THE BISHOP AND THE POPE: GIOVANNI CINUGHI, POPE PIUS II PICCOLOMINI, AND ‘PIESCHI’ IN MATTEO DI GIOVANNI’S ALTARPiece FOR SANTA MARIA DELLE NEVI

Leafing through the illustrations -- my habit with new books -- in the excellent Santa Maria delle Nevi a Siena: La Chiesa di Giovanni Cinughi, by Gabrielle Fattorini and two colleagues1, it struck me that that the predella of the quattrocento altarpiece commissioned from Matteo di Giovanni for the bishop of Pienza, Giovanni Cinughi, might express a double meaning: its primary subject matter, the miraculous foundation and subsequent consecration of the great Roman basilica Santa Maria Maggiore, and simultaneously the founding and consecration by Pope Pius II Piccolomini of his cathedral dedicated to Mary in Pienza, to which he appointed Cinughi as its first bishop. I realized on reading further that Gabriele Fattorini had the same idea before me: he writes ‘E quanto alla predella c’è da domandarsi se la figura di papa Liberio non potesse sottintendere una duplice allusione a importanti prelati della Siena piccolominea: lo stesso vescovo Giovanni Cinughi in qualità di fondatore di edificio, ma anche Pio II...’2

But can this intuition be taken further, building on the analyses of Fattorini and Drimaco? I think so. And besides, it’s fun3

Giovanni Cinughi, Pope Pius II and Pienza, and the “pieschi”

The culmination of Giovanni Cinughi’s career was his appointment as first bishop of the newly established diocese of Pienza by Pope Pius II, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, in 1462.4 He served as Bishop of Pienza until his death in 1470.

Pienza was a special diocese, with specially close links to the papacy. It was created by Pope Pius as an essential element of the transformation of his natal town of Corsignano into a small ‘city’ named after himself, which is still today famed for its early Renaissance buildings around a superbly harmonious central piazza focussed on its marvellous new cathedral. Only as the seat of a bishop could Pienza be called a ‘city’. And Pius ensured the original link to his papacy would endure by making the new diocese subject directly to the pope, a rare distinction.5

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1 Santa Maria delle Nevi a Siena: La Chiesa di Giovanni Cinughi, a cura di Gabriele Fattorini con la collaborazione di Benedetta Drimaco (Il Leccio, 2014.) I refer to the book as Fattorini and Drimaco, and to each essay within the book by its author (see References).

2 Fattorini, p. 44. The “piccolominean” interpretation of the altarpiece is explored further by Drimaco (b) pp. 79-88.

3 Images of the altarpiece and a detail of its predella are found at www.renaissanceintuscany.com, under the headings PIENZA -- The Bishop and the Pope; they are © Art Resource Inc.

4 Cinughi’s appointment as first bishop of Pienza was made by Pope Pius’ bull of 1 September 1462 (Chironi p. 20). Properly speaking, Cinughi was the single bishop of the two new dioceses of Pienza and Montalcino, each with a cathedral church, established simultaneously by Pope Pius to be headed by one bishop, whose primary seat in practice would be Pienza with its entirely new cathedral church: see Chironi pp. 17-18.

5 This status of Pienza and the diocese is closely analyzed by Giuseppe Chironi pp. 15-21. The best and most enjoyable source for Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini’s life and career remains his own Commentaries or memoirs (unique for a pope), published in English translation from the Latin; see Commentaries (Gragg) and Commentaries (I Tatti).
Cinughi must have been in the confidence of Pope Pius, probably too of the Piccolomini family, to be entrusted with this project so close to Pius’ heart. At the same time, it is notable that Pius refrained from naming as bishop one of his own family or bearing his family name honorifically, perhaps to forestall criticism but also consistent with the delicate, intricate balance of authority Pius seems to have envisioned for the Pienza cathedral, while ensuring a predominant role for the Piccolomini family as patrons, as analyzed by Giuseppe Chironi. Both Pius and Cinughi were proud citizens of Siena; both were scions of prominent Sienese patrician families; both undertook ecclesiastical careers while maintaining interests in renaissance humanist intellectual pursuits. (Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, of course, was one of the most famous and successful humanists of his day as well as one of the most fascinating historically.) Piccolomini had been Bishop of Siena since 1450, so he had been Cinughi’s ecclesiastical “boss”, before being elected pope in August 1458. As pope, he appointed Cinughi to be Bishop of Chiusi before transferring him to Pienza; indeed, the appointment to Chiusi might have been made with facilitating creation of the future new diocese in mind, since it was established by carving out portions of the dioceses of Chiusi and Arezzo. Cinughi also gained experience as a bishop, and status, which prepared him for Pienza, doubtless while keeping in touch with Pope Pius and their mutual connections.

After Pius’ death in August 1464, Cinughi made a point of emphasizing his role as faithful executor of Pope Piccolomini’s express intentions in the November 1464 establishment of the constitutions for the new Pienza cathedral chapter and the cathedral opera or fabbriceria (governing board of works).

Moreover, Cinughi worked closely with the pope’s Piccolomini family heirs in Siena as well as Pienza. Drimaco (following Chironi) points out that Cinughi maintained his principal residence in Siena, even though an episcopal palazzo had been built in Pienza. Ecclesiastically, Pius’ nephew Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini was Archbishop of Siena; in 1466 he appointed Cinughi to the sensitive role of...
pastoral inspector on the Archbishop’s behalf of all the churches in the Siena diocese.\textsuperscript{11} Civilly, in
Pienza, Pius’ Todeschini Piccolomini heirs, Francesco’s three brothers Antonio, Andrea and Giacomo,
were jointly awarded the great new Palazzo Piccolomini and the Piccolomini lay patronage rights to
the cathedral (although effectively these rights were wielded by Giacomo and Andrea, since Antonio
soon renounced his rights in Siena and Pienza order to concentrate his career in the Kingdom of
Naples).\textsuperscript{12} The Piccolomini brothers played key roles in the patronage and governance of the Pienza
cathedral specifically through Pius’ bull awarding them lay patronage and through the constitutions
established by Bishop Cinughi, as well as through their wealth and unrivaled prominence. Cinughi
evidently facilitated their dominant influence, even beyond Pius’ intentions, for instance by
acquiescing in their chosen appointees to the Opera.\textsuperscript{13}

Cinughi was clearly one of the “pieschi”, that is the friends and close relations of Pope Pius who
sustained his reputation, ideals and works during his life and after his death. In addition to Cardinal
Todeschini Piccolomini (the future Pope Pius III) and his brothers, they included Cardinal Giacomo
Ammanati (probably the leading light of the “pieschi”, and the only one who regularly resided in
Pienza), Gregorio Loli (a prominent Siensese diplomat before Pius called him to Rome as personal secretary to the
pope), the future bishops of Pienza Tommaso del Testa and Agostino Patrizi, the Sienese banker to the
pope Ambrogio Spannocchi and the Neapolitan banker and head of Pius’ papal household Alessandro
Miraballi  -- all of whom had been officially awarded the Piccolomini family name by Pope Pius as an
expression of their friendship and alliance; as well other cardinals closely allied with Pope Pius, such as
Cardinal Niccolò Forteguerri of Pistoia and Siena and Cardinal Berardo Eroli of Spoleto (both
appointed cardinals by Pius), the renowned Greek Cardinal Bessarion, and the outstanding
philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa (who, however, died the same month as Pope Pius in
1464); together with humanist writers and curial office-holders identified with Pius, notably
Giannantonio Campano (made a bishop by Pius) and Lodrisio Crivelli.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{11} Drimaco (a) p.30.
\item\textsuperscript{12} Chironi, pp. 408-409; also pp. 18-23. On the palazzo, see Mack p. 76 (and its footnote, where he quotes the 1463 papal bull extensively). A recent very comprehensive study of the city of Pienza and its architecture is Pieper (2000).
\item\textsuperscript{13} Chironi, pp. 22-25, 407-409. Chironi reproduces as Appendix 3 Pius II’s entire papal bull of 28 August 1462 “con a quale conferisce il patronato sulla Cattedrale, propositura, canonicati, e Opera di Pienza in favore dei Piccolomini Todeschini”; and as Appendix 8 the “Costituzioni capitolari del vescovo Giovanni Cinughi”.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Chironi refers to the Sienese government mobilizing in 1465 the ‘cardinali “pientini” ’ (p. 24), that is Ammanati, Todeschini Piccolomini and Forteguerri, all three of whom were named cardinals by Pius II; Cusa and Bessarion were highly regarded cardinals well before Pius’ election but were among his closest collaborators as pope. For biographies an excellent source is the ongoing Dizionario Biografici degli Italiani, available online through the Treccani publishers at http://www.treccani.it/biografie/ . (I adopt the DBI’s spelling of Loli, although Lolli is also common.)
\end{itemize}
The Cinughi Church of Santa Maria delle Nevi

Bishop Cinughi’s primary legacy was and is his church of Santa Maria delle Nevi in Siena.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the church was begun shortly after Cinughi’s death in 1470 and completed in 1477, in a civically prominent position close to Cinughi’s home, it was enabled by his successful petition to the Sienese governing council (effectively the church’s charter) and was made the primary or “universal” legatee in his will, as carefully explored by Fattorini and Drimaco\textsuperscript{16}. Most probably Cinughi had determined before his death the architect, the dedication of the church to Santa Maria delle Nevi (Saint Mary of the Snows or of the Snowfall), and the main subjects of the altarpiece. Some of this may have been specified in his detailed will, of which only an abbreviated later copy survives, and more expressed orally to his executors who were also to have lay patronage of Santa Maria delle Nevi (as specified in the will, the two senior members of the Cinughi family in Siena: in 1470 probably they would have been two of his three prominent cousins Cino, Checcho and Nello Cinughi\textsuperscript{17}) and perhaps to the first two chaplains of the church who may also been designated by Giovanni Cinughi.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Image of Santa Maria delle Nevi}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{15} This section draws particularly on Fattorini.

