

# The Sistine Chapel: New Sources on its Building History and the Question of its Architect

## Abstract

This article discusses new findings on the sparsely documented building history of the Sistine Chapel. Drawing on previously unknown papal briefs and ambassadors' reports, it shows that the better part of the construction work took place between August 1479 and October 1481 under the direct supervision of Giovannino de' Dolci, who simultaneously supervised the construction site of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Old St. Peter's. While the papal briefs contain further information on the construction material and workers involved, the diplomatic correspondence also brings new data to bear for a discussion of the building costs as well as the public and political context of this papal building project.



The pontificate of Pope Sixtus IV is considered a milestone in the transformation of Rome from a medieval city to a Renaissance metropole. Among the better-known aedile projects of the first Della-Rovere pontifex are Ponte Sisto, the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, Santa Maria del Popolo, and the Sistine Chapel.<sup>1</sup> In particular the latter, with its famous fresco cycles, is of great cultural and historical interest and has been studied in much detail. Considering the emblematic importance of this building, however, there is surprisingly little documentary evidence for a history of its construction (fig. 1).

As is well known, two contracts of 1481–1482 are the only written documents of the work done by Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Cosimo Rosselli, Biago d’Antonio and Luca Signorelli on the marvelous frescoes on the Chapel’s inner walls depicting the Old Testament stories of the Israelites and Moses.<sup>2</sup> Up to now, lack of written source material has left the history of the building of the Chapel itself largely in the dark. To date the construction work, we are dependent mainly on the scant evidence offered by

1 Rome, exterior view of the Sistine Chapel (photo author)

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1 For an overview of Sixtus’ building projects, see *Sisto IV* 2000, Blondin 2005, for Ponte Sisto: Schwarz 1991. The most up to date and comprehensive study on the Sistine Chapel is Pfisterer 2018.

2 The contracts of 1481–1482 are preserved in Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Obl. et Sol. 79 A, fols. 15v and 16v. They have been edited by Gnoli 1893; Steinmann 1901, pp. 633–635; Ettliger 1965, pp. 120–123, here pp. 122–123. For a discussion, see Nesselrath 2003; Pfisterer 2018.

humanist poetry:<sup>3</sup> The *Lucubratiunculæ Tiburtinae*, written by the English humanist Robert Flemming, are dated in the first print edition to 5 December 1477 and seem to indicate that construction was under way at that point in time.<sup>4</sup> Providing a much more detailed account of the building, a eulogy in praise of Sixtus IV written in 1482 by one of his secretaries, Andreas of Trebizond, testifies that building work had been completed by then.<sup>5</sup> Also the identity of the architect or chief builder of the Sistine Chapel is the subject of surmise. We have some much later entries in the Vatican Archive, registered in the *Diversa Cameralia* under 1486, which document payments to the son and heir of Giovannino di Pietro de' Dolci for the latter's work on the Chapel.<sup>6</sup> On this evidence, researchers have tended to view Dolci as the probable architect of the Sistine Chapel, largely rejecting Vasari's claim that Baccio Pontelli built or at least designed the Chapel, since there is documentary evidence that Pontelli came to Rome in 1482, by which time the building was certainly finished.<sup>7</sup> Introducing new written source material, this paper will shed some light on these and other aspects of the building history of the Sistine Chapel.

### Source Material

To begin with, let us reconsider the question of papal building documentation or the lack thereof. In general, there are two main reasons for the much cited shortage of documentary evidence: on the one hand, many papal registers have been lost; on the other, the registers of the *Camera Apostolica* did not always record the payment of artists.<sup>8</sup> The resulting scarcity of documentation has made the history of the construction and decoration of the Sistine Chapel the object of much interpretation and speculation. For instance, the start of construction has been variously dated to 1473, coinciding with the visit to Rome of Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, or to the Holy Year, 1475, coinciding with the rebuilding of Ponte Sisto and the Hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, or as late as 1477 on the basis of the aforementioned humanist accounts.<sup>9</sup> Researchers have

3 For an interpretation of the poems of Aurelio Brandolini, see Pfisterer 2018.

4 ISTC if00193500; cf. Pacifici 1923, here pp. 26–27: “Quumque intra divi sacra ipsa palatia Petri, / nonnullas Pater ille domos ornat reparatque tum illic aedificat pulchrum praestansque sacellum / quod quum perfectum fuerit pleneque politum, / taleque iam factum, quale ipsum destinat auctor / amplo et celso animo, tum demum fas erit illud / Praesulis absque pari monumentum dicere Sixti.” On the problems of the edition and author, see: IJsewijn 1985; Cairns 1990.

5 Ed. Monfasani 1983, pp. 11–12: “Tu sacellum in apostolico palatio, parietibus labentibus, tecto tabullato et desidenti, ex parte omni deformato ut vix, immo ne vix quidem, pontificulo Campanie adiceretur, funditus diruisti, dignissimum excitasti, novum atque admirabile tanto studio et celeritate in maximo illo contra Florentinos bello absolvisti ut parietibus quoque interioribus auleis auroque vestitis et cancellis inauratis, transversa marmora illa sculptilia decurrentibus, in admirabilitatem videntibus cedat. Tanta enim murorum amplitudo, tanta ipsius testudinis laxitas et latitudo, tanta religiosorum ornamentorum copia et pulcritudo est ut quamvis absolutum omni ex parte homines intueantur, absolvi tamen in tantis erarii angustiis potuisse non credant. Addidisti picturam utriusque legis, paribus redditam figuris, pulchritudine, suavitate, ac omni artis felicitate plenam ut non adumbrata et muta, sed viventia et pene spirantia corpora penitillo videantur. [...]”. Cf. Daniels 2014, p. 275.

6 Müntz 1882, vol. 3, 1, pp. 137–139; Steinmann 1901, pp. 628–631. On the *Diversa Cameralia* see Schuchard 2018.

7 Vasari (1550) 1986, pp. 386–387, cf. Röttgen 1997, and most importantly: Benelli 2004, p. 523 with n. 21 and p. 556. Benelli cites a *Mandato camerale* of 13 August 1480 in which Pontelli, “architecto florentino”, receives 115 ducats “ad computum suorum laboreriorum tam in palacio apostolico quam in aliis locis iussu sanctissimi domini nostri pape.” Benzi 1990, p. 76, considers Pontelli's contribution to the Sistine Chapel as “fabbriche [...] progetturali”. On the question of the architect, see *ibid.*, pp. 135–138.

