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IL SACRO BOSCO:

The Significance Of
Vicino Orsini's Villa Garden at Bomarzo In
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IL SACRO BOSCO:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VICINO ORSINI'S VILLA GARDEN AT BOMARZO IN THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE GARDEN DESIGN

By

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ABSTRACT

IL SACRO BOSCO:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF

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IN THE HISTORY OF

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The mysterious garden created by Pierfrancesco "Vicino" Orsini at Bomarzo, Italy, begun c. 1551 and known as the Sacro Bosco ("Sacred Wood"), has traditionally been viewed as a strange divergence from the mainstream in the history of garden design. This thesis seeks to prove that Orsini's plan for the garden, while certainly unusual, was not at all the absolute anomaly that many writers and scholars would have it be, but that it reflects a well-known Renaissance predilection for the bizarre, the fantastic, the wild, and the mysterious. This predilection had manifested itself in earlier Italian gardens and would continue to be exhibited in garden design after Bomarzo.

This thesis offers my own observations and photographs of Bomarzo, and contains the most complete overview of the life of Vicino Orsini that

has been presented so far in English, based upon facts collected by the French researcher Jacqueline Theurillat and Bomarzo expert Jacopo Recupero. This understanding of Orsini's life, as best we can reconstruct it from the sparse information left us, is of utmost importance in comprehending the garden at Bomarzo. For it was in the mind of Vicino Orsini, influenced by literature, the ideas of friends, and the cultural forces of his time, that the notion of the Sacro Bosco took shape. This thesis will also consider the trend in Renaissance garden design toward admitting elements of the wild and fantastic, for it is in the Sacro Bosco that this trend becomes most apparent.

It is hoped that this thesis will provide a basis for further research into the wild and fantastic aspects of Renaissance garden design, and of Bomarzo in particular. Many of the mysteries of Bomarzo remain intact, however; some may never be solved, and perhaps were not in the first place ever meant to be solved.

DEDICATION

TO THE SPARTAN MARCHING BAND

The Spirit of Michigan State University

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INTRODUCTION

Bomarzo is a village in the foothills of Italy's Ciminian Mountains, about 90 kilometers north of Roma and 2.5 kilometers west of the Tiber River (see Illustration 1: map of Bomarzo area). The village, which today has a population of about 8,000, is situated on a massive hillside of tufa or peperino stone, a porous volcanic rock which manifests itself in great outcrops throughout the area (see Illustration 2: map of Bomarzo). The locale is well-known for its background in Etruscan history: the surrounding hills are riddled with ancient Etruscan tombs which began to be discovered in the early Renaissance. Etruscan artifacts have been turned up in nearby Pianmiano, in Piano della Colonna, and at Monte Casuli, among other sites.[1] Bomarzo itself is probably built upon the remains of what was once an Etruscan, and later a Roman, town.[2]

The quite town of Bomarzo, somnolent under a hot summer sun, possesses a singular attraction which draws visitors to it from around the world. It is not the bleak Palazzo Orsini, built by scions of a branch of Rome's famed Orsini family, which has guarded the town since the early fourteenth century. The palace does possess interesting features, but surely not enough to warrant the attention given Bomarzo in the twentieth century. The attraction is not the site of the village, though it is pretty enough with its tufa-stone buildings seemingly carved from the living rock of the hillside. There are no great churches in Bomarzo; the main flow of cathedral-visitors goes to nearby Orvieto to see the magnificent duomo there, while Bomarzo is served by an unremarkable parish church. No great wines come from Bomarzo,

though the spirited and intriguingly-titled golden wine Est! Est!! Est!!! is created in a town not far away. There are no famous paintings in Bomarzo. It would seem, in fact, that Bomarzo was passed over by the great tides of Italian history and creativity, and has forever remained as it appears today: a quiet, sleepy backwater, its surface unruffled by change.

Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. This tranquil village had its years of glory and animation, and an odd reminder of this burst of creativity lies just outside the city walls: one of Italy's most puzzling art-historical treasures, a tourist attraction which draws many hundreds of visitors per year, a monument which has confounded its visitors almost since the time of its creation. It is the villa garden of the Palazzo Orsini--or, at least, what is left of it--called the Sacro Bosco ("Sacred Wood") or Giardino dei Mostri ("Garden of the Monsters"), created by Pierfrancesco "Vicino" Orsini in the mid- to late sixteenth century (see Illustration 3: map of Sacro Bosco). Each day, groups pf tourists, mostly foreigners who have read articles in the popular press about this most "mysterious" of Italian gardens, wander through the Sacro Bosco of Orsini, and pause to ponder the strange statuary within it.

Think of an Italian Renaissance garden, and what image comes to mind? No doubt a vision of formal beauty: carefully laid-out aisles through tamed and lovely flower beds and trimmed hedges, vistas looking out onto splashing fountains and classical statuary, stairways and terraces leading up to the attached villa, which looks out onto the surrounding countryside. Our perception of Italian Renaissance gardens comes from our knowledge of certain areas of certain gardens such as the famous ones at Caprarola, at the Villa

d'Este, and at Florence's Pitti Palace. Such well-known views represent but one side of the Renaissance garden-designer's art, however, and the famous formal areas of these gardens are but one side of their story. In truth, the wild, fantastic, and mysterious elements in Renaissance garden design developed concurrently with the formal aspects in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and were present to some extent in many cases even in the most "domesticated" of Italian sixteenth-century gardens. Bomarzo represents a culmination of the use of the wild and fantastic in Renaissance garden design; because of a fortuitous set of circumstances, these elements received their greatest expression here.

What is "mysterious" about the garden at Bomarzo? A visit there will answer that question and will reveal why the popular press and connoisseurs of exotic travel destinations have taken such an interest in the Sacro Bosco. A serious study of the garden's creator, the garden's historical background, and its relationship to other Italian gardens of its time might, on the other hand, partially dispel some of the mystery.

Some significant scholarly work has in fact already been done on the Sacro Bosco. The fundamental source is still the "fascicolo special dedicate alla Villa Orsini di Bomarzo," published in the Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, which contains five articles: a stylistic analysis of the statuary in the garden by F. Fasolo, a compilation of known documentation of the garden by G. Zander, a proposed historical interpretation by L. Benevolo, a study of the history of the city of Bomarzo and the Villa Orsini by A. Bruschi, and a short note on the Orsini villa at Pitigliano by P. Portaghesi. (See Bibliography for full titles of articles.) In 1956, M. Calvesi published a summarization of historical

data on Bomarzo in "Il sacro bosco di Bomarzo," Scritti di storia dell' arte in onore di Lionello Venturi (Rome, 1956, I, 369-402). Discussions of Bomarzo are included in E. Battisti's L'antirinascimento (1962), Bruschi's "Il problemo storico di Bomarzo" in Palladio (1963), S. Settis's "Contributo a Bomarzo" in Bolletino d'arte (1966), J. von Henneberg's "Bomarzo: The Extravagant Garden of Vicino Orsini" in Italian Quarterly (1967), and E. Guldan's "Das Monster-Portal am Palazzo Zuccari in Rom" in Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte (1969). Other articles aimed at the general public have appeared in travel magazines, gardening journals, etc. Von Henneberg published "Bomarzo: Nuovi dati e un interpretazione" in Storia dell'arte in 1972, which gives some results of research on the life of Vicino Orsini.

The most detailed biographical information published to date on Vicino Orsini was assembled by J. Theurillat in 1973 in her book Les mysteres de Bomarzo et des jardins symboliques de la Renaissance, which contains discussions of many letters and documents which the author discovered in European libraries. In 1975 J. Oleson published his study of the "Etruscan" pediment in the Sacro Bosco in Art Bulletin ("A reproduction of an Etruscan tomb in the Parco dei Mostri at Bomarzo," Art Bulletin, 57, 1975, 410-417). And in 1982 E.G. Dotson looked at "Shapes of Earth and Time in European Gardens" (Art Journal, 42, 1982, 210-216), concentrating mainly on Bomarzo and the evocation of the passage of time and changes in the earth around and including the statues. Dotson is currently at work on an investigation into the theme of time in European gardens, in which a longer study about the Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo will appear; this work should soon be published.

