The Mural Polyptych of Sienese School in St. John the Baptist Church in Farnetella: Elements of Commission, Iconography, and Attribution

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The Republic of Siena in central Italy was one of the most prosperous territories in high-and late-medieval Europe. This prosperity endowed an enormous output of artistic production which has been extensively studied by scholars around the world for many years. Nonetheless, there is still artwork from this era and region that has not been properly studied, such as the fresco found in the Church of St. John the Baptist in the village of Farnetella, about 30 kilometers from Siena in Tuscany. The aim of this article is to investigate some specific, new elements to better understand the commissioning, attribution, context, and unusual *epiconography*² of this mural painting. By focusing on this artwork, I will show how, even in such a small and marginal village, the Gothic culture gave birth to a historically and artistically fascinating fresco. The study will explore, too, how religious devotion and interest in symbols typical of the Middle Ages could be

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¹ I want to thank Professor Stefano Riccioni, supervisor of my bachelor's thesis where I began my research on the fresco. For the valuable suggestions, I wish to thank Professor Gaudenz Freuler and Professor Serena Padovani. My thanks, too, to all the personnel of the archives and libraries I consulted for their helpfulness.

² The term “epiconography” refers to the mixture of legible and visible, two aspects which are often considered separately in historical-artistic studies. Epigraphs, as well as being a text, are visual art forms and therefore an integral part of the iconographic program. On this topic, see Stefano Riccioni, “L’Epiconografia: l’opera d’arte come sintesi visiva di scrittura e immagine” in *Medioevo: Arte e storia, atti del X Convegno internazionale di studi*, Parma, 2007 (Milano, Electa, 2008), pp. 465–480.
reflected in rare iconography.

The painting (Fig. 1), located on the wall behind the main altar, is a *mural polyptych*, simulating a wooden triptych with the Virgin and Child in the central panel and Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist on either side. Until the mid-20th century, the fresco was covered by a 17th-century canvas of the Florentine School,3 and so has not undergone any in-depth study. The peripheral position of the village of Farnetella, too,

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3 The canvas is by an anonymous Florentine school painter who depicted the same main subjects of the fresco: Madonna and Child between St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. In 1954, the parish priest arranged for extensive renovations to the church and probably the canvas was moved then, uncovering the fresco. In 1901, Adolfo Ferrari reported that the fresco was still covered by the canvas in *Historical-statutory Monograph of the Castle of Farnetella in Valdichiana with appendix of unpublished or rare documents* (Rocca S. Casciano: Cappelli, 1901), p. 27. While Ferrari was clearly aware of the fresco’s existence behind the canvas, he never investigated the history of this fresco. In contrast, in photographs of religious ceremonies that took place after 1955, the fresco is visible (Fig. 2).

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probably contributed to this lack of scholarly interest. Those who did acknowledge it, referred only to it briefly.

The earliest published mention of the fresco, a few lines in 1985, stated "[...] wie ein bis heute unveröffentlichtes, in Umkreis des Francesco di Vannuccio entstandenes in S. Giovanni in Farnetella zu datieren ist,"\(^4\) where the fresco is attributed to the circle of Francesco di Vannuccio, a Sienese painter at the end of the 14\(^{th}\) century about whom we know little. The second appearance in print, in 2002, appeared in a volume by Laura Martini, who suggested the authorship of the piece be attributed to "Andrea di Bartolo con più stretti legami con Taddeo di Bartolo."\(^5\) Both are just brief mentions without any further investigation. The third report (from 2011) is a little longer, but not much. It appears in a study about the *mural polyptychs* in Tuscany and Umbria which generally surveys their functions and the reasons why this particular type of wall painting was commissioned. It is in this context that the painting of Farnetella may be placed.\(^6\)

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\(^4\) "Like the still unpublished and undated mural polyptych painted by the circle of Francesco di Vannuccio in St. John Church in Farnetella" (trans. by author). Enrica Neri Lusanna, *Herz-Jesu Altar in Die Kirchen von Siena*, eds. P. A. Riedl and M. Seidel, 1.1 Abbadia all’Arco - S. Biagio (München: Brückmann Verlag, 1985), pp. 286-287. Here Dr. Neri Lusanna analyzes in detail the historical-artistic information of the altar of the Church of Sant’Andrea, Siena. The altar is decorated with a polyptych mural, and so the author lists other examples of mural polyptychs in the territory which includes Farnetella. The reference to the Farnetella painting is brief because the fresco in the church of Siena cannot be considered in terms of stylistic comparison with that of Farnetella as the Sienese work is damaged, the figures are missing, and only a painted rich wooden frame remains.

\(^5\) "Andrea di Bartolo’s style with some features akin to Taddeo di Bartolo“ (trans. by author), Laura Martini, *Memorie d’arte antica: restauri a Montepulciano* (Montepulciano: Le Balze, 2003), p. 15. Here, Martini examines a polyptych mural in the Franciscan convent of the nearby city of Montepulciano, citing Farnetella’s fresco only as an example of a polyptych mural in the Sienese territory, but does not add any other information or stylistic comparisons in favor of her attribution, likely because such a comparison would not be useful since stylistically, they differ, sharing only a monastic context.

