

Description of the Feast of San Giovanni, copied 9 February 1407/8

Text in Cesare Guasti, *Le feste di San Giovanni Batista in Firenze descritte in prosa e in rima da contemporanei* (Florence: R. Società di S. Giovanni Batista, 1908), pp. 9–17. See also Alessandro D’Ancona, *Le feste di S. Giovanni Battista in Firenze: Poesia antica* (Pisa: Nistri, 1882); Nerida Newbigin, “Rewriting John the Baptist: Building a History of the San Giovanni edifici,” *Spunti e ricerche* 22 (2007): 5–27.

Manuscripts

Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS II.ii.445, ff. 61r-62v

“Questo libro è di Zanobi di Pagholo d’Angnolo Perino del popolo di sa’ Llorenzo, ghonfalone del liono ad oro, quartiere di San Giovanni Batista di Firenze, el quale scrisse cholla sua propria mano ed ebbelo fatto a di xv di magio 1409 prossimo passato. Chi ll’à in chortesia gle renda, acciò che Dio e ssan Giovanni Batista gli faccia bene.”

Inc., f. 64: “Al nome di Dio amen. A di 9 febbraio 1407. Qui apresso iscriverò la festa di Santo Giovanni Batista chessi fa affirenze proprio.”

Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale MS 561 (?) già Strozzi (least useful)

“Comincia la bela mostra per San Giovanni la festa”

Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 2183

Inc. “Qui comincia la festa di San Giovanni Batista di Firenze”

Companion, God save you. — And welcome to you too! —
Where are you coming from? — Just wait till I tell you. —
Tell me now, for Heaven’s sake! —
I’m coming from Florence. — And I’m coming from France. —
You’re joking! — No! — God protect you! —
And you too. — Can I do anything for you? —
Yes, I wish... — What? —
Did you see the *festa*? — Yes, indeed. —
Tell me, for the love of Florence,
is it as beautiful as they say? —
By St Denis, yes,
and more than I could say. —
Oh, I would love to hear about it. —
Listen then, and pay attention
and I will describe it step by step,
sweet companion, since you ask me.
Yes, by God, I shall not refuse.

The honourable chapel of the Baptist
is covered round about on every side
with lilies worked
into the canopy that covers the piazza.
In the foreground on every section
are the symbols of the Commune and of the People,
in a medallion in the centre
the red Eagle and the Lilies.
And beyond that my tongue
loosens as I recount the rich display
laid out in every cloister.
All the roads are closed and covered.
Oh, what nobility is seen that day!
The gold, the pearls, the precious stones,
so many and such joyous riches,
are displayed on that day
that every other nation is put to shame.

All the cloths are displayed in Calimala,
so that I did not believe there were so many in all the world;
all lined up in a row,
inside and outside the shops and counters.
Even though I saw it, I do not believe it,
that such grace could have rained down from God.
No one could believe it:
the coloured rows, azure and white.
And I'll tell you more,
that I came out from
admiring the different colours
almost fainting.
Then I came to the next street, among the Linen craftsmen,
where all you could see was
a surfeit of beds,
furnished with such rich silks
that would keep any great lord happy,

along with other things a lord would need:
kerchiefs, towels and cloths.
The second-hand clothes were stacked
so close and tight through the Market
that earth and sky could not be glimpsed between them:
cloaks, hoods, mantles and doublets.
Such sweet delights
for my eyes on every side.
Even if I lived a thousand years
they would still enflame me.

The next beautiful display
was the Silk craftsmen: their jewels,
I'd never seen such beautiful
workmanship as I did spilling over that day
purses with garlands,
satins and velvets and pink brocades,
red, blue and violet samite.

In Vacchereccia: ermine and lapin,
grey miniver, squirrel, fox and deerskin.
Girdlers and Purse-makers
do the same with all their merchandise.
I must breath the name of the Goldsmiths too,
and the beautiful inlays, that seemed real,
with true-to-life enamels,
set in gold and silver. And then often
my mind goes
to the Armourers, the Corso of the Bridle-makers,
the Pot-sellers, and box-sellers,
everyone found them amazing.
My tongue forces me to say
that every palace seemed to be made of roses.
Lovely slave-girls shook out the sheets in the morning,
fresher and more joyful than hawthorn flowers.

All kinds of clothes were there to be seen,
too many to describe.
Now I want you to hear about
the great Offering, which was done then in the evening.
Everyone went behind his *gonfalone*,
two by two in turn.
For your good,
sweet companion, listen to how it was done.
Never did my eyes
see so many big wax candles;
not four or five or six
but more than twenty thousand, without a word of a lie.
Everyone had to follow;
and there were sixteen [*gonfalconi*],
each with its company.
The *festa* has begun,
with all its games and people to be enjoyed.
I never thought I would see such a thing.

