

A City of Secrets

Presented to the Sphex Club, February 17, 2022

By R. Chambliss Light

Cham Light spoke from the lectern in the sanctuary of St. Paul's Episcopal Church located at 605 Clay St. in Lynchburg, VA.

Cham had invited SPHEX members to sample wines and cheeses from the area of the city in Italy about which his presentation was based before the meeting at 7:00 and also after his presentation in the narthex of St. Paul's. At the end of his presentation Cham said he had done this partly to get members of the SPHEX back in the habit of meeting in person.

Cham's guests were his wife, Edie, Megan Lucas, CEO of the Regional Business Alliance and wife of SPHEX member Tory Lucas, the Reverends Diane and Todd Vie, co-priests of St. Paul's, Sumner Jenkins, organists and choirmaster of St. Paul's and who had prepared the photos and video segments of Cham's presentation and who operated the video and sound system that evening and Cham and Edie's daughter Paige Light who viewed the presentation via Zoom.

SPHEX members who were there in person were Jim Wright, Tory Lucas, John Cook and Billy Hansen.

Since I was invited in to membership in Sphex on Jan. 8, 2009 this is my fourth presentation.

My first three papers were on the acquisition and use of political power, the role of the Virginia Brigade in the War of 1812 led by my ancestor General Joel Leftwich and a review of the U.S. Presidential Electoral College. This evening's paper entitled The City of Secrets may seem a little like a travelogue but there is a more serious underlying issue that under grids this review. The question is how does the city in question have so many internal factions yet also has a very strong unified identity ? And are there lessons we can learn for the betterment of our own community ? Let me admit I am certainly not an expert in sociology or psychology nor am I an expert on the city in question so the issues I review this evening will be phrased more like questions and are subject to commentary by much more expert opinion than myself.

Sumner can you please show the first two photos: panoramic views of Siena

The City in question is Siena, Italy, population of about 55,000, located in the heart of Tuscany. The title of this paper comes from a book published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015 by New York University professor Jane Tylus entitled Siena: City of Secrets. It is excellent. She had a number of interviews and seminars following publication of the book and they are on You Tube if you want to know more details than what I am able to present tonight. The secrets to

which she refers are the many works of art that are not generally open to the average tourist and also the nuances of the Contrada and Palio that are either not noticed by the average tourist or hidden from them.

Siena is built on three hills. Siena has geographic challenges. There is no river present so water came from wells and it was not until the 1910s that an aqueduct was built to provide a dependable water supply. The ancient Etruscans did not think the hills were high enough for a defensible location and the ancient Romans thought the hills were too high to build a town. Therefore, in its early days Siena struggled as a city and it was not until the 11th century that the first walls to protect the town were built. Subsequently there were a total of eight walls built to protect the city, much of them still standing with the last one completed in the 1460s. That so many of walls are still standing makes navigation in the city confusing and difficult.

Sumner please show the next two photos which are views of the campo in Siena about which you will hear more detail later in the presentation.

But before delving in to additional details about Siena a very short lesson in the history of the country we call

Italy is in order. With the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in 476 Italy and really most of Europe fractured into small city states which were very unstable and were almost constantly at war with their neighbors. Italy was basically five or six separate large city states: Naples / the Kingdom of Sicily in the south, Rome in central Italy, The Republic of Venice in the east, Florence in north central Italy and Milan even further north. Some may also include Genoa in this list. There were also many smaller ones.

They were always jockeying for neighboring territory to expand. Sometimes they were aligned with the Pope and sometimes with the Holy Roman Emperor and the French were occasional invaders who complicated things still further. It was not until 1861 that the country that is called Italy was brought together but then only barely.

Even now the country is very divided with Sicily being semiautonomous as is northeast Italy, the area that used to be part of Austria. Sicilians do not even refer to themselves as Italians and refuse to have a bridge built to connect them to the mainland but rather allow a ferry to connect them. Venetians have much the same attitude and their local dialect cannot really be called Italian. No wonder the central government in Rome seems to constantly be in turmoil and chaos.

