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The 'Secret' Language: The Italian Stemma

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It is A GAME of CODES, really. The 'secret' language teases. But when decoded there is a story, a history to be told identifying a family and its stature, be they papal, ecclesiastical, or noble and even with links to the likes of the Kings of France, among others. The language decoded informs history, and invariably shows itself in the form of a visual language.

A simple translation of the word *stemma* (singular) is, in essence, a family crest or seal. They are most often in high or low relief and attached or sculpted onto oval shaped shields. They are positioned and placed everywhere including on column capitals, bollards, tombs, in the marble pavements inside palaces, villas, churches, and outside in gardens. *Stemmi* (plural) often crown the top of fountains and obelisks. They can be found in the coffered ceilings in both paint and high relief as if rosettes. *Stemmi* are carved in travertine or marble, some in stucco (plaster), cut into wood and displayed in the ceiling decorations of villas, palazzi and churches. Once you start to notice this apparently cryptic visual information, you can start to play the game. It requires visual acuity and a good memory, but pictorial charts, especially papal ones, help a lot and are the best way to begin. *Stemmi* are not, though they may present themselves as such, mere decorative elements, but they are representative of a building's or monument's patronage or a nobleman and his family's power and wealth. They tell stories.

Gli Stemmi Papale 1389–1963

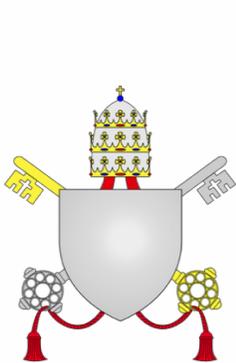
[\(Click chart to see it really huge!\)](#)

 1389 TOMACELLI 1404 BONIFACIO IX	 1404 MIGLIORATI 1406 INNOCENZO VII	 1406 CORRER 1409 GREGORIO XII	 1409 FILARGIS 1410 ALESSANDRO V	 1417 COLONNA 1431 MARTINO V	 1605 MEDICI 1621 LEONE XI	 1605 BORGHESE 1621 PAOLO V	 1621 LUDOVISI 1623 GREGORIO XV	 1623 BARBERINI 1644 URBANO VIII	 1644 PAMPHILI 1655 INNOCENZO X
 1431 CONDULMERO 1447 EUGENIO IV	 1447 PARENTUCELLI 1455 NICOLO V	 1455 BORGIA 1458 CALLISTO III	 1458 PICCOLOMINI 1464 PIO II	 1464 BARBO 1471 PAOLO II	 1655 GHIGI 1667 ALESSANDRO VII	 1667 ROSPIGLIOSI 1669 CLEMENTE IX	 1670 ALTIERI 1676 CLEMENTE X	 1676 ODESCALCHI 1689 INNOCENZO XI	 1689 OTTOBONI 1691 ALESSANDRO VIII
 1471 DELLA ROVERE 1484 SISTO IV	 1484 CIBO 1492 INNOCENZO VIII	 1492 LENZUOLI BORGIA 1503 ALESSANDRO VI	 1503 TODESCHINI PICCOLOMINI 1503 PIO III	 1503 DELLA ROVERE 1513 GIULIO II	 1691 PIGNATELLI 1700 INNOCENZO XII	 1700 ALBANI 1721 CLEMENTE XI	 1721 CONTI 1724 INNOCENZO XIII	 1724 ORSINI 1730 BENEDETTO XIII	 1730 CORSINI 1740 CLEMENTE XII
 1513 MEDICI 1521 LEONE X	 1522 FLORENZ 1523 ADRIANO VI	 1523 MEDICI 1534 CLEMENTE VII	 1534 FARNESE 1549 PAOLO III	 1550 CIOCHI DEL MONTE 1555 GIULIO III	 1740 LAMBERTINI 1758 BENEDETTO XIV	 1758 REZZONICO 1769 CLEMENTE XIII	 1769 GANGANELI 1774 CLEMENTE XIV	 1775 BRASCHI 1799 PIO VI	 1800 CHIARAMONTI 1823 PIO VII
 1555 CERVINI 1590 MARCELLO II	 1555 CARAFA 1559 PAOLO IV	 1559 MEDICI 1565 PIO IV	 1566 GHISLIERI 1572 PIO V	 1572 BONCOMPAGNI 1585 GREGORIO XIII	 1823 SERMATTEI DELLA GENGA 1829 LEONE XII	 1829 CASTIGLIONI 1830 PIO VIII	 1831 CAPPELLARI 1846 GREGORIO XVI	 1846 MASTAI-FERRETTI 1878 PIO IX	 1878 PECCI 1903 LEONE XIII
 1585 PERETTI 1590 SISTO V	 1590 CASTAGNA 1590 URBANO VII	 1590 SFONDRATI 1591 GREGORIO XIV	 1591 FACCHINETTI 1591 INNOCENZO IX	 1592 ALDOBRANDINI 1605 CLEMENTE VIII	 1903 SARTO 1914 PIO X	 1914 DELLA CHIESA 1922 BENEDETTO XV	 1922 RATTI 1939 PIO XI	 1939 PACELLI 1958 PIO XII	 1958 RONCALLI 1963 GIOVANNI XXIII



