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MONASTIC NETWORKS IN ELEVENTH-CENTURY ITALY:
THE EARLY STAGES OF PETER DAMIAN’S EPISTOLOGRAPHY
(1044-1046)**

Abstract
In the light of the challenge to overcome entrenched conceptions that offer few explanations for the dynamics of ecclesiastical powers and their mechanisms of organization in the 11th century, this article investigates the network structures formed during the initial years of Peter Damian’s priory. Particularly their role in establishing a legitimate field of action for the Hermitage of the Holy Cross of Fonte Avellana. From this perspective, Peter Damian’s correspondence represents an invaluable corpus to investigate the early stages of a collaborative network, constituted around that anchorite community.

Keywords: Peter Damian – Fonte Avellana – Monastic network
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Since the early 1980’s, discussions about social integration’s networks and their configurations have become an important part of research within the field of medieval history. The concept of social network adopted by medievalists derived from a tradition of prosopographic studies dedicated to the Roman Empire, of which main goal was to build databases about people who shared a common family and friendship group. If, in this approach, social networks were taken into consideration only for their importance in shedding light on the power sustained by certain individuals or family groups, more recently, based on sociological investigations, modern and contemporary historians have discovered new methods for studying social networks1.

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In sociology, this concept refers to the group of relationships established between individuals or social groups, in order to answer to the question of how it could be possible for an individual’s behavior to be modeled by social interaction and vice versa. In understanding a ‘network’ as the result of social relationships, these studies focused on different interactions of social units, which can be quantified according to their nature, quality, and intensity.

The socio-political history of the Middle Ages has regularly investigated social networks feeding on alien concepts. Although unknown to medieval men, the concept of network enables historians to understand the connections formed between an individual and a social group and also the nature of social groups we intend to investigate. While networks of friendship and family, as well as more extensive groups of solidarity, always existed in the medieval political scenario, it is important to keep in mind that such social networks were being constantly reorganized due to the fact that they constituted social interactions that could be long-lasting or otherwise. Therefore, it is pertinent to identify and qualify the complex social network established around the Hermitage of Fonte Avellana during the early years of Peter Damian’s leadership between 1040 and 1046.

Founded at the end of the 10th and beginning of the 11th centuries, Fonte Avellana gained political prominence through the process of strengthening and competition amongst new types/forms of Benedictine monasticism that occurred from 1050 onwards. The development of specific functions such as the provision of souls, the defense of proposals for moral renewal, and the custom inherited from the High Middle Ages of safeguarding the younger sons, allowed these new communities to become centres of material, spiritual, and ideological force for society, turning them into important vectors of social ordering.

Until recently, authors such as Jean Leclercq, Marcel Pacaut and Norman Cantor referred to the concept of crisis to explain the appearance of new models of monastic life between the 10th and 12th centuries. Making use of an expression coined by Germain Morin in 1928, these historians were able to associate the emergence of hermit communities that claimed a return to the ascetic practice of early Christians to a ‘coenobitical crisis’, brought about by the questioning of the indisciplined lifestyle

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3 Fonte Avellana is a hermitage located in the mountains of Sant’Abbondio on the border of the Italian provinces of Marca and Umbria. Founded by a group of hermits who had lived in that location since the turn of the first millennium, this community was tightly connected to the reform of coenobitical customs led by Romuald in the hermitage of Camaldoli, where he was from. The community of Fonte Avellana was incorporated into the congregation of Camaldoli in 1569. See: *Fonte Avellana nella società dei secoli XI e XII. Atti del II convegno del Centro di studi avellaniti* (Fonte Avellana, 29-31 agosto 1978), Fonte Avellana 1979.


of traditional Benedictine monasteries. In an attempt to find a common element that explained the growth of eremitical practices in the early 11th and 12th centuries, Leclercq, in particular, argued that these phenomena were a reaction to the enrichment of traditional monasteries such as Mount Cassino and Cluny. Like Leclercq, many historians have referred to the theme of monastic prosperity to explain the partial disaggregation of the central trunk of Benedictine coenobitism that remained in the Christian West after the turn of the first millennium. However, not many of these scholars valued the methods through which these new communities ensured their social place and their strategies of institutionalization and political affirmation.

