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City and Countryside in Siena in the Second Half of the Fourteenth Century

WILLIAM CAFERRO

This article reopens the classic debate about the relationship between the city and the countryside in medieval/Renaissance Italy. It examines city-countryside relations in Siena in the second half of the fourteenth century and compares them with what we know of Siena's northern neighbor, Florence. It argues that Siennese policy was moderate and even-handed and, despite similar pressures, less harsh than that of the Florentines. The difference is explained by the fact that Siena was economically far less potent and thus ever mindful that its own fate was intrinsically linked with that of the countryside.

One of the great issues in the historiography of medieval/Renaissance Italy has been the relationship between the city and the countryside. The basic question scholars have grappled with is whether cities, in their attempt to sustain and support themselves, imposed unduly harsh burdens on their rural lands. Early studies, such as those of Gaetano Salvemini and Romolo Caggese, portrayed the cities as willful oppressors, systematically and ruthlessly exploiting their *contadi*.¹ This view was successfully challenged by Enrico Fiumi in a series of important articles published in the 1950s.² Drawing primarily on the example of Florence, Fiumi showed that the relationship between the city and its countryside was not oppressive but symbiotic, based on mutual dependencies and common interests. The focus of the debate was the period from roughly the late thirteenth century to the middle of the fourteenth century, a period of intensive growth and development of the communes and one of great interest to that generation of scholars.

More recently, as historians have turned their attention to the less elegant, more troubled second half of the fourteenth century, Fiumi's

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¹ Salvemini, "Un comune rurale," pp. 274-297; Caggese, *Classi e comuni rurali*. The most recent manifestation of this argument is in Jones, "Communes and Despots," pp. 71-96.

² Fiumi, "Sui rapporti tra città," and "Fioretura e decadenza," pp. 385-439, 443-510, 427-502. See also Fiumi, *San Gimignano*, chap. 4, particularly pp. 165-168. Fiumi's interpretation of San Gimignano is consistent with that of Florence. Fiumi traced the exploitation argument as far back as the eighteenth century in the work of Pagnini (see "Sui rapporti tra città," pp. 18-19) and later Pohlmann and Perrens. See Pagnini, *Della decima*, vol. 2, pp. 155, 157.

view has been expanded upon and refined. Marvin Becker, although generally accepting Fiumi's model for the earlier period, argued that as a result of the many crises of the second half of the fourteenth century and early fifteenth century Florence began to deal more severely with its *contado*.³ This opinion was seconded by Anthony Molho, who described the era as one in which the Florentines imposed a "harsh and oppressive rule that tended to erode the economic prosperity of the Tuscan countryside."⁴ In the last decade and a half, thanks primarily to the work of Judith Brown and Giorgio Chittolini, a somewhat more nuanced picture has emerged. Their findings indicate that the countryside, or at least portions of it, derived some benefits from Florentine rule.⁵ Nevertheless, the characterization of Florentine policy as essentially an exploitative one remains valid.⁶

The aim of this study is to determine whether the pattern for Florence applies equally to Siena, a city that occupied much of southern Tuscany and whose history was closely linked with that of its northern neighbor. The study will focus on the period from 1362 to 1399, for which there is unusually rich documentation. In particular, the historian is well served by the existence of the *regolatori revisioni*, an extraordinary collection of budgets from both minor and major offices dealing in communal monies.⁷ The period is of additional interest because it was one of great

³ Becker, *Florence*, vol. 2, pp. 181–188. See also Becker, "Problemi della finanza," pp. 433–466; and "Economic Change," pp. 7–39.

⁴ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, p. 24. According to Molho and Julius Kirshner, the establishment of the *monte delle dote* in the 1420s encouraged further exploitation. See Kirshner and Molho, "The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence," p. 436.

⁵ Brown noted that Pescia, a subject town, was taxed less heavily than Florence in the early fifteenth century. Brown, *In the Shadow*, pp. 169–170 (the discussion continues through p. 176; a useful historical introduction to the city-countryside debate is given on pp. xix–xxii). Chittolini has pointed out that rural inhabitants of the *contadi* of subject towns such as Pisa and Pistoia often preferred the centralized rule of Florence to that of their local cities. Florentine rule offered *contadini* the possibility of a "less unequal dialogue." Chittolini, *La formazione*, pp. 309–318 (quote p. 317).

⁶ The comments of Brown and Chittolini do not—and are not intended to—negate the existing hypothesis (only to qualify it). Indeed, the discrepancy is in large part due to differing conceptions of the nature of the Florentine countryside, an issue that I will discuss later in this article and one that needs further study.

⁷ In 1362 Siena initiated the office of the *Regolatori* to review and audit all communal budgets and thereby help effect a more systematic and honest accounting of communal monies. As part of their job, *Regolatori* auditors routinely copied the budgets that they reviewed. These copies have survived and are now contained in 15 as yet uncatalogued registers (*regolatori revisioni*). The registers contain a wide range of budgets until 1563. Despite Giuliano Catoni's plea more than a decade ago for scholars to exploit the riches of this archive, it has attracted little scholarly attention. See Giuliano Catoni, "I 'Regolatori'," pp. 46–70. All the documentary evidence in this paper is from the Archivio di Stato in Siena (ASS). In addition to the *Regolatori* registers, I have also used *Biccherna* (B), *Consiglio Generale* (CG), and *Concistoro* (Conc.) registers. Like the *Regolatori*, these were communal offices in medieval and Renaissance Siena. The *Biccherna* was the city's chief financial organ, functioning much like a modern-day treasury, the *Consiglio Generale* was the city's chief deliberative assembly (sometimes called the Council of the Bell), and the *Concistoro* was an executive assembly, composed of the ruling elite.

political, social, and economic changes in Siena and is generally viewed as a turning point in the history of the city.⁸

