

Cristian Nuvoione



Festa della Perdonanza Celestiniana

INSIDE:

Festival of Celestinian Forgiveness 4

Rent Golf Carts in Rome 6

Accessible Places to Stay 7

Florence's Wine Windows 8



Roma Experience

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Italy's Intangible Heritage And How You Can Actually Touch It

Data on Italy's concentration of UNESCO World Heritage Sites often gets tossed around in

tourism boards' marketing materials, and for good reason. The *Bel Paese* is tied with China — 32 times its surface area — for the highest number of entries on the list, at 55. From the *Medici* villas to the Venetian lagoon, Italy's World Heritage Sites could serve as guideposts for a lifetime's worth of trips.

But in understanding the rituals and traditions that make the country tick, there may be a better place to begin.

Enter another collection of UNESCO-backed treasures — those on the Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists,



Davide Alberanti

Cable car on Monte Bianco

introduced in 2008. Broken down into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of

Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, the lists have educational and practical functions. But what qualifies? According to Article 2 of the relevant UNESCO convention, the "intangible" refers to "practices, representations, expressions,

knowledge, skills — as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith — that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."

continued on page 2

Accessibility

What's New for Mobility Challenged Travelers in Italy

Italy's — and, in particular, Rome's — cobblestone streets and creaking infrastructures have long been looked upon as minefields for the mobility impaired. But attitudes about what's possible have been shifting, both at the institutional level and on the ground with individual tour operators.

Robert Pardi, business development partner at *Roma Experience* (www.romaexperience.com), which just launched a series of accessible Vatican and Colosseum tours, is one of the latter. He remembers how daunting just renting a wheelchair once was in Rome, much less finding sidewalk ramps, roll-in showers or accessible monuments. Fifteen years ago, before moving to Italy, Pardi traveled to Rome with his wife, *Desiree*, who was using a cane after chemotherapy treatments. Their long-haul flight aggravated her condition and when Desiree ended up requiring a wheelchair, the seed was planted for Pardi's vision. "Every person has the right to live and enjoy their life, whatever access needs they have," he says.

There's a "growing desire to make the cities more accessible" in Italy, Pardi says, noting that among his peers in travel, he's noticed "a big

continued on page 6

Italy is home to 55 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Transhumance also gave rise to rich folklore: songs sung and stories told on the trails; tales and poems of wives pining at home for their herder husbands.

Currently, the Representative List has nine diverse entries from Italy. You're more likely to recognize some than others (Neapolitan pizza making, say, versus *Pantelleria's* very niche agricultural practices). New entries will be announced when the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage convenes this December in Bogotá, Colombia. *Lucia Iglesias*, a media representative for UNESCO, emphasized to *Dream of Italy* that it isn't a competition: "Each file is examined independently, not in comparison with the others," she clarified. Still, it's hard not to see any new jewel in Italy's crown as a victory. Here's exactly what elements are under review for UNESCO recognition, and why they matter.

Transhumance

Italy, Austria and Greece submitted a joint petition to add transhumance — crossing the land — to UNESCO's Representative List. Broadly speaking, transhumance (*transumanza* in Italian) refers to seasonal movements of shepherds or other herders and their grazing flocks, a global but dwindling practice. (The fact that, in Italy, these herders still follow time-honored

routes known as *tratturi* is what distinguishes the practice from that of many other countries.) Transhumance involves twice-yearly migration, to lowlands for the winter and highlands in summer. In Italy, the tradition lives on in *Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Sardinia* and limited parts of *Lombardy*, though with much variation.

that today this level of long, large-scale "horizontal transhumance" — the coordinated movement of multiple herds from one region to another — is almost nonexistent, having given way to a "vertical" variety, which involves shorter distances. But the remnants of

these interregional ties and the reverence for herders is "a part of our DNA here," she says.

Transhumance also gave rise to rich folklore: songs sung

and stories told on the trails; tales and poems of wives pining at home for their herder husbands.

