



PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA

Artist & Man

JAMES R. BANKER

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Again to Maureen

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ABBREVIATIONS



AM	Archivio della Misericordia, Sansepolcro
ASCS	Archivio storico Comunale, Sansepolcro
ASF	Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASR	Archivio di Stato, Rome
ASU	Archivio di Stato, Urbino
ASV	Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Vatican City
BAV	Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City
Cam. Ap., Intr. et Ex.	Camera Apostolica, Introit et exitus
Collegio Not. Cap.	Archivio del Collegio dei Notai Capitolini
cort.	cortonesi (Italian) or cortonensium (Latin)
CRS	Compagnie Religiose Soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo
den.	denarius, denarii
fol(s).	folio(s)
lib.	libbra, libbre
NA	Notarile Antecosimiano
reg.	register
ser.	series
sol.	soldi

NOTE TO THE READER



The reader may be aided by consulting the chronology of the life and works of Piero (see pp. xviii–xix). Readers who are interested in the documents of Piero’s life and their archival location should consult my *Documenti fondamentali per la conoscenza della vita e dell’arte di Piero della Francesca* (Selci-Lama, 2013). Unless otherwise noted, I have translated Latin and Italian sources myself.

The reader should note that in referring to positions in the paintings and using the terms *right* or *left*, I am indicating the viewer’s position, not that of someone in the painting, unless otherwise specified. In the Renaissance, Piero’s birthplace was called Borgo San Sepolcro, or simplified to Borgo. The modern Italian state has designated the town as Sansepolcro. I shall use the modern name and occasionally Borgo for variety. Maps of central Italy and Sansepolcro in the fifteenth century are found on pp. xxiv and xxv. In the text and in the Sansepolcro map, street names are cited as they were in the fifteenth century. I have at times used the Italian *Quattrocento* to indicate the fifteenth century. In fifteenth-century Sansepolcro most measurements of length and width were expressed in *braccia* (arm-lengths); one *braccio* equaled 56 centimeters. In footnotes, to indicate where documents are found I have employed the term *folio* (abbreviated to fol. and fols.) to designate the paper number in registers and manuscripts. At times notarial registers of contracts do not have a folio number (written *unfol.*), and here the reader is informed of the contract’s position by the date.