In this study I will concentrate on Bomarzo as a product of its time, emphasizing that it is not at all a "mysterious" exception to a "rule"

governing accepted Renaissance garden design. Although some scholars have alluded to the fact that Bomarzo was influenced by other Renaissance gardens (Theurillat in particular includes much about other gardens in her book, though she is primarilty attempting to prove that Pirro Ligorio carried out the works at Bomarzo), there have been no studies specifically on the place of Bomarzo in the tradition of "wild" or fantastic elements in garden design. In addition, I will include a biography of Vicino Orsini based on the letters collected by Theurillat, which comprise the best documentary material to date on his life; by doing this, I will show that not only the particular site of Bomarzo, but also its predecessors and the singularly inventive mind of its creator worked together to form the unique and inimitable Sacro Bosco.

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1]John P. Oleson, "A Reproduction of an Etruscan Tomb in the Parco dei Mostri at Bomarzo," Art Bulletin, 57, September 1975, 410.

[2]Arnaldo Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 5-6.

CHAPTER ONE

A VISIT TO BOMARZO TODAY

Somewhere near Orvieto, on the rail line south from Florence to Viterbo, a change occurs in the countryside. The wide, bright fields filled with sunflowers give way to higher and higher hillocks of bare rock capped with brown trees and sun-dried grass. The surroundings take on an air of strangeness, wildness. The hills press up to the railroad tracks. Here and there, through breaks in the rocky hills, tumbling streams flow, cutting their beds deeper into the soft volcanic stone. This area of Italy once seethed with volcanic activity; now, the only remains of the ancient volcanoes are the hills made out of tan, porous tufa rock. The tufa, called peperino by the Italians, forms the basis for much of the building material used in farmsteads and villages here. Orange lichen grows over the tufa, painting weird patterns on hill and house alike.

The train continues on, past weathered stone houses with tiny crosses painted over their doors as if to give protection or to ward off...something. The grey forests weave odd patterns, the twisted trees seem to writhe in the hot wind. This is an area of people close to the earth and yet steeped in Catholic tradition since this region of Lazio became a papal protectorate during the Middle Ages. This is also a land still animated by ancient superstitions, a land shadowed by the memories of the Etruscans, whose mysterious tombs honeycomb the tufa cliffs.

There is a certain sense of the unnatural, the uncanny, which a visitor feels even today upon entering the wild region around Bomarzo.

Perhaps "unnatural" is the wrong word, for it is the very abundance of nature here which adds to this vaguely uneasy perception. Getting off the train at the little station of Attigliano-Bomarzo, the visitor sees nothing of the town beyond. Veiled by trees, the station seems an island of semi-civilization in the midst of an ocean of dusty live-oaks and exuberant vegetation. A few old men sit inside the cool shadows of the station, silently smoking pipes and watching the few passengers get off the train.

I was alone on my visit to Bomarzo. After a rainy, chilly night spent in an old albergo in Viterbo, I had boarded a bus for Bomarzo the next morning. The rising sun banished the last damp tendrils of fog that curled between the trees and hung over the fields. The bus stop was at the extreme southern end of the tan, lozenge-shaped village of Bomarzo, and my first view of it was of blank-walled houses and a dusty main road climbing toward the top of the hill, toward the Palazzo Orsini.

As I walked into the village I looked carefully for any evidence of the famous tourist attraction just down the slope from the town. There was no evidence: not a single postcard or picture-book was for sale in any shop, and no poster or placard advertised the park. Bomarzo was as it probably had been twenty or thirty—or even forty or fifty--years ago, I imagined: an old hill town made out of tawny stone, the old women wearing black dresses in the heat of summer, the young women nowhere to be seen, the young men gathering in the darkness of the town's few bars, the old men sitting on doorsteps and watching their neighbors. The only hint that this was, indeed, the 1980's came from one tiny, flashy red sports car which rocketed down the main street in the hour I spent exploring there. Townspeople eyed me, my American clothing, and my cameras with suspicion,

and no one spoke to me.

The Palazzo Orsini commands the very top of the hill on which Bomarzo is built. I wandered up to the palazzo, noting that the lower part has been given over to a few shops and some offices of the Commune (the town hall and mayor's office). There seemed to be no way to enter the rest of the palace. Upon asking, I was told that it was "closed for renovations." When I explained that I was an art-history student researching the Sacro Bosco, the man in the Commune office seemed to become even more reluctant to speak: mi dispiace, but the Palazzo is closed, and there is really nothing there of interest anyway.

Disappointed, I walked back down the hill, away from the imposing bulk of the palazzo. To the right, an archway through which I could see the sundrenched Lazian countryside beckoned, and as I went otward it, I saw the first hint of the Sacred Wood: a small green sign was posted on the wall under the arch. It said "Parco dei Mostri," and an arrow under it pointed through the arch and out toward the sunny fields beyond.

I followed the winding, dusty road down the hill and away from the village. To my right was an immense empty field; I was later to discover that this had once been the site of the formal garden of the Palazzo Orsini, designed and planted during Vicino Orsini's lifetime, and standing as a contrast to the Sacro Bosco further down the hill (see Illustration 2 for map pf town, formal garden, and Sacro Bosco and their relationships to each other).[1] How many times must Vicino have ridden past this garden, mounted on his favorite horse, Ragazzino, on his way down to his beloved Sacred Wood? Had I known then of the formal garden, I would have paused and tried to visualize what it might have looked like in the 1550's;

scholarly works have claimed that certain pathways and the overall layout of this rather conventional Renaissance garden are still visible upon close inspection.[2] However, I was unaware of all this. The unsuspecting eye sees this old garden only as a weedy field, overgrown with long grass and wildflowers and populated by yellow butterflies.

Edmund Wilson told of a visit he made to Bomarzo in the late 1960's, and quoted the French poet Andre Pieyre de Mandriargues, who had written of Bomarzo in 1957 that "the jungle was undisturbed," but it was "only a question of time before it would be barred off by a barbed-wire fence and tickets would be sold at a wicket."[3] When Wilson visited, he found that both the fence and the ticket-booth were present, "and the jungle had been partly cleared, though not enough to make it easy going."

As I reached the base of the hill, I found not only Wilson's ticket-booth and fence, but also a large parking lot covered with tufa gravel and a number of tall wooden flagpoles from which pastel banners fluttered. A tourist attraction, indeed. A sad, small zoo featuring exotic chickens, deer, and a goat was just beyond the parking lot. The present owners of the Sacro Bosco, the family of Giovanni Bettini, who was a member of the World Academy of Artists and who purchased the garden in 1952, are apparently in the process of clearing the forest, restoring some of the statues, and attempting to promote the garden's presence to visitors. However, it seemed to me almost as if the Sacro Bosco (with the owners' backing) and the village of Bomarzo were at odds with each other: the village seems to want to ignore the weird garden with its stone apparitions, as if it were an embarrassment to them, while the owners want to advertise the garden and attract more visitors. Parhaps the villagers, close to the old ways

of life as they are, still regard the garden and its grotesqueries with more than a little superstition. Tales are still told of odd happenings in the garden: that when one stands in the mouth of the Mascherone at dawn on a certain day of the year, it will tell you the details of your death; that the woman on the back of the tortoise sometimes spins around mysteriously.[4] Perhaps these legends and others are whispered in the village at night as gestures are made to ward off the evil eye. In any case, a conspiracy of silence appears to exist in the village of Bomarzo in regard to the Sacro Bosco below.

I had not encountered anyone on my mile-long walk down from the village, and no one was in the thatch-roofed ticket shed at the garden's entrance except a bored-looking salesgirl. She sold me a ticket for 2,000 lire. The hut also contained a sort of souvenir shop, but the only souvenirs of Bomarzo that apparentlt were available were a printed guidebook and three sizes of a terra-cotta reproduction of the Mascherone, the open-mouthed "mask" that is Bomarzo's best-known sculpture. I purchased the guidebook and went outside into the sultry air to find my way into the realm of the mostri.

The guidebook, published by the Ente Provinciale per il Turismo di Viterbo, proposes a route to be taken through the garden. It gives no source for this proposed itinerary, and there is no literature on the garden that I know of which prescribes such a route. It is possible that the owners of the garden, in attempting to reconstruct it and to make it more accessible to tourists, were obliged to construct a seemingly-logical pathway through the woods. They have done an admirable job in laying out the paths and lining them with wood chips, though it is highly doubtful

that this is the way the Bosco appeared in Vicino's time, for it is improbable that the modern itinerary has anything to do with Vicino's, if indeed he had one.

