

# The Feast of San Giovanni in Florence 2016

## The Civic Parade, *Calcio Storico* And Fireworks

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CASS London Metropolitan University





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## The Civic Parade, *Calcio Storico* And Fireworks

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

Christian Wilson Frost

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## The Civic Parade, the *Calcio Storico*, and the Fireworks

The morning processions now gave way to civic parades that included activities more distinctly representing the agon underpinning the day-to-day functioning of the city. Some of the events, such as the *Calcio Storico* football match can be traced back centuries—even though at certain periods in history they did not occur—while other events that used to occur, such as the city's Palio (horse race), no longer feature in the feast day events. Although the events proper began late in the afternoon, there were many more people milling around the streets from around an hour before it was scheduled to start. Large numbers of the public mingled with handsomely dressed locals who arrived from all directions into the Piazza Santa Maria Novella as they all tried to take their place for the afternoon events. Television and media crews interviewed spectators and participants. Horses and cattle, along with the heavily dressed contributors sought shelter from the sun in patches of shadow around the edge of the square as the parade began to take shape. In the run up to four o'clock, floats and trailers holding the flags of the Quartieri, spears, and banners began to appear around the large Piazza in front of the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella.







A tethered white bull and a few horsemen were also present. As the time to depart came closer the caparisoned horses and their apparently noble riders, along with the other colourfully dressed *Spandieratori*, drummers, trumpeters, swordsmen, artillerymen, crossbowmen, musketeers, and spearmen, followed by the four *Calcio Storico* teams, took their places and began the march through the city towards the temporary pitch for the final of the *Calcio Storico*.



To Prato

To Pistoia

**Florence circa 1550 showing  
the the path of the Contemporary  
Civic Parade**

The Path of the Parade is in red  
Blue indicates the path of the Calcio supporters

Porte Nuovo  
(Porte alla Carraia)  
1218-20

Porte S.  
Trinita  
1252

Porte  
Vecchio

To Siena and  
Volterra

6





- Hospitals
- Churches
- Palazzi
- Guilds
- Civic Buildings





## The Front of the Parade

Led by a handful of militia and two mounted police the parade departed the piazza heading east until it reached the line of the old Roman walls. Once here it turned right and headed south, continuing anticlockwise on the line of the old Roman walls until it reached the Palazzo Strozzi, built on the corner of the old Roman Decumanus Maximus, the main east-west street of the Roman Florentia. Following the Decumanus (now the Via Degli Strozzi) west the procession crossed the middle of Piazza della Repubblica, laid out at the end of the nineteenth century on the site of the old Roman forum, and headed towards the main medieval route north-south, the Via de Calzaoli.

The front of the parade was all pageant and pomp, full of bright costumes, drums, flags and antique weapons. It is here that the four Quartieri—or districts—of the old city, first set out in 1343, are represented as a part of the identity of the city as a whole: Santa Croce is Azzurri (Blue), San Giovanni is Verdi (Green), Santo Spirito is Bianchi (White), and Santa Maria Novella is Rossi (Red). The modern city currently has 5 Quartieri (Centro Storico, Campo di Marte, Gavinana-Galluzzo, Isolotto-Legnaia and Rifredi). All four of the fourteenth-century quartieri represented here fit inside the current Centro Storico.





Each Quartier comprised three Gonfalone that were originally the political basis for power in the city. Now, as local conscription is not necessary, and elections are national, these groups are predominantly ceremonial, combining together to represent the old Quartieri in city festivals.





## The Rear of the Parade

Amidst the parade was a banner (*palio*) and a bull, both prizes for the winner of the Calcio Storico football match to be played later that afternoon. In between these two prizes were officials of the football match who could be identified by the balls they carried through the streets in the four teams' colours. Lastly, of less interest to the massed tourists but of greater interest to the locals, were four teams, one from each historic Quartieri, who had competed in the two semi-finals a fortnight earlier. Each team, wearing period costume breeches but contemporary t-shirts displaying their colours, and preceded by banners displaying their respective coats of arms, led their supporters (also wearing the teams colours) through the streets of the city towards the arena singing songs and playfully (but occasionally with some menace) sparring with the increased police presence that had been dispatched to maintain order. As the main parade headed south towards the Piazza della Signoria, the supporters broke off, continuing their path east along the old Roman Decumanus until they reached the location of old Porta San Petri in the first set of Commune walls where they then turned and headed south, zig-zagging through the streets until they reached the Piazza Santa Croce where they took their positions to cheer the arrival of their team into the footballing arena.





