\(^6\) Elisa Camporeale, “Polittici murali del Trecento e Quattrocento: un percorso dall’Umbria alla Toscana” in *Atti e Memorie dell’Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere “La Colombaria,”* vol. LXXVI, N. S. LXII (Firenze: Olschki, 2011). Camporeale maps 14\(^{th}\)-and 15\(^{th}\)-century mural polyptychs in Tuscany and Umbria. For each fresco she records the shape of the carpentry, the state of conservation, the painting technique and, when possible, an attribution. With the Farnetella fresco, a dozen lines of text report the location, the subjects depicted, and the attribution previously proposed by L. Martini and E. Neri Lusanna. Nonetheless, this is important because it thoroughly analyzes the general characteristics of mural polyptychs in Tuscany and Umbria, relating to their commission and location (often linked to
History of the Village and the Church

The painting adorns the wall of the main altar of the parish church of St. John the Baptist, located in the main square of Farnetella. (Fig. 2) The village of Farnetella stands on a hill on the western side of the Valdichiana, on the border between the provinces of Siena and Arezzo. The first official document regarding Farnetella, now in the State Archive in monasteries/convents or churches in small villages), and the reasons for which they were made (usually reflecting an economic saving).

Fig. 2 Church of St. John the Baptist (interior during a religious ceremony, Farnetella, 1955. The fresco is visible behind the altar. Photo: Private Collection, published with permission.

7 An ancient site, remains of Etruscan (5th-3rd century BCE) and Roman populations have been found at the foot of the hill on which Farnetella is built. Giulio Paolucci, Sinalunga e Bettolle: due centri etruschi della Val di Chiana (Sinalunga: Comune di Sinalunga, 1996), p. 21. Adolfo Ferrari – a 20th-century aristocratic who was passionate about history – claimed, without citing sources, that the origins of Farnetella date back to the 5th century CE. Adolfo Ferrari, Monografia storica-statutaria del Castello di Farnetella in Valdichiana: con appendice di documenti inediti o rari (Rocca S. Casciano:, Cappelli, 1901), p. 27.
Siena (A.S.S.), is dated 1175. After this, all of its vicissitudes were related to the Republic of Siena. In 1271, Sienese troops destroyed the village because it was wrongly accused of having harbored an enemy of the Republic. Immediately, the inhabitants of Farnetella repeatedly asked the Republic of Siena for permission to rebuild their native village, but they were not authorized to do so until 1295, when they began to rebuild the village on a nearby hill with defensive walls.

It is logical to deduce that in 1295 the parish church was also rebuilt, but this leads to a problem. The only date mentioned by earlier scholars is that of 1392, when, according to 19th-century historian Emanuele Repetti, the church was built. Repetti did not cite where he found this date. Nonetheless, "Ecclesia S. Johannis de Farneta" is listed among the taxable religious institutions, recording their tithes between 1274 and 1280 and is in the list of tithes between 1295-1304, indicated by "Ecclesia S. Johannis de Farnatella." This

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8 This document certified the peace between the noble family of Scialenghi and the Republic of Siena, which forced the former to return the castle to its previous owners, the noble family of Baroti. A.S.S, Dipl. Riformagioni; Cap 1, Cal. Vecchio, c. 20 r.

9 The Republic of Siena, a historic State from 1125 to 1555, controlled the economics and politics of the majority of villages in southern Tuscany. The city of Siena at that time was one of the richest and most populous in Europe.


11 Not only did the author not cite his source; a search of the archives did not yield any document that referred to this date. Yet, Repetti's Physical and Historical Geographical Dictionary of Tuscany otherwise always followed a logical and scientific procedure in finding the sources for the entries in his dictionary. The date of 1392, I believe, is plausible for other considerations, as discussed here.

12 Guidi Pietro (ed. by), Rationes decimarum Italiae nei secoli XIII e XIV: Tuscia, vol. I – Le Decime degli anni 1274-1280 (Città del Vaticano, 1932) p. 87. Note that between the tithes of 1274 – 1280, the name of the church appears with the amount owed next to it but, it is never specified if it was actually paid, as the village (and the church) were destroyed in 1271. Also note that there are numerous villages in Tuscany that take their name from the Quercus Farnia plant species, such as ‘Farneto’, ‘Farneta’, ‘Farnetella,’ so it could refer to a different village. This is unlikely, however, because only in Farnetella is a church dedicated to San Giovanni and because this name was written close to the name of the near parish church of Rigomagno.

means that before 1392, there existed a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist in Farnetella, but it is not certain that it was the same building. Other possible documents associated with the church’s construction were probably destroyed in two fires in the Diocesan Archive of Arezzo which occurred in 1378 and 1463.\textsuperscript{14} Other surviving civil documents never mention the church.

Turning to the church itself in a search for clues as to its dating is not very profitable because during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, extensive changes were made to the building including covering the original external stonework with plaster. In the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, the original flooring was covered with modern tiles, the side altars (as well as the wooden pulpit) were dismantled, and all the internal walls were plastered and whitewashed.

Despite this, the fresco survives and can be dated to the end of the 14\textsuperscript{th} /-beginning of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, evoking the earlier cited date of 1392. During this time, the town of Farnetella enjoyed stable socio-economic conditions,\textsuperscript{15} perhaps spurring the decorating of the church with the fresco as well as two wooden statues by Francesco of Valdambrino, located in two niches next to the main altar.