Siena has figured prominently in the above-mentioned debate. Both Salvemini and Caggese drew heavily on Sieneese sources to argue their cases.⁹ Caggese devoted a separate lengthy article specifically to the Sieneese situation, which he characterized as exploitative, comparing the city to an "immense tree" that "sucked as far as the extreme limits of the *contado* the life-blood necessary for its exuberant development."¹⁰ Caggese's opinion was then accepted without reservation by Ferdinand Schevill in his larger study of medieval Siena.¹¹ William Bowsky, in his pioneering study of public finance during the era of the government of the Nove (1287-1355), attacked Caggese's view and exposed the earlier historians' factual and interpretive errors.¹² Bowsky argued persuasively that Sieneese policy, though not quite so generous as that described by Fiumi, was neither repressive nor exploitative, but "consistent and realistic."¹³

But did Siena, which faced many of the same crises as Florence in the second half of the fourteenth century, respond by embarking on a similar campaign of oppression of its *contado*?¹⁴ In assessing Sieneese policy, Bowsky focused his attention primarily on the so-called *contado gabella*, comparing the income received from this tax with the overall income received by the commune's most important fiscal organ, the Biccherna.¹⁵ The *contado gabella*, initiated in 1291, was the basic tax imposed on the *contado*. It was a direct tax intended to replace the

⁸ In the period 1362 to 1399 Siena experienced five plagues (1363, 1374, 1383, 1389, and 1399), seven major famines (1368, 1370-1371, 1374, 1383-1384, 1389-1390, and 1391-1393), a serious uprising among the lower classes (1371), and three distinct governments (the Dodici from 1355 to 1368, the Riformatori from 1368 to 1385, and the Priori from 1385 to 1399). In addition, the city was the victim of numerous attacks by mercenary companies, the so-called Companies of Adventure, that traversed Italy in this period. Historians generally agree that these events were decisive in transforming Siena from a vibrant commune in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century to one of secondary importance in the fifteenth century. There has, surprisingly, been little work done on this period. My dissertation was, in part, an attempt to fill this lacuna. Caferro, "Companies of Adventure."

⁹ Salvemini based his observations on legislation involving the town of Rocca di Tintinnano, located in the southeastern section of the Sieneese countryside in the Val D'Orcia. Caggese drew upon laws contained in the Sieneese constitutions of 1262 and of 1309-10. These were edited and published by Ludovico Zdekauer and Alessandro Lisini, respectively. See Zdekauer, ed., *Il costituito*, and Lisini, ed., *Il costituito*.

¹⁰ Romolo Caggese, "La repubblica di Siena," p. 73.

¹¹ Schevill, *Siena*, pp. 229-249.

¹² William M. Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 225-255 (chap. IX); pp. 290-292. More recently Daniel Waley has made brief mention of the issue exclusively with regard to the thirteenth century. He judged the sources for this period inadequate for a meaningful treatment. See Waley, *Siena and the Sieneese*, p. 114.

¹³ Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 254-255.

¹⁴ No attempt will be made to distinguish among the policies of the three regimes that governed during the period of this study. The policies of the three regimes will be treated collectively, as part of the continuum.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239. The Biccherna was the main financial office of the commune.

many individual taxes previously imposed by the city, which had proven both unpopular and difficult to collect.¹⁶ According to Bowsky's figures, the percentage of Biccherna income represented by the *contado gabella* for the period from 1307 to 1354 was, on the average, approximately 12.4 percent, with the highest total of 22 percent reached in 1334.¹⁷ These percentages were seen not as exploitative, but as quite moderate.¹⁸

If we begin by applying Bowsky's criterion to the second half of the fourteenth century, we see that the *contado gabella* now represents a much smaller percentage of Biccherna income. In the period from 1362 to 1399 the *contado gabella* represented, on average, 6.1 percent of Biccherna income, a decline of more than 50 percent from the previous era (see Table 1). The highest percentage for our period was a relatively meager 11 percent reached in 1362. The general trend was one of progressive decline. From 1362 to 1373 the *contado gabella* represented approximately 7 percent of Biccherna income. It declined to 6.3 percent in the period from 1382 to 1389, and dropped to a miniscule 3.9 percent in the decade of the nineties.

Such figures contrast sharply with those uncovered by Becker for Florence. According to Becker, the rural *estimo*, the Florentine equivalent of the *contado gabella*, "accounted for only one-tenth of the republic's income from all direct and indirect taxes" in the third decade of the fourteenth century, but increased to a full one-sixth by the end of the century.¹⁹ To maximize revenue, the *estimo* itself was, shortly after the Black Death, transformed into two impositions: an *estimo ordinario* and an *estimo straordinario*. Income from the tax, which had averaged 30,100 florins in the period from 1336 to 1338, increased to between 41,000 and 50,000 florins at the end of the century.²⁰

In Siena, where the *contado gabella* remained a single imposition, income declined precipitously. Throughout the 1330s the *contado gabella* was set at 48,000 lire, reaching a high of 60,000 lire in 1333.²¹ By the last decade of the century, however, the *contado gabella* had declined dramatically, returning a mere 13,160 lire by 1399.²²

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 238–239, table 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁹ Becker, *Florence*, vol. 2, p. 185.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 185.

²¹ Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 238–239, table 11. These were rates fixed by the government, not actual payments received. There is, however, one instance in which Bowsky was able to uncover precisely what the government collected. In this case the figures reveal that the government collected more than the imposed rate. In 1334, although the fixed rate was 48,000 lire, the commune collected approximately 50,457 lire. I believe, therefore, that it is reasonable to assume that the posted rate of the *contado gabella* corresponded to the actual income derived from it.

²² Archivio di Stato di Siena (ASS) Reg 5 [232r], [251v]. The high for the decade was 17,524 lire in 1397. Reg 5 [145r], [160r].

TABLE I
CONTADO GABELLA AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL BICCHERNA INCOME

Year (semester)	Contado Gabella	Biccherna Income	Percentage of Income
1362	44,350	403,626	11.0
1363 (II)	20,799	244,670	8.5
1364	42,636	650,280	6.6
1365 (II)	16,601	219,867	7.6
1368	30,897	460,374	6.7
1369	28,068	607,601	4.6
1370	29,997	513,469	5.8
1372 (II)	11,488	234,668	4.9
1373	26,886	472,996	5.7
1382	32,000 ^a	453,045	7.1
1383 (II)	19,561	291,105	6.7
1385	48,546	581,203	8.4
1388	18,921	606,017	3.1
1389	29,546	531,853	6.0
1390 (I)	12,031	266,271	4.5
1395 (I)	5,336	190,455	2.8
1396 (II)	14,087	197,649	7.1
1397	17,594	432,045	4.1
1398 (II)	6,749	221,083	3.0
1399	13,160	523,106	2.5

^a This figure does not represent the actual amount collected but is based on a statement in legislation of 1382. See Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, p. 61.