\textsuperscript{16} Drimaco (a) pp. 30-32; Fattorini pp. 40-41, 50-51; Fattorini and Drimaco, Appendix 6, pp. 116-119.

\textsuperscript{17} Fattorini p. 41, and Drimaco (a) p. 33.

\textsuperscript{18} The image of Santa Maria delle Nevi on this page is from Wikimedia Commons, by Sailko.
The church’s architecture seems broadly to echo architecture of Pope Pius’ and Cinughi’s Pienza. This is hardly surprising, not only because of Cinughi’s close connections to Pius, the Piccolomini and Pienza, but also because during the 1460s and 1470s Siena itself was marked by grand buildings in similar architectural spirit: the Loggia del Papa at Pope Pius’ own direction, and completion of the civic landmark Loggia del Mercato, the Palazzo Todeschini Piccolomini and Palazzo Piccolomini delle Papesse (for the two branches of the Piccolomini family through Pius’s two sisters), the Palazzo Spannocchi (most ambitious of them all), an important chapel dedicated to the Visitation built by Alessandro Miraballi, and substantial additions to the civic chapel before the Palazzo Pubblico itself.¹⁹

Santa Maria delle Nevi’s facade has a broad similarity to the Pienza cathedral as Fattorini points out, and the main doorway in particular reflects the Pienza cathedral portals closely.²⁰ Fattorini proposes as the church’s architect the outstanding early Renaissance artist Lorenzo di Pietro called Vechietta, a painter, sculptor and probably architect; and it was Vecchietta who had painted the primary altarpiece for Pope Pius’ cathedral in Pienza.

But it is the dedication of Cinughi’s church, especially, which invites parallels with Giovanni Cinughi’s role in connection with Pope Piccolomini and his Pienza cathedral.

The dedication of the church refers to the story of the miraculous founding of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, traditionally the first Christian church dedicated to Mary. Machtelt Israels summarizes the story in his exemplary study of Sassetta’s altarpiece in the Siena cathedral, the prime precedent for Cinughi’s altarpiece:

“The legend of the Virgin of the Snow, the founding legend of Santa Maria Maggiore..., consists of one of the most enchanting Marian miracles. A Roman patrician called Johannes and his wife had no children and, once they got to a certain age, they started to worry about what to do with their patrimony after their deaths. On the night of 3rd August 352, the Virgin appears to Johannes in his dream, declaring that a miraculous snowfall on Mount Esquiline would indicate to him the place where he would edify a church in her glory. Johannes thereupon rushes to the Holy Father, Liberius (352-366) and it transpires ... that Mary has also appeared in a vision to the pope. Subsequently, a messenger arrives from Mount Esquiline to report that a miracle has indeed taken place. Liberius and Johannes together set out for the Esquiline, to find that snow has fallen from the summer sky and has remained unmelted on the hill in the form of the church that has to be built. Liberius humbly takes a spade to reinforce the contours of the plan... The feast of Maria ad Nives has been celebrated on 5th August since its institution by Pope Honorius III in 1222.”²¹

Then, as Israels emphasizes, “The local foundation legend of Santa Maria Maggiore held a fascination that transcended the boundaries of Rome, due to a shifting of accents in its interpretation. Patrons identified themselves with the patrician Johannes and seized the opportunity offered by the legend

¹⁹ Fattorini, pp. 41, 47-49. A comprehensive discussion is Fabrizio Nevola, Siena: Constructing the Renaissance City (Yale, 2007); also by Nevola on the Palazzo Spannocchi in Lawrence Jenkins (ed.), Renaissance Siena: Art in Context (Truman State University, 2005): “Ambrogio Spannocchi’s ‘Bella Casa’: Creating Site and Setting in Quattrocento Siena”.

²⁰ Fattorini, pp. 60-62.

for elegant self-presentations in a variety of artworks.” In Santa Maria Maggiore itself, “The programme” of the great altarpiece by Masaccio and Masolino “seems to be a crystallization of the campaign in [the] name of Martin V to reconstruct Rome and this basilica in particular... The portraits of Martin V and of a cardinal [identified by Israels as Cardinal Casini of Siena] can be detected in the representation of the miracle on the central panel of the altarpiece.”

The potential parallel with Pius II’s campaign in Pienza is evident, all the more so with Cinughi sharing the name Giovanni with the Roman patrician patron of Santa Maria Maggiore (both childless, as well, although Cinughi as a cleric was unmarried). Citing Israels too, Fattorini characterizes Cinughi as “un perfetto ‘ideal snow-patron’, in quanto ecclesiastico, patrizio e onomino del protagonista della leggenda liberiana”.

The immediate and local precedent for Cinughi and his heirs was the chapel and altarpiece of Santa Maria della Neve in the Siena cathedral, the focus of Israels’ study: “The chapel was instituted ... in fulfillment of the last wish that Turino di Matteo [an operaio of the cathedral, that is a member of its governing board of works] uttered at his deathbed... Turino therefore actually stood at the cradle of the chapel, as it were, and tributary references to his life as operaio of the cathedral can indeed be found in Sassetta’s eventual altarpiece. His widow [and heir], Ludovica di Francesco Bertini, ... took the reins in realising the project. With the aid of influential characters such as bankers and wealthy merchants as well as two consecutive bishops of Siena..., she managed to obtain and realize the chapel that she and Turino had wished... Ludovica carefully manipulated the design of the chapel to build an image of herself and her late husband for posterity and their own afterlife.”

Again, the potential parallels are evident with Cinughi’s deathbed wishes, with his heirs and his Piccolomini and “pieschi” allies, and with Cinughi’s church of Santa Maria delle Nevi.

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22 Fattorini p. 43; “ideal snow-patron” is Israel’s phrase p. 135, as Fattorini points out.

23 Israels pp. 101-102; 122; 164-165. See also Fattorini pp. 42-47 on the “Devozione senese per la Madonna della Neve”. Images on the following page of the Sassetta altarpiece of the Madonna of the Snow/Santa Maria della Neve are from Wikimedia Commons; the altarpiece is now in the Contini Buonacossi Collection in the Uffizi, Florence.
The Santa Maria delle Nevi Altarpiece and Giovanni Cinugi

It would be understandable -- almost inevitable, in this context -- if Cinugi and his heirs wanted to draw out these parallels in his altarpiece, in his church of Santa Maria delle Nevi, to memorialize the culmination of his career with Pope Pius and his -- their -- bishopric and cathedral of Pienza.

Moreover, the powerful Piccolomini family and Sienese “pieschi” luminaries would have been well worth flattering by Cinugi and his executors, both his family and his church’s two chaplains, as well as by the painter of the altarpiece. (Renaissance artists always had to be alert to potential patrons, since paintings were generally made for particular patrons, purposes and places, not -- as today -- painted as isolated works of artistic creativity or for galleries to sell).

In fact, the painter -- probably in line with Cinugi’s wishes -- was Matteo di Giovanni, who had painted two of the five altarpieces for the Pienza cathedral (all still in place); one of them, it is generally agreed, was only completed after Pius’ death and hence for Bishop Cinugi; No artists could have been better chosen than Matteo di Giovanni, and his former teacher Vechietta, to understand and express in work for Cinugi, through the story of Santa Maria delle Nevi, subjects and references evoking parallels with Cinugi’s great days associated with Pope Pius II personally and as carrier-out of Pius’ intentions, as well as Cinugi’s association with the Piccolomini family, perhaps beneficiary of Piccolomini patronage. And with Cinugi himself dead, Matteo di Giovanni personally, or with the guidance of “pieschi” close to Cinugi and Pope Piccolomini, might well have introduced references of which he and the “pieschi” of Siena were well aware but which we today must winkle out from hints that contemporaries would have read more easily -- as we shall see.

The main panel of the altarpiece portrays established Christian subjects for worship, suitable for Santa Maria delle Nevi: naturally, since the essential purpose of every altarpiece is liturgical, its essential meanings religious. However, this altarpiece also evokes Giovanni Cinugi’s close connection to his papal patron: a leitmotif, as it were, for the altarpiece as a whole including its predella where the inspiration, founding and planning, and consecration of Santa Maria Maggiore are depicted.

The altarpiece’s main panel depicts the Madonna and Child with angels, as does Sassetta’s precedent altarpiece for the Siena cathedral chapel of Santa Maria della Neve. Delightfully, Matteo di Giovanni has picked up Sassetta’s idea of two angels moulding snowballs and developed it into a whole panoply of more playful angels readying celebratory snowballs, which they actually throw in the predella depiction of Mary’s miraculous snowfall, a wonderfully humorous touch.

