In 1117, after a great earthquake which devastated northern Italy, the archbishop of Milan and the consuls of the same city—the city’s leaders—called the people of other northern cities and their bishops to a great meeting in Milan, in the Broletto, an open space beside Milan’s two cathedrals, now part of the Piazza del Duomo. There, in the words of an eyewitness, the chronicler Landolfo of S. Paolo, writing two decades later:

The archbishop and the consuls set up two theatra [stages]; on one the archbishop with the bishops, abbots and leading churchmen stood and sat; in the other the consuls with men skilled in laws and customs. And all around them were present an innumerable multitude of clerics and the laity, including women and virgins, expecting the burial of vices and the revival of virtues.

It seems that this meeting was called in response to the earthquake, and Landolfo mentions shortly after the whole people congregated there out of fear of the ruin of the rubble, so that they could hear mass and preaching; it was also, however, seen as a moment in which people could ask for justice, and Landolfo himself was there to seek restitution, for he had recently been expelled from the church (S. Paolo) of which he was the priest and part owner. He failed in that; his enemy
Archbishop Giordano was never going to let him have his church back, and nor (although with less venom) would his successors. Landolfo’s remarks about the revival of virtues should be read as sarcasm, in that context. But his image of the set-piece meeting with its stages is a striking one; and so is the image of the separation of powers, the Church on one stage, the consuls and men of law on the other.¹

This narrative can be set against a document from July of the same year, surviving in a contemporary copy, stating that ‘in the public arengo [perhaps in the same open space] in which was lord Giordano, archbishop of Milan, and there with him his priests and clerics of the major and minor orders of the church of Milan, in the presence of the Milanese consuls and with them many of the capitanei and vavassores [the two orders of the Lombard military aristocracy] and populus, the consuls of Milan decided a court case brought there by the bishop of the neighbouring and now-subject city of Lodi. This is only the second text which mentions consuls in Milan at all, and the first in which the consuls are actually named—nineteen of them—and shown acting in a judicial role. Landolfo’s account and the consular document seem to refer, if not to the same assembly, at least to rapidly succeeding versions of the same occasion, and thus reinforce each other: the one showing a highly orchestrated event, the other showing its effective legal content. And they have also been seen—and heavily emphasised—as a pair ever since modern historiography began to concern itself with the origins of Italian city communes, which in the case of Milan goes back to Giorgio Giulini in the 1760s: in this dramatic moment, we can see the consuls of Milan begin to take on their new and future role as urban rulers, and Italian history took a decisive new path from then on.²
In what follows, I intend to nuance that moment, quite considerably. But let us begin by looking briefly at why the moment, and the new régime, has such historiographical importance. There are two contexts for this, seen very broadly, one Italian and one international (including, not least, American). For professional historians in Italy, the role of the middle ages in the grand narrative of the past was never that of the origins of the modern state, as in most of western Europe (or else its regrettable failure in Germany), but, rather, the victory of the autonomous city states over external domination, which made possible the civic culture of the Renaissance; indeed, external rule was only part of it, for Italians tended until recently to regard the genuine state-building of Norman and Angevin southern Italy as a wasted opportunity.
and the origin of southern ‘backwardness,’ in that it undermined urban autonomy there. The city was the *principio ideale*, the ‘ideal principle’ of Italian history, in Carlo Cattaneo’s famous image of the 1850s, in the run-up to the Risorgimento. When the moment was which first produced urban autonomy was therefore of very great interest and importance for the historical community, and the *moto associativo*, the ‘associative movement’, which led to autonomous collectivities was a core focus of study, particularly in the decades around 1900, the period when scientific history developed in Italy. Indeed, its more-than-scientific emotional force meant that debates about the nature of medieval civic collectivity soon became metaphors for the main political and cultural battlegrounds of early twentieth-century Italian history; medieval historians were important in the socialist and fascist movements, in the Crocean idealist community, and also in the slower-burning clerical movement which would end up as Christian Democracy after World War II. One would think that this would mean that the subject was fully studied; that has unfortunately not been the result (I will come back to this), but its centrality remains taken for granted in Italy.3