Note: All figures have been rounded off to the nearest lira.

Sources: Archivio di Stato di Siena. For 1362—Reg 2 [26v], [31r], [37v], [49v]; 1363—Reg 2 [135r], [72r], [68v]; 1364—Reg 2 [124r], [118r], [77v], [133r]; 1365—Reg 2 [147], [172v]; 1368—Reg 3 [127v], [122r], [130r], [135r]; 1369—Reg 3 [117r], [137v], [138v], [66r]; 1370—Reg 3 [96r], [108v], [72v], [159]; 1372—Reg 3 [181r]; [183v]; 1373—Reg 3 [207r], [222r], [209v–209r], [225r]; 1382—B 265 [95v]; 1383—B 267 [89r], [94v], [95r]; 1385—Reg 4 [18v], [54v], [58r]; 1388—Reg 4 [179r], [182r], [219r], [219v]; 1389—Reg 4 [238v], [239r], [269r], [269v]; 1390—Reg 4 [294v], [295r]; 1395—Reg 5 [69r], [72r]; 1396—Reg 5 [122v], [124r]; 1397—Reg 5 [145r], [153r], [160r], [171r]; 1398—Reg 5 [222r], [223v]; 1399—Reg 5 [232r], [236v], [251v], [253v].

In any case, I must make clear that the actual percentage of total communal income represented by the *contado gabella* was certainly much lower than the figures indicate. As Bowsky noted for era of the Nine, the Biccherna, although the most important fiscal organ of the city, did not receive all of the commune's income.²³ A certain amount of money was collected by ancillary offices such as the Gabella Generale and the *dogana* of salt. It was retained by those offices and then administered separately. Such practices increased dramatically in the second half of the fourteenth century.²⁴ As a result of the continual crises of the era, Sieneese officials, now dealing in vastly greater sums of money, found it increasingly expedient to rely on a variety of offices to collect and disburse funds. The proceeds of the *dogana* of salt and the gabelle on pasturelands (*gabella dei paschi*) were, as of 1369, assigned

²³ Bowsky, *Finance*, p. 239.

²⁴ This is discussed in greater detail in Caferro, "Companies of Adventure."

exclusively to the repayment of loans.²⁵ Extant budgets for the gabelle on retail wine from the decades of the sixties and seventies show that the proceeds of this gabelle also went frequently to the repayment of loans. We can get an idea of the magnitude of the sums involved from the example of 1370. During this year Siena, like all of Tuscany, experienced a dramatic and ruinous famine. According to the Biccherna budget for the second semester of 1370, when the famine struck at full force, the commune collected 251,000 lire.²⁶ This figure is quite moderate and indeed seems somewhat odd considering the large and extremely expensive purchases of grain the commune was forced to make. The chance survival of the budget for the office of the Biado—the office that dealt specifically with the purchase of grain—reveals, however, that the commune also collected some 275,822 lire directly in that office to buy grain.²⁷ None of this money went to the Biccherna. If we add the income from the office of the Biado to that of the Biccherna, the result is a more formidable and more realistic 526,822 lire. The percentage of overall income represented by the *contado* tax shrinks to 2.8 percent.

CONTADO, COUNTRYSIDE, AND ADDITIONAL GABELLE SOURCES

Based solely on the evidence of the *contado gabella*, it would appear then that the *contado* was not only not overburdened in the second half of the fourteenth century, but was substantially less burdened than in the first half of the century. Unfortunately, however, we cannot, as Bowsky himself noted, judge the total weight of taxation on the *contado* from the *contado gabella* alone.²⁸ Although the *contado gabella* was not, despite its importance, the only tax imposed on the countryside, it is not entirely clear what the other taxes were. There is, to date, no literature on Sieneese gabelle in the second half of the fourteenth century. And despite the richness and detail of the budgets in the *regolatori* archive, it is often difficult to separate taxes imposed on the city from those on the countryside. For one thing, scribes often did not take the care to distinguish between the portion of income from a particular gabelle that came from the city from the portion that came from the countryside. For another, scribes, in their haste, occasionally grouped several gabelles together in a single line, making the proceeds of an individual gabelle indistinguishable from the rest. Gabelles that were farmed to private individuals—a practice common throughout the second half of the fourteenth century—were rarely itemized but were recorded simply as “gabelle sold” without further indication of what

²⁵ Morandi, “L’Ufficio della dogana,” p. 67.

²⁶ ASS Reg 3 [159v].

²⁷ ASS Reg 3 [174r].

²⁸ Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 243–244.

they were. Finally, the commune's administrative practices were often inconsistent in this troubled era. The same taxes were not always collected by the same offices. The gabelle on "bread, wine and meat in the contado," for example, appears in the Gabella Generale budget of the second semester of 1364, in the Biccherna budgets in the late 1370s and early 1380s, and for most of the intervening and following period in no budget at all. This last location—limbo—was unfortunately the residence of many gabelles. In all probability these missing gabelles were used directly to pay back the interest on loans, a common practice in the first half of the fourteenth century and even more common in the second half.

