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THE MEDIEVAL HOUSEHOLD  
IN CHRISTIAN EUROPE, C. 850–C. 1550

Managing Power, Wealth, and the Body

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BREPOLS

# The Palazzo of the da Varano Family in Camerino (Fourteenth–Sixteenth Centuries): Typology and Evolution of a Central Italian Aristocratic Residence\*

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## *Introduction*

Italy has no shortage of historic buildings which have seen their original role and function alter over the centuries. But few of them can equal the adaptability shown by the *Palazzo* da Varano in Camerino in adjusting to new situations. Its constantly changing purpose in life — over the course of its six centuries of existence it has been the residence of the local *Signori*, a seat of papal authority, and finally home to a prestigious university — has made it almost the perfect symbol of architectural metamorphosis, both reflecting and shaping the urban reality surrounding it. Indeed in this paper I argue that the *domus* cannot be considered apart from the *familia* which built it, the da Varano of Camerino: they grew together, they speak the same language, their spirits are entwined.

Although it represents a fine example of the evolution of aristocratic residences in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *Palazzo* and the family are, strangely, familiar only to a restricted circle of experts. Archeological and architectural research into the building is at an early stage and there are still many unanswered questions about how the rooms rediscovered during restoration were actually used. Built in several stages over the span of three centuries, restructured many times, the building we see today bears little resemblance to its ancient counterpart and, in fact, has lost most of its original rooms. Overall, there were three main construction phases and

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\* My greatest debt is to Prof. Alan Partington who made possible the English version of this study written originally in Italian. I wish to thank him for his patience and kindness.

each of them was linked to the public and private affairs of the family within the wider context of medieval Italy from the time when they first settled in Camerino as feudal lords, through the days of their rise to power, their *presa della piazza*, and finally to when they fell to the most tragic of ends.<sup>1</sup>

At a more abstract level, the first building phase (Gentile's Houses) can be seen as an expression of the family's ambition to rise to power, the second one (the Palace of Venanzio) represents their actual rise to power, while the third and last phase (Giulio Cesare's New Houses) sets the final seal on their achievement of both military and civil power (fig. 1).

In fact although unique in many details, the *Palazzo* has many features in common with other palazzi of the period including the Palazzo Trinci in Foligno, the Palazzi Ducali of Urbino and Gubbio, just to quote the most important in the region, or the well-known Palazzo Ducale di Mantova.

A parallel can also be made with the House of the Rufolo described in Jill Caskey's study in this volume. Although this residence is older than that of the da Varano in Camerino, they nevertheless share many features. Of particular importance here is that they were both constructed, not as a single unit, but over a considerable period of time. They both started from a central nucleus, then expanded in size and altered in function.

There is too a certain parallelism, though in reverse, between the two families to which they belonged. The Rufolo were a rich family of merchants who acquired noble status through commerce and the various services and favours they rendered to the Crown. The da Varano were feudal nobility but, like other similar powerful families of central Italy, they did not disdain a certain indulgence in trade to extend their power and patrimony.

### *The da Varano Family and the Historical Background*

The da Varano was the most powerful family for over three centuries — from the thirteenth to the sixteenth — in the strategically vital region of the southern Marche, set in the heart of central Italy and at the core of the papal territories.

Their initial rise to power was essentially little different from that of other Italian feudal families who managed to use to their own advantage the upheaval which was the result in Italy of two singular events in European political history — the removal of the papal seat to Avignon (1309–78) and the Great Schism of the Western Church (1378–1449). These families were skilful in attracting favours from both the empire and the Church and once settled in the towns, they created fully fledged oligarchic

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<sup>1</sup> The use in this context of the expression *presa della piazza* is meaningful. In the Middle Ages, town and square were considered as synonyms. The square was meant as town and vice versa. The square, moreover, was the place where every public event took place and so *prendere la piazza* (conquest of the square) means to be in power in a town.

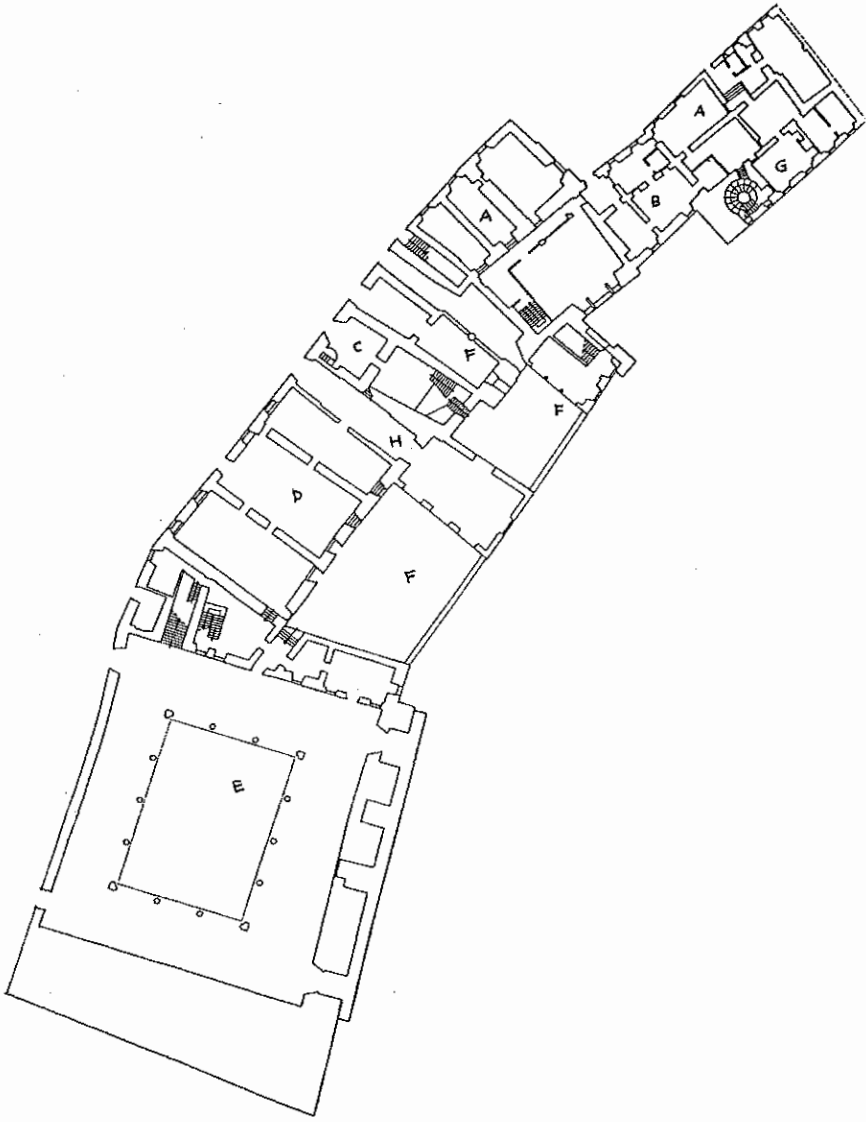


Figure 1. General plan of the da Varano *Palazzo* (made by architect G. Remiddi with the permission of the Dipartimento di Botanica, Università di Camerino)

dominions, later transformed into the *Signorie*. As first-rate politicians, or *condottieri*, in the pay of the papacy, of leagues, or of towns such as Florence, Venice, or Naples, the da Varano were important players, at times as protagonists themselves, at other times as arbiters in many of the historic events of the day. They spent much of their time and energy mastering the arcane ways of the legal system of the period, turning themselves into expert and highly sought-after lawyers, fit for important positions in the town and the church.<sup>2</sup> Rodolfo, Gentile, and their heirs also helped the city increase its power over the neighbouring territories through a policy of subdual.<sup>3</sup> This kind of domination was vital and inevitable not only for defence but also for economy and taxation, and was exercised over rural communities as well as over less powerful towns.

Guelphs in a most Guelph of towns,<sup>4</sup> the da Varano remained faithful through the years to the papal party which brought them considerable benefits and favours, culminating in the second half of the fourteenth century in their acquisition of the *Vicariato*:

an institution in which the *Signore* (landlord) could impose public authority [. . .] as well as a series of *regalie* (gratuities) on a certain territory ruling in the name of a

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<sup>2</sup> A letter sent in 1224 by Pier delle Vigne, fiduciary of Emperor Friedrich I, to Rodolfo da Varano testifies to this expertise. Rodolfo was in fact asked to teach Civil Law in the new university of Naples recently founded by the emperor. See P. Falaschi, 'Berardo I da Varano signore di Camerino', *Studi Maceratesi*, 18 (1982), 8–76 (p. 16, n. 22); idem, 'Orizzonti di una dinastia: i Varano di Camerino', in *Il Quattrocento a Camerino: Luce e prospettiva nel cuore della Marca*, ed. by A. De Marchi and M. Giannatiempo Lopez (Milano: Motta, 2002), pp. 35–45 (p. 36 and n. 43).

