The panel situated in the fourth nave bay of the Sienese cathedral pavement has been given various titles: The Mount of Wisdom, The Mount of Virtue, or The Story of Fortune (fig. 1). Although the allegorical scene obviously has some connection with all three of these topics, I want to reinforce the aspect of wisdom, and to emphasize the importance for the panel's essential iconology of early Christian texts viewed through a humanist lens. During the 1480s the cycle of Sibyls and Hermes Trismegistus had been finished by several artists. In 1504 Pinturicchio was commissioned to make a presentation drawing, the cartone di disegno for the Mount of Wisdom. Two years later the panel was finished in the marmo sgraffitto technique. 

The crowded composition shows a spiral-shaped mountain with two plateaux. One group of people has just disembarked from a boat steered by Fortune, and now climb the path up the hill. At the summit a female personification is flanked by the ancient philosophers Socrates and Crates,[2] who are identified by tabulae above their heads. The woman, who has been identified as either Sapientia or Virtus, hands a palm frond to Socrates and a book to Crates. Simultaneously, Crates is hurling from a basket his jewellery downhill at Fortune’s head, symbolizing the vanity of earthly possessions. She tries to protect herself with the ship’s sail, whilst balancing between the boat and a sphere. The cornucopia, the ship’s rudder and the sphere are all attributes of Roman Fortuna[3], who is
now represented, freed from medieval (mis-)interpretations, as the benevolent Goddess, distributing her gifts according to the moral order. In the pavement iconography she safely transported her passengers to the mountain, despite her boat’s dilapidated state.[4] The group of people can now ascend the hill to gain what the tabula above Sapientia promises: If you can conquer the difficult ascent of this hostile and stony hill, you will receive the palm-branch as a token of peace of soul:

HVC PROPERATE VIRI SALEBROSVVM SCANDITECTE MONTEM PVLCHRA LABORIS ERVNT PREMIA PALMA QVIES.[5]

Before considering the literary sources, it is however helpful to clarify the diversities of social and intellectual status of those climbing the hill. By examining the male garments more carefully, it becomes clear that they represent different classes, identified by all’antica robes and hats in various classicising and contemporary styles. In fact the hats seem to provide the most accurate way of distinguishing the eminent mountaineers.[6] Comparing Raphael’s approximately contemporary frescoes, the School of Athens (fig. 2) and the Disputa, it becomes evident that Raphael did not distinguish his sages in this way. While the tunicas are broadly similar to those of the Sienese sages, hats are rare, used only to identify popes and bishops. The same is true for many Renaissance paintings. Botticelli in his drawings for the Divine Comedy makes a distinction, however which gets closer to the representation in Siena. He gives Virgil the characteristic cylindrical hat, divided by eight fas-ciae coming out of a corporal roll. Dante instead wears the typical hat of humanists and clerics (fig. 3). That Pinturicchio was quite familiar with the means of distinguishing personalities by depicting different kinds of hats is visible in his frescoes in the Libreria Piccolomini just some meters away from our pavement panel (fig. 4+5). Here we see examples of clerical hierarchies with their appropriate hats, as well as examples of sages from the West and the East, humanists and ordinary people.

Fig. 2: Raphael, School of Athen (part.), Vatican City, Stanza della Segnatura (Stefano Zuffi, Konrad Oberhuber, Raffaello, Milan 2006, p. 155, part.).

Fig. 3: Botticelli, Divine Comedy, Inf. X (part.) (Hein-Th. Schulze-Alt-cappenberg, Sandro Botticelli. Pittore della Divina Commedia, vol. 2, p. 61, part.).

Fig. 4: Pintoricchio, Enea Silvio receives the cardinal’s hat (part.), Siena, Libreria Piccolomini (photo by author).
In the Sienese *Mountain of Wisdom* Socrates, Crates and the two men on the lower level, one sitting in thought, his companion marching forward while looking backwards, are clearly identified by their hats as Antique sages. In front of them two men appear in the typical barrettes of clerics and humanists. A prominent group of six persons in the lower foreground stand behind the four sages and clerics, as if waiting their turn to begin the march (fig. 6). This sextet, which includes a woman with plainly arranged hair, is made up of contemporary youths wearing aristocratic or student hats. *Sapienza*, the goal to which they all strive, wears a crown studded with precious gems. *Fortuna*, the complete antithesis of *Sapienza*, is unclothed, hatless and barefoot, her ethereal beauty the embodiment of a transcendent and abstract fate. It is thus evident that the pavement master intended this double search for one’s destiny as a problem comprehending all intellectual classes, from philosophers to ordinary people, so clearly characterized in this representation.