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24 Images of the altarpiece and a detail of its predella are found at the end of this little essay; they are © Art Resource Inc.

25 Fattorini makes a similar point pp. 43-44, as does Israels before him pp. 135-136.

26 Drimaco (b) summarizes Matteo di Giovanni’s career prior to the Cinugi altarpiece, pp. 76-79, and provides references to the most recent studies and publications.
-- Saints: Peter (and Paul), John the Evangelist (and Jerome), and Catherine

Mary and the Christ Child are flanked on their right (our left) by Saint Peter, the quintessential papal saint: first pope in Rome and holder of the papal keys to heaven awarded by Christ himself, the keys wielded by all his successors and which Peter holds here too. The emphasis on papal allegiance is reinforced by the image in the predella below of Saint Paul, Peter’s common apostolic companion (including in their joint feast day of 29 June) and papal saint, who (Drimaco points out) holds in his hand en epistle labelled “AD ROMANOS”. In Cinugi’s personal circumstances, it would be natural to see Saint Peter, first pope, as recalling to mind his recent successor Pope Pius II, although this image of Peter is evidently stylized and not a portrait of Pius.

On Mary’s left is Saint John the Evangelist, Giovanni Cinugi’s name-saint, clearly evoking the memory of Cinughi personally. The connection is reinforced by an image in the predella of Saint Jerome: Cinughi had been christened “Giovanni Girolamo”, and no doubt appreciated as well Jerome’s status among humanists as a cardinal doctor of the Church, patron saint of scholars, and representative of early Christianity. Fittingly, here, the Christ Child is gazing at and gesturing toward Saint John and by implication bestowing divine blessing on Giovanni Cinughi.

Kneeling below John the Evangelist is Saint Catherine of Siena. She too embodies a personal connection with Cinughi, whose mother Catherine died only months before Cinughi himself and for whose soul he endowed annual masses in Siena’s Dominican church. Of course Saint Catherine herself was Sienese, immensely popular among her fellow citizens; was a Dominican tertiary and is depicted as usual wearing their robes; was associated with the papacy, too, by playing a traditionally crucial role in the 1377 return of the papacy to Rome from Avignon; and had been canonized by none other than Pope Pius II, on Saints Peter and Paul day in 1461.

-- Saint Lawrence: archdeacon of the apostolic see

Kneeling below Saint Peter is Saint Lawrence, marked out by the martyr’s grill on which he was roasted to death. As Drimaco recognizes, his prominent inclusion is not easily accounted for.

Moreover, I suggest, an explanation of Lawrence’s presence should be strong enough to account for why Lawrence is depicted in preference to a saint much more obviously linked to Cinughi, such as Saint Dominic (since the Cinughi family were buried in Siena’s Dominican church), or especially Saint Peter Martyr for whose chapel in San Domenico Giovanni Cinughi held patronage rights and before which he was buried -- “his” (suo) chapel as it said in his will, making provision for annual celebration there of the feast-day of Peter Martyr as well as of masses to be celebrated the next day for the soul of Cinughi’s mother Catherine.

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27 Drimaco (b) p. 85; referring, of course, to Paul’s New Testament Epistle to the Romans.
28 Drimaco (b) p. 86; Drimaco also points out that Cinughi died on 30 September, 1470, Saint Jerome’s day.
29 Drimaco (b), pp. 82-84, makes similar points, although my reading puts the stress slightly differently.
30 Drimaco (b) p. 84.
31 Drimaco (a) pp. 30-32, and Fattorini pp. 50-51
Drimaco suggests the choice of Saint Lawrence may reflect the two original chaplains of Santa Maria delle Nevi both being named Lorenzo, both apparently nominated originally by Cinughi himself. This seems possible, although one would have expected that the close Cinughi family connection to Peter Martyr and Saint Dominic would have been given preference by Cinughi’s heirs and the lay patrons of his church, indeed by Cinughi himself.

But Saint Lawrence also appears in the predella of the fifth and final altarpiece for the Pienza cathedral, the second by Matteo di Giovanni, which was completed for Bishop Cinughi over a decade before the Santa Maria delle Nevi altarpiece. In fact, this predella is odd one out even in Pienza, for it presents a crucifixion flanked by Saint Ansano, one of the four patron saints of Siena, and Saint Lawrence; whereas three of the four other Pienza pale predella present a half length Christ in pietà flanked by Mary and John the Evangelist, and the fourth a half length Christ blessing in between Mary annunciate and the annunciate angel Gabriel. This fifth altarpiece’s predella is also the only one without Pope Piccolomini’s arms on both ends; instead whatever arms which were in those places originally have been obliterated by a gold wash. These oddities could be accounted for, I suggest, by Bishop Cinughi of Pienza wishing to make his own mark in the final altarpiece, completed for his cathedral after Pope Pius’ death. Drimaco, in fact, suggests that the evident portrait visage of the bishop saint labelled as Saint Martin in this altarpiece could represent Giovanni Cinughi himself, rather than Nicholas of Cusa as suggested by Henk van Os and accepted by Jan Pieper. (I am less sceptical than Drimaco of the resemblance to Cusano, but it is not conclusive; unfortunately we have no portrait of Cinughi to compare.) The missing arms could have been Cinughi’s, covered over by a later bishop or cathedral opera disliking the contrast with the Piccolomini arms everywhere else, or damaged by the lightning which struck the cathedral, particularly affecting this altarpiece. Saint Ansano, reputedly a patrician among the four patrons of Siena, evokes Cinughi’s Sienese loyalty (especially in the context of Pius’ papal successor being unsympathetic to Pius’ associates, reinforcing Cinughi’s reliance on his Sienese connections). Thus, paired with Ansano, Lawrence could evoke Cinughi himself and some special attachment he had to Saint Lawrence.

Why would Cinughi see himself in Saint Lawrence, and again why Lawrence in preference to, say, Saint Peter Martyr? Lawrence is a Roman saint, particularly associated with papal Rome, “the capital of the world and the apostolic see” (in the words of the popular Golden Legend), often paired with his fellow deacon miraculously buried with Lawrence in the early Christian basilica of San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura. But only Lawrence held the “high rank” of “archdeacon of the apostolic see”, according to the Golden Legend. And Lawrence is traditionally associated with faithful service to his
particular pope, as illustrated in the beautiful frescoes by Fra Angelico commissioned from Pope Nicholas V for the private papal chapel in the Vatican palace, dedicated precisely to Saint Lawrence (and which Pius and his close associates would have known well). As deacon of the Roman Church, Lawrence had been personally entrusted by Pope Sixtus II with the treasures of the Church, anticipating the pope’s arrest in an Imperial persecution of Christians. Consistently, the figure of the papal Saint Paul “ad Romanos” appears in the predella directly under Saint Lawrence.

For Cinughi, then, Lawrence could well have represented his own role as faithful servant of his pope, Pius II Piccolomini. This seems to me particularly plausible in light of Saint Lawrence featuring in both Cinughi’s Santa Maria delle Nevi altarpiece and the predella of the fifth altarpiece in Pius’ Pienza cathedral, completed for Bishop Cinughi (and perhaps the cathedral’s Piccolomini lay patrons) after Pius’ death. Consistent with this interpretation, in Cinughi’s altarpiece Lawrence is positioned on Mary’s right, associated with the papal Saint Peter (as well as his papal companion-saint Paul), kneeling in homage to Mary but also, it seems to me, as Peter’s loyal deacon. This portrayal of Lawrence in association with Peter, and the predella image of Paul too, all on Mary’s right may imply a “papal” side of the altarpiece, perhaps, compared to Mary’s left where Cinughi’s name-saint John the Evangelist is associated with Catherine his mother’s name-sake, and in a minor key his second namesake Saint Jerome, all on a “personal” side of the altarpiece, perhaps.

Two details in the portrayal of Saint Lawrence seem to me to strengthen this identification of Lawrence with Cinughi as the pope’s loyal bishop of Pienza. Lawrence’s richly embroidered vestments display two scenes most visibly: centred on his back is the Visitation and, slightly below and aside, prominent on his sleeve, is the Baptism of Christ by Saint John the Baptist. In the Visitation, Mary — newly, miraculously pregnant with Christ following the Incarnation — meets her cousin Elizabeth, who is almost as miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. The event is known above all for the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise for the Lord who “hath regarded the humility of his handmaid [the Virgin Mary]; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed [as Mother of God]; for he that is mighty, hath done great things to me [the Incarnation]; and holy is his name...”. A highly suitable citation for an altarpiece of the Madonna and Child, certainly, and a prayer to be recited in hopes of a patron’s salvation, too: “he hath received Israel his servant, being minded of his mercy...” However, the cathedral of Pienza is in fact — as described by Pius himself — two churches, an upper church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and underneath it a lower church dedicated to John the Baptist: I suggest that, in addition to their religious propriety, the two scenes on the painted Saint Lawrence, archdeacon of the papacy, are meant to evoke Pius’ and Cinughi’s double cathedral of Pienza, held directly from the pope. Indeed, the positioning of the

37 See *Fra Angelico and the Chapel of Nicholas V*, by I. Venci, R.L. Colella, A. Nesselrath, C. Giantomassi and D. Zari, Vatican 1999; notably the contribution by Renate Colella on “The Cappella Niccolina, or the Chapel of Nicholas V in the Vatican: The History and Significance of its Frescoes”, pp. 22-71 and especially pp. 28-29. The first papal chapel dedicated to Saint Lawrence was - and remained -- the famous Sancta Sanctorum in the Lateran Palace, so Saint Lawrence’s papal association was strongly established.

