

RITUAL OF IDENTITY OR RENAISSANCE FAIR: THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF
SIENA'S PALIO TRADITION

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More than many other Italian cities, Siena is a world in its own right, where the historical past is always present and inescapable, and is cyclically renewed in the annual ritual of the Palio, the focus of the city's structure, the passion and even the identity of its people.¹
- Italo Calvino

Twice each summer – once in July and once in August – the citizens of Siena, Italy, perform their medieval heritage in the Palio, a tradition that dates back to city's autonomous republican era. Though Siena's palio tradition is similar to the revivals of medieval feasts presented throughout the peninsula,² and imitated around the world today, the Sieneese claim that their tradition has special legitimacy. According to documents, the August palio dates back to the early thirteenth century and the July palio has been held, with only occasional interruption, since the sixteenth century. It is this long and arguably uninterrupted history that the Sieneese claims separates their tradition from similar events, characterized by some critics as "tourist-inspired revivals."³ In this paper, I would like to offer another reading of what makes Siena's palio traditions unique. Although they were institutionalized under very different circumstances,

¹ Italo Calvino, review of *Il Palio delle Contrade morte*, 1983 quoted by Giuliano Catoni in *The Palio and its Image: History, Culture, an Representation of Siena's Festival*, ed. Maria A. Ceppari Ridolfi, Marco Ciamolini, Patrizia Turrini (Monte Dei Paschi di Siena, 2001), p97).

² Today dozens of northern and central Italian cities present historic traditions complete with period costumes, music, banquets, and spectacle. According to a list published on the *Federazione Italiana Giochi Storici* (FIGS) website [<http://www.feditgiochistorici.it/calendariomanifestazioni/index.html> (accessed February 27, 2006)] there are more than fifty historical games and re-enactments held annually in Italian cities and towns. These events, such as the Florentine *Calcio*, are similar to Siena's Palio in their evocation of civic history and in their sacred dimensions. (The *Calcio Fiorentino* takes place on June 24th, the feast of the city's patron saint, John the Baptist.)

³ Alan Dundes and Alessandro Falassi. *La Terra in Piazza: An Interpretation of the Palio of Siena*, (Berkeley, 1975) p5.

two palio traditions evolved out of similar political needs. Both served to construct, articulate, and promote a unique Sienese identity. Today, as Calvino suggests, the city seems to be a world apart, defined by its tradition. But in the Republican era, when the city constantly beset by enemies from beyond its walls as well as within, the Palio tradition and the unique Sienese identity it promoted was not merely novelty; it was an essential part of civic politics and defense.

Performance in Siena always had a political function. Traditions, such as mock battles and processions produced for sacred feasts or during carnival seasons, often reflected the particular issues of the day. Mock battles waged between rival families or factions allowed very real enmities to be expressed in a controlled fashion.⁴ Processions often marked the territory over which a religious or political group held sway.⁵ The symbolic importance of such traditions increased in times of change, such as when one political party overthrew another or when the city was threatened by foreign rivals. The continuation of long-standing and cherished traditions after such tumultuous times could assure the populace that their city had not changed, even if government personnel or political parties had. The palio traditions, however, seemed to have done more than merely soothe civic fears. While festive performances may have served as propaganda for civic leaders, Siena's palio traditions seem to have reflected something deeper.

The institution of each palio tradition virtually coincides with the most important moments in the city's history in the years 1260 and 1557. These were times when Siena's politics and its civic ideology were tested, but also times when, despite all evidence that might argue to the contrary, the Sienese became even more firmly united. The August palio was instituted as an annual civic feast in honor of the Assumption after Siena's unlikely, but pivotal, victory in the Battle of Montaperti in 1260. It was from this point forward that Siena became a major force in Tuscan politics, but it was also at this point that internal civic politics became increasingly strained. The July palio was instituted over 300 years later, after the city had lost its autonomy to the Medici in 1557. The evolution of this palio tradition, as well as the exclusively

⁴ Sixteenth century Sienese chronicler Giugurta Tommasi argued that such traditions had several socio-political functions. First, they are less dangerous than other pastimes. Second, they provide an outlet through which old enmities might harmlessly evaporate. Third, they accustom citizens to battle. And finally, they memorialize antiquity. See Giugurta Tommasi, *Libri I-III*, 1355-1444 quoted in William Heywood, *Palio and Ponte: an account of the sports of central Italy from the age of Dante to the XXth century*. (New York, 1904), p182. Of course such traditions, especially the *pugna*, were often marred by actual violence. The traditions were banned by city magistrates in the Campo in the thirteenth century, only to reinstate them under stricter governmental control shortly thereafter. See Fabio Bisogni, "La Madonna di Provenzano" in *The Palio and its Image*, p 113.

⁵ For more on the function of processions in the Sienese Republic see the special issue of *Renaissance Studies* 20:2, ed. Fabrizio Nevola and Phillipa Jackson, especially the following essays: Machtelt Israëls, "Altars on the street: the wool guild, the Carmelites and the feast of Corpus Domini in Siena (1356-1456)" pp 180-200 and Mauro Mussolin "The rise of the new civic ritual of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in sixteenth-century Siena," pp 253-275.

Sieneese holy day, the feast of the Madonna di Provenzano, on which it is produced, is directly related to Siena's struggle to maintain its autonomy against the various foreign overlords who occupied the city throughout the sixteenth century. On the surface, the institution of the July palio during Cosimo di Medici's rule seems to indicate that Siena's new overlord approved of the city's devotion to and festive traditions in honor of the Virgin. Yet, as this paper will argue, the continuation of the palio tradition after the Fall of the Republic was much more of a concession by the Medici than a gesture of support. The tradition also evidences Sieneese devotion to their long history and civic identity, in spite of their current state of dependency. The details of the evolution of the cult of the Madonna di Provenzano and its feast, for which the July palio was run, reveals that the Medici may have been trying to appease the populace of the tumultuous city. An examination of Siena's palio traditions in relation to both the city's initial rise to power and its ultimate loss of autonomy sheds new light on the uniquely political function of performance in Siena.