As for the international interest in the subject, this was associated, from Burckhardt through to US Western Civ, with the Renaissance too, although here also with the addition of the supposed democratic, or at least republican, nature of the Italian communes, as a contribution to the origins of modernity. As the historian of Venice Frederic C. Lane said to the American Historical Association in 1965, ‘My thesis here is that republicanism, not capitalism, is the most distinctive and significant aspect of these Italian city-states; that republicanism gave to the civilization of Italy from the thirteenth through the sixteenth century its distinctive
quality. . . . The attempt to revive the culture of the ancient city-states strengthened in turn the republican ideal and contributed mightily to its triumph in modern nations and primarily in our own'. The US focus on the history of the Renaissance, which remains so strong, derives from both these strands. The experience of the Italian communes has also been used surprisingly often as a point of reference by non-medievalists, as with the US sociologist Robert Putnam’s influential co-authored book, *Making Democracy Work*, which attributes all contemporary civic solidarity in Italy to the influence of the Italian communes and their ‘collaborative solutions to their Hobbesian dilemmas’ in the eleventh century, or, in the UK, Quentin Skinner’s well-known survey *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, which simply starts, without qualification, with the early Italian consulates, in a chapter titled ‘The Ideal of Liberty’. These two important scholars have, I have to add, been content to get their information about communal Italy from fairly basic textbooks, but the Italian communes, and more widely the Italian city-states, have a notable place in their story-lines about what each sees as modernity.

I could lengthen this list, but there is probably no need. The point is that the Italian communes have been widely used, often without much detailed thought, to denote one of the stepping-stones to the modern world, for their bottom-up collaboration, for their move away from monarchical institutions, for their institutional creativity, or for their secular (and therefore more ‘modern’) culture. This sort of interpretation to me is fundamentally mistaken, as are all teleological readings of history. But not all of these descriptions are incorrect; communes were indeed characterised by institutional creativity (if for no other reason than that their institutions tended
to fail), and were also indeed founded on bottom-up collaboration (however fundamentally shot through they were with hierarchical and military-aristocratic values and rivalries as well). These were novelties, and their very contradictions make them interesting, as well as difficult to explain. The leitmotif of this book will therefore be such contradictions; and they are best summed up by a simple problem. North and central Italian cities in 1050 (say) were run by aristocratic and military—and also clerical—élites with much the same practices and values as those anywhere else in Latin Europe; and, even if they were sometimes hard to control, these élites were, just as elsewhere, fully part of hierarchies which extended upwards to bishops, counts, and kings/emperors, as part of a coherent Kingdom of Italy. By contrast, in 1150 (say) they were run by élites which may well have been from the same families, but which had developed autonomous and novel forms of collective government focused on annually changing consuls in fifty and more cities and towns, almost none of them looking more than nominally to any superior powers, which regularly fought each other; such governments seemed highly radical to outsiders, and were organised enough and sure enough of themselves to be able thereafter to ally together and fight off the most serious attempt by an emperor to control Italy in depth for two hundred years, that of Frederick Barbarossa, in the years 1158–77. This was a new world. And yet they made this to-us dramatic change without, in all but a few cases, showing us any evidence of an awareness that they were doing anything new. What did they think they were doing? What did they think they were doing?