I entered the park by the "first" (according to the guidebook) statues: two sphinxes couchant on stone pedestals (see Illustration 4). I noted that all the inscriptions in the garden (and there are many of them, found on nearly every statue) have been highlighted with ochre-red paint; this serves to make them more legible, but it seemed to me to tamper with the overwhelming, surrounding suggestion that the great statues are emerging from, or being absorbed into, the earth. Seeing the weathered statues as they appear today, it is difficult to imagine that they were once the work of human hands, so earthy and natural do they seem. The red paint ties them to our world, makes them less an earth-creation and more an example of human artifice. It was not until later that I discovered that Vicino himself had once conceived a scheme to paint all the statuary in his Bosco, though no physical evidence of this remains today.

The sphinx, of course, is symbolic of riddles and puzzlement; the "Riddle of the Sphinx" of the Oedipus myth was well-known to Renaissance scholars. Perhaps these sphinxes, built, if we may believe a scholarly interpretation of one of the inscriptions on their pedestals,[5] as part of the first works of the garden in 1551, stand for the enigma of the garden which lies beyond them.

Next on the itinerary is the head of a bearded man, balanced atop a square block of stone. An inscription is carved on this base, but the letters are so weathered that no attempt has been made to fill them in with red paint. Is this a portrait of someone Vicino knew or admired?

The answer is likely to remain a mystery.

Around the corner, past some trees, and a new surprise: a huge, barrel-chested giant stands wrestling with another giant whom he has overturned and is now apparently trying to tear limb from limb (see Illustration 5). The guidebook calls this "The Fierce Giants;" other works have called it "Hercules and Antaeus" after the classical myth, or "Hercules and Cacus" after a version of the story which was based on a local Etrurian legend about Hercules wrestling the minstrel Cacus, who possessed Apollo's gift of prophecy.[6] Others have called the statue "Orlando" after Ariosto's hero in Orlando Furioso, or "Anglante" from the poetry of Bojardo.[7] An attempt has even been made to show that this is an erotic sculpture, and that the overturned figure is really female, leading to the accusation that Vicino Orsini used this garden as a place of orgiastic revelry.[8] Still other scholars have tried to show that this is a rendition of one of the giants in the service of the magician Oronte in Tasso's Floridante.[9] The debate may well rage on forever; the argument for the Ariosto connection is probably the strongest, although the "Hercules" attribution also has some merit (the earth-giant Antaeus would seem to be right at home among the earth-works of Bomarzo).[10]

A new surprise is next: a giant tortoise with the veiled figure of a woman on its back (see Illustration 6). Here, it seems, the creator of Bomarzo is playing with accepted ideas of proportion: in reality, a tortoise would be small and a human figure large, but this particular tortoise dwarfs the woman on its back. Why the strange juxtaposition? The notion of inversion, of normal relationships reversed, is an idea which seems to occur again and again in the Sacro Bosco. It is as if this is all part of

an elaborate mind-game Vicino played with visitors to his garden, confusing and at the same time delighting them.

The woman, faceless now, stands with one arm raised, her garments fluttering about her, on a globe which is placed on top of an elaborate garlanded pedestal, which itself is balanced on the tortoise's shell. It has never been proved what this statue signifies; the French poet-surrealist de Mandriargues said in 1957 that this "nymph" once held a "trumpet," and that it is likely "that it produced, by means of the play of water, a music which could only have been celestial or terrifying."[11] Robert Hughes debunked this theory, however: "perhaps there was water music at Bomarzo," he wrote. "But whatever its wheezings and hootings may have issued from, it cannot have been this statue, for there is no hole in the nymph's eroded face through which air could have been blown through the lost trumpet." Hughes links the tortoise-woman to a well-known Renaissance allegory: she is Fortuna, noted for her swiftness, but here, "in an elaborate stone joke," mounted on a slow-moving tortoise, proclaiming that fame and fortune come too slowly to Vicino Orsini. This seems a logical explanation of this odd figure, if anything can be logical about Bomarzo.

The picture that is beginning to take shape here is one of Vicino as an eclectic, a collector of strange stories and fables, of well-known myths and legends, of local sayings and proverbs. If the battling giants and the tortoise-woman can be linked to literature, proverbs, and allegory, then perhaps all of the iamgery in the garden at Bomarzo has a hidden meaning, each statue with its own. The garden would then become an intricate and erudite game, a puzzle or riddle to be deciphered by Vicino's guests as they wandered through it. All of the known references in the statues, and

all of the decipherable inscriptions, seem to point toward such an explanation. This will become clearer when the character of Vicino Orsini is explored in Chapter Three.

Further along the path, the so-called "Pegasus Fountain" (see Illustration 7) appears. Though it is shaped like a fountain, no pipes have been found to indicate that it ever was a real one. Its dry base is tilted; some scholars claim this is because of its settling into the soft earth, while others say that the tilt was planned, as there is another "base" (without a statue) close by that tilts in the opposite direction. This latter view seems most likely.[12] Carved from one block (unlike the tortoise and woman, which was carved from two separate blocks), this "fountain" portrays a winged horse springing from a rocky mount; the base is carved to resemble rustic stones. The figure of Pegasus from classical mythology is associated with the art of poetry, and scholars have guessed that Vicino wanted a Pegasus in his garden because of his love for collecting and discussing poetry and literature.[13] The suggestion has also been made that this figure actually represents the winged horse of the magician Atlant in Arioto's Orlando Furioso--thus setting up the argument over whether Vicino based his statues on mythology or on poetry of his own time, just as with the battling giants.[14] Vicino mentioned in a letter his admiration for the magician in Ariosto's epic, and it seems that he identified strongly with this figure "who ruled the enchanted places and solitary heights."[15] It has also been suggested that Vicino merely had this fountain made to salute, or perhaps to mock, the elegant Pegasus Fountain at the nearby Villa Lante at Bagnaia, known as one of the most lovely formal Renaissance gardens in Italy. However, it is probable that the Villa Lante fountain was constructed

after the main works at Bomarzo were completed, so this explanation seems unlikely. It is more probable that Vicino wished the true meaning of this sculpture, like those of the others in his wood, to remain enigmatic and obscure, so that the viewer himself might ponder and supply an interpretation. Vicino may have been somewhat smug about the fact that apparently only he understood the "true" meaning of his strange stone figures. He once crowed in a letter about "the marvels he made for all the fools" ("...les merveilles comme il l'a fait pour tant de balourds," according to Theurillat.[16]

The path moves out into an open, sunny clearing, and the so-called "Grand Nymphaeum" (see Illustration 8) emerges: a hemicircle of stone blocks, accented by seven rectangular niches and topped by a collection of rather overbearing stone urns. Moss and grass grow on the steps leading up to the Nymphaeum, and nearby is a truncated stone block bearing the inscription VICINO/ ORSINI/ NEI/ MDLII. This inscription has led scholars to believe that the date of the completion of this lower part of the garden can be fixed at 1552.

What is this Nymphaeum; what was its purpose? It seems a very theatrical piece of architecture, which leads me to speculate that it follows a trend in Renaissance garden design toward architecture recalling theater sets.[17] Perhaps Vicino was attempting not only theatrical effects, however, but also those of Roman ruins, with the idea in mind that the structure would become even more evocative as it decayed and fell into rubble. The appreciation of ruins was just coming into vogue, and Vicino reminds us of this fashion again and again in his garden.

A smaller Nymphaeum, with only one niche, appears further along the trail. This niche holds a female figure, which scholars have called a nymph, a Venus, or a Grace (see Illustration 9). This "nymph" stands

atop the masklike figure of a snarling dragon. But is this truly a female figure? Edmund Wilson has called it a "hermaphrodite," and indeed it appears that it may be so: the breasts are not large, and there is a hole in the genital area where a phallus may once have appeared. This does not necessarily prove, however, that the Sacro Bosco was once used as a site for Vicino's orgies, as Wilson suggests.[18] The hermaphrodite may well fit in with the general idea which I have proposed for the Sacro Bosco: that nothing is as it appears, that two or more explanations may be valid for each statue.

The famous "Leaning House" (see Illustration 10) is next on the itinerary, as the path begins to curve and lead upward to the next terrace. Some who have written about Bomarzo claim that Vicino planned the little house's incline, to make it all the more fantastic. Others argue that the casetta only leans because it has settled into the earth over the years, like many of the other works in the Bosco. One of Vicino's letters seems to confirm this latter view: he indicated his concern about the sinking and settling of his statues, and he even "borrowed" the great garden-designer Vignola from his friend Cardinal Alessadro Farnese to try to halt the statues' submergence into the earth.[20] Vignola apparently was unable to come up with a solution, or he may just have created a temporary one, for the statues of Bomarzo today continue in their 400-year process of returning to the earth from which they came. Still, the incline of the casetta gives it, like the other creations in the Bosco, an air of the bizarre, an extra sense of uncanniness.

