ROMAN HOUSE–RENAISSANCE PALACES

INVENTING ANTIQUITY IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

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ANTIQUITY AND IDENTITY

"Entering the palace by the main door, a high expansive peristyle courtyard is come upon, in which the square open area is surrounded by columns . . ."[1] This is a very brief extract from a lengthy description written in the early 1460s by Pope Pius II (1405–64) of the palace he had just had built in Pienza (Plate 1; Figures 1–3). The words used in the Latin text and the architectural forms described for this contemporary dwelling are, however, based firmly in the ancient world. It is this intimate relationship with Antiquity and its expression in the design and understanding of Italian town houses in the mid- to late fifteenth century that forms the subject of this study. Encapsulated here is the reflection of perceptions of the ancient world and the way in which ideas about Antiquity would, in turn, be used to enrich contemporary architecture.

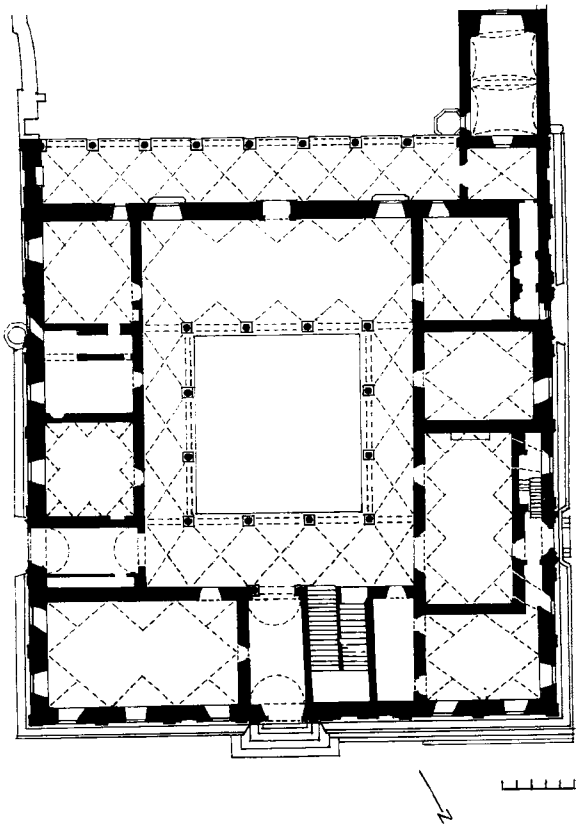
Pius was something of an architectural connoisseur and he had quite specific ideas about what he wanted in the buildings he commissioned, looking to northern European as well as to Italian and ancient architecture for models.[2] Probably after a visit in mid-February 1459, he decided to transform the little village of Corsignano in the Sienese *contado*, where he had been born while his parents were exiled from Siena itself, into a city named after himself – Pienza.[3] He wanted, as the eminent humanist Flavio Biondo (1392–1463) recognised in September 1462 after visiting Pienza, to ennoble his birthplace as the Roman emperors Septimius Severus and Marcus Aurelius had their home cities of Lepcis Magna and Rome.[4] The palace was one of the most prominent structures that Pius had built in Pienza. It was constructed between c.1459/60 and 1462 by Bernardo Rossellino.[5] Bernardo had worked not only in Florence, including on the construction and possibly in the design of the Palazzo Rucellai, but also in Rome in

1. Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – main entrance (photo, Xavier Salomon).

the 1450s for Pope Nicholas V and was thus conversant with both ancient and recent architecture.[6]

Pius' awareness of classical precedents and fascination with the ancient world is clear: he had trained as a humanist scholar before he entered Holy Orders, and in his memoirs – the *Commentarii* – he made frequent reference to ancient monuments and literature. Evidence of his great interest in the project of Pienza is shown by his extensive and detailed description.[7] His classicising attitude to the town was underlined by his use of classical terms to describe it, such as referring to the main piazza as the forum.[8] It seems that he also thought it was important to look at Vitruvius' *De architectura* (the only complete surviving classical architectural treatise) when he began work at Pienza. Thus Lodovico Gonzaga, marquis of Mantua, wrote to Alberti in December 1459 requesting his copy of this text to lend to Pius.[9]

It was not just Pius who saw a close connection between his palace and the ancient world. In one of a series of panegyric poems written c.1464, the poet and humanist Giovanni Antonio de' Pandoni (c.1405–c.1485), called il Porcelio, made a specific comparison between Palazzo Piccolomini and an ancient palace.



2. Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – plan of the ground floor (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).

