## The Ideal City: The 1262 Constitution of the Sienese Commune

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Scholars such as Spiro Kostof and Paul Zucker have described the development of the late medieval Italian towns as "uncontrolled and haphazard," categorizing it as irrational organic growth with no sense of order. I believe the contrary, that the thirteenth century communal governments of northern and central Italy each created a highly ordered urban environment. A primary example of this type of urban ordering is the city of Siena in central Italy. Siena serves as an excellent example due to the fact that the existing city and the thirteenth century Sienese building and zoning statutes are solid sources of information. Documents such as the 1262 constitution help us understand how such a new and powerful government shaped the city and, more importantly, why the city became what it is.

The control of urban development in Italian cities in the thirteenth century was based on the application of practical architectural codes and zoning regulations which were prescribed and enforced by the communal governments. These governments were interested in the practical facility of the city, and they were also conscious of the civic value of their cities. Because the populations of the central and northern Italian towns increased rapidly throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the towns themselves changed in order to accommodate the public needs of the new populace. In addition, most of these towns were located on pre-existing Etruscan or Roman foundations, with a well-established network of roads, along which the towns expanded incrementally. Towns located on mountainous terrain, such as Siena, Perugia, Gubbio, and Todi, thus expanded in relation to existing topographic conditions and constraints.

The growth of these cities coincided with the founding of communal forms of government as opposed to rule by the bishops and feudal barons. As the new offices of the communal government evolved, new building types and urban spaces soon followed. Accordingly, the new communal government established specific building standards as a result of new urban needs which had outgrown the framework of the pre-existing city. These needs included the unimpeded freedom of public circulation as mandated by a growing market economy, the beautification and maintenance of dignified processional and pilgrimage routes, and the physical control of the well-traveled spaces. This was not a phenomenon particular to Siena; all major northern and central Italian towns expanded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Hence, an understanding of how the communal institutions utilized legislative procedure in an effort to consciously change and re-shape the infrastructure and form of their existing city is paramount. These nascent communal governments transformed the old city into the physical expression of new political, social, and religious needs and ideals maintained by a code of law. In the case of Siena, a series of detailed legislative statutes enacted by the communal government in the thirteenth century attests to the role the government played in both

the public and private lives of its citizens. Outlined in the statutes of the Sienese Constitution, and specifically in the third *Distinctio*, are numerous rubrics which regulate the architectural construction within the jurisdiction of the city. Architecture, in this case, includes streets, *piazze*, fountains, aqueducts, bridges, fortifications, towers, public and private *palazzi*, and all other types of communal buildings. The communal government, moreover, gave a great deal of attention to the street as an architectural entity in the statutes.

My purpose in this paper is to outline the history of Siena's urban development, beginning with its period as a bishopric, in an effort to demonstrate that Siena's early communal government was responsible for the creation of a highly ordered urban environment. I will ultimately focus on the third *Distinctio* of the *Constituto del Comune di Siena dell'anno 1262* to argue that the communal government consciously articulated a new series of building codes in which one finds, among other things, specific regulations for Siena's street development.

In order to grasp the depth of the political relationship between Siena's communal government, the nobility, and the religious institutions, one must first understand the history of Siena's rise as a bishopric and its impact upon Siena's urban development between the eighth and eleventh centuries. As early as the eighth century, the bishop ruled the town as an ecclesiastical authority, and in 913, the bishop's church of S. Martino verso i Tufi, located in the oldest walled nucleus of the city known as Castelvecchio, was transferred to a church identified as S. Maria in Castelnuovo.<sup>2</sup> Concurrent with this move was the construction of a new extension of defensive walls, evidence of the growth in power of Siena's episcopate between the ninth and tenth centuries (Fig. 1). The bishop's enlarged city was subdivided into several parishes (parrocchie), each with a chapel (capella). This was the earliest type of administrative division of the city, and it was this basic parish organization which formed the backbone of the later and more powerful contrada.<sup>3</sup>

Though the nuclei of the neighborhood structure, known as the *contrada*, were in place by the eleventh century in the form of the parish, the powers of state government continued to be fought over by papal, Imperial and feudal-noble officials. Hence the need for defensive compounds. Yet the physical fabric of the city underwent further change when the nobles in the countryside moved into the city and began construction of their family houses (*casamento/casatorre*) in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, both inside and outside *Castelnuovo*. These were essentially transplanted castles, architecturally based on their rural prototype and slightly modified for urban needs. They were fortified, isolated strongholds which were composed of a private, central court, around which the patriarchs of the family built their houses (*palazzi*) with one or more monumental towers. These dominating towers were the focus of the family's walled precinct, and they served for the defense of the

family against other noble families, the Church, and Imperial factions. Moreover, the towers were the symbol of the family's social and political sovereignty in a specific section of the city. This new urban building type thus wielded great influence on the physical character of the city: the powerful family stronghold, both within and outside *Castelnuovo*, controlled and limited the public access to the streets which traversed and were adjacent to their property.