Similarly, most of the studies dedicated to the life and works of Peter Damian, one of the main leaders of the Holy Cross of Fonte Avellana, focused on his engagement in contesting traditional forms of coenobitism, either as a vector of monastic reformation or as a collaborator for the strengthening of a «reforming Roman party», during the second half of the 11th century.6 Leaving aside Peter Damian’s political contribution to the process of organizing his own eremitical community, he was acknowledged by historiography as one of the idealizers of a ‘Gregorian Reform’ program and was repeatedly considered a papal agent in the defense of freeing the Church from lay tutelage.7 From this perspective, Damian was part of a group that, after the pontificate of Leo IX, led the Roman Curia for half a century and thrived in order to implement a common agenda of moralization and disciplinary actions for the whole Church under


the command of the Papacy. In other words, he was treated as a member of a group, which included other ecclesiastics, monks and canons. This group aided the Papacy, or was designated to act on its behalf, due to a shared doctrinal and political conception that proposed a general reform of the clergy and society during the second half of the 11th century and the first half of the 12th. Even when historians tried to bring out singularities in regional initiatives, they classified them into different ‘schools’: Humbert of Silva Candida’s ‘Lotharingian’ school, Peter Damian’s «Italian» school, among others. Therefore, a specific study of Damian’s insertion in Regnum Italicum’s networks of power, either monastic or aristocratic, is yet to be done. Due to the weight of the historiographical tradition of the ‘Gregorian Reform’, many current works still insist on depicting Damian as an agent who excluded lay leaderships from ecclesiastical matters, thus neglecting his intense correspondence with imperial German leaderships such as the Dukes of Tuscany and especially the Benedictine abbots who led Mount Cassino, Cluny, Pomposa, Vallombrosa, among others.

It is important to identify and to qualify the complex social network established by Peter Damian at the hermitage of Fonte Avellana. As mentioned above, the lack of a specific study of his social insertion is precisely due to the influence of a ‘Gregorian Reform’ historiography, which insists on interpreting Damian as a combatant against the secular presence in ecclesiastical political affairs. Hence, an investigation of his epistolary trajectory from the hermitage of Fonte Avellana will enable us to evaluate the establishment of these relationships, which, as we will argue in this article, served to organize and to sustain strategies for this newly formed anchorite community’s survival within the Regnum Italicum. By mapping the links established throughout this epistolary network, we can assess the role played by this emergent community amongst countless other ascetic settlements of the period. We would also like to point out the importance of episcopal and imperial aristocracies in this process.

1. The beginning of Damian’s epistolary activity

Throughout the 11th century, letters were a fundamental way of establishing relationships, especially by creating a unique type of spatiality among men apart from each other and who had to communicate through writing. Giles Constable claims that letters were a conscious document, almost public, often written to promote a dialogue at a distance between sender and addressee. The letter sought to build a kind of presence of its sender by promoting the circulation of its content to a wider audience.
than the specific addressee. Through these it was possible to continue and deepen a
debate initiated in person or perhaps to establish the first contact between two people,
creating a proximity before an effective meeting. Therefore, the letter was a formal
way of building, maintaing and even destroying political relationships. As a way to
expand the circulatory space of political relationships, letters allowed the reordering
of social belonging, establishing links that had been non-existent or breaking them in
the course of settling disputes.

In the Middle Ages, the letter was an important political instrument and because
of this we see a proliferation of epistolary texts, especially at monastic locations.
This can be verified by an analysis of Peter Damian’s letters, sent between 1044-
1046, after he took over the priory of the recently established Hermitage of Holy
Cross of Fonte Avellana. His epistolographic texts clearly had a political use that
allows us to map out not only the geography of monastic relationships, but also how
his letters established a sociology of relationships. This can be demonstrated in a
work written by Peter Damian’s disciple and secretary, John of Lodi (1025-1105),
in which he announced Damian’s ability to make himself present through his letters.
In his *Vita Beati Petri Damiani* (=1077-1081) John of Lodi presented the reasons for
Damian’s ascension to the priory of Fonte Avellana and described the spiritual and
material advancement of the community under his *regimen*. According to Lodi, the
letters of Damian played an important role establishing his presence within the other
communities that he created:

Nequaquam sane illorum oblivisci poterat, cum quibus a suae conversionis
exordio conversatus fuerat, quousque jussione magistri sibi commendatos esse
recolebat. Quanquam nec caeteros, quos per diversa loca discipulos aggregaverat,
sua ditius visitatione carere patiens, modo sui praesentia, modo epistolis, modo
dirigendo aliquo spiritualium discipulorum sibi haerentium, omnes paterna sollici-
tudine congruis vicibus inviseret.