There are two rooms in the casetta, an upper and a lower; the upper one may be entered only from the upper terrace. Both rooms are empty, and

through the large open windows one can look out over the wonders of the lower terrace. Both rooms are also ornamented with fireplaces which are not merely ornamental: they feature working chimneys. It is tempting to think that Vicino and his friends may have used the casetta as a sort of grown-up "playhouse," even meeting here on chilly days with a fire built on the hearth.

Near the entrance to the casetta is an inscription: CRIS/ MADRUTIO/ PRINCIPI/ TRIDENTINO/ DICATUM. The inscription dedicates the casetta to Vicino Orsini's great friend Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo, whom Vicino had met in Trent when the cardinal hosted him and his men as they made their way north to Germany to face the Schmalkaldic League in 1546. Madruzzo, born in 1512, apparently remained a close friend of Vicino's from the time of the German adventure on, for his name often occurs in Vicino's known letters. Madruzzo no doubt visited Bomarzo more than once, and when he died in 1578 he was visiting another fantastic Italian garden, the Villa d"Este of his friend and fellow cardinal Ippolito d'Este.[21]

Walking past a row of urns (see Illustration 11) carefully placed along the edge of the upper terrace, the visitor next sees the huge figure of a sleeping woman (see Illustration 12). Nude from the waist up, this vaguely erotic figure reposes with head thrown back languidly, her fingers trailing dreamily on the bed of rock she sleeps upon. Is this woman dreaming the strange visions which surround her? Again, it seems we are not intended to know.

A dolphin or sea monster rears from the earth (see Illustration 13), startling in its ferocity. Is this the dolphin of mythology, associated

with Bacchus? Could it be the Leviathan of the Biblical tale? Ambiguous as this is the next figure, called "Neptune" (see Illustration 14), which may also be a river-god of the type often used to decorate Renaissance fountains. This stone divinity strongly resembles a river-god found on a fountain at the Villa Lante at Bagnaia (see Illustration 15),[22] though again it is unclear which may have followed which, so speculative is the dating.

The strong, curving contours of an Oriental-looking dragon battling two lions (they are a lion and a lioness, despite claims by some that they are mastiffs) comes into view next (see Illustration 16). This statue finds a precedent in a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci: a similar scene of a dragon fighting lions (see Illustration 17).[23] It is also possible that Vicino based this statue on a woodcut in the very popular allegorical romance called the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili,[24] or that he found his model in a print in the scientist Athanasius Kircher's Mundus subterraneus, which purportedly shows a fossilized dragon which had recently been discovered.[25] Ariosto speaks of dragons in his epic poem. The dragon epitomizes the fantastic--but Vicino lived at a time during which such creatures just might have been accpeted as a natural occurrence. Not in Italy, of course, but who knew what strange creatures might be found in the unexplored interiors of Africa, Asia, and the New World?

In the same vein is the next of the mostri: a gigantic elephant, over life-sized, carrying a castle and mahout on its back and lifting the limp figure of an armored soldier in its trunk (see Illustration 18). Much speculation has been devoted to the precedents for this figure. It may represent a real animal of Vicino's time: the elephant called "Annone"

which had been presented to Pope Leo X as a gift and which became very famous in Rome.[26] It may represent the elephant found on the arms of Emanuele Filiberto, against whom Vicino fought in the battle at Hesdin in Flanders (Filiberto was a commander of the Imperial troops who captured Vicino and his companions; perhaps it is Filiberto who is being crushed in the elepahnt's trunk--or perhaps it is Vicino himself).[27] It may derive from a plate in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili which shows an elephant carrying an obelisk on its back (this plate may also have inspired Bernini's elephant-with-obelisk statue in Rome).[28]

The next statue, a seated woman, nude but draped from the waist down, who wears a large urn full of vegetation on her head (see Illustration 19), again raises questions. Is she Flora, Ceres, or a figure from a Renaissance allegory? May she be the nymph Amphitrite, beloved by Neptune? She looks out at the statue of the bearded deity who may or may not be Neptune which stands at the opposite end of a long avenue of vases. She leans upon a carved group of sirens, putti, and heraldic emblems whose meaning has not yet been speculated upon.

The most famous of the mostri is next: the Mascherone, a giant open-mouthed face which gapes from the side of a hill (see Illustration 20). Before approaching it, I turn to look back upon the garden. There is not a feeling of fright here among the monsters, but rather a feeling of peace, as if somehow they belonged here and welcomed one who walked in their midst in quiet contemplation. It was a more peaceful feeling than I had experienced in the town, with its sidelong glances and suspicious inhabitants. There is something very old and mysterious about these strange beings--and I call them "beings" because they have a presence and a quality of

existence that is undeniable. They live, in the sense that they seem a part of the ancient earth, though whether they are issuing forth from it or sinking back into it is open to question.

The phrase "removed from the world" entered my mind at that point, standing there among the meraviglie of Bomarzo. Perhaps the trees surrounding the statues were not so tall in Vicino's time, yet he still would have had to ride down the long hill and past the large formal garden to arrive at his Sacro Bosco. It truly is "removed," from the village, at least; no market or traffic sounds disturb the quiet peace here in the garden. The sun slants through the trees, and here and there clouds of gnats dance in the shafts of light. It is cool and shady, cooler than the hilltop town or the dusty road or the open field. It is a place of escape.

The monsters are frozen, immobile, lichen-covered; pine needles blanket the ground. Here and there one sees the rose, the symbol of the Orsinis, carved in stone into the sides of statues, or held by the heraldic Orsini bears (see Illustration 25; "Orsini" derives from the word "orso," or "bear," and legend has it that the first Orsinis were suckled by a she-bear, thus absorbing the strength and power of the bear). A pathway is bordered by huge stone pine cones; it leads nowhere. The monsters look off into the distance, and, where faces are not worn away by time and weather, they seem to smile knowingly. What do they know? That they are a wonder and a puzzlement to all? Or that, now, only they know the answers to the riddle of their existence? They tolerated me in their midst, as if they were amused that their secrets were being explored.

I wandered past the three-headed statue of Cerberus, the hound of Hell, past a sinking stone bench (see Illustration 21) and a broken pediment

of a temple (again proving the interest ruins held for Vicino; the pediment was purposefully carved to look as if it were broken, to resemble an ancient Etruscan find[29]--see Illustration 22), and down into a sun-filled clearing at the base of the garden slope. Here stands one of the most enigmatic of Vicino's monuments: the tempietto, a classical-looking "Roman" temple complete with dome (see Illustration 23). Some scholars have said that this temple is a true evocation of classical architecture, designed in memory of Vicino's beloved wife Giulia after her death, but this has convincingly been shown to be a false assumption.[30] I walked into the cool greyness of the temple interior and stood looking up at the ceiling. There was a sense, even here, of an art more ancient than the classical; a mystic proximity to things of the earth and religions older even than the Etruscans. The classical details and proportions of the temple did little to dispel this feeling. I stood in the darkness and looked out at the bright day, silently asking the spirit of Vicino Orsini for some answers to the riddles he had created. But all was quiet under the star-carved dome of the tempietto.

I roamed back up the slope to the Mascherone, which still gaped in frozen astonishment, its upper lip carved with the red-painted inscription OGNI PENSIERO VOL.... The last letters are weathered away. The present owners, as Dotson has pointed out, seem to prefer to think that the original inscription read OGNI PENSIERO VOLA ("All thought flies"). However, she adds, the spacing of the letters is such that it is very possible that the inscription once read LASCIATE OGNI PENSIERO VOI CH'ENTRATE. Dotson cites the similarity of the Bomarzo open-mouthed face to a seventeenth-century drawing of a mask framing a doorway; this mask is inscribed LASCIATE

OGNI PENSIERO O VOI CH'INTRATE (sic). It is not unreasonable to suspect, as Dotson does, that the Bomarzo mask carried a similar inscription, in reference to the inscription over the gate of Hell in Dante's Inferno: LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA VOI CH'ENTRATE ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here").[31] An elaborate Renaissance joke, perhaps; or an evocation of the Boccacione or plaster Hell-Mouth which Vicino had seen paraded through the streets of Rome as a young man; but there is yet an aura of ancient mystery and religion. Or does this mask merely gape like Vicino wished all his visitors would react when they entered his Bosco? Then the inscription over the mouth--if we take it as reading "Abandon all thought, ye who enter here"--would make sense; as much as anything makes sense in Bomarzo.

