CHAPTER THREE

CARDINAL GIOVANNI GAETANO ORSINI
AND HIS FAMILY

The man who would lead John XXII’s second great legation to Italy was born into one of medieval Rome’s most powerful families. His paternal grandfather was the illustrious Matteo Rosso Orsini who, as senator, exercised a virtual dictatorship over Rome in the dark years of the early 1240s, when the armies of Frederick II encircled the city and the cardinals squabbled over who should succeed Gregory IX in the papacy’s hour of crisis.1 Matteo Rosso sired an enormous brood, of which Cardinal Giovanni’s father, Matteo Rosso II, was the youngest son. The younger Matteo Rosso was prominent, if less spectacularly than his father, in the public life of later thirteenth-century Rome, especially after the election of his older brother, Giovanni Gaetano, as Pope Nicholas III (1277–80). Though separated in age by perhaps some twenty years, the two brothers were quite close, and Matteo Rosso became one of Nicholas III’s most trusted and reliable agents in the governance of Rome and its contado.2 Giovanni’s mother, whose name remains unknown, was Matteo Rosso’s second or third wife. She was not a member of the Gaetani family, as is often alleged, but, it would appear, of the Romangia family, a baronial clan of the Roman contado. In a letter (12 December 1335) to Alfonso, infante of Aragon, Cardinal Napoleone Orsini—Giovanni’s first cousin, and thus a reliable source regarding the family’s bloodlines—refers to Napoleone of Romangia, electus of Monreale

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1 For Matteo Rosso I, see Matthias Thumser, Rom und der römische Adel in der späten Stauferzeit. Bibliothek des deutschen historischen Instituts 81 (Tübingen, 1995), pp. 143–152.
as maternal uncle (avunculus) of Cardinal Giovanni Gaetano Orsini of San Teodoro.3

Giovanni Gaetano di Matteo Rosso II Orsini was born in or near Rome in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The exact date is uncertain, though it was probably some time around 1285. Giovanni began his university education in 1308, when he was most likely in his early twenties; when he was provided to the archdeaconry of Bibiesca, Burgos, in September 1316, he was at least twenty-five, as he was not dispensed super defectu aetatis.4 He had at least four half-brothers, all of whom were apparently a good deal older than he was. One of these, Orso, seems to have died as a young man. Francesco and Napoleone (“Poncello”) were, like their father, active in the political life of Rome. Francesco was senator in 1301 and led the opposition to Henry VII in 1312; he died before 1337. Poncello served as vicar to the papal senator, King Robert of Naples, in 1314, and died before 1328; his sons seem to have had an especially close relationship with Cardinal Giovanni. A fourth brother, Jacopo (d. 1323), pursued a career in the Church.5 A number of dispensations super consanguinitate, which Giovanni obtained as cardinal for various nieces and nephews, suggest that he had four or five sisters or half-sisters, all of whom married into prominent and distinguished Roman houses.6

It is hard to say for certain when Giovanni began his ecclesiastical career. His first benefice was a canonry in Rheims, which he acquired sometime before 1308.7 Between 1308 and 1310 he was at the University of Padua,8 where he became something of a fixture