

To what did the Renaissance popes owe their capacity to project the idea of Christian unity even though the Catholic world was completely fragmented and the Roman Empire dissolute? My paper examines the popes' pragmatic uses of ancient rhetoric and religious *auctoritas* in the interest of political expediency. I assess the papacy's dominion over the Mediterranean by analyzing soft power through rhetoric and authority. The popes acted as heirs to the Roman Empire by remolding the *pax romana* rhetoric. Language in their correspondence reveals both pragmatic and ideological concerns, which aimed at undergirding their supreme authority over the Mediterranean. While the popes proposed themselves as heirs to the Roman Empire, my archival sources reveal pragmatic ambitions: the will to maintain temporal hegemony over the Mediterranean world—both Christian and Muslim—. The *pax romana* rhetoric provided the pontiffs with a precedent from which to choose their course of action while their *potestas* enabled them to engage politically so as to exploit their right to exercise *imperium*. Hence, the ideology of moral supremacy advanced during the medieval crusades was the same, but with a twist of political realism.