11 «Magister vero ejus tantum ipsam prudentiam ac zelum considerans laetabatur strenuum se recepisse discipulum, cui tuto committeret ipsius eremi gubernacula. Assumpto itaque discipulo-
rum consultu eremi procurationem ei, licet abneganti ac renuenti, post se suscipiendam mandavit. Post migrationem vero magistri, regimen loci suscipiens, tam spirituali quam temporali cultu haud
modice dilatavit. Et quia divina gratia ad ubiorem animarum fructum ejus mentem succenderat,
coepit alia loca perquirere, ubi ad serviendum Deo congregare monachorum copiam posset. In
Camarinensi itaque diocesi aptum quendam ad eremitarum habitacula locum, juxta suam
vicinam
rum, curiosus indagator invenit; ibique congregatis fratribus, oratorio fundato ordinatoque priore,
sub quo famulari Deo deberent, rursum ad locum alium investigandum processit. Pervenit igiur ad
montem Pregium in territorio Perusino, ibique alia eremitarum fundavit habitacula, ubi videlicet
seclillum quamdam invenit, in qua B. Romualdum quondam mansisse ferebant. Quo igiur in loco,
aliis locatis fratribus, ad alium rursus demigrans, in comitatu Faventinum congruum reperit locum,
quo nuncupatur Gamonium, ubi praeparatis habitaculis alios Deo famulaturos constituit. Sed et
vicinum huic loco monasterium, quo Acerae dicitur, construxit; alterum quoque in Ariminesi
territorio in loco qui Murcianum nominatur». *Vita Beati Petri Damiani per Joannem monachum
ejus discipulum*, PL CXLIV, col. 124-25.
In the hagiographic text above, that values and praises the authority of its protagonist, Damian is depicted as the central reference for several monastic communities, to the point where he was forced to multiply himself to answer the demands that came to him. He could offer his aid in person (modo sui praesentia), by mail (modo epistolis), or through his representatives (modo dirigendo aliquo spiritualium discipulorum sibi haerentium). Among these three forms of presenting oneself, the first two types can be considered equivalent, as they allow the visitor to be physically present or present through a specific type of writing, the epistle. Like a dialogue that involves a «quasi-presence and quasi-speech between the sender and the addressee» — sermo absentium quasi inter presentes —, letters were widely used by the 11th century’s masters of epistolography to connect different times and spaces. According to Constable, letters could construct spatial and temporal bonds between individuals or groups: «In terms of the epistolary situation, real letters bridged the gap principally of space, and fictional letters bridged the gap principally of time».

Being the main reference of authority within the hermitage, the prior was a material and spiritual leader for his ascetic community. Therefore, he had to attend in person or by writing to all of those in need of him. As Damian himself announced to his hermits in letter 18, the prior was the first brethren of the community, a reference to every order, a recipient of all obedience and responsible for the zeal in the community, including the duty to register their modus vivendi, their administrations and their memory. A prior’s leadership was measured by his ability to make his community known and to keep it in the social memory. This is why Peter Damian’s priory was marked by the growing epistolographic record. Sermons, theological treatises and even hagiographies were adapted to an epistolary format. It seems that the use of letters enabled the format and type of written text to be adapted not to a general purpose, but to a contingent demand. As a authority, vector of communication, teaching and registration, letters could be considered a political instrument used to build spaces of intervention for many monastic groups.

For this reason, an investigation of the early years of Peter Damian’s correspondence at the head of the Fonte Avellana priory allows us to verify the complex relationships established by this prior with the most eminent authorities of his time. This can also demonstrate how his letters played a preponderant role in integrated social groups. In general, the addressees of the 23 brief letters issued throughout his priory were mostly situated close to Fonte Avellana. However, during this period Damian ceased communicating with leaders outside the Regnum Italicum. In fact, when we consider the addressees located further away, we can identify themes and strategies concerned with situations and disputes in which Damian engaged with

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14 Ibi, 14.
those correspondents closest to him. In focusing on his letters’ content we came to understand why Damian looked for those interlocutors specifically.