In the twelfth century, a new party representing the people of the commune began to emerge. Although the people of Siena, known as the *popolo*, assembled in parliament in the piazza of the parish church of *S. Cristoforo* on the *Banchi di Sopra* as early as 1137 (Fig. 1), the first known foundation charter of the commune of Siena exhibits a later date of 1146/47.<sup>5</sup> In this document, the commune first gains recognition as a political power in the state, though the Imperial forces did not recognize its full legal status until 1183, in the Peace of Constance. With this treaty, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa granted the cities in the Lombard League jurisdictional rights to their city and the *contado*, rights which extended to central Italy as well. Despite the treaty, the communal officials, the urban nobility and the Church disputed jurisdiction amongst themselves in the following century.

In the years following this treaty, Siena expanded ever more rapidly upon its three hills, along the ridges of which its three principal trading road extended. The primary road extended from Rome to parts of central France and was known as the via Francigena/ Romea, hence the name. Within the walls of Siena, the road's name changed and accorded with its topographic location. The "high road" was known as the Banchi di Sopra, and the "low road" as the Banchi di Sotto (Fig. 1).6 Though the cathedral church of S. Maria in Castelnuovo continued to be the bishop's church according to canon law, the new seat of the commune began to take shape just outside the northern gate of the bishop's city, the Porta Salaria. Since Castelvecchio and parts of Castelnuovo were no longer convenient to the major trade route, the via Francigena/Romea, they were abandoned by many of the magnate families for the new political and commercial city center. The banking houses and shops (botteghi) were thus located on the ever important via Francigena/ Romea and as close as possible to the hub of commercial activity, the Mercanzia, or merchant's guild (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the principal avenues of communication with the Sienese contado converge at the Croce del Travaglio, which is only a few steps from the Mercanzia and the piazza del Campo, the city's primary market-place. The extent of this major urban expansion can be seen in the first and subsequent extensions of the medieval defensive walls along the arm of the via Francigena/Romea between the twelfth and thirteenth

The communal struggle for power echoed a larger conflict which dominated both religious and secular affairs between the Papacy and the Imperial-Hohenstaufen leadership. This divide was known as the political conflict between the Guelf party (*guelfo*), which was affiliated with the Church, and the Ghibelline party (*ghibillos*), of the Emperor. Many of the successful Sienese magnate merchants were Ghibelline supporters, and they dominated Siena's first communal government, known as *Il Consiglio della Campana dei Ventiquattro*, or the Council of the Bell of Twenty-four. They governed from circa 1240 until 1270, and, during their tenure, Siena remained under Ghibelline rule. 9

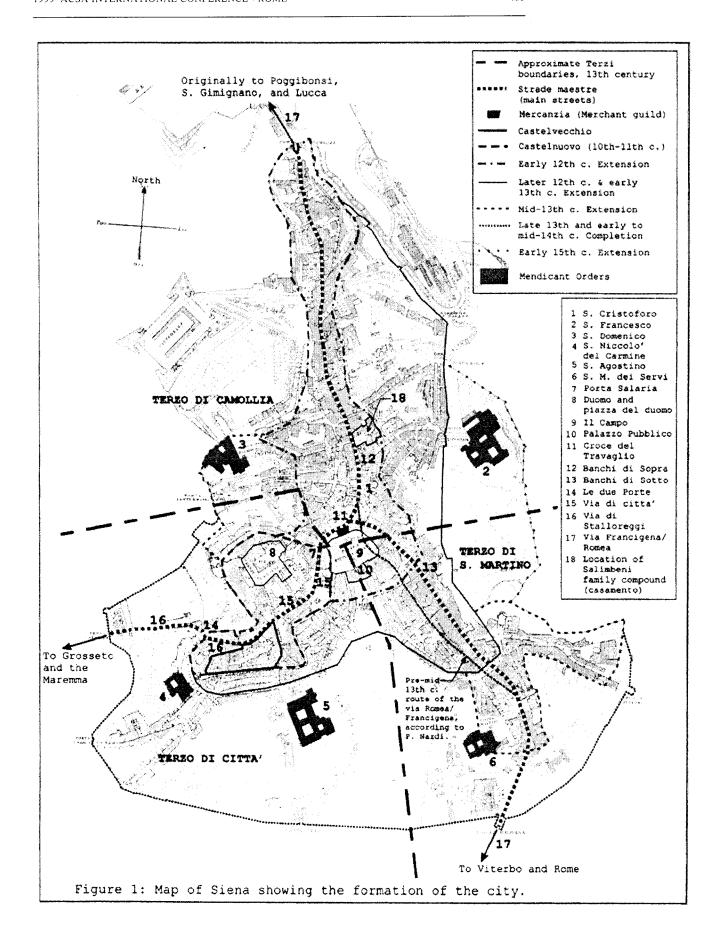
The government of the *Ventiquattro* had enduring consequences. The first is that they formalized the city's division into three administrative districts, called *Terzi*, or "thirds." They are the *Terzo di Citta'*, the *Terzo di Camollia*, and the *Terzo di San Martino*, the delineation of which followed the topographic boundaries of the three main ridges themselves and converged at a point near the Mercanzia (Fig. 1). Second, they enacted a policy of fiscal taxation of citizens between 1254 and 1257, and this led to the compilation of a catasto, or a register of the tax districts (*lire*) of the city and its suburbs (*borghi*). This document is known as *Il Catasto di Siena per* 

