The Politics of Space in Early Modern Rome

Laurie Nussdorfer

Wesleyan University, lnussdorfer@wesleyan.edu
As absolute as the pope in Rome” was a simile that seventeenth-century Italians invoked when they wished to express the notion that a ruler could do exactly as he pleased. Spatially the popes of the Counter-Reformation lived up to this image by carving out and clearing grand ceremonial vistas that invited the admiration of Rome and the world. Their patronage contributed to two of the most famous monumental public spaces in early modern Europe, Michelangelo’s Capitoline plaza in the sixteenth century and Bernini’s St. Peter’s square in the seventeenth. As the patrons intended, these rhetorical gestures of absolutist urbanism—the great “stage sets” of the Counter-Reformation papacy—have long succeeded in dazzling visitors and scholars with the magnificently articulated authority of the popes. But what was the reality behind this image from the point of view of the urban population who were the popes’ subjects? There was more than one actor on the city stage, and authority in Rome was not as easily monopolized as the pontiffs tried to suggest. In this study I analyze the political character of papal absolutism from the perspective of the Roman population, focusing on the rhetorical uses of space that this population articulated.

The rhetoric of absolutism turned all eyes toward the prince. But this rhetoric veils the fact that the eyes and attention of the prince’s devoted and obedient subjects were often turned elsewhere. Rome was a city of diverse and independent centers of influence. Despite the relative success of the papacy’s efforts to deny subjects any formal public authority, patrician families, religious orders, and foreign embassies were just some of the groups that rivaled the popes as foci of private, less formal, attention and power. Lacking political institutions that gave them an active role in decision making, these and other urban groups found other ways to advance or protect their interests. The city landscape itself became a substitute for participatory institutions; it was a flexible and accessible rhetorical resource. When we see how these city dwellers utilized and gave meaning to urban space in their private battles for social prestige or for control of particular neighborhoods, we understand more clearly why the popes themselves resorted to such grandiose public gestures. Space in Rome was a vehicle for political expression. Here I explore how papal subjects used urban space as a means of expression and what their use of space reveals about the tensions within this particular absolutist regime, an elected monarchy ruling an Italian state and an international church.

In probing the political meanings of “private,” that is, nongovernmental, space in Rome, we shall see that the city had a great diversity of types of space. Our protagonists are a wide range of Roman residents: people of varied gender, class, culture, and nationality. If “space

I am grateful for the suggestions of Nicholas Adams, Patricia Fortini Brown, Elizabeth S. Cohen, Joseph Connors, Gene Irschick, Burr Litchfield, Michael Meeker, Pamela Radcliff, Peter Sahlins, and Marla Stone. I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude the late Fred Travisano, who drew the map of Rome.
speaks," as the anthropologists say, the spaces examined here brag, mock, shout, argue, and throw things.1 This study discusses three questions raised by such contention. What kinds of space were fought over in baroque Rome? How did space express or activate conflict? And what does contested urban space reveal about the nature of this absolutist regime?

I pursue the role of space through some typical examples of Roman quarrels: some involving domestic and neighborhood battles, others involving family and institutional rivalries, still others involving political disagreements, religious tensions, jurisdictional contests, or challenges to governmental authority. By examining the varied locales of disputes, I seek to find out how spaces were charged with meaning or activated in struggle. Although Rome shared characteristics with other early modern capitals, the regime to which it gave a setting marked its urban political culture in unique ways. In concluding I attempt to connect these examples of contested and vocal space with the specificities of absolutist government as the popes practiced it in Rome. I begin with space that was closest to home, domestic space, then push into the heart of town, and finally move outward to the city’s edge.

1. Neighborhood and Domestic Quarrels

When we examine urban quarrels at the smallest and most private scale, we immediately notice a strong connection between gender and space. It is usual to think of conflict in the early modern city as something that happened in “public space” and to discover in such conflicts and spaces that women were largely absent. But if we look at the more intimate arenas of social interaction, the neighborhoods and houses of seventeenth-century Rome, women were often protagonists in spatial contests. Moreover, space itself was very clearly a gendered concept in the minds and habits of early modern urban people. In a discussion of gender and topography in Renaissance Venice, Dennis Romano has highlighted the differences in the uses and images of space for men and women. Venetian men claimed the whole city as permissible terrain, while women took risks when they left the vicinity of their home parishes. The ritual and political center of town, the piazza of San Marco, was gendered male, as was the great Rialto bridge where the heart of Venetian commerce beat. Female space, by contrast, was parochial and domestic.2

While no similar global study has been made of Rome, Venetian gender geography almost certainly had its counterpart in other Italian cities. Seventeenth-century Roman sources, whether narrative chronicles of urban events or criminal proceedings, rarely depict women in action out of doors. In only one instance, during the special period of interregnum after the pope’s death known as the Vacant See, have I found mention of women as political participants in crowds, in this case a throng chanting mocking songs against the former pontiff.3

1 E. T. Hall, The Silent Language (New York 1959), quoted in Burke, 7. Among the most significant recent theorists of the rhetoric of urban space is M. de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley 1984); see esp. chap. 7, “Walking in the City.” For a survey of theoretical work on space and power see D. Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Oxford 1980). For a brief but thoughtful treatment of the historical connection between urban space and politics, see J. Konvitz, The Urban Millennium: The City-Building Process from the Early Middle Ages to the Present (Carbondale, Ill. 1985) 25–31.


3 [Teodoro Ameyden], “Diario della Città e Corte di Roma . . .,” Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 1832, 145.
Although women were physically present in the streets, they were not present in representations of spatial conflict. In most chronicles or news accounts, all male-authored, the lone female protagonists are aristocrats or nuns dying “in the odor of sanctity.” They are in enclosed settings and they are pacific, though the holiness of their lives might well become contentious. The more disputatious females, notably courtesans, who appear in court records, despite their status as “public women” who presumably could move about with greater ease than most of their sex, preferred to use male agents when organizing personal vendettas in the streets. As Elizabeth S. Cohen has shown, even women who flouted the general rules of gender propriety in early modern Rome adhered to gendered notions of urban space.\(^4\) These examples leave the impression that the most visible arteries and squares of the baroque city were indeed coded as male.

Such a marked gender boundary between the visible space “outside” and the invisible space “inside” would lead us to expect a volatile terrain with a pronounced gender dimension at the borders of “outside” and “inside.” And indeed, as Cohen puts it, “the doors and windows of early modern Rome were exciting places, emotionally and sexually charged.”\(^5\) On this smaller urban scale, criminal proceedings document tensions that were expressed in a rich array of spatial gestures, often with a sexual component, directed at houses. Noisy or dirty rituals of “house scorning” and the posting of anonymous insults on doorways were two forms such conflict took. On a June night in 1608 a crowd, whistling, farting, blowing horns, and throwing stones, cried out to a couple living in Piazza Sant’Agostino, “procuress . . . slut . . . we want to put horns on your door.” A quieter revenge might leave excrement, ink, or blood on the front portals of artisan homes or draw phallices (and horns) there or stick up handwritten sheets denouncing husbands as cuckold and wives as whores.\(^7\)

Interpersonal conflicts between people who knew each other broke out at the house door because of the gender connotations of domestic space; here was the locus and most vulnerable point of female and male honor.\(^8\) Rhetorically the best way to lower a man’s reputation was to blacken his wife’s; spatially the choicest site for character assassination was their residence. The association of women with houses made sexual insult targeting female behavior the preferred form of personal attack by both men and women. Although women were more often victims than perpetrators of “house scorning” rites or defamatory libels, they sometimes commissioned such business or even took part themselves.\(^9\) Marking the house in this public manner shamed one’s enemy before the world that counted here, the audience of the neighborhood. The meaningfulness of the space in front of a building is a theme that will


\(^{5}\) Ibid., 621.

\(^{6}\) Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASR), Tribunale Criminale del Governatore, Processi (1608), busta 67, 194r–v, quoted ibid., 604–5. For the location of Piazza Sant’Agostino, see fig. 1.

\(^{7}\) Examples from ASR, Tribunale Criminale del Governatore, Processi, are cited in E. S. Cohen 1992, 602–3; Burke, 95, 104; Scrittura e popolo nella Roma barocca, 1585–1721, ed. A. Petrucci (Rome 1982) 25, 33–34.

