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THE PALIO

The incorporation of Siena in a grand-duchy, then in a national kingdom, and finally in the ever more widely generalized and abstract conception of a modern state was bound to leave permanently unsatisfied the inborn political passion of the Sienese people, who, taking the word 'political' in its truest sense, possessed a creative and ardent love for their own 'Polis'. This passion, deeply implanted in the very flesh and blood of the Sienese, could only be given an outlet by making a return, to some extent at least, to what amounted to their original 'cell', to the *contrada*, the city quarter. Strictly speaking these so-called quarters of the city covered a much smaller area than a quarter, being scarcely more than a seventeenth part of the town. Each *contrada* is something like a political unit, although their communal activities concern all manner of things which have nothing to do with politics as understood today.

The division of the city into *contrade*, at one time twenty-two in number, probably goes back to a constitution adapted for the needs of warfare. Certain it is that in the Middle Ages the whole population belonged to one or other of two groups, the *milites* or the *populus*, the knights or the people, and that the people as well as the knights-at-arms were included in military corporations, of which the most important represented the three divisions of the city. It is thus very possible that the *contrade* still existing today correspond more or less to those regions of the town which always formed a military unit, although these associations were first clearly recognizable historically from Renaissance times, in the annals of public festivals.

On the other hand Siena, from the very nature of the ground whereon it stands, falls into separate regions: one can easily imagine it growing together out of a series of isolated settlements. In the early Middle Ages there was apparently no city wall encircling the scattered parts of the town, so that each group of buildings represented a kind of fortress in itself. Later it became customary for the various types of crafts to settle in particular sections of the town, as can be seen from an examination of the coats of arms of the respective *contrade*. For instance, the silk-worm *(bruco)* on the coat of arms of the *contrada* of that name indicates the silk-workers' craft, which was practised in that part of the city. As is plainly recognisable in the Festival of the Palio (the Banner Horse-races), the arch-enemy and rival of each *contrada* is its nearest neighbour, while all other more distant *contrade* are considered as allies. That is the natural law of politics.

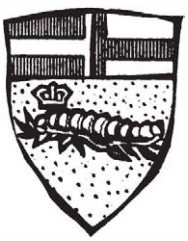
The rivalry between the different *contrade*, or wards, finds its expression mainly in the annual horse-races known as the Palio, which at the same time provide an occasion for a contest in display: for that is the other side of the Sienese passion, namely, their ardent love of public exhibition, of fine gesture, of *magnificenza*, which is all of a piece with the half aristocratic, half bourgeois habits of old Siena. Picturesque festivals crop up throughout the history of Siena with the regularity of milestones along a roadway.

The Palio horse-race is not racing in the ordinary sense of the word, for its aim is not the triumph of the best horse and the best rider. The *contrade* cast lots for their horses, and the riders, who are not Sienese but just young men from the horse-pastures in the Romagna, are engaged by the *contrada* only a few days before the Palio takes place. The race is really more like a trial by ordeal, but one in which every sort of trick and cunning likely to favour one's chances is quite in order, so much so that the result depends almost more on secret intrigue than on the quality of the horses.

Visit of a *comparsa* to a friendly *contrada* on the feast of its patron saint.

The coats of arms of the three city wards, *San Martino*, *Città* (city), and *Camollia;* and of two *contrade*, *Montone* (ram) and *Aquila* (eagle).

The Palio Race on the Campo at sunset.



The emblems of the *contrade*, *Chiocciola* (snail), *Civetta* (screech-owl), *Giraffa* (giraffe), *Pantera* (panther), and *Bruco* (silkworm).