38 *Commentaries* (Gragg) p. 286.

39 At the base of Lawrence’s vestments, toward the centre of the altarpiece, is portrayed an unidentified saint who appears to be an apostle; his image is very close to, and directly underneath, the inscription identifying Matteo of Siena (Matteo di Giovanni) as painter of the altarpiece, “OPVS MATEI DESENIS MCCCCLXXVII”: this apostle is, I suggest, Saint Mathew – another of the diverse deliberate connections between the “literal” saints of the altarpiece and persons (Cinughi himself primarily) commemorated by relevant saints, and hoping for the saints’ intercession.
two embroidered scenes is an exact analogy to the positioning of the facade of the upper church in Pienza relative to the lower church below its apse.

There is, moreover, one oddity in the contemporary accounts of Pius’ Pienza which might hint at a an additional, related reason for Cinughi’s identification with Saint Lawrence, and connect Lawrence to Pienza and Pope Pius. In a lengthy passage praising Pope Pius and his creation of Pienza, Biondo Flavio (the well-known historian and one of Pius’ papal secretaries ) records that “you did something that became the vicar of Christ and the successor of Peter, chief of the apostles, no more than all Christian men. For you began with divine concerns and yourself laid with your own hand, on the feast day of Saint Lawrence, the famous cornerstone of the cathedral you had planned, an act that was fitting work for a Roman pope”. But Pius himself, in his remarkable memoirs or Commentaries, does not mention laying the ceremonial cornerstone of the Pienza cathedral, as surely he would if he had done so in person, for instance during the visit to Pienza he describes in September 1460 on his delayed return from Siena to Rome after the Council of Mantua. It is thought by Mack that Biondo Flavio confused Saint Lawrence’s day, August 10, with the day of Pope Pius’ 1462 consecration of the cathedral, August 29 (the feast-day marking the “decollation”, beheading, of Saint John the Baptist), just as Biondo Flavio in the same passage mistakenly ascribes the dedication of the cathedral to Saint Matthew (who was indeed a principal patron saint of Corsignano-as-was and then Pienza, and whose festivities Pius much enjoyed in Pienza a few weeks after the cathedral’s dedication). Mack’s interpretation is plausible. But might Biondo Flavio instead have been referring in his flattering way to Pius having had the cathedral’s cornerstone ceremonially laid by proxy on a previous Saint Lawrence’s day? In August 1459, for instance, after Pius had left Siena on his way to the Congress of Mantua (although plans would not have been advanced enough for any more than a purely ceremonial event), or in August 1460 (when Pius was not far away, occupied in Siena and at thermal baths nearby receiving treatment for his seriously crippling gout or rheumatism). If so, who better to act in proxy for Pius than a nearby Sienese cleric, a faithful Piccolomini family associate, and (perhaps in Pius’ mind already) future first bishop of Pienza-to-be, Giovanni Cinughi?

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40 Mack, p. 168, translation for Mack by Catherine Castner; the entire passage, in Latin and English translation is pp. 166-170. It is from Biondo Flavio’s supplemental volume to his Italia Illustrata; this volume, of 1462, was dedicated to Pope Pius. Mack’s comments on the passage are in his footnotes p. 225.

41 Commentaries (Gragg) pp. 154-156. Mack (p. 38 and its footnote) cites a record of the Sienese council of 8 May 1459 considering a petition sent by Pius from Florence “informing the Sienese of his intentions ‘for the construction of a temple and house at the town of Corsignano’ [Pienza to be] and asking the government to ‘give license to the architect and supervisor [Architecto et Ordinatori] sent by his Holiness...’ “: very likely Pius had chosen and commissioned his architect, the Florentine Bernardo Rossellino, when in Florence, discussed his basic intentions with Bernardo, and sent him as soon as possible to inspect the building site and begin work, which might suggest a ceremonial laying of a foundation stone and early site planning even as early as that August 1459. Pius was in a hurry! And he did see buildings rising already in September 1460.
-- and Dante?

In addition to its saints, there is one more characteristic of the main panel of the Cinughi altarpiece which might evoke Pienza (though I do not insist upon it!). The Madonna’s golden halo is inscribed with the title, “VERGINE MADRE FIGI[LA DEL TUO FILIO]”. As Drimaco recognizes42, this quotes the initial phrase of Dante’s famous prayer to the Virgin Mary pronounced by Saint Bernard seeking Mary’s intercession for Dante, which begins the final canto of Paradiso, the culmination of his Divine Comedy: “Virgine madre, figlia del tuo figlio... Virgin Mary, daughter of your Son, more humble and exalted than any other creature.“. In addition to its theological and poetic resonance, the quotation in the Madonna’s halo may even recall the Pienza cathedral. Pius’ official papal bulls refer to the cathedral as dedicated “in honorem SS. Virginis Dei Redemptoris nostri genetricis”, in honour of the Most Holy Virgin Mother of God our Redeemer (August 1462) and to “beate Marie Virginis, domini et dei nostri genetrici”, the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of our lord and God (September 1462).43 But, less formally, Porcellio Pandoni’s contemporary Latin poem in praise of Pius and Pienza refers to the cathedral as being dedicated to “Nati filia Virgo paren” -- in Latin, fitted to Porcellio’s poetic metre, this is close to Dante’s ”Virgine madre, figlia del tuo figlio”.44 Pope Pius was a great admirer of Dante whose Divine Comedy, he wrote, “seems to breathe a wisdom almost divine”.45 Moreover, my reading of the cathedral’s facade (in Pienza’s Missing Statues: Insight from a Renaissance Puzzle into a Pope’s World) points out sculpted details which, I suggest, “mobilize Dante’s well-known poetic imagery for the carved imagery in the Pienza facade” -- including specifically imagery from Dante’s prayer pronounced by Bernard.46 Bishop Cinughi and his “pieschi” associates such as Cardinal Ammannati, one of Pius’ closest friends, with his own residence in Pienza, would have known of any Dantesque allusions in the Pienza cathedral. Mary herself, of course, was commonly seen as a figure of the Church; and it seems more than coincidental that directly below Mary in the Cinughi altarpiece is the predella scene of the pope founding a new church in accordance with Mary’s miraculous intercession, a scene in which the pope is central artistically, visually, and significantly.

42 Drimaco (b) p 82.

43 The papal bulls are quoted in in, respectively, Chironi 2000, p. 516; and Pius’ own Commentaries (Gragg), pp. 277 and 280 (Latin original in Heck pp. 553 and 550); and referred to in Johnson 2011, p. 27. As noted there, “Pius does not say the church was dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin; even though that is often and unsurprisingly presumed since the church’s dedication today and traditionally is to ‘Maria Assunta’, and her Assumption is the main subject of the most prominent altarpiece in the cathedral. Nevertheless Pius’ own emphasis was on a dedication to Mary as the Virgin Mother of God”. Ludwin Paardekooper independently had made a similar observation in a footnote to “La diffusione della tavola quadrata nel senese: un influsso pientino o meno?”, in Pio II Piccolomini: il Papa del Rinascimenteto a Siena, a cura di Fabrizio Nevola, Protagon 2009; p. 47, footnote #38.

44 Porcellio’s poem, dated by Mack 1464?, is reproduced in the original Latin and translated into English in Mack 1987, Appendix 1, pp. 170-171; his English translation by Catherine Castner of Porcellio’s Latin is “[Pius] dedicated just such a temple to you, Virgin daughter ande mother of the Son”.


46 Andrew Johnson, Pienza’s Missing Statues: Insight from a Renaissance Puzzle into a Pope’s World, RenaissanceInTuscany.com 2011 [abstract at http://www.renaissanceintuscany.com/pienzas-missing-statues.html], pp. 57-58; specific references to suggested Dantesque allusions in the facade are on pp. 21-23, 33, 37, 49-52.
The Predella: The Founding and Consecration of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, of Santa Maria delle Nevi, and of the Cathedral of Pienza

With the main panel of the Cinughi altarpiece setting the scenes, so to speak, it is the predella which offered scope for illustrating a double interpretation of the legend of the Madonna of the Snows: literally the story itself, of Santa Maria Maggiore, and figuratively a “piccolominean” interpretation (as Fattorini puts it48). In both prominent precedents for an altarpiece of Saint Mary of the Snows, in Rome and especially in the Siena cathedral, just such a strategy was implemented by the artist for his patrons -- and the parallels with Pope Piccolomini’s Pienza cathedral are stronger. There is even a triple interpretation, with Cinughi’s church’s dedication to Santa Maria delle Nevi specifically evoking the Roman dedication legend, but I suggest the predella imagery predominantly evokes parallels between Santa Maria Maggiore’s old legend and Pope Pius’, and Bishop Cinughi’s, new cathedral of Pienza.

