

# Language and Images of Renaissance Italy

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CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

1995

## 8. The Humanist Villa Revisited

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THE accepted view of the early Renaissance villa—that is the one embraced by Georgina Masson, André Chastel, Ludwig Heydenreich and James Ackerman, and to a lesser extent by David Coffin and Cristoph Frommel—is an idealized one, ‘a fantasy impervious to reality’, as Ackerman has described it in his recent book on *The Villa*.<sup>1</sup> The fantasy has an impeccable ancient pedigree, for it can be traced back to Greece of the eighth century BC in the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, and it flourished in the Rome of Caesar and Augustus with the agricultural treatises of Varro and Columella, not to mention the pastoral verse of Horace and Vergil.

The fantasy was revived in written form again after 1300 in the letters of Petrarch describing his life at Vacluse and Arquà, and in a more pragmatic form in the agricultural treatise of the Bolognese Pietro de' Crescenzi.<sup>2</sup> Eulogistic descriptions of the Florentine countryside and its villas also begin at this time with Villani's account of the *contado*,<sup>3</sup> and Boccaccio's setting for the *Decameron*. The pastoral ideal and ideology was not only expressed in the form of odes, epistles, treatises, and stories; for it had also been given concrete form in the great landed estates and villas of the Roman Empire,

<sup>1</sup> G. Masson, *Italian Villas and Palaces* (London, 1966), 9, 11, 176–9; A. Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique* (Paris, 1961), 148–51; L. Heydenreich, ‘La villa: genesi e sviluppi fino al Palladio’, *Bollettino del Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura ‘Andrea Palladio’*, 9 (1969), 11–22; J. S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses* (London, 1990), 9–34, 63–87; D. Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* (Princeton, 1979); C. Frommel, *Die Farnesina und Peruzzis Architektonisches Frühwerk* (Berlin, 1961), 85–119.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Petrarch's letters, *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, 4 vols. (Florence, 1933–42), Bks. vi. 3; viii. 3; xi. 12; xii. 8; xiii. 8; xvi. 6; xvii. 5; tr. M. Bishop, with a further selection from the *Epistolae variae* and the *Epistolae rerum senilium* (Bloomington, Ill., 1966); P. de' Crescenzi, *Trattato della Agricoltura*, 3 vols. (Milan, 1805).

<sup>3</sup> G. Villani, *Cronica*, ed. G. Aquilecchia (Turin, 1979), xi. 94; 212–13.

which were themselves celebrated in the letters of Pliny the Younger and in the murals of Pompeii and Bosco Reale, for example.

This rural vision has proved to be perennially seductive for the urban middle class and aristocracy, as it also continues to attract generations of scholars. The astonishing consistency and longevity of the idea is irresistible for Ackerman, who traces the continuous strand through history from the Villa of the Mysteries to Fallingwater.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the perceived unity of theory and practice has proved to be intellectually compelling, as Heydenreich found in 1969:

Between 1450 and 1500 there emerged in Italy, outside the towns, a new type of secular architecture: the villa as country house . . . in this process of development the literary conception of the country house as retreat or *locus amoenus* is unified with the practical function of the building . . . The confluence of the literary and architectural impulses render the villa the most characteristic example of a distinctly humanist architecture, where the aesthetic components play an equivalent role to the ethical ones.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the writers concerned with Renaissance villas are more interested in the sixteenth century when this confluence of literature and architecture had indeed taken place; but in their search for the first signs of this phenomenon, they seize upon the five Medici villas near Florence and pronounce the emergence of a new building type. The new type may be said to have fully emerged with Lorenzo de' Medici's villa of Poggio a Caiano, begun by 1485 (Fig. 8.1);<sup>6</sup> but before this, the development of a new, classicizing rural building type was slow and erratic. Above all, in investigating the emergence of the *all'antica* villa, the method of superimposing literary conceptions onto the buildings has not proved helpful for an understanding of architectural form and development, and our view of the Florentine villa in the fifteenth century has barely changed since Patzak's *Palast und Villa in Toscana* of 1908–13.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ackerman, *The Villa*.

<sup>5</sup> I have translated from Heydenreich, 'La villa', 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> P. Foster, *A Study of Lorenzo de' Medici's Villa at Poggio a Caiano*, 2 vols. (New York, 1978); F. W. Kent, 'Lorenzo de' Medici's Acquisition of Poggio a Caiano in 1474; and an Early Reference to his Architectural Expertise', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 42 (1979), 250–7.

<sup>7</sup> B. Patzak, *Die Renaissance und Barockvilla in Italien*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1908–13), i–ii, *Palast und Villa in Toscana*. The most helpful recent studies with further bibliography are M. Gori-Sassoli, 'Michelozzo e l'architettura di villa nel primo rinascimento', *Storia dell'Arte*, 23 (1975), 5–51; G. Gobbi, *La villa Fiorentina: Elementi storici*