These

memories and myths are part of what Di Nardo and her colleagues showcase through Abruzzo Parks' "In Transhumance" tours, in which travelers can take part in a 10-kilometer leg of the transhumance cycle, in collaboration with herder-cheese producer *Alessandro Pelini*. Like a tribe of temporary shepherds, participants move between *Castel del Monte* (near *L'Aquila*) and the pastures of *Campo Imperatore*, part of the *Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park*. Along the way, they



All photos by Abruzzo Parks

Transhumance



October 2019
2
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The first Italian UNESCO World

listen to lore, poetry and local history, and the excursion ends with a tasting of cheeses and other delicacies from Pelini's family business.

Costs are nominal (30€ per person), but complications are somewhat expected, at least regarding the descent phase in autumn. When Di Nardo spoke with

Dream of Italy, she was rather poetically awaiting "news from the shepherd" on what day the group descent into the valley would take place this year. "So much of it is dependent on weather, on factors outside our control," she explains. Once the information is available, Di Nardo communicates the date and meeting point to interested parties often just a few days before the descent. It's not particularly compatible with arranging transatlantic travel, she admits — but the ascent outing is easier to firm up, usually running on the last Sunday of June or the first Sunday of July. Abruzzo Parks also organizes several lower-key, family-friendly "Days in a Shepherd's Shoes" (*Giorni da Pastore*) each summer. The best way to stay informed on dates and specifics is by sending an inquiry or making a booking on www.abruzzoparks.it.

Such tours are hardly just approximations of the tradition. The community-oriented, open-to-all nature of transhumance is touted as a strength in its UNESCO nomination file: "Any interested individual who may want to approach the practice can be involved in it. Transhumance is a moment of popular participation," it reads.



Alpinism on Monte Bianco

Sportsmanship traditions haven't made much of a showing in Italy's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists, but that may change if alpinism is accepted. As with the transhumance candidacy, alpinism's UNESCO bid



Photos by Davide Alberani

Monte Bianco



was not submitted by Italy alone; Switzerland and France joined in making the nomination. Differently, though, alpinism as a phenomenon is confined, at least in the campaign's definition, to one geographical area traversing the three national borders: *Monte Bianco (Mont Blanc)*, the highest mountain in the Alps. (*Valle d'Aosta* proudly claims its Italian portion.)

Geographically and symbolically, the birth of alpinism, or mountaineering, is often traced to Monte Bianco; in the 18th century, Swiss scientist *Horace-Bénédict de Saussure* made the first known attempts to climb it. Today, some 700,000 alpinism practitioners (including 5,000 professional guides) are spread across the three nominating countries. Notably, the UNESCO candidacy doesn't focus much on preservation of these alpinists' techniques, which vary widely within a sport that's ultimately about nimbly navigating challenging terrain. The nomination file instead defines alpinism broadly as "the art of climbing up summits and walls in high mountains, in all seasons, in rocky or icy terrain, by one's own physical,

technical and intellectual abilities," championing community, beauty and nature over the cut-and-dried mechanics of the sport.

In some ways, the alpinism candidacy feels like a peace offering between Italy and France. They've had an undercurrent of rivalry regarding who

can really claim Monte Bianco — or is it Mont Blanc? — since the French Revolution. And if anything can help drive out petty disputes — however many centuries deep they may run —

continued on page 4

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Heritage Site was in *Valcamonica*.

In commemoration of Celestine's mass pardoning, pilgrims flock to Santa Maria di Collemaggio annually for the opening of its Porta Santa, or Holy Door.

it's the mountaineer mindset. Indeed, the UNESCO nomination file praises alpinists' *esprit de cordée* ("rope team spirit"), extolling how it "promotes solidarity, exchange, sharing and accountability, when the slightest mistake by a rope team member could affect the success of a given objective or cause an accident."

Yet the alpinism candidacy has seen the most controversy of the three Italian UNESCO contenders. The application file seemed to anticipate this by underscoring a "concern for maintaining sites in their natural state and limiting landscape and environmental impacts."

