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Pope Joan

The covered-up pontificate of a woman



Extended e-book edition

Pope Joan

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Some Information on the Author

The author is a Senior Research Fellow at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia and works as an archaeologist. His numerous publications cover a wide variety of topics ranging from palaeopathological studies [1-4], mummy studies [5,6] and works on medieval topics [7,8]. In the field of mummy studies, he has published several papers, especially on the topic of the identification of royal mummies [9-12]. The methods and research strategies gained there were also adapted for use in the research on Pope Joan.

He also published studies on diseases and behaviour under stress [13,14] or technical examination methods [15-17].

The author has also worked on other research projects on scientific forgeries [18] and war-time and crisis cross-dressing in other cultures and time periods [19,20].

The study presented here was published in hardcover in 2018 and softcover in 2019 and has been updated and expanded for the English e-book edition [21-23].

Introduction

The question, if Pope Joan was a real historical figure or a legendary fiction of the Middle Age has been debated for 800 years now. It is said, that her pontificate was in the mid-850s and she ruled as Pope Johannes VIII Anglicus. Modern church historians often dismissed her as fiction [24,25], while others have defended her existence [26-31]. New archival evidence strongly support that Pope Johannes Anglicus (Popess Joan) was indeed a real existing individual and she incumbent the Holy See after Pope Benedict III during two and a half years between c. 856 and 858 AD.

The following historic material presents a variety of evidence including chronicles, letters, coins and evidence of manipulation and is intended for scientific reader as well as for the interested public. The strongest evidence for the apostolic succession is provided by the combination coins of the Popes with the Frankish Emperor and the letters addressing Pope Joan.

Most theories about Pope Joan are compromised by wrongly placing of Pope Joan as the direct successor of Leo IV, as the medieval chronicler (wrongly) suggested.

Direct quotes from the medieval sources and direct statements from chroniclers are marked. [Direct comments and adds from my side are in square brackets].

The graphological assessment was written by Marguerite Spycher and the author had no influence on the outcome of this assessment.

I must ask many of the readers to forget all he or she understands about the modern Roman-Catholic church and Papacy (Conclave, white smoke, habemus papam, Tu es Petrus, the red biret of Cardinals, the tiara with three crowns, etc.) These traditions emerged after the time of

Pope Joan in the High Middle Ages or even the Modern Age and so they are not relevant for Pope Joan.

Pope Joan belongs to a time where popes resided in the old Lateran palace, they were elected not in Conclave but by a democratic and public election among the Roman clergy, excluding all bishops as they could not transfer their episcopal seat to Rome (a rule from the Council of Nicaea, still followed in this century).

Statues of Pope Joan in the Vatican?

Since 1277, when Martin von Troppau mentioned the pontificate of a woman in his chronicle, the world has been wondering whether this is the truth or whether it is a false story, an urban Roman legend, which has become an 'alternative truth' in the Middle Ages over the centuries. Was there once a female pope? What are the consequences for apostolic succession? Is a woman an interruption because, according to traditional interpretation as a woman, she is not allowed to receive priestly ordinations? Has the allegedly unbroken line of the popes since Peter actually been broken? These questions moved the Middle Ages intensely, and the debate is still ongoing. Soon the figure of the popess was abused to make church politics in the later Middle Ages, before she was accepted, somewhat ashamedly, but at least as a possible truth in the Catholic Church. Only a few years later, the dispute flared up again, for the Protestants recognized in her history a perfect instrument of propaganda in order to harm the Catholic Church and to make the claim with the figure of the popess that the apostolic succession had been interrupted. From then on, the Catholic side began to expel the figure of the popess into the realm of legend and tried to refute her existence. Today, the popess is more important than ever, since she serves the cause of women's rights and has become the idol of feminism and investigative journalists. On the other side are the church historians, an ecumenical group of Protestants and Catholics, who now both claim that the popess was only a legend. This paper attempts to outline the two positions and to evaluate them on the basis of historical sources and scientific research.

Also, in Rome itself, in the Vatican, one can observe strange things, as long as one knows what to look for. On the Internet you can find pictures of a statue with female features in a niche in the Vatican under the search terms 'Statue, Popess Johanna'. Information about the exact location, however, is missing.

This mystery prompted me to go looking for the statue during a visit to Rome. At first, I could not find the statue and ran the whole nave in St. Peter in search of the statue in the niche. I discovered another statue that caught my attention. It is located high up in the nave and is not noticed by most visitors, especially because most of them head right immediately after the entrance, where the tour begins and the first highlight awaits: Michelangelo's Pietà. But instead, you turn left and look up, you see a female figure in the garment of a bishop and on your head the tiara with a single crown band. She also holds the keys to heaven's gate in her hands.

