marazzi, *Aristocrazia e società*. Recently also West-Harling, *Rome, Ravenna, and Venice*, pp. 112-125; Verardi, *Le strutture del potere*, pp. 87-106. Specifically on the term *proceres* and its variations in meaning in Rome, Carpegna Falconieri, *La «militia»*, p. 570.

²⁴ LP, vol. 2, p. 107. See Daileader, *One will, one voice*, p. 25. On the papal election in the early middle ages, see Paravicini Bagliani, *Morte e elezione*, pp. 3-19, 79-98.

²⁵ LP, vol. 2, pp. 126-127. On the subject see Marazzi, *Le «città nuove»*, p. 268 and Herbers, *Leo IV*, pp. 246-249. On the *praeceptum* written for the Corsicans in the life of Leo IV, Unger, *Der «Liber pontificalis in Kazlei»*, pp. 312-313.

²⁶ LP, vol. 2, p. 119.

²⁷ LP, vol. 2, p. 134.

²⁸ LP, vol. 2, p. 125: «His itaque sacris peractis officiis, cunctos nobiles Rome multiplicibus donis, non tantum in auro argentove, sed et sericis palleis honoravit atque ditavit».

²⁹ LP, vol. 2, p. 127: «Ecce enim quanta crebro dicti praesulis erat ac praefulgebant misericordia, qui non tantum pro defensione urbis suos Romanos proceres diligebat, sed undecumque valebat colligere homines ad eorum auxilium et solatium invitabat».

of Centumcellae, unsafe on account of the constant attacks of the Saracens, to the new fortified foundation of Leopolis³⁰; there is also the *magister militum* Daniel who accuses the *superista* (but *magister militum* as well) Gratian, according to biographers, directly in front of the Emperor Louis II³¹.

The political role of the group of *proceres* in these difficult situations is then celebrated in the life of Leo IV. In fact, they first take the responsibility of choosing and electing Leo pontiff before the celebration of Sergius II's funeral, and without waiting for the *iussio* of the emperor (according to the dictates of the *Constitutio Romana*): this is a sudden and courageous political choice, taken during the delicate phase of a papal succession made even more dramatic, according to the biographers of the Life, by the persistent Saracen threat (even though the sacking of the Roman basilicas had just been completed). They are the *proceres*, therefore, who, *sine permissio principis*, successfully ensure the regular functioning of Roman political life by imposing a new, capable and determined pope.

Secondly, the *proceres* are at the side of the pontiff in another extremely delicate situation represented at the end of the life. This concerns the trial of the high Lateran official Gratian denounced directly to Louis II for plotting with the Greeks against the *potestas* of the Frankish emperor in Rome. The trial is exceptional, being the only known one involving the Emperor Louis II, who had travelled to Rome for the occasion, as the judging authority alongside the pontiff³². The exceptionality is also emphasised by the judicial venue in which it takes place: it is not at the *palatium lateranense*, where the judicial sessions presided over by the pope and his appointed officials usually took place, but at the *domus* built by Leo III near St Peter's basilica. Thus the emperor judges but outside the Aurelian walls, probably at the imperial palace that stood in the Vatican³³. In fact, the entry of the emperor in Rome, accompanied by the Frankish *optimates*, was a delicate matter, especially when the memory of the abuses and violence that had marked the last descent of Louis II to Rome in 844³⁴, not yet emperor at the time, was still alive. In the life, the Roman *proceres* are represented at the court session with the Frankish

³⁰ LP, vol. 2, pp. 131-132.

³¹ LP, vol. 2, p. 134. On the trial of Gratian, see Herbers, *Leo IV*, pp. 224-227. On *magistri militum*, see Borri, «*Duces*» and «*magistri militum*» and Carpegna Falconieri, *La «militia»*. The title appears in Rome at the end of the 5th-early 6th century to denote the Byzantine leaders of the *militia* in charge of the defence of the city of Rome; it is also employed in later centuries in reference to the city's army, whose exact internal distribution and social composition are unknown.

³² References to the trial in Capo, *The «Liber pontificalis»*, pp. 258-260. On the complex subject of imperial rights in Rome and its territory, particularly in the judicial field, see Bertolini, *Osservazioni sulla «Constitutio Romana»* and Capo, «*Iura regni et consuetudines illius*».

