



BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

SIENA, ITALY

During the 9th century, the city of Siena in central Italy became a major stopping point on the road between Rome and Paris. By the beginning of the 12th century it was a bustling new city producing some of the best wool in Italy, developing a clothing industry and exploiting a small silver mine.

By the end of the 12th century Siena was a commercial and financial center and her growing economic success began to challenge the city of Florence which is only 30 miles to the north. A deep and emotional competition developed between the two cities which eventually led to the Battle of Montaperti in 1260.

Siena was victorious and entered a period of extraordinary power—power which rested in the hands of a small group of influential families. One way the families showed their new-found wealth and influence was the construction of magnificent fortified palaces.

The city's location on the road to Rome gave it a commercial advantage but it also made it a resting place for pilgrims. If you were en route to the Vatican from virtually any part of Europe you made a stop at Siena.

The city began the construction of a series of outstanding churches, towers and public fountains. And since most of the modern construction has taken place outside the old city, Siena's 12th century character remains relatively unspoiled. Narrow winding streets and ancient buildings enclosed within the original city walls give Siena a distinct medieval feeling.

Above the entrance gate to the city is an inscription that reads, "Siena opens its heart to you even wider than this gate."



THE CONTRADE

The three hills of Siena correspond to the city's three administrative districts which were once divided into 59 sub-districts called contrade —17 of them still exist. They were not set up as simple geographic boundaries,

but as self-governing political and social districts. Historians believe that they might go back over 3,000 years.

Today both local and federal laws recognize each of the contrade as a legally organized community with specific rights. Each one operates as a social club, a gastronomic society, a neighborhood association and a family bank. Your membership in a contrade is the result of your birth.

Recently, sociologists have become interested in the contrade and their affect on society. Contrade solidify the community and influence the behavior of the inhabitants. And they appear to play a significant role in giving Siena one of the lowest crime rates of any city in the world.

Each contrade has an emblem that represents one of the virtues attributed to Siena.

The She-wolf stands for faithfulness.

The Giraffe for elegance.

The Snail for prudence.

The emblem with the seahorse and water is the Wave and it stands for joy.

The Noble contrade of the "goose" stands for wisdom and intelligence. It was awarded the title of "noble" because of the courage shown by its militia in the battles against Florence. Like the other contrade it has an administrative building and a museum which displays trophies of its past, a neighborhood band, and a warehouse for the storage of the weapons it used in great battles, a fountain and a church.

The goose is of particular importance because this was the contrade into which Siena's own St. Catherine was born.



ST. CATHERINE

In the middle of the 1300s, Siena was devastated by the plague. Known as the Black Death it reduced Siena's population from 50,000 to 10,000. It ushered in a period

of religious fervor that produced two celebrated saints, Bernardino and Catherine.

The Basilica di San Domenico was a convent of Dominican friars in the neighborhood where St. Catherine was born in 1347. It was the Basilica in which she had her first religious visions.

A series of frescos on the walls of the building tell the story of her life.

She was the twenty-third child in a lower middle class family with twenty-five children. Her father was a wool-dyer. At the age of six she began to have visions of angels helping people and offering them protection. During her teen years the visions strengthened and her reputation began to spread throughout the city. She gave up all physical comforts and slept with a rock as a pillow. For three years, she spoke only to God and her confessor.

St. Catherine developed an idea which she described as an “inner cell”—a place filled with the knowledge of God and of self into which she could withdraw. At the age of 16 she joined a group of laywomen associated with the Dominican order. She took private vows and continued to live and work outside the convent.

During a period of tension between Italy and the Papacy, the Pope moved to the French city of Avignon. St. Catherine believed that the only way to put an end to the constant warring between the cities of Italy was to return the Papacy to Rome. In order to accomplish this she traveled to Avignon to meet with Pope Gregory XI and press for his return to Italy. The move back to Rome took place shortly after her visit and she is credited with playing a significant role in the event. Catherine then went on to Rome and helped the next Pope, Urban VI, reorganize the church in Italy and gain support throughout the country.

At the east end of the nave of the Basilica, on an elevated platform, a small chapel contains the only portrait of St. Catherine painted during her lifetime. It was painted by her friend Andrea Vanni.



Throughout her life Catherine was a prolific writer. She could not read or write so all her works were dictated. Her language was straight forward. The voice on the page is that of a Sienese woman making her well-reasoned arguments — nothing elaborate or contrived. There are 380 letters, 26 prayers and 4 treatises.

She wrote to Popes, kings, and noblemen of every rank as well as humble people just asking for her advice. She died in 1380 at age 33. In 1939, she was named a

Patron Saint of Italy and in 1999 a Patron Saint of Europe.

