

Celebrations held in Siena during the Government of the Nine

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Summary: *In fourteenth-century Siena the government of the Nine functioned very much within alliances with the leading Guelf powers. This article studies celebrations of Guelf victories in Siena, as depicted in the famous castle cycle of the Palazzo Pubblico and described in the writings of Benvoglianti.*

Various Siennese sources, including chronicles, archival documents, and manuscripts, record celebrations in Siena for military victories during the government of the Nine (1287-1355). Some of these victory celebrations commemorate specific Siennese successes in expanding control and jurisdiction over the surrounding countryside. Such expansion, begun long before the Nine came to power, tended to provide a degree of military and economic security to the City of Siena itself.

Although Siena is often thought of as a Ghibelline city — perhaps to a large degree because of the famous victory over the Florentines at Monteperti in 1260 — the government of the Nine functioned within Guelf constitutions and within alliances with the leading Guelf powers of the time. This situation has led, understandably, to comments about the ideological nature of Siennese Guelfism as compared to its pragmatic nature, and also compared to Florentine Guelfism. For example, the foremost historian of the Nine, William Bowsky, writes: “Siennese involvements with the *taglie* were practical and pragmatic, not ideological. Guelfism did not contain the political magic in Siena that it did in Florence . . . Siennese Guelfism was of more recent vintage and more dubious heritage. Siena’s glories dated from an epoch of Ghibelline rule. . .”¹ He further writes:

Guelfism in the Siena of the Nine, then, was not a major issue. On the whole, the government trod lightly in this area and thus was not likely to be stampeded into foolish courses of action 'after loud beating of the Guelf drums,' or to send huge contingents into the *taglie* for purely ideological considerations.²

On the other hand, Bowsky also states: "Great noble families such as the Tolomei, Malavolti, and Salimbeni converted to Guelfism, largely so as to maintain their international banking and commercial positions."³

In fact, this historical condition of a relatively brusque and somewhat abrupt "conversion" to Guelfism on the part of the Sienese, in contrast to the long, firmly established tradition of Guelfism in Florence, might well have led, at least temporarily, to a situation of ideological ambivalence. Furthermore, Siena was not a major political or military power, but instead, an entity within a larger framework of more powerful forces. In such a case, there might well have been an awareness among the Sienese under the Nine that the present alliances with the pope and an Angevin king might change back again to renewed alliance with an emperor (as actually happened in 1355). Such a situation might have augmented ideological ambivalence.

Perhaps an example of ideological ambivalence might be found in the meaning and contents of the inscriptions on the famous *Maestà* painted in the Siena Palazzo Pubblico. According to Benvoglianti, Siena might once have been in a position of "submission" to the Angevins: "La città di Siena era sotto la protezione del Re di Napoli se non sottoposta nel 1276 perchè il Podestà di Siena si dice podestà per grazie di Dio e del Re."⁴ In fact, the "giglio" of the Angevins is depicted throughout the decoration of part of the baldachin in the fresco of the Palazzo Pubblico *Maestà* in Siena. But how does the presence of this apparent Angevin heraldry fit in with the provisions in the Sienese *Statuti* that indicated an aversion to coats of arms being painted in public buildings, or on public fountains or gates? Were the painted "gigli" in effect an imposition that was reluctantly accepted by the Sienese, particularly in view of the role of the Madonna in protecting Siena at the battle of Monteperti?⁵ In this regard, could certain parts of the *Maestà* inscription be a not so subtle message against the Angevins' trying to pry into, and gain control of, too much of Siena's autonomy as a free commune? For instance, in the line "L'angelichi fiorecti rose e gigli," could the words "angelichi" and "gigli" refer to the Angevins? Certainly an iconographical reference is not lacking. And who does ". . . chi per proprio stato disprezza me e la mia terra inganna" refer to?⁶

At this point, a question might be raised as to whether it is really possible,

after all, to separate — in a clear manner — strong alliances of a pragmatic and diplomatic nature from ideological purity, or to determine how great successes in banking and commercial ventures might have colored the ideological leanings of the recently “converted” Sieneese noble families. Perhaps the ideological make-up of the Sieneese leaders during the government of the Nine wavered between the parameters of practical necessity — if not opportunism — on one hand, and wistful and nostalgic looking back to the good old days of the Monteperti era on the other hand. Within this situation there was also the “ideological” desire to maintain Siena as an autonomous city state, allied with, but not subjugated to, other powers. How much was ideology tempered by opportunism if the Guelf alliances were the most effective means, during a particular time, to attain submission and control of important castles in the Sieneese *contado*?