The statue is rather difficult to photograph because of the light conditions. I couldn't find the other statue at first. Therefore, I visited the papal tombs in the so-called grottoes. One leaves the caves through a side exit that leads visitors past the outer wall of St. Peter. Suddenly the statue of the popess appears unexpectedly. She stands in a niche at the very side of the facade of St. Peter. The statue is not listed in the guidebooks, and the equestrian statue of Emperor Constantine is marked there in the plans instead of her. Constantine stands very close, but one has to go up the stairs to the Apostolic Palace. But this way is blocked by a glass door and guards. In the niche in front of the entrance to the palace, however, stands this statue of the popess. It is stylistically from the Baroque period and probably comes from Bernini or his school. Contrary to many statues in St. Peter it does not have an inscription, the field under the statue is empty.

To avoid a subjective misinterpretation of the statues, I repeated the visit to the Vatican, this time accompanied by my friend and research colleague: FM is an excellent art connoisseur, physician and anatomist (and Catholic with very good knowledge of ecclesiastical art and Latin). I just told him that I wanted to show him some statues and what he thought about them. The statue inside St. Peter at the arch of the nave astonished him too. Judgement: Definitely female, you can even see her breasts under her robe. The second statue on the outside front surprised him even more. The verdict here: Clearly and unambiguously, the person depicted is a woman, she even has a woman's hairstyle. It cannot be the representation of a saint or martyr, because she wears a bishop's robe, the tiara with a crown band, book and keys to heaven. Thus, she is an apostolic successor of Peter on the pontiff's throne.

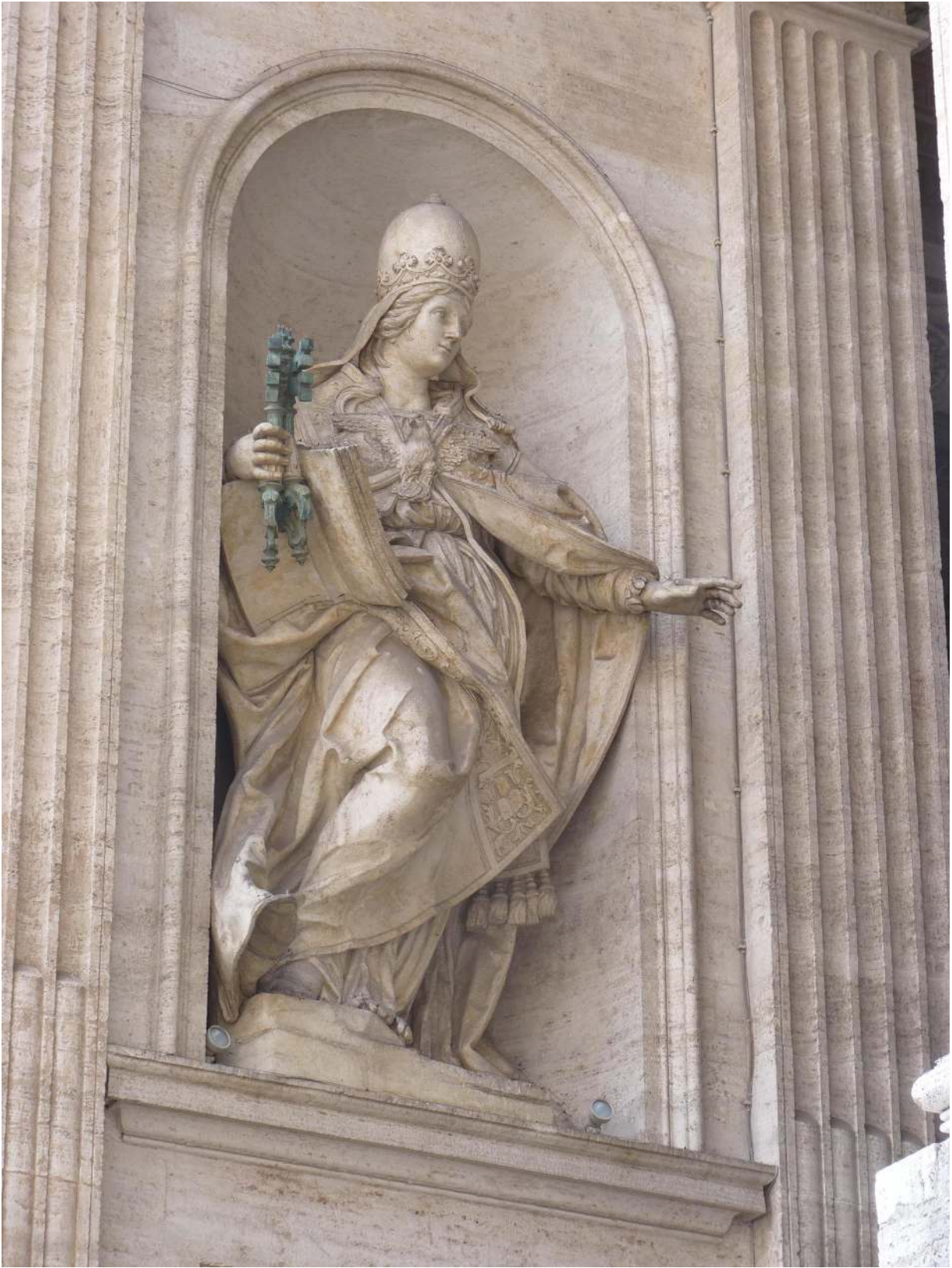
It is hardly possible to obtain further information, because according to art guides and books in the Vatican Library there is no such statue here. The only information I could find is that statues of popes of the early Middle Ages are supposed to stand on the facade. What fits the supposed pontificate of Joan. The statue also holds the open book in her hands, this convention of representation has become typical of Pope Joan over time (to illustrate her scholarship and great knowledge). The card no. II of the Great Arcana in the Marseille tarots also shows «La Papesse» with the open book.

