

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Hunt, John M. The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome: A Social History of the Papal Interregnum

Aaron Taylor Miedema

Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085988ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29865>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Miedema, A. (2018). Review of [Hunt, John M. The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome: A Social History of the Papal Interregnum]. *Renaissance and Reformation* / *Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 191–193. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29865>

Spenser's approach in relation to English and Irish ruins and ruination, not those of Rome. Alongside the book's transnationalism, Hui takes a philological approach to literature. The book's mining of words for layers of significance can be almost dizzyingly thought-provoking, although on a few occasions it does slow down the reader's progress and obscures the larger argument. Likewise, the copious and diverse examples and references to related ideas about ruins (some from earlier and later centuries) occasionally result in short fragmented sections. However, given the feast of evocative ideas in the book, such criticism is mere crumbs.

In recent years, there has been no shortage of articles and books on the "poetics of [insert topic]" in early modern literary studies. This observation is not meant to be facetious; rather, this growing body of scholarship seems a healthful part of the critical trend to conduct formalist literary analysis of texts within specific historical contexts and in close relation to particular themes and topoi in works. *The Poetics of Ruins in Renaissance Literature* is significant not only for its philological emphasis but also for its selection and elucidation of the poetics of a topic not just conceptual (and therefore often nebulous to define) but materially present in the period. Hui's fascinating account of architectural ruins, in the physical world and in texts, grounds and enriches his deft analysis of words and literary forms. The book is written in clear and expressive language. Simultaneously focused and expansive, Hui's study makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Renaissance poetics.

ANTON E. BERGSTROM

Wilfrid Laurier University

Hunt, John M.

The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome: A Social History of the Papal Interregnum.

Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 200. Leiden: Brill, 2016. Pp. xii, 299. ISBN 978-90-04-31377-4 (hardcover) €154.

The city of Rome is a city of layers. Archaeologically and architecturally speaking, it is a city that has wrestled with—and continues to wrestle with—carving out a contemporary city amid the epic ruins of classical Rome and the

churches and palaces of the seventeenth century, and all the layers between. The city also has deep political and spiritual layers; modern Italy, for example, had to struggle with the traditions of papal political and spiritual control of the city to make its capital in the eternal city. And while the city is eternal, the papacy itself was not, and it too had to struggle, adapt, and negotiate to make its authority dominant over the turbulent city after the Babylonian Captivity. John M. Hunt's *The Vacant See in Early Modern Rome* exposes the truly unique and topsy-turvy world of the vacant see in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Rome, and through this examination exposes the negotiation of the papacy and people with the political and spiritual archaeology of Rome. In typically Roman fashion, it is a tale of preservation, use, and abuse.

Before the modern Italian state laid claim to the dominions of the church, the pope was not only the spiritual leader of the Catholic world but also the absolute temporal lord of the papal dominions in central Italy. The succession of the papacy presented a conundrum, as there was not a predetermined successor to the papal tiara. The temporal authority of the papacy over the city retreated behind the walls of the conclave as the cardinals debated and elected the new master of Rome. The old city government of the *Popolo* attempted to step into the power vacuum, but, its authority fell into disarray with the return of the popes in the fifteenth century. The remnants of papal authority squabbled with the *Popolo* and the police forces got into physical altercations with each other and themselves. The absence of political or legal authority meant that people resorted to self-help justice—saving up their grudges and vengeance for the vacant see. In essence, Rome became an early modern version of the film “The Purge.” The vacant see was a turbulent and violent time for an already violent city.

The power vacuum left by the death of the pope also provided the populace of Rome with the opportunity to express their adoration or loathing for particular popes. Flocks of Romans came to touch the dead body or collect mementos of popular popes. Sculptures of unpopular popes and evidence of their patronage were defaced or destroyed. The populace also expressed its feelings in writing, and the comedic and critical broadsides took on a biting and bitter tone. The vacant see offered the outpouring of emotion, vengeance, and anger, and served as a ritual political outlet for the populace of Rome.

This notion of the vacant see as political outlet took on other forms that made the city a more precarious and violent place. The populace engaged in

looting palaces of the deceased pope, a tradition that had roots in the Middle Ages. However, this ritual lost cohesion by the sixteenth century, and people began looting the palace of the incoming pope or simply turning on unpopular cardinals. The threat of looting and the increasing violence of the vacant see caused the elites of Rome to hire large retinues of armed retainers to protect their palaces. These retainers were drawn from the numerous rural poor and local bandits who thronged to the city upon the news of a pope's death looking for employment. The addition of armed men, in a city that already had an unusually high ratio of males, increased local tensions, as they drank, gambled, and stole to pass their idle hours; moreover, women frequently became the focus of unrest and violence, and, in many cases, participants.

In spite of the conclave's best efforts, when papal governance withdrew temporarily from the city, the conclave was incapable of isolating its proceedings from the populace with vested interests in the selection of the new pope. Shouts from the crowd gathered around the conclave expressed the people's opinions. Nor was the conclave able to keep its secrets, and any rumour, true or false, could begin the ritual pillaging or uproar in the streets. The public's curiosity about the information coming out of the conclave was made more intense by the fortunes gained and lost by Romans wagering on who would become the next pope. Both papal and city authorities endeavoured to suppress the popular betting on the conclave, but lack of coherent or consistent authority made suppression of betting a difficult process.

Hunt arranges the diverse rituals of the vacant see in thematic chapters, which permits him to focus closely on each element of the papal interregnum. This does have the slight drawback of not giving the reader a sense of how an individual vacant see played out. Hunt observes that not every element investigated occurred during every interregnum; each one was unique. However, this is a trivial issue; a synchronic approach would not have permitted Hunt to focus on each individual phenomenon. *The Vacant See* is a solid, scholarly contribution that is made entertaining with its stories of Romans behaving badly.