

# Allegories of Good and Bad Government

(originally entitled Peace and War)

Frescoes in the Room of Peace (Room of The Nine)

Palazzo Pubblico (City Hall)

Siena, Tuscany, Italy

Painted by

Ambrogio Lorenzetti

1338-1339

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Intended for educational purposes only.

Prepared by Laurel Lee at [www.timefordemocracy.com/index.html](http://www.timefordemocracy.com/index.html) (2016 January 13)

The Good and Bad Government frescoes in the Siena Town Hall are the first and only secular paintings of their time. They're reminiscent of town scenes found on ancient Roman murals. Their message is clear. If city officials are good, the whole city will benefit.

The frescoes are also the first works to give landscape a central role.

Siena leaders commissioned the Allegory of Bad Government to depict assassinations, sacking, violence, poverty and famine, while the Allegory of Good Government shows a rich, prosperous, serene and tranquil countryside and city.

Seven hundred years ago, Siena was experiencing its greatest prosperity when it asked Lorenzetti to paint murals to celebrate city government and the value of a republic.

Siena's good fortune didn't last. Crops failed within the year. Famine ensued. Within 20 years, a plague killed half the people, including Lorenzetti.



View from window of Sala della Pace.  
[http://56.media.tumblr.com/tumblr\\_lfwokhYR1s1qggp6so1\\_500.png](http://56.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lfwokhYR1s1qggp6so1_500.png)  
<http://lorenzettifrescos.tumblr.com/>



[https://clarklemons.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/img\\_0957.jpg](https://clarklemons.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/img_0957.jpg)



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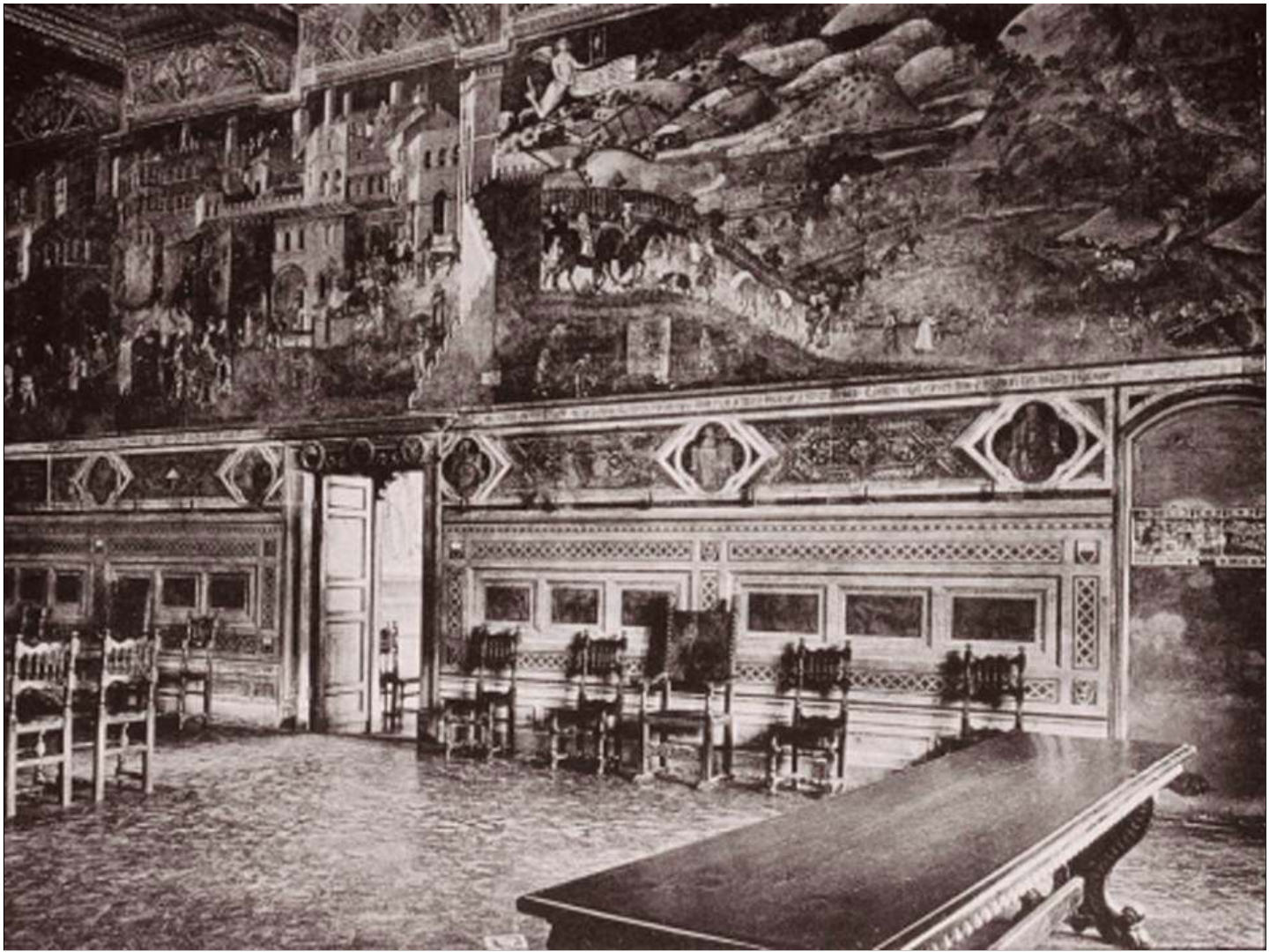


