

THE FOUNTAINS OF SIENA

Being a city without a river, Siena has to depend on water from elsewhere. In the Middle Ages, the city arranged to bring water from the hills in underground channels (*bottini*) which emerge in “fountains” (*fonti*) all over the city, from which the citizens drew the water for their needs. The larger ones had three pools feeding into each other; the first and highest one was for drinking water; the next for watering animals and the third for laundry. Water flowing from the third pool then went on to operate mills or irrigate gardens. Many of these fountains were housed in architecturally distinguished buildings. Many fell into disrepair, but quite a few still have water coming into them and a society has been formed for their preservation and that of the *bottini*, called the *Associazione La Diana* (named after a mythical river that was supposed to have run beneath Siena). Someone with time on their hands and a taste for urban walking (they are very spread out) could do worse than go on a fountain crawl.

Fonte Gaia

The best known is the **Fonte Gaia (or Fountain of Joy)** in the Piazza del Campo. The city employed Jacopo della Quercia (c.1374-1438), Siena’s most famous sculptor, to give it a beautiful carved marble surround. Unfortunately, over the years it deteriorated and della Quercia’s work was replaced in 1858 by a replica – although without two of the original naked statues which the prudish 19th century city fathers decided were unsuitable for public view. The battered fragments of della Quercia’s fountain were kept, however, and can now be viewed in the Hospital museum.

The present day Fonte Gaia is now a favourite meeting place for tourists, and also for pigeons which perch on the statues of the Madonna and of the Virtues, Graces and animals that adorn it.



Fonte Gaia in Piazza del Campo (wikipedia)

Fontebranda

There are several fountains with handsome gothic superstructures away from the centre, on the outskirts of the original walled city. **Fontebranda**, the next most famous after the Fonte Gaia, and the most beautiful of the gothic ones, is in the via Fontebranda up the hill from the Santa Caterina car-park, not far from St Catherine’s house. It is said to be the oldest of the fountains, dating back to the 11th century, although the present crenellated building with its ogival arches dates from the

13th century. It was fortified, along with the Pescaia and Follonica fountains, against possible Florentine attack.



Fontebranda

Fontebranda had one of the strongest flows of water and was used by tanners and dyers, as well as more recently supplying a nearby municipal laundry facility and slaughter-house. All traces of the slaughterhouse have disappeared, but the building housing the old laundry or wash-house (below) is still extant (it was still being used in the 1970s), just down the hill from the Fontebranda fountain. Through the locked grills one can see the old wash basins with their stone slabs against which women slapped their washing to loosen the dirt.



The old wash-house

Fonte Nuova d'Ovile

The Fonte Nuova or New Fountain, in via Pian d'Ovile near the Porta d'Ovile, was built between 1296 and 1303 and again has a gothic superstructure, although only part of it remains. It replaced an earlier Fonte D'Ovile, just outside the Porta d'Ovile, the remains of which can still be seen in via Baldassare Peruzzi.



Fonte Nuova d'Ovile



The earlier Fonte d'Ovile

Fonti di Pescaia

The Fountains of Pescaia (always referred to in the plural, perhaps to emphasise their importance in medieval times) are yet another gothic structure fortified after the famous battle of Monteperti in 1260 when the Siennese beat the Florentines and wanted to guard against retaliation. This large fountain supplied the pools in the area of the city where fish (pesce) for the city were reared. It is just off the via di Pescaia, the big by-pass road on the west side of Siena, near the via Martiri Caserma Lamarmora. The original crenellations can still be seen, but are now surmounted by an 18th century structure. It has in recent years been restored and in 2010 the “Museum of Water” (Museo dell’Acqua) opened in it. Visiting the museum is however complicated, as it requires prior notice (ask for information at the tourist office in the Campo). Visits to the subterranean bottino serving the fountain can also be arranged.



Fonti di Pescaia before their restoration



Fonti di Pescaia in 2014

Smaller fountains

There are also a number of much smaller fountains aimed at serving residential areas of the city. The three most accessible are:

- **Fonte del Casato or Fonte Serena**, a typical small fountain, down the vicolo della Fonte off via del Casato di Sotto (the street that leads up out of the south-west corner of the Campo). It is small with a single Renaissance arch, and hidden away down some steep steps – it was so unknown to other than the local inhabitants that the Florentines, after the 1555 siege of Siena, failed to include it on a list that they drew up of all the fountains in the city. It dates to the 1350s. Via del Casato di Sotto is lined with huge palaces which would have had their own wells; the fountain no doubt served chiefly the poorer inhabitants.