As brief letters only contain the brevity of a summary, they could not present elaborate grounds to condemn or to request ecclesiastical and secular authorities. In a continuous interdependence with the longer texts, these writings carried requests that would be best argued in medium letters and in the extended format of the opusculum or liber. With that in mind, see the diagram below:

Through analysis of these letters written between 1044 and 1046, we can observe Peter Damian’s efforts to take part in disputes of his region, especially in the denunciation of simoniac practices by episcopal representatives (Pesaro, Fano, Cas-

tello). We can also follow his efforts to transfer the resolution to a place outside the archbishopric of Ravenna. Peter Damian’s trajectory in the first years of his priory coincides with the establishment of a new network of interlocutors. The same time he approaches to the ecclesiastical representatives of the Roman See and made the contact with the German monarchist leadership. He also strengthened the spiritual assistance to a particular member of the Ravennate lordly elite and finally postulates his disaffection with the episcopal leadership of Ravenna. But what motivated these approaches and this dissociation? We would like to argue the fight against simony and the defense of monastic’s exemptions as our hypotheses.

2. The establishment of a network against simony

Letter 4 is the first one to exemplify an effort to build a support network through epistolary writing. The recipient of this letter is Lawrence, an earlier Cassinese monk and a potential partner in the defense of immunities to Benedictine monasteries against simoniacal bishops. He was archbishop of Amalfi from 1027 to 1039, when he was removed from the post due to conflicts with Guamar (1013-1052), Prince of Salerno and Duke of Amalfi. Addressing Florence, Lawrence was received in Rome by the Archpriest at the time, John Gratian, future Pope Gregory VI (1045-1046), whom he served as a direct counsellor. In his letter to Lawrence, Damian asserts:

Dilectissime mihi pater et domine, quo circa te desiderio ferveam, quae tuae dilectionis flamma meum pectus exurat, testis est lingua, quae tam crebro te abesse conqueritur, testis est conscientia, quae serenissimam angelici tui vultus speciem tam perspicue contemplatur. In illo quippe pectoris receptaculo non ubi pater aut mater sed ubi ipse sum, te alterum reconditum gero. Quapropter humiliter peto, ut mihi mutui amoris vicem redhibeas et gratia, quae simplex egreditur, ad me duplicata recurrat. Hoc autem mihi persuadere facile poterunt, qui ad vos de nostris partibus venientes aliquod negotium in praesentia sanctissimi apostolici domini mei exercere contendunt. Talem te ergo, karissime pater, in causa reproborum episcoporum Phanensis et Pensaurensis exhibe, ut te in veritate comperiam Dei iudicium pertimescere, contra ministros diabolicum viriliter decertare, arida diabolicae plantationis arbusta convellere, ecclesiam Christi ad lumen velle de tenebris revocare. Unum autem nolo te lateat, quia si infames illi et criminosi in episcopatus arce persistiterint, non modicum splendidissima domini papae opinio laborabit, et tu, qui consiliarius eius es et tanta omnigenae eruditionis sapientia polles, naevum proculdubio reprehensionis incurreres.


In this letter (approx. 1044-1046), Damian approaches Lawrence as an intimate friend. The petition is marked by the presence of a friendship bond revived by the epistolographical contact. Damian clarifies his condemnation of the bishops of Fano and Pesaro as simoniacs and advises his interlocutor to approve his request, emphasizing the risks that the Roman pontificate would run if these bishops were not removed from their sees. As Gregory VI’s direct adviser, Lawrence served as an intermediary between Damian and the pope, so that the denunciation of simoniac bishops could reach its conclusion. In a diplomatic offensive, Damian used his most influential contacts with the papacy to ratify and to legitimize convictions and judgments against the bishops of his region. Lawrence is but one pawn in this persuasive game against local bishops. Damian’s next letter (number 11) sent to the papacy to denounce the evils of simony, was to Peter, the papal chancellor:

Dilectissime, cum non ignorem, quod hoc tempore Romae sit, nec non et frequent er audiam, qui sis, ad hoc unum mente recurro, qui valet candens lilium inter spinarum densa producere, ipse eciam te talem voluit Romanis artibus exhibere. Qua propter nov eris procul dubio, qui caritatem tuam habere desidero, et speciali tecum familiaritate et unanimi concordiae vinculo tecum connecti non mediocriter concupisco. Neque enim huic meo desiderio locorum valet obesse longinquitas. Nam et ipsum mei capitis oculum non video, per quem video, utile tamen mi nisterii eius nichilominus fruor, et quia oculus mihi in proferendis exempli verbis occurrit, tu mihi in hac parte sisculus, tu sis magister, quatinus per te mihi liceat cernere, si quidquam apud aures beatissimi huius apostolici valeam laborare. Nisi enim ad rectitudinis statum sedes Romana redeat, certum est, quia totus mundus in suo lapsus errore perdurat. Et necesse est iam, ut eadem sit renovandae principium, quae nascentis humanae salutis extiterat fundamentum.