The literal story to be illustrated involved the founding through miraculous inspiration by the Virgin Mary, and the planning and consecration by Pope Liberius, of Santa Maria Maggiore as a new papal basilica, funded by a pious Roman patrician as its lay patron. The parallel story is the founding in honour of the Virgin Mary and presumably with her blessing, and the planning and consecration, of the cathedral of Pienza by Pope Pius49, as a papal diocese, patronized by the Piccolomini family patricians of Siena, all closely associated with the new cathedral’s first bishop, Giovanni Cinughi (who may have played an earlier role too, laying the ceremonial foundation stone on Pius’ behalf). Details of the imagery could and would have made this parallel virtually explicit to Siena’s contemporary “pieschi”, I suggest, while emphasizing Cinughi himself, too.

From the outset, the selection of which elements of the legend to illustrate makes this case. The Cinughi predella by Matteo di Giovanni illustrates three scenes, already fewer than the seven scenes of its Sassettta precedent. The four scenes left out are the two visions of Mary appearing to the patrician Johannes and to Pope Liberius, Johannes’ meeting with the pope, and the church under construction (peculiar to the Sassettta pala’s sponsorship by a cathedral operaio). The three common scenes are Mary’s miraculous snowfall indicating where the church should be built, the pope’s confirmation of the plan by his symbolic spadework (a sort of laying of its foundation), and the pope’s consecration of the completed church. Strikingly, the consecration is not part of the original legend, however implicit, but was introduced in the Sassettta altarpiece for the Siena cathedral chapel (as Israels pointed out50). In effect, to concentrate the story for the Cinughi predella, the church’s miraculous and Marian origins which make up most of the original legend are evoked in the single scene of her snowfall (and delightfully so, it must be said!), in order to ensure that the two scenes of foundation and of consecration are emphasized, with as much room for legible details as possible. Artistically, this strategy makes sense; but not coincidentally it is also a strategy for emphasizing parallels with Pienza. Similarly, the church’s founding and consecration are scenes in which bishop

47 A detailed image of the foundation and consecration scenes of the predella is at the end of this little essay; it is © Art Resource Inc.

48 Fattorini p. 44.

49 “pious Aeneas”, as he said himself, quoting and punning from Virgil’s Aeneid: citation

50 Israels p. 102.
Cinughi could play a more prominent part than the original story’s lay patron (perhaps bearing in mind, too, that the Pienza cathedral was funded by Pope Pius from papal revenues, not by the Piccolomini family to whom he assigned their role as lay patrons just before the new cathedral was consecrated).

The three scenes are separated by two small painted classical aedicules enclosing saints related to principal patron saints in the main panel, as pointed out above. The aedicule separating the snowfall and foundation scenes is occupied by Saint Paul, and is positioned immediately below the kneeling Saint Lawrence, with Saint Peter standing; the aedicule separating the foundation and consecration scenes is occupied by Saint Jerome, similarly positioned immediately below the kneeling Saint Catherine of Siena, with Saint John the Evangelist standing.

Observation

--- Snowfall

The first scene, on the left side as we face the altarpiece, is of the miraculous snowfall bestowed by the Virgin Mary upon the Esquiline Hill of Rome, surrounded by the city walls (in a delicate coral colour, as if made from Sieneese bricks), strengthened by three towers with a classical city gate on our left. The snow falls gently to form on the ground the shape of of the church to be built in Mary’s honour. Above is Mary herself, with arms outspread and her hands impelling snowflakes to fall from two bowls held by angels; two more angels are spilling snowflakes as well. Two angels behind Mary are in the motion of throwing celebratory snowballs, like gleeful children. It is as if the angels in the main panel have descended to participate in the predella with the Virgin Mary.

--- Foundation

This second and central scene is of the pope using a humble spade (actually more like a hoe) to reinforce and preserve the church’s foundation lines as formed by the fallen snow. Precisely the same city walls make up the background as in the snowfall scene. The pope is richly robed in golden vestments, on his head a golden papal tiara. His great cope, lined in black, is held back to allow him to fulfill his holy chore by two prominent clerical figures attending the pope closely. The attendant to the left is a cleric wearing a purple cassock with a red cape round his shoulders, unfastened. The attendant to the right is dressed in black with a black hood lined in a lighter material (it is particularly by his role as close attendant on the pope that he is recognizable as a cleric). He is looking to our right toward three prominent cardinals in full ceremonial dress, each wearing the cardinal’s unique red hat, the galera. The “first cardinal”, at whom the figure in black is looking directly, is gesturing approvingly toward the consecration or perhaps particularly to the figure in black, responding almost as if participating in the foundation. Two other distinct figures, behind and between the figure in black and this first cardinal, also look directly at him; the foremost of the two is another cardinal, although wearing a red cap (biretta) rather than the high ceremonial galera, while the second is a cleric whose head only is shown. The other two of the three principal cardinals stand witnessing the ceremony: one stands out with a black cloak over his rochet and by his full black beard, the other is wearing a black cassock under his white rochet and cardinal’s red cloak. Behind these figures is a...
crowd of witnesses. By contrast, on the left side of the scene, next to the cleric in purple attending the pope, are two well-dressed laymen, one in a long black robe holding a red cap in his hand, bareheaded in respect, and the other, at whom the cleric in purple appears to be looking, is especially richly dressed in gold robes. On the far left foreground are two isolated cardinals in full ceremonial dress, but -- oddly -- looking away from the ongoing ceremony and, to my eyes, seeming more to bewail than celebrate the event.

What is going on here, in addition to the evident ceremonial actions of the pope? We will return to this question after looking at the third scene, because some of the figures re-appear there.

-- Consecration

The third scene is of course the consecration of the church, specifically its high altar, by the pope. It takes place within a completed church, albeit a highly stylized one: it appears to be a triple loggia, within which three steps lead to the altar set before a semicircular niche or apse closing the central arched “nave” of the church. Upon the altar stands a golden or bronze statue of the Madonna and Child. Behind the church can just be seen to its left and right, again, the same walls and classical gate as in the first two scenes.

The architecture of the stylized church deserves close attention: to my mind, it deliberately evokes Pope Piccolomini and Pius’ and Cinughi’s cathedral of Pienza. According to the literal story being illustrated, of course, the church is Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which is a three-aisled basilica; one might see this as consistent with the stylized church portrayed in this predella scene of its consecration. But a basilica has lower side aisles, not three of equal height. However, the Pienza cathedral facade is marked by three arches of equal height, almost as a blind loggia so to speak; and its interior similarly comprises three aisles of equal height -- a characteristic Pope Pius himself specified, so that “It makes the church more graceful and lighter”. In addition, the grand Loggia de’ Piccolomini in Siena, or Loggia del Papa, built in 1462 for Pope Pius, is a three-arched loggia, open at either end. I suggest that the stylized church portrayed in Matteo di Giovanni’s predella is a hybrid of the Loggia de’ Piccolomini and the Pienza cathedral meant to recall both structures to informed contemporaries -- and hence pay tribute to Pius, to Cinughi’s career as Pius’ bishop of Pienza, and to the Piccolomini family who were the cathedral’s continuing patrons (and perhaps Cinughi’s too) as well as one of the most influential families in Siena when Santa Maria delle Nevi and its altarpiece were made on Cinughi’s behalf.

Note:

51 Two of them seem to be women, possibly hinting at Pope Piccolomini’s two sisters.

52 Commentaries (Gragg), p. 287.

53 The Loggia del Papa is inscribed in bold humanist Latin “PIUS II PONT MAX GENTILIBVS SVIS PICCOLOMINEIS” : Pius II Pontifex Maximus [Pope Pius II] for his House of Piccolomini [his Piccolomini relatives, family, lineage].
Images of the Pienza cathedral, © Andrew Johnson; and the Loggia del Papa, Siena, from Wikimedia Commons by Sailko
Within this predella scene’s architecture, the pope stands centrally on the top altar step, wearing exactly the same robes as in the foundation scene, looking towards the Madonna and Child, his right hand gesturing in consecration of the altar. Below and behind the pope (between him and us), on the second altar step, attending closely on the pope and holding back his cope, stands the same cleric wearing black as the figure performing a similar role in the foundation scene (although here we see his arm extending in a red sleeve from his slit cloak, and he is wearing a clerical sort of short cape likely of gold). This figure in turn is gazing back at another trio of cardinals further to the (our) left: they might be the same trio as stood in the second scene at the right side, although here two of them have their backs to us and only one faces us. Further to the left, just at the edge of the church “loggia”, stands a lay figure facing us, wearing a black robe, slit to show red sleeves, with a red cap on his head, holding in his left hand what seems to be a cord or belt. Behind him are barely visible a small group of others. On the opposite side, right of the scene are three lay figures. One kneels at the foot of the altar steps, within the central arch of the church “loggia”, closest to the pope and his attendant in black: this kneeling figure is richly dressed in gold, precisely the same as the lay figure in gold in the foundation scene. The other two are positioned under the outer arch of the church “loggia”, the foremost kneeling in reverence, the other in the motion of removing his red cap and beginning to kneel; neither seems to wear the same clothes as any figure in the foundation scene.

**Interpretation**

The dedication story of Santa Maria delle Nevi and the precedent altarpieces initially suggest that a double or even triple reading of the predella would be plausible, as discussed earlier: the literal story, the parallel with Cinughi’s church, and even more the parallel with Pope Pius’ and Bishop Cinughi’s cathedral in Pienza. The selection of then scenes for the predella reinforces this case.