## Crossing the City

Meanwhile, the front of the parade and the Calcio Storico teams continued heading south into the Piazza Signoria where, having passed Ammanati's Neptune Fountain (1560-75) and Michelangelo's David (1501)—a representation of the victory of republicanism over tyranny—the parade passed between the Loggia dei Lanzi (1376-82)—originally built for the use of government officials during public ceremonies—and Bandinelli's Heracles and Cacus (1525-34) and on down the narrow Via della Ninna towards the location of the old Porta de' Buoi from the first set of Commune walls. From here the parade diverted northwards to the south-eastern corner of Piazza Santa Croce by the entrance to the main church cloister and the Pazzi Chapel where it finally entered the temporary arena.



## Preparations of the *Calcio Storico*

The *Calcio Storico* has been played regularly, but intermittently in various parts of the city since 1542. However, since its revival by the Facists in 1930 it has been played every year. A large, temporary, scaffold arena (built specifically for the tournament) has been assembled inside the Piazza Santa Croce with terraced seating around all four sides, a red padded inner ring, and backup fences and nets set slightly further back. The paved surface of the piazza has been covered in 20 cm of earth to protect the players but also to return the square to conditions similar to when the game was first played. All tickets for the event are sold in advance although it is also possible to watch the game from the upper windows of the buildings which surround the square or as a live telecast.



The 1930 *Calcio Storico* in Piazza Signoria.



Drawing of Calcio from 1688: Pietro di Lorenzo Bini (ed.), *Memorie del calcio fiorentino tratte da diverse scritture e dedicate all'altezze serenissime di Ferdinando Principe di Toscana e Violante Beatrice di Baviera*, Firenze, Stamperia di S.A.S. alla Condotta.