Personification of the Church?

Only extensive research into all the statues and tombs revealed an official interpretation of the popess: In the Portico of the Vatican there are a number of personifications, such as moderation, faith, hope and as No. 18 'the Church' [32]. The female pope with tiara thus shall represent the church (personifications are partly female in Roman pagan mythology, so not a general rule that would explain the woman). The statue was created in 1720-1732 by Giuseppe Frascari. Normally the personification 'the Church' depict Virgin Mary as a symbol, but this is not the case here. This statement conflicts with the above-mentioned information from the art guide. Is it 'the Church' or 'an early pope' - but with female traits?

Actually, one would expect from a statue representing the church or papacy as personification and made around 1720 to wear a tiara with triple crown. But the statue shows a tiara with only one crown, referring to the time of the early to high Middle Ages. It is a strange reference to the time in which the popess is suspected. Although, officially a woman has never sat on the papal throne and so it raises the question of why the personification of the church depicted as a female pope?

Does the statue subtly refer to the biggest scandal in church history? The popess cannot be accepted, since she is regarded as fiction, yet the cipher of the female pope is so powerful that she cannot be dismissed.



Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome, Vatican State. The statue of Pope Joan? Or the personification of «the Church», dressed as female Pope. The statue was made c. 1720 but depicts a tiara with one crown ring, referring to the early Middle Ages. Why?

Photo by the author (2018).