With this in mind, the encoded language emblazoned on *stemmi* is represented by: a single column (often times surmounted by a crown) for the **Colonna** family (1); an oak tree for the **della Rovere** family (2); six balls or spheres for the **Medici** family (3); six fleur-de-lis for the **Farnese** family (4); thunderbolts and stars, **Aldobrandini** family (5); dragons and eagle, **Borghese** family (6). There is the triumvirate of three bees, **Barberini** family (7); there are doves holding laurel sprigs in their beaks, **Pamphili** family (8); mounds in pyramidal shapes — the six mounded representation is always crowned with a multi-pointed star for the **Chigi** family (9). Then there is the three-mounded representation also crowned by a star and divided in two by a horizontal band, **Albani** family (10), just to mention some of the more prominent families and their *stemmi*. Almost all of the families I have just mentioned have one or more members that were elevated to the papacy.

Furthermore, to decipher *stemmi* one must be a sort of haberdasher as well. This is because families with ecclesiastical connections combined their family crest with either a cardinal's hat or a papal miter. A cardinal's hat is a brimmed hat with a very wide, flat rim with opulent tassels wrapped around and dangling from it. Sometimes a cardinal will elevate to Pope and sometimes not. There can be many cardinals and a pope simultaneously in a single family, or even a nobleman for that matter. Papal miters on *stemmi* come with crossed keys which seem to hold the 'hat' upright. The iconography here refers to Saint Peter: God said unto Peter, 'to you I give these keys and upon this rock you will build my church.'



Papal template



Template w/ Clemente XI Albani



Cardinals' template



Cardinal Albani



Papal



Cardinal



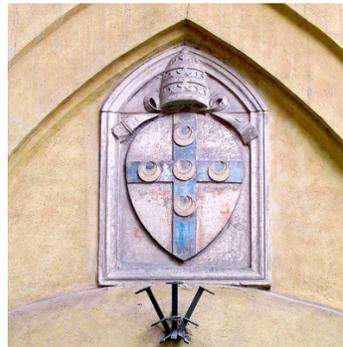
Royal



Aldobrandini thunderbolt and stars

Aside from papal miters and tassel bedecked hats, we have crowns for nobility or families with 'royal connections' that reach beyond the Italian borders. How does this come about — marriage, bargaining chips, and favors too. Take the Aldobrandini family crest: not only was there a pope in Clement VIII Aldobrandini, but there were also cardinals and somewhere along the line 'arrangements' were made that finds the family with their seal surmounted by a crown, signifying royalty. This coding does not require a specialization or scholarship in family crests, popes or cardinals or specific names, necessarily. The decoding is an overview based on the visual 'hieroglyphics' as presented.

Now to highlight specific families:



Looking carefully for the family coat of arms, one can see that the family's influence exerted itself on many of Siena's public and private buildings.



Piccolomini crest, Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza

PICCOLOMINI

Let's take the Piccolomini family from Siena, as well as heirs to a town in Tuscany which they renamed 'Pienza.' The town of Pienza was totally reconfigured and the main piazza is one of the great, early Renaissance displays of an ideal town plan. The Palazzo Piccolomini which defines one edge of the piazza displays both the cardinal's hat and the papal miter with either or both placed above the Piccolomini cross and half-moons. Decoding here is simple: we are being told that Pius II Piccolomini (1458–1464) was first a cardinal and then the Pope. This could mean that the palazzo was under construction while he was a cardinal and completed after he was elevated to Pope.

