

POPE, EMPEROR AND THE INVESTITURE CONTEST

By es_bih, 17 November 2007;

Papal and Imperial affairs have been intertwined since the revival of the title in the ninth century to culminate Charles the Great's already illustrious career of Western political revival.^[1] The papacy experiencing a slump both in quality and power suffered at the hands of local politics, which it remedied through a revival of the Imperial title in the west thus ensuring Frankish support. Similar conditions were experienced during the Ottonian period when the title had been defunct during the interchange of dynasties following the Carolingian collapse. Otto I took the title in much the same manner, the pope welcomed a sound ally upon whom he could count as defender of the papal right.^[2] The struggle between Pope and Emperor was born out of this revival of Imperial power by Otto I. Germany of the tenth century had a more electoral kingship. Furthermore, while lacking hereditary rights alongside no pronounced East Frankish like feudal institutions the monarch needed the imperial title direly to hold together the vast realm he inherited. On the other hand the Pope too as a political figure had fallen severely from his power broker days during the fall of Byzantine control in Italy in the 7th and 8th centuries. This created a ripe situation for collaboration, but also created a set of circumstances through Ottonian reliance upon investiture in order to control^[3] the German church upon whom he relied for governance. The revived papacy not only looked more politically sound, but morally took upon the cross symbolically as a champion and preserver of Peter's keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Investiture Contest's struggle for dominance symbolized the relationship between Pope and Emperor during the 10th and 11th centuries.

When Otto I took the title of King he had inherited the direct royal connection to the Carolingian Empire through his control of the old Middle Kingdom. His rise to Imperial power had been arduous and full of intrigue and war. The German or East Frankish Kingdom had retained the Imperial rights; however, no Emperor virtually existed for years upon Otto's rise to power. Otto faced strong local lords upon whose support he could not rely on in his quest to strengthen the central government and establish a more viable hereditary monarchy. In order to combat noble encroachment upon his power he relied upon strength of character and the sword. Being a capable and strong monarch Otto could not rely upon might alone. In order to legalize and legitimize his position even further he desired the Imperial title of Charlemagne. While it eluded him for years he finally obtained it driving out Berenger at the behest of Pope John XII. This new ecclesiastic alliance culminated with him being Crowned Emperor in 962 AD^[4]. This legitimized his rule in a legal sense, but in practical matters he weakened the aristocracy in favor of local bishops and abbots who he found more reliable and capable to run his reinvigorated Empire.

The Investiture Contest was born out of this marriage of Imperial and Papal politics. By the Time of Otto III the system had been firmly established and worked effectively.^[5] Nevertheless, such favor of ecclesiastical officials also under pious Emperors allowed for a revival of the more righteous and less corrupt Papacy. By the time of Gregory VII the papacy already had a tradition of decrees declaring its

superiority in selection of ecclesiastical offices. This revival of papal integrity naturally followed with a resurgence of papal strength in European politics. Gregory VII brought this resurgence to the forefront with his bouts against Henry IV. The Imperial title in the eyes of the papacy had been conferred upon the Emperor through the Church, and therefore the Pope as “Emperor Maker” retained his superiority in the relationship. In feudal terms the Emperor was the one who owed the services and obedience to the Pope not the other way around.

As the Investiture Contest sparked off the Emperor’s fought back fiercely. Such measures were heresy to Henry IV’s ears as he was the supreme lord of the Earth upon whom all authority had been conferred through might of conquest and divine intervention. On a more secular and practical basis he needed his control over ecclesiastical offices direly as they ensured smooth government. The self interests of the great duchies and Italian nobility were bound to tear the Empire apart.^[6] With his power to select the local bishops and abbots he ensured himself loyal and capable government, however, with this papal resurgence Henry IV faced a return to non-co operational regional governments.

The roots of this conflict go back a generation earlier to 1059AD when Pope Nicholas issued a decree on Papal Elections.^[7] In retrospect to the previous controversies around the Papal chair Nicholas prepared to strengthen the office for himself and future Popes as well. He decreed: “Ye know, most blessed... how much adversity this apostolic chair ... did endure... to how many blows, indeed, and frequent wounds it was subjected by the traffickers in simonical heresy...”^[8] The decree also strengthened papal power Nicholas imposed that ecclesiastical appointments are the sole business of the church: “But if any one, contrary to this our decree promulgated by a syndodal vote, shall, through sedition or presumption or any while, be elected or even ordained and enthroned: by authority of Peter and Paul he shall be subjected, as Antichrist and invader... to a perpetual anathema, being cast out from the ...holy church of God... with his instigators, favourers and followers... Whoever shall adhere to him... shall be bound by a like sentence.”^[9] Furthermore, Nicholas decreed that the Imperial rights bestowed upon Henry IV come from the Pope and that the future of his dynasty is intertwined with papal predominance. “Henry who is at present called “king,” and will be ... emperor by God’s grace; according as we now have granted to him and to his successors who shall obtain this right personally from this apostolic see.”^[10]