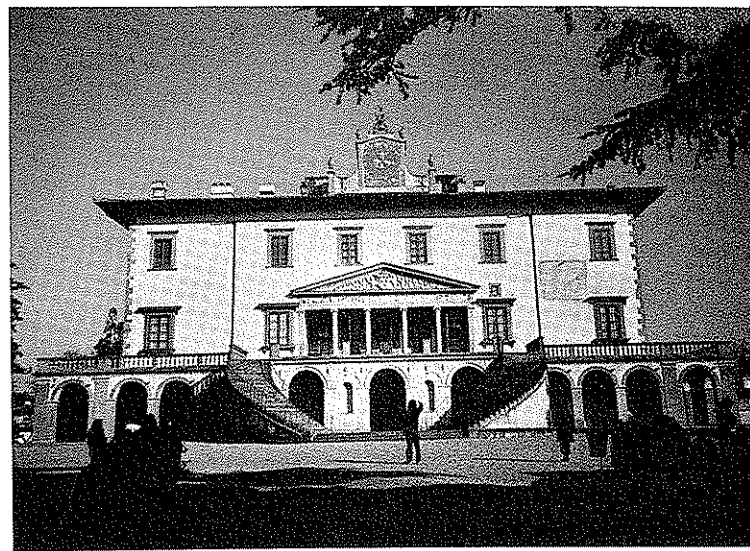


FIG. 8.1 Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, from 1485

The architectural form of the Medici villa of Careggi should be a warning to scholars who imagine that the humanist interests of those who met at the villa might be directly expressed in the architecture (Fig. 8.2). Unlike their inherited estates in the Mugello, Careggi was a new acquisition for the Medici, bought by Cosimo's father Giovanni di Bicci in 1417. The purchase document shows that it was already an impressive complex: a *palatium* with a courtyard, loggia, well, and cellars, with its own chapel, stables, dovecote, tower, and walled garden, as well as two houses for tenant farmers.<sup>8</sup> Patzak concluded that the main reconstruction campaign took place after Cosimo's return from exile (c.1435) and before 1440, since a document records that about 1,300 florins had been spent on building at Careggi up until 1440. Building and decoration were probably complete by 1459 when Galeazzo Maria Sforza visited the villa and praised its beauty in a letter to his father.<sup>9</sup>

*e critici per una lettura* (Florence, 1980); and L. Giordano, '“Dirissima Tellus”. Ville quattrocentesche tra Po e Ticino', *Bollettino della Società Pavese di Storia Patria*, 40 (1988), 145–295.

<sup>8</sup> M. Ferrara and F. Quinterio, *Michelozzo di Bartolomeo* (Florence, 1984), 251–2.

<sup>9</sup> Patzak, *Palast und Villa*, 75–7, 166 n. 89.



FIG. 8.2 Medici villa at Careggi, east façade

The most important *all'antica* features of the house are the twin loggias with composite capitals which face each other across the courtyard. However, these loggias are linked on the east side by very different, apparently outmoded, octagonal piers bearing water-leaf capitals (Fig. 8.3). The curving east wall, whose irregular shape was determined by the presence of the public road that ran past the house, almost certainly belongs to the old house bought in 1417; and the octagonal piers supporting a corridor built along the inside of that wall may survive from the old house, if they are not part of an early Medici building campaign.<sup>10</sup> According to Vasari, it was

<sup>10</sup> Saalman has argued that the deliberate juxtaposition of contrasting forms, one apparently old-fashioned or gothic, the other modern or classicizing, was a characteristic formula of Michelozzo's, in 'The Palazzo Comunale in Montepulciano: An Unknown Work by Michelozzo', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 28 (1965), 9. Patzak, *Palast und Villa*, 78, believed that the octagonal piers with water-leaf capitals were part of the medieval house. The problem is not easily solved since octagonal piers with water-leaf capitals were popular for about fifty years from the 1390s until the 1440s; see A. Rensi, 'L'Ospedale di San Matteo a Firenze: Un cantiere della fine del trecento', *Rivista d'Arte*, 39 (1987), 84, 112–15. Dated examples can be found in the portico of the Hospital of San Matteo, documented as between 1391 and early 1392, *ibid.* 89; the Palazzo Da Uzzano, c.1411–21, in B. Preyer, 'The "chasa ovvero palagio" of Alberto di Zanobi: A Florentine Palace of about 1400 and its Later Remodelling', *Art Bulletin*,



FIG. 8.3 Medici villa at Careggi, courtyard

65 (1983), 387 n. 4; the Spedale of S. Antonio at Lastra a Signa, 1416–21, in G. Tampone (ed.), *Studi e ricerche sul nucleo antico di Lastra a Signa* (Florence, 1980), 116–32.

Michelozzo who designed the renovations at Careggi, and all subsequent scholars have attributed to him the regularization of the courtyard with two identical porticoes, and the barrel-vaulted passages giving free access between the garden and the courtyard.<sup>11</sup>

The pragmatic solution adopted by combining castellated and classicizing forms is sometimes contrasted with the Medici palace being built *ex novo* in the late 1440s and 1450s, just when the courtyard at Careggi may have been rebuilt. Were old-fashioned or piecemeal solutions acceptable in the country because they were less publicly visible, whereas a town palace was a better investment in status? We should remember that Careggi was already an imposing structure when the Medici bought it, and owners were loathe to demolish when they could renovate and convert older structures. After all, the Medici palace in town was built on the site of relatively insignificant buildings while the old family house (the *casa vecchia*) was left intact for the heirs of Cosimo's brother two doors up the road.<sup>12</sup>

The Medici palace in town was not itself a new building type. Brenda Preyer has shown how the three-storeyed rectangular block with ground-floor rustication and a central courtyard with loggias, was already established by 1421 when the Palazzo Da Uzzano was completed.<sup>13</sup> At the Palazzo Medici the type was regularized and refined in an *all'antica* language.<sup>14</sup> As the Palazzo Medici retains the essential structural features of the Florentine palace type, so, it could be argued, Careggi conforms to the characteristic fortified type of country house. Surely one of the main reasons that an *all'antica* villa type was slow to evolve, was the sheer difficulty of accommodating classical elements within the castellated framework. Urban builders

<sup>11</sup> G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi (Florence, 1906, repr. 1981), ii. 442.

<sup>12</sup> The two largest buildings demolished to make way for the Palazzo Medici were one house profitably let for 24 florins a year and the Albergo di S. Caterina, along with nineteen or twenty smaller dwellings; see I. Hyman, *Fifteenth Century Florentine Studies: The Palazzo Medici; and a Ledger for the Church of San Lorenzo*, Ph.D. thesis (New York, 1968), 57–89. See also D. Carl, 'La Casa Vecchia dei Medici e il suo giardino', in G. Cherubini and G. Fanelli (eds.), *Il Palazzo Medici Riccardi di Firenze* (Florence, 1990), 38–43.

