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The Vacant See: Ritual and Protest in Early Modern Rome

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The interregnum between the death of one pope and the election of the next was a fundamental part of the rhythm of political life in sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century Rome. This study of the Vacant See, while focusing on that of 1644, brings to light some of the enduring features of the submerged political culture of the papal capital.

UNLIKE CONTEMPORARY KINGS, the popes of the early modern period could die. No ceremonial fiction maintained a papal reign in the way that funeral rituals prolonged the rule of the Renaissance kings of France.¹ Indeed, at the time when such performances reached their apex in sixteenth-century France, papal legislation aimed in precisely the opposite direction. The pontiffs strove to ensure that no individual or body in Rome inherited their authority at their death. Until the cardinals of the Holy Roman Church gathered and elected a new pope, no papal courts functioned, no new laws could be made, and curial offices ceased.² In short, during the interregnum or Vacant See, normal government in Rome was suspended.

This hiatus in absolute rule was a distinctly demarcated, if indefinite, interval; usually lasting one or two months, it had its own rituals, symbols,

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¹See the chapter entitled "The King Never Dies" in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) and Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Droz, 1960). The work of Natalie Davis and Angus MacKay has been suggestive for my thinking about political ritual, especially Natalie Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97-123, and Angus MacKay, "Ritual and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century Castile," *Past and Present* 107 (1985): 3-43.

²The bull of Pius IV, *In eligendis*, 1562 laid down the rules that governed the conduct of the Vacant See during the early modern period. *Bullarium diplomatum et privilegiorum sanctorum Romanorum pontificum*, 25 vols. (Turin, 1857-72) 7 (1862): 230-36. For a thorough analysis of the powers of the cardinals during the Vacant See see Lorenzo Spinelli, *La vacanza della sede apostolica dalle origini al Concilio Tridentino* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1956), 229-45.

customs, and institutions. Special coins were minted and officials wore different dress—black for laymen and violet for cardinals.³ The “ceremonies” of the Vacant See fascinated contemporary Europeans, who took vicarious delight in the legendary freedom of Rome at such times. As one seventeenth-century account described it:

If the Murtherers and other mischievous persons be not surpriz'd in the very Facts, and can make a shift to abscond themselves and keep out of the way till the creation of a new Pope, they return to their habitations as if they had committed those crimes in some other Countrey.⁴

There was no doubt about it; Romans, and foreign governments too, looked to the Vacant See as an opportunity to get even and an occasion to get ahead. But, despite contemporary rhetoric, the Vacant See was not merely “time out,” when anarchy reigned around the tomb of the apostles. It was also a chance to enact an alternative urban political regime in which all strata of Roman society played a part.

We are not accustomed to think of the subjects of absolute monarchs as political actors, and even less the subjects of the pope. As Montaigne found out on his trip to Rome in 1580 the early modern papacy guarded orthodoxy with exceptional ferocity; opinions critical of the government were likely to be considered not only subversive but also heretical.⁵ Moreover ecclesiastical rulers restricted the public functions of their citizens even more than did other Renaissance princes, for many important offices were open only to clerics. Laymen, whether well-born or humble, had little voice in the affairs of the realm and women none at all. During the Vacant See, therefore, Romans had a unique opportunity to expand their civic role and express their political views.

A close look at Rome in the interregnum following the death of the Barberini pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) shows us how this altered constitutional reality was periodically recreated in the papal capital; it underscores the importance of dramatic forms as a medium of political communication and

³The coins minted during the Vacant See bore a device that symbolized the tutelage of the cardinal chamberlain or the Sacred College in the absence of the pope. This was a canopy, the *pavilion* or *ombrellino*, which stood for the secular power of the papacy, over the crossed papal keys surmounting the arms of the cardinal chamberlain. I am indebted to Professor John Scott of the University of Iowa for this information. Examples of such coins are reproduced in Edoardo Martinori, *Annali della zecca di Roma. Gregorio XV e Urbano VIII* 2.14 (1919): 17-19, 2.15 (1919): 1.

⁴*The Ceremonies of the vacant see. Or A true relation of what passes at Rome upon the pope's death*, trans. J. Davies (London, 1671), 21-22.

⁵Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 937.

occasionally of political mobilization.⁶ Like the time of the theater, the Vacant See was “privileged time”: it enjoyed distinctive forms of ritual, conflict, and play. But perhaps its most notable quality was that, in the absence of the pope, the city’s players were the people.

Romans always stayed well-informed about the condition of their ruler’s health. Whispered rumors of a serious illness were enough to cause ripples of disorder through the city.⁷ Ever alert to signs and portents, Romans noticed, for example, when the Barberini family carriages were moved out of the Vatican palace or when the pope received the sacrament of extreme unction. But most telling of all was the midnight procession of men in chains, prisoners charged or convicted of major crimes, snaking its way across town to the protective confines of the Castel Sant’Angelo. By this token, Romans knew that the end was near, for one of the first actions of the Vacant See was to open the city jails. The Castel Sant’Angelo, a papal fortress, alone retained its inmates.

Once the pope died, an elaborate and time-honored series of rituals got underway, marking a break with one nexus of authority and the construction of another. At the pope’s bedside, the cardinal chamberlain, one of only three curial officials who kept his powers during the Vacant See, removed the so-called “ring of the fisherman” from the pontiff’s finger.⁸ In the presence of the clerks of the Apostolic Chamber he broke both the ring, used to seal papal briefs, and the matrix in which the lead stamps for papal bulls were molded. The message of these acts was that the law and justice of the late pope were no more.