\(^{8}\) E. S. Cohen 1992, 621.

\(^{9}\) Accused of posting written insults were two courtesans and a quarryman’s wife; Burke, 107. E. S. Cohen 1992, 615–16, describes two cases of female-initiated “house scorning.” In one the courtesan Agnese de Incoronatis organized two “house scorning” by male acquaintances against her enemy Domitilla Corvina and dressed herself as a man to participate in the second one; ASR, Tribunale Criminale del Governatore, Processi (1607), busta 57, 500–506. In the other case, a unique instance in which a woman attacked a man through a “house scorning,” it was directed at the interior rather than the exterior of his house; ASR, Tribunale Criminale del Governatore, Processi (1601), busta 12, 803–11v.
reappear when we consider the role of urban palaces in the rivalries of patrician families. It is worth noting that front doors or walls of modest artisanal dwellings also had special resonance, imparted not by architectural skill but by the gendered character of space in early modern Rome.

What lay behind the doors was no less a battleground, as men and women inside houses fought with each other for freedom and control. Two examples of illicit love recently analyzed by Elizabeth S. Cohen and Thomas V. Cohen allow us to look more closely at the spatial dimensions of these emotional episodes. An impassioned youth writes to his lover that his mother has moved to block his secret nocturnal exits. She has taken away his door key and denied him access to a particular room in the house because she thinks he talks to his lover from that room. The resourceful young man will try to sleep in a different room, "under the loggia." He is a virtual prisoner; his mother locks the door every night, and she makes him keep the door to his room open at all times so that she can see him and make sure that he is not opening his window. He begs his lover to show herself at her window. And, while she is at it, he asks that she "plug up that hole." In this domestic arena, conflict between mother and son focused on getting out.

In another, quasi-Boccaccian, case the issue was getting in. A notary's wife succeeded in having a love affair with a neighbor, even though her husband locked her inside as he left each day. The house was meant to be an enclosure to insure the honor of husband and wife, but it turned out to be a tissue of apertures; windows, backyards, attic crawl spaces all served as ways of piercing its protective confines. The suitor first got the lady's attention by throwing a message into the backyard and by speaking to her maid, a key intermediary, from his balcony. A window provided the means to convey a signal. In the crawl space above the ceiling of a second-story room, the protagonists cut a hole between the adjoining buildings; soon the enlarged opening acquired an artfully plastered cover. When discovered, the lover is glimpsed midway through the ceiling, his torso in the crawl space and his legs dangling below. He scrambles to safety, as the angry husband pokes the ceiling from below with a spear. In city living, domestic space was vulnerable to subversion from within, as well as assault from without. People could see and be seen from balconies, backyards, courts, and windows. As the Cohens note, houses shared "fragible" walls. Domestic space failed to suppress or contain the conflicts of marital partners and became instead the theater of their enactment.

2. Family and Institutional Rivalries

As we shift from the passionate and episodic quarrels of kin and neighbors to the studied architectural strategies of patrician families and religious bodies, the space in question changes character. It becomes space with a particular social or institutional identity, a distinctly located space. Great families and religious orders bought property and put buildings on it, and...
in the process often left a lasting mark on the urban landscape. The city townhouses or palazzi constructed in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries by important native families like the Massimi, the Cenci, and the Altieri, or immigrants like the Barberini, the Pamphilii, the Chigi, and the Corsini, retain the names, and sometimes the descendants, of their original patrons. The churches and attached residences put up by such new Counter-Reformation religious orders as the Jesuits, Theatines, Oratorians, and Barnabites, or the reform branches of older orders like the Carmelites and Capuchines, form part of the visual memory of anyone visiting the city today. In the early modern period, elite families and religious orders took literal possession of discrete pieces of the urban environment, reshaped them, and made them into physical signs of their identity. They expressed their family and institutional aspirations in architectural terms that reconfigured the space around them. They made it theirs, or tried to.

In a study of what he calls the "institutional urbanism" of baroque Rome, Joseph Connors has drawn attention to the way the large palaces and convents erected in this period transformed their sites.

The parts of Rome that seem unplanned are usually planned around the interests of powerful individuals or institutions. Operating over long spans of time, tenaciously guarding principles of self-interest, fostered and sometimes harnessed by popes but never entirely dominated by them, large buildings became engines of change that gave shape to much of the city.\textsuperscript{13}

Seen from above, the street plan of Rome shows the results of this process; the tangle of medieval byways clears for a moment in an eccentrically, often brilliantly, designed space around an imposing architectural compound.

As Connors demonstrates, such spaces often reflect competition between families or orders who hoped to enhance their image and found themselves threatened or thwarted by rivals in the same neighborhood. Although "status bloodbaths"\textsuperscript{14} conducted over urban space were not at all unique to Rome, the protagonists in these particular dramas owed something to the special character of the city. They were relatives of popes who suddenly had money to build on a grand scale, or representatives of Italy's ruling families who needed to have a presence near the papal court, or religious orders that required a headquarters in the Church's central seat.

In 1610 the Medici grandduke of Tuscany looked out the back of his Palazzo di Firenze (fig. 1, no. 1) with covetous eyes toward the family palace of the reigning pope, Paul V Borghese (1605–21). He saw an opportunity to exploit the Borghese's recent efforts to give their residence a more dignified setting by clearing space before it. The year before they had taken advantage of a Roman law that allowed compulsory purchase of adjoining properties by larger neighbors for purposes of beautification; they had bought and destroyed a warren of small buildings to create the neatly geometric Piazza Borghese. They made known their possession of the space in no uncertain terms: chains kept the public out, and no windows or doors could be opened onto the piazza. The Medici ruler found this vista so alluring that he at once

\textsuperscript{13} Connors, 209. For a model study of this type of local impact by a powerful family, see M. Bevilacqua, \textit{Il Monte dei Cenci: Una famiglia romana e il suo insediamento urbano tra medioevo ed età barocca} (Rome 1988).

\textsuperscript{14} The phrase is that of Erving Goffman, as applied in C. Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in his \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures} (New York 1973) 436.
designed an addition to his palace that would overlook the new square. But the Borghese, freshly arrived at the apex of wealth and social prominence by their acquisition of the papacy five years before, had no intention of permitting an established princely dynasty to enjoy the fruits of their labor. The pope immediately countered Medici plans by buying property across the street from his nephew’s palace and putting up a wall that would keep anyone from looking down on it. As a trump card, he suggested that whatever piazza the Medici might create on their own would be a good place for a market, a sure kiss of death to aristocratic decor and decorum. Papal families had muscle, at least while their kinsman held office, which made even princes retreat, and the Medici drew back.15

In the contest between Borghese and Medici, one is struck by the eloquence of voids. In the tight skein of streets that make Rome such a densely textured urban fabric, to carve out a clearing was a statement of power, a rhetoric that the Borghese did not invent but had learned from earlier papal families. However, space spoke in a more precisely visual way as well, for the point of opening it up was to make it easier to see the palace in the background.16 Owners wished to frame their façades elegantly so as to enhance the aesthetic impact of their construction and thus their own prestige. In this context the Medici intention to profit visually from the Piazza Borghese was not merely opportunistic, enabling them to enjoy a nice view, but boldly competitive, permitting them to challenge their rivals for the spectator’s gaze.

Competition between religious orders almost inevitably took on spatial dimensions in Rome for there were more and more of them from the sixteenth century on and they all wanted to be in the Tiber bend (ancient Campus Martius), though not all succeeded. For the increasing number of new orders and new branches of old orders that sought headquarters near the papacy, institutional visibility demanded centrally located sites; as Connors notes, Rome’s domed skyline still attests to this insistence. In fact, monastic bodies were sometimes uncomfortably close and quarreled over urban space.17 The shaping of the tight little square in front of the church of Sant’Agostino (fig. 1, no. 7, and fig. 2) is a narrative of thwarted moves by rival orders.

The Augustinians were there first and prospered. In the fifteenth century their medieval church and convent were fashionably rebuilt in the new Renaissance style. In the 1570s the Counter-Reformation brought them a new neighbor, the Jesuits, who were given a nearby palace and church for use as a college for nobles from German Hapsburg lands. The German College expanded with amazing speed, and by the 1630s it occupied not one but two sides of the piazza in front of the Augustinian church.18 To make their suffocating presence even more oppressive to the Augustinians, the Jesuits designed an aerial bridge to link their two buildings.


