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Onsite Research at 13th ce. Papal Sites

The presence of one cohesive “national” myth or legend in Italy is difficult to discover due to the nature of the Italian commune, yet certain constructs seem to apply or rather, are assumed in telling the story of Italy and especially of Rome. The idea of “Rome” and the ideology of the Church is often imprinted on medieval Italian history, but this is a misrepresentation of the rich cultural heritage of the local, individual heritage of the history that formed the Italian communes. Any mention or reference to the Guelph and Ghibelline factions most commonly brings to mind the tension between the medieval Empire and Papacy as the Guelphs seemingly offered their allegiance to the Pope and the Ghibellines to the Emperor. Violence was the everyday reality and became part of the experience of the Italian commune. It remains part of our fascination with this tumultuous time period and lies at the heart of the questions we ask about the players and events. Were the Guelphs fighting on behalf of papal power, or were they fighting for their own more particular reasons? Did the Ghibellines feel a sense of duty to the German princes, or was that an available or convenient construct for them to use in their own struggles? Instead of looking at the power politics of various popes and would-be emperors and then attaching the rivalry between the Guelphs and Ghibellines to this scenario, it could be beneficial towards our understanding of medieval Italian history to focus on the local context of not just the individual communes, but their interactions and the communal identities that were being shaped. When we ask about the reason for the extreme upheaval and often uncontrollable violence, the answer likely has less to do with the battle for control of Christendom or an overarching ideology, and more to do with the local context. If all the actors of the time were foremost seeking their own best interest, which is likely, then it could be the case that both the Empire and Papacy sought out the Italian factions in order to lend validity to their own claims--instead of the other way around. In other words, the old adage easily applies here: all politics is local politics. Researching key aspects of communal affairs through the lens of the Partes Guelph and Ghibelline will provide a valuable key to understanding medieval Italian and Church history.