The family is identified by a blue cross with five half-moons, thus their family seal. The Palazzo Piccolomini defines one side of the trapezoidal piazza in Pienza and displays the family *stemma* over its main entrance(s), and more prominently, a *stemma* is attached midway up the palazzo's corner. Corners are all-important, because a corner and, therefore, a *stemma*, can be viewed from more than one vantage point.

The next question which would require not only the visual prompts, but curiosity to find out ‘why the half-moons?’ Firstly, the blue cross started out as the family crest and then half-moons were added until the final number of five was settled on. Because my curiosity is insatiable, I took a peek at the family history and, extraordinarily, the half-moons came into the picture, so to speak, because the 16th century Italian archbishop and astronomer Alessandro Piccolomini located a prominent lunar crater in the southeastern sector of the Moon! This lunar impact crater is named Piccolomini after the archbishop/astronomer. Even the floor tiles and ceiling in the Piccolomini Library in the Siena cathedral, are glazed with the half-moons. Who knew?!

(Click image to see it much larger)



Piccolomini Library, Siena

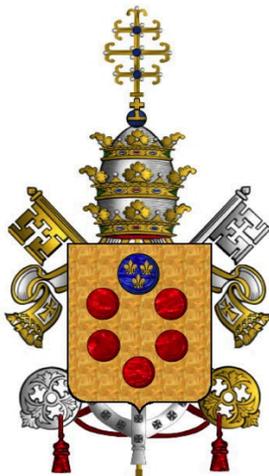
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Detail of floor tiles



Overall view showing floor tiles and *stemma* on the far wall



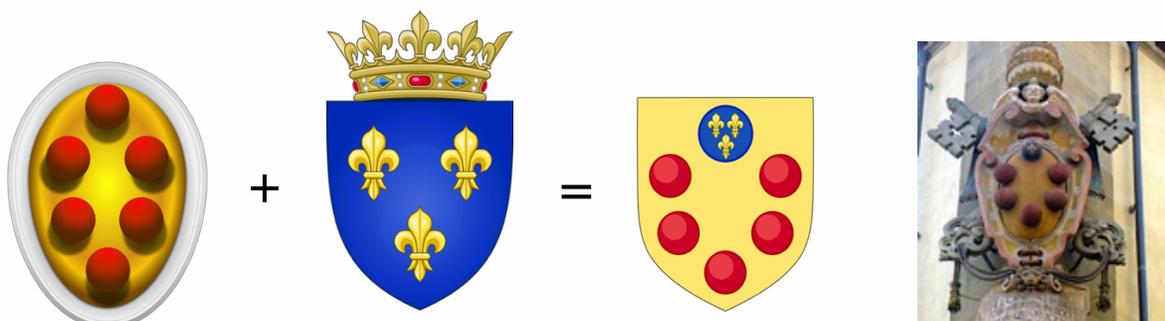
The six *palle*

MEDICI

Now on to the **Duchy of Florence** and the **Medici**. They were the Duchy's most powerful ruling family. The family, patrons of the arts, included princes, bankers, cardinals, and popes at one time or another. The family *stemma* is six *palle* (or balls) where the *palle* are either in high or low relief. The *stemma* appears everywhere in Florence and Rome, and, thereby, tells us something about the buildings to which they are affixed.

You will also find the Medici *stemma* in most Tuscan towns as they were under Medici rule. The *palla* (singular) at the top is picked out in blue paint. Two great Renaissance popes were Leone X Medici (1513–1521) and Clemente VI Medici (1523–1534). Therefore, any church, palazzo, or villa you see in Rome, as well as Florence and elsewhere with the Medici *stemma* attached, means that it was built or renovated during their cardinalate or papacy depending on hats, tassels, and keys!

Deciphering this family *stemma* is relatively straightforward: Always six balls or sphere, five red and one blue. The ball at the top is blue in color because it is the background color or the seal of the kings of France. Furthermore, the blue *palla* is inscribed with three golden lilies (fleurs-de-lis) that, again, represents the kings of France.



Shield on the corner of
Palazzo Arcivescovile,
Florence

How is it that the kings of France's crest here appears as transformed into a sphere and combined with the five other spheres? Memorizing the visual story is easy, but again curiosity digs deeper: it's said that the French King Louis XI had a debt with the Medici family and in order to reduce his debts, he allowed the bank to use his symbol, giving the Medici bank more clout among the people and within Italy; after all, the blue ball and lilies signify royal 'lineage' and connections. It might also be noted Catherine de' Medici was the queen consort of Henry II (1547–59) and regent of France. Thus, by the mid-16th century the 'lineage' became legitimate.

