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Bodily Vengeance on the Capitoline: the cultural significance of public mutilation in Fourteenth Century Rome

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"Suso, Suso a gliu tradetore!"
"Up, Up to the traitor!"2

-Cola di Rienzo-
-8 October 1354-

As the Roman Tribune Cola di Rienzo (1313-54) attempted his escape from the back of the Palazzo Senatorio, the medieval palace perched atop the Capitoline Hill, he could not help but jeer along with the angry crowd storming the seat of his government and calling for his blood. Given his renown as an orator, his quip would have been unsurprising to those who had heard him before. It was a reckless attempt at disguise and easily caught the attention of an observant participant who grabbed the Tribune and offered him to the crowd. Unlike 1347, after the implosion of Cola’s first tribuneship, this time he would not escape with his life, nor in fact anything else. Indeed, after the crowd hurried him back to the top of the Capitoline, not only would they publicly execute him, but they would subject his body to one of the most gruesome post-mortem mutilations recorded in late medieval Italy. In isolation, one might dismiss this collective violence as simply an explosion of unconscious mob frenzy. But Cola’s post-mortem humiliation was not a simple affair. It took place over three days, and involved three staging points in a journey towards the river Tiber, where finally his scant remains were disposed. Everyone was invited to what was an extraordinarily public spectacle, some even laughed as they followed; people ‘seemed to be at a festival’.3 It is in light of such details that conceptual models which entertain notions of ‘senseless’ violence are difficult to reconcile.4 And though historians have sought to answer why the Roman popolo desired to kill Cola and thus end his regime, in their focus on motives, they have not explained the prolonged and ritualistic nature of the event itself.5 It is a question that can only be answered through an analysis of the process of the Tribune’s unfortunate end, situated in its fourteenth-century Roman context. Thus it is through the juxtaposition of the ‘moments’ in Cola’s journey, with the nature of his political agenda and his favourite rhetorical themes, that I argue the event was strongly defined by the ironic symbols perceived by its participants. Symbols which ensured his complete expulsion, not only physically but also ideationally, from the social body, and thus guaranteed the complete destruction of Cola and his political experiment.

2 The primary account of Cola’s life from an anonymous Roman: Anonimo Romano, Cronica, Vita di Cola di Rienzo (The Life of Cola di Rienzo), trans. John Wright (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1975) p. 151
3 Ibid. p. 152
Cola di Rienzo had humble beginnings in the Regola district of Rome, and importantly this meant he did not belong to the baronial caste which had plagued the city with decades of intermittent street wars.\(^6\) Temporal power in Rome was still technically possessed by the papacy, but after its 1309 flight to Avignon the pope could do little else but send letters, as the city tore itself apart.\(^7\) It was in this furnace of urban strife, set amongst the carcass of the ancient city that Cola dreamed of resurrecting ancient glory, in service of a new communal order, and that he advocated for the Imperial idea: the return of the Holy Roman Emperor to Rome.\(^8\) Described as having been ‘nourished on the milk of eloquence’, Cola was a fast learner.\(^9\) And it was his subsequent reputation as an ‘excellent speaker, and good scholar’, that ensured his selection as the papal ambassador of the short lived popolo government of 1343.\(^10\) In Avignon he had impressed Pope Clement VI with his wit, and was appointed ‘Notary of the City Chamber’, an office that would enable Cola’s famed rise to power in 1347 to the self-ascribed title: Nicolas Tribunus Augustus.\(^11\)

It was on the 20 May 1347 that Cola jubilantly climbed the Capitoline flanked by a crowd of Romans, whereupon he outlined a comprehensive attack on baronial power.\(^12\) The popolo ‘joyfully elected him their Lord’, and the justice of the ‘Buono Stato’ was reportedly swift.\(^13\) But despite reports of unparalleled peace, the Pope would not tolerate the notary’s imperial pretensions for long.\(^14\) Cola staged his own coronation, and even went so far as to knight himself in the infamous bath of Constantine.\(^15\) And so in December, anxious of eroding papal power, Clement engineered a baronial coup d’état. The tribune escaped the city unharmed, but his enemies were left unsatisfied. They commissioned a public mural with a prophetic warning: it pictured the Tribune hanging upside-down.\(^16\) Cola would nonetheless return in 1354, welcomed as if he were ‘Scipio Africanus’, a crowd again ‘honourably escorting’ him up the Capitoline.\(^17\) But after only sixty-nine days it