17 Connors, 260–61. Female religious orders were also involved in such contests; see, for example, the nuns of Sant’Anna versus the Barnabites, ibid., 267.

18 In an unusual glimpse of the social meanings attached to buildings by contemporaries, Giovanni Domenico, one of the victims of the “house scorning” that occurred in this square in 1608 (see above), reprimanded his attackers for their noisy behavior so near the church of Sant’Agostino; he did not seem to think that either the Augustinian fathers or the student lodgers in the German College as neighbors were owed the same degree of respect as the church itself; E. S. Cohen 1992, n. 22.
Legend
1. Palazzo di Firenze
2. Campo Vaccino
   (Roman Forum)
3. Ghetto
4. Santa Maria in Via
5. Palazzo di Ceri
6. Monte della Pietà
7. Sant’Agostino
8. Piazza San Silvestro
9. Piazza Navona
10. Campo dei Fiori
11. Rione Borgo
12. Ponte Sisto
13. Palazzo Farnese
14. Piazza di Spagna
15. Piazza del Popolo
16. Piazza Colonna
17. Rione Trastevere
18. Rione Monti
19. Jewish cemetery
   on Aventine Hill

Fig. 1. Map of Rome (drawing by Fred Travisano).

Fig. 2. Piazza Sant’Agostino
is the small square in front of
the church of Sant’Agostino
(A at top center of plan)
(after Rome 1748: The
Pianta Grande di Roma
of Giambattista Nolli
in Facsimile
[Highmount, N.Y. 1984]).
Suddenly Sant’Agostino looked as if it had wandered into the courtyard of a gigantic Jesuit boarding school. The Augustinians counterattacked by buying up property on the one side that remained, expanding their convent there and adding a new library, the Biblioteca Angelica. In 1659 the architect Francesco Borromini was at work for them on plans for the space in front of the heavily pressed church, hoping to follow the common Roman practice of providing the church with a square as wide as its façade.\(^{19}\) Borromini developed a number of graceful possibilities, which would have created a generous and symmetrical space, including one that eliminated the Jesuits’ aerial bridge and another that shaved a corner off their property and set one of their buildings back several yards. Not surprisingly, the Jesuits opposed redrawing property lines for the sake of urbanistic aesthetics that enhanced Augustinian prestige. They blocked the improvements and left their neighbors inelegantly boxed in their tiny claustrophobic square. The rivalry between the two orders continued architecturally rather than urbanistically, with both mounting major building campaigns in the mid-eighteenth century. It was an ironic footnote to the contested space in front of Sant’Agostino that the pope called on a local Augustinian in 1769 to draft the bull suppressing the Jesuit order worldwide.\(^{20}\) Thanks to Connors’ work, we now know that the struggles between the Jesuits and Augustinians for visual control of the piazza they shared in Rome were almost as old as their conflicts over theology.

In early modern Rome, patrician families and religious institutions fought over how their buildings would be framed, and thus over spatial identity and effects, in part because the heart of the city was so densely occupied and in part because they expected people to look. By the seventeenth century there was not much room to maneuver urbanistically; property lines were fixed, public land was jealously protected by civic officials, and recalcitrant neighbors could often maneuver around the laws authorizing their destruction. Most makers of visual statements, papal families aside, had to be content with small aggressive gestures. Instead of an entire piazza, they had to be satisfied with a corner that jutted prominently into the street, arresting the pedestrian’s eye, or a doorway that lined up axially with the portal of a church, drawing the attention of the faithful as they exited after Mass.\(^{21}\) These persistent and vigorous efforts by families and corporate bodies to mark the city physically were not as flashy or enduring as those of the Borghese or Medici or even the Augustinians and Jesuits. But they all resulted from a common assumption that there were visual consumers for such signs. Rivalry of this type ultimately depended on the existence of viewers, real or imagined, who would make the space in front of palaces and churches something worth arguing about.

### 3. Political Disagreements

Of course, there were plenty of other reasons to argue in Rome, and some that expressed themselves in territorial terms arose from the international role that the city played in European politics. Catholic monarchs kept an eye on what went on at the papal court; beyond the borders of the Papal States the popes had legal powers, financial resources, and propaganda impact, which no ambitious ruler, at least before the eighteenth century, could afford to ignore. Foreign governments worked energetically to keep their interests alive in Rome; moreover,

\(^{19}\) Connors, 273.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 279.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., fig. 19, p. 223; fig. 25, p. 228; p. 254.
they could often count on sympathy from a substantial community of their subjects living in the papal capital.

The intersection of these two features of foreign presence in Rome sometimes proved volatile. Because Rome was a city hospitable to all Catholics, yet thickly wired with testy representatives of Europe's major states and "national" or ethnic groups, it became a battle-ground for distant political conflicts. European war and revolution touched off local violence between foreigners who either identified with the goals of their compatriots or found that they could not escape being so identified.

Space operated in two distinct modes to condition these quarrels. It produced fixed urban "hot spots" that were likely places for tensions to ignite. The churches associated with particular "nations," usually through an ethnically defined religious confraternity, were a prime example; everyone from the Croats to the Bretons had one. Second, space was something activated by the movement of a resonant personage, in this case the ambassador or envoy of a foreign power. The route a diplomat took was public news, as was his destination and turnout. When, in situations of conflict, he became a target, he gave a mobile "charge" to the space through which he passed.

Before analyzing some examples of foreign contests played out along the Tiber, I should clarify the meaning of the presence of non-Romans in Rome. Rome was full of foreigners, some just passing through and many settled in for generations. In this respect Rome was both like and unlike other Italian cities. To an important degree, all early modern towns grew by attracting newcomers, and, in the great spurt of population growth of the second half of the sixteenth century, few cities could have been found in Europe with no foreign immigrants.22

In some ways, however, the foreign component in Rome's population had unique inflections not found so significantly elsewhere. Of course, there were the pilgrims who, especially during Holy Year celebrations, arrived in the hundreds of thousands. But less evanescent "outsiders" were those who had come to work in Rome and who formed "national" communities tied to a shared place of worship through a religious confraternity. Despite their large retinues, it was not mainly the ambassadors of foreign powers who accounted for the proliferation of more than two dozen national churches by 1700; the general configuration of upper-class employment in the city was a more important factor. Since the Middle Ages, the papal bureaucracy had included a sizable component of non-Roman officials.23 From lowly secretaries in the Roman Curia to lofty cardinals of the Sacred College, to say nothing of wealthy financiers, men trained in law and letters from well-established families all over the peninsula continually made their way to Rome. On their coattails came fellow countrymen looking for jobs and using local patronage networks to find them. Once ensconced in the papal capital, foreigners nurtured a common identity in national brotherhoods that dotted the city with their churches or chapels.24


An example of the influence of such sites on the articulation of conflict in Rome comes from the middle period of the Thirty Years War, after Spain and France began direct military engagements in 1635. Their Roman churches, the Castilian San Giacomo and the French San Luigi, then became magnets for political hostility; nor did it help matters that they were only two blocks apart. One well-known episode occurred in April 1636 in front of the entrance to San Giacomo on Piazza Navona, Rome’s great market square (fig. 1, no. 9). A group of Spaniards taunted and then punched a Frenchman who was standing outside, possibly hoping for alms. He departed but must have had an idea where to go to find eager listeners for his tale of woe because an angry band of Frenchmen soon rounded the corner and assaulted the residence attached to San Giacomo. From within, the Spaniards threw stones down on their attackers, but the Frenchmen multiplied, swelled by Savoyard reinforcements, and ransacked a glassmaker’s shop and the market stalls for objects to launch in return. The fight engulfed the whole piazza, and, though the arrival of government officials and large numbers of papal police calmed things temporarily, more Castilians joined the fray after nightfall. Fired by this riot, high tensions between the two “nations” continued for some time, both around San Giacomo and at places where chance brought Frenchmen face to face with Spaniards.25

