10 *Continuity and change*

Throughout this book examples have been selected to illustrate Sienese actions and preoccupations from laws, council minutes and other sources for the period between 1250 and 1310. A topical approach, with no chronological organization, involves the implicit assumption that the period possessed a fundamental unity and that generalizations about attitudes and activities are valid for the whole of it. This telescoping of two generations, which must have some distorting effect, cannot stand without some justification being offered.

CHANGE

How would emphasis on continuity and denial of significant development or innovation have struck a contemporary?

A convenient vantage-point might be 9 June 1311, which was a great day in Siena's history. Duccio di Buoninsegna had completed his painting for the cathedral's high altar, the supreme masterpiece usually known (since the central scene portrayed the Virgin 'in Majesty') as the *Maestà*. The huge altarpiece, comprising some seventy panels, was borne to the cathedral from Duccio's workshop outside the Stalloreggi gate, *con grandi divotioni e procissioni*.[1] Shops were closed for the day as the bishop and clergy, officials of the commune, citizens, women and children and a band of musicians all accompanied the painting on its journey. Prayers were said and the city's Protectress and Advocate was begged to preserve it from all danger and evil and to keep and increase in peace and well-being Siena and its area of jurisdiction.

For the elderly at least, it must have been a day for reflection as well as rejoicing. Some would have recalled the city's dedication to the Virgin before Montaperti, fifty-one years earlier, and for a very few memories would have gone back as far as the lifetime of Frederick II (d. 1250), father of that battle's co-victor, King Manfred. When they looked back to the Siena of their young days did they see it as a very different place and society?

The Duomo to which the *Maestà* was taken had progressed in grandeur in recent decades. A campanile had been built, other work was going ahead and

1 *RIS, CS*, p. 313 (chronicle of Agnolo di Tura del Grasso).

before long a new baptistery would be planned. Work on the commune's palace was in full swing.[2] Yet one unhappy aspect of life would have occurred to any reflective Sienese. The dedication of the city to the Virgin in 1260 had preceded military triumph over the Florentines. That triumph, however, had had no durable consequences and by 1311 it must have been accepted by most Sienese that Florence's briefly interrupted predominance in Tuscany was likely to be permanent. The ephemeral glory of 1260 perhaps magnified the later humiliation, so strongly felt, of being outshone by Florence.

This story went back much further; Siena and Florence had clashed in a great trial of strength in 1229–35 and thenceforth were pitted against each other in a struggle for domination which was bound to condemn the loser to bitterness. Other Tuscan cities – Lucca and Pisa in particular – had had their hours of greatness earlier. Lucca, Pisa, Arezzo and Pistoia all experienced the shadow of Florence yet none of these had challenged so directly, seemed so close to victory and felt so keenly the outcome. The Sienese were obsessed by the notion that they could equal Florence in strength and magnificence and the work on the Palazzo and cathedral was connected with that belief. The two generations who lived through the times dealt with in this book had suffered a profound disappointment.

The contrast between 1311 and 1250 would have seemed most melancholy to those closely involved in finance. Around the middle of the thirteenth century the Sienese bankers were leaders in the business of the papal court and in the conduct of finance and commerce at the fairs of Champagne. Such primacy depended on the confidence of the world of trading and money, as well as on good fortune. Techniques and expertise counted for much also, but here the Sienese had no monopoly. The political developments of the 1260s caught the Sienese banks at a disadvantage in comparison with the Florentines and this was due to ill fortune as well as ineptness. The circumstances were such that the Sienese financiers surely perceived themselves as losing ground, particularly at the papal court, through the very success of the Florentines. It was a case not of comparative loss of position but of direct gains by the Florentine companies at Siena's expense, first at the Curia, then in dealings with the most powerful monarchy in Europe, the French.

The lengthy agony of the Bonsignori bank was the most evident sign that things had gone wrong for Siena's financiers.[3] No company had been more closely associated with the papacy, yet by the pontificate of Boniface VIII (1294–1303) the Bonsignori were doing no papal business and were falling into grave trouble,

2 Above, pp. 12–15. For the chronology of the architectural work see now A. Middeldorf Kosegarten, *Sienesische Bildhauer am Duomo Vecchio* (Munich, 1984), pp. 22–34.

