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The Pope Who Was Put on Trial Nine Months After He Died

Unpublished spec sample by Alex Mercer (~600 words)

In January 897, a courtroom in Rome's Lateran Palace held a defendant who could not speak, could not stand, and had been in the ground for roughly nine months.

The accused was Pope Formosus, who had died in April 896. His prosecutor was the sitting pope, Stephen VI. On Stephen's orders the corpse was exhumed, dressed in full papal vestments and propped on a throne to face a council of clergy. A deacon was assigned to stand beside the body and answer on its behalf, which made the defense about as effective as you would expect.

The charges were technical. Church law of the time frowned on a bishop leaving one see for another, and Formosus had been Bishop of Porto before becoming Bishop of Rome. Stephen argued that this made his entire papacy illegitimate. The deeper reason was politics. Ninth-century Rome was a prize fought over by rival Italian and Frankish factions, and in 896 Formosus had crowned the East Frankish king Arnulf of Carinthia as emperor, snubbing the powerful House of Spoleto. Stephen owed his position to the Spoletan side. Putting Formosus on trial was a way to erase everything he had done, including that coronation.

The verdict was never in doubt. The dead pope was declared unworthy of the office, his acts and ordinations were annulled, and the three fingers of his right hand that he had used to give blessings were cut off. The body was stripped, buried in a common grave and soon thrown into the Tiber.

That was where the plan began to fail. The trial, now remembered as the Cadaver Synod, disgusted many Romans. According to the traditional accounts, Formosus's body was pulled from the river and quietly given a proper burial; later writers added stories of miracles attached to it. Within months, public anger turned on Stephen himself. By the summer of 897 he had been deposed, thrown into prison and strangled.

The reversals kept coming. Pope Theodore II, who reigned for only about twenty days late in 897, annulled the synod and had Formosus reburied with honor in St. Peter's Basilica. His successor, John IX, went further and held councils that banned putting the dead on trial. Then, a few years later, Pope Sergius III, who had taken part in the original synod, reaffirmed the verdict against Formosus. That left clergy ordained by Formosus unsure for years whether their own ordinations counted.

The episode sits at the start of what historians later nicknamed the "pornocracy," or "rule of the harlots," a stretch of the tenth century when powerful Roman families made and unmade popes almost at will. The label comes from hostile chroniclers such as Liutprand of Cremona, so it should

be read with some caution. Even so, the Cadaver Synod remains one of the strangest legal proceedings in European history: a trial in which the defendant's silence was taken as part of the evidence against him.

What makes it more than a curiosity is what it shows about power. Stephen did not just want Formosus gone; Formosus was already gone. He wanted the record changed. The backlash suggests that even in a violent age, ordinary Romans recognized when a court had stopped being about justice and become pure theater.

Sources consulted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Cadaver Synod" and "Formosus" entries.
- Catholic Encyclopedia (1909), "Pope Formosus" and "Pope Stephen VI (VII)."
- Liutprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis* (10th century), Book I, the main near-contemporary narrative source; hostile and partisan.
- J. N. D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford University Press), entries for Formosus, Stephen VI, Theodore II, John IX and Sergius III.

Note: details like the exact recovery of the body and the miracles come from traditional, partly legendary accounts and are framed that way above.