



ROMAN HOUSE—
RENAISSANCE PALACES

INVENTING ANTIQUITY
IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

Georgia Clarke

Courtauld Institute of Art, London

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Note on the Drawings</i>	xix
<i>Note on the Transcription of Texts</i>	xxi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii
<i>Preface</i>	xxv
1 ANTIQUITY AND IDENTITY	I
2 VARIETY, MAGNIFICENCE, AND IMITATION	41
3 THE ANCIENT HOUSE – TEXTS	85
4 DISCOVERING AND RECORDING ANCIENT HOUSES	126
5 CREATING <i>ALL'ANTICA</i> PALACES	162
CONCLUSION: EMULATION AND A NEW ARCHITECTURE	274
<i>Appendix: Vitruvius' De architectura in Italy in the Fifteenth Century</i>	283
<i>Notes</i>	291
<i>Bibliography</i>	343
<i>Index</i>	373



FIGURES

1	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – main entrance (photo, Xavier Salomon).	<i>page 2</i>
2	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – plan of the ground floor (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	3
3	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – courtyard (photo, Xavier Salomon).	4
4	Porta dell’Arsenale, Venice.	10
5	Arch of the Sergii, Pula (photo, Ralph Lieberman).	11
6	Porta dell’Arsenale, Venice – pedestals with Christian and classical dates.	12
7	Casa dei Crescenzi, Rome – inscription over entrance.	13
8	Loggia del Consiglio, Verona.	16
9	Como Cathedral façade – Pliny statues (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	17
10	Arch of the Gavii, Verona.	18
11	Arch of the Gavii, Verona – inscription on right-hand pier.	19
12	Palazzo Orsini, Nola (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	24
13	Medal of Cardinal Pietro Barbo – reverse showing the Palazzo di San Marco, Rome, 1455.	26
14	Palazzo di San Marco, Rome.	27
15	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – piazza façade.	30
16	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – part of podium frieze (now removed from the façade and inside the palace).	30
17	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – podium frieze panel: <i>rostra</i> .	31

18	Urbino – plan of Palazzo Ducale and piazza (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	32
19	Plan of ‘the Roman house’ (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	35
20	Palazzo Carafa, Naples.	37
21	Palazzo Carafa, Naples – view of courtyard, column with inscription, and entrance passage.	38
22	Palazzo Carafa, Naples – part of inscription under column.	39
23	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence.	40
24	Palazzo Medici, Florence – courtyard (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	44
25	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence.	45
26	Cancelleria palace, Rome.	46
27	Palazzo Gondi, Florence – courtyard (photo, Howard Burns, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	47
28	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 14v – ancient capitals.	48
29	Palazzo Gondi, Florence.	49
30	Palazzo Medici, Florence.	50
31	Palazzo dello Strozzi, Florence.	51
32	Palazzo Carafa, Naples – façade corner, detail of upper storey.	52
33	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – façade, detail of lower storey.	53
34	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence – façade, detail of stonework.	54
35	Palazzo Sanseverino (now the Gesù), Naples.	55
36	Cancelleria palace, Rome – <i>piano nobile</i> windows.	56
37	Porta Borsàri, Verona – detail.	56
38	Palazzo Vitelleschi, Tarquinia (Corneto).	60
39	Cà Dario, Venice – inscription.	62
40	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – capitals on second storey of façade.	74
41	Codex Escorialensis, 28 II 12, 25r – Mausoleum of Hadrian, Rome: detail of podium.	75
42	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence – cornice.	76
43	Forum of Nerva, Rome – detail of entablature.	76
44	Castelnuovo, Naples – entrance arch.	77
45	Castelnuovo, Naples – entrance arch, detail of lower storey.	78
46	Arch of Trajan, Benevento – city side (photo, Scala).	79
47	Gate of Frederick II, Capua – remains of tower (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	80
48	Gate of Frederick II, Capua – reconstruction by Geoffrey Clarke (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	81
49	Gate of Frederick II, Capua – detail of stonework (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	83

