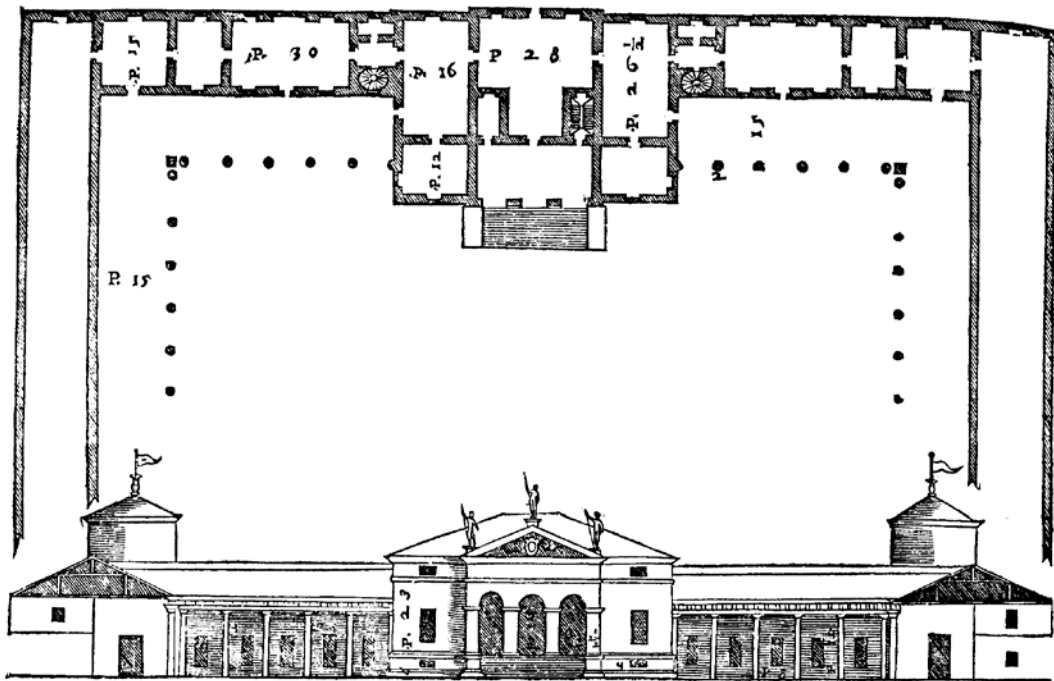


# The Landmark Trust

## VILLA SARACENO

### History Album

Volume I:  
A tour and brief history



*Andrea Palladio's design for Villa Saraceno,  
in Book II of his Quattro libri dell'architettura (1570).*

Written & researched by Richard Haslam, March 1994.

Updated by Caroline Stanford with help from Lorella Graham,

2008 & 2015

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## **VILLA SARACENO – BASIC DETAILS**

**Built :** c 1550  
**Architect:** Andrea Palladio  
**Client:** Biagio Saraceno

**Acquired by  
The Landmark Trust :** 1989

**Project architect:** Francesco Doglioni  
**Site architect:** Ilaria Cavaggioni  
**Landmark's architect:** John Bucknall  
**Historian:** Richard Haslam

**Main contractor:** Taita of Feltre  
**Fresco conservation:** Vanni Tiozzo  
**Floors and stonework:** Ambrogio Trevisan

**Opened as a Landmark:** 1994

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

**Barchessa** – colonnaded open barn or shed.

**Battuto** – ground material rammed into lime and sand, smoothed and oiled, for floors.

**Casa vecchia** – literally, 'the old house': here, the first medieval manor house on the site.

**Colombara** – dovecote or tower, often also converted for domestic use.

**Intonaco** – a thin layer of render applied to brick work, giving the impression of stone.

**Loggia** – gallery or room open on one or more sides, sometimes pillared.

**Sala** – main central entrance hall.

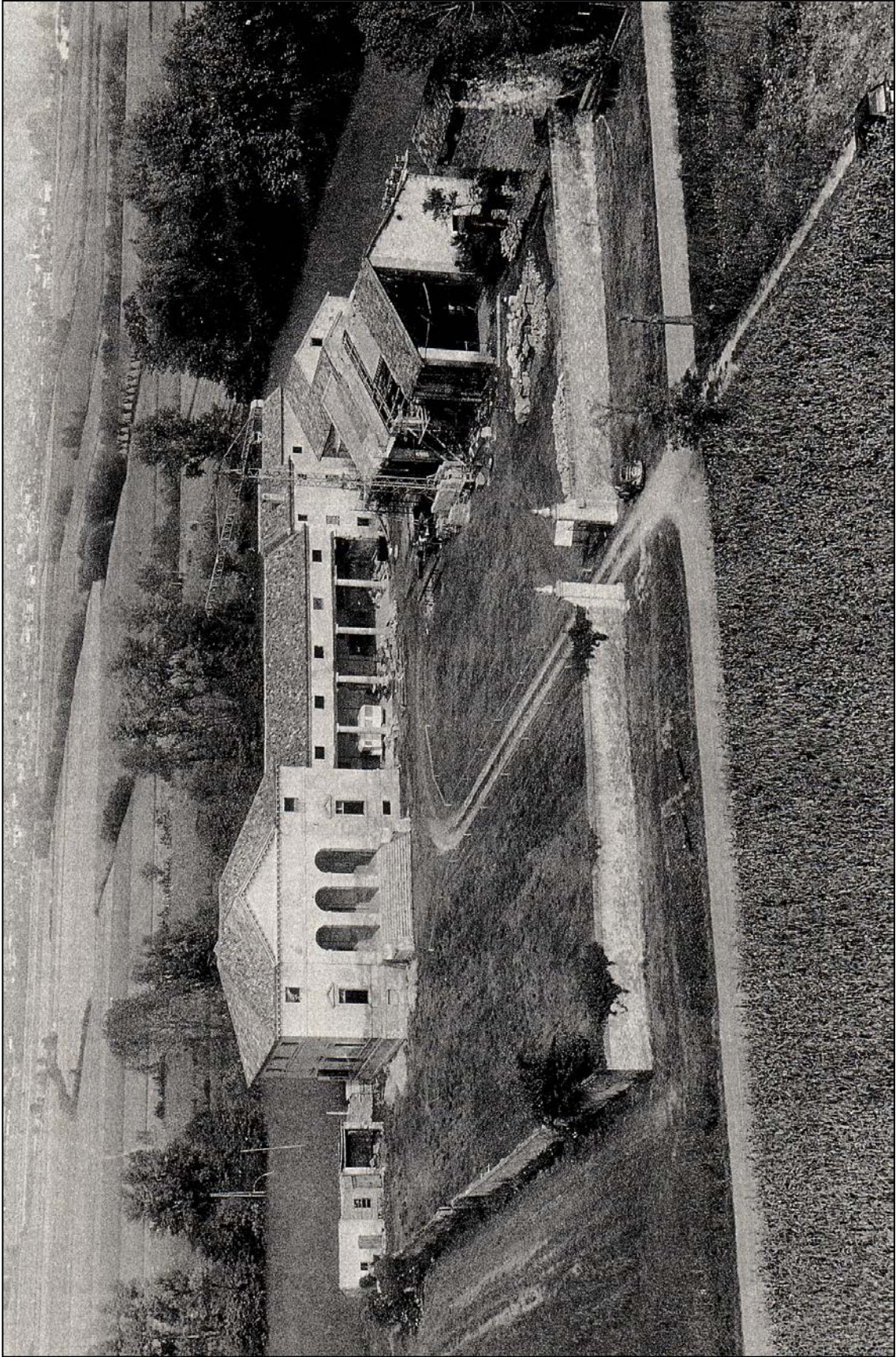
**Stanza maggiore** – main reception room.

**Stanzino/camerino** – small room/bedroom.

**Tezza** – barn.

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The villa site during restoration, 1990-4.

## SUMMARY

The Villa Saraceno, the villa house built for Biagio Saraceno between 1546 and 1555, is one of the earlier, and the most modest, of Andrea Palladio's fifteen or so surviving attributed villas. If the Italian Renaissance was an agricultural as well as an artistic and literary movement, this farming villa with its literary frescoes is its built embodiment. The Veneto had long been an area of peculiar poetic and intellectual fertility: Roman poet Virgil was born forty miles to the west of this villa at Mantova; Roman architect Vitruvius twenty five to the northwest at Padova; the poet Petrarch retired to live eight miles east at Arqua, and Palladio himself was a son of Vicenza, fifteen miles to the north. Palladio (1508-80) was the most influential Italian architect of the Renaissance, and one of the greatest. Through his careful studies of ancient Roman architecture, he aimed to recapture the splendour of antiquity. The manner in which Palladio realised the Roman ideal of escaping the bustle of the city to a cultured but self-sufficient existence in the country is one that had particular influence on later architects in Britain and beyond.

The Saraceno villa house was added to a much older working courtyard and took three generations to finish. Palladio was commissioned by Biagio Saraceno (whose portrait is thought to be above the door from the loggia) to build a new house on the main axis of his existing farm courtyard. This house outshines the other buildings on the site, but did not replace them as Palladio recommended in his retrospectively published scheme in *Quattro libri dell' architettura* 1570.

This means that the evolution of a typical villa of the Veneto can be clearly seen in the Villa Saraceno, with the survival of much-altered medieval structures like the old house (*casa vecchia*) and dovecot (*colombara*); the barns surviving on the east side of the courtyard, and the nineteenth-century colonnaded barn (*barchessa*), all instead of the symmetrical *barchessa* and pavilions envisaged by Palladio on either side of the principal house in the scheme he published in 1570.

The Saraceno family had come to Vicenza from Rome in the late thirteenth century. They were members of the minor nobility and pursued professional careers in the Church, law and medicine. Like many such Veneto families in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they also built up agricultural estates, improving the land and introducing new crops and methods, in this case at Finale near Agugliaro. Pietro, Biagio's elder brother, built the massive Palazzo delle Trombe at the crossroads in the hamlet of Finale (turn left at the entrance to Villa Saraceno), so named after its rainwater spouts in the shape of trumpets, since lost.

For Biagio, Palladio conceived a beautifully proportioned house clasped by the colonnaded wings of a Roman courtyard (see title page). The villa faces roughly due south and was carefully aligned to frame the view of the Dolomite mountains to the north through the north door at the centre of the loggia, an alignment which acts to catch the breeze. However, this owner's dwelling (*corpo padronale*) was all that was realised of Palladio's noble concept. It had formal steps up to the south-facing *loggia* (the colonnaded formal porch) and hall (*sala*), and others, which are lost, down to the orchard (*brolo*) beyond. To either side were two-room apartments, each with a smaller vaulted room (*camerino*) overlooking the court, and a larger one, (*stanza maggiore*) to the north with a fireplace. There were cellars beneath and a granary above reached by an ingenious staircase tower within the *sala*.

This house has inevitably been altered over the past four centuries. Soon after it was built, the loggia vault was decorated with frescoes, as were the *sala* and west *stanza maggiore* and *camerino*, probably for Biagio's son, another Pietro, in the late 16th century. The *sala* frescoes have been identified as depicting Pietro Aretino's play, *Orazia*.



In 1604, the Saraceno heiress Euriemma married Scipione Caldogno and improvements continued. The vaults of the *camerini* were knocked down in 1659 for Lucietta Thiene Caldogno, when a mezzanine floor was inserted in the east apartment and an east wing was added; this upset the harmony of Palladio's fenestration on the north and south facades. A bad fire in 1798 in the *barchessa* on the east spread to the villa house. The east roofs and all the rooms beneath, and later the *barchessa* itself, had to be rebuilt. This fire explains the asymmetry of the roofs to the villa, to which further damaging modernisation was done around 1900.

For two hundred and fifty years the Villa Saraceno was mostly used as a farmhouse. Just as the Renaissance vision was to fade, so eventually did the fabric of this place, until in the 1970s and 1980s even the farm workers, the fruit trees and the cows had gone, leaving only the waving maize growing strong in the fields around to evoke the poetic practicality of the past, in a landscape much emptier of humans than it would have been in more labour intensive days.

The Caldogno family sold the property after 1838, and it passed through several hands before the Landmark Trust bought it from the Lombardi family in 1989. This happened through the foresight of Landmark's founders, Sir John and Lady Christian Smith, who had established Landmark in 1965 to rescue significant buildings at risk. The Smiths first looked at the Villa Saraceno as early as 1981, but were initially deterred by proposals to build a motorway close by (a threat that has sadly now become a reality, despite the Veneto's designation as a World Heritage Site). In 1989, Landmark was still under Sir John's direction and largely funded by his private trust fund, the Manifold Trust. This gave Landmark the flexibility to intervene when a particularly significant building was at risk, even occasionally, as here, outside the UK. Today, the Landmark Trust is a registered British charity with almost two hundred buildings in its care, four of them in Italy. (Sir John Smith stood down from active involvement in 1990 and died in 2007).

By 1989, when Landmark intervened, the Villa Saraceno been un-lived in and neglected for fifteen years. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century surfaces in the house were decaying due to the damp; the farm buildings were near to collapse. The first task was to renew all the roofs and create a custodian's cottage in the farm buildings. Meanwhile careful studies were made of the structures themselves and of the documents relating to the history of the villa and its owners, in preparation for the detailed restoration, carried out as gently as possible in accordance with the tenets of Ruskin and Morris. The original arrangement and noble proportions of the *sala* and west apartment in Palladio's house have been recovered, with remarkably complete sixteenth-century decoration. Conservation of the frescoes and the careful repair of external and internal plasters formed a major part of the work carried out. To keep interventions to Palladio's house to a minimum, the new kitchen is sited outside it, in the adjoining west room of the *barchessa*; and much of the modern accommodation is contained within the older *casa vecchia* and *colombara*. Work was completed in March 1994.

Since then, the villa has been let for holidays and the income this generates helps to fund the site's maintenance and ongoing conservation. The main rooms are open free every Wednesday afternoon through the summer to the general public. Since 1994, through the boldness, foresight and generosity of Sir John Smith in taking on the Villa Saraceno, thousands of people have been able to experience life in a Palladian villa.

### **Outline of the History of the Site**

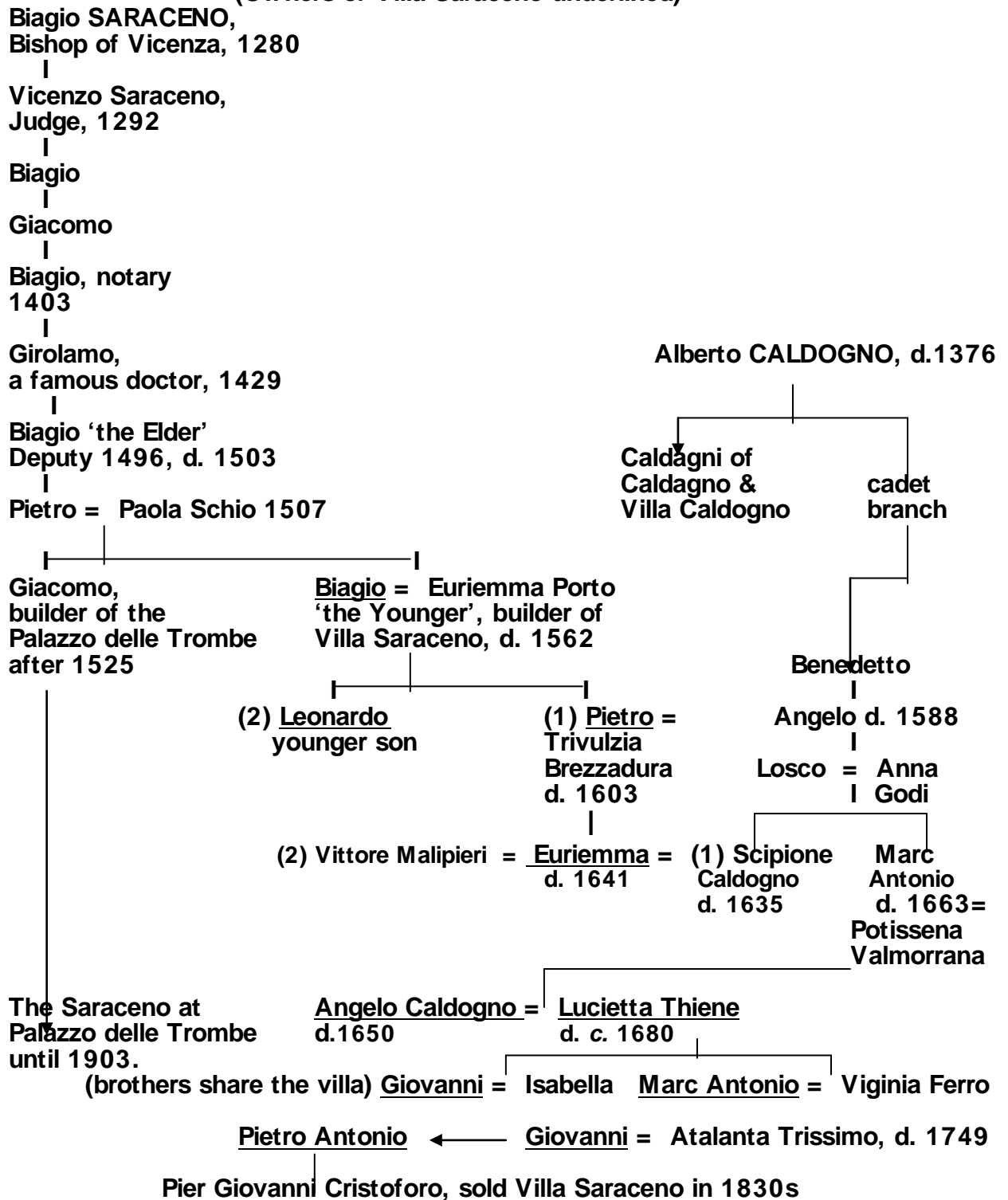
While there are a number of things that point to the site of the Villa Saraceno having been occupied well before the first of the buildings here today were built, the earliest documentary references to it are the land purchases of Biagio Saraceno the Elder (died 1503). The background in Roman times remains conjectural, but generally the local pattern of settlement in the later Middle Ages is clear. The little chapel that still stands southeast of the villa is dedicated to S. Bernardino, the Siennese preacher, and was rebuilt in 1502. Such increasing prosperity reflects the continual improvement in the drainage of this marshy plain through which the Po and its many tributaries run from the Alps to the Adriatic, not very many miles away.