ST. BERNARDINO

The other great saint of Siena is St. Bernardino. He was born in 1380, the same year St. Catherine died. In spite of the fact that he was born into a noble family and well educated, he spent his early adult life working in hospitals and helping the sick. When the Black Plague arrived he took charge of the city’s hospital. In 1404 he became a Franciscan friar.



He was disgusted with the lawlessness, and absence of moral behavior that surrounded him and began traveling throughout Italy preaching for a return to the decent and ethical life that he saw in the teachings of Christ. He was a dramatic and effective speaker and usually spoke in open spaces because the crowds that came to hear him were too big to fit into the churches.

On the top of one of the three hills of Siena is a Basilica dedicated to St. Francis. It was in front of this church, in 1425, that St. Bernardino preached one of his famous sermons. He was known as the “People’s Preacher” because his sermons were filled with realistic descriptions of life—from what went on in the home of a bachelor to what was going on in women’s fashions.

To the right of the church is a small chapel dedicated to St. Bernardo and marked with the letters IHS...the first three letters of the name of Christ in Latin.

St. Bernardino spent a great deal of time calling the Sienese nobles to task over their sinful habits. He was once confronted by a man who made his living printing playing cards. The printer complained that because St. Bernardino’s preached against gambling his business was being ruined. Bernardino suggested that the man start printing cards with IHS on them which in the end turned out to be a much more profitable business.

In 1956, Bernardino’s ability to communicate Christian ideas through simple language and symbols was recognized by Pope Pius XII, who made him the Patron Saint of Advertising.

THE PALAZZO PUBBLICO

It was during the 13th and 14th centuries that Siena’s most important public works were constructed including the Palazzo Pubblico. At the side of the public square it is considered to be one of the most elegant buildings in Italy and the inspiration for many of the other palaces in Siena. It has been the seat of the city’s

Siena, Italy

government for almost 700 years.

Siena was well aware that its love of wealth and power was often in conflict with its love of the Virgin Mary. The Palazzo Pubblico is filled with art that addresses this problem.

A perfect example is *The Portrait of Our Lady in the Hall of the Great Council*. On the surface the subject appears to be entirely religious, but that is not the case. There is a block of text in which Mary warns the government to act with humility and justice. It says, "I will answer your prayers, but if the strong molest the weak, your prayers will go unheeded."

Down the hall is a giant fresco that dates to 1335 and makes the same point in a different way. It is titled *The Effects of Good and Bad Government*.

There are two matching scenes. One is Siena under good government—the other under bad government. Good government is represented by a wise old man dressed in the colors of Siena. Next to him are the cardinal virtues—Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude. Prudence is always at the head of the line because it is the virtue that regulates all of the others. Above are Faith, Hope and Charity. In the properly governed city life is peaceful, work is progressing. A teacher sits behind a desk in front of his students. Weavers work at their looms. The country-side shows a successful harvest and hunters finding game.



Bad government is marked by the dishonesty of public officials, pride, greed, mismanagement, and the power of special interest.

THE CAMPO

The center of Siena, both culturally and physically, is a plaza called The Campo. It is one of the most famous squares in the world and for centuries it has been the focal point of Siena's political and social life.

This was the site where official government proclamations were read. It was the spot where warring families came to battle things out. It was also the place where St. Bernardino built an outdoor pulpit and preached against the shallow behavior of Sieneese men and women.

Early on Siena became a sophisticated self-governing republic and divided itself into associations, each with its own political and economic interests. Differences

of opinion between the groups were often settled with an organized street fight in The Campo—a fist-fight with three hundred participants to a side. The rules called for fists-only but from time to time things would get out of hand and swords, daggers and battle axes would show up. At some point before the 13th century a portion of that anger was redirected into a horse race.

The Campo is the site of that race and its called The Palio. It was first recorded in 1283 but probably goes back much earlier. The Palio is actually a banner given to the winning horse at the end of the race. The race is held twice each year on the 2nd of July and the 16th of August. The edges of the plaza are covered with sand and the corners are protected with padding. Each of the ten horses in the race represents a neighborhood association, one of the Contrade. On the morning of the race there is an elaborate procession through the streets and around The Campo. The participants are dressed in 15th century costumes. The race itself takes less than two minutes—enough time for the riders to circle The Campo three times. There are no rules of conduct for the race which takes on the character of a moving free for all. Considerable amounts of money are bet on the outcome and the honor of each neighborhood is at stake. The winner gets the banner which is covered by a representation of the Virgin Mary that was painted by a leading artist for the occasion.



THE CATHEDRAL

The great church of Siena is the Cathedral. Construction on the building was begun in 1180 and was still underway in the middle of the 1300s when the wealthy merchants and bankers of the city decided to expand the design and construct the largest Cathedral in the world. What you see here today was planned as a small section of the main building, but the arrival of the Black Plague in 1348 put an end to the grand plan. Work continued on a smaller scale and the building was completed by the end of the 1300s.