In its modern incarnation, Siena's palio traditions tease spectators with what appears to be a continuation of the city's medieval past, complete with period costumes, music, and gaming. These elements, which have become hallmarks of other so-called Renaissance Fairs, are, in Siena, curious distractions from the important history that the modern tradition retains from the city's medieval past. This history has little to do with the pomp and ceremony that form the bulk of souvenir tour books, and has much more to do with a history of resistance and propaganda enacted through performance, which was an integral part of the city's survival as an autonomous republic for nearly 400 years. Details of each tradition's unique history offer important information, not only about the city's performance history, but also about the connection between such traditions and the history of power and loss that defines Siena's past.

Before making this connection, however, a brief description of the term "palio" and its history in Siena is warranted. The Sieneese did not invent the palio. A palio is defined as any race in which a banner is awarded to the winner. Such events were popular throughout the peninsula in the Middle Ages, with origins, perhaps, in Roman or Etruscan settlements.⁶ The

⁶ Evidence for the existence of such games in cities such as Florence, Ferrara, Arezzo, Pisa, Pistoia, and Asti is contemporary with documents attesting to the earliest Sieneese tradition. Elizabeth MacKenzie Tobey provides detailed summaries of the thirteenth-century documents for these cities in her dissertation, "The Palio in Italian Renaissance Art, Thought, and Culture," (PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 2005), 49-54. For further discussion of the history of northern and central Italian traditions generally, see Luciano Artusi and Silvano Gabbrielli, *Gioco, Giostra, Palio in Toscana* (Florence: Libreria S.P., 1978), and William Heywood, *Palio and Ponte: An Account of the Sports of Central Italy from the Age of Dante to the XXth Century* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1904, rpt. 1969). On the Florentine tradition, see Heidi L. Chrétien, *The Festival of San*

first *palii* in Siena were not civic celebrations, but private affairs. Since horses were prized possessions, early *palii*, in Siena and elsewhere, were typically organized for and by the noble class, often on private land in the *contado* or countryside, for bragging rights or in honor of a guest. When Siennese officials eventually instituted *palii* within the city's walls as part of civic celebrations, the race was one event among various popular and light-hearted performances, such as mock battles, dances, and processions. Although palio races seem to have become traditional parts of Siena's annual festivities beginning as early as the thirteenth century, no evidence suggests that the race itself was an integral part of a civic or religious ritual at this time.⁷ Moreover, in the republican era and after the fall, *palii* were also staged by groups expressly as acts of resistance or derision towards the city. These races did not feature expensive stallions, but instead often forced young students, donkeys, Jews, or even "whores" to race.⁸ Additionally, although the modern palio is virtually synonymous with Siena's Piazza del Campo, the geographic and symbolic heart of the city, during the communal era no palio races were ever run there. Even though other spectacles and games were staged in the Campo, palio races were relegated to the city streets. Thus, the *palii* of the early era has very little in common with the modern tradition.

Yet, some important aspects do tie the modern tradition to its medieval antecedent. Most importantly, the term "palio" has always referred to a race with a prized banner or "pallium." The adornment, display, and ultimately, the act of claiming this blessed banner (after the race) still form the essence of the modern tradition. And, finally, the palio is today, as it has always been, a simple horserace. This summer, on two separate holidays, ten horses, representing the city's districts or *contrade*, will race for the prized palio banner and thus continue what proponents claim is Siena's unique festive tradition. But Siena's is not the only modern palio.

Giovanni: Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); Pietro Gori, *Le Feste per San Giovanni: Le Feste Fiorentine attraverso i Secoli* (Florence: R. Bemporad and Sons, 1926; rpt. Florence: Giunti (Ristampa Anastatica), 1989); Paolo Pastori, ed., *La festa di San Giovanni nella storia di Firenze: Rito, istituzione, e spettacolo* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 1997); and Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980, rpt 1991). For the Asti tradition see Venanzio Malfatto, "Il Palio di Asti: storia vita, costume," *Studi piemontesi* 13 (1984), 248-9. For a comparison of the Florentine San Giovanni festival and the Siennese Palio see my article, "The Audience and Civic-Religious Celebrations in Tuscany," in *Western European Stages* 12:2 (Spring 2004), 81-86.

⁷ Mauro Civai and Enrico Toti, *Palio: the Race of the Soul* (Siena: ALSABA Edizioni, 2002), 33. Civai and Toti note that although the *palio* is mentioned in the oldest documents pertaining to the religious and political ritual aspects of Siena's Assumption Day traditions, "the parchments do not contain enough detail to give a true and accurate date of when [the Palio tradition] was begun." Nor do such documents note the importance/function of the race, if it was repeated annually, who sponsored it, or who participated in it.

⁸ Brendan Dooley has made documents relating to *palii* run in Rome in the seventeenth century featuring "whores, heretics, and jews" public on the Medici Archive website; <http://www.medici.org/news/dom/dom042001.html> (accessed February 26, 2007).

According to the *Federazione Italiana Giochi Storici*, there are seventeen other palio traditions presented annually in Italian cities and towns. One might, therefore, add another similarity between the medieval and modern tradition to the list: Siena's modern tradition, like its medieval antecedent, is not unique in its specific elements.

Yet, Siena's palio is, and has always been, unique in its function. Scholars typically point to two essential qualities of the tradition that set it apart from similar events. First, in Siena the Palio is a religious ritual. Second, it is a civic ritual whose continuity from the Republican era allows modern Sieneese to participate in a civic identity that otherwise would be lost to history. The former idea is uncontested. Siena's Palio is explicitly run in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary on her two important feast days – the local holiday of the Madonna di Provenzano on July 2nd and the Assumption on August 15th.⁹ The races, therefore, represent the climax of two complex and venerable religious feasts, which involve various rites and prayers throughout.¹⁰ Winning the race is considered to be a direct blessing by the Virgin and the prized palio banner is today, as it was in the middle ages, a holy object, blessed by the archbishop in the opening ceremony of the feast.

The Palio's function as a civic ritual is also generally accepted, but this idea brings with it more contentious issues. Let us begin by exploring what can be documented. The Palio's history as a civic ritual does date back to Siena's republican era. In fact, as shall be further examined presently, the connection between the Palio and Sieneese devotion dates to a specific moment in the city's political history. Documents from the mid-thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries attest to the presence of a palio as an integral part of the city's annual civic ritual. At this time, this ritual spanned three days, was produced by members of the secular government with the consent and participation of ecclesiastic authorities, required the participation of all members of the Commune, and involved representatives from allied communities. In addition to the palio race, the important events of this annual celebration included the paying of taxes and the investiture of civic officials. Thus, the early Palio was associated with honor and support of

⁹ In addition to the official Catholic feast of the Assumption on August 15th, the Sieneese celebrate a local holiday dedicated to the Madonna della Provenzano on July 2nd; this date has been associated with the feast of the Visitation.