³³ Probably at the imperial palace that stood in the Vatican and possibly also housed the imperial *missi* in Rome. See Delogu, *I Romani e l'Impero*, p. 219. On the judicial practices of Rome, see Toubert, *Les structures du Latium*, pp. 1229-1254 and Wickham, *Roma medievale*, pp. 442-468.

³⁴ LP, vol. 2, see Gantner, *A king in training?*.

aristocrats: the former beside the pope, the latter beside the emperor. The two groups, however, are not just representatives. They take an active part in the session by listening to the accusation of Daniel, repeated before the assembly; they decide together with the emperor, without the intervention of the pope, to give credit to Gratian, who accuses Daniel of speaking falsely. Biographers then remark that Louis II appropriately ruled according to Roman law. The Roman *proceres* are therefore protagonists on many levels: on the one hand they attend the whole event guaranteeing order, together with the pope – it is not by chance that biographers mention the *furor* of Louis II, who rushes to Rome to clarify Gratian's position; on the other they judge, together with the emperor, but not together with the pope, who merely presides over the session in relation to one of his representatives.

4. *Who wrote the life of Leo IV? Gratian, the superista, and his network*

At this point, we need to attempt to characterise the powerful élite that hides behind the biographers of the life of Leo IV. The continuous celebratory references to the pontificate of Leo III in the life of Leo IV would suggest that this élite consists of Roman families, bound together with a social success achieved by Leo III, managing to re-emerge during the years of Leo IV's pontificate. Certainly, these families seem to put some distance with the pontificate of Sergius II which, in the life of Leo IV, is alluded to as the time of neglect and acquiescence that led to the sacking of Rome by the Saracens (the explicit denunciation is found in the "Farnesian version" of the life of Sergius II, probably to be ascribed precisely to the biographers of Leo IV)³⁵. Thus the purpose is openly to pay homage to Leo III, a controversial pontiff, who however was evidently seen as a beneficent figure by the most prominent families in the pontificate of Leo IV.

This family network seems to have Gratian, a high official of the Lateran *palatium*, at the centre of this network. In the life of Leo IV he is described as «*eminentissimus magister militum, Romani palatii egregius superista and consiliarius*»³⁶. A title of great prestige is thus attributed to him, the contents of which remains in part unclear. The term *magister militum* here – I think – and more generally in the economy of Leo IV's life, indicates membership of the most illustrious group of Roman families and does not allude to specific assignments of a military nature³⁷. Conversely, the title of *superista* is at-

³⁵ On this subject Betti, *The two versions*, pp. 190-192.

³⁶ LP, vol. 2, p. 134. Gratian, who appears in the trial episode, is also referred to as *superista urbis Romae* (*ibidem*, in Daniel's testimony to the judging assembly). The shift from *palatium* to *urbs* is interesting.

³⁷ Toubert acknowledges the uncertainty of the role entrusted to the *magistri militum* in the 9th century: he believes, on the basis of the Life of Leo IV (LP, vol. 2, p. 118) that they were ordained *super exercitum* by the pope. However, the episode to which Toubert is referring has Cesarius, son of Sergius, Duke of Naples, as its protagonist: in short, we are not talking about Roman

tributed to the official in charge of overseeing the activities that took place at the *palatium lateranense*, and ensuring the security of the pontiff, probably with command duties on specific military units³⁸. Lastly, the term *consiliarius* seems to indicate a personality who could boast intimacy with the incumbent pontiff and therefore had some ability to direct his policies³⁹.

The interesting thing about Gratian is that he was able to maintain himself in power by surviving, almost unscathed, the troubled phase that followed the death of Leo IV (17 July 855). Indeed, Gratian played a decisive, albeit secluded, role during the first part of the pontificate of Benedict III. According to the life of the pontiff⁴⁰, he and a few others remained loyal to the newly-elected Benedict III, thus proving to be the architect of his success against the rival candidate for the papal throne, the powerful Anastasius, who had already been excommunicated during the pontificate of Leo IV (when indeed Gratian was at the height of his power)⁴¹. In the first part of the life, the biographers of Benedict III describe how Arsenius, bishop of Orte, managed to manipulate most of the Roman dignitaries, ecclesiastics and laymen, inducing them to refuse the already chosen candidate, Benedict, in favour of Anastasius, who also had the support of the imperial *missi*. But Gratian, still defined as a *superista*, and Theodore *scriniarius*, remained committed to defending the *palatium*, and only after their arrest did Anastasius and his followers enter Rome and brutally deposed Benedict. In spite of the support of the imperial *missi*, the fortunes of Anastasius were short-lived. The antipope aroused a sudden aversion among the Roman bishops, clergy and people, who managed to depose him and impose Benedict once again⁴². In the end, Gratian represented the top man of a power elite related to Leo IV, that successfully resisted Anastasius and eventually succeeded in imposing its own candidate.