Several literary sources for the panel’s iconography have already been suggested: *Fortuna* was addressed in the *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* (1499) and earlier in the *Somnium de fortuna* by Enea Silvio Piccolomini, published in 1475-76. Both texts discuss the vicissitudes of riches that *Fortuna* bestows on important people. The *Somnium* furthermore indicates Socrates and Crates as important moral exemplars. Socrates is placed first among those who never gain Fortuna’s favour. The *Somnium* also portrays Crates as an example of the man who set aside the gloomy riches given him by *Fortuna*, who then could proceed easily towards philosophical enlightenment.[7] However the *Somnium* remains conventional in characterization and beyond this initial similarity provides no suggestion of narrative structure.

As a compositional source for the weary and upward winding climb towards the goal of moral virtue, the iconic narrative of the *tabula cebetis*, a first century text which became increasingly popular from the end of the 15th century, can plausibly be suggested. Here, at the end of the complex ascent of a hill inhabited by several virtues, *Fortuna* is confronted by *Vera Disciplina*, which, however, implies a negative connotation for Fortuna.[8] The *tabula cebetis* certainly provides a model for a narrative structure with a virtuous aim, approaching human life from a moral, religious-philosophical standpoint. However, it does not provide the specific source for the Sienese pavement iconography, any more than do any other texts which have so far been adduced.
Thus far it would seem that the pavement iconography is dominated less by humanist and neoplatonic sources themselves, than by a humanist interpretation of biblical or patristic texts, familiar to anyone with a humanist education. I wish therefore to reinforce this hypothesis by considering both the Bible itself and also Lactantius. Surprisingly, neither of these texts has previously been taken in consideration for the interpretation of the Mountain of Wisdom, although each contains a chapter closely related to the pavement panel.

The Mountain of Wisdom’s most obvious source should certainly be the Old Testament Book of Wisdom. This provides both a narrative and also a background iconology. In synthesis, wisdom is primarily explained through human aspects, as being close to ordinary people. Thus the Book of Wisdom is important in strengthening the search for wisdom in relation to faith as the only way for heavenly acceptance and final illumination, while acknowledging God’s guidance of man’s destiny through an uncertain, though positive, boat allegory.

In the introductory passage wisdom is termed a philanthropic spirit (1,6), ruled by the Holy Spirit which teaches mankind everything (1,5). It is explained how Wisdom is directed by God (7,15) and is to be interpreted both as a mirror of God’s strength and an image of his perfection (7,26). This explains why God will only accept those who seek wisdom (7,28). Eternal life will only be for those who know how to live wisely (8,17). The narrative thrust of the chapter becomes increasingly relevant thereafter for the pavement iconology. Wisdom is termed the teacher of all virtues and therefore its highest embodiment. Wisdom is responsible for the perception of God and necessary for heavenly acceptance (8,2-8,8). What is remarkable here is a detailed imagery of a boat journey towards wisdom under divine guidance (5,10; 14,1-14,7). God’s providence directs the ship with its faithful crew despite the waves and the dilapidated state of the ship. Thanks to God’s guidance the ship is usable by all, be they experienced sailors or not. The narrative then shifts to a description of vices which hinder mankind’s path toward virtue. It depicts “irrational serpents and worthless animals” (cfr. the serpents and frogs in the pavement panel), God’s punishments for excessive folly (11,15). Gold and silver stand for ephemeral and worthless symbols incomparable to the inner riches of true wisdom. Wisdom will be granted however to those who seek it (7,9-7,11; 13,10). Finally the Book of Wisdom describes Solomon as the supreme model for wisdom and exemplary behaviour (8,19-9,19).