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\(^6\) Op. Cit. Anonimo Romano, Cronica, Vita di Cola di Rienzo, p.31
\(^8\) Gregorovius, Ferdinand, History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages, trans. Annie Hamilton (Four edn.; London: George Bell & Sons, 1898) pp. 200-1
\(^10\) Partner, Peter, The Lands of St Peter: The Papal State in the Middle Ages and The Early Renaissance. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972) p. 297-98
\(^13\) Op. Cit. Anonimo Romano, Cronica, Vita di Cola di Rienzo, p.31
\(^14\) Ibid. pp. 31-32
\(^16\) Op. Cit. Anonimo Romano, Cronica, Vita di Cola di Rienzo, p.42
\(^17\) Vallani, Giovanni, ‘Cola di Rienzo's revolt of Rome and his rise as champion [tribuno] of the People, 1347. (Extract from Nouva Cronica), in Samuel K. Cohn (ed.), Popular Protest in Late Medieval Europe: Italy, France, and Flanders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 80
\(^13\) Ibid. p. 43

‘Buono Stato’ (Good Estate), was term Cola used for his regime: Op. Cit. Collins, Amanda, Greater than Emperor, p. 17
\(^16\) Op. Cit. Anonimo Romano, Cronica, Vita di Cola di Rienzo, p.93
\(^17\) Ibid, p. 134
would all be over. Years of famine, plague, and depopulation, had rendered the trope of imperial resurrection increasingly meaningless to the Roman popolo: the simple tool of an ambitious signori. Cola’s baronial enemies had moved quickly, and his paranoid style of governance kindled murmurings of ‘tyranny’.

It was on morning of the 8 October 1354 that mobs, of ‘men, women and children’ largely from the Colonna districts charged the Capitoline Hill, shouting ‘long live the popolo!’ and moments later: ‘Death to the traitor, Cola di Rienzo! Death!’ Setting fire to the Palazzo Senatorio, they prevented Cola’s emergence onto the balcony with a hail of stones, fearing that his brilliant oratory would ‘break their wills’. Cola had attempted to escape the building, but he was spotted, captured, and then jostled back to the top of the Capitoline. And then positioned in the place of the Lion, Cecco dello Vecchio, a little known notary, stabbed and killed the Tribune, setting in motion a frenzied swarm in which people took turns, pushing their weapons into Cola’s body until it looked like a ‘sieve’. His feet were tied together, and he was dragged down the Capitoline, skin and flesh peeling off as he was hauled along the via Lata towards the Piazza San Marcello. At his arrival, ‘he had no head’, and they hoisted the unrecognisable corpse up over a balcony, hanging it upside-down. His ‘fat guts dangled from his belly’ as he hung for two days and one night, while zitielli (youths) threw stones at the corpse. And then being cut down, under the ‘orders’ of Colonna patriarchs, the procession continued to the Mausoleum of Augustus, where Cola’s remains were consigned to the Jews for burning, and his ashes finally dumped into the Tiber.

The blurred image of the raging vengeful mob might conceal deeper meanings at work here, but there are clearly several identifiable symbolic ‘acts’ in what was an inherently communal process of humiliation: the hauling up and down the Capitoline, the public procession through the city, the hanging upside-down, the involvement of children, the selection of the final destination, and then the consignment for destruction to the Jews. Without a doubt killings like this had been seen before; in 1348, the Florentine popolo had risen up against the Duke of Athens, the crowd targeting ducal officials, who became vicarious representations of the tyrant’s power, and were thus physically torn apart. But the symbols at work in Cola’s case, though they similarly denote the destruction of his political regime, were tightly connected to the Roman context.

Perhaps the most potent of these symbols is the role of the Capitoline hill itself as the historical seat of the ancient Senate, and hence the location of medieval communal government. But aside from its historical importance, the physical presence of the hill not only visually dominates the abitato and is visible from every neighbourhood, for those who occupy it the hill provides a commanding view over the city. It is unsurprising then that the Capitoline possessed an important role as the physical manifestation of city governance. To rise unto such a hill provided a powerful allegory of an actual rise to political office, a trope confirmed by both Cola’s coup d’état’s in 1347 and 1354. The primary ‘act’ in both instances involved the climbing of the Capitoline flanked by crowds of the popolo. Once ascended he ‘mounted the platform’, and looking over the city

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20 Ibid, p.148
21 Ibid, pp. 151-52
22 Ibid, p.152
23 via Lata, modern day via del Corso
24 Ibid.
enacted his prerogative - conferred by the raised status of the hill - to present his victory speech. Thus, the significance of the popolo storming the Capitoline is not only in the fact that government was located there, but in an ascension to the level of governance: an assault on the symbolic basis of the regime's power.

