

THE TRIAL OF A DEAD POPE

AN ACCOMPLISHED CARDINAL

In the late 9th Century, the Catholic Church was in turmoil. Between the years 896 to 904, there was a new pope every single year. Two popes in this period reigned for less than a month. This period of instability was spurred on by papal corruption, including the buying and selling of church offices, nepotism, lavish lifestyles, concubines, brutality, and even murder. The power in Rome at the time was in the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor, which was appointed by the pope. The many political families of Italy had become a sort of feudal aristocracy, through ties with local militias. The common goal of all these families was to gain control of the Chair of St. Peter and therefore decide who becomes Emperor. The divine right of the pope would ascend whatever bishop wields it, and elevate his party from a small kingdom to a superpower.

In 866, Cardinal Formosus was appointed to be a legate of Bulgaria. A legate is a personal representative appointed directly by the pope to a foreign nation, almost like an ambassador from the Vatican. Boris I of the First Bulgarian Empire held his legate in such high esteem, that he formally petitioned that the Vatican make Formosus the Archbishop of Bulgaria. While this request was remarkable, it was forbidden for a bishop to change sees, and Formosus was already tied to the Diocese of Porto in Rome. The emperor's request was unceremoniously denied. In the early 870s, Formosus' responsibilities had expanded and he was working closely with Pope John VIII and performing various diplomatic duties throughout the young Holy Roman Empire.

TURMOIL BEGINS

Upheaval struck the Vatican when Louis II, the great-grandson of Charlemagne, died in 875. His death triggered a succession crisis, as Louis II had two uncles: Charles the Bald and

Louis the German. Both these men were grandsons of emperor Charlemagne and both had similar claims to the throne. Formosus was sent to Trent to meet with Louis the German and discuss the question of succession. After deliberations the current pope, John VIII, intended to give Charles the Bald the crown. Formosus was again sent as a member of the party which invited Charles the Bald to Rome to receive the crown and ascend the throne. Much of the inner circle disagreed with the coronation of Charles, and favoured Louis the German. As Charles the Bald was crowned, these opponents of the pope and the new emperor fled Rome in secret to seek safety elsewhere in Europe.

Formosus, interestingly enough, fled with them. Formosus was not a direct enemy of John VIII and was certainly no enemy of Charles the Bald, as when he fled Rome he stayed under the protection of a close ally of Charles the Bald. It seems likely then that Formosus was worried about political reprisal from John VIII. Formosus' rapid ascendancy and undeniable talents in the diplomatic sphere had made him a strong candidate for the Chair of St. Peter, and thus made him an enemy of whoever sat in that seat. For this act, Formosus was excommunicated from the church. The charges against him were all encompassing: that he was driven by ambition and not faith, that he had conspired to become the Archbishop of Bulgaria and then Pope, that he had opposed the emperor and that he had deserted his post. An apocryphal tale states that Formosus had made a promise upon his excommunication to never again be ordained and to live out the rest of his days as a layman. This tale was not true, but nonetheless Formosus wisely chose to lay low for several years.

BACK TO BUSINESS

In 882, John VIII was assassinated by his own clerics. They first poisoned him, and then in order to finish the job, they clubbed him to death. After his untimely demise, a new pope was

elected. Pope Marinus I immediately drew controversy as he was the bishop of Caere as he was elected. Under normal rules, the canon forbids bishops from moving between dioceses, but Marinus for whatever reason didn't obey this rule. Ironically this was the very same rule which prevented Formosus from becoming the Archbishop of Bulgaria years earlier. Perhaps in solidarity with Formosus' previous struggle, one of Marinus' first acts as pope was to release him from his excommunication, recall him to Rome, and restore him to his Diocese of Porto. Back in his rightful seat, Formosus quietly played politics for the next eight years.