There had in fact been projected in the Sienese pavement a panel designed by Luca Signorelli with Solomon close to the Mountain of Wisdom, which ultimately was never realized. Thus the Book of Wisdom, a primary source for every educated humanist and priest is indubitably a fundamental text for a proper understanding of the Mountain of Wisdom, by developing a narrative around the search for wisdom for the faithful and ordinary folk, who are truly looking for God and heavenly acceptance. It becomes very clear that wisdom is obtained but by one only means: “Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me”. The biblical text thus provides a framework for the theological meaning of the development and the plot, but also establishes several details in the figurative scene. The same can be said about the next text we are going to look at.

Already in 1899 Émile Mâle hinted at the significance of the writings of Lactantius (ca. 250-325), the early Christian apologist, for the cycle of sibylline wisdom in the pavement. Several authorities have agreed. In his seven books of the Divine Institutiones Lactantius developed a complex synthesis of Christian doctrine. Especially during the 15th century his work on sibylline wisdom became increasingly important. The first printed edition of the Divine Institutiones was already available by 1465 and many other editions followed. In fact, Lactantius is not only of fundamental importance for the cycle of the sibyls but equally for the Mountain of Wisdom.

Lactantius’ third book of the Divine Institutiones, called “On the false wisdom of philosophers” is the most authoritative source for the Mountain of Wisdom. Parallel to the Book of Wisdom Lactantius clearly relies on wisdom’s religious background, accessible to people with different status, while, as an apologist, he also looks at the past and the different directions philosophers and their wisdom come from,
all of which are unified by their search for truth and wisdom. Perhaps surprisingly, in Lactantius philosophy is not assigned the incontestable authority which at first glance the panel might suggest. As he explains, philosophers do not necessarily possess wisdom. Rather, philosophers simply aspire towards wisdom and search for it. Lactantius refers to Pythagoras, as the first “philosopher”, in order to explain why human study might never lead to wisdom, and that wisdom and philosophy are not truly equivalent. [14] This in Lactantius’ time not uncommon definition is preceded by Plato’s description of Socrates’ statement, who said that a man himself could not be called wise, as only a God could be wise. Otherwise a man could be called a philosopher or a friend of wisdom.

[15] For Lactantius the two most important, though contrary, philosophical approaches are those of Socrates and Zeno, and he inclines to the latter. Socrates’ thesis implies that nothing can be known, whereas Zeno teaches that everything may be supposed. [16] Following Arkesilaos of Pitane Lactantius repeats the example of ordinary people having possession of genuine wisdom, as they know what they need to know, and admit without hesitation to being ignorant of other things. [17]

Arkesilaos visited the Peripatos in Athens. He was a great admirer of Crates’ teaching and became the leader of the Academy after his teacher’s death. [18] The opponents of Arkesilaos were the Stoics whose founder was Zeno of Citium. Diogenes Laërtius in his Lives of the Philosophers writes of Zeno, who in Athens following a shipwreck, enters a bookshop and becomes interested in Socrates’ writings. After asking the bookseller where he could possibly meet this person, Crates of Thebes was pointed out to him as a contemporary model. Another variant of this story by Laërtios records that Crates was already staying in Athens when he was informed that his ship was damaged, where after he thanked Fortuna exclaiming: “It is well done of thee, Fortune, thus to impel me to philosophy”. [19]

Following this interpretation of Zeno and Arkesilaos by Lactantius these two suggest themselves as possible actors at the bottom of the hill in the Sienese panel. The stoic, Zeno deep in thought, sits at the start of the path leading to wisdom. [20] According to Lactantius the teaching of Zeno’s school was based on a lifestyle which strengthened virtue and peace of mind. In the panel these are fundamental issues in the path to wisdom and are mentioned in the tabula above Sapientia. In Laërtios’ description Zeno earned a golden crown for his virtue (Diogenes Laërtius, vii. 6, 11), and he is likewise represented as crowned in the panel’s iconography. Lactantius underlines Zeno’s compassion, which makes him an extraordinarily humane philosopher. Zeno saw pity as fundamental for a functioning human society. [21] The philosopher is directly connected to the group behind him who represent the popolo. Representative of the stoics, Zeno’s philosophy influenced the composition of this group, for as Lactantius writes, his philosophy is addressed to everyone, including women and slaves. It is only virtue, however, which leads to a fulfilled and happy life. [22]

