

A Prelude to the Wars of Religion: The Sack of Rome (1527)

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ABSTRACT

The Sack of Rome in May 1527 by the troops of Emperor Charles V—king of Germany, Spain, Naples, and Sicily, and ruler of the Netherlands—was an event of rare violence that left a deep impression during the sixteenth century. An accident of a war opposing a considerable portion of European princes, it partially served as an outlet for religious tensions that had been growing since the late Middle Ages. Protestant but also Catholic soldiers united in a sacred intoxication that announced the religious conflicts to come. The soldiers nevertheless conserved a genuine rationality that lent its full support to a logic of predation. Quickly known throughout Europe, these exactions were interpreted by the vast majority as a religious event: well-deserved punishment for the papal Antichrist or the corruption of the Church, a divine scourge, sacrilege, or an occasion to reconcile Christians within the universal reformation.



Representation of the Sack of Rome as a divine scourge in a treatise and prognostication on the war of Rome, ms. Spencer 81, f. 3v, New York Public Library. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



The descent of Bourbon in Italy. Map by the author.

Rome, Martyr City of a European Conflict

On May 5, 1527, an imperial army consisting of Spaniards, Flemings, Italians, and Germans encamped in front of Rome. With the Duke of Bourbon at its head, it threatened the continent's religious capital. He spent over a month living off the land, while seeking to contain the disgruntled troops who had been deprived of pay for over a year.

One must go back two years in time to February 24, 1525, in order to understand the situation. On that morning, imperial troops crushed the French before Pavia: Francis I, who was at the head of his armies, was captured and transferred to the Emperor Charles V in Spain. Italy and Europe were frightened in the face of this overly fortunate prince; a dual league formed around Pope Clement VII to expel the emperor from Northern Italy. Already occupying Parma, Florence, and Modena, the pontiff expanded to Milan and Venice on one side, and to France and England on the other.

Imperial troops counter-attacked without coordination. Ugo Moncada, the Governor of Naples, helped the Cardinal Pompeo Colonna to foment a revolt against the pope in Rome in September 1526. In Cartagena, the Duke of Bourbon set sail for Genoa with a new Spanish army; he was joined in Milan by twelve thousand lansquenets from Germany. In Rome itself, Viceroy Charles de Lannoy played the card of military intimidation, and obtained an agreement with the pope on March 25, 1527. Facing mutiny in Bologna in March, Bourbon began to pillage Romagna on the way to Florence, whose siege would enable him to pay his soldiers. On April 25, the arrival of troops from the league in Florence, in addition to the pope's breaking of the truce, prompted the duke to change target. He launched his army against Rome, promising the booty of the world's richest city. Bourbon died during the first assault. Lacking a leader—the emperor's orders took weeks to arrive, and the young Prince of Orange chosen to succeed the duke did not have his predecessor's authority—the army rampaged through the city.

The city was subject to looting and violence for eight days. The defenders were quickly eliminated in the fighting. The population was massacred, tortured, and ransomed with no distinction between age or sex, nationality or allegiance. Even the sick in hospices and well-known allies of the imperial cause were killed. Women were raped. Churches and palaces were forced open and emptied of their valuable objects. Archives and libraries were burned. The pope and a part of his court succeeded in shutting themselves in the Castel Sant'Angelo, where they remained safe during the pillaging. The Venetian ambassador described the situation as being worse than hell itself. There

were at least twelve thousand deaths, a number that grew with the victims of hunger and epidemics. The violence continued despite the signing of a treaty in June, especially when the army returned from its summer quarters in September.

Sacred Violence and Economy of Predation

The religious violence of the German lansquenets was emphasized in particular. For over ten years, Luther and his disciples had denounced the pope as the Antichrist and Rome as the new Babylon; they vehemently condemned the superstitions of papists such as the worship of saints and relics, the luxury of churches, etc. The exactions of German troops echoed this preaching. In churches they profaned or destroyed relics, tore or smeared images, and stole and dismantled liturgical ornaments. They parodied Catholic pomp by installing a prostitute dressed in priestly clothing on the throne of Saint Peter while singing "*Vivat Lutherus pontifex!*" in false processions, or while presenting animals for communion. Clergymen were the preferred targets of soldiers, as prelates were killed, humiliated, or sold as slaves, while nuns were raped and monks were castrated.

However, religious violence was not solely the act of Lutherans. In Catholic Europe as well, there was criticism against the corruption of the pope and the Curia, in addition to the prophets and astrologers that announced the imminent punishment of the Church, a prelude to its universal reform and the return of Christ. There had been increasing portents of the scourge to come since 1524. Yet Bourbon and a part of the European knighthood saw themselves as the instrument of God in a world governed by providence. For them the fighting was something mystical, an ordeal in which abandoning oneself to divine will was a way of saving one's soul and bringing about God's reign on Earth.

Beyond the religious element, the sack was also a question of money. The occupiers established a ransom economy, in which one had to pay to save one's life and property. The Italian and imperial general Ferrante Gonzaga paid large sums of money to these men through his mother in order to avoid the pillaging of the family palace. Similarly, many of the acts of torture were carried out by soldiers who wanted their victims to admit where they had hidden their money, or to force them to lend it out. The economy of predation also applied to relics, which were subject to trafficking and speculation.

Europe as Witness

While a few humanists opted for a historical interpretation by likening the event to Alaric's sack of the City in 410, most observers emphasized the religious and even providentialist view of the Roman tragedy. News of the sack spread throughout Europe, initially in the form of rumors, and later as increasingly precise and coherent witness accounts. The dispatches of ambassadors, which were only known in courts, were succeeded by letters and reports by survivors, as well as by newspapers and occasional printings for broad diffusion. The first of these came from the presses of Venice in mid-May.

In Germany, Luther and the Protestants exulted. The Roman Antichrist and his new Babylon had finally been punished. In Spain, France, and the Netherlands, Erasmists and moderate evangelists were more guarded. Many saw the sack as deserved punishment for the corruption of the Curia and the pope, and believed that the emperor should take advantage to call a council and impose the reformation of the Catholic Church they had been waiting for since the beginning of the century; the scope of the massacres and destruction nevertheless horrified them. Some Catholics shared this opinion, while others were foremost scandalized by the sacrilege committed by the emperor and his ungodly troops.

The imperial chancellery was thus forced to justify itself, despite the divisions among its members. Charles V, who was stupefied, retreated into grief. Gattinara, his Chancellor, urged him to depose the pope and call a universal council, or to repudiate his generals. In late July, the imperial secretary Alonso de Valdes wrote a dual justification of his master: a letter addressed to all Christian princes, and a *Dialogue on the Things that Occurred in Rome*. These two texts of providentialist and Erasmian inspiration described the sack and its exactions as the act of a mutinous army, with neither leaders nor orders. Emphasizing the deep regret that the event had caused the emperor, Valdes likened it to a divine scourge directed against Clement VII and the corruption of the Curia, which should enable the reconciliation and reformation of all Christianity.

Through both the violence that was unleashed and the interpretations that it prompted, the Sack of Rome prefigured the wars of religion that would soon tear Europe apart. It also represented a threshold beyond which Catholic anti-Romanism, which had been very strong since the fifteenth century, began to decline. For the papacy, it finally marked the beginning of a reconstruction: pagan antiquity—honored at the papal court since the 1490s—was repudiated in favor of biblical antiquity, while the City was taken in hand to become the symbol of the purity of the Church.

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