“Hot spots” could be fixed, as in the case of the churches of national confraternities, or they could be mobile. The persons of ambassadors were mobile, as were their residences for much of the period. As we shall see, in the later seventeenth century, embassies began to become a more stable element in the urban landscape, acquiring permanent locations and influencing their neighborhoods in distinct ways. But before this time the representative of a foreign power simply rented an available palace. Thus the diplomatic symbols of a foreign state, both sites and men, floated, and ambassadors were more identifiable in movement than at rest. They could create zones of potential political conflict simply by riding through the city streets. One case when such potential was actualized arose in the wake of Portugal’s successful rebellion against Spanish control in 1640. The Portuguese were eager to get papal approval of their independent existence and sent an envoy, the bishop of Lamego, to Rome in 1642. The Spanish ambassador, the Marchese de los Velez, hoped to eliminate the irritating presence of the Portuguese representative, however, by ambushing him on his return from a luncheon meeting with his key ally, the ambassador of France, who was lodging at the Palazzo di Ceri behind the Trevi fountain (fig. 1, no. 5). The Spaniard sent eighty armed men to trap the diplomat in the thicket of alleys through which his carriage had to make its way back to his rented quarters in the Palazzo de Cupis in Piazza Navona. But the French were warned and came to their guest’s rescue with a force of their own, while the papal police followed to try to keep the factions apart. Shooting broke out as the carriages of the Spanish and Portuguese ambassadors headed toward each other on the narrow street in front of the church of Santa Maria in Via (fig. 1, no. 4), and utter pandemonium ensued. The Portuguese envoy fled for cover to a tavern, and his wounded Castilian antagonist, carriage smashed and horses killed, found refuge in the palace of a friendly cardinal. Eventually papal guards escorted Lamego to his palace and left a troop of five hundred men to protect it.26

25 Giacinto Gigli, 162; for another contemporary source see L. von Ranke, History of the Popes, trans. E. Fowler (New York 1901) 3:374–75. Gigli’s diary reveals that the day before the episode in the Piazza Navona broke out the pope had dispatched his envoy to try to make peace between France and Spain.

26 Gigli, 210; Pastor, 29:208–9. After 1622 Spanish ambassadors were lodged in the rented Palazzo Monaldeschi on the Piazza della Trinità dei Monti, which became known as the Piazza di Spagna after this residence was purchased by the king of Spain in 1647; M. Barberito, ed., Diario di Roma by Giacinto Gigli (Rome 1994) 1:243, n. 34.
Diplomats were certainly not the only people whose physical passage through the city was volatile. Contemporary diaries are full of stories of scuffles and riots sparked by aristocrats who would not give way to each other as precedence demanded, though tales of deliberate ambush are rarer. What I have emphasized here are the spatial and social features that conditioned a particular type of contested space in papal Rome. “National” sites and narrow streets, immigrants who retained a strong sense of collective identity and mobile representations of foreign states, often proved combustible when combined with the passions of distant conflicts.

4. Religious Tensions

Jews were not foreigners in Rome; in fact, they may have been its oldest residents. In the Middle Ages they played an active role in the urban world; while not an enormously prosperous community, they managed to make a living, raise families, and worship without arousing much attention from the Christian majority. In the fifteenth century the conditions of familiar and unremarkable contact slowly began to change, and emblematic of new times was the institution of a Jews’ race for the pre-Lenten festivities of Carnival in 1466.27 The Roman Jewish community already had a traditional public relationship with civic authority at Carnival time; they provided funds for the annual pre-Lenten games and rode in the yearly procession with representatives of the guilds, feudal vassal towns, and city districts, concluding with an act of homage to the magistrates on the Capitoline hill. The Jews’ race marked a departure from this tradition perhaps only in degree: a less decorous exhibition, more intimately related to spectators, potentially more comic and more vulnerable. But it was a new occasion to mark Jews publicly as Jews, and it occurred in the context of a widespread campaign in Italy to increase the distinguishing signs by which Jews were identified.28 This was not neutral in its effects. The first satirical plays mocking Jews, called giudiate, are recorded in Rome in the fifteenth century; in the sixteenth century the violence of Christians against their Jewish neighbors following the Easter Passion plays in the Coliseum became so regular that performances were prohibited after 1539.29 The intensification of the campaign of differentiation culminated with papal orders that established an official ghetto for Roman Jews in 1555 and with a spate of laws to prevent many kinds of ordinary contact between Roman Christians and Jews.30

The creation of the ghetto (fig. 1, no. 3), a densely textured rectangle next to the busy bridges leading to Trastevere, was the most dramatic redrawing of Rome’s urban space during the early modern period. For the first time an area within the city was defined as set off, by legally mandated boundaries, for one social group. Among the heterogeneous mix of “nations” that circulated in Rome, Jews alone had to live apart. In the heart of the city

27 A. Esposito, “Gli Ebrei a Roma tra Quattro e Cinquecento,” Quaderni storici 54 (1983) 815–45; Boiteux, 783, 750; for the most detailed discussion of the zone around “piazza giudea” in the period before the ghetto was established, see Bevilacqua (as n. 13) 40–60.
29 Boiteux, 758, 762.
30 Gigli, 163–64, reports a renewed effort to enforce legislation of the late 1550s in 1636; A. Milano, Il Ghetto di Roma (Rome 1964).
henceforth there was a zone of confinement and alterity, and thus a newly charged set of boundaries: the walls of the ghetto. The ghetto in the city’s center and the Jewish cemetery on the Aventine hill at its edge (fig. 1, no. 19) were the two nodes that the sixteenth century marked most intensely by religious difference.31 The “Jews’ weed patch” (ortaccio degli ebrei), as the cemetery was contemptuously called by the Romans, had its precise counterpart across town in a special burial ground for prostitutes.32 Urban space, an irrelevant factor in the interaction between Jews and Christians before the 1550s, would never again be neutral. Yet if it was new for tensions to express themselves in spatial terms, what was not new was their strongly temporal articulation. Timing was key in conflicts between Roman Jews and their neighbors, although the time that mattered was determined by varied measures. Here we will look at two types of dispute in two kinds of time, the first during Carnival, a regularly occurring season fixed by the liturgical calendar, and the second during the Vacant See, an unpredictably located period produced by an elected monarchical regime.

Although they are recorded as early as the fifteenth century, Carnival plays mocking Jews became more common, elaborate, and prominent in the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.33 These giudiate, as the anti-Semitic satires were called, were rarely staged indoors in the formal theaters of aristocratic palaces, but were a subgenre of informal street comedy. During Carnival, the time of year traditionally given over to plays and playgoing, it was customary to mount theatrical displays on decorated carts, or carri, an early modern counterpart to the parade float, and move them around the city. At a likely corner or piazza, the carro would stop and actors would amuse bystanders with a performance on diverse themes. Often, when Jews were the topic, it was their alien ritual practices that were held up to ridicule: marriage customs, circumcision, and especially burial, made so visible by the trek out of town to their cemetery on the Aventine.34 The de facto institutionalization of the giudiate in the course of the seventeenth century showed up in small details: giudiate scripts were printed for the first time; artisan guilds, minor theatrical entrepreneurs, and neighborhood groups took over the sponsorship of floats; giudiate moved indoors to converted granaries or other low rent proto-theaters. Their increasing presence may have been due in part to the general development of new forms of theater in this period, as well as to the loss of an outlet for anti-Semitic impulses when the pope put an end to the Jews’ Carnival race in 1668. The legal status of the giudiate was ambiguous; the producers of a carro decked out secretly with an elaborate architectural depiction of a synagogue (scola) were arrested for indecent words in 1666, and public performances of giudiate were sometimes forbidden. But much else of


32 Boiteux, 776. Both cemeteries are shown on the map of Rome engraved by Giovanni Battista Falda in 1676; see A. P. Frutaz, Le piante di Roma (Rome 1962) vol. 3, tav. 357–63. In 1566 Pope Pius V ordered prostitutes into a specially segregated residential quarter, also called the ortaccio, near the tomb of Augustus; the restriction was not as effectively enforced as that affecting the Jews, however, and by 1600 the prostitutes’ ortaccio extended over a very broad zone between Porta del Popolo, Piazza San Silvestro, and the Tiber. See E. S. Cohen, “Seen and Known: Prostitutes in the Cityscape of Late Sixteenth-Century Rome,” Renaissance Studies (forthcoming), and Barry (as n. 31) 19–20.