The 'Allegories Of Good & Bad Government: An Art History Reminder  
©Dr. Ilya Sandra Perlingieri (2011 January 10)  
<http://rense.com/general92/alleg.htm> (pdf)





Two of the 3 panels, in situ  
<https://clarklemons.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/allegory.jpg?w=529>  
<https://clarklemons.wordpress.com/2012/11/21/siena-and-good-government/>



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Sieneese leaders knew that love of wealth and power conflicts with love of the Virgin Mary. Palazzo Pubblico art addresses the problem.

On the surface, a portrait of Our Lady in the Hall of the Great Council appears to be entirely religious, but a block of text warns government officials to act with humility and justice.

Mary warns, 'I will answer your prayers, but if the strong molest the weak, your prayers will go unheeded.'



<http://www.discovertuscany.com/siena/what-to-do/museo-civico-siena.html>

The same landscape appears in the allegories of both Good and Bad Government.

A wise old man represents Good Government. Four letters around his head stand for for Commune Saenorum Civitatis Virginis.

The cardinal virtues of Peace, Bravery, Prudence, Generosity, Modesty and Justice flank him. Prudence leads because the other five virtues depend on her. Faith, Hope and Charity rise above the venerable old man. Life is peaceful and work progresses in a well-governed city.

Two children play at the ruler's feet. The children might be Ascus and Senius, sons of Remus, because, according to Roman legend, his sons founded Siena. Also according to legend, Remus and his brother, Romulus, founded Rome.

Twenty-four Sieneze citizens in procession represent guardians of Democratic government.

Guards and prisoners opposite the 24 illustrate that dishonest public officials, special interests, pride, greed, and mismanagement lead to bad government and tragedy.



Figures of justice  
<http://www.discovertuscany.com/siena/what-to-do/museo-civico-siena.html>



Algoodgov700.jpg

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City fresco

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Effects of Good Government in the City fresco 1338-39  
<http://www.theartroomonline.net/2014/06/cityscapes-ambrogio-lorenzetti.html>



Effects of Good Government in the City fresco 1338-39  
<http://www.theartroomonline.net/2014/06/cityscapes-ambrogio-lorenzetti.html>



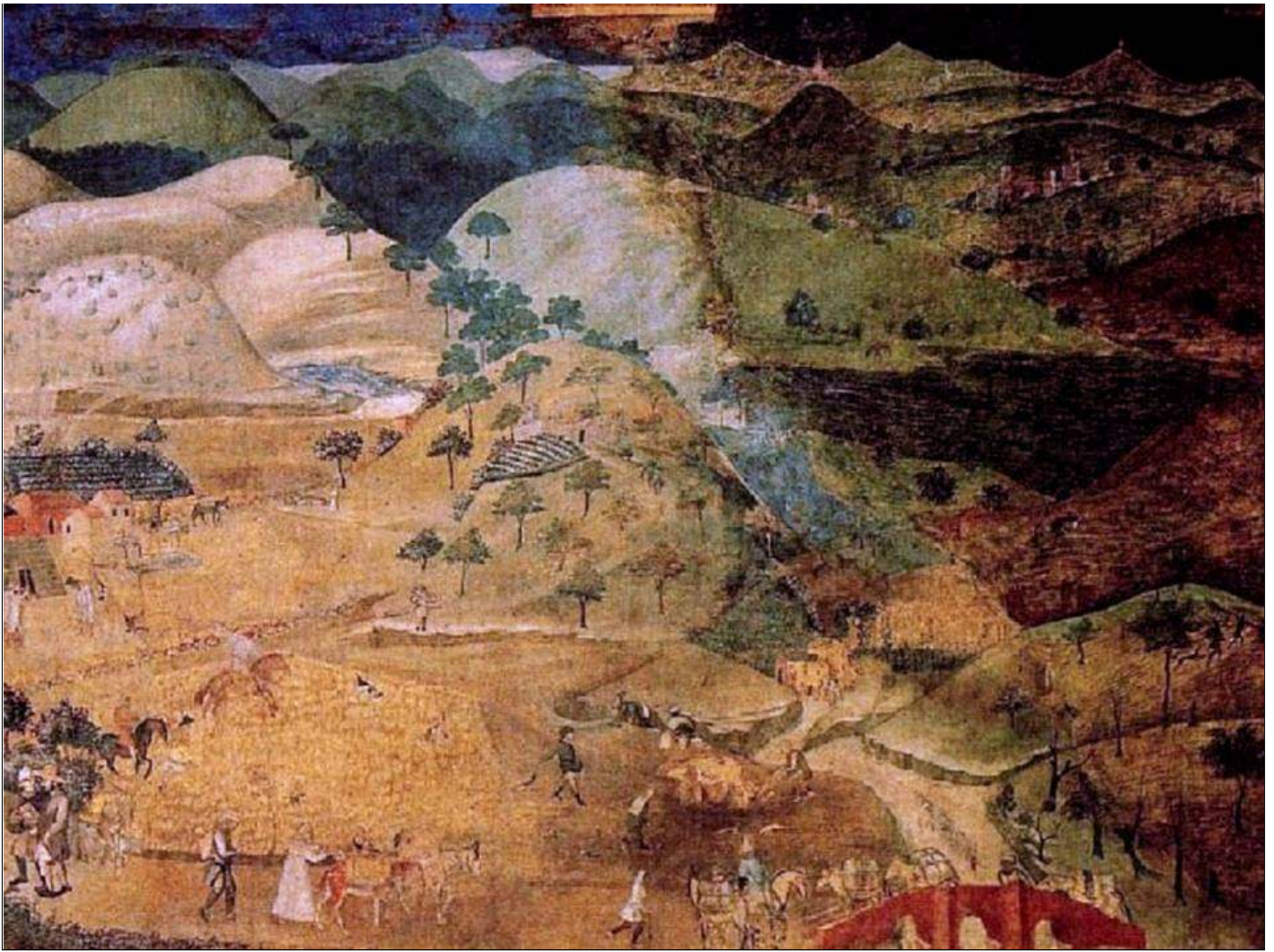
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Ambrogio Lorenzetti – The Effects of Good Government in the Countryside (1338) fresco, City Hall of Siena  
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In the Allegory of Good Government, Justice is elevated; and in the Allegory of Bad Government, she is felled. She lies bound and tethered, her scales thrown down while Tyranny holds court.