Others say the balls had less exalted origins: some say they were pawnbrokers' coins or medicinal pills (or cupping glasses) that recalled the family's origins as doctors (*medici*) or apothecaries. Others say they are *bezants*, Byzantine coins.



Palazzo Spada stemma; swords and crown

SPADA

With the Kings of France and the three golden lilies in mind, we could now turn to a family crest for the Spada family, a noble family with aristocratic roots. There were no popes in the family, but, prior to their purchasing and renovating the palazzo, it was built and lived in by one Cardinal Capodiferro. There is no evidence of the cardinal's family crest above the main entrance or a lingering wide brimmed hat, but instead the family crest of the Spada family which is surmounted with a crown and three lilies above three swords; Spada translates to *sword*!



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Palazzo Spada stemma; detail

I confess, my curiosity to know more about the specifics brought me back to the original owner, Cardinal Capodiferro. At a young age, Capodiferro was admitted to the court of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, the future Pope Paul III. Pope Paul III made him nuncio in 1541 to the Kingdom of France. Thus, the coded or decoded language held true: a favor of thanks from the French kings to the nuncio and passed on to the Spada family, who had no papal connections. Trust your instincts when decoding once you get the hang of it.



Porta del Popolo seen from the Piazza del Popolo, Rome, detail



The dome of St Ivo by Borromini decorated with the six Chigi mounds

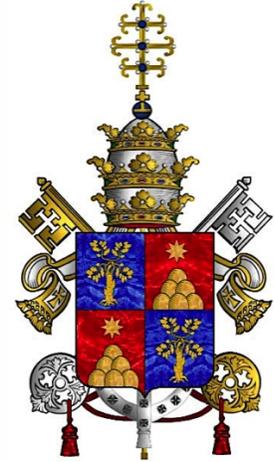
CHIGI

Let us now consider the extremely prominent Chigi family. The family's hereditary home was Siena and they were primarily bankers and merchants. The visuals attached to the family are six mounds piled up in a pyramidal shape and crowned by a multi-pointed star. The Chigi mountain made up of six mounds can be found on every major building project in Siena and its environs.

Agostino Chigi, 'Il Magnifico,' a wealthy banker established himself in Rome by building a private family villa — the Villa Farnesina (1508–1511). Interestingly, one does not find the family *stemma* displayed on the exterior, but on the interior the coffered and painted ceilings show off the Chigi mounds and multi-pointed star. Because Agostino Chigi was not a cardinal nor a pope, one does not find his branch of the family with the tassels of a cardinal nor the mitred hat and keys of a pope. The miter and the keys come in the 17th century with Fabio Chigi, a descendant of Agostino Chigi, being elected as Pope Alessandro VII Chigi in 1655. It is here, however, that the coded language gets mildly complicated. With his elevation to Pope, the family *stemma* of six mounds and a star has changed its coding and the family seal appears not only with the six mounds and star, but it is quartered with the oak tree of the della Rovere family, a family of cardinals and popes.



della Rovere family *stemma* in relief, Sistine Chapel, Rome



DELLA ROVERE

CHIGI + DELLA ROVERE

Thus, the della Rovere family brings even more clout and significance to the Chigi family.

Pope Julius II della Rovere (1508-1513) was, without a doubt, the greatest Pope of the High Renaissance. He distinguished himself as a patron of the arts and his vision was to rebuild Rome to the likeness of the Caesars. Pope Alessandro Chigi VII, prior to becoming pope was as a cardinal and a close advisor to Julius II, and for this reason was allowed to add the oak tree to his family *stemma*. He then had the privilege to 'sign' his buildings with his family seal crossed with the della Rovere crest or a *hybrid stemma*.



Pope Julius II, Raphael, 1511-1512



Soffit detail with the *stemma* of Pope Julius II, Raphael Rooms, Room of the Signatura, south wall, Vatican Palaces



della Rovere *stemma*, Palazzo della Cancelleria, Rome



della Rovere family *stemma*; the oak tree

Mixing and matching or, hybrids like this can be found with many of the *stemmi* transforming and adding more pictorial language to their family seals. Favors, marriage, and bribery prevail in this process of transformation. In fact, thinking back to the Medici, Pope Pius IV Medici is not a Medici at all, but he was granted the right to adopt their family seal (the six *palle* or balls) as his *stemma*. These *hybrid stemmi* are not so difficult to decode once you become familiar with the pure family heraldry. Mix and match if you will and refer to the Papal Chart at the beginning of this essay.

