INTRODUCTION

It is largely due to the traditional view of the Renaissance as an urban phenomenon that art historians have tended to focus on the city and to regard fifteenth-century art and architecture as the products of a purely civic culture created for an urban environment. Scholars have continually fallen prey to an ancient literary construct – but one which is still very much alive – according to which the countryside is perceived as the antithesis of the town.[1] This adversarial model was an ideological commonplace in the fifteenth century, to the extent that authors as diverse as Franco Sacchetti and Lorenzo de' Medici made it the subject of jests and ironic treatment.[2] By presenting the topos in an exaggerated or burlesque form, audiences were invited to step back and laugh at the urban-rustic antithesis, to see it in a critical light. It was clear at that time and ought to be clear to us now that this dichotomised approach was only one short version of a long and complicated story about the countryside.

This book takes as its starting point a very different view, one established by Nicola Ottokar, Johan Plesner, Armando Sapori, Enrico Fiumi and Philip Jones, that urban landowners of late medieval Florence maintained one foot in town and the other in the country, and that these were the two interdependent halves of a single social and economic world.[3] Although this view has been widely accepted by historians since the late 1950s, there have been few attempts by art historians to examine the material evidence or the artefacts produced by that integrated society. The main task of this study, therefore, is to start to redress the balance by investigating the rural activity and villa architecture of Florentines in the fifteenth century.[4] The fundamental questions that motivate this investigation are: what sort of buildings did Florentines of the so-called early Renaissance inhabit when they were out of town, and what sort of lives did they live there?

What emerges is, in art-historical terms, an anti-canonical view of the Florentine villa in this period. For this is not a book about the Renaissance in any obviously recognisable way. The impact of humanism on the villa, a subject with which many have long been concerned, is willfully disregarded, because the purpose here is to escape from the idealised and fictional construction of the 'Renaissance Villa', and to reach towards the everyday experience of people in their country houses. The evidence for this investigation is drawn from unpublished tax returns, account books, diaries, notarial records and letters. Indeed, the approach is largely driven by the archival data, so that villas are explored by way of a variety of documents, while taking particular pains to seek out and exploit the detail retrievable in the richest sources, such as the building accounts and letters relating to the Strozzi villa of Santuccio or the notarised document of Division for the Sassetti villa at La Pietra. Since all sources are to some degree tendentious, it is important to be aware in this case that an abundance of financial documentation tends to lead to a perception of an economically oriented society. This is offered here not as

the only interpretation, but as a counterbalance to the view based on pastoral poetry, *novelle*, and humanist panegyric.

Nor is this a book about the Medici. Until now the entire canon of early Renaissance Florentine villas could be said to consist of just five houses: Trebbio, Cafaggiolo, Careggi, Fiesole and Poggio a Caiano, all belonging to the Medici. How is it possible to understand the whole development of villa architecture during the period from this tiny and unrepresentative group of buildings? How is it possible to explore material culture in the countryside, or attitudes to rural life, via one ruling family? As an alternative to the Medici, this book examines the properties of two other clans of the landowning class: the Strozzi and the Sassetti. In doing so, it not only attempts to broaden the canon by looking at imposing but neglected houses, but it also attempts to look beyond the canonical criterion entirely, to find out what more ordinary country houses might have been like and to gain a sense of a whole range of buildings in the fifteenth-century countryside, including labourers' as well as landowners' houses.

It follows that the approach is not based on value judgement, in that the buildings included in this book were not originally selected according to artistic or aesthetic criteria. Most studies of villas have taken architectural merit as the prerequisite for selection or have catalogued the most remarkable buildings within one region, but this is an investigation of two families and all their country houses, whatever their physical appearance may be. Some of these buildings have disappeared or are unrecognisable, others survive in a transformed state with few or no discernible fifteenth-century features, while, in a few cases, the fifteenth-century villa structures have been preserved. The two most complete surviving fifteenth-century landowners' houses belonging to the Strozzi and Sassetti families form the basis for architectural analysis in Parts I and II of this study.