The problem is complicated still further by the unclear definition of the term *contado*. Historians have all too often interpreted the term in a very general sense, to include all the lands of the countryside under the jurisdiction of the city.²⁹ Becker, for one, uses the terms *contado* and *countryside* interchangeably. For Siense authorities in the fourteenth century, however, *contado* had a much more limited and specific meaning. It is likely that the distinction was, as Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber described for Florence, less an issue of legal theory and more one of fiscal practice.³⁰ The towns that were designated as part of the *contado* appear to have been those that paid the *contado gabella*. In addition to these, the Siense countryside also included towns and territories with very different relationships to the city.³¹ The most prominent were the semi-independent towns—what Bowsky once described as "satellite communities"—that maintained nominal independence but accepted the general overlordship of Siena.³² These towns, such as Magliano, Grosseto, and Talamone, were not included in the assessment of the *contado gabella* but instead appear to have paid their taxes directly to the city. They also appear to have paid a *censo*, a yearly fee that was symbolic of their subject status.³³ The countryside also contained the so-called *Masse*, a series of rather densely populated

²⁹ Molho distinguished carefully between the terms in his *Florentine Public Finances*, p. 25, note 5. For the purposes of his monograph, however, he used the term *contado* to refer to "all Tuscan territories not part of the city proper." This, as he well knew, was erroneous. The most sophisticated treatment of the issue is in Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber's *Tuscans*, chap. 2 (see particularly pp. 36–46).

³⁰ Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*, p. 41. I am indebted here to Dr. Andrea Giorgi, who corrected my own erroneous conception of the nature of the Siense countryside.

³¹ The nature of all the relationships is still not entirely clear. For example, the inhabitants of Montalcino, a town southeast of Siena, were granted citizenship in 1361. Other areas were described in communal documents simply as *distretti*, the meaning of which is not certain. There is a need for much research here. A brief discussion for the era of the Nine is in Bowsky, *A Medieval Italian Commune*, pp. 7–9.

³² Bowsky, *Finance*, p. 228.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48. According to Bowsky, the *censo* was a nominal fee paid yearly. Budgets from the second half of the fourteenth century indicate, however, that the *censo* was collected each semester, or semiannually.

communities located just outside the town wall. They were ruled directly by the city.

Despite these substantial caveats, the sources are nevertheless far more plentiful for the period 1350–1399 than for the century and a half preceding it and do offer important insights. We are, for example, particularly well served by the records of 1364. Biccherna and Gabella Generale budgets contain numerous taxes imposed specifically on the countryside, including the tax on notaries “who went to office in the contado,” the tax on oxen in pasturelands, the tax on the baths at Rapolano and Petriolo, and a variety of taxes collected directly from the towns of Grosseto, Paganico, Campagnatico, Magliano, and Talamone.³⁴ In addition, the itemized budgets of the gabelle of retail wine make it possible to isolate the portion of this important tax that came specifically from the countryside. The total income from these various sources was 55,546 lire.³⁵ When added to the 42,636 lire collected from the *contado gabella*, the total taxation of the *contado* was 98,182 lire. This figure represents approximately 13.5 percent of communal income for the period, roughly twice the percentage represented by the *contado* tax alone.³⁶

Our sources are even more abundant for the year 1397. Along with detailed Biccherna, Gabella Generale, and gabelle of retail wine budgets, we also have the budget for the *dogana* of salt. Altogether Sienese authorities raised an additional 38,429 lire beyond the original *contado* tax from these taxes.³⁷ This represented 11.3 percent of overall income.³⁸ Table 2 shows the additional income received from taxes imposed on the countryside for other available years, along with the percentage of overall income it represented.

It is clear that the new percentages, though representing in some cases substantial individual increases, are still rather modest. In most cases they fail to match those uncovered by Bowsky for the *contado* tax

³⁴ The Gabella Generale records for this year are especially detailed. See Reg 2 [123v–124r] (semester I, 1364); Reg 2 [116v–118r] (semester II, 1364). In addition to the gabelle mentioned above, a fairly substantial amount of money also came from the *censi*. One of the taxes collected from the towns of Talamone and Magliano was the so-called *gabella di baratteria*, a tax on the barracks where games of dice were played.

³⁵ The tax on retail wine brought in 10,642 lire from the “contado e comunanze” in the first semester and 12,763 lire in the second semester. Reg 2 [71r]; Reg 2 [128r].

³⁶ Here I include in the calculation of overall income that collected by individual gabelle offices but not turned over to the Biccherna. Of the 107,090 lire collected by the office that administered the gabelle on retail wine, only 27,466 lire went directly to the Biccherna. The rest went to the office of the condotta to hire mercenary troops and repay loans. If we now add this money to the 650,280 lire collected in the Biccherna, the total income is 729,904 lire.

³⁷ Among the taxes collected from the countryside were the gabelle on oxen in pasturelands, a gabelle on grain and wine, and “certain gabelle sold in the contado.” These appear on the Gabella Generale budgets—Reg 5 [145r]; Reg 5 [160r–160v].

³⁸ Here overall income includes, in addition to the 432,045 lire collected by the Biccherna, 55,711 lire from the *dogana* of salt.

TABLE 2
INCOME REPRESENTED BY THE *CONTADO GABELLA* AND OTHER TAXES
IMPOSED ON THE COUNTRYSIDE

Year (semester)	<i>Contado</i> Taxes	With <i>Contado</i> <i>Gabella</i>	Total Income	Percentage of Overall Income	
				Original <i>Contado</i> Tax ^a	Combined Taxes
1364 ^b	55,546	98,182	729,904	6.6	13.5
1365 (II) ^b	15,354	33,292	254,798	7.6	13.1
1368 ^c	21,421	52,318	460,374	6.7	11.4
1369 ^d	35,814	63,882	667,430	4.6	9.6
1373 ^c	11,995	38,881	472,996	5.7	8.2
1395 (I)	10,684	16,020	190,455	2.8	8.4
1396 (II)	3,650	17,737	197,648	7.1	9.0
1397 ^d	38,429	55,021	487,756	4.1	11.3
1399 ^c	16,482	29,642	523,106	2.5	5.7

^a This percentage is the share of *Biccherna* income given in Table 1.

^b Derived from the budgets of the *Gabella Generale*, *Biccherna*, and *gabelle* of retail wine.

^c Derived from *Gabella Generale* and *Biccherna* budgets.

^d Derived from the budgets of the *Gabella Generale*, *Biccherna*, *gabelle* of retail wine, and *dogana* of salt.

Note: All figures have been rounded off to the nearest lira.

alone in the first half of the century. In every case they fall far below those of Fiumi, who, unlike Bowsky, did include in his evaluation taxes imposed on the countryside other than the *contado* tax.³⁹ According to Fiumi's figures, *contado* taxation made up 25 percent of total Florentine income in the 1330s.⁴⁰ This he judged a relatively light burden.