8 See for instance: Diener 1981; Märkl 2005.

9 Steinmann 1901; Monfasani 1983; Pagliara 1992; Voci/Roth 1994; Pfisterer 2018.

generally concentrated on the famous frescoes, while architectural features of the Chapel have enjoyed much less attention.<sup>10</sup> The most informative publication on the building history of the Sistine Chapel remains an article written by Pier Nicola Pagliara published in 1992. On the basis of a modern architectural survey of the building itself and the results of historical building research, Pagliara offers several new insights into the building of the Chapel and argues in favor of identifying Giovannino de' Dolci as its architect.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the documentary basis on which art historians operate remains basically the same as that used and published by Eugène Müntz (1879) and Ernst Steinmann (1901). Although this source material is, thus, extremely well known, it is worth briefly reconsidering what it really contains. Anyone working critically with Eugène Müntz's fundamental work will rapidly grasp two things: first, that the Alsatian-French art historian drew largely on the records of the *Camera Apostolica*, i.e. the financial records of the Curia,<sup>12</sup> and second, that his research was admirable but certainly not exhaustive. Among the pertinent records unnoted by Müntz are, for example, two payments of late 1483 for liturgical cloths and linens to decorate the Chapel.<sup>13</sup> For his part, Ernst Steinmann recruited the help of the Austrian historian and librarian Heinrich Pogatscher (1864–1937) to re-examine the Vatican sources. It is important to note that Pogatscher thoroughly searched the treasury records, but explicitly omitted the brief-registers containing papal correspondence. Most probably he did so for practical reasons, since at that time the relevant brief-registers were believed lost and indeed, the registers then available do not contain any information about the Sistine Chapel. In the meanwhile, however, three previously missing brief-registers have been rediscovered: two are now found in the State Archives in Rome, and the third is in the Biblioteca Giordiana in Veroli (copies of the latter may be consulted in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma and in the Vatican Archive).<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that these registers have now been available for several decades and have actually been read by various scholars, they remain largely ignored by most historians and art historians.<sup>15</sup> As it turns out, one of these formerly missing registers does indeed contain three previously unknown papal briefs bearing directly or indirectly on the history of the building of the Sistine Chapel and its architect.

10 See Nesselrath 2003; Pfeiffer 2007; Howard 2010; Pfisterer 2013; Daniels 2014; Pfisterer 2018.

11 Pagliara 1992, pp. 256–265 (English version: 1994); see also: Pagliara 2003; arguing against Dolci: Benelli 2004, p. 523 with n. 21.

12 For an introduction to the archives of the *Camera Apostolica*, see *La Reverenda* 1987, and Märkl 2005.

13 See the following payments recorded in the *Camera*: “Raphael etc. [= *Sansoni Riario*] Similiter solvi faciatis honorabili viro Michellino Angeli Bontii mercatoris Florentino florenos centum tredecim de boloninis 75 pro floreno pro valore XVIII banchalium de lana et trium spalliarum de syrico pro capella nova Sanctissimi Domini Nostri Pape, et pro tribus dozinis sarviettarum pro dicta capella assignatis domino Bartolomeo de Padua, scalco secreto prefati Sanctissimi Domini Nostri, quos etc. datum ut supra, die 24 Octobris 1483, anno XIII. R. etc. B. de Spello.” (Archivio di Stato di Roma, *Camera* I, 849, Mandati camerale 1482–1484, fol. 232v); “Solvi faciatis discreto viro Jo[hanni] cimatori florenos quatuor de camera pro cimatura pannorum viridum ad usum capelle nove Sanctissimi Domini Nostri pape, quos etc. datum ut supra [= 7 November 1483]” (ibid., fol. 238r). For the latter payment, cf. Burckard (1483–1506) 1906–1911, vol. 1, p. 7, v. 11–14: “Dominica secunda, post festum epiphanie Domini [January 18, 1484] [...] r. in Christo p. d. Silvester episcopus clugiensis celebravit missam solemnem in capella majore palatii pape in paramentis viridibus, papa absente, cardinalibus presentibus, et non fuit sermo. [...]”. In this context, it is interesting to note that later the Sistine Chapel was adorned with tapestries designed by Raphael and manufactured in Bruges. With further references, see Weddigen 1999.

14 For an overview, see Frenz 1977; Cosma 1980.

15 See Daniels 2019 with further references and new information on Bartolomeo Platina's family.

In addition to these rediscovered registers, I will draw on the records of diplomatic correspondence written by Quattrocento ambassadors to the Curia as a hitherto neglected source of information on work on the Sistine Chapel. Again, this material, preserved mainly in archives of Milan, Mantua, Modena and Siena, is hardly unknown. While the letters of the ambassadors of the various Italian powers in Rome are chiefly concerned with diplomatic business at the papal court, their “paper world” also contains useful information on diverse other matters such as artistic and building activities in the city of Rome.<sup>16</sup> In particular, one previously overlooked Milanese dispatch refers explicitly to the building of the Sistine Chapel (app. I). It evidently escaped the attention of other researchers due to its having been correctly but misleadingly archived not under the series “Rome” but under “Naples”, although the subject matter exclusively treats the ambassador’s dealings in Rome. Furthermore, the letter lacks both date and sender and does thus not readily present itself as relevant for the history of the Chapel. In sum, there is thus considerably more written source material on the building history of the Sistine Chapel than had previously been thought. Taken together, these documents offer several new insights into the building of this most famous monument.