The short answer is that we do not know, and will never know, except very partially indeed. Our evidence is scarce, of course; this is the middle ages, and not the late middle ages
of the documentary explosion, which in Italy was fully under way by 1250 but not at all a century earlier. But the question is important enough that it is worth trying to answer it. I have thus chosen to focus on three case studies, which are in each case characterised both by a relatively good set of documents (usually land transactions) and a varied set of narratives, the dialectic between which may get us somewhere towards the problem as I have posed it: Milan, Pisa, and Rome. They are in fact the best three cities in Italy for such a pairing. Genoa might have been a fourth, but its earliest evidence is too sketchy—as we shall see (pp. 162–66) in the fifth chapter here, which contains a briefer overview of other Italian cities, so as to locate the three in their wider typicalities and atypicalities. My three chosen cities are also well-studied, but these studies do not fully focus on the issues which most concern me here. Milan and Pisa are relatively often compared (largely because the University of Pisa hired several historians from Milan in the 1960s); Rome is seldom brought into the equation, however, and will be a useful contrast to and control on the other two. It is a mantra that every Italian city is different, and this is undoubtedly true, but the different experiences shown by each of these three have obvious parallelisms as well, and thus will go some way towards creating the sort of indirect, glancing picture of the way people made choices, which is the best the evidence can offer us. I am by training a social historian, so I am more experienced in analysing the results of such choices and the patterns they make than the mental processes involved, but those processes are crucial too, and I wish to set them out as clearly as I can.

Before we look at concrete examples in the next chapters, however, we need to look at the historiographical frame for how to analyse communes in more detail as it has emerged
in the last generation; this is important to set out, in order to show where I am following others (including my own previous work) and where I am not.

The quantity of detailed and comparative Italian scholarship on early communes has not been as substantial as one would think. For a long time Italians concentrated on their immediate antecedents, and when consuls appeared they perhaps thought their job was done; for example, the leading Italian historians of the generation before this one, Giovanni Tabacco and Cinzio Violante, did most of their empirical work on the period before the late eleventh century. In the last forty years, however, although the number of studies is still not huge (except for monographic analyses of individual cities, which are plentiful; but these do not often use their empirical data as a basis for wider rethinking), some important work has changed our view of what happened across the period 1050–1150 quite considerably.

The first point that needs to be made (and it is one that is uncontroversial in the historiography) is that the leadership of medieval Italian cities was not ever exclusively commercial, whether mercantile or artisanal, unlike the picture often painted for northern Europe. Most of Italy’s major landowners lived in cities—that was the basic reason why Italian cities were so much larger, more powerful, and more socio-politically complex than those of the rest of Latin Europe, and had been for centuries—and they always had a central role to play in city politics. Indeed, economic development, although it was moving fast in Italy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, was not in itself a necessary cause of the development of communes; the major ports of Pisa
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and Genoa were precocious communes, and so were the exchange foci of Cremona and Milan, but Venice was not, and plenty of relatively uncommercial centres, such as Bergamo or Parma, developed consular régimes at much the same speed as economic leaders; I will not have much to say about economics here as a result. Essentially, early city communes are by now generally recognised to have been, in the very loosest sense of the word, aristocratic: they were not usually the result of open conflict (Rome was the major exception here; see below, pp. 174, 184, for others), and they worked to perpetuate the power of landed élites of different types. It was the pre-communal period, above all the early and mid-eleventh century, that was the period of urban uprisings; the very earliest evidence for what could be called communes, by contrast, appears in the last decade of the eleventh century in the case of a handful of cities and the twelfth, often well into the twelfth, for the others. They appeared, historians often now say, in the context not of contestation but of compromise:10 between the different factions or strata of urban élites, between bishops and secular urban leaders, and between those leaders and wider communities. This occurred above all as a result of the confusion caused by the Investiture Dispute in the decades after 1076, which pitted emperor against pope and led to a civil war in Italy (including, often, rival bishops in individual cities and thus a crisis of their traditional leaderships) in the 1080s–90s, and to the steady breakdown of the Kingdom itself from then on into the following decades; communes were thus a defensive reaction to crisis.