The last of the mostri was the most intriguing to me. A moss-encrusted head--some old sea-beast?--rears out of the earth. Upon it is balanced a globe, and on top of the globe is a castle (see Illustration 24). This creature has been called "Time," but what is it, really?[32] It rises out of a dried-up fountain pool, its eyes goggling and mouth yawning. The castle has been called a symbol of the Castellano branch of the Orsini family (Vicino himself was a member of the fading Mugnano branch),[33] but could that be all that this statue symbolizes? Is the globe a world globe, a symbol of power? Does the entire statue make reference to some lost wood-cut print or passage from a forgotten poem? There is no clue--and Bomarzo itself offers none.

Here in Bomarzo, where one feels so close to the ancient earth and age-old religion, speculation comes easily that Vicino intended this garden to evoke the notion of the primeval forest, the wood at the beginning of the world. The spirits of the living earth and living trees are all around in

this place; it is as if this were one of the sacred groves of Diana and the first King of the Wood, Virbius, and whoever their Etruscan forebears may have been.[34] In Europe, the worship of trees has been important virtually since the beginning of mankind--the immense forests which covered the continent made a great impression on the earliest humans. The forest around Bomarzo was particularly wild; Frazier tells of it in The Golden Bough, calling it "the dreaded Ciminian forest, which Livy compares to the woods of Germany...No merchant," he says, "had ever penetrated its pathless solitudes; and it was thus deemed a most daring feat when a Roman general, after sending two scouts to explore its intricacies, led his army into the forest and, making his way to a ridge of the wooded mountains, looked down on the rich Etrurian fields spread out below,"[35] Frazier states that there is abundant proof of the presence of tree-worship in ancient Italy.[36] To the primitive mind, all objects are animate, and the vast surrounding forests in which the earliest tribes lived were populated with the living spirits of the trees. At Bomarzo, deep in the heart of the dark Ciminian forest, this certainly must have been so. The idea of a Sacred Wood, then, goes far back into the history of the region and of the earliest peoples of Italy.

With these and other thoughts in mind, I left the strange garden of Vicino Orsini. As I walked back toward the village and "civilization," I resolved to look at the existing literature on the Sacro Bosco and to attempt to pull together the scholarly research on the garden and on Orsini himself. A visit to the garden raises many more questions than it answers, and perhaps this will always be so. Perhaps there are no easy, all-encompassing solutions.

NOTES--CHAPTER ONE

[1]Leonardo Benevolo, "Saggio d'interpretazione storica del Sacro Bosco," Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 61.

[2]Ibid., see also map showing layout of the formal garden in Arnaldo Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 4.

[3]Edmund Wilson, "The Monsters of Bomarzo," FMR, 11, 1985, 61.

[4]Robert Hughes, "The Strangest Garden in the West," Horizon, 18, 1976, 50.

[5]See Chapter [redacted] Three, 45.

[6]Michael Grant and John Hazel, Who's Who in Classical Mythology, (London: Waidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), 97.

[7]Jacopo Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo (Florence: Bonechi Edizioni, 1977), 18-20.

[8]Wilson, "Monsters," 64.

[9]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 20.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Andre Pieyre de Mandriargues, Les Monstres de Bomarzo (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1957), 19-20.

[12]Esther Gordon Dotson, "Shapes of Earth and Time in European Gardens," Art Journal, 42, 1982, 213.

[13]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 23.

[14]Jacqueline Theurillat, Les Mysteres de Bomarzo et des Jardins Symboliques de la Renaissance (Paris: Editions Vilo, 1973), 29-30.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., 41.

[17]Mila Mastrorocco, Le Mutazione di Proteo: I Giardini Medicei del Cinquecento (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1981), 56-60.

[18]Wilson, "Monsters," 64.

[19]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 24.

[20]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 45.

[21]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 28.

[22]See photo of the Villa Lante river-god statue in Ronald King, The Quest for Paradise: A History of the World's Gardens (New York: Mayflower Books, 1979), 100.

[23]See illustration of the da Vinci work in Hughes, "Strangest Garden," 53.

[24]The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili woodcut may also be seen in Ibid.

[25]Athanasius Kircher, Mundus subterraneus, II (Amstelodam: Joannes Janssonium a Waesberge & Filios, 1578 ed.), 103.

[26]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 34.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Hughes, "Strangest Garden," 55.

[29]Oleson, "Reproduction of an Etruscan Tomb," 410-417.

[30]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 26-27; see discussion of her findings in Chapter Three below.

[31]Dotson, "Shapes of Earth and Time," 215, n. 7.

[32]Recupero, 48-50; Theurillat, 125-126.

[33]Recupero, 48.

[34]James G. Frazier, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion (New York: MacMillan Publishing Comapny, Inc., 1976 ed.), 9.

[35]Ibid., 127.

[36]Ibid., 128.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF BOMARZO

Since the Sacro Bosco is so much a product of a particular place--in an oak firest, in a tufa-studded valley, at the foot of the hill of Bomarzo, surrounded by an area once inhabited by the ancient Etruscans--it seems best to begin with an overview of the history of Bomarzo. The Sacro Bosco can be properly understood only in the context of its natural and manmade surroundings. Without some idea of this setting it would be difficult to explain or even describe the impression of ambiguity and mystery given by this particular creation.

Arnaldo Bruschi wrote the only modern published history of the village of Bomarzo and the area surrounding it in 1955.[1] He based much of his history of the area on a document written by a priest of Bomarzo, a Father Vittori, in 1845.[2] The history of Bomarzo offered here will rely upon both Vittori's and Bruschi's findings, with additions from the other literature.

Many scholars and researchers have written of the mystic, occult atmosphere which oervades the area of Bomarzo. It vibrates with "...an unequivocable presence of subtle enchantment," Bruschi writes.[3] "The countryside, the rocks, the trees, the air itself are impregnated with it." From whence comes this air of ancient mystery? Bruschi becomes almost poetic: "The ministers of death: demons, the infinite divinities of shadowy Acheronte, the Harpies, the Furies, the Gorgons, the Graie, the Pretedi, the Moire,...the Titans...exit the caverns and crannies of the rocks, driving away the satyrs and the nymphs and the gentler gods."[4]

The "gods of light" are impotent against these elder spirits, says Bruschi.

These ancient divinities have several things in common: all are earth-sprung, in the way of the most ancient gods of almost every culture. Many likely developed from the religion of the oldest known colonizers of the region around Bomarzo, the Etruscans. The rustic, coarse mysticism which Bruschi and others claim still exists among the people of Bomarzo would thus be traceable in a direct line to these archaic inhabitants of the area.

What is the psychology of the residents of Bomarzo today? Let Bruschi explain it: "Close to the earth and those who live upon it; possessing an unconscious sense of melancholy which is both contemptuous and diffident; imbued with a sensual love of the good life, sumptuous and lighthearted: a love of luxury...and of irony, of music, of feasts, of hunts, and of commerce."[5] All of these things, says Bruschi, are instinctive means of attempting to conquer death. Bruschi found that the people of Bomarzo have an almost obsessive concern with death, and are often preoccupied with oppressive thoughts concerning it. The dichotomy between the twin psychologies of the Bomarzans is, to Bruschi, quite clear, as is its synthesis: the need for pleasure and "joie de vivre" covers, "like an enchanted mask," the need to deceive death. The people who express such great joy at certain times in their lives (festivals, for example, or happy life occasions such as weddings) can, at other times, show a profound melancholy.

Bruschi traces Father Vittori's history of Bomarzo, beginning with its origins as a fortified Etruscan city identified as "Meonia" or "Meoni."

This city was equidistant between the Etruscan settlements at the sites of present-day Orte and Viterbo, and apparently an important defensive stronghold. Vittori claims that the zone of direct influence of the combined cities must certainly have reached to the banks of the nearby Tiber.[6] It was important to the Etruscans to control the Tiber, both as a defensive measure and because it was a commercial waterway, and for this reason they established several large fortified settlements near the river.[7]

The site of Meoni was sufficiently far from the river, however, to render it practically ineffective as a direct river defense. I would suggest that the Etruscans may have used Meoni as an armed outpost from which the river could easily be reached in a short time. Bruschi mentions other present-day sites which probably began as Etruscan river-defense forts: the Orsini castle at Mugnano (which probably derived its name from "Meoni," or the later Latin "Moenianum") is one of them.