Other kinds of documents, particularly those of the pastoral visits of bishops,


\textsuperscript{15} Between 1344 and 1440 a number of documents, recording the relationship between the Republic of Siena and Farnetella, state that many parts of the walls were restored and fortified. In 1344 the walls were enlarged (A.S.S, Cons. Gen. 135, c. 42); in 1380 the conditions of Farnetella are deemed excellent (A.S.S, Conc. 1799, n. 96), and, in 1431, a drawbridge was added (A.S.S, Conc. 395, c. 38'). The last years of the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, Tuscany (as part of a general European phenomenon) were characterized by an improvement in the demographic and social situation after the passage of the black death. Although it would recur occasionally, it had led to a sharp demographic decline, rebalancing the relationship between resources and population, laying the foundations for the subsequent development of the Renaissance. Franco Cardini, Marina Montesano, \textit{Medieval History} (Florence: Le Monnier University, 2006).
provide a few more clues. Analyzing the text of the oldest pastoral visit,\textsuperscript{16} conserved in the Diocesan Archive of Arezzo, on May 28, 1468, we see that Bishop Lorenzo degli Acciaiuoli visited the church and on his arrival met “rector frater Ambrosius Bartolomei de Rughomagno frater ordinis sancti Augustini.”\textsuperscript{17} This suggests that the parish had friars from an Augustinian monastery. The Augustinian Vallesi monastery could be reached by a wooded path, only three km from Farnetella. Repetti\textsuperscript{18} wrote that this monastery was rebuilt in 1257 but was suppressed during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. It is now a private residence. While the presence of Augustinian friars at Farnetella at the end of the 14\textsuperscript{th} century cannot be documented with certainty, in an account of the 1468 pastoral visit is a description of the Chapel of the Madonna delle Nevi, inside the church at Farnetella, stating:

\textit{Interrogatus de honere dicte capelle dixit quod superioribus temporibus in dicta cappella solitum fuit celebrari quater in mense videlicet semel in die sabbati et semel in die lune et bis in die dominico et quod aliquotiens celebrabantur plures missae in mense prout sciunt frater Ambrosius rectoris ecclesie predicte et donmus Antonius plebanus Rugomagni et frater Paulus de Rugomagno frater delle Vallesi.}\textsuperscript{19}

As it was “quod superioribus temporibus” or “as in the past,” it suggests that the

\textsuperscript{16} Pastoral visits by bishops within the territory of his diocese were for purposes of control and inspection. Records of pastoral visits to Farnetella prior to 1468 did not survive the fire at the diocesan archive in Arezzo.

\textsuperscript{17} “rector friar named Ambrosius Bartolomei from Rigomagno, friar of the Order of Saint Augustine” (trans. by author). Don S. Pieri, Don C. Volpi (ed.), \textit{Visite pastorali dal 1257 al 1516} (Servizio Editoriale Fiesolano, 2006), p. 119.


\textsuperscript{19} Don S. Pieri, Don C. Volpi. p. 121. “When asked about the duty of this chapel, it was said that, as in past times, it was customary to celebrate at least four masses distributed as follows: one mass on Saturday, one on Monday and two on Sunday, and several masses are celebrated several times as well as the Ambrogio rector of the above-mentioned church, Antonio parson of Rigomagno and friar Paolo di Rigomagno from Vallesi.” (trans. by author).
Augustinian friars performed religious functions in Farnetella prior to 1468. The presence of erudite Augustinian monks at the church of Farnetella is an important element in understanding the iconology and iconography of the fresco.

**Madonna and child with Saints: Technique and Description.**

The fresco depicts a triptych with the *Madonna and child with Saints* measuring 215 cm high x 178 cm wide. The fresco itself is larger than this, as some portions towards the top and the side are painted with whitewash, and we do not know if they cover painted portions or not. These modifications were made specifically to surround the 17th-century canvas that was positioned in front of the fresco. Nevertheless, this decorative choice is different from more-common variants at that time. The two favored artistic techniques in late-14th-century Tuscany were wall painting and panel painting. In this case a rather singular option was decided on, a sort of optical illusion that combined both alternatives: the creation of a wall painting with the forms of a wooden altarpiece, called *mural polyptych.*

Although in commissioning a fresco it was necessary to bear the costs of

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20 The order of St. Augustine, founded in 1244, had received the faculty of preaching and confessing in the parish territories from Pope Innocent IV through the papal seal: “Vote De votorum” of 23 March 1244. From the 13th century, the Church entrusted more and more mendicant orders with the difficult mission of preaching among the people and converting as many as possible. David Gutiérrez, *The Augustinians in the Middle Ages* (1256-1356) (Rome: Institutum historicum Ordinis fratrum S. Augustini, 1986). The phrase “quod superioribus temporibus” does not imply a temporary Augustinian presence, but one established over time. If the date 1392 is accepted, there is no reason to exclude the 70 years before 1468, for it is likely (based on context) that this relationship between the Vallesi and Farnetella already existed.

