

Papal Letters, Networks, and Geographies, 844-1032

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Introduction

The ninth to eleventh centuries were a formative period for the papacy, during which much of the groundwork for transforming the popes from a respected but only regionally potent bishop to the absolute monarch of the Catholic Church took place. In my dissertation, I am studying the social and political networks of popes of this era through the medium of papal letters. As part of this project, I am mining these letters for geographic data, which I will employ to interrogate the relationship between power, authority, and geography in the context of papal history. To these ends, I have used these data both to construct maps of the popes' geographies in the past and in the present, so as to catch a glimpse of how the popes perceived each timeframe, and to construct geographic networks, which help parse the relative importance of the mentioned places and regions. The data I am presenting today is drawn from the letters of the first four popes of this era, Sergius II (r. 844-847), Leo IV (r. 847-855), Benedict III (r. 855-858), and Nicholas I (r. 858-867). Not only do these popes help establish a proof-of-concept for my project as a whole, but they also form the cadre of pontiffs who brought the early medieval papacy to the height of its power and influence, and so are worthy of some special attention in themselves.

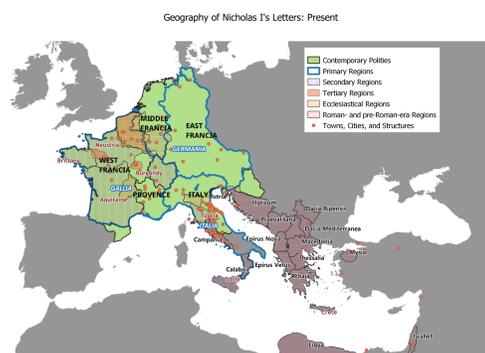
Sources

As with many types of medieval documents, only a fraction of the papal letters have survived. While the registers from this period that recorded all papal correspondence have been lost, many letters were preserved, in part or in whole, in many different sources for a wide variety of reasons. Modern scholars have published and edited these letters, and most have been assembled into standardized letter collections. I have gathered all of these letters, which have universally been published, and am in the process of reading through them, approximately 1,200 total. While I am therefore employing the entire extant corpus of letters, one must keep in mind that these are semi-random survivals of a much larger body of work.

As I read the letters, I assemble the relevant information into a database, of which two categories of information warrant mention here. As the popes composed their letters in Latin, I record both the Latin place name as well as the modern English equivalent, since geocoders tend not to be trained in Latin. I also indicate whether the geographic reference was made in a contemporary or historical context.

Map Exempla: Nicholas I

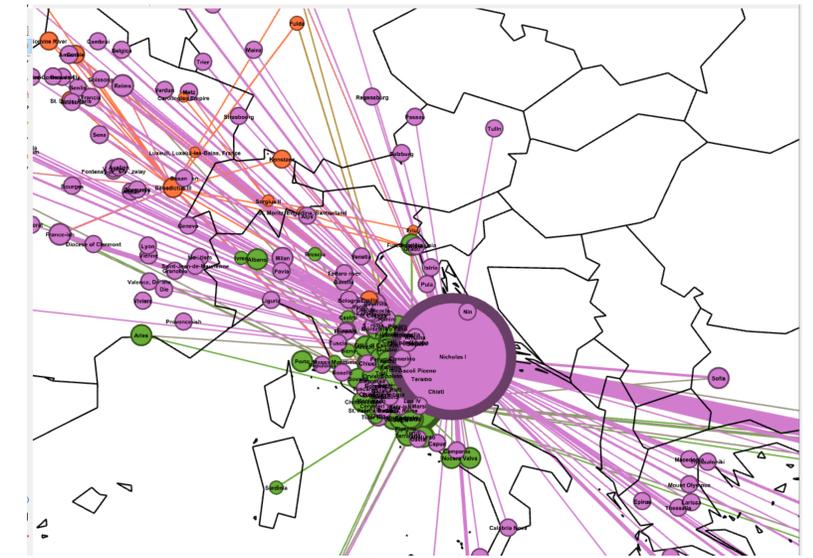
The letter collection of Nicholas I is largest of those in this study and provides the most geographic data, making their corresponding maps the best example of their potential as analytical tools. I designed these maps in GIS program QGIS, using both pre-made vector data from scholarly historical mappers EurAtlas's map of Europe in 900 and drawing other regions manually. The two maps here illustrate the geography mentioned in Nicholas's letters, the top map portraying the data from a historical context, and the bottom in a present context.



A brief comparison of the two maps makes a few salient points. First, Nicholas conceives of Western Europe as being divided into the same general regions – Gaul, Italy, and Germany – in both temporal categories, and these regions are all drawn from ancient Roman geography. This is consistent with the prominence of Roman-era regions and provinces in both maps as well. Together, these suggest that Nicholas had a conservative conception of geography.

One might also note the density of both maps in what is today Belgium and North Eastern France. In part, this is a testament to the density of communication to figures in this area. The numerous types of regions represented in the area hint at the complex set of interests and claims – historical and contemporary, ecclesiastical and political – that Nicholas negotiated in this region, which was home to two powerful monarchs and several bishops of considerable influence.

Network Analysis



In Gephi, I also undertook some simple network analysis of the geography presented in these papal letters. Here, we can see the networks created by the letter collections of all four popes under study. Gephi only recognized three discrete networks, merging those of Sergius and Benedict. This is likely because both popes provided small data samples, of which a significant proportion of each was drawn from a charter that Sergius issued to the abbey of Fulda, which Benedict later confirmed. I also analysed the networks by forcing the papal nodes to their geographic averages, which helps visualize where the concerns of each pope lay. Note that Leo's node is hidden under Nicholas's, and that his node is located in Italy, somewhat to the north east of Rome.

Conclusion

While these maps and networks have already raised some interesting points, I intend to develop my work in several directions. First, I am in the process of taking my map data and publishing it on the web, so that I and others can manipulate the data and get a cleaner view of various features. Working with different types of maps to showcase various aspects of the data (e.g. heatmaps) is also on my agenda. Second, I shall replicate this work for the rest of the popes I study for my dissertation. Finally, there are several avenues of inquiry that I intend to pursue using these tools. For example, how congruent are the geographic networks to the personal networks that I will be examining? Do the regions and networks represented here change over time? If these ideas intrigue you, or you wish to follow up, keep an eye out for my dissertation defence next year.