In front of Zeno, striding energetically forward while glancing backwards to dispute, is Arkesilaos. [23] He is placed also in front of the popolo, the young nobles and students, whom he appears to invite to follow the path to wisdom. Indeed this group on the lower level stands closest to Sapientia. However Arkesilaos, like Zeno, remains at the beginning of the path to wisdom. As Lactantius stated, Arkesilaos initiated an unstable and inconsistent philosophy through referring to Socrates and the negation of wisdom. [24] This is the reason for Lactantius’ enquiry: “Where, then, is wisdom? It consists in thinking neither that you know all things, which is the property of God; nor that you are ignorant of all things, which is the role of a beast. For it is something of a middle character which belongs to man, that is, knowledge united and combined with ignorance.” [25] If one is to follow Lactantius and Arkesilaos, wisdom therefore would be most easily found in each interested and educated man. This explains, on the one hand, why the group of people in the lower foreground stand nearest to Sapientia; it also helps identify the pair further along the path to wisdom. These are two humanists, who in the literature have been suggested to be Pandolfo Petrucci and Alberto Aringhieri, the regitore della Repubblica and the Operaio del Duomo respectively. [26]
At the summit of the hill only Socrates bows towards Sapientia, who reaches out her hand to offer him a palm branch. According to Lactantius, among the philosophers Socrates possessed most “human” wisdom.\[27\] While history regards Socrates as the wisest of philosophers, in recognizing his own ignorance, Lactantius emphasizes the point that Socratic teaching incorporated the thesis that nothing could really be known. The complex iconography of the pavement stresses this sceptical aspect, developed in Lactantius’ chapter “On the false wisdom of philosophers”.\[28\] Here we learn that philosophers, concentrating on discussing good and bad ways of conducting life fail to practice it themselves. True wisdom in contrast lies in the conjunction of virtue and knowledge.\[29\]

In the same chapter Lactantius writes of the shipwreck and liberation from riches. His harsh judgement of the leading philosophers climaxes in an acknowledgement of their inner emptiness, whereas more obscure philosophers appear wise only at the very moment, they divest themselves of possessions. Therefore, Lactantius writes somewhat angrily, he would wait to see their own lifestyle. They would do better to suffer from shipwreck in a storm, as they were not sustained by virtue, but driven only by perverse fear. These dishonourable and insignificant men would cast their belongings away so as to receive more liberality. There follows the example of throwing precious objects into the sea, which however Lactantius narrates through the main character Democritus. He is praised for selling all his possessions and later throwing the money into the sea. Lactantius says however that Democritus would have done better in investing this money humanely and helping the poor. It would be virtuous to get rid of one’s money, but only if one subsequently assisted those who needed it.\[30\]

Again, according to Lactantius, another false approach by the philosophers lay in their understanding of Fortuna. She was not the thoughtless goddess, settling people’s destiny by random choice, and thus philosophers were mistaken in seeing Fortuna as their opponent. On other occasions they saw Fortuna as God in a natural guise. They would in fact search for the truth in Nature rather than God, a crucial error, since they then claim God to be Nature, a perversion of the truth. Good and bad do not originate with Fortuna. On this occasion Lactantius rounds out his story once again with the example of Democritus, who supposed truth to lie in a bottomless well. But this is erroneous, for it is unnecessary to descend toward truth: rather, it is an ascension to the top of an isolated, windy hill or even to heaven itself. Truth could only be found on the highest summit and this would explain Socrates’ desperate admission that he knew only that in reality he knew nothing. But, Lactantius continues, Fortuna would ultimately be nothing more than a chain of unexpected events. Unwittingly, people would think that she distributed both good and bad. This explains why she would be often represented with a cornucopia and a rudder or wheel, as if she were able to confer riches to people and direct their lives, whereas Fortuna would never be harsh to anyone.\[31\]