21 For more information on this technique, see note 6. Between Tuscany and Umbria there are just over twenty mural polyptychs survive, and this one in Farnetella is one of these rare examples.
transferring the painters’ crew to the site for several days,\textsuperscript{22} the overall price of a fresco was lower than the price of an altarpiece.\textsuperscript{23} This is likely why they chose to make a mural altarpiece rather than a wooden panel. Another reason could be the “alleged inalterability and immovability of the fresco,”\textsuperscript{24} as well as the desire to maintain a “coherence with the technique adopted for the decoration of the rest of the environment,”\textsuperscript{25} and to reduce the time necessary to do the work. The choice of the mural altarpiece was quite popular in buildings connected to monastic orders.\textsuperscript{26} So, considering the presumed relationship between Farnetella and the Augustinian convent in Vallesi di Rigomagno, this provides a possible further explanation for this decision.

Regarding technique, it seems that, after the usual rough coating on the stone wall, a single layer of plaster was laid in which the contours of the figures have been engraved with many deep grooves still visible today. These incising of the figures’ shapes and of the carpentry\textsuperscript{27} suggest a modality of transposition of the preparatory drawing different from the more common sinopia. Simultaneously the other engraving operations on plaster were carried out in the parts that were meant to be gilded, such as the rich punching in the


\textsuperscript{23} With the same dimensions, including the wooden support (and therefore the work of a carver), a panel painting was more expensive than one on a wall. Elisa Camporeale, Polittici murali..., 2011, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p. 19.

\textsuperscript{26} For example, the one in Abbadia Sicille (Trequanda) connected with the Olivetans monastic order, or that of Montepulciano within the Franciscan convent. E. Camporeale, Polittici murali... (2011), p. 75. A further, less evident example of a wall painting is preserved in the Augustinian convent in Monticiano, attributed to Bartolo di Fredi. All of them can be dated to the end of the 14th century.

\textsuperscript{27} “Carpentry” here refers to the pictorial representation on the wall of the wooden structure.
Many parts of the painting were undertaken using dry or no longer sufficiently wet plaster, which caused a loss of pigment in several areas, the most evident of which is the halos\textsuperscript{28} (Fig. 3).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{halos.png}
\caption{The decoration schemes of the punchmark halos in the fresco of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella. Photo: author.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{28} Another aspect discussed in this article is the filing of the punching of the halos of the fresco of Farnetella. Punching is a decorative technique that involves etching geometric or floral shapes on wood or plaster using metal or wooden tools. It was used throughout the medieval period to adorn the edges of the garments, the haloes and the outlines of the work.

In Farnetella, artists used six different punches, cataloged following the numbering proposed in Erling Sigvard Skaug, \textit{Punch Marks from Giotto to Fra Angelico. Attribution, Chronology, and Workshop Relationships in Tuscan Panel Painting with particular consideration to Florence, c. 1330/1430}, I (Oslo: IIC Nordic Group, 1994), as shown in Fig. 3. The correlation between the morphology of the punches can assist in identifying the relationships between the components of a workshop, between master and pupil, or the movement of an artist to another place. In the characters of the main register of the polyptych of Farnetella the punching utilizes a recurring model composed of simpler forms at the four corners surrounding a more elaborate central form. This model is found in many works by Sienese and Florentine artists between the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries, but with a certain recurrence was also employed by Bartolomeo Bulgarini and Taddeo di Bartolo.
blue mantle of the Virgin. In the carpentry areas, the gold background has been completely lost, leaving the tin leaf colored with a black varnish called mecca. Significant traces of gilding remain in the halos and in other areas of the polyptych (Fig. 4). The light
reflected with UV\textsuperscript{29} rays is almost identical on the entire surface of the painting, so that most of the pictorial images visible today appear to be original. Of particular interest are small details that reflect the light differently (Fig. 5), consisting of adhesive materials made with organic derivatives. These organic traces can be found in the contours of the garments, in the square decoration of the Evangelist, and in the rays of the eagle.

The integrity of the fresco is compromised by the presence of two deep vertical cracks in the plaster where, despite a more recent, rather poor attempt at repair, it is still visible. Also evident is a swelling of the plaster around the Christ Blessing and micro-cracks spread throughout the surface, especially in the upper-left zone. While these can be considered consequences of the natural process of deterioration, this is not so for the numerous holes and abrasions concentrated in the area around the Christ Blessing, which perhaps were due to the need to fix objects there using nails. The damage to the rectangular area covered with plaster at the right shoulder of the Blessing is also due to human intervention. The brown colors used for the hair, beards, part of the wooden structure and the clothes of the main characters are in a better condition.

A description of the work might seem unnecessary, but none have been proposed or published to date. The iconographic program (Fig. 6) is of the Maestà in the central panel flanked by St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. In the upper pinnacles from left to right are St. Paul, Christ Blessing, and Bartholomew the Apostle (Fig. 7). The

\textsuperscript{29} In this case a UV lamp (320-400 nm) was used in a completely dark environment, photographically recording the ray reflections.
main space within a polylobate arch is reserved for the most important figure, the Virgin, and more attention is paid to her than to the other figures. Her robe, covered by a blue mantle was originally embellished with two eight-pointed stars, which reveal signs of lost decoration. The Child, in a position halfway between seated and upright, tenderly turning his eyes towards his Mother, wears an orange garment covered with a white tunic. His left shoulder is decorated with a pleating of the fabric in a shape that is uncommon in

**Figure 6** Pictorial scheme of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella. Photo: author.

A Virgin and Child  
B Saint John the Baptist  
C Saint John the Evangelist  
D Saint Bartholomew  
E Christ Blessing  
F Saint Paul
contemporary local works. In his right hand he holds a pomegranate with the frond of the tree to which the fruit was attached. The drape that gives shape to the throne is also marvelously decorated: the ornamental motif, difficult to recognize today, was composed of diamond (lozenge) shapes interspersed with floral motifs on a red background. The complete decorative scheme is reconstructed in Fig. 8.

