

Giampiero Brunelli. *Il sacro consiglio di Paolo IV*. Studi di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea 4. Rome: Viella S.r.l., 2011. 288 pp. index. append. bibl. € 26. ISBN: 978-88-8334-471-8.

by **William V. Hudon**

Giampiero Brunelli here examines an ecclesiastical administrative body called the *Sacro Consiglio*, one formed and operated during the waning months in the pontificate of Paul IV (1555-59), arguably the most infamous and vicious counter-reformer of them all. While in absolute terms the *Sacro Consiglio* may have been little more than a brief experiment in the political, legal, and economic administration of the Papal States, Brunelli finds in its organization and scope a long-term significance. In describing the body and its operations, Brunelli has written a remarkable book on early modern ecclesiastical history that helps illustrate just how far the historiography on that topic has seemingly shifted since the end of World War II, while in reality perhaps little has changed.

Brunelli uncovers the history of a little-known administrative organ that further illustrates the complexity of ecclesiastical government in early modern Italy. With its inspirational origin in the suspicious, back-biting years of the Carafa pontificate, and its actual operations anticipated by an informal council headed by the arrogant, criminal cardinal nephew Carlo Carafa (1517-61), the *Sacro Consiglio* became something different. Established on 31 January 1559 as a collegial body made up of Bernardino Scotti (1480-1568), Virgilio Rosario (d. 1559), and Camillo Orsini (1492-1559), the *Sacro Consiglio*, Brunelli explains, worked closely with the newly created Regent of the Camera Apostolica (Cardinal Alfonso Carafa), to bring other cardinals and the papal household under tighter, more rigidly orthodox control. While they did so, *Sacro Consiglio* members did a great deal more, operating like a supreme court on ecclesiastical matters and on jurisdictional disputes in the Papal States. They intervened in the oversight of religious orders, reorganized fiscal and taxing operations in the papal territories, and regulated the work of appointed local governors. Brunelli uses the records from the six-month life of the *Sacro Consiglio* with related state records, to show all this, as well as the other works of the body, ranging from supervision of police operations to control over sales and distribution of grain, meat, and other basic foods, to coordination of defense forces and provision for repair of infrastructure. He shows that the actions of the *Sacro Consiglio* over its brief existence varied, and in surprising ways. The primary

activity of the group seemed far more practical than ideological. The members, Brunelli finds, attempted to mediate conflicts between military forces and local populations in papal territories, for instance, and in real estate and credit disputes. They collaborated with the pope on moral and inquisitorial cases, but they also attempted to curb overreaching governors, and named ad hoc commissars to regularly examine local matters while emphasizing maintenance of existing laws and observance of special privileges and exemptions previously granted. While the pontificate of Paul IV might be remembered for repression of religious dissent, the repression *Sacro Consiglio* members apparently most often had in mind was aimed at squashing banditry, not heresy, and included strict limits on the carrying of weapons.

This remarkable, brief history could be used to identify genuine complexity in the final curial operations and activities of a papacy usually treated in monolithic terms. The argument Brunelli presents is set up nicely to make the case. If he had, he might have joined a growing group of historians – beginning it seems to me, with Hubert Jedin, but in more recent decades represented by North American scholars – who have been arguing that such complexity permits an outlook beyond commonplaces steadily applied to this period of Christian history. Brunelli apparently saw no such utility. He found the *Sacro Consiglio* a constitutional alternative to the papal-dominated temporal government of Central Italy, but possessing essentially identical powers to the Congregation of the Sacra Consulta that administered the Papal States from 1588 to 1692 under the thumb of cardinal nephews. His *Sacro Consiglio* comes out in the conclusion as “a kind of triumvirate” (259), a constitutional *reformatio interrupta*, consistent with genuine conciliar systems developing elsewhere in mid-sixteenth-century Europe, one rejecting the nepotistic corruption of the system it replaced. So, in Brunelli’s triumvirate comparison we understand his final, implied conclusion: it was an experiment overcome by autocracy, just like the ancient example.

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