Different from the letter to Lawrence of Amalfi, this one has Damian confirming that he was never introduced to chancellor Peter. Therefore, it is possible to assume that, at this point, he still did not have access to the Roman episcopal environment. He certainly sought to establish this connection throughout this letter. The best way to do this was to incorporate a qualifying and flattering rhetoric toward his addressee. But not only that: what is evident at the end of this brief epistle is his moral commitment to the Christian renewal, particularly marked by his fight against the simoniacal practices. If in letter 4 Damian drew upon a previous monastic bond with Lawrence to approach the high pontiff, in letter 11 he did so by resorting to the adulation of the guardian of all papal communication.

The next letter is also characterized by this exercise of self-presentation and desire for friendship. Addressed to the monk John, bishop of Cesena (1031-1053), Damian seeks to consolidate his access to an episcopate whose authority was monastic:

Ego itaque, quia munera terrena non habeo, despicabilia tibi opusculorum meorum dona transmitto, non ut per hoc defensionis tuae patroncinium quaeam, sed ut

ad cordis tui cubiculum linguae meae vestigii aditum pandam, non ut mihi prosit auxilium, sed ut meum tibi valeat prodesse consilium. [...] Quorum videlicet partem in hac eciam epistola scriberem, si curiosum supervenientis oculum non timerem. Terminum igitur mihi post festum paschale praefigite et, ut ad vos veniam, vestrae sanctitatis auctoritate iubete. Peto eciam, si placet, ut quod latoris praesencium ore depromitur, efficaciter audiatur20.

Devoid of any claim or demand, this letter took on the role of a presentation note whose purpose was to present something more important to the bishop of Cesena: the religious gift (aecclesiasticum munusculum) offered by all letters (opuscula) written by Peter Damian up until that moment. The way he disposed of his epistolary production had a clear goal: to give his addressee the opportunity to meet him, to know who he was and what he thought about certain subjects. As a gift, this set of epistles became an effective form of rapprochement, which allowed Damian to contact the Cesenate religious leadership, to present himself, to establish friendship and bonds of solidarity, or even to multiply them; and to overcome physical limitations, imposed by the impossibility of being in different places at the same time. Let us observe how the prior of Fonte Avellana tried to dissuade bishop John from his real intentions:

Quapropter ego, quia ad celsitudinis vestrae noticiam pervenire desidero, ut-pote aecclesiastico viro et super montem Syon divinitus elevato aecclesiasticum munusculum scalarum more praemitto, quia vero non vanae gloriae ostentacione, non corporalis commodi utilitate, vel mea ad vos opuscula dirigio, vel vestrarum gratiam requiro, illi melius satisfacio, quem de oculis cordium iudicare sine nulla dubietate cognosco21.

Undoubtedly, Damian’s purpose was to make himself known and his ecclesiological writings were the most effective means to achieve this goal. However, if this «religious gift » was interpreted as an act of ostentation or vanity by the addressee, the attempt to inaugurate a link with Cesena bishop would fail. Therefore it was necessary to use direct sentences and a short text free of ornaments that could synthesize the doctrinal capacity of its author and, at the same time, not demerit him in terms of humility and good ascetic example. In other words, it was necessary to expose his material detachment, his lack of interest in the publicity of his ideas and his complete surrender to humility.

The successful approach to the episcopate of Cesena, some 30 km from Ravenna, would guarantee new regional allies to the prior of Fonte Avellana, especially in his dispute against the simoniacal bishops of Fano and Pesaro. According to Umberto Longo, bishop John was committed to reforming the customs of the clergy subordinated to the cathedral of Cesena22, which led him to request from Damian a

20 Peter Damian, Epistola 12, in Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani, I, 141-142.
21 Ibi, 140.
22 U. Longo, Esiste una santità della riforma del secolo XI?, in Riforma o Restaurazione?
hagiography of the bishop Mauro of Cesena in 1045. This presentation certainly had the expected result, which was to gain political support for the Avelanite campaign against the simoniacal bishops.

Another letter attested Peter Damian’s work in the construction of a support network against simony. The missive 13, written in 1045, was addressed to Pope Gregory VI and it confirms Damian’s intention to place himself within the centre of papal power. With a style similar to Letters 4 and 11, this epistle exemplifies the spirit of hope and good expectations regarding the conduct of the papacy under Gregory VI.