The Saraceno family's history goes back a long way before its association with this site, however. Theirs was a Roman family, recorded in Papal office in 1171 and known to be building churches in Rome in the thirteenth century. It was as an ecclesiastical family that the Saraceno came north, accompanying an earlier Biagio Saraceno when he was appointed bishop of the new-ish see of Vicenza in the 1280s. The Saraceno became nobles of Vicenza as well as Rome, but never of the Republic of Venice. There is more to be clarified on their origins however, since their surname sounds like the nickname of a sailor who singed some Saracen's beard, and since the charge on their coat of arms – a double headed bird of prey – is also used by one of Venice's noble families, the Malipiero.



**Stone carving of the coat of arms of Giovanni Pietro Saraceno, dated 1491 (Verlato, p. 226).**

**SARACENO AND CALDOGNO FAMILIES**  
(Owners of Villa Saraceno underlined)

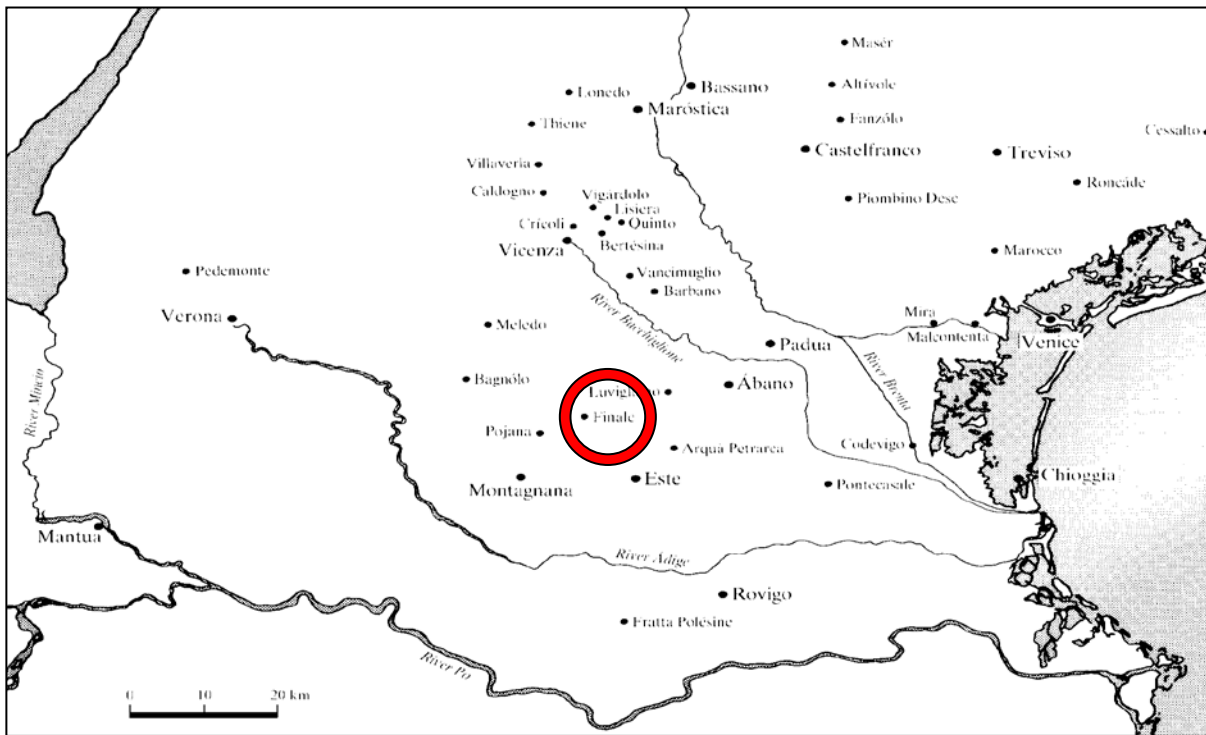




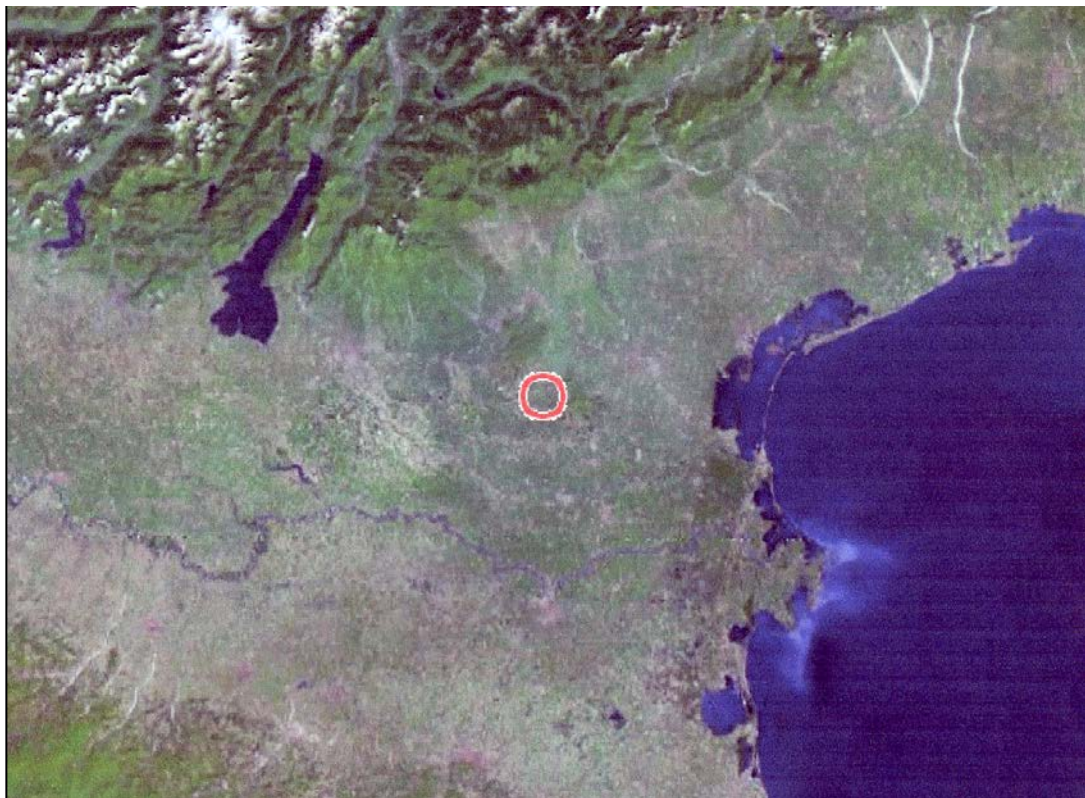
The Saraceno family flourished above all in the law (Vicenza was one of the few cities that had a legal profession restricted to the nobility), but in other professions too – in medicine, in the Church, in arms and letters. Girolamo Saraceno, a famous doctor in the fifteenth century, had a younger son Biagio (the Elder) who built up a large landholding near Agugliaro, as did another well-known Vicenza family, the Pigafetta (family of Antonio Pigafetta, involved in the discovery of the Americas). Though the Saraceno were not among the city's greater folk, the names of the families with whom they contracted marriages are a roll-call of its nobility: the Porto, the Pigafetta, the Schio, the Brazzadura, the Vella; and of many of Palladio's patrons too: the Godi, the Valmarana, the Thiene and the Trissino.

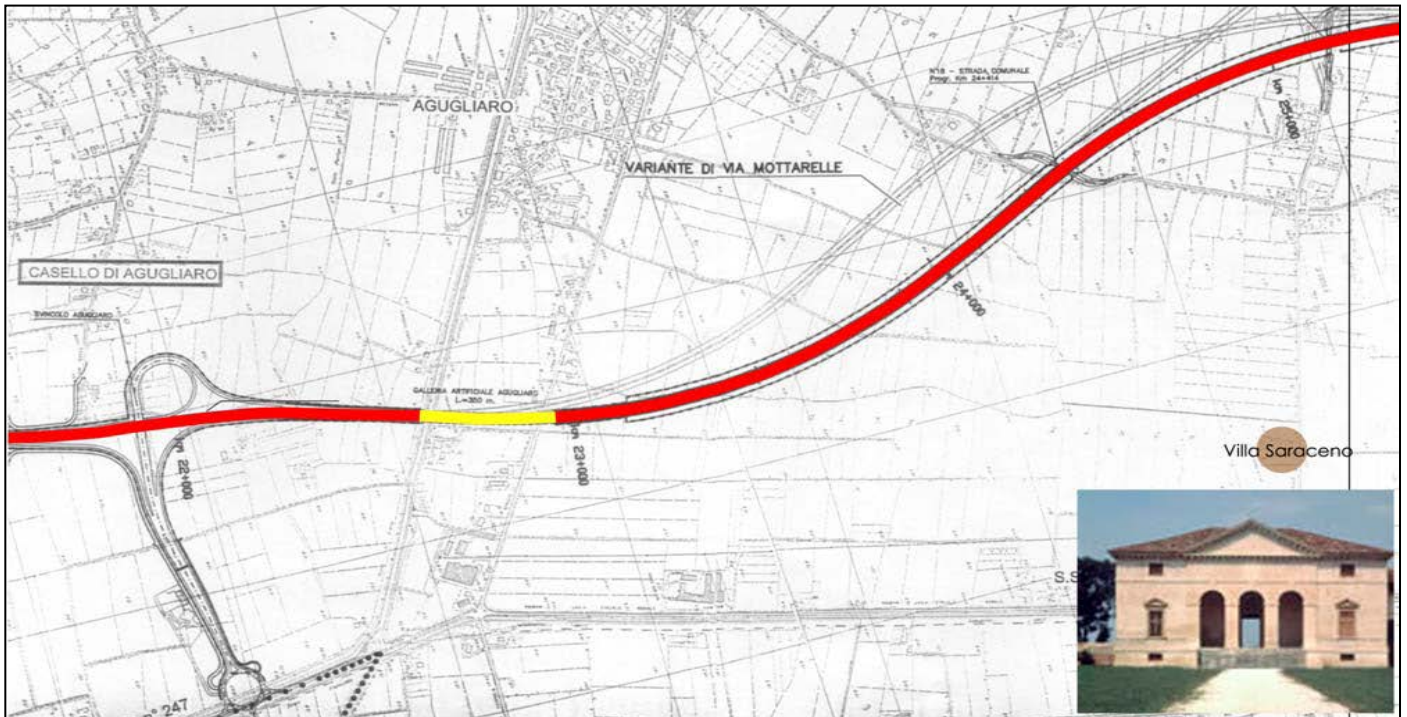
The road to Noventa and Este is an ancient one, known in the sixteenth century as the Strada Reggia. The proximity of the Saraceno properties to it, just west of Finale, was plainly convenient for the supervision of the farming and also for access of building materials such as lime and timber (assuming the bricks were made on site, which was usual at the time).

The farming villas of the Veneto have been much studied, inspired by the contribution made to its buildings by Palladio. The Renaissance, at any rate on the marshland estates of the educated entrepreneurs of Vicenza, Padua and Venice, was as much an agricultural movement as an architectural one. The introduction of new crops (like the maize still grown all around, from Virginia, and the tobacco that would later dry in the lesser buildings of the Villa Saraceno) and improved methods of cultivation soon yielded rewards on this rich land. The look of the land would have been more varied than it is today – more orchards and vines; trees like willows and poplars for fuel and farm uses (although pine and larch for beams came from the Alps); arable crops; cows and pigs; horses for transport (presumably oxen were used for ploughing); chickens and pigeons – all with their appropriate housing – and last but not least the silkworms, whose impact on the countryside was the growing of mulberry trees to feed them. Despite today's tendencies toward monoculture and the drastic decline in rural employment and consequent lack of constant human presence in the landscape, the Villa Saraceno remains more closely related to its surrounding farmland than practically all the rest of Palladio's surviving villas. It is supremely important for that.



The marshy plains between the Monte Berico on the west (the ridges of hills that overlook Vicenza at their northern end) and the Euganean Hills on the east (quite different looking, volcanic mountains that rear up behind Padua) offered many sites for family enterprises. The lower Vincentino area is drained by the River Bacchiglione, which passes through Vicenza to join the Adriatic at Chioggia, and by the River Frassine, which flows into the Adige, which also enters the sea just south of the Venetian lagoon. The Saraceno lands extended all around Finale and onto the Eugean Hills. Land reclamation, ditches and the taking of water were strictly controlled by the Venetian Republic at least from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and major works were carried out by Dutch engineers, just as they were in the fenlands of England in the early seventeenth century. However, no records relating to Saraceno lands survive in Venice.