<sup>3</sup> On 27 January 1240, Cardinal Sinibaldo de' Fieschi (the future Pope Innocent IV), rector at that time of the *Marca*, '[. . .] recognises the jurisdiction of Camerino, began a policy of expansion over many of the neighbouring territories some of them already enfeoffed [. . .] Rodolfo (da Varano) was succeeded by Gentile 1st. so called because he was the first with this name to exercise public power': Falaschi, 'Berardo I', p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Camerino has an ancient history. The town was founded by the people of Umbri. Later it became a Roman municipality. At the dawn of the Middle Ages, the town and its territory were a pre-eminent part of the dukedom of Spoleto (the dukes of Spoleto were also dukes 'of Camerino'). From the eighth century Camerino was included in the Church estates. As already mentioned, in the tenth century the *Marca di Camerino* made its first appearance as an independent state no longer linked to the dukedom of Spoleto. From the end of the eleventh century to the beginning of the twelfth century, the town chose to be a free *Comune* although under papal supremacy. For a history of the town, among others, see C. Lili, *Dell'Historia di Camerino, 1649–1652*, vol. II, anastatic edn of the 1835 edn (Macerata: Forni, 1991); P. Savini, *Storia della città di Camerino*, 2<sup>nd</sup> expanded edn with notes by Milziade Santoni Esq. (Camerino: Tip. Savini, 1865); R. Romani, *Guida storico-artistica di Camerino e dintorni* (Terni: Stabilimenti Alterocca, 1927); B. Feliciangeli, *Ricerche sull'origine dei da Varano signori di Camerino: Estratti da L'Arcadia*, Atti dell'Accademia e scritti dei soci (Roma: Tip. Poliglotta Vaticana, 1919).

higher power [. . .] In order to obtain the *vicariato* the *Signore* is obliged to perform an act of submission and to bind himself to pay a yearly tribute.<sup>5</sup>

They were finally elevated to the status of dukes in 1515 by Pope Leo X Medici (bull of 30 April).

The founder of the family is usually identified as a certain Gentile of unknown lineage, father of Rodolfo.<sup>6</sup> Documents from the first half of the 1200s list him among the representatives of the *Comune*, or town council. He was mayor for a time which is confirmation of the fact that the da Varano had moved residence from their ancient stronghold of the Rocca Varano to within the city and had purchased property there which allowed them to exercise rights as *maiores* (or leaders) of the *Comune*. Rodolfo was succeeded by his son Gentile who passed into history as Gentile I da Varano and was the man who completed the process of the family's urbanization by founding the residence which is the focus of this essay.

### *The History of the Family and the Three Main Construction Phases*

#### **Gentile's Houses**

The building of the first phase of the *Palazzo*, located — not by chance — in one of the town's focal points near the cathedral, reflects not only the da Varano family's desire for visibility within the urban context but also of its actual pre-eminence over the other local aristocratic families.

During the so-called Investiture Struggle between the empire and the papacy, the *Comune* of Camerino sided though the years with the papal (or Guelph) party. On the night of 12 August 1259, Count Ranieri de'Baschi, leader of the Camerino Ghibellines' fifth column, opened the eastern gate of the city to the troops of King Manfredi under the command of Percival Doria sent to occupy the central regions of

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<sup>5</sup> P. Falaschi, 'Intorno al Vicariato Apostolico in temporalibus', *Atti e Memorie*, 103 (1998), 157–97 (pp. 164–65); M. T. Guerra Medici, *Famiglia e potere in una signoria dell'Italia Centrale: I Varano di Camerino* (Camerino: Centro Audiovisivi e Stampa, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> The origins of the da Varano remain obscure. Ancient non-documented sources and legends, devised in the main to glorify the house in accordance with a medieval and Renaissance custom, offer little help. The seventeenth-century historian and scholar Camillo Lili in his *Dell'Historia di Camerino* claims it originates in the third century AD with a certain Berardo and Commodo, and even fantasizes about links with the Anglo-Norman house of Surrey Varennes (or Surrey Warren) who were supposed to have found their way to Italy some time in the ninth century. Others have maintained that the family originates from the Varano Castle in the Parma region in the time of Charlemagne. The prefix *de* or *da* to a name usually indicates a place name, a feudal possession, rather than a person. See Lili, *Dell'Historia*; Savini, *Storia della città di Camerino*; Feliciangeli, *Ricerche sull'origine dei da Varano*; Falaschi, 'Berardo I'.

Italy.<sup>7</sup> At the mercy of the Ghibelline and imperial forces, the city was put to the sword and sacked and the houses of the Guelph families largely destroyed. According to the tradition, however, several Guelph families managed to escape the massacre through the San Silvestro Gate and took refuge in one of the surrounding castles. Here, Gentile, with the help of Pope Alexander IV and a number of local Guelph towns, reorganized the exiles and, in 1261, led them in the reconquest of the semi-ruined town and expelled in turn the Ghibelline forces. Gentile was in the forefront of the city's reconstruction and reconquest of its lost territories, but he was never acclaimed *Signore*.<sup>8</sup> The grateful townspeople, however, did confer on him for two years the exalted title of Captain of War.<sup>9</sup>

The houses which had come into da Varano ownership since Rodolfo's days,<sup>10</sup> situated near the Santa Maria Maggiore collegiate church, were rebuilt and restored by Gentile during this period (c. 1265), which bears witness to the family's social and financial advancement. To these were added a group of houses which had belonged to the Vicomanni family and which passed into Gentile's hands, as witnessed in a seventeenth-century document.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This gate, destroyed in the first half of the last century, after the town's reconquest, was named 'of Gentile'. In the fifteenth century, it was renamed 'Giulia's Gate' from Giulio Cesare da Varano. See P. Falaschi, 'Il Palazzo ducale dei Varano di Camerino e i giardini rinascimentali', in *Atti dell'Incontro l'Orto Botanico e il verde a Camerino, 7 maggio 1988* (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 1989), pp. 5–14; G. Remiddi, 'La città ed il Palazzo', in *Documenti sulla fondazione dell'Orto Botanico a Camerino, 29 marzo 1827–28 aprile 1828* (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 1991), pp. 41–68; P. Angeletti and G. Remiddi, 'Le vicende urbane di Camerino nel Quattrocento', in *Il Quattrocento a Camerino*, ed. by De Marchi and Lopez, pp. 92–97.

<sup>8</sup> In 1262, Gentile, on behalf of the town, conquered a number of Ghibelline castles as well as the Stronghold of Sentino, a very important strategically placed outpost. Here on 8 December 1444, Costanza da Varano (daughter of Piergentile and Elisabetta Malatesta) married Alessandro Sforza, Lord of Pesaro and brother of the famous Francesco. In the *Elogia* written by the humanist Varino Favorino in the sixteenth century and commissioned by Giovanni Maria da Varano, Gentile I is celebrated as *Dominus et reconditor Urbis Camerini, Cathedralis Ecclesiae instaurator*. Among others, see Savini, *Storia della città di Camerino*, p. 220; A. A. Bittarelli, 'Varino Favorino e gli Elogia', in *Camerinum*, ed. by A. A. Bittarelli (Camerino: Mierma, 1996), pp. 365–76 (p. 373).

