

## Diocese

Written by W.J.Pais

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Originally the term *diocese* (Gr. *dioikesis*) signified management of a household, thence administration or government in general. This term was soon used in [Roman law](#) to designate the territory dependent for its administration upon a city (*civitas*). What in Latin was called *ager*, or *territorium*, namely a district subject to a city, was habitually known in the Roman East as a *diocesis*. But as the [Christian bishop](#) generally resided in a *civitas*, the territory administered by him, being usually conterminous with the juridical territory of the city, came to be known ecclesiastically by its usual civil term, *diocese*. This name was also given to the administrative subdivision of some provinces ruled by [legates](#) (*legati*) under the authority of the governor of the province. Finally, [Diocletian](#) designated by this name the twelve great divisions which he established in the empire, and over each of which he placed a *vicarius* (Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, Stuttgart, 1903, V, 1, 716 sqq.). The original term for local groups of the faithful subject to a [bishop](#) was *ekklesia* (church), and at a later date, *paroikia*, i.e. the neighbourhood (Lat. *parœcia*, *parochia*). The [Apostolic Canons](#) (xiv, xv), and the [Council of Nicæa](#) in 325 (can. xvi) applied this latter term to the territory subject to a [bishop](#). This term was retained in the East, where the Council of Constantinople (381) reserved the word *diocese* for the territory subject to a patriarch (can. ii). In the West also

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*parochia*

was long used to designate an episcopal see. About 850

[Leo IV](#)

, and about 1095

[Urban II](#)

, still employed

*parochia*

to denote the territory subject to the

[jurisdiction](#)

of a

[bishop](#)

[Alexander III](#)

(1159-1181) designated under the name of

*parochiani*

the subjects of a

[bishop](#)

(c. 4, C. X, qu. 1; c. 10, C. IX, qu. 2; c. 9, X, De testibus, II, 20). On the other hand, the present meaning of the word

*diocese*

is met with in Africa at the end of the fourth century (cc. 50, 51, C. XVI, qu. 1), and afterwards in

[Spain](#)

, where the term

*parochia*

, occurring in the ninth canon of the Council of Antioch, held in 341, was translated by "diocese" (c. 2, C. IX, qu. 3). See also the ninth canon of the Synod of Toledo, in 589 (

[Hefele](#)

, ad h. an. and c. 6, C. X, qu. 3). This usage finally became general in the West, though

*diocese*

was sometimes used to indicate

[parishes](#)

in the present sense of the word (see

[PARISH](#)

). In Gaul, the words

*terminus*

,  
*territorium*

,  
*civitas*

,  
*pagus*

, are also met with.

## Historical origin

It is impossible to determine what rules were followed at the origin of the [Church](#) in limiting the territory over which each [bishop](#) exercised his authority. Universality of [ecclesiastical jurisdiction](#) was a personal prerogative of the Apostles; their successors, the [bishops](#), enjoyed only a [jurisdiction](#) limited to a certain territory: thus Ignatius was [Bishop](#) of [Antioch](#), and [Polycarp](#), of [Smyrna](#). The first [Christian](#) communities, quite like the Jewish, were established in towns. The converts who lived in the neighbourhood naturally joined with the community of the town for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries. Exact limitations of episcopal territory could not have engrossed much attention at the beginning of [Christianity](#); it would have been quite impracticable. As a matter of fact, the extent of the diocese was determined by the domain itself over which the [bishop](#) exercised his influence. It seems certain on the other hand, that, in the East at any rate, by the middle of the third century each [Christian](#) community of any importance had become the residence of a [bishop](#) and constituted a diocese. There were [bishops](#) in the country districts as well as in the towns. The [chorepiscopi](#) (*en chora episkopoi*), or rural [bishops](#), were [bishops](#), it is generally thought, as well as those of the towns; though from about the second half of the third century their powers were little by little curtailed, and they were made dependent on

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the

[bishops](#)

of the towns. To this rule

[Egypt](#)

was an exception; Alexandria was for a long time the only see in

[Egypt](#)

. The number of

[Egyptian](#)

dioceses, however, multiplied rapidly during the third century, so that in 320 there were about a hundred

[bishops](#)

present at the

[Council of Alexandria](#)

. The number of dioceses was also quite large in some parts of the

[Western Church](#)

, i.e. in Southern

[Italy](#)

and in

[Africa](#)

. In other regions of

[Europe](#)

, either

[Christianity](#)

had as yet a small number of adherents, or the

[bishops](#)

reserved to themselves supreme authority over extensive districts. Thus, in this early period but few dioceses existed in Northern

[Italy](#)