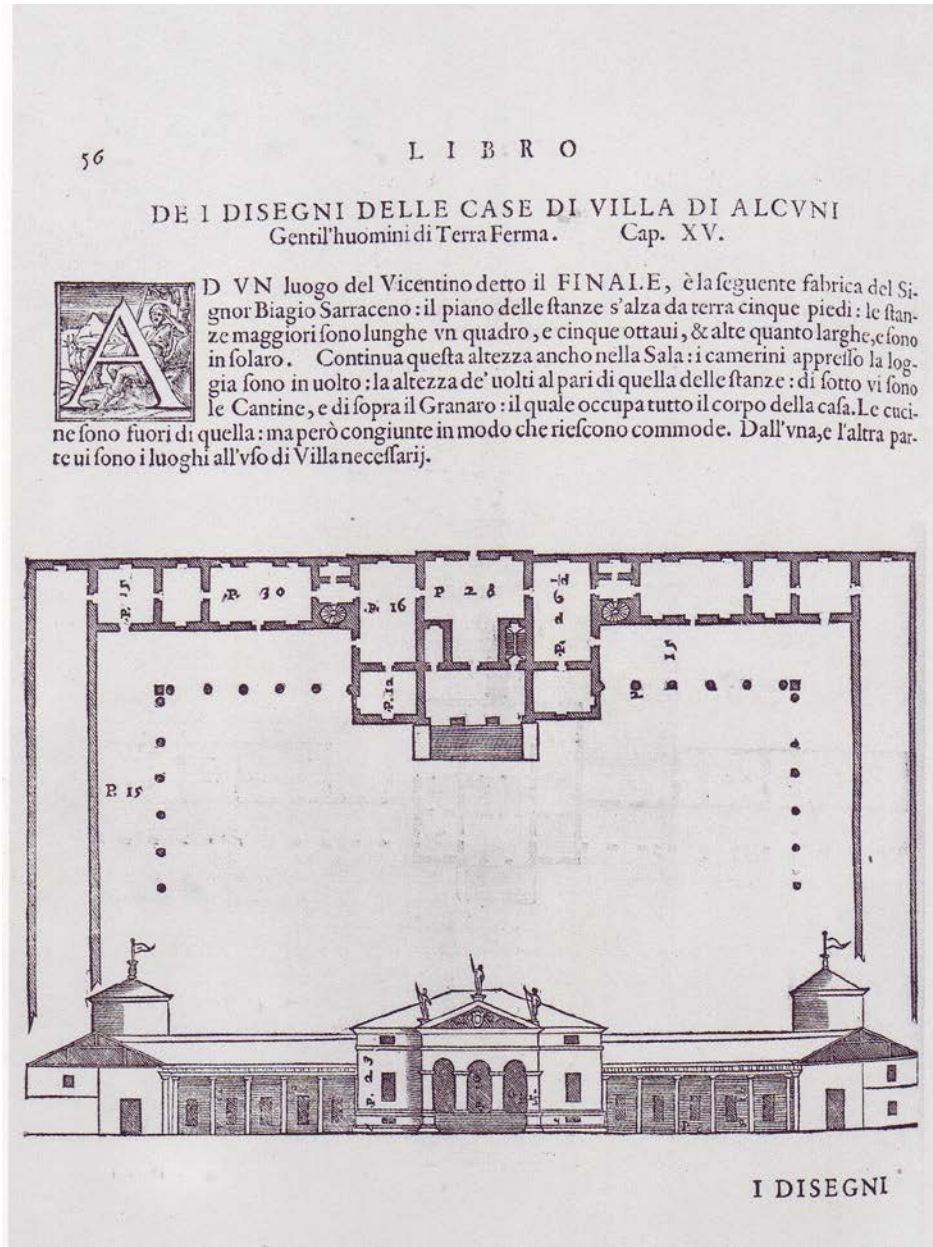


The debate on whether an autostrada should pass through the Veneto began in the 1980s and continued despite the area's designation as part of the World Heritage Site known as Vicenza & Palladio's Villas of the Veneto. The plans were challenged locally and internationally, but during Silvio Berlusconi's premiership during the early 2000s and after many circuitous rulings and challenges, the autostrada was finally built. It passes within a kilometre or so of the Villa Saraceno (the route is shown above), and explains the bank of trees we have planted as a sound buffer along the canal bank to the north of the *brolo*. Sadly, the Dolomites and the little conical hill upon which Palladio so carefully aligned his villa can now only be seen during the winter, when the leaves have fallen.



## *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*

The Villa Saraceno has never been better described than in the few words written by Andrea Palladio in *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, published in Venice in 1570. In Book II, dealing with houses 'ordered' by him in that city and beyond, a chapter called 'Concerning Designs for Villa Houses (*Case di Villa*) of some Gentlemen of the (Venetian) Terraferma' begins with the following page:



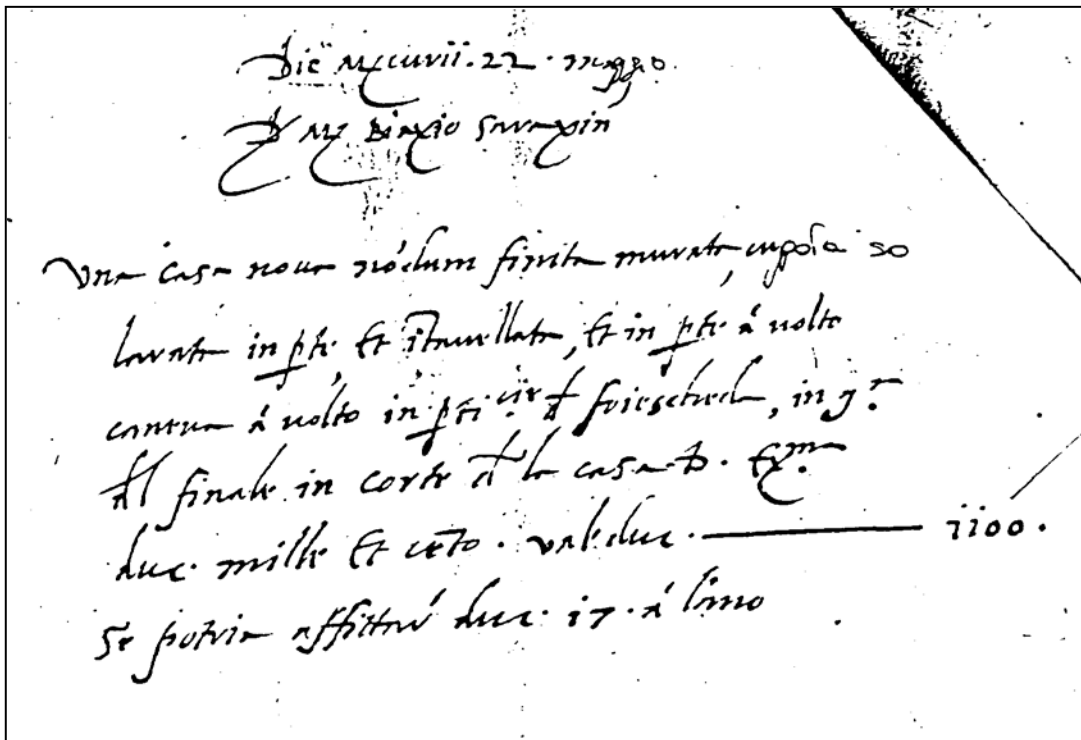
'At a place in the Vicentino called Finale, is the following fabric of Signor Biagio Sarraceno [sic]: the living quarters are raised five feet from the ground: the larger chambers are a square and five eighths long and as high as they are wide, and have beamed ceilings. This height also continues in the Sala: the little rooms on either side of the loggia are vaulted: the height of the vaults is equal to that of the chambers; beneath are the Cellars, and above is the Granary: this occupies the whole extent of the house. The kitchens are outside the latter: and yet joined to it in such a way that they are convenient. On the one side, and on the other are the spaces necessary for Villa use.'

Biagio Saraceno the Elder's son Pietro inherited the properties in Finale, and, probably in the late 1530s, they passed to Pietro's two sons, Giacomo and Biagio the Younger. The properties were divided between the brothers. The elder, Giacomo, took the better of the farm courtyards nearest to Finale and began building on it the massive, two-storey house still called the Palazzo delle Trombe (or trumpets) from its rainwater spouts. This house remained unfinished at the time of the death of his Giacomo's son Gasparo – and indeed long after that – but continued as the family house of Giacomo's descendants until 1903.

The younger brother, Biagio, commissioned a far less conventional building of one main storey, opening by a loggia into the courtyard and fields, from the brilliant young architect who was almost his exact contemporary and his neighbour in Vicenza: Andrea Palladio. This was to be the Villa Saraceno, a house with a more turbulent history than the Palazzo della Trombe. It remained with the Saraceno family for only three generations, passing to others through marriage until it was sold by the last heirs in 1838.

The villa house was begun sometime between 1545 and 1555, and largely finished in its surviving manifestation at that date. It was valued in 1555 at 1100 ducats, whereas at Biagio the Younger's death in 1562, his town house, of two storeys, was worth 850 ducats. The Villa Saraceno's initial building history remains obscure. The same is true of practically all of Palladio's villas, and were it not for the architect's own (and possible revised) account of Villa Saraceno in his *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, some twenty five years after the building was conceived, there would be little evidence to attribute the villa to Palladio. As it is, it can be taken for certain that the main structure of the *corpo padronale* (villa house) and its finished surfaces are mostly those of Palladio, or close repairs of the original work.





The first mention of the unfinished villa house, from a document dated 1555.

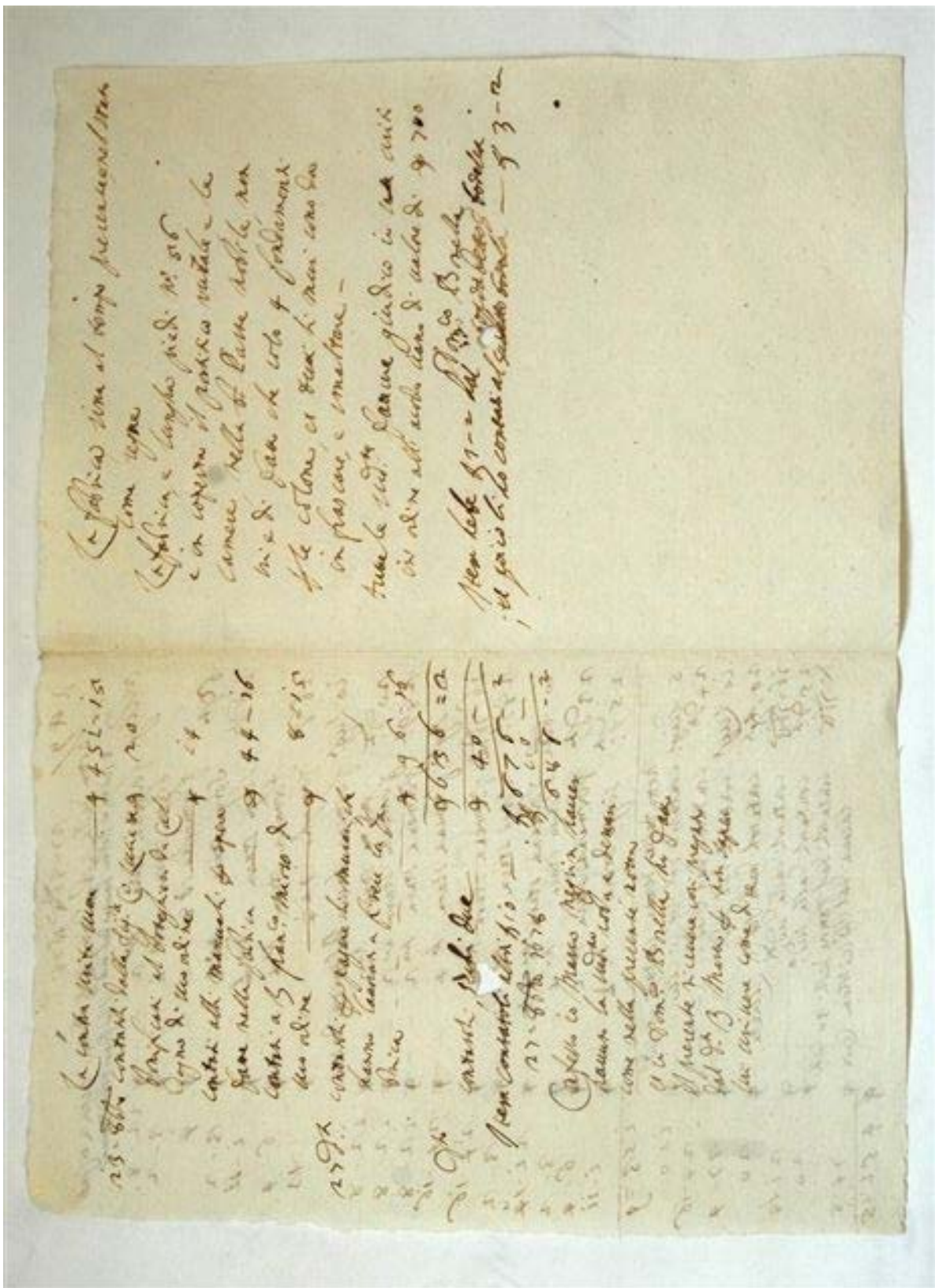
The house's decoration with the four cycles of fresco paintings has been successfully assessed in the light of known family history by Antonio Verlatto (see below). Such erudite decorations were often carried out after the main building phase, and (as is true of Palazzo delle Trombe) sometimes they were never carried out at all. However, those in the *sala* depict a play by renowned playwright and writer Pietro Aretino, *Orazia*, published in 1546. This provides further (if circumstantial) evidence that the villa house was built around 1550. If Verlatto's identification of the portrait of the man above the entrance door in the loggia as Biagio the Younger is correct, this suggests the loggia sequence was done within a few years before or after his death in 1562.

Biagio the Younger had two sons with his wife Euriemma Porto, the younger of whom, Leonardo, inherited the villa at Biagio's death. The contents of the house were also listed when the estate was divided between the brothers, revealing no particularly rich furnishings. Leonardo, who seems to have led an exemplary career in public office in his city, 'died without descendant or will', so on his death in 1584 the villa passed to his elder brother, Pietro, who is known to have been a patron of painting. Various dates before his death in 1603 are thus possible for the frescoes in the *stanza maggiore* and west *camerino*.

This Pietro Saraceno went through life stormily, although he also inherited the Palazzo delle Trombe and his great uncle Gasparo's former property after the death of his wife Lucietta. This reunited the Saraceno holdings with an estimated value of 20,000 ducats, an immense fortune. Pietro's wife Trivulzia Brazzadura

bore him his only legitimate child in 1603 in tragic circumstances, being carried dying to the new villa from Noventa so that the birth could be witnessed there by a priest – which turned out to be of a daughter, Euriemma. Such witnessing was vital in such a litigious society, and indeed family, for Biagio's will had declared that only his legitimate and male offspring could inherit. That ruled out Pietro's illegitimate daughter, and the other Saraceno relations (most of them illegitimate themselves) conspired together to wrest the inheritance from Euriemma. Little Euriemma was dramatically apprehended by her aunt Ludovica and taken to the palace of her husband, Girolamo Ghellini, in Vicenza. They rode out to Finale, spent two nights and a day ransacking the deed chest, and rode away with what seemed relevant in several trunks. To get her hands on her brother's fabulous wealth, Ludovica hoped to prove that her 'natural niece Euriemma' was in fact illegitimate, on the basis that Pietro's marriage to Trivulzia had never taken place – claims later shown to be false.

Euriemma and two husbands spent the next thirty years successfully defending themselves against the claims of the other family members. Married first to Scipione Caldogno (and after his death in 1635 to Venetian noble Vettore Malipiero) it was not until an agreement dated 1632 that she managed to take full possession of the villa and other properties at Finale. Euriemma and Scipione or Vittore are therefore theoretical final candidates for finishing the decorative works. Here, we are at last on surer factual ground because of the long court case; but they make no mention of this sort of work, whereas they do mention a *barchessa* built in 1607 on the east of the new house. This couple had no children although the Saraceno were a large family (seventeen in the generation of Biagio the Younger) and they lasted till the eighteenth century, the last male, another Biagio, being created a marquis by the Elector of Bavaria in 1691. The villa however passed next not to the Saraceno family but to Angelo Caldogno, a nephew of Euriemma's husband Scipione. His marriage with an heiress, Lucietta Thiene, and his early death left her in charge from 1650 to 1680.



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 in S. Maria all'altare della S. Maria di 9 700  
 Non solo 11-2 dal S. Maria di S. Maria  
 il giro di la camera di S. Maria di 3-2



'On 10 August 1658

Invoices made by Master Francesco Merlin stonemason at Finale in the new Barchessa and p.

For the bases and capitals of the pillars at three ducats per pillar, i.e. base, capital, two pillars

For bases and capitals of six round columns at 3 per column 18 ducats val.

For three half columns or pilasters

For four sections of cornice beneath the roof

For two mouldings for the kitchen fireplace

To fit two windows in the bedroom facing the court

For repairing the doors between bedrooms

th\* 111-12

th 46-12

th 16

th 5

th 3-10

th 6'

\* Troni: Venetian currency

**Building accounts for Lucietta Thiene's barchessa, 1658.**

(Doc. 3, Archive Caldogno-Curti, bundle 46, Vol. CXLI, Vicenza).