Furthermore, it is Gratian himself who leads the already established power elite between the pontificate of Leo IV and that of Benedict III, guaranteeing its continuity. He succeeds because he is the *superista* of the *palatium* at the death of Leo IV, and maintains his high office during the interregnum phase. Officially filling the role of deputy after the death of the popes was de-

magistri militum and we are in the midst of military operations to stem the Saracen threat of 848. See Toubert, «*Scrinium*» et «*palatium*», p. 82.

³⁸ The *superista* appears for the first time in the life of Hadrian I (772-795). On the *superista*, see Toubert, «*Scrinium*» et «*palatium*», pp. 90-93; Carpegna Falconieri, *La «militia»*, p. 579.

³⁹ Toubert, «*Scrinium*» et «*palatium*», p. 93.

⁴⁰ Edition of the life of Benedict in LP, vol. 2, pp. 140-148. On Benedict III (855-858), see Bertolini, *Benedetto III*.

⁴¹ See Arnaldi, *Anastasio Bibliotecario*. The excommunication of Anastasius, cardinal priest of San Marcello, is also reported in the *Annales Bertiniani* (MGH, AB, pp. 92-95, *ad annum* 868): see MGH. Conc. III, n. 24, pp. 230-231 (850 XII 16, Rome) and n. 29, pp. 298-299 (853 VI 19, Rome). The accusation against Anastasius was that he abandoned his *paroechia* and resided abroad. In the life of Leo IV (LP, vol. 2, p. 129): «eo quod parochiam suam per annos V contra canonum instituta deseruit. et in alienas usque hodie demoratur». On the conflict between Leo IV and Anastasius, Cò, *Vescovi, re, imperatori*, pp. 1-17.

⁴² LP, vol. 2, pp. 141-143.

cisive. This meant that it was possible to influence the outcome of the papal elections and thus, more generally, to condition the internal dynamics of the Roman *proceres*; in this regard, it is interesting that it was precisely a letter of Leo IV which laid down clear provisions on the government of Rome, to be implemented in the absence of the pontiff. The letter, dated to April 853, appears to have been drafted before Leo IV's departure for Ravenna and therefore does not refer directly to the case of the pope's death. However, it does suggest that it was during the pontificate of Leo IV that the urgent need to control the regular administration of the *palatium* in the absence of the pontiff was expressed. In the stipulation, Leo IV recommends that the *ordo ecclesiasticus* (the high-ranking members of the palatine clergy) on the one hand, and the *ordo palatinus* (all lay officials) on the other, should not be undermined; he then insists that the *nobiles* continue with regularity to administer justice at the *palatium*⁴³. This seems to have been an important stipulation, aimed at guaranteeing stability to the public order and social arrangement despite papal successions. Its consequence of it, we see the involvement of Gratian the *superista* following the death of Leo IV, who, thanks to his public role, participates in the boycott of Anastasius, preventing not only the social revolution – the elite constituted by papal officials would have taken on a new appearance – but also the political one (the special relationship of Anastasius with Carolingian authority is undeniable) which would lead to his election as pope.

The reasons why I believe that Gratian's elite should be associated with the writing of the life of Leo IV are as follows. Gratian was a high Lateran official during the pontificate of Leo IV and certainly in the early part of the pontificate of Benedict III. In that role he, or one of those associated with him, were certainly able to interfere in the process of writing the life of the pontiff, which was entrusted to the officials of the *scrinium* and the *vestiarium*. Furthermore, it cannot be a coincidence that the life of Leo IV ends with the detailed narration of the trial of Gratian. The episode is inconsistent with the rest of the narrative – the life omits the fact that Louis II was consecrated emperor in Rome by Leo IV (850), but records that he rushed to Rome to judge Gratian – and marginalises Leo IV, the almost inactive president of the special judicial session. Instead, the protagonists of the story are Gratian and the emperor. Gratian, accused of plotting against the *potestas* held by the Franks in *terra Romana* with plans to return Rome to the Greeks, is exonerated by popular vote. The emperor, who declares the innocence of Gratian, decides that Daniel, the false accuser, would be judged *secundum Romanam legem* and handed over to Gratian; the emperor then intercedes with Gratian on Daniel's behalf and Gratian is willing to release Daniel. What is the purpose of including this account in the life of Leo IV? My impression is that this account