¹⁰ The Palio begins two days before the race with a procession of the palio banner or *drappellone* into the church officially associated with that particular Palio – the Church of the Provenzano for the July Palio, and the Cathedral, which is dedicated to the Madonna of the Assumption, for the August Palio. Likewise the Palio is not complete until the winning *contrada*, along with their horse and rider, returns to the Palio church with their prize in order to receive their final blessing. On the night preceding the horserace each *contrada* has a banquet marked by repeated invocations of the Virgin's name and prayers asking for her blessing. Before the race, the horse and rider are blessed in a special service in the *contrada* church.

the civic ideal. Today, civic pride is still an integral aspect of the modern Palio and the festival might be described as an unabashed celebration of the city's past. Although the race itself takes only a little more than a minute to run, the festive procession that precedes it takes hours to perform. In a display that includes citizens dressed in military costumes that harken back to the city's republican past, the Sieneese pay homage to the past with dignity equal to that of the religious elements of the Palio. In short, the races, along with the processions, banquets, and masses that make up the days of the Palio, are the culmination of a year-long ritual of religious devotion and civic identity. Just how particular this identity is and what details of history compel the Sieneese to fight for the honor of their tradition, shall be further explored.

One aspect of Siena's palio history that is often overlooked, but is of particular interest to a study of the politics of the tradition, is the fact that the Sieneese do not, in fact, need to argue for the distinction of their tradition. Since 1935 Siena's exclusive right to use the title, *Il Palio*, to describe their palio tradition has been government sanctioned.¹¹ Despite the continued existence of other *palii* and the claims of other cities that their traditions may be older or in other ways equally legitimate, Siena's is *the* Palio. All other cities must refer to their traditions by indicating their city name or with some other diminutive association. Although the details that could settle the continued disputes over legitimacy may be lost to history, what has mattered, at least in the modern era of tourist dollars, is that Siena has the official palio and all others seem to be at a deficit.

How did Siena get official government sanction of their local tradition? Quite simply, the Sieneese appealed to Mussolini. In the nationalistic fervor that marked the early twentieth century and the atheism that marked Fascism, a tradition of civic identity and Christian devotion ironically was neither abolished nor changed. On the contrary, Siena's palio tradition was deemed to bring honor to the nation of Italy as a whole. In order to comply with the politics of the era, Siena did, however, temper their civic and religious tradition with displays of equal reverence to Mussolini and the new fascist state. Although Mussolini himself never deigned to attend the Palio himself, the Sieneese raised their flags in honor of Italy's ally, Hitler, during his 1938 tour of Tuscany. But the twentieth century was not the first time the city modified their

¹¹“In answer to a request submitted by Podestà Bargagli Petrucci, a letter reached the Prefect of Siena in 1935, communicating that ‘the Duce has, by appropriate ordinance, decreed that the name Palio shall be reserved exclusively for the Palio of Siena.’” from *Palio: Colors of Siena* quoted on the Comune di Siena's official website: <http://www.comune.siena.it/main.asp?id=945&l=en> (accessed 4/24/07)

expressions of civic identity in order to win the favor and permission of overlords. In fact, details of the tradition's long history reveal that the city was always making political concessions. On the surface the city may seem to have been denying its very identity by making such compromises, but upon closer examination it is clear that the Palio was the very means through which the Sienese continued to demonstrate their unique political perspectives in politically fraught times.

Despite records that prove the Assumption feast was popular before 1260,¹² this date marks an important change in Siena's political position and thus in its festive displays. On 4 September of that year, the Sienese met troops representing their neighbor and rival, Florence, on a hill near Montaperti. Dante, noting the defeat his countrymen suffered, describes the battle as the "great slaughter that colored the Arbia red,"¹³ but from the Sienese point of view, this battle represented a miraculous escape. The Sienese, who followed Ghibelline politics at the time, were outnumbered by their Guelph enemy, who initiated the battle by advancing on Siena's city walls and threatening to annihilate its people. Siena's dramatic shift from a threatened underdog to the political leader of the region was reflected in every aspect of Sienese life from this point forward. This shift was especially evident, however, in the remarkable festive expressions the city produced explicitly in honor of the Virgin, to whom this victory was attributed. Despite popular devotion to the Blessed Virgin in Siena before the mid-thirteenth century, it was only after the battle of Montaperti that the city claimed her as its special protector.¹⁴

¹² In a section of *Ordo Officiorum Ecclesiae Senensis* (1215) that departs from mere description of liturgical process, Oderico offers a description of the Sienese during an early Assumption feast, noting that this feast has "the greatest concourse of people of all the year." ("The Origins and Development of the Iconography of the Madonna in Siena" in *The Palio and its Image: History, Culture, an Representation of Siena's Festival*, ed. Maria A. Ceppari Ridolfi, Marco Ciamolini, Patrizia Turrini (Monte Dei Paschi di Siena, 2001), p97). Civic statutes dated 1239 note that a certain Bruon di Cigurda, who had run the palio in August and had come in last, did not take his pig, which was the usual prize to the loser. Although there is no specific information about the scope of the event or its history, this note in the civic documents suggests not only that a palio in August had become typical, but also that the government had become involved in its administration. See "Compilations of Documents on Siena's Contrade and Festivals" in *The Palio and its Image: History, Culture, an Representation of Siena's Festival*, ed. Maria A. Ceppari Ridolfi, Marco Ciamolini, Patrizia Turrini (Monte Dei Paschi di Siena, 2001), p520.

¹³ "grande scempio che fece l'Arbia colorata in rosso," Canto X, 85-6, in *La Divina Commedia*, ed Fredi Chiappelli (Milan, 1965).

¹⁴ The 1215 transcription of Oderico's *Ordo Officiorum Ecclesiae Senensis* notes prayers specifically to the Virgin regularly recited by the Sienese clergy, even though devotion to the Virgin in Siena, like that the whole of Western Christianity at the time, was relegated to a status well below devotion to Christ. The early Marian devotional icon of the Sienese duomo, the so-called "Madonna degli occhi grossi," dated c. 1215, was clearly not an altarpiece at the same time Oderico's compiled his text. For more information see "The Origins and Development of the Iconography of the Madonna in Siena" in *The Palio and its Image*, pp 91-110 and Heal, Bridget. "'Civitas Virginis': The Significance of Civic Dedication to the Virgin for the Development of Marian Imagery in Siena before 1311," in *Art, Politics, and Civic Religion in Central Italy, 1261-1352*, ed. Joanna Cannon and Beth Williamson (Ashgate, 2000), 295-305.

