

Historic Centre of the City of Pienza

BY JIM SANO



Enea Silvio Piccolomini was born in Pienza in 1405; he became a distinguished humanist scholar before ascending to the papacy as Pope Pius II in 1458. In 1459, upon becoming the pope, he transformed his small hometown village of Corsignano into an “Ideal City” from the Renaissance period. He rechristened the town as Pienza, derived from his papal name, signifying “City of Pius.” Pius II’s ambitious plan to develop the town as his summer court involved building or renovating about 40 public and private structures. These projects included new homes for the cardinals in his papal group and the construction of 12 houses for the local people near the walls and Porta al Giglio. Pienza holds historical significance as the first place to implement Renaissance town-planning concepts. It was essential in developing the planned “ideal city” concept and was fundamental to advancing urban design. It was the first place Renaissance Humanist principles were applied to urban development in Italy and beyond. These influences are evident in the design of the Pienza Cathedral, which showcases a fusion of late Gothic and pure Renaissance styles in its interior and exterior, along with a bell tower that amalgamates Gothic and Renaissance forms. Under his guidance, the town underwent a significant transformation.

PIAZZA PIO II AND CATHEDRAL

Pius II’s new vision of urban space was realized in the superb trapezoidal square known as Piazza Pio II. The construction of new significant buildings around the square began in 1459. These included the Cathedral, Piccolomini Palace, the Borgia Palace, the Town Hall, and the Ammannati Palace. While the medieval urban plan was largely respected, a new central axis road, Corso Rossellino, was built to connect the two main gates in the medieval wall, which was also reconstructed during this period.

Piazza Pio II is located along the main thoroughfare of Corso Il Rossellino, which runs through the heart of Pienza from east to west. The distance from the town gate of Porta al Murello (also known as Porta al Prato) at the western end of Pienza to the Porta al Ciglio at the eastern end is just 300 meters. Pienza, previously Corsignano, underwent significant changes, with Piazza Pio II at the core of this transformation. This iconic square hosts notable landmarks such as the Cathedral of Pienza, the elegant Palazzo Piccolomini, the Palazzo Comunale, and other impressive monuments from the city’s reformation period. A 15th-century well sits at the heart of the square, symbolizing the area’s rich historical past. As the city expanded over the years, developing new neighborhoods and districts, Piazza Pio II has consistently served as Pienza’s lively hub.

Pienza is famous for its remarkable historic center, designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1996. It is also renowned as an outstanding example of Renaissance architecture. Situated on a hill overlooking the Val D’Orica, approximately 53 kilometers southeast of Siena, Pienza was established by the prominent humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius II. With his wealth and influence, Piccolomini initially transformed his birthplace village, Corsignano, into the Renaissance masterpiece we see today. Pope Pius II enlisted the expertise of Bernardo Rossellino, one of the finest Renaissance architects, to oversee the transformation of his hometown, aiming to bring his vision of an ideal Renaissance city to life. Rossellino integrated the principles of his mentor, humanist thinker and architect Leon Battista Alberti, as well as influences from German philosopher Cardinal Nicolà Cusano and the German Gothic tradition. Rossellino harmoniously integrated his beautifully balanced architecture with the surrounding countryside, which has remained virtually unchanged over the centuries. Pienza is the first and most significant example of an “Ideal City” realized in the Renaissance.



The Pienza Cathedral, also known as the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, is a Roman Catholic cathedral which is considered the ideal city's Renaissance jewel. It was designed by Bernardo Rossellino and consecrated in 1462. It is the square's focal point. Its large windows are strategically designed to flood the interior with light, imbuing the cathedral with an aura of ethereal beauty and tranquility. The architecture represents the early Renaissance style, featuring graceful columns, pilasters, and arches that decorate its façade. The bell tower enhances the cathedral's architectural appeal with its unique Germanic-inspired design. The cathedral's interior serves as a sanctuary showcasing remarkable artworks, including five masterpieces from the esteemed Sienese School. These artworks are prominently displayed near the altar, evoking a sense of awe and reverence. The cathedral's three naves and numerous aisles also exude a serene atmosphere, contributing to its overall ambiance.

THE PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI, situated on the western side of Piazza Pio II, was the former summer residence of the pope. It is located opposite the Palazzo Borgia/Palazzo Vescovile. The building was named after the pope's original surname, Piccolomini. It is considered the most beautiful and important of the three main buildings in the center of Pienza. The majestic three-story palace features papal apartments, a captivating internal courtyard providing a peaceful respite from the outside world, an elegant triple-tiered loggia, graceful arches, detailed stonework, and a Renaissance Garden with views of the Val d'Orcia. Built-in 1459, the renowned Alberti Palace inspired its design in Florence and features a facade decorated with pilasters and windows neatly arranged in each bay. This architectural harmony reflects the balance and proportion typical of the Renaissance aesthetic.