34 Boiteux, 757–58.
dubious decency was tolerated by the government, and it fell to the Jewish community to protest—cart by cart and script by script—these sacrilegious masquerades and to demand their interdiction.  

Spatially the mobile Carnival entertainments qualify as objects that “charged” the corners at which they paused and the streets through which they moved. Like the stately palaces of elite families, they acquired meaning only because people looked at them, but unlike those buildings they created audiences, turning pedestrians temporarily into viewers and uniting them in scorn at the religious outsiders in their midst. In general, the carts’ itineraries focused on and around the privileged Carnival route par excellence, the Corso, the main street where the races took place from Rome’s northern gate at the Porta del Popolo to the foot of the Capitoline hill. This choice may have served to increase the audience and avoid more provocative areas, such as the borders of the ghetto, several blocks southwest of the Corso. When a giudìata mocking a Jewish funeral did pass close to the ghetto in 1609, the Jews retaliated by throwing household objects at those involved; more than a hundred Jews were arrested after this incident. The carri did not usually spark physical combat between Jews and Christians, however; the persistent appeals of the Jewish community to papal officials were the most common form of opposition.

In a sociological sense, space may also help explain the popularity of the giudìate with specific quarters and trades. Martine Boiteux makes the point that it was the riverine districts nearest the ghetto, and vendors, like the fishmongers, whose market was adjacent to it, who most assiduously promoted these derisive displays. But if proximity did indeed breed a desire for the psychological distancing of mockery, it was a taste keyed to indulgence at Carnival, the holiday when appetites of all sorts were celebrated and indulged.

The other period of time in which Jews and Christians contested space was during the Vacant See, that necessary but unpredictable interval when Rome had no pope. Since Rome’s was an elective rather than a dynastic monarchy, an interregnum was a perennial expectation in urban political life. The Vacant See was a period legendary for its lawlessness, as the city’s busiest tribunals, the papal courts, could not function when there was no pontiff. The civic magistrates who tried to keep order under these conditions often had to issue public edicts forbidding harassment of Jews, who were a vulnerable group during such times. The ghetto, with its great gates locked at night, was potentially a source of protection for the community, but it was also an enticement.

In the Vacant See of 1644, for example, the records of charges brought before district judges called caporioni reveal an irritating kind of meddling with ghetto residents by the artisan patrols deputed to police the city’s fourteen wards or rioni (fig. 3). These patrols functioned only during the Vacant See, and on the first day the capotoro who headed the band

35 Ibid., 775–76, 780.
37 Ibid., 780–82.
from the rione of Regola, which adjoined the ghetto at Piazza Giudea, was anxious to demonstrate his rights over ghetto territory. From Piazza Giudea he had his drummer alert the quarter to the rule that everyone had to put a lamp in the window at night as a crime deterrent. He ordered the Jews at the main gate of the ghetto to remove its bolt so that his troop could freely enter by day or night. That this was not viewed favorably by the Jews was attested later that day when the officer found a Jewish locksmith putting the bolt back on, which he then confiscated. The capotoro and his band seem to have taken full advantage of their access to the ghetto to make punctilious arrests, such as that of a certain Salamone, "wandering at night without a light." Coming upon "a quantity of Jews gathered together in a conventicle," the capotoro had them seized, then brought charges against the onlooker, described as "that Jewish banker," who yelled at the patrol from his window, "Cunning thieves!

Fig. 3. An artisan rione patrol making its nighttime rounds during the Vacant See (from conclave plan of 1669 engraved by G. B. Falda and published by G. G. De Rossi in Antoine Laffère, Speculum romanumae magnificentiae [Rome 157–], Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library).
This is how you lead poor men to the slaughter!” The officer repeated the words to the district official he served, “so that justice would be done.”

In the annals of Christian mistreatment of Jews, these are perhaps minor annoyances, but they show how the creation of a segregated urban enclave for a religious minority encouraged attempts to violate it. The ghetto was a temptation to those who, like the local artisans of the rione guard, wanted to satisfy an expanded sense of their own power and actually had the chance to do it during the Vacant See. Spatial privilege was part of a political grammar explored further in the next section. Only during the interregnum, however, was it something the normally humble Roman craftsman could appropriate and safely use against a social group that was even more lowly than his.

5. Jurisdictional Contests

Sometimes contests over space in papal Rome were really struggles over rights. After all, if Michel Foucault is correct, territory is less a geographical notion than a juridicopolitical one; it is “the area controlled by a certain kind of power.” Holders of bits of power may seem to be quarreling over space, when they are in fact fighting over authority. This notion of territory seems particularly relevant to an absolutist regime, which posited an unchallenged sovereign at the head of the state, but attached him or her to a social body composed of multiple, overlapping, competing corpuscles of privilege. In Rome, as in the rest of ancien régime Europe, the legal landscape was a patchwork of different kinds of authority. Urban space was subject to a wide variety of juridical claims, and disputed juridicopolitical claims expressed themselves as spatial conflicts.

One of the most interesting intellectual developments of the seventeenth century intersects precisely with these issues of jurisdiction and territory: the elaboration of the notion of diplomatic immunity and extraterritoriality. As we saw in an earlier section, ambassadors to the papal court did not commonly have fixed abodes before the mid-seventeenth century. When they began to settle down geographically after 1650, however, they did so within the rapidly knit mesh of new legal thinking about their rights. According to this thinking, immunity was not limited to the building housing the diplomat’s physical person but stretched out over adjacent streets. The result was the subtracting of whole areas of the city from Roman authorities and their concession, in effect, to the crowns of whatever foreign government was being represented diplomatically. Thus, to take two of the most prominent examples, a “quartiere di Francia” and a “quartiere di Spagna” established themselves first juridically and then spatially (fig. 1, vicinity of nos. 13, 14). In 1687 when Pope Innocent XI was trying to abolish these privileges, a document was drawn up that listed the exact streets, squares, churches, and palaces in the neighborhood of the French ambassador’s residence, at that

40 The cases heard by the caporioni are kept in ASR, Tribunale del Senatoro, Processi, vol. 147 (1644), buste 134, 143. On the rioni see below, n. 46.


43 Neveu, 482. See also Niccolò del Re, Monsignor Governatore di Roma (Rome 1972) 44. Ecclesiastical immunity offered a much older model for seventeenth-century diplomats. In Rome churches served as sanctuaries that were off-limits to judicial officers, a fact that led to occasional contests over space; for an example from 1676 see Specchio di Roma barocca: Una guida inedita del XVII secolo, ed. J. Connors and L. Rice (Rome 1990) 118–20.
time the Palazzo Farnese (fig. 1, no. 13), which were subject to his jurisdiction. According to the doctrine of extraterritoriality, no armed police agent (sbirro) or soldier could enter and no judicial warrants could be executed within this rather substantial ambit. Criminals sought by papal police simply crossed the street leading to Ponte Sisto (fig. 1, no. 12) and they were, untouchably, in “France,” although police sometimes did touch these borders and ended up scuffling with French guards, or their Spanish equivalents, over a suspect they had pursued.

Even when crime was not an issue, however, this space was “hot.” The volatile truth about jurisdiction was that it could never be sufficiently defined and could be preserved only at the cost of constant vigilance precisely because it was about power. In 1688 when an honor troop of the pope’s personal soldiers, the famous Swiss Guard, accompanied a group of cardinals to Mass at the English College, which was located in the “quartiere di Francia,” the French ambassador angrily protested to the pope. French sovereignty, at its rather exposed outpost between the Campo dei Fiori and the Tiber, had suffered an affront: armed men had violated its flanks. Battles over privileged space were a form of political negotiation, in this case between the pope and France, which could only be endlessly repeated, since they could dramatize but not decide the question of who was stronger.