50	Marcanova Codex, Biblioteca Estense, Modena, Cod. Lat. 992, 27r – “Palacium Cesaris” (photo, Geoffrey Newman, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	99
51	Fra Giocondo, ed., <i>M. Vitruvius per Iocundum solito castigatior factus . . .</i> (Venice, 1511), 64v – <i>domus</i> plan.	102
52	Francesco di Giorgio, UA 322v – plan of building near Cassino (Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali).	110
53	Reconstruction of Tuscan, Tetrastyle, and Corinthian <i>cavaedia</i> , based on Vitruvius (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	112
54	Reconstruction of possible forms of the Displuviate <i>cavaedium</i> , based on Vitruvius (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	115
55	Fra Giocondo, ed., <i>M. Vitruvius per Iocundum solito castigatior factus . . .</i> (Venice, 1511), 61v – Displuviate <i>cavaedium</i> .	115
56	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 24r – Greek house: plan and elevation of the courtyard: “Casa sechondo el modo grecho,” “Logie sechondo el modo grecho” (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	120
57	Gonzaga palace, Revere – courtyard (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	121
58	Palazzo Scala (now Gherardesca), Florence – courtyard (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	122
59	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – courtyard corner.	123
60	UA 163r – “palazo maiore” and “palazo di Nerone” (Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali).	129
61	UA 165v – unnamed building and “palazo di Chatelina” (Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali).	130
62	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 87r – reconstructed plan of House of Catiline, Rome: “Chasa di Chatellina per maggior parte ruinata” (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	130
63	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 26r – “in Boario,” so-called Basilica Aemilia, Rome.	131
64	Villa Chigi, Le Volte – detail of south façade.	133
65	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 8r – plan of “studio di Marcho Varone,” near Cassino.	134
66	Le Mura di S. Stefano, Anguillara Sabazia (photo, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome).	135
67	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – south-facing, garden façade.	138

68	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 30r – Septizonium, Rome: elevation and plan.	139
69	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 83v – plan of ruins on the Pincio, Rome: “hedifitio in Roma in nele vingnie di monte Pinci” (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	142
70	Francesco di Giorgio, UA 334v – “parte di palazo maggiore” (Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali).	144
71	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 82v – reconstructive plan of the Palatine palace, Rome: “palatio Maggiore in Roma” (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	145
72	Palatine palace, Rome – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	146
73	Francesco di Giorgio, UA 320r (Gabinetto disegni e stampe, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. By permission of the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali).	147
74	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 17v – house plans (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	148
75	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 29v – reconstructed plan of the Septizonium, Rome: “chome istava la pianta i[n]tera di sete i[n] soli.”	149
76	Giuliano da Sangallo, Biblioteca Comunale, Siena, S. IV. 8, 10r – plan based on that of the Septizonium, Rome.	149
77	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	150
78	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence – elevation and section (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	150
79	Palazzo Strozzi, Florence – courtyard.	151
80	Forum of Augustus rear wall (with Temple of Mars Ultor behind), Rome.	152
81	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 39r detail – Large Baths, Hadrian’s Villa, Tivoli: part of stucco vault.	155
82	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 39v – 1488 plan for palace for the king of Naples.	157
83	Villa Medici, Poggio a Caiano.	158
84	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	159
85	Le Mura di S. Stefano, Anguillara Sabazia – plans of ground floor and upper storey (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	160
86	Filarete, architectural treatise, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, Cod. VIII. 2 (2796), 146r – façade of the architect’s house (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	163

