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History as civic vocation

Historiae Bononienses by Giovanni Garzoni

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Abstract

In his *Historiae Bononienses* completed around 1494, Giovanni Garzoni recasted in a continuous narrative a number of earlier monographs on the history of Bologna spanning the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. Bologna's internal turmoil, which often erupted into civil war, was rooted in external wars involving in most circumstances the city's legitimate overlords—the popes. This situation creates a perpetual conflict, which threatens or even curtails civic *libertas*. Garzoni's *Historia* draws on models of both civic and court historiography, whose crucial assertion is that the ruling family guarantees the historical, cultural and political identity of the city. While he allows that Bologna's destiny is connected to the fortunes of the signorial family of the Bentivoglio, a leading role in the centuries-old fight for *libertas* was always played by *populus Bononiensis*, who adopted this as almost a civic vocation.

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History as civic vocation *Historiae Bononienses* by Giovanni Garzoni

Historiae Bononienses by Giovanni Garzoni is a vast history which recounts the Bolognese events from the beginning of the late Middle Ages to the eve of the golden years of Giovanni Bentivoglio II. The work comes to an end around 1494, when the author recasts in a continuous narrative a number of earlier monographs, written over the past thirty years. Physician and humanist, a main protagonist of the Bentivoglio intellectual *entourage*, Garzoni reflects on the political identity of Bologna and engages in writing its history not only under a courtly point of view, but considering the fortunes of the *populus* in its century old fight for liberty.

The work opens with a brief proem in which, at center stage, is *populus Bononiensis*, whose glories and virtue «in rebus bellicis» the writer wants to recall. It is therefore mainly a story of wars that will be recounted: the writer claims to have selected contents based on their memorableness, that is of a civic identity to be culturally manufactured entrusting it to *litterae*.¹

In a rather sketchy account of the history of Bologna spanning the IX through the XII centuries, the first book's underlying theme is the city's armed defence and the assertion of autonomy with respect to the imperial power. The Latin form of Garzoni's account reflects the language of power and the hierarchy of relations it defines in a rather precise manner, indeed because it complies with a rhetoric ennoblement. The unconditional surrender to Emperor Lotario - «imperio ac potestati»² - rules out any legal or political autonomy of the city.

The expulsion of the imperial *podestà* (1162) is seen as an action of citizens aimed «ad recuperandam libertatem».³ In Garzoni's account the history of the city starts right here as history of its own *libertas*. This implies the definition of the span of its *iurisdictio*, both vertically and, so to speak, horizontally, while expanding towards the other cities of Romagna. By means of referring to the distinguished archetype of the Roman people, the communal government is qualified as a *regimen ad populum*, a citizen government based on *libertas*. Here we may find the underlying ideology which makes the paragraphs regarding the origins a prelude to two great narratives, placed in the middle of the first book as an antithetical diptych.

De bello cum Mutinensibus recounts the military, political and diplomatic triumph of Bologna and its people over the imperial power in the battle of Fossalta (1249). The text finds its cry in the dialectic between an immeasurable desire of *imperium*, hence tyrannical, and a right of resistance, guaranteed by the natural right.⁴ On the other hand, in *De primo bello civili Bononiensium* Garzoni sets a direct causal relationship between the civil conflict between the Lambertazzi and the Geremei (1274) and the loss of liberty, that is the institution of the papal overlordship over Bologna and its territory.

Following an exhausting four-year war, the *civitas* is handed over to an external *potestas*: this sets a possible correlation between an act of voluntary submission— as is peculiar to a free city and to a citizen government - and the need to preserve its safety. Nevertheless, according to the ideology of liberty, complete submission is comparable to slavery, a condition which is genetically and historically not congenial to the Bolognese citizen, accustomed to *imperare*.

From this moment on, Bologna is by all means a city subjected to the State of the Church and to the papal *potestas*, along with its territory, in compliance with strict terms, sanctioned by a treaty, the sixteen Capitula of Pope Nicholas III, on which Garzoni relates very marginally. Instead he recounts a story of inexhaustible civic unrest and the Church's difficulty to exercise its supremacy over a city and a region which are averse to acknowledging it.

The *Leitmotiv* of the loss of liberty, which is the main theme of the Bolognese civil war and of its civic patriotism, acts as an introduction to a story about wars that will always be, to a certain extent, wars for 'liberties'; in a way

¹ G. Garzoni, *Historiae Bononienses*, A. Mantovani (ed.), Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2010, I 1, 4-5, 222. The following quotations come from the same edition.

² I 2, 14, 225.

³ I 4, 4, 231.

⁴ I 6, 91-92, 271.

that the issue of civic liberty is to be intended with a series of subjections to an institution which is of a higher hierarchical rank, with respect to which the people try to define an area of non-interference.

This is apparent when we consider the second book of *Historiae*: here we will briefly expand on two events, Taddeo Pepoli's Lordship (1337-1347) and the rebellion against the Church in 1376. In these texts the 'militant' intention appears very clearly: it identifies a cohesion within an event in which the role of the *populus* is comparable to the glories of its most distinguished men, to whom the city chooses to link its own contested longing for liberty.