<sup>9</sup> Though the person who holds this position had only a formal jurisdictional power, he could exercise a political and military one. He could, in fact, go to war against all those who menaced the town, its territory or inhabitants; make peace treaties and alliances; pay troops and impose taxes. See Falaschi, 'Intorno al Vicariato', p. 162, n. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Roma, Biblioteca Vaticana, Codice Vaticano Barber, Lat. 2441c. fol. 30<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> 'was built by Gentile Varano in the houses of the *Signori* Vicomanni given by Rambotto I, *Signore* of Belforte to the said Gentile [. . .] for which the *Signori* Varano gave as recompense the houses in which today still live the family of the Vicomanni': A. Benigni, *Frammenti storici della città di Camerino* (Camerino, Biblioteca Valentiniana, MS 157, c. 53<sup>r</sup>)



At the end of the thirteenth century what must have earlier been a fairly haphazard collection of constructions begin to take the shape of a more unified place of residence. These buildings were erected on the highest and narrowest part of the hill, where the original city arose for defence reasons. Of this original construction very little remains apart from a few walls of squared sandstone ashlar which must have originally been outside the wall, some round or oval arch doors, and some internal walls made of composite material. The houses, as witnessed by restoration work past and present, needed to have particularly stringent proportions and followed the line of the ancient, narrow, sloping streets as we can see from the fact that the only two surviving doors are on different levels despite being only yards apart.<sup>12</sup> These streets connected the higher part of the city (the square with the collegiate church) with the road (on the ancient Roman way) leading down to the base of the rock. Two or three of them, which were terraced or stepped, similar to those which are still today visible and in use in the old part of the town, between the top and halfway down the hill, were later absorbed into the building during its enlargement.

In 1239 Gentile married Alteruccia, niece of Suppo d'Altino, who bore him five children — Gentile, Ringarda, Berardo, Rodolfo, and Gualteronda. He was nominated *podestà* (a temporary appointment as governor of the city) for the first time in 1266 and organized his residence no longer as a simple defensive bastion but also as a meeting place for the town's official representatives. In Camerino, as well as in other Italian towns, the *Comune* did not possess a proper official place for meetings or to draw up deeds, so it was in the habit of using the bishop's see, churches, or private houses.<sup>13</sup> Contemporary documents testify that in Gentile's Houses, on 9 December 1266, a contract of purchase for an area for use as a market-place was drawn up. This state of affairs continued into the fourteenth century as attested by a deed dated on 22 October 1328, quoted by Feliciangeli: 'in front of Santa Maria Maggiore church and the Houses of the illustrious *Messer Gentile*'.<sup>14</sup>

The almost complete absence of documentary evidence makes it difficult for us to reconstruct the daily life of this family around the end of the thirteenth century, but the *case* (houses) which Gentile reorganized for the greater comfort of himself and

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<sup>12</sup> The work of restoration, preservation, and functional adaptation, supervised by the architects Angeletti and Remiddi began in the 1970s. (They are also the authors of the Palace plan as shown in fig. 1.) This resulted in the discovery of various locations of architectural merit and made possible the use of the ample space of the ancient palace. See Remiddi, 'La città ed il Palazzo', p. 46; M. A. De Angelis, 'Restauro e nuove acquisizioni nel Palazzo dei Da Varano a Camerino: Contributi alla conoscenza ed al recupero del Palazzo ducale', in *Atti dell'Incontro l'Orto Botanico*, pp. 17–29, and Angeletti and Remiddi, 'Le vicende urbane', pp. 94–95.

<sup>13</sup> By law, 'it was possible to draw up deeds, everywhere, except the taverns and those places where people gambled': Falaschi, 'Intorno al Vicariato'.

<sup>14</sup> B. Feliciangeli, 'Cenni storici sul Palazzo dei Varano in Camerino', Nota A, in 'L'itinerario di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga attraverso la Marca e l'Umbria nell'aprile 1494', *Atti e memorie della Deputazione di storia patria per le Marche*, 8 (1912), 21–53 (pp. 23–24).

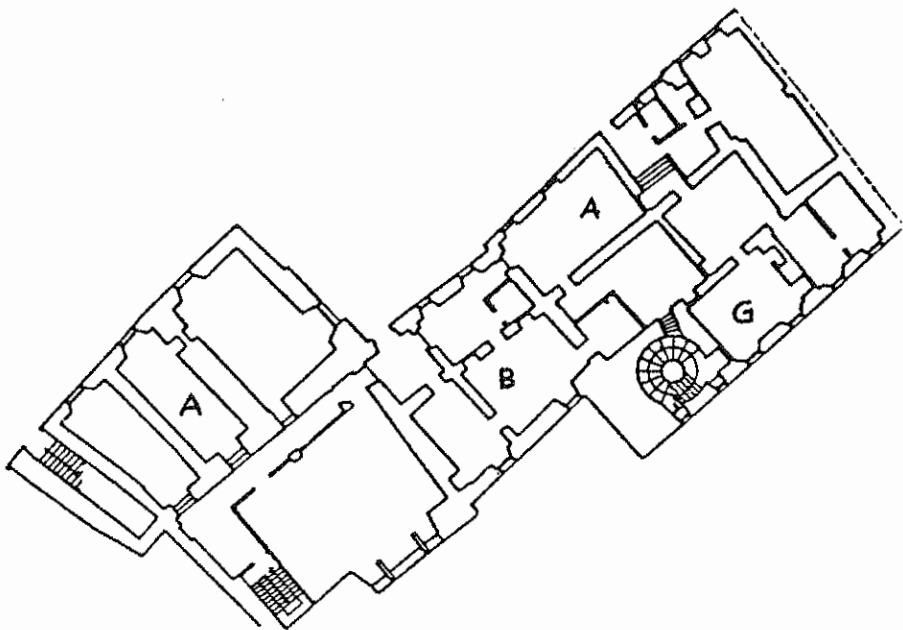


Figure 2. Gentile's Houses plan (detail of fig. 1 above)

his family cannot have been very different from other dwellings which arose at the same time throughout central Italy, many of which can still be seen today. In fact from as early as the twelfth century we find that buildings separated by a courtyard and belonging to the same family tend to be joined together as a single construction, more or less complex. This solution was adopted particularly in urban areas where space was very limited.<sup>15</sup> The internal disposition of rooms was typically as follows: a front area for work or public use and a series of rooms behind or on the upper storey which included a dining room, bedrooms, kitchen, the pantry, and sometimes the toilet and well.

The plans of this part of the construction (fig. 2) indicate an area divided into a number of separate zones and it is difficult to perceive an organized unified design. On the contrary, we are probably looking at the haphazard building expansion typical of the period. On the ground floor the ceilings sometimes have barrel vaults or round arches or lowered cross vaults as was normal practice at the time. The floors are built of bricks. On the upper storeys, the ceilings were probably a *palcho*, that is,

<sup>15</sup> The medieval town was usually divided into rectangular lots of nine *braccio* with a frontage of roughly 5.25 m. The houses, on two or more floors (which still exist in Florence, Perugia, and Gubbio), had a *fronte ristretta* (narrow façade), i.e. the narrowest part faced the street.

composed of beams left open to view, whilst the floors were wooden boards. Given the harsh climate, the bedrooms were probably located near the kitchen to take advantage of the heat. There were also, given the status of the family, plenty of decorations: plaster walls painted with simple geometric designs — like those which can still be seen today at Palazzo Trinci in Foligno — and various ornaments in contrasting colours or painted curtains which on important occasions would become 'real' in the sense that the rooms would be draped, according to the time of year, with wool, linen, silk, or even tapestries.

We are, however, in the world of hypothesis and analogy. Traumatic events and changes of taste have transformed the function and appearance of these rooms out of all recognition. Time has destroyed the decorations and stolen away the furnishing and everyday objects. In 1279 a dreadful earthquake struck the area and a large part of the city suffered grave damage. Many buildings collapsed and many victims were buried under them.<sup>16</sup> We may well conjecture that the family, just like many others, had to reconstruct part or all of their houses. However, the earthquake played into the hands of the family and favoured their ambitions. The emergency drove the town institutions to concentrate power into the hands of a few, not to say one, individual. This decision essentially foreshadowed the *Signoria* which was shortly after set up in the city.

### **The Palace of Venanzio (Fourteenth Century)**

The concession of the *Vicariato 'in temporalibus'* by the Holy See gave the da Varano the opportunity to extend their urban residence. Conceived not only as a private space, but also as a public one open to town life, the second building phase included some of the pre-existing urban components. The first problem facing the architects (whose identity remains unknown to this today) was dictated by the need to save as much as possible of the pre-existing structures through the creation of others which would link up with the new constructions.<sup>17</sup>

The da Varano lived in Gentile's Houses for more than a century. He was succeeded by his sons Rodolfo and Berardo. The latter started expansion and modernization work to create a palace fit to house a family whose power was steadily growing in both the military and civic spheres and which was accumulating official posts within Camerino, in the surrounding towns, and in important far-flung places such as Pistoia, Lucca, Perugia, and Florence. He himself helped draft documents stipulating

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<sup>16</sup> Among the destroyed buildings were the San Pietro in Muralto convent (where all the nuns died 'except one' according to an old chronicle), the Collegiate Church of San Giacomo, and part of Santa Maria Maggiore.

