CHAPTER 1

Narratives of Papal History

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The papacy is the world’s oldest continuously functioning institution. Its sheer longevity has both attracted scholarly and popular interest and baffled those who have tried to understand the papacy’s remarkable story. Ever since the 6th century, when the first papal history, the Liber Pontificalis, began to be compiled, there has been an all but irresistible temptation to assemble papal history into a seamless narrative.¹ In modern accounts, no matter their scope, one pontificate inevitably follows another.² The ghostly presence lurking behind this essay, however, is Walter Ullmann’s famous The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages. Ullmann was aggressively continuist in his presentation of the papacy as an institution and as an ecclesiological expression. This

¹ Le Liber Pontificalis: Texte, introduction et commentaire, (ed.) L.M.O. Duchesne, 2 vols. (1886–92; repr. Paris: 1981). The text begins with St. Peter. Everything down to the early 6th century was written up all at once, usually based on earlier sources, some of which survive for comparison. From the middle decades of the 6th century down to 891 the lives were written more or less contemporaneously. Various continuations carried the work into the 12th century, but these later materials have not received the attention lavished on the earlier sections. Raymond Davis has translated the Liber Pontificalis from the beginning to 891: The Book of Pontiffs, Translated Texts for Historians 6, rev. ed. (Liverpool: 2000); The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes, Translated Texts for Historians 13 (Liverpool: 1992); The Lives of the Ninth-Century Popes, Translated Texts for Historians 20 (Liverpool: 1995). The most recent discussion of the tangled and controversial emergence of the Liber Pontificalis is Philippe Bladeau, “Narrating Papal Authority (440–530): The Adaptation of the Liber Pontificalis to the Papacy’s Developing Claims,” in The Bishop of Rome in Late Antiquity, (ed.) Geoffrey Dunn (London: 2015), 127–40.

approach begs far more questions than it answers. Inevitability seems to trump contingency. Occasional bumps on a seemingly flat surface provoke problems of interpretation. In reality, the history of the papacy is always simultaneously several histories at once. One of them is the serial biography of the men who have been bishops of Rome, popes that is. Do personalities matter? Have we sufficient source materials to know popes as individuals? Another history concerns institutions. How did a papal government arise? What did it do? How did it relate to other governing structures, both ecclesiastical and secular? On what conceptual – ideological or ecclesiological – bases did the papacy rest at any given time? What roles did the popes play as patrons of art and architecture, or of learning more generally? Each of these questions, except for the ones about patronage and personalities, will be answered in some detail by other essays in this volume. The intention of this essay is to lay down some basic guidelines on the popes and the papacy.

The volume to which this essay serves as a modest, orienting introduction treats the Middle Ages. Was there a “medieval papacy”? All historians find questions about periodization at once frustrating and essential. In so far as history purports to be the study and explanation of continuity and change, history needs some boundary markers. A glance at virtually any general history of the papacy will reveal several such markers: the papacy in the Roman Empire; the Byzantine domination of the papacy; the papacy in the Carolingian age; the “iron age” of the papacy; the “Investiture Controversy”; the papal monarchy; the crisis, or the decline, of the medieval papacy.3 In some tellings, the papacy was launched on its historical course by Christ’s words to Peter in Matthew 16:16–18. Be that as it may, historical evidence for anything than can reasonably be called a papacy is hard to find before the reign of the emperor Constantine (306–337). Thereafter, and for a long time, it is interesting to note that papal history marches along in essentially secular terms. The papacy emerged under the aegis of Rome. Rome’s heir, Byzantium, dominated the papacy until the Carolingians liberated the popes. The squabbling later Carolingians could no longer protect the papacy, and the institution fell into the hands of the corrupt Roman aristocracy. In the 11th century, things changed as various reform currents took root in Rome and the popes threw off the secular yoke. They liberated themselves to some extent from the local notables and from the German emperors. They also put their own house in order morally, spiritually, intellectually,