*On 28 April 1659 At Finale*

*'The very illustrious Lady Countess Lucietta Thiene Caldogna, guardian of the very illustrious Lords Conti her sons, having engaged Mister Zanetto Brusenello, builder, to build the two east facing bedrooms of the palazzo at Finale, for which the skills of a builder are needed, and because the skills of a carpenter are also required in them, the said very illustrious Lady agreed to that effect and engaged Mister Antonio di Ghirardi, carpenter, responsible to the said Mister Antonio, to make the Sansovino-style ceiling in the small bedroom where he has knocked down the vault, at the price of th 55:16, and likewise to build the wall where the half-brick separating wall will stand, which will divide the bedrooms from each other at the price of th 37:4, and all the windows that will be needed at a price of 3:10 each, which are 14 in all, the very illustrious Lady having to have all the necessary things delivered to the court of the above mentioned palazzo for the making of the above, and so both parties promise to precisely observe the above [...]*

*in witness of which I Girolamo Ruggieri (...) wrote'.*

**This translated letter explains Lucietta Thiene's alterations to the east wing of the villa house in 1659, which made two equal rooms on the main and mezzanine floors.**

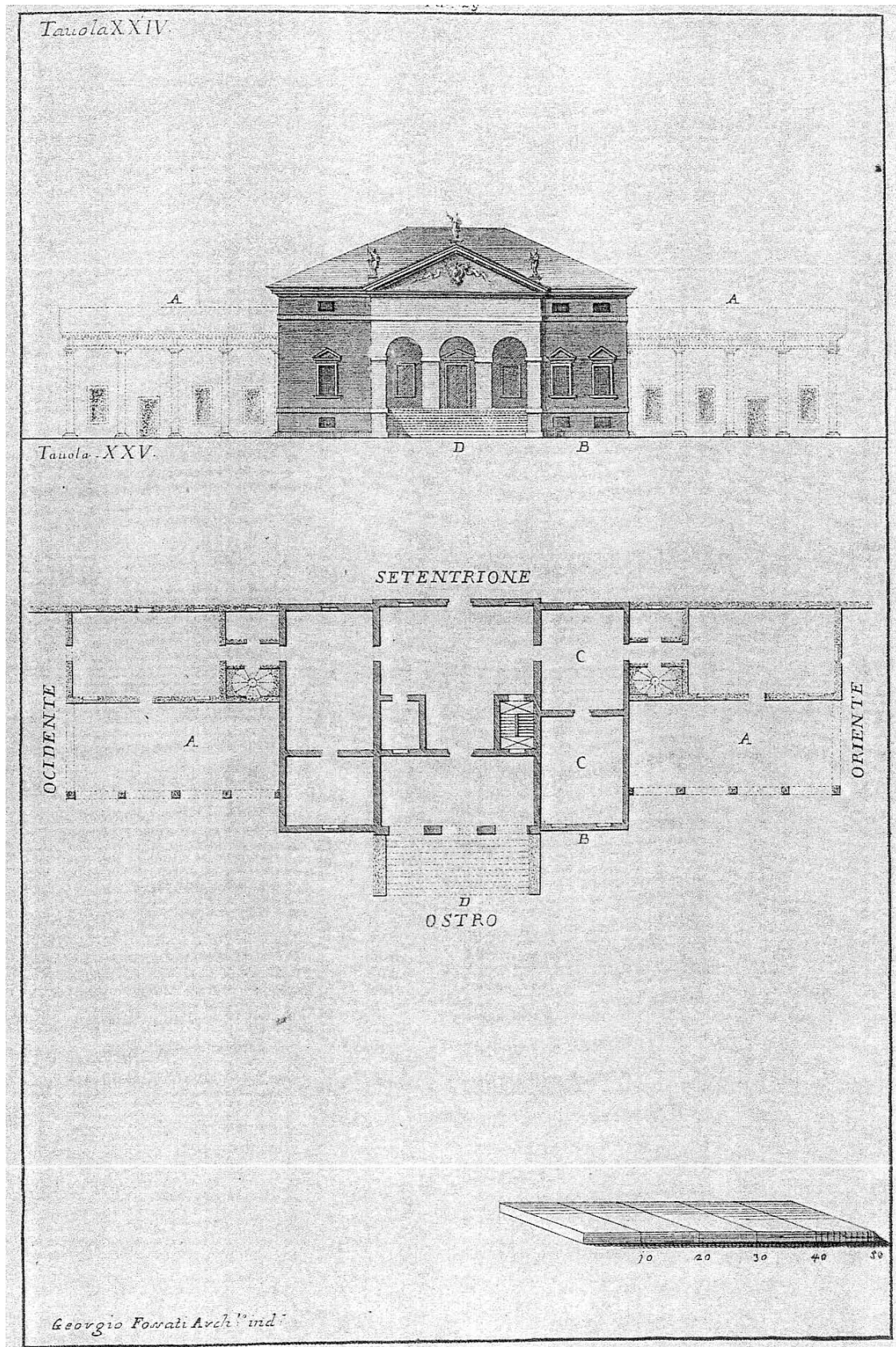
(Doc. 4 archive Caldogno-Curti, bundle 46, vol. CLXI, Vicenza).



Lucietta set the villa on a new course, rebuilding and rededicating the little chapel in the field to the west to S. Gaetano Thiene; inserting the two ornate gateways in the *corte* with their flaming urns to represent either friendship or eternity; replacing the east *barchessa* with a large, colonnaded building whose north wall survives in today's *barchessa*; and somewhat awkwardly dividing the house in the same years (1658-60), so that her two sons would each have an equal share of it.

This was the last true prosperity that the Villa Saraceno knew. In the mid-eighteenth century, modifications were made to the inserted mezzanine in the east wing, with consequent effects on the north and south fronts, work perhaps to be associated with the plan and elevation of the villa published by Francesco Muttoni in 1740.

Just when esteem for Palladio was increasing again, shown locally by Ottaviano Bertotti Scamozzi's re-publication of Palladio's designs in 1740, the villa fell into the hands of a farming tenant called Pietro Verona. Italy's long agricultural depression was also beginning. Verona pulled down the south half of the medieval barn and in 1798 suffered a conflagration of the *barchessa* from which the Palladian building only narrowly escaped. It was probably the repairs after this fire that explain the lopsided roof to the villa house. The Caldagno family eventually offered the damaged building for auction in 1838.



Francesco Muttoni's survey of the altered villa, published in 1740.

The next owners, the Peruzzi family, had the *barchessa* rebuilt (by an academically-minded architect yet to be identified) on the lines of the *Quattro Libri* illustration, but to mistaken proportions: the space available is too wide to be filled with only five bays between columns. The Peruzzi were followed by the Marcolin, and then in 1887 by the Schio family, who ran the villa as a dairy farm until the outbreak of war in 1939. That busy period saw the reconstruction of many of the farm buildings, and much subdivision of villa house (now removed). The last private owners were the Lombardi family, from whom the Landmark Trust bought the property in 1989; the Lombardi's principal work was to reinstate full-width steps on the seventeenth-century substructure in front of the loggia.



**Detail from a survey of the surroundings of Villa Saraceno 'in the time of Angelo Caldogno', 1648. Note entrance arrangements to the *corte* before Lucietta Thiene's 17<sup>th</sup>-century alterations.**



**Another version of the Saraceno coat of arms, still above the chapel to the east of the villa (not in Landmark's ownership). It carries the initials 'BS' for Biagio Saraceno, but is not dated. The crest appears to show a wing growing out of the foot of a bird of prey and is perhaps a personal adaptation by one of the two 16<sup>th</sup>-century Biagios, of Pietro's double-headed eagle.**





**Palladio in his late sixties, painted by his friend Gian Battista Maganza. Maganza had accompanied Palladio and Trissino to Rome in 1545 and became a lifelong friend of Palladio.**

### **ANDREA PALLADIO (1508-80)**

The son of Pietro della Gondola, Andrea Palladio began his life humbly in Padua as a stone mason. By 1524, at the age of sixteen, he had moved to Vicenza, where he enrolled as an assistant in the guild of bricklayers and stonemasons. He had already been apprenticed to a Paduan stonemason, but served only eighteen months of a six-year apprenticeship before deciding to transfer his training to the Pedemuro workshop in Vicenza under Giovanni da Porlezza. He remained on good terms with his former master and it seems likely that his talent, and perhaps personal charm, were recognised even this early in his career.

In about 1536, he encountered a Vicentine noble, Giangiorgio Trissino. Trissino was a poet, philosopher, mathematician, amateur architect and one of the great scholars of his day. He established a humanist academy for the benefit of young Vicentine nobles. It was Trissino who first encouraged the young stonemason to study mathematics, music and Latin, especially the works of Roman architect and theorist Vitruvius whose ten volume treatise, *De Architectura*, survived the Middle Ages in manuscript form and had begun to be published in print in the late 1480s. At this period, there were no local architects in Vicenza and outsiders were called in for any major project. This was the case for the Palazzo della Ragione or Palace of Justice in Vicenza, built 1449-60. In the late fifteenth century a two-storey colonnade was added around the building, part of which promptly collapsed. Over the next fifty years a succession of Venetian architects came to advise on the palace's future, without notable success. Names such as Serlio, Sansovino, the Veronese Sanmicheli and Mantuan Romano all made suggestions but indecision reigned.

Andrea moved back to Padua for a couple of years between 1538-40. Here, he became part of the circle of Alvise Cornaro, a friend of Trissino and enthusiastic participant in Paduan literary and artistic circles. Serlio was also an intimate and an important influence in honing Andrea's drawing skills. In 1537 Serlio had published Book IV on the orders of architecture, as the first volume of his hugely influential *Seven Books on Architecture* (finally published posthumously in 1584 as *Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospettiva*.) Book IV, on the Classical orders of architecture, set new standards of graphic illustration. Cornaro was to be useful in a more practical aspect, since his contacts would provide many of Andrea's future patrons. Andrea began to establish his reputation independently of the Pedemuro workshop, and in 1540 was publicly referred to for the first time by the nickname given to him by Trissino, Palladio, and as 'architect.'

In 1540, Palladio was back in Vicenza, and had several major projects in hand in his own right, at this stage designed chiefly from secondary sources. The Vicentine nobility, meanwhile, was developing a certain independence of spirit with regard to the Republic of Venice, which equally aspired to extend its influence to the hinterland



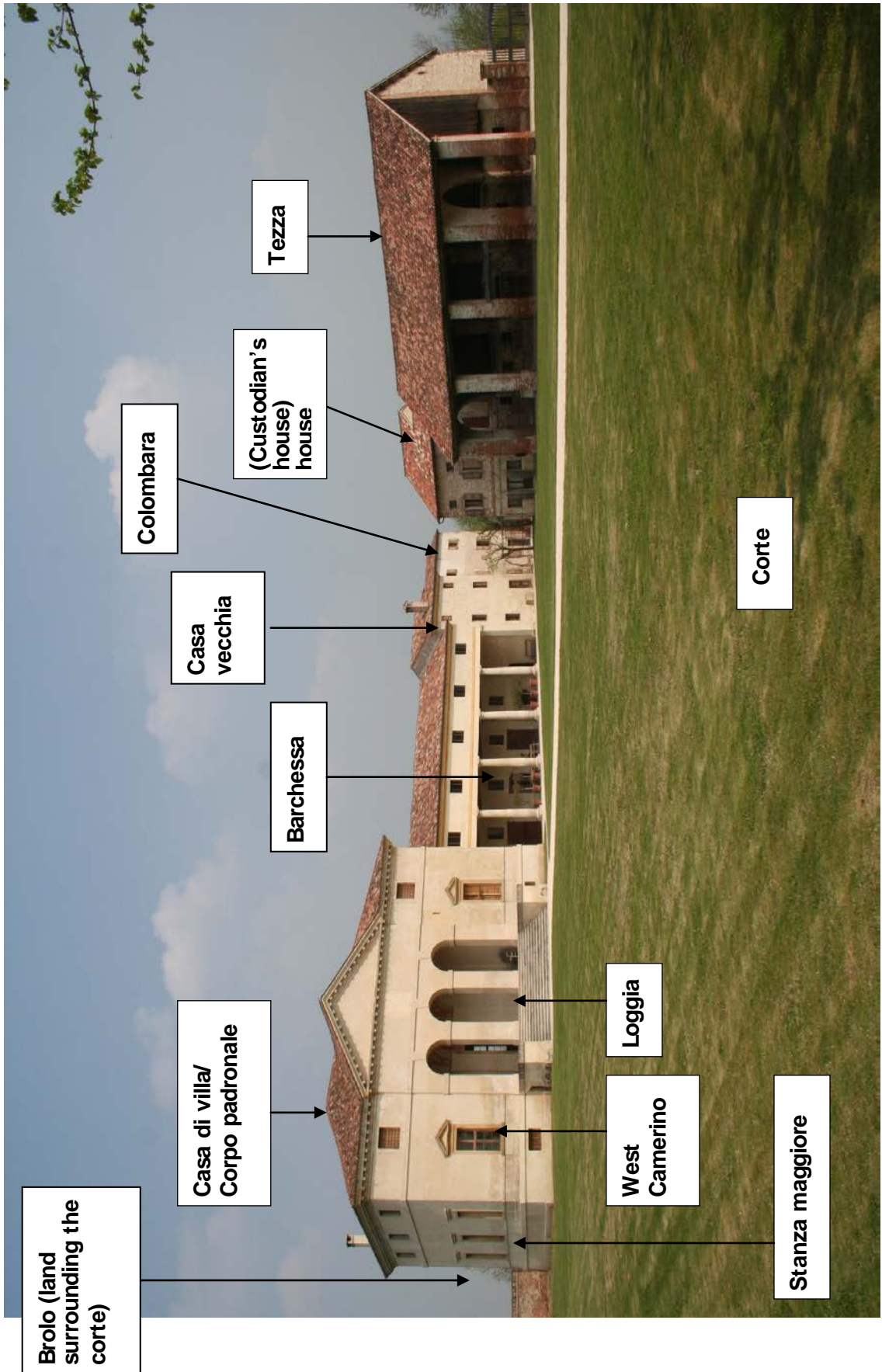
of the Veneto. Perhaps this was partly why, in 1541, Trissino took Andrea to study the remains of ancient architecture in Rome. This visit had a huge emotional and professional impact on the young architect and was the first of five such visits over the next few years, which he spent drawing and measuring directly from the overgrown and neglected piles of masonry. As a result of such observations, his own designs became simpler and less reliant on the formulae of other contemporary architects, as he worked for a variety of influential clients.

In 1546, Palladio submitted a design to remodel the so far ill-fated Palazzo della Ragione (also known as the Basilica) in collaboration with the Pedemuro workshop. His solution was brilliantly simple in engineering terms and work began in 1549. This work established his reputation and from 1550 onwards, he was engaged in a constant stream of commissions for palaces, villas, churches and public buildings. Villa Saraceno is therefore one of his earliest villa commissions (only the Villas Godi, Gazotti and Pisani Bagnolo are known to predate it) and he very soon evolved a formula for the ideal villa, which needed little further development: a central block of ruthlessly symmetrical plan (Villa Saraceno's lack of ornament makes this especially apparent) with a portico, and extended wings either horizontal or curved to provide farm buildings and link the dwelling with the surrounding countryside. Yet this simplicity is deceptive, reflecting a mature distillation of the principles of proportion to create a sculptural effect of great presence. His use of temple-front porticos for villas was a novelty (Palladio mistakenly thought that this was a practice of the ancients). The relation of portico to the rest of the building and the rooms beyond was all determined by the ancient harmonic proportions.

In 1554 Palladio published *Le antichità de Roma*, which remained the standard guidebook for the next two centuries. In 1570, by now in his sixties, he summed up his life's work in his *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, at once a statement of his theory, a glorification of his achievements and an advertisement for his practice. Palladio was the first great professional architect. While firmly rooted in the region in which he spent his life, the rules that he derived from his study of the ancients (and which he frequently broke in his own work) came to be accepted as an authority equivalent to that of the classical canon and would have worldwide influence.

**ANDREA PALLADIO – A CHRONOLOGY**

- 1508 Born in Padua on 30 November  
1521 Begins work as a stone mason  
c1537 Villa Godi in collaboration with the Pedemuro workshop  
1541 First visit to Rome  
1544 Begins Villa Pisani in Bagnolo  
1545 Becomes involved in refurbishment of the Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza  
c1550 Villa Saraceno under construction. Produces drawings for Palazzo Chiericati and Villa Foscari.
- 1550 Begins Villa Cornaro and the palace of Iseppo De'Porti  
1554 Begins Villa Barbaro in Maser  
1556 Casa Antonini and Palazzo Thiene  
1557 Begins Villa Padoer in Po Valley  
1558 San Pietro di Castello in Venice, Villa Malcontenta begins  
1559 Villa Emo at Fanzolo  
1561 Begins Villa Pojana; refetterio for St George's monastery in Venice; Villa Serego  
1562 Begins façade of San Francesco della Vigna and work on San Giogio Maggiore in Venice
- 1565 Begins Villa Cagollo in Vicenza and Villa Pisani in Montagnana  
1566 Palazzo Valmarana and Villa Zeno  
1567 Begins work on Villa Capra 'La Rotunda'  
1570 Nominated *Proto della Serenissima* (Illustrious Citizen of Venice) and publishes *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*
- 1571 Villa Piovene, Palazzo Porto Barbaran, Loggia del Capitanio, Palazzo Porto Breganze.
- 1574 Publishes the *Commentari* of Caesar; works on studies for frontage of the Basilica di San Petronio in Bologna
- 1577 Begins construction of *Il Redentore* in Venice
- 1580 Prepares drawings for the interior of Santa Lucia in Venice, oversees start of construction of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. Dies 19 August 1580.