87	Palazzo Medici, Florence – plan of the ground floor (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	165
88	Palazzo della Signoria, Florence.	167
89	Palazzo Spini, Florence.	168
90	Castle of Frederick II, Prato – detail of stonework on tower.	169
91	Palazzo della Signoria, Florence – window.	170
92	Palazzo Medici, Florence – window on the <i>piano nobile</i> .	171
93	Palazzo Bardi-Busini, Florence – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	174
94	Palazzo Medici, Florence – plan of <i>piano nobile</i> (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	175
95	Palazzo Medici, Florence – courtyard capital.	177
96	Gonzaga palace, Revere (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	181
97	Cancelleria palace, Rome – corner of main façade.	182
98	Cancelleria palace, Rome – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	183
99	Palazzo della Rovere, Savona (photo, John Shearman, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	185
100	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 4v – detail of so-called Crypta Balbi, Rome.	186
101	Sebastiano Serlio, <i>Regole generali di architettura . . .</i> (Venice, 1537), 18v – forms of rustication.	187
102	Palazzo dello Strozzi, Florence – façade, detail of stonework.	188
103	Amphitheatre, Verona – detail of stonework.	189
104	Palazzo Gondi, Florence – windows.	190
105	Francesco di Giorgio, Codex Saluzziano 148, 20v – palace façades (Biblioteca Reale, Turin).	191
106	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – detail of the ground floor.	192
107	Cancelleria palace, Rome – façade, detail of stonework.	194
108	Temple of Mars Ultor, Rome – detail of stonework.	195
109	Round temple by the Tiber – detail of stonework.	195
110	Palazzo Minerbetti, Florence – detail of stonework.	196
111	Palazzo Penna, Naples.	198
112	Palazzo Penna, Naples – detail.	199
113	Gate of Frederick II, Capua – term (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	200
114	Palazzo Orsini, Nola – moulding along lower storey.	201
115	Palazzo Orsini, Nola – entrance portal (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	202
116	Palazzo Lapi, Florence – detail of first-floor window.	204
117	Colosseum, Rome – upper two storeys.	205

118	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – capital on ground floor of façade.	206
119	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – <i>piano nobile</i> window.	209
120	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – upper storey windows.	210
121	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – outer corner of main piazza façade.	212
122	Palazzo Castellesi (now Giraud-Torlonia), Rome.	213
123	Codex Coner, 46r – elevations of sections of the Forum of Augustus rear wall and the Cancelleria palace, Rome (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane’s Museum, London).	214
124	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona – detail of façade.	216
125	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona – inscription on right- and left-hand sides of entrance portal.	217
126	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona – courtyard capital with Eliseo Raimondi’s arms.	218
127	Palazzetto Turci, Rome.	219
128	Simple <i>sgraffito</i> imitation stonework.	221
129	Palace of Domenico della Rovere, Rome – detail of east façade.	222
130	Casa Fontana-Silvestri, Milan, reconstruction from F. Frigerio, <i>Gli affreschi di Bramante a Milano</i> (Bergamo, 1902).	223
131	Palazzo Carminali-Bottigella, Pavia – detail of second storey.	225
132	Casa Manilio, Rome – detail of sculpture on façade.	226
133	Casa Manilio, Rome.	228
134	Casa Manilio, Rome – detail of inscription.	229
135	Casa Manilio, Rome – Greek inscription over a door.	230
136	House of Mantegna, Mantua.	232
137	House of Mantegna, Mantua – inscription.	233
138	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – part of courtyard inscription.	234
139	St Peter’s, Rome – Filarete’s bronze doors: Nero in building set with reliefs, including portrait roundel.	236
140	Giuliano da Sangallo, Codex Barberini 4424, 31v – detail of elevation of interior of Basilica of Junius Bassus/S. Andrea Catabarbara Patricia, Rome.	237
141	Stone portrait roundel of Emperor Galba (Musei civici, Milan).	237
142	Palazzo Dal Verme, Milan – courtyard.	238
143	Palazzo Vimercati, Milan – entrance portal.	239
144	Palazzo Vimercati, Milan – entrance portal detail.	239
145	Palazzo Rucellai, Florence – entrance portal.	243
146	Palazzo Carafa, Naples – entrance portal.	244
147	Palazzo Sanseverino, Naples – entrance portal.	245
148	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – entrance portal.	246

