

The Private and the Public in Carolingian Rome: The Papal Role in Feeding the City's Poor

For close to eight hundred years, the Roman state took responsibility for feeding its capital's poor population. With the disintegration of the empire's institutions, this task was assumed by the city's bishop, the pope. This paper examines the papacy's role in provisioning the city of Rome within the context of Christian practices; the growing responsibility and pretensions of the papacy itself for the governance of Rome; and changing definitions of—and boundaries between—the public and the private in early medieval Italy. Charity was one of the seven virtues, and one whose practice was especially necessary in a city that had to host a steady stream of pilgrims from throughout Christendom. The church constructed a full panoply of institutions to perform *caritas* and its selfless care for those in need slowly became a major legitimizing concept as the church exerted its right to rule Rome and much of central Italy. The need to perform these provisioning functions, however, led the church to establish new and different kinds of landholdings in and around Rome that may also have served a military function. Finally, some historians of early medieval Italy have seen the period as one in which an idea of the public inherited from Imperial Rome was more and more replaced by a privatization of resources. The papacy's increasing use of food provisioning as a legitimating feature of its rule would seem to indicate that, on one hand, that Rome itself may have not followed that trend; on the other hand, many see its organization and approach to agricultural property as indicating that it also participated in this trend.