## **A TOUR OF THE SITE**

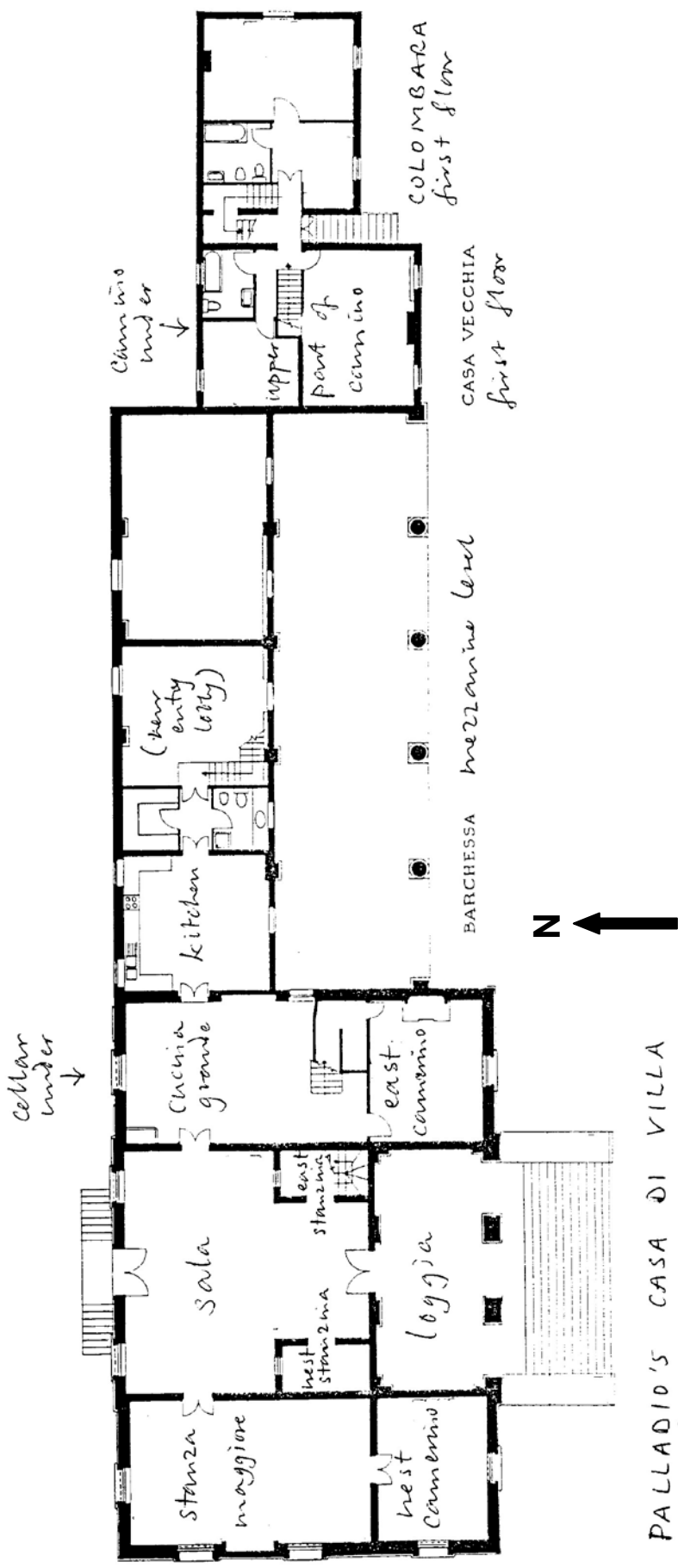
To an English reader, the layout of the Villa Saraceno grouping may look a little like an English manor farm – but much of its detail is unfamiliar. It consists of ten or so buildings grouped round a courtyard. Their shared reddish brick rendered with a thin coat of lime (*intonaco*), and the pitch of their roofs (most of which were remade at the end of the nineteenth century), give homogeneity to components whose origins are spread over the last five or six centuries.

Their arrangement shows most of these buildings were agricultural from the Middle Ages on. The grouped farming facilities here (which is what ‘a villa’ means in the Veneto), like those at Palazzo delle Trombe just up the lane to the east at Finale, reflect the large estates of the Saraceno family round about, and their huge and varied produce. (Palazzo delle Trombe is another case of a large Renaissance house being added to a medieval farm courtyard).

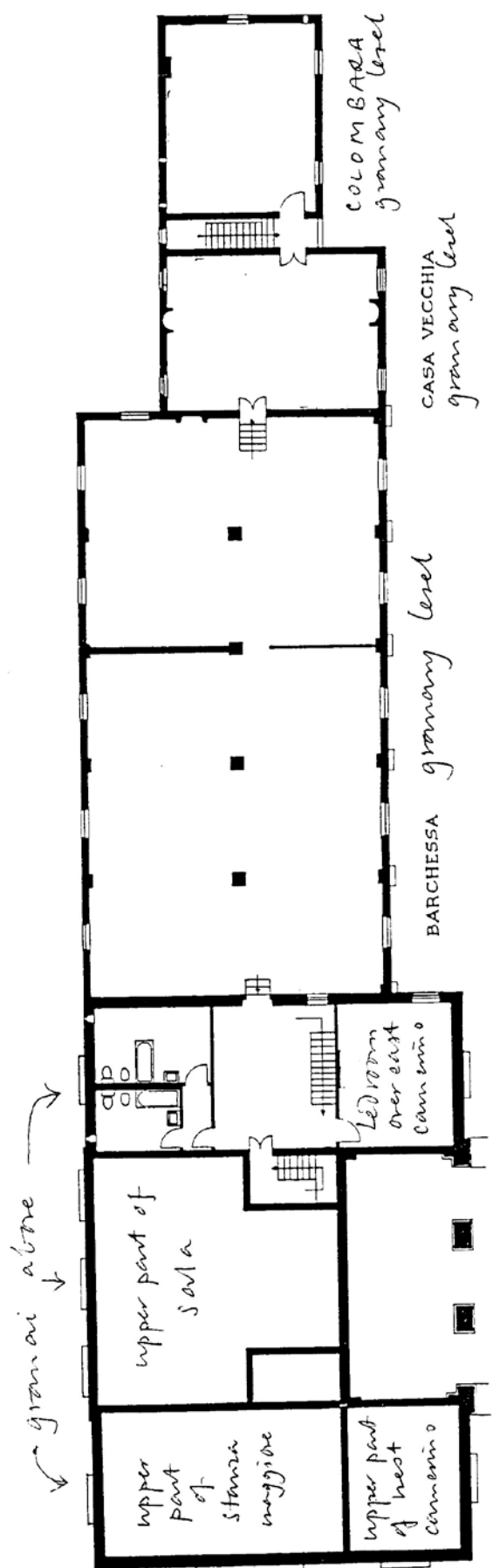
The kink in the site plan at the north east corner of the site is where the oldest surviving buildings are found: the dovecote tower or *colombara* was built around 1500 among earlier structures, of which fragments survive. Then came the long barn on the east side, also of around 1500, which then reached the road and contained under its gable (at another kink, where the silo tower now is) what was originally the only entrance to the court. A similar arrangement can be seen at nearby Villa Pojana. An addition to the dovecote in the form of a second tower house came a generation later (known today as the *casa vecchia*).

Andrea Palladio sought to formalise this somewhat informally accumulated plan, both in the scheme as built and in the grander vision published twenty five years later in the *Quattro Libri*. Palladio’s work is the villa house or landowner’s premises (*corpo padronale*) sited on the north side of the court; and, almost certainly, the court’s defining wall, which is proportioned to place the new house centrally and form a perfect square on plan with it and the front of the barn. What is not by Palladio is the colonnaded range to the immediate east of the main house – that which survives is the third example of this particular Veneto agricultural building type to stand in that position (none of them were Palladio’s, but the surviving example does dimly represent the architect’s concept of all the farm buildings being remade as a Doric atrium framing the house).

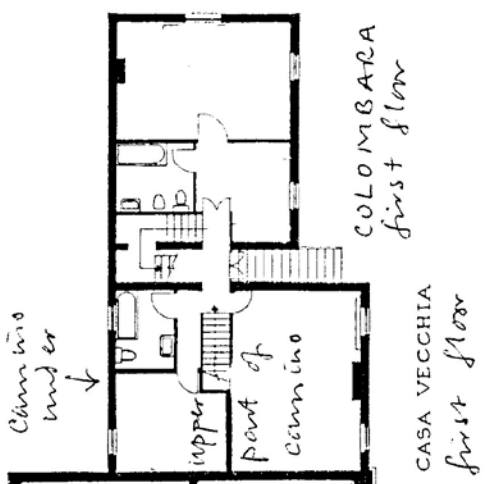




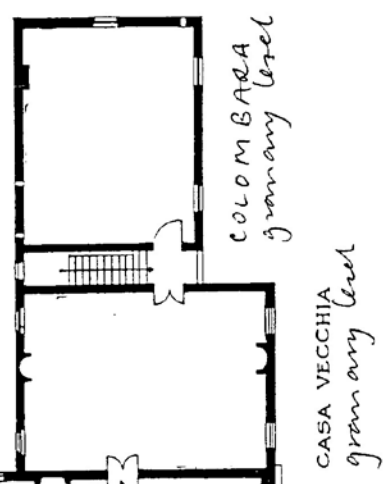
PALLADIO'S CASA DI VILLA  
main floor



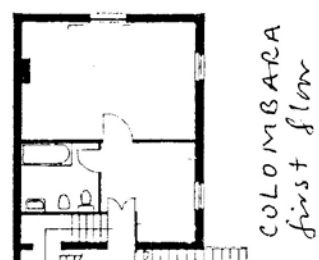
PALLADIO'S CASA DI VILLA  
mezzanine level



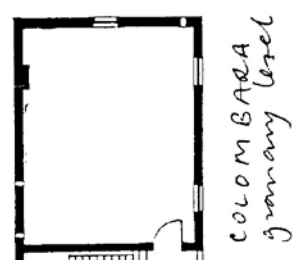
CASA VECCHIA  
first floor



CASA VECCHIA  
granary level



COLOMBARA  
first floor



COLOMBARA  
granary level

These elements are shown in the annotated plan opposite, which gives the local names (i.e. in Italian or in the Venetian dialect) for the various buildings and spaces that make up the villa. Other land surveys also follow, including three done for the owners in the seventeenth century; their contribution to interpreting the site is discussed in a later section.

## **STRUCTURE BY STRUCTURE**

### **1. THE BROLO**

This Venetian dialect word describes the orchards surrounding a villa. Usually they are walled against animals or pilfering, but here the six acres or so outside the wall is protected by a canal on the west, north and east, and a ditch along the lane on the south. This canal forms the start of a water catchment; the broadest section at the northeast (about twenty five feet) began as the usual fishpond to supply the farmstead's needs and was soon extended; the water flow at the south was sufficient to turn a mill for grinding corn. The discovery in this corner of a possible kiln for making bricks suggests that an active additional benefit of the digging of the canals was the provision of clay to make the bricks from which various buildings were built.

While the *brolo* was ploughed in the twentieth century for arable crops, its function on the west at least was the growing of fruit trees. On the east, the land mediates between the *tezza* (great barn, which among other things was a stable for horses and a cow house) and the fields beyond, so the ground must have been fenced as paddocks. The high trees along the canal margins are Italian white poplars, presumably for pollarding for vines and so on; whether or not this was a Renaissance practice is not clear.

### **2. THE CORTE WALL**

This forms an enclosure set in the wider *brolo*, within which Palladio's building is first glimpsed rising like some ancient temple in the fields. The starkness is of course somewhat unnatural – even in the 1960s there were fruit trees either side of it and its height is gauged partly to those. It is not wholly consistent in structure or date, being partly built with buttresses and partly not; and it seems that none of the existing gateways into it existed in the sixteenth century, the only entrance into the *corte* then being the main gate in the *tezza*.



The two fine gateways with finials of flaming urns leading out to the road and to the most favoured part of the *brolo* to the west are revisions of the original concept, and can probably be associated with the work of Lucietta Thiene in the mid-seventeenth century. The little door centred in the north side of the small garden under the west wall of the main house may again be later (it is cut through a buttress); the gate by the *colombara* at the northeast is a break in a barn wall; and that of the south of the *tezza* is also recent, since that length of wall is actually the old spine wall of the *tezza*. The kink in the southeast angle is an early feature, and may be associated with a chapel accessible from the lane and the *corte*, but was apparently superseded in the Renaissance by the little church in the field to the west. All sorts of minor agricultural buildings such as hay barns have stood around the *corte*'s perimeter from time to time, defining the farmyard as on the east, or attached to the wall, like a vanished building for animals at the northwest, which has left a row of blocked windows behind. Until 1992 there was a row of hen-houses (one wattle-and-daub) against the north wall west of the house.



The *tezza* or great barn, with the silo tower glimpsed beyond.



The silo tower, straddling the *corte* wall in the southwest corner.

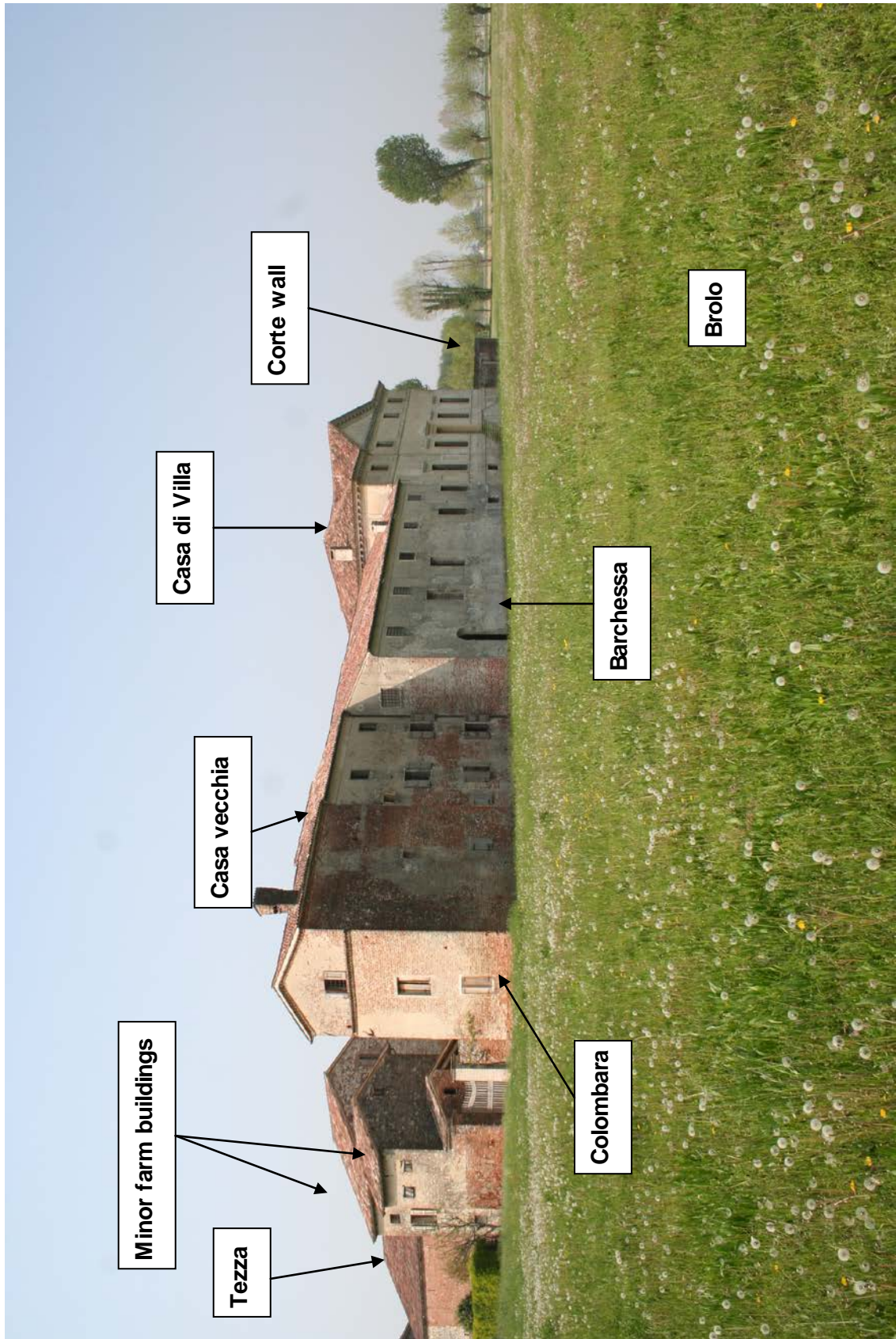
### 3. THE SILO TOWER

This a picturesque but undistinguished 1930s addition to the farmyard in the lane at the southwest corner of the *corte* would call for no particular comment, were it not that its base contains one of the keys to the Villa Saraceno's history. Looked at from the south, the tower straddles the *corte* wall, and this section of wall contains the remains of the only entrance to the villa as it was in 1500, and as it remained until Lucietta Thiene Caldogno made her gateways into the *corte* some time after 1648, at which date a survey shows no breach in the south or west walls. All that is left is the crumbled Nanto stone jambs of a not especially wide cart entrance, filled in long ago; what is missing is the stone arch, semicircular and decorated with a roll moulding like so much late-medieval work in the Vicentino, which shows in the seventeenth-century survey drawings. This led into the pillared front section of the *tezza*, in line with the surviving section, and provides another proof that the *tezza* was a very long barn between about 1500 when it was built and the 1790s when its southern part containing the stables was demolished.