Jurisdictional dispute was touched off not only by special places but also by special times. The Vacant See was an especially potent stimulus to conflict for it created a temporal enclave in which Romans had an unequaled opportunity to stretch their bits of power. The removal of the pope through death reconfigured authority in the city, creating an enhanced sense of their rights among a proliferation of holders of jurisdiction. In the same rione-based artisan patrols that we saw pressing their claims into the ghetto, for example, we see equal aggressiveness to defend their turf from each other. Often the results were bloody, since craftsmen were not usually allowed to handle weapons and the police duties they assumed during the Vacant See were one of the few opportunities they had to bear arms. Usually scuffles between patrols erupted at the always ill-defined rione boundaries that overlapped an existing public square; in other words, it was not the entire perimeter of a district that was volatile, but those points along it that intersected some small or medium-sized piazza. Thus it was the space between the two rioni of Regola and Parione, in front of the Monte della Pietà or government pawn bank, that saw a fight between districts in 1644 (fig. 4). The patrols of the

---

44 The French ambassador settled down in the Palazzo Farnese soon after Queen Christina of Sweden left it in 1659; Neveu, 476. The 1687 map of the French quarter published ibid., 483, includes the area between the present-day Via dei Pettinari (former Via di Ponte Sisto) and Via delle Grotte on the south to Via di Montoro on the north and between the Tiber River on the west and the Campo dei Fiori on the east (fig. 1). See also Specchio di Roma barocca (as n. 43) 47–49.


45 Neveu, 500–501. This episode took place during the period between 1687 and 1689 when Pope Innocent XI’s struggle with Louis XIV over his envoy’s jurisdiction was at its peak; F. de Bojani, “L’affaire du quartier à Rome du XVIIe siècle. Louis XIV et le Saint-Siège,” Revue d’histoire diplomatique 22 (1908) 372–78.

46 The rioni were thirteen (later fourteen) medieval urban districts that had electoral, festive, and military functions, to which were added police and judicial duties during the Vacant See. They were administered by the lay gentlemen who also controlled the municipal government on the Capitol. Although in the early modern period they had to compete with parishes as units of local administration, they continued to serve as meaningful territorial entities in a wide variety of contexts, from lay charity and public instruction to guild elections. See Nussdorfer, Civic Politics (as n. 42), passim.

47 Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Conclavi (1644), 279r–v, 298r; Gigli, 258; Archivio Storico Capitolino, Credenzone I, vol. 6 (16 Aug. 1644). Rione boundaries were not formally recognized until 1744; before that time the authorities on their location were the capotori, the artisan captains of the district patrols who led this and other battles.
neighboring rioni both entered the square at the same time, exchanged gunfire, and left two men dead. Despite attempts to discipline the amateur troops, such incidents recurred in 1644 and in other Vacant Sees.

This behavior at rione boundaries seems to have had more to do with the desire to exercise rights that existed uniquely during the interregnum than with preexisting animosities. The same protectiveness about jurisdiction was demonstrated by the upper-class district officials, or caporioni, who could act as judges only in the Vacant See. Though a caporione was not necessarily even a resident of the rione for which he was responsible, he became scrupulously attentive to his boundaries, refusing, for example, to allow a warrant issued by the caporione of an adjacent district to be executed in his domain. The interregnum remapped authority in papal Rome, giving fresh energy to many of those corpuscles of privilege that were normally fairly passive. I have discussed lower- and upper-class laymen in these examples because laymen in particular profited from the juridical peculiarities of the Vacant See. As new and unfamiliar contenders for power entered the lists, they articulated their expanded perception of their rights in contests over space, the territorial idiom in which so much that was important in early modern politics was argued.

48 Giacinto Gigli was the punctilious official involved in this incident; Archivio Storico Capitolino, Credenzone XI, vol. 14, 132v.
6. Challenges to Government

Stone-throwing youths have something to tell us about urban space and papal absolutism. This section discusses two occasions on which Romans took up stones to defend themselves because the papal government could not insure their safety. These are examples of popular action that indirectly acquire a political dimension because they comment on and are in dialogue with the authority of the state. The space contested in these examples is, in the broadest sense, Rome, understood as a network of streets and squares that contain people. It is urban space not just fought “in” and “over,” but at times active symbolically and tactically in its own right. Some of the spatial themes we have encountered earlier recur in these incidents, such as the “charging” of particular buildings or piazzas, but some novel aspects also appear. Events could alter and rearrange the ways city residents constructed urban space. Here we see how space was made meaningful, negatively and positively, to young men of the popular classes and how they activated certain meanings for political ends. The final example shows how space that had become significant in one context could carry its associations into different contexts. I begin with the two episodes, one in 1650 and one in 1736, and then look back at the circumstances of popular culture that informed them.

In the summer of 1650, recruiters for man-hungry Spanish armies, intent on filling their quotas and unconcerned about how they did it, descended on Rome.49 It became dangerous to be out in the streets, especially at twilight or high noon when they were likely to be deserted, because any young man risked being kidnapped. Sometimes the illegal recruiters, or ingaggiatori, used guile, for example, engaging a delivery boy to carry vegetables from the market to the house of the Spanish ambassador and then locking him up. At other times they used force, simply halting pedestrians or carriages and seizing their occupants. The reigning pope, Innocent X (1644–55), seemed complicitous with the abductors, in part because his niece was married to a Roman nobleman, Prince Niccolò Ludovisi, who held a Spanish military command, and in part because he took no action. As one contemporary wrote that summer, when the pope was told of the bitter popular outcry against the Spaniards, “he answered that we have to be patient, nothing can be done, and the Spaniards need help.”50

Angry over their treatment by the Spaniards and unable to stir a response from the government, gangs of Roman youths who happened upon a kidnapping in progress sometimes were able to free their compatriot by pelting the agents with rocks. Three Spaniards laid hands on a streetsweeper in Piazza San Silvestro (fig. 1, no. 8) one noon, and a passerby who went to his defense was soon joined by boys hurling stones. Two of the Spaniards fled in the direction of the ambassador’s palace, but one took refuge in the church on the piazza, where he was pursued by the youths who continued to throw stones at the church doors. The Spanish ambassador’s whole retinue then returned, brandishing swords against the boys, when “suddenly a great number of stone throwers (sasaioli) big and small, more than three hundred, appeared and while they threw stones chanted slogans against the Spaniards.”51 The boys quickly got the upper hand.

Upon hearing that Spaniards were involved, their enemy, the French ambassador, who in 1650 was residing not far away in the Barberini palace at the Quattro Fontane, armed his

49 Gigli, 367–71; Pastor, 30:183.
50 Gigli, 369.
51 Ibid., 370.
servants and headed for the square, joined by the retainers of the most powerful pro-French cardinals and nobles in the city. Artisans in the nearby streets shut up their shops and also ran to the Piazza San Silvestro. Papal troops in the fortress across the river, alerted by the sight of the people of the Borgo quarter (fig. 1, no. 11) armed and ready to cross the bridge to join the crowd in the piazza, halted their passage with artillery. The inhabitants of Trastevere (fig. 1, no. 17), the other district connected by bridge to the main part of the city, were similarly blocked by the pope’s Corsican guards. Despite these precautions, a huge throng—which is probably how we should translate the figure of twenty thousand given by our source—was now gathered outside the church where the Spaniard was still trapped. They began to rumble with plans to set fire to the palace of the pope’s nephew Prince Ludovisi and to that of the Spanish ambassador. Finally, several companies of papal cavalry and police succeeded in dispersing them. Although nothing happened except the temporary creation of a large and threatening crowd, the incident seemed to leave Romans feeling more confident. They had scared the recruiters, and they reminded them of it by chanting their menacing verses whenever they caught sight of a Spaniard.52

The episode reveals an interesting difference of opinion between the papal government and its subjects about urban space and what kinds of actions should be tolerated in it. To the pope, systematic aggression against Romans by the agents of a foreign crown was permissible, though collective popular retaliation was not. Innocent X seems not to have regarded the city at large as his sacrosanct jurisdiction, and, given the tissue of privileged authorities in Rome, he probably had good reason not to. Nor did he seem to regard the persons of his subjects as symbols of his authority; it was no affront to papal dignity that Romans should disappear into Spanish holds. In some fundamental sense, then, neither the streets nor the people in them were his. When he put his troops into service, it was to protect what were essentially powerful individual interests—his own family and the representative of a foreign state—and their embodiment in buildings.