However, responsible and accident-free alpine adventuring can be organized through Italy's national federated association of licensed Alpine guides, the *Collegio Nazionale delle Guide Alpine Italiane*. Keep in mind you hardly need to scale mountain peaks to breathe in the alpine air; plenty of Monte Bianco resources offer a training-wheels approach. A cable car ride might be more your speed, for example, and can be booked through *Skyway Monte Bianco* (www.montebianco.com/en), an operator that comes recommended by the *Valle d'Aosta* tourism office. A downloadable English brochure (www.lovevda.it/en/before-your-trip/information/leaflet) issued by the same entity gives season-by-season tips on staying in the nearby villages of *Courmayeur* and *La Thuile*, suggesting

hiking itineraries, cuisine, sights and historical tidbits. As even the UNESCO nomination file puts it, "style and sensory experience often outweigh the success of ascending to a summit."

Festival of Celestinian Forgiveness

For most of Italy, late summer means *Ferragosto* vacations and lazy beach days. For *L'Aquila*, it's more associated with forgiveness of sins: The *Festa della Perdonanza Celestiniana*, or Festival of Celestinian Forgiveness, has taken place every year on August 28 and 29 for 726 years in *Abruzzo*.

The festival is almost comparable to *Carnevale* in scale and celebratory zing. The centerpiece is *L'Aquila's* just-outside-the-walls basilica, *Santa Maria di Collemaggio*, founded by the hermit *Pietro da Morrone*, who was crowned Pope there on August 29, 1294, and became known as *Celestine V*. Soon after, Celestine V issued a papal bull proclaiming universal pardoning of sins for all who visit the church on August 28 and 29 of any given year. The bull, on its original parchment paper, is still intact and underwent restoration in 2017.

Today, Celestine V's gesture of unconditional pardoning — radical for its time — is considered a direct predecessor of the Catholic Jubilee year, first instituted by *Pope Boniface VIII* in 1300 (and most recently by Pope Francis in 2016). In commemoration of Celestine's mass pardoning, pilgrims flock to *Santa Maria di Collemaggio* annually for the opening of its *Porta Santa*, or Holy Door.

Much pomp and circumstance precedes that climactic moment. The spectacle begins moodily on August 16 at around 5 p.m., when a fire symbolizing peace is lit outside of the *Hermitage of Morrone* near *Sulmona*. A small group of locals then lights torches that will guide them all the way to *L'Aquila* on what's known as the *Forgiveness Walk*. Passing through barely mappable villages on the route (ever heard of *Bagnaturo?*), the group ceremoniously stops in each one, lighting a fire in a hefty tripod-style pit in each town. For the rest of the day, the flames burn on, signifying that the message of peace from on high at *Morrone* has made its way to that community. (A detailed itinerary of the



Cristian Nuvolone



Raniera Palavino

Festival Procession

Forgiveness Walk is published ahead of the proceedings on www.perdonanza-celestiniana.it, under “Programma.”)

The real magic begins when the procession arrives in L’Aquila on August 23, winding its way to Santa Maria di Collemaggio, where another lighting ceremony, accompanied by flag-throwing and fanfare, inaugurates the week of festivities to come (usually at around 6 p.m.). Downtown L’Aquila is a hotbed of activity in the days that follow — rather atypical for a landlocked Italian city in late summer.

Concerts, tastings and *aperitivi* color the town until August 28, when a procession of costumed locals, the *Corteo della Bolla*, or Papal Bull’s Parade, snakes its way through the streets. Departing from the town hall at around 4 p.m. and moving toward Santa Maria di Collemaggio, the procession is the final pregame for the much-awaited opening of the Holy Door.

Through it all, three figures occupy places of honor. Chief among them is the *Dama della Bolla*, protectress of the papal bull, which L’Aquila’s mayor will read to the crowds gathered before the basilica just before the doors are flung open. Flanking the Dama della Bolla are the *Giovin Signore*, a young man carrying an olive branch to be used for the first ceremonious knock, and the *Dama della Croce*, a woman bearing jewelry made by L’Aquila artisans.

After all the buildup, the open-Sesame moment comes in what feels like a flash. L’Aquila’s municipal authorities unlock the doors, allowing pilgrims to

pass through to the basilica over the next 24 hours. The closing ceremony is at dusk on August 29, which *Giovanna Di Matteo*, costume curator for the procession, emphasizes is “incredibly evocative and moving.”