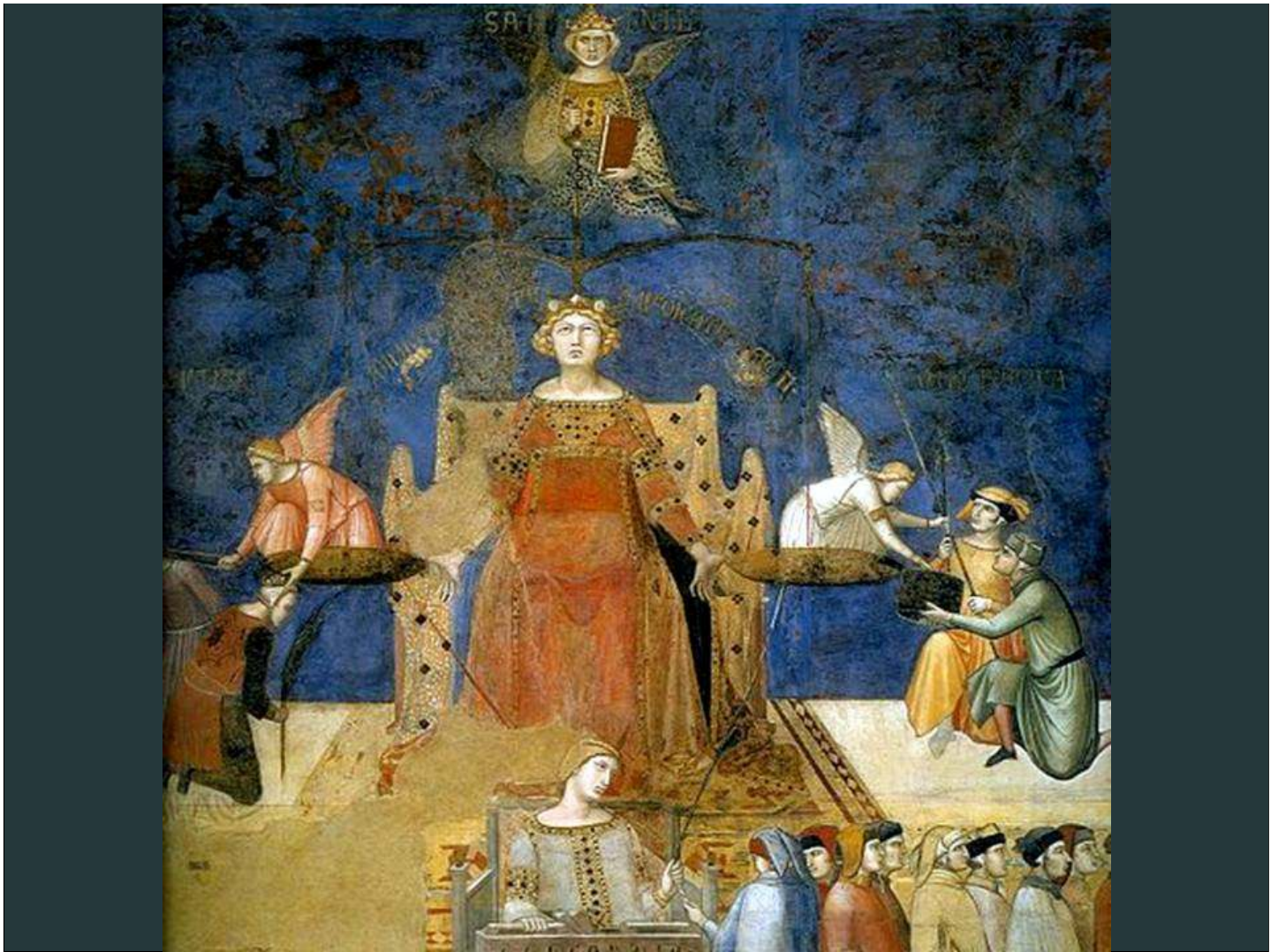
Five characters at the left of Good Government personify Justice. Justice herself sits on a throne in the middle. Wisdom rises above, holding a scale. Angels to the left and right represent different kinds of Justice. Two ropes drop from the angels over the scale and join at Harmony.