On the other hand, to the Romans, both those who filled Piazza San Silvestro and the many who stayed home, the basic safety of persons was crucial. When their streets made them vulnerable, they complained and then rapidly took matters into their own hands. Physical intimidation was their tactic, always spontaneous, at first small-scale and finally massive. Although the setting for this particular confrontation was a product of chance, the fact that it was a piazza conforms to the now familiar pattern for unruly behavior. Its central location made it easy to draw support from all zones except, thanks to military intervention, the two districts on the far side of the Tiber. But the choice of targets—the recruiters, their diplomat patron, and the pope’s nephew—is instructive. The protagonists in this conflict seem to have shared the papal attitude that safe streets were not the government’s concern, but theirs. They seem not to have expected protection but rather to have hoped for punishment of the culprits and to have felt perfectly legitimate in inflicting it themselves. Assuming that all young men were vulnerable, that the threat came from specific persons, and that force would work against them, they turned out swiftly and in large numbers, once a dramatic showdown was under way. Their tactics were effective, in part, because the young stone throwers had created a dramatic showdown. As we shall see, the circulation of bands of sassaioli, or stone-throwing boys, was anything but fortuitous; they were becoming an identifiable feature of popular youth culture in early modern Rome. This episode highlights the circumstances in

52 Ibid., 370–71.
which they could offer services of value to the larger community, circumstances that were repeated with uncanny similarity in 1736.

In the spring of that year the sassaioli took up their stones against Spanish military recruiters. This time, however, a chance conflagration led to something much bigger and more sustained, violent, and inventive than in 1650. In a "tumult" that affected many parts of Rome and lasted for several days, significant piazzas, secret hideouts, and deserted expanses on the city's edge were activated by thousands of youths. This episode alerts us to some important processes of change for the regime. The papacy was weaker internationally and domestically than it had been in the mid-seventeenth century. Foreign powers flexed their muscle more openly in Rome and in the entire territory of the Papal States. Papal troops were not as quick to respond to the challenge from the Roman populace; they failed to block movement across the bridges and could not stop the spread of riotous actions. In consequence, young Roman stone throwers were more convincing contenders for control of urban space in 1736 than they had been in 1650.

Beginning with the war of the Spanish succession in 1700 and continuing with the dynastic wars that followed it, the popes were unable to keep rival armies from marching through their lands, billeting on their people, and of course seizing their subjects for military service. Romans were particularly vulnerable during the 1730s, the decade of struggle between the Austrian Hapsburgs and the Bourbons of Spain and France over the Polish succession, because the Spanish Bourbons, engaged on one front in Lombardy in the north, also seized the Kingdom of Naples in the south and needed to shuttle troops between the two regions. In the eyes of the new Bourbon king of Naples (Charles IV of Naples), the Papal States were no more than a source of food and men on the route between Naples and Lombardy. In the countryside his ill-paid troops looted and pillaged; in the towns they scavenged for soldiers.

The reigning pope, Clement XII Corsini (1730–40), could do little against the troops of King Charles IV, so he gave them transit permits and allowed them to be quartered with helpless rural communities rather than uncomfortably close in Rome. Nevertheless, despite papal edicts prohibiting military recruiting by foreign governments, "Spanish" ingaggiatori, as the Bourbon agents were called by Romans, were operating with virtual impunity in the city in the spring of 1736. As in 1650, any solitary youth was potential prey for these unscrupulous recruiters.33

Once again Romans had to find their own means of self-defense, building slowly from individual acts of resistance to a determined, collective use of force. Public insults and isolated acts of insubordination were the first signs of growing agitation. One day a crowd jeered Spanish officers passing through Piazza Colonna (fig. 1, no. 16) with a new recruit and threatened them with rocks; later some road workers freed a victim as he was led through the piazza of the Maddalena.34 Matters came to a head on the weekend of 23 March when a woman whose son had been seized by Spanish officers in the Campo dei Fiori (fig. 1, no. 10) a few hours earlier accosted one of them and he roughed her up. In the ensuing scuffle a crowd gathered, and the Spanish officer thought it prudent to retire to a house next to the Farnese

33 F. Valesio, 5:849–53. Despite his Italian mother and duchies, King Charles IV of Naples, his troops, and his agents were uniformly perceived by Romans as "Spaniards," whatever their actual ethnicity. Romans of all classes did not distinguish between the Neapolitan and Spanish Bourbons; in their eyes both represented the political interests of "Spain."

34 Ibid., 5:849.
palace, which had now passed from the hands of the French Bourbons to the Spanish Bourbons.

The crowd grew larger, swelled by stone-throwing youths from the district, Regola, and from Trastevere across the bridge. One young man whose brother had been abducted the night before arrived with two hatchets and began chopping down the door of the house into which the Spanish officer had fled. When an officer appeared at the window with a pistol, a well-aimed rock knocked it out of his hand. The angry mob broke into the house, sacked it, liberated two men they found inside, and then searched neighboring houses for other Roman captives. Papal police eventually arrived and dispersed the huge crowd that had filled the Piazza Farnese, but not before a window in the palace was broken and a rock was thrown at the Spanish coat-of-arms on the Farnese palace. The youths, however, left the square in high spirits, carrying one of the freed men crowned with a laurel wreath and shouting “Viva Trastevere!” A noteworthy feature of these events was the lively sense of district loyalty and pride shown in such scenes. These feelings were closely linked to the culture of stone throwing in early modern Rome.

In this incident a single Spanish agent had again been the focus of the crowd’s attention, but this time he had not escaped into the protective confines of a church. The stone throwers had made it possible to attack his shelter effectively and to gain the satisfaction of releasing his victims. Moreover, apparently knowledgeable about where other captives might be hidden, these rioters had immediately followed up their success with more searches, as had youths in other parts of the city. The clues are indirect, but they point to good communications among the participants.

There were other signs of concerted and politically informed action. One group, for example, went looking for support; they headed for the palaces of the cardinals sympathetic to the Austrian Hapsburgs, cheering hopefully, “Long live the emperor!” as they asked for weapons. They told the imperial ambassador that they were two thousand strong, all under thirty years of age. Their slogan was certainly politically astute; they clearly knew that their best hope of help against the Spanish and Neapolitan Bourbons was their enemy, Austria. However, the cry, “Long live the emperor!” may not have been entirely innocent of local connotations, although its potentially antipapal overtones were not developed. Protesters did move threateningly on the palace of the pope’s family, however, for his nephew Bartolomeo Corsini was one of King Charles IV’s highest officers. As in 1650 the residence of a papal kinsman with close ties to the enemy was a target of frustrated popular wrath.

But perhaps the most startling fact about the episode is that it did not end there. That night rioters kept up their search for weapons and captives, stoning hideouts and any individual who threatened them with a gun. Most remarkably, twelve hundred determined stalwarts encamped together in Trastevere and another hundred slept in the Campo Vaccino, the former Roman Forum (fig. 1, nos. 17, 2). This ominous horde on the abandoned fields at two edges of the built-up city (abitato) made the papal authorities very nervous. Clement XII put out a new edict prohibiting military recruiting in Rome. “But,” as one surprised observer

55 Valesio, 5:852.
56 Valesio, 5:850. See also Venturi, 98–100.
wrote, “that was not enough.” 59 Two days passed and the twelve hundred remained waiting in Trastevere.

Finally, the pope opened talks with them by sending two Roman noblemen, one associated with the imperial Hapsburg cause and the other a representative of the lay civic government, to find out what they wanted. The youths asked for amnesty for everything they had done during the “tumult.” This too turned out to be a shrewd move, for Spain was later to try to pressure Clement to extradite the alleged ringleaders. The negotiators took the request for pardon to the pope, and he granted it at once. Promising “on their word as Romans” to do no further violence, the young men returned to their homes, continuing to cheer the emperor. 60 Although the story was over for the Roman stone throwers, the “tumult” troubled the papacy for some time to come. The Spanish Bourbons remembered that rock thrown at their coat of arms on the Palazzo Farnese and demanded “satisfaction” for the insult. When they did not receive it, they broke off diplomatic relations with the pope. 61

In thinking about what the events of 1736 reveal about the political implications of space, one is struck by the new prominence of the “edge” as opposed to the “center.” Mostly, the space that counted in early modern Rome was the central built-up area, or abitato. Thus far in our analysis the extensive areas of green outside the abitato but still within the ancient walls have been a silent frame to the more articulé “downtown” locations. In the eyes of most of those contending for power and prestige, this peripheral space was neutral or “back-stage.” It became rather less neutral when occupied by twelve hundred young men for several days. The large open tracts that it afforded were a distinct practical advantage to the stone throwers, for where else could twelve hundred or so youths camp out? But the truth was that what was coded “periphery” to quarreling spouses, religious orders, ethnic groups, and patricians was not so coded to boys of the popular classes of Rome. This space was “hot” to them for it was here that they were accustomed to fight for power and prestige.

