

Memorial to a pandemic: Siena



The exterior of the Duomo in Siena, Italy. The Facciataone remains are located to the right of the Duomo (not pictured).

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Janet R. Gilsdorf, MD

Dr. Gilsdorf (AQA, University of Michigan, 1999) is Robert P. Kelch Research Professor Emerita Department of Pediatrics, Division of Infectious Diseases, University of Michigan Medical School, and Professor Emerita, Department of Epidemiology, University of Michigan, School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI.

By the early 14th century, Siena, nestled in the Tuscan hills of what is now Italy, was a thriving city. It had recently prevailed in a bloody war against the

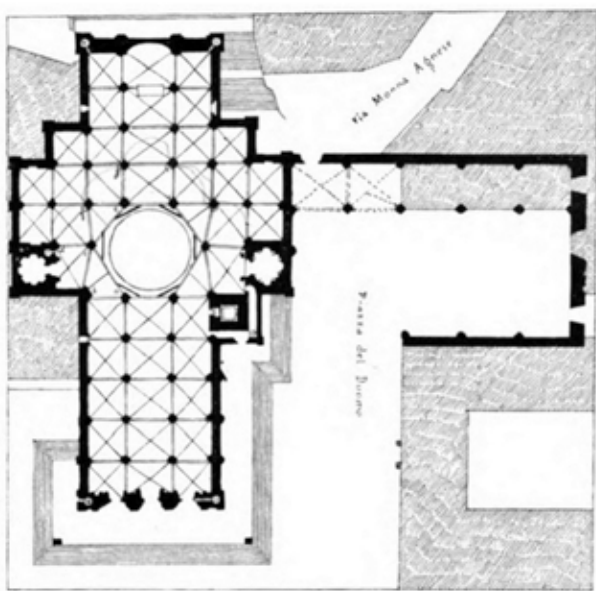
army of nearby Florence, and with a population of more than 100,000 people, emerged as one of the most prosperous economies in Europe.¹ Between 1320 and 1340, the town hall, Palazzo Pubblico, was built on the Piazza del Campo to house government offices. Private palaces were built to house wealthy citizens. Underground tunnels were dug to deliver fresh water to the Fonte Gai (Glad Fountain) in the Campo. The city walls were expanded, and new gates were opened to accommodate the increasing population.

The resource-rich, proud, and ambitious people of Siena became disenchanted with their cathedral (the Duomo, officially the Metropolitan Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption) and in 1339, they convinced the Council of the Bell (the local authority) to begin construction of a larger and more splendid church, one that would be the most magnificent in all of Italy. Construction began in February 1340 on the structure, which was designed to incorporate the old Duomo as a transept in the new cathedral.² It was built in the Sienese style with alternating stripes of black and white marble. Stone by stone, the new walls were erected.³

In 1348, the Black Death hit Siena. As described by the Sienese chronicler Agnolo di Tura:

At that time a great mortality began in Siena, greater, gloomier, more terrible than could ever be told or imagined....The groin and the armpit became swollen, and suddenly, while they were talking, men died. The father scarcely stayed to watch his child; one brother fled from another; the wife deserted her husband, because it was said that this disease was caught by looking and from the breath.

So many died...that no one could be found to bury them for hire....Enormous trenches were made, and bodies were thrown into them and covered with a little earth, and then other bodies were put in and covered in turn, and so on, layer by layer, till the trench was full. And



The floor plan of the new Duomo rebuild.²

I, Agnolo di Tura, called Grasso [fat], buried five of my children in one trench with my own hands, and many others did the like....It was ascertained that in this time there died in Siena more than eighty thousand persons.⁴

The chronicler went on to say that neither physicians nor medicines nor any kind of precaution could impact the illness. So many died that everyone believed it was the end of the world. The church bells didn't toll, and no one wept for the deceased, for all awaited their own death.

After the Black Death finally dissipated, not only had much of the population perished, but many others had fled from the city. Famine and lawlessness were widespread. Siena's major banks collapsed, and the city was eclipsed in importance by Florence, which was 35 miles to the north, and depleted of its wealth by the powerful Medici family of Florence. The sources of building materials and supplies had dried up.³

Work on the new Duomo stopped, and by 1356, defects had become visible in the construction. The much smaller Siena no longer needed, nor could it afford, a larger, more magnificent cathedral, so the master builder Benci di Cione from Florence was consulted. He determined that the four columns showed such weakness that the vaulting arches and the walls that rested upon them had become insecure, and the damage could not be repaired. He recommended taking them down.³ In 1357, considering the reduced fortunes and the dispirited citizens of Siena, the city leaders declared that only the outer walls of the new construction would remain to serve as a monument to the glory and great wealth of the city.³

Over the subsequent 600 years, Siena has never regained its past economic superiority over other Italian cities; in fact, the charm of its medieval character makes it a popular tourist attraction.⁵ The current population of Siena, 55,000, is half that at the beginning of the plague.¹

Today, the entrance or face of those remaining outer walls—known as the Facciato—is all that remains of the defunct grand cathedral. These spare walls have none of the great beauty intended for the new Duomo. Rather, the Facciato is austere and harsh, an abandoned, useless appendage to the cathedral of Siena. Yet, those walls have endured for more than 600 years, paying honor to Siena's past eminence. The Facciato is also a somber reminder of the power of an infectious disease to raise chaos, to ruin a prosperous society, and to change everything. It is a solemn metaphor for the vast emptiness of a pandemic.



The Facciatone as it stands today. Istock photo. Stock Photos|Ancient

The current COVID-19 pandemic differs significantly from the Black Death. While more than one million Americans have died of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the COVID-19 mortality rate is dwarfed by that of the Black Death, which is estimated to have killed between one-third and two-thirds of the European population.⁶ Today, we have highly effective vaccines and antiviral treatments against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, whereas, in 1348, none were available against *Yersinia pestis*, the causative agent of bubonic plague recognized 550 years later.⁷ Today we understand the cause and the dynamics of spread of SARS-CoV-2 infection and have instituted effective mitigation strategies for prevention of COVID-19, whereas the Black Death, along with many other microbial infections, was, at the time, thought to be the result of a miasma, or bad air.⁸

Yet, parallels may be found between these two pandemics. In both pandemics, fear of the disease was abundant; society was significantly disrupted; misinformation was prevalent; and commerce was substantially affected. Today's social and news media recounted daily the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 1353, Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, a collection of medieval tales, recounted what life was like during the Black Death in Tuscany.⁹

Will a commemorative to the current pandemic similar to the Facciatone persist for the next 600 years to remind the world of COVID's impact on today's society? What would it look like? More than a million gravestones scattered across America? Diaries documenting jobs lost, businesses closed, hospital emergency departments and

intensive care units overwhelmed? Will music, literature, paintings, and sculpture that express the emotional toll of SARS CoV-2 endure as they did after the Black Death?

While we reflect on all that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how we might possibly represent its enormity, complexity, and meaning, the Facciatone, an amazing remnant of both the doomed new Duomo and the lost economic prominence of old Siena, may serve as a memorial to all pandemics.

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The author's E-mail address is gilsdorf@umich.edu.