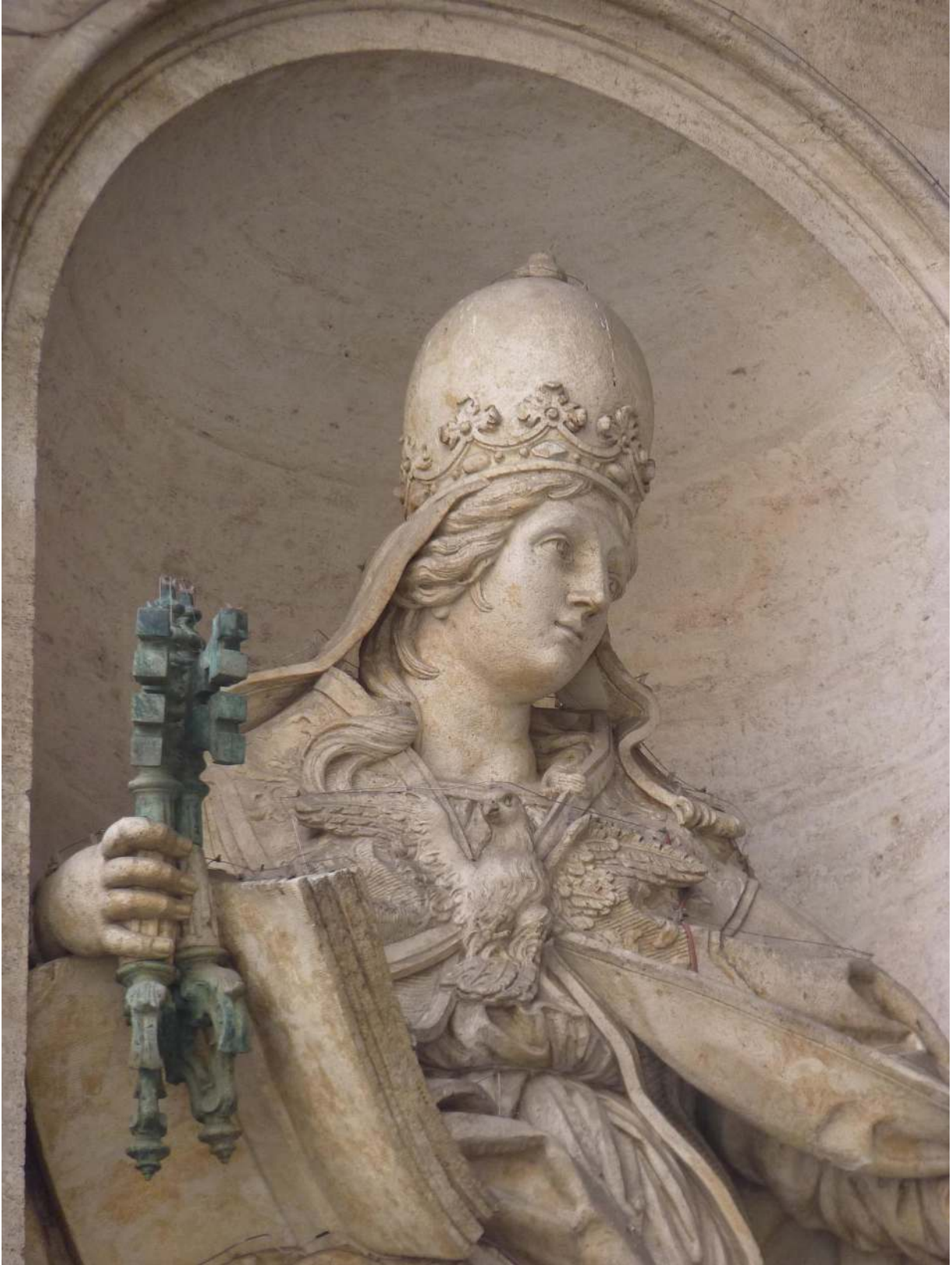


Photo by the author (2018).

The Shrine of the Popess

We used our stay in Rome to visit the Lateran, probably following the same route that the popess must have taken during her fateful procession and where her shrine is localized. The way from Saint Peter to the Lateran is relatively long. Once, one has reached the Colosseum, today two parallel streets lead to Saint John in Lateran, the Lateran Church. There stands the Lateran Palace, where the popes used to live in the Middle Ages (The pope is bishop of Rome in the Lateran and Vicar of Christ in the Vatican). Historically, the Lateran church is even more important for the papacy than St. Peter's Basilica. For in the Lateran stands the pope's throne, of which the pope proclaims 'ex cathedra', these are infallible doctrinal decisions on questions of faith and morality. From the Vatican it takes about an hour to move there in a procession.

You can either take Via di San Giovanni in Laterano or Via dei Santi Quattro, which runs parallel. Both lead up the hill where the Lateran palace stands. The pilgrim's path, which is still marked on the pavement, leads along Via dei Santi Quattro, before suddenly turning onto Via di San Giovanni in Laterano and passing the church of San Clemente. Instead of going now along the road to Lateran, the pilgrim path returns to Via dei Santi Quattro in order to take a steep path up to Lateran [21]. Concerning a procession this detour makes no sense, it is cumbersome and makes the passage of a large group in a procession difficult. One avoids, however, a section on the road Via dei Santi Quattro. Why? It is said, that Pope Joan gave birth to a child there, and since then the popes have avoided this part of road on the Via Sacra. Even if the streets of today no longer correspond completely to the course of the road at that time, the

detour is remarkable. We reflected on the possibility that a religious celebration and subsequent procession could unexpectedly cause labour in a very pregnant woman and decided to investigate the matter in more detail.