<sup>13</sup> W. Bombe, *Nachlass-Inventare des Angelo da Uzzano und des Lodovico di Gino Capponi* (Leipzig, 1928, repr. Hildesheim, 1972); Preyer, 'The "chasa ovvero palagio"', 387 n. 94.

<sup>14</sup> For a recent analysis of the design of Palazzo Medici in relation to the traditional Florentine palace type, see B. Preyer, 'L'architettura del palazzo mediceo' in Cherubini and Fanelli (eds.), *Il Palazzo Medici Riccardi*, 58–65.

could retain the powerful and defensive image they desired by using massive rustication and prominent cornices, which were classically reinterpreted but fundamentally a continuation of fourteenth-century developments; whereas a far more radical transformation had to take place in the country.

The other reasons for the slow adoption of classical forms in the country are well known. There was a lack of models, since so little remained of ancient villas above ground and none had been excavated.<sup>15</sup> Vitruvius's description of the Roman house was terse and ambiguous, and there was no illustrated edition before Fra Giocondo's of 1511.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it is likely that during the early Renaissance a pastoral landscape was more important than a specific architectural setting. A bucolic environment had been the essential feature in antiquity and it was not until the late republic and early Empire that a specific, grand architectural style became associated with the rural ideal.<sup>17</sup> As in antiquity, the Renaissance was also slow to express the pastoral ideal in an architectural form.

On the other hand, the positive desire to maintain an idiom that was associated with ancestral power, with the longevity of the lineage and its old rural origins, encouraged landowners to retain castellated forms. The Medici villas of Trebbio, Cafaggiolo and Careggi all belong to the type of castellated villa favoured throughout the fourteenth century and still popular for most of the fifteenth. The term 'castellated villa' may seem to be a misnomer, for castles and villas are usually seen in contradistinction as two quite separate architectural types, the medieval form preceding the Renaissance form. However, the stylistic transition was not straightforward, for castellated features not only survived, often in combination with classical features, but they were even deliberately revived in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>18</sup> Like the chivalric values with which they were associated, towers and castellation persisted.

<sup>15</sup> J. S. Ackerman, 'Sources of the Renaissance Villa' in id., *The Villa*, 29–30, 63. The villa of Settefinestre is the only example that has come to light so far of an ancient villa, large parts of whose walls survived, and were recorded in a late 15th-c. drawing; see P. Ruschi, 'La villa romana di Settefinestre in un disegno del XV secolo', *Prospettiva*, 22 (1980), 72–5.

<sup>16</sup> See L. Pellicchia, 'Architects Read Vitruvius: Renaissance Interpretations of the Atrium of the Ancient House', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 51 (1992), 377–416.

<sup>17</sup> Ackerman, *The Villa*, 12, 20, 39, 41, 51–7, 60–1.

<sup>18</sup> Important examples are the Villa Salviati, see L. Zangheri, *Ville della Provincia di Firenze. La città* (Milan, 1989), 296–8; the Medici Villa of Petraia, see ibid. 78–95,

Furthermore, it is clear from fifteenth-century documents and literature that the two architectural forms functioned in the same way. Fortified structures were estate centres, family residences and delightful rural retreats, just as unfortified houses were. In addition there were many practical reasons for the preference for fortification. A defensive structure could still be useful, as a deterrent, as well as in case of attack by roving brigands, mercenary armies, or conspiring political rivals.<sup>19</sup> Towers had important agricultural uses and, even in the landowner's house, they functioned as granaries and pigeon lofts, damp-proof and thief-proof.<sup>20</sup>

Careggi can also very usefully illustrate the pitfalls encountered by architectural historians in their determination to categorize country houses and define distinct types. Frommel suggested four categories: the villa castle, the villa palace, the villa farm and the suburban villa.<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, Careggi might be said to belong to all four types since it is castellated, suburban, had productive farms, and was described by contemporaries as a *palagio*. It is a misconception that functions can necessarily be separated or restricted. The two most famous quotations about Careggi illustrate two of its very different functions: Vespasiano da Bisticci describes Cosimo rising on a February morning to spend two hours pruning in his vineyard before going in to read St Gregory's *Moralia*;<sup>22</sup> and Cosimo supposedly wrote to Ficino, 'yesterday I came to the villa of Careggi, not to cultivate my fields, but my soul. Come to us, Marsilio, as soon as possible. Bring with you our Plato's *De summo bono*.'<sup>23</sup> In both cases

and F. Chiostrì, *La Petraja, villa e giardino* (Florence, 1972); and the Ginori villa of Baroncoli, see L. Ginori-Lisci, *Baroncoli, la dimora rurale di Carlo il Vecchio de' Ginori* (Florence, 1950), and D. Lamberini, *Calenzano e la Val di Marina*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1987), i. 259–65.

<sup>19</sup> A. Lillie, 'Florentine Villas in the Fifteenth Century: A Study of the Strozzi and Sasseti Country Properties', Ph.D. thesis (London, 1986), 172–3. On town palaces used for defensive purposes, see F. W. Kent, 'Palaces, Politics and Society in Fifteenth-Century Florence', *I Tatti Studies*, 2 (1987), 63–5.

<sup>20</sup> Lillie, 'Florentine Villas', 161–4.

<sup>21</sup> C. Frommel, 'La Villa Madama e la tipologia della villa romana nel rinascimento', *Bollettino del Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura 'Andrea Palladio'*, 9 (1969), 47. Heydenreich's categories are similar: the *villa-castello*, the *villa suburbana*, and the '*villa* in the true sense of the word', in Heydenreich, 'La villa', 12.