Ecclesiastics dominated the nine days of papal mourning rites. The pope’s body rested first in the Sistine Chapel, and was then carried by eight canons of St. Peter’s into the basilica itself accompanied by the cardinals and prelates

⁶Cf. MacKay, “Ritual and Propaganda,” 12. The Vacant See in 1644 lasted from 29 July to 15 September. Maffeo Barberini, born in Florence in 1568, was elected to the papacy and took the name Urban VIII on 6 August 1623; when he died on 29 July 1644 his 21-year reign was one of the longest in history. Urban VIII was celebrated for his artistic patronage and notorious for his nepotism; he made his brother and two nephews cardinals, bought a prince’s title for a third nephew, and enriched his family prodigiously. On Barberini patronage see Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: Art and Society in Baroque Italy*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

⁷For some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century examples see Clara Gennaro, “La ‘Pax Romana’ del 1511,” *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* 90 (1967): 34-35. For such a reaction seven months before Urban VIII’s death see Giacinto Gigli, *Diario romano (1608-1670)*, ed. Giuseppe Ricciotti (Rome: Tumminelli, 1958), 241.

⁸The “ring of the fisherman” took its name from its depiction of St. Peter on a boat drawing in a fishing net. For descriptions of the rituals of the Vacant See I have relied on the following published sources: Girolamo Lunadoro, *Relatione della corte di Roma E de’ Riti da osservarsi in essa* (1635; Venice, 1661), 188-99; *Ceremonies of the vacant see*; Fr. Antonio Zaccaria, *Della elezione, coronazione e possesso de’ romani pontefici trattato del cav. Lunadoro accresciuto e illustrato da Fr. Antonio Zaccaria* (Rome, [c. 1736-1795]), 5-72.

of the curia. For three days it lay in state in the chapel of the Holy Sacrament, its feet extending through the iron grill in front. Kissing the dead pontiff's slippered foot was a layman's only part in the mourning ceremonies, and turbulent crowds pressed forward for their chance.⁹ Burial took place on the evening of the third day in another chapel in St. Peter's. After nine days of requiem masses the papal obsequies terminated with a funeral oration by a learned preacher. On the morning of the tenth day the cardinals celebrated the mass of the Holy Spirit and solemnly entered conclave; they would not leave again until they had elected the new pope.

The setting and liturgies of the papal funeral ceremony evoked his sacred duties as Bishop of Rome, but the pope had a second "soul," as Paolo Prodi has recently put it; he was also a territorial prince of Italy, temporal ruler of a kingdom extending from the Po River to the mountainous frontier of the Kingdom of Naples.¹⁰ Now that the law-making ring of the fisherman had been smashed, however, who held temporal power in the Papal States was an open question. In early modern Rome, the chief contenders were the lay civic magistrates centered on the ancient Capitoline hill and the seventy cardinals based across the Tiber in the Vatican.

It was the bell on the Capitol that tolled the news of the pope's passing to the waiting city. Was it purely coincidence that the "Patara," as the bell was called, rang only to announce the death of the pope and the beginning of Carnival?¹¹ Like Carnival, the Vacant See was a new and extraordinary political world in which spectators could at any moment be transformed into participants.

No formal statutes established who governed Rome during the interregnum, but the lay urban elite, excluded from the offices of a clerical bureaucracy, were determined that it should be they. In the secular mantle of the "Senate and People of Rome," they alone could exercise justice during the Vacant See; papal tribunals ceased, but the city's chief lay judge, the Senator, continued to hold court on their authority. However, without a written grant of powers, the "Roman People," as they were commonly known, had to mobilize every possible weapon to defend their jurisdiction from the cardinals.¹² Audible, visible, and dramatic gestures—and the vulnerable claim of

⁹Gigli, *Diario romano*, 254; *Ceremonies*, 11.

¹⁰Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice Un corpo e due anime: la monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Mulino, 1982).

¹¹Martine Boiteux, "Carnaval annexé. Essai de lecture d'une fête romaine," *Annales Économies Sociétés Civilisations* 32 (1977): 360.

¹²The term "Roman People" refers not to all Romans but specifically to those few hundred "gentlemen" who had the right to hold political office and participate in councils on the Capitol. Although the full formal title of this somewhat fluid body was the *Senatus populusque romanus* (S.P.Q.R.), they were known colloquially as the *Popolo Romano* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources. The city statutes, approved and published in 1580, gave the Capitoline magistrates specific rights while the pope was alive but did not mention the Vacant See.

custom—were their arms. In these circumstances the ritual delivery of the city jails, after the “Pataras” death knell, sent an early message of civic power.

Lay officials called *caporioni*, heads of Rome’s fourteen urban districts (*rioni*), and an amateur neighborhood police force took charge of emptying the three prisons. One gentleman *caporioni*, Giacinto Gigli, has left an account of his actions in 1644 during the Vacant See of Urban VIII:

When the Capitoline bell sounded, the captain of my *rione* . . . came to my house, since I was the *caporione* of Campitelli [the *rione* in which the Capitol was located], with many soldiers and with two drums. Accompanied by them, I went to the Capitol, where a large crowd had gathered; ascending the stairs of the Senator’s palace I went to the prisons, which were immediately opened and the keys turned over to me. I had all the prisoners come before me and, with the soldiers and drums, I went out followed by all the prisoners one by one.¹³

There was an interesting coda to this ceremony with its popular political resonance. “At other times,” Gigli went on, “it was the custom for the last of the prisoners, following the *caporioni* to his house, to carry away the *corda* [rope used in the strappado torture]; . . . the keeper of the prisons had to pay fifteen *giulii* to get it back, which he gave to the soldiers of the *caporione*.”¹⁴ This time, however, the prison warden paid the soldiers in advance not to remove the hated instrument of papal justice.