<sup>17</sup> Very interesting is the discovery confirmed by yard works of a castle, and not only of a tower as previously thought, inside the Palace of Venanzio: Angeletti and Remiddi, 'Le vicende urbane', p. 92.

fruitful military, political, and commercial alliances both for the town and his own family.<sup>18</sup> The da Varano also adopted a highly judicious matrimonial policy aimed at the consolidation of their power over a large region from the crest of the Apennines to the Adriatic sea, from Camerino to Civitanova. By the fourteenth century this power was definitively consolidated — as many as thirty towns recognized Rodolfo II as their liege. Skilled commander and designated as *vessillifero* (standard-bearer) of the Church by Cardinal Alborno, he was also the head of the so-called *Lega Maledetta*, a coalition against the papal seat of Avignon, and played a leading role in the events surrounding the Schism of the Western Church.<sup>19</sup> With Rodolfo II, Giovanni *Spaccalferro*, Venanzio *Falcialferro*, and Gentile III, all sons of Berardo II, the main command structure of the state of Camerino coalesced around one extended family whose ramifications reached all units of the state and all sections of the society that mattered. These developments brought the first important addition to Gentile's Houses, the construction of what is referred to, from the name of its patron, as the Palace of Venanzio.

This second group of residences dates from the second half of the 1300s, almost certainly from the 1370s. The dating coincides with the award of the *Vicariato* and the feudal concession of the cities of Tolentino and San Ginesio by the Holy See. The building, work on which continued after the death of Venanzio in 1377 and did not finish until around 1410 or 1420, acquired a sort of symbolic value — an emblem and expression of the recognition by the Church of the authority of the da Varano over the southern *Marca*.

The new building, next to the old, has typical fourteenth-century characteristics with a shape which follows the form of the underlying rock which it uses as an anchor, with four floors towards the valley and three on the city side overlooking the square, parallel with the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore collegiate church. Its grand structure dominated the square and formed its boundary and gave it an air of authority which soon eclipsed that of the *Comune* as centre of the civil and political life of the city.

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<sup>18</sup> Rodolfo I was *podestà* of San Ginesio (1299) and of Roccacontrada (1301), Commander of Lucca (1294) and Perugia (1304). Berardo was, moreover, Commander of Perugia (1289), Pistoia (1294), and Bologna (1297). See the biographies edited by F. Paino, in *I volti di una dinastia*, ed. by P. Falschi, Exhibition Catalogue (Milano: Motta, 2001), pp. 50–77; Falaschi, 'Orizzonti di una dinastia', pp. 35–45.

<sup>19</sup> The presence of Rodolfo II was crucial in the election of Pope Clement VIII (Cardinal Robert of Geneve) held in Fondi in 1378. A short story (novella XLI) in the *Trecentonovelle* of Franco Sacchetti (c. 1334–1400) tells us something about the personality of this extraordinary man. Rodolfo — accused by his son-in law Galeotto Malatesta of having acted against God and his soul because of his support for the Fondi election vs. the papal see of Avignon — answered, 'I have done this because in this way they will be too busy quarrelling with each other to have time to pay attention to our affairs': F. Sacchetti, *Il Trecentonovelle*. In effect, the fighting between the two popes benefitted the policy of territorial acquisition from the Church estate pursued by much of the local aristocracy.

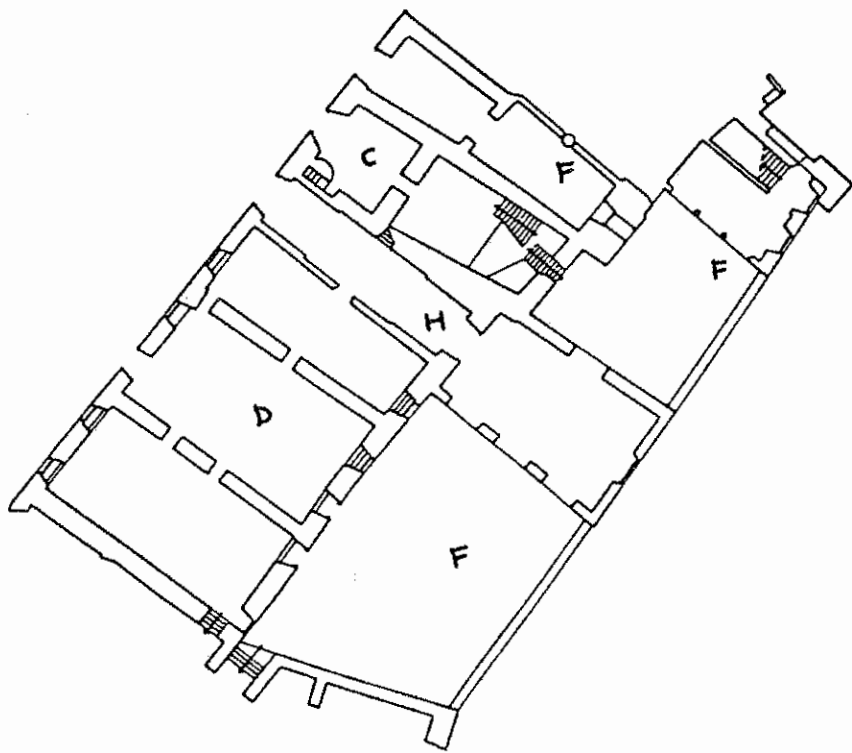


Figure 3. Palace of Venanzio plan (detail of fig. 1 above)

What was noted about Gentile's Houses — that they were built in phases over a long period of time — also applies to the Palace of Venanzio and again in this it differs very little from other aristocratic residences of the time.<sup>20</sup> The plan is very simple with regularly connecting rooms although still of a medieval character (fig. 3). The Palace was in Gothic style. We can deduce this from the surviving narrow one-light three-lobed windows on the valley side and, on the piazza side, from the large oval windows (maybe three-light with columns) which, though they have been long filled in, can still be made out, and also from oval-arched entrances (also filled in) hailing from a later date but erected in the same style of those in Gentile's Houses, presumably in an attempt at artistic continuity. The Palace was taller than today's building: the position of the above-mentioned large oval windows is in fact too close to the present roof. A few traces of string-course mouldings are still visible. These

<sup>20</sup> It is still not possible for us to hazard any guesses as to the name of the builder, and things will stay that way, save some fortuitous discovery in some long-neglected archive.

cornices, although present in the fourteenth century, only later became a fairly common architectural element both in private and public buildings. The whole construction is in sandstone with greyish-blue tones and the occasional glassy flake due to the presence of quartz and silicon in the stone. Comparison with surviving decorations from local buildings of the same age suggests that pink (so-called *rosa di Assisi*) and white limestone could well have been used in the decoration of arches and frames and in the stone plaques still to be seen on the outside walls.<sup>21</sup> Still visible on the front of the Palace is a white stone coat of arms with the da Varano weapons, as was fashionable in the fourteenth century when they were often put on the external walls or on the two corners of the façade.

Next to the pre-existing buildings and connecting them to the first part of the family's house, the Palace of Venanzio also incorporated a watchtower which stood next to Gentile's Houses which, once lowered, was 'used as a strong, full, volumetric element to strengthen the corner'.<sup>22</sup>

The Borgia Inventory, dated 1502 and compiled at the time of Cesare Borgia's subjugation of the city, alludes in its description of the Palace to rooms situated in the old tower, 'a room on the top of the tower with two windows, a *cappucciario* [. . .], two doors', and also in the tower, 'a room with a coffered ceiling, a fireplace, a window, two doors and furniture'.<sup>23</sup> The Palace also contained another pre-existing urban component, a water cistern which was underneath the ground floor of the innermost room.<sup>24</sup>

In the room next to the 'cistern chamber' remains can still be seen of a staircase which rests directly against the rock and which shows how the various floors were connected internally. All around there are also a number of small rooms whose precise function is still not clear, but some of which at least were presumably servants' quarters. Their closeness to the water cistern suggests that a laundry and dye-house were also situated here. Another interesting detail is the narrow staircase, certainly meant for private use (a contemporary example can be seen in Rocca

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<sup>21</sup> The use of white and pink limestone is quite typical of architecture and sculpture in other medieval buildings of the town, such as the San Domenico Convent, Sant'Ansovino Tomb, and the intricately carved portals of the San Venanzio, San Francesco, and Sant'Agostino churches as well as in the *loggia* of Beldiletto Castle.