He likened its splendour and richness to that of the "aedes" (house) of Trajan in Rome.[10] He may have been thinking of the 'Imperial palace' that in popular thought was located in the imperial fora.[11] There was certainly also a tradition that the 'Palatium Traiani et Hadriani' was built entirely of stone, as was Palazzo Piccolomini, and splendidly decorated.[12]

The example of Palazzo Piccolomini introduces many important issues: from the interaction between ancient and modern, the importance of patrons, architects, and humanist scholars in the creative enterprise of the construction of the fifteenth-century *all'antica* palace, to the part played by texts, buildings, and ideas in the desire to fashion a new architecture that was rooted in Antiquity. The focus of this study is on the mid-fifteenth to late fifteenth century because this is when a direct connection between architectural forms and design and an interest in the classical past can be clearly determined. Moreover, these explorations and relationships formed a fundamental part of the development of architectural ideas in the sixteenth century and later. That is not to say that this period was, by any means, only about a renewed relationship with classical Antiquity or a revival of Antique forms; but these were significant components in the realm of architecture.[13]

3. Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – courtyard (photo, Xavier Salomon).

In exploring this relationship, certain questions need to be asked: not only how it was expressed but also in what ways ancient architecture and architectural theory provided valid models for modern architecture. Accordingly, a range of sources must be examined: fifteenth-century architectural treatises and descriptions of buildings – both ancient and modern – as well as built architecture. At the same time some sense of the cultural context in which such dwellings were constructed is essential in order to understand how scholars, patrons, and architects came to possess the past in order to make it part of their present.[14] A fundamental term in this discussion is *all'antica*.[15] It translates as 'in ancient style'

or 'manner,' but it has a deeper meaning than just surface appearance or style. It represents an attempt to enter the ancient world and then absorb and re-formulate that knowledge for contemporary application. Thus, Filarete (c.1400/10–c.1469), in his architectural treatise of c.1460–64, sought to affirm the significance of the "antique style" (*maniera antica*, or, *modo antico*) by stating that it was "more beautiful" than "the modern custom," that is, the architecture of the more recent past.[16] Filarete's own name was, of course, an *all'antica* invention from Greek – lover of virtue – perhaps devised for him by the pro-Greek humanist Francesco Filelfo (1398–1481) at the Milanese court and adopted in preference to his real name – Antonio Averlino.[17]

RENAISSANCE

'Renaissance' – a complex term on which much has been written – is intimately linked to the expression *all'antica*.[18] It has come to stand for many different things and there is no absolute agreement amongst those who use it as to its precise definition. It reflects, though – at the very least – a shift in emphasis and interests in cultural and architectural enterprises, and at the core of its use here is the importance of humanist scholarship and approaches to the classical past. 'Renaissance' in its sense of re-birth is an important concept as this book considers both the design of palaces in styles that made constant references to ancient architecture and the contemporary re-viewing of domestic architecture through the filter of classical Antiquity. It also has contemporary validity since those writing about architecture in the fifteenth century often referred to ideas of rediscovery, renewal, and enlightenment.

As Cynthia Pyle has argued (in the quest to soften the hard, nineteenth-century Burkhardtian line between 'mediaeval' and 'Renaissance'), due weight must also be given to the radical changes in approach to the past made by scholars in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the gradual emergence and conscious adoption of *all'antica* interests during the fifteenth century.[19] Close links between humanist enterprises in relation to language, literature, and the writing of history and contemporary endeavours in the visual arts are reflected, for example, in the claim by the humanist philologist Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) in his *Elegantiae latina lingua* (written at Alfonso I of Aragon's court between 1434 and 1444) that "soon the language of Rome rather than the city, and with it all the other disciplines, will be restored."[20] Sarah Stever Gravelle, in a discussion of humanist approaches to Latin, set out how the "revival of antiquity was meant to profit the contemporary world, not to inhibit it. The models of antiquity were to be renovated, adapted, and certainly superseded if no longer relevant."[21]

As is now understood more clearly, the classical Roman world did not disappear in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. into the barren barbarism of a Dark Age to be miraculously reborn in thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Italy. A complicated process of continuity and change ensured that many threads united the two ends of this historical spectrum. Not least amongst these was Latin, the language of the Church and of international communication.[22] Mediaeval monastic libraries and scholarship ensured that classical texts survived and often continued to be read.[23] But it is also true that a new, critical philological approach to classical texts and the ancient world began to appear in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, and developed further during the course of the fourteenth century, particularly through the activities of Petrarch and his circle.[24] This became of central importance in the fifteenth century.

