

Gregory VII

Born c. 1020
Died 1085

Italian pope

Henry IV

Born 1050
Died 1106

German king and Holy Roman emperor

Gregory VII was the pope, leader of the Catholic Church, and Henry IV, as Holy Roman emperor, ruled a number of lands. Thus they were the two most powerful men in Western Europe, and in 1075, they faced off in a power struggle called the Investiture Controversy that would have an enormous impact on history.

The immediate cause was the right of the emperors to appoint bishops and other church leaders, a right that the pope claimed solely for himself. In reality, the conflict between Gregory and Henry represented a much larger battle between church and state, a battle that would influence events in the Middle Ages and would continue to affect public life even in modern times.

Gregory's early years

The future Pope Gregory VII was born with the name Hildebrand in Rovaca, a village in northern Italy, in about 1020. In medieval Europe, it was not uncommon for a young

"In the name of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I withdraw ... from Henry ... the rule over the whole kingdom of the Germans and over Italy. And I absolve all Christians from the bonds of the oath which they have made or shall make to him; and I forbid any one to serve him as king."

"First Deposition and Banning of Henry IV," February 22, 1076

man to know—or rather, to be told—what he would do for a living when he was still very young. Thus as a boy Hildebrand began an education for the priesthood, and later became a monk in the Benedictine order.

Hildebrand underwent much of his education in Rome, center of the Catholic Church and home of the pope. In 1032, Benedict IX had become pope, but with his loose lifestyle and riotous living, he became unpopular, and was overthrown twelve years later. Benedict managed to return to the papal throne, however, for a short time before selling his position to the future Pope Gregory VI.

The fact that someone could sell off the papal throne, which was supposed to be sacred before God, said much about the state of affairs in the Catholic Church at the time. As pope, Hildebrand would do much to reform the church, yet he got his start in papal affairs by serving as chaplain to Gregory VI from 1045 to 1047.

Emperors and popes

Centuries earlier, Pope Leo III had crowned **Charlemagne** (see entry) as “Emperor of the Romans.” From this title had arisen the idea of the Holy Roman Empire, which comprised a number of small states in what is now Germany and surrounding countries. Though the empire was seldom a strongly unified realm, the title of emperor had great symbolic status for German kings, who were usually crowned at special ceremonies in Rome.

In 1046, three men—Benedict, Gregory VI, and Sylvester III, who had briefly occupied the throne after Benedict—all claimed the papal throne. King Henry III of Germany, father of Henry IV, traveled to Italy to straighten out the situation. His solution was to remove all three and install a new pope, Clement II, who crowned him emperor.

Gregory VI was forced into exile in Germany, and he took Hildebrand with him. Two years later, however, in 1049, Hildebrand returned to Rome as advisor to Pope Leo IX, and over the years that followed, he would occupy a number of important positions within the church.

Henry's early years

When Hildebrand was thirty years old, his future rival Henry IV was born in Germany. Not long afterward, in 1056, Henry III died, and therefore his six-year-old son became king of Germany. Until he reached the age of sixteen, however, Henry's mother Agnes of Poitou (pwah-TÜ) ruled in his place as regent.

In the early years of his reign, Henry fought a series of conflicts with nobles—rulers within his kingdom who had inherited title and lands, but held less power than the king—from the German region of Saxony. In 1075, however, the twenty-five-year-old king would face the most powerful opponent of his life: Pope Gregory VII.

Gregory the reformer

On April 21, 1073, Pope Alexander II died. Soon afterward Hildebrand, who had become immensely popular among the people of Rome, was elected pope by the cardinals, the highest officials within the church other than the pope himself. In honor of Gregory VI, he chose the title Gregory VII.

Gregory set about reforming the church, which had long been in decline. Not only could church offices be bought and sold, but increasingly more corrupt men had taken positions of power, thus weakening the moral authority of the pope and other church leaders. With the church in a shambles, Gregory was determined to put it back on the right course—and to show the Holy Roman emperor who was boss.

For many years, emperors had been investing, or appointing, bishops within the church. On February 24, 1075, however, Gregory issued orders banning lay investiture, or appointment of bishops by leaders outside the church. Not long afterward, he put down on paper a list of twenty-seven key points about the papacy, or the office of the pope: for instance,



Pope Gregory VII was determined to rid the church of corruption and increase the power of the papacy, which resulted in a historic confrontation with Emperor Henry IV.

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Matilda of Tuscany

Though she was related to Emperor Henry IV, Matilda of Tuscany (c. 1046–1115) took part in the Investiture Controversy on the side of Pope Gregory VII. Her family had long controlled lands in northern Italy, including Canossa, site of the castle where Gregory and Henry had an important meeting in 1077.

Matilda was raised in an unconventional way for a young girl of the Middle Ages, receiving the sort of comprehensive and wide-ranging education that was normally set aside only for boys. Clearly she was being groomed for leadership, and upon the death of her father and brother in 1052, Matilda became countess of Tuscany.

Knowing that neighboring princes might want to invade a region “ruled” by

a six-year-old girl, her mother married Godfrey, duke of Lorraine (a region on the border between France and Germany.) However, Godfrey was in conflict with Emperor Henry III of Germany, who imprisoned both mother and daughter from 1055 to 1056.