Nevertheless, at the present time the Imperial office had the strength to combat encroachment upon what they deemed their personal rights. The Imperial version of the above mentioned decree contrasts the Papal slightly. In it Henry and his successors are to be included in the decision process alongside the cardinals when it comes to new Papal elections. “That, when the Pontiff of this Roman church universal dies, the cardinals, after first conferring together ... Henry shall approach and consent to the new election.”^[11]

By the time of Henry’s majority Gregory VII had been in an uproar over Papal rights. Upon his election in 1073AD as Pope he took the name of the former Gregory the Great who much like him had been a strong Papal figure and a reformer. Henry in light of the earlier Imperial position chose to abide by traditional Imperial policy. The two clashed as Gregory VII gained confidence both through study of previous papal

bulls and an alliance with the German aristocracy, which hoped for a return to local power at the expense of centralized Imperial authority.

Henry facing excommunication decreed through an official letter to the pope that his authority was neither based on “usurpation”^[12] nor Papal decree. He announced that this authority was bestowed upon him through divine right: “Henry, king not through usurpation but through the holy ordination of God...”^[13] With this defiance of Papal authority Gregory VII moved resiliently against Henry IV through an official excommunication and intended deposition. “I withdraw, through thy power and authority, from Henry the king, son of Henry the emperor, who has risen against thy church with heard of insolence, the rule over the whole kingdom of the Germans and over Italy. And I absolve all Christians from the bonds of oath which they have made or shall make to him; and I forbid any one to serve him as king...”^[14]

Henry fearing international reprisal at his weakened condition alongside having the nobility in open revolt repented and was absolved of his sins by Gregory in the year 1077 AD at Canossa. Henry continued his previous policies that distanced him from Gregory once again, while the Holy See turned out other documents in favor of its position. In 1078 and 1080 two decrees issued a ban on lay investiture which further strengthened the theological backing for Gregory’s case of Papal supremacy. The decree of 1078AD announced: “we decree that no one of the clergy shall receive the investiture with a bishopric or abbey or church from the hand of an emperor or king or of any lay person, male or female...”^[15] Furthermore, while the former announced Church investiture the latter pronounced heavy punishment upon nonconformists. “Likewise if any emperor, king, duke... perform the investiture with bishoprics or with any ecclesiastical dignity, he shall be bound by the bonds of the same condemnation...”^[16]

This struggle continued on past the present Pope and Emperor. However, the terms of engagement and foreshadowing of future events were foreshadowed through this initial conflict. Henry IV had been in a position of power in 1076 as both King of Italy and Germany. Furthermore, while the nobles rose in rebellion he had been able to silence the uprising and reestablish Imperial control. His abilities as King saved him from losing his title, nevertheless, his enemies at present were many and taking on the Pope could not be sustained as a long term strategy. He won a diplomatic victory by humbly presenting himself before the Pope clothed much like a peasant begging forgiveness and inclusion in the Roman Church. The Pope had to absolve him of his sins due to Papal regulation. Henry won a diplomatic victory that forestalled this power struggle however he had not been able to win the war as the Investiture Contest ended up crippling the Imperial authority at home and abroad. These events followed by a second excommunication^[17] and the eventual death of Gregory. Henry came out victorious for the time being, but in time the Papacy supported by nobles at times and the French monarchy prevailed.

The Investiture Contest marked the end of an epoch of Imperial might home and abroad. With the Papal attempt to curb outside selection of clergy in order to strengthen its own position and cleanse the Church of corruption the succeeding Popes were detrimental to Imperial authority. The Popes needed the Emperor in 962AD for the simple reason of protection. A faithful Emperor had been a dire need for the legendary Charlemagne showed how a brave monarch had the power to curb

corruption and support the Church. However, Ottonian domestic policy intertwined with lay investiture. If the Ottonian system had been based on a secular footing the two bodies would have been cooperating throughout this strengthening of Papal authority as well. The Emperor could afford to bow down to the Pope symbolically by taking his throne from him, but he could not even dare think to give away his right to assign ecclesiastical offices in his domains for they were the chief instruments of governance in the Empire. As Papal authority strengthened Imperial authority took a steep downward spiral. Regional factors within German politics were silent but brooding and took full advantage of this international affair. In conclusion the relationship between Pope and Emperor in the 10th and 11th centuries relied upon cooperation, when that cooperation had been compromised by the strengthening of Imperial authority that relationship crumbled taking with it the Ottonian tradition of a strong and capable Western Emperor.

References and Notes:

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