If opening the prisons had a plebeian flavor, the next civic ritual, a meeting of the “public” council, was for patricians only.¹⁵ Again the Capitol was the setting, specifically the palace of the conservators, which was named for the city’s three highest lay officials. The Roman public council met less and less frequently in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although at one time as many as eighteen hundred well-born citizens were eligible, no one kept records of eligibility any longer and attendance at most sessions during Urban VIII’s reign was no more than twenty men.¹⁶

¹³Gigli, *Diario romano*, 253-54. Two other *caporioni* performed the same duties for the two other city prisons.

¹⁴The *corda* or strappado was the typical form of punishment for plebeian offenders in Rome who could not afford stiff fines. It required tying the arms of offenders behind their backs, hoisting them in the air, and dropping them a specified number of times. This usually resulted in the dislocation of the arms.

¹⁵The “public” council was so-called to distinguish it from the somewhat more restricted “private” council; *Statuta almae urbis Romae* (Rome, 1580), bk. 3, chs. 2-3.

¹⁶Laurie Nussdorfer, “City Politics in Baroque Rome, 1623-1644,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1985), 127, 134. Although in need of revision, the only general survey of Roman municipal institutions in the medieval and early modern period is Emmanuel Rodocanachi, *Les institutions communales de Rome sous la papauté* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1901).

At the pope's death, however, a number three or four times this showed up, including many who normally never appeared at council sessions.¹⁷ It was a spectacle not only of expanded participation in government during the Vacant See but also of the confidence of the "Senate and People of Rome" in their rightful dominion at such times. The gathering of the public council, which occurred only once, was a sign of the transfer of power from the Vatican to the Capitol. It marked the mobilization of the "Roman People" for a new political role.

The council would not meet again; its purpose was to delegate authority during the interregnum to 17 lay officials—the 3 conservators and 14 *caporioni*—and 40 appointed "deputies." Henceforth it was this restricted group that directed the efforts of the "Roman People" to ensure the "quiet" of the city. Their very first action that day was to issue a series of edicts or *bandi* to maintain public order. Among other items these regulations banned carrying firearms; demanded that innkeepers turn in a list of overnight lodgers each day; ordered householders to keep a lantern burning at one window during the night; prohibited games of chance, which might lead to brawls, and dressing in disguise, which made it harder to identify malefactors.¹⁸

The three conservators then divided up their own tasks. One circulated through the city at the head of a company of two hundred soldiers; the second stood guard at the Vatican; and the third remained at the Capitol supervising the judicial business of the *caporioni*. The 14 *caporioni* held court in each urban district to try cases arising in the neighborhoods and also led a nightly patrol through their *rioni* to discourage would-be criminals.¹⁹

All these measures to keep order were a dramatic counterpoint to the "disorders" that often accompanied the deaths of popes. The audience for official civic rituals did not always stay politely in their seats; at times they took over the stage and became participants in a symbolic politics of their own. In 1644 many Romans, particularly among the lower classes, were enraged at Urban VIII's government; a recent three-year war had drained the public treasury and forced taxes to unheard-of heights.²⁰ Citizens had accused the pope's three nephews of getting rich while managing armies that never won a battle.

¹⁷Nussdorfer, "City Politics in Baroque Rome," 137-38.

¹⁸Archivio Segreto Vaticano (ASV), armadio IV, vol. 80, edicts of 29 July 1644; Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASR), *Bandi*, vol. 18, edicts of 29 July 1644.

¹⁹Nussdorfer, "City Politics in Baroque Rome," 310-11.

²⁰From 1641 to 1644 the War of Castro had pitted Urban VIII against Odoardo Farnese, descendant of Pope Paul III, who, in addition to being an independent ruler in his own right as duke of the north Italian state of Parma and Piacenza, was also a feudatory of the pope for the duchy of Castro north of Rome. For a brief account of the war that is favorable to the pope see Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, trans. Ernest Graf et al., 40 vols. (London, 1891-1953) 29 (1938): 382-401. For Roman opposition to the War of Castro see Nussdorfer, "City Politics in Baroque Rome," 239-76.

With the tolling of the “Patara,” they were at last free to express their fury publicly. Local tradition dictated their target—the pope’s statue on the Capitol.

Bernini’s life-sized marble figure of Urban VIII, erected by the “Roman People” four years before in the chamber where the public council met, was on the second floor in a room with large windows overlooking the Capitoline square. No sooner had the news of the pope’s death rung out than a crowd intent on destroying the statue stormed the hill. Anticipating such a reaction, the conservators had boarded up their palace, and a great feudal baron, the Constable Colonna, whose daughter was married to a Barberini nephew, had sent an armed force of his vassals to stand guard. The angry mob halted briefly before the pikes and muskets of the “Colonnesei.” But harangued by an aristocratic prelate who urged them “to take revenge on the barbarian [Barberini] tyrants,” they shifted to another object.²¹ Descending on the nearby Jesuit college where a stucco image of Urban VIII had been set up in a courtyard, they quickly turned it to dust. Or as one contemporary chronicler put it, “the pope died at quarter past eleven and by noon the statue was no more.”²²