Siena is between Rome and Florence and its history has been a

centuries long struggle to maintain its identity and heritage. Siena refuses to have a direct link between Rome and Florence so to get to Siena by train you first have to go to Florence then go

south, the Sienese really do not want to make it too easy to visit and be overrun with tourists like Venice and Florence.

I have been to Siena four times, in 2002 and 2007 as a day tripper visiting for a couple of hours going from Rome to Florence and then, intrigued by the famous Palio, for five nights in August 2016 and six nights with our adult children in August 2019.

While I have learned a great deal from these experiences I am more perplexed about the attitude and karma of the city now than I was after my first visit.

As I will detail in my remarks later on in this presentation the City is very divided in some ways but at the same time very unified with a sense of solidarity in other ways. What lessons can we learn from Siena that may be transferable to Lynchburg ?

Siena has a rich history though it has mostly been under the thumb of and in the shadow of Florence which is about 44 miles due north of Siena, Rome is approximately 143 miles south.

It needs to be recognized that the population of Siena though about the same as Lynchburg is much more homogenous than Lynchburg with a much longer shared history and that presumably would help them achieve greater group identity in spite of their internal differences.

Before going in to specific aspects of Siena let's look at a quick timeline of Siena:

8th Century BC: mythical date of the founding of Siena, supposedly by one of the sons of the founders of Rome

30 AD: Romans establish a trading post, Siena eventually prospered based on wool, wheat and salt, some mining and also money lending

4th Century onward Siena was and still is a stopover for pilgrims on the Via Francigena, the 1900 km / 1,181 mile pilgrim route from Canterbury, England to Rome Italy, this contributed to Siena's reputation for hospitality and the establishment of the hospital and the Monte dei Paschi bank,

1125: Republic of Siena established, lasted until 1555 defeat by Florence

11th Century AD: first city wall built, the last and eighth wall was finished in the 1460s

1260: Siena backed by the Kingdom of Sicily defeats Florence at Monteperti, this was a proxy war between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope

1287-1355: most stable political period for Siena which operated as a Republic under governance of The Nine

1348: the plague wipes-out between over 50 % of the population of Siena, going from 42,000 to around 14,000, they never fully recover

1472: founding of the Monte dei Paschi (mount of piety) Bank, originally started as a source of loans so people could avoid private money lenders, considered oldest bank in the world

1479: Siena defeats Florence at Poggibonsi

1551: Siena defeats Florence backed Spaniards

1555: Florence takes Siena after an 18 month siege, Siena is under the thumb of Florence until the establishment of Italy as a country in 1860

1798: powerful earthquake destroys many buildings

1860: Siena liberated from Florence oversight after creation of the new nation of Italy

1910s: 64 km / 40 miles aqueduct built for reliable water supply

1965: Siena becomes the first city in Italy to ban cars from historic center

All great cities have their great buildings, great institutions and great historical figures so let's quickly review some of those of Siena.

The Cathedral in Siena is one of the focal points in the city. It is the most commonly portrayed symbol of the city. It has a long and complicated history with the first written documentation dating to 1136. It is over 291 feet in length, built in colored marble: white from Carrara, green from Prato and pink from Siena. The interior is filled with great works of art. In the second photo you can see the banners of the contrada which we will discuss in more detail later on. The Sienese wanted to make this the largest church in Europe but the plague and direction from the Pope derailed it but you can still see the façade that they started and have preserved.

The Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, which means staircase in Italian, is across from the Cathedral and we know it was built in the 12th century though tradition says it existed even before that time with the first written documentation of it in 1090. It was the oldest hospital in Europe and also one of the largest. It was dedicated to care for pilgrims, the indigent and abandoned babies. It has many beautiful frescoes and other works of art. It became a museum when a new hospital was built outside the city walls. We will be talking about the city's contradas in more detail a little later but when babies are born in the new hospital since it is located outside the city walls a box with dirt from the contrada is placed under the birthing bed so it can be said the baby was born in the contrada of their family.