In this text, Damian conveys his desire to serve the Apostolic See directly and above all, in the matter that was dearest to him: the fight against simony. This whole composition seeks to value the election of Gregory VI, reinforcing Damian’s public commitment to the fight against the episcopal corruption of his region. According to Damian, the presence of the prudent wisdom of Pope Gregory VI would allow the disciplinary revival of the clergy (Refloreat Disciplina). Damian warns the pope:

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Laqua made a very important analysis about the meaning of Refloreat disciplina in Peter Damian’s work. According to Laqua, Damian used this verbal metaphor taken from Augustine in the three letters, in which revival is equivalent to resurrection. This verbal metaphor assigns the central function of the resurrection and re-flowering of the church also to the imperial sovereign, presenting the traditional concept of sacred royalty. See: H. P. LAQUA, «Refloreat disciplina»: ein Erneuerungsmotiv bei Petrus Damiani, in San Pier Damiano nel IX centenario della morte (1072-1972), II, Cesena 1972, 279-90.
Verumtamen utrum ista, quae scribimus, mundo sperare sit licitum, primo Pensaurensis aeclesia bonae spei clarum dabit indicium. Nisi enim praedicta aeclesia de manu illius adulteri, incestuosi, periuri atque raptoris auferatur, omnis populorum spes, quae de reparacione mundi erecta fuerat, funditus enervatur. Omnis siquidem ad hunc finem oculos tendunt, omnes ad hanc unam vocem aures erigunt. Et si ille tot criminibus obvolutus ad episcopatus arcem restituitur, ab apostolica sede boni alicquid ulterius posse fieri, penitus denegatur.26

The warning tone of this letter concerns a possible pontifical consent to the restoration of the episcopal privilege to the bishop of Pesaro. This aims to ensure that pope Gregory VI confirms the judgments perpetrated by Damian in the name of a supposed disciplinary revival of the clergy. In spite of its extensive adulation, this letter enables us to consider that the struggle against simony was not an initiative from the Apostolic See, but an expression of local demands which resorted to papal support in extreme situations. Those who required such support from the papacy needed to be very skilled in order to convince the Pontiff about the urgency and justice of their demands rather than the arguments of the ones they accused.

Up to this point, we have been able to observe Damian’s epistolographic trajectory to establish or strengthen friendship and service ties outside the authority of the bishop of Ravenna. For someone who was formed in environment of Ravenna Church and who had maintained, until then, a great with its episcopal power – as it is attested in letter 3 sent to Gebhard, Ravenna’s archbishop (1043) – it is very strange that Damian does not refer to this episcopate in his subsequent letters to secure the condemnation of the simoniacal bishops of Pesaro and Fano. It is pertinent to ask why Damian had to seek a new network outside of Ravenna. Furthermore, what could have been the reason that led Damian not to appeal to the bishop of Ravenna to confirm the condemnation of the simoniacal bishops of his region? Letters 7 and 8, written in 1044 and 1045 respectively, seem to confirm the existence of a conflict behind this long diplomatic undertaking through Damian’s letters between 1044 and 1046, after the death of his good friend, the archbishop Gebbard, in February 1044.

In letter 7, Damian brings a serious charge to Widger27, Gebhard’s successor, complaining about the little care that Widger dispensed to the monastery of St. Apolinar in Class. If in a previous letter (letter 3 to archbishop Gebhard) to Widger’s predecessor Damian only complimented the episcopate of Ravenna, in this letter the archbishopric’s spotless and protective condition ceases to exist. Declaring Widger’s disregard in acknowledging his contribution to doctrinal affairs, Damian begins the letter:

> Verumtamen satis miror, venerabilis pater, quia postquam ad te veni, postquam ab alio revocatus itinere vestris iussionibus parui, nullum legacionis verbum, nullum suscipere merui vestrae familiaritatis indicium. Certe nonnulli testes sunt huius

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26 Peter Damian, Epistola 13, 144.
rei, quam loquor, quia si bonae memoriae decessori vestro hic habitandi gratia op-
tempare voluisset, acquieturum se nostris consiliis et de salute suae animae et de
spiritualium rerum ordinacionibus rata promissione firmaret. Vos autem e diverso me
cotidie flagellatis, cotidie acres verberum plagas infligitis, et qui audire non meretur
linguam gravem, de sacris manibus suscipit disciplinam.