As we shall see, I will call some of the detail of that defensive reaction into question, to an extent; all the same, I would not disagree with most of the general picture. But the stress
on aristocratic dominance has had its good and its bad side. It can be a reality check on older romantic notions of popular democracy winning out in the Italian city-republics, but it can also, even now, be based on a Paretoesque assumption that all historical protagonism is really aristocratic by definition. Some Italian historiography has been rather comfortable as a result, and has stressed how the real sources of political power did not change at all with the early communes. In favour of such continuitist readings are some unproblematic findings, such as (as Ottavio Banti showed) that the new city régimes were mostly not called ‘communes’ until the mid-twelfth century, but ‘cities’, cīvītates, as they had always been, thus hiding for us (and for them?) any changes in their governance—indeed, commune was not even a noun in sources for most cities before the 1120s, but an adjective or adverb, meaning ‘collective’ or ‘in common’. Furthermore, it is now often argued, not just that consuls had or could have a public role from very early—which is not hard to show—but also that consular régimes simply inherited the public role that counts and bishops had in cities before them. A further element of continuity was the undoubted importance of iūdices, men with legal training and experience, for they had run cities under bishops in the eleventh century, under some mixed régimes in the early twelfth, and then under more clearly consular-dominated régimes in the mid-twelfth: it has been argued that as long as they controlled public acts, the legal basis of such acts was unlikely to be very different.

These latter arguments, however, risk flattening out the period so completely that the real novelties of the consular period, whether consciously perceived at the time or not, become invisible. For example: the main way in which the traditional regnum Italiae, which united Italy north of Rome
from the seventh century to the eleventh, showed its public identity and legitimacy was through assemblies called *placita*, where justice was done on a regular basis in the sight of large numbers of people; these judicial assemblies vanished in almost the whole of north-central Italy in the late eleventh century, and communes did not seek to re-create them. Either the *placitum* tradition, with its strong ‘public’ element, did not work any more; or consular régimes felt that they did not have access to it; or else public power had become differently located. Whichever way, a basic underpinning of political power was lost or greatly changed; and legal experts visibly adapted to that, indeed took it for granted. We will come back to this.

Where historians have disagreed more in the last generation is over the nature of the élites which ruled early communes. For a start, if major landowners were important in communally ruled cities, how different were such cities from the countryside at all? Hagen Keller, already author of some of the best general articles on the formation of the communes, in 1979 published a major book which (among other things) argued strongly, based largely on evidence from Milan, that the élites of northern Italian cities in our period were divided into defined strata, *ordines*, and were headed by military aristocrats (he called them *Adel*) defined by feudo-vassalic relationships and also different social origins: *capitanei*, who held fiefs from the local bishop and had private (signorial) lordships in the countryside, and *valvassores*, who were the vassals of the *capitanei*; there were also ‘citizens’, *cives*, among these élites, leading figures outside the narrower aristocratic hierarchy, but they were a minority in early communal leaderships, and anyway even men devoted to commercial activity could have vassal ties to the military *ordines* or to bishops.
This might not seem so controversial (I myself happily accepted it at the time, and still accept its main lines), but it coincided with an important and polemical article by Philip Jones on the ‘legend of the bourgeoisie’, generalised later in another large book, which argued—again among many other things—that Italian cities were not fully ‘civic’ in the ways in which medieval historians were accustomed to seeing them, and that the importance of landowners in cities meant that the latter were long dominated by aristocratic values (the communes were ‘born seigneurial’); and Pierre Racine’s thèse on Piacenza, which proposed (and this did go too far) that early communes were so much under the control of landed aristocrats that they could be seen as a ‘seigneuric collective’, and were not really typologically distinct from signorial lordships in the countryside. None of these historians were Italians, and their views did not by any means seem as useful to Italians in the 1980s as Keller’s conclusions did to me; Italians broadly, and not always helpfully, responded by stressing how ‘civic’ Italian cities were in all periods after all, and how different they were from the countryside, notwithstanding the attempts by foreigners to make them like northern Europe. They also made some better-aimed points about Keller’s ‘society of orders’: that its two-fold nature did not characterise more than a minority of north Italian cities (and none in central Italy); that it was more rigid than it needed to be, as exactly who capitanei were and how they behaved was different from place to place; that aristocratic strata and episcopal vassals did not dominate early communes everywhere either; and that Keller had understressed the important fact, demonstrable for example in Milan as Paolo Grillo has shown, that there was quite a sharp difference between capitanei who were involved in city politics and members of the same ordo who...
were not—and that the former, although still episcopal vassals, were less interested in signorial rights and other elements of rural power, and much more interested in more ‘civic’ activities. One can accept most of these points without thinking any less of Keller’s book, but the debate leaves open some crucial issues as well, such as what exactly the ‘civic’ values of twelfth-century cities did consist of, if they were indeed so different from those of the countryside and of northern Europe. (This was explored by one of Keller’s critics, Renato Bordone, but far from completely.)