Lactantius closes his chapter about the false wisdom of philosophers with the suggestion that only the combination of wisdom and virtue would help them for a better life. And true wisdom would result only through the acknowledgement and the worship of God.\[32\]

It becomes clear that Lactantius as the first Christian author who combined systematically religion and wisdom, is not only the most relevant narrative source for the Sienese iconography; it also puts the topic of the search for wisdom in a precise place. Searching for wisdom does not mean to follow the teaching of philosophers, though some of them might help as an example. Therefore Lactantius says: “Thus philosophy, inasmuch as it does not possess true religion, that is, the highest piety, is not true wisdom.”\[33\] The search for wisdom in Lactantius is primarily connected to the Christian pia sapientia. It is only the combination of religion and wisdom that leads to illumination and therefore to a higher knowledge. Thus in concordance with the Old Testament’s Book of Wisdom, only those searching for wisdom as well as for God and worshipping him may count among the wise people and be accepted in heaven, whereas the Book of Wisdom brings it to the point: only those inhabited by wisdom are admitted by God and his providence will keep them on the right way. The positive interpretation of men’s final destiny,
coming out of a seemingly troublesome fate, but guided by God’s providence or Fortuna’s help are equivalents in the Bible and Lactantius.

As throughout his book, here again Lactantius uses ancient philosophy and its pagan sages to undermine his apologetic approach to justify Christian religion. Pagan authorities often showed useful virtues and moral behaviours comparable to the Christian doctrine. However it is clear that in Lactantius the truly illuminated and wise people are the docti, the learned pagans of his days, an interested and skilled society, and as it seems often “prominent in culture”, who are truly looking for religion and the final truth.[34] Therefore looking at the Sienese background the importance of Lactantius’ docti seems to be of clear relevance for the humanists, who may be mirrored in this group, as well as for the laic public.

These two categories, following Lactantius, possess the highest possibility of finding true religious wisdom. Represented in the panel on the hill’s lower plain we might be assured of their ascendance to the top of the hill, where they will find the enthroned pia sapientia distributing heavenly rewards.

What we are dealing with here in Siena is a religious allegory, which gets close to being an ekphrasis to specific chapters in early Christian texts. Though we do have contemporary sources dealing with some of its elements, they may not be seen as the primary sources, whereas however they might go back to the same roots. The Mountain of Wisdom is a very clear example for a genuine humanistic interpretation of Patristic texts and reveals their importance for humanistic studies. By the means of an apologetic author – who could also be interpreted ironically – humanists are allowed to give relevance to ancient sages, while claiming for priority for their own wisdom.

Endnotes
4. Fortuna's well intentioned move may therefore contradict the opinions of Stefano Colonna and Gosbert Schüßler, whereas Fortuna may only distribute unstable goods, underlined by her unstable position on the sphere (Colonna 1989, Variazioni sul tema della Fortuna, p. 136). Schüßler also points to a negative identification of Fortuna as a symbol of misfortune and evil. Schüßler, after elaborating a pointed summary of the main points in the allegory of Fortune and her attributions, must however conclude with the observation that her unstable position between the boat and the sphere could never give security and stability. Also her nude representation would rather point to a reading as a prostitute. Schüßler sees in the connection with the sea another hint to a negative interpretation and her image as bringing misfortune. The mast of the ship, the only possibility of navigation, is broken. Therefore Fortuna could never have brought the crowd of people to the secure land (Schüßler 2004, Die Tugend auf dem Felsenberg, pp. 448-456). Certainly Schüßler’s image of Fortuna is not the one of Fortuna-Occasio, which means, the goddess bringing fortune and profit (on Fortuna-Occasio see: Helas 1999, Fortuna-Occasio, pp. 101-124). While Schüßler is looking for a humanistic interpretation of the panel, his idea of Fortune is still the medieval image, cited by Petrarca and others, which he mentions. Cassirer and others instead have pointed out, how people in the Renaissance tend to see Fortune as being steered by one’s virtues, thus making man interfere with his own destiny (Ernst Cassirer, Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance, Leipzig 1927, pp. 81, 126). Though Schüßler mentions this changed attitude in the Renaissance, he makes no use of it for the pavement panel (Schüßler 2004, Die Tugend auf dem Felsenberg, p. 487).
5. Caciorgna mentions two possible sources for this phrase. The first part HVC PROPRARATE VIR might be taken from the 7th century text by Eugenius Toletanus In basilica sancti Felicis quae est in Tataro (Carmina XII): “Ecce domus Domini, quae ducit ad atria caeli; / cordibus afflicti huc proparate viri” (Marilena Caciorgna and Roberto Guerini, Il pavimento del Duomo di Siena: l’arte della tarsia marroccia dal XIV al XIX secolo; fonti e simbologia, Milano 2004, p. 81). The second part should be from Gerominy’s Epistular: “Scandebat monem Thabor, in quo transfigurat et Dominum”. The same work would also mention Crates, throwing his riches into the sea (Caciorgna 2003, La virtù figurata, p. 151).
6. There is little literature about hats in the Renaissance. On costume a useful approach is suggested by: Sara Piccoli Paolo, Turbanti e copricapi, esotici: Una ricerca esplorativa di tipologie e significati nella miniatura fra Duecento e primo Cinquecento, in: Antichità Viva, 37, 1998, pp. 6-14. She explains the significance of hats for social group as a means to exhibit power, or in case of clerics, as distinction of religious status or rites (My thanks to Anne Dunlop for pointing to the article). Hats in Italy were influenced from an early time on from the Near East.