Di Matteo has been assisting with the aesthetics of the festival since 1983 and heading up the costume court for the past 13 years. For her, the addition of the festival to the UNESCO list would not just be a point of pride, but also a way of encouraging further research on local identity. She sees the potential for

“more in-depth studies...for better understanding of why Celestine specifically chose to entrust this place with the papal bull, and to gain an overall better understanding of our ‘cityhood,’” she explained.

Cityhood is everything to L’Aquila. This became clear, Di Matteo says, in the aftermath of the April 2009 earthquake that ravaged the city. If the festival previously had more of a cultural or spiritual focus, these days, the way Di Matteo sees it, it’s about local identity and pride. She recalled how, in 2009, the mayor was in tears upon arriving to Santa Maria di Collemaggio; how the court members were able to work together to “dig up costumes to wear from the most impossible places. We worked through the devastation,” she said. “And that was when I got it.”

—Mary Gray

Mary Gray is a freelance writer, journalist and lecturer based in Florence, where she was previously Associate Editor of *The Florentine*. For more information, visit www.verymarygray.com



Opening of the Holy Door

Photos by Raniera Patavino



The Details

Abruzzo Parks

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(39) 33 97320568
www.abruzzoparks.it

Asvir Moligal –

Terre Rurali d’Europa Partnership
(*transhumance protection organization*)
(39) 33 792900
www.moligal.eu

Club Alpino Italiano

Via Petrella, 19
Milan
(39) 02 2057231
www.cai.it

Collegio Nazionale delle Guide

Alpine Italiane
Via Errico Petrella, 19C
Milan
(39) 02 29414211
www.guidealpine.it

Monte Bianco Courmayeur

Piazzale Monte Bianco, 15
Courmayeur
(39) 01 65842060
www.lovevda.it/en

La Thuile

Via Marcello Collomb, 36
La Thuile
(39) 01 65885196

Festival of Celestinian Forgiveness

Casa Comunale
Palazzo Fibbioni
Via San Bernardino
L’Aquila
(39) 08 62645466 or (39) 08 62645653
www.perdonanza-celestiniana.it

1€ = \$1.13 at press time

sites are shared with other countries.

increase in tours catering to clients with access requirements." At both the institutional and popular levels, Italian activists like 26-year-old *Iacopo Melio*, an author and Internet sensation with Escobar syndrome who was recently knighted, are pushing the conversation along. When asked for input on new developments in accessible travel, Melio cautioned *Dream of Italy* readers to remember that the situation still "varies so much from place to place" and that "giant steps forward" don't happen overnight. In the meantime, however, a number of new trends and developments are helping mitigate the old familiar challenges.

New Ways of Rome-ing

Beyond the boom in accessible site-specific tours like those offered by Roma Experience, *Lauren Mouat*, a Rome-based guide and co-owner of the tour company *Unlock Italy* (www.unlockitaly.com), says that exploring the Eternal City from cushioned-seat electric golf carts has helped level the playing field for travelers with limited mobility while also offering a greener, kinder-to-pedestrians alternative to hurtling around in bulky, gas-guzzling vehicles. Electric golf carts "allow you to be outside and feel like you're in the midst of all the action," Mouat says, while offering sweet relief between taxing sightseeing stops. Electric golf carts also have logistical advantages over cars in the chaotic historic center: They can access all the main roads while not requiring any special permits to enter Rome's ZTL, or limited traffic zone. Parking in designated blue-line bays is also free for carts, though not easy to come by.

Mouat and the Unlock Italy team typically source golf carts from Rolling Rome (www.rollingrome.com), local providers that also offer their own custom tours (and pure equipment rentals for those interested in an autonomous adventure).

Most carts can accommodate most standard folding manual wheelchairs, although bulkier electric models will not fit.

Typically, although these carts ride low to the ground, most, across providers, are not equipped with entrance ramps or lifts. While a user on crutches could independently maneuver him or herself onto the seats, some wheelchair-bound users will need assistance. *Paolo Apolloni*, a partner at a



Rolling Rome

Tour, adding on a hotel pickup service if they have concerns about storing their wheelchair on board. Pickups can be

organized at any hotel in Rome's historic center — "otherwise, the battery risks running out," she clarifies.