Neighborhood-based bands of sassaioli had for some time routinely battled with rocks in the large open areas on the edge of the built-up area of the city (fig. 5). Large-scale organized stone-fights show up in news accounts by the late sixteenth century and in literary sources by the seventeenth. 62 There is also slight evidence that by 1736 rivalries were based on a rough four-way division of the city into two groupings from across the Tiber, Borgo and Trastevere, and two from the main part of the city, the trident focused on Piazza del Popolo to the north and the Monti district to the east 63 (fig. 1). Whatever the precise spatial configuration of loyalties during normal times, however, in the conflict with the Spanish recruiters the boys joined forces and repaired to the sites of their stone-fighting contests. This was their turf, and it was terrain on which they had often stood and fought each other. Space endowed with agonistic significance in the context of popular youth culture acquired new meanings for the young men and for their anxious observers during these events. It became a place of refuge

59 Valesio, 5:852.
60 Ibid., 5:852–53.
61 Pastor, 34:376; Valesio, 5:865, 867–70; Venturi, 100.
62 Bragaglia (as n. 33) 85; P. Romano, La sassaiola (Rome 1943) 30; F. Trinchieri Camiz, “The Roman ‘Studio’ of Francesco Villamena,” Burlington Magazine 136 (1994) 510 n. In the 1601 incident reported by Camiz, pro-French and pro-Spanish stone throwers came to blows as they celebrated rival dynastic births. My thanks to Robert Davis for this reference. In his first colloquy, Giovanni Battista Ferrari discusses the Roman “lapidatio,” Colloquiones J. B. Ferrarii (Siena 1652) 4–10. See also the comic epic by Giovanni Camillo Peresio, Il maggio romanesco (Ferrara 1688) 79–80.
63 Venturi, 99, quotes a pamphlet of 1736 naming the four factions.
to one group, a source of danger to the other. But it carried with it some of the power of the old meanings as well. This was space associated with aggression and solidarity, which helped to keep the protesters’ spirits high in the confrontation with Spain and the papal government. Quite apart from anything else they accomplished, by staying together and securing a pardon for their conduct, the lower-class youths involved in the “tumult” provided an unprecedented example of informal popular political organization in Rome. They had achieved it by activating a network of loyalties that were forged in long-standing local combat between rival gangs of stone throwers, and then turning these bonds from “intramural” to “extramural” sport. And they used it to reclaim the city streets from predatory foreigners.

7. Conclusion: Specificities of Regime and Place

Some theorists have argued that space as a discursive category originates in military or strategic thought; to talk in spatial terms is thus to talk about the effects of power.64 If we look at our array of examples of contested space in Rome and ask, “what were the effects of setting?” we see a potent and flexible medium indeed. Urban space displayed, publicized, concealed,

64 See Foucault and his interlocutors (as n. 41) 69–70.
dominated, excluded, enclosed, separated, trapped, and protected. How could city dwellers ignore a resource that did so many powerful things?

The kinds of space that incited conflict in papal Rome had varying qualities. Contested space could be space associated with ritual, especially festivity; space set off for a particular social group who were defined as outsiders; space that was placed under different political authorities; space around “charged” persons, and especially space around “charged” buildings. Most frequently it was this last category that gave the urban landscape its punch. Houses, palaces, and churches acquired meaning through their association with notions like female virtue, family prestige, institutional honor, national identity, and legal immunity; these were values important enough to fight about. Space was also made volatile by time, both sacred and secular.

Piazzas were repeatedly the settings of disputes in papal Rome. One wonders what the expressive vehicles of social tension would have been if this city had had a linear grid of uniform façades instead of an organic skein of forking routes and irregular junctures. Foreign “quarters,” the ghetto, and the abandoned areas within the city walls were also topographical features that gave a particular inflection to conflict in early modern Rome.

Of course, some of the contests over space that occurred in Rome would have had their counterparts in other cities and indeed in other epochs. There is nothing unique to seventeenth-century Rome about fights over domestic space among family members, nor about hostility toward neighbors, nor even about the struggle of elite families to outdo each other visually. Other towns also saw quarrels between residents of different national extraction as well as violence and ridicule directed at Jews by their Christian compatriots. Nor was Rome the only early modern capital to witness jurisdictional squabbles between foreign diplomats and local authorities, or perhaps even stone-fights.

Nevertheless, even such ubiquitous conflicts were expressed in ways that had a distinctively Roman flavor. Peter Burke reminds us that the practice of posting written insults on doors may have owed something to the example of Rome’s famous “talking statue” Pasquino, upon whom “pasquinades,” anonymous satirical critiques of the government, were left to amuse passersby. Martine Boiteux claims that certain forms of the Carnival mockery of Jews were a specifically Roman phenomenon. The Jews’ traditional homage to the civic “Senate and Roman People,” for example, was surely dictated by a local script. The thickness with which the city was strewn with “national” churches reflected its continuing welcome to Catholic pilgrims as well as the large foreign component in the papal bureaucracy; there may well have been more foreigners in Rome, as people so often said.

There were also certain kinds of conflict that occurred in Rome precisely because it was the seat of the head of the Catholic Church and because the office of its ruler was an elected rather than dynastic position. These are the contests that were peculiar to the city and to the regime. The rivalry between religious orders was not absent elsewhere, but it was more acute in Rome, where the way the order presented itself had important repercussions for the kind of support it could count on from the Church hierarchy. The same need to look after affairs at the papal court and in the Curia required representatives of the great princely houses of Italy and the envoys of Europe’s Catholic monarchs to be in Rome and to command attention there. Not everyone concentrated in this small and public arena got along, and not all of them were happy with the way a given pope treated their interests.

65 Burke, 109; Boiteux, 772.
The elective character of papal monarchy meant Romans could periodically expect to be without a ruler and with new power. This interregnum of unpredictable timing and duration was structured ritually and legally in such a way as to give lay officials in the city rare and highly prized claims to authority. The Vacant See offered the possibility of going beyond ordinary boundaries. It offered Romans unique jurisdictional stakes, which they never tired of fighting over.

The fact that new pontiffs carried their families to power in Rome also gave a special inflection to urban conflicts. These families were at once show-offs and scapegoats. Papal kinsmen acquired huge fortunes and enormous influence overnight and rushed to turn their windfall into social status by building city palaces that dwarfed those of the hereditary aristocracy. But the buildings that jostled and elbowed out their neighbors to proclaim the new princely rank of their owners were symbols of corruption and betrayal to an angry populace. It was not the pope but his relatives who drew the blame for policies the Romans did not like. They attacked the family palace, not the Vatican.

Finally, by the eighteenth century the military weakness of the papacy became another factor shaping the contests of the capital. The reasons for the long-term decline of the international stature of the papal government were rooted in more than two hundred years of large aspirations and small resources. In these centuries the duties and ambitions of the early modern popes may well have been heavier and grander than those of merely temporal rulers; in any case their peculiar amplitude finally resulted in a government so bankrupt that it could not defend its borders at all. In a Rome in which stone-throwing youths fought off agents of foreign armies, the absolutist state seemed to have evacuated its capital city altogether.

It had not, of course, and if we stand back and survey absolutism in general, the case of Rome illustrates a broader point about the tenacity of the regime and its fit with cities. The monarch’s monopoly of formal power denied to subjects any authorized role in decision making. By providing no accessible institutional space for the play of opinion and interest, absolutist government virtually assured the search for alternative sites. The city offered itself as a thickly textured social and symbolic environment in which a broad array of conflicts could be visualized and dramatized. A regime that restricted political participation so tightly necessarily thrust the processes of articulation and negotiation that we think of as politics into the streets and squares. Thus, by its very logic, early modern papal government guaranteed that Rome would be a politically charged landscape.


Bibliography


Burke, P.,  The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy (Cambridge 1987).