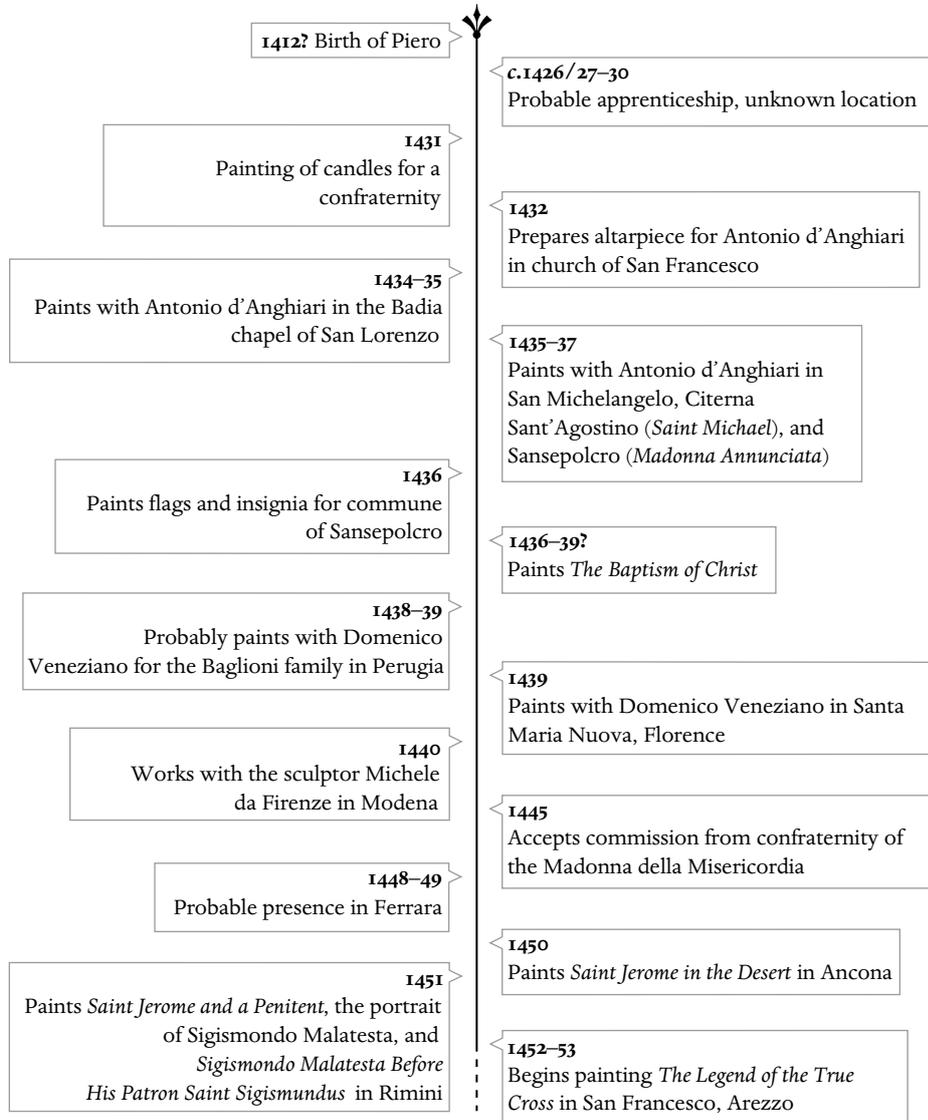
Monies are more difficult to explain and require a paragraph. Although in fifteenth-century Sansepolcro most monetary transactions were recorded in *lira cortonese* or *cortonesium* (lira of Cortona, so named but minted at one time in Arezzo), there were no such coins (nor their theoretical components of 20 soldi per lira and 12 denari per soldo) in circulation. The lira of Cortona was a theoretical money of account used only as a means to compute the values of smaller silver coins in circulation, which most commonly in Sansepolcro were from Bologna (*bolognini*), Ancona (*anconetani*), and Florence (*grossi*). For larger transactions, gold florins minted in Florence were used, though occasionally Venetian gold ducats were exchanged. During Piero’s lifetime, the florin as well as the ducat were said to be worth 5 *lire* of Cortona, though there were constant fluctuations. Most silver coins lost value against the gold coins over time. In the second half of the Quattrocento, people in Sansepolcro occasionally made transactions in the Florentine coin *Fiorini larghi*; these “large florins” were usually valued at around 6 *lire* of Cortona.

An artisan might receive between 25 and 75 florins (125 and 375 *lire*) a year, depending on his experience and the number of days he was employed or the number of his commissions per year. In Sansepolcro the communal government paid 150 florins yearly to the town doctor and 50 florins (plus use of a house) to the grammar-school teacher.

SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA



(N.B. If no place is specified, the event occurred in Sansepolcro)





PROLOGUE



Who was Piero della Francesca, and how did he become the great artist he was? For the four hundred years from his death until the late nineteenth century, Piero's art and person were largely neglected, and few would have asked such questions. Then, as scholars' burgeoning interest in late medieval history converged with the Cubists' fascination with geometrical shapes in the early twentieth century, intellectuals began to recognize Piero for his art, geometrical sophistication, and historical role. Aldous Huxley wrote an admiring essay on Piero's *Resurrection of Christ* (Pl. VII), which he celebrated as the greatest painting in the history of art, and T. S. Eliot referred to his *Baptism of Christ* (Pl. I) in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" ("A painter of the Umbrian [*sic*] school/Designed upon a gesso ground/The nimbus of the Baptized God..."). Painters, among them Philip Guston, demonstrated their admiration by placing reproductions of Piero's images in their studios. More recently, Piero has entered popular awareness in movies and television programs due to the memorable scene in the film *The English Patient* of the actress Juliette Binoche swinging by a rope in the chapel of Piero's *Legend of the True Cross* (Pl. IV), and to John Mortimer's novel and television presentation of *Summer's Lease*, in which the heroine traverses the so-called "Piero Trail" from Arezzo to Sansepolcro to Urbino. Italian Renaissance scholars have come to view Piero's painting and achievements in pictorial theory and geometry as the fullest expression of the early Renaissance fascination with perspective. This has raised his artistic stature to a level with Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo.