But before these came the royal offering
of the Signori and of the Parte Guelfa:

a thousand pages and more
could not relate what honour they brought.
Ah, how natural it all seemed.
Fierce Mars seemed to ride with them,
following behind
the *gonfaloni*, so finely adorned.
The merchants had never seen
such chivalric beauty,
with their lighted torches,
too wondrous to relate.
I saw that day more honourable people
than I can describe.
And, even if God grants me
every wish, my friend,
I never saw a more beautiful *festa*.

Then, on the morning of the feast day,
the festivities started again,
even more delightful
and magnificent than the day before.
Many prisoners were given on request
to the Baptist, as a precious act of faith.
More and more I thought
the *palii* and *ceri* were regal,
from the bottom to the top,
each one more beautiful, each a richer gift.
And in all there were
seventy *palii* and thirty great *ceri*,
presented by the cities and castles.
Now hear something else:
the *palio* that is run in the evening.
I'll tell you about it next.

On a beautiful triumphal car,
guarded by a lion on each corner,
painted with a pattern
of golden lilies and their coats of arms,
drawn by two horses,
each caparisoned, in the way
that I shall now describe,
in white and red, in fine fabric.
And unarmed,
on each horse, rode a page,
beautiful, swift and light,
and both dressed in similar livery.
Let us leave them.

In the middle of the car stands a pole
where the noble *palio*
of vermilion cloth is displayed,
and at its top sits a lily.

It is made of red velvet, fair and fine,
trimmed with ermine and miniver,
with fringes and golden lilies,
one in the middle and one at the top.
How well you display the treasure
of Florence's noble garden.
Every day I love you more,
you refine your beauty
so that everyone believes,
that there is no more beautiful *festa* in the world.
Then the restive racehorses
were brought in the late afternoon.
In the race
some shout, some go for the whip, some faint,
some break their bridles.
Then in the end, the horse from Ferrara wins,
beating all the others with his strength.

The precious *palio* set out
through all the streets of Florence, accompanied by instruments.
Now I want to clarify, my friend,
this one point.
Listen, if you please.
On this day I saw so many people,
at least twenty thousand
were women, just for that event,
but to tell the truth
there were way more men than women,
who stood like columns,
all the most beautiful, from the Prato [di Ognissanti] to [Porta a] San Piero:
I saw thousands of royal queens
in their proud robes.
O divine might!
Who could relate one sixth
of what appeared before my eyes.

The rich clothes of silk and gold,
white, blue and purple samite,
adorned with velvet,
fabrics of every colour I saw that day.
Young men glided among them,

flirting lovingly
with those angelic faces
that transform midnight into bright day.
I turned around
and thought I was in paradise;
I admired first on and then another face,
as if I had lost my mind.
I found myself in love,
for each one pleased me more than the last.
They all seemed infused
with courtly charm; and I could not
have my fill of looking at them, for they were like pearls.

On their blond tresses they wore
rich and precious garlands and crowns;
their lovely faces were like
lilies, violets and roses.
You would never have said: These are people!
In their playful and angelic manners,
sweet and lovely,
they seemed rather a thousand paradises.
And I want you to know about the beautiful enamels
they displayed in the quarters [of their coats of arms].
Little lions and hounds,
scattered over white and red backgrounds,
so that even if Polycretus had made them
they could not be more beautiful.
Golden feathers in their hair,
beautiful ornamented white girdles,
adorned with lions' heads and lilies.

On their delicate breasts they wore brooches,
one a ship, another a boat,
and another a galleon,
armed as if they were real:
another a castle with pretty inlays,
another a tower, another a column, another a little shield.
Another delighted in
a bear under a canopy;
Others had lions,
some rampant, some seated,
and one for his delight
was wearing a liophant and a castle.
One had a green bird,
another a falcon, a crane, or a siren,
with dolphins and whales.

Some a liocorn, and as an emblem
some had a leopard, and some a griffin with wings.

All made of pearls, with vipers and dragons,
chamois, ostriches, beavers and panthers
that seemed quite real;
mounts with bushes, and pelicans,
little circles with phoenixes, lovely and fair,
storks and geese, wild and tame;
and one with a sparrowhawk
that tore at her hair, and some with pheasants,
and roebucks and dogs,
deer, badgers, wolves and ermine;
moors' heads,
that seemed alive, lovely camels,
every kind of bird;
game, I saw; sun, moon and stars;
fair beyond measure,
and set in relief with fine detail,
sparkling richly with gold.

There were so many emblems that I could not relate them all,
displayed all around on little shields,
all enamelled
with their arms and those of their husbands.
Therefore, my friend, I have to finish
with these women and with their honoured men,
to whom they give pleasure and honour
more than anyone in the world.
And now bind yourself
to defend them from anyone who might challenge them,
for there is no more beautiful city in the world.
And know that this is true, for it is the flower that blooms above all others.
Let us leave now.
Are you happy, my dear friend? —
Yes, indeed. — Farewell! — Farewell! Farewell!