Monte dei Paschi Bank meaning mount of piety was founded in 1472 and dedicated to helping people especially the poor and pilgrims with loans to avoid private money lenders such as the Medici. For years it was the largest financial contributor to the Palio and other Sienese activities but in the 2016-2017 it became financially distressed and the Italian government had to rescue it. It is still an important force in Siena but not as generous to community causes as before. Latest

figures from 2020 has it as the third largest bank in Italy with 1,368 branches in the country, 11 branches abroad and gross revenue of \$3.4 billion.

These are three of the most prominent buildings / institutions in Siena but what about famous persons ?

Undoubtedly the most famous person in the history of Siena is St Catherine of Siena. Catherine was born in Siena in 1347 to parents in the cloth dyeing business, the second youngest of 25 children. She was a lay member of the Dominican Order. She started to have religious visions at an early age, travelled extensively to share her visions and thoughts, believed she spiritually married Jesus Christ, developed stigmata and died in Rome from constant fasting in 1380 at age 33, the same age as Jesus Christ. Even though she was illiterate she had several priests who acting as scribes wrote down her words of wisdom and other utterances as well as maintained her extensive letters to various church officials and potentates not only in Italy but across Europe. She was very influential in persuading the Pope to leave Avignon and return to Rome. Over 400 of her letters survive and her words have been printed in to three different volumes. Later the Pope sent her to Florence to negotiate a peace between Rome and Florence. The Pope has declared her as a co patron saint of both Italy and of Europe. When she died the Dominican Order in Rome did not want her body to be returned to her home church in Siena so citizens from Siena broke in to the Basilica di Santa Maria sopra Minerva which is right around the corner from the Pantheon where her body had been entombed and in the process of trying to spirit her body back to Siena a struggle ensued and as a result her head was torn-off her body and the rest of her body stayed in Rome. The photos show her body in the glass coffin under the altar in the church in Rome and her head preserved in this glass reliquary in her home church, San Domenico in Siena. There is also one of her feet at the Basilica of John and Paul in Venice, the same church where the majority of Venice Doges are buried. She has also been proclaimed a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, the second woman to have been so honored. There are several excellent biographies on Catherine one of which is entitled Setting the World on Fire, the life of one of the most amazing women ever. Catherine's own published works are still in print.

We previously saw two photos of The Piazza del Campo which is the shell shaped center of the city and which is the site of the famous horse races, the Palio or Banner which is run on July 2 and August 16 every year ad dedicated to Mary mother of Jesus. Each palio is different and there is great artistic competition to be selected for the design. This is the perfect Segway in to the Palio.

Sumner please show the next two slides which are a map of the city showing the different Contrada and also the different shields. The Palio which is sometimes called the Race of the Soul because of its importance to the city's psychic is run in honor of the Virgin Mary who Siena thinks helped them to their victory at Monteperti. It is not clear exactly when the race started but some historians trace them to the 1300s, about the time references exist to the Contrada or subsections of the City. The Contrada or companies seemed to originally been established for

military purposes and in the early days there were battles between them though they have evolved considerably since those early times. There are other horse races in Italy but the ones in Siena are considered the most accurate of medieval / Renaissance times just as Siena is considered one of the best preserved cities of medieval / Renaissance times.

The Contrada of which there are 17, though at times numbered in the 40s, are part of the City government but also are social organizations with their own clubhouse, chapel and museum. Edie and I are wearing scarfs of the Aquila or Eagle which we purchased from the Contrada at their group dinner the night before the race. You can also purchase them in souvenir shops but there are some slight differences and the Sienese can tell the real ones from the tourist version. A child is given a scarf at their baptism tied with a special knot that is the same for all the Contrada, it is never supposed to be untied and they cherish it for their entire life.