11. The Oxford annotated Bible with the Apocrypha 1965, p. 109 (7-7).


20. Caciorgna had already identified the figure of Zenon in the pavement, however locating him in the standing figure, ready to step off. In the sitting figure she sees the librarian, who handed the book over to Zenon. The figure of Zeno would be connected with the pavement’s iconography for the coinciding theme of the ‘Naufragium felix’, a citation in Diogenes. In this context this
Figures

Fig. 1: Pintoricchio, Mountain of Wisdom, Siena Cathedral, pavement panel (Pietro Scarpellini and Maria Rita Silvestrelli, Pintoricchio, Milan 2003, p. 259).
Fig. 2: Raphael, School of Athens (part.), Vatican City, Stanza della Segnatura (Stefano Zuffi, Konrad Oberhuber, Raffaello, Milan 2006, p. 155, part.).
Fig. 3: Botticelli, Divine Comedy, Inf. X (part.), (Hein-Th. Schulze-Altcappenberg, Sandro Botticelli, Pittore della Divina Commedia, vol. 2, p. 61, part.).
Fig. 4: Pintoricchio, Enea Silvio receives the cardinal’s hat (part.), Siena, Libreria Piccolomini (photo by author).
Fig. 5: Pintoricchio, Enea Silvio elected Pio II (part.), Siena, Libreria Piccolomini (photo by author).
Fig. 6: Pintoricchio, Mountain of Wisdom (part.), Siena Cathedral, pavement panel (Pietro Scarpellini and Maria Rita Silvestrelli, Pintoricchio, Milan 2003, p. 259, part.).

Summary

Central to the design of the Siena cathedral pavement is the Mountain of Wisdom. It is located among Sages like Hermes Trismegistus and the Sibyls. Originating in a larger study of the roles of Neoplatonic, Gnostic and Hermetic concepts of salvation in the cathedral pavement design, this paper concentrates on the panel designed by Pintoricchio in 1504 which shows Socrates, Crates, Fortuna and Sapientia together with a “peripatetic” group of Sages who ascend the mountain. Many sources have been claimed for this scene, among them the Bible, Augustine, and the tabula cebetis. Crucial for understanding the panel’s iconography are however the Old Testament’s Book of Wisdom and Lactantius’ Divine Institutes, with its chapter on the False Wisdom of the Philosophers. Lactantius uses ancient philosophy and their pagan sages to undermine his apologetic approach to justify Christian religion. Within this context Socrates and Crates constitute important moral exemplars. The Book of Wisdom indicates Sapientia as the teacher of all the virtues, and through an interpretation of Divine Wisdom links humanity to the maritime allegory. Only those who recognize the superiority of Divine Wisdom finally achieve enlightenment.

Author

Angela Dressen is Andrew W. Mellon Librarian at Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Florence, Italy).