3 Above, pp. 34–5.

dragging with them the other Sienese banks whose credit generally and dealings in France in particular were involved. Meanwhile a saying was attributed to the pope himself which must have caused bitter offence if it reached Siena: the ubiquitous Florentines, he was supposed to have said, ranked with earth, air, fire and water – 'a fifth element'.[4]

It did not require the bankruptcy of a single company or unpalatable papal *mots* to bring it home to Sienese financiers that the Florentine companies had gained an unchallengeable predominance. It was brought home to them every day by the rate of exchange between their own pound and the Florentine florin, dealing in exchange being a crucial part of their work. The Florentines launched their silver coin, the *fiorino*, at a time when parity prevailed between the two currencies (1252), but the Sienese pound weakened over the ensuing decades. In 1270, 32s. 6d. Sienese was required to purchase a florin, by 1277 the rate had deteriorated to 38s. 6d. For a few years the rate tended to alter slightly in Siena's favour, but by 1292 it had weakened to 40s. and by 1302 to 50s. In 1311, shortly before the procession to the Duomo, the florin fetched 53s. 4d. Thus its strength had nearly tripled *vis-à-vis* the Sienese currency in the period covered in this book. A senior banker with a reasonably good memory would have been able to draw the graph (figure 2, p. 208) which plotted the decline of the Sienese pound. A very similar fate had befallen the Pisan pound (parity in 1252, 54s. to the florin in 1311), whilst the mint of Lucca had lost most of its importance over the same period, as well as its currency declining in terms of the florin – but this would have been small consolation to the Sienese.[5]

The year 1311 found Henry VI in Italy (but not yet in Tuscany); thus imperial authority stood in the background as it had done in the mid thirteenth century. On the earlier occasion imperial alliance had brought disillusionment; by the time of Henry VII, although a handful of magnates were banished as Ghibelline sympathizers, Siena's rulers no longer took such an alliance seriously as a card to be played.[6] Florentine might, in fact, was accepted as the first factor in Siena's foreign policy.

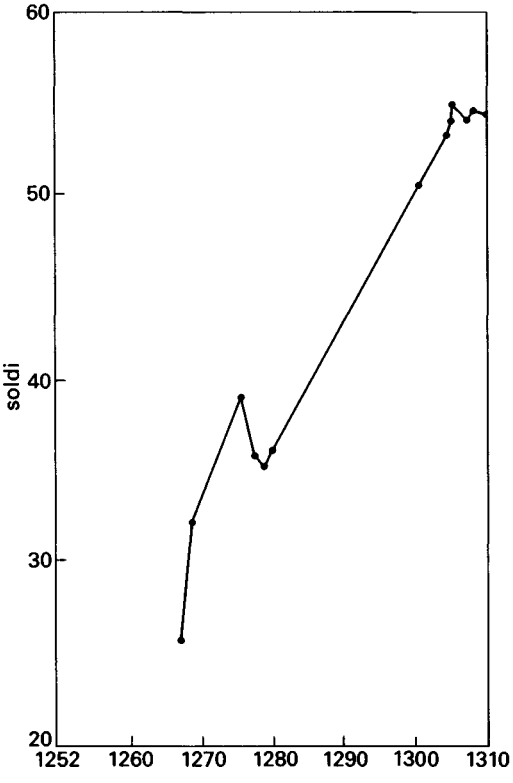
CONTINUITY

Despite the melancholy decline in his city's standing in Tuscany, a Sienese might have decided in 1311 that the unchanging factors in its character predominated over the shifting ones. Duccio's altarpiece would in itself have been a reminder of continuity. The painter's long career – he had practised his art for more than

4 P. Villari, *I primi due secoli della storia di Firenze*, edn 3 (Florence, n.d.), p. 331.

5 P. Spufford, *Handbook of Medieval Exchange* (London, 1986), pp. 39–51. Figure from p. 50, by kind permission of Dr Spufford.

6 *RIS*, *CS*, p. 313.



2 FLORENTINE FLORINS IN SIENESE SOLDI AND DENARI 1252–1310.

thirty years before completing the *Maestà* – was rooted in Sienese tradition. The massive work of carpentry which made the altarpiece possible and the technique of the gilt background are equally characteristic of Siena. Disputed attributions are a prominent feature of art-historical scholarship confronted by Duccio and the Sienese art of his time and this in itself is evidence of his centrality within a continuous tradition. Two superb paintings now in Britain help to make this point. A triptych of the *Crucifixion* in the Royal Collection bears the attribution 'Duccio', though Professor John White would ascribe it to the painter's circle. The single-panel *Crucifixion* formerly in the collection of the Earls of Crawford and now in the Manchester Art Gallery is equally controversial; Professor Stubblebine attributes it to Duccio's pupil Ugolino. Professor Deuchler sees neither painting as coming from Duccio's workshop. Nor is there agreement over the role to be assigned to Duccio himself in the painting of the *Maestà*. The disagreements of the experts make it clear that by the late thirteenth century there was a type of Sienese painting which might be the work of Duccio himself or of his assistants or

circle. Differences of opinion about chronology confirm the point that there was an enduring Sienese artistic tradition.[7]

