



Adrian IV - the only English Pope elected, 1154

There have been few non-Italian popes in history but an Englishman, Nicholas Breakspear, elected as Pope Adrian IV, was one of the greatest. At that time the papacy was in peril from enemies on all sides, but Adrian challenged them resolutely, courageously and successfully.

Nicholas Breakspear was born around 1100 of humble stock in Abbot's Langley in Hertfordshire. His father Robert had taken minor orders at the nearby monastery of St Albans. Nicholas was admitted to the monastery as a pupil but fell from grace due to laziness and was expelled. He quit his native land, went to Paris and gained admission at the University.

In 1125 Nicholas went south to enter the novitiate at the house of the Canons Regular of St Rufus at Avignon where he was professed, ordained a priest and later became Prior. He soon established himself as a force to be reckoned with. In 1137 he succeeded to the abbacy, but the Canons found his rule too strict and appealed to Pope Eugenius III, who sent them home in reconciliation. The complaints were repeated in 1146, together with a deputation appealing to Pope Eugenius. This time the Pope bid the Canons find another abbot. He retained Breakspear for his own service, creating him Cardinal-bishop of Albano.

In 1152 Cardinal Breakspear received instructions to go to Norway and Sweden as papal legate. His first achievement was to settle the differences between the Scandinavian monarchs which led to a lasting peace. He then created a new archbishopric for the kingdom of Norway at Nidaros (now Trondheim) in honour of St Olaf (d1030). Here he invested John Byrgesson, Bishop of Stavanger, with the pallium creating him the first Archbishop of Nidaros, with responsibility for the sees of Apsloe, Bergen and Stavanger, those of the small Norwegian colonies, of the Orcades, Hebrides, the Faro Islands and that of Gaard in Greenland, also the Shetland and Western Isles of Scotland and the Isle of Man. The legate's success in Sweden was limited however, and he returned to Rome where on arrival, he was acclaimed "Apostle of the North". The Pope had just died and as he represented the most popular candidate to succeed, Nicholas was acclaimed Pope, taking the name Adrian IV. He was crowned on 4th December 1154.

Almost at once Pope Adrian found himself in trouble. Within the Roman Senate there was a powerful faction, led by Arnold of Brescia, a Roman tribune and ardent heretic, that wanted to sweep away

papal authority and return to the days of the ancient Roman Republic. Turmoil in Rome made the Pope's position there untenable and he retired behind the Vatican fortifications. Besieged by the hostile Republicans, Adrian took the unprecedented step of imposing an Interdict on the people of Rome. All churches were closed and no religious services, including Mass, could be held. It was Lent and Holy Week was fast approaching with pilgrims pouring into the city. Faced with spiritual and financial disaster the people lost their nerve. Arnold of Brescia was banished and the Senate acknowledged the temporal sovereignty of the Holy See. Adrian lifted the Interdict and said Mass in the Lateran Basilica.



Pope Adrian IV's portrait in the Venerable English College, Rome

Adrian's most formidable threat came from Frederick Barbarossa, the mightiest German sovereign since Charlemagne, who harboured an ambition to subsume all of Italy into his Empire and make himself the most powerful magnate in Europe. Frederick had succeeded to the throne in 1153, was crowned at Aachen, but needed the prestige of being crowned by the Pope as Holy Roman Emperor. He embarked on a campaign of conquest in Italy and advanced on Rome.

Not knowing Frederick's intentions Pope Adrian rode out, stopping on the first night at Nepi. On the morrow the intrepid Pontiff moved to take part in one of the most dramatic scenes in history. It was customary in the Middle Ages for the Pope, whenever he paid another sovereign the high compliment of a personal visit, to ride to the meeting-place on a white palfrey and the sovereign whom he was honouring was expected to assist him in dismounting by holding his stirrup as an act of respect to him as the successor of the Blessed Apostle. When

Adrian arrived at the Royal Pavilion outside Sutri, Frederick strode forward but nothing happened. Hearing angry murmuring from the German troops, the Pope's retinue with the cardinals took fright and fled, leaving Adrian alone. The Pope quietly dismounted and Frederick stepped eagerly forward but Adrian refused to give him the customary kiss of peace and rode back to Sutri. The next day the two met again but this time Frederick saw sense and assisted the Pope off his horse. The kiss of peace was exchanged and on June 18, 1155 Frederick was anointed and crowned by Pope Adrian in St Peter's.

The Roman Republicans then revolted against both Pope and Empire. Battle ensued and the Emperor's forces won the day. However, feeling that he could no longer defend the city, Frederick departed and, seeing the Pope safely ensconced at Tivoli, he battled his way back to Germany.

Meanwhile, the Norman freebooter King William of Sicily was quietly occupying papal territories in the South. Adrian himself led the forces against William, recovering Brindisi and other maritime towns but William advanced and defeated the papal army, taking Adrian prisoner. A summit meeting was held at Beneventum where a settlement was agreed and Adrian returned to Rome in November 1156.

At the same time Pope Adrian was facing anarchic confusion in Ireland. The land had been at the mercy of the Vikings who had looted and destroyed the churches and monasteries. Church lands had been appropriated by laymen and there was chronic internal strife with corruption everywhere. In 1155 King Henry II of England requested Papal sanction to invade Ireland. Adrian's response obliged Henry to rule Ireland as a Papal fief and do homage to the Pope, which he refused. Twelve years after Adrian's death Henry did eventually invade Ireland. A papal bull justifying his action called 'Laudabiliter' (praiseworthy) and attributed to Adrian was produced but has long been considered to have been a forgery.

Adrian died suddenly in 1159 and was buried in St Peter's where his sarcophagus bears the simple inscription "Hadrianus Papa IIII". While controversial, he had done his part in securing a firm foundation for the great revival of the papacy in the Middle Ages.

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