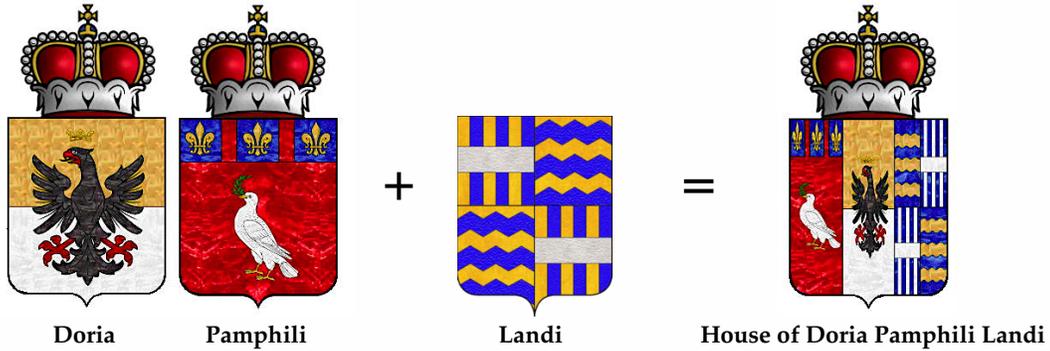
The Pamphili hybrid *stemma* with the fleurs-de-lis, Fountain of the Four Rivers, Piazza Navona, Rome



Palazzo Pamphili, the dove and laurel sprig

PAMPHILI

Another hybrid is found with the Pamphili family *stemma*. The original *stemma* was a single dove holding an olive branch in its beak, where both the dove and the olive branch were intended to symbolize the family's friendliness ('extend an olive branch'). With the election in 1644 of Pope Innocent X (Giovanni Battista Pamphili 1572–1655) to the papacy, the *stemma*, and its language changed to incorporate three fleurs-de-lis or lilies with the immediate deciphering being the Kings of France. Yet, my curiosity was thwarted. There is no evidence of a family marriage or a negotiating tool to link themselves with the French Kings. Is it perhaps merely decoration as the lily, as a flower, symbolizes purity? Could it be decoded to mean an emphasis on the family's effort to come across as friendly, while playing up a subtle, non-existent connection with French royalty? Perhaps, but it seems odd, so I will continue to suggest there is, somewhere in the family history, a French monarch who denotes the divine right to rule.



With the Pamphili we see even more layers and hybridization: As previously mentioned, family crests are often emblazoned with a crown, without either the miter or cardinal's elaborate hat. All of these noble families abounded with intermarriages with other Italian noble families. For instance, the **House of Pamphili** princes joined forces with the princes of the **House of Doria** of the great seafaring family from Genova. They then intermarried with the **House of Landi**, complicating the family *stemma* even further. The **House of Landi** comes from a town outside of Rome and the family was granted the title of prince. What machinations to get prestige and stature. If not actually Papal, the crown above the seal was the next best thing.



Farnese crest over the main entrance, Palazzo Farnese, Piazza Farnese, Rome



Pope Paul III Farnese, Titian 1543

FARNESE

Before I close my story two other families cannot be left out of the many more I could highlight. One is the Farnese family and Pope Paul III Farnese (1468–1549). Their coat of arms, or *stemma*, is composed of six lilies and not to be confused with the three lilies for the Kings of France. For the French the lily means the divine rule of right, but the lily outside of the French context is a flower that means perfection, purity, and courage. At different times over the course of history, the fleur-de-lis has represented peace, war, strength, and nobility to name a few.

In my deciphering the Farnese *stemma* of six lilies I suspect for the Farnese it meant all of the above, maybe even subtly 'the divine rule of right' given Paul III's power. Paul III Farnese was, along with Pope Julius II, one of the greatest patrons of the arts. Julius II della Rovere brought the three 'greats,' Michelangelo, Raphael and Bramante to Rome to rebuild the city to the scale and likeness of ancient Rome and Paul III continued his legacy and building campaigns.