<sup>22</sup> Vespasiano da Bisticci, *Vite di uomini illustri del secolo XV*, ed. P. d'Ancona and E. Aeschlimann (Milan, 1951), 419. The '*Morali*' must refer to St Gregory's commentary on the Book of Job, the *Expositio in Librum Iob, sive Moralium Libri XXV*.

<sup>23</sup> Cited by Ackerman, *The Villa*, 73; tr. from M. Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1576), repr. ed. M. Sancieriano, 2 vols. (Turin, 1962), 608. For a recent view of this passage, see A. Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence* (Princeton, 1988), 3–4.

farming and intellectual pursuits are treated as complementary and compatible activities typically associated with villa life.

After 1450 there is concrete evidence of a search for a new type of villa, and Giovanni di Cosimo's Villa Medici at Fiesole is the first example of this new form of country house, built between 1453 and 1457 (FIG. 8.4).<sup>24</sup> Unlike the earlier Medici villas which were all adapted from older structures, this was built *ex novo*. It had no tower or castellated features, and unlike the other villas its shape was symmetrical and compact. Although it is difficult to establish precisely the original plan (FIG. 8.5), it is likely that wide loggias facing towards gardens on the east and west were yoked by a central *sala* on the ground floor.<sup>25</sup> It has been remarked that this design is like a

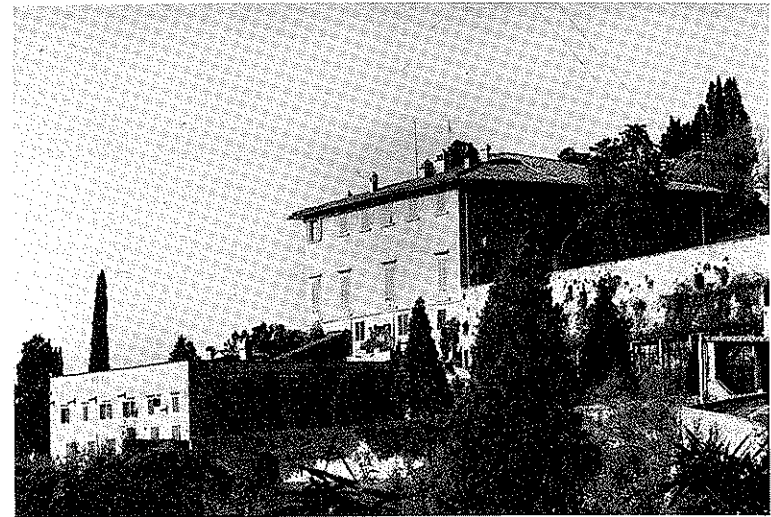


FIG. 8.4 Medici villa at Fiesole (1453–7), from the south-east

<sup>24</sup> For the construction date of the villa, see Ferrara and Quinterio, *Michelozzo*, 253; A. Brown, *Bartolomeo Scala, 1430–1497* (Princeton, 1979), 17; Ackerman, *The Villa*, 289 n. 18; A. Lillie, 'Giovanni di Cosimo and the Villa Medici at Fiesole', in A. Beyer and B. Boucher (eds.), *Piero de' Medici 'il Gottoso' (1416–1469)* (Berlin, 1993), 196.

<sup>25</sup> Frommel, *Die Farnesina*, 87–8; C. Bargellini and P. de la Ruffinière du Prey, 'Sources for a reconstruction of the Villa Medici, Fiesole', *Burlington Magazine*, 111 (1969), 597–605; G. Galletti, 'Villa Medici a Fiesole' in G. Morolli, A. Acidini Luchinat, L. Marchetti (eds.), *L'Architettura di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Florence, 1992), 79–81.

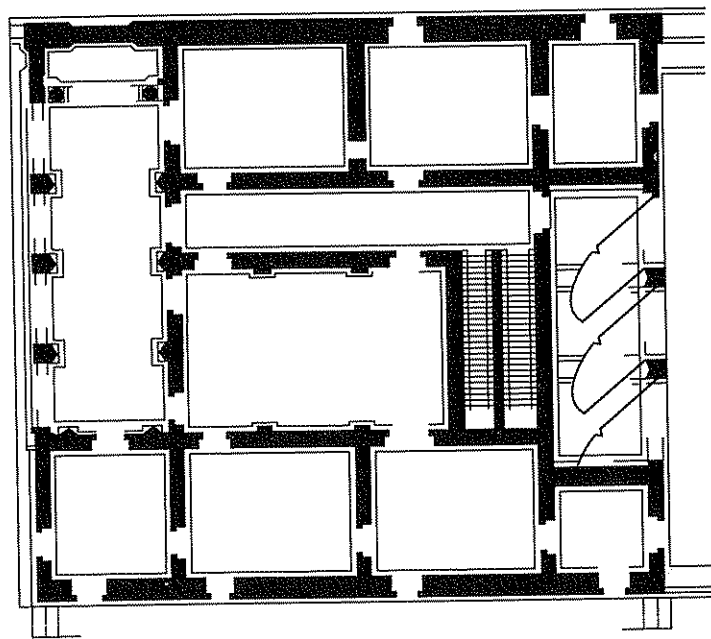


FIG. 8.5 Medici villa at Fiesole, plan

Florentine town house turned inside out. Instead of a forbidding exterior with loggias facing inwards onto a central courtyard, the void occupying the centre of the house has become an interior *sala*, and the exterior walls have been opened up by loggias.<sup>26</sup>

A common misconception, that the villa at Fiesole was an isolated house and garden with no working farms attached, is partly dispelled by Giovanni di Cosimo's purchase of a large farm at Fiesole in late 1457 or early 1458. Woodland was cleared to create new vineyards and Giovanni converted the holding into three small farms with new farm houses. Apart from wine, the farms produced wheat and limited quantities of beans, barley, spelt, wood, and small livestock.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Patzak, *Palast und Villa*, 92; Frommel, *Die Farnesina*, 88.