NONGABELLE SOURCES

We have thus far concentrated only on income from *gabelle*. In order to understand the full extent of the financial burden imposed by the city on the countryside, however, we must also consider income derived from nongabelle sources. One of the primary ways medieval Italian communes raised money was through the use of loans. The Sienese government had at its disposal various types of loans, including forced loans (*preste*), voluntary loans, and the so-called *preste a balzi*.⁴¹ These were ideal for gathering large amounts of money to meet immediate needs such as those caused by emergencies.⁴² The turbulent events of

³⁹ Fiumi included, along with the *estimo*, the income from taxes on salt, wine, and contracts imposed on the countryside. Fiumi, "Sui rapporti tra città," pp. 29-30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Preste a balzi* were, in Siena as elsewhere, loans on a specific group. They usually offered special rates of interest.

⁴² de la Roncière lauded loans for their "flexibility and quick results." See de la Roncière, "Indirect Taxes," p. 142.

the second half of the fourteenth century ensured that the Sienese officials would impose these loans in unprecedented numbers.⁴³ The legislation enacting the *balia* of September 1382 mentioned that the great difficulties in recent times had made it necessary to impose a *preste* every month.⁴⁴ During the first two years of the war with Florence from 1390 to 1391, Sienese authorities imposed at least 20 forced loans.

It is clear from the available evidence that these loans were imposed regularly on the countryside.⁴⁵ It is not always possible to determine precisely how much money was collected, but there are a few instances in which comprehensive figures emerge. The Biccherna budget for the second semester of 1375, for example, reveals that the city collected some 24,969 lire from loans on the countryside. Unfortunately it is difficult to determine the overall burden this represented for the *contadini* because we know almost nothing of the other taxes imposed on the countryside at this time. We are somewhat better served by the sources for 1382. Biccherna budgets show that in that year the city collected approximately 21,740 lire from *preste* imposed on the countryside.⁴⁶ When added to the income received from other taxes imposed on the countryside in that year, the total is 66,159 lire, or 14.6 percent of total income.⁴⁷ Likewise, if we add the income derived from loans in the first semester of 1390—approximately 16,122 lire—to the other available taxes from the countryside, they represent 10.6 percent of total income.⁴⁸ Such figures again fall far short of Fiumi's, even though he did not account for income derived from *preste*.

In any case, it appears that the burden of *preste* fell more heavily on the city than on the countryside. The 24,969 lire collected from the countryside during the second semester of 1375 accounted for less than a fifth of all loan income.⁴⁹ Income from loans imposed on the countryside in the first semester of 1390 represented less than a sixth of all income from loans.⁵⁰ When the mercenary company of Hannekin

⁴³ This is discussed in greater detail in Caferro, "Companies of Adventure," pp. 188–223 and pp. 247–267. The direct tax, the *dazio*, was employed in this period, but it appears to have been a minor tax that brought minor returns. Its use was restricted primarily to raising revenue to repay loans.

⁴⁴ CG 192 [19v].

⁴⁵ It appears that the countryside was most typically required to pay according to the rate of the *contado gabella*. Usually a loan required a month's worth of *contado* taxes or, in cases of greater need, a half year's worth. This was also true for the era of the Nine. See Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 170–171.

⁴⁶ B 264 [66v], [92v]; B 265 [68v].

⁴⁷ The breakdown is as follows: 32,000 lire from the *contado* tax; 12,419 lire from the *gabelle* on bread, meat, and wine; and the 21,740 lire from *preste*.

⁴⁸ Reg 4 [294v]. Here the other taxes include only the *contado gabella*.

⁴⁹ According to the Biccherna budget, 67,240 lire were collected from the city, 25,098 lire were collected from the clergy, and 24,969 lire from the *contado*. Reg 3 [304v]. The total collected from all loans was 117,307 lire.

⁵⁰ 16,122 lire were collected from the countryside, 92,180 lire were collected from the city.

Baumgarten and Albert Sterz invaded Siennese territory in 1364, the commune issued a full nine loans to raise the needed cash, of which only one was on the countryside.⁵¹

These loans, it should be made clear, did not constitute investment opportunities for lenders. An oft-debated issue among historians of medieval Italy is whether loans were a worthwhile investment for lenders or a harmful removal of wealth from potentially more profitable business ventures. In his study of public finance in Siena during the era of the Nove, Bowsky saw loans as generally "profitable for lenders."⁵² It is clear, however, that this was not true for the latter part of the fourteenth century.⁵³ With loans being imposed at an unprecedented rate and the tax base consistently and dramatically decreasing, the government—which in the best of times was barely able to meet everyday expenses—was simply unable to keep pace. Interest on loans was, as Lauro Martines accurately noted for the period in general, "the first and chronic victim" of such fiscal crises.⁵⁴ The Siennese sought consistently and often creatively to evade their responsibility. In 1382, for example, legislation was issued declaring that no interest would be paid for a full two years on the specious grounds that such payments constituted usury and were thus prohibited by the Church.⁵⁵ The budget of the salt *dogana* in 1397–98 reveals that the commune, by then in desperate financial straits, paid the interest on several loans with salt rather than hard currency.⁵⁶

The commune's awareness of the burdensome nature of such impositions is evident from the frequent legislation aimed at eliminating them. Claiming that there was "nothing more dangerous . . . than to burden subjects beyond their ability to pay," city officials promised that in attempting to raise income and minimize expenses, it would specifically avoid the imposing new loans.⁵⁷ Similar legislation was issued in September 1363, July 1364, August 1366, July 1379, November 1385, and July 1396.⁵⁸

⁵¹ The nine impositions were: a forced loan of one florin per 1,000 lire (July 17), a voluntary loan on the clergy (July 17), a *presta a balzi* (Sept. 4), a forced loan of two florins per 1,000 lire (Sept.), a forced loan of four florins per 1,000 lire (Sept.), and four voluntary loans (Oct.–Nov.). Only the forced loan of one florin per 1,000 lire imposed on July 17 included taxation of the *contado*. B 231 [33r]; Reg 2 [129v]; CG 171 [71v–72r], [81r], [84v], [97r], [100v], [102r]. The forced loans of two florins per 1,000 lire and four florins per 1,000 lire imposed in September were pieced together from a recapitulation in the city council deliberations of June 5, 1366. See CG 174 [65v].

