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_The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome. A Social History of the Papal Interregnum_  
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Ostensibly, this study focuses on the phenomenon of the Vacant See (_Sede Vacante_) from 1559 to 1655, which superficially means the period between the death of one pope and the coronation of his successor. Undoubtedly, some readers will expect that the ritualized nature of Roman life during this interregnal period will produce a monograph that is repetitive and dull. This could hardly be farther from the truth. As with his other work, Hunt’s monograph is brimming with conflict, violence, revenge, _bravado_, and the whole of early modern life. This century of vacant sees provides Hunt with a large sample size allowing him to draw conclusions from broad-based supporting evidence. This is necessary in a social history that goes far beyond the concerns and acts of the new pope’s electors to comment on continuing discussions about absolutist claims, criminalization, and dialogue between ruler and subjects.

The period of 1559 to 1655 follows the end of the Italian Wars, when papal political power waned, and covers the post-Tridentine period, when papal religious authority rebounded. Hunt situates this period within the twentieth-century scholarly consensus that the papacy succeeded in “developing a centralized, absolutist state,” subduing rebellious cities, violent nobles, and the powerless civic magistrates of Rome (p. 2). While Hunt argues that the elected nature of the papacy subverted any continuous hold on absolute power, his study also reveals that during the vacant see there was plenty of competition between the College of Cardinals and the _Popolo Romano_, violent altercations, and jostling for power. Any theory about the papacy’s increased disciplinary influence must contend with the reality that between pontificates judicial authority ceased, community consensus broke down, and violent self-help filled the void.

To understand this period, the participants, and the landscape in which things occurred, Hunt describes the administrative branches (the College of Cardinals, _Popolo Romano_, _caporioni_) that witnessed and policed the Vacant See in clear and precise detail. The same care is applied to relating the rituals that punctuated the period, including the deceased pope’s obsequies and funeral, the conclave, and the newly elected pope’s coronation. To enliven this world Hunt animates these structures with the opinions and experiences of diarists, ambassadors, and newsletter (_avvisi_) writers, like Giovanni Girolamo Lomellino, Teodoro Ameyden, Giacinto Gigli, and Giovanni Battista Spada, who was the governor of Rome. These witnesses describe the sights, sounds,
and tension in the city (and across the Papal States), as well as the clashes between factions and individuals. To dig deeper into the experiences and mentalities reflected in these accounts Hunt mobilizes the decrees (bandi) issued and the cases prosecuted by the Governor of Rome’s criminal tribunal. The result is a rich tapestry of evidence of pre-modern life that spans the income spectrum and embraces everyone from cardinals to bandits, crossing gender, class, and lay-clerical divides.

This volume is a fascinating perspective on the city of Rome and the groups that vied for power and honor within the chronological and social confines of a limited and liminal moment. Hunt’s study has enlarged the usual perspective of the Vacant See from one that focuses tightly on the Vatican Palace and Rome, to one that embraces the greater Papal States, the roads running north and south, and groups that were affected both by the opportunities for employment as well as the Vacant See’s resulting instability. This entrenchment of Rome and the papacy within the larger peninsular economic and social world is much needed. Combining Roman tribunal records with newsletters allows Hunt to connect local and regional information, giving substance to newsletters’ claims and grounding tribunal examples in regional fears and trends or beliefs about the economy and politics.

This effort to contextualize the Vacant See within the broader geographic and social pressures highlights Hunt’s desire to show how the period’s violence is connected to larger processes, distinct from the cultural anthropologist’s vision of a social “safety-valve” or “collective protest.” Instead, Hunt frames this experience of violence in two ways, firstly in defense of individual honor and to resolve old grievances, and secondly as evidence of anger over breaches in the previous pope’s maintenance of the “moral economy” and harsh justice. The former explanation is clear from tribunal records that show how people waited until the pope’s death to strike, even ignoring earlier pacts and resolutions. The latter conclusion sits amid a larger depiction of papal government, in which Hunt argues that “Romans wanted neither a saint nor a sinner [as pope]; rather they desired a pope who would ensure the wheels of patronage ran smoothly without committing egregious nepotism. A reforming pontiff was not desired” (pp. 240–241). While I agree with this judgement, it characterizes pre-modern Rome as knowingly tolerant of a certain amount of disorder, violence, and corruption. The existence of decrees listing items that should not be pillaged reasserts the contemporary expectation of violence and shows that minimizing the damage was considered a best-case scenario.

In conclusion, this volume fills a need and also acts as a nexus pointing the reader towards research on other social issues connected with the vacant see, including pasquinades, rumor, gambling, and banditry. Unfortunately the