A more fully accepted work, but actually more critical of others, and arguably more radical, was Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur’s 2003 book *Cavaliers et citoyens*, on urban militias, in the twelfth and (especially) thirteenth centuries. Maire Vigueur argued that the political core of the commune across both centuries was not the military *ordines* as characterised by Keller (and plenty of other people), but, rather, the collectivity of mounted knights of every city, which extended far beyond a narrow set of feudo-vassal aristocrats, to 10–15 percent of the urban population, and certainly included richer members of the commercial and artisanal strata, as well as judicial experts and notaries. He argued for the twelfth century that the hegemony of this very wide militarised élite stratum produced a ‘very great stability and a very strong homogeneity of the class which governed the commune’ for the entire consular period, and that studying the (few) prosopographical analyses of consuls produces ‘a feeling of boredom, an impression of déjà-vu’ because of the total homogeneity of the stratum, based as it always is on an ‘honest’ landed patrimony, tenurial links to local churches, and a tight set of kinship and business links to other consular families. There is no doubt that
this book, by extending the scale of urban élites very greatly, has given a new framing to research in the field, and has the ability to get scholars to sidestep older debates. I will have it in my mind often in what follows; in particular I am sure, with Maire Vigueur, that the importance of feudal ties to bishops has been overplayed in communal analyses, and that communal activity belonged to a relatively wide stratum. I have my doubts about the total homogeneity of that stratum, however. As we shall see, it included, in each city, more diversity than that; and I shall stress in what follows a stratification inside it based on wealth, which in my view helps us to get closer to real social and political differences in the experiences of the early city communes—which are important, as we shall see when we reach the empirical evidence for my three case studies.

Let us pause on definitions for a moment. I have been referring to ‘aristocrats’ and to ‘élites’; I shall stick to ‘élites’ for the most part when talking about urban leaders, as it is suitably vague—it can certainly extend to all of Maire Vigueur’s urban militia—and will restrict references to the military ‘aristocracy’ to people who are definitely capitanei and their equivalents (though how rich they were, and how different they really were from leading cives, is another matter, as we shall see). But what about the word ‘commune’ itself? Scholars have traditionally regarded it as meaning the urban government of people called consules (the near-universal word for city rulers in north-central Italy by 1150, except in Rome, where senatores was preferred, and in Venice, where dukes remained central), and have tended to regard communes as starting with the first references to consuls—there is a well-known list of such first references, beginning with Pisa in 1080–85, then Asti in 1095, Milan in 1097, Arezzo and Genoa in 1098, and so on. But
these references are all entirely chance citations, and consuls or their equivalents could have existed a long time earlier in most cases. As Keller has said, we do not know the date of the passage to a consular régime in a single Italian city (although Rome, as we shall see later, is a partial exception). In addition, is the simple appearance of the word *consul* enough to mark a new form of government? Many early references to the word are to very generically defined figures, who may well have had no official status, as has been convincingly argued for Pisa and Arezzo out of the canonical list, and also Lucca, where the word is first used in the 1090s, in a poetic text referring to 1081. So our evidence for consuls may have either preceded or succeeded the crystallisation of the ‘real’ commune, which also, as we have seen, was not called a commune in most cities until well into the twelfth century. Given that, how can a ‘real’ commune be characterised?