To the right of the Virgin stands St. John the Baptist, the saint to whom the church is consecrated. He is depicted as usual: camel-skin robe, rigid features, long hair, and a scroll in his left hand containing the inscription: ECCE [AGN]US [D]EI. In the upper portion, corresponding with St. John the Baptist, stands St. Paul, easily identifiable by the sword

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30 The pomegranate is a symbolic fruit often associated with the Madonna and Child. It expresses the unity of Christians in the Church, just as the pomegranate seeds are enclosed within a single skin. Another allegorical use, perhaps more pertinent to this context, is that it was linked to the Passion (and therefore to the Resurrection) as a warning of the inevitable divine project for Virgin’s own Son.
Figure 8. Reconstructed ornamental motif behind the Virgin and Child, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella. Photo: author.
he holds in his right hand, his index finger crossed over the hilt. In St. Paul’s left hand – hidden behind his tunic – he clasps a book representing the New Testament, which contains the thirteen letters written by him. In the right pinnacle, above St. John the Evangelist, is St. Bartholomew with a curved beard pointing to the symbol of his martyrdom: the knife. In the central pinnacle, the Christ Blessing is depicted with his typical solemn and composed demeanor. While his right hand is raised with three fingers in the act of blessing, his left hand holds a book that bears the inscription: [E]GO / SUM / [LUX] or “I am the light.”

**Style and an attribution hypothesis**

In terms of style, the fresco can be ascribed to the school of Sienese painting at the end of the 14th century. The painting has a discreet elegance that, despite showing a balanced structural scheme, would probably be considered inferior to the endeavors of the great 14th-century artists Lorenzetti and Martini. The figures, especially in those of the lower portion, reveal a graceful trace of shades combined with an appreciable pictorial delicacy (Fig. 1). In contrast, the line becomes heavier and more solid in all the other figures. Greater rigidity is found in the hands and feet of the characters; more naturalistic than the others is the Virgin’s left hand, with which she grasps the left side of the Child to support him. The intention to create a valid volumetric space is found only in the fold of the drape that follows the shape of the Virgin’s throne; elsewhere, the figurative rendering is substantially frontal.
It is not easy to propose an attribution of a work half-covered by whitewash and with no historical documents or scientific information derived from a specialized restoration. The Virgin and Child with Saints of Farnetella does not seem close enough to the style of Francesco di Vannuccio, who has a strong but more refined expression, which therefore leads us away from the attribution of Prof. Neri Lusanna.\textsuperscript{31} Of course, there is considerable difficulty in recognizing the hand of Francesco di Vannuccio.\textsuperscript{32}

Another attribution, here to the circle of Andrea di Bartolo, as proposed by Laura Martini,\textsuperscript{33} turns out to be an excellent starting point because, although Martini does not provide any explanation of the attribution, it enabled me to identify some physiognomic similarities and relationships with Bartolo di Fredi and his son Andrea.\textsuperscript{34} Still, these elements are not sufficient to make an exhaustive attributive argument to the circle of Andrea di Bartolo.

\textsuperscript{31} See note 4. The reason for this attribution is mainly based on a stylistic comparison with two small panels by Francesco di Vannuccio kept at the Wallace Collection (P550) and at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Cat. 94). While it is true that there are some anatomical affinities, the artistic quality seems clearly superior to the work in Farnetella.

\textsuperscript{32} An example is the small tempera on wood preserved in the Pinacoteca di Montepulciano (n. 131 / 1971) that Cesare Brandi attributes to Francesco di Vannuccio, while Laura Martini attributes to Cristoforo di Bindoccio.

\textsuperscript{33} See note 5.

\textsuperscript{34} Some physiognomic features of the nasal bridge and of the mouth clearly stamped on the face are common to the workshop of Andrea di Bartolo; the slightly absent gaze of St. John the Evangelist is comparable with some faces of Bartolo di Fredi.

Geographic relationships also had an impact. About 4 km away from Farnetella, at Scrofiano in the small chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist, there is another mural triptych attributed to the same circle as Andrea di Bartolo by Laura Martini. In addition, work by the sculptor Francesco di Valdambrino, creator of the wooden statues in the same church of Farnetella, collaborated with Andrea di Bartolo to paint his statues. For example, see the wooden statues of St. Ansanus and St. Crescentius of Rome of 1410 in the cathedral of Siena. Furthermore, in the “Breve dell’Arte dei Pittori senesi,” reported by Milanesi, the name that precedes that of Andrea di Bartolo is Giovanni di Giacomo (called ‘unghero’ or ‘d’Ungheria’), and it seems that “in 1408 he was vicar of Farnetella” -- an interesting coincidence that cannot be developed further due to the scarcity of information on the latter painter.
When analyzing the style of the fresco carefully, while I find it is possible to affirm that the points of connection with the style of Andrea and his father Bartolo, it cannot be attributed to their own work. Instead, it can be attributed to the very prolific workshop in the Sienese area at the end of the 14th century – that is, the workshop of Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, which often replicated the ways of Bartolo and Andrea.\textsuperscript{35} The former established a sort of studio and collaborated with Bartolo di Fredi, sometimes