### New evidence

Let us begin with the aforementioned ambassadorial report which sheds some light on the commencement of work on the Chapel. Lacking the address and dating formulae characteristic of diplomatic *dispacci*, the letter is anonymous and undated. A close examination of the handwriting and contents, however, enables a certain identification of its author as the Milanese ambassador in Rome Giovanni Angelo Talenti. Talenti had been sent to Rome in the wake of the war that broke out following the Pazzi Conspiracy, with instructions to negotiate a peace treaty between the league of Florence, Milan and Venice on the one side, and the coalition of the Pope and the King of Naples on the other. Talenti arrived in the Eternal City in January 1479 and stayed there at least until May/June of that year. Thereafter, he travelled together with his colleague Pietro da Gallarate to Florence and back to Rome and finally to Naples, where the ambassadors arrived on 25 October.<sup>17</sup> The letter is undated, but it was surely written during this journey (and most probably in Rome), which explains why it was archived under the series “Naples”. Two events mentioned in the letter allow us to date it more precisely: first, the writer mentions King Ferrante of Naples’ investiture of Ludovico Sforza, il Moro, with the Duchy of Bari, which occurred on 14 August 1479.<sup>18</sup> A second, more precise *terminus post quem* is offered by the author’s assertion that he participated in a papal consistory on “Friday 20th of the present month”, for which the only possible fitting date is 20 August 1479. The letter must have been written shortly after this consistory. Turning to the content of the dispatch, Talenti first writes about the peace negotiations underway in Rome since late June 1479, gives an account of the dealings of the French ambassadors and the military activities around Perugia, and then comes to make the following remark:

16 A good overview of Renaissance diplomatic source material is provided by Ilardi 1962. The expression “paper world” is a reference to the title of Senatore’s seminal study: Senatore 1998. On the source value of *dispacci* for Rome, see Farenga 1994; Märtl 2003; Carteggi 2013; Modigliani 2013.

17 On Talenti see Cerioni 1970, vol. 1, p. 238; *Lettere* 1977–1981; Petersohn 2004. For the chronology of his embassy, see *Lettere* 1977–1981, vol. 4, n. 423, pp. 189–190, n. 1; n. 430, p. 219, n. 20, and Excursus, pp. 395–396; Somaini 2003, vol. 2, p. 1003 with n. 34. For the context, see Andenna 2000, pp. 4–5; Mele 2013.

18 See below, note 63.

“His Holiness proceeds continuously to do the most pious and dignified things. Now he has started to build a most solemn Chapel in the Apostolic Palace on the place where the other one for ceremonies stood. It will cost more than 20,000 ducats, that is, for the buildings alone. He has also sent envoys to Venice in order to buy most solemn tapestries for the price of 2,000 ducats. I have no idea who fixed the idea of this war into his mind, since by his nature he could not be more pious and clement. Every day he protests that he acts on behalf of God and his Church and that they will not desert him. God willing, the best will happen.”

It is obvious that the building in question – a chapel being constructed in the Apostolic Palace – can be no other than the Sistine Chapel. Though only a short aside, Talenti’s remarks are of considerable importance for the history of the building of the Chapel, since they contain insider information on three central aspects of the construction work: Firstly, the time frame of work on the Chapel, secondly, the costs, and thirdly, its political context. Before investigating the latter two points in greater depth, I will focus on the building chronology of the Chapel as the basis for the further interpretation of the sources. As a firm indication of when work on the Sistine Chapel commenced, we have the testimony of an ambassador who had been in Rome since the end of January 1479 and who reports that construction had begun “hora”: “now”, that is at the end of August 1479. Interestingly, this coincides with the construction work being done on another, quite distinct chapel in Old St. Peter’s which was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 1479. This no longer extant building was destined to become the pope’s own funeral chapel hosting his bronze tomb sculpted by Pollaiuolo.<sup>19</sup> As Müntz noted, contemporary sources – such as the diaries of the masters of ceremony Patrizi Piccolomini and Burckard – neatly differentiate between these two “Sistine Chapels”, identifying the Sestina with the “capella magna” or “capella sacri palatii”, and the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception as the “capella Sixti in Sancto Petro”.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the ambassador’s dispatch, no confusion between the two chapels is possible.<sup>21</sup> However, the concurrent work being carried out on the chapel in St. Peter’s is an important factor when considering our next sources, the papal briefs.

The briefs date to 18 September, 30 October and 13 November 1479. In the first (app. II), Pope Sixtus informs Giovannino de’ Dolci of his desire to rapidly conclude construction work on “our Chapel, which is being built for the Divine Cult.” For this reason, he authorizes Dolci to order all producers of chalk, bricks and stones, all cutters and suppliers of pozzolan (a typical type of stone containing volcanic material, used in Rome and Central Italy) and sand, all providers of water and all other types of workers and suppliers of the construction site to

19 Frommel 1977, pp. 29–30; Aurigemma 2000.

20 Müntz 1882, vol. 3, pp. 147–148; *L’œuvre* 1980–1982, vol. 1, p. 28: “capella maiori”; p. 365: “capella sacri palatii”; p. 434: “in capella maiori palatii”; vol. 2, p. 417, n. 4: “cellebrante reverendissimo domino cardinale sancte Crucis in capella Sixti in Sancto Petro”; Burckard (1483–1506) 1906–1911, vol. 1, p. 6: “in capella majore palatii” (and *passim*).

21 See also below, note 51.

22 The text of the brief clearly follows a formulary. Cf. an almost identical brief, cited by Lee 1978, p. 132, n. 32, brief to Paolo di Francesco, 12 March 1483: “Dilecte fili salutem etc. Desiderantes quod fabrice que nostro nomine fiunt cito ad exitum perducantur. Confisi de fide Solertia et diligentia tua. Damus tibi facultatem, et potestatem mandandi et precipiendi omnibus calcem, matones, et Petram facientibus, Puzolanam seu Sabulum fodientibus, et advehentibus, aquam portantibus, ac cuiuscumque generis artificii fabris, magistris et operariis, quorum opera necessaria tibi ad ipsas fabricas videbitur, ut pro convenienti et iusto pretio vendant portent et laborent, prout tu pro huiusmodi fabricis necessarium et oportunitate duxeris: Mandantes omnibus et singulis Alme urbis nostre officialibus, et Mareschallis, ut tibi in hoc assistant, et faveant, Renitentes et contradictores quotiens obedire recusaverint prout expediens fuerit. Contrariis non obstantibus quibuscumque. Datum [...]”.



provide their goods and services at a fair price according to what Dolci thinks best. Moreover, the Pope instructs all Roman officials to cooperate with Dolci.<sup>22</sup> In the second brief (app. III), Sixtus IV urges the *Conservatores Urbis*, the civil government of the city of Rome,<sup>23</sup> to allow all those following Dolci's instructions to provide marble and other stones from anywhere for the construction of the Chapel. In doing so, the Pope suspends the Bull *Cum aliam nostram*, which his predecessor Pius II had issued, following the *Conservatores'* request, on 28 April 1462 in order to prevent churches and ancient ruins from being plundered of their marble for new buildings. In his Bull, however, Pius II provided for possible papal exceptions, and we know that Sixtus IV had already made use of this right in 1474 for the building of the Vatican Library (to whose creation Dolci contributed).<sup>24</sup> The third brief (app. IV) entails the appointment of a subordinate official on the construction site, a marshal ("maresciallus"), whose name was not copied into the register. The Pope appoints him with instructions to implement all necessary actions in order to speed the completion "of the Chapel in our Apostolic Palace, which has recently ("nuper") been started to be built." This confirms the evidence of the ambassadorial report indicating that building activity had just commenced in the fall of 1479. Moreover, the pontiff instructs the marshal to cooperate especially in matters of masonry and roofing work with other marshals, as well as with officials inside and outside the city of Rome who had been appointed by the "commissarium, officialem seu caputmagistrum fabricae."