De gestis Tadei Pepuli senioris chronicles the institutional changes brought about by a citizen who has become *dominus* in a city that claims, through him, its own autonomy from the legitimate *dominus*, the Sovereign Pope. From this point of view Taddeo Pepoli's episode acts as a sort of narrative archetype, which chronicles all the stages of the relationship with the Church that will repeat itself throughout that century and the following one. A relationship which is periodically very difficult, whenever the Popes will exert their *iursidictio plenissima*, which is a coercive power that is legally exerted within a material and a spiritual realm.

Threatened by anathema and interdict, the rebellious city faces the «postulationes»⁵ which reclaim for the Pope, by virtue of Bologna's submission to Nicholas III, free rule over the city. The alternative to disobedience is a war waged by the Pope against the city which is subjected to him.

The solving of the crisis is handled with legal competence and diplomatic expertise: Taddeo, invested with the mandate bestowed on him by the people proclaims the consignment of the city «in pontificis potestatem». As the guarantor of a new fidelity relationship by virtue of his good government, Taddeo is appointed «perpetuus vicarius ac tribunus»⁶ of the Church in the city of Bologna. The legitimacy of the civic government is reaffirmed by granting vicarship to Taddeo, a government which is based on the political reliability of the «conservator pacis». Taddeo's supremacy isn't therefore that of a tyrant but of a lawful Lord, who has been able to safeguard the city's liberty by renegotiating its submission to the Pope.

De Bello populi Bononiensis cum Gregorio Undecimo Pontifice Maximo is not merely the story of one of Bologna's many wars, but rather, to all intents and explicitly right from the title, the city's war against its own legitimate Sovereign. The way in which Garzoni chooses to recount the events that cause Bologna to rebel against the «worst of its legates», Guglielmo of Noellet, and start one of its major political revolutions, rather than the revolutionary scope of the institutional changes, ends up emphasizing the state of constant internal turmoil that intertwines with those events up to the point that it becomes their *primum movens*.

The legate's actions are those of a tyrant, who is basically accountable for two crimes: stirring up the factions and offending the people by damaging them and their belongings, directly or by means of his officers. For this reason the tyrant's expulsion is not to be considered a riot, but a war on behalf of the common good and collective interest.

Garzoni's text portrays the magistracies *in re*, that is as they are fulfilling their function. First of all the «anziani consoli», whose primary task is the general defense of the republican institutions, both from the Church's armed attack and from the hegemonic tendencies of the noble factions. In fact one of the most representative magistracies of the new regime, that of the people's «confalonieri», that is the «tribuni plebis» – from now on in the text always beside the consuls – purposely aims at defending and preserving the «res publica» in an anti-noble sense.⁷

The initiative of the new system of government which safeguards and defends 'the state of liberty' is rooted within a civic tradition in which the *regimen politicum* and the peculiarities of «habere rem publicam» are those typical of the cities «superiorem reconoscentes»: considering the horrendous atrocities of the war and the excessive power of the factions, the subjection to the Church has to be renegotiated through the acknowledgement of the Church's legitimate supremacy.

The fact that Giovanni da Legnano is granted apostolic vicarship and the terms under which Bologna is committed to the Church are considered a remarkable achievement for the city. The writer doesn't mention Gregory XI's claim to *merum imperium* over Bologna. What the text recounts is the general approval for the new legate, appealing to the Bolognese as he is the main mediator of the agreement drawn up between Bologna and the Pope and is *naturaliter* the most credible and authoritative guarantor for it.

⁵ II 1, 12-13, 316-17.

⁶ II 1, 23, 319.

⁷ II 2, 25-32, 346-48.

The third book of *Historiae* starts with the essay *De gestis Johannis Bentivoli primi* whose proem provides the reader with the key to all the events that are about to be recounted, identifying them with the history of the Bentivoglio family. The consistent ideological support for the new Lords indeed sets Garzoni's *historia* within a tradition that has been defined historiography of the "Corti Padane", where the legalization of the Signorial family takes place owing to their role as preservers and guarantors of the civic identity. In Bologna's case that means a possible concurrence of *principatus* and liberty.

In Giovanni's case, as for those who before him took over the Lordship of Bologna, the *principatus* has to be sanctioned through the institutions' acknowledgement of the role of the *dominus*, that is, at the same time, acknowledgement of those very institutions. For this reason the text dwells on the fact that Giovanni is awarded the title of «tribunus perpetuus»,⁸ later on supplemented by that of «urbis conservator et defensor»,⁹ which had already been given to Taddeo Pepoli. But the escalation of the conspiracies in order to entrust the city to the Visconti family poses a threat to his supremacy; moreover his domination is not favored by the people, in a progressive deterioration of the public consensus for which Bentivoglio is personally responsible. A tough inquisitorial regime leads the people to accuse him of being the most ruthless of all tyrants. Giovanni's political shortcoming, which is underlined by Garzoni with remarkable independence of opinion, consisted in placing himself 'outside' the civic tradition of *libertas*, with catastrophic consequences for the city.

