

Cola di Rienzo and the Reenactment of an Ancient Tale: Finding the *Prata*

Flaminia in Fourteenth Century Rome

Much has been written on the appropriation by Cola di Rienzo (ca. 1313- 54) of the stories and symbols of both republican and imperial Rome to reinforce his short-lived reign of “good government” and his theatrical approach to the assertion of power. (See e.g., A. Schwarz, “Eternal Rome and Cola di Rienzo’s Show of Power” in Postlewaite and Hüsker, 2007). From Rienzo’s contemporary biographer, the Anonimo romano, chapter 1, we know that Rienzo was “well acquainted with Livy, Seneca, Cicero and Valerius Maximus.” Rienzo was also on close terms with the poet and classical scholar Francesco Petrarca whom he likely met in Avignon four years prior to his seizure of power. To my knowledge, however, one story from Livy has not been well considered, if at all, in the Rienzo literature for its similarity to the actions of the self-declared tribune of the fourteenth century, and yet it is a natural fit for the learned and flamboyant Rienzo and was a story he would have known. This is the tale of Lucius Verginius, the fifth century B.C.E. centurion whose thwarting of the attempted debauchery of his daughter by a ruling decemvir, instigated a secession on the Aventine followed by a gathering on the *Prata Flaminia* where the plebeians voted to make consul elections subject to their approval. (Livy 3.44-58). Indeed, the tale from 449 B.C.E. bears a striking resemblance to the assembly of Rienzo’s followers on the Aventine on May 18, 1347, followed two days later by the gathering of his “plebeian” mob by the church of Sant’Angelo in Pescheria, the location of the ancient *Prata Flaminia*. Both Verginius and Rienzo sought the protection of rights guaranteed on bronze tablets, the former the Twelve Tables, the latter the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*. Indeed, Rienzo had lectured Rome’s barons on the significance of the enumeration of rights received by the

Emperor Vespasian from the Roman people then housed at the Lateran and which had been thought by some to be the Twelve Tables. (Musto 2003, 52).

An important question in superposing the Verginius story upon the actions of Rienzo in May 1347 is whether he would have known that the area around Sant'Angelo had once been the Circus Flaminius, the link to the Flaminian Meadow of fifth century B.C.E. (Livy 3.54.15). Little of the ancient structures that surrounded the circus remained in the fourteenth century and those that did such as the *propylaeum* of the Porticus Octaviae were either called by fanciful toponyms or were not associated with the Circus Flaminius in the ancient literature that we are told Rienzo knew. While assiduous study of ancient texts such as Macrobius, *Sat.* III.2, who noted that the temple to Jupiter Stator, the ruins of which were known in Rienzo's day, was in the Circus Flaminius, the likeliest source for his knowledge would have been more recent "guides" to Rome such as the twelfth century *Mirabilia urbis Romae* that placed the Circus Flaminius by the "Jew's Bridge," the then popular name of the ancient Pons Fabricius. (Nichols and Gardiner 1986, 14). A secondary consideration, if time permits, will be how the Circus Flaminius known in the fourteenth century to be located in the area in front of Sant'Angelo in Pescheria could have become "lost" and relocated where the Crypta Balbi is now known until the remarkable reassembly of the *Forma Urbis Romae* puzzle pieces in 1960.

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