Chapter 9

From One Conflict to Another (13th-14th Centuries)

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Struggle among the Cavalieri and the Birth of the Popolo (1194-1227)

The chronicler Pietro Villola recounts how in the spring of 1194 the podestà of Bologna, Guidottino da Pistoia, was attacked and wounded while exercising his office. Put to flight, he was pursued by some nobles of the city who, having seized him, pulled out all his teeth because he had condemned them to too many fines they deemed too high.¹ According to other sources, reported by Leandro Alberti, the horrific action must have instead been an official punishment, enacted against a podestà guilty of corruption.² In its not easily resolved ambiguity, oscillating between the idea of a simple private action against a too-zealous functionary to that of a penalty carried out against a corrupt official, the misfortune of poor Guidottino illustrates some of the difficulties that accompanied the passage in the Italian communes from a system of government based on local consuls (consoli), representing the greater urban families, to a government founded on the presence of a foreign podestà. Perhaps the differences in the accounts are due – at least in the original sources that have not survived – to diverse estimations of the work carried out by Guidottino. Most likely, as happened elsewhere in those very crucial decades, the podestà left some people satisfied but not others. Perhaps during his term of office a dispute and conflict had arisen within certain families who participated in the highest level of urban public life. It would be difficult to explain, otherwise, why the podestà who succeeded Guidottino, the Milanese Guido da Vimercate, wanted six experts to review the accounts relative to the public expenditures carried out under Guidottino’s term and during the two preceding years, which also had been turbulent, and in which Bologna had been governed by consuls. At the end of their inquiry the six wrote a report in which they listed a long series of expenditures which they declared to have not been “done well.” They had discovered that during the period examined the consuls of the commune (belonging to the oldest and most glorious families of milites, that is, the mounted knights in the communal army) had extorted many of the public

¹ Villola, “Cronaca,” p. 58.
² Alberti, Historie di Bologna.
resources that they were supposed to have administered; from compensation for military expenses to indirect tariffs on commerce, from grain collected from the rural communes to grinding mills owned by the commune.³

On the one hand, we cannot be certain that the diverse judgements given by the sources on the operations of Guidottino da Pistoia were weighted by the authors of the texts according to whether or not they found them to be advantageous to participation in the exploitation of communal goods. On the other hand, the report of the expenditures carried out under Guidottino’s mandate clearly shows that a vast conflict pierced the urban milites during the last years of consular rule and the first of podestà’s. That conflict was rooted in the ever-increasing difficulty of sharing the resources of the commune, which for almost a century had been at its disposition. Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur has clarified how, from the beginning of the communal experience, the urban milites had prospered not only through the wars they conducted on behalf of their cities – wars which were periodic, seasonal, and which made it possible every spring to amass booty, ransoms, and indemnities – but also by means of privileges that the city put at the disposal of those who waged war, such as the concession of fiscal revenues of every type.⁴ This system, at Bologna as elsewhere, functioned in some measure for most of the 12th century, especially because those wars also meant an expansion of territory, thereby making available an increasing quantity of resources and permitting the number of milites to grow. Nevertheless in the final decades, perhaps because it reached the boundaries of the contado, the mechanism jammed and entered into crisis.

This halt to growth seems to have been at the basis of the continuing conflicts internal to the ruling group despite attempts to pacify them at the dawn of the Duecento. There are frequent traces of those conflicts at Bologna in the chronicles and contemporary documentation, in particular in the so-called tower pacts with which some families committed themselves to help each other in building a structure and fighting together against another family group. This happened, for example, in 1196 when members of the Carbonesi family pledged to fight together against the heirs of Pietro di Enrico, namely those who would become the Galluzzi. One of the Carbonesi, a certain Uspinello, was killed, according to the chronicler Villola, in the course of a clash that took place in 1182, which seems to have been one of the ludus battalie, organized and ritualized combative games which frequently degenerated into outright conflicts. Next to these ritualizations of violence, other attempts

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³ Orlandelli, Il sindacato del podestà, p. 158; Milani, L’esclusione dal comune, p. 33.
⁴ Maire Vigueur, Cavaliers et citoyens, pp. 167-213.