Evidence emerged from the main panel of the altarpiece, which emphasizes Cinughi’s close connection to the papacy and by clear implication to Pope Pius, setting the scene for predella interpretations along similar lines.

Within the predella, we have seen the stylized, fictive architecture of the church in the consecration scene seems to evoke both the new cathedral of Pienza and the new Piccolomini family loggia in Siena, both built by Pope Pius, much more than Santa Maria Maggiore.

For the literal reading of the predella’s two scenes of church foundation and consecration, of Santa Maria Maggiore, the church of the miraculous snowfall, the primary figures are perfectly legible: Pope Liberius, of course, and as the lay patron Johannes the figure in rich golden robes, the secular equivalent of the pope’s gorgeous golden vestments. These two figure prominently in both scenes. Yet the prominence and continuity of several other figures from the foundation to the consecration is striking, figures for whom there are no evident equivalents in the original, literal story: it seems likely they can be interpreted in terms of the parallel reading.

Here we should recall that while the altarpiece was and is Giovanni Cinughi’s altarpiece, and we can expect that commemoration of his role, his career -- and salvation of his soul -- are front and centre, as is certainly the case in the main panel of the altarpiece, nonetheless the predella is an evocation but by no means an accurate reconstruction of the actual foundation and consecration of the Pienza
cathedral, much less of Cinughi’s church in Siena. And we should recall that, while the altarpiece
was made in memoriam of Giovanni Cinughi and his close relations with Pope Pius, the altarpiece was
painted by Matteo di Giovanni after Cinughi’s death and under the supervision of his heirs and
executors, primarily (presumably) his Cinughi cousins, in the context of a Siena where the Piccolomini
family and illustrious “pieschi” were influential. Perhaps Cinughi’s cousins remained allied to the
Piccolomini as he had been; at any rate the Piccolomini and “pieschi” would have been worth
flattering. One or more of them might also have influenced Matteo di Giovanni’s choice and
arrangement of figures in the predella.

-- The Pope: Pius II

The pope playing the primary role in both scenes surely represents not only Pope Liberius at Santa
Maria Maggiore but also, in the context of Cinughi’s career, Pope Pius II Piccolomini founding and
planning and consecrating the cathedral of Pienza, also dedicated to Mary the Mother of God, her
Son. (While his visage is tiny, I fancy his square, plump features might even be meant to evoke Pius’
face.) Papal foundation and consecration of Cinughi’s church in Siena never took place, of course,
but conceivably its patrons and artist liked to think of it having Pope Pius’ posthumous blessing.

-- The Pope’s Closest Attendant: Giovanni Cinughi

The clerical figure in black who closely attends the pope in both the foundation and consecration
scenes, the only one who does so, represents Giovanni Cinughi, to my mind. It is very unlikely that
any other personage would be given a role second only to the pope in both scenes of Cinughi’s own
altarpiece, in his own church, and attend the pope -- Pope Pius -- so closely. Fattorini suggests that
Cinughi appears in the second scene (founding and planning of the church) as the other clerical figure
attending the pope closely, the one dressed in purple; but he only appears once, whereas surely
Cinughi would figure prominently as well in the consecration of the church, as its first bishop (albeit
his appointment was formally pronounced three days after the actual consecration). The addition of
the gold cape in the second scene may be meant to indicate Cinughi’s ascension to this higher clerical
status. Thus, again, as with the papal archdeacon Saint Lawrence, Giovanni Cinughi appears as the
pope’s faithful servant, his closest attendant.

-- The Church’s Lay Patrons: Piccolomini and Cinughi

The figure in gold who appears in both the foundation and the consecration scenes surely denotes
the lay patron Johannes in the literal Santa Maria Maggiore reading. But he cannot represent
Giovanni Cinughi personally, despite the obvious resonance of their names, since Cinughi was a cleric,
and bishop shortly after the cathedral’s consecration. Yet in the original story the lay patron plays a
central role, and so too in the parallel reading. I suggest that, consistent with the patron Johannes’
role, this golden figure represents the influential lay patron or patrons of the Pienza cathedral: that is,

54 Fattorini p. 44: he is not explicit, but I draw this inference from his citation of figure 65 in his book, which is a detail of
the foundation scene of the Cinughi predella including the pope and the three figures to the left, but does not show the
pope’s attendant in black whom I identify as Cinughi. It is possible, but seems to me unlikely, that Cinughi is illustrated
not only as the pope’s attendant in black (in the foundation scene and in the consecration scene) but also as the cleric in
purple similarly attending on the pope in the foundation scene.
the secular Piccolomini brothers Andrea and Giacomo, jointly (or perhaps the senior of the two if they were individually distinguished).  

However, while in the consecration scene this golden lay patron appears in a privileged, almost central, position below the altar, in the previous foundation scene he is one of two lay figures standing together, or of three including the cleric in purple attending the pope. What then of the other prominent lay figure in the foundation scene, next to this golden lay patron, who is dressed in black and holds a red cap, looking toward us? Can he be another lay patron, perhaps one of the Piccolomini brothers? The clue, I suggest, is provided in the consecration scene, where it seems to me the same figure reappears, to the left at the edge of the stylized church: discernibly with the same curls although this time wearing his red cap, again looking toward us, still wearing black with slits for sleeves. But here his extended hand is holding forth a cord or belt or belts, uniquely. To my mind we are meant to read this as a “cingulum”, a belt in Latin, or “cinguli” — a pun on “Cinuguhi” — so that he represents the Cinughi lay patronage of the church in Siena, established by Giovanni and exercised by his family heirs and executors (again, here, a single figure representing the two joint lay patrons). A cingulum/cinughi pun is by no means implausible, in light of the subtle humour of Matteo di Giovanni’s altarpiece expressed in angels throwing snowballs and other elements, as we shall see. This reading is reinforced by the adjacent larger figure of Saint Jerome, separated in his aedicule but depicted as gazing downward directly at the Cinughi figure in black holding out a belt, in the consecration scene; Jerome, we saw, evokes Giovanni Cinughi, as his second baptismal name. Hence the same Cinughi figure’s positioning in the foundation scene in close association with the Piccolomini lay patron, who is also the lay patron Johannes of Santa Maria Maggiore. Of course in the parallel Pienza reading, this would unduly elevate a Cinughi role relative to strict history, but then, in a stylized depiction of a triple reading, done for Cinughi and his heirs, why not?

What, then, of the first of those three figures to the left of the pope in the foundation scene, associated with the two lay patron figures, that is the prominent cleric attending closely upon the pope, dressed in purple with a short red cape, whose gaze toward the golden lay patron in some sense holds that threesome together? I suggest he represents Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, appointed archbishop of Siena and shortly afterwards cardinal by Pius in 1460 (and who was later pope himself, briefly, as Pius III). In the Siena of the 1470s he was perhaps the most important Piccolomini, above all ecclesiastically. It is likely he would figure in the predella, and seems to me most likely to figure as the close attendant of his uncle the pope, whether or not he had been present historically at the events in question. Moreover, he is wearing a purple cassock, the traditional colour for a bishop, with a short unfastened cape of red, the cardinalate colour; he is bareheaded, with a clerical tonsure. I suggest the intention is to single out Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini as the archbishop of Siena, with the open red cape perhaps recalling his status as a


55 Chironi’s analysis (p. 407-409) points out that the papal bull of 28 August 1462 awarded lay patronage to the Todeschini Piccolomini males resident in the diocese, which in practical terms was exercised by the two brothers Giacomo and Andrea (residence in the diocese apparently having been interpreted to include Siena together with Pienza), since the third brother, Antonio, was resident in the kingdom of Naples as Duke of Amalfi and renounced his rights in 1464, and Francesco, of course, was archbishop of Siena.

56 Cingulum, cinguli; in modern Italian cingolo or cintura, but the older version was cinghio. See the standard Lo Zingarelli: vocabulario della lingua italiana (Zanichelli).
cardinal.\textsuperscript{57} (He may reappear among the cardinals in the consecration scene, as discussed below.) Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini would fit, too, in this threesome of church patrons, gazing toward the golden lay patron representing his brothers jointly. \textsuperscript{58}

\textit{-- Cardinals in the Crowd: “Pieschi”}

What, then, of the crowds and particularly the cardinals prominent in both predella scenes, especially the foundation scene? No doubt they stand as generally admiring witnesses of the pope’s actions, as in the corresponding scenes in Sassetta’s precedent altarpiece (where the foundation scene is particularly crowded with cardinals). They may be seen simply as generic cardinals. Yet I think there is more to be read here, too.

Matteo di Giovanni’s foundation scene contrasts a distinct group or line-up of three cardinals on the right, all wearing the highly ceremonial red galero (a fourth is standing slightly behind them, wearing only a red cap or biretta), backed by a small crowd, offset by two isolated cardinals on the far left. The Giovanni Cinughi figure in black, attending the pope, directs his gaze toward the three cardinals, while they in turn look back at him and the pope, making admiring or approving gestures. But the two isolated cardinals on the left turn away from the pope’s foundation of the new church and seem by expression and gesture to bewail it -- somewhat amusingly, another of Matteo di Giovanni’s gently humorous touches. I suggest the predominant cardinals on the right represent Pope Pius’ supporters and allies, the “pieschi”, distinguished from the isolated, bewailing two who represent the faction of cardinals who opposed Pope Pius and his policies. Without seeking to attribute individual identities to those two cardinals, I suggest that Matteo di Giovanni has satirized them and their opposition to Pius, and contrasts them to Pius’ loyal and more numerous supporters on the right side.