His quiet patience paid off, and in 891 Formosus was unanimously elected to the papacy. He had inherited a mess from Pope Stephen V, and was deeply distrustful of Emperor Guy III who Stephen V had put in power. Guy's family interests were historically rather hostile to the papacy, and Guy started his life in the same boat. To bolster his position as Emperor, Guy forced Formosus to crown his son Lambert as co-emperor in 892. Formosus was not so easily defeated, and he soon persuaded the powerful Arnulf of Carinthia to advance to Rome and liberate Italy from underneath Guy. In 894, Arnulf's army occupied most of Northern Italy. Guy died soon thereafter, leaving his young son Lambert in the care of his mother, Empress Regent Agiltrude. In 895 Arnulf undertook his second Italian campaign, progressing to Rome and seizing the city from the Empress Regent by force. The following day, Formosus crowned Arnulf as emperor in St. Peter's Basilica. Empress Agiltrude and Lambert escaped to Spoleto. The new Emperor Arnulf moved against Spoleto but was struck with paralysis mysteriously on the way and was unable to continue the campaign. Some accounts claim that Empress Agiltrude had managed to poison the new emperor. Within weeks, Pope Formosus was dead. Though the timing is highly suspect and the exact cause of death is lost to time, he *was* 80 years old, so it's not impossible that he simply died of natural causes.

POST MORTEM

In the riots and chaos which followed Formosus' demise, Pope Boniface VI rose to the papacy. Boniface was an odd choice, having been twice previously degraded from holy orders for immorality. His reign was even stranger still; within 15 days of taking the Chair of St. Peter, Boniface had died. Some say he simply died of the gout, while others contend that it was an inside job in order to create more room for Boniface's successor. In early 896, Pope Stephen VII, the candidate of the party of Spoleto and close ally of Empress Agiltrude, was elected to the papacy. Shortly after Stephen's ascension, Empress Agiltrude and Lambert returned to Rome. It's important to remember that while Formosus' reign as pope only lasted four years, he was such a major player in Vatican politics for decades, even if he was the nicest person alive, he was bound to make a few enemies. Stephen VII was one of those enemies. He was said to have a deep and seething hatred for Formosus, and even after his death he couldn't stand to reign in his shadow.

A year after ascending, Stephen ordered that a synod be held for Pope Formosus. While synod has many meanings in the church and these meanings have changed over time, in the 9th century a synod was a sort of court for the bishops where they would discuss and deliberate matters of administration or doctrine. This synod was prompted by a request from the Empress Agiltrude and was to relate to Formosus' crimes. Agiltrude's purpose was to make the actions by Formosus against her son, Lambert null in order to return him to the throne. While this could've been done by simple papal order, Stephen VI, perhaps driven by his hatred, ordered that the corpse of his predecessor be removed from its tomb and brought to the papal court for the trial.

The trial began as the decomposing corpse of Formosus was carried into the courtroom. On Stephen VII's orders, the cadaver, which had been lying in its tomb for seven months, had been dressed head-to-toe in full papal garb. The dead body was then propped up in a chair behind

which stood a teenaged deacon who acted as the Devil's advocate and defended Formosus from Stephen VI. The three charges which were laid at Formosus' festering feet are: moving between dioceses, committing perjury, and of serving as a bishop while actually a layman. Ironically, he was specifically not guilty of the first crime as he did not become the Archbishop of Bulgaria despite the Emperor's request, and the third was based on that tenuous rumor about a promise made at the moment of his excommunication. Despite the flimsy evidence, the verdict reached by the court was that he was guilty and thus had not been worthy of the pontificate. The "damnatio memoriae" was applied to Formosus, all his measures and acts were annulled, and all his orders were declared invalid. The clothing was torn from his long-dead body, the three fingers from the hand he had used in blessings were cut off, and the corpse was buried in a graveyard for foreigners. This still wasn't enough, as shortly thereafter Stephen had him exhumed again and thrown into the Tiber river.

AFTERMATH

The appalling trial and the savage mistreatment of Formosus' corpse provoked so much anger and outrage in Rome that within a few months there was a palace revolution and Stephen VII was deposed, stripped of his papal garb and imprisoned. Later that same year, the man who had just been Pope was strangled to death in a commoner's prison. Some time later, Formosus' corpse washed up on the bank of the Tiber and was retrieved by a monk. He was reinterred in St. Peter's Basilica, where he lays today. Stephen's successor, Romanus, lasted only ninety-two days. Romanus' successor, Theodore II, lasted less than three weeks. For decades the papacy was plagued by the shadow of Formosus and the Cadaver Synod, with political forces in support of and opposed to the deceased leader fighting bitterly with each other over his orders and legacy. This strange and macabre moment has been described as "the lowest point in the history of the

papacy.” While theatrical and absurd, it’s a stark reminder of the power of political theater and the inhumanity of those driven to seek that power for themselves.