CHAPTER ONE
THE EMPTY SEE

1. Empty See Governance and the Papal Electoral System

A discussion of the Empty See (also Vacant See or sede vacante) anchors this study. The term’s definition can be deceivingly simple: It is often defined as the institution that takes over the temporal regime of the church left void by the pope’s death. It was regulated in the Middle Ages with special laws and liturgy, customs, symbolism, and even coinage. However, historical evidence undermines this conventional definition. In at least three easily identifiable cases throughout the Middle Ages, behaviors characterizing the Empty See emerged when a pope was very much alive, but when violence or pillaging was launched by his enemies: in 1319 Muzio di Francesco stole the papal treasury because he did not recognize the authority of Pope John XXII, then in Avignon; pillage followed the death of Cardinal Legate Alborno in 1367 Viterbo as Pope Urban V still ruled Christianity, and was present in Viterbo. Finally, another case took place during the Subtraction of Obedience in 1398 schismatic Avignon. Historically, the Empty Sees, real or not, emerged as a catalyst for liminal violence, with social disruptions like looting and pillaging and a marked increase in formal and ritualized behavior. For example, during the Subtraction of Obedience, white-clad and torch-carrying crowds proceeded along the streets of Avignon as the remains of dismembered “traitors” hung on the city’s gates.

1 Since the term will be used often in this text, I would like to clarify its usage. It has become a common place in the English language to use the term sede vacante (no Italics), as a noun, as in “the Sede Vacante,” even though the exact Latin would prohibit the usage. Sede vacante (the seat being vacant) is the ablative absolute of sedes vacans (vacant seat) and it has grown into usage to describe the vacancy of the Episcopal and holy Sees. The term appears countless times preceded by an article (a, the or la) in many languages, English, French, Spanish, and Italian, for example. See for example, the Department of Communications of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops ‘Death and Election of a Pope: A Brief Backgrounder,’ at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/pope/BriefBackgrounder.pdf> for current US English usage.
It then becomes advantageous for the development of the argument to somewhat redefine the Empty See, and to possibly avoid the traditional terminology that is so thoroughly linked to the person and death of the pope. In the following chapters, I will argue that what took place during the interregna could be described more accurately as "liminal violence," rather than Empty See violence, or interregnum pillaging, with some adaptation of the terminology to reflect the fact that it was violence triggered by the real or presumed absence of the head of the church.

This investigation of the customary violence attached to the papal interregnum starts with the liturgy and governance of the Empty See. Elections were often contentious and the institution searched for a system that offered stability and independence. It follows that the papal electoral system evolved from a process open to "all" into one that was limited to the conclave of cardinals. The analysis of the liturgy and governance of the Empty See through the medieval ordines, or ceremonial books, suggests that "customizing" the Empty See facilitated and smoothed the transition between popes and limited the uncertainty that usually marked the end of a pope’s temporal rule.

The transition between authority in the medieval and early modern periods has been widely studied within the scope of monarchies, and because the medieval papacy has traditionally been defined as a monarchy, a discussion of ecclesiastical transitions in the Middle Ages can naturally follow from this starting point. Various studies have shown how secular institutions framed their political continuity. As Sergio Bertelli stated elegantly, "Denying the death of their sovereigns, communities denied their own dissolution." Ernst Kantorowicz highlighted first the dual nature of the king’s body and of the monarchical institution: The king’s body was destined to perish while his institutional body endured in the kingdom. Reflecting on Kantorowicz’s analysis, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani considered how the church formulated its own institutional continuity. He suggested that ecclesiastical transitions were developed and built from the inherent internal contradiction between the pope’s physical transience and the church’s institutional continuity. He con-