In one further important respect, this work differs from most architectural histories of the villa, for the land and agriculture are treated with the buildings as integral themes. Here the justification is twofold. Firstly, farming was quite simply the economic raison d'être behind almost every country house; secondly, this approach derives from and is consistent with the fifteenth-century concept of the villa. In and around Florence in this period, the word *villa* was used in three interrelated ways, firstly to mean the countryside in general;[5] secondly, it was applied to a hamlet, unfortified village, or small town in open countryside;[6] and thirdly, it referred to a country estate embracing the landowner's house (*casa da signore*), any related farmhouses (*case da lavoratore*) and outbuildings, together with gardens and farmland.[7] In this book the word villa is largely employed in this third sense to refer to country estates in which the conglomerate of land and buildings are treated as a unity. Apart from the *casa da signore*, the complex of *case da lavoratore*, outbuildings (granaries, stables, dovecotes) and other buildings related to the estate economy (mills, kilns, and country inns) are integrated into a holistic treatment of the estate or villa.

The book is in two parts, each dedicated to a family and its country properties. The two case studies were selected to complement each other, for the Strozzi in Part I are an example of a big, once-powerful clan with vast inherited estates suffering opposition from the ruling Medici faction, whereas the Sassetti in Part II typify a small family of Medici partisans attempting to boost their status through art and architectural patronage and the aquisition of new estates. The many branches of the Strozzi clan managed to survive the demographic crises of the second half of the fourteenth century, emerging with more than forty households in 1427.[8] They were one of the most powerful families in Florentine politics from the election of their first member of the *signoria* in 1284[9] until the exile of four Strozzi in 1434.[10] Even after the return of the Medici, the size of the Strozzi clan, their entrenchment in Florentine patrician circles, the Medicean sympathies of several members, and their caution, resilience and shrewdness ensured their survival under Medicean domination.[11] The Sassetti, on the other hand, had never been a huge family and lost many of their number in the plague of 1383, leaving only five households by 1427.[12] As an old Ghibelline family, they were in political disfavour during the fourteenth century,[13] and it was only as Medici employees

and supporters that the brothers Bartolommeo and Francesco Sassetti were elected to public office after 1452.[14]

A close examination of one individual and his main country residence forms the nucleus of each section. Whereas the wide range of rural buildings drawn into this study by including all the residential villas owned by Strozzi and Sassetti kinsmen has made it possible to explore diverse building types of the *contado*, the detailed analysis of two villa owners and their houses – Filippo Strozzi at Santuccio and Francesco Sassetti at La Pietra – sheds light on the stylistic development of villa architecture in this period. In these two case studies Santuccio can be described as a typical fifteenth-century *casa da signore*, while the house at La Pietra emerges as an exceptionally grand and innovatory design that was applauded by humanists and was far from utilitarian in appearance or function. Yet it is important not to isolate the case of La Pietra and put it on an art-historical pedestal, because it is above all in relation to the buildings around it that we can begin to imagine how a great country house like this might have looked to fifteenth-century Florentines, and it is in the context of the lives of the Sassetti family that we can best understand what this villa might have meant to them and their contemporaries. Apart from investigating the formal characteristics of villa architecture, a key aim of this study is to integrate the buildings with the family history, to use the villas as evidence for understanding the people, particularly the motives and purposes that gave impetus to their lives in the country and, vice versa, to use family history to shed light on the functions and forms of the houses.

PART ONE: THE STROZZI

The history of the Florentine villa in the early Renaissance has been almost entirely built around five houses belonging to the Medici.[1] It is no coincidence that this now obsolete historiographical model should have focussed exclusively on the buildings of the hegemony, but in this case the idea of *Herrschaftsarchitektur* has been carried to extremes, reduced to the buildings of one branch of a single ruling family.[2] It is lamentable that this tiny sample should still be considered representative of fifteenth-century Florence, a republican oligarchy in which not only the vast majority of elite families, but also a substantial section of what might be called the artisan class, and even a surprising number of unskilled urban workers, sharecroppers and tenant farmers, owned some land and a place to stay in the country. Ultimately, the Medici examples may emerge far closer to those of their well-off co-citizens than has been realised, but until the sample is widened to include a larger group of buildings, we shall never be able to evaluate the Medici country houses in context, let alone investigate the broader category of Florentine villas in the early Renaissance.

