



## VITA IN VILLA NEL SENESE (VILLA LIFE IN THE SIENESE COUNTRYSIDE)



Edited by LUCIA BONELLI CONENNA and ETTORE PACINI

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Quarto, 575 pp., 523 illustrations in black and white and (prevalently) in color.

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A simple glance over the table of contents can yield a precise idea of the interdisciplinary breadth of this book, born of the collaboration between the most highly qualified historians and naturalists in their respective fields, with the aim of analyzing living and working conditions in the countryside around Siena and investigating all aspects of villa life.

What emerges is an original, in-depth, evocative picture of a small rural universe, in which the land-owning nobility, without abdicating an aristocratic vision of society, tightly intertwined their own lives with the lives of those serving under them, and in which persons belonging to sharply distinct social classes found themselves to be closely interdependent, and much more frequently than a superficial class-oriented vision of history might suggest.

It is a context of relationships - found in a large part of Tuscany - pivoting around farm work and formalized in the sharecropping (*mezzadria*) contract, whose extraordinary resilience for many centuries was the region's main economic resource.

Ettore Pacini, Massimo Nepi, and G. Gabriele Franchi describe the landscape and the strictly naturalistic aspects of the countryside around Siena, such as the botanical characteristics of the crops and garden plants most widely present, from grapevines to olive trees - considered the king and queen of the agriculture of the Tuscan hills since the Middle Ages - to holm oaks and cypresses - the signature elements of the Tuscan countryside - to the many exotic ornamentals that are still today an attraction in some of the gardens around Siena.

The history and agriculture of the gardens are examined by Maria Mangiavacchi, Narcisa Fagnoli, and Felicia Rotundo. Rotundo has also prepared an interesting repertory providing an exhaustive list of all the ancient villas still present in the Sienese countryside, along with helpful descriptions and historical information.

The relationships between some illustrious Sienese families and the Order of Saint Stephen, founded in Pisa by Cosimo de' Medici for the defense of the Tuscan coastline against Saracen raids, are used by Danilo Barsanti to investigate the landholdings and villas on which these families had established patronage entailments ("commende di patronato") in favor of the Order. Mario Ascheri devotes attention to the relationships between agricultural estate owners and those who worked their land, regulated by *mezzadria* contract, using the resources of a vast literature on a subject which is still not completely explored, looking particularly at the *mezzadria* system in the enormous landholdings of Santa Maria della Scala.

A broad, detailed picture emerges of this ancient contractual system which, though no longer practicable in our day, for many centuries regulated life to the satisfaction of both parties, at least wherever the fertility of the land ensured good crops.

A valuable art historical study by Laura Bonelli and Gabriele Fattorini uses as its springboard the construction and above all the decoration of the Chigi villa at Le Volte to expand an analysis of the



vast production of grotesques, pastoral scenes, and landscapes frescoed on the ceilings and walls of numerous Sienese villas, from the rooms in Belcaro Castle decorated by Giorgio di Giovanni to the bucolic images painted by Ignazio Moder at Geggiano.

Mario De Gregorio offers a scholarly discussion of local culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a key aspect of the renewal of attention in the countryside and the beneficent effects of extended villas stays (for which a word was coined in Italian, “villeggiatura”) noting in his introduction the deplorable lack of a specific bibliography on villa life in the Sienese countryside despite the significant interest in this topic, and not only from the viewpoint of culture. Within this context, De Gregorio describes the environment in which Ettore Romagnoli lived, which fostered his production of “sketches” of views of almost all the villas in the area around Siena, linking it to the environment that seventy years earlier had favored the patient historical research of the celebrated eighteenth-century man of letters Giovanni Antonio Pecci. A passage from a work by Pecci beautifully illustrates the spirit of this book: “The inhabitants of the State of Siena should thus reflect on the fertility of the soil, consider the vastness and extension, the abundance of waters, rivers, pastureland, woodland, fruit orchards, and forestlands, and should then resolve to take advantage of this through commerce and trade, and by so doing they will not fail to have opportunities to become as wealthy as they were in times gone by, because then the mountains, hills and plains will be repopulated and Siena and her State will be the envy of the other provinces.”