la Lira dell'anno 1254-57, and it included all of the measurements of the houses, streets, and piazze for the imposition of taxes. <sup>10</sup> The physical re-structuring of the city into the Terzi provided the government with three districts upon which to base their economic analysis of property according to movables (mobile) and non-movables (immobile). With the enactment of the 1254 catasto, however, it is probable that the parish districts (parrocchie) of the church became the contrade, or neighborhoods that formed the solid social structure of the city. In this manner, the original parish church would have provided the religious focus for each of the contrade. <sup>11</sup>

The third primary contribution of the early communal government was the completion of a comprehensive constitution for the commune of Siena, entitled *Il Constituto del Comune di Siena dell'anno 1262*. The first Ghibelline council understood that the regulation of the city and its architecture could play a large role in the enforcement of its power and ambition, and the government lavished much attention not only on the appearance of its public buildings, streets, and *piazze*, but also on private houses for which specific regulations were issued. In other words, in 1262 the council established the fundamental parameters of a building, zoning, and maintenance code to which future governments would contribute.<sup>12</sup> The constitution's statutes represent a deliberate attempt to control the forms of the city, and they embody the communal government's commitment to their new civic ideal.

The most thorough study of the 1262 constitution to date is that of Lodovico Zdekauer. According to his findings, five *Distinctiones* form the body of the 1262 constitution. The first *Distinctio* describes the organization of public offices and statutes relating to the church. The second *Distinctio* describes civil procedures, including the principles of the courts of civil law. The third addresses communal jurisprudence and the city in particular, and the fourth *Distinctio* describes the private interests of the individual. The subject of the fifth *Distinctio* is criminal justice.<sup>13</sup>

For our purposes, the most interesting portion of the 1262 constitution is the third Distinctio. Here, the communal government expresses its desire to control all public works in the city, with particular attention given to the street system. The government did this in an attempt to create a sense of order in a continually expanding city, and to this end, they prescribed rules which influenced the form of the public places. These rules explicitly stated their civic ideal of clean, sanitary, safe, luminous, and beautiful streets and piazze. The communal government believed that the maintenance of these public places was necessary to the well-being of its citizens, while the enforcement of strict building codes forced other independent institutions within the city, including family groups and the mendicant orders, to submit to the sovereignty of the government. In other words, the statutes represented the imposition of a new urban order in an attempt to revise the old city and control the new one. Thus, the founding of this "new city" within the city was most certainly a political act, with accessibility to all parts of the town on the main streets (strade maestre) of utmost importance. These main streets connected once-segregated parts of the city to one another and provided public access to each of the administrative districts (*Terzi*). Furthermore, the primary roads (strade maestre) were the only physical links between the heart of the new city (Mercanzia and Campo), and the various neighborhood and trade districts within the city, the city's gates (porte), and the contado beyond, which supplied the city with its sustenance. Hence, the strade maestre became a fundamental part of the structure of the city. The primary roads, in fact, were crucial to the economic survival of the merchant commune because they were part of a larger, international road system (via Francigena/Romea) which connected Siena to the other cities in Italy and France. Siena could control the portion of this road within the juridical boundary of the city, as defined by the defensive walls and gates, however the physical control of the via Francigena/ Romea near the contado boundaries was a source of conflict between neighboring communes. In addition, accessibility within the city to



