Frederick had to deal with more than the princes. He had to confront the papacy. In 1157, at the diet (assembly) of Besançon, Pope Adrian IV sent Frederick a letter that coyly referred to the imperial crown as the pope’s *beneficium*—“benefit” or, more ominously, “fief.” “A great tumult and uproar arose from the princes of the realm at so insolent a message,” wrote Rahewin, a cleric who had access to many of the documents and people involved at the time. “It is said that one of the [papal] ambassadors, as though adding sword to flame, inquired: ‘from whom then does he have the empire, if not from our lord the pope?’ Because of this remark, anger reached such a pitch that one of [the princes] . . . threatened the ambassador with his sword.”

Frederick calmed his supporters, but in the wake of this incident, he countered the “holy church” by coining an equally charged term for his empire: *sacrum imperium*—the “sacred...