The overwhelming desire of many scholars was to understand Antiquity in all its complexity and to take its lessons for use in contemporary life. Some artists and architects, in turn, wanted to find the rules and laws that were reckoned to have governed the creation of highly admired artworks and buildings. In this enterprise, classical texts helped them to form opinions, judgements of, and approaches to classical art forms. In architecture and the other arts, as well as in general culture, Antiquity was to become an essential touchstone. As part of this cultural world a mental geography of famous ancient sites played a significant role, but also, increasingly in the fifteenth century, attempts were made to match these to the physical world and surviving classical remains. Such concentrated efforts in the fifteenth century, along with the ways that these came to be directly expressed in *all'antica* architectural forms, are the reason that the fifteenth, and not the fourteenth, century is the place to begin in relation to *all'antica* architecture.

Self-conscious examination of the nature of society and the roles of individuals was another fundamental aspect of the Renaissance.[25] If it was Petrarch who defined the millennium between the Roman Empire and the fourteenth century as a 'Dark Age,' then it was fifteenth-century historians and writers such as Flavio Biondo who were instrumental in forming the concept of the "medium aevum" (Middle Age) to characterise the millennium between the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the fourteenth/beginning of the fifteenth century when, Biondo argued, "good letters" re-emerged.[26] The drastic personal effects of the Black Death in 1347–48 and the political and military conflicts that affected Italy throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may have encouraged a desire to reaffirm roots, and, in part, a sense of origin and bonds to the classical past provided such security.

In Biondo's *Roma instaurata* of 1446–48, the first scholarly guide to the ancient remains of Rome, and his *Roma triumphans* of 1459, an encyclopaedic work on all aspects of Roman life, there is a clear sense of both transformation and

continuity between ancient and modern society.[27] Biondo ended *Roma instaurata* with the statement that the popes rather than emperors were "Perpetual Dictator" (an ancient military and imperial title) in the city, and that cardinals replaced the Roman Senate; a comparison Porcelio made for the Venetian Senate in 1453.[28] In *Roma triumphans* this point was more fully articulated, for Biondo said not only that Rome was now a Christian republic where the pope was consul and the cardinals were senators but that all ranks, from kings to counts and bishops, could be matched to ancient republican offices.[29] His was the first complete formulation of an idea that saw equivalence between ancient and modern roles.

This was a powerful idea that continued to appear in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; thus, for example, the Bolognese humanist Filippo Beroaldo (1453–1505) equated the ancient Senate with the College of Cardinals, and Paolo Cortesi (1465–1510) throughout his book on all aspects of a cardinal's life referred to cardinals as senators and to the modern papal Curia as the Senate.[30] By the early sixteenth century the pope was presented by writers, depending on the context, as having replaced either the head of the Roman Republic – a consul – or the leader of the Roman Empire – the emperor.[31]

The way in which ancient and modern institutions were seen as equivalent went further than comparisons of organisations and public positions. In his 1493 commentary to Suetonius' *Lives of the Roman Emperors*, for example, Beroaldo drew many parallels between contemporary Bolognese and ancient Roman practices.[32] This was not just a case of putting the ancient in modern dress, for Beroaldo also knew that Bologna had been a Roman colony.[33] As is clear from this and other texts where such links are made, a survival of customs rather than their conscious revival is implied.

ROME – OLD AND NEW

The sense of both continuity and change implicit in the connection made between the structures of ancient and modern society was echoed in the way in which Rome itself came to be presented. For many people the city of Rome symbolised both the glory of Antiquity and the Christian Church. Between 1506 and 1509 Francesco Albertini, chaplain to Cardinal Fazio Santorio, wrote a guidebook to Rome entitled *Opusculum de mirabilibus novae et veteris urbis Romae*.[34] He described Rome in three books, two on the marvels of the ancient city (*vetus urbs*) and one on the Christian churches, papal palaces, cardinals' palaces, and other amenities of the modern city (*nova urbs*).

The theme of a 'new Rome' was one that went back further than the sixteenth century and, geographically, beyond Rome itself. For the description

of a city as a "nova Roma" (new Rome) or a "secunda Roma" (second Rome) is one that can be found in laudatory and polemical literature from at least the eighth century onwards applied to a range of cities that claimed a leading political role in the post-Roman world.[35] With Rome's sacking by the Goths in A.D. 410 the glory of the ancient city, and therefore also the mantle of power, was reckoned to have passed to a successor or heir.