Whatever the elusive answers may be to these questions regarding ideology, the political and military commitments of the government of the Nine to the Guelf powers were strong. Ghibellines could not be members of the Nine, nor hold office. Ghibellines were also described as enemies of Siena. Siena also took part in military pacts which entailed providing Guelf military forces composed of troops and supplies from various Guelf cities. Guelf military victories were marked by celebrations in Siena.

It is interesting to note that celebrations in Siena to honor Guelf victories included those victories that resulted in an expansion of Siena’s jurisdiction over castles in the Sieneese countryside. Although the castles depicted in the famous castle cycle in the Siena Palazzo Pubblico were apparently limited to those that swore submission to Siena, celebrations were also held in Siena for Guelf victories that took place far beyond Sieneese territory.

It seems that the celebrations themselves included presenting a green robe or toga to the persons who brought news of the victories, and also included illuminations of the towers of the Palazzo Pubblico, Palazzo del Podestà, the church tower of the Duomo, etc. Sieneese chronicles report some of these victory celebrations, exemplified by the following description for the year 1306: *E Sanesi ferò gran festa del la sopradetta vittoria e furo vestii piu di X messi dal comune, che recoro le novelle.*⁷

Perhaps an even richer source for Guelf victory celebrations is found among the unpublished manuscripts of Benvoglianti. His research is based on archival documents, some of which are lost or no longer exist (a situation which makes part of his research all the more important). A selection from Benvoglianti serves to illustrate how Siena celebrated Guelf military victories that took place in cities far away from Sieneese territory.

(1305) Si fece allegrizza per il fatto di Pistoia.

Si pagano 18 denari per ciascuno a quattro persone, le quale fecero Fanone sopra il Campanile della Chiesa maggiore per cagione della vittoria della citta di Pistoia.

(1310) Si paga il valore di una gonella che fu dato al messo che arecò la nuova che il Comune di Bologna hebbe Docia.

(1310) Si pagano lire 7.13.6 in una robba che fu dato a uno, che venne di Bologna con la novella di Ferrara.

(1310) Si pagano 8 soldi a quattro huomini che stetterò nella torre de Mignanelli a far falo della novella che vennero che quelli di Todi furono sconfitti.

(1311) Si pagano lire 6 e soldi 22 per due gonelle fornite et un cappuccio ad arme del Comune di Siena, che furono date al messo che da Bologna recò la nuova di Piacenza.

(1311) Si pagano lire 6.6.6 due gonelle a due messe, uno de quali recò le novelle di Padova, e l'altro le novelle della sconfitta di Spoleto.

Si danno 4 soldi a due huomini che facesse falo della sconfitta delli Spoletini.

Si pagano lire 8 per una robba fornita cioe gonella, guarnaccia, e capuccio forniti al arme del Comune di Siena, la quale robbe si diede al messo che da Perugia recò la nuova della sconfitta de Ghibellini di Spoleto.

(1314) Si pagano lire 7.8 per due gonnelle date a due messe, che portarono nuove da Ancona come i Ghibellini erano stati sconfitti.

(1318) fu fatto falo per le buone nuove di Genova.⁸

In his article, Joseph Polzer suggested that some of the castles depicted in the famous castle cycle in the Siena Palazzo Pubblico were painted in time for a sort of official unveiling during the victory celebrations that marked their conquests: “. . . the Sienese government intended to have these conquered towns depicted even before the cessation of hostilities. There could have been but one purpose intended: that these frescoes should have been ready for display at the celebration of the triumph.”⁹ There seems to be no doubt that the paintings of newly acquired castles were part of the commemoration of the conquests (or acquisitions, in some cases) of these castles, but the evidence suggests to us that Polzer’s hypothesis does not hold up regarding the relative timing of events. Simone Martini was paid for painting the castles of Arcidosso and Castel del Piano together about four months after Arcidosso surrendered, while Benvoglianti points out that the Sienese government paid for “Panne

verde” for the persons who brought news of the victory over the “Conti di S. Fiore” in 1331.¹⁰ Simone Martini was paid for painting Montemassi and Sassoforte together in 1330. Montemassi, however, surrendered to Siena in August 1328, and Benvoglianti notes that in 1328, “Si fece falo . . . per l’acquisto di Montemassi.”¹¹