Although the cart craze is primarily concentrated in Rome, travelers to Florence can find similar services through *Eco Tours Italia* (www.ecotoursitaly.com).

Navigating the Lodging Labyrinth

Businesses in big-ticket destinations such as Rome and Florence have been forced to reckon with accessibility issues in responding to market needs. The farther off the beaten path one goes, though, the more challenging it becomes to find reliable information, particularly regarding lodging.

For those planning a trip without assistance, or in need of a jump-off point for lodging research, a helpful and up-to-date resource is the free downloadable PDF guide by *Village For All* (www.villageforall.net), which features a curated selection of vetted accommodation structures from *Trentino to Puglia*. Organized by region, the guide's English is middling and the nitty-gritty specifics of each property scarce, but each entry contains at-a-glance ratings for the featured property's performance in a variety of categories, from wheelchair accessibility to "senior-friendly" status. Contact information for individual structures and distance data about their nearest hospitals is also included. However, it's still



Unlock Italy



Roma Experience

similar provider, *My Best Tour* (www.golf-cart-tour-rome.com), emphasizes that despite the lack of entry-easing equipment, the seats are "suitable for both quadriplegic and paraplegic clients in that there are no doors and the seating is low, as if you're sitting at a table in a restaurant."

Camilla, a rep of *LivItaly Tours* (www.livitaly.com), another operator offering golf cart tours, told *Dream of Italy* that the most foolproof route for clients with special access needs is to opt for the Rome Golf Cart Private

Many Italian museums offer dis

advisable to reach out to any properties that catch your eye for follow-up questions and additional photos.

If the prospect of calling and emailing properties culled from a guide feels overwhelming, budget for a go-between to help with vetting before you book. *Accessible Tourism (AT)* (www.accessibletourism.it) is a project of the tourism and culture cooperative Co&So. Backed by membership in the European Network for Accessible Tourism and a partnership with Florence's Convention and Visitors

Bureau, AT is a one-stop shop for a wide range of services. Rather than offering a

free database of properties, the staff gives referrals to guaranteed-accessible hotels in their network after users make an inquiry.

AT can organize barrier-free stays all over Italy in the usual spots such as Venice, Rome and Florence, but also in Naples, *Palermo*, *Catania*, and lake, country and seaside destinations (*Lago di Garda*, *Alto Adige* and *Castiglione della Pescaia*, for example). Fixed-itinerary, fully accessible group or customized trips are also available, along with private transport solutions to and from many major airports.

A final resource is Sage Traveling (www.sagetraveling.com). The no-fuss website offers an abundance of free information on major Italian (and other European) destinations compiled largely by John Sage, the founder and an inveterate wheelchair-bound

adventurer, as well as similar hotel consulting services, trip planning and travel packages.

Surprises at Archaeological Sites

More and more rough-hewn sites that once seemed like lost causes for limited mobility travelers are becoming easier to navigate. According to *Anna Caruso*, a Naples-based guide (www.facebook.com/wanderitalywithanna), the most notable accessibility improvements on her turf in recent years have been the wheelchair-friendly routes installed in *Pompeii* as part of a broader two-year restoration project. Prior to the late 2016 inauguration of the three-kilometer route, taking mobility-impaired clients through was "effectively impossible, so this [new path] is really a great thing." Now, visitors can enjoy a smooth, appropriately paced outing that, for Caruso's groups, usually takes about two to three hours to complete. From the entry point at *Piazza Anfiteatro*, the path extends to *Porta Marina* and moves through about 20 monuments along the way.

Noteworthy developments are also transpiring in pure equipment innovation for these places. Take the "Wheely Trekky," a wheelchair designed specifically for famously inaccessible archaeological monuments (like the Palatine Hill, ancient *Ostia*, *Montecassino* and, yes, the more precarious parts of Pompeii). Available through *Rome and Italy* (www.romeanditaly.com), the chair has one wheel and two handlebars in the front and back offering support, and requires help from two trained

assistants who can roll or carry it through tricky or hilly terrain.

