

Feast of Pope Damasus I, who reigned from 366 to 384.

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Dec. 11, 2009 NCR Today

For anyone who has wondered when and how and why women lost the influential positions they held in the early Church, an examination of the pontificate of St. Damasus will provide answers.

From [*The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*](#), [1] by Nicola Denzey:

"Chief among Damasus's concerns was to see to it that the bishop of Rome was foremost among all the bishops of the late empire--a position we call 'Roman primacy.'"

"Damasus largely extirpated women from this sacred landscape, not necessarily because he was misogynist, but because as he sought to promote a new, papal Christianity, women played a greater role in the Christianity of his rivals than he would acknowledge. Women simply lost out, secondhand victims in struggles for power between a masculinized, 'Catholic' or papal Christianity and the more lay oriented, democratic, and local Christian communities of the city. In this papal hierarchy, there were simply no roles for women except as idealized, mythologized, and symbolic succors to male interests."

Denzey's book has a Search feature on Amazon. "Damasus" brings up 45 results, including all of Chapter 7, "Pope Damasus, Ear Tickler".

From Publishers Weekly, a description of the book:

"Denzey, a lecturer at Harvard University, uses a technique akin to feminist midrash to decipher what these women's lives were really like as the feminine ideal shifted from pagan Rome's devoted wives to Catholic Christianity's virgin martyrs. . . . The study concludes with an analysis of Pope Damasus's impact in the fourth century: a stunning masculinization of Rome's sacred space, the privatization of women's roles, and the end of the female tradition of bone gathering."

From an older book on the same period, Peter Brown's classic, [*The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*](#): [2]

"Damasus, great patron of the catacombs, has every reason to be proud of the nickname bestowed on him by his enemies, *auriscalpius matronarum*, 'The Ear Tickler of Noble Ladies.'"

St. Damasus and his private secretary, St. Jerome, whom he commissioned to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into the Latin vulgate, had to deal with the matrons of Rome, but they despised them and denigrated them in crude terms which echo still. "Garrula anus," Jerome called Proba. Garrulous old woman. They regarded women as meddling gossips at best, heretics at worst. Just as today's nuns need visitators, and today's "radical feminists" need denunciation, the women of Pope Damasus's Rome needed to be silenced, erased.

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Links:

[1] http://www.amazon.com/Bone-Gatherers-Worlds-Early-Christian/dp/0807013080/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1260415758&sr=1-1

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Cult-Saints-Function-Christianity-Religions/dp/0226076229/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1260464544&sr=1-1#noop