More central to the general question of continuity and change is the social and economic structure of the population. It has been shown[8] that men often exerted political authority in the city for lengthy periods, unaffected by revolutions in its external alliances and by such fundamental internal changes as the emergence of a 'popular' organization and the promulgation of anti-magnate legislation. An enduring oligarchy of landed financiers from a few very wealthy families, allied with certain other prominent figures, mainly trained in the law, characterized Siena throughout the period covered in this book. This basic fact favoured a fundamental continuity in outlook and policy and weighed heavily in the balance against any tendencies towards change from within.

If oligarchy showed a singular power of survival, this was not in the continuance of oligarchy as a socio-political form (a form that in a city–state is more or less inescapable), but rather in the continuity of individuals and families as the city's power-wielding patricians. The main reason for that is to be found in the weakness of those elements which might have been expected to penetrate from below and to transform the earlier oligarchies, a process which occurred in varying degrees in most of the greater Italian cities. Thus one returns to the lack of Sienese industrial development and the related weakness of gild organization. The failure of the Popolo to achieve lasting institutional successes is the measure of the exceptional strength and endurance of Siena's oligarchy.

The dominance of these families was not maintained through any formal monopoly of authority. Indeed a constitutionally formalized monopoly would have made its preponderance more vulnerable. In the period before the Nine, from the 1250s to 1280s, there were many wealthy landowning financiers who rarely held civic office or spoke in council. The fact of their abstention did not limit the general domination of their dynasties and those allied to them. The same situation prevailed under the Nine: members of the named *casati* families being ineligible for election to the Nine, they exerted their influence through the other offices of the *ordini* – in the Biccherna, the Mercanzia and the Guelf Party or *milites* – or through the commune's many other institutions, diplomatic, military, fiscal and so on. With estates, clients, familiars, servants, ecclesiastical office and patronage, not to mention money and borrowing power, they had no need for personal participation in the often routine preoccupations of the Nine. Certainly

7 See J. White, *Duccio, Tuscan Art and the Medieval Workshop*, (London, 1979); J. H. Stubblebine, *Duccio di Buoninsegna and his School*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1979); F. Deuchler, *Duccio* (Milan, 1984). Useful for recent work on the subject is M. Davies (rev. D. Gordon), *The Early Italian Schools. Before 1400* (National Gallery, London, 1988), pp. 13–24.

8 pp. 90–3.

the period of the Nine cannot be seen as a time of control by 'middle elements', holding power at the expense of a superseded oligarchy of landed financiers.[9]

Thus one of the reflections of a Sienese in 1311 would have been, with respect to the city's ruling group, 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' – whether he rejoiced in this, as a beneficiary, or deplored it. The following two decades – still 'under the Nine' – were to reveal a yet more marked persistence of magnatial strength. The Tolomei fought a private war with the Salimbeni in 1315–16; 'they had great enmity', says the chronicler, 'and the Nine could do nothing to make peace between them'. In 1318 Sozzo and Deo dei Tolomei were involved in a conspiracy against the Nine, but were condemned and driven out to the contado.[10] This pattern of great families withdrawing in defiant self-sufficiency to their estates was to continue through the rest of the decade and the 1320s.

In 1323 the commune determined to despatch a mixed force of cavalry and infantry in support of the Florentines against Castruccio Castracane, lord of Lucca. The commune's own horsemen sent 200 cavalry, i.e those owed through the militia obligation. Apart from these, eight noble families combined to add a joint body of horsemen, numbering 215, to which the Salimbeni contributed forty-six, the Piccolomini thirty-six and the Tolomei twenty-four. The commander of this amalgamation of private armies was a Sansedoni, a relative of the Dominican Ambrogio.[11] Nothing could have symbolized more clearly than this cavalry force the continuing domination of Siena's great families.

How well the wealth of the landed dynasties held up through the fourteenth century is another matter. One great landowner, the Hospital, ran into periods of acute difficulty in the 1340s and 1350s.[12] Meanwhile the city remained dependent, for the continuance of its main business and for tolls, on the agricultural market at a time when Florence, in total contrast, was already the base of a powerful textile industry.