At this point, it becomes necessary to recall that Sixtus IV was having two chapels built. Of the three briefs, only the third (13 November 1479) explicitly speaks of the "fabricae capelle Palatii nostri apostolici" and thus refers indisputably to the Sistine chapel, while briefs I and II merely designate the building in question as "capella nostra". In particular, the wording of the first brief (18 September 1479): "capella nostra, que pro divino cultu constructur" is strongly reminiscent of the way Sixtus IV denoted the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception when promising its visitors an indulgence: "capellam cum altari construi et aedificari fecimus, pro divinis officiis inibi ad laudem divini nominis honorifice et devote persolvendis".<sup>25</sup> This could indicate (though not necessarily) that the mandate here given to Giovannino de' Dolci applied specifically to the chapel in St. Peter's. The second brief (30 October 1479) names Dolci as the "commissari[us] seu cap[ut]magist[er] fabricae capelle nostre", a title that seems to refer to the prior commission. Moreover, the provision of marble in this brief may be readily brought into connection with the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, since the records of the Camera Apostolica include payments for the carpenter Lorenzo di Pietrasanta in September 1480 for having brought a marble column "ad capellam Sanctissimi Domini Nostri in sancto Petro": this and other columns have been identified with *spolia* taken from the Baths of Trajan which, after the destruction of the chapel, were first brought to the Cappella Paolina on the Quirinal hill and now are located in the Apostolic Palace in the corridor leading to the Biblioteca Sistina.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, Pagliara has exhaustively shown that the Sistine Chapel is largely a brick building in which marble is only used as decoration on the interior.<sup>27</sup>

Returning to the third brief which refers clearly to the Sistina, the instructions give the unnamed marshal a mandate to command resources from other papal construction sites as according to the needs of the "commissarius, officialis

23 For the institution: Franceschini 1997.

24 On Pius II's Bull *Cum aliam nostram*, 8 April 1462, see Rubinstein 1988; Frommel 2006, p. 115; Richardson 2009, pp. 178–181.

25 Aurigemma 2000, p. 458.

26 Müntz 1882, vol. 3, pp. 147–148; Aurigemma 2000.

27 Pagliara 1992.

seu caputmagister fabricae huiusmodi.” This title is much the same as that in the well-known contract engaging the Florentine artists for the “Locatio picture cappelle magne novi palatii apostolici sive deputatio ad ipsam depingendam”, i.e. the interior decoration of the Sistine Chapel, dated 27 October 1481, in which Giovannino de’ Dolci is designated as “superstans sive commissarius fabricae palatii apostolici”. Thus, it would seem that Dolci as “commissarius” or “caputmagister” was certainly responsible for the construction of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception and most probably also for that of the Sistine Chapel, for which he received payments in 1486. Taken together, the three papal briefs are thus singular documents of the ongoing building process at both sites under the guidance of Giovannino de’ Dolci, leading us to the construction site itself and letting us stand among the workers and their working materials such as water, chalk and marble. Above all they provide us with new insights into the dating of work on the Sistine Chapel and the role of Giovannino de’ Dolci.

### **Giovannino de’ Dolci and the building of the Sistine Chapel**

The documents introduced provide substantial new information on the scope of Giovannino de’ Dolci’s activity on the Vatican construction site and give cause to reconsider the question of whether he was indeed the architect of the Sistine Chapel.<sup>28</sup> As we have seen, Dolci did not only receive payments for his work on the Sistine Chapel in 1486, but was already at work in 1479 receiving direct orders and authorization from the Pope regarding this business. At the same time, the papal briefs refer to him as “commissario seu capomagistro fabricae”, not as “architectus”. In the cameral records, the title “architectus” was given to Baccio Pontelli, who, however, received a considerably lesser sum of 150 ducats for unspecified work done in the Apostolic Palace.<sup>29</sup> As Christoph L. Frommel has shown, papal supervisors of the early construction phase of New St. Peter’s at the beginning of the 16th century were referred to as “soprastanti”. Their office was to guide and control the free “fabricatores” working on the various segments of the construction site. Frommel has traced this organisational structure back to papal building projects under Pius II and Paul II.<sup>30</sup> In building Palazzo Venezia for Paul II, Francesco del Borgo (under whom Dolci had worked for its construction), had a corresponding role, but was given the title of “presidente della fabbrica”.<sup>31</sup> Even if we consider that the terminology during this period may not have been exact and that a “capomagistro fabricae” may have had the skills and function of an architect – as Giovannino de’ Dolci clearly did –, the precise nature of his engagement in building the Sistine Chapel remains unclear, even in light of the new documents presented here. In fact, these documents do not tell us anything about a previous planning phase which, however, we can assume must have taken place. Nevertheless, the new evidence confirms research showing that Giovannino de’ Dolci had by that time become virtually the most important architectural consultant and supervisor at the papal palace.<sup>32</sup> Pagliara has suggested that the pope may have engaged Dolci for the work on the Chapel because of the impending structural problems mentioned by Andreas of Trebizond in his encomiastic text. On the technical side, the core of the problem was to design and build a large stone vault resting on a wall of sufficient thickness and curved in the right measure so that it would not collapse, and indeed the use of pozzolan stone – as for instance in the Pantheon – was essential for