Text on the wall says: 'Turn your eyes to behold her who is portrayed here (Justice), you who are governing, crowned on account of her excellence, who always renders to everyone his due.

'Look how many goods derive from her and how sweet and peaceful is the life of the city where this virtue who outshines any other is preserved.

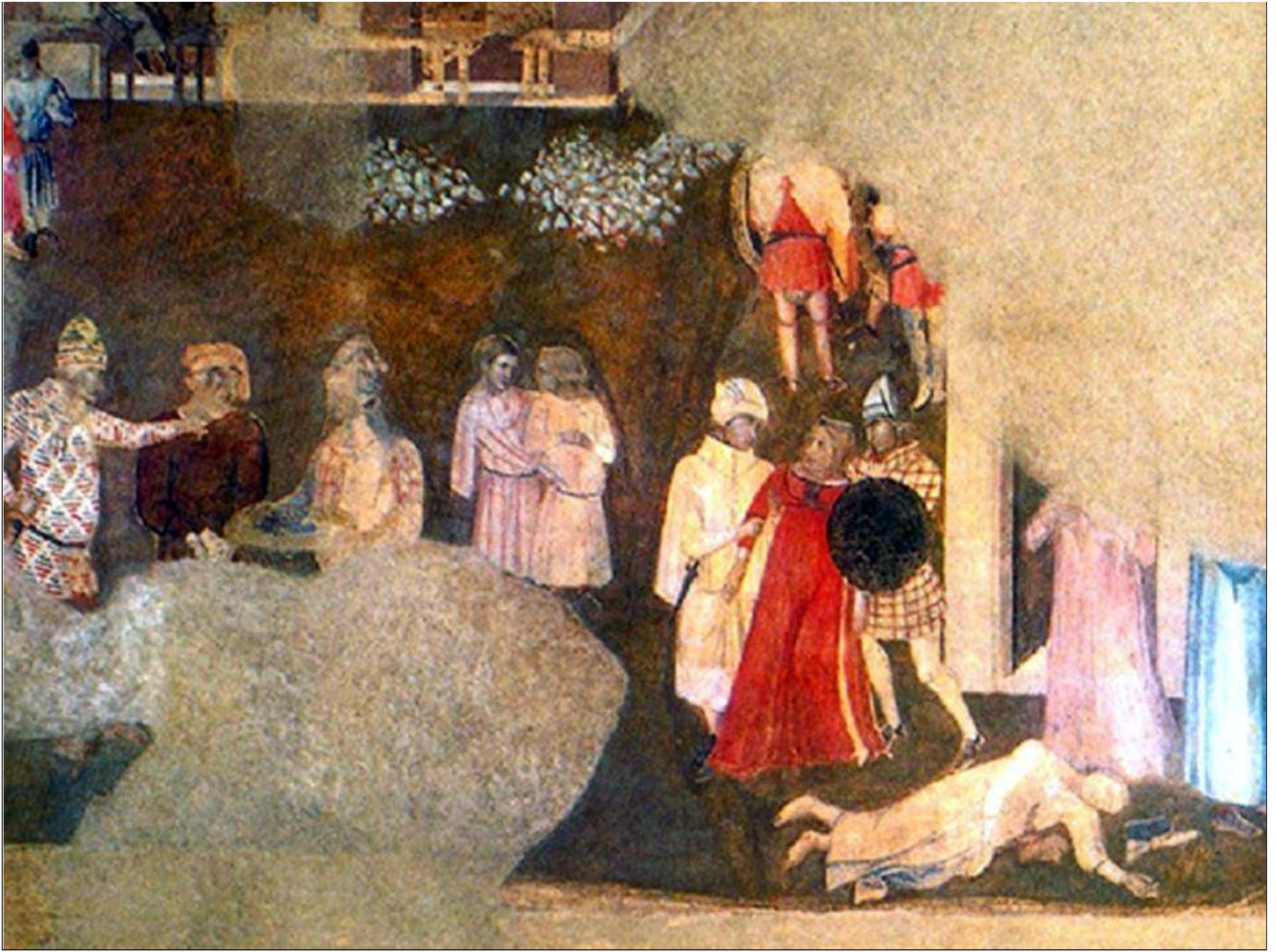
'She guards and defends those who honor her, and nourishes and feeds them. Her light requites those who do good and gives due punishment to the wicked.'