The Etruscan origins of Bomarzo are undeniably proved by the many Etruscan necropoli in the area. Etruscan tombs riddle the foothills of the Ciminian Mountains around Bomarzo, and major tombs have been found since medieval times at Pianmiano, Piano della Colonna, and Monte Casuli nearby.[8] Vicino Orsini himself must have known of these tombs; there is evidence of Etruscan influence upon some of the statues in the Sacro Bosco (notably the "broken Etruscan temple pediment"),[9] and Vicino's close friend Francesco Sansovino (son of the sculptor Jacopo Sansovino and grandson of the sculptor Andrea Sansovino) translated into Italian "the most remarkable monument of Etruscomania," the Commentaria supra opera diversorum auctorum de antiquitatibus loquentium confecta of Fra Giovanni

Nanni (who was known as Annio da Viterbo).[10] It is not certain, but it is very probable that Vicino possessed Etruscan artifacts in his personal collections; certainly it is not unreasonable to imagine that a cultured gentlemen of this region would own such objects.

The last great battle of the Etruscans against their Roman conquerors, the Battle of Lake Valimonte, occurred a short distance from Bomarzo.[11] The Romans certainly plundered the city of Meoni, and perhaps destroyed it completely, according to both Vittori and Bruschi.[12]

The city on the hill rose again during the period of Roman domination. A Roman sepulchre has been identified at the base of the campanile of the present-day parish church in Bomarzo.[13] Celebrated Roman families such as the Rutili, Vibrii, and Rufini had homes and villas in the area, and perhaps in the city itself.[14] The Romans had a good eye for a defensive site, and this rocky escarpment was perfect for such use.

Roman rule continued for many centuries, and with the rise of Christianity Bomarzo was still an important city. In the second century A.D., according to Bruschi, Bomarzo became the seat of a bishopric.[15] Invading Goths and Vandals were repeatedly to interrupt the peace of the hilltop city, however. Coins bearing the likeness of Alaric the Goth, c. 534 A.D., have been found in Bomarzo, indicating an invasion around that time.[16]

Bruschi states that by 590 A.D. Bomarzo was among the cities liberated by the Roman Esarca of Ravenna, but the Romans were then driven out of the town by Aguilulf (590-616) and his Lombards. By the seventh century, however, Bomarzo was again flourishing under the rule of Rome, and was still the center of a diocese, and had grown to combine itself with the abandoned city of Ferentum nearby.[17]

Years of relative peace followed before Bomarzo was again occupied by an army: this time the Lombards under King Luitprand (d. 744) took over the town, as well as the villages of Orte, Amelia, and Bieda. The towns were freed by papal troops in the late 740's, but the Lombards returned again around 749 under the leadership of King Astolfo. Bomarzo and the surrounding region were finally liberated from the Lombards in the late 700's with the aid of the Frankish kings Pepin (crowned King of Italy in 781) and Charlemagne (crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800).

During these times of upheaval and invasion Bomarzo had suffered. The city had shrunk back to the single high hill, which was easier to defend. This medieval Bomarzo was probably about the size, in area and population, of the present-day town. Vittori theorizes that the first permanent cathedral church at Bomarzo was probably built at some point in this period (though one would think that some sort of large church structure would have been present before this, as Bomarzo had been a bishop's seat since the second century). Probably, says Vittori, materials from the old Roman buildings were used to construct the cathedral, which was built on the basilical plan. Houses, also built of blocks and rubble taken from old Roman structures, huddled around the cathedral, and were perhaps surrounded by an encircling wall.[18]

One last invasion of Bomarzo was to occur: this time, the Hungarians swooped down upon the town and virtually destroyed it once again. This tenth-century attack probably also destroyed the cathedral; nothing else is ever mentioned of this structure. The bishopric was never re-established at Bomarzo; the last Bomarzan bishop of whom Vittori found evidence was

a Bishop Lamberto, mentioned in a document dated 1015.[19]

Bruschi says that the diocese of Bomarzo was joined to that of Bagnoregio in the twelfth century.[20] The loss of its staus as a bishopric, however, did not affect Bomarzo's importance as a strategic defensive site. Around this period, a noble family built a castle atop the hill of Bomarzo, probably on the remains (and perhaps, again, using the rubble) of the old Roman fortifications.

Bomarzo possessed a "decidedly warlike aspect" as early as 1225, says Bruschi, when a cavalry attack by troops from Orvieto was driven back by the troops of the lord of Bomarzo. The Orvietans laid seige to Bomarzo, but were repelled by the defenders and forced to retreat, discouraged by the defensive rpeparations of the town.[21]

In the late thirteenth century, however, Bomarzo would seem to have become subjugated to the growing city of Viterbo. There is evidence that the Bomarzans were at one point forced to surrender portions of their property to the lords of Viterbo,[22] and that the castle at Bomarzo was actually sold to Viterbo. The sale of the castle is documented in a deed dated 1293.[23] Bruschi says that the dominance by Viterbo over Bomarzo lasted only about 25 years. By 1334, the castle at Bomarzo had been returned to its original ownership by a local lord.

We know very little of Bomarzo and what occurred in the town between the early 1300's and the early 1500's; the records fall silent for nearly 200 years. It is not until Gian Corrado Orsini, the father of Vicino, comes into possession of the castle at Bomarzo in 1502 that the records begin to speak again. The Orsinis apparently had been present in the area before that time (Bruschi found evidence of a lord of Bomarzo named

Anselmo Orsini as early as 1340),[24] but the history of the Renaissance influence in Bomarzo really begins with the coming of Gian Corrado and the birth of his son, Pierfrancesco "Vicino" Orsini.

NOTES--CHAPTER TWO

[1]Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo," 3-32.

[2]Ibid., 3.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., 5.

[8]Oleson, "Reproduction of an Etruscan Tomb," 410.

[9]Ibid., passim.

[10]Ibid., 416, n.44.

[11]Bruschi, "L'Abitato," 5.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 6.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 7.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MASTER OF THE SACRO BOSCO: VICINO ORSINI AND THE GARDEN AT BOMARZO

The man who is credited with conceiving the strange garden at Bomarzo remains in many respects as mysterious as his singular creation. Most writings about Bomarzo deal with the Sacro Bosco itself, and with speculations about its possible sculptors or architects, and do not delve deeply into the life of its wealthy patron. The reason for this may be that, until fairly recently, little was known of the life of Vicino Orsini.

Recent discoveries of letters and documents written by Vicino, however, have brought to light many aspects of his life. In particular, the French historian Jacqueline Theurillat has uncovered many papers in Italian, Belgian, and French libraries which were either written by Orsini or were addressed to him by acquaintances. Theurillat assembled the papers into a book in 1973; this work provides the most complete biography of Vicino Orsini to date.[1] The major deficiency in Theurillat's book is its lack of footnotes; one os left not knowing where or from which library a document comes, and she translates the original sources into French without providing the original Italian (though she does include some photographs of actual documents). Theurillat also spends a great deal of the book attempting to prove that Pirro Ligorio was the actual architect of the Sacro Bosco; she argues this quite convincingly in many ways. I think, nevertheless, that her main contribution to the historical record of Bomarzo is her research into Orsini's letters and papers, and the resulting biography of the Duke of Bomarzo.

From the tone of his letters one can tell that Vicino was not the hunchbacked, jealous misanthrope he has become in the popular mind due to the Argentine writer Manuel Mujica-Lainez's novel Bomarzo, published in 1967, and the more recent opera based on that book.[2] Mujica-Lainez based his fictional Vicino only slightly on historical fact, though the novel is very entertaining to read and is rich with Renaissance intrigue, murder, and Machiavellian plotting. It would be romantic to believe that Mujica-Lainez's vision of Vicino were true. The letters and documents tell us otherwise. Even so, the real Vicino Orsini led a life that was in many ways worthy of a novel. Warrior, nobleman, student of literature, patron of the arts: Vicino Orsini indeed seems to embody the ideal of the "Renaissance man," as Theurillat's research has proved.