The shrine of the Popess Joan is located on the road connecting San Giovanni in Laterano and Via dei Santi Quatro, where the road then rises steeply. The shrine is not much bigger than a guardhouse, has been repainted recently and no longer looks as run-down as pictured in the books of Morris and Stanford [27,28]. The faded painting in the barred shrine undoubtedly depicts the Virgin Mary with Jesus and not the popess. Nevertheless, the place is considered the «Shrine of the Popess», and unlike many other shrines in the city of Rome, flowers, small letters and other things are repeatedly put in the bars. The story Peter Stanford tells in his book about the popess is correct, the place enjoys a secret veneration [28].

The research on the topic brought us to two very different research traditions, which reach completely different conclusions. We present them both here (in most other books that have been written on the subject, only one view is emphatically defended and the reader is presented with a one-sided view of things and a more or less tendentious interpretation of the references). Many authors on this topic aim to conceal information, especially the publications, claiming that Popess Joan was a legend.



The Shrine of Pope Joan in Rome. Via dei Santi Quatri and Via dei Querceti, 1, 00184 Roma RM, Italia, the street on the right side leads to the Lateran. Photo by the author (2018).

Pope Joan Interpreted as Myth

The first tradition of interpretation sees Johanna as a legend that eventually became a myth, but does not represent any historically verifiable truth: A woman's supposed pontificate was scheduled in the middle or second half of the 9th century: Maybe she was identical with Pope John VIII (872-882) or she reigned after Pope Leo IV. Later, according to certain theories, the church invented a fictitious pope named Benedict III to cover her up. She is said to have ruled for a little more than two years as John VII or VIII (856-858). Or her two- or two-and-a-half-year lasting pontificate was between Leo IV and Benedict III, occasionally she also placed after Pope Benedict III (Morris 1985). The interpretation that she actually was Pope John VIII (872-882) is quite unlikely, since his pontificate is quite well documented. Nevertheless, the name John VIII plays an important role in the disguise tactics and misinterpretation. In official papal chronicles of the Baroque era, still used to the present day, she is considered a fictional character that never existed [25,33,34]. She is therefore not mentioned at all or only briefly [33,35]. Between the lines it is explained to the reader, that she is a fiction and therefore the topic should not be followed up. Please don't think about it and certainly don't look for it is the message between the lines.

Today there are two basic interpretations of the myth: On the one hand, the story is interpreted as fiction, which has become a necessary story due to social and political developments (a kind of 'fake news' of the Middle Ages). Alternatively it is concealed truth that has become a myth and has been enriched and developed over time. A myth is rarely completely real, often has only a small core of truth and is nevertheless of the greatest importance for

humanity. Mythical stories can indeed become so important that they have a lasting influence on real history and art and inspire the imagination [24,25,36]. The history of Pope Joan could also be such a myth that has had a lasting effect on the history of the Church and is more important today than ever, since the Catholic Church is once again debating the admission of women to the priesthood. Pope Joan is an idea with tremendous impact.

The female Pope seen as an urban legend

This position is held by many scientists and church historians based on historical sources and is accepted 'truth' in science by many. However, the significance of Pope Joan is by no means diminished in this interpretation, since the myth is of eminent importance for the understanding of church history. From today's perspective, the (allegedly) fictitious popess is the only really interesting papal figure of the Middle Ages. All of the other popes from this era have faded into obscurity.

The origin and development of the myth can be divided into different phases and shows how a collectively shared 'fictitious truth' may have emerged from a Roman local legend in the course of the Middle Ages, which served as an argument and sharp weapon for church politics at the time.

The breakdown of the myth was presented by the church researcher and theologian Ignaz von Döllinger (1799-1890). The monastery provost cannot be accused of political bias, for he was excommunicated in 1871 for his criticism of the papal universal primacy of 1870. Von Döllinger had proved that the new dogma of the pope's infallibility was ultimately derived from forgeries in the 9th century [25]. Conversely,

it can also be proven, that numerous documents of the church were falsified and manipulated in the 9th century, which will later serve as a line of argumentation for the second tradition of interpretation of Popess Joan. Von Döllinger's work «Papst-Fabeln des Mittelaltes» (1863 and reprinted in 1890) dealt with the legend of Johanna [24]. He claimed that there are no sources on Joan before the 13th century from the writings available. (This statement is probably no longer valid today). Entries in earlier chroniclers of the High Middle Ages such as Marianus Scotus (died 1082) or Sigebert von Gembloux (about 1100) mentioned her, but they are later additions with other, later calligraphy (in the Middle Ages valuable chronicles were provided with additions to keep them up to date). Von Döllinger distinguished between the 9th century, where history supposedly took place, and literary tradition in the 13th century. The creation of the legend was created in several phases, which will now be briefly outlined. The Dominican Jean de Mailly of the Lorraine region and Étienne de Bourbon's dependent manual of preachers pass on a grave inscription [25,36]:

