Factions in Rome between Papal Wars and International Conflicts (1480–1530)

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The Guelph and Ghibelline dimension in Roman factions in the fifteenth century was highlighted some years ago by Christine Shaw in her treatment of the more general topic of relations between Roman barons and Renaissance popes. Today, Shaw’s studies are still considered very innovative in light of historians’ renewed interest in factions and their re-assessment of factions as a crucial category in the political competition of the early modern age. This paper will not go into the question of whether the terms “Guelph” and “Ghibelline” may be applied satisfactorily to the case of Rome. Certainly, the terms were part of the lexicon used by the sources of the period, even though the language describing factions was extremely varied, drawing on a vocabulary of passions. Terms like *partegiani*, *inimici capitali*, *inimici coperti*, *sviscerati amici*, *devotione* or *setta*, and *briga* recur perhaps more frequently than do “Guelph” and “Ghibelline,” which during the modern age took on increasingly negative connotations with no ideological overtones. In the 1520s, “Ghibelline” and “Imperial” were, however, used interchangeably.

In Rome, conflict among factions in the decades straddling the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries revolved around the complex relations between the Orsini and the Colonna, the two most illustrious baronial lineages, because of their deep roots within the city, the prestige that came with being ex-papal families, the extent of their feudal possessions both in the Papal States and in the

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1 I use the following abbreviations: ASV: Archivio Segreto Vaticano; ASR: Archivio di Stato di Roma; RIS: Ludovico Antonio Muratori, ed., *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, new edition revised, expanded and corrected under the direction of Giosuè Carducci and Vittorio Fiorini (Città di Castello, 1900–); DBI, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, *Enciclopedia Treccani* (Roma, 1960–).


kingdom of Naples, and the participation of their condottieri in the wars of the period. As we shall see, these lineages were not compact realities but diversely articulated groups riven by internal tensions and conflicts. These tensions were perhaps more serious for the Orsini because of the broader demographic makeup of their lineage. Compared to other cities, factional strife in Rome had some peculiar characteristics that went beyond just violence, even if recurring vendettas and feuds featured regularly in the city chronicles; there was also an institutional dimension to the strife, arising from a political system in which the pope was a sovereign elected by the Sacred College, and therefore in which the great families found it indispensable to have a representative. In the pages that follow, I aim to look closely at the dynamics behind the Roman factions during the early modern age. I identify a change that occurred between the 1480s and the 1530s, at a time when the Italian and European conflicts, in which the papacy acted as a participant, not merely an arbiter, had increased the importance of supralocal events. Moreover, the Protestant schism further complicated matters at the very centre of Catholicism.

1 Papal Wars, Factions, Feuds (1480–1492)

After the events of the Great Schism, the return of the Papal See to Rome coincided with the reconstruction (also in a doctrinal sense) of a strong idea of the papacy, one that was dense with sacred meaning and that renewed links with the imperial heritage of Rome, while also re-asserting the authority of the Vicar of Christ above that of the Ecumenical Council. At the same time, in light of the fact that the fifteenth-century popes had become “Roman” again, they strove with every means to reinforce the temporal Papal States. This latter objective meant establishing control over Rome and the surrounding countryside, and the cities mainly situated along two axes—southwards to Naples and north towards Romagna. In reality, papal capacity to assert itself as a pivotal component in the Italian political system was held back by the popes’ incoherent military policy, which saw them engaging not so much in the struggle against the Turk, but as actors in the Italian conflicts, also known as the Papal Wars.4

Sixtus IV (1471–1484), the Franciscan Francesco della Rovere, a churchman whose modest family hailed from Liguria, was endowed with an impressive theological culture. He pursued the construction of a curial machine and a

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