CHAPTER ONE

ITALY AND AVIGNON, 1305–1325

On 5 June 1305 Lord Bertrand de Got, archbishop of Bordeaux, was elected supreme pontiff at Perugia, and nuncios were sent to him from Perugia, for he was some thirty days distant from Perugia. And [the cardinals] sent him their [election] decree, which was presented to him at Bordeaux by three upright men, officials of the curia... The aforesaid pope, called Clement V after he received the decree, determined to make his residence in the County of Venaissin, and never to cross the mountains, as indeed he never did, although he had promised [to do so].

Thus did the Dominican scholar and bishop Ptolemy of Lucca relate the election of Pope Clement V in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Ptolemy could hardly be numbered among the most strident critics of the fourteenth-century papacy, but his account of Clement’s election is among the first clear expressions of what would become almost an article of faith among fourteenth-century Italians: that the papacy’s exile on the Rhône was no accident, but the consequence of a deliberate plot, spun by the agents of Philip IV at Anagni and embroidered by calculated Gallic deceit. Villani was instrumental in circulating the rumor that Clement’s predecessor, Benedict XI, had succumbed to poison; though he did not implicate Clement directly, he could not refrain from observing that Gascons “are naturally greedy.” Dante immortalized the notion of a Gallic conspiracy in *Inferno* XIX, where Pope Nicholas III foretells the pontificate of Clement V, the “lawless shepherd” from the West, who would succeed Boniface VIII and join him after death in the circle of the simoniacs:


2 *che sono naturalmente cupidìi; X.lxxx (p. 443).*
A new Jason he will be, of whom we read
In Maccabees; and as his king was pliant to
That one, thus will he who rules France be to this one.\(^3\)

Divine Will had ordained that the papacy should reside in the city of the Caesars; now arrogance, envy, and insatiable ambition impelled these new Gauls, like Brennus two millennia earlier, to storm the walls (if only metaphorically, in this case) and cart off the dearest and most sacred of Roman spolia, the throne of Saint Peter. \(\text{Vae victis, indeed.}\)

The real roots of the Avignon papacy, of course, were immeasurably more complex, but the depth and intensity of Italian feeling underscore a crucial fact: if the Avignon papacy was part of a larger “crisis of the later medieval Church,” in the familiar parlance of so many undergraduate textbooks, it was also, in the eyes of many Italians, emblematic of a cultural and historical crisis. Rome may have been the spiritual center of Western Christendom, but it was also, needless to say, an Italian city. Indeed, to a considerable extent, it was the Italian city—\(\text{Urbs: no adjective was necessary; everyone knew which city was meant—}\) the centrum mundi, to which all roads led, and the cradle of Italy’s languages and cultures, its ruins the enduring reminders of an age when Italians ruled the known world. Long before the advent of nationalism allowed them to conceive of Italy as a politically united nation-state, the peoples of Italy recognized and celebrated their cultural and linguistic descent from Rome. This “cultural patriotism,” for want of a better term, had undergone significant development in the thirteenth century, when rising urban literacy rates sparked a new demand for vernacular literature, and the contending armies of foreign powers heightened the Italian peoples’ awareness of their distinctness from other peoples in the West. As part of the process, thirteenth-century Italians came to regard the papacy, that most central and indispensable of medieval

\(^3\) \text{Inferno XIX, 79–84:}
\begin{verbatim}
Che dopo lui verrà di più laida opra,
di ver’ ponente, un pastor senza legge,
Tal che convien che lui e me ricuopra.
Nuovo Iasón sarà, di cui si legge
ne’ Maccabei; e come a quel fu molle
suo re, così fia lui chi Francia regge.
\end{verbatim}