Sergei Bertelli argues that the act of elevation was an integral part of coronation ceremonies throughout late Ancient Roman, Byzantine, and Medieval European traditions. Known as anátellon, the ritual involved the raising of the new leader on a platform or even a shield, the act of raising ‘above the heads of his men’ highlighting the specially chosen and newly ascended importance of the leader, in and over the social body. Importantly though, this process only took place with the help of the people, who had to hold the leader up. Cola’s ascensions to power bear remarkable parallels to this process, and it is indeed, in the imagery of his ‘rise’ up the Capitoline, that his ‘descent’ can be understood.

When the Tribune attempted his escape, he had actually descended the Capitoline out of a rear window of the palace into the Tabularium. It was from here, at the bottom of the hill, that he attempted unsuccessfully to disguise himself within the crowd. That the popolo were reluctant to kill him on the spot, forcing him back up the hill, underscores the symbolic importance it holds. Once ascended, the place of the Lion was selected as the site of judgment, serving its role as the location ‘where [Cola] had passed sentence on others’. As the place where authority was enacted, the reversed roles legitimated the process of his execution, while simultaneously producing ironic symbols for the relatives of the condemned. It was then the notary Cecco del Vecchio who performed the role of prime-mover in Cola’s lynching, and while there has been debate over his importance in the conspiracy, the meaning of his action lies more in his insignificance, and thus his representation of the group. Everyone took turns in pushing their blade into Cola’s body, inflicting their own personal revenge, but the public, communal character of the event was its most important element. It was therefore as the popolo that the Romans, in the process of anátellon, had raised Cola up to the seat of power, and so in his ‘dethronement’, they would also communally force him down. Cola’s attempted descent on his own terms had to be reversed, so that when he was finally tied around the feet after death, it was in a communal act of the popolo, in the reverse of the anátellon, that he was dragged below the feet of the people, rather than atop their shoulders, away from the Capitoline - the symbolic seat of power.

That Cola’s body was then dragged through the centre of the city and in such a public and festive manner ‘that people joked’ as if they were at a festival, is reminiscent of the parade pageantry that was long part of the urban experience in medieval Rome. Not only had the Tribune himself staged a number victory parades, but before the flight to Avignon, Papal processions were common. The solenno processo formed an integral part of a Pope’s coronation, a symbolic gesture

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29 Ibid, p. 140
31 Ibid, p. 151
32 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Holstein, Alizah, ‘Rome During Avignon: Myth, Memory, and Civic Identity in Fourteenth-Century Roman Politics’, (Cornell University, 2006) p.189
which involved taking possession of the city.\textsuperscript{37} It involved stops at key landmarks, which served as representative pit-stops for their urban districts. In paying a visit to San Marcello, Cola was paradoxically receiving tribute from rione Pigna, an area known as Colonna heartland.\textsuperscript{38} Anonimo Romano’s identification of Jugarta and Sciattera della Colonna as the figures ordering the next stages of post-mortem denigration, suggest that the Family was not merely involved in the plot, but possibly the primary instigators.\textsuperscript{39} And so, the fact that the evidence of the popolo’s justice was dragged into this area for public display conveys a powerful message: the Colonna were still in charge, possessing significant powers of patronage, all despite Cola’s efforts to break the baronial status quo.

The next stages of the ritual become important for the complete expulsion of Cola’s physical and ideational presence from the social body. At the point he is hung up in the Piazza San Marcello Anonimo Romano describes him in thoroughly animalistic terms. The body no longer has a head, and begins to lose its humanoid features, becoming little more than meat. The act of hanging upside-down drained the blood from the body making it ‘white as bloody milk’. And then beginning to bloat, it became ‘so fat’ that it resembled ‘a giant buffalo or cow in a slaughterhouse’.\textsuperscript{40} It would have been a particularly gruesome display, but the sight of animals hanging after slaughter was common for a Fourteenth Century Roman.\textsuperscript{41} Such parallels with everyday life, work to desensitise the mutilation, eroding the humanity of the body. This was not only important in physically deconstructing the memory of Cola and his regime, it served to confer normalcy and thus justice upon the act itself.