Pierfrancesco "Vicino" Orsini was born on July 4, 1523, to Gian Corrado Orsini and his second wife, Clarice. His birthplace was undoubtedly the huge Orsini palace, which even then loomed over the village of Bomarzo, for his father Gian Corrado had come into possession of the town in 1502. Gian Corrado had begun renovations on the palace, which had probably stood at least since the eleventh century and possibly had been built on ancient remains of an Etruscan or Roman fortress.[3]

The child Pierfrancesco was nicknamed "Vicino," or "neighbor," after his grandfather, who was also named Pierfrancesco. Vicino grew to prefer his nickname and, as far as is known, never used the name "Pierfrancesco" as an adult.

The father, Gian Corrado, was by all accounts an intractable and cold man. His first marriage, to an Orsini cousin, Lucrezia Orsini dell' Anguillara, had produced one son, Giacomo, and had ended with the death of

the wife, Lucrezia. His second marriage, to Clarice (also an Orsini cousin), produced two more sons, Vicino and Maerbale. Gian Corrado died in 1526 and conferred the inheritance of his lands in Bomarzo and the surrounding countryside to Giacomo, Vicino, and Maerbale. Some strange conditions were appended to the inheritance: Giacomo was to continue his ecclesiastical studies under pain of disinheritance, and moreover was to tutor his two younger brothers until they had reached their fifteenth year, unless their mother remarried.[4]

It is unclear, however, what did then become of their mother, Clarice. When Gian Corrado died, she left Bomarzo and her children under the care of their half-brother Giacomo. Perhaps she returned to Rome to escape the "backwoods" quality of life in Bomarzo. Giacomo apparently died soon after, for he is not mentioned at all in further records involving the inheritance.

It is known that Vicino and his younger brother Maerbale disputed with each other over the terms of the inheritance.[5] Arbitration began in 1542 and was presided over by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of the Pope, Paul III. The settlement of the dispute was apparently no easy task, and records of it run into the hundreds of pages. Arguments went on until 1548. Vicino seems to have been much more accomodating than Maerbale. In the end, Vicino inherited the title of "Duke of Bomarzo," and was given the fief of Bomarzo, the surrounding forests, and "half of Foglia, from the river to the roots of Soracte."[6] Maerbale received "the other half of Foglia, the eagle's nest of La Penna, and the fortress of Chia, on the egress from Bomarzo along the Orte-Viterbo road."[7]

While the inheritance dispute was going on, Vicino married, in 1544. He chose his wife, Giulia, from the Farnese family, who were at least as

prominent in Rome as the Orsini. The daughter of Galeazzo Farnese, Giulia is not to be confused with her famous great-aunt Giulia Farnese, nicknamed "La Bella" and celebrated because she was the mistress of the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI. Vicino's Giulia was an intriguing combination of sweetness and strength. She was not the faithless wife of Mujica-Lainez's romance; she appears to have been a loyal spouse to Vicino and a strong partner in his undertakings. She was celebrated by poets of her time, as were many noblewomen, but in her case the poets' praises do not seem to have been mere flattery. Betussi, for example, said of her in 1556: "Et in atto, et in vita mostra tanto valore ch'io non conobbi mai altra piu piena di constantia, di che n'ha dato testimonio nella iatture del suo fedele Vicino Orsini, sempre con animo costante e forte sopportando i colpi d'adversa fortuna."[8]

Vicino and Giulia seem to have loved one another, and their life together was probably happy. Vicino never speaks ill of her in any of his letters, except on one occasion much later when she tried to interfere in the progress of his works in his Sacro Bosco.[9] During the early years of their marriage Vicino was primarily occupied with continuing the renovations begun by his father on the palazzo. He added loggias and a pediment ornamented with lilies: probably a tribute to Giulia, as the Farnese emblem was the blue iris or lily.[10]

This quiet life was not to continue, though, for in 1546 Vicino, like all noblemen in lands subject to the Church, took part in a general mobilization of all the Roman nobility into a grand army which would march against the Protestant Schmalkaldic League in Germany. Pope Paul III ordered the raising of this army as a gesture of support for Emperor Charles V, and the papal grandson Ottavio was named Captain-General. The Pope's

other grandson, the aforementioned Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, was named Legate.

Theurillat describes the scene: "Rome, in the enthusiasm, amid the ringing of bells, watched the departure of these magnificent noblemen, whom the old Pontiff blessed from high on the steps of Aracoeli. The Legate carried a great crucifix; he meant to confront the Protestant princes with it. Behind him were all the nobles...of Rome."[11] Vicino Orsini was among them, mounted on an armored horse and ready to ride to the north to restore the glory of the Church. Theurillat discovered a list of the warriors involved, in a communique addressed from a Venetian, Rovereto, to the Doge of Venice. "Not a name is missing," marvels Theurillat. "The spies of Venice have always been good!"[12]

The grand army, unfortunately, did not hold up in actual battle. Some contingents, upon reaching Germany, gave up immediately when faced by the Lutherans. Charles V procrastinated about sending reinforcements. The army, whittled away by deserters, disintegrated. In discouragement and frustration, Vicino and many of the other nobles returned home. For Vicino the only good thing to have come of this ill-fated expedition was his acquisition of a new and important friend: the cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo, who had received Vicino's contingent sumptuously in Trent as they passed through on their way north.[13] Madruzzo's name would later be inscribed in the Sacro Bosco.[14]

Giulia had not been idle during her husband's absence. She had managed his lands and estates with seemingly little difficulty, according to the existing records. In addition, she had undertaken to complete the chapel of Santa Maria della Valle in Bomarzo, which had been begun by her

father-in-law Gian Corrado. Under her guidance the chapel was finished. Theurillat discovered an inscription carved in the chapel's crypt; quoted in full in the text of a report from a Borghese steward, it reads: "This Christian building, commenced by Gian Corrado Orsini, was interrupted for a short time by his death. Completed by his daughter-in-law Giulia Farnese and designed for the use of the public pending the return of her husband Vicino and the armies from Germany. Anno 1546."[15]

The orginal Latin inscription in the chapel reads:

D.O.M.

HOC CHRIST. OPUS
IO. COR. URS. INDUS
TRIA VIX EFFOS MO
RTE PREVENT
JULIAE FARNESIAE NURUS CURA EX
PLEVIT ET USUI PUBLICO
DICAVIT VICINO CONJUGI
MILITE IN ALEMANIA
ANN. MDXXXXVI. [16]

Poor translations of this inscription, made from the crumbling stone of the parish church itself, have led some researchers to believe that Giulia died in 1546, and thus that the tempietto built later in Vicino's Sacro Bosco is a posthumous tribute to her. In fact, all the inscription proves is that Giulia, like most of the other members of her family, loved to build things. Her sister, Girolama Farnese Sanvitale di Fontanellato, had a chapel built at Fontanella which still exists. Another sister, Violante Farnese Conti (who had married Vicino's best friend Torquato Conti) built a "miniature court" housed in a "pretty palace" at Poli.[17]

Vicino and Giulia had several children: the eldest Oratio, followed by Marzio, then by one or two daughters, and finally by Corradino. Another son, Alessandro, died young.[18] After Giulia's death, two other children are

mentioned in the records; named Leonide and Oronthea, they may have been children of his second marriage, or they may have been illegitimate.[19]

Upon his return from Germany, probably in late 1546, daily life at Bomarzo resumed its peaceful progress for Vicino. There are no recorded complaints about Vicino or Giulia from their peasants (though there had been severe complaints about both Gian Corrado and Maerbale).[20] The only documented reproach against Vicino was form his neighbor, Count Colonne di Sipiciano, which probably occurred around 1546; it was a dispute about pigs![21]

Vicino regularly traveled to Rome in order to visit relatives, to attend festivals and spectacles, or to do business. Among his known business associates were his friend Torquato Conti, and also Paolo-Giordano Orisini, Ascanio della Corgna, the Count of Santa Fiore, and the Counts Orsini di Pitigliano and di Anguillara.[22]

In the city Vicino took part in literary, artistic, and cultural discussions with these men, and there is no reason to believe that he was not as learned as they, if not more so. Theurillat specifically discovered Vicino taking part in discussions about the project for the basilica of Montemellini, which involved the architect Pirro Ligorio. Ligorio had probably met Vicino several times in Rome, says Theurillat, and had been connected with other Orsini before that, as he had taken part in the reconstruction of the theaters of Pompey and of Marcellus in Rome, owned by the Orisini family.[23]