The interweaving of wars against external powers and civic conflict becomes the centerpiece of Garzoni's account, which is relevant to the fifteen-year period between 1420 and 1435; the struggle for supremacy between the Canetoli and the Bentivoglio is portrayed as cause and consequence of the other war, «civilem an externam incertum habeo»,¹⁰ namely the one waged against the city by its own sovereigns, with the ensuing, recurring and devastating «status commutatio».

In 1420, after Antonio Bentivoglio's *coup*, Bologna is at war with the Church. Martin V claims free rule over the city and, if the people will not comply, they will be struck by anathema and interdict, while the whole city and its territory will be invaded and destroyed. The people's response concerns all the controversial points of the conflict with the Church: the defensive reasons for which the city was surrendered to Nicholas III and to his successors; the violation of this pivotal pact by Pope John XXIII and his abusive behavior. If, therefore, the Pope, who has unilaterally broken the agreements, brings war to the city that has placed itself under his protection, he carries out a tyrannical act and the people's armed resistance is totally legitimate.

It is a conflictual dynamics which repeats itself during Eugenius IV's papacy, when the Church renews its claim to exercise *merum et mixtum imperium* over Bologna. The sensitivity of the institutional issues allows the account to give considerable space to the ever temporary and controversial peace agreements, which acknowledge Bologna's 'state of liberty' in exchange for the renewed obedience to the Pope.

After Antongaleazzo's murder in 1435, which associates, according to the account's descriptive strategy, Bentivoglio's cause to that of Bologna's liberty, and the city's renewed subjugation to the Visconti, the exceptional events of the years 1442-1445 are the centerpiece of *Commentarii Rerum Bononiensium*, from Annibale Bentivoglio's success to his tragic death. All the *tópoi* of the rhetoric of liberty are referred to by the main characters of the story: love of one's country, which imposes the commitment to free it; the oppression of a tyrannical government, exemplified in the usual triad of violence against individuals, unfair taxes, devastation of personal properties.¹¹ The «salus» of the country, which is inevitably united to Annibale's, will become a perpetual acquisition only if he will be able to guide the citizens towards a peacemaking process. And it is precisely at this point that Annibale becomes a hero: in a sort of *gradatio* with a political tinge, he is invested by his supporters with the titles that Bologna has always bestowed upon the ones who hold the *principatus*, «pater patriae», «conservator defensorque urbis», «patronus atque auctor libertatis».¹²

Annibale, along with the entire city, is the protagonist of the military operations that lead to the conquest of the Porta Galliera fortress and to the victory against the Visconti's troops in San Giorgio in Piano. These events are seen as the final act of a war of liberation; a war carried out by the armed people, which restores the 'state of liberty' within the city. Unfortunately Bentivoglio's murder triggers a «parricidiale bellum»¹³: a war waged by the citizens against their own country, homicide and treachery against the man who is the country's father and Lord.

⁸ III 1, 26, 382.

⁹ III 1, 39, 386.

¹⁰ III 3, 1, 411.

¹¹ III, 4, 38-40, 441-42.

¹² III 4, 80, 453.

¹³ III 4, 123, 465.

Within a framework of permanent war, the final pages of *Commentarii* describe the continuous defections of the countryside castles, which are watched by the political exiles, and eventually Sante Bentivoglio's arrival in Bologna. In fact he is hailed as the one who, by virtue of his own name, will be able to preserve the regained liberty. In parallel with his return, as if to set an implicit link between the need to maintain the liberty and the acknowledgement of being subjected to the Church, in an eloquent textual *dispositio*, comes the proclamation of the city's renewed subjection to Pope Nicholas V.

Pope Nicholas V's Capitula (1447) are in reality the result of long negotiations in a situation that appears to be crucial when the Legate leaves Bologna, not having obtained the *merum imperium* he claims on behalf of the Pope: this situation the Bolognese people cannot accept, because they signed the pacts and because this request is incompatible with liberty. Only in 1450 the arrival in Bologna of Cardinal Bessarione, starts the dissolution of the difficult political and military knot. The battle fought at Porta Galliera against the political exiles is, once again, an episode that testifies the value of a city that is ready to fight for its own liberty, as it becomes apparent from the crucial presence of the armed people next to Sante.

The episode, with which Garzoni concludes the narrative of *Historiae Bononienses*, truly marks the end of an era and the beginning for Bologna of a new, favorable season, which nevertheless remains outside the horizons of the text. The image of the young Giovanni Bentivoglio II being knighted seals the history of the city in the name of the family that for fifty years has influenced its fate. Once again in Garzoni's text the past receives light from the present, so that the hope of a future of greatness coincides with the good governance of Giovanni Bentivoglio, the one who can rightly be called «pater patriae».

Precisely in the proem to *Commentarii* Garzoni wrote that, of the various ways in which citizens can express their devotion to their homeland, the choice of those who exert themselves «ad res gestas scribendas»¹⁴ is not the least important. In fact writing is entrusted with the mission of making the people aware of their own identity and duties. While putting the author at center stage, *Historiae Bononienses* reaffirms its political vocation: to be an integral part, *iuxta propria principia*, of those events of war that they recounted and whose ideological interpretation wants to be a sign of a genuine civic passion.

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¹⁴ III 4, 4-6, 431.

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