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## The Curia Romana and Pre-Modern Politics

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In an age when foreign policy sinks or swims on the strength of one's ability to build coalitions, where commitment to international law is deeper for some and more ambivalent for others, and diplomacy is undercut by the profligates of ungodly terror, it may be wondered whether we are entering a new phase in human political relations. This moment in history may be singing a different verse, but the tune is much the same as in years past. Politics is as politics does.

This was confirmed for me in reading *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492-1700*, another in the prestigious series Cambridge Studies in Italian History and Culture. This volume is under the editorial guidance of Gianvittoria Signorotto and Maria Antonietta Visceglia who, together with several other Italian colleagues, have formed an impressive collection of essays on the papal court spanning roughly from the patrimony of Innocent VIII Cibo (d. July 1492) to Innocent XII Pignatelli (d. September 1700). Including these men, the period counted thirty elected to the chair of Peter. This volume utilizes archival data and a wide range of primarily German and Italian

bibliographic sources to examine the political roles of the electors of these popes and the impact their activities had on life inside and outside the papal court.

A more or less chronological series of ten chapters begins with an examination by Marco Pellegrini of factionalism within the Sacred College in the court of Alexander VI Borgia, a Spaniard and nephew of Pope Calixtus III, whose nepotistic practice is now legendary. The vagaries of Alexander's reign were passed over by the cardinalate, in part due to a long trail of strategic promotions that would become standard practice among his successors. Pellegrini argues that the emergence of factions created by the pope's allies led to a weakening or confusion among the cardinals, whose dignity became increasingly linked to their role as papal electors. With the politicization of the college, the interests of European monarchs influenced the thought and practice of any given conclave, often to the increase in the financial well-being and prestige of "their" cardinal. It would take another century and more to institute effective reform, but by then the papacy itself had become a shadow of its former monarchical self. In the meantime, papal protection served to

ground an unfailing allegiance, until the latter half of the seventeenth century, when the importance of the official capacities of the curia, especially the Secretariat of State, came to the fore. Only then do we see a more collaborative model take root. Since the curia was to function in the city of Rome, the cardinals were asked to live there. Irene Fosi recounts how their symbolic function is made manifest in the ceremony of the *posse*, when the pontiff took formal title of his see. Fosi makes use of the *Diarii* of the Masters of Ceremonies, the result of which is a delightful anthropological study on the status of the court and its perception by the people of Rome.

Status, of course, was something to be nursed. Elena Fasano Guarini's essay reviews a trove of letters from the Florentine State Archives between Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici to his father Cosimo I and brother Francesco I. Ferdinando (b. 1549), the fifth child of Cosimo I, was made a cardinal deacon by inheriting the title after his elder brother Giovanni—who had been appointed to the college in 1560—died of malaria in 1561. Ferdinando remained in Florence until ready to take up the affairs of his office and then set out to cultivate “friendships” that would emerge as power blocks within the college and that were, of necessity, conducive to the will of the house of the Medici. The granting of favors, often where one or more lucrative benefices were on the line, became an art form in itself.

The political tit-for-tat existing among the curial cardinals themselves extended to the princes and kings of Europe who sought to curry the favor of the pope. The essay by Mario Rosa on the Roman court as the “theater of the world” or Maria Antonietta Visceglia's study on the factions endemic to the college, both depict the high drama of statecraft being played out by this international body. Factions seemed to have a different connotation than they have at present. In the first half of the seventeenth century, factions were considered healthy mechanisms for political stability. Alliances were often cemented not merely through the good will of one to another, but through the harmonious relation of personalities or families. Thus, if a king's “favorite” at court could sway the papal envoy (and vice versa), or if the monarchs

of Europe could marry into the papal family, the practical disposition of the affairs of state could be more easily resolved and the personal prestige of the parties would grow. This was especially true when the pope inserted himself in international mediation. Olivier Poncet supplies a later chapter on cardinal protectors of the crown heads of Europe, a group of men who could display all the hallmarks of loyalty to their patrons and yet were especially practiced in the double cross.

In the pope's shadow on this international stage is the office of what became the Secretariat of State, which is given a very balanced treatment by Antonio Menniti Ippolito. The Secretariat emerged from the domain typically assigned to the cardinal-nephew of the pope, whom Ippolito describes as “the linchpin in a web of relationships that proved indispensable for the smooth operation of the curia,” as well as the secretarial offices by which papal briefs were recorded for public and diplomatic purposes. By the close of the eighteenth century, the popes were relying more and more on the Secretariat. Their information was supplemented by a number of gazettes that began to be printed about this time and are scrutinized by Mario Infelise. A concluding essay by Renato Ago on papal contributions to urban projects in Rome situates the pontiff and his court alongside the Roman aristocracy—the laymen and women who helped pay for it all.

This book is a welcome addition to a growing literature on papal Rome during the period in question. It breaks up the compartmentalization of the papacy into either late medieval, renaissance, or early modern categories, and displays a certain institutional continuity while pointing to some structural changes within the curia. These changes are in part self-induced, but some reflect the influence of external forces. Moving beyond the narrow political or quasi-apologetical confines of the work of von Ranke or Pastor, these essayists offer a more subtle interpretation of the papal court. If I might be allowed one minor complaint, it is that there is no page identifying the authors of the essays. Then it would be easier to send congratulations on their scholarly achievement.

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