The most enduring memorial to Pope Pius II (r. 1458–1464) is the small renaissance city of Pienza, transformed by him during his lifetime from its former incarnation as the rural village of his birth, Corsignano, and renamed to commemorate his own papal appellation. Pienza is renowned as an early example of renaissance town planning actually brought into existence and still extant today. Thus the fabric of the miniature city succeeds, as Pius intended, in keeping alive his name and that of the Piccolomini clan to which he belonged. This essay argues that the architectural heritage is but the material vestige of Pius’s whole conception. As well as a memorial for posterity, the buildings and streets of Pienza – indeed the surrounding countryside too – provided the scenographic setting for the ultimate foundational act, the performance of religious ritual in time and space, lifted onto a cosmographical plane by the endowment of a sacred relic on the occasion of a holy feast day falling at the autumnal equinox.

Pienza is the subject of a vast literature, largely within the field of architectural history, not least since the restoration programme in 2005 to mark the 600th anniversary of its founder’s birth. The present essay addresses Pius’s choice of the feast of the Beheading of St John the Baptist for the dedication date and considers the impact on the city of Pius’s donation of the mandible of the apostle Andrew. With the aid of Agostino Patrizi Piccolomini’s Pontificale Romanum, it culminates in an evocation of the proceedings on the day of the dedication of its cathedral, 29 August 1462, which – it is argued – included a procession around the small city, to be regularly repeated into perpetuity.
on each occasion of which Pienza’s inhabitants were kinaesthetically reminded of the full scale of their benefactor’s patronage.

The analysis that follows is grounded in the premise that Pius thought in terms of movement through space, whether through the interior of a building, through urban landscape or from region to region. This is clear from his autobiographical I commentarii, as exemplified in the passage in which Pius proudly describes his newly built palazzo in Pienza on his first visit following its construction [Fig. 1, Map 1]:

As you enter the palace by the main door you face a large and lofty peristyle [...] From the main door to the peristyle there extends a gleaming arched portico as long as the width of the dining rooms on each side. After passing through this and entering the peristyle, if you turn to the right you will find a staircase leading to the rooms on the second floor by some forty easy steps a foot high, two feet deep, and nine wide, each made of a single great stone. Twenty of the steps turn right and twenty left and there is a window at the turn to light both flights. At the top is a gallery, which on three sides looks down into the court through square windows divided by a stone cross. Its ceiling is skilfully constructed and decorated in various colors. As you follow it to the right you come to a square hall out of which open two splendid chambers, one of which gets the western sun and the other the north light as well [...] At the end of the gallery is a hall seventy-two feet wide and a third again as long with six doors. Two look into the gallery, two give access to the middle portico that looks toward Mount Amiata, and the others to two large and elaborate chambers.1

Pius writes in terms of passing through the light-filled internal spaces, looking forward, now to the left, now to the right, upwards toward the ceiling, down into the courtyard. This mode of topographical description – as if ‘on the move’ through physical space – was not unique to Pius: Giannozzo Manetti had employed it some years earlier in his account of Nicholas V’s architectural projects.2 More specifically, it is

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2 Iannottii Manetti de vita ac gestis Nicolai quinti summi pontificis (1455), trsl. A. Modigliani (Rome: 2005). Drawing on a tradition of ekphrasis, Manetti’s descriptions are significantly less detailed than those of Pius: indeed, at Manetti’s time of writing many of the buildings that he described were still yet to be constructed or completed; Smith C. – O’Connor J.F., Building the Kingdom: Giannozzo Manetti on the Material and Spiritual Edifice (Tempe, AZ: 2006) 66–68.