⁴³ MGH, Epp. V, n. 23, p. 599: «Precipimus, ut in nostra absentia nec ecclesiasticus, nec palatinus ordo deficiat. Sed constitutis diebus, tamquam si nos hic fuissetem, omnes nobiles recurrant et quaerentibus ac petentibus legem ac iustitiam faciant».

is first and foremost useful to Gratian and his loyal elite, who are entrusted with a specific political communication to the emperor. Unfavourably viewed by some of the Roman *proceres* (just considering Daniel as a spokesman for the Roman families hostile to Gratian), unpopular with the Franks (Louis II personally rushes to Rome to judge Gratian), Gratian declares himself supportive of Frankish interests, loyal and obedient to the emperor who, however, takes action in Rome in full respect of the Roman legal tradition⁴⁴. This episode of the trial was therefore included by Gratian himself to reassure the Franks of his reliability and to strengthen his position and that of his men in and outside Rome. Moreover, the episode was also meant to be edifying: it illustrated the contexts and ways in which the emperor could legitimately intervene in Rome. After all, when Leo IV died, Gratian took sides against Anastasius, the popular candidate supported by Louis II. But even in the life of Benedict III, the lively narrative of the confrontation between Benedict III and Anastasius seems conveniently manipulated: in the end, the responsibility for the riots and violence lies with Anastasius, his men and the imperial *missi*, but not with the emperor, who seems to be unaware of the events⁴⁵. In the life of Benedict III too, there is therefore a desire to showcase affable relations between Gratian and the emperor.

The last consideration concerns the relations between Gratian and the pontiffs who took advantage of his services. There is evidence, indeed, of tension between Leo IV and Gratian, that could have resulted in open opposition. The most significant source in this regard is a fragment of a letter addressed by the pontiff to Louis II, that the editor dates to September 852. Before discussing the Saracen threat, the pope here denounces a certain Gratian, whom the editor, correctly in my opinion, identifies precisely with the *superista* Gratian⁴⁶. In the denunciation, the pontiff accuses Gratian, apparently known to the emperor and very influential, of having killed several men; probably the formula *tam ferro quam aqua fustibusque* indicates that these murders were perpetuated by Gratian while he administered justice irregularly or improperly. Hence such an issue must certainly have aroused the interest of the Franks, who distrusted Roman justice (this emerges from the already existing *Constitutio Romana*). Then Leo IV added that Gratian – and this was even more inappropriate – had forced several men to swear allegiance to him, which was considered in Roman circles as a legitimate act only when carried out towards the pope or the emperor. The pope thereby clearly denounces the build-up of Gratian's network, which is sealed by the oath: a complex,

⁴⁴ LP, vol. 2, p. 134: «clementissimus imperator, nolens contra instituta veterum Augustorum peragere Romanorum, eos secundum Romanam legem instituit iudicare».

⁴⁵ This consideration already in Bertolini, *Benedict III*.

⁴⁶ MGH, Epp. V, n. 1, p. 585: «Plures homines Gratianus tam ferro quam aqua fustibusque necare non timuit, et, quod his omnibus peius est, plures ad suam fidelitatem per iusiurandum constrinxit, id quod nulli, ut bene nostri, licet nisi imperatori aut pontifici perpetrare». On this letter, see RI I, 4, 2, 1, n. 245, p. 109.

uncontrollable power elite based on personal relationships strengthened by the oath, a practice that Leo IV perceives and denounces as unfamiliar in the Roman context, and as especially threatening to the stability of the Roman order.

Moreover, the tension between Leo IV and the power élite headed by Gratian is allayed through the writing of the life of the pontiff. In fact, the pope's biography also becomes a frame of reference for the expression of the identity of this elite, which is represented by a more substantial first-person narrator than usual, and/or by the introduction of narratives serving to promote the elite itself. This causes a kind of marginalisation of Leo IV. His political action is generally collective in most historical episodes: Leo IV acts side by side with the Roman *proceres* or seemingly smaller groups of *sui fideles* or *sui homines*.

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