### 4. THE TEZZA OR GREAT BARN

This is one of the key components of the late-medieval farm courtyard, as of so many Veneto villas. Originally some forty five metres (150 feet) long, it has been much reconstructed, but the east wall at least, with its simple cornice ornament of diagonally-set bricks, is unaltered work of around 1500. The cow-byres against this wall are post-war and remained in use until the 1980s – a use which seems to go back to the origins of the villa farm. The pillars and the roof seem to be part of the general overhaul the courtyard received when the Schio family set up their dairy farm around 1890. Only the well looks an anomaly; it may well be that the position of the shaft if not the wellhead is one of the oldest elements on the site. The *tezza* faces west, so the afternoon sun reaches deep into it; and its agriculturally usable space was extended (at least in the twentieth century) by a stone-paved floor laid outside in the *corte*, on which to dry grain.





The villa complex viewed from the north east.

## 5. MINOR FARM BUILDINGS

To the north of the *tezza* are several minor farm buildings, largely of the late-nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. They were designed for several purposes, including well-ventilated spaces for drying tobacco and a little sty at the north for keeping pigs. Parts of them have been converted as the custodian's house. However, at the southeast angle of the northern structure, a battered or splayed-out wall goes deep into the ground, and it seems that the barn of which this formed part extended past the gateway to the *brolo* at the northeast of the *corte* and was attached to the next structure to its north. This is another indication that the layout of the *corte* predates the group of late-medieval buildings that survive more completely today.

## 6. THE COLOMBARA OR DOVECOTE

It was normal for these manorial farms to have a dovecot tower, usually at one of the northern corners and sometimes, in earlier times, defensible. The pigeons gleaned grain in the fields around and contributed eggs and manure to the communal operation. The birds flew to an alighting shelf round the upper storey (this survives at the villa only on the east, the other walls having had their upper portions rebuilt in the 1970s). This is simply detailed in brick, which was also used for the pigeons' entry holes, of which only three survive.

It is this structure of around 1500 that bears, beside the outside steps, the marks of attachment to the older building mentioned above. It is not clear how its upper floors were reached unless by internal ladder stairs which have disappeared, and may not have been appropriate as a high status building. The *colombara* originally served as the landowner's lodgings when he was at his villa farm; and in his absence no doubt served for his steward. It is therefore one of the structures to be associated with Biagio Saraceno the Elder (d. 1503). The landowner's rooms were on the first floor, and were lit by a south-facing, multiple-light window whose dimensions can be seen from below; the east-facing windows were rectangular and on a central axis. The north wall preserves not only the blocked opening of the big fireplace, but also a modestly ornate chimney above. To its west are the sandstone-frame openings to the latrine chutes, which discharged with some sophistication into a late-medieval cesspit below ground. The ground floor could have been kitchens; but these also could have been in a separate building.

## 7. THE CASA VECCHIA OR OLD HOUSE

This is another domestic tower built just to the west of the *colombara*, perhaps a generation later. It has a larger ground plan, with a fine lower room known to the Saraceno in the sixteenth century as the *camino* (or fireplace) which had a cheaply painted monochrome fresco frieze high up its walls. The ceiling beams of the *camino* now visible in the bedrooms are original, but have been raised about a metre. They are blackened by smoke from the last use of the building, when it was gutted for the drying of tobacco. The little fireplaces on its upper storey belong to an earlier phase in the twentieth century, when these and adjoining spaces were used for rearing silkworms: to guard against frost killing them in their chrysalis stage it was prudent to have a source of heat. The most distinguished feature is the Renaissance stone doorframe at the present first floor level, but this is unlikely to have been its original position. The structure also includes an older fragment, the finely-made brick pier enclosed in its northwest corner which may have been part of another colonnaded barn along the north of the *corte*. The *casa vecchia* also lacks an internal staircase; the fact that it was built at just a sufficient distance from the *colombara* to permit a stone staircase to rise between them – as it does now – suggests that this might always have been the intention.

## 8. THE CASA DI VILLA OR VILLA HOUSE, OF ANDREA PALLADIO

It is logical to have described the medieval and antecedent buildings on the *corte* before coming to the house which Biagio Saraceno the Younger commissioned from Palladio shortly after 1545, since its proportional relationship to the older group determined its position. It is equally logical to leave the complex structure between it and the *casa vecchia* till last: although they relate to Palladio's concept for this villa (even if they do not exactly reflect it) they were built later.

Apparently the simplest of Palladio's major buildings in its absence of an order (no columns or pilasters) and its reliance on a language of surface and volume in the building tradition of the Veneto, even this design evolved from a complex set of practical circumstances. The remains of a so far unexplained, large medieval arch high in the internal wall of the southwest *stanzina* off the *sala* may relate to the arcaded structures that seem to have extended along the north side of *corte* until Lucietta Theine's reconstructions of the 1650s. Its earliest parts are foundations of impermeable rubble stone some two metres below the ground.



**Palladio centred his villa on a little hill to the north, photographed here in 2007 when the trees were newly planted, to muffle any noise from the anticipated autostrada.**

In digging these and the cellar under the east wing of the house, it must have become apparent that this villa stands on a site that is virtually incurably wet. There are springs as well as a high water table only a metre or two below ground level (which account for the canal – though all water levels are now controlled by the pumping system installed at the time of restoration by Landmark). A layer of clay above these water sources keeps the topsoil almost waterlogged. The one remaining cellar with a brick vault, entered from *corte* level at the east via the *barchessa*, no doubt instantly filled with water, as it had until the pump was turned on in 1992. No more cellars were built and this one was, ineffectually, given a brick drain leading away to the south.

The spaces under the rest of the villa house are walled compartments filled with the sandy soil of the fields rammed down tight, the only case in Palladio's villas where there is not a fully ventilated storage storey below the main rooms as well as above. As it happened, Biagio Saraceno's brother Giovanni had just built vast cellars beneath Palazzo delle Trombe and may be that the former's production of wine could have been safely stored there instead.

The villa house thus stands on a platform raised the height of a man above the *corte*. It is worth stressing its organic connection to the farm courtyard at this point, since accounts of the villa from a stylistic point of view seem to take this for granted. The villa's careful positioning within the wider landscape setting should also be stressed, the north-south axis that runs through the two doors into the sala being carefully aligned to frame a view of the distant Dolomites.

Access to this platform on both north and south elevation is by steps, neither existing set being to Palladio's design and both therefore remaining in somewhat provisional form. The south steps up into the loggia began as a narrow flight, but early in the seventeenth century a broad archway and wing walls were constructed (the space beneath this structure later serving, rather mundanely, as another pigsty). The existing grey stone steps were installed around 1970: the elevation drawn in the *Quattro Libri* does not allow the detail of the steps to be deciphered. During restoration, excavations late in the day revealed the remains of what seemed more like a stepped ramp than a flight of steps, perhaps even so constructed to permit horses to ascend to the loggia. Villa Emo at Fanzolo near Treviso provides an example of this, as does Palladio's design for Villa Thiene at Cicogna near Padua.





**The east – west axis in the villa is meticulously aligned, and the flow of tiled and *batutto* floors create a sense of effortless unity.**

Never built, the Villa Thiene design (Quattro Libri II, xv) reveals a wide, axially oriented ramp of broad shallow steps flanked on either side by narrower, more tightly packed treads, suggesting that ramp and side steps may well have served different purposes. buildings being remade as a Doric atrium framing the house. Time and budget did not allow us to revisit the configuration, but it remains an ambition to look again at the form of these south steps at the Villa Saraceno one day.

The north steps, from the *brolo*, must also originally have been oriented axially like the south ones. This too was only realised late, and so for now they remain a degraded arrangement as rebuilt in the nineteenth century.

These two flights gave direct access to and from the *corte* and the *brolo*. By the same token, views of the wider alluvial plain and the moving air so necessary in the summer for comfort enter the house on this rigorous north-south access. North lie the Dolomites seventy miles away and visible as snowy peaks on a clear day in the winter. North also means sunlessness and rain. South means the fertile plain tilted imperceptibly towards the River Po and the slow seeping of water from the Alps into the Adriatic, and it means the sun. Indeed, patron and architect gave an orientation to the *corte* by placing the villa house as they did, and so linked it thematically to natural cycles: in the seventeenth century at least, its two sides were spoken of as facing the morning (*a mattina*) and the evening (*a sera*).

The floorplan of the villa house is of the highest artistic and social subtlety. It encapsulates the acceptance of the lessons of ancient Rome that Palladio made real, in terms of the equally accomplished structural skills of the Veneto of the late Middle Ages, but transformed into something quite new and charged with creative energy. Sketches of this plan at two levels on page 28 reveal throughout Palladio's genius for combining practicality with the monumental, and the virtual absence of any subsequent interventions allows the perceptive to see his mind at work.

At the Villa Saraceno as much as in his works, 'Palladianism' was as much an approach to building as an architectural style. This is expressed in the floors, all on a level on their platform and largely formed not of wood like some of the ceilings, nor of stone like the external paving, but of *battuto*.

This Veneto technique, which uses salvaged building material milled, rammed in lime and sand and then ground smooth and oiled, produces a surface that is seamless and so contributes to the flow of space and light through the rooms, both earthy and noble. These *battuto* floors survive today in the loggia, in the two rooms in the west wing and the two rooms in the east wing.

In the loggia and the west wing, the oldest levels of *battuto* are beneath the current one since the rammed sandy infill below them has sunk. In the loggia another layer was added long ago, while in the *stanza maggiore* a brick floor was laid in the nineteenth century to level it up. In the west *camerino*, a new *battuto* floor has been laid at the correct level. In the east wing (today's dining room) the vault of the cellar prevented subsidence on a similar scale, so these are primary floors, which we continue to repair carefully to conserve the ancient surfaces.

Only in the *sala* was there a tiled floor, and this too had sunk. Many of the original two-clay tiles can be seen in the corners, still laid on the diagonal.

Above this floor rises a brick structure of deceptive simplicity, elegantly slender in the walls and covered with breathtaking economy with roof trusses (with their *dardo di Jove* scarf joints) spanning forty five feet. In these early villas, Palladio was inventing a new type of house for the countryside, using the simplest of available local materials. The effect of stone was commonly achieved by using *intonaco* (fine lime plaster applied to the brickwork), essential both as a shelter coat and for its damp-dispersing properties. The use of stone (a friable ochre sandstone from Nanto) is restricted to the most important door, window and cornice mouldings. The resulting artistic character is extraordinary compression and intelligence, as if there were no room for Classical columns in a design where line and surface count for so much. Now that the original design of the Villa Saraceno has been rediscovered, either revealed by stripping away later changes or renewal, it repays careful contemplation. Veneto architecture achieves its pinnacle through such surfaces, both naturally-coloured and frescoed – often just a few millimetres thick.

The noble space of the loggia, mediating between the open landscape and the *sala*, personifies this combination as well as forming the centrepiece of the south front. Projecting just enough to make its monumental function clear without compromising the integrity of the volume of the house, it is marked externally by lines in the plaster suggesting ashlar (stone blocks) and it carries the pediment in which the *Quattro Libri* indicate a coat of arms was to have been placed. In the event, the slab below the pediment seems to have performed this function. Interestingly, no evidence was found on the roof of the pediment for plinths to hold the acroterion statues shown in Palladio's design, indicating that this villa was finished less magnificently than nearby Villa Pojana, for example, now also restored by the local commune and open regularly to the public and a fascinating comparison.

The basic decorative scheme used throughout Villa Saraceno, typical of the sixteenth-century buildings of this region, is plain, ivory white, lime plaster walls (possibly covered at times with tapestries or hangings hung from the wooden cornices) combined with richly decorated ceilings. All these ceilings have in common the warm tones and colours that the restoration brought back to life, even the blues in the *stanza maggiore*. The rooms are each quite different from one another, as the interplay of form, volume, theme, function and spiritual temperament combine in a sophisticated expression of Humanist culture.

The loggia responds by its shallowness and great height to the agricultural vista to which it looks out beyond; the *sala*, by contrast, is a place of internal scenery. Its frescoes provide a *trompe l'oeil* to imagined outside scenes. The vistas framed through each of its four doorways connect the heart of the building by visual and spatial means both to its internal components east and west, and to its external setting north and south. A semi-public, ceremonial space in function somewhat like an English medieval great hall, the *sala* differs from the medieval pattern of internal planning of the Veneto *palazzi* by reaching from front to back only by means of the loggia, and by being rather wider in response to the composition of the façade. The fresco frieze and painted ceiling beams give it unity and the combination of internal and external egress give it diversity. The great barn-like doors to north and south catch passing winds in the stifling summer and contrast in scale and axis with the smaller stone architectural doorways which provide the transverse axis. In addition to the small towers with their Vicentine pierced grilles, these originally performed as entrances to the east and west apartments, a *mattina* and a *sera*.

While both these suites of rooms had similar plans (a large rectangular chamber with a fireplace leading to a smaller chamber in the angle of the south front), the best of the two suites was the west one. Here, the ceiling beams were decorated like the *sala*'s, though smoke blackening has obscured much of it since. This may explain why a correction was made in the seventeenth century to Palladio's fireplace in the *stanza maggiore*, making a very shallow flue.

The Baroque outline of the original was found during repairs and the present fire surround is a reconstruction of in plaster of the probable sixteenth-century arrangement. Both the *camerini* in the angles had brick vaults as their ceilings (similar to the loggia between them, although cross-vaulted), which were knocked down in the seventeenth century, perhaps in part because their outward thrusts may have caused the cracks in the walls noted 300 years ago, but in the case of the east *camerino*, primarily to permit the insertion of the mezzanine. The vaulted ceiling in the west *camerino* has been reinstated to its original dimensions, but in lath and plaster rather than brick.

This latter intervention brought with it the rediscovery of the fresco decoration of the west *camerino*, or as much as remained after a hacking off around 1900. Above the ceilings inserted during these alterations, the crowns of the lunette frescoes remained, as did the under-drawing of a Judgement of Paris. Thus the *loggia*, *stanza maggiore* and the west *camerino* were all found to have had allegorical or mythological decoration (described in more detail in the following section).

The east apartment does not seem to have been frescoed, its very large fireplace suggesting that it was in fact the kitchen despite Palladio's declared intention in the *Quattro Libri* that the kitchen be in a separate building. Here, the downstairs walls that mark out the original room divisions have been left, but it must be remembered that the ceilings and room divisions in the mezzanine are mid-eighteenth-century, and the concrete stair dates from about 1900 – at which date the tower steps up to the granary (after having been rebuilt on no fewer than three separate occasions) were finally removed from Palladio's scheme. Retention of this mezzanine floor enabled the existing internal circulation between first floor rooms to continue.

## 9. THE BARCHESSA

In its present form this quintessential Veneto farm building is the most misleading on the site, since it is a piece of later neo-Palladianism. Constructed in the mid-nineteenth century by an unknown architect (or builder), it replaced the structures burnt out in a fire of 1798. Seeing the vacant space between the villa house and the *casa vecchia*, and interpreting this as the space once occupied by the five-bay *barchessa* shown in the *Quattro Libri* design, the decision was taken to insert a version of the latter regardless of the fact that this inevitably meant over-wide spacing of the columns and proportional disharmony.