As members of the ruling class, the Strozzi may seem a dubious choice in the attempt to widen the canvas. Yet, they are also an obvious alternative to the Medici: they were their pre-eminent rivals, an older, larger clan, who were richer and more powerful than the Medici at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Like the Medici, there were important patrons of art and architecture in the family, especially Palla di Nofri Strozzi who acquired key palace and villa sites and commissioned works by Gentile da Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Ghiberti and Michelozzo; and Filippo di Matteo Strozzi, whose most famous commissions were his great palace occupying a whole block in the centre of Florence and his frescoed burial chapel in the church of S. Maria Novella. The Strozzi also provide the opportunity to explore whether opposing factions suffered from cultural, as well as political and financial, exclusion under the Medici regime. Moreover, the surviving archival records of the Carte Strozziane are unsurpassed, even considering the extraordinary wealth of family documentation in the Archivio di Stato in Florence.

The Strozzi family's prominent role in Florentine political life lasted for 150 years from the election of Ubertino di Geri Strozzi as prior in 1284 until 1434 when the Medici regime banished Palla di Nofri Strozzi, together with his kinsmen Smeraldo di Smeraldo Strozzi and Matteo di Simone Strozzi.[3] Between 1282 and 1399 the Strozzi held more posts in the city government than any other family.[4] Their political power was sustained by financial prosperity acquired mainly through international banking and the wool industry. When the new property tax was instituted in 1427 the Strozzi were still the wealthiest clan in Florence, owning "2.6 percent of the total net taxable capital of the city",[5] including Palla di Nofri Strozzi, who was by far the richest individual Florentine, declaring a taxable wealth of 162,925 florins.[6] The Medici regime's suppression of their

opponents from 1434 meant that the Strozzi lost their political power, and simultaneously entered a period of financial decline.[7]

Yet the sheer size of the clan, living in about forty-five households in 1427,[8] ensured their survival; while the retention of their social status is demonstrated by their continuing intermarriage with the Florentine oligarchy.[9] Another indicator of wealth, their investment in and use of the state dowry fund (*Monte delle doti*), shows that throughout the fifteenth century more Strozzi women (113) were endowed by the dowry fund, and more Strozzi men (78) married women assisted by the same fund, than in any other clan.[10] Moreover, several branches of the family were Medici partisans who managed to prosper and attain government posts until, in the last two decades of the century, the status of the whole clan was boosted by the extraordinarily successful financial career of Filippo di Matteo Strozzi whose fortune was worth more than 112,000 florins by 1483.[11]

It is clear, therefore, that extremes of wealth and poverty were achieved at different times within the fifteenth century, as indeed they coexisted within the family network.[12] Despite the tendency of historians to concentrate on rich and powerful individuals such as Palla di Nofri and Filippo di Matteo Strozzi, the poor members of the clan outnumbered their wealthier kin. Similarly, political destinies swung during the fifteenth century and, whereas Palla, Smeraldo and Matteo died in exile, and the majority either shunned or were excluded from the political limelight altogether, four key Strozzi – Francesco and Antonio di Benedetto, Messer Marcello di Strozza and Palla Novello – all prospered as Medici supporters. It is partly this range of fortune that makes the Strozzi clan a suitable case study in the quest for a more representative view of rural life and rural buildings. Although they should not be considered as a paradigmatic model, taken as a whole, the Strozzi may characterise broad trends in property holding and development. Above all, the Strozzi are a prime example of urban merchant-bankers who were major landowners in the surrounding countryside while retaining their city base.[13] The origins of their landholdings remain obscure, but widespread purchases are documented from the late thirteenth century until the Black Death in 1348, picking up again in the last quarter of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

1 • The Acquisition and Alienation of Country Property

Families sought to establish their identity in many ways: most obviously through the adoption of a family name and in the display of pictorial and representational signs such as heraldic devices, personal emblems or portraits, or alternatively through written records such as *ricordanze*, geneaologies and even the preservation of family archives. Another tactic operated firstly by way of territorial association, through the occupation and ownership of land or space,[1] and secondly, with the creation of a material identity consisting of inhabited buildings, their contents and all possessions. This material identity, once established, could be passed from generation to generation and became the patrimony. The preservation of a patrimony was considered universally desirable in late medieval and Renaissance society.[2] Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think of its form as fixed, for it was constantly being modified, either augmented and embellished or eroded and transformed. Since the management of property is a continuing process of negotiation, this chapter considers the manoeuvres and strategies that the Strozzi family adopted in their attempt to preserve their rural patrimony during the fifteenth century.