The crowd’s attack on the figure of Urban VIII had not surprised civic officials. In 1590 Romans angry at Pope Sixtus V’s high taxes and rigorous rule had tried to destroy his effigy on the Capitol after his death.²³ In the Vacant See of 1559 they had actually succeeded in their assault on the marble statue of Paul IV (1555-59). Outraged at the crimes of the pope’s nephews, the populace first sacked the headquarters of the Inquisition and then mutilated Paul IV’s likeness in the palace of the conservators. Returning to the Capitol two days later with a professional stonemason, they decapitated the sculpture and dragged its head around the city for four days before a compassionate gentleman paid to have it thrown in the Tiber.²⁴ Fifty years earlier Michelangelo’s bronze statue of Julius II had been similarly dismembered by the pope’s recently conquered Bolognese subjects.²⁵ While “punishment in effigy” was widespread in Renaissance Europe—both as official and unofficial public ritual—in Rome such manifestations traditionally occurred only during

²¹Accounts of the incident may be found in “Diario della Città e Corte di Roma da Deone hora temi Dio [Teodoro Ameyden],” Biblioteca Casanatense (Rome), ms. 1832, 111-12, and Gigli, *Diario romano*, 254. The sources identify the prelate in question as Monsignor Cesarini; from circumstantial evidence I think he is Filippo Cesarini, second son of Duke Giovanni Giorgio Cesarini, a member of Rome’s highest nobility. Filippo Cesarini is described elsewhere by Teodoro Ameyden as “abate, giovane di molto spirito.” Teodoro Ameyden [sic], *La storia delle famiglie romane di Teodoro Amayden*, ed. Carlo Augusto Bertini, 2 vols. (1910; Bologna: Forni, 1979) 1: 302.

²²Ameyden, ms. 1832, 111-12. This passage has been published by Stanislao Fraschetti, *Il Bernini* (Milan: Hoepli, 1900), 154.

²³Pio Pecchiai, *Roma nel Cinquecento* (Bologna; Cappelli, 1948), 158.

²⁴Monika Butzek, *Die Communalen Repräsentationsstatuen der Päpste des 16. Jahrhunderts in Bologna, Perugia und Rom* (Bad Honnef: Bock und Herchen, 1978), 276-78, 467-74 (documents).

²⁵*Ibid.*, 91-97, 337-38 (documents).

the Vacant See.²⁶ The interregnum was a time when normal political processes in the city, conditioned as they were by the need for secrecy, decorum, and behind-the-scenes influence, broke down. What erupted in 1644 as it had in 1559 was fury at the pope and his nephews, and the criticism—both angry and satirical—of papal government that previously could never be uttered aloud.

While civic rituals and popular protest focused on the Capitol, symbol of secular government, the cardinals made the tomb of the apostles their base of operations. Here they set about defining an alternative regime on terms quite different from those claimed across the Tiber. Papal prohibitions on their exercise of authority in the temporal sphere did not apply to the administration of the Church as a spiritual entity; thus ecclesiastical government during the Vacant See fell to them.²⁷ But the growing absolutism of the early modern papacy had so obscured the boundaries between temporal and spiritual jurisdiction that the precise mandate of the Sacred College was far from clear.²⁸ It was on this touchy border that the cardinals and “Roman People” clashed.

Several weeks into the Vacant See that preceded Urban VIII’s election in the summer of 1623, the prelate who was responsible for Rome’s main criminal court—non-functioning during the conclave—sent a complaint in to the cardinals. He charged the Capitoline magistrates with usurping the powers of the Sacred College. Monsignor Giovanni Benini wrote:

This morning I saw a new edict published in the name of the conservators and now I am advised that they are arranging to publish another. Issuing edicts presupposes having jurisdiction in the matter that they treat, and I have said several times at meetings that the conservators do not have [this jurisdiction] and that the tradition that they adduce [in its defense] is mere corruption, not to be permitted to continue.²⁹

²⁶MacKay, “Ritual and Propaganda,” 15, 15n40, 16. See also Orest Ranum, “The French Ritual of Tyrannicide in the Late Sixteenth Century,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1980): 68. In his diary Gigli mentions that a traitorous commander was burned in effigy in Perugia in 1643 and he also records the burning of a “statua di paglia” (“straw statue”) of the unpopular French minister, Roman-born Jules Mazarin, in France in 1649. Gigli, *Diario romano*, 237, 331.

²⁷Spinelli, *La vacanza della sede apostolica*, 233, 244.

²⁸Although Pius IV’s bull *In eligendis* emphatically reiterated the prohibition on the Sacred College’s exercise of power in temporal matters, in actual practice the cardinals often seemed to behave like temporal rulers. For example they received official visits from foreign ambassadors at the beginning of the conclave; Lunadoro, 192. They also supervised the papal governors scattered around the Papal States throughout the Vacant See; the letters sent by these officials to the Sacred College in 1644 can be found in “Conclave per la Morte di Urbano VIII anno 1644,” ASV, Conclavi, 79r-133r. Cfr. Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice*, 188-89.

²⁹“Lettere spedite per la morte di Clemente VIII, Leone XI, Paolo V e Gregorio XV,” ASV, Conclavi, 298r (1 August 1623). For the offending edicts see ASR, Bandi, vol. 12, edicts of 9, 10 and 17 July 1623.

Two days later the conservators were duly summoned and forbidden to issue any further *bandi* without the cardinals' consent.³⁰ Their obedience was not put to the test however for the new pope, Urban VIII, was elected shortly thereafter.

Against this background the speed with which civic officials published their edicts following Urban VIII's death in 1644 was a strong statement of their determination to govern the city during the Vacant See. It was as if the act of issuing public regulations was itself a ritual that endowed its actors with authority.³¹ Indeed the Sacred College saw it in just that light and this time did not have to be urged to respond. They met the Capitoline challenge with a barrage of edicts of their own.