⁵² Bowsky, *Finance*, pp. 187–188.

⁵³ See Caferro, "Companies of Adventure," pp. 295–298.

⁵⁴ Martines, *Power*, p. 179.

⁵⁵ Lisini, ed., *Provedimenti*, pp. 30–31.

⁵⁶ Reg 5 [227v].

⁵⁷ CG 192 [19v] "nihil periculosius est . . . quam gravare subditos ultra possibilitatem eorum."

⁵⁸ CG 170 [48r]; CG 171 [72r]; Statuti 32 [142r–145v]; CG 189 [50r]; CG 195 [44r]; CG 198 [18v].

FURTHER ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

On the basis of my figures it would be tempting at this point to conclude that the *contado* was not unduly burdened. Such a conclusion would be premature. Taxation, however insubstantial, could still prove burdensome if the subjects of that taxation did not have the economic wherewithal to pay. Since we do not know the overall wealth of the countryside—either for the subject period or the period preceding it—we cannot know with certainty what the burden was. We do know, however, that the Sieneese countryside in the second half of the fourteenth century was a thoroughly miserable place. Warfare, plague, famine, and the incessant raids of the Companies of Adventure had inflicted great damage. During the 37 years under consideration in this study, there were a full five plagues and six famines.⁵⁹ These resulted in a severe reduction in overall population. The famine of 1370, for example, carried away much of the Maremma, reducing its largest town, Grosseto, from 1,200 men to 100, and reducing overall food output from 40,000 *moggia* to 5,000 *moggia*.⁶⁰ Additional complaints of depopulation can be found in city council legislation issued in 1375, 1382, and throughout the 1390s.⁶¹ Frequent wars and mercenary raids destroyed many of the physical structures of the countryside: local fortifications were ruined, farmhouses were set on fire, and livestock was captured or killed. Basic activities such as the planting and harvesting crops and the internal transfer of goods were rendered difficult. Many who had not been swept away by plague or famine simply abandoned their lands and moved elsewhere, further exacerbating the problem of depopulation.

Extant legislation reveals that such calamities had a significant economic impact. Although my figures indicate that the countryside shouldered a rather small proportion of overall taxation in 1382 (see Table 1), legislation enacted by the *balia* of that year stated that *contadini* "sustained infinite burdens."⁶² A major problem for many local communities was debt.⁶³ In 1370 the inhabitants of the town of Roccastrada, whose homes and fields were ruined by mercenary companies, complained of "great poverty" and a debt they were unable to meet.⁶⁴ The town of Campagnatico complained of the same problem in 1366 and again in 1384.⁶⁵ The situation appears to have become

⁵⁹ Siena experienced plague in 1363, 1374, 1383, 1389–90, and 1399–1400. Famine occurred in 1368, 1370–71, 1374, 1383–84, 1389–90, 1391–93.

⁶⁰ CG 180 [94r].

⁶¹ CG 186 [30r] (1375); Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, pp. 93–96 (1382); CG 197 [119r], [165r], CG 198 [4v] (1390s).

⁶² Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, p. 125.

⁶³ See Piccinni, "I 'villani incittadinati'."

⁶⁴ CG 180 [88v] (October 11, 1370).

⁶⁵ CG 274 [50r]; CG 194 [65v–66r].

particularly severe in the decade of the nineties. In the city council meeting of October 1394, officials complained that many *contadini* were fleeing their land because of debt.⁶⁶ In the city council meeting of February 1395, city authorities stated bluntly that many communities “had become so poor and miserable” and had incurred such debts that “they were completely incapable of responding to the taxes and other burdens of the commune.”⁶⁷ By 1399 the commune declared that its *contado*, given over to “prey, robbery and extortion,” was now *sciolta* (disengaged) and no longer able “to maintain the present state.”⁶⁸

Despite Giuliano Pinto’s assertion to the contrary, Sieneese governments showed both an awareness of the problems of the countryside and a willingness to help.⁶⁹ To aid towns that were particularly hard hit, Sieneese authorities frequently granted them relief from their taxes. In 1372 the residents of Chiusdino were absolved from their obligation to pay taxes to the city for five years “because they had become paupers.”⁷⁰ In 1382 the city passed legislation granting towns in the Maremma freedom for five years from all “dazi e gravezze” (direct and other taxes).⁷¹ Inhabitants were also allowed, if they produced the desired 3,000 *moggia* of grain for the commune, to sell the excess outside the Sieneese *contado* for whatever price they could get. This was certainly a privilege, because it was strict policy in Siena, as in nearly all other Tuscan communes, to prevent *contadini* from selling their goods for profit outside of local territory.⁷² There are many more examples of Sieneese governments’ forbearance with the countryside. In 1366 the city council granted tax relief to the towns of Tressa, Arbiola, Isola, and Cuna—all on the same day—as compensation for damage received at the hands of a mercenary company led by Ambrogio Visconti.⁷³ In 1371 the town of Castello della Selva was granted tax relief for a full ten years.⁷⁴

These measures were not intended as outright gifts. They were meant to allow communities to help themselves. The money from the taxes not paid to the city was to be used by the local community to repay its debt,

⁶⁶ CG 197 [119r].

⁶⁷ CG 198 [4v] “Considerando che molte comunanze del contado sono divenute in tanta poverta e miseria che in tutto impotenti a rispondere al comune de le loro tasse e tasseioni e altre gravezze unde interviene che alcuna d’esse avendo gia fatto grande soma de devito con comune. . . .”

⁶⁸ CG 198 [24v].

⁶⁹ Pinto viewed the Sieneese taxation of its countryside as unfair and portrayed the city as generally unconcerned. See Pinto, “Mercanti e la terra,” pp. 268–269. A similarly negative view of Sieneese policy was expressed by Isaacs, “Le campagne senesi,” pp. 390–393.

⁷⁰ CG 182 [16v].

⁷¹ Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, pp. 95–96.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.