Justice in Allegory of Good Government

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2e/Lorenzetti\\_Amb.\\_good\\_government\\_det..jpg/465px-Lorenzetti\\_Amb.\\_good\\_government\\_det..jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2e/Lorenzetti_Amb._good_government_det..jpg/465px-Lorenzetti_Amb._good_government_det..jpg)

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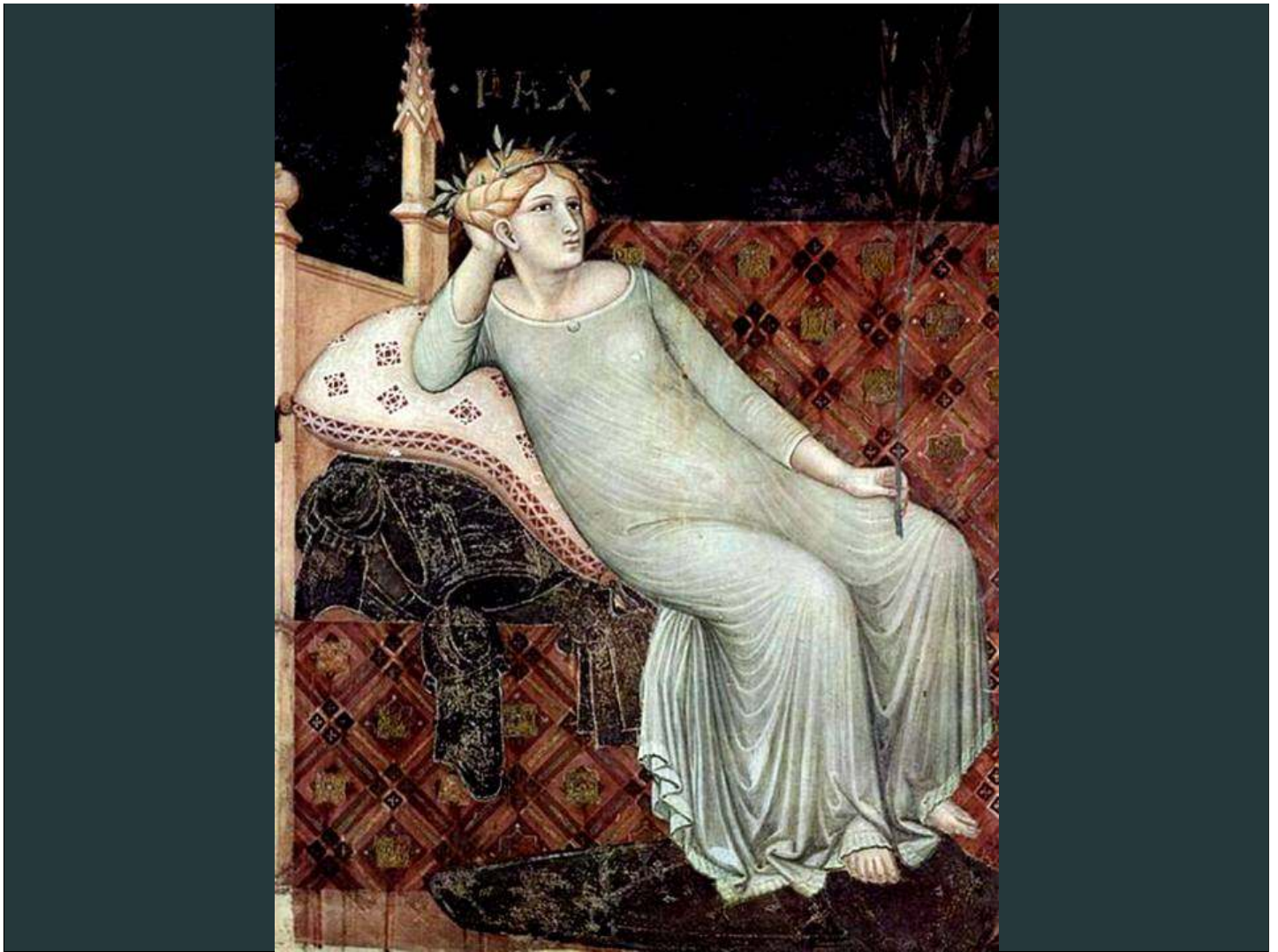
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The Allegory of Good Government shows a variety of activities necessary for a well organized city. Activities include manufacturing, construction, and even leisure.

Young female dancers might also represent the nine Muses of art and science in Greek mythology.



The figure of Peace in Allegory of Good Government

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Detail effects of good government

[http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco/full/good\\_city\\_republic.jpg](http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco/full/good_city_republic.jpg)

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Detail effects of good government

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The countryside is to the right of the city.

The winged figure of Security hovers over the countryside, holding a gallows in one hand and in the other a scroll that promises safety to all who live under the rule of law.

