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# The Cadaver Synod: Strangest Trial in History

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# The Cadaver Synod: Strangest Trial In History

One thousand, one hundred and four years ago, a criminal trial took place in Italy, a trial so macabre, so gruesome, so frightful, that it easily qualifies as the strangest and most terrible trial in human history. At this trial, called the Cadaver Synod, a dead Pope wrenched from the grave was brought into a Rome courtroom, tried in the presence of a successor Pope, found guilty, and then, according to Horace K. Mann's *The Lives of the Popes in the Early Middle Ages* (1925), "subjected to the most barbarous violence."

For the past several centuries, the papacy has enjoyed enormous respect in every quarter of the globe, partly because most 19th and 20th century Popes have stood for and publicly defended basic principles of liberty, justice and humanity in a tumultuous world often beset by war and revolution, and partly because with a few exceptions these Popes have been extraordinarily admirable human beings. Pope John XXIII, for example, who reigned from 1958 to 1963, is one of the most beloved men of all time, and the present Pope, John Paul II, whose pontificate began in 1978, is not only the most admired man in the world, but also one of the greatest figures of the 20th century.

In earlier times, however, things were sometimes quite different. Eleven hundred years ago, the papacy was going through an era which, John Farrow tells us in his *Pageant of the Popes* (1942), "shroud[ed] the papacy with gloom and shame." The period from around the middle of the 9th century to around the middle of the 10th century is often referred to as the Iron Age of the Papacy. This period, according to Richard P. McBrien's *Lives of the Popes* (1997), "was marred by papal corruption (including the buying and selling of church offices, nepotism, lavish lifestyles, concubinage, brutality, even murder) and the domination of the papacy by German kings and by powerful Roman families."

During that Iron Age, Eamon Duffy writes in *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (1997), "[t]he Chair of St. Peter became the prize of tyrants and brigands and a throne fouled by fierce tides of crime and licentiousness... [and] the papacy became the possession of great Roman families, a ticket to local dominance for which men were prepared to rape, murder, and steal."

"Candidates the most-worthless and unfit were forcibly intruded... into the Chair of St. Peter," Mann adds. "All real power [in Rome] was at this time in the hands of the great families who, through their connection with the local militia, had become practically a feudal aristocracy. These families were all jealous of one another, and were perpetually fighting for supremacy. The one aim of each party, pursued by every resource of violence and intrigue, was to get control of the Chair of St. Peter. Its occupant must be one of theirs at all costs."

"During the Iron Age of the Papacy, Pope succeeded Pope with bewildering rapidity. In the 94 years from 872 through 965 there were 24 Popes; and during the nine years between 896 and 904 there were no less than nine Popes. (By contrast, there was a total of only nine Popes in the entire 20th century, and one of them, John Paul I, reigned only 33 days.)

In the Iron Age, according to Matthew Bunson's *The Pope Encyclopedia* (1995), the powerful families that dominated Rome not only arranged to have their supporters elected Pope, but also "had pontiffs... deposed, and killed to advance their political ambitions... or as vengeance for some action taken by the Pope that offended them or inconvenienced some plan or plot." As a consequence, of those 24 Popes who held office from 872 to 965, seven—nearly one-third—died violently or under suspicious circumstances. Five Popes were assassinated in office, or deposed and then murdered. John VIII, the first Pope to be assassinated, was poisoned by his entourage; when the poison did not act quickly enough, his skull was crushed by blows from a hammer. Both Stephen VII and Leo V were deposed, imprisoned and strangled. John X was deposed, imprisoned and suffocated by being smothered with a pillow. Stephen IX was imprisoned, horribly mutilated by having his eyes, nose, lips, tongue and hands removed, and died of his injuries.

Two other Popes died in circumstances strongly indicative of foul play: Hadrian III was rumored to have been poisoned, and John XII, the sources tell us, either died of a stroke suffered while in bed with a married woman or was beaten to death by the woman's outraged husband.

