



# The Feast of San Giovanni in Florence 2016

## The Donation of the Candles

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## The Donation of the Candles

(All photos by the author)

Architecture, Festival and Order:  
The history and persistence of the Florentine Feast of San  
Giovanni and its significance to the city's civic identity.

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Detail of the Madonna della Misericordia, school of Bernardo Daddi, middle of the fourteenth century, Bigallo, Florence



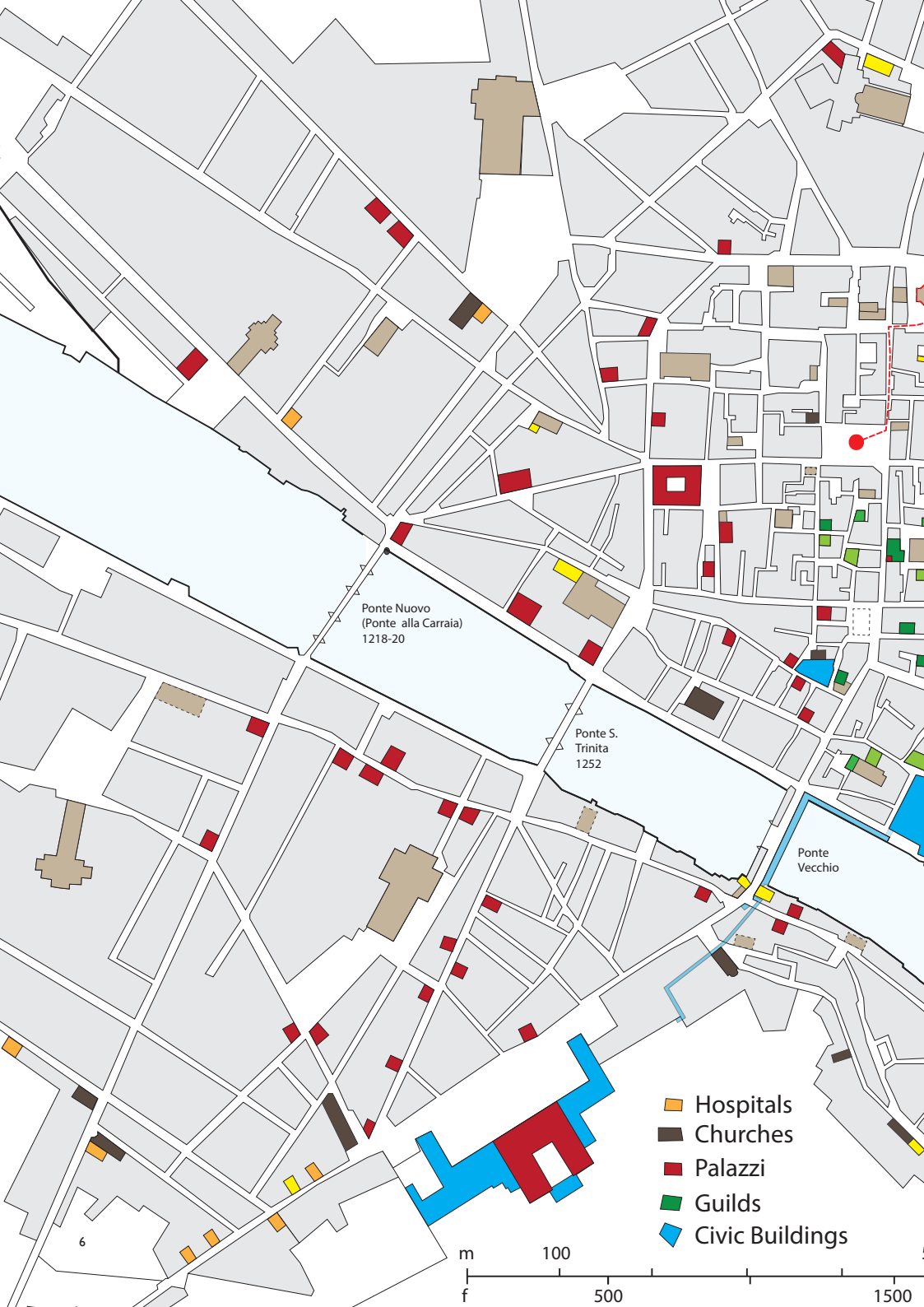
## The Donation of the Candles

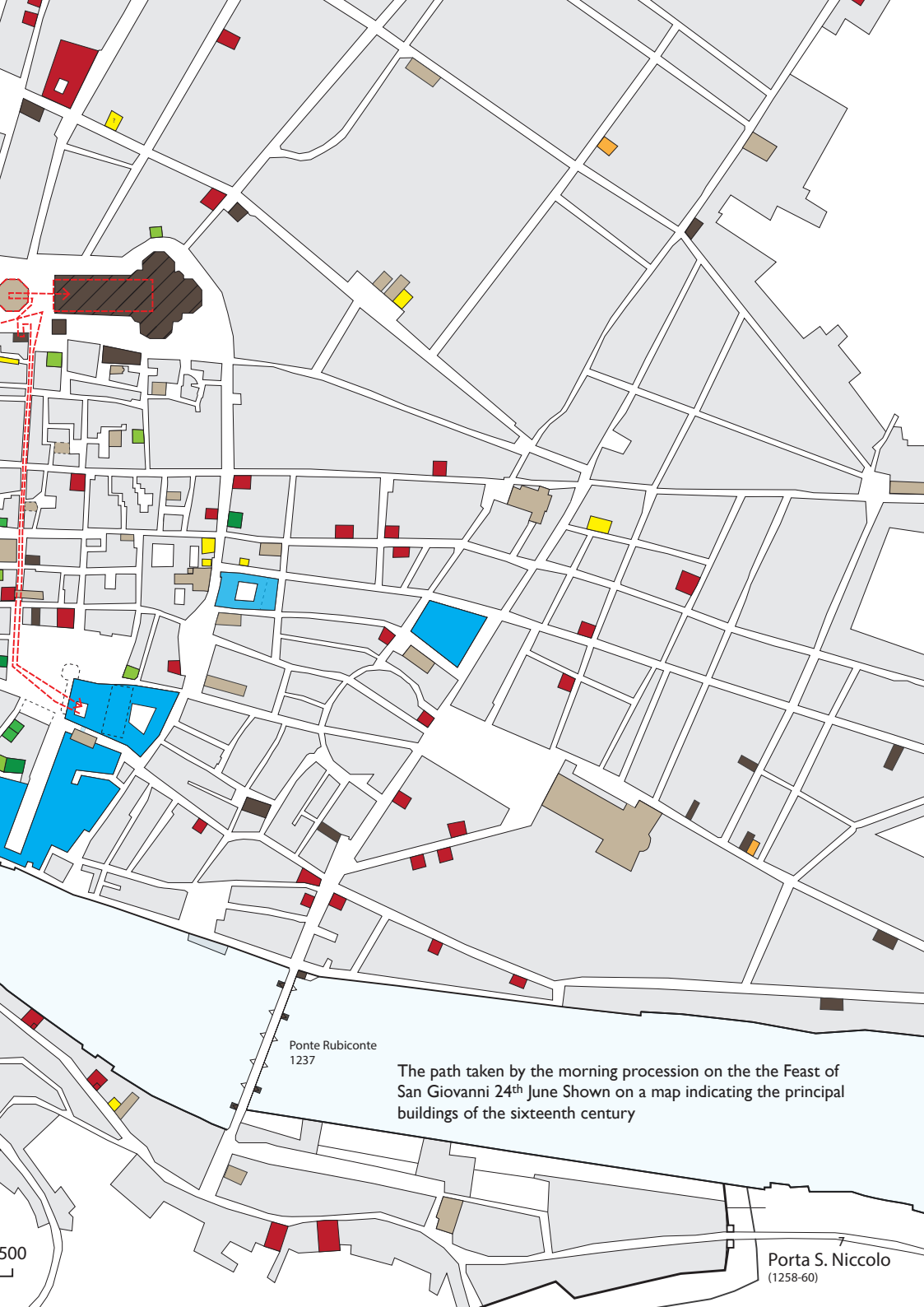
### Morning Mass

At 8.30 in the morning of the Feast Day of San Giovanni Battista on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 2016 mass was held in the Baptistery of Florence in honour of the patron saint of the church and city. The congregation was small, using only a handful of the supplied pews, and was a mixture of Florentines and tourists numbering about 30 in total. The mass was relatively short, lasting around half an hour, with not all the congregation taking communion. There was no sermon.

This mass was the first of a series of events—set within the buildings, streets and piazzas of the city—which, since their emergence in the seventh century, have been revised, developed, and adapted to accommodate the evolving requirements of Florentine civic life.







