



Sack of Rome, Francisco Javier Amerigo Aparicio, 1884

Rome Was Unbuilt In a Day

*Let all the world witness how many
different means Fortune employs when
she wishes to destroy a man.*

Benvenuto Cellini

† THE PAPAL CONCLAVE of 1523 was attended by a flock of resplendently-dressed cardinals, all eager to receive yet another round of the customary bribes.

Giulio de' Medici, Lorenzo de' Medici's adopted son (and the bastard child of Lorenzo's murdered brother Giuliano) offered the highest bid and was duly elected as Pope Clement VII after a respectable twenty days of bargaining.

The venerable *Catholic Encyclopedia* ranks the period of Clement VII's reign as 'the lowest ebb' in the papacy's history, apparently failing to keep an accurate count. (It is no less than the seventh time in its pages that the phrase is used.)

As Clement VII, Medici presided over the Sack of Rome in 1527, arguably the worst pillage of any great city in world history.

The attack followed a series of shifting alliances between Spain, France, and the Papal States of Italy, and desperate political manoeuvres by Clement in an attempt to preserve his power during a time of great danger to the papacy and Rome.

Despite being Italian, Clement initially allied the papacy with France, fearing imperial domination by Italy over Rome and the Papal States. But when France's King Francis I was defeated by imperial forces and taken prisoner in 1525, Clement forged an alliance with France's enemy, Charles V of Spain—a pact, ironically, almost identical to the one he had negotiated with France.

Clement's alliance with Charles was not enough, however, to overcome his fears of the gathering imperial forces within Italy.

When Charles occupied Northern Italy and began threatening to convene a council to deal with the growing 'Lutheran problem' in Germany, Clement feared that this could lead to his overthrow and replacement with a pope more agreeable to the emperor.

Consequently, when Francis was released from captivity, the increasingly desperate Clement abrogated his recent agreement with Charles and hastily forged yet another alliance with France. France, Milan, Venice, Rome and the Papal States were now aligned against the combined Spanish and German forces of the Holy Roman Empire.

Even the aptly named 'warrior-pope,' Julius II, who spent the majority of his pontificate waging warfare, never attempted so ambitious a military campaign—and unfortunately, Clement was no Julius.

To make matters worse, Clement's vacillating politics had precipitated a coup within Rome, with the rival Colonna family pillaging the Vatican and taking control over the city. Clement's remaining allies within Italy began siding with the imperial forces, allowing the 34,000-strong mercenary army led by Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, to advance on Rome, which was defended by only about 5,000 poorly-equipped militia.

Just then fate took an unexpected turn: Charles III died after falling from a ladder while scaling the city's high walls. With the funds to pay them depleted by Charles V's perpetual warfare, the starving mercenaries—no longer under the restraint of a strong leader—mutinied and laid waste to the city.

In the resulting carnage, 12,000 civilians were slaughtered and the city's remaining citizenry fled. Rome's population dropped by over eighty percent within about a week, destroying the city's prestige and bringing an abrupt end to the Italian Renaissance. Once again, papal nepotism and lust for territory had brought ruin upon the Romans.

The Vatican's Swiss Guard was massacred in the siege, but their bravery and loyalty to the pope bought Clement barely enough time to escape through a secret tunnel and seek refuge in the nearby Castel Sant'Angelo.

Even so, the defeated and humiliated pope's subsequent confinement and total subservience to Charles V caused him to later deny King Henry VIII's annulment of marriage to Catherine of Aragon, ultimately resulting in Henry's excommunication and England's historic break with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. The Protestant Reformation in England in turn lent gravity to the cause of Martin Luther in Germany.

Clement died that same year—allegedly from eating poison mushrooms, although there is little evidence to support the claim. His political and military efforts having largely ended in disaster, Clement is known today mostly for his contribution to the arts, having commissioned Michelangelo's painting of *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, as well as being a patron to the famous artist Benvenuto Cellini.

Ironically, Cellini—the flamboyant Florentine sculptor—may have played a part in the Sack of Rome which would have historical consequences far beyond his modest artistic legacy. In his autobiography (not published until 1728) Cellini claimed that Charles III was toppled from his ladder after being shot by an arrow from the artist's crossbow while he was in armed service to the pope. By killing Charles, Cellini boasted that he had 'singlehandedly saved Rome.'

Cellini wasn't above embellishing various other incidents in his memoirs, but if his account of the battle is true, the implications are staggering. Indeed, by instigating the Sack of Rome, Cellini—an accomplished flute player as well as a sculptor—may have unintentionally called the tune for much of subsequent European history.