On the day after the conservators posted their *bandi* to preserve social order, the cardinals issued directives of their own annulling them.³² The Sacred College took the offensive and refused to allow the *caporioni* to proceed to judgment in legal cases involving corporal punishment or fines over 25 *scudi* without their case-by-case approval. Ignoring the whole thrust of papal legislation, the cardinals announced that they wished "everything to continue exactly as is customary in *sede plena*, when the pope is alive, and that no innovations be made."³³ The Capitol and the Sacred College disagreed fundamentally on the structure of power during the interregnum, and Roman laymen were galled. As the *caporione* Giacinto Gigli noted bitterly, "The people complained that, all authority having been taken away from the people by the popes, the college of cardinals now wanted to remove that dominion that remained to them in the Vacant See."³⁴

Despite the wishes of the cardinals, however, the city fathers held their own, stubbornly persisting in issuing *bandi* and carrying on judicial business.³⁵ Finally after several weeks of orders and counter-orders the battle of the edicts ended in a compromise. The "Roman People" would continue to publish their decrees but would add the face-saving phrase, "with the consent and participation of the Sacred College."³⁶

³⁰ASV, Conclavi, 1623, 302r.

³¹See in this connection the suggestive formulation of Pierre Bourdieu, "Because any language that can command attention is an 'authorized language,' invested with the authority of a group, the things it designates are not simply expressed but also authorized and legitimated." *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 170.

³²ASR, *Bandi*, vol. 18, edict of 30 July 1644.

³³"Volendo le Signorie loro Eminentissime, che si osservi precisamente quel che Sede plena, vivente il Pontefice era solito d'osservarsi, e che non si faccia alcuna novità;" ASR, *Bandi*, vol. 18, edict of 30 July 1644.

³⁴Gigli, *Diario romano*, 255.

³⁵ASV, *armadio IV* vol. 80, edicts of 4 August and 8 August 1644. Nussdorfer, "City Politics in Baroque Rome," 314-317.

³⁶ASV, Conclavi, 1644, 280r-81r. ASR, *Bandi*, vol. 18, edict of 16 August 1644.

Although the episode ended peacefully, it reminds us that political conflict in early modern Rome was particularly likely to surface in the period of the Vacant See. In the Middle Ages Roman barons had fought to control the city during the intervals between popes; the triumph of papal absolutism in the sixteenth century, and the emergence of a strong central state administration staffed by clerics, introduced new contenders for power and a new style to their conflict. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Vacant See sparked a political struggle between churchmen and laymen for temporary “dominion” over Rome. Rather than the bloody clashes of Orsini and Colonna, cardinals and curialists now fought a war of words with the local lay patriciate.

Public words in early modern society were not to be taken lightly and, although the form of combat was less destructive, what was at stake was no less keenly felt. Beneath the immediate jurisdictional disputes between the “Roman People” and the Sacred College in 1623 and 1644 lay deeper political frustrations. As contemporary observers and later historians have pointed out, the college of cardinals was itself a casualty of the papacy’s successful consolidation of power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³⁷ Once the representative organ of Christendom, by 1600 the cardinals as a body had lost all their deliberative and consultative functions. While they still served the pope, they did so, if we may borrow Prodi’s secular analogy, as bureaucrats rather than as senators.³⁸ Thus the Vacant See was for the cardinals—as it was for the lay Roman elite—a rare opportunity to exercise “dominion.”

Although the Capitoline authorities had a detailed legal charter for use while the pope lived, they rested their case for governing Rome in the interregnum on custom rather than a formal grant of powers. The traditions that dictated the choice of the Capitoline bell to announce the pope’s death, the opening of the city prisons by civic officials, and the convening of the council in the palace of the conservators, constituted in an effective sense the new order. Only by repeating these visible public acts before an attentive audience did a claim based on custom come to life. Significantly it was a spectator, a Roman duke whose exalted birth excluded him from civic office, who defended the “ancient rights” of the “Roman People” before the cardinals in 1644.³⁹

Papal officials countered politically-charged rituals with skillful legal arguments. As Monsignor Benini contended in 1623, “It is certain that to acquire jurisdiction, especially in corporal matters, a privilege of the prince is

³⁷Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice*, 169-78. “Relazione di Alvise Contarini, 1632-1635,” in *Relazioni degli Stati Europei lette al Senato dagli Ambasciatori Veneti del secolo decimosettimo*, ser. 3, *Italia, Relazioni di Roma*, eds. Niccolò Barozzi and Guglielmo Berchet, 2 vols. (Venice, 1877-1878) 1 (1877): 355-57.

³⁸Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice*, 178-83.

³⁹Gigli, *Diario romano*, 255-56.

needed, and ancient usage is not sufficient, even when not explicitly prohibited by the prince."⁴⁰ Once again clerical strategy was to deny the special juridical character of the Vacant See. In the final analysis, however, the churchmen could not make such reasoning stick; papal legislation itself, while silent on the role of the "Roman People," had created "another country" in which Romans could construct an alternative regime.

The fierce struggles between lay and clerical officials to whom bits of temporal authority devolved with the pope's death were a function of the contradiction between the ambitions of absolutism and the principle of elective, rather than dynastic, succession. In the absence of a single commanding figure the character of politics during the Vacant See differed markedly from that which prevailed during a pontiff's reign. Disputes over jurisdiction were normally held in check by the pope; during the interregnum such boundaries were openly and hotly contested.