149	Codex Escorialensis, 28 II 12, 12r – part of pillar decorated with relief of ancient weapons.	248
150	Palazzo Scorziatis, Naples – entrance portal.	248
151	Palazzo Scorziatis, Naples – entrance portal, detail.	249
152	Porta Capuana, Naples – detail.	249
153	Palazzo Vitelleschi, Tarquinia (Corneto) – entrance portal.	250
154	Gonzaga palace, Revere – entrance portal (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	251
155	Arch of Augustus, Rimini.	252
156	Banco Mediceo, Milan – entrance portal (now in Castello Sforzesco, Milan).	253
157	Palazzo Mozzanica, Lodi.	254
158	Palazzo Mozzanica, Lodi – entrance portal.	255
159	Palazzo Mozzanica, Milan – entrance portal (now in the courtyard of Palazzo Trivulzio, piazza S. Alessandro 6).	256
160	Palazzo di San Marco, Rome – vault of entrance passage from piazza Venezia.	258
161	Palazzo della Rovere, Savona – entrance vault (photo, John Shearman, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	259
162	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – entrance passage.	260
163	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – inside of courtyard corner.	261
164	Cesare Cesariano, <i>Di Lucio Vitruvio Pollione de architectura . . .</i> (Como, 1521), 97v – Testudinate <i>cavaedium</i> .	262
165	Palace of Bergonzio Botta (now Palazzo Pozzobonelli, via Olmetti 3), Milan – courtyard.	263
166	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona – courtyard loggia.	264
167	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona – courtyard loggia: capital.	265
168	Gonzaga palace, Revere – courtyard loggias (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	266
169	Palazzo di San Marco, Rome – courtyard.	267
170	Palazzo Scala (now Gherardesca), Florence – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	268
171	Palazzo Scala (now Gherardesca), Florence – courtyard loggia (photo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence).	269
172	Codex Coner, 8v – Palazzo Castellesi, Rome: plan (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, by courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, London).	270
173	Palazzo Castellesi (now Giraud-Torlonia), Rome – courtyard (photo, Cammy Brothers).	271

174	House of Mantegna, Mantua – plan (drawn by Geoffrey Clarke).	272
175	House of Mantegna, Mantua – courtyard (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	273
176	Palazzo Cuomo, Naples.	278
177	Palazzo Caprini (also known as House of Raphael), Rome, print by Antoine Lafréry (photo, Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London).	281
178	Fra Giocondo, ed., <i>M. Vitruvius per Iocundum solito castigatior factus . . .</i> (Venice, 1511), 63r – modest house plan.	282

COLOUR PLATES

1	Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza (photo, Scala).	<i>page</i> 385
2	Cancelleria palace, Rome – courtyard.	386
3	S. Miniato, Florence – altar tabernacle (photo, Scala).	387
4	Palace of Bergonzio Botta (now Palazzo Pozzobonelli, via Olmetti 3), Milan – courtyard detail.	388
5	Cà Dario, Venice.	388
6	S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna – ‘Palatium’ mosaic.	389
7	Palazzo Raimondi, Cremona.	390
8	Palazzo di San Marco, Rome – entrance portal on via del Plebiscito.	391
9	Palazzo Ducale, Urbino – Torricini façade.	392

ANTIQUITY AND IDENTITY

❧“E ntering 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

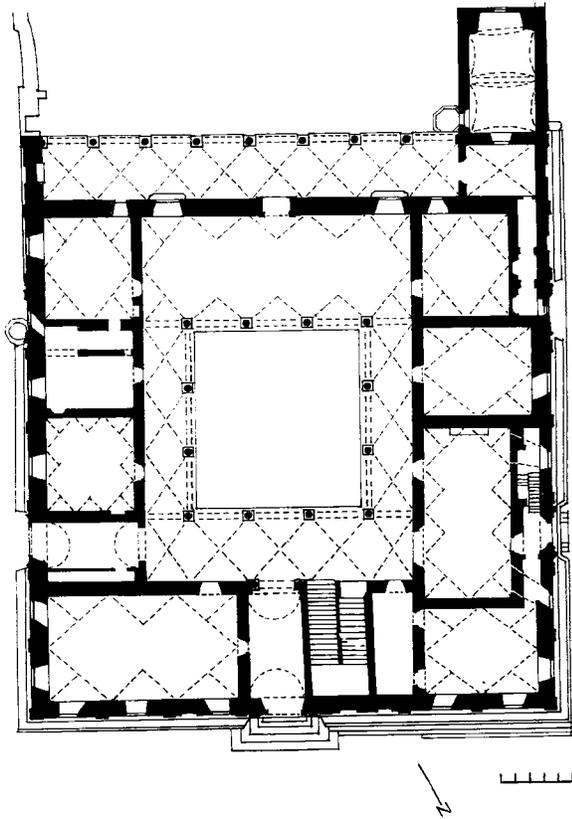
1. Palazzo Piccolomini, Pienza – main entrance (photo, Xavier Salomon).



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 latinae 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