<sup>22</sup> Remiddi, 'La città e il Palazzo', p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ragioni e descrizione del Ducato di Camerino* (Archivio di Stato di Modena, fondo Estense), in S. Corradini, 'Camerino e i Borgia: cronistoria dell'occupazione e inventario del Ducato, luglio 1502-agosto 1503', in *Studi camerti in onore di Giacomo Boccanera*, ed. by G. Tomassini (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 1993), pp. 55–103. See also E. Tagliacollo, *Il Palazzo di Giulio Cesare Varano a Camerino* (Roma: Tesi di Laurea, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that this practice was not rare. A century later Francesco di Giorgio Martini, architect, military engineer, and expert in hydraulics, at the wishes of Federico da Montefeltro, also placed a public cistern under the Palazzo Ducale in Gubbio.

d'Ajello, another castle in the da Varano estate a few miles from Camerino, as well as in some still conserved in a number of old houses in the town), set by the thick wall and leading to the floor above.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst this part of the edifice was opened onto the valley side, the ground floor was composed of further service areas and public spaces, such as offices, 'cancelerie', reception areas, which became necessary whenever a family assumed a position of hegemony in the political life of a town. Half-way public, these spaces looked out both onto the piazza and onto the inside courtyards which led to the *horti*, the gardens which were located in the restricted space between the city walls and the houses which were set a few yards further back.<sup>26</sup>

The second floor housed the private living rooms and the Great Hall described and applauded in numerous contemporary documents: 'two fireplaces, a coffered ceiling, a door and a dresser: eight big and two small windows, 120 feet in length and 44 feet in width, in this room there are sixteen elm-wood benches, twenty bars with iron hooks to hang tapestries.' Another document (1584) repeats and confirms all this: 'On the right at the beginning of the long side there is a fireplace, another one in on the left at the end of the wall, before it there is a dresser.'

The Palace of Venanzio also included the earlier *Ponte di Madonna* (from the end of the thirteenth to the start of the fourteenth century), a bridge — a 'pathway in the air' — thirteen yards long connected to the private chapel dedicated to the patron, which unfortunately no longer exists, situated next to the apse of the collegiate church. Access to the bridge was through a 'half-closed *loggia*' with entrances from

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<sup>25</sup> Here, in a part where the bare wall is covered by a layer of malta, someone has drawn in charcoal a hand with the finger pointing to a phrase of writing, not all of which has survived: *Die XI februa... ..munt festina... a...et ...ven bis retulit MCCCC* (Remiddi, 'La città ed il Palazzo', p. 64, n. 23).

<sup>26</sup> The modern appearance of this part of the Palazzo, however, can be traced back to the works carried out in the second half of the fifteenth century, between 1465 and 1480 by Giulio Cesare da Varano. We know this thanks to the vaulted ceilings with lunettes to be found in the three ground floor rooms and which are features of many other buildings of the period. These are also the only rooms in which mural paintings have survived which bear witness to the richness of decoration this Palazzo must once have boasted, as well as giving some indications of the use to which they were put. Research seems to confirm that they were public rooms used as offices or reception areas. See B. Teodori, 'Dipinti murali nella residenza di Giulio Cesare Varano: Recupero ed ipotesi', in *Atti dell'incontro l'Orto Botanico*, pp. 31–50; F. Paino and M. Paraventi, 'Una rappresentazione cortese: i dipinti murali del Palazzo Ducale di Camerino', in *Studi storici per Angelo Antonio Bittarelli* (Camerino: Università degli Studi, 2001), pp. 175–96; Angeletti and Remiddi, 'Le vicende urbane', p. 97; F. Marcelli, 'Immagini di Signori, Re e Imperatori nella Sala di Giulio Cesare', in *I volti di una dinastia*, ed. by Falaschi, pp. 36–43; F. Marcelli, 'Appunti per una storia della committenza varanesca', in *Il Quattrocento a Camerino*, ed. by De Marchi and Lopez, pp. 68–77.

two separate rooms.<sup>27</sup> Through this the ladies of the house of da Varano were able to make their way to prayer without having to trudge across the road below.

The *Ponte* must have played a very important part in the private life of the family, as evident from Rodolfo III's will. He succeeded his father, Gentile III, in 1399, and concentrated and consolidated the vast family territories which were gradually assuming the unified characteristics of a *Signoria*. Wishing to be sure of leaving a roof over the heads of his legitimate male heirs and their families, he shared out among them not only his vast territorial possessions but also the family residence so that there would be no fighting over who owned what. He thus divided up the numerous rooms of the great house so that each family nucleus could live in comfort and independence from the others. This is why the ladies had separate access to the bridge from their rooms, whilst stairs and courtyards were shared by all.<sup>28</sup>

The construction of the Palace of Venanzio brought the completion of that part of the building which, along with Gentile's Houses, goes under the title of *case vecchie* ('the old houses'). It continued to be the private residence of the family even after the building of the final wing of the *Palazzo*, the *case nove* (the 'New Houses') with the huge *quadriportico* by Giulio Cesare da Varano to which we now turn our attention.

### Giulio Cesare's New Houses (Fifteenth Century)

The final seal of the power exercised by the da Varano over the town and over their other considerable territories is symbolized by the building of the last phase of the *Palazzo*. Designed to assert Giulio Cesare's personal prestige, it is an expression of the new artistic creed which spread from Tuscany all over in Italy. The centripetal and centrifugal heart of the humanistic-Renaissance culture and of the ideological basis of the power of the *Signoria* is represented by the wide *quadriportico* on which stood the new reception halls. With its half-public space, the *loggia* mediates the

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<sup>27</sup> A similar edifice, still surviving today, is the one which joins the Palazzo Trinci of the lords of Foligno (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) with the Palazzo delle Canoniche and the Cathedral of San Feliciano.

<sup>28</sup> 'Dicens dictus testator quod facere adibitum retro cameram unicornuorum et ingressum de sala grandi et exire in logiam supra pontem qui est ante et juxta dictam cappellam sibi videbatur actius et commodius quam per alias partes ipsarum domorum': Feliciangeli, 'Cenni storici sul Palazzo dei Varano in Camerino', p. 23. Known as 'the father-in-law of Italy' for his sixty-nine children, Rodolfo III died in 1424 in his best-loved castle of Beldiletto. A most generous lord, he earned the loyalty of the famed *condottiero* Braccio da Montone, who in 1421 married Nicolina, one of his numerous daughters and who was already the widow of Galeotto Malatesta. Despite all his efforts, however, a few years after his death the da Varano were dogged by infighting which led to ten years' of republican government in Camerino. See A. Meriggi, *Honorabilibus amicis nostris carissimis: Lettere inedite dei Da Varano di Camerino al Comune di Montecchio, Treia 1381-1426* (Camerino: Centro audiovisivi e Stampa, 1996).



relationship between the court and the citizens, a kind of symbiosis between the square and the *atrium*.<sup>29</sup>

On the death of Rodolfo III (1464), in accordance with the stipulations in his will, the inheritance was divided among his four legitimate sons, Berardo, Gentilpandolfo, Piergentile, and Giovanni. The first half of the fifteenth century saw the application of a policy of strict centralization of power on the part of Pope Eugenius IV, intent on restoring his authority over all the territories of the papal states. In this wider context, ambition mixed with fears over the future division of the family properties induced the elder two brothers to plot against the younger. Using stratagems worthy of Machiavelli at his best (or worst), Berardo and Gentilpandolfo concocted false accusations against Giovanni and Piergentile, managed to have them killed, and appropriated their possessions.<sup>30</sup> Giovanni was murdered by assassins whilst Piergentile was beheaded at Recanati by order of the papal legate in 1433, on 6 September.<sup>31</sup>

This fraternal betrayal provoked a popular uprising which, together with more markedly political and commercial motivations, resulted in 1434 in the massacre of the two older brothers and many other members of their family, including various of their children. These events were, in effect, also proof that the city of Camerino was no longer willing to submit to the family's domination of its affairs.<sup>32</sup> It was left to the women of the house of da Varano who, after the massacre, 'were sent back home'<sup>33</sup> to grasp the reins of a power which was escaping them, to save what was possible, to toil and suffer so that one day their sons might eventually regain their lost authority and prestige. In the meantime, the *Palazzo* became the seat of a republican government which ruled the city for nine years.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> M. Ceriana, 'Note sull'architettura e la scultura nella Camerino di Giulio Cesare da Varano', in *Il Quattrocento a Camerino*, ed. by De Marchi and Lopez, pp. 98–115 (p. 109).