That said, the *barchessa* is not unpleasing, and is an interesting building for other historical reasons, since it embodies fragments of two of its predecessors on the site. That built in 1607 has left few traces, yet the archives contain documents that describe its making down to the last nail, because of the court case in which the Caldogno family listed all they had spent on improvements. Even this was not the first building on the site: fragments of particularly fine medieval brickwork were found at its east end.

The *barchessa* built in 1657-9 for Lucietta Thiene to replace this structure still survives on the north side, where the fragmentary pilasters and the arched doorway and windows (all reopened during restoration) facing the *brolo* tell of a more interesting building, which perhaps also served as a stable. For this lost structure, too, complete accounts exist. Built with Doric columns like those shown in the unrealised *Quattro Libri* full design, it had an unconventional colonnaded



plan projecting southwards beyond the plane of the Palladio building. The new trachite paving in the *barchessa* has been arranged to mark where some of its column bases are.

There is one further element to be studied: the bricks in the columns. The stone bases and capitals are nineteenth-century but materials from the preceding *barchessa* was re-used, producing columns of random diameters and eccentrically disposed entases. These elements tell us something about at least one of the earlier brick colonnades. Other than that, the *barchessa* is a splendid example of utilitarian Neo-classical building, providing invaluable spaces at ground level.

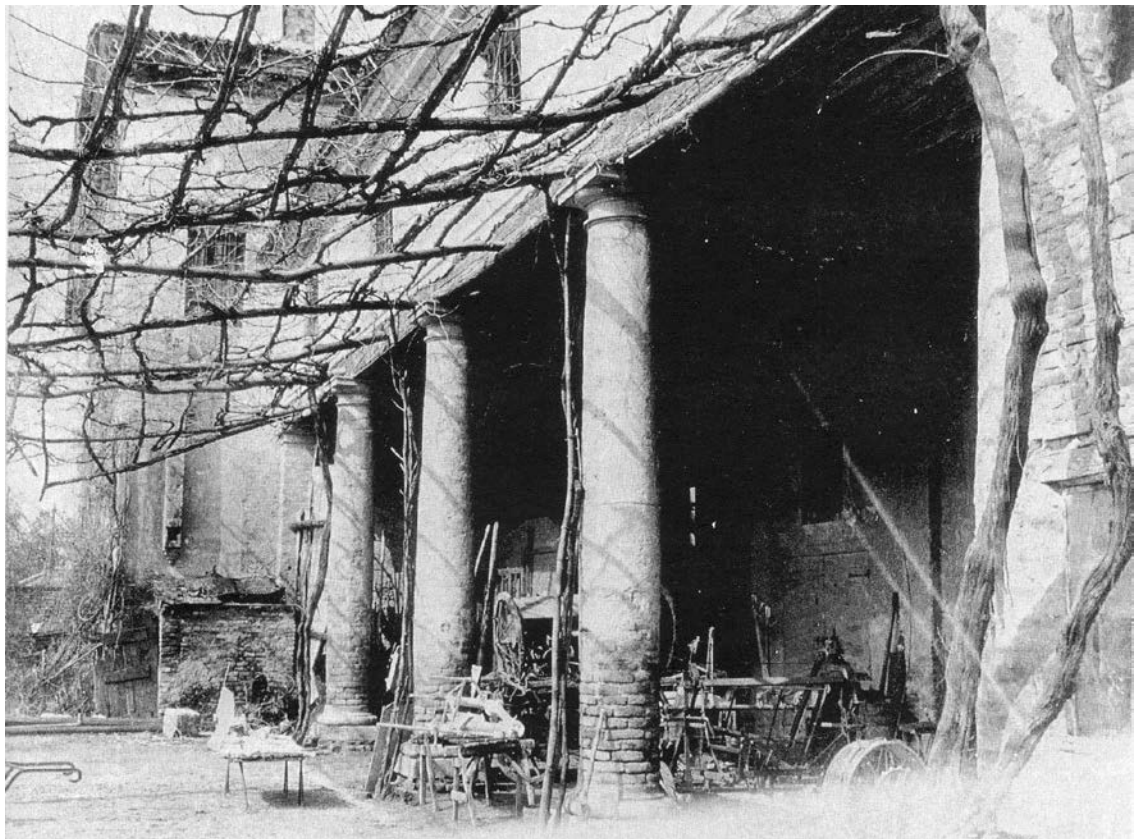
The Villa Saraceno is far from Palladio's most ornate villa but it is one of his most habitable, in the twenty-first just as in the sixteenth century. It gains its power and sense of presence from its very simplicity, and Palladio's careful placing of it within the surrounding landscape is of supreme importance to its effect.



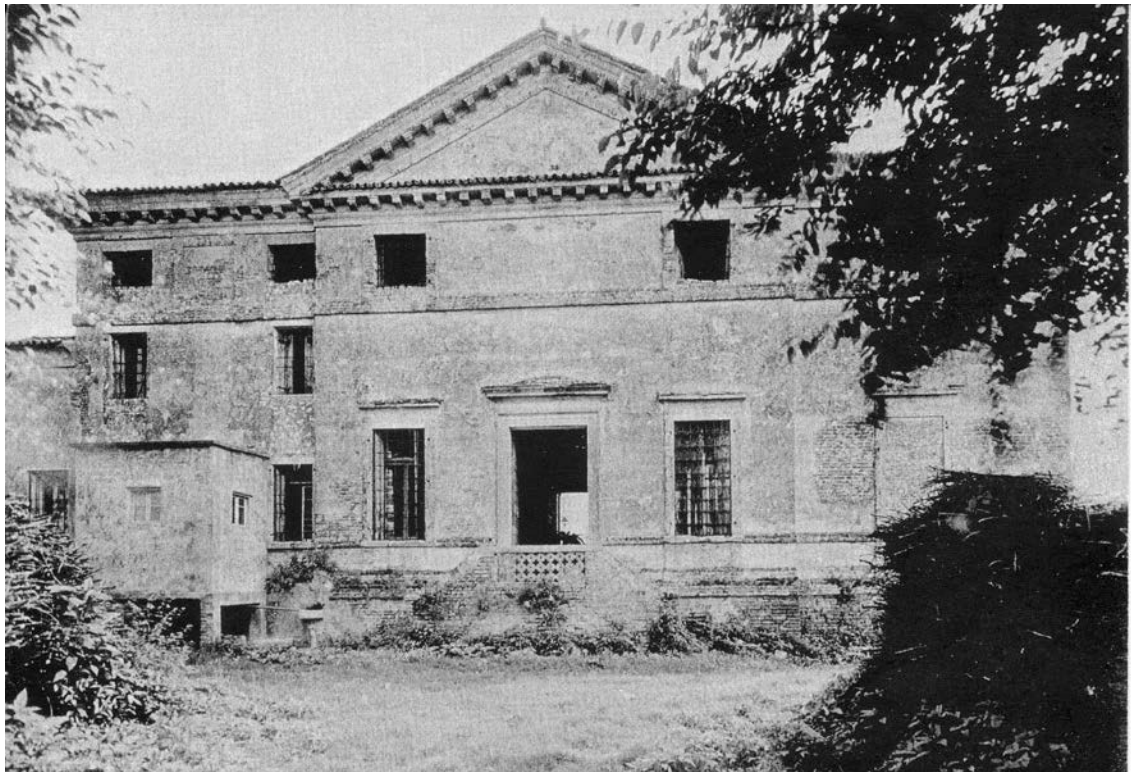


**The photographs in this part of the album, taken around 1950-65, show the villa while still in the productive uses for which it was all created. The number of people living in the buildings declined from more than thirty before World War II to none by 1974. They show the villa in the last period when its decline was more picturesque than damaging. They came from the collection of the Soprintendenza ai Beni Ambientali e Architettonici in Venice, which were passed to the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura 'A. Palladio' in Vicenza.**

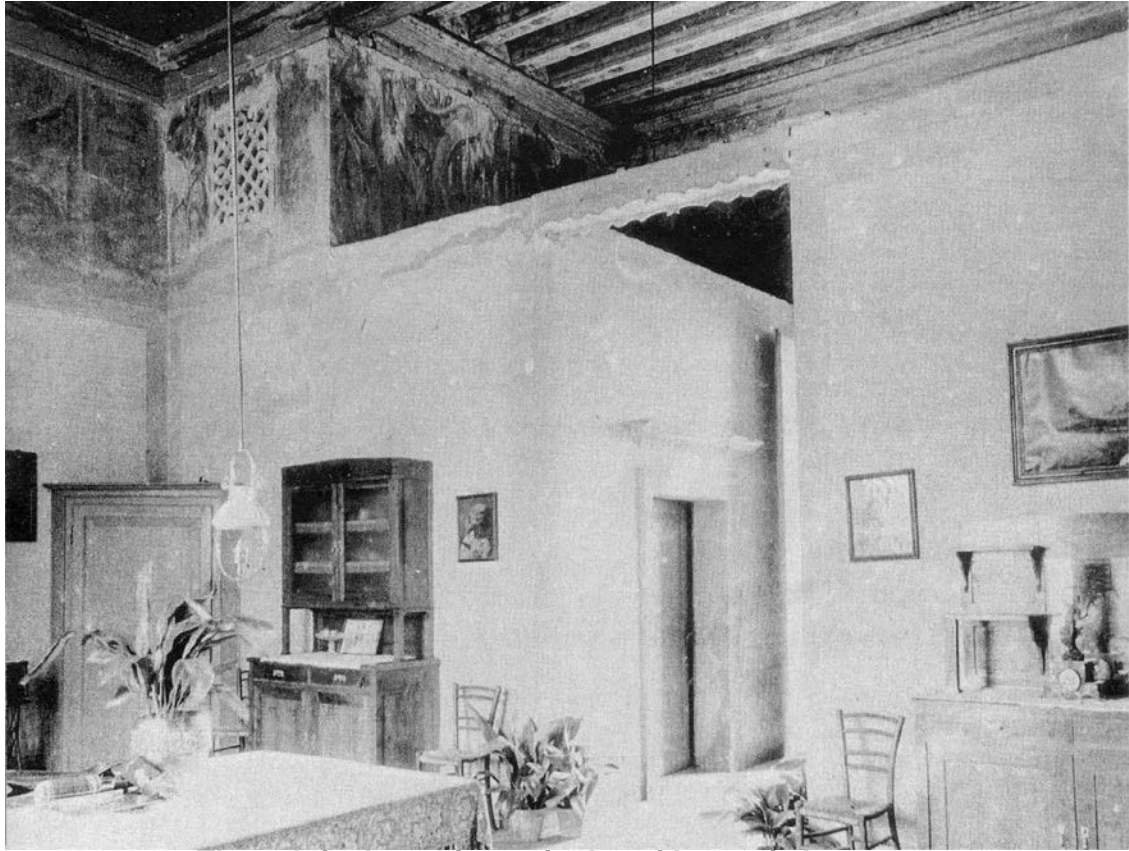












The *sala* in domestic use in the mid-twentieth century.

The frescoes before restoration



**The loggia**



**The *sala***



***Stanza maggiore looking west***





The west wall of the loggia after restoration.



## The frescoes at the Villa Saraceno

When the Landmark Trust took on the Villa Saraceno, the frescoes and friezes that are one of its chief glories were largely invisible, concealed beneath layers of dirt and later limewash. Their painstaking recovery was one of the most exciting aspects of the restoration project. In more recent years (1999), Antonio Verlatto has decoded their subjects in his book *Agugliaro*<sup>1</sup>, a copy of which may be found on the bookshelves in the *stanza maggiore*. For readers without Italian, a room by room summary of his researches follows, with thanks to David Graham for his translation.

We can also ponder *why* the sons of the Veneto chose to decorate their villas with frescoes. At a practical level, it has been suggested that walls in Palladian were so decorated to save the expense of tapestries, unnecessary in the heat of the summer farming season. This is less relevant as an explanation at the Villa Saraceno, where the walls are left blank and may or may not have held tapestries. What is more certain is that the themes of the frescoes at the Villa Saraceno – and indeed the design of the villa itself - have been very deliberately chosen to elucidate and magnify the traits and loyalties of its owners. They are an exercise in both self-projection and in praise of civic, Roman duty.

Palladio himself declared that a private house should accurately reflect the *qualità* of its owner. Palladio also notes in the preface to Book II of the *Quattro Libri* that ‘the architect must observe that....for great men and especially those in public office, houses with loggias and spacious ornate halls will be required so those waiting to greet the master of the house or to ask him for some help or favour can spend their time pleasantly in such spaces.’ This seems exactly the intended role of the loggia and *sala* at the Villa Saraceno, with their beautiful yet edifying frescoes, designed by association to portray the Saraceno family in the best possible light. There were few theatres in mid-sixteenth-century Italy; Palladio notes that it became fashionable to stage ‘comedies...or similar entertainments’ in the *sala* of the family home.

It has also been suggested that Palladio and his architecture of antiquity were taken up by the nobles of the Veneto in a conscious move to distinguish themselves architecturally and politically from the Venetian republic, with its Gothic and Byzantine forms. By building their new villas *all’antica*, the Vicentines were re-asserting their dominion over the region by consolidating their existing holdings against the Venetian interlopers.

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<sup>1</sup> Verlatto, Antonio, et al., *Agugliaro*, 1999, Comune di Agugliaro, Vicenza, pp. 72-94.

### The Loggia

Any account of the frescoes in the loggia must begin with the monumental figure of Biagio Saraceno himself, positioned inside a shell in the arch lunette above the entrance door, to welcome the visitor. He is seated on a bench and his thoughtful expression must surely represent a likeness of the man himself. His gaze is fixed on his right hand, where the Palatine crown rests, which he has just received from the goddess above. In his left hand he holds the staff of command, symbol of recognised authority. He wears a plumed helmet and the short, green tunic of the 'ancient' *condottiere*, fastened by elaborate braces, with a mask on his chest. On his legs are Renaissance-style buskins. His athletic body is framed by a large violet cape, unwinding in silken folds and draped across his knee.



**Biagio Saraceno above the entrance door**

Above the inside arches of the loggia, winged Victories standing on globes and painted in ochre monochrome gather on either side to glorify the client, some sounding trumpets, others holding laurel crowns.



### **Abundance**

In the centre of the vault above, Abundance is painted against a blue sky in an elaborate octagonal frame connected to two matching frames. She is dressed in rich Renaissance garments with one firm breast exposed, symbolising material and spiritual fertility. In her right hand, she holds triumphally the golden crown of a knight of the empire and an olive twig to symbolise peace, which she is about to hand to Biagio as he sits above the door. In her left hand she holds a winged wand with two interwoven serpents, symbolising peace and economic prosperity, here resulting from rich agricultural production. This serpent wand was also carried by Mercury, Jupiter's messenger and the Roman god of good tidings and protector of trade.

Abundance wears a golden crown on her curly hair, with a pearl necklace and pearl earrings. Her damask gown in warm golden shades on a green background is fastened with an emerald brooch. The goddess's depiction is in the style of Zelotti, with a long, puffed right sleeve and the fall of the drapery on the cloud.



**One of the *putti* that flank the goddess.**

In the side frames dance two winged *putti* or cherubs, surrounded by a fluttering violet band and holding olive twigs. They play the part of two Erotes following the goddess Aphrodite in this manifestation of her as Abundance.

The corners framing the central octagon are painted in monochrome and show four female figures (Floras) with breasts partly exposed and voluminous drapery, seated on an architectural volute (or scroll). They represent the four states of 'Holy Agriculture': from right to left when entering the loggia, these are: Working the Land (the ox yoke); Irrigation (the tipped jug); Harvest (a sheaf of canes or ears of wheat) and the Glorification of Peace (an olive garland).



**Irrigation and Working the Land**

The Floras are looking at four oval scenes, in black monochrome enclosed by scrolled volutes. These embody mythically *Virtus Romana*, or the virtues of the Roman citizen, although may simultaneously be intended to represent the four cardinal Christian virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. On the right, on entering the loggia, is Camillo, nominated Dictator of the Senate. He draws his sword and says to Brenno, chief of the Gauls, the fateful phrase that 'Rome is conquered by iron, not gold.' The scene is identifiable by its architecture as being set on the Campidoglio in Rome and is nicely linked between the silhouettes of Camillo, the onlookers and Brenno, who has been taken by surprise.