The prior of Fonte Avellana claims that Widger does not offer him the same
friendship given in the past by his predecessor. Gebhard was an exemplary prelate, a
Christi miles according to the terms employed by Damian in letter 3, when he praises
and exhorts his friendly archbishop to persist in the fight against simony: «While the
dragon of simony, after binding the arms of those trafficking wretches in its intricate
coils of avarice, is spewing forth its venom, you were almost the exception in stand-
ing unconquered and unshaken as the knight of Christ».

Gebhard was rigorous and just, committed to the welfare of the monks and their discipline.
It is important to note that in safeguarding the good relationship with Gebhard of Eichstätt, to whom
he assigned spiritual counseling in exchange for protection and kindness, Damian
stated his expectations concerning Widger’s archbishopric: to promote the protection
of the monasteries against those who threatened and plundered them.

Ecce, clementissime domine, caetera monasteria sub alis misericordiae vest-
trae inlaesa persistunt et cum securitate et immunitate Deo deserviunt. Hoc autem
solum ex quo me in illud ingredi praecepistis, tot patet invasionibus et rapinis
obnoxium, ut nisi mens vestra vel nunc flectatur ad misericordiam, iam videatur
funditus desolatum. Sic itaque domus Dei per me videtur in infima deici, per quem
sperabatur Deo vobis cooperante caelotenus exaltari. Qua propter, gloriosissime
domine, fuis lacrimis ad vestigia vestra corrue, sanctae viscera pietatis imploref,
secundum gravitatibus vestrae prudenciam iam memineritis retinere flagellum, iam
ponatis tot persecutionem modum dicente Domino: Dum conturbatus fueris, in ira misericordiae
memor eris. Nec gravetis sanctum locum adhuc auferendo pecuniam, quem tantam aecclesiasticarum
rerum nostis iam pertulisse

However, this expectation was left unfilled by Widger. He burdened the
monastery of St. Apolinar in Class, a cenobitical community put under Damian’s
direction previously by Gebhard of Ravenna. Advised by Damian to return to the

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29 English translation by Owen J. Blum, see Peter Damian, Letters I. 1-30, Washington DC
1989, 88. The latin original: «quo symoniacus draco miserabilium negociatorum brachia perplexis
concupiscenciae spiris virus infundit, tu solus pene ex omnibus invictus Christi miles incolomis
permanens Petri iaculo nequissimae bestiae guttur infigis et aeclesiam tuam mundam ab omni eius
pestifera contagione custodis et quod pastorum inno latronum culpa magistri sedes amisit, nobilis
alumni cathedra inviolata servavit». Peter Damian, Epistola 3, in Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani,
I, 107.
30 «Sed inter haec omnia vestrae sanctitatis studia illud mihi multo est carius, quod saluti mo-
nachorum pastoralis oculus vester invigilat et occulta diu vulnera in lucem producere et discipline
aecclesiasticarum rerum nostis iam pertulisse
31 Peter Damian, Epistola 7, 117.
good direction of the monastic subjects, Widger is called to guarantee immunities and exemptions for the monasteries submitted to his dominion. What seems to bother Damian is that the archbishop assures the immunity of other communities, while disrespecting the monastery of Class, using its possessions without measure. This letter becomes very significant, because through it we can identify the trigger of the disagreement between the prior of Fonte Avellana and the highest representative of the Church of Ravenna to whom he was subordinated.

In the following letter (8), Damian continues his complaint regarding the new archbishop, this time to Gisebert, priest and treasurer of the Church of Ravenna:

Non ignoras, dilectissime, quia et olim a Geboardo archiepiscopo et nuper ab hoc novo, qui zelo divini Spiritus constitutus est, necnon et a plerisque Ravennae cibibus sepe multumque rogatus tandem consensi, et heremum deserens spe lucrandi animas urbem habitaturus adveni. Sed cum praedictum virum cernerem, non dam ad quod missus, sed quod permisssus fuerat agere, populum quoque non in me caritatis zelum, non in se studium proprie salutis habere paenituit, fateor, quia dum vanitatibus hominum credidi, a divinae voluntatis linea licet sero perspicue tamen me oberrasce cognovi, et dum congregorum aviditate piscium vivarium petii, raros saltim, quos per diffusa marium fluenta claudere consueveram, frustratus amisi.