<sup>30</sup> This terrible episode saw the involvement of Arcangelo di Fiordimonte, a servant of the da Varano, who supported the betrayal in the hope of giving back the town its lost freedom.

<sup>31</sup> Piergentile, who married Elisabetta of Galeazzo Malatesta of Pesaro, declared his heir to be Filippo Maria Visconti, the Duke of Milan. In this way, he drew him into the internal events of Camerino. The false accusations of Vitelleschi, Apostolic Legate for the *Marca*, against Piergentile concerned the supposed forgery of papal currency.

<sup>32</sup> The continuous splitting up of the private dominion led, in addition to discontent and fighting, to exorbitant taxation that meant intolerable economic and commercial consequences even for the rich guilds. See P. Falaschi, 'La Signoria di Giulio Cesare da Varano', in *Camilla Battista da Varano e il suo tempo: Atti del convegno di studi sul V centenario del Monastero delle Clarisse di Camerino, 7–9 settembre 1984* (Camerino: Diocesi, 1987), pp. 15–38; Guerra Medici, 'Famiglia e potere', pp. 289–321.

<sup>33</sup> Lili, *Dell'Historia*, p. 177.

<sup>34</sup> Much the same occurred in some of the cities around Camerino. Various massacres were politically piloted by Rome which fomented popular sentiment in favour of the restoration of communal power in order to unseat the local *Signori* and regain possession of its dominions. These included the assassination of the Chiavelli family in Fabriano, and in Foligno that of the Trinci.

Elisabetta Malatesta, wife of Piergentile, with the help of her da Varano sisters-in-law — Tora, wife of Nicolò Trinci of Foligno, and Guglielmina, wife of Battista Chiavelli of Fabriano — managed to rescue her children, Rodolfo, Costanza, and Primavera, and her nephew Giulio Cesare. From her ancestral home in Pesaro, for nine years, Elisabetta Malatesta did all she could to regain possession of the lost *Signoria*; with the aid of Francesco Sforza and of Federico da Montefeltro, the Visconti of Milan, nominated heirs in Piergentile's testament, they carried their plan to a successful conclusion. Finally, in December 1443, Rodolfo and Giulio, her son and nephew, returned to their rightful home of Camerino, acclaimed as its lords. In accordance with the wishes of Pope Nicholas V, Elisabetta acted as regent until 1449. She was responsible for the marriages that allied the da Varano to some of the greatest families in Italy.<sup>35</sup>

The two cousins shared both the task of government and the proceeds of their military expeditions until 1464, the year in which Rodolfo died.<sup>36</sup> The first work on what later became known as the *Palazzo di Giulio* dates from the years immediately following Rodolfo's demise. Having sent back to the court of Ferrara his sister-in-law and her children — for whom he had obtained confirmation from Pope Paul II of their *Vicariato* over Camerino (together of course with his own children) — Giulio Cesare now had full power in his hands. Captain of the papal armies under Popes Paul II, Sixtus IV, and Innocent VIII, Captain General of the Republic of Venice and of Ferdinand, king of Naples, and Lieutenant of Matthias I Corvinus, king of Hungary, he was a man of ambitious, unscrupulous, and entirely secular spirit. He went on to dedicate much of his energy and finances — with the help of his wife, Giovanna Malatesta 'a princess wise and of great erudition'<sup>37</sup> — to the creation within his court and his city of a cultural climate which aspired to fulfilling the highest humanistic ideals of the Renaissance. Not only did he spare no effort to restructure, extend, and beautify his own residence but he also let himself be guided by the many humanists, artists, and men of letters he welcomed to his court, who without doubt steered his tastes in the right direction.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Her daughter Costanza to Alessandro Sforza of Pesaro, brother of Francesco (1444); her son Rodolfo to Camilla, daughter of Niccolò d'Este of Ferrara and sister of Lionello (1448); and her nephew Giulio Cesare to Giovanna Malatesta of Rimini (1451).

<sup>36</sup> Rodolfo IV and Giulio Cesare, *capitani di ventura*, were celebrated for their skill as commanders able 'to transform the poor peasants of the *Marca* countryside into merciless mercenary troops': Falaschi, 'La Signoria di Giulio Cesare da Varano', p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Lili, *Dell'Historia*, p. 218.

<sup>38</sup> The choice of high-flown subjects, Fame, Fortune, mythological characters, and also of contemporary military exploits is a clear indication of how Giulio Cesare was not indifferent to the trappings of glory. The classical names he gave to his children (Annibale, Cesare, Pirro) are also proof of his Renaissance spirit. See L. Allevi, 'Umanisti camerinesi: Il Cantalicio e la corte dei Varano', *Atti e Memorie della Regia Deputazione di storia patria per le Marche*, 3 (1925), 167–95.

His fame grew at the same rate as that of the city where building sites were ever more numerous and busy (including those of the *Ospedale* of Santa Maria della Misericordia, the temple to the Annunziata, waterworks, and even the construction of a Clarissan convent so as to keep his beloved daughter Camilla as close to him as possible).<sup>39</sup> In a codicil in the Vatican Library, we can read: 'he [Giulio Cesare] took great delight in building, and thus raised the Ducal Palace by the Cathedral, which in those days was reputed one of the most sumptuous in Italy, in the year which was, 1490'.<sup>40</sup> This date was nearer the end than the beginning of the work. By that year it must have been near completion if we can trust Benigni's dating to 1498 of an inscription on the portal to the courtyard: *Iulius Caesar Iooannis II filius palatii huius novi et atri fundator. A.D. MCCCCXCVIII*.<sup>41</sup>

This last part of the residence has to be interpreted as a manifestation of the power of a family which boasted links with all the principal noble houses of Italy. Giulio Cesare desired it to be built according to the dictates of the Renaissance with simple, elegant lines but with no lack of both painting and sculptures as decoration. As was the case with the Palazzi of Federico di Montefeltro in Gubbio and Urbino, this edifice did not arise *ex novo* but was the result of the restructuring of other houses belonging to the family which, as we know from the testament of Rodolfo III, were situated close by and had not yet been finished.

To the sixty-nine rooms of the 'old houses', another forty — in a Renaissance style meant for official functions — were added, plus a stable for ninety-four horses: 'Item: a stable with fountain, a room at the top of this stable for the family and it can hold ninety-four horses.' These included numerous service areas including a *spezieria* (something between a grocery and a pharmacy) 'with a door and window [with] some large benches for writing on' and even rooms to house birds (hawks and birds of prey) during the moulting season: 'Item: two Rooms for housing birds, with no doors, a Room [. . .] and an iron cage to hold large birds [. . .] another Room next door to put birds when moulting', and furthermore 'a room where the Lady kept her birds'.<sup>42</sup> Hunting and falconry were the da Varano's and the court's main hobbies,

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<sup>39</sup> Well-known and still surviving is the drainage of the Colfiorito marsh. Famous as *botte dei Varano* (Varanos' barrel) it was carried out with the help of a number of Florentine engineers and technicians requested by Giulio Cesare from Lorenzo de Medici as testified in a letter. See A. Massari, 'Regesto delle lettere di Giulio Cesare Varano', *Studi Maceratesi*, 10 (1976), 288–318.

<sup>40</sup> Rome, Biblioteca Vaticana, MS Borgiano Lat. 282.

<sup>41</sup> In another part of his *Frammenti* (c. 224<sup>f</sup>), Benigni gives another date MCCCCLXXXIX (1489), whilst Lili writes that the courtyard was completed sometime between 1489 and 1492 (*Dell'Historia*, p. 241). Each of the versions of Varino favorino's *Elogia* give different completion dates. The apparent contradictions are resolved if we bear in mind that the architecture, the decoration, and the paintings were all finished at different moments

<sup>42</sup> *Ragioni et descrizione del Ducato di Camerino* (Archivio di Stato di Modena, fondo Estense).

and doubtless among the collection of volumes in the well-stocked Palazzo library (of which unfortunately nothing remains) there will have been a copy of the famous tract *De arte venandi cum avibus* by Frederick II.