At such times rivalries and tensions usually cloaked in courtly decorum exploded; indeed Rome without the Holy Father seemed very like a Hobbesian state of nature. If so, it was a carnivalesque state of nature in which play fused with protest, and ribaldry with revenge. The Vacant See, like a grand urban fête, mobilized all the expressive resources of the society in a range of modes and moods. The interregnum of 1644 aptly illustrates this shift in the tone of protest from "rites of violence" to irreverent talk, writings, and songs. The rage at papal misgovernment that vented itself in attacks on the statues of unpopular popes quickly gave way to more satirical expressions of opinion.

As the eloquence of the "talking statue" Pasquino⁴¹ attested, satire was no stranger to Romans even while popes were alive, but it was always a clandestine and highly risky affair. In 1636, an aristocrat had lost his head in Rome merely for possessing a manuscript of "pasquinades" that made fun of Urban

⁴⁰ASV, Conclavi, 1623, 298r (1 August 1623).

⁴¹Pasquino was the most famous of a number of "talking statues" in Renaissance Rome. This remnant of an antique marble figure group, christened "Pasquino" soon after it was unearthed, had stood since 1501 at a busy intersection in downtown Rome, in an area frequented by literate Romans—notaries, employees of the curia, and booksellers. Anonymous lampoons, often in Latin verse, mocking the pope and other powerful figures, were posted on the statue and left to amuse passersby. These satirical epigrams were known as "pasquinades," which in Rome eventually came to mean writing of any length or form criticizing the government. The term soon spread from Rome to the rest of Europe, but outside Rome the word "pasquinade" (or "pasquil") tended to retain the more restricted original meaning of an anonymous lampoon. A complete edition of sixteenth-century Roman verse pasquinades has recently been published. Valerio Marucci, et al., eds., *Pasquinade romane del Cinquecento*, 2 vols. (Rome: Salerno, 1983). Pietro Fornari [pseud. P. Romano] published a series of volumes on Roman satire in the early modern period under the general title *Pasquino e la satira in Roma* (Rome: Agostiniana, 1932-37). See also Anne Reynolds, "The Tradition of Pasquino: Humanism and Ritual Celebration in Early Sixteenth Century Rome," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 34 (1985): 178-208.

VIII's government.⁴² No matter how angry they were, critics of the regime rarely dared to complain aloud. During the Vacant See, however, as one anonymous chronicler put it in 1644, "the knots by which the Barberini had tied everyone's tongues for so many years came loose."⁴³ Giacinto Gigli, a respectable gentleman who did not share the hostility of many Romans towards Urban VIII, described the outburst that followed his death with some amazement:

During [these weeks] the people vented themselves against dead Pope Urban VIII and the Barberini with injurious words and with the pen, writing of him every evil; wherewith were published an infinite number of compositions in Latin and in the vulgar tongue, in prose and in verse, so that I do not believe there has ever been anything like it. Some were bizarre and facetious, others satirical and stinging, and others too sharp and unworthy of a Christian. In sum, whoever had a fine wit and was an eloquent writer or good poet showed it in speaking ill of Urban and his nephews.⁴⁴

Gigli's final line provides a clue that a sense of injury was not all that animated this flood of compositions. A delight in literary play also found the freedom of the Vacant See exhilarating.⁴⁵ Both factors undoubtedly help to account for the presence of ecclesiastics and aristocrats among the rabble-rousers and authors of witty verses. One who combined these identities was the youthful Roman nobleman Monsignor Filippo Cesarini, who had spurred the crowd on the Capitol to take vengeance on the Barberini. Cesarini was embittered because a papal official had locked up his cousin, the Duke of Ceri, for killing a constable several years before.⁴⁶ A writer of poems mocking Urban VIII, the prelate was also credited with a mischievous request to the dead pope's favorite sculptor Bernini. According to the story, Cesarini accosted the celebrated artist on the Capitol and told him to make "a large Christ" to put in the apse of St. Peter's between the tombs of the "two thieves," Paul III and Urban VIII.⁴⁷ After his performance before the crowd that day the Sacred College ordered Cesarini to stay in his palace lest further scandal ensue.⁴⁸

⁴²On the execution of Marchese Francesco Bentivoglio-Manzuoli see Gigli, *Diario romano*, 164, 185, and Giorgio Spini, *Ricerca dei Libertini*, rev. ed. (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1983), 186-87.

⁴³P. Romano [Pietro Fornari], *Pasquino e la satira in Roma: Quod non fecerunt barbari . . .* (Rome: Agostiniana, 1937), 99.

⁴⁴Gigli, *Diario romano*, 256.

⁴⁵Romano suggests that in this age both panegyric and invective—two sides of the same coin—were more an indication of literary energy than of political passion. Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 37.

⁴⁶Gigli, *Diario romano*, 254.

⁴⁷Diary of Marc' Antonio Valena, quoted in Frascchetti, 154n4. We recall that it was the descendants of Paul III Farnese who had fought Urban VIII in the costly and unpopular War of Castro, concluded only four months before.

⁴⁸ASV, Conclavi, 1644, 277r. Frascchetti, 154.