⁷³ CG 174 [62v–63r] (June 5, 1366).

⁷⁴ CG 181 [46v].

repair its fortifications, or to meet whatever other specific need there might be. The city expected this to be done within the specified time limit, or else the local community would be penalized. Nevertheless, when communities did not live up to the terms of the agreement, as often happened, the city, rather than impose penalties, frequently responded with leniency.⁷⁵ In 1371, for example, the inhabitants of Torrenieri were granted relief from taxes for five years in order to build up their fortifications.⁷⁶ After 13 years, the town, whose inhabitants had been reduced to the "status of paupers" by a new wave of calamities, had still had not lived up to its obligations. City officials decided, rather than punish it, to contribute 300 florins to the project.⁷⁷

The generosity of the city sometimes even went beyond that which was mandated in the official legislation. According to the legislation issued by the city council in 1366, the residents of Castelnuovo di Berardenga were to be granted freedom from taxes for five years provided they built a fort in that time.⁷⁸ The actual budget for work done on the project, however, survives and shows that of the 4,054 lire spent on the fort, 2,068—more than half—was paid for by the government.⁷⁹

As conditions worsened in the 1390s, the city took more dramatic steps. To entice debtors who had abandoned their lands to return, the city council issued legislation in 1394, 1395, and again in 1396, offering to intercede directly on their behalf to arrange for equitable settlements with their creditors.⁸⁰ In addition, the budgets for the Gabella on retail wine reveal that this important tax was no longer collected from the countryside after 1392.⁸¹

The laws of 1394, 1395, and 1396 offering aid to debtors are particularly noteworthy because they indicate that the problem of debt was one experienced by city and countryside alike. The preamble to the laws of both 1394 and 1395 contains the declaration that "the city and likewise the contado are much diminished" because "citizens and contadini have gone, and go, because of debt."⁸² An important phenomenon at this time, noted by Molho for Florence and more recently by Pinto for Siena and much of central and northern Italy, was the process by which

⁷⁵ The legislation of November 26, 1382, notes bitterly that those communities that were given "discounts" were not using them for their intended purpose, which was to build fortifications. Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, p. 80.

⁷⁶ CG 181 [30v-31r].

⁷⁷ CG 194 [25r].

⁷⁸ CG 174 [71r-71v].

⁷⁹ Reg 3 [177r].

⁸⁰ CG 197 [119r] (October 21, 1394); CG 197 [165r] (November 30, 1395); CG 198 [9v] (April 10, 1396).

⁸¹ The budget for the gabella on retail wine for the first semester of 1392 reveals that only 139 lire out of a total of 12,696 lire were collected from the "contado and Masse." Reg 4 [431v]. After this nothing more was collected.

⁸² CG 197 [119r].

TABLE 3
INCOME FROM SALT SOLD IN THE *CONTADO* AND *MASSE*
(in lire)

Year	Amount	Source
May 1363-64	21,703	Reg 2 [130r]
May 1369-70	14,074	Reg 3 [74r]
July 1375-76	16,564	Reg 3 [317r]
July 1385-86	21,092	Reg 4 [164r]
March 1387-88	29,023	Reg 4 [231r]
March 1394-95	22,698	Reg 5 [134r]
March 1396-97	24,705	Reg 5 [187r]

Source: Archivio di Stato di Siena.

contadini became indebted to urban lenders.⁸³ Unfortunately, the attention received by this issue has given the impression that the city somehow suffered less or, at the very least, showed indifference to a process that brought ownership of rural lands increasingly into urban hands and reduced the *contadino* to the status of proletarian.⁸⁴ It is clear from this legislation that in Siena urban dwellers were themselves hard hit, and the government was willing to intercede directly on behalf of both.

The willingness of the city to help the countryside should not be taken to mean that its rule was entirely beneficent. Evidence from the budgets of the *dogana* of salt indicates that this tax, unlike the *contado gabella* and most other gabelle imposed on the *contado*, was not allowed to decline as conditions in the countryside worsened. The *dogana* budget of March 1363 to March 1364 reveals that 21,703 lire were collected from the *contado* and the *Masse*.⁸⁵ Thirty-three years later, after three plagues, six famines, and several wars, the *dogana* collected 24,705 lire from the *contado* and the *Masse*.⁸⁶ In the intervening years, there was some fluctuation, but unlike the *contado* tax there was no consistent decline (see Table 3).

In 1399, the same year that the city council declared the *contado sciolta* and unable to meet the most basic needs of the state, city officials

⁸³ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, pp. 27-28. Pinto's general comments appear in "Le Compagne e la crisi," pp. 139-143. His comments specific to Siena appear in "Mercanti e la terra," pp. 268-270. My own research confirms that the process was occurring in Siena. Legislation issued in May 1395 explicitly states that many *contadini* were afraid to come to the city for fear that they would be seized for debts they owed there. See CG 197 [140v]. See also Piccini, "I 'villani incittadinati,'" pp. 200-203.

⁸⁴ Piccini, "I 'villani incittadinati,'" p. 160. Pinto specifically blames city authorities for encouraging the process. He states: "la politica fiscale di Siena agevelò, più o meno consapevolmente, il consolidamento della proprietà contadina" (p. 268). And later he writes: ". . . politica della città che, qui come altrove, mirava a drenare verso il centro la ricchezza prodotta nella compagna" (p. 270).

⁸⁵ Reg 2 [130r].

⁸⁶ Reg 5 [187r]. This figure, when adjusted for the mild inflation that occurred over the period, was 21,779 lire, almost no change from the previous total. The florin was worth 67 *soldi* in 1364 and 76 *soldi* in 1397.

imposed two forced loans within three days of each other and a separate forced loan on subject communities.⁸⁷ These most certainly struck hard at the countryside.