Although the power dynamics in Tuscany would continue to shift, the Sieneese celebrated their momentary hegemony over the region in various ways, and for years after their power had declined, in their dramatic devotion to the Virgin. In short, the victory at Montaperti allowed Siena to thrive and the Sieneese took every opportunity not only to give thanks to the intercession of the Virgin, but also to celebrate their position as her favored city. New art¹⁵ and architecture was commissioned, new language describing the city in relation to the Virgin was articulated in civic statutes, and new festive celebrations were instituted, in which citizens could perform their important new relationship with their heavenly protectress. And while, festive performances, such as the palio, have often been discussed as mere commemorations of Siena's golden era, it is important to note the power of performance in actually attaining this power. Performance was not a coincidental part of Siena's Marian devotion; it was, in fact, the foundation of the city's connection to the Virgin. The new art, architecture, and language that are commonly associated with the golden era of Sieneese power all come together through performance. Performance was not only what the Sieneese did to celebrate their victory, it was also their means to achieving this victory. The performance of devotion to the Blessed Virgin began on the eve of the battle when the Sieneese officially dedicated their city and themselves to the Virgin in an elaborate ritual. The palio traditions that continue today are understood, by the Sieneese, to be a continuation of this original performance of devotion.

The details of the initial ritual dedication are reported in several later chronicles. One fifteenth-century chronicler, Paolo di Tommaso Montauri, notes that the ritual was not initiated by the ecclesiastic leadership, nor did not begin at the official religious heart of the city, the Duomo. The ritual was begun by the city's *sindaco*, Buonaguida Lucari, who addressed the citizens before a local church, to give "all the city and *contado*" to the "queen and empress of life eternal," the Virgin Mary.¹⁶ Although it commenced in a secular fashion, the ritual eventually achieves ecclesiastic recognition when Lucari led the citizens to the cathedral and was met by the

¹⁵ The visual iconography that developed to connect the Queen of Heaven as the Queen of Siena in the generations to follow has been well noted by scholars. Diana Norman's text *Siena and the Virgin* (1999) is, of course, one of the most thorough examinations of the subject. More recently, however, Norman turned her attention to how iconography in at least one important piece, Simone Martini's *Maesta*, not only imagines the Blessed Virgin looking in on the governors of the city, but actually presents her in a ritualized setting. In 'Sotto uno baldachino trionfale': the ritual significance of the painted canopy in Simone Martini's *Maesta*," *Renaissance Studies*, 20:2 (2006). pp. 147-160, Norman argues that this image of the Madonna under a *baldechino* or triumphal canopy offers a similar political message as popular political rituals

¹⁶ *Croniche senesi*, ed. 1931-9, p. 202, quoted in Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 3. For other chronicle transcriptions, see Langston Douglas, *History of Siena*, p84 and Ferdinand Schevill, *Siena: The Story of a Medieval Commune* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1909), 81-4.

bishop and members of the clergy. It is unlikely that any image of the Madonna adorned the high altar at the time of the ritual, yet Montauri notes that the meeting between secular and ecclesiastic representatives happened “before our Mother, the Virgin Mary, ” most likely referring to an image that adorned a side altar, the so-called “Madonna degli occhi grossi.” (figure 1). Montauri goes on to note the ritual act of devotion and humility that transpired in front of the image. The leaders went hand-in-hand to the altar, and Lucari, after prostrating himself on the ground, addressed the image with an emotional plea:

I most miserable and unfaithful sinner give, donate, and concede to you this city of Siena and all its *contado*, its [military] force and its district, and as a sign of this I place the keys of the city of Siena on this altar.¹⁷ (figure 2)

Then the *sindaco* begged the Virgin to guard the city and its citizens from the “iniquitous and evil dogs, the Florentines,”¹⁸ who had threatened to decimate the city completely.

According to the popular retelling of the subsequent events, the Virgin answered the Siennese prayers in spectacular fashion. The next morning, she covered the hills of Siena with her white mantle, a blanket of snow or fog, which hid the Siennese troops from the Florentines and enabled them to ambush their enemy unprepared. Following their victory, the Siennese gave thanks to their holy protectress in another ritual, as well as with concrete gestures designed to forever seal the bond between the city and the Virgin. In the records of re-submission of Montalcino to Siena immediately after the victory, new language is used to tie Siena to the Virgin as its “defender and governor.” Additionally, new statutes dated from 1262 committed the commune to continue such ritual demonstrations. Two candles were to burn constantly before the altar of the Virgin in the cathedral, as well as before the *carroccio* or war chariot captured from the Florentines. Plans were also drafted to construct a permanent chapel in her honor, for which another, more ornate image of the Virgin was commissioned. This image (figure 3), the *Madonna del Voto* was completed in 1270 and installed in the new chapel, where it became the focal point for future performances of devotion.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Such new displays, spaces, and images were important elements of Siena's evolving Assumption day festivities, which were instituted as the city's central day of celebration and obligation only after the victory at Montaperti. As Norman notes in her study, *Siena and the Virgin*, "There is . . . sufficient contemporary historical evidence to suggest that the Virgin's status as a protector of Siena was considerably enhanced at the time of Montaperti."¹⁹ Norman goes on to note how the annual feast served to reify the important connection between the city and the Virgin. The Assumption

then duly became an even more important religious festival for the Sieneese, precisely because it provided an opportunity for the annual reaffirmation of the dedication of the city to the Virgin and a renewed appeal for her protection, whilst also providing an opportunity to recall Siena's greatest triumph over its traditional enemy, Florence.²⁰

Indeed the ritual celebrations that followed in subsequent years were exceptional. Later statutes record the details of the events, which required the participation of all male inhabitants of the city between the ages of eighteen and seventy, as well as representative of Siena's dependant territories, upon the threat of fines.²¹ The multi-day feast, marked with music, gaming, and banquets, as well as solemn rituals, began on the eve of the Assumption with a procession of citizens who made their way around the city and to the Duomo to offer their donations to the Virgin. This reenactment of the original dedication was arranged in a hierarchy that underscored the important organization of the various groups and representatives of the city. The procession was led by the city's governors, followed by its treasurers, representatives of subject communities, noble families, and finally the citizens themselves, divided into districts²². Each group was responsible for its own donation, in the form of candles, which were presented to the Virgin. One can only imagine the spectacle of such a procession with illuminated candles

¹⁹ Diana Norman, *Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State* (New Haven, 1999), p.4.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ In addition to civic statutes that document the requirements of the tradition, fifteenth century account books belonging to a Sieneese peasant family attest to personal participation in the feast, including the burden of having to pay taxes on the Assumption day. These account books are the subject of Duccio Balestracci's *The Renaissance of the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Tuscan Peasant*, trans. Paolo Squatriti and Betsy Merideth (University Park, PA, 1999).