Not only high-born clerics indulged in satirical compositions. A former employee of the Barberini, Monsignor Stefano Vaio, was thought to have been the author of a song attacking Urban VIII, which was printed and chanted through the streets. Vaio, reputed to be slightly mad, had risen to prominent curial offices with papal patronage and did not have any apparent motive for revenge. He simply “professed to be a free spirit [*huomo libero*] and amused himself composing verses and songs.”⁴⁹

Not all of the creative political comment of the Vacant See was learned or literary; “the misdeeds of Urban are sung by youths in the street,” one witness reported in 1644.⁵⁰ Song was in fact a popular vehicle of public criticism. Lower-class women had a favorite refrain, “Papa Urbano della barba bella, doppo il giubileo mette la gabella,” referring to the pope’s habit of granting plenary indulgences just before levying new taxes.⁵¹

The most famous song of the Vacant See of 1644 however was “Pope Tax” or “Papa Gabella.” It had an easy structure that lent itself to the invention of new verses. The song diverted not only young boys in the public squares but also the upper strata of Roman society. “Serenades with music and instruments take place all night from a great number of carriages, singing the ballad ‘Papa Gabella,’ which daily grows in stanzas.”⁵² Although some copyists were arrested with handwritten copies of the song and swore that Monsignor Cesarini was the author, the prelate himself denied the attribution, while playfully composing another verse that blamed Monsignor Vaio.⁵³

“Papa Gabella” may not have been printed, although other songs were, but its celebrity was widely attested in Rome. An existing manuscript copy shows it to have been a complete catalogue of popular complaints against Urban VIII’s government.⁵⁴ High taxes, the poor quality of bread, the wealth of the Barberini nephews, all figure among its rhymes. In quatrain goes, “In the time of Urban, / the big *pagnotta* [a loaf of bread], / lightweight and badly-

⁴⁹Gigli, *Diario romano*, 257.

⁵⁰Ameyden, ms. 1832, 131. Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 12.

⁵¹“Pope Urban of the handsome beard, After a jubilee [indulgence] raises taxes.” This verse was recorded by Teodoro Ameyden, who added, “Mulierculae quoque suas concinebant cantilenas, inter quas haec fuit: ‘Papa Urbano della barba bella, doppo il giubileo mette la gabella’;” ms. 1832, 145. The passage was published by Alessandro Bastiaanse, *Teodoro Ameyden (1586-1656): Un neerlandese alla corte di Roma* (The Hague: Staatsdrukkerij, 1967), 357. My thinking about the political uses of song was stimulated by conversations with Laura Mason.

⁵²Ameyden, ms. 1832, 145. Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 107-8.

⁵³Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 112-13.

⁵⁴Excerpts from the manuscript in the Berlin State Library were published by Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 108-11. For a reference to printed songs see Gigli, *Diario romano*, 257.

baked, / became a *panella* [oilcake].”⁵⁵ The gist of the judgment against the Barberini was summed up in a mock epitaph that played on the family’s heraldic emblem, the bee:

On the tomb of Urban VIII a few words appeared,
He fattened the bees and flayed the herd.⁵⁶

The dead pope was not the only subject on Roman tongues during the weeks of the Vacant See, however. The interregnum gave city dwellers a unique opportunity to speak openly not only about their past ruler but also about the one to come. Indeed the scrutiny of the whole Catholic world fell on the conclave, for foreign governments were just as interested as Romans in who would occupy the chair of St. Peter. Thus in 1644,

[many verses] and jokes and gossip and judgments were heard about all the cardinals, divulging the habits, vices, inclinations, and defects of each one, especially those who aspired to the papacy, with prophecies about the consequences that would befall if so-and-so became pope.⁵⁷

For the most part the authorities—both lay and clerical—did nothing to stifle political discussion. It would have been a difficult task in any case. As one observer commented, “Never has Pasquino chattered as much as at the death of this pope.”⁵⁸ A papal official grumbled that simply controlling the normal places where wits posted anonymous lampoons had no effect for the scribbled compositions slipped easily from hand to hand.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Nel tempo d’ Urbano,
la grossa pagnotta,
leggiera e malcotta,
divenne panella,
o papa Gabella.

(Romano, *Pasquino e la satira*, 108.)

⁵⁶Ameyden records both a Latin and Italian version of these lines, which were published in Bastiaanse, 360.

Paucā haec Urbani scribantur verba sepulchro:

Tam male pavit oves, quam bene pavit apes.

Or: Questo d’ Urban’ si scriva al monumento:

Ingrasso l’ api e scortico l’armento.

⁵⁷Gigli, *Diario romano*, 257.

⁵⁸Ameyden quoted by Bastiaanse, 360.

⁵⁹For the papal official’s complaint see ASV, Conclavi, 1644, 290r (24 August 1644).

In this setting the rites and possibilities of the electoral process took hold of the imaginations of papal subjects far removed from formal political institutions. No longer limited to a tiny power zone around the pope and his key nephew, the “charismatic center” had fractured into dozens of potential candidacies. The unique spectacle of political choice at such times stirred all levels of society, and in mimicked elections of their own those at the bottom themselves “played” at taking part. Thus, a group of women from the Roman district of Sant’ Eustachio amused themselves after a wedding during the Vacant See of 1559 by enacting their own conclave. Each took the name of a cardinal and passed a candle from hand to hand; the one to whom it passed most often, they believed, would become the new pope.⁶⁰ Peasants from the Marches dressed themselves as cardinals in the Vacant See of 1655, and elected a shepherd-pope, abolishing the hated grain-milling tax in the bargain.⁶¹

During the conclave of 1623 in which Urban VIII was elected, the grooms (*palafrenieri*) who usually served the pope mounted a little performance in St. Peter’s while their future master was locked up in the Vatican. With the expertise of those on intimate terms with papal ceremonial, they acted out the scene that would shortly transpire. Hoisting one of their number on their shoulders as if he were the newly-elected pope, they proceeded around the basilica and then lowered their comrade irreverently onto the high altar itself.⁶² Such mock elections suggest how compelling the conclave was for subjects of the Papal States. In fantasy and burlesque those normally denied a voice in government commented on the political process.