<sup>27</sup> ASF, Catasto 924 (1469), fo. 308<sup>v</sup>, 'Uno podere posto parte nel popolo di San Chimenti e parte nel popolo di S. Michele a Muscholi cho' loro vochaboli e chonfini, che già furono 2 poderi chon due chase che ll'una era rovinata e nell'antra [altra] abitava el lavoratore, di che per potere trovare meglio l'[h]anno fatto 3 poderetti chon

He bought another vineyard nearby, and this modest policy of expansion was continued by his brother Piero after Giovanni's death with the purchase of more vineyards and olive groves in 1465,<sup>28</sup> and by Lorenzo the Magnificent, who acquired four *pietra serena* quarries nearby and a barber's shop on the *piazza* at Fiesole.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, in comparison with the other Medici estates in the Mugello, at Careggi and elsewhere, Fiesole was never a large agricultural enterprise, and on that steep slope it can never have been intended to be. Yet the reductionist view of Fiesole as a 'pleasure house', untainted by motives such as profit and utility,<sup>30</sup> bears little resemblance to what we know of fifteenth-century villa ideology, where *utilitas* was so often linked to the notion of beauty, and where no landowner lost an opportunity to make a profit. From the wealth of archival sources dealing with rural property and rural pursuits, it is evident that country houses without farmland were very rare.<sup>31</sup> The anti-utilitarian approach also rings false in terms of humanist villa ideology itself, for *oeconomia* and *utilitas* were essential components in the ancient view of rural life and rural architecture, both being revived in Alberti's treatises *Villa, I Libri della Famiglia* and to a lesser extent in his *De re aedificatoria*.<sup>32</sup>

tre lavoratori; [h]anno la presta di £.30 e 3 paia di buoi F[iorini].75; e per adattarli a 3 possessioni v'è murato e speso di molti denari a sboschare e porre vengnia . . . Lavorali Nencino di Piero e figliuoli e 2 poderuzzi, e l'antra [l'altro] lavora Marcho e Lucha d'Andrea. Rendono l'anno in parte e chon detto podere sono 3 pezzi di terra di valuta di F.55 tra sodi e boschi; in tutto rendono in parte: grano staia 80 | fave staia 12 | orzo staia 8 | vino barili 10 | spelda staia 12 | lengnie chataste 3.

El detto podere chomperò Giovanni mio fratello dal 1457 in quà da Archanciolo di Messer Bartolomeo da Monte Ghonzi, gonfalone Vaio, charta per mano di . . . [blank]. El detto podere dà detto Archangelo nel 1457 dalla sua scritta 247 . . . Fiorini 785.14.4. Tra tuti e 3 detto poderi vj si truova su 80 chapi di beschie [bestie] minute di stima e valuta di F.18 . . . F.40.'

<sup>28</sup> ASF, Catasto 924 (1469), 1, fo. 308<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> ASF, Decima repubblicana 28 (1498), fo. 455<sup>v</sup>; *Libro d'inventario dei beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, ed. M. Spallanzani and G. Gaeta Bertelà (Florence, 1992), 179.

<sup>30</sup> Ackerman, *The Villa*, 78, 'Michelozzo's simple arcaded cube was the first modern villa designed without thought or possibility of material gain'.

<sup>31</sup> For example, in a survey of thirty-eight 15th-c. estates belonging to the Strozzi and Sassetti clans, only one land-owner's house (that belonging to the painter Zanobi Strozzi near the Badia Fiesolana) was not attached to farm-land; see Lillie, 'Florentine Villas'.

<sup>32</sup> The archaeological evidence for Roman Italy is summarized by Percival, 'even in the fashionable areas the most luxurious villas tended more often than not to include a section devoted to farming . . . the villa was only very exceptionally other than a business enterprise', in J. Percival, *The Roman Villa* (London, 1988), 53. Alberti's short treatise entitled *Villa*, in *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1960), i. 359–63,



However, authors such as Ackerman and Frommel are right to stress the novel aspects of Fiesole, for the usual motives for acquiring a villa site were lacking. There were no ancestral Medici lands here; this was no rural power base; the agricultural profits would always be modest; and there was no pre-existing villa on the site, whose reputation might have attracted Giovanni, as his nephew Lorenzo was later attracted to Palla Strozzi's site at Poggio a Caiano. It was not on a main road and access was steep and difficult for visitors. The spectacular view was this villa's *raison d'être*, and for that reason too the house was closely integrated with its surroundings. The integration of house and land is evident in the outward facing loggias, open to the gardens and the view, in the creation of terraces so that people could step out of the house into a sort of open-air drawing room (FIG. 8.6), and in the way the levels of the house and garden, supported on their retaining walls, follow the contours of the hillsides (FIG. 8.7).<sup>33</sup> This was a brilliant design solution that provides a fine illustration of how architecture may be inspired by and perfectly adapted to its site.

Another misconception derives from Vasari's statement that this villa contained not only 'camere, sale ed altre stanze ordinarie', but also rooms for special purposes, 'alcune per libri, e alcune altre per la musica'.<sup>34</sup> However, the two surviving inventories of 1482 and 1492 make it clear that living quarters were relatively restricted: only one large *sala* on the ground floor with three *camere* and an *anticamera*, and upstairs three more *camere* and one *anticamera*, apart from the kitchen and two servants' rooms. There is no mention of music rooms, nor are any instruments listed in either inventory.<sup>35</sup> As for books, just one *scrittoio* is mentioned in the 1482 inventory,

456–8, influenced by the writings of Hesiod and Cato, is entirely concerned with farming, and with the honest labour associated with country life. In this context leisure is suspect: 'E dicono che la fame e il bisogno abita vicino all'ozio'. In *I Libri della famiglia* (*Opere volgari*, i. 1–341), the third book entitled 'Economicus', includes a discussion of rural life (188–209) recommending thrift and self-sufficiency in order to achieve maximum productivity and a healthy, tranquil, cheerful life.