28 The most exhaustive study on Giovannino de’ Dolci is Vatovec 1989; but see already Müntz 1879.

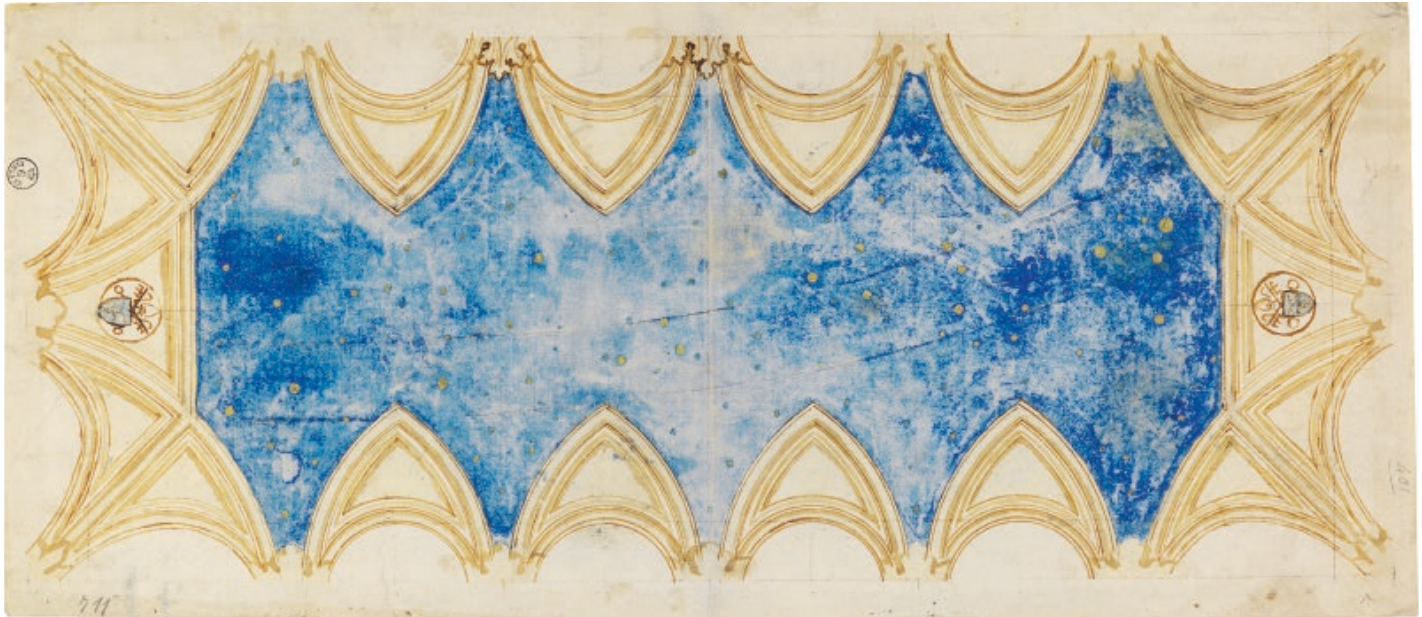
29 Benelli 2004.

30 Frommel 1983, pp. 126–128; Frommel 1984, pp. 109–111.

31 Frommel 2006, pp. 207–208.

32 Cf. the literature cited in note 28.





2 Piermatteo d'Amelia, design for the 15th-century decoration of the vaulted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, ca. 1480. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (photo courtesy of MiBACT)

achieving this goal.<sup>33</sup> This vaulted design, essential for its eventual later decoration, can first be seen in the famous drawing in the Uffizi by Piermatteo d'Amelia (fig. 2). According to Pagliara, Dolci possessed the skills to solve such problems, having accumulated considerable technical experience as a fortress architect. If it is true that structural problems on the site of the Sistine Chapel occurred during the construction process, we may now assume that these problems became pressing in late 1479, leading the pope to require Dolci's services. This thesis is supported by the analysis of the building of the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception that Dolci was also supervising and which, according to Aurigemma, was likewise strongly motivated by problems of static on the south walls of St. Peter's.<sup>34</sup>

The new documents show that Giovannino de' Dolci was not the only papal official on the building site, but rather that he was the supervisor of a team of other officials and artisans working on both the Sistine Chapel and the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, a system strongly reminiscent of those described by Frommel for works carried out during previous pontificates. One member of this team was probably the carpenter Lorenzo di Pietrasanta, who organized the transport of the marble columns from the Baths of Trajan to the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. Pietrasanta is known to have followed Giovannino de' Dolci to Civitavecchia in November 1481, and to have worked under Dolci's supervision at this site, where the latter assumed the title of Castellano of Civitavecchia.<sup>35</sup>

At the time that Giovannino de' Dolci took command, construction work on the Sistine Chapel was in any case not very advanced. The ambassadorial report of Giovanni Angelo Talenti and the third papal brief agree in referring to building activity having just begun in the fall of 1479. Moreover, since the organisational structure was brought into place between September and November 1479, we may confidently hypothesize that this was the start of the main construction work and that Giovannino de' Dolci thus supervised the building work during this critical phase. As noted above, Dolci left Rome in November 1481. This would suggest that work on the Chapel had by that time progressed to the stage that his active guidance at the site was no longer required. In the well-

33 I thank the anonymous peer reviewer 1 for having pointed this out to me.

34 Aurigemma 2000. For a discussion of d'Amelia's work, see Pfisterer 2013 and 2018.

35 See especially Vatovec 1989.

known contract dated 27 October 1481 engaging the Florentine artists for the interior decoration of the Sistine Chapel, Dolci is still referred to as “superstans sive commissarius fabricae palatii apostolici”. Thereafter, he remained a member of the commission that inspected the frescoes *in situ* in 1482.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, the new documents suggest that the major part of the construction work on the Sistine Chapel took place between August 1479 and October 1481 under the direct supervision of Giovannino de’ Dolci, but they also show that the approach of seeking ‘the author’ of a major architectural project such as the Sistine Chapel is to some extent futile, and that such an enterprise is better understood as the result of teamwork. Whatever Baccio Pontelli’s role was here (if indeed he had one), it is evident that Dolci must be regarded as the supervisor in charge of the construction site itself. This time frame is considerably shorter than earlier studies have proposed, but fits the impression furnished by Andreas of Trebizond of work on the Chapel, and also resolves other problems such as the need to explain what was supposedly done between 1477 and 1479. On the contrary, the impression of a rather short timespan for the building of the Chapel, also coincides with the results of the most recent research claiming that its interior was painted speedily.<sup>37</sup>