Given this interest and the resulting research it has stimulated, one might assume that we possess a fully articulated biography of Piero with an account of his life and achievements. But such is not the case. Writers on Piero in Italian or English have often employed the word "enigma" in their titles, highlighting the difficulty of understanding his life and art. There are many admirable studies of the paintings of Piero and a few on his mathematics, but no one has satisfactorily brought together all the materials on his art, mathematics, and his person in a narrative that reconstructs his development. Consequently, no one has yet successfully placed Piero in the many social and artistic contexts that he chose for himself.

The mysteries of Piero's life stem from several factors: he did not often work in the major artistic centers of Renaissance art, Florence, Rome, and Venice; he did not assemble a large workshop with many students who would have preserved his drawings and his memory; and more than other important Renaissance painters, he suffered an almost immediate decline in public and critical interest, despite Giorgio Vasari's

appreciative biography. Piero himself is in part responsible for this state of affairs due to his seeming lack of interest in his own reputation. As a consequence of these factors, several of his works were dispersed or destroyed. In attempting to reconstruct the full image of Piero's life and achievements, I must ask the reader to be indulgent in recognizing the elements of mystery while sharing the excitement of discovering the most probable solutions in the reconstruction of Piero's life. Solving some of these mysteries in the painter's life and his art opens up new and yet unanswered ones. This book is intended to introduce the reader to these questions, and to shed light on them as Piero did on the subjects of his paintings.

My approach is to follow Piero's development by placing historical documents in relationship to his paintings and mathematical treatises over his lifetime. Until now, the lack of evidence and the lingering supposition of an unchanging style have impeded such a way of organizing a book on Piero's life. But I have discovered over one hundred previously unknown documents specifically relating to Piero, and in the last two decades others have discovered an additional twenty documents or so. Through them, we are now able to chart the evolution of the man and his thinking. Of course, because we know much about Piero through his paintings, they will remain important as sources of evidence.

This approach obviously requires careful attention to problems of chronology and Piero's travels. My discussions of how to date his activities and where they occurred will, I hope, be one of the more significant contributions of the book. On Piero's chronology the reader should profit from consulting my outline of his life at the end of the preliminary materials (pp. xviii–xix). My solution to the problem of identifying Piero's whereabouts at particular moments is based on a novel treatment of the documents. I have accumulated a substantial number of documents that locate Piero in Sansepolcro in specific years. For example, he frequently served as a witness for his fellow citizens in notarial documents. When Piero appears in Sansepolcro as a witness or in other documents noting or requiring his presence over a few months or years, I calculate that he was there for the period of the chronological run of the documents. And I assume the reverse of this as well: if Piero does not appear in documents from Sansepolcro over an extended period of months or years, I reckon that he was absent from his home town for that entire period. Of course, he may have returned home for a brief visit on occasions when he was absent for extended periods, and one cannot be exact on the beginning and end of these absences.¹

I am encouraged to follow this approach because it has often confirmed the conclusions of previous researchers based on the then known documents and other forms of evidence. More importantly, it leads to a more precise estimate of Piero's activities. Although I am confident that no great number of additional documents will be discovered for Sansepolcro that would attest to Piero's presence in the town for any extended period of time from 1438 to 1458 (except for 1445 and 1454) and later shorter periods, the findings of this method can be easily readjusted if a formerly unknown document should reveal his presence in Sansepolcro or elsewhere. In fact, such documents are

welcomed as they would make our knowledge of Piero's life ever more precise. In the end, I believe my method provides a more secure and detailed base for the chronology of Piero's activities and paintings than any other.