Put like this, it should be fairly clear that it is up to any historian to use the characterisation which s/he finds most useful. I would prefer to use, not a definition, but an ideal type, a collection of related elements which may not all be present in every city, but which, as a whole or in part, can be used to characterise and compare the city communal phenomenon from place to place. These would include in particular, for the Italian commune in its twelfth-century version: a conscious urban collectivity, which included either all (male) city-dwellers or a substantial part of them, usually held together by oaths; a regularly rotating set of magistracies, chosen or at least validated by that collectivity (not often in any ‘democratic’ way, but at any rate not chosen by superior powers such as kings or bishops); and a de facto autonomy of action for the city and its magistrates, including in warfare and justice, and eventually taxation and legislation—the basic
elements of early and central medieval government. Not all communes were in practice autonomous (e.g., from bishops), particularly at the start; and not all communes had magistrates regularly chosen or assented to from below (Frederick Barbarossa chose many urban rulers for a decade, and the dukes of Venice, who were life-long rulers even if themselves elected by complex processes, doubtless had a strong voice in the choice of their sapientes and consiliatores), but the point about an ideal type is that it allows a focus on why certain elements are absent, rather than provoking often unhelpful arguments about whether a city without one element or another is ‘really’ a commune at all. Nonetheless, it also allows one to see that a city with only a single one of these elements might not so usefully be compared with cities with most of them: a city with a community of the oath, for example, and no other autonomy (Milan in the 1040s is a clear instance) could well be difficult to control, and in Milan’s case was, but found it hard indeed to maintain the continuous protagonism that annual magistrates and a city-based judicial remit would later bring; similarly, a wholly autonomous city which nevertheless firmly looked to a single ruler for life (as were both Rome and Venice before 1143) had a markedly different political practice from one where the rotation of powerful offices was already the norm.

Consuls were very widely accepted as city rulers in northern and central Italy by the 1150s. They are taken for granted as rulers in narratives of that decade, whether written by men holding communal office themselves, such as Caffaro in Genoa, Ottone Morena in Lodi, and Bernardo Maragone in Pisa, or by an outsider as unsympathetic as the highly aristocratic German historian Otto bishop of Freising, uncle to Barbarossa himself; by now we begin to get our first clear
references to early communal fiscal exactions; and the 1150s was also the decade in which Pisa took the important step of preparing the first version of a comprehensive local law-code, an undoubted claim for full practical autonomy. These are the main reasons why I will regard 1150 as an endpoint for my discussions, for communes were fully established in most major cities in north-central Italy, in one form or another, by then. Earlier, it would depend on the city; but for me a crucially important marker is the appearance of regular consular judicial records, which are the first documents which show consuls or their representatives autonomously in action in any systematic way, sometimes describing themselves as electi a populo and similar phrases, significant ones for our recognition that this was a very different form of government from the traditional hierarchies of the Kingdom of Italy. Such records also soon show a claim to legal supremacy over parties even if they did not consent to it (an important sign of legal authority), which is shown by the preparedness of consuls to reach judgments even when one of the parties did not appear in court.

If so, the consolidation of a communal régime can be regarded as first attested in the 1130s in most of the precocious cities: Milan again, plus Piacenza, Lucca, Padua, Cremona, and Verona, with Pisa and Genoa, as we shall see, clearly the first of all, with a similar consolidation partially visible already around 1110—but this time the group definitely does not include Asti and Arezzo, where consular courts are not recorded until as late as the 1180s and 1190s respectively. Keller has argued for the 1120s–30s as the moment of the institutional crystallisation of communes, which fits these dates well enough, at least, again, for the earliest-established communes. I would also prefer this to his other main argument, set out in the context of Milan, in which a collective oath of peace between the
**C H A P T E R  I**