This excerpt further strengthens our understanding of the growing disagreement between the prior of Fonte Avellana and the archbishop of Ravenna. Both epistles justify Damian’s diplomatic offensive in establishing a new network to assure his actions against simony, while giving him effective support against a possible persecution of the leadership of Ravenna. The construction of this relationship outside of Ravenna authority seems even more defined in letter 19, issued at the beginning of 1046 to Bishop John of Cesena, ratifying the intensification of friendship and spiritual service between both. Besides that, Widger’s name also appears in chronicles in an unflattering way. Hermann of Reichenau wrote that the pope (Gregory VI) refused to consecrate him. Hermann of Reichenau’s testimony helps us corroborate the thesis that Damian worked intensely on the detraction of simoniacal bishops, including among them Widger, the Archbishop of Ravenna.

Furthermore, letter 20, sent to King Henry III in May of the same year, sealed the diplomatic-epistolographic journey undertaken by Damian to strengthen himself in the face of Widger and simoniacal bishops. In this epistle, the prior congratulates Henry III on the deposition of the simoniacal archbishop on May 18, 1046, advising him to choose a new successor:

non alius in rege suo Wiquerii cathedram in aeclesia negociantis evertit... Vernutamen nolo lateat dominum meum regem, quia pestifer ille vir ad Ravennatem urbem suas epistolas fabricavit, alias quidem occulte singulis, alias vero commu-

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32 Peter Damian, Epistola 8, in Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani, I, 118-19.
33 «Quibus etiam diebus Widgerum, qui Ravennae praesulatum iam biennio inepte et crudeliter nondum consecratus tenebat, ad se vocatum episcopatu privavit». Hermanni Augiensis (Hermann von Reichenau), Chronicon, hrsg. von G. H. Pertz, Hannoverae 1844 (MGH SS, 5), 126.
niter universis, in quibus se facturum omnia quaecumque ipsi voluerint, de rebus aecclesiae spopondit. Quod si verbis minime crederent, secundum haec suum nuncium iurare praecipit. Unde non dubito quosdam de Ravennatibus maiestati vestrae suggerere, ut ad eandem cathedram ille valeat repedare. Nimium raptorem mundi, qui ambiunt aecclesiastica bona diripere, talem volunt episcopum, qui eorum rapi nis non valeat obviare.

The Avelanite recognized Widger as a sly fraudster who destroyed the «house of God» (domus Dei). In this epistle, Damian openly names him as a merchant of the Church (ecclesiae negociantis), a simoniac who traded spiritual goods while expropriating ecclesiastical goods. According to Damian’s testimony Widger sought the support of the local aristocracy and also of the ecclesiastics of Ravenna, exploiting their desire to control and use the ecclesiastical assets (rebus ecclesiae) to encourage his return to the archbishopric of that city. Attesting how a bishop should not behave regarding property, immunities and exemptions placed under his safeguard, Damian warns the king about the danger of Widger’s local collaborators in undertaking a diplomatic offensive with Henry to restore him to duty. The prior of Fonte Avellana was not unaware of the possibility of such an arrangement.

With a tougher and more accusatory tone, letter 20 captures Damian’s epistolographic efforts to establishing an extra-local support network for his offensives against the simoniac bishops of his region. Analysing this small collection of letters, sent from 1044 to 1046, we are able to observe the epistolographical mechanisms employed by Damian to preserve and insert himself into a new network formed mainly by ecclesiastics who were part of the papal circle. What remains of these epistles is the declaration of monastic discontent with episcopal conduct. Being the spokesman of such discontent, Damian, at the same time, announces himself as the bearer of the «spiritual ordinances of spiritual matters» (spiritualium rerum ordinationibus), able to bring the ecclesiastical leadership back under the good supervision of monastic-priestly life. But this position was not permanent. It was necessary to make himself present through letters to maintain, rearrange and, if possible, extend the network that would collaborate with the disciplinary initiative headed by an ascetical leadership.

3. Final considerations

Peter Damian’s correspondence is an invaluable corpus to initiate an investigation about the early stages of a collaborative network constituted around Fonte Avellana. This epistolary network contains a geography and a sociology which demonstrate through time how a monastic group could prioritize a particular space or group, choosing to undo the ties between specific correspondents or alleged allies who proved to be no longer useful. The many different dimensions of the networks bear witness to how personal the relationships of power were during the medieval

34 Peter Damian, Epistola 20, in Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani, I, 201-02.
period. Epistolary groups are, therefore, extremely useful to map out the organization of these networks. Thus, in this article, we intended to reconstruct the initial geography of the letters expedited by Damian so as to map out the main areas of his actions. We also analyzed the earlier years of correspondence searching for a sociology of action in these letters. Through the alliances and dissensions present in these epistles we could demonstrate the reach of the Avelanite authority and influence under Peter Damian’s leadership.