,

[Gaul](#)

,

[Germany](#)

, Britain, and

[Spain](#)

. In the last, however, their number increased rapidly during the third century. The increase of the faithful in small towns and country districts soon made it

[necessary](#)

to determine exactly the limits of the territory of each church. The cities of the empire, with their clearly defined suburban districts, offered limits that were easily acceptable. From the fourth century on it was generally admitted that every city ought to have its

[bishop](#)

, and that his territory was bounded by that of the neighbouring city. This rule was stringently applied in the East. Although

[Innocent I](#)

declared in 415 that the

[Church](#)

was not bound to conform itself to all the civil divisions which the imperial government chose to introduce, the [Council of Chalcedon](#) ordered (451) that if a *civitas* were dismembered by imperial authority, the [ecclesiastical](#) organization ought also to be modified (can. xvii). In the West, the [Council of Sardica](#) (344) forbade in its sixth canon the establishment of dioceses in towns not populous enough to render desirable their elevation to the dignity of episcopal residences. At the same time many Western sees included the territories of several *civitates*.

From the fourth century we have documentary evidence of the manner in which the dioceses were created. According to the [Council of Sardica](#) (can. vi), this belonged to the provincial synod; the [Council of Carthage](#), in 407, demanded moreover the consent of the [primate](#) and of the [bishop](#) of the diocese to be divided (canons iv and v). The consent of the [pope](#) or the emperor was not called for. In 446, however, [Pope Leo I](#) ruled that dioceses should not be established except in large towns and populous centres (c. 4, Dist. lxxx). In the same period the [Apostolic See](#) was active in the creation of dioceses in the [Burgundian](#) kingdom and in [Italy](#). In the latter country many of the sees had no other [metropolitan](#) than the [pope](#), and were thus more closely related to him. Even clearer is his rôle in the formation of the diocesan system in the northern countries newly [converted](#) to [Christianity](#). After the first successes of St. Augustine in [England](#)

### [Gregory the Great](#)

provided for the establishment of two

### [metropolitan sees](#)

, each of which included two dioceses. In

### [Ireland](#)

, the diocesan system was introduced by

### [St. Patrick](#)

, though the diocesan territory was usually coextensive with the tribal lands, and the system itself was soon peculiarly modified by the general extension of monasticism (see

### [IRELAND](#)

). In

### [Scotland](#)

, however, the diocesan organization dates only from the twelfth century. To the

### [Apostolic See](#)

also was due the establishment of dioceses in that part of

### [Germany](#)

which had been evangelized by

### [St. Boniface](#)

. In the

### [Frankish](#)

Empire the boundaries of the dioceses followed the earlier Gallo-Roman municipal system, though the Merovingian kings never hesitated to change them by royal authority and without pontifical intervention. In the creation of new dioceses no mention is made of

### [papal](#)

authority. The

### [Carlovingian](#)

kings and their successors, the Western emperors, notably the Ottos (936-1002), sought

### [papal](#)

authority for the creation of new dioceses. Since the eleventh century it has been the rule that the establishment of new dioceses is peculiarly a right of the

### [Apostolic See](#)

### [St. Peter Damian](#)

proclaimed (1059-60) this as a general principle (c. 1, Dist. xxii), and the same is affirmed in the well-known "Dictatus" of

### [Gregory VII](#)

(1073-1085). The

### [papal decretals](#)

(see

### [PAPAL DECRETALS](#)

) consider the creation of a new diocese as one of the

*causæ majores*

, i.e. matters of special importance, reserved to the

### [pope](#)

alone (c. 1, X, De translatione episcopi, I, 7; c. 1, X, De officio legati, I, 30) and of which he is

the sole judge (c. 5, Extrav. communes, De præbendis et dignitatibus, III, 2). A word of mention is here due to the missionary or regionary

[bishops](#)

,  
*episcopi gentium*

,  
*episcopi*

(  
*archiepiscopi*

)  
*in gentibus*

, still found in the eleventh century. They had no fixed territory or diocese, but were sent into a country or district for the purpose of evangelizing it. Such were

[St. Boniface](#)

in

[Germany](#)

, St. Augustine in

[England](#)

, and

[St. Willibrord](#)

in the

[Netherlands](#)

. They were themselves the organizers of the diocese, after their apostolic labours had produced

[happy](#)

results. The

[bishops](#)

met with in some

[monasteries](#)

of Gaul in the earlier

[Middle Ages](#)

, probably in imitation of

[Irish](#)

conditions, had no administrative functions (see Bellesheim, *Gesch. d. kath. Kirche in Irland*, I, 226-30, and Lônia, below).

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