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HISTORIC CENTRE OF THE CITY OF PIENZA

“Pienza was as he had imagined it: a gem of stone set on one of the highest hilltops in the Val d’Orcia and, as the guide said, at the end of the 15th century it was only a tiny medieval hamlet called Corsignano.”

Il Fosso Bianco, Miriam Focili

Until the dusk of the Middle Ages, the fate of this small town in the Val d’Orcia had not yet crossed that of its fundamental personality, a man who would have so deeply carved out its identity as to take on his very name. Born in 1405 into an old family from Siena, Enea Silvio Piccolomini was a poet, a traveller, a writer of erotica, author of the famous *Commentaries*, a priest and a politician, embodying in his multi-faceted profile the richness and the intellectual fervour of humanism. He also became pope in 1458, with the name of Pius II. Corsignano, the village where he was born was soon renamed Pienza shortly afterwards, the name shaped on the illustrious citizen’s pontifical one. Before being a shell for new letters and sounds, Pienza is first and foremost the materialisation of an ideal which is both ethic and aesthetic: that of a planned city. The new pope wanted to transform the anarchic tangle of the ancient village into a future utopia of rationally designed spaces. To make this urban dream come true, Pius II chose to use a pupil of Leon Battista Alberti, the architect Bernardo Rossellino. In reinventing the main square of Pienza, the two men were able to take the space of the medieval city into the heart of the Renaissance, ploughing a lasting furrow in the history of modern town-planning.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 789
PLACE OF INSCRIPTION: MÉRIDA, MEXICO
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 1996



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: Pienza occupies a key position in the development of the concept of a planned “ideal city”. It is considered the first application of the concept of Renaissance humanist urban design.



“Those who go to Rome from Siena, after having passed the Castle of San Quirico, continuing on the right of Radicofani, pass by Corsignano, which can be seen on the summit, on the left, at the top of a gentle slope, three miles from the main road.”

Piccolomini, who in the Commentaries has a bird’s eye view over Tuscany, invites us to explore the surroundings of Pienza, in the heart of the Val d’Orcia, in its turn a UNESCO World Heritage site. The best way to visit is to do so slowly, treating yourself to pauses to religiously contemplate the views, explore the historic heritage and indulge in more hedonistic distractions.

1 San Casciano dei Bagni is an excellent starting point. Beyond the risk entailed by drawing up classifications of travel, the thermal baths of San Casciano dei Bagni can easily be considered amongst the finest in Tuscany. Its 42 springs with water at 40°C can boast of having been popular ever since the Etruscan period, becoming central in Roman times, as shown by the archaeological remains of the thermal shrine. From San Casciano follow the Via Francigena and go towards **2 Radicofani**, where you can admire a fine **fortress**; built 896 m above sea level on basaltic rock, with a squat keep, it dominates not only the village below, but the whole of the Val d’Orcia, Mount Cetona and the area of Mount Amiata. Then carry on to

3 Chiusi, which in ancient times was one of the most important centres in Etruria and today offers a wide range of high level cultural opportunities. **The National Archaeological Museum of Chiusi** is worth a visit. Inside it you can admire a collection of artifacts discovered in the city which tell of the life, art and culture of the time. The **Cathedral Museum**, on the other hand, has works from the early Christian, medieval and modern periods. From the museum you can access the **Labyrinth of Porsenna**, a route of underground tunnels of the ancient Etruscan hydraulic complex, 130 m long. It will now be the turn of **4 Montepulciano**. This small town perched on a rocky ridge between the Siense Valdichiana

and the Val d’Orcia is known for its DOGC (Controlled and Guaranteed Denomination of Origin) wine, made from a selection of Sangiovese called Prugnolo Gentile, one of the most appreciated in Italy. In addition to the inevitable wine bars, the town is studded with outstanding historical and architectonic elements. When you arrive in **Piazza Grande**, greet the Well of Griffons and Lions, and play at imagining what the façade of the **Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta** would be like if it had not been left unfinished since the 16th century. It will be very easy to reach **5 Pienza** from here: get ready to taste some excellent Pecorino cheese and fill your eyes with the beauty of the Renaissance.



MAP



A SIGN OF GOD

“Due to necessity [the church] contrary to habit, extends from the north towards the south.”

The Commentaries of Pius II (IX, 24), Enea Silvio Piccolomini

To be an ideal city from the architectural point of view, according to Pope Pius II and his architect Bernardo Rossellino, Pienza also had to be ideal from the astronomic point of view. Climbing up the tower of the Town Hall every April 1st at around 1.20 p.m., you can notice how the façade of the Duomo casts a shadow that is perfectly inscribed in the nine rectangles drawn on the esplanade. It really seems that, as we can read in the Commentaries, Pius II deliberately gave

up the canonical orientation established for ecclesiastical buildings – which should have been “oriented” i.e. facing the Orient – to succeed in transforming the Cathedral into a huge sundial that celebrated the spring equinox, a date which defines Easter (which falls on the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox). The stone ring on the esplanade is symbolically connected to the rose: above, the ring of light, the eye that sees, is good; below, the ring of stone, the eye that cannot see, is evil. The phenomenon occurs today on 1st April and not 21st March, due to the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar in 1582, which corrected the error of 11 days accumulated over millennia because of the period of the Earth revolving around the Sun, which takes place not in exactly 365 days, but in 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds.