the religious and secular *piazze* was of great importance to the communal government, and the *strade maestre* fulfilled this need. Religious and tribunal processions, commercial travel, and military expeditions all either led to or originated in either the *Campo* and/or the *piazza del duomo* (Fig. 1). Both the width and "height," or the horizontal and vertical clearance, of the strade maestre were thus determined by these factors because the street had to accommodate numerous activities, such as clearance for the tall banners and other objects used in the religious and secular processions, the movement of an ox and cart and a nobleman's horse, and the ceremonial military cart (*carroccio*). Evidence of the overall effectiveness of these regulations can be seen today in what was the *Banchi di Sopra/Banchi di Sotto*: overall, the street is free from horizontal and vertical obstruction.

In order to ensure that their vision was carried out, the magistrates enacted laws and levied fines in order to keep the primary streets (strade) and secondary streets (viari) and piazze clean and free from obstruction. The distinction of one type of street from another demonstrates that the government aimed to establish a hierarchy among the public components of the city, possibly in reaction to the once-dominant, inaccessible private family precincts and streets. For example, the statutes prohibited the construction of buildings and arches over the strade maestre (Banchi di Sopra, Banchi di Sotto, and via di Citta'/di Stalloreggi, Fig. 1). They also regulated the distance that an architectural construction could protrude into these primary streets, if at all. This included exterior staircases and overhead galleries and balconies (ballatoi and sporti), all of which were inconvenient to passers by and impeded the flow of commercial traffic and civic procession. Moreover, overhangs (fenestram vel discum) and sales benches from the shops could not intrude upon a street more than half a braccio if the width of the street was six Sienese braccia or less, and upper level galleries and balconies were prohibited. One sees the crowding effect which these elements would have on the nature of a street or piazza in Pietro Lorenzetti's fresco of the Buon Governo (1337-40) in the Palazzo Pubblico. The appearance of these elements does not indicate that the building codes in the statutes failed, but that over-crowded conditions was an ever-present problem in a growing city. The Buon Governo shows that the statutes were meant to address a real problem.

The commune further differentiated between the major thoroughfares (strade maestre) and the minor streets (vie) by prescribing a specific width for each and by specifying finished paving materials and surfaces. The average width of the minor streets (vie) was six braccia (circa 3.50 meters), and the major thoroughfares (strade) had to be at least eight to ten braccia wide (circa 4.70 to 5.90 meters). 14 These dimensions, moreover, follow the standards established by other city-states. The major streets (strade maestre -Banchi di Sopra, Banchi di Sotto, and via Stalloreggi/Citta') were flagged in stone paving, whereas the paving for the minor streets (vie) consisted of brick. <sup>15</sup> According to Zdekauer, the use of bricks for the streets was an innovation of the thirteenth century, and the Sienese were certainly known throughout Tuscany as master pavers; they had even completed the paving for the primary piazza in nearby Perugia. It is evident that no expense was spared in paving Sienese streets and piazze. They were finished with a high quality of brick as specified by the statutes of the constitution, and the governmental regulation of Siena's building materials further ensured quality materials. To attain its goal, the state practiced eminent domain with the power to buy houses and piazze for street improvements, such as the re-structuring of a street feeding into the Campo or the Croce di Travaglio. This was a power which they exercised forcefully throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> In addition, private citizens from each district had to petition the communal council for permission to proceed with any sort of building renovation or street improvement.

Additional methods for street improvements as described in the 1262 constitution include methods for straightening a street by means of a cord stretched from the corner and along the face of one

of the family towers.<sup>17</sup> The new civic ideal called for clean and well-lit streets (*pulcra et luminosa*) in an effort to rid the city of the restricted, dark and curving streets which had resulted from the earlier domination of the walled family precincts. The *via della Citta*' serves as an excellent example of the practical application of the 1262 laws (Fig. 1). It had a width approximating ten *braccia*, was paved in stone, and, from an aerial view, exhibits the quality of rectilinear alignment as explained in the constitution.