General attitudes may also be moving toward recognizing that Italy's archaeological patrimony is for all, and not just the physically privileged. Pardi recalls the days when Roma



Experience ran test drives of its Accessible Colosseum tours and how impressed he was with the group's reception, the assistance provided by Colosseum staff and how it jived with his own vision of keeping things "people-focused, and prioritizing focusing on accessibility more than disability." Roma Experience, he says, would like to eventually expand its accessibility offerings to Naples, *Capri* and Pompeii, but for now is concentrating on Rome, because "it's important to us to not just have equipment, but the experience itself," he explains.

A Work in Progress



Wheely Trekky

The growing opportunities in accessible Italian travel are just one element of larger conversations about livability for the mobility impaired. Pardi, Caruso and others expressed optimism about the

direction in which things are heading, but remain realistic about the pace of change and the impossibility of one-size-fits-all solutions.

"We have to work within the system," Pardi acknowledges, but "people love to travel, people have the right to travel and people deserve to have wonderful experiences regardless of what society defines as a limitation."

—Mary Gray

counts for travelers with disabilities.



Accessible Tourism

DISCOVER FLORENCE'S WINE DOORS

Walking around the historic center of Florence, you are sure to notice strange, small cutouts in the walls of the old large family homes. They are called *buchette di vino*, referred to in English as “wine windows” or “wine doors.”

Originally, the *Nobile* families in town also had estates out in the countryside, where they produced wine and olive oil. In 1559, the ruling *Medici* family began allowing these wealthy families to bring the wine and oil from their countryside cellars and sell it out of their homes in Florence — directly from farm to table.

Customers — including any Florentine, not just nobility — would bring their own bottles and ring the bell, and the maid, called a *cantiniere*, would come and fill it for them. These were the first wine shops, and they were ubiquitous by the 19th century. Back then, they included a *vinaio*, a place to drink a glass of wine while eating light snacks.

Due to a combination of property sales, World War II bombings and the Florence flood of 1966, wine windows began disappearing in the 20th century. Some are now mail slots, others doorbells to the multiple apartments inside; some of the villas in town still have the former operating hours listed on the now-defunct windows. However, several of these wine doors are still operable in restaurants and wine bars around town.

For several years now it has been possible to buy *vino sfuso*, which translates literally to “loose wine” — that is, wine that doesn’t come prepackaged — in bulk, saving a lot of money. During operating hours, you

can come up to the windows and have the attendant fill your wine bottles, flasks or demijohns with wine.

photo op, but based on tradition!

In 2015, the Wine Windows Association was formed in Florence to document, preserve and promote the *buchette*. They have created an online map and a print version for those who would like to discover the wine windows around town. In 2004, the first book on the subject came out in Italian, *Le Buchette del Vino a Firenze nel Centro Storico ed in Oltrarno* by Linda Casini Brogelli. Another book in Italian was printed in 2005, *I Finestrini del Vino* by Massimo Casprini.

Here is a list of some of the more famous wine windows in town. It is like a treasure hunt to find them!

Babae

Via Santo Spirito, 21/r

This is the small bistro with the wine door open from 7 to 8 p.m. (*The “R” in the address means Rosso or “Red,” but some homes have blue numbers on them.*)

Vivoli Gelateria

Via Isola delle Stinche, 7r

You can view this wine door from both the outside and the inside.

Il Latini Ristorante

Via dei Palchetti, 6/r

This was the wine cantina of the Palazzo Rucellai.

Buca Lapi

Via del Trebbio, 1r

This was the wine cantina of the Palazzo Antinori.

Osteria delle Belle Donne

Via delle Belle Donne, 16/r

To find this wine window, look for the sign with the operating hours on it.

—Judy Witts Francini

Judy Witts Francini is a culinary concierge, market maven, Italian life coach and cooking teacher who has lived in Italy since 1984. For more information, visit www.divinacucina.com



All photos: Judy Witts Francini



Babae



Via del Giglio, 2

When *Babae*, a new bistro, recently opened in the *Oltr’Arno* on *Via Santo Spirito*, it also reopened the building’s wine window, one foot by eight inches in size. From 7 to 8 p.m. they sell a *gottino* (like a tumbler) of wine for 3 euros. You come from outside and ring the bell, and on the inside, someone will come to serve you the wine. More of an Instagram

The *Antinori* family moved to Florence in 1202.