Inheritance[3]

Belonging to a well-established, landed family, the fifteenth-century Strozzi mostly inherited their country estates, and wherever possible they retained those ancestral lands. Of the twenty-two Strozzi villa owners listed in the first *catasto* of 1427,[4] fourteen were able to pass their principal country estate to their sons and grandsons, who declared the same villa in the last *catasto* of 1480[5] (Fig. 1 and Appendix B). The remaining eight examples demonstrate that the sale of country estates usually took place under duress. Two of these owners died childless, two were exiled, another family emigrated to Ferrara and another sold land to pay debts. The tenacious attitude to ancestral estates is illustrated by Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, whose husband, Matteo di Simone, had died in exile and who reluctantly sold her land piece by piece to support her banished sons. She managed to keep the inn at Quaracchi for nearly thirty years after her husband's death, only selling in 1462; and when her son Filippo finally returned, she still owned the farm at Pozzolatico, which had belonged to her father-in-law at the turn of the century.[6]

Thus, the great majority of Strozzi landowners tried to retain their real estate even in the face of misfortune, and a moderate degree of debt was not usually enough to bring about sale. On the contrary, poverty was often cited as a reason for keeping a country house. For example, Bernardo di Giovanni at Signano, Ubertino di Tommaso at Montughi, Carlo di Marco at Il Palagio and Marco di Goro at Fornello all claimed to live in the country because they were too poor to reside in town.[7] Only two members of

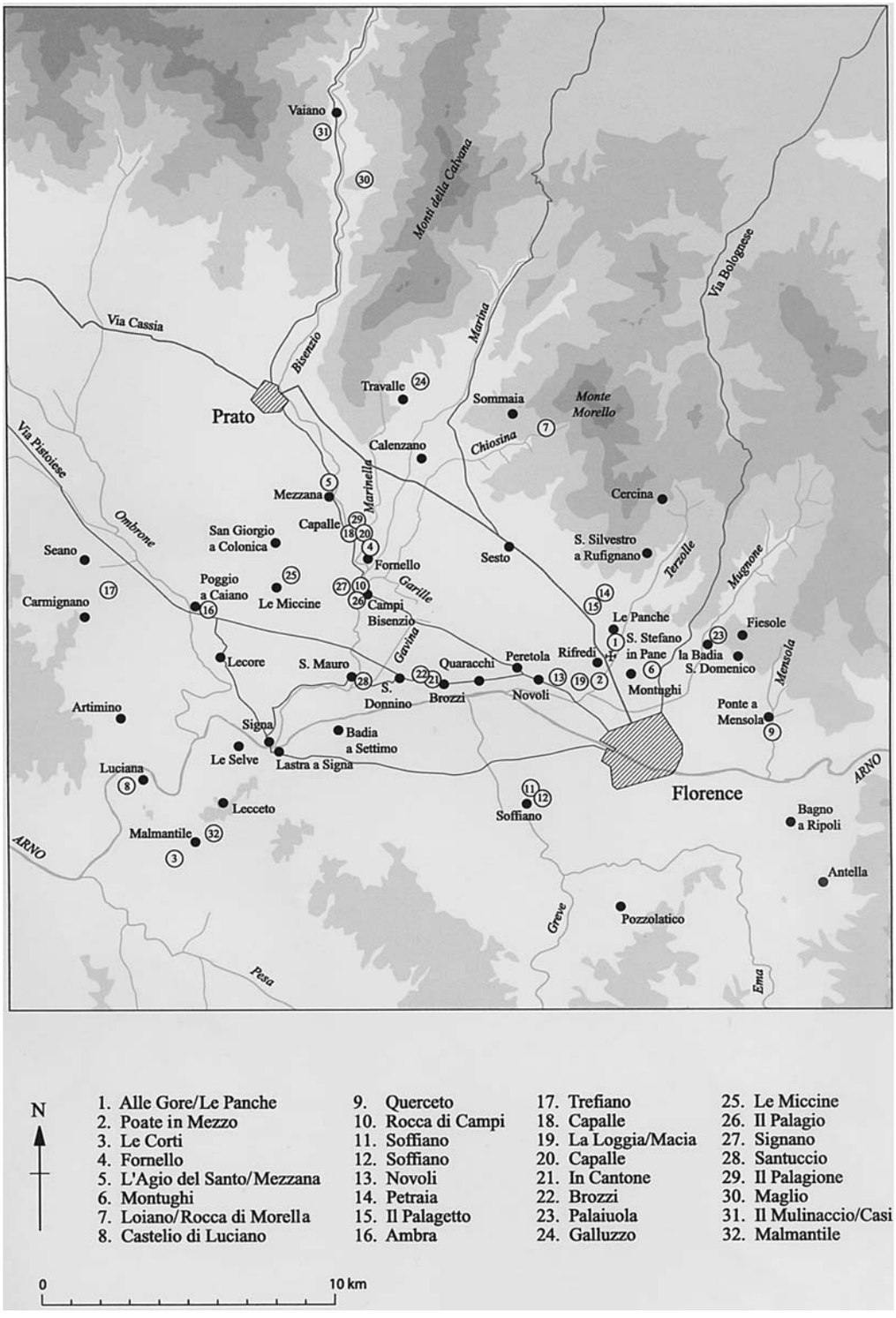
the clan seem to have sold their main country residence because of debts: Rinieri d'Antonio sold his villa at Brozzi to a richer Strozzi cousin, Francesco di Benedetto in 1441 and Lionardo di Stagio sold his villa at Casi to Francesco Sassetti in 1477.[8]