No doubt as a result of this experience, Matilda was no supporter of her German cousins. Furthermore, she became closely involved in church affairs, and her family were close friends with the future Pope Gregory VII. Therefore when the Investiture Controversy between Henry IV and Gregory VII came to a head, Matilda sided with Gregory. Nonetheless, the fact that she was related to Henry made her a natural go-between for the two opposing sides.

he wrote that no one had the right to question the pope’s actions, and that kings and princes should kiss the pope’s feet.

The conflict begins

In June 1075, Henry won a victory over the rebellious German princes with the help of his cousin Rudolf, duke of the German region of Swabia. He recognized that the German nobles wanted to challenge his power and would encourage a conflict between the pope and himself. He relayed this information to the pope, but in November 1076, he appointed a high church official himself in direct violation of the pope’s order. This resulted in a letter from Gregory that threatened Henry’s excommunication, or removal from the church.



Matilda of Tuscany. *Reproduced by permission of the Library of Congress.*

Like her mother before her, Matilda had sought to strengthen her position through marriage, in her case to her step-brother Godfrey the Hunchback in 1069. The purpose of this marriage was political, and after her infant son died in 1071, she returned to Italy. Godfrey died in 1076, but she remarried in 1089, once again for political reasons. This time the groom was Welf V, a German duke who supported the new pope, Victor III, against Henry. By this time she was forty-three, and Welf only seventeen.

Matilda enjoyed a much closer relationship with Henry V, son of Henry IV, than she had with his father. But when she died in 1115, leaving no heirs, Henry V claimed most of her lands. She was later celebrated in a long poem by Donizo, her chaplain at Canossa.

Angered by the pope's letter, in January 1076 Henry called together twenty-four bishops in the German city of Worms (VURMZ), and they sent a letter of protest to the pope. Along with this letter, Henry sent one of his own that called the pope "a false monk." This in turn enraged Gregory, who on February 22 issued orders declaring that Henry was excommunicated and damned to hell; furthermore, the people of his kingdom were forbidden from submitting to him.

The snows of Canossa

This put Henry in a very serious position, since medieval people were far more likely to follow the pope than they were a king. Rudolf took advantage of the situation to

turn against Henry and gather support. Henry sent a message to the pope in which he offered to submit, but by then the pope had realized what the German nobles already knew: that if he allowed Henry to submit to him and thereby called off the fight, he would lose influence in Germany.

Henry went south, hoping to meet with Gregory, but he found his way blocked by nobles who wanted to prevent the meeting. Finally, in January 1077, he managed to cross the Alps, a high range of mountains between Germany and Italy. He arrived on January 25 at the pope's temporary residence, a castle belonging to Matilda of Tuscany (see box) at Canossa (kuh-NAH-suh) in northern Italy.

Barefoot and dressed in rags to indicate the fact that he had humbled himself before the pope's spiritual authority, Henry waited in the snow outside the castle. To test the king's sincerity, Gregory allowed him to remain outside in the cold for three whole days; then he agreed to forgive him, and ended his excommunication.

A change of fortunes

The scene at Canossa made for great drama; however, it was not the end of the story. On March 26, 1077, Rudolf declared himself king of Germany, and Rudolf and Henry began warring with each other for the throne. Henry demanded that Gregory help him by excommunicating Rudolf. Gregory, however, was more inclined to support Rudolf. When the war began to go in Henry's favor, Gregory declined to excommunicate Rudolf and instead re-excommunicated Henry.

This resulted in a war of words between church and state, or pope and king, and both enlisted the help of learned men who referred to the Bible on the one hand, or Roman law on the other, to prove that their leader should rule Europe. Henry even tried to replace Gregory with an antipope (someone not recognized as a true pope by the church), Clement III. The death of Rudolf in October 1080 helped him immensely, and he crushed all further resistance to his rule. By the early 1080s, he was on the offensive against the pope.

By 1083, Henry had captured the part of Rome that included the papal residence at St. Peter's, and he imprisoned

Gregory. On March 21, 1084, Henry won control over most of the city, and soon afterward placed Clement III on the papal throne. Clement in turn crowned Henry Holy Roman emperor, and excommunicated Gregory.

A painful ending

Now desperate, Gregory called on the help of Robert Guiscard (gee-SKARD), leader of a powerful Norman family that controlled the island of Sicily. Robert's forces marched on Rome and drove out Henry's army, but when the Romans resisted them, the Normans looted and burned much of the city. This in turn made Gregory a very unpopular man, and he fled Rome under the protection of the Normans.

Gregory died in exile soon afterward, on May 25, 1085. Henry went on living for twenty-one more years, but his life would end as painfully as Gregory's had. In 1093, his sons rebelled against him, and in 1105 one of them had him imprisoned. Henry escaped, but died soon afterward.

Church and state

In 1088, Urban II (see box in Innocent III entry), who had inherited Gregory's enthusiasm for papal authority, became pope. Seven years later, while Henry was caught up in struggles with his sons, Urban launched the First Crusade, a war to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims who controlled it. In so doing, he greatly built up the authority of the popes over political leaders.

Henry's son Henry V, who had imprisoned his father, later reached an agreement with Pope Calixtus II in the Concordat of Worms (1122). The latter recognized the power of the popes, who for the next three centuries would remain among the most powerful leaders in Western Europe.

But popes would not rule without challenges from kings, who eventually gained more control. Even today, the struggle between church and state—that is, between the authority of government and that of religion—continues. In most Western countries, however, the political power is clearly in the hands of the government.

For More Information

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