Ponte Rubiconte  
1237

The path taken by the morning procession on the the Feast of San Giovanni 24<sup>th</sup> June Shown on a map indicating the principal buildings of the sixteenth century

500

Porta S. Niccolo  
(1258-60)



## The Gathering of the Procession

Following the mass, people began to gather. Groups of drummers, flag throwers (*Spandiatori*), and ceremonial trumpeters arrived from different parts of the city - many congregating in the Piazza della Repubblica before marching to the Piazza del Duomo







## The Formation of the Procession in the Piazza del Duomo

Once in the Piazza del Duomo they were joined by members of *la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze* dressed in black robes with the insignia of the baptistery on their chests, who, since 1796 have been responsible for planning the event. Amidst this group of (mostly) men, dressed in robes and different coloured period costumes, was a man dressed in fine garments carrying a mint of candles alongside accompanied by another well dressed man carrying a small box of coins and a woman, robed in a fine long dress, holding a cushion on which sat another gift.





## The Procession to the Palazzo Vecchio

These three gift bearers then led a procession down Via dei Calzaiuoli to the Piazza della Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio escorted by two guards (also in ceremonial dress) behind a banner representing *la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze*. Then, behind these tributes followed a flourish of trumpets and a roll of drummers and the men of the *la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze*. Lastly, a series of colourfully dressed, sword carrying officers were followed by the *Spandieratori*.

Although not participating directly, members of the public often greeted or engaged with members of the procession thus raising their own profile in the feast for another year. These impromptu exchanges, made possible by the lack of any barriers or marshalls, are an important civic component of the festival scene.





## The Piazza della Signoria

On arrival at the Piazza della Signoria the group split into two. The gift bearers, trumpeters, guards, the first wave of drummers, and the representatives of *la Società* entered the Prima Cortile of the Palazzo Vecchio where they awaited the arrival of the mayor and other civic dignitaries. The rest of the party remained outside the Palazzo in the square; mingled with the public; and began a flag throwing show to entertain the gathered people. Although there were a few police present they had little to do with ordering this sequence of events. Members of the public were free to remain outside or gather with the advanced candle group in the cortile. There were no crowd barriers and no distinction was made between participant and observer.











## The Arrival of the Mayor

The mayor and other officials of the city dressed smartly in contemporary suits—the mayor with his sash of office—joined the *la Società di San Giovanni Battista di Firenze* and the other celebrants in the Prima Cortile of the Palazzo Vecchio, and began to form into the order of the parade.

Once ready this ceremonial group returned to the Piazza through the west door of the Palazzo Vecchio and the mayor led the parade back up into the Via dei Calzaiuoli toward the Piazza del Duomo with *la Società*, the candles and gifts, trumpeters and drummers, and the costumed flag-throwers following on behind. This time the whole procession was led by two mounted police preceding the first banner, thus the whole parade is a mixture of contemporary and medieval costume, with both elected and non-elected participants from both civic and non-civic institutions. To the sound of occasional trumpet fanfares and constant drumming, the parade continued toward the baptistery and cathedral past the occasional parked car or van with only a single police officer stationed at each junction stopping moving traffic from holding up the procession. This was the only visible police activity. There were no barriers along the streets or any police shepherding members of the public in order to make a clear path for the parade, that happened automatically with crowds parting gently to allow the advancing pageant to pass.



The mayor and his entourage were free to use media devices during the procession





## Piazza del Duomo: The Blessing at the Bigallo

Once the parade arrived at the Piazza del Duomo the mayor gave the candles to the senior representative of the church—in this case the Cardinal and Bishop—who then blessed the gift(s) at the Loggia del Bigallo. There was a pause while the various members of both entourages paid their respects and reformed into a further group that then made their way to the Baptistry.





## The Baptistry, the Robing, and the Blessing

The front section of the procession then entered the Baptistry, with the city's active clergy, some assorted musicians, and a few members of the public who squeeze through Ghiberti's 'Gates of Paradise'. Once inside the cardinal made a final blessing and donned his vestments for the main mass and, accompanied by a short fanfare, joined the other participants in forming the procession, as it exited eastwards back towards the cathedral.





## High Mass in the Duomo

Finally the mayor, the cardinal, and those present in the baptistery, processed into the cathedral through the central doors on the west facade. The clergy and the city dignitaries continued up the central aisle to the crossing where other important members of the city had already taken their seats for mass. The remainder of the congregation, made up of lesser townfolk, visitors and tourists, found seats where they could.

This mass, intermittently interrupted at the back by people arriving and leaving through the south portal, was policed by ushers and wardens with most attendees demonstrating an understanding of the solemnity of the occasion. Nevertheless, there was continual movement throughout the service that turned into a flurry of activity during Holy Communion. Several priests left the sacristy with the Host and positioned themselves at stages along either side of the central aisle of the nave, where they could serve a small section of the congregation. Once Holy Communion was complete, at about one o'clock the remaining members of the congregation left through the south portal and the cathedral was reopened for paying visitors who entered through the northern door in the main façade.