<sup>33</sup> Frommel, *Die Farnesina*, 88; Ackerman, *The Villa*, 73–7, notes that 'this may have been the first formal garden in the Renaissance to be conceived as an extension of the architecture', although he adds that it was designed 'to stand off from rather than to merge into its natural environment'; Galletti, 'Villa Medici', 80, suggests that the terraced site may have been inspired by the hanging gardens of Babylon.

<sup>34</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, ii. 442–3.

<sup>35</sup> ASF, MAP, CIV, 4; 'Inventario della chasa di Fiesole fatto questo di 15 di dicembre 1482'; *Libro d'inventario dei beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, 168–78.



FIG. 8.6 Medici villa at Fiesole, east loggia and upper terrace

attached, together with a lavatory, to what had been Giovanni de' Medici's own *camera*.<sup>36</sup> The sense of a commodious and grand establishment conveyed by Vasari's text is therefore largely dispelled by the inventories. On the other hand, Vasari's reference to a large number of storage and service rooms conveniently built into the sub-structure of the house is upheld, for the area devoted to services and agriculture was almost as great as that of the residential apartments.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, for those who wish to make a strict division between humanist villas and farm houses, it was the menial and

<sup>36</sup> ASF, MAP, CIV, 4; although no books were listed in the 1482 inventory, paintings were included and the *scrittoio* contained 'una tavoletta di San Girolamo' and 'una Vergine Maria in camera'.

<sup>37</sup> Vasari, *Le vite*, ii. 442–3, emphasizes the successful combination of splendour and utility at Fiesole, when he describes Fiesole as 'un altro magnifico ed onorato palazzo, fondato dalla parte di sotto nella scoscesa del poggio con grandissima spesa, ma non senza grande utile: avendo in quella parte da basso fatto volte, cantine, stalle, tinaie ed altre belle e comode abitazioni.' The 1492 inventory, *Libro d'inventario dei beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, 168–70, lists the following rooms in the lower levels: 'salotto a uso di vendemia . . . camera che è in sul salotto detto, chiamata la camera della citerna . . . l'altra camera detta la camera de' famigli in su detto salotto . . . l'aggiamento e andito di detta camera . . . camera detta la camera da colare . . . cella ovvero volta di sopra a detto salotto . . . l'altra volta allato a questa, detta quella della state . . . stanza dell'olio a rincontro di detta.'





FIG. 8.7 Medici villa at Fiesole, south façade and lower terrace

agricultural functions of the household, rather than intellectual pursuits, that were incorporated into the design and specially catered for in an ingenious and modern way.

A study of other villas that date from the elusive thirty years between the construction of the Villa Medici at Fiesole in the 1450s and Poggio a Caiano in the 1480s suggests that this was a period of experiment before the emergence of a new building type that conformed to the *all'antica* style. Significantly, the example of Fiesole with its compact, symmetrical plan and its hospitable loggias, was not immediately taken up, perhaps because of the novelty of its design and its difficult site. On the other hand an example from the 1460s illustrates a very different solution to the problem.

Francesco Sassetti's villa at La Pietra is a town palace transposed into the countryside (FIG. 8.8). Unlike many villas, it is three-storeyed, and its massive, regular block with a central courtyard, three grand *sale*, and seven complete residential apartments, is only slightly smaller than the Palazzo Medici in town. The sequence of spaces on entering the house at La Pietra is a common feature in urban domestic architecture, leading on a central axis through a



FIG. 8.8 Sassetti villa at La Pietra (c.1462–c.1470), south façade

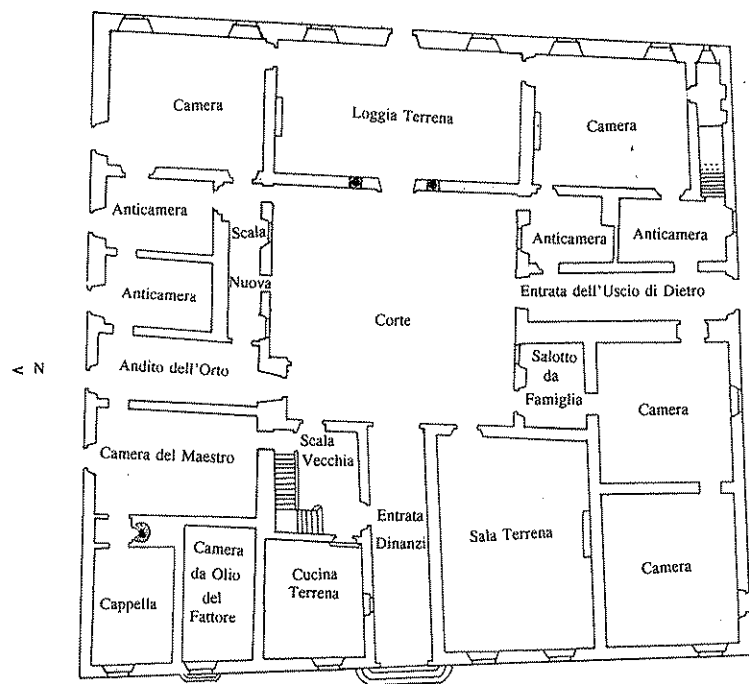


FIG. 8.9 Sassetti villa at La Pietra, reconstructed ground-plan

vaulted hallway into a courtyard with a loggia at the far end. Its plan takes that of the Palazzo Medici as a starting point (FIG. 8.9), but the three hallways [*androni*] (FIG. 8.10) and the loggia converging in the central courtyard divide the ground floor into four distinct apartments, achieving a more systematic and coherent organization of interior space than the Palazzo Medici. The cohesion of the Sassetti villa design was also due to the adoption of a single plan consistently employed for all three storeys of the house, a principle that had been adopted for Pius II's palace at Pienza, another building that exploited the advantages of the urban palace type in a semi-rural setting.<sup>38</sup>

There were obvious practical reasons for Sassetti's choice of this sort of house. The site was suburban, exactly one mile from the city walls. And it satisfied Sassetti's need for a big family palace that

<sup>38</sup> Lillie, 'Florentine Villas', 406-8.