The scroll says: 'Without fear every man may travel freely and each may till and sow, so long as this commune shall maintain this lady (Justice) sovereign, for she has stripped the wicked of all power.'

Lorenzetti expressed the idea that peace follows when citizens act in accordance with nature, as well as deriving from good rulers.

Medallions on fresco borders personify planets and the natural order of seasons. Citizens fish and tend vines in March; cultivate soil and plant in April; ride horses in May, plough and raise stock in June, harvest cereal in July, thresh in August, and hunt in September.

Winter work is visible but doesn't follow pictorial conventions of the time.

Lorenzetti's workers are allegorical manifestations of the children of the planets. Mercury's children engage in mercantile activities. Venus's children are weavers, dancers and a bride. Knights and guards represent the children of Mars. Saturn's children are ploughmen, diggers and threshers, and his cripples are omitted. Jupiter's children are hunters.

Lorenzetti shows the importance of performing tasks appropriate to the seasons and in accordance with nature to ensure peace.

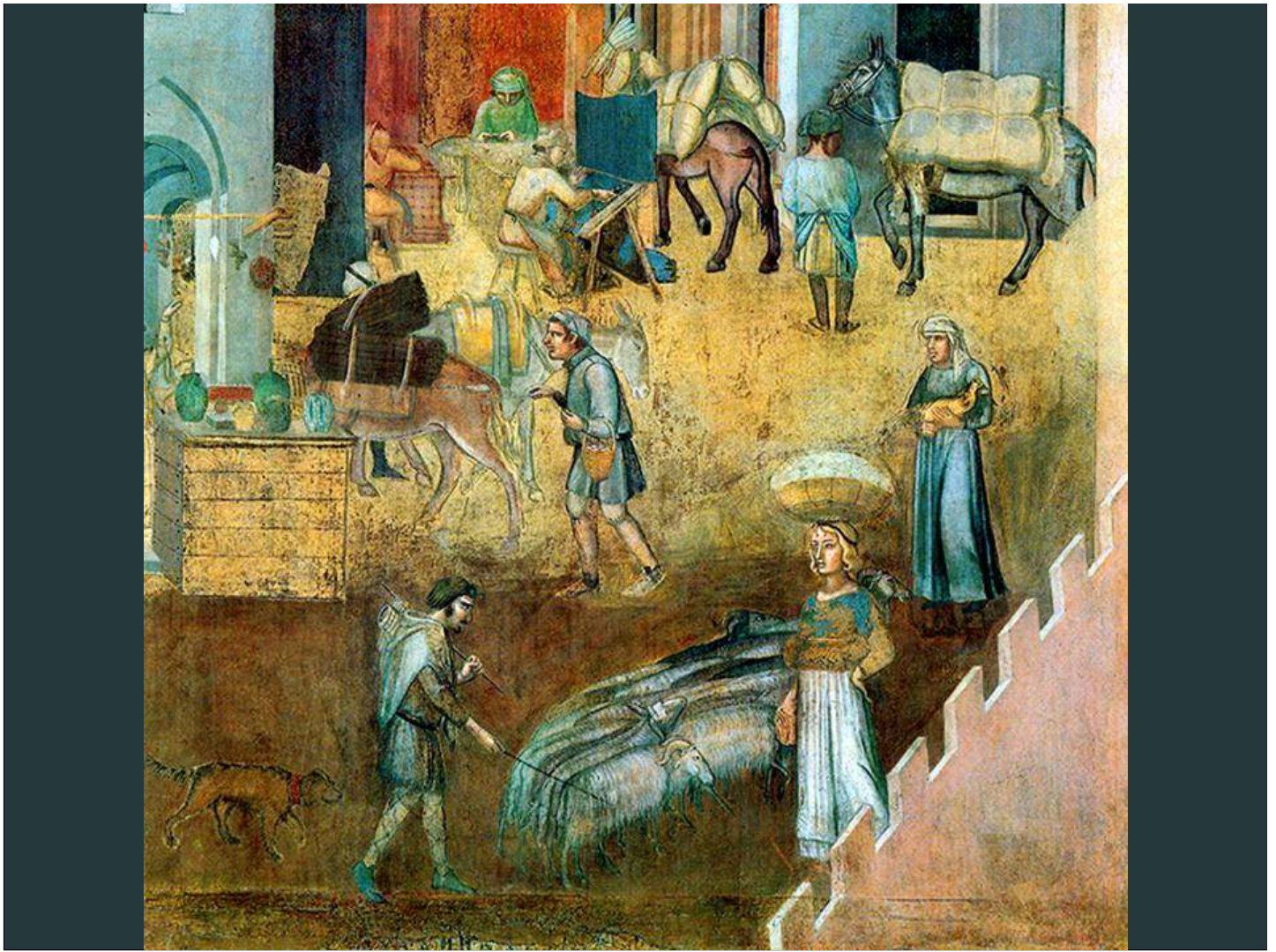


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<http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco.php>



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Effects of good governance in cities, 1337-40, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena  
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<http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco.php>



The Allegories of Good and Bad Government are located in the Sala dei Nove (Room of the Nine, also known as the Room of Peace).

