

PREFACE

Siena is one of the best-loved cities in Italy, in Europe, in the world. It offers a vision of medieval civic perfection: narrow, enfolding brick streets curving along airy hillsides, all leading in the end to the great brick-paved slope of the Piazza del Campo, the great town square with its soaring belltower, and the bright water of Fonte Gaia rippling sunlight up on the carved marble of its walls. This feeling of having entered a place sustained by a benign past is nourished by the absence of cars, largely kept out of the city centre, which in itself gives one the feeling of returning to a quieter, simpler world. It is a city to be explored at a walking pace; the narrow streets lined with tall brick houses provoke surprise and discovery; emerging into a sunlit square, with a neighbourhood restaurant adorned with pots of geranium and basil, and a decorative ceramic panel with the symbol of one of the seventeen contrade on the wall at the corner. Or you come upon a church you never remember seeing before, like the breathtaking glimpse of Santa Maria in Provenzano seen down the narrow slope of the Via Luchenni, baroque stone and sunlight at the end of the shadowy street. Siena is a wonderful place to get slightly lost in. Although the overwhelming impression which any visitor receives is of an astonishing concentration of art and architecture from the late middle ages, there are also subtle survivors from the renaissance, baroque and romantic eras. Few who have come upon them will forget the sense of personal discovery which accompanied, for example, the realization that the four statues on the renaissance triumphal arch which frames the altar of the Piccolomini chapel in the cathedral are little-known early works of Michelangelo. Or that one of Pinturicchio's scenes in the Piccolomini library attached to the cathedral shows an enchantingly Italianized and idealized imagination of the King of Scotland enthroned in a loggia on the shores of the Forth. Or that one of the most complete baroque theatres in Europe is concealed within the venerable structure of the Palazzo Pubblico; or that the church of the Santissima Annunciata in the great hospital of Santa Maria della Scala has an east wall frescoed with Christ at the pool of Bethesda, the whole fresco a virtuoso exercise in perspective and illusion, a towering vision of great colonnades and sunny hillside temples. And as the Via Enea Silvio Piccolomini approaches the Porta Romana, there are the sphinx-topped gate piers of a shadowy villa garden, and an exquisite neo-classical gazebo or summer house is perched on the boundary wall.

In Siena, none of the streets are straight, because their gently unpredictable curves reflect the topography of the hills on which they are built. Secure between high walls of warm, pale brick, you lose sight of where you have come from without quite being able to see where you are going. But Siena is small, and you can be fairly sure that after another few steps, a slice of the Campo will appear, or the black-and-white flank of the cathedral, or the great, gaunt bulk of San Domenico will show up on the horizon, so that once again, you are oriented. As Hisham Matar observes, Siena is ‘as intimate as a locket you could wear around your neck, and yet as complex as a maze’.¹

The historic centre predominantly consists of brick and stone, a place of warm earth tones. The houses open straight onto the street: Siena is not a place for private gardens, though there is plenty of green space and trees inside the walls. This is one of the most haunting and lovely aspects of Siena’s townscape: the intense urbanity of the Campo is barely ten minutes’s walk from the Valle del Follonica, one of the peninsulas of country which extends into nearly the heart of the city. Climb almost any street away from the Campo, and it will curve up to one of the city’s three hills, and offer sudden vistas of undulating countryside lying open under the sky. Looking out from the Piazza in front of San Francesco, or coming to any of the brick built city gates with their fragments of precious fresco under the arch, a fruitful and lovely countryside stretches away to the distant blue ridges of the hills. It is decorated with rows of cypresses and dotted with olive trees, neat rows of vines, and patches of woodland, a vision of nature which, like the city itself, represents a vision from the past successfully brought forward into the present. This fruitful serenity, eloquent of olive oil, wine and country bread, enfolds the walls and towers of the city. Since the fourteenth century, Siena’s prosperity has depended on its countryside and it is fitting that the two are so intimately related visually. There are only a handful of cities in Europe where the intertwining of town and country is so simply beautiful, and so mutually sustaining.

As many have said, entering through one of Siena’s gates means leaving the world of railway stations and undistinguished suburbia behind, and entering a secret, labyrinthine, medieval world. Many of the handsome palazzi are renaissance buildings, and renaissance in design, as is Pius II’s conspicuous white marble loggia, with its clothes shop tucked into the side of its plinth, but they blend harmoniously in size and proportion with older buildings. Others are more ‘medieval’ now than they were when they were built, as the result of Siena’s continuous dialogue with its own past. This interchange between the contemporary city and its medieval

¹ Matar, p. 50.

self is everywhere: in the archaic and delicious *panforte* in its bright wrappers, the lettering of which evokes thirteenth-century manuscripts. In the ancient dishes still forming a living part of Sienese food, such as the *pasta all'antica Senese* — sausage, leeks, sheeps' cheese, abundant black pepper — whose origins could plausibly stretch back to the time of the Romans. A glance at Lorenzetti's fresco of the well-governed city suggests that in fact, we would find medieval Siena quite hard to recognize, a city of loggias and balconies, not the noble flat-fronted buildings we know now. Some of the façades we know were once adorned with colourful frescoes, and the dozens of towers must have made it feel like a medieval version of downtown Manhattan. Only Monteriggioni and San Gimignano today offer some visual hint of that vertical Siena which has vanished. We might also have some difficulty in recognizing the people. Siena today is one of the safest cities in Europe, but its history is one of violence; not just the attacks of the Florentines and other enemies, but internecine strife between noble families, and the ritualized violence which regularly pitted the men of the city's three divisions against one another in mock battles and lethal games. All that seems now to have been successfully canalized into the ninety seconds of madness which is the heart of the famous Palio.

Although so much of the city of today is the result of a sequence of proud local recreations of a remembered golden age, few visitors today fail to sense in some degree that Siena offers a glimpse of that ideal city which has been a constant human dream since antiquity. It is as though the benign influence of Lorenzetti's *Good Government* fresco, that admonishment to just rule on the wall of the council chamber in the Palazzo Pubblico is powerful still, over the city on its hills and the fruitful land which laps about it.