Fonte del Casato

- Fonte di San Francesco** is situated off (or rather underneath) via Rossi just before the entrance to the Piazza San Francesco – look for the trompe-l’oeil of a naked woman at a window and go down the street below her window. It is in an area which in medieval times was inhabited by wool and silk workers who would probably have used this fountain. It is in the Contrada of the Caterpillar (Bruco) and a sculpted caterpillar can be seen at the back of the fountain. Children of the contrada are “baptised” into the contrada at the fountain (the habit of baptising children into the contrada seems to be a 20th century invention. The contrada of the Bruco chose to use an existing fountain, unlike most other contrade which built handsome modern fountains (see below). The standing figure represents “Barbicone”, a leader of a local uprising in 1371 and a hero of the contrada.



Fonte di San Francesco

- Fonte del Pantaneto** is in the via Pantaneto (the continuation of the Banchi di Sotto), just below the Logge del Papa. It was built in 1452 in response to a petition from local residents and draws its water from the same bottino as the Fonte Gaia. It heavily restored in the 19th century, now presenting a Renaissance/baroque appearance. The basins are made of marmor giallo di Siena, a rare yellow marble only found around Siena. Like the Fonte San Francesco, it serves as the official fountain of its contrada, the Unicorn (Leocorno).



Fonte del Pantaneto

- **Fonte di San Maurizio or Samoreci:** if one goes far enough down the Banchi di Sotto, it becomes via Pantaneto and finally passes under the Porta di San Maurizio, an old gate in the walls that defended Siena in the 1200s when it was much smaller. In niches just above the gate there are busts of two of the Florentine Medici Grand Dukes who ruled Tuscany in the 15th and 16th centuries, Ferdinand I and Cosimo II. Just beyond the gate, on the right, stands the Fonte di San Maurizio. It dates back to the 13th century. However, it was rebuilt first in the 16th century and then in the 18th century, so almost nothing of the medieval fountain remains. The Medici crest with its pawnbroker's balls dated 1583 has pride of place above the fountain. It is on the old via Francigena, and no doubt pilgrims stopped here for a last good drink of water, both for them and their animals, before leaving Siena on their way to Rome. It also served the people of the local contrada for their water needs. In its rebuilt form, it has only a single basin, but there are slight traces of two further basins, one for laundry and another for watering animals.



Fonte San Maurizio

Contrada fountains

In the 1950s, the different contrade began designating a contrada “fontana” in which the children of the contrada could be given a baptismal initiation on the contrada’s feast day. Most of the contrade commissioned new fountains in a modern style with a sculpture of their symbol – below, for instance, is the fountain of the **Contrada of the Eagle (Aquila)**, which was built on the site of an old drinking fountain.



Contrada fountain of the Eagle

The **Contrada of the Wave (Onda)** has a particularly attractive one figuring it symbol of a dolphin. It is situated just below the church of San Agostino.



Contrada fountain of the Wave (Onda)

The **Contrada of the Porcupine (Istrice)** has its fountain behind the church of San Pietro alla Magione at the top end of the via Camollia. Porcupines were imported into Italy by the Romans and have remained into Tuscany ever since, the the disgust of the farmers as they eat root crops like potatoes. Their quills can quite often be found around Barontoli, and you may see one while driving at night.



Contrada fountain of the Porcupine (Istrice)

These are small decorative fountains (fontane) rather than the utilitarian fonti that provided water to the city in days gone past. Some of the contrade, instead of building a new fountain, adopted an old fonte. As noted above, the Fonte of San Francesco is the fountain of the Caterpillar contrada and the Fonte del Pantaneto is the fountain of the contrada of the Unicorn. The Goose contrada uses the Fontebranda; and the contrada of the Shell uses the Fontana dei Pispini, a medieval fountain near the Porta Pispini. The website below has full discriptions:

www.sites.google.com/site/betsydonnelly/siena'scontradafountains.