### Costs and Finances

As we have seen, the Milanese ambassador estimated the costs of construction work on the Chapel – the building alone – at 20,000 ducats. This is the only source we have for the building costs and at first glance it seems extraordinarily high. In comparison, from February to June 1486, Giovannino de Dolci’s son Cristoforo received the sum of 3,000 Florins for the work his father did on the Sistine Chapel, the Apostolic Palace, and Civitavecchia during the pontificate of Sixtus IV. The mason Graziadei Prata received significantly smaller sums for minor works in the Chapel.<sup>38</sup> In order to better judge the expenses of such papal building projects, we can draw parallels to the well-studied financial records of Popes Pius II and Paul II. In his study of labour costs under Pius II and Paul II, Frommel has estimated the monthly income of a carter at 1.18 ducats, that of a *marmorai* at around 3.54 ducats, and that of a stonemason at 2–3.48 ducats.<sup>39</sup> Altogether, Pius II spent between April 1461 and June 1463 the sum of 980 ducats building the *scale di San Pietro* – the stairs leading to St. Peter’s –, and between February and August 1463 a further 600 ducats on the chapel of St. Andreas in Old St. Peter’s.<sup>40</sup> This was a considerable sum of money for the pope at that time, but it pales in comparison with the estimated cost of the Sistine Chapel.

This raises the question of how Sixtus IV was able to afford such an expensive building project.<sup>41</sup> Although the Cameral records for his pontificate are indeed quite well preserved, there has been to date no comprehensive study of his finances. However, Clemente Bauer has estimated the annual income of the Apostolic See in the years 1480 and 1481 at circa 270,000 or 280,000 ducats.<sup>42</sup> In

36 Cf. above, note 2.

37 Pfisterer 2013 and 2018.

38 Steinmann 1901, pp. 628–631: “[...] computis ratione edificiorum per quondam magistrum Iohanninum de Florentia patrem tuum in capella et aliis membris palatii apostolici ac in arce Civitevetule factorum [...]”

39 Frommel 2006, pp. 113–114.

40 Frommel 2006, pp. 114–115. For the historical context, see also Hack 2014.

41 Cf. Goldthwaite 1980, p. 150: “Furthermore, building costs could be estimated beforehand with reasonable accuracy. Rates for basic materials were standardized, and it did not require a high level of arithmetic skill to calculate the quantity of material needed to build walls of given dimensions.” (According to Goldthwaite, the same applied to labour costs.)

42 Bauer 1927, p. 344.

contrast, Claudia Märzl has shown that the total cost of the papal household of Pope Pius II amounted to some 125,000 fl. in average. This would seem to suggest that Sixtus must have had considerable financial resources available for building projects, but his nepotistic generosity (for instance his regular payments to Girolamo Riario), and the payment of papal condottieri, particularly in 1479, swallowed much of this surplus.<sup>43</sup> According to Bauer, the annual running costs of the Apostolic Palace alone totalled around 20,000 fl., exactly the sum named by the Milanese ambassador for the building of the Sistine Chapel. Once again drawing comparison to Sixtus' predecessor, Pius II, thanks to a nine-month fundraising-campaign, left the Camera Apostolica with a surplus of 59,526 fl. at his death.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, shortly after the death of Sixtus IV, the papal treasurer Falcone Sinibaldi informed a Milanese ambassador that "His Holiness hasn't left himself a dime in the hour of his death", adding that he had even been forced to pawn his Mitre. He apparently left a debt of more than 200,000 fl.<sup>45</sup>

### Public and Political context

The beginning of work on the Sistine Chapel in late summer 1479 neatly coincides with the military and political developments of the Pazzi war. As ambassadorial correspondence and cameral records clearly show, this military engagement tied up a considerable measure of the pope's financial and human resources until the summer of 1479, by which time Sixtus IV and the king of Naples had practically won the war, thus liberating reserves for peaceful purposes. This places the work on the Sistine Chapel in the context of the resolution of the Pazzi conflict, a connection which was also emphasized by Andreas of Trebizond.

Given this background of military activity, it seems ironic that the Milanese ambassador Giovanni Angelo Talenti paints a picture of Sixtus IV as a pope who had no interest in war and high politics, but rather was mainly concerned with religious matters, the acquisition of artworks (Venetian tapestries)<sup>46</sup>, and building activities. Plainly this was an image deliberately cultivated by the pope in connection with the peace negotiations underway between Milan and the papal coalition. The pope wished to be portrayed as deeply religious and innocent of involvement in the Pazzi conspiracy, for which Count Girolamo Riario was given the blame. Despite his apparent otherworldliness, ambassadorial reports reveal clearly that Sixtus IV was very much involved in the peace negotiations. These negotiations were conducted in papal consistories which were traditionally held in the *capella magna*, the building then being renovated to become the Sistine Chapel.<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding its sacral character, the Chapel space was never simply religious, but was always very political as well, as the writings of the masters of ceremony Patrizi Piccolomini, Burckard or Paride de Grassi clearly indicate.<sup>48</sup>

43 Archivio di Stato di Roma, Camerale I, esp. 847.

44 Bauer 1927; Märzl 2005.

45 Gian Francesco Oliva to Gian Galeazzo Sforza, Rome, 30 October 1484 (Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 96): "La bona memoria de papa Sixto, como si ha da messer Falcone [Sinibaldi] thesorero de Nostro Signore, non lassò uno quatrino alla morte sua. Se li trovarono zoie in Castello S. Angello de valuta circa vinticinquemila ducati et la mitra chiamata 'Lo Regno' de valuta de circa centomilia ducati, quale però fo impegnata per sua Beatitude per octanta milia ducati per havere li mercatanti che l'hano in pigno l'assignamento de questa summa de dinari, quale presto sarà maturo, se redimerà dicto Regno intra pochi mesi. Se intende etiam che lo prefato papa Sixto ha lassato debiti ultra la summa de ducenti milia ducati, una parte delli quali è cum li soldati che si tene Nostro Signore, non la deba pagare. [...]" In 1473 a *pasquinata* against Sixtus IV had predicted that he would have been forced to pawn his Mitre. See Daniels 2013.

46 Cf. above, note 17.

47 See Petersohn 2004. On the political function of the Chapel: Schimmelpfennig 2005.

48 For Patrizi Piccolomini and Burckard see above, for Grassi see Stenzig 2013.

Moreover, Arnold Nesselrath and Ulrich Pfisterer have shown that the decoration of the Chapel may be seen in connection with the pacification of relations between Sixtus IV and Lorenzo de' Medici.<sup>49</sup> As I have elsewhere shown, themes found in political pamphlets written in 1478 and 1479 during the Pazzi crisis were later presented in the Sistine frescoes.<sup>50</sup> In addition, both the Milanese ambassador Talenti and the poet Andreas of Trebizond bring the construction of the Sistine Chapel into connection with the war of the Pazzi.