\textbf{Figure 9} Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, Chapel of the Mantle, Spedale Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, 1370. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

\textsuperscript{35} Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero were active since the 1360s as both held various political and administrative roles within the Sienese state. Numerous documents attest to a lasting and fruitful collaboration, in which the payments demonstrate that Cristoforo occupied a position of greater importance than Meo. In 1370, they signed the frescoes of the
Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena. In 1382, they worked in the Cathedral of the same city, and in 1393, they worked in the Public Palace of Siena with Bartolo di Fredi. Again, in 1406, they worked at the Cathedral. They emulated the Lorenzettian style, taking up forms and iconographies dear to the most important Sienese artists and translating them into a popular and cursive artistic language that, in the best examples, portrays an effective simplicity. They were certified for the last time in 1407. Cristoforo, while continuing to carry out his profession as a painter, may have entered the monastic order of the Camaldolese, still appeared in the “Breve dell’Arte dei Pittori senesi” as late as 1414–1417. Gaetano Milanesi, Documenti per la storia dell’arte senese, I (Siena, 1854), p. 33; Ettore Romagnoli, Biografie cronol. dei bellartisti senesi, III, (1835), p. 425–28. Serena Padovani, “Un aggiornamento del catalogo di Cristoforo di Bindoccio e Meo di Pero” in Opere e giorni. Studi su mille anni di arte europea dedicati a Max Seidel (Venezia: Marsilio, 200), p. 223.

**Figure 10** (Left) Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, Chapel of the Mantle, Spedale Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, 1370. Photo: Wikimedia Commons; (Center) Detail Christ from upper portion of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, 14th century. Photo: author; (Right) Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, St. Mary’s Church, Campagnatico (Grosseto), 1393. Photo: Diocese of Grosseto.
elaborating some characteristics of his style (later taken up by his son Andrea), increasing
the difficulties of precise attribution.

However, the points of contact with Cristoforo and Meo’s workshop are numerous
and convincing. The first signed and dated work by these artists is from 1370: the frescoes
of the Cappella del Manto at the Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, of which only
a few parts remain (Fig. 9). This work, a grandiose commission in one of the most
important places in the city, is characterized by its high artistic quality. The grace of the
figures and the softness and refinement of the Siena school’s forms perhaps recall the
figure of St. John the Evangelist and the Virgin in Farnetella, and some features of the
faces of the Siena busts are comparable with those of Farnetella (Fig. 10). About ten years
later, circa 1380, the style of the two painters evolved more roughly in the apse of the
church of San Francesco in Pienza (Figs. 11-12). In this work, the flat folds of the drapery,
the voluminous hands, and the large elongated eyes are very similar to the Virgin of
Farnetella and to a panel attributed to the same painters from the 1380s, depicting the
Madonna and Child (Fig. 13). In the latter, note the similarities of Farnetella to the poses
and the wavy feature of the children’s hair, as well as the marked shading under the eye,
which gives the gaze a slight feeling of mournfulness without losing its intensity.

37 I would like to thank Dr. Sara Mammana for these images.
38 Serena Padovani, “Un aggiornamento del catalogo di Cristoforo di Bindoccio e Meo di Pero” in Opere e giorni. Studi
A later signed work by Cristoforo and Meo is the mural painting at the church of St. Mary in Campagnatico (Grosseto) depicting stories from the life of the Virgin, dating to 1393. It was attributed to them with certainty in 1981 when restoration work revealed their signatures (Fig. 14).\footnote{Serena Padovani, “Sulla traccia di Cristoforo di Binduccio e Meo di Pero,” Bollettino d’Arte VI (1982), p. 85.} This painting clearly lacks the refinement of the Siena paintings, especially their physiognomy and the clumsy presence of the figures within three-dimensional spaces. The busts of the apostles painted in the center of the triumphal arch of

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11.png}
\caption{Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, Church of St. Francis, Pienza, c. 1380. Photo: Dr. Sara Mammana.}
\end{figure}
the church of Campagnatico is also of particular interest for comparison with Farnetella (Figs. 10, 15). The excessive roughness of the faces, the surly expressions, the shape of the faces, and the waves in the hair are like the figures of Farnetella. Another example is a panel attributed to Cristoforo and Meo, now in the Barnes Foundation collection, which depicts the Virgin and Child between St. Anthony Abbot and St. Catherine of Alexandria, also echoes affinities with the fresco, notably between the figure of St. Anthony the Abbot and St. Paul in the cusp in Farnetella, sharing likeness in the setting of the face and the style of beard and hair (Fig. 16).

**Figure 12** Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, Church of St. Francis, Pienza, c. 1380. Photo: Dr. Sara Mammana.
**Figure 13** (Left) Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, Virgin and Child, Private Collection, Firenze. Photo: Cambi Casa d’Asta Archive. (Right) Detail of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, fresco, 14th century. Photo: author.

**Figure 14** Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, St. Mary’s Church, Campagnatico (Grosseto), 1393. Photo: Courtesy of the Diocese of Grosseto.
These comparisons provide a strong case for attributing the Farnetella work to these two painters. One of the characteristics of this workshop is also the presence of two different quality levels, one more skilled than the other, probably due to the two different hands.40 The gap in technical ability is also found in the fresco of Farnetella, where the lower register is more refined than the upper one, characterized by its roughness and stylistic inferiority.