Onda (wave)

Leocorno (unicorn)

Drago (dragon)

Selva (forest)

Oca (goose)

The Palio races were held in the first place—and certainly since the beginning of the fourteenth century—on the Feast of the Assumption in honour of the Holy Mother of God of Provenzano; this was a picture formerly in the possession of Provenzano Salvani, political leader of Siena at the time of the Montaperto war, which hangs now in the church of that same name. Later, approximately from 1650 onwards, the race was held on 2 July, the Feast of the Visitation, and still later a second race was added which took place on 16 August. In early days the race was run right across the whole town; for the last four centuries, however, it has been held on the Campo and is now so bound up with the social character of the square that the whole Palio seems to represent the Campo at its culmination of artistic significance.

At the Palio each *contrada* appears not only with its horse and rider but also in the decorative figures of its *comparsa*, a dramatic representation of armour-bearers and arms, consisting of a Captain *(capitano)*, two ensigns *(alfieri)*, standard-bearer *(figurino)*, drummer *(tamburino)*, rider *(fantino)*, the equerry *(barbaresco)*, and a page. In the procession before the race, which should never fail to include a reproduction of the *carroccio*, the war-waggon of Siena, the rider or jockey goes ahead on a parade horse, while the equerry leads the actual race-horse by the reins. Meanwhile the ensigns show their acrobatic skill in the swinging of the flags to the sound of rolling drums.

The race itself takes place at sunset around the Campo on a course strewn with earth; the sharpest corners to the right and left of the Town Hall are edged with mattresses, as on taking the bend it is quite possible for a rider to be flung off his horse in a sweeping curve.

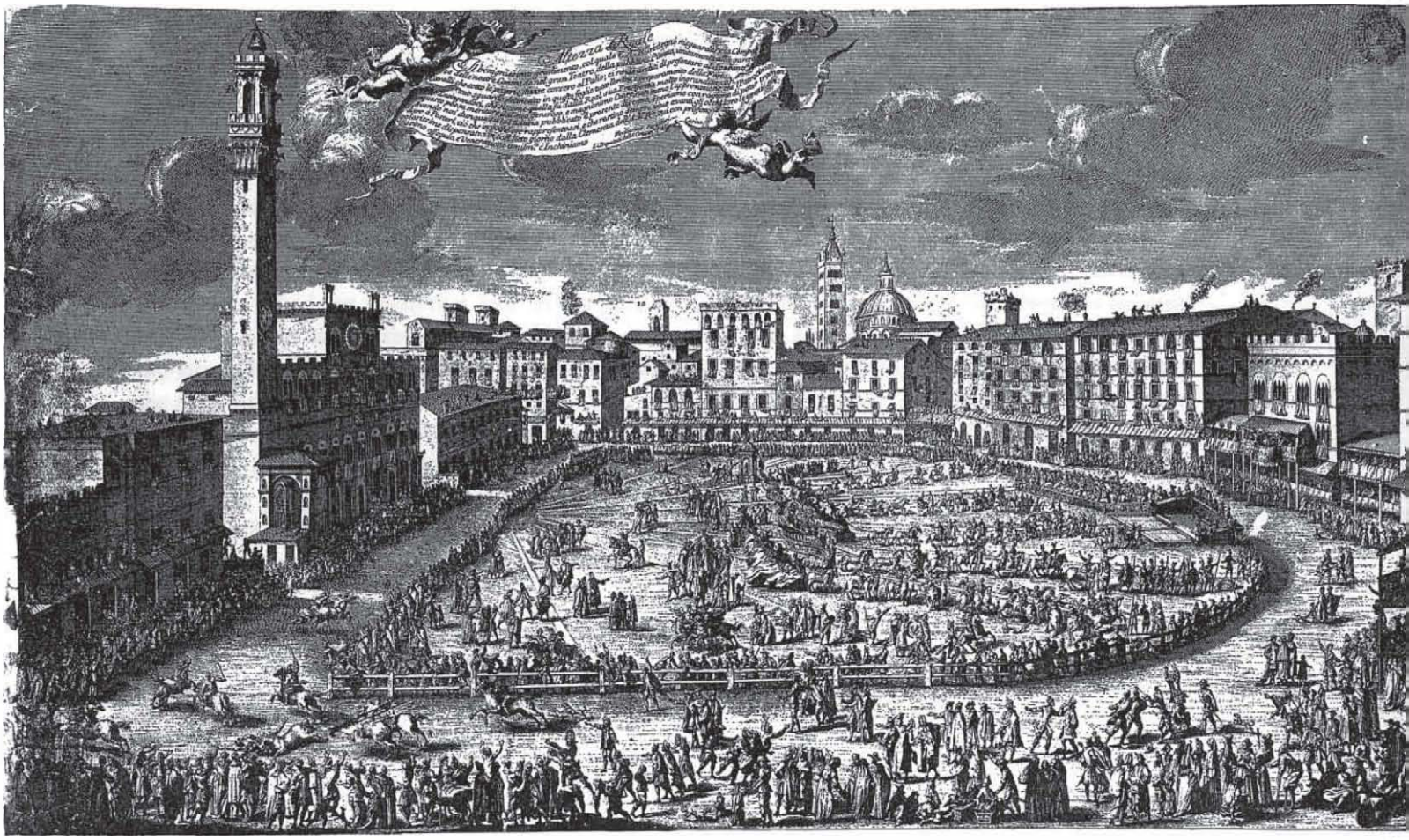
The apparel of the *comparse* is renewed from time to time, with the result that it is not the dress of the fourteenth century that is chosen as a model, as one might expect, but that of the Renaissance. But reminiscent of the height of old Siena's glory is the grandeur of the heraldry on banner, standard and hanging draperies.