We have some great videos which tell this part of the story better than I can and so Sumner if you will play video one, people in the center of the campo I will provide some additional commentary as we move through the scenes.

The Palio is like a college homecoming with natives coming from out of town to visit with family and friends in their Contrada and march around the city singing songs about Siena and their Contrada, this is video number two. All the songs have the same melody and words extolling Siena except at the end when one shouts the name of one's own Contrada.

Video number three is part of the Palio ritual, it is of men waving and throwing flags of their Contrada. All together there are about 600 men in period costumes meticulously designed and maintained in medieval / Renaissance fashion.

Video four is of the race itself. Tons of special sand is brought in to cover the Campo for the races. There are usually about 30,000 spectators in the infield where admission is free and another 20,000 in the stands and in the private rooms on the upper levels. The race itself is three times around the campo, a little less than a mile and takes less than three minutes. There are literally no rules for the race, why should there be ? if there are no rules than no one can not be accused of breaking them. Betting between the Contradas goes on, jockeys are oftentimes bribed and if winning the race is important than almost as important is sabotaging the Contrada that is your Contrada's historical enemy to prevent them from winning the race and hopefully helping one of your ally contradas.

Sumner please play the last video which is Rick Steves giving a summary of the race.

So where does all this travelogue information leave us as to the question as to any lessons we might learn for our own city from Siena ?

I would point-out that Siena is very safe, has very little crime, usually no murders during the course of a year, has very little physical violence even during the Palio and virtually no graffiti.

In closing I would make the following observations and raise the following questions:

We have seen how important the buildings such as the cathedral and hospital are to Siena ? Do we have anything comparable, perhaps Monument Terrace or the Old City Courthouse are our equivalents.

How about important institutions like the bank is to Siena ? Centra Health is certainly a large employer who provides important services to the area. Perhaps BWXT, a leading company in their field which is the only company listed on the New York Stock Exchange headquartered in Lynchburg. I did not highlight the University of Siena. It was founded in 1240 and was the first publicly funded university in Italy. It has about 20,000 students, about half of the population of Siena and is well respected for its schools of Law, Medicine and Economics and Management. What about our own local schools of higher education ?

How about a famous person or persons like St Catherine who could be a unifying and inspiring figure ? Rev. Jerry Falwell ? He is probably too controversial . Ann Spencer ? Perhaps though her profile needs to be raised and while her papers etc. are in good hands at UVA it is a shame the originals are not here. How about John Lynch ? He was the founder of our city, a Quaker and though a slaveholder freed his slaves at his death. Another individual may be actress Faith Price, she was not born in Lynchburg but grew-up here and still has a strong identity with our community. My own choice would be astronaut Leland Melvin who is Lynchburg born and raised and after a successful career has rejoined our community. Are there others I am overlooking, who would be your choice of a unifying and inspiring person ?

The songs are definitely an important part of the psychic / karma of Siena ? Do we have an equivalent opportunity ? Maybe we should consider having a song composed.

How about a shared activity like the Palio ? Perhaps the Bateaux Festival or the various home and garden tours might be leveraged to help unify and inspire our civic pride. In our lives the Ten Miler has come close to that activity but my perception is that it has slipped from that position though my perception might not be correct.

Siena has their Contrada and our sort of equivalents are neighborhoods such as Sandusky, White Rock Hill, Peakland, Fort Hill and so on. What can we do to help these neighborhoods feel better connected as part of the city at large ?

Lynchburg has one asset that Siena does not have: the James River, we have been doing a good job of leveraging that and we need to continue that positive momentum, it may be our biggest opportunity.

I love Lynchburg and central VA more than any other place on earth. My paternal ancestors were among the area's first settlers and I would do anything to keep it moving forward. So we are back to where we started, identifying some aspects of Siena a wonderfully lovely but not perfect

city and asking ourselves what lessons can we learn from them ? I have raised some of the questions, do you have some additional questions ? do you have any of the answers ?

There is also a Facebook page called Sieneese Abroad.