The Cathedral was dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

The building, however, is only a small part of the Cathedral's attraction—it ended up as a repository for

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some of the most magnificent art in Italy.

The floor itself is an outstanding work of art. It consists of 56 marble panels with figures from mythology and scenes from the Old Testament.



The Piccolomini Library was built to house the library of Archbishop Piccolomini of Siena, who became Pope Pius II. The room is decorated with a series of frescoes that illustrate the main events in Piccolomini's life.

Looking down at you from the ceiling are the statues of 172 Popes. The fact that they are looking down at you is not a judgment about your behavior, it's just an architectural reality.

THE GOTHIC STYLE

Most of the churches in Siena are built in an architectural style known as "Gothic." It was developed in northern Europe and had only limited success in Italy. It was seen as a form of political submission to the Holy Roman Emperor in Germany and called "Gothic" as an insult— a reference to the barbarian Goths who invaded and destroyed ancient Rome. The Cistercian monks were the first to use the Gothic style in Italy.



They gave up the round Roman arch for the pointed Gothic arch which allowed them to build bigger churches with more open space.

In Siena, they used the style for both the Basilica of

San Domenico and San Francisco. The Gothic style had one ultimate advantage that attracted the builders— everyone who entered the House of God, even the poorest of the congregation could see everything that was happening during the mass.

DEDICATED TO THE MADONNA

The city of Siena has dedicated itself to the Virgin Mary and there are hundreds of stories that tell of her intercession on behalf of the people. The most famous took place in 1260.

A messenger arrived from Florence with two demands. The first called for the Sienese to demolish their city walls. The second insisted that the Sienese hand over a group of ex-Florentines who had left Florence to escape its repressive government. If these demands were not met a 40,000-man Florentine army would crush Siena.

The odds were overwhelmingly against the Sienese but they still decided to resist. They went to their, as yet unfinished, Cathedral which had been dedicated to the Virgin Mary, placed the keys to the city on the altar and prayed for her help. The next day the Sienese won the battle and totally demolished the Florentines. Since then, every time the city has been in danger the citizens of Siena have gone to the Virgin Mary for help.



Most recently it was during the Second World War. In 1944, American forces were bombing their way north. Town after town was being hit by allied planes. The German stronghold at Siena was targeted for a major bombing raid.

The residents of the city crowded into the Cathedral and once again asked the Virgin Mary for help. The next day the raid was canceled and the city saved.

CERTOSA DI MAGGIANO

In the year 1314, Cardinal Riccardo Petroni ordered the construction of a Carthusian Monastery on the outskirts of Siena. A well was dug. A tower was constructed. And the cloister built around them.

During the Renaissance a series of galleries were added along the sides of the courtyard.





Outside the central buildings the monks set up their vineyards. Olive trees were planted. Fruit and vegetable beds were installed. Herbs were cultivated for both medicinal and gastronomic use. And for hundreds of years these buildings and the land around them functioned as an important monastery.

By the early years of the 20th century, however, the property had fallen into a dismal state of disrepair.

Then in 1969 it was taken over by Anna Grossi Recordate. Anna spent over five years restoring it and transforming it into a small hotel called Certosa Di Maggiano.

There are only 17 rooms and they correspond to what were once 17 monastic cells. But no monastery ever looked like this. Each room is decorated in a slightly different style.

The public rooms include a library where cocktails are served before dinner.



There is a large sitting room called "The Emperor's Hall" because of the twelve 18th century paintings that portray twelve of the emperors of Rome.

Breakfasts are served in an area that once was the monastery's kitchen and has been decorated with traditional Tuscan cooking equipment. When the weather is right, breakfast is also served on the nearby patio.



Dinners are served in a small elegant dining room or under the arches of the central cloister. The restaurant has become well know for its excellent food.

In addition to the olive groves and vineyards there is a tennis court, heated swimming pool and a helicopter landing pad.

KEEPING MEMORY ALIVE

Whenever I describe a church I start with the date of its construction. The structure's ability to last for hundreds of years is a sign of its capacity to counter the effects of time by keeping memory alive.

In fact, keeping memory alive is one of the primary

tasks of a church and it does it on two levels.

On one level it reminds people of the collective experience of their religion. It reminds them that they are part of a group and the solidarity of that group can help them deal with the stress of life.

On a second level it reminds each of us of special moments — moments when we have moved beyond what we know in our minds to what we feel in our hearts.



But a well-designed church, or mosque or synagogue can remind you of those experiences. It can also remind you that more of those special moments

may lie ahead — moments of spiritual awakening that may have an even greater impact on your life.

TO LEARN MORE

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