Consecutive groups of nine men were elected by the middle class and not by noble families to hold office for an intense two months, during which they were the commune's CEOs and superior to the Concistoro (General Council). The Nine were sequestered in small quarters 24 hours a day. On the south wall, the Sala's only window illuminates the Allegory of Good Government on the north wall. The Nine went to and from their bedrooms through a door on the north wall next to the fresco.

The procession of 24 citizens probably memorializes the admission (in 1236-1270) of common people to communal government; though the figures might represent various officials and magistrates.

The frescoes exalt the political creed of the rulers who commissioned them. These rulers were Guelphs; and held power in Siena until 1355.

Their creed promotes Justice on the one hand; and the subordination of private interests to the common good on the other. Aristotle originated the creed. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote of it. Remigio de' Girolami, a Dominican friar, popularized it in the early 1300s.

Guelph (Guelf). The name of a German family. Historically, (a) A member of a German princely family so-called from the name (Welf) of the founder and several of his successors. It is now represented by the ducal house of Brunswick and the British royal family. (b) A member of a great political faction in Italy from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, that opposed the authority of the German emperors in Italy, the upholders of which constituted the other faction, the Ghibellines. The Guelphs were made up of the Church party, asserting the papacy to be independent of the emperors, and the party of the principalities and city republics, contending for their rights and liberties, and thus were in a measure the national party.

pages 958-959

Webster, Noah, Harris, W.T. et al (editors)

A Dictionary of the English Language

Springfield (MA): G. & C. Merriam Company (1909, 1927)

Text on the wall says: 'This holy virtue (Justice), where she rules, induces to unity the many souls (citizens); and they, gathered together for such a purpose, make the Common Good their Lord.

'He, in order to govern his state, chooses never to turn his eyes from the resplendent faces of the Virtues who sit around him; therefore to him, in triumph, are offered taxes, tributes, and lordship of towns.

'Without war, every civic result - useful, necessary and pleasurable - duly follows.'



[http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco/full/evilcity\\_detail.jpg](http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco/full/evilcity_detail.jpg)  
<http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco.php>

The Allegory of Bad Government is on the wall opposite Good Government. It used to be an exterior wall and suffered moisture damage. Damage makes the fresco difficult to study.

Bad Government inverts the forms and composition of Good Government. Tyranny sits on the throne of Justice like the wise old man, but looms larger and like a devil. The lesser planets of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars preside. Bad Emperor Nero puts in an appearance.

Tyranny is fanged, cross-eyed, porcine, bloated with corruption and neither male nor female. The figure has a woman's flowing hair and wears a cloak with gold embroidery and precious stones.

It has a gold cup in hand. Its feet rest on a goat, a symbol of luxury and lust.

Justice is at the bottom, vanquished and bound. Her scales are broken and scattered on the ground around her.

Lorenzetti surrounded Tyranny with the major evils and enemies of life as identified by a contemporary guidebook for magistrates:

Cruelty

War

Vainglory

Pride (Conceit)

Deceit (Betrayal)

Fraud (Deception)

Avarice (Parsimony)

Fury (Wrath)

Division (Disharmony)

The frescoes express concern about the fragility of society in Tuscany at the threshold of the Renaissance.

Bad Government is a civic nightmare. Tyranny holds court and Winged Fear presides. Trouble is everywhere. Every scene shows self-serving schemers set loose in a chaotic landscape, hell-bent on doing their worst.

Today, the message seems surprisingly prophetic.



Fear fills the same space in Bad Government as Security fills in Good Government. Fear is a skinny old woman who threatens the village with a sword. Two armies advance towards each other. Houses are engulfed in flames. The countryside is bare and barren. Trees bear no fruit and no one cultivates the land.

In city and village, people fight and thieve. The city is falling into ruin. Houses are being demolished and windows are wide open. Businesses are gone, except a blacksmith who forges a weapon. Robbers roam the mostly deserted streets. A gang of ruffians drags a woman by her hair.



Effects of Bad Government (detail, the Tyrant in Allegory of Bad Government)