Despite the splendid isolation of the Vatican, the outside world followed very closely what transpired at the twice-daily votes inside the conclave.⁶³ Outside the “wheels” where food was passed into the cardinals and in the courtyard beneath the palace foreign agents mingled with the local curious to exchange the latest news. The Sacred College could have limited access to the Vatican quite effectively simply by closing the Tiber bridge that linked the papal zone to the rest of Rome. Instead they generally kept the route open to all comers.

Thus in August 1644 Romans heard with alarm that Urban VIII’s nephew, the mighty Cardinal Francesco Barberini, was promoting the candidacy of his close friend the Florentine cardinal Giulio Sacchetti. They knew

⁶⁰Pecchiai, *Roma nel Cinquecento*, 327.

⁶¹Alessandro Ademollo, “Il macinato a Roma,” *Rivista Europea* 8 (1877): 443.

⁶²Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms. Urbinate latino 1093, 578r. The incident took place on 25 July 1623 six days after the cardinals had entered conclave and twelve days before the election of Urban VIII. It is recorded in the manuscript newsletters called *avvisi*, which give historians much of their information about events in early modern Rome, under the date of 29 July 1623. For a discussion of the *avvisi* as historical sources see Jean Delumeau, *Vie économique et sociale de Rome dans la seconde moitié du XVIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: De Boccard, 1957-59), 1: 25-36.

⁶³On licit and illicit means of communicating with the conclave see Nussdorfer, “City Politics in Baroque Rome,” 328-29.

that the outcome of papal elections was usually determined by arrangement between the cardinal nephews of the preceding popes, each of whom acted as head of a faction of “creatures”—cardinals promoted by their uncles. Urban VIII’s remarkably long reign had produced a sizeable Barberini faction, almost enough to dictate the election of Sacchetti. As the days passed Sacchetti’s name dominated the talk outside the “wheels.” After three weeks it looked as if he would win; “The courtyard published Pope Sacchetti with great certainty,” a Spanish agent reported.⁶⁴ But an angry crowd gathered outside the conclave. “If you make Sacchetti Pope,” they shouted to the windows above, “Rome will be sacked!”⁶⁵

Did the comments of the populace affect the outcome of the election? Not directly, perhaps, but those within the palace who had stubbornly resisted Cardinal Barberini’s candidate were undoubtedly pleased to hear the support for their cause. They held out for another two weeks; in the end Sacchetti was defeated by the Roman Giovanni Battista Pamphili, who took the hopeful name of Innocent X. The Vacant See was over.

In the customs and rituals of the Vacant See early modern Romans shaped an important vehicle of political expression. Although we have concentrated on reactions to Urban VIII, the fate of earlier papal statues indicates that Urban was not the only target of Roman displeasure. In fact, government officials at all levels faced a similar settling of accounts during the interregnum. Angry crowds attacked the warehouses of the papal banker after Clement VII’s death in 1534 and harassed the banker and architect of Sixtus V in 1590.⁶⁶ A former chief criminal magistrate was verbally assaulted in 1644 and his successor’s belongings vandalized in 1655.⁶⁷ Even while the popes lived unpopular state agents drew threats of vengeance “in the next Vacant See.”⁶⁸ Built into Roman political life was a special rhythm of restraint and release. Or as the contemporary historian Girolamo Brusoni put it, “It is the practice of the Roman court to fawn with excessive baseness on ruling princes and to curse with incredible shamelessness those in decline or dead.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴Ameyden, ms. 1832, 137.

⁶⁵Gigli, *Diario romano*, 257.

⁶⁶Melissa Bullard, “Grain Supply and Urban Unrest in Renaissance Rome: The Crisis of 1533-34,” in *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, ed. P. A. Ramsey (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982), 282. Delumeau, *Vie économique et social de Rome*, 2 (1959): 889.

⁶⁷Gigli, *Diario romano*, 254, 452.

⁶⁸In 1649 a Roman man of letters named Giovanni Camillo Zaccagni was executed for threatening to avenge wrongs, which he felt his family had suffered at the hands of the papal official in charge of controlling city grain supplies, “quando fusse venuta la Sede Vacante.” Gigli, *Diario romano*, 329.

⁶⁹Girolamo Brusoni, *Della Historia d’Italia* (Venice, 1676), 410.

What difference did such intervals of freedom make? The alternative regime constructed for the Vacant See instantly dismantled itself on the new pope's election. Was it just a safety valve for potentially dangerous political tensions or did it actually accomplish something?

While there is no evidence that rulers altered their policies because of anxieties about their post-mortem reputations, the Vacant See was not without practical results. Hated officials often lost their jobs in the next reign.⁷⁰ More significantly, by allowing public grievances to air, the interregnum provided the rudiments of a civic agenda for the new monarch. He might not act on it to everyone's satisfaction, but there was no question about what concerns he should address. For Innocent X the issues were plain—high taxes and Barberini corruption.⁷¹

But the Vacant See also conveyed a more profound if elusive political message. It was both spectacle of popular judgment and urban morality play. During its privileged time and space the Roman hierarchy of power turned upside down; the weak became strong and the mighty were humbled. Its most enduring legacy was this periodic renewal of the promise of justice.

⁷⁰For example, the fiscal procurator of the Capitol lost his job in 1644 and the Governor of Rome, an ecclesiastical magistrate, in 1655. Gigli, *Diario romano*, 259, 454.

⁷¹Gigli, *Diario romano*, 273-74, 276. For some "civic agendas" of the sixteenth century see Pecchiai, *Roma nel Cinquecento*, 216-31. On the political implications of "momentary articulations of social values," see also David Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 27.