The Iron Age of the Papacy produced a number of unfortunate "firsts" for the papacy. As noted above, the first papal assassination took place when John VIII was murdered; this was on Dec. 16, 882. In 896, Boniface VI became the first (and only) person to be elected Pope after having previously been twice degraded from holy orders for immorality.

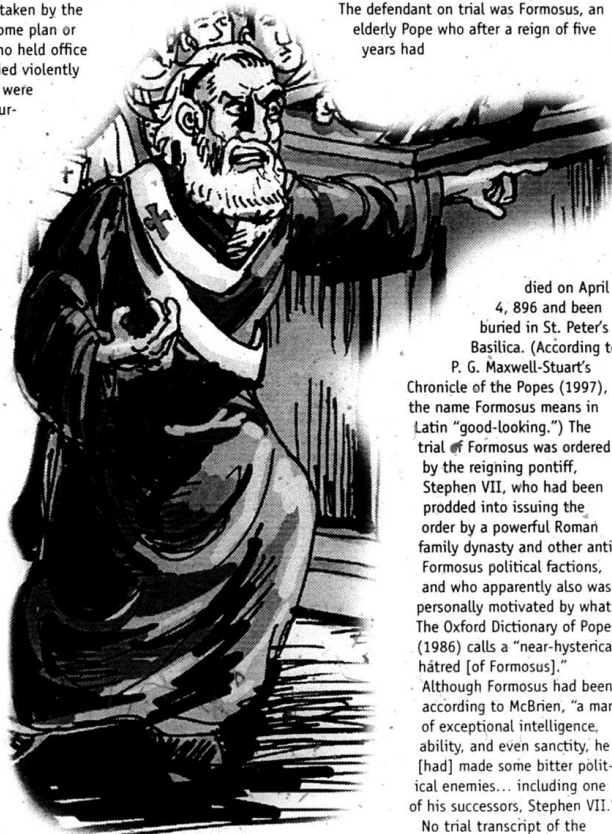
In 904, Sergius III became the first (and only) Pope to order the murder of another Pope; pursuant to his order, Leo V, who previously had been deposed, was strangled in prison. In 931, John XI became the first (and only) illegitimate son of a Pope to be elected Pope; his father was Sergius III. In 955, John XII became the first (and only) teenager to be elected Pope; he was 18 at the time.

It is only against the backdrop of this dark century in the history of the papacy that it is possible to make sense of the Cadaver Synod. Without question, the Cadaver Synod was not only the lowest point in that Iron Age, but also, as

Bunson maintains, "the lowest point in the history of the papacy."

The Cadaver Synod occurred sometime in January, 897 in the Church of St. John Lateran, the Pope's official church in his capacity as Bishop of Rome.

The defendant on trial was Formosus, an elderly Pope who after a reign of five years had



died on April 4, 896 and been buried in St. Peter's Basilica. (According to P. G. Maxwell-Stuart's *Chronicle of the Popes* (1997), the name Formosus means in Latin "good-looking.") The trial of Formosus was ordered by the reigning pontiff, Stephen VII, who had been prodded into issuing the order by a powerful Roman family dynasty and other anti-Formosus political factions, and who apparently also was personally motivated by what The Oxford Dictionary of Popes (1986) calls a "near-hysterical hatred [of Formosus]."

Although Formosus had been, according to McBrien, "a man of exceptional intelligence, ability, and even sanctity, he [had] made some bitter political enemies... including one of his successors, Stephen VII."

No trial transcript of the Cadaver Synod exists. Nonetheless,

it is reasonably clear what happened: Sitting on a throne, Stephen VII personally presided over the proceeding. Also present as co-judges were a number of Roman clergy who were there under compulsion and out of fear.

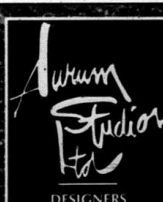
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The trial began when the disinterred corpse of Formosus was carried into the courtroom. On Stephen VII's orders the putrescent corpse, which had been lying in its tomb for seven months, had been dressed in full pontifical vestments. The dead body was then propped up in a chair behind which stood a teenage deacon, quaking with fear, whose undeniable responsibility was to defend Formosus by speaking in his behalf. The presiding judge, Stephen VII, then read the three charges. Formosus was accused of (1) perjury, (2) coveting the papacy and (3) violating church canons when he was elected Pope.