The private home and shop owner bore the expense for such beautification, as well as the maintenance of the street adjacent to the palazzo or shop. Only under rare circumstances did the commune fund maintenance. The commune had its own expenses, partially funded by direct (*dazio*) and indirect (*gabelle*) taxation, as seen with the construction and maintenance of its own representative place, *Il Campo*, and that of the church, *la piazza del Duomo*, and all other public works. Though many of the structural changes in the urban fabric were not funded by the communal government, it did enforce the new regulations with the imposition of heavy fines. Either the *Podesta'* or *Capitano del Popolo*, or both, depending on the year studied, enforced the statutes and dispensed the penalty for disobedience.

In conclusion, the streets were maintained for the benefit of everyone by private entities, yet this privately-funded maintenance had to meet specific public standards. Because the commune treated the street as an architectural entity, just as they would a building, this allowed them to prescribe specific building codes, or standards, for the physical control of the street. In this manner, the communal government created and maintained access to all parts of their city and conquered the architectural obstacle formerly posed by the family compounds of the nobility. This demonstrates that these cities did not grow in a haphazard, uncontrolled manner. To the contrary, the communal government consciously and intelligently organized its city to conform to a new civic ideal.

## NOTES

- For a general discussion of Sienese urbanism, see L. Bartolotti, Le citta nella storia d'Italia: Siena (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1983); W. Braunfels, Mittelalterliche Stadtbaukunst in der Toskana (Berlin: Verlag Gebr. Mann, 1951). General histories include J. Hook, Siena: A City and Its History (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1979); L. Douglas, A History of Siena (London: John Murray, 1902); F. Schevill, The History of a Medieval Commune (1909; New York: Harper and Row, 1964); W. Heywood, A Study of Medieval Siena (Siena: Enrico Torrini, 1901); D. Waley, Siena and the Sienese in the thirteenth century (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); W. Bowsky, A Medieval Italian Commune: Siena Under the Nine, 1287-1355 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); E. Sestan, "Siena avanti Montaperti," Bollettino senese di storia patria 68 (1961), pp 29-74. For late medieval Sienese urbanism, see P. Nardi, "I borghi di S. Donato e di S. Pietro a Ovile," BSSP 73-75 (1966-68); D. Balestracci and G. Piccinni, Siena nel trecento: assetto urbano e strutture edilizie (Firenze: Edizioni Clusf, 1977); T. Benton, "Three Cities Compared," In Siena, Florence and Padua, ed. Diane Norman, vol. 2 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995): 7-28; L. Zdekauer, La Vita Pubblica dei Senesi (1897; Bologna: Forni Editrice, 1967).
- <sup>2</sup> C. Pietramellara, *Il Duomo di Siena* (Firenze: Editrice Edam, 1980), p. 21.
- <sup>3</sup> P. Nardi, *ibid.*, p. 59, believes that the *vescovo's* division of the city into *parrocchie* served as the model for *contrade* organization. I fully agree.
- For more on the Sienese *casamento*, see Balestracci-Piccini, *ibid.*, pp. 96-101.
- <sup>5</sup> The first Societas populi senesis was recorded in 1140, see L. Sbaragli, "I Mercanti di mezzana gente al potere in Siena," BSSP

15 (1937), p. 37. For the 1146/7 date see V. Lusini, "Note storiche sulla topografia di Siena nel secolo XIII," *BSSP* 28 (1921), p. 266, note 1; L. Douglas, *ibid.*, p. 22. In 1147 the Lords of Montepescali paid homage, as an act of formal submission, to the church, the bishop, and the commune, see G. Cecchini and D. Neri, *The Palio and the Contrade, Historical Evolution* (Siena: Monte dei Paschi, 1958), p. 15. Eventually the civic meetings took place in the parish church itself, see Previte-Orton, "The Italian Cities till c. 1200," *The Cambridge Medieval History* vol. 5 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929): 210-11; Douglas, *ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