CONCLUSION

The city's continuing dependence on the south Tuscan countryside is the most important of continuities. Those combinations which have been noted in wills remained the norm throughout the population: plots of agricultural land, woodland, animals, a house and warehouse or workshop in the city.[13] Duccio the

9 For this paragraph see chapter 4 above. For an expression of the same view see Marrara, particularly pp. 254–61.
10 *RIS, CS*, pp. 364–5, 372–3.
11 Ibid., p. 406. For Ambrogio Sansedoni, see above, pp. 142–6.
12 Epstein, p. 246.
13 Above, pp. 20, 39–40.

painter was no exception and possessed land near the river Tessa.[14] The 'Tavola delle Possessioni' of 1317–18 shows some two-thirds of the taxed population owning rural property. The richest, those whose total property was assessed at above 5,000 l., had on average over 85 per cent of the value of their holdings in rural wealth.[15]

Had Sienese domestic accounts and journals survived for this period it would be clear that this was taken for granted at the time. One rather unsatisfactory volume of *Ricordi* – unsatisfactory mainly because it is accessible only in an incomplete and quite unreliable edition – must be pressed into service: this is the book of domestic records and financial accounts kept in Italian between 1231–43 and 1261–62 by Moscada, widow of Spinello di Mattasala, a member of the Lambertini family. These *Ricordi* document a well-to-do household reliant largely on the receipt of rents in kind. They leased out a mill to the prior of San Vigilio, the rent consisting entirely of grain which was due at the rate of 13½ *staia* each month. More grain, flour and wine were received as rent from holdings in the Sienese countryside and grain rendered as rent was often resold. The family derived income also from workshops and other urban premises; they leased out rooms to a cooper and a brooch-maker. The sale and resale of foodstuffs was a constant feature of life at almost all levels of the population. Moscada's expenses include (1242) a very considerable purchase of must (new wine) from Tolomeo di Giacomo Tolomei della Piazza, one of the founders of the Tolomei financial house, a transaction which confirms yet again the versatility of Siena's 'bankers'.[16]

Early Sienese wills incorporate disappointingly few household inventories, but one rare survival among them lists the contents of the quite humble home in the *popolo* of S Giovanni of Aldobrandino di Dietaiuti (1280). Though a man of modest means, Aldobrandino had felt some anxiety on his deathbed about having engaged in usurious transactions; he states no occupation. At the time of his death his chattels comprised two chests, one cupboard, a bed with bedding, some benches and casks – and, of course, grain and wine.[17] It is not certain that grander households would have contained great quantities of furniture and other possessions, but the tables portrayed in the *Feast at Cana* and *Last Supper* panels of the *Maestà* altarpiece bear handsome table-linen, plentiful earthenware vessels for wine (and a cask), other vessels and goblets, a few knives.

14 White, *Duccio*, pp. 191–2.

15 G. Cherubini, *Signori, Contadini, Borghesi* (Florence, 1974), pp. 231–311, particularly pp. 253, 257.

16 See 'Ricordi di una famiglia senese', *ASI*, app. vol. 5 (1847), pp. 5–76. The manuscript is Ms 136 (A.IV.27) of the Biblioteca Comunale, Siena. Comparison of the manuscript with the published text shows that much is omitted and that much that has been printed is incorrect: see also G. Garosi (ed.), *Inventario dei Manoscritti della Biblioteca Comunale di Siena*, 2 vols., Florence, 1978–80, 1, pp. 292–5. A correct edition of this manuscript is much to be desired.

17 Dipl., AGC, 19.6.1276 (copy, with inventory dated 22.10.1280).

Some of the evidence suggests that Siena with its numerically weak middle class, should be treated as an instance of 'two nations', with the grand landowners, in control of the city's destinies, on one side of the divide, the agricultural labourers, servants, grooms and carters, water-carriers and so on, on the other. Not everything fits in with this suggestion, however. In particular the flourishing religious confraternities, felt at the time to be particularly characteristic of Siena, are in conflict with it. An example of contemporary pride in these institutions is the legacy of a lady who bequeathed the sum of 3 l. to be divided between all the confraternities of the city.[18] Membership of these bodies, flagellants and the rest, extended from the rich to the rather poor, and only the distinctly poor would have found themselves debarred by the expense involved. The religious gilds brought together in a common activity those elements coming between the highest and the lowest, an accomplishment which would have been insignificant or impossible had the shape of Siena's social body really comprised an extremely slender 'hour-glass' waist. Even if the intermediate class was less significant quantitatively than might be expected, its role in the city's life was an important one.

There was a good deal to engage the loyalties of the Sienese – family, *contrada*, church and confraternity – apart from the strongly-felt pull of the city's own personality. In spite of discomfort and hunger and the occasional violence of dynastic strife, Siena in the thirteenth century had much to offer, affording its population varied forms of satisfaction, social and individual.

18 Dipl., Spedale, 2.4.1304 (text in English, '5 Magnate Families', pp. 333–6).