To Prato

To Pistoia

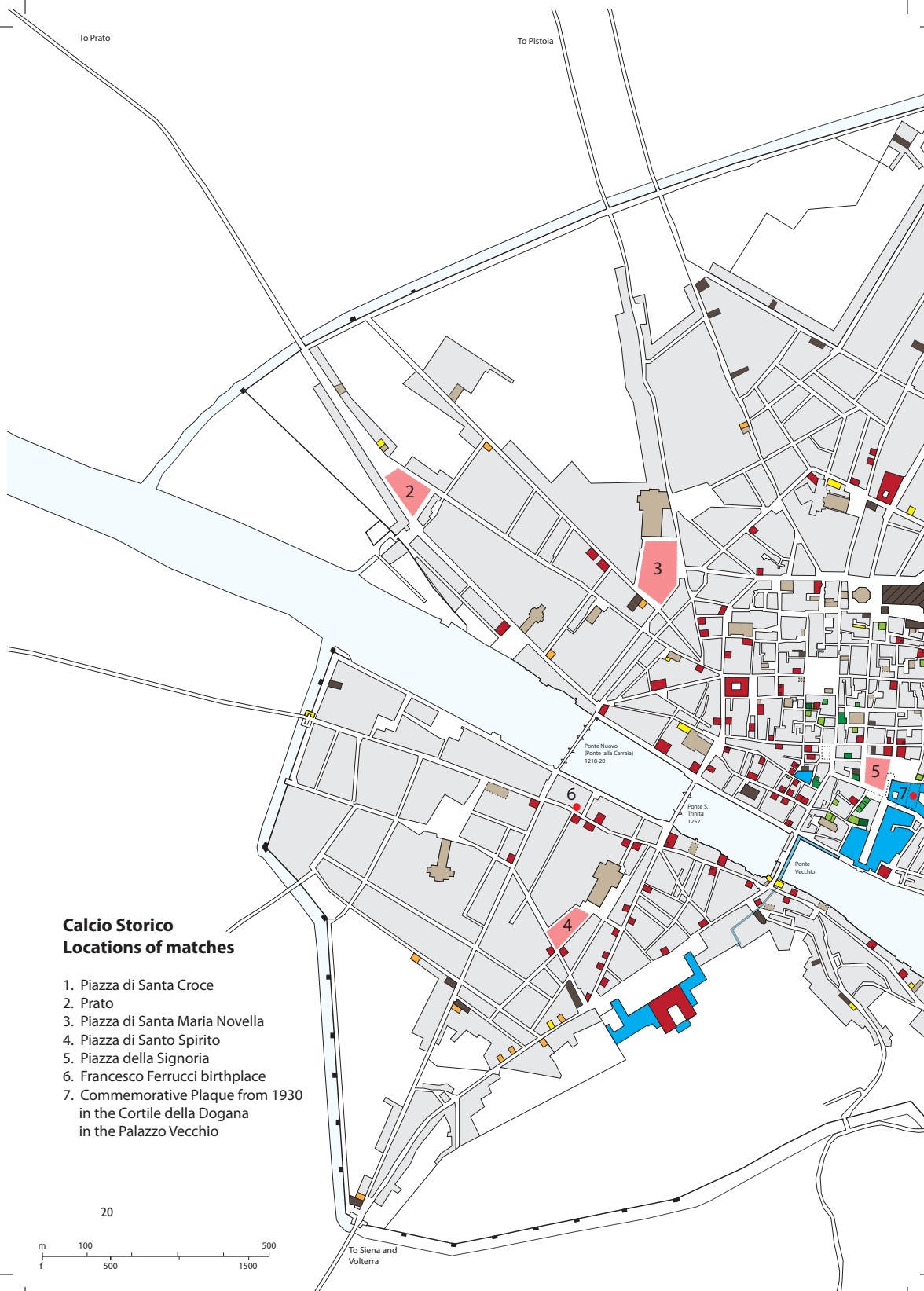
## Calcio Storico Locations of matches

1. Piazza di Santa Croce
2. Prato
3. Piazza di Santa Maria Novella
4. Piazza di Santo Spirito
5. Piazza della Signoria
6. Francesco Ferrucci birthplace
7. Commemorative Plaque from 1930  
in the Cortile della Dogana  
in the Palazzo Vecchio

20

m 100 500  
f 500 1500

To Siena and  
Volterra





To Bologna

To Fiesole

To Arezzo

Porta Rubiconte  
1257

- Hospitals
- Churches
- Palazzi
- Guilds
- Civic Buildings



## The Calcio Storico

After the whole parade entered the arena (excluding the supporters), all four teams greeted baying crowd. Presentations were made and slowly the finely dressed musicians, *Spandieratori* and 'soldiers' of the city dispersed from the sand filled arena leaving only the officials—a referee, six linesmen, and a field master as well as several paramedics and physios—and the finalists, twenty-seven on each team, to compete for fifty minutes in a gruelling, ruthless and bloody game that appeared almost without rules.

There were fistfights, harsh tackles, knockouts, injuries, blood and a ball. There were no substitutions, no half time, and no change of ends. The aim is always to deliver a ball into a low net at the end defended by your opponents that ran the entire width of the pitch. Such a goal scores one point. If the ball crossed the end above the low crossbar but is caught by the cage at the back, it scored a half point. Small coloured flags were given to the supporters of each team who stood in the 'Tribuna' behind the opposition's goal. Other spectators were accommodated on seats located in 'Tribuna' at the sides of the pitch.

Following the game, the parade returned to the arena for one final fanfare as the supporters and the teams left (or were carried from) the pitch. The crowd gradually melted into the small streets and bars of the city for refreshment after spending over an hour exposed to the searing midsummer sun. Members of different groups were also absorbed into the city to change, eat and celebrate the day with their various associations.



Calcio Storico Florence on the 24th June 2008 between Azzurri and Rossi. Photos Lorenzo Noccio. Public domain.







## The Evening of the Feast

The evening of the feast only had one public event - a great firework display orchestrated from Piazzale Michelangelo on the hill below San Miniato al Monte in Oltrarno. However, various social groups gathered in smaller parties throughout the city to celebrate the culmination of the days festivities. Street stages were erected and gardens, facades, balconies and rooftops were taken over to view the show

Although there appeared to be a mixture of people all through the city, different groups did congregate in different areas. Most of the obvious sites, such as all of the bridges and along much of the north bank of the Arno, as well as other parts of the old city centre, were given over to tourists and lovers who were looking for a location that would allow for the best photographs to immortalise their memory of the day. However, as the north bank of the Arno moves down from the Ponte alle Grazie along the Lungarno delle Grazie to the wider Lungarno della Zecca Vecchia, temporary restaurants and bars, decked out with canopies and carpets, hosted cabaret entertainment for the more affluent members of the public. This was where the established (and apparently local) Italians gathered in large groups for planned parties. Here, directly below, but on the other side of the Arno from the Piazzale Michelangelo, they had a commanding view of the fireworks as they exploded above the castellated silhouette of the Porta S. Niccolò.

While their parents and grandparents sat in the bars across the river, younger Italians went over to Oltrarno, to Lungarno Serristori and Lungarno Benvenuto Cellini, by the base of the Porta S. Niccolò, where other temporary bars had been constructed in the park on the abandoned wharf alongside small stalls selling drinks and food on the sandbank below. Here, cramped together on the streets, or picnicking by the river, groups of people watched as the fireworks were set off above, celebrating another midsummer feast of the city's patron saint. This final event not only signalled the end of the day but the turn of summer when the days begin to shorten.

God Sent Giovanni to earth as his human Precursor so that he was born when the days were becoming shorter while the Lord Himself was born when the days were growing longer; that in this minute detail the subsequent words of this same John might be prefigured: 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3. 23-30).

St Augustine, Sermon 194, For the Feast of the Nativity.