²² This division of citizens reflects the original division of the city into three separate areas in the pre-communal era, and is still referenced today in the *contrade* system, the system around which the modern Palio is organized.

lighting the city as the devoted made their way to the Duomo. The candle representing the commune, for example, weighed one hundred pounds.

By the 1330s several substantial rubrics of civic statutes were dedicated to recording the details of the festivities, including how the feast was to be advertised, how to deal with those intent on disrupting the event, and how much each dependant community was required to donate. The need for such details to be set down in record suggests that the celebration's execution was of paramount importance to the commune, but it also suggests that there were problems that arose in connection to it. By 1400, the problem of subject cities shirking their responsibility towards the feast warranted a specific petition to be brought before Siena's principal legislative assembly. In explaining the problem, Siena's leaders underlined the importance of the event not for their own honor, but for that of "the Virgin Mary, our advocate, [who in recent years] had lacked many of the *palii*, candles, and tributes for which our ancestors had expended much sweat, money and blood to the glory of the city." This description not only points out the need for pomp and ceremony in terms of honoring Siena's heavenly intercessor, but also makes specific reference to the human sacrifices that allowed for Siena's glory. Moreover, in noting what these human sacrifices are, sweat and money are ranked along side, and even before, blood. Ancestors are not merely honored for giving their lives in battle, they are also to be praised for their physical efforts and financial contributions that made the city great. Thus, although the Assumption celebration is always discussed in terms of the city's holy protector, the Sieneese also were clearly aware of and openly honoring human aspects of their city's success. In honoring the sacrifices of the men who came before them, the Sieneese reaffirm their own commitment to upholding the city's autonomy.

While some details of the Assumption tradition are clearly documented, including the size of the candles, the value of the silk banner awarded to the palio winner, and the amount of wine distributed to citizens, some details of the annual celebration are subject to interpretation. For example, it seems clear that Siena intended for its Assumption feast to remain a reflection of a powerful state, represented in finely organized processions and ceremonies highlighted by lavish displays. Yet, history also reveals that Siena did not remain powerful within the larger political sphere for very long. By 1270, just ten years after their legendary victory, Florentine Guelphism so dominated the region that even once-famously Ghibelline Siena followed Guelph policies. The feast of the Assumption and other performative events did not end or change at this

point or at any other point during Siena's republican era, however. In fact the only documented changes to the traditions, which seem to have become typical at each shift in leadership, is an increase in pomp and ceremony. More musicians were hired and more wine was dispensed to the populous in years following coups, famines, and plagues, than in times of stability.²³ Obviously civic leadership, regardless of affiliation, was more intent on appeasing and appealing to a potentially nervous populous than inventing new traditions. Civic leaders, proved their loyalty to the civic ideal by conceding the personal glory that could have been propagated through changes to the tradition, and instead continuing the long-standing tradition. No matter which party was the helm, Siena remained the city of Montaperti. Her power, though tested, was continually celebrated in reference to the city's dramatic victory in the legendary battle that first asserted its autonomy in the face of increasing external threats.

By providing opportunities to celebrate the city's real and imagined power, Siena's performative traditions functioned as political tools. Throughout the republican era, factional politics threatened the state more than any foreign rival. The need to construct, articulate, and promote not only a united civic front, but also an all-encompassing Siennese identity, to which each citizen, regardless of class or occupation, could link himself, was paramount. The legendary accounts of the original Siennese Assumption ritual and celebration, before and immediately after the Battle of Montaperti, reveal that this event, with its overt acts of religious devotion was really a civic ritual intent on recasting the gambles of a government on the brink of disaster, as divine intervention. The idealized civic identity that the city so desperately needed was made concrete through performative traditions. Thus despite changes in leadership that might have meant, for example, new oligarchic representatives leading the Assumption Day procession, the hierarchy established after Montaperti remained intact throughout the republican era, and beyond, as is evident in the modern tradition that continues today.

Yet, the modern tradition, as its proponents so adamantly argue, is not a revival of this republican spirit. Despite the issues that continued to plague the city, especially in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the performance of civic identity never completely disappeared. Incredibly, Siena's palio tradition persevered even after the city lost its autonomy. In their darkest days, the Siennese found hope and a reinvigoration of their civic ideal by turning

²³ For more details on expenses for and statutes related to the Palio see Giovanni Cecchini, "Palio and contrade: historical evolution." In *Palio*, ed Alessandro Falassi (Milan: Electa), 1983.

again to the Virgin. This time it wasn't the Virgin of Montaperti, but a new image of the Holy Mother, one that evolved from and reflected the city's new circumstances and challenges. This new image – the Madonna di Provenzano – would ultimately give rise to a cult and a new palio tradition that can be seen as a direct response to the occupation and ultimate rule of foreign overlords. These dramatic political changes forever shifted the structure of Siennese government, but did not destroy the spirit of Siennese civic identity. How can a city sustain an ideal of civic unity and pride, in the face of foreign occupation and ultimately rule? The answer to this question cannot simply be reduced to the continuation of performance. The Siennese also continued military and political resistance at this time, even going so far as to create a new Siennese state of exiles in the *contado*. However, whereas Siena's military and political resistance ultimately failed, the Siennese succeeded in preserving their history, identity, and culture through performance. On the one hand, the inception, evolution, and institution of the new palio tradition in honor of the Madonna di Provenzano can be seen as a continuation of Siena's long history of civic performances, which began with Montaperti, but had begun to flounder by the sixteenth century. On the other hand, the Provenzano tradition was a completely new performance of Siennese civic ideology for a new generation of Siennese, a people who retained their civic ideal, but had to deal with the reality of occupation and foreign rule. Siena's civic ideology was always in some ways a false belief in the city's potential power in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Yet, even more than the early palio tradition, the new Provenzano tradition sustained a civic ideal for a republic that was not merely foundering, but had actually already fallen.