Furthermore, the date of 1392 by Repetti cannot be excluded, as it could still be hidden in the parts of the fresco covered by plaster, particularly when we consider that the workshop signed and dated its works in the Campagnatico and Siena cycles. This would explain the affinity of style with the Campagnatico painting produced only a year later. Indeed, the elegance and finesse of the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist pushes the dating toward the 1380s, closer to the Siena cycle.

The unusual epiconography of Giovanni Evangelista

In the compartment to the left of the Virgin is St. John the Evangelist. While John was the youngest apostle, he was considered spiritually elevated and close to Jesus, so he often appears together with Mary at the foot of the cross.41 He is represented mostly as

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40 Between the two, Cristoforo seems to be preeminent. Not only was he always named first in documents, it was attested to by the payment for the same work in which Cristoforo receives two denarii, while Meo only receives one. Serena Padovani, “Sulla traccia di Cristoforo di Bindoccio e Meo di Pero,” Bollettino d’Arte VI (1982), pp. 91–92.

youthful in appearance, intent on writing his Gospel. His symbol is an eagle\textsuperscript{42} who usually poses next to him, sometimes acting as a lectern\textsuperscript{43} for his gospel. In contrast, at Farnetella

\textbf{Figure 15} (Left and Right) Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, St. Mary’s Church, Campagnatico (Grosseto), 1393. Photo: Diocese of Grosseto; (Center) Detail Christ from upper portion of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, 14\textsuperscript{th} century. Photo: author.

\textsuperscript{42} The tetramorph (the four living creatures associated with the four Evangelists) derives from the vision of the Celestial Chariot from the book of the prophet Ezekiel [1: 10–11] and was then attributed to the individual Evangelists based on the analogies between the characteristics of the respective gospels and symbols. Gerd Heinz-Moh, \textit{Lessico di iconografia Cristiana} (Milano: Istituto di propaganda libraria, 1995), p. 49. The first to associate the Gospels with the symbols of the tetramorph was Irenaeus of Lyon in the 2nd century. In the 4\textsuperscript{th} century, St. Jerome definitively sanctioned the association of man with Matthew because his Gospel is centered on the humanity of Christ; the lion to Mark because it emphasizes the majesty of Christ; the ox to Luke because he focuses on the sacrificial nature of Christ’s death; and, finally, the eagle to John because his Gospel is the highest theologically and speaks of the incarnation of the divine Logos which, like the eagle, comes from the highest heaven.

the eagle is placed between the human figure and the book. (Fig. 17) This is not the only example in the Sienese school in which the succession “human figure-symbol-object” appears in the figure of the Evangelist, though in all the others, the object that the Evangelist holds in his hand is a disk instead of a book.

Figure 16 (Left and Right) Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero, St. Mary’s Church, Campagnatico (Grosseto), 1393. Photo: Diocese of Grosseto; (Center) Detail Christ from upper portion of Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, 14th century. Photo: author.
Figure 17 Detail John the Evangelist, Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, fresco, 14th century. Photo: author.
Furthermore, the book’s contents are impossible to read because the Evangelist keeps it turned toward himself, while in Farnetella it is clearly angled to the observer. Where the book is facing the observer, there is no eagle interpolation. The Farnetella fresco, as far as the author is aware, is the only work in which this iconography is found.

In the book, there is an inscription transcribed here for the first time (Fig. 18), using the edition with the Leiden conventions below:

\[
\text{Joh(anne)s hab} \quad \text{et simili} \quad \text{tudinem a} \quad \text{quil[a]e, eo quo[d]a} \quad \text{[nim]is alta} \quad \text{[peti]erit; ait} \quad \\
\text{[en]i[n principi]} \quad \text{o er[a]t [Ver] \quad bum, et [V]er \quad bum erat / apud Deum / e[t]} \\
\text{Deus era / t Ve[r]bum}
\]

The inscription, in Gothic minuscule, is divided into the right page and the left page of the depicted manuscript. The arrangement of the words, as well as the colors and the handwriting, imply meaning beyond the simple literary contents, for the intention is to create a written page with the engraving of the squaring and the line, as well as the red initial still visible today.

Starting from the left page is the text “\text{Johannes habet similitudinem aquilae, eo quod nimis alta petierit; ait enim.}” This commentary on St. John’s Gospel was initially

\[44\] For example, remaining in the Siene area, the mid-14th-century panel by Maestro d’Ovile preserved in Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena in which the Evangelist indicates, as a warning to the reader, the first verse of his gospel. Pietro Torriti, \textit{La Pinacoteca nazionale di Siena}, Vol. 1 (Genova: Monte dei Paschi di Siena SAGEP, 1977), p.134.

\[45\] No works of art with identical iconography have been found in an analysis of about 3,000 medieval depictions of St. John the Evangelist in digital and paper catalogs.

\[46\] Ludovico Antonio Muratori, \textit{Liturgia Romana vetus tria sacramentaria complectens, Leonianum scilicet, Gelasianum, et antiquum Gregorianum}, (Venetiis, Jo. Baptistae Pasquali, 1748), p. 539. Trans. by author: “John has the appearance of an eagle, so that he can go extremely high; therefore, he says.”