Palazzo Piccolomini

THE PALAZZO VESCOVILE, also known as Palazzo Borgia, was built at the pope's insistence as a residence for the bishops who would travel to Pienza to meet with him. The Palazzo Borgia now houses the Museo Della Cattedrale and the Diocesan Museum, which has a collection of textile works and religious art. The museum features a beautiful painting of Christ in the Church, created in the 7th century, and other impressive paintings and art from various churches in the area from the 14th and 15th centuries. The Bishop's Palace of Pienza is located on the left side of



the Piazza Pio II in front of Palazzo Piccolomini. Pope Pius II donated the ancient Gothic palace to Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia on the condition that he renovate it to fit in with a bold new architectural vision. The cardinal hired Bernardo Rossellino to design and renovate the palace during the fifteenth century to make it his residence. Later, he became one of the most infamous popes of all time: Pope Alexander VI. The Palazzo Vescovile features a sober Renaissance facade, a slender portal, and two orders of "Guelph cross" windows. On the corner overlooking Corso del Rossellino, you can see the coat of arms of the Borgia family. Inspired by Germanic influences, the late Gothic interior contributes to the architectural splendor of Piazza Pio II, further enhancing the historic charm of the town's center.

THE PALAZZO COMUNALE is the town hall located in the main piazza opposite the Church. Designed by Bernardo Rossellino, the palace features a portico with three arches and a façade crafted entirely in travertine. The palace has a loggia on the lower floor; in 1599 the third floor was constructed. The palace has a brick bell tower shorter than the Church. The interior portico is adorned with graffiti and stone coats of arms representing the various Podestas (Mayors) and Pope Pius II Piccolomini. The Council Room houses a 15th-century fresco from the Sienese school depicting the Madonna and Child with the Patron Saints of Pienza.



Palazzo Comunale

THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO is just a few minutes from the central Piazza. It features a beautiful gothic portal and a gabled façade. The Church is built on the site of an 8th-century church and belongs to Pienza's earlier incarnation as Corsignano. Inside are various beautiful frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Saint Francis and beautifully painted walls by artists of the Sienese School. San Francesco is known to be one of the most important religious places in Pienza. The Church was rebuilt in the 14th century in a Romanesque style with an oculus above the single entrance door and frescoes with scenes from the life of Saint Francis on the internal walls, especially in the apse.



Church of San Francesco

A short walk to the north of the Piazza Pio II is the charming **PIAZZA DI SPAGNA**, which features outdoor restaurants that perfectly capture the essence of Tuscany. This area is home to much of Pienza's beauty, featuring numerous excellent bars and restaurants and several shops selling locally produced Pecorino cheese, which is naturally packaged in hay.



Pope Pius II was baptized in the 11th-century Romanesque parish **CHURCH PIEVE DI CORSIGNANO** on the outskirts of Pienza. It has an unusual round tower and a doorway decorated with flower mythological motifs. A crib is sculptured on the architrave of the side doorway.



South of Piazza Pio II, behind the Cathedral, is a narrow lane called the Belvedere (Panoramic Viewpoint), offering breathtaking views of the classic Tuscan landscapes characterized by rolling hills and majestic cypress trees.



West of the historic center is Piazza Dante. At this point, Pienza becomes more residential and somewhat less Renaissance. A ten-minute walk (600 meters) from the park on Piazza Dante, continuing west, away from the historic center, will eventually bring you to the Pieve di Corsignano. This 12th-century Church predates Pope Pius II and offers further vistas of the Val d'Orcia.

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST IN PIENZA

When visiting Pienza, indulge in the renowned Chianina steaks and the traditional Tuscan pici. This simple yet delicious dish comprises handmade pasta topped with Chianina meat sauce, garlic sauce, and toasted breadcrumbs. Pienza is most renowned for its Pecorino cheese. It is often called the Pecorino capital due to the exceptionally flavorful and aromatic milk produced by a Sardinian sheep breed that grazes in the Val d'Orcia pastures. The key to their milk, and subsequently the cheese from Pienza, lies in the unique combination of herbs that grow in the Valley meadows, particularly in the famous 'crete' clay area known as the Crete Senese. Be sure to try the Pienza pecorino, a delightful hard cheese crafted from sheep's milk and aged in small wine barrels. Pienza's historic center is captivating, boasting a rich history and meticulous attention to detail. The surrounding Val d'Orcia only adds to the magic with its breathtaking scenic beauty that will surely capture your heart. ☐



Old walls in Pienza



Sunny and colorful Pienza