Although much of Siena's republican history was marked by internal and external political problems, the period from the late fifteenth century through the sixteenth was particularly fraught. After a generation of fierce factional conflict, power volleyed from the traditional oligarchic leadership under the Nove to a coalition of reformers, and back to a new, reorganized Nove. Soon after this return to power, however, the Nove government, which was once a model of egalitarian oligarchy, dissolved into dictatorship. By the turn of the sixteenth-century, Pandolfo Petrucci, once leader of the Nove, claimed control over the city. Although the Siennese had occasionally looked to foreign lords for protection, this was the first time the city was ruled by a single leader. Petrucci remained in control until his death in 1512, when his heirs attempted to extend signorial power. After finally expelling the family in 1524, the Siennese

celebrated the restoration of civic liberty. Yet, this celebration was premature. A mere two years later, the city's freedom was threatened again by its old rival, Florence, this time supported by papal troops. Although the Sieneese repelled the invaders with the help of Charles V, the city was never completely autonomous again. Charles' interests in Siena were watched over by hundreds of Spanish troops and by mid-century the soldiers dominated the city, numbering over a thousand strong.

Although foreign occupation was intolerable to the sixteenth century Sieneese and this history seem incongruous to the civic ideology celebrated in traditions such as the Palio, the true history of the Palio cannot be understood without examination of this era of dependency. The Provenzano Palio was, in fact, born out of the city's struggle for and ultimate loss of autonomy at this time. The origins of this Palio cannot be traced to single revolutionary moment; rather the tradition was founded in many small acts of resistance. These acts were not typically initiated by the noble classes, whose honorific history is represented in the costumes that characterize the modern Palio. On the contrary, it seems to have sprung forth from the devotion and actions of the lowest classes, whose history is curiously absent in the pomp of the Palio. To understand how the tradition evolved, one must begin with the myth of the Madonna di Provenzano and her uniquely Sieneese cult. On the surface, the followers of the cult of the Madonna di Provenzano were continuing to celebrate the miraculous power of the Blessed Virgin, the same holy protectress who had guided them to victory at Montaperti. However, in word and deed the devotion shown to this new Sieneese Madonna was distinct from the devotion that earlier generations showed to the Virgin. The Madonna di Provenzano protected and supported the Sieneese, not in glory, as she had in the past, but in their new dependant circumstances. She cured prostitutes, protected peasants as they refused archbishop's orders, and blessed the new generation of Sieneese as they dealt with the shame of their once-glorious city being absorbed into the Medici Duchy.

Along with the humiliation of foreign occupation that characterized the sixteenth century, the Sieneese also had to contend with an influx of new and undesirable visitors to, and ultimately inhabitants of, their city. The scores of soldiers in Siena at this time necessarily attracted prostitutes, and many of these women remained in the city even after the Spanish garrison was expelled in 1552. Most lived in and were associated with the Provenzano area, a place close to the monastery of San Francesco, which had been used by the Spanish as their local stronghold.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the ill repute of the area, one of the houses in Provenzano was adorned with a simple terracotta image of a *Pietà*. Such an image, set in front of a private home or in a niche on a city street, was a typical expression of lay religious devotion in the era, and similar images were prevalent throughout Siena, as they were throughout Europe. The popularity of some of these images even rivaled the devotion to artworks commissioned and deemed sacred by ecclesiastic authorities. Among such images, the small terracotta *Pietà* in Provenzano was nothing unusual, but soon a series of events and associations would change the image from commonplace to extraordinary, inspiring the rise of a cult and ultimately official recognition.

The amazing transformation and exaltation of the Madonna di Provenzano, as the image would come to be known, began not with a miracle attributed to the image, but rather with an incident that happened to it. One day a drunken soldier fired at and broke the image into pieces; only the Virgin's face and bust survived. When the damaged image, already beloved by residents of the Provenzano region, was returned to its original niche, it achieved fame throughout the city due, in part, to its new association with the violence of the foreign soldiers. In the years to follow, miracles were attributed to the image, which increased the number of Sieneese devoted to this new Sieneese Madonna.

As the sixteenth century progressed, there were many reasons for the Sieneese to turn to their heavenly mother's protection, both in the Church and on the streets. The city may have succeeded in expelling Charles V's troops in 1552, but the Sieneese knew that there was no time for celebration. As the city exhausted itself fighting to oust foreign occupation, its old rival, Florence, merely watched and waited. Florence's international power had only increased as the Medici went from the unofficial leaders of a republic to the acknowledged princes of a new Duchy. Previously Siena may have been a resilient opponent for Florence, but in the grand scheme of the rising Duchy, the little Republic of Siena was nothing more than an annoying hurdle to pass on their way towards total dominance over the region. The Sieneese kept the Medici at bay for a short time, backed yet again by foreign allies, but eventually the Medici, by now allied with Siena's former overlord Charles V, won; Siena was enfeoffed by Florence in 1557.

Throughout this time marked by constant fear and suffering, the Sieneese, directed their prayers to images of the Virgin, including those small, popular images that dotted their streets

corners and building facades. By the later part of the century, in fact, these small images provided the Sieneese with their only solace, as internal conflicts between the city's ecclesiastic and civic magistrates made it impossible for citizens to frequent the cathedral and its images at will. The poor inhabitants of the Provenzano area, in particular, paid special attention to their damaged, but still sacred terracotta Madonna. At this time, the laity's devotion to popular religious images was clearly demonstrated when they lavishly decorated such small and otherwise simple images, displaying to all passers-by the honor to which the image was held. Such displays were especially important on feast days.