Nor did the Strozzi sell country lands in order to buy houses in town or to construct new palaces there. Later we shall see that, although Francesco Sassetti bought the site for a new town house, he did not sell country property so as to raise the capital to build in Florence. The wealthiest members of the Strozzi clan, Palla di Nofri and Filippo di Matteo, had sufficient funds to build a palace in the city while maintaining their country estates. Only Palla di Palla and his sons sold rural property in order to build their new town palace, the Strozzino, although significantly they chose to sell land and scattered farm houses while managing to keep their main country residence at Soffiano. In tax returns there are many complaints from Strozzi who could not afford a town house, yet only one of the family, Rinieri d'Antonio, took up the option to sell his villa in order to retain urban property.

It has been suggested that country property was a less highly esteemed component of the Florentine patrimony than urban real estate,[9] but the Strozzi evidence, demonstrating that there was a firm and widely held policy of preserving inherited villas,[10] shows that it is unwise to contrast attitudes to town and country property in black and white terms. The most pragmatic reason for holding on to ancestral lands is that inheritance is the only form of acquisition that requires no capital outlay. But above all, the retention of old property as well as the choice of new sites in Strozzi-dominated districts, demonstrates that the association of family identity with ancestral country estates remained powerful throughout the century. There was no rush to sell out and build new villas in new places.[11] Filippo di Matteo was unusual because he returned to Florence in 1470 with a great fortune in capital but no real estate and had the opportunity to begin on fresh ground as well as the means to build on a grand scale. Nevertheless, he is a paradigmatic example of the traditional clansman, investing modestly and conservatively in the old family areas, buying back the villa at Santuccio, which had previously belonged to his uncle and where his family had owned the patronage rights to an oratory since the 1370s, acquiring a house at Capalle that his kinsman had owned and was close to other cousins, and finally purchasing land at Le Miccine where several Strozzi grazed their livestock.

The notion of ancestral lands has been challenged by P. J. Jones, who suggested that such estates were not as ancient as genealogists had implied and that they were acquired in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries rather than in the eleventh or twelfth.[12] However, the desire of fifteenth-century landowners and diarists to represent properties aquired by their fathers and grandfathers as ancestral, is itself significant, and reveals their wish to appropriate the signs of dynastic stability and old wealth in an accelerated timescale. Strozzi dominance in the districts of Campi and Capalle was indeed relatively recent. Campi Bisenzio had been a feudal estate of the Mazzinghi family from the tenth century,[13] until the Strozzi began to buy into the area around 1295, increasing their holdings as the Mazzinghi fortunes sank during the fourteenth century.[14] The Strozzi fortress at Campi was not built until the 1370s by Carlo di Strozza, who enlisted funds for construction from other members of his clan.[15] Similarly, Capalle had long been a rural haunt of the archbishop of Florence, who owned a palace next to the ancient *pieve* there.[16] In this case too, the Strozzi probably only gained their foothold in the *castello* in the early fourteenth century,[17] but they were certainly a dominant presence by the end of the fourteenth century and retained three large estates at Capalle throughout the fifteenth century.[18]