CONCLUSION

This last caveat notwithstanding, Siena's overall management of its countryside can only be described as remarkably even-handed and moderate. If the countryside was heavily burdened, as indeed it was, the fault lay not with any conscious policy on the part of city officials. These were hard times for everyone. An anonymous member of the city council of April 1395 put it best when he explained, in the prelude to legislation appointing yet another *balia* (an ad hoc committee granted special powers to handle emergencies) for yet another crisis, that "justice and the good life . . . would seem completely abandoned."⁸⁸ In such dark days, those who resided in the city fared no better than those in the countryside. Indeed, as Gabriella Piccinni has pointed out, requests for citizenship declined dramatically in the second half of the fourteenth century. Of the 872 persons who sought citizenship in the century, more than 75 percent did so during the first half of the century.⁸⁹ A mere 2 percent of all requests came after 1370. Such meager interest in citizenship indicates that it brought little economic advantage. The only real advantage the city offered at this time was protection. Behind its formidable town walls, the city folk were at least free from the warfare, mercenary raids, and widespread brigandage that afflicted much of the countryside. And yet behind these same walls there occurred two major political upheavals, a bitter revolt of woolworkers in 1371, and sufficient random violence to make clear that in this difficult era security was a relative term.

The guiding principle that underlay Siennese policy was expediency. Siennese officials do not appear to have adhered to any specific philosophy but, rather, issued legislation ad hoc, intended to meet momentary crises. In all instances, however, they did not lose sight of the fact that the fate of the city was intrinsically linked with that of the countryside. To have pressed too hard on a countryside already overburdened by an unending procession of natural disasters would have been foolish. A poverty-stricken peasant was not a good taxpayer. Faced with prospects of further exploitation and no redress of grievances, the peasant might well abandon his lands and seek refuge elsewhere. A poverty-stricken peasant was, to be sure, better than none at all. And in this era

⁸⁷ A *presta* of 3,000 florins was imposed on the countryside on July 8, followed by another *presta* (of unspecified amount) on July 11 and a *presta on censuales* (subject communes) on the same day. Conc 210 [4r], [9v], [10r-11v].

⁸⁸ CG 197 [134r], ". . . la giustizia e il buono vivere . . . parebbe in tutto abandonato. . . ."

⁸⁹ Of the 872 persons that sought citizenship in the fourteenth century, 657 sought citizenship in the first half of the century. Gabriella Piccinni, "I 'villani incittadinati'," pp. 172-173.

of widespread depopulation and economic crisis, there was always a city, seeking to improve its circumstance, that would willingly offer special concessions to a discontented *contadino*.⁹⁰

Siene policy was, therefore, quite different from that of Florence. Where the Florentines stand accused of relentlessly extracting money from their countryside, attempting wherever possible to increase the burden, the Siene moved cautiously, seeking most often to reduce the strain.⁹¹ Where the Florentines showed a willingness to impose taxes on the countryside as an alternative to greater impositions on the city, the Siene seemed predisposed to listen to the petitions of the countryside and look more to their citizens for the needed funds.⁹²

How can we account for the dissimilarities between two communes so close geographically? The difference in policy can best be explained by the different economic capabilities of the two communes. Florence, despite its difficulties, was nevertheless an enormously powerful and rich commune. Siena, on the other hand, although it had waged a spirited cultural and political competition with its northern neighbor in the thirteenth century, was by the latter half of the fourteenth century clearly the economic inferior of the two. According to Molho's figures, the four major Florentine gabelles—on gates, salt, contracts, and retail wine—brought in some 289,248 florins in 1385.⁹³ At the same time these same gabelles in Siena returned a mere 40,241 florins—less than one-seventh of the Florentine total.⁹⁴ Moreover, although we have no precise reading on the wealth of the Siene countryside, it is clear that Florence's was, in any case, far wealthier. The Florentine countryside included several substantial subject towns such as Pistoia, Arezzo, and, in the fifteenth century, Pisa. The Siene countryside, with the exception of a few larger towns such as Grosseto and Buonconvento, was composed primarily of relatively minor communities. By the second decade of the fifteenth century, the total value of all patrimonies held by the inhabitants of the Florentine countryside was 2,362,522

⁹⁰ Meek discusses this issue for Lucca and for Tuscany in general. See Meek, *Lucca 1369-1400*, p. 89. In 1376 Lucca offered five years of immunity from taxes to foreigners who settled in the local countryside. Pisa offered ten years of immunity. In 1382 Siena offered foreigners five years of immunity from "ogni dazii e gravezze" if they settled in the Maremma. For Siena see Lisini, ed., *Provvedimenti*, p. 96.

⁹¹ Becker, *Florence in Transition*, p. 188. Becker states that the "pattern of exploitation" intensified in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

⁹² For Florentine imposition on the countryside rather than the city, see Becker, *Florence in Transition*, pp. 181, 189, 193.

⁹³ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, pp. 47-48.

⁹⁴ The gabelle on contracts (*contratti*) yielded 1,385 florins (5,124 lire—Reg 4 [15v], [21r], [54v]); the gabelle on gates (*porte*) 5,554 florins (20,549 lire—Reg 4 [21r], [54v]); the *dogana* of salt 22,345 florins (82,678 lire—Reg 4 [164v]); and the gabelle on retail wine 10,956 florins (40,539 lire—Reg 4 [18r], [49v]). In this year the florin was worth 74 *soldi*. Income from the gabelle on contracts, gates, and retail wine appears on the budget of the Gabella Generale in the first semester of 1385. Other gabelle income appears on the budgets of the individual gabelle.

florins.⁹⁵ By contrast, the entire city of Siena, according to the tax assessment made in the middle of the century—after a period of economic recovery—had a total taxable wealth of only 912,000 florins.⁹⁶

With the availability of such wealth from their countryside, the Florentines, despite what was no doubt an equal awareness of the dangers, felt sufficiently secure to impose considerable burdens on it. Siena, however, had no such security. It quite literally could not afford to demand too much from its subject lands. Siena's plight was that of the smaller commune. Indeed, if its policies resembled any of those of its Tuscan neighbors it was most nearly those of Lucca, a commune of still more limited means, which, as Christine Meek has shown, carefully attended the needs of its *contadini* in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁹⁷ Florence appears to have been—as it was in so many ways in this era—the exception rather than the rule.

⁹⁵ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Hicks, "Sources of Wealth," p. 10. Hicks judged the Siennese economy to be "generally healthy throughout the first half of the fifteenth century."

⁹⁷ Meek, *Lucca*, p. 112.

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