**Muzio burns his hand.**

The next vignette shows Muzio in the presence of King Porsenna beneath a canopied throne. Muzio is burning his right hand over a candle placed on an elegant Renaissance table as, according to the story, he exclaims 'Look and understand how the Romans scorn life.'





**Marco Curzio leaps into the precipice.**

The third virtue of sacrifice to civic duty is represented by Marco Curzio, a young Roman knight who sacrificed himself by leaping into a precipice that had opened up in the Forum in Rome. An oracle had foretold that the infernal abyss could not be filled with soil but only with that which was most precious to Rome. The young Curzio realised that what was most precious to Rome was its youth and soldiers. After his sacrifice, the precipice did indeed miraculously close.

The subject of the fourth scene is less certain. It shows a Roman warrior with drawn sword pointing at a person on a throne, who appears not at all frightened by the imminent threat. Instead, he tries to calm the soldier with his right hand. It may represent The Error of Muzio, and certainly seems intended to contrast self-restraint with anger.

These oval vignettes are surrounded by festoons of flowers and bouquet motifs, although these have unfortunately been completely repainted, possibly in the nineteenth century.

Only the west end wall of the loggia is frescoed today, and the treatment may belong to the eighteenth century. A Corinthian colonnade with high entablature stands against a sky with scattered clouds. No sign remains of any matching scene on the east wall.

The fresco in the vault has similarities to that at nearby Villa Pojana, also designed by Palladio, and it may well be that some of the same fresco painters also worked at Villa Saraceno, possibly at the same time (1550-60). Antonio Verlatto attributes the cycle of frescoes in the loggia to the Verona artist Anselmo Canera (1522-83) though states that the youthful Andrea Michielei, called Vicentino, may also have contributed.

**Sala (or main entrance hall).**

The cycle of frescoes in the *sala* depicts the tragedy *Orazio* by Pietro Aretino (1492-1556). This cycle begins in the centre of the north wall, above the door that opens to the *brolo* to the rear. Verlatto identifies in this complex image the keys at once symbolically to the cultured existence aspired to within a villa; to a possible motive for the commissioning of the frescoes, and to start of the story those frescoes depict.



**Above the north (*brolo*) entrance to the *sala*.**

The image is divided into two halves within an oval with a pair of ochre masks top and bottom, and golden ribbons around the framing volutes. To the right is a Palladian setting with two windows, where a 'lord' dressed in the 'ancient style' sits at a Renaissance writing desk, where lie his helmet and a candle. A long bench stands along the wall behind him and his faithful white dog lies curled in the foreground.

A band of light illuminates the floor of square tiles, which continues beyond the open door where the scene opens up into the left half of the painting, into a field where two distant armies are drawn up facing each other. A rider gallops towards them. Crucially, Verlatto identifies the room where the lord is writing with the *sala* at the Villa Saraceno, the very room in which this cycle is painted, on the following basis. Verlatto further suggests that the 'lord' represents Pietro

Aretino himself, shown writing *Orazio* at the villa. The identification is made on the following basis.

In November 1552, Pietro Aretino wrote a letter from Venice to Lucietta Saraceno, wife of Gasparo Saraceno and daughter of Girolamo Chiericati. Lucietta was the wealthy owner of the Palazzo delle Trombe, without children, who would leave her property to the sons of Biagio. Aretino was a true Renaissance man, who moved easily in the circles of figures such as Titian, Sanmicheli, Sansovino, Michelangelo and Vittoria (he never mentioned Palladio, possibly because he thought he was too provincial but perhaps too because Palladio sought to revive classical forms, whereas Aretino rebelled against ancient conventions in his own writings, championing the vernacular both in language and, often, topic).



**A likeness of Lucietta Saraceno by Alessandro Vittoria, a sculptor from Trento (1552). Her friend Aretino urges her in his letter to have a medallion struck by Vittoria (who made one of Aretino himself in the same year).**

That Lucietta was one of his correspondents certainly suggests she was both charming and highly educated, and indeed she advised her nephew Biaggio to profit from the most renowned and avant garde artists of the time. In his letter, <sup>2</sup>Aretino tells Luicetta of a visit to Vicenza by Alessandro Vittoria, an 'excellent sculptor, student of Fidia Sansovino in style.' The letter also suggests that Aretino, who himself owned a villa at Gambarara on the Brenta canal, may have been a recent guest of Lucietta. 'My debt,' he writes, 'also for your generosity, ensures that I will always be at your disposal.' *Orazia* was dedicated to Pope Paul III and published in 1546. It would be taking Aretino's depiction in the fresco too literally to infer that he wrote the play at the Villa Saraceno in that year (not least as his letter to Lucietta was written in November 1552) but the accuracy of depiction of this very *sala* suggests a close association of some kind.

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<sup>2</sup> Pietro Aretino, *Lettere*, Libro Sesto, p. 109 (Parigi,1609). Biblioteca Marciana, Venice.

On the basis of this letter and the identification of the room in the fresco as the *sala* at the Villa Saraceno, if Verlato is correct in his identification, a link is provided with one of the most colourful figures of mid-sixteenth century Italy. It suggests the play (which Aretino is reported to have preferred to all his other work) was composed at least in part while Aretino was a guest of the Saracenos. Thus the dramatist's imagination leaps beyond the walls of the room to the beginning of the play.

The story of *Orazia* is based on Books I and II of Livy's *History of Rome*. Rome was at war with the powerful city state of Alba. To settle the conflict, the two kings agreed to nominate three champions from each of their armies, to fight to the death. By coincidence, each army had a set of triplets, the Horatii for the Romans and the Curiatii for the Albans, and these were selected as the champions. All three Curiatii and two Horatii were slain, but Orazio, the last of the Horatii brothers, survived. Rome was thus saved and the Curiatii vanquished. In the first image, Orazio is shown galloping joyfully towards the Roman army near the seven hills of Rome, while the Alban army waits on the other side, with the city of Alba Longa behind. The tragic story of how Orazio murders his sister Celia unfolds through the rest of the cycle.



1. Celia had been the promised wife of one of the fallen Curiatii brothers, whom she had loved. The story continues to the left of the entrance from the loggia, where the old nurse shows Celia a length of fabric once embroidered, and the golden collar, of Celia's fallen Curiatio husband, slain by Orazio.



2. The next scene (above), moving anticlockwise, is set in a Roman street, where the space expands into a stage surrounded by Renaissance palaces. Here Celia, again accompanied by her nurse, laments the death of her husband to her father, Publio. Her brother Orazio, victor over the Curiatii and angry with her sister for her disloyal display, is restrained by his friends on the right. On the left, Marco Valerio, a Roman fecial, invokes the response of a high magistrate. The splendid urban setting features a big single arch in the background similar to the famous Arco dei Gavi in Verona, 'undoubtedly' in recognition of the painter Anselmo Canera's home town and a proper tribute to the 'most Roman' city in northern Italy, to whom Verlato also attributes these frescoes stylistically.





3. The third scene (above) shows the young Celia, still with her nurse, being taken by her father to appear before the magistrate, depicted seated on a throne and flanked by dignitaries evoking the justice of the Roman people. There are two fine buildings on the right: the first is reminiscent of Girolamo Chiericati's work, the second, in the background towards the triumphal arch, that of Marcantonio Thiene.



5. After the fourth, central scene of the author and two armies already described, the fifth image in the frieze (above) shows the Roman people following Celia and her imploring nurse, while Orazio speaks to Spurio, a friend of his father. The perfect, almost theatrical perspective of the buildings, figures and crowd is striking, culminating in the large triumphal arch topped by two acroterial statues and a plaque bearing the letters S P Q R, for the motto of the Roman Empire.



6. The next scene (above) shows Publio calling for the sentence from Duumviro, who is seated on a high throne between lictors with fasces (bundles of sticks, symbolising the strength of the many united). On Publio's left are his son, Orazio, and his daughter, Celia, with her nurse. The marble architecture on the back of the throne is well painted, with two bronze statues of Justice and the gigantic ionic columns of the Forum. Another big triumphal arch can be seen in the background.



7. The seventh scene shows the end of the tragedy. Celia is stabbed by her brother, but first makes a heartbroken cry to her beloved, deceased husband. The nurse screams, covering her eyes with her hands so as not to see the murder. Note the big circular basilica on the right, with Corinthian columns in green marble, the butcher's with meat on display symbolically placed behind the victim and, at the end, another arch with two very tall obelisks.



8. The eighth and final scene (above) above the south entrance door, shows the dead body of Celia, with bloody gown, carried on the shoulders by young men, with the loyal and distraught nurse crying in the middle. The crowd is arranged theatrically in the oval scene, with a splendid ring of Renaissance buildings (the second on the left recalls the Palazzo Canossa in Verona), and the focal point directed toward a monumental arch based on that of Hadrian in Ancona. Orazio, the fratricide, closes the scene exclaiming: *'This is the fate of one who dares to lament the death of our enemies.'* (third act).

The play in fact has one further episode. Orazio is arrested for the murder of his sister and taken for trial. The hero is condemned to be whipped and then hanged for murder. Orazio's last chance is to appeal to the people of Rome against his sentence, and his father's grief moves the crowd to acquit Orazio, who is therefore sentenced to a symbolic punishment instead. Aretino here departs from Livy, by making Orazio initially refuse to compromise his honour further, preferring death. At this point, a voice from the heavens intercedes and tells him to accept the symbolic punishment. The hero obeys, so humbling himself before both the gods and his city.

The entire sequence presents a balanced contrast with the theme of 'Virtus Romana' in the loggia, says Verlatto. Or does it rather represent a cautionary tale of the dangers of opposing the state, even in matters of the heart, and heavenly approval of martial virtue? The *sala* was, after all, used as a ceremonial space for the despatch of business by the lord of the villa, as well as for more recreational uses. A folder containing a copy of *Orazia*, in English translation, may be found on the bookshelves in the *stanza maggiore*, which may perhaps inspire our guests' thespian ambitions.

The crowded street scenes with their tight perspectives and detailed architectural representations of this cycle of frescoes prefigure the impressive scenery that survives in the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (commissioned 1585), whose exterior was designed from 1580 by Palladio shortly before his death. The proscenium arch and detailed scenery by Vincenzo Scamozzi are especially reminiscent of the kind of street scenes depicted in this cycle, based largely on Palladio's and others' researches on the theatres of Classical Rome.

Finally, remember to look above the frieze to the finely painted and coffered ceiling in the *sala*. Lightly restored and conserved by Landmark, this decoration is original, its fine detail the crowning richness of this late-Renaissance space.

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2007

## Pietro Aretino (1492-1556)

The possible association of Aretino with the Saraceno is an exciting one. An equivalent among British Landmarks would be discovering that Christopher Marlowe had written a play at Wolveton Gatehouse or Francis Bacon one of his major works at Old Campden House.

Son of a cobbler from Arezzo (from where he took his adopted name), Aretino was one of the most versatile and vigorous vernacular writers of sixteenth-century Italy. He may never have had any formal education, but thanks to the contacts of an aristocratic protector of his attractive mother, he enjoyed the company of cultivated men from a young age, writing his first poems in his late teens in Perugia. In 1517, he acquired a position in the household of Agostini Chigi in Rome. Chigi was a wealthy banker and patron of artists, and with his support, Aretino soon moved into the outer circles of the *litterati* surrounding Pope Leo X, whose attention he caught with a poem on the death of an elephant. Such circles were not as staid as we might expect today, and Aretino earned a reputation for writing *pasquinades* or lampoons on those of influence, especially useful in blackening reputations.

Eventually, in 1524, Aretino had to flee Rome after publishing a series of sonnets to go with a set of banned pornographic engravings by Aretino's friend, Giulio Romano, which showed thirty five positions of lovemaking. Aretino returned to Rome the following year, but then fled into self-imposed, permanent exile in Venice from 1527, after another victim of his pen, Bishop Giovanni Giberti, tried to have him assassinated.

By now in his mid thirties and as well informed as ever, Aretino transformed the crude *Avisi* or news broadsheets of the day into satirical and disconcertingly well-informed sources of personal and political comment on the densely hierarchical Venetian Republic. He also published his letters, scolding, praising or flattering by turns the public figures, who would become his chief source of income as they attempted to placate his powerful pen with gifts and favours. He earned the sobriquet of Scourge of Princes and even Francis I sent him a placatory gold chain in 1533. Aretino was also a man who collected lively, witty and beautiful people around him, and so it burnishes Lucietta Saraceno's reputation that she seems to have moved within these circles. It is on his letters that Aretino's reputation chiefly rests today, but he also wrote plays and Dialogues, delighting in bringing the themes of ancient Rome to contemporary settings, such as his *Ragioamenti*, dialogues about brothel affairs that satirised the fashion for erudite discourse on Platonic themes and drawing parallels



between the deviousness of the courtiers at the Doge's court and the wiles of the courtesans for which sixteenth-century Venice was renowned.

The artist Titian was a great friend of Aretino, and arguably the one circumstantial point of evidence against Verlato's identification of the writing lord in the frescoes at the Villa Saraceno is that the portrait Titian painted of his friend in 1545 shows him with a distinctive flowing beard (as indeed do all other engravings and portraits of him). We must assume, then, that the personification in the fresco is merely symbolic.



**Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), Titian.  
Pitti Palace.**

**Stanza Maggiore (today's sitting room)**

Here a high frescoed frieze runs around the walls below the ceiling. The ceiling beams are original and still bear traces of the original painted decoration. The frieze was found to have survived the centuries less well than the frescoes in the *sala* and is stylistically different. The frieze breaks at the centre of the west wall above the fireplace; once, there would have been a tall chimney breast here, probably also painted. The frieze is divided into six panels within scrolled frames, curled on two sides and with apotropaic masks (against bad luck) on the other two. Between them are pictures of imprisoned nude men and women, winged *putti* and festoons of fruit. Four corner ovals in blue monochrome – which must once have been very striking – link the sections.

The room seems to be dedicated to the myth of the foundation of Rome and the stories of Aeneas, with some scenes taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*. This was a popular theme in the mid-sixteenth century among Roman-Emilian mannerists, although less so in Vicenza.



**The Judgment of Paris.**

The painting on the south wall, which is best preserved, shows The Judgement of Paris. He is regally dressed, seated on a rock, and is handing the prize of the golden apple to Aphrodite, the goddess he found most beautiful – a choice that legend tells eventually led to the Trojan War. Athene, Hera and Aphrodite, the three contenders, are shown nude, their blonde hair tied with a string of pearls. Aphrodite is wearing a small golden band on her arm.



**Aeneas lands in Carthage.**

The painting above the entrance door shows Aeneas's landing in Carthage (*Aeneid*, Book 1). The hero and three companions are looking down from a high precipice at their ships anchored in the port with sails furled. Some soldiers are descending a long ladder.

The hunting scene (Book 4) follows to the right. It shows the cave where Dido and Aeneas, caught by a sudden, fortuitous downpour, made love. Some hunters with their dogs can be seen above the cave. The happy lovers are painted on the left, Dido wearing the royal crown, as they make their way toward Carthage, visible in the distance. A rainbow marks the recent storm.

On the opposite side, after the Judgement of Paris, there is a scene that is difficult to interpret. It may be the procession of the Glorious Descendants met by Aeneas in the Elysian Fields (*Aeneid* Book 6). The last two scenes are even harder to decode, but they are probably taken from stories by Tito Livio.

A bust of a young man dressed as a Roman dignitary, who may be one of Biagio's sons (Leonardo or Pietro), is shown in a shell at the centre of the east wall above an elaborate pedestal. Two naked prisoners in chains are shown at the sides, one young with an athletic body shown from behind, the other elderly with features that suggest a portrait. Two other prisoners, these ones partially dressed, are shown on the opposite side.

Other Venuses are seated on volutes. Some are completely nude with their bodies framed by silken veils in pastel shades; others are richly dressed in brocades fastened with rich cameos.

Almost all are playing with winged Erotes, arranged between fruit and vegetal festoons.

Verlato attributes the frieze in the *stanza maggiore* to Giovanni Antonio Fasolo (1530-72), on the basis of the obvious Michelangelesque plasticity of the nudes, though Battista Zelotti's (1526-78) style is also suggested, especially in the chromatic shades and the loose drapery of the Venus's clothing.

The frescoes at the Villa Saraceno may be neither the most accomplished nor the most extensive of those to be found in Palladio's villas, but they formed a gracious backdrop to life in what was also a working estate. Today, they give us a compelling glimpse into the civilised and erudite existence of the Sarcenos of the sixteenth century, who had the foresight to commission for their villa house a young and relatively untried architect, whose designs would change the world of architecture.

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