Although most Strozzi inherited their estates directly from their father or grandfather, a few members of the clan benefitted from non-patrilineal or collateral inheritance. For example, Piero di Carlo's estate was entirely made up of bequests from various members of his family. He inherited his first town house from his sister Maddalena who died in 1430,[19] but nevertheless preferred to reside at the Villa of Querceto near Ponte a Mensola, which he initially rented from his naturalised Ferrarese cousins Niccolò, Lorenzo, Uberto



1. Map of the Florentine *contado* showing the location of Strozzi villas in the fifteenth century. The numbers correspond to the list of Strozzi villas in Appendix B (drawn by Steven J. Allen, adapted from IGM, 1:100,000, Folio 106, 'Firenze', 1956).

and Tito di Nanne Strozzi. It was later confiscated and came into his own possession in 1436 (Fig. 2).[20] In 1438, his brother Salamone died and a codicil in their father's will came into effect ensuring that his farms at Campi went to Piero rather than to Salamone's own children.[21] Finally, in 1449, a first cousin, Strozza di Smeraldo, bequeathed his town house and his estate at Loiano on Monte Morello to Piero. By then, he owned two of the grandest and best-situated of all Strozzi villas, Loiano and Querceto, and was so well provided for that he could afford to sell the scattered and less valuable lands at Campi.[22]

Given the great variety in fortune and career patterns observable across the many branches of the Strozzi clan, the consistency and tenacity with which they held on to old rural estates is remarkable. It is also clear from the rich documentation that the main landowner's house or *casa da signore* was the most persistently guarded single item in the portfolio of inherited and bequeathed country properties. Scattered lands and smaller houses were more frequently and easily sold because they were a less important part of the patrimony, whereas the *casa da signore*, perceived as a crucial part of the family's sense of identity, was retained even in adverse circumstances.

Shared Ownership and Division

The desire to maintain intact major dynastic estates came inevitably into conflict with the need to divide property among heirs.[23] Since the rule of primogeniture was not observed in central Italy,[24] a landowner could either leave his estate to be shared among his sons or heirs *per non diviso*, or he could separate his properties and distribute them among the individual heirs. Many country estates were maintained jointly by a widow and her sons until the widow's death or the sons' maturity,[25] and most of the Strozzi estates were shared between brothers at some time.[26] This shared arrangement seldom survived into the heirs' middle age, however, and even more rarely into the next generation. The selfish desire for sole possession, the urge towards economic independence, and the sheer inconvenience of housing several families under the same roof led to the eventual division of households. So although a shared household was an experience suffered by the majority, it rarely lasted a lifetime, and the overcrowding that occurred when brothers married and produced children often precipitated division. At this point, the property might either be sold outside the family, or an exchange might be negotiated within the family. This sort of exchange took place between Francesco and Zanobi di Benedetto Strozzi, who originally shared their villa at Brozzi. When Francesco was forty with a wife and seven children his brother Zanobi gave up his half of the *casa da signore* in return for land in the district. Zanobi Strozzi, the manuscript illuminator and painter, was then twenty-two and had already bought another villa for himself at Palaiuola below the Badia Fiesolana.[27]

Moreover, it was usually the principal family residences – in town or country – which were coveted by the whole family and which represented a large capital unit that could not be divided and apportioned as easily as pieces of land, shops or small houses. Thus, in 1430 and 1433, Francesco and Zanobi still shared the Brozzi villa, while all their other country lands and farmhouses had already been divided between them.[28] Similarly, in 1427, Messer Marcello and Rosso, the sons of Strozza Strozzi, submitted separate tax returns for all their property except for the Rocca di Campi and its lands, for which they wrote a third, joint tax return,[29] delaying the problem of division until the next generation.[30]

The differences and quarrels arising from shared property are documented in tax returns and *ricordanze*. The ambiguity of these arrangements left much room for manipulation and exploitation within the family and almost inevitably gave rise to complex notarised exchanges, if not full-scale litigation.[31] In one family, Giovanni, Tommaso and Begni, the sons of Jacopo d'Ubertino, all disagreed about the division of their patrimony and particularly their villa at Ponte di Mezzo, which was swapped from one brother to the other. It belonged to Giovanni in 1430 and was declared jointly by all three in 1442; but after a legal settlement in 1446, it was allotted to Tommaso, although Giovanni was still complaining in 1451 that he owned no country property and that