Chapter 5

The Lateran

The barons of Rome are highway robbers; they condone murder, theft, adultery, and all sorts of evil. They want their city to lay in desolation.

Anonimo Romano, La vita di Cola di Rienzo

When the French Raymond Bertrand de Got was elected pope Clement V (1305–1314) and transferred the papal court to Avignon, the Commune remained the only central authority in Rome. The Senate and People of Rome, or Popolo Romano as the municipal authority was commonly called, headquartered on the Capitoline, rose in this period to its peak of influence and political representation. The institution was a relatively democratic representation of the civic elites. Executive power rested in the hands of one or sometimes two senators, who were appointed, nominally at least, by the pope. A body of councilors whose number varied over time—termed the Riformatori, Buoni Uomini or Conservatori—flanked the senators. Apparently councilors to the senator, the Conservators actually held administrative and judicial power and were elected by the people through complex procedures minutely described in the civic statutes. They included representatives of the rioni, the administrative units into which the city was subdivided, and of the guilds—the two major guilds were the bovatteri and the mercatanti, the cattle breeders and the merchants. The Felix Societas Balistariorum et Pavesatorum Urbis, a civic militia, commanded by two Banderenses, defended the council.

The urban elites who composed the Senate—a burgeoning middle class of merchants, breeders and landowners who formed the industrious backbone of the civic economy—pursued ideals of political stability and orderly government conducive to commerce. Their economic interests clashed with

1 “Li baroni di Roma sono dirubatori di strade; essi consentono le omicidia, le ruberie, le adulteria, ed ogni male; essi vonno che la loro cittate giaccia desolata.” (Anonimo Romano (Bartolomeo di Iacovo da Valmontone), La vita di Cola di Rienzo, tribuno del Popolo Romano, ed. Zefirino Re (Florence: Felica La Monnier, 1854), 19. According to the Anonimo Romano, that is what Cola di Rienzo declared to Clement VI in Avignon. On the Anonimo and his text, see pp. 205–06, n. 11 above.

those of the baronial caste, the feudal landholders who monopolized agricultural production and controlled supply routes. The civic authority strove to centralize territorial administration, regaining control of vital infrastructure. They launched a series of ordinances against the baronial lords—measures and policies that would largely be continued by the papacy upon their return to Rome. The political tumult of the Roman fourteenth century, together with difficult economic times and the devastating plague of 1348, tested the ideals of peace and orderly government harbored by the municipal authority. Between the 1360s and 1390s, however, the Senate achieved broad representation and relative stability in governing institutions. The civic authority had one precious ally: the Raccomandati del SS. Salvatore, a lay confraternity that grew, with the Senate’s support, into the most powerful in Rome. The representatives of the same social groups formed the governing council of the confraternity as sat in the Senate, sharing a common vision for the city.

Founded by the Colonna at the tail end of the thirteenth century to manage a small infirmary near the Lateran, the Raccomandati grew during the course of the fourteenth century to occupy and shape the Lateran piazza with a sprawling hospital complex, giving the area its present configuration. Their institution was the only one rivaling the papal S. Spirito in Sassia, now in a Borgo abandoned by the popes. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, and at the peak of their influence, the Senate granted the confraternity jurisdiction over the Lateran and Via Maior, the road linking the Lateran to the Colosseum, contended by rival clans in the previous century. Via Maior was the central tract of the main ceremonial and supply route of the city. The confraternity kept the artery secure through a barrage of hospital buildings at both ends, performing a central role in the steady provisioning of Rome. The civic elites demonstrated, through the Raccomandati and their hospital, the possibility of a viable alternative to papal administration and the welfare systems it provided, and the advantages of a unified municipal administration in which the power of baronial lords was kept in check.

Commanding both agricultural production and distribution, the feudal lords who held sway over Rome in the thirteenth century wielded a crude but most effective form of power: preventing the convoys of competitors from reaching the city, or withholding the stocks in one’s granaries, meant regulating the amount of foodstuffs that reached the market, hiking their prices. The power to inflate prices was a political instrument. Food shortages were often not due to natural causes; artfully induced by the baronial landholders, famines ravished the population and could be lifted on command. During a period of unrest and weakening of the municipal authority in the last months of 1347, for