Politics, power, and the desire to claim hegemony or justify actions and aspirations, either local or regional, were the principal reasons for the prominence given to statements of ancient descent and pre-eminence. They were also notable elements in the strong 'nationalist' make-up of Italian city-states in the mediaeval and Renaissance periods. Cities claimed either precedence to ancient Rome as early cities of pre-Roman Italy, direct descent from Rome, or else to have been known in Antiquity as equal to Rome. This obsession with precedence and hierarchy was not confined to historical debates, but was matched by the importance accorded to the issue in public life, such as in the order of ambassadors at receptions.[36] The Bolognese Benedetto Morandi even used the antiquity of his city as proof that its ambassadors should come before those of Siena in papal audience.[37]

FOUNDING FATHERS

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was almost a mania to trace the origins of towns and cities, as the writings of panegyrists and local historians attest.[38] Often a specific founder from ancient literature, mythology, or history was identified, and this too was frequently set in relation to the primacy or otherwise of Rome. By the late thirteenth century Padua (a centre for interest in classical culture) was considered by its inhabitants to have been founded by Antenor, a Trojan prince, who, like Aeneas, left for Italy after the destruction of Troy.[39] The importance of this idea to the Paduans is shown by the 'discovery' in 1283 of a large skeleton, which was identified by the Paduan jurist and scholar Lovato Lovati as that of Antenor, and a tomb for it was erected in the city centre.[40] Padua in this way could put its foundation many generations before that of Rome, since Rome's legendary founder, Romulus, was a much later descendant of Aeneas, Antenor's contemporary.[41] Such a story about Antenor did not have a life simply as a fanciful exploit, for in 1483 the Venetian chronicler Marin Sanudo referred to it without any kind of qualification.[42]

Florence too was said to have had a prominent founder, although, this time, a historical figure rather than a mythical one. In the earliest known chronicle, of the thirteenth century, and continuing into the fifteenth century the city was said to have been established by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony and because of this was

called "parva Roma" or "piccola Roma" (little Rome).[43] At the same time Dante and other poets referred to Florence as the "daughter of Rome" and as having been built in the "image" of Rome, and this idea continued to be put forward in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[44] In Giovanni Villani's early fourteenth-century account this first city was said to have been destroyed five hundred years after the original foundation but retained its Roman links since it was refounded by the Romans, again on the model of Rome – this time as a Christian city.[45] The Florentine Baptistery was identified as a Roman Temple of Mars by Villani in the early fifteenth century and by many other writers into the sixteenth century.[46] Later in the sixteenth century the Etruscan, and therefore pre-Roman, roots of Florence became the leitmotiv of pro-Florentine politicians and historians.[47] This occurred as Florence extended its territorial and other claims and cited the realm of ancient Etruria as both model and justification, although aspects of this Etruscan identity may already have been emerging in the fifteenth century.

Milan's writers also had various fronts on which to claim their city's pre-eminence. One fourteenth-century account stated that Milan had been established by Janus.[48] He was the earliest king in Italy, before he was ranked as a god and gave his name to the Janiculum, which was later to become one of Rome's seven hills.[49] Thus, the connection made with Janus would place the foundation of Milan before that of Rome. Milan had in fact been one of the capitals of the later Roman Empire, but by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries some sought to backdate Milan's political importance and stated that the emperor Trajan or Nerva had built a palace in the city.[50] The attempt to project this role back in time was so that Milan could declare parity with early imperial Rome, which could be seen as more prestigious than having been a regional capital in a fragmenting and collapsing empire. It was a desire already revealed by the mediaeval use of the title of "secunda Roma" in Milan's long-standing rivalry with nearby Pavia.[51]

In Venice, however, both before and during the fifteenth century, views about the city's origins were much more tangled, and different strands gained or lost prominence at various times and among different groups.[52] Constituents of this history included that Venice was founded by Christians fleeing the mainland during attacks on Italy; that it was founded by Antenor and the Trojans before Rome and then had a Christian re-foundation; that it was closely tied to the 'new Rome' of Constantinople – Constantine's capital (later renamed Byzantium); that it was Roman and perhaps even directly founded by Rome. The result was a complicated and "flexible heritage" in which one aspect might be promoted over another when necessary.[53] By the mid- to late fifteenth century some claimed for Venice a 'rightful' position as "nova," "secunda," or "altera Roma." One justification was that the true heritage of Rome had been retained in Venice because it had never been sacked by the barbarians, unlike Rome itself.[54] In 1468