FIG. 8.10 Sassetti villa at La Pietra, hallway

could be built immediately after his return from Geneva, instead of laboriously having to acquire a large site in town. The house was certainly under construction in 1462 and was inhabited by the early 1470s.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, there may have been a literary or intellectual motive, for Vitruvius recommends that villa builders dissatisfied with modest farm-houses should follow his design for town houses:

Si quid delicatius in villis faciendum fuerit, ex symmetriis quae in urbanis supra scripta sunt constituta, ita struantur, uti sine inpeditione rusticae utilitatis aedificentur.

If a touch of elegance is required in a farm-house, it should be built in a symmetrical manner, which things are described above for town-houses, yet without interfering with the needs of agriculture.<sup>40</sup>

Sassetti owned a manuscript of Vitruvius,<sup>41</sup> and it is likely that the Vitruvian solution for a grander villa was deliberately adopted here. In a similar vein Alberti in his *De re aedificatoria* praises suburban villas that combine the dignity of the town house with the delights and pleasures of the country house.<sup>42</sup>

This, therefore, is a building that fulfils a number of criteria for a humanist villa. Its owner collected Latin manuscripts, employing the humanist scholar Bartolomeo Fonzio as his librarian,<sup>43</sup> as he later consulted Fonzio over the iconography and classical inscriptions for his burial chapel in Santa Trinita.<sup>44</sup> The villa itself was praised in letters and poems by three humanists: Ficino, Fonzio and Ugolino Verino.<sup>45</sup> Its design apparently derives from a specific antique

<sup>39</sup> Lillie, 'Florentine Villas', 373–4.

<sup>40</sup> Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), tr. F. Granger, vol. ii, bk. VI, cap. vi, 42–3. I am grateful to Charles Robertson who drew my attention to this passage.

<sup>41</sup> Biblioteca Laurenziana, 30, 10; A. de la Mare, 'The Library of Francesco Sassetti (1421–90)', in C. H. Clough (ed.), *Cultural Aspects of the Italian Renaissance: Essays in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller* (Manchester, 1976), 163, 178; C. H. Krinsky, '78 Vitruvius Manuscripts', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 30 (1967), 37. Sassetti's Vitruvius is an early 15th-c. French manuscript bound in one volume with Cato's *De Agri Cultura* and Varro's *Rerum rusticarum libri III*.

<sup>42</sup> L. B. Alberti, *L'Architettura [De re aedificatoria]*, ed. G. Orlandi and P. Portoghesi, 2 vols. (Milan, 1966), vol. ii, bk. IX, ch. ii, 790–1.

<sup>43</sup> De la Mare, 'The Library of Francesco Sassetti', 165.

<sup>44</sup> F. Saxl, 'The Classical Inscription in Renaissance Art and Politics', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 4 (1941), 26.

<sup>45</sup> A. Lillie, 'Francesco Sassetti and his Villa at La Pietra', in E. Chaney and N. Ritchie (eds.), *Oxford, China and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his Eightieth Birthday* (London, 1984), 83–93.

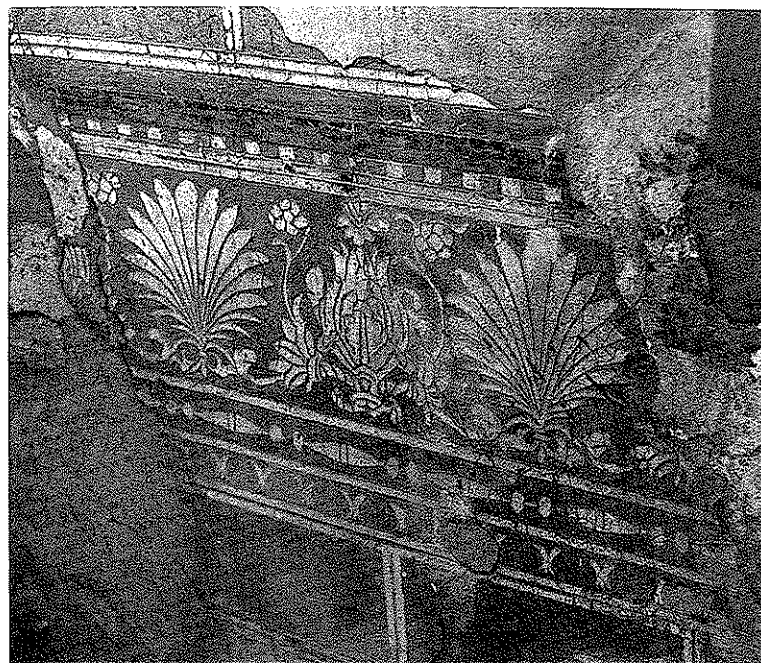


FIG. 8.11 Sassetti villa at La Pietra, detail of *sgraffito* decoration in the courtyard

literary source—Vitruvius; and it contains many classicizing elements from the palmettes (FIG. 8.11) and the *putti* carrying festoons incised on the courtyard façade to its miniature domed oratory. Yet these generically *all'antica* features are motifs taken, not directly from antique sources, but from the most accessible up-to-date source, that is, from buildings recently constructed in town.<sup>46</sup> What then does the term 'humanist villa' tell us about the appearance of a building which fits better into an architectural history of the urban palace than it does into an architectural history of the villa?

There are four possible definitions of the term 'humanist villa'.