‘THERE WERE TWO ORDERS OF WINDOWS, ADMIRABLE FOR THEIR SHAPE AND SIZE, AND EACH ORDER WAS MADE UP OF TWENTY-THREE WINDOWS, EQUIDISTANT FROM ONE ANOTHER. THREE PEOPLE COULD LOOK OUT AT THE SAME TIME FROM EACH OF THE WINDOWS, DIVIDED BY SMALL COLUMNS [...]’

It is with these words that in his *Commentaries* Pius II describes a part of the Pope's home in the town: it is

the details that catch the attention of travellers. You will notice it immediately: the square on to which the town-house looks is tiny, but full of important buildings and is worth careful observation. Everything revolves around the trapezoidal **1 Piazza Pio II**, where the **Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta** towers (on the longest side). The church, which dates back to a 1462 design by the architect Bernardo Rossellino can be recognised for the façade of travertine marble, clearly divided into three parts. In the interior, flooded by the light which streams in from the window at the back, past and present are mixed, the inheritance of the Gothic style with the latest trends of

the Renaissance style. In the forest of columns, have fun finding the paintings by the most famous Sieneese artists of the time, the marble holy water fonts, the tombstones set in the floor and on the walls.

Next to the Cathedral, you will find the **2 Church of San Giovanni** (or the **Crypt of the Cathedral**). A small door on the left of the cathedral leads to an underground space, where you can wander around the remains of the carved decorations of the old church and a series of Flemish tapestries. From here you can have access to the **“labyrinth”**, a system of drainage tunnels, dug out under the apse of the Cathedral to stem the problem of the above structure caving in: today it is a small gem that will remind you of stories of castles and princesses.

3 Palazzo Piccolomini, the residence of the pope and his family, is on the right of the cathedral: you will easily identify it by the façade of natural ashlar stone. Its stern character and the simplicity of the design contrasts with the splendour of the interiors. In his design, Rossellino was consciously inspired by ancient Roman buildings and the latest fashions of the architects in Florence, giving rise to one of the best examples of a Renaissance residence.

At the back, in the loggia on the southern side of the building, there is a magnificent **4 hanging garden**.

On fine days, this “window” on to the peacefulness of the landscape, acts as an infallible distributor of happiness. Facing the Cathedral, there is the

5 Town Hall, with a three-arched portico dominated by a tower with a terracotta clock. Lastly, you will find the **6 Diocesan Museum** at Palazzo Borgia, where you can relive the splendours and ostentatiousness of the past, amid religious works of art, sacred vestments and precious gold and silver items.



PIENZA in books

Reading suggestions to discover Pienza and its surroundings.

- **The Commentaries of Pius II**, Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1462-64). The masterpiece by Piccolomini is considered one of the great “monuments” of the Italian Renaissance. Halfway between a novel and a book on anthropology, it paints a picture of the political and religious world of the European 15th century, in which the city of Pienza is abundantly described.
- **Il Fosso Bianco**, Miriam Focili (2019). One September morning, the mechanic Gualtiero Vanni, a poor wretch with a drinking problem, goes down to

the Fosso Bianco to have a boiling bath in the thermal pools. Here he finds a gorgeous girl in front of him, walking by herself in the water: a blonde angel covered with blood who cannot remember anything about herself or her past. It will be a difficult investigation, set in Pienza and in the Val d'Orcia, for the two police officers, Elena and Giada.

• **Il campo di Gosto**, Anna Luisa Pignatelli (2023). This novel tells the story of Agostino, called Gosto, a divorcee, with a daughter who only thinks about money and who is surrounded by evil people. The events alternate descriptions of the marvellous landscapes of the Val d'Orcia and the inner shadows of the characters.

Children's books:

• **Il Rinascimento per gioco**, Valentina Orlando, Celina Elmi (2018). Pienza and its “creator”, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, condense the spirit of their time. Through the eyes of the young archaeologist Clara, children will be able to relive that extraordinary adventure of human curiosity that was the Tuscan Renaissance and seize its distinctive character and the vitality of its key players.

• **Stella Bianca. La ragazza che parla ai cavalli**, Mathilde Bonetti (2019). The fatal spark comes at the charity raffle of the fair in Pienza where a young Irish girl, Crystal, who has only recently arrived in Italy, wins White Star, a magnificent filly. This is the first in a series of coming-of-age novels, all played out on the mutual trust and on the strength of friendships between humans and animals.

