CHAPTER 1

The Papal Hydra: The Politics of the Vacant See

“The King is dead! Long live the King!” These words habitually resounded in the ears of French subjects at the death of their king and the immediate succession of his heir in the early modern era. This ceremonial phrase developed from the efforts of jurists and royal officials in the late Middle Ages to provide political and symbolic continuity during the brief interregnum between the death of the reigning king and the coronation of his successor. The idea was to give the illusion that the dignitas of the king did not fall vacant, nor did the judicial structures of the realm cease functioning after his death. Royal officials first accomplished this political subterfuge with an effigy of the dead monarch that would lie in state until the coronation of his successor, but by Louis XIII’s reign the French crown had adopted this phrase and the hasty presentation of the heir-apparent as the king to the people.1

Papal magistrates and masters of ceremonies, in contrast, responded quite differently when their master, the pope, died. Rather than perform rites that fictitiously maintained the pope’s existence and the continuation of his government, papal officials visibly and ritually proclaimed the abrupt lapse of his regime and his family’s power. Since the papacy was an elective monarchy, papal officials could not adopt the French rite of swiftly declaring a successor. The Catholic world but also Rome and the Papal States had to wait as the cardinals gathered in the conclave to elect the next occupant of St Peter’s throne—an interval that could be as short as two weeks or as long as several months in extreme cases. However, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries the cardinals typically took about a month to select a pope.

According to a venerable tradition, codified in several bulls that culminated in Pius IV’s In eligendis of 1562, most of the machinery of papal government came to a halt from the time of the pope’s death until the coronation of his

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successor. The offices of the Dataria and Cancelleria—important bureaucracies dealing with dispensations and papal finances, respectively—closed for the duration of the vacant see, while the criminal and civic tribunals of Rome, including the dominant court of the governor of Rome, could not open new cases. Only the financial heart of the papacy, the Apostolic Chamber, continued its activities under the guidance of the cardinal chamberlain. This prelate broke the *annulus pescatoris*, “the ring of the fisherman,” used to affix the pope’s seal on official documents, thereby signifying the end of his regime and the prohibition of the making of new laws during the vacant see. In this regard, the papacy shared much in common with other early modern elective monarchies, such as the Holy Roman Empire and Poland, which emphasized the sudden lapse in governmental activity with the death of the monarch.

In the case of the papacy, a fear existed of a family attempting to establish dynastic control over the papal crown—a fear not so farfetched when one thinks of the ambitions of the Medici and Farnese families.

With the death of the pope, Rome lost its political and charismatic center. By the 16th and 17th centuries, popes had claimed the largest share of political and ceremonial space in the city through the transformation of recalcitrant feudal lords into tamed court nobles and through the progressive weakening of the College of Cardinals and the municipal authorities on the Capitoline Hill.

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3 Aleksander Gieysztor, “Gesture in the Coronation Ceremonies of Medieval Poland,” in *Coronations: Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual*, ed. János M. Bak (Berkeley, 1990), pp. 153–55. Early modern Venice, although a republic, similarly played up the death of the doge, the executive head of the civic government elected for life, in order to sever the individual from the office. The critical difference with papal Rome, however, was that the Venetian patriciate and their civic officials maintained true authority while the doge lived and after his death. For an excellent discussion of ducal funeral rites, see Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, pp. 263–77.