- <sup>6</sup> For the via Francigena/Romea, see V. Lusini, ibid., pp. 239-41; M. Cristofani, Siena: le origini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1979); M. Bezzini, Strada Francigena-percorsi nell'XI secolo fra Siena, Poggibonsi e San Gimignano (Siena: Edizioni il Leccio, 1992); O. Redon, L'Espace d'une cite' Sienne et le Pays Siennos (Rome: Ecole Francaise de Rome, 1994)
- <sup>7</sup> For further information on the contado and masse, see O. Redon, *ibid*.
- See D. Waley, *The Italian City-Republics*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: Longman Group UK, Ltd., 1988), pp. 145-156; D. Waley, *Siena and the Sienese in the thirteenth century*, pp. 114-125. In 1271 the Guelfs return to Siena and forced the Ghibellines into exile.
- Scholars disagree on the dates of the Council of the Bell. According to Armstrong, the council first convened in 1240, E. Armstrong, "The Sienese Statutes of 1262," *The English Historical Review* 42 (1900), pp. 1-19. Both Donati and Cairola, place the dates from prior to 1262 to 1270, see F. Donati, "Il palazzo del Comune di Siena," *Arte Antica Senese* (1904), pp. 311-54; A. Cairola and E. Carli, *Il Palazzo Pubblico di Siena* (Roma: Editalia, 1963). Douglas, *ibid.*, from before 1262 until 1277.
- Sbaragli states that the first tax assessment was made in 1198 and grouped the citizens according to the value of their possessions as *maggiori, mediocri e minori*, see Sbaragli, *ibid.*, p. 36. Bowsky, to the contrary, identifies the 1254 document as the first Table of Possessions, a document of which the Sienese government had ordered teams of surveyors to complete. Unfortunately, a "diagram" of either estimate has not been located. If either of the tax-based "diagrams" had existed, it would have predated that of Talamone. See J. Pinto, "Origins and Development of the Ichnographic City Plan," *JSAH* 35.1 (1976), pp. 35-50; W. Bowsky, *The Finance of the Commune of Siena, 1287-1355* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).
- Originally there were fifty-nine *contrade*, now there are seventeen. These were and are very powerful "neighborhood" organizations; their solidarity should not be underestimated. For the

- contrada, see Balestracci-Piccini, *ibid.*; Cecchini and Neri, *ibid.*; Kees van der Ploeg, *Art, Architecture and Liturgy: Siena Cathedral in the Middle Ages* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1993).
- <sup>12</sup> The *Nove*, or Council of the Nine, was the Guelf government which ruled from 1287-1355, after that of the Ghibelline *Ventiquattro*. They enacted the Statuto dei Viari del 1290, or statutes for the streets, the *Tavola delle Possessioni del 1318/20*, and the *Costituto del comune di Siena volgarizzato nel 1309/10*, all with architectural codes based on those of 1262.
- For the 1262 constitution, see L. Zdekauer, *Il Constituto del comune di Siena dell'anno 1262* (Milano: U. Hoepli, 1897); L. Zdekauer, "Il frammento degli ultimi due libri del piu antico constituto senese, 1262-1270," *BSSP* 1 (1894), pp. 131-5, 271-84; L. Zdekauer, "Le spese di selciatura e di riparazione della via di Malcucinato," *BSSP* 3 (1896), pp. 402-5; Armstrong, *ibid*. Zdekauer believes that the statutes developed from the *brevia* (temporary council meetings/records), such as the *Breves Officialium Comunis Senesis* of 1250, and that the cornerstone of the 1262 constitution was the *Ghibelline* supported Roman Law. For documents after 1250, see V. Lusini, "Siena, R. Archivio di Stato: Inventario degli statuti del comune," *BSSP* 4 (1897), pp. 410-23; S. Borghesi and L. Banchi, *Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte senese* (Siena: Enrico Torrini Editore, 1898); G. Milanesi, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese* (Siena: Onorato Porri, 1854).
- <sup>14</sup> 1 braccio senese = 0.595 meters. For the six braccia dimension, see Zdekauer, Il Constituto del comune di Siena dell'anno 1262, d. III, r. CV. Balestracci-Piccini, ibid., 45, states that the strade maestre were 8-10 Sienese bracci, whereas Zdekauer states that they were 10-12 Sienese bracci, L. Zdekauer, La Vita Pubblica dei Senesi, p. 29.
- L. Zdekauer, Il Constituto del comune di Siena dell'anno 1262, d. III, r. LXXIX; Balestracci-Piccinni, ibid., pp. 41-2.
- For a fourteenth century example on the *Campo*, see F. Toker, "Gothic Architecture by Remote Control: An Illustrated Building Contract of 1340," *Art Bulletin* 67.1 (1985), pp. 67-94.
- <sup>17</sup> L. Zdekauer, *Il Constituto del comune di Siena dell'anno 1262*, d. III, r. LXX; Balestraccini-Piccinni, *ibid.*, pp. 46-7 for another full description of "al cordam"; L. Zdekauer, *La Vita Pubblica dei Senesi*, pp. 29-30 for "la strata recta linea".
- <sup>18</sup> L. Zdekauer, La Vita Pubblica dei Senesi, pp. 37-8; Balestracci-Piccinni, ibid., p. 47, note 24.
- 19 The effect of the statutes on the Campo and the *piazza del Duomo* would constitute a separate study; a fair amount of information is available on both.