\[47\] This inscription has never been found in other depictions of John the Evangelist. \textit{St. John The Divine} in George Kaftal, \textit{Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan painting} (Florence, Sansoni, 1952). I would like to thank Professor Luca Fiorentino, Professor Raffaele Argenziano, and Dr. Katie Zins for their help on this aspect.
attributed to Theophilus of Antioch, but it has recently been proposed to be an elaboration of the Merovingian culture. Probably the passage became famous through the

**Figure 18** Detail of Gospel Book held by John the Evangelist, Virgin and Child with Saints, Church of St. John the Baptist, Farnetella, fresco, 14th century. Photo: author.
Sacramentarium Gelasianum⁴⁸ (also reported in the Missale Gallicanum Vetus), which was placed in the chapter Expositio evangeliorum in aurium apertione and pronounced by the presbyters before beginning to read the Gospel according to John. On the right page, there is the usual incipit of the same Gospel.

While the scroll of the Baptist and the book of the Christ Blessing feature a large capital inscription in the fresco, that of John the Evangelist is written in small cursive characters, as if it would only be read by the learned clergy who said the mass in the apse area. Therefore – and here the link between the image and the inscription becomes crucial – presumably the meaning that this iconography conveyed was thought to be understood only by those who, like the officiant, had greater knowledge. Common belief was that the eagle could fly the highest of any bird and look at the sun without being blinded. After approaching the sun, the eagle would immerse itself in a fountain of youth to renew its strength.⁴⁹ This has been interpreted in Christian doctrine as the spiritual rebirth of man by God’s message (i.e., baptism). For this reason, the eagle has also become the symbol of the catechumens, which are those who are preparing to receive the sacrament of baptism.⁵⁰ It is fascinating then to realize an allegorical connection in this iconography between the

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⁴⁸ The sacramentaries were the books used by the officiant in which the formulas for the celebration of the Eucharist were found. There were many versions depending on the locations and adaptations. The Gelasian Sacramentary, whose main forms are attributed to Pope Gelasius I, dates to around 750 and contains the Roman rite with by Gallican elements, due to the frequent transcriptions which occurred across the Alps. The use of the sacramentaries began to wane as early as the 10th century, but the new missals being created adopted sacramentary content. The Council of Trent sanctioned the end of this uncontrolled proliferation with the affirmation of the Missal for use in the Church of Rome.


⁵⁰ Ibid.
function of the text indirectly concerning baptism and the saint to whom the church is consecrated, St. John the Baptist, the initiator of baptism.

Moreover, although this commentary is rare – it is even more enigmatic to find it precisely written in a small peripheral church such as Farnetella – the content it transmits (the metaphor of John as an eagle) can be found in homilies, sermons, and texts written by scholars of the first centuries of the Middle Ages. Among the Fathers of the Church, Augustine of Hippo dealt extensively with the reflection and commentary on Christian characters and texts, in particular on the Gospel of John. In 416, he dedicated one hundred and twenty-four sermons to St John’s Gospel. Among these are six sermons that reiterate John's characteristic of flying up high like an eagle. In particular, in homily number 36, John was compared to the eagle for his intelligence, for his ability to reach the elevation of God, and to transmit his message through the Gospel for all men. The interpretation of the iconography “human figure-eagle-gospel” could explain the Evangelist (human figure), through characteristics attributed to the winged animal (eagle), could transmit the divine message to Christians through scripture (Gospel). While, to state this with certainty, the intentional theological connection with Augustine’s texts combined with the context – the peculiarity of the inscription combined with the image of the eagle positioned in this way – suggests that this is a realistic option. Furthermore, we should not

51 An example is Irenaeus of Lyon, Origen of Alexandria, Giovanni Crisostomo, and, still later, Meister Eckhart, Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, and Tommaso d'Aquino.


53 There are references to the eagle in Tractatus no. 15, 19, 36, 40, 48, 84. Agostino di Ippona, Commento al Vangelo di San Giovanni in Opere di Sant'Agostino, vol. XXIV (Roma: Città Nuova, 1968).
forget the hypothesis that all this rare epiconography may derive from the cultured framework of the Augustinian convent in Vallesi, supporting the idea that the Augustinians were involved in the commissioning of the work.

Conclusions

I believe that the village of Farnetella, although scarcely populated and peripheral compared to the greater centers of the medieval Republic of Siena, preserves a work that is not entirely marginal. This artwork should acquire a position of more importance, as the interesting elements that emerge from it demonstrate. Unlike other frescoes rediscovered in the 20th century, that of Farnetella has not yet been thoroughly investigated and considered for restoration, which is fundamental for research purposes and to guarantee its integrity for future generations.

Concerning the question of attribution, it can be determined that – despite the work being in a poor state of conservation and partially covered by whitewash – there are numerous elements that direct us toward the circle of Cristoforo di Bindoccio and Meo di Pero. Thus, Farnetella’s work is vitally important because it can contribute to the knowledge of one of the most prolific workshops of the Sienese area in the 14th century.

At the same time, several mysteries remain unsolved, such as the definite date of construction of the church in Farnetella, the possible relationship with the Vallesi convent, and the enigmatic meaning of the iconography of St. John the Evangelist. These are all questions I hope will stimulate future research. 🌍