In a discussion of Sieneese political pictorial art, Bowsky expressed sadness that we no longer see all the paintings commissioned by the Nine: “It is sad that we do not have even descriptions of others of the palazzo pictures, long since destroyed. . .”¹² At about the same time that these words of Bowsky were being printed, one of the paintings from the castle cycle (perhaps Arcidosso, painted by Simone Martini in 1331, even though the castle is “officially” recognized as representing Giuncarico) was being uncovered, setting off another “celebration” in Siena and the art world in honor of its “reconquest” and “unveiling” by the restorers. Further discoveries of paintings in this famous cycle seem possible, if not probable or inevitable, some time in the future. Max Seidel, a member of the official commission appointed by the mayor of Siena to study the fresco depicting a castle that was uncovered in 1980-1981, has written (in the official report) that another fresco surely (“sicuramente”) exists beneath part of the famous Guido Riccio fresco.¹³ And, more recently, Alexandra Miletta writes that technical tests conducted by Maurizio Seracini indicate that other paintings exist on the adjacent wall, presently hidden beneath the scenes representing the *Battle of Val di Chiana* and the *Battle of Poggio Imperiale*.¹⁴

The eventual rediscovery of some of the painted castles in the Palazzo Pubblico could lead to what some scholars might regard as the “discovery of the century” in art history. Such a discovery could, in turn, touch off in Siena (and throughout the world of art history and medieval studies) celebrations that greatly exceed even those that took place after those same castles were conquered by the government of the Nine in Siena in the fourteenth century.¹⁵

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Notes

1. W. Bowsky. *A Medieval Italian Commune* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 170-171.
2. W. Bowsky, p. 173.
3. W. Bowsky, p. 35.
4. Biblioteca Comunale di Siena, ms. C.V.4 (U. Benvoglianti. *Miscellanea*), p. 1.

5. Archivio di Stato di Siena, *Statuti*, 26 (1337-1355), p. 71: "Nulla arma possint dipingi in aliquo palatio ut porta vel fonte . . ." This provision was basically a repetition of that of an earlier *Statuto*: Archivio di Stato di Siena, *Statuti*, 8 (1291-1329), p. 16. In light of this provision restricting the painting of coat-of-arms, one might ask: What in the world is the glaringly large coat-of-arms of a branch of the Fogliani family doing on the famous equestrian portrait known as Guido Riccio? Doesn't this aspect seem anachronistic? Cf. also Mario Ascheri. *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, November 1988, p. 70.
6. W. Bowsky (p. 286) translates the pertinent passages of the *Maestà* inscriptions as follows: "The angelic flowers of roses and lilies with which the heavenly field is adorned do not delight me more than good counsel (i buoni consigli). But sometimes I see one who, for his own advantage, despises me and deceives my land. . ."
7. *Cronache Senesi*, ed. by A. Lisini and F. Jacometti (1939), p. 293.
8. Biblioteca Comunale di Siena, ms. C.V.4 (U. Benvoglianti. *Miscellanea*), pp. 121, 126, 131, 142, 155.
9. J. Polzer. "Simone Martini's Guidoriccio Fresco: The Polemic Concerning its Origin Reviewed, and the Fresco Considered as Serving the Military Triumph of a Tuscan Commune," *RACAR* 1-2 (1987), p. 29.
10. J. Polzer, p. 29, notes 78, 79, 80, 81; Biblioteca Comunale di Siena, ms. C.V.4 (U. Benvoglianti. *Miscellanea*), p. 180.
11. Biblioteca Comunale di Siena, ms. C.V.4 (U. Benvoglianti. *Miscellanea*), p. 174.
12. W. Bowsky, p. 291, note 97.
13. M. Seidel. "'Castrum pingatur in palatio': Ricerche storiche e iconografiche sui castelli dipinti nel Palazzo Pubblico di Siena," *Prospettiva*, January 1982, p. 34, note 36.
14. A. Miletta. "Guidoriccio da Fogliano at the Siege of Montemassi: The Controversy over the Simone Martini Authorship and the Technical Evidence for a Post-1330 Dating of the Fresco," Dissertation, University of Syracuse, 1988, pp. 11-12.
15. Guelf victory celebrations continued after 1333. Within the time span ca. 1333-1351, Guido Riccio da Fogliano is well-documented as being allied with, and working (i.e. fighting) for, one of the most powerful Ghibelline families in Italy, the della Scala of Verona. It is difficult to imagine Guido Riccio's equestrian portrait being displayed in full glory (the way it is today in the Siena Palazzo Pubblico) in the Council Hall of the Sienese government of the Nine in the midst of the Guelf victory celebrations that were taking place in Siena during the years 1333-1351.