On one such feast day, the feast of the Visitation during the famine-stricken years of the early 1590s, women were decorating the Madonna di Provenzano when one of the local prostitutes, known as Giulia di Orazio, mocked their devotion, taking the Virgin's name in vain. Giulia was, at that time, suffering from an incurable illness. Soon after deriding the women in their devotion, Giulia was overcome by remorse for her words. She then prayed to the image, calling on the Madonna di Provenzano for forgiveness. According to the legend, Giulia was cured of her illness the very next day and when word of this miracle spread through Siena devotion to the Madonna di Provenzano increased at an incredible rate. More miracles followed until, by 1594, the image was overwhelmed by gift and donations, as was customary at the time. As devotion to the image increased, a few local citizens took it upon themselves to catalogue the offerings left at the image and make sure the image was constantly illuminated, as was fitting for a sacred image.²⁴ At this early point in the image's history, there was no official civic or ecclesiastic institution behind the promotion of the Madonna di Provenzano.²⁵ Thus, as scholars have noted, "the cult [of the Madonna di Provenzano] was a popular and spontaneous one."

Despite its origins in popular and unofficial religiosity, the Madonna di Provenzano did not remain the domain of prostitutes and peasants for long. The poor image was soon claimed by the nobility who literally joined the working class in their homage to the Madonna. One gentleman, Muzio Placidi, assisted the two working class custodians of the image, keeping detailed records of the increasingly valuable donations now left by the wealthy Sieneese in front

²⁴ According to Fabio Bisogni the original custodians of the offerings were a silk weaver, named Ercole Spinelli, and a tailor, Pietro di Francesco. See *Palio and its Image*, p116

²⁵ Even the few named figures associated with the image at this time were personalities representing alternative spirituality and resistance to institutional religiosity. One such figure, a major proponent of the Madonna di Provenzano, was Father Teio (1538-1601) who remained a layman all his life, but founded his own congregation devoted to charity and education of the young. His initial work was done without the official recognition of the ecclesiastic authorities, and thus arose suspicion. Ultimately his congregation, its works and finances, were channeled into regulated institutions. See *Palio and its Image*, p. 114.

of the image. Placidi expanded the records associated with the Madonna to include not only donations, but also the names of visitors who stopped before the image, as well as details about the ever-increasing reports of miracles attributed to the Madonna di Provenzano. These records ultimately helped the cult gain official recognition from Rome, but even with such records, ecclesiastic appreciation of the image was hard won. Local ecclesiastic authorities initially attempted to stop local devotion to the image, in accordance with the new rulings of the Council of Trent, but antagonism towards the new Sienese cult was not just a religious issue; it was a political one. The archbishop, for example, decreed that all valuable gifts left for the Madonna should be deposited not in a local Sienese bank, but in the Riccardi bank of Lucca. Even though the archbishop was Sienese, his order would effectively put his countrymen's donations into the hands of the Medici. The custodians of the image did not obey this command, and instead sought refuge for themselves and their treasury in a local monastery.²⁶ Such minor acts of resistance may seem inconsequential against the larger political losses the city suffered at the time. Yet despite their small scope, these minor acts continued a legacy of popular resistance associated with Provenzano. Moreover, the details recorded in civic and religious documents relate the Madonna di Provenzano directly to details of the city's struggle for autonomy in the so-called "golden era" of the thirteenth century, the era of Montaperti.

The legacy of the Madonna di Provenzano ties the city's sixteenth century struggles to Siena's glorious history of resistance, devotion, and victory in the early republican era. This legacy begins, simply enough, with the name attributed to the image. The Provenzano district, as already has been noted, was an area of ill repute in the city. With such a disgraced history, it is curious that the Sienese would continue to refer to the sacred image by such a name, especially in the later era when the noble classes were becoming more and more invested in the image. Other sacred Sienese images of the Blessed Virgin have gone by various names in their rise from popular devotional icon to officially sanctified holy image. One reason the image retained its name, was that in spite of the region's ill-repute in the sixteenth century, Provenzano actually had an honored reputation in the longer civic history. The fact that the area was called "Provenzano" as late as the sixteenth century attests to yet another detail of Siena's history of resistance. In the early republican era two leading Ghibelline families, the Salvani and the Provenzani, established homes in the area. An heir to both noble lines, Provenzano Salvani, was

²⁶ Ultimately the offerings were transferred to the local Borghesi bank. See *Palio and its Image*, p 116.

a hero at Montaperti, but died a mere nine years later defending the Ghibelline cause in the Battle of Colle, in 1269. This battle may have marked the end of the city's short-lived hegemony in the region, but it in no way signaled an end to the glory associated with the Siena's early Ghibellinism. In fact, even though the homes of Ghibelline families, including Provenzano Salvani, were destroyed in the aftermath of the battle, the region continued to be identified by his name. As scholars have noted, "in an irony of fate, the death of . . . Provenzano Salvani and the destruction of houses had the effect of preserving his memory for posterity."²⁷ But the perpetuation of the name Provenzano for more than 400 years is more than an irony. Like so many seemingly random details of Sieneese history, the preservation of the Provenzano name was a subtle act of resistance. Ghibellinism may have been defeated in 1269, but the civic ideology that formed the foundation of Siena's first autonomous era lived on literally and figuratively throughout the city. This ideology continued not only for the entire republican era, but even past the fall of the Republic. Reference to one of Siena's original civic heroes in the name of the Madonna di Provenzano is just one example of how this deep civic love and ingrained civic resistance showed itself in times of turmoil.

Much of this legacy was also documented beginning in 1594 by the newly founded Vestry Board, a group of noblemen specifically assembled to take control over the increasingly popular devotion site. One item that made it into the Vestry's record is the fact that Muzio Placidi, the first nobleman to act as custodian for the image, reported lived in a house next to San Cristoforo. This reference to Placidi's family home is noteworthy because it links Placidi to Buonaguida Lucari, the *sindaco* who led the city's first Marian-dedication ritual on the eve of Montaperti. The dedication in 1260 originated in front of the church of San Cristoforo. Thus the first nobleman associated with Provenzano, the man who led the noble class in their devotion to the Madonna di Provenzano, is characterized in the records as a veritable heir to the man who led the Sieneese in their first dedication to the Virgin. Such a detail may seem somewhat petty, and indeed many of the notations from the Vestry's records seem to have little significance on their own, but together many of the items deemed worthy of inclusion in this official record connect the Madonna di Provenzano to the city's early history associated with the victory at Montaperti. The Sieneese devotion to the Madonna di Provenzano is, thus, a continuation of their devotion to the Blessed Virgin, honored before, during, and annually after Montaperti. To say this another

²⁷ Palio and its Image, p 112.

way, just as the sixteenth-century Sieneese saw themselves as heirs to the victors of Montaperti, as they struggled in vain for autonomy, so too the Madonna di Provenzano, new focal point for Sieneese Marian devotion, became heir to the Madonna del Voto, the focus of Siena original Marian ritual. The inception and evolution of devotion to the Madonna di Provenzano was an attempt by the sixteenth century Sieneese to continue or perhaps capture the spirit of their ancestors.