The Farnese were, perhaps, the greatest and grandest family of Rome with surely the most stupendous and magnificent palace in Rome, the Palazzo Farnese. The palazzo is sumptuous, spacious, huge and filled with magnificent ancient sculptures, works of art, frescoes, and coffered ceilings of Lebanese cedar with the *stemma* carved in coffers alternating with rosettes. The palazzo's gigantic frieze incorporates the lily alternating with the ancient Roman candelabras. Even the twin fountains (basins moved from the Baths of Caracalla to this piazza) are crowned with travertine lilies that jet water up and then falls into the gray, granite basins below.



Piazza Farnese, one of twin fountains with the Farnese fleur-de-lis as the water jet, basin from the Baths of Caracalla



Ceiling detail of the Farnese crest with the tassels and broad brimmed cardinals hat, Palazzo Farnese, Rome



Michelangelo's frieze incorporates the fleur-de-lis, detail, Palazzo Farnese, Rome

Today it is the French Embassy, but the six lilies remain, and the *stemma* of 3 lilies and crown of the Kings of France is nowhere to be seen; but the French flag is the crucial reminder. Ironic.



Palazzo Farnese, Rome (now the French Embassy), detail of central bay flying the French flag, the Farnese seal of 6 fleurs-de-lis and the blue flag for the EU

BARBERINI

The other family I would like to bring into the story before concluding 'THE GAME' is the Barberini family. Their *stemma* is three bees, and the *stemma* is seen all over Rome. Originally the family name was Tafani—horseflies—and therefore the seal originally was composed of those malicious insects. Since it was felt to have bad connotations, they decided to change the family name, and to replace the more malevolent insects with bees; after all, bees have always been a symbol of hard work, dedication, and eloquence. Furthermore, honey is a metaphor of the sweetness of the divine word and of glistened gold.



The stained glass window at Santa Maria in Aracoeli, Rome



Pope Urban VIII, Pietro da Cortona, ca 1624

There is a famous saying often repeated in Rome: *Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecerunt Barberini*, or rather, 'what the barbarians did not do, the Barberini did.' Specifically, the turn of phrase refers to Urban VIII Barberini's decisions to 'vandalize' the Pantheon by taking the bronze from the Pantheon's portico and melt it down and use the bronze to manufacture cannon, and for Gian Lorenzo Bernini's use for the gigantic bronze canopy (Baldacchino) standing directly under the dome of St Peter's. The design includes not only spiral columns and tassels crawling with bronze bees and more bees!

Despite their errors and misdeeds, however, the Barberini were also great patrons and protectors of the arts, having also taken under their wings not only Gian Lorenzo Bernini, sculptor and architect, but also the other great baroque architect, Francesco Borromini and painter/architect, Pietro da Cortona.

CONCLUSION:

If one understands the concept and accepts the mix and match approach, one can walk Rome or any Italian town and begin to know their stories. The coded language decoded is key to playing 'The Game.' Crests and symbols transformed into architectural and sculptural elements be they friezes, capitals, paving, fountains, or standing proud and marking entry will always inform, and impress and bring a new level of awareness and meaning to Italy and Rome's incredible story. Play the game of visuals and have fun!

Photo credits

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Aldobrandini thunderbolt and stars, © Stefano Valeri/Dreamstime

Piccolomini crest in Siena, with blue cross, © Sailko/Wikimedia

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Piccolomini Library Ceiling, © Elke Wetzig/Wikimedia Commons

Pavimento Libreria/Siena Opera della Metropolitana

Piccolomini Library/Web Gallery of Art

Medici stemma/Musei Vaticani

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Shield on the corner of Palazzo Arcivescovile, Florence © theflorentine.net

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Spada crest, © Archimede/eurekamania.it

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Della Rovere stemma, © Roberto Pinerno/Rome Art Lover

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Pamphili pediment over entrance, © Roberto Pinerno/Rome Art Lover

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Palazzo Farnese, *stemma* over entrance, © Livioandronico2013/WikiMedia Commons

Pope Paul III Farnese Titian 1543, *Ritratto di Paolo III*, Titian, 1543,
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Wood ceiling at Palazzo Farnese, detail, © Tuljak!

Palazzo Farneze, detail of frieze, © Roberto Pinerno/Rome Art Lover

Palazzo Farneze, detail of facade showing French flag, World Monuments Fund

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Stained glass window at Santa Maria in Aracoeli, Rome, © David Lown/Walks in Rome

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