The diplomats took part in peace negotiations with the building and decoration of the Chapel directly before their eyes. Their reports state that the papal audiences and consistories they attended were held “in capella”, a location which they clearly distinguish from other such places in the Apostolic Palace such as the Camera del Papagallo or other churches such as St. Peter's itself, or Santa Maria del Popolo.<sup>51</sup> Giovanni Angelo Talenti and his fellow ambassadors were clearly aware of what was happening in the Apostolic Palace and St. Peter's, and they may well have been eyewitnesses to Giovannino de' Dolci's construction site and the painting of the frescoes during their interviews with the pope and his cardinals. The speedy construction and decoration of the Sistine Chapel, but also its use as a site for diplomatic functions thus placed it in a public context right from the start.

To conclude, on the basis of the new sources presented here, it is now possible to more precisely date the construction period of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, identify its author(s), and to better contextualize its genesis and evolution in the nexus of the politics and public opinion of that period.

49 Nesselrath 2003; Pfisterer 2013 and 2018.

50 Daniels 2014. See also Howard 2010 on a path of investigation worth exploring further.

51 See for instance the letters of Battista Bendidio, envoy of the Duke of Ferrara, to Count Ercole di Ferrara: 8 April 1479: “Questa mane etiam siamo sta' in capella nui oratori de la liga [...]” (Modena, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Segreto Estense, Ambasciatori, Roma 1). On 11 May 1480, he writes of an audience held “in capella”; and on 21 May, that the Pope celebrated Vesper mass “in capella”. Bendidio clearly differentiates this from Mass in St. Peter's (however cf. Gherardi [1479–1484] 1911, p. 15, v. 10–20). For instance, on 2 November 1480, he writes: “[...] quibus dictis, sua Santità andò a dire la missa in sancto Petro [...]” (ibid., see also the letter of 11 June 1481). On 24 April 1481, Bendidio records: “[...] In Capella el dì de Pasqua non vene lo M[agnifico] oratore Veneto per la differencia cum li oratori del duca de Bretagna [...]”. On 2 January 1482 he reports on an oration delivered by Alberto de Zoboli before the Pope “in capella”. The same oration is recorded by Gherardi as having been delivered “in pontificiam vaticanam” (see Gherardi [1479–1484] 1911, p. 85, v. 4–13, and for Zoboli ibid., p. 129, v. 2f.). On 11 January 1482, Bendidio waits together with the cardinal of Mantua (Francesco Gonzaga) and the Vice-Chancellor (Rodrigo Borgia) for the consistory to begin, conversing with them in the meantime “ne la camera el papagallo”. Another clearly designated place is Santa Maria del Popolo (see for instance the letters of 3 June, 30 July 1481; or 4 March 1482: “[...] missa papale a Sancta Maria de Populo [...]”). On 7 April Bendidio explicitly states that the “missa papale” in the morning had taken place in the Apostolic Palace (“palazo”) (Modena, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Segreto Estense, Ambasciatori, Roma, 1).



## Edition

Doc. 1 | Anonymous letter, written by the Milanese ambassador in Rome, Giovanni Angelo Talenti, to the Sforza-regime in Milan. [s.d.; after 20 August 1479] Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 229

Magnifiche etc. In questo dì ho una de Vostra Maestà del ultimo de zugno, la quale debbe essere andata in processione; però epsa Vostra Maestà non se maravigliarà, se prima non ha havuto risposta da mi. Circa quanto la mi rechiedeva de la opinione se haveva de la pace,<sup>52</sup> praticata tutta via per el mezo de li oratori francesi,<sup>53</sup> et ben ch'io creda Vostra Maestà ne debba essere stata dopoi advisata, pur per satisfare alla domanda, per questa mia l'intenderà quello che hora io ne senta, et così ne haverà novelle più fresche. Sapia adunca Vostra Maestà che per hora non ce n'è rasonamento alcuno. Fra quatro o sei giorni partirà quello secretario del Re de Francia<sup>54</sup> che fece retornara quel primo oratore da Milano<sup>55</sup> col compromesso, cum commissione che'l non se partesse insino non avesse altro da Sua Maestà. El secretario non vene per tale casone, como credo haverete potuto intendere, ma per altre cose del prefato Re, dal quale ogni hora se attende risposta circa questo compromesso. Questo è quanto se intende de questa materia. Venerdì passato che fuo alli 20 del presente, fuo uno longo concistorio per provedere alle cose de Perusa,<sup>56</sup> per intendersi che non passano bene per noi altri, et se ne dubita molto, secundo anche voi altri che feci quodammo suso el facto dovete meglio intendere de noi. Fuo ordinato che tutte le gente de la Chiexa et del Re<sup>57</sup> andasseno là oltra, et così ad questo proposito fuorono comissi brevi al Duca di Calabria<sup>58</sup> et de Urbino<sup>59</sup> et littere per el Collegio di reverendissimi cardinali. Credo che dopoi se sia sopraseduto, dubitandosi non provocarse Senesi per havere li inimici alle spalle, el partido è duro. Exitus melius declarabit, utinam desinat in pacem. Havemo havuto una bona nova de la presa de Valle d'Ambra.<sup>60</sup> Se ne parla molto fra noi cum grande festa. Se dice per alcuni che molte de le gente del signore Matheo da Capua<sup>61</sup> sonno manchate alla monstra. Idio metta in cuore a ogniuno de fare una bona pace, ma dubito non seguirà fin che la brigata serà ben straca. La Sanctità de Nostro Signore persevera et non resta de fare ogni dì opere molto pie et digne. Hora l'ha dato opera de fare una solemnissima capella nel Pallazzo apostolico, dove era l'altra per le solemnità. Costarà meglio de XX<sup>m</sup> ducati, cioè li edificii. Ad Venetia ha mandato per solemnissimi drapi per precio de dua millia ducati. |v| Io non scio chi li habia impresso ne la mente questa guerra, però che de sua natura el non potria essere più pio et clemente. Ipse protestatur quotidie quod agit causam Dei et ecclesie sue et quod ab eis non deseretur. Idio lassi sequire quello sia per lo meglio. Contra voi altri che havete de la Chiesa se fano grandissime cominatione usque ad privationem inclusive.<sup>62</sup> Queste cose non pono durare, et però è da sperare che redibunt illa pristina tempora nostra et seremo ad ogni modo li fidi

52 Cf. *Lettere* 1977–1981, vol. 4, pp. 176–177, n. 3.

53 The principal French ambassadors were: Guy d'Arpajon and Antoine de Morlhon. They were accompanied by Jean de Voisins, Antoine de Tournus and Jean Barbier. *Lettere* 1977–1981, vol. 4, 3–5.

