At this point we should perhaps try to place the rise of the Italian communes in perspective, for it is a historical development of fundamental importance. The communes laid the foundation of a new urban political culture, in opposition to the feudal, landed order around them, and gave rise to the flowering of city-state culture that was the distinctive feature of medieval Italian civilization. As the eleventh century progressed, groups of citizens in northern and central Italy – lesser nobles, lawyers and judges, merchants, sometimes artisans – began to demand the freedom to manage their own affairs, unfettered by the traditional authority of their feudal lords, either lay or ecclesiastical. In some cities, like Milan, these demands were also linked to popular pressure for religious reform. These disparate groups of citizens banded together in associations, formally united by a sworn oath, which they called "communes"; by this term they meant a collectivity united to protect and advance its members' common interests, economic, political, legal, administrative. The members of the commune elected their own officials, usually titled consuls, in opposition to the magistrates who governed their cities on behalf of the feudal lords. These communal organizations did not hesitate to challenge their lords and seize power by force, as the citizens of Asti did in the later eleventh century. The first mentions of fully-fledged communes come at the end of the eleventh century: at Pisa in 1081, Asti in 1095, Genoa in 1099, although by the time they make their appearance in the historical record they had probably existed for some time already. The Italian communes represented a revolutionary departure in urban life; strictly speaking they originated as extra-legal organizations, outside the existing constitutional framework of their cities, or rather in direct opposition to it. Gradually they won legal recognition and acquired legitimacy, until finally they supplanted the old authorities and took over the government of their cities. Given the revolutionary potential of the communal movement and the threat it posed to the prevailing feudal order, it is small wonder that Countess Adelaide strove to crush it.

By reason of her importance as a leading territorial magnate and her dynastic ties to the imperial elite, Adelaide was called upon to play a central part in the politics of the Empire. This was a critical moment: in the middle decades of the eleventh century the political structure established by Otto I, based on the close relationship between secular and religious authority, was breaking down. Conflict was brewing between the emperor and the reform movement in the Church, over the emperor's right to appoint bishops and invest them with their lands. Adelaide's son-in-law, the Emperor Henry IV, was at the center of this con-