The depiction of one specific cardinal supporter of Pius’ reinforces this reading: the middle cardinal of the right-side threesome, with a full black beard, is very likely identifiable as the renowned Greek Cardinal Bessarion. This is the only predella figure with a beard; Italians and western Europeans were generally clean-shaven in the quattrocento, in contrast to Greeks and especially Greek clerics. Bessarion was well-known as the uniquely bearded cardinal, with a full black beard albeit much greyed in later years. He was probably the most recognizable and most famous of Pius’ close associates, one the pope’s principal allies, thrice candidate for pope himself, prominent and

\textsuperscript{57} An alternative reading, of the three figures side by side in the foundation scene as the three Piccolomini brothers Andrea, Giacomo and Francesco, is not implausible in itself, but would not explain the cord or belt prominently held out by the otherwise same figure in the consecration scene. Also, all three Piccolomini might well have been “de trop” in the Cinughi altarpiece painted under the direction of Giovanni’s Cinughi family heirs and executors.

\textsuperscript{58} An alternative might be Francesco’s predecessor Antonio Piccolomini who was archbishop of Siena 1458-1459, so would have been in office if the ceremonial foundation of the Pienza cathedral took place in 1459; but an altarpiece made in 1477 seems much more likely to feature archbishop Francesco. In point of fact, Francesco’s position was somewhat odd to our eyes (although apparently not to contemporaries). He became administrator of the archdiocese of Siena after the death of the first archbishop in November 1459, being formally appointed in February 1460 with the right to the title and insignia of archbishop; yet, although a cleric in minor holy orders, he was not ordained as priest or as bishop for some forty years, until just days after he was elected pope in 1503, before his formal coronation. In the meantime, the archbishop’s purely liturgical functions were performed on his behalf by an adjunct. See Treccani Enciclopedia dei Papi, article on Pio III (Matteo Sanfilippo, 2000). Also “The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church”, by David M. Cheney, at www.catholic-hierarchy.org ; “The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church” at www2.fiu.edu/mirandas/cardinals.htm . It was only from 1917 that the Church required cardinals to be ordained priests.
influential until his death in November 1472.\textsuperscript{59} I suggest that the posthumous but recognizable portrayal of Bessarion as the middle of three cardinals appreciating the founding of the new church serves three purposes: to alert us again to the parallel “piccolominean” reading of the scene, that of the Pienza cathedral (regardless of whether Bessarion had or had not been present in strict historical accuracy); to pay tribute to a recently deceased major personage in Cinughi’s lifetime, one associated with Pius’ (and probably Cinughi’s) ideals; and to alert us to the identification of his companions in the predella as “pieschi”, whether or not specifically identifiable one by one.

The “pieschi” cardinals accompanying Bessarion might denote the leading Sienese “pieschi” cardinals of Cinughi’s day and of the 1470’s when the altarpiece was made, including, in addition to Archbishop Todeschini Piccolomini, Giacomo Ammannati Piccolomini and Niccolò Forteguerri of Pistoia and perhaps Berardo Eroli of Spoleto (all three appointed cardinals by Pius). But the inclusion of Bessarion implies that the group might well denote more widely Pius’ most prominent cardinal supporters in his lifetime including those who had died before the altarpiece was made: most obviously, in addition to Bessarion, Nicholas of Cusa.

In this context, it is intriguing that the Giovanni Cinughi figure in the foundation scene appears to be looking toward the first of the three cardinals, who is gesturing with his right hand toward the foundation actions of the pope not only in approval but conceivably as if he were encouraging, even guiding, Cinughi and perhaps the pope himself. Was there one of Pius’ cardinals for whom Cinughi had a special regard, personal or ecclesiastical, perhaps in some fashion connected to the Pienza cathedral? We do not know. The only hint, it seems to me, is that if the visage portrayed in Matteo di Giovanni’s second Pienza altarpiece is indeed Nicholas of Cusa (despite Drimaco’s skepticism), then he might be denoted as this “first cardinal”. Cusano’s renown as champion of the papacy in the conciliar struggle of the 1430s and 1440s, as theologian and philosopher, and as proponent of church reform, might have made him a personage admired by Cinughi as well as by surviving “pieschi” of the 1470s (and perhaps by Matteo di Giovanni).

A different visual clue might refer to Cardinal Ammannati, whose personal coat of arms punned on his name with two crossed hands (“mani” -- as on the facade of his palazzo in Pienza). The hands of the third cardinal of the threesome might be read as nearly crossed, although they are not, which could denote Ammannati. On the other hand (so to speak), it is also possible that the vigorous gesture of the first cardinal might be read as emphasizing his hands, too. Given Ammannati’s role as perhaps the most illustrious of the Sienese “pieschi” surviving Pius (and author of a famous letter recounting a dreadful dream of Pius’ death), voluminous correspondent with fellow “pieschi” such as Gregorio Loli Piccolomini, Cardinal Eroli, and Cardinal

\textsuperscript{59} A bearded cardinal might have been a punning reference to Cardinal Barbo, who succeeded Pius as pope (as Paul II); but Paul II had been hostile to Pius II’s legacy and anyway died in 1471, so it seems highly unlikely there would have been any reason for Cinughi’s heirs to feature Barbo as a cardinal in the Cinughi altarpiece.
Todeschini Piccolomini, and regular summer resident of Pienza during and after the bishopric of Cinughi, he is surely one of the cardinal “pieschi” evoked in this foundation scene, and someone else for whom Cinughi and his executors might have had a special regard. 60

Another gently humorous touch, a visual pun, is perceptible in the clerical head just behind and to the right of Cinughi: I propose this is Tommaso del Testa Piccolomini, who followed Cinughi as bishop of Pienza just as he is positioned following Cinughi here, was the serving bishop of Pienza when the altarpiece was made, and whose name simply means “head” (testa -- del Testa was his family name, Piccolomini again an honorific awarded by Pope Pius).

The consecrations scene depicts several figures who appear first in the foundation scene, but distinctly fewer of them. Common to both are the pope, his close attendant (Giovanni Cinughi), the golden lay patron (Piccolomini), and the lay Cinughi figure. But, from the foundation scene, four supporting cardinals and two isolated cardinals, plus the the pope’s second clerical attendant (Bishop Francesco) and the “testa” cleric, all with visible faces, are reduced in the consecration scene to just three cardinals, only one of whose faces is visible to us (with another’s profile barely discernible). The crowd of supporting witnesses backing up the cardinal threesome is much reduced, to a barely visible group at the left edge behind the lay Cinughi figure. Two apparently new lay personages appear, prominently arriving from the right to join the golden lay patron in support and reverence of the pope’s consecration of the new church. 61

All this could well reflect Matteo di Giovanni’s purely artistic choices, to simplify and focus the scene and to fit into the more enclosed fictive church architecture for the consecration. Yet there are perhaps some hints of another reading. The pope’s close attendant (Giovanni Cinughi) looks toward the three cardinals on the left, just as he does toward the cardinal threesome on the right in the foundation scene. Moreover, although two face away from us, the three cardinals in the consecration scene are dressed exactly as are the threesome in the foundation scene (in addition to all wearing the cardinal’s red galera). One with his back to us is wearing a voluminous black cloak over his white rochet and red cassock, just as only Bessarion is wearing in the foundation scene. The other with his back to us (he of barely discernible profile) is wearing a voluminous red cloak over his white rochet and red cassock, just as only the “first cardinal” is wearing in the foundation scene. The one cardinal who faces us in the consecration scene is wearing a red cloak over his white rochet and a black cassock, as does the middle cardinal of the foundation threesome (although so do the two isolated cardinals). It seems possible, I suggest, that the two cardinals portrayed facing away from us denote principal cardinal supporters of Pope Pius who have since died. One is most likely Bessarion (in the consecration scene, he seems to be placing his right foot upon the first step of the altar, as if joining Pope Pius, who had of course died in 1464, and joining Cinughi who died in 1470, two years before Bessarion). The other, in this context, could well denote Nicholas of Cusa (who died within days of

60 The image p. 23 is of the carved arms of Cardinal Ammannati on his Palazzo Ammannati in Pienza (by the author).

61 It is interesting that no cardinal is closely associated with the pope in the predella consecration scene, but only Giovanni Cinughi. This reinforces Cinughi’s status in the altarpiece, of course, and simplifies Matteo di Giovanni’s imagery, but it may also reflect a historical incongruity in the consecration of the Pienza cathedral. Pope Pius himself consecrated the high altar, but (perhaps because of Pius’ crippling gout arthritis) the long dedication ceremonies as a whole were presided over by the senior cardinal, Cardinal d’Estouteville, who might have been a logical candidate for depiction in the consecration scene except that he was the rival Pius defeated for the papacy and notoriously at odds with Pius over papal policies! Better, then, to depict only Cinughi, and not run any risk of appearing to praise d’Estoutevelle.
his old friend Pius), consistent with my tentative reading of the foundation scene. The third cardinal in the consecration scene, the one facing us, could then be Ammannati, still alive and still prominent, well-liked and admired in Siena and in Pienza in 1477 when Matteo di Giovanni painted the Cinughi altarpiece (which would also be consistent with my tentative reading of his almost-crossed hands, “mani”, in the foundation scene); or this cardinal facing us could denote Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, still cardinal archbishop of Siena; or he could represent an amalgam, as it were (similar to the golden patron evoking lay Piccolomini patronage), of the surviving, living “pieschi”, companions still of their great, deceased colleagues. This reading of the consecration scene, of the cardinals with their faces now concealed evoking prominent cardinal allies of Pope Pius who had died before the altarpiece was made, is consistent as well with even Cinughi’s visage portrayed partially hidden from us in this scene, and turned to gaze at the cardinals whose faces we cannot see, perhaps at both, perhaps at Bessarion who is just stepping up onto the altar steps to join Cinughi and at whom the middle cardinal is gazing too.