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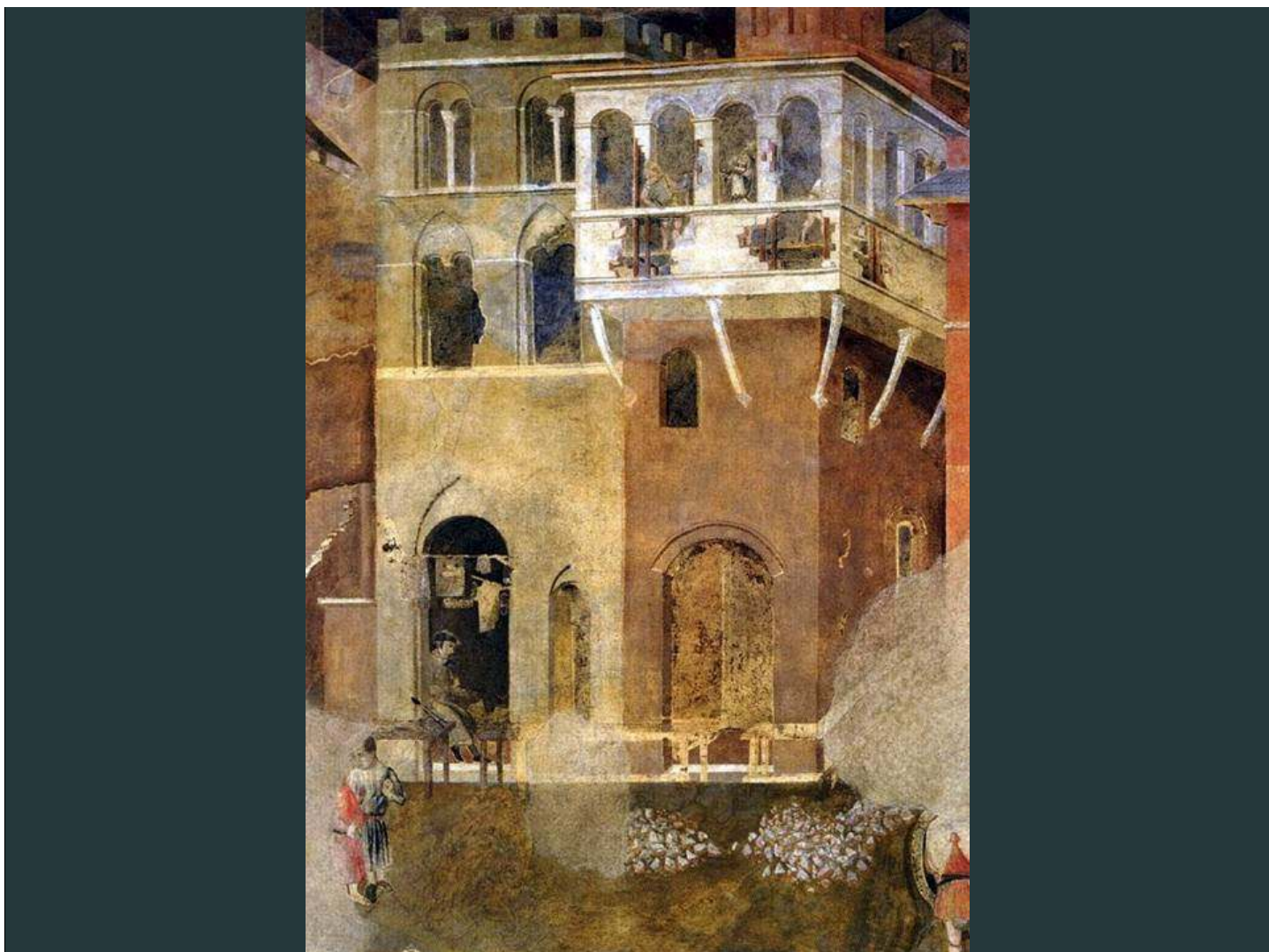


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Detail of Effects of Bad Government

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Effects of Bad Government on the Countryside (detail)

<http://www.poderesantapia.com/images/art/albadgovernmentcountry700.jpg>

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<http://thepeasantandthepriest.com/fresco.php>

In the early 1300s, Siena was a rich and cosmopolitan city. Wealthy Siennese families ran several large international banks. Siennese merchants traded goods in foreign countries, especially France.

Siena was on the main pilgrimage route to Rome. The city greeted pilgrims from all over Europe with one of the most impressive Italian cityscapes of the time. Siennese leaders were acutely aware of how art and architecture shaped the city's identity in the eyes of both natives and visitors. The Nine controlled the city's layout and the design of its largest buildings. The city spread across three hills. An enormous cathedral and city hall dominated the skyline.



As government officials and as private citizens, the Sieneese patronized the arts. Their preference for native sons hints at a general pride in the city's painters, known throughout Italy for the quality of their work.

The Nine commissioned Lorenzetti's work ten years after the death of the Italian who had assisted Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria in the disruption of the political balance of Italian city-states.

Disaster struck Siena and other cities soon after the completion of Peace and War; and the commune couldn't afford more projects.



[https://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/601/flashcards/24601/jpg/siena\\_palazzo-pubblico11327448559942.jpg](https://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/601/flashcards/24601/jpg/siena_palazzo-pubblico11327448559942.jpg)



<http://www.sheltonstate.edu/Uploads/files/faculty/Chuck%20Boening/western%20civ/Renaissance%20Italy.jpg>  
 Copyright Wadsworth – Thomson (2005)



The Palace of the Doges. Venice, Italy.

[http://tomaselli.wiki.ccsd.edu/file/view/Doge's\\_Palace\\_2.jpg/57130448/Doge's\\_Palace\\_2.jpg](http://tomaselli.wiki.ccsd.edu/file/view/Doge's_Palace_2.jpg/57130448/Doge's_Palace_2.jpg)