Although the inception and evolution of their devotion to the Madonna di Provenzano may have developed from latent civic identity that rumbled in the bellies of the no longer autonomous Sieneese, the institution of the Palio in honor of the Provenzano has a slightly different, though connected, history. One might say that the institution of the tradition was the Medici's reaction to Sieneese resistance. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Sieneese no longer had the power to institute or support their own civic feasts. The last feast the failing republic had managed to produce celebrated the city's final victory over Florence, at the Battle of Camollia in 1526. Records show that this victory was celebrated annually with banquets and a palio on the feast of the Visitation, July 2nd. Holding this celebration on a Marian feast day during the waning days of the Republic linked Siena's latest victory to the city's holy protectress, thus continuing the legacy of Montaperti and, again, claiming the glory of the thirteenth century city, even in the desperate days of the sixteenth. After the fall of the Republic, however, the Medici couldn't have their fiefdom celebrating its own glory, especially if it was directly associated with Florence's humiliation. Yet, even when the feast was renamed to merely celebrate the Visitation, its history remained intact. On the other hand, the Medici couldn't completely abolish the feast without adding more fuel to the fire of those who openly resisted Mediciean rule and losing what little peace they had established in the newly enfeoffed Sieneese. In order to maintain the air of order and appease their subjects, the Medici tried to reconcile the Sieneese's desire for the feast with their own traditions. At first they simply moved the celebration up a week, to the feast of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, but imposing a new patron onto the Sieneese did not work. Despite their dependent status, the Sieneese stubbornly refused to give up their holy protectress. Thus the Medici were forced to find another focus for the July celebrations. The official recognition of the Madonna di Provenzano came just in time, perhaps hastened by Medici connections in Rome.

It is without question that the Sieneese hold their Palio sacred. It may, in fact, be the passion that they display in regard to the tradition that piques the curiosity of foreigners and have made *Il Palio* such a lucrative tourist attraction. Yet in the midst of selling “official” banners and books that explain the “secrets” of the tradition, the Sieneese keep certain facts to themselves. One of the most complex, but ultimately revealing, truths about the history of the two palio traditions is that both traditions were not merely meant to honor the city as it was; these traditions were also acts of resistance. The institution of the August Palio or the Palio of the Assumption as an annual civic celebration in the early communal era celebrated a specific political victory at the Battle of Montaperti. Even though the power resulting from that victory continued for a mere nine years, the legacy of Montaperti has continued for more than 800 years. As scholars have noted, “to this day, if . . . a Sieneese group of athletes should happen to play against and defeat a team from Florence, they are likely to yell “Montaperti” at the end of the contest.”²⁸ The contradiction inherent in this Montaperti mythology attests to the fact that the Sieneese have always attempted to promote a unique identity founded in an almost radical civic pride despite the facts of history. The creation of the July Palio, dedicated to local cult of the Madonna di Provanzano, grew out of the continued need for the Sieneese to celebrate their long-cherished identity, even after the city had lost its autonomy. The very name links the so-called miracles of the sixteenth century to the Ghibelline heroes of the thirteenth century. Moreover, the details chosen to substantiate the legitimacy of the cult of the Provenzano all relate to long-lost power of the young Republic and its rituals.

Both of Siena’s palio traditions are opportunities for modern Sieneese to perform the details of their civic legends. Tourists cannot possibly be expected to comprehend or appreciate these convoluted histories and yet to experience the power of the Palio in person is to witness truly transformative expressions of civic pride. I attended a pre-Palio event in July of 2002, in which an unusual wild-card spot in the race was open. The contrada who won this spot by lottery would have the chance to receive one more blessing from the Madonna. When the lottery was completed and the name of an underdog *contrade* was called the result was pandemonium in the Campo. Old men

²⁸ Alan Dundes and Alessandro Falassi. *La Terra in Piazza: an Interpretation of the Palio of Siena* (Berkeley, 1975), p 9.

cried, a little boy in front of me wet his pants in excitement, and dozens of young men stormed the Palazzo Pubblico, some of them attempting to scale its walls. This sort of excitement is not seen at other civic festivals, nor is it seen at religious rituals in the city. Only the Palio, with its continued function in Sienese civic identity has this power. Although proponents claim that the cause of this power is beyond explanation, it is clear that its unique potential lies in the tradition's long and complex mythology.



Figure 1: Master of Tressa, Madonna and Child ("Madonna degli occhi grossi"), c.1215, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena

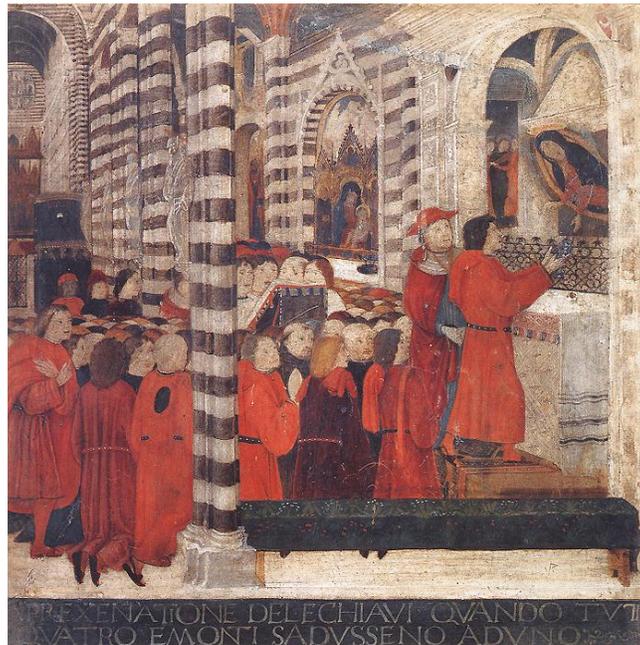


Figure 2: *Presentation of the Keys of the City to the Virgin*, 1483. Siena, Archivio di Stato, Museo delle Tavole di Biccherne



Siena, The Madonna of Thanks ("Madonna del voto"), c. 1270, Capella del Voto, Duomo, Siena.