Besides the City coat of arms one sees the horizontally divided white and black *Balzana*, the banner of the three main sections of the town; and then the seventeen crests of the contending *contrade*, each with its own particular animal. These latter were raised to the rank of aristocratic emblems by King Umberto I, an enthusiastic spectator at the races, since when they have been further adorned by the badge of the House of Savoy. Every *comparsa* wears the colours of its special coat of arms.

In each *contrada* there is a kind of Guild-house in which traditional customs are fostered and preparations made for the Palio: here the members meet and here the trophies of former victories, the costumes, the drums and the banners, are exhibited. Nearly always one can find pictures there of famous races and sometimes, exhibited with proud irony, the dented helmet of some *fantino* whom rivals had mishandled on account of some wily victory. Once a year the feast of the *contrada*'s patron saint is celebrated: the little church near by is decorated, friendly *contrade* are visited with waving of flags and beating of drums, and the day ends with a banquet on a festively lighted street.

Every Sienese remains faithful to that *contrada* where he has passed his childhood and at the approach of the Palio races he takes part eagerly in all the intrigues aiming at bribing the *fantini* of the enemy *contrade* to hold back their horses, or to throw a rider by a well-aimed slash of the whip. At the same time big candles are burnt in the churches; and even in the horse-box, where the allotted horse is kept and jealously watched and tended till the day of the race, a picture of the patron saint is hung, surrounded by burning lights.

The race begins with a consecrated offering to the Holy Virgin, for, in spite of all the trickery which is carried on with wry humour and dogged intensity, the whole affair is a kind of solemn game of consecration, possibly distantly related to the horse-racing of antiquity in honour of some god.



View of the Campo during the Palio horse-race and the procession of the *comparse* on 2 July 1717. From a contemporary engraving printed by Domenico Rossi in Rome. *City Museum, Town Hall, Siena.*

The Sienese know full well that in this way they can harmlessly dispel a passion which might otherwise weigh upon them, and at the same time satisfy their yearning for the great imaginative fulfilment of their community in the only manner that still remains possible.

The Palio may be described as the last popular manifestation in the proud history of a free city.

Emblems of the *contrade*, *Istrice* (hedgehog), *Torre* (tower), *Lupa* (she-wolf), *Nicchio* (mussel-shell), and *Tartuca* (tortoise).

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