As Cola’s body hung for the next two days and one night, the zitielli (youths) of the city ‘threw rocks at him’.\textsuperscript{42} Ritualised rock throwing by young boys in this period was commonplace, as was the delegation to this group of ritualistic mutilation of enemy corpses.\textsuperscript{43} And it was largely the spiritual role attributed to children as the most ‘pure’ part of the social body, which explains the acquiescence or even encouragement of adults. Children were often in this period ascribed ventriloquist qualities in their actions, their violence containing a prophetic communication of God’s will or approval.\textsuperscript{44} They were thought to possess an immunity to thanatological ‘contamination’, serving as convenient intermediaries between the living and the dead.\textsuperscript{45} Symbolically then, the attack on the cadaver by the community’s spiritual heart, indicated the divine endorsement of Cola’s expulsion from the social body.

The final dragging of Cola’s remains to the Mausoleum of Augustus, entailed a clear mockery of Cola’s use of ancient imperial motifs in his political rhetoric.\textsuperscript{46} That Nicolaus Tribunus Augustus, would be taken ‘to rest’ with the first emperor of the Roman Empire, was a firm reassertion that his dream of a newly ascendant

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Bertelli, Sergio, \textit{The King’s Body} p. 246
\textsuperscript{44} Eisenbichler, Konrad (ed.), \textit{The Premodern Teenager: Youth and Society 1150-1650} (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002) pp. 79-80
\textsuperscript{45} Zorzi, Andrea, ‘Rituals of Youthful Violence in Late Medieval Italian Urban Societies.’, in Samuel Cohn, et al. (eds.), \textit{Late medieval and early modern ritual: studies in Italian urban culture} (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 238, 244.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. p. 239
\textsuperscript{48} Colonna Fortress: Op. Cit. Musto, Ronald G., \textit{Apocalypse in Rome} p. 345
Rome, rising on the power of the imperial return, was well and truly dead. The Tribune’s admiration of the ancients produced an ironic acquiescence on the part of his enemies: Cola di Rienzo could now sleep with Augustus himself. His mangled remains however, would provide a stinging contrast between the two Romans. Cola would not have a commanding monument erected in his honour, but he would be dumped into the hands of the Jewish community to be disposed. 47

It is possible that this final act represented the imitation of the solenno processo, in which the Jewish community was acknowledged by the newly ascended pontiff, however it seems more likely that this bodily relegation represented the final stage in expulsion. 48 Though some instances of lynching in this period show that the remains, after being degraded to the status of meat, were sometimes consumed by the populace itself, carrying forth the complete animalisation of the body, many others involved the consignment of the rejected ‘meat’ to an external ‘other’. 49 Often dogs or another carnivorous animal fulfilled this role, but it is not hard to see how the Jewish community in Rome, served to achieve this same function. 50 Not considered as part of the Christian social body, the meat was relegated to them for final obliteration, and although this did not occur through consumption, the burning of the body carried out the same process of complete eradication. And then, as a final measure, the ashes not left in the stead of the Augustan tomb, were thrown unceremoniously into the river Tiber, thus completely flushing all semblance of the material and ideational existence that Cola, the Tribune of the people had once possessed.

Clearly Cola di Rienzo’s lynching was not as simple as it may seem at first sight. There were multiple stages of humiliation with layers of symbolic value, most of which occurred after the Tribune’s death on the Capitoline. And perhaps this is the most revealing aspect of this entire spectacle. Cola was not tortured or made to suffer, indeed, according to Anonimo Romano once in the place of the Lion ‘no man was bold enough to touch him’, Cola had stood there ‘for almost an hour’. 51 It is an observation which suggests that despite everything that would be done to his body, there was an inherent reluctance on the part of the crowd to engage in such grotesque levels of violence. When he was killed, it was done quickly and ‘he felt no pain’. 52 What was set in motion was a series of symbolic processes, which served to dehumanise the body, justify, and then ascribe social and political meaning to the events. These rituals served to turn what would otherwise be a cold blooded and random act, into a meaningful and comprehensible enactment of popular justice. The destruction of Cola’s body, was in many ways defined by the attempt to destroy his regime, and it was because Cola’s Buono Stato was so heavily invested in his person, that the destruction of his body yielded such potent messages. But ultimately, its most powerful consequence lay in the vicarious disempowerment of the ideas, which underpinned Cola’s dream for Rome and thus his potential legacy as il Tribuno del popolo: the imperial revival and the breaking of the baronial status quo.

53 Consignment to animals: Ibid.
55 Ibid.p. 152
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