54 Jean de Voisin, cf. Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 298, 1 July 1479.

55 Guy d'Arpajon, cf. Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 298, 19 July 1479.

56 For the military actions in Perugia at that time, see the letters of Filippo Sacramoro to the Dukes of Milan in Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, Potenze Estere, 298, and *Lettere* 1977–1981, vol. 4, p. 183.

57 Ferrante d'Aragona, King of Naples.

58 Alfonso duca di Calabria.

59 Federico da Montefeltro.

60 Valdambra (Bucine). Cf. *Lettere* 1977–1981, vol. 4, n. 408 (Lorenzo to Girolamo Morelli in Milan, Fiesole, 25 June 1479), pp. 129–130 with n. 2.

61 Matteo da Capua, condottiero napoletano engaged by the Church. Roberto Malatesta da Rimini won over his troops in June.

62 Here the author refers to the threat of the interdict against Milan. Cf. Somaini 2003, vol. 2, cap. VIII, 1, pp. 985–1018. For the situation between July and September 1479, see pp. 1012–1013.

cari como prima. Se intenderano le iustificacione de ogniuno et serano admesse. Haverete forse intexo como el Re ha dato el Ducato de Barri al signore Ludovico.<sup>63</sup>

[fol. 27r | Iohannino de Dulcibus de Florentia. [*left margin*: L. Grifus]  
Dilecte fili salutem etc. Desiderantes quod capella nostra, que pro divino cultu  
construitur, cito ad exitum perducatur, damus tibi facultatem et potestatem man-  
dandi omnibus calcem, matones et petram facientibus, puzolanam seu sabulum  
fodientibus et advehentibus, aquam portantibus ac cuiuscumque generis fabris,  
magistris et operariis ad edificandum rebus fabrilibus vel opera necessariis, | fol.  
27v | ut pro convenienti et iusto pretio vendant, portent et laborent, prout tu pro  
huiusmodi capelle fabrica necessarium et oportunum duxeris, mandantes omni-  
bus et singulis alme Urbis nostre officialibus, ut tibi in hoc assistant et faveant,  
renitentes et contradictores oportunitis remediis compellant, prout expediens vide-  
bitur, contrariis non obstantibus quibuscumque. Datum Rome etc. ut supra.

[fol. 103r | Conservatoribus Urbis.  
Dilecti filii salutem etc. Volumus ac vobis presentium tenore mandamus | fol.  
103v | quatinus mandatariis et deputatis a dilecto filio magistro Iannino de Dulci-  
bus de Florentia commissario seu capomagistro fabrice capelle nostre presentium  
ostensoribus permittatis fodere ubicumque voluerunt marmora et alios lapides  
exportare pro usu ipsius capelle, non obstant[e] bulla felicitatis recordationis Pii II  
nostri predecessoris in contrarium edita, ceterisque contrariis quibuscumque. Da-  
tum Rome etc. die XXX Octobris MCCCCLXXIX. Anno nono.

[fol. 124r | [*left margin*: L. Grifus]  
Dilecto filio [...].  
Dilecte fili salutem etc. Volentes omnes necessarias provisiones facere, per quas  
fabrice capelle Palatii nostri apostolici nuper de novo edificari cepte oportunius  
intenda[n]tur et illa iuxta desyderium nostrum celerius perficia[n]tur, ac de tua  
solertia et industria confisi, te mareschallum et extraordinarium tam circa hanc  
quam omnes alias fabricas, que intra extraque almam Urbem nostram de mandato  
nostro fient et prout ceteri alii marschalli et extraordinarii intus et extra dictam  
Urbem sunt ad beneplacitum nostrum cum salario, emolumentis, honoribus et  
oneribus quibus alii mareschalli et extraordinarii dicte Urbis et extra potuerint  
[gauderi] et gaudent, tenore presentium facimus et deputamus tibi que nihilomi-  
nus citationes, commissiones | fol. 124v | et aggravationes tam reales quam perso-  
nales aliaque omnia et singula, que dicti alii mareschalli et extraordinarii vigore  
officiorum ipsorum facere possunt et debent et presertim que tibi per commissari-  
um, officialem seu caputmagistrum fabrice huiusmodi deputatum vel deputan-  
dum pro tempore iniungentur faciendi ac super personis et rebus officia mare-  
schallorum et extraordinariorum ac artem muratorum et carpentariorum aut alias  
ad negocium fabricandi spectantibus seu fabricas predictas tangentibus necnon  
contra quascumque, ordinationi et mandato eorundem commissarii, officialis seu  
capudmagistri contravenientes et alias quascumque personas tam intus et extra  
Urbem et ut de aliis mareschallis et extraordinariis dictum est faciendi et exequen-  
di plenam concedentes facultatem et potestatem, mandantes quoque omnibus et  
singulis, ut tibi in premissis nullum impedimentum inferant, sed assistant et oportu-  
ne faveant. Non obstantibus contrariis quibuscumque. Volumus autem, ut prius  
in manibus eiusdem commissarii de huiusmodi officio fideliter exercendo debi-  
tum prestis iuramentum. Datum ut supra [= 13 November 1479].

Doc. 2 | Brief of Sixtus IV to  
Giovannino de' Dolci  
18 September 1479  
Biblioteca Giovardiana di Veroli,  
Cod. 14, fol. 27r–v

Doc. 3 | Brief of Sixtus IV to the  
Conservatores Urbis  
30 October 1479  
Bibliotheca Giovardiana di Veroli,  
Cod. 14, fol. 103r–v

Doc. 4 | Brief of Sixtus IV to anonymous  
13 November 1479  
Biblioteca Giovardiana di Veroli,  
Cod. 14, fol. 124r–v

63 King Ferrante d'Aragona gave the Duchy of Bari to Ludovico Sforza (il Moro) on 14 August 1479. The Duchy was vacant since the death of Ludovico's brother Sforza Maria Sforza on 28 July 1479. Andenna 2000, p. 3.



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