The trial was completely dominated by Stephen VII, who overawed the assemblage with his frenzied tirades. While the frightened clergy silently watched in horror, Stephen VII screamed and raved, hurling insults at and mocking the rotting corpse. Occasionally, when the furious torrent of execrations and maledictions would die down momentarily, the deacon would stammer out a few words weakly denying the charges. When the

The next Pope, John IX, whose pontificate lasted from 898 to 900, also nullified the Cadaver Synod. At two synods convened by John IX, one in Rome, the other in Ravenna, the pronouncements of Theodore II's synod were confirmed, and any future trial of a dead person was prohibited.

Incredibly, however, this was not the end of disputes about the legality of the Cadaver Synod.

Sergius III, who was Pope from 904 to 911, reversed the decisions of the synods of Theodore II and John IX by convening a synod which quashed their invalidations of the Cadaver Synod and reaffirmed Formosus' conviction and sentence. Sergius III even went so far as to place an epitaph on the tomb of Stephen VII which lauded that evident madman and heaped scorn on Formosus.

According to The Oxford Dictionary of Popes, Sergius III was a "violent hater of Formosus" and had been elected Pope by an "anti-Formosan faction." In fact, Sergius III, while a bishop, had actually taken part in the Cadaver Synod where he was one of the clergy coerced into serving as co-judges with Stephen VII. Sergius III, it will be recalled, was also the only Pope to order the murder of another Pope, and also the only Pope to father an illegitimate son who became a Pope. It is no wonder, therefore, that historians such as Farrow describe the pontificate of the murderer Sergius III as "dismal and disgraceful."

Although the decrees of Sergius III's synod marked the last formal pronouncement by the Roman Catholic Church on the lawfulness of the Cadaver Synod (which in Latin, the language of the Church, is officially known as the synod horrenda), today there is a nearly unanimous consensus among scholars and theologians, both within and outside the Church, that the Cadaver Synod was an illegal monstrosity and that Formosus stands entirely vindicated, cleared of all the charges against him. On the other hand, it is

hardly surprising that, as McBrien notes, "there has never been a Pope Formosus II, although Cardinal

Pietro Barbo had to be dissuaded from taking the name in 1464. He took the name Paul II instead."

Although the Cadaver Synod is frequently mentioned in various history books, it has found its way into only one great piece of literature, English poet Robert Browning's masterpiece "The Ring and the Book," a huge poem consisting of 21,116 lines of verse. Browning had a comprehensive understanding of the Cadaver Synod because his own father, Robert Browning, Sr., had, according to The Poetical Works of Robert Browning (1998), published by Oxford University, "become an expert in the conflict-filled lives of the Popes in the late 9th and early 10th centuries." Having done extensive historical research in the libraries of Paris, the elder Browning "knew all about the Cadaver Synod of 897, when the corpse of Pope Formosus was brought into open court and abused and sentenced by his successor, Stephen VII, resulting in a controversy that ran through several pontificates." While "The Ring and the Book" was being composed, the elder Browning had presented to his poet son the results of this historical research, which filled 40 notebooks, and included "a list of many interesting narratives, beginning with 'The remarkable trial of the dead body of Formosus.'"

The story of the Cadaver Synod occupies only 134 lines of "The Ring and the Book," yet Browning was still able, with amazing accuracy and astounding conciseness, to recount the events of the trial, as well as the basic facts about the deposition and murder of Stephen VII, the endeavors of Theodore II and John IX to rehabilitate Formosus, and the efforts of Sergius III to affirm the judgment of the Cadaver Synod.

It is appropriate, therefore, to conclude the present article on history's most bizarre trial, the Cadaver Synod, by quoting two sparkling lines from "The Ring and the Book": "Read: How there was a ghastly Trial once/ Of a dead man by a live man, and both, Popes."

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