civitas (or populus) and the nobiles of the city, at the end of an urban uprising in 1044–45 against the aristocratic ordines and the archbishop, and then the punctuation of religious disputes among the Milanese populus by collective oaths (called iuramentum commune) in the 1060s and 1070s, are ‘primitive forms of communal organisation and self-government’; these oaths were too inchoate and ad hoc to be straightforward harbingers of a new political régime, and there is for me a clear danger of a teleological reading here. But it must also be recognised from the outset that, if the full set of elements of my ideal-type commune only appear in most cities in the 1130s to 1150s, then this is rather later and slower than some other historians have argued, which has implications for our understandings of causation—and for the self-awareness of the people who moved these developments along.

A final element in this historiographical survey is a closely related point which I have argued myself, and which I wish to continue to develop here: that communes at their inception were very informal bodies. They had, in the end, to become more formal, to replace the old formal hierarchies, public and private, of the Carolingian and post-Carolingian world, which lost force, sometimes finally, with the civil wars of the late eleventh century; but that process was by no means immediate. Consuls were creating a new structure, based on elements (such as collective oaths and rotating offices) which had never been used on their own for government before; their leaders were often from traditional élite families, who in the past had been in the entourages of kings/emperors, counts/dukes, bishops, and will often have found the habitus of royal or episcopal courts and formalised placitum assemblies much more familiar and congenial than that of the city gatherings which marked the early communal period in most
places. Why would we assume that they had a clear and consistent idea of what they were doing? Why would we assume that they would automatically feel that ruling their peers, and those less powerful than they, would be more honorific than remaining in the traditional hierarchies accepted by their ancestors, which they were, indeed, sometimes still members of, again royal and episcopal ones above all? And why would we assume that, once consular systems were established, their leaders would recognise that this was The Future, and simply set about consolidating them? They were most likely making it up as they went along; they may well have thought of themselves as simply modifying earlier forms of political practice, and they may well have preferred to think this, too. Indeed, some consular régimes do not seem to have been permanent, or very high-profile, at the start; they were ‘latent’ in Giuliano Milani’s nice phrase, as in the cases of Vercelli, Ravenna, and Florence, discussed later. Some elements of the future communal ideal type did become formalised relatively early, notably the city assembly, as we shall see. But even the soldest régimes otherwise developed very informally for a long time, adding on elements as they became necessary and possible, certainly borrowing them from neighbours in one of the classic examples of ‘peer polity interaction’ (by 1200 most communes had very similar institutional structures, in fact), but proceeding along very ad hoc paths at the start.

It can be added that those who led cities at the end of the eleventh century did not necessarily all want to become consuls at all. Links to kings and bishops, even if by now less power-enhancing on their own, could remain more attractive. The Avvocati family in Lucca, for example, major city figures throughout the eleventh century, and the lay leaders of the city in the thirty years after 1080, do not appear among
the city’s consuls in the first generation after their first real appearance in Lucca in 1119–20, but instead are attested as imperial representatives (missi), as ‘counts of the sacred palace’, an even higher-flown imperial title, and also as episcopal advocates (hence their later surname): these titles and roles seem to have been more prestigious than ‘mere’ consular office. Once the Lucchese consulate had fully stabilised, they did join it, but that was not until the 1150s. Perhaps they were the family who saw this period most clearly, whereas the actual consuls had less idea of what they were doing. It is hard to tell in Lucca, as there are too few discursive texts which might give us a clue as to people’s motives—the major reason why I do not include Lucca, which I know well, among my case studies. But the Avvocati have plenty of parallels in the earliest communes elsewhere, as we shall see. And it is this initial, uncertain, informal period which I shall be concentrating on here, when city leaders of different types—and we shall look at a whole set of different types in our three case studies—were sleepwalking into a new and often radically different régime: all the while, for the most part, pretending that they were doing nothing of the kind.