We have more, if only slightly more, documentation from this period, but once again we have no clue as to the identity of the architect who originally planned these new constructions and adjoined them to the old (fig. 4). Some have attributed it to the Florentine architect Baccio Pontelli (1450–95), who was active in the Marche late in life and who we know was in contact with the da Varano, but the lack of any documentary evidence means we cannot be absolutely sure.<sup>43</sup>

We know of the presence on site of Lombard master-builders and Tuscan stone-cutters (from Settignano) who fashioned the sandstone decorations. Among them was a certain Francesco di Matteo Fasini, called Lancino,<sup>44</sup> who declared his readiness to carve the heraldic figures that Giulio himself had designed.

But one of the changes which totally transformed the whole appearance of the building was the extension of the surface areas of the older structure, with the creation of new courtyards including the elegant *quadriportico*, or four-sided portico, the pride and joy of the whole construction. To prepare for this, wide vaults were erected running from the outside walls of Palace of Venanzio and the city walls into the valley below, thus closing off areas which had previously been left open. This meant that urban elements belonging to the thirteenth–fourteenth-century town, including parts of streets, adjoining lanes, and passageways, were now incorporated into a private, internal space. The areas which were thus created have conserved and protected the ancient layout of the Palazzo and we can guess from the traces which are still visible of chimney breasts, ventilation passages, horse ramps, and so on how each zone was originally used.

As already mentioned, the Borgia Inventory comprises records of the size of rooms along with the furniture and decorations they contained. It tells us about pieces of

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<sup>43</sup> The attribution to the Florentine artist is still controversial although recent studies suggest attributing the design to Baccio Pontelli and the realization to local Lombard and Florentine workers. In fact there is no evidence of civil buildings designed by him. As inlayer and military architect he worked in the Marche in the last years of his life (in the strongholds of Jesi, Osimo, Senigallia). In Senigallia he also built the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie which has windows in the style of the Guelph cross. This architectural device, his adherence to the style of Francesco di Giorgio Martini, builder of the Gubbio Palace courtyard, the use of sober and elegant decorative elements, typical of the Florentine style, along with documents in which he appears to be in debt to the da Varanos have strengthened the attribution. See G. Marucci, 'Il Palazzo Ducale di Camerino. Un tesoro ritrovato', *Antiqua*, 25 (1990), 21–24; S. Corradini, 'Il Palazzo di Giulio Cesare Varano e l'architetto Baccio Pontelli', *Studi Maceratesi*, 5 (1969), 186–220; Remiddi, 'La città ed il Palazzo'; Angeletti and Remiddi, 'Le vicende urbane'; F. Benelli, 'Il Palazzo Ducale di Camerino', in *Il Quattrocento a Camerino*, ed. by De Marchi and Lopez, pp. 273–74; Ceriana, 'Note sull'architettura', pp. 109–12.

<sup>44</sup> Feliciangeli, 'Cenni storici sul Palazzo dei Varano in Camerino', p. 40.

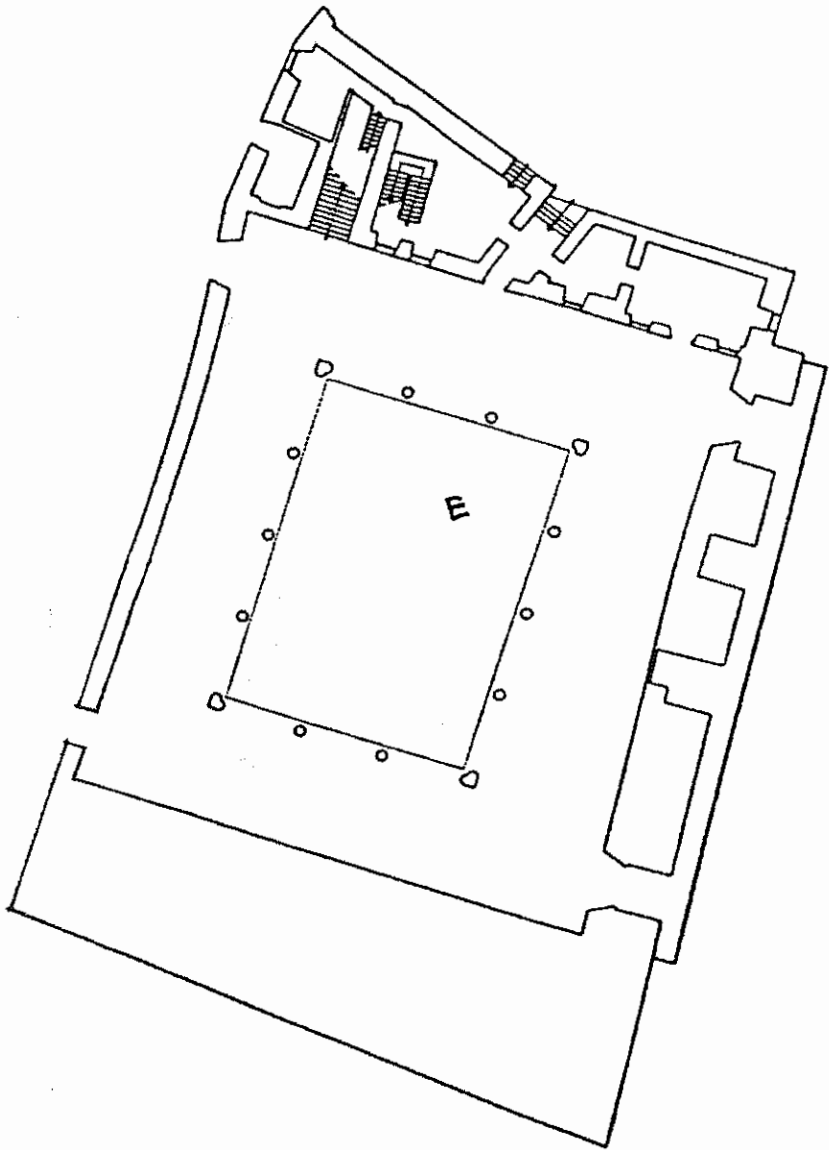


Figure 4. Giulio Cesare's New Houses plan (detail of fig. 1 above)

furniture such as *lectere et cariole* (a type of folding beds), large cases, some of them *pinctata* (painted), tables, and benches. The upper floors were *suffictate*, that is, with coffered ceilings. A contemporary surviving example of this kind of ceiling is to be found in the Palazzo Ducale in Gubbio. These documents also mention a number of *studioli* (small but comfortable rooms usually used as private studies, the most famous of which is the one used by Federico da Montefeltro in Urbino) and a library. Particularly interesting is the description of a tiny room in the apartment of the *Signore* next to a small study and a private chapel 'again a secret room where the *Signore* slept, fitted with wooden panels, a coffered ceiling, a bed, an ironed, glazed window and a door'. Examples of similar rooms in aristocratic residences in northern and central Italy can still be seen in Urbino, Modena, and Ferrara.

The windows were *ferrate* (ironed) or sometimes even *invitriate* (glazed) although these latter are found only in very special rooms: 'a Room where the Mass was recited' or in 'a secret room where the *Signore* slept'. Glass, imported from Venice, from France, or from Flanders, was very rare and expensive. The many references to looms is indicative of the presence of the rather more ordinary *impannate* (translucent cloth): 'in this room [are kept] all the *impannate* of the new rooms' (the rooms in the New Houses, I suppose).<sup>45</sup> The Inventory also speaks of *usci*, which were heavy wooden shutters which, when used to block off the windows, opened outwards and were often made of several moving slats.<sup>46</sup>

Due to the harsh climate there were a good number of fireplaces. They had architraves with shallow hoods following the fashion of the time which started in Florence and has been attributed to Brunelleschi and his followers. The *cappa a padiglione* (canopy hood) was in fact considered rather out of place since its curving lines disturbed the harmony of the classical style which the new architecture of the age was trying to create for the interiors of private houses.