Require de quodam papa vel potius **papissa, quia femina erat**, et simnlas se esse virum, probitate ingenii factus notarius curie, deinde cardinalis et tandem papa. Quadam die cum ascenderet equum, perperit puerum, et statim Romana iusticia, ligatus pedibus eius, ad caudam equi tractus est et a populo lapidatus per dimidiam leugam, et ubi obiit, ibi sepultus fuit, et ibi scriptum est: *Petre, pater patrum, papisse prodito partum*. Sub ipso institutum fuit ieiunium quatuor temporum, et dicitur ieiunium papisse.

Jean de Mailly marked the paragraph with the remark 'require' that this story had to be reviewed. The reading of the inscription: Petre Pater Patrum P. P. P. dissolved Jean de Mailly the abbreviations as «Petre, pater patrum, papisse

prodito partum» (Petrus, father of the fathers, tell us about the birth of the popess) [25]. The inscription is not preserved to us as archaeological object, but only passed down as a quotation by de Mailly. Shortly afterwards, the Franciscans took up history, and in the chronicle of the unknown Erfurt Minorite and in the likewise anonymous «Flores temporum» the inscription was even associated with the devil. Von Döllinger argued that the interpretation still varied at this early stage, for the Erfurt chronicle understood the inscription as the demon's request to the pope to disclose her birth in the papal consistory, while the source «Flores temporum» saw in the inscription a promise not to leave a possessed person until the popess carried out this exorcism, namely to announce the birth of her child [25]. So, a connection with the devil was established very early on, which became important in later phases.

The inscription seems to originate from pagan times, probably from the Mithras cult. The term «patrer patrum» was a frequent title of the highest priests of Mithras [37] Von Döllinger suspected that the name of the priest might have been Papirius or similar, but the name was no longer fully legible. In ancient texts the following P. P. P. often mean «propria penuncia posuit» (built with his own money). If a text is not written out in full, it must be an abbreviation that was common and easy to break down at the time. Why Jean de Mailly interpreted the inscription as «papisse prodito partum» is not known. It is also unclear how the transformation process came about: local tourist guides or an already circulating local myth about the popess are suspected, who then interpreted this interpretation into this tomb inscription [25].

The Dominican Martin von Troppau (born around 1220/30-after 1278), also known under his Latin name Martinus Polonus, created the «Chronicon pontificum et imperatorum», a universal chronicle of great importance and distribution [38]. His work has been translated into

numerous languages and has great influence on the historiography of the Middle Ages. He wrote the papal and imperial list in 1277 and also included the Popess Johanna in the list. According to Troppau, Leo IV was followed by Popess Johanna as Pope John VIII and then Benedict III. Martin von Troppau reported on Pope Johannes Anglicus:

Post hunc Leonem **Johannes Anglicus natione Maguntinus sedit annis II, mensibus V, diebus III** or, et mortuus est Rome, et cessavit papatus mense I. Hic, ut asseritur, **femina fuit**, et in puellari etate a quodam suo amasio in habitu virili Athenis ducta, sic in diversis scientiis profecit, ut nullus sibi par inveniretur, adeo ut post Rome trivium legens magnos magistros discipulos et auditores haberet. Et cum in Urbe, ubi vita et scientia magne opinionis esset, in papam concorditer eligitur. Sed in papatu per suum familiarem impregnatur. Verum tempus partus ignorans, cum de Sancto Petro in Lateranum tenderet, angariata inter Coliseum et Sancti Clementis ecclesiam peperit, et post mortua ibidem, ut dicitur, sepulta fuit. Et quia papa eandem viam semper obliquat, creditur a plerisque, quod ob detestationem facti hoc faciat. **Nec ponitur in catalogo sanctorum pontificum propter muliebris sexum quantum ad hoc deformitatem.**

[38,39]

Direct

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According to this, the popess held a pontificate of two years, five months and four days. Von Troppau explicitly mentions that the popess was a woman (*femina fuit*) and was educated in Athens. She was very learned and was unanimously elected as new pope. She became pregnant and since she did not know when she would give birth, she died and was buried on the processional way between the Colosseum and the Lateran Church near the church of St.