As an aid to understanding Piero's artistic development, I have divided his paintings into three successive phases, with the proviso that he clearly learned and accumulated a number of techniques and stylistic elements that he could choose to employ or not at any one time.² The three suggested phases primarily turn on the degree and nature of perspectival organization and painting methods. In the first phase Piero's painting is informed by his powerful sense of proportion and spatial organization, but there is no evidence of orthogonals (drawn lines that converge at a vanishing point in a drawing or painting) or other systematic means to achieve the illusion of the dimension of depth in the depiction of pictorial space. In this phase, where Piero depicts human flesh he uses a *terra verde* (green earth) pigment in the undercoating, a traditional method thought to enliven the complexion of figures. In the second phase, Piero abandons the *terra verde* underpaint and achieves lifelike flesh through other pigments, at times also with an oil medium, in addition to the medium of egg tempera he had used before. More importantly, Piero now employs a thorough-going organization of pictorial space by perspective, achieved by the use of cartoons (preparatory life-size drawings that provide designs or outlines when transferred to the painting surface) and etched perspective lines that converge on the horizon. In the third phase, Piero appears less interested in a rigorously constructed perspective in his paintings. The objects in his paintings still diminish in size the deeper they are in the picture space, but they exhibit less evidence of the means to achieve the perspective, such as cartoons or orthogonals constructed as guidelines on the picture surface. By this phase of development, Piero apparently could achieve a three-dimensional illusion through a freer gauging with the eye.

Despite these changes over his lifetime, three qualities appear to be permanent in Piero's thinking and basic to his accomplishments. First, from his earliest painting and writings Piero demonstrates a fascination with proportion. Proportion underlies his theory and practice of perspective. We cannot say whether his fascination was an innate disposition or whether he learned it through the Greek mathematician Euclid's similar fascination with the subject. Second, and doubtless related to his focus on proportion, was Piero's powerful capacity for compositional organization. Third, Piero possessed an extraordinary ability to think visually, or perhaps better said, he possessed an ability to conceive and represent vast areas of a visual space, most evident in his construction of the mural paintings in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo. Also, in his mathematical treatises he moved beyond the Greek practice of using verbal propositions to represent geometric thinking, instead constructing complex geometric drawings, which acted as far more eloquent proofs than verbal statements ever could.

We begin our investigation of Piero's life with the formation of his interests and early education, which laid the foundation for his achievements. Although only one of his letters and just a few comments of contemporaries have come down to us, we do possess ample documentation relating to his family and his social, political, and

economic activities. So we shall explore the settings of Piero's life, especially his family and the culture of the cities where he resided, and mine these revealing sources for clues and answers about Piero himself. It would be a mistake to expect that this would yield an image of the personality similar to those in twenty-first-century biographies. Indeed, the very concept of personality has changed radically since the fifteenth century, when individuals were more highly integrated into social and family institutions. In the end, the best I can hope is to have sketched a persuasive account of Piero's relationship to these institutions—and thereby a convincing outline of the man himself.

If this book had more space, there would be much more discussion of the scholarly contributions of others. I have restricted my endnotes and bibliographic citations to my essential sources of information, doubtless at times only schematically acknowledging important historical research and reflection. I have had to eliminate or summarize many scholarly debates over aspects of Piero's life and art. These are available in more specialized journals and books. A proper study of Piero requires the combined expertise of a historian of painting and perspectival drawings, a historian of mathematics, a philologist, a conservator of paintings, and a scholar highly adept at fathoming the intricate cultures of Renaissance Italy. One life is too short to master all these disciplines, so I rely on the research of the many scholars who have specialized in them. I am especially indebted to the scholarship of Carlo Bertelli, Frank Dabell, J. V. Field, Martin Kemp, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Ronald Lightbown, and Pier Daniele Napolitani. Doubtless they will recognize their ideas alluded to in the pages of this book. For a sophisticated analysis of Piero's mathematics, the reader can consult the research of J. V. Field. For the most part, I have based my arguments on published and previously unpublished documents, all of which I have brought together and recently published.³

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