-- Newcomers

Finally, the two lay newcomers in the consecration scene, on the right: are they simply artistic choices, to balance the composition as generic worshippers in the new church, or do they bear another significance? Certainly they are prominently placed, as the only two figures under the right-hand arch of the stylized loggia-church. They are clearly lay figures and clearly grouped with or follow on from the principal lay patron dressed again in gold, all three joining in reverence as the altar is consecrated by the pope. They are strikingly newcomers, in two senses: first, unlike all the other principals, neither figure appears in the foundation scene (certainly not wearing this clothing, although the faces are merely types); second, they are evidently newly arrived, in some haste, the first having just arrived to kneel behind the principal patron in gold, the second still in the act of removing his cap in respect and beginning to kneel. If more than generic, they could be meant to represent lay “pieschi” contemporaries and members of the extended “house of Piccolomini”, evoked it will be recalled by the inscription on Pope Pius’ Piccolomini loggia, such as Gregorio Loli, Alessandro Miraballi, or Ambrogio Spannocchi, all three of whom were awarded the Piccolomini family cognomen by Pius. But their depiction as “newcomers” seems to me on balance slightly more likely to evoke successor lay patrons of the Pienza cathedral, presumably to come from the Todeschini Piccolomini family resident in the Pienza diocese in the succession established by Pope Pius’ August 1462 bull. As such, one might see them as balanced on the left of the scene by the Cinughi family lay patron of Giovanni Cinughi’s church of Santa Maria delle Nevi, backed by the small group perhaps representing Cinughi family members. Reading the “newcomers” as Piccolomini successors to follow on from the golden patron representing the lay Todeschini Piccolomini brothers, patrons of the Pienza cathedral in Cinughi’s day, might also be hinted at by his position kneeling on the first altar step.

Thus, together under the central arch of the stylized church architecture recalling the Pienza cathedral and Pius’ loggia for “the house of Piccolomini”, we see the late Pope Pius II Piccolomini consecrating the altar of the Madonna, standing on the altar’s top step, assisted by the late Giovanni Cinughi his faithful servant and trustworthy bishop who stands on the altar’s next step, accompanied

62 It may be significant that there are two of them, since the final alternative succession established by Pius’ bull, after the direct Todeschini Piccolomini line, was the two most senior Piccolomini. See Chironi p. 19.
emblematically by the church’s Piccolomini lay patron, kneeling on the lowest step. It seems to me no coincidence that the Pienza cathedral was not only founded by Pope Pius but directly under papal jurisdiction, clerically cared for and under the spiritual direction of its bishop, with lay patronage by the privileged Piccolomini family -- all as established by Pius and by bishop Giovanni Cinughi in the constitutions he implemented following, he emphasized, Pius’ wishes.

**Meanings**

Is this level of detail over-reading and over-interpreting the Cinughi altarpiece predella? Quite possibly so.

And of course we must not forget that the fundamental, predominant meaning of the altarpiece is and was religious: the worship of God and reverence of His Mother the Virgin Mary, through her mediation and that of principal patron saints. Their theological, religious and emotional importance to contemporaries was of the essence. The altarpiece by definition was placed on an altar for the celebration of the liturgy of the mass.

Yet the interpretation of the altarpiece’s main panel and its predella in terms both of the “literal” story of Santa Maria Maggiore and of a parallel reading or readings associated with its patron’s career and person and his close associates or executors, is highly plausible, even inevitable given the story and the precedent altarpieces. The interpretation of the Cinughi altarpiece main panel in those terms seems convincing, through its saints, their positioning and portrayal (even beyond Drimaco’s and Fattorini’s “piccolominean” readings\(^{63}\)). A similar interpretation of the predella holds well, too, and the predella *storia* scenes provide even more scope for the parallel interpretation than the main panel’s relatively static *sacra conversazione*. Principal figures clearly recur in the predella scenes of foundation and consecration of the new church, figures identifiable in the parallel reading as Pope Pius II Piccolomini, Giovanni Cinughi as the pope’s close clerical attendant (his loyal servant, as Lawrence the archdeacon was to his pope), the noble lay patron (the Piccolomini brothers, but with the plausible addition of a lay Cinughi patron figure). Three principal cardinals also recur, or at very least two of them. And I suggest that identification of certain specific personages is likely, such as Cardinal Bessarion and Tommaso del Testa Piccolomini, probably Archbishop Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini and plausibly Cardinal Ammannati, perhaps Nicholas of Cusa -- or were identifiable to Sienese and “pieschi” contemporaries of the 1470s.

However, these particular readings also suggest a more general, overarching interpretation of the predella, consistent with the main panel of the altarpiece: the memorialization of Pope Pius, attended by his loyal servant Giovanni Cinughi and his illustrious “pieschi”, perhaps his anticipated triumph, even if Pius’s work was necessarily incomplete, apparently defeated at his death -- all as Pius’ and Cinughi’s heirs and allies saw it or wished to see it.

The first of the three predella scenes, the miraculous snowfall precipitated by Mary to inspire and direct building by Pope Liberius of a new church in her name, can and should be read, I suggest, as referring to divine inspiration and Mary’s blessing for the new church to be built by Pope Pius -- not

\(^{63}\) Drimaco (b) pp. 79-88; Fattorini pp. 44-45.
only the new cathedral of Pienza but also a new and stronger Church for all believers, with the pope’s leadership. The analogy was well-established: as Bishop Durand wrote in his influential Rationale divinorum officiorum, “Just as the physical building is constructed from a group of stones joined together, so too the Church is spiritually constructed of diverse men gathered together... The material Church thus represents the spiritual”. Durand also points out that this double interpretation is emphasized by the very ceremonies for the dedication of a new church and and consecration of its altar which are evoked by the Cinughi altarpiece predella.

The second, central predella scene, directly under the Madonna and Child of the main panel, the planning and foundation of the new church, expresses not only the foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore, of Cinughi’s analogous Santa Maria delle Nevi, and of the new Pienza cathedral and new diocese involving Giovanni Cinughi as its first bishop-to-be, but also Pope Pius’ efforts in his lifetime to build a renewed, stronger Church, with the support of loyal friends and allies, cardinals, other chief clerics, and believers generally, despite Pius’ satirized, self-interested opponents.

The third predella scene, the consecration of the new church, evokes not only the actual consecration of Santa Maria Maggiore, of Santa Maria delle Nevi, and of the new Pienza cathedral, but also the idealized memory and hoped-for triumph of Pope Pius’ ideals for a new, stronger Church -- inspired by Pius whom the altarpiece memorializes, with new supporters and successors rushing to join the great original and surviving “pieschi” to appreciate what Pius was trying to achieve, to sustain his memory, and perhaps are inspired to continue his work.

In fact, Pius’ objectives as pope were indeed a stronger, more united Church of Christian Europe, in the face of divisive wars and (as he saw it) rulers preoccupied with selfish interests, failing in their greater responsibilities as Christian princes, a Church transformed finally by self-sacrificing leadership to overcome its own too-often greedy, petty “princes” failing in their greater responsibilities too, to restore the Church’s authority and defend Christianity and Europe from the hitherto victorious, advancing Turks -- ideals which, in retrospect, are usually considered illusory (a crusade!? European nations working in concert!? princes who are other than mutually suspicious and self-interested rivals!? a stronger Church just when it was about to be overtaken by ever more worldly popes and later the Protestant revolt!?), and tarnished by Pius’ inevitable personal failings, ironically including reliance on that very group of loyal “pieschi” evoked in the altarpiece, especially the Sienese “pieschi” against whom his successor Pope Paul II railed.

But the Cinughi altarpiece can hardly be expected to reflect these opposing and hostile views. Indeed its authors no doubt felt Pope Pius was vindicated when, only three years after the altarpiece was signed by Matteo di Giovanni, sixteen years after Pius died in sight of his failing expedition to defend Europe, the Turks landed in force in Italy itself, at Otranto; but that is another story.

64 Durand p. 11; also on the dedication of a church see pp. 60-69, on the consecration of its altar see pp. 77-88.

65 Best expressed throughout his own vivid, personal Commentaries, for which these few lines are a very inadequate summary.
An idealized Pius II at Ancona, exhorting his expedition against the Turks. The cypress tree is a common memorial in Italy, and the black birds are probably an omen of Pius’ imminent death. The image is from the fresco cycle of Pope Pius’ life in the Piccolomini Library, Siena cathedral, commissioned from Pintoricchio by Cardinal Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini. From Wikimedia Commons.
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