

Contact Info

Peter Damian's Correspondence with Empress Agnes
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Introduction

Born in 1007 in Ravenna, Italy, little is known about Peter Damian's early life. Eventually entering the hermitage of Fonte Avellana in 1035, he emphasized ideas of apostolic poverty, attempting to live life without ownership of land or the accumulation of money, and the importance of celibacy. Although later rising through the ranks of the church, at the time of his correspondence with Agnes (1060-1067), Damian had little to no status. As a result, certain aspects of the letters such as when Damian chastises the former regent of the Roman Empire (1056-62) provide interesting revelations. Regardless, examinations into Peter Damian and his work have typically been focused on his travels and correspondence with men. As a result, his writing to and interactions with women have remained largely overlooked. Consequently, this project sought to explore his writing to a specific example of the women that he held close, namely Empress Agnes. In doing so, I hoped to identify what traits were valued most by Damian in order for Agnes to become most closely connected to God, and for what reason.

Research Objectives

An analysis of letters between Agnes and Damian will help benefit medieval studies by addressing a group of individuals, namely women, that are typically overlooked throughout history. Additionally, I hoped to see what Damian valued regarding a moral and upright life in his own personal writings to women, rather than how he talked about them to others. This could then be compared to the main goals of the church at the time to see any potential variation. Thanks to Adobe Pro and MAXQDA, I was able to relatively easily format and tag keywords/themes throughout the letters in order to have a clear data set that could then be put into an excel sheet to answer my research questions. These were largely the only tools necessary, as the letters I was looking at did not lend themselves to mapping due to having a low geographic significance. Therefore, the goals of my research did not revolve around examining any type of travel.

Method

When beginning the research, I initially thought to look at Damian's correspondence with Agnes as well as his sisters in his corpus of letters. However, I eventually shrunk the subset to strictly look at his writings to Agnes, as to have a specific set of communication to better examine. Due to the highly analytical aspect of the documents and Dr. Torgerson's approach to research, I decided on using MAXQDA to assess the frequency at which specific terms occurred throughout the letters in an effort to answer my research questions. Due to research on what Damian emphasized as a hermit and an initial reading of some of the letters, I decided on words such as virginity and poverty as I believed they would be common themes. From there, I branched out to slightly more abstract terms such as his emphasis on color to see how they connected to or contrasted these initial themes. Similarly, I began tagging Roman emperors and terms associated with religious symbolism, as it was clear Damian was using these examples as a means to drive home specific concepts and ideas to Agnes. However, as a means of avoiding confirmation bias, I then re-formatted the documents so that each sentence began on a new line. After tagging each sentence for meaning, I was able to put my results into an excel spreadsheet, in order to assess the frequency in terms of percentage Damian talks about each of his topics in order to most accurately answer my questions.

Results

MAXQDA ended up being extremely helpful to better analyze the decided on letters. Although somewhat expected, it is clear that Damian had a great amount of reverence for Agnes arguably for her position of power and the subsequent example she could set for others. However, even when rare examples occur in which he chastises her, Damian continues to blame himself rather than Agnes even when he is doubting her strength to continue to commit to her new lifestyle. However, these instances are surprising, as Damian had no real authority during this time, yet he had no problem criticizing a former member of royalty. Additionally, what is surprising is the fact that Damian's largest valued trait is not virginity unlike initially thought. The biggest section that dominates 28% of the letters revolves around his explanation as to why and insistence on Agnes's continued removal from society and abandonment of worldly things. As a result, this theme comes through in many of the other topics he talks about such as his emphasis on color regarding purple with royalty and gray with poverty, his emphasis on Roman History and the folly of quests for power, and even some aspects of the religious symbolism. The commonality connecting all of his themes revolves around Agnes's devotion to this idea, and his insistence that she continue to commit to it.

Conclusion

Agnes's and Damian's relationship seems to be friendlier than initially anticipated. Although he may have had ulterior motives in using Agnes as an example, his willingness to take time to answer her spiritual questions such as the ability to pray on the toilet as well as his continued begging for her return makes it appear that he genuinely enjoyed writing to her. With the general tone of the messages showing his great amount of support for her in her endeavors rather than criticize her left and right, it can be reasonably assumed that his relationship with Agnes goes against his other views of women. However, this could potentially be inconclusive, as the examined writing deals with a specific set of letters to a historically significant figure rather than all of his correspondence with women in general.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Code	Subheading	Frequency		Tags By Sentence	Frequency	Average in Percent
2	Religious Symbolism	Silver	17		Religious Symbolism	30	8%
3		Gold	16				
4							
5	Importance of Color	Gray (Poverty/Humility)	2		Wealth & Poverty	8	2%
6		Purple (Royalty)	6				
7							
8	Reference to Biblical/Religious Figure	David	4		Biblical Reference	52	14%
9		Pope	5				
10		Bishop	11				
11		Isiah	4				
12							
13	Emphasis on Roman History	Emperors	11		Roman History	30	8%
14		Mention of Rome	18				
15							
16	Deference to Agnes	Reverence	8		Deference to Agnes	8	2%
17							
18	Emphasis on Death & Everlasting Life	Salvation	3		Reasons for Agnes's Devotion	9	28%
19		Earthly	14		Continue to Commit	5	
20		Glory	17		Despite Royalty	12	
21		Mortal	7		Embrace the Strength/Love of Christ	21	
22					Modesty & Virtue Over Vice	19	
23					Lack of Earthly Importance & Glory of Afterlife	36	
24							
25	Valued Traits	Importance of Virginity	7		Virginity	4	7%
26		Worldly	5		Why Agnes Needs Solace	21	
27		Poverty	4				
28		Abandonment	2				

	E	F	G
Misc. Categories			
	How to Embrace God's Love	1	17%
	Fasting	1	
	Take the Good with the Bad	1	
	Need to Wash Away Sins	1	
	Greeting	7	
	Ok to Pray on Toilet	1	
	Sin of Slavery	1	
	"Ill Always Be By Your Side"	1	
	Agnes's Ignorance	1	
	Explanation For No Pallium	9	
	Hesitancy in Agnes to Commit	4	
	Absence Doing Damage	4	
	Chastising Agnes	4	
	Begging For Return	17	
	Want What You Can't Have	3	
	Difference Between Perceived & Reality	2	
	Importance of Church & Its Teachings	4	