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The post-imperial Romanness of the Romans

An inquiry concerning the collective identity of the citizens of Rome in the early Middle Ages can conveniently start from the eighth century. Before this date, the post-imperial city had been turned into a peripheral town of the Byzantine Empire, whose importance mainly lay in the fact that it was the see of the pope, one of the patriarchs of the Christian Empire. The populace of Rome was no longer a special body for the imperial administration, nor had it any political participation save its immediate contact with the popes.¹

Things began to change in the first years of the eighth century. When Philippicus Bardanes seized the power in Constantinople, the Roman people refused to receive into the city the insignia of an emperor considered to be a heretic. In the next decades the Romans defended the popes against violence caused by their opposition to the religious and fiscal policies of the empire. But only when the temporal power of the popes was established, the population of Rome assumed a constitutional identity which accompanied and supported the papal sovereignty. When the popes received from Pippin, the Frankish king, political control of the Byzantine provinces in central Italy, including Rome, immediately they endeavoured to create a legal subject which had to become the political body of the new state. In the minds of popes such as Stephen II, Paul I or Hadrian I, the sovereign rights belonged directly to St. Peter, who delegated them to the pope, his vicar; but it was also necessary to have a people who should be not only the flock of the saint, but also act as the institutional support of the new political and administrative organization and as a fundamental part of its state structure. The popes were too deeply rooted in the tradition of imperial Roman law to imagine that a worldly government, such as the one they were going to create, could be founded exclusively on religious and sacramental relationships.

‘The Romans’ were therefore the body politic of the papal state. The term, which previously was used to refer to all the inhabitants of the Byzantine provinces of Italy, came in the second half of the eighth century to refer mainly, if not only, to the citizens of Rome. They were linked to the figure of the pope not only by their shared residence in Rome and their direct involvement in the events of the city, but also by the fact that they were the pope’s electors, together with the clergy of Rome. So they had both a religious and a juridical relationship with the pope. The concept of a *respublica Romanorum*, associated with, but distinct from, the apostolic church, was imme-

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¹ On the history of Rome, 7th-9th centuries: Llewellyn 1973; Noble 1984; Delogu 2001; Dagron 1998; Herbers 1999; Cosentino 2008.