1. It may refer to a house belonging to a humanist scholar, in which case the term describes the inhabitant rather than the appearance of the building. In practice, humanist scholars were more likely to celebrate the buildings of wealthy patrons or build grand schemes

<sup>46</sup> Lillie, 'Florentine Villas', 406–25.

in their imaginations than on the ground.<sup>47</sup> (Examples are Ficino's farm at Careggi; Poggio Bracciolini's villa at Terranuova; Michele Verino's villa at Lecore; Giannozzo Manetti's villa of Vacciano; Vespasiano da Bisticci's villa 'il Monte' at Antella.)

2. The term may refer to the site of humanist discourse, a place where humanists met to discuss ideas and texts. In this case the term describes the function of the building. (Examples are the Medici villa of Careggi, the Paradiso degli Alberti at Pian di Ripoli, the Pandolfini villa at Signa, the Acciaiuoli villa at Montegufoni.)

3. The term may refer to the subject of humanist discourse, a place that humanists wrote about in classicizing terms, often evoking ancient descriptions of villa life. In this case the term describes the building's literary role and how it was perceived. (Examples are the Sassetti villa at La Pietra, the Medici villas of Careggi, Fiesole, Poggio a Caiano.)

4. The term may refer to a house whose architectural form was guided by notions of what ancient villas looked like; or which was designed to be a tangible expression of the humanist pursuits of the inhabitants. In this case the term describes the appearance of the building. (Examples are the Villa Medici at Fiesole, the Medici villa of Poggio a Caiano.)

These definitions frequently overlap and any or all of them may apply to one building. For example, the Villa Medici at Fiesole can justifiably be described as a humanist villa in every sense.

The fundamental question is whether a building type can be defined by function alone, or whether that particular function must be associated with particular architectural forms in order to become a type. In the case of the humanist villa, there is a discrepancy between function and form in the early history of the type. The Villa Medici at Fiesole is the one important exception, but apart from this, as a term describing architectural form, it should be used with great caution before the late fifteenth century and the construction of Poggio a Caiano.

Although very few villas associated with Florentine humanism

<sup>47</sup> Bartolomeo Scala is a prime example of a scholar who found the funds to build a *villa suburbana* in the ancient manner, see A. Brown, *Bartolomeo Scala*, and L. Pellecchia, 'The Patron's Role in the Production of Architecture: Bartolomeo Scala and the Scala Palace', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 42 (1989), 258–91. For the financial status of Florentine humanists see L. Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists 1390–1460* (London, 1963), ch. 3 and apps. I–II.

have been studied, the concrete evidence available supports this view. It is striking how dissimilar the houses are, and how pragmatic their owners. For example, the loggia of the Pandolfini villa at Ponte a Signa retained its water-leaf capitals;<sup>48</sup> whereas Giovanni Rucellai's Villa Lo Specchio at Quaracchi (FIG. 8.12), and the Tornabuoni villa at Chiasso Macerelli,<sup>49</sup> both shared clannish capitals with shields that were probably once painted with the family coats of arms, rather than employing any semblance of a classical order. Thus, even wealthy bankers and merchants involved in the new intellectual movement chose other options when it came to expressing their cultural affiliations. A topiary hedge in the form of Cicero at Quaracchi,<sup>50</sup> frescos depicting the Liberal Arts and Venus with the three Graces at Chiasso Macerelli,<sup>51</sup> were effective embellishments that did not require demolition, nor the inconvenience and expense of construction. Likewise, in a clan like the Strozzi, those most closely concerned with humanism—Palla di Nofri Strozzi (patron of Chrysoloras), Matteo di Simone Strozzi, and Piero di Benedetto Strozzi (humanist scribe and rector at the Pieve di Ripoli)—did not, as far as we know from the surviving buildings, employ classicizing architectural forms in their country houses.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately financial restraints and practical considerations presided.

There is an important distinction to be made between the physical construction of *all'antica* architecture and a pervasive ideology or literary framework that describes buildings in an *all'antica* language and superimposes an ideal ancient model on an imperfect, tangible present. The problem stems from a simplified view of ancient and Renaissance pastoral literature that accepts the notion of *otium* at face value, and then proceeds to apply it literally to the most functional of art forms. Rather than assuming that literary texts can

<sup>48</sup> Tampone, *Lastra a Signa*, 91–115. Known as the Villa del Ponte a Signa or the Casa di Gangalandi, this is the house to which Agnolo Pandolfini retired from political life, living 'like another Lucullus'; see Bisticci, *Vite*, 470–1.

<sup>49</sup> Zangheri, *Ville della Provincia di Firenze*, 24–31.

<sup>50</sup> A. Perosa (ed.), *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*. Part I, *Il Zibaldone quaresimale* (London, 1960), 22; F. W. Kent, 'The Making of a Renaissance Patron of the Arts', in A. Perosa (ed.), *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*. Part II, *A Florentine Patrician and his Palace* (London, 1981), 81.

<sup>51</sup> R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, Calif., 1978), i. 94–7; ii. 60–3.

<sup>52</sup> Lillie, 'Florentine Villas', 60, 64–5, 110, 293, 488–91, 492–3; Piero Strozzi was, in any case, too poor, A. de la Mare, 'Messer Piero Strozzi, a Florentine Priest and Scribe', in A. S. Osley (ed.), *Calligraphy and Paleography: Essays presented to Alfred Fairbank on his 70th Birthday* (London, 1965), 55–68.





FIG. 8.12 Giovanni Rucellai's Villa Lo Specchio at Quaracchi, courtyard

explain buildings, it may be more helpful to turn the argument around and discover whether buildings and their physical environment can shed light on the construction of Renaissance literary models. After all, buildings are the most substantial form of concrete evidence available and they have too rarely been brought into play when considering the nature of invention and imitation in the literary construction of Renaissance pastoral.