The room which drew the greatest benefit from the restructuring of the Palazzo was certainly the Great Hall already mentioned above. It was meant for all public meetings and ceremonies and even had room for plays to be performed if we believe the Inventory which talks of 'five wooden trestles on which to build a stage inside the room'. Here was celebrated the marriage between Giulio Cesare and the seven-year-old Giovanna Malatesta in 1451, as was the solemn funeral of the same Giovanna in 1511. It was draped with tapestries for all important occasions or visits, and it would certainly have been so bedecked to receive the Ambassador of Hungary in 1489 and for the visit of Isabella d'Este in 1494. So she wrote in a letter of 10 April sent from Gubbio to her husband Francesco Gonzaga: 'On Saturday, escorted

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<sup>45</sup> Still uncommon during the fourteenth century, the *impannate* were made from wooden frames on which pieces of linen were fastened with tacks. The linen was made waterproof and more transparent by varnishing with turpentine oil mixed with other substances.

<sup>46</sup> Furnishings no longer in existence (decorated doors, coffered ceilings, sculpted fireplaces) must have been in the palace rooms until the eighteenth century, as described in some inventories of that time (from 1736 till 1759), now kept in the Archive of Rome.

by them [the Lord of Camerino and his sons] I was given lodging in his Palace which is very beautiful and perfectly adorned.<sup>47</sup>

The rooms themselves were undoubtedly all fully decorated.<sup>48</sup> From some of their names we can guess the nature of the murals they contained: the room of Fortune, of Lions, of the Peacocks, of Mirrors, of Griffins, of Friendship, of the Nymphs, of the Eagle. These paintings have entirely disappeared — apart from a single set still found in a ground-floor room — which is indeed a great loss.

But the showpiece of the *Palazzo* of Giulio Cesare da Varano is the spacious and ethereal *quadriportico* around which the reception rooms and offices were situated. Beneath was a huge snow cistern. The amount of snow that this could collect ensured an extra supply of water in summer and a place to preserve perishable foodstuffs. The courtyard itself was accessed from the square through an architraved portal in a sober and elegant style supported by two columns over which a bust of Giulio Cesare was mounted.<sup>49</sup> The arch we see today, however, is a replacement of the original, dating from the end of the sixteenth century.

The beauty of this courtyard (fig. 5) rests in the serene harmony of its structural elements which make it one of the finest examples of late-fifteenth-century civil architecture. The planning difficulties faced by the architect in the design of the *quadriportico* were solved in an entirely unique fashion with the axial alignment of the columns with the windows and the top of the arch with the thickness of the wall. It is rectangular with round arches (three on the short sides, four on the long ones) supported on slim columns with Corinthian capitals above which we find a double moulding containing twenty-four coats of arms featuring, alternately, the weapons of the da Varanos and the rose of the Malatesta alongside figures of mermaids *a graffito*. Of many of these, as of the roundels between the arches, very little remains. Feliciangeli wrote of 'crowns or garlands in relief inscribing a central acronym composed of a G and a C: a capitol Y twisted with a C *a graffito*'.<sup>50</sup> Three similar

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<sup>47</sup> B. Feliciangeli, 'Lettere d'Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, marchesa di Mantova', appendix in 'L'itinerario di Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, attraverso la Marca e l'Umbria nell'aprile 1494', pp. 3-20 (pp. 13-19).

<sup>48</sup> 'Marvellous to the eye is the Palace of Giulio with its rooms universally painted with pictures and with portraits of the various *condottieri* of Camerino, with the arms and military machines of that century': Lili, *Dell'Historia*, p. 243. In particular he notes Francesco Sforza and Giacomo Piccinino 'on a chariot drawn by Fame and by Fortune with the three Parcas ahead who weave the threads of their lives'. There is a historical reason for this choice. The da Varanos in fact came back to power with the help of Alessandro Sforza and thanks to the intricate plotting of Elisabetta Malatesta and her cousins Fortebraccio and Francesco Piccinino, both among the most famous *condottieri* of the fifteenth century.

<sup>49</sup> The bust, newly restored, was shown for the first time last year at the exhibition on the da Varano family. See Marcelli, 'Immagini di Signori', p. 60, and Ceriana, 'Note sull'architettura', pp. 264-66.

<sup>50</sup> Feliciangeli, 'Cenni storici sul Palazzo dei Varano in Camerino', p. 33.



Figure 5. Courtyard of the da Varano *Palazzo*.

painted garlands have been discovered in the three ground-floor rooms of the *Palazzo* we have already mentioned. Coats of arms are inscribed in laurel twisted with ribbon, flowers, and fruits — symbols of glory, prosperity, and fertility — and placed in the middle of the painted ceilings.<sup>51</sup>

Positioned on the axis of the columns — an unusual choice — are windows in the style of the Guelph cross which overlook the courtyard, while on the outside front of the *Palazzo* towards the square there were arched two-light windows — ‘a window towards the main street with a central stone double column’.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Paino and Paraventi, ‘Una rappresentazione cortese’, p. 177.

<sup>52</sup> *Ragioni et descrizione del Ducato di Camerino* (Archivio di Stato di Modena, fondo Estense).



In addition, there were paintings in *graffito* technique between the windows, of which little or nothing has survived. Thanks to drawings made in the nineteenth century (in 1889), we have an idea of their subject matter, mythological figures each with their name and attributes: Melpomenes, Venus (the goddess is on a shell and rides dolphins), Apollo (playing the lyre surrounded by Muses), Aurora (on a chariot drawn by doves), Fortune (a wheel in her hands, on a chariot pulled by horses), the three Graces, Mercury, and Minerva. The last band of decoration, placed just under the wide projection, was divided into two superimposed friezes: the lower composed of candlesticks and leaves, the higher of lozenges and circles. The presence of this kind of decoration distinguishes this palace from others built in the Marche and Umbria in the fifteenth century and goes a long way to showing just how welcome the humanistic and Renaissance styles were in Camerino.<sup>53</sup>

### *Giovanni Maria da Varano and the Decline of the Signoria*

But the age of humanism was not an era of humanity, and the family had little chance to enjoy their fine new residence. It was completed in 1498 shortly before the Borgia tempest broke upon the courts of Romagna and the Marche. Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, subdued first the duchy of Urbino, then the state of Camerino, by sword and treachery. In 1502 the da Varano family was once again cruelly massacred. Giulio Cesare himself was strangled. His three sons, Annibale, Pirro, and Venanzio, met similarly grisly ends. The *Signoria* was briefly restored in 1503 by Giovanni Maria, the only heir to escape the slaughter. In 1515 he was accorded the title of duke by Pope Leo X. Prefect of Rome, Admiral and Count of Senigallia, in 1520 he married Caterina Cybo, niece of Pope Leo X and daughter of Maddalena de' Medici and Franceschetto Cybo, son of Pope Innocent VIII.

Although there was little further building work, the new owner devised the gardens, the underground corridor connecting the residence with the fortress, and the festive paintings in the Great Hall. In the years between 1515 and 1520, Duke Giovanni Maria had the decorations of this room completed with the personal coats of arms of the lords of the da Varano house with their ladies along with a number of inscriptions (*elogia*) composed by the humanist writer Varino Favorino, according to a fashion popular at the time.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately this room too no longer exists, having been divided and put to other uses.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> P. Zampetti (*Pittura delle Marche. Dalle origini al primo Rinascimento* (Firenze: Nardini, 1988)) hazards a couple of guesses as to possible painters: Sandro Botticelli or Carlo Crivelli.

<sup>54</sup> 'In front of the entrance, on the wall close to the ceiling, there is a series of paintings with the da Varano and their wives' coats of arms. In each picture da Varano weapons are set on the right and on the left those of the wives, if known': Document of 1584 quoted in Corradini, 'Il Palazzo di Giulio Cesare', p. 211).

<sup>55</sup> Instead there is now the long, wide corridor of the Law Faculty with its adjacent lecture halls. Of these one named 'Aula Scialoja' is noted for its eighteenth-century furniture.

With the death of Giovanni Maria in 1527, the golden age of this remarkable but neglected family and of their little-known residence drew to a close, together with most of the other Italian *Signorie*. Times were changing, there would be other trials and tribulations, but that is another story.

An important example of civil architecture, a mixture of the public and private so characteristic in the Italy of the *Signorie*, the Palace of the da Varano has met a certain critical fortune only in the last few decades. A local version of a national language nearer in spirit to Roman and Adriatic examples (see Palazzo Riario and the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino) than Florentine ones, its greatest claim to fame lies in the formal solutions given by the *quadriportico*, whose unique design was never seen before or again in the architecture of the fifteenth-century Italian *logge* (porticos).

This short essay, in which I have tried to illustrate how the building phases went hand in hand with historical events, will I hope inspire further research which, through the identification of the different living spaces, will provide a more detailed picture above all of the private life of this family.