Vicino's literary and visual culture was indeed Roman. The evocative ruins of the ancient city probably figured most prominently in his vision of the place, and then, among the ruins, the life of new Rome: churches and other buildings under construction, the bustle at the heart of the

great Church itself. Pope Paul III had reinstated the old Roman Carnival in 1545, for he was a lover of vast spectacles and colorful, bizarre events.[24] Under his pontificate, many strange and glorious happenings occurred in Rome, purely for the sake of pleasure. In addition to the Carnival (for which it is known that a particular artist, Giulio Clovio, best known as a miniaturist, who was probably well-known to Vicino because of the famous Book of Hours which he created for Vicino's good friend Cardinal Farnese, was commissioned to design the Carnival masks and costumes),[25] tournaments in full medieval costume were held in what is now the Piazza Navona. Masque-like processions took place in which a giant papier-mache head with an open mouth, called the Boccacione, was paraded through the streets; perhaps this was a revival of the theme of the "Hell-Mouth" from medieval mystery plays.[26]

In addition, great discoveries were being made at the same time by Italian explorers and scientists. News of newly-discovered lands and peoples reached Rome frequently, and artists were kept busy illustrating accounts of strange countries and creatures. For example, the celebrated naturalist Ulixos Aldovrandi discovered, in 1551, what he claimed to be the remains of a winged dragon; a rendering of this creature appears in the well-known Mundus subterraneus of Athanasius Kircher, and the appearance and posture of the dragon closely resemble Vicino's sculpted dragon at Bomarzo.[27]

Vicino apparently remained in Rome for long periods of time, enjoying the place and engaging in philosophical meetings and discussions with other like-minded young nobles and intellectuals. Theurillat and other scholars theorize that this background, this admixture of fantasy and philosophy which Vicino found in Rome, formed the basis of his later preoccupation

with and delight in marvels. He would later transform some of these Roman experiences into the stone statues carved from the rocks which bristled at the foot of his villa at Bomarzo.

It is clear that Vicino was a voracious reader. He alludes several times in his letters to works of literature such as Ariosto's epic poem Orlando Furioso. There are three references to Orlando Furioso in his known letters, and one in particular is relevant to the creation of the garden at Bomarzo. In the letter, Vicino compares his palace to the castle of the magician Atlant in Ariosto's poem, and he compares himself to the warrior-wizard mounted on his winged horse, his shield of vermilion silk on one arm and a book of magic spells on the other. This magician, who "ruled the enchanted places and solitary heights," appealed strongly to Vicino's active imagination.[28] An echo of Orlando Furioso may well be seen in Vicino's garden: in both the "battling giants" statue (often called "Orlando") and in the "Pegasus fountain."

However, there is ambiguity here, too. The battling giants may well represent Orlando tearing apart the shepherd, and the winged horse may well be that of the magician. But they may also represent purely classical subjects: Hercules and Antaeus (or Cacus), and Pegasus. It is possible that Vicino intended these figures to be ambiguous, recalling antique and modern subjects at one and the same time. Ariosto himself was inspired by ancient myths and legends, and much of the statuary in formal Renaissance gardens was based on classical motifs. It may have been part of Vicino's plan to create a garden as an elaborate thought-game, with figures that might be interpreted now in one way, now in another.

Theurillat proposes that another small book, the Novella del Altro Mondo, a fantasy written in the Venetian dialect, may have influenced Vicino's concept of his garden. In this book the buffoon Domenico Taiacalze tells of his adventures in the Hereafter. He travels to Hades in Charon's bark and, finally, in a narrative which parodies the epic voyage of Dante and Virgil, arrives in Paradise. There he encounters the spirits of the most famous soldiers of his time, including the handsome Nicolo Orsini. Taiacalze goes on to compare Nicolo to Hercules. This book was certainly known to Vicino, as it was in the library at Bomarzo and because it praised his family's most famous warrior.[29] Perhaps the "battling giants" statue is meant as a tribute to Nicolo.

Having returned home in 1546 from the expedition against the Schmalkaldic League, Vicino soon began the first work of shaping the garden. Most research on the garden does not mention the fact that there actually was a formal garden already attached to the palace at Bomarzo. It is impossible to say with any certainty how this garden may have appeared in Vicino's time, but aerial photographs clearly indicate a system of straight paths and evenly-divided beds.[30] The Sacro Bosco, located just to the south and west of this formal garden, would then have fulfilled the function of a boschetto, the "wild" section expected in the Renaissance concept of the garden. The Sacro Bosco, then, is a sort of boschetto "gone mad," inspired perhaps particularly by the landscape and rock formations which were found not far from Vicino's palace, combined with fantastic images he had encountered in works of art of the period, poetry, and conversations with learned friends.

The tufa rock outcroppings which jutted out here and there in the wood were left largely in their natural positions by Vicino and his workers. He

did move some rocks originally positioned along the small river Concia which flowed through the wood; these were rearranged to build the crooked house, the ampitheater, and the nymphaeum.

On this lower level of the garden, where the present entrance is located, are the two carved sphinxes on pedestals (Illustration 4). A road passes between them and ascends toward the palace. The inscription on their bases may show that the sphinxes were among the first works completed in the garden. One base is inscribed:

CHI CON CIGLIA INARCATE
ET LABBRA STRETTE
NON VA PER QUESTO LOCO
MANCA AMMIRA
LE FAMOSE DEL MONDO
MOLI. SETTE

Most scholars have interpreted this as an invocation to those who would enter the garden: "He who does not pass through here/ with eyes wide and lips tight/ cannot admire the most famous (marvels) of the world." However, as Theurillat has pointed out convincingly, if the inscription MOLI (which can be interpreted as a "huge edifice" such as a mausoleum, with "sette" referring to the "Seven Wonders of the World") is, instead, read as MDLI (the "O" being quite indistinct), then the last line may be read MDLI. SETTE--dating the beginning of the garden in July 1551 (July is the seventh month, "sette," and the birth-month of Vicino).[31] We may then speculate that Vicino may have wanted the "O" to be ambiguous, thus forming another of the word-games that he and his epoch delighted in.

Another word-game is in process on the pedestal of the other sphinx.

This inscription reads:

TU CH'ENTRI QUA CON MENTE
PARTE A PARTE
E DIMMI POI SE TANTE
MARAVIGLIE
SIEN FATTE PER INGANNO
O PUR PER ARTE

This invocation is perhaps more straightforward: "You who enter here, tell me if such marvels were made by trickery or by art." The words TU CH'ENTRI QUA echo, however, the inscription read by Dante and Virgil over the gate of Hell: LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA VOI CH'ENTRATE, and may link this statue to the inscription over the open mouth of the Mascherone further on in the Sacro Bosco (see Chapter One, pages 22-23 above).

A second date, 1552, is inscribed in front of the garden's amphitheater on a stone; it is the only other date on this lower terrace. If the assumption that the sphinxes were begun in 1551 should be correct, then apparently it took a year for the monuments on the lower terrace to be completed.

Vicino may have preferred to remain in Bomarzo, absorbed with the building of his monuments, but fate intervened once again in the form of a call to battle. Forces were at work which would separate Vicino from his wife and family and from his Sacro Bosco for a long time.[32]

Cardinal Alessandro Farnese had two brothers. One, Ottavio, was the Duke of Parma and the son-in-law of Charles V. The other, Oratio, married Diana, illegitimate daughter of Henry II, the King of France, in the spring of 1553, with Cardinal Farnese officiating at the wedding.

Henry II wanted to consolidate his position in Flanders against Charles V. He had the support of the Protestant princes in this en-

deavor and, soon after the wedding, he sent his new son-in-law Oratio to command a company of his best soldiers at Hesdin. The troops were headquartered in the largest chateau in the city, but the main forces of the French army were far away from Hesdin. Oratio Farnese and his men were tragically unaware of the shrewdness and technical superiority of the Imperial troops, who had conceived a grand plan to take Hesdin from Henry II.

The Emperor's forces, under the command of the ruthless Antonio Doria, had anticipated the French strategy, and Imperial sappers had carved a maze of tunnels beneath Hesdin and had placed mines everywhere, even under the very foundations of the chateau. The battle, when it occurred, was hopeless for the French from the start. On the day of the attack by the Emperor's troops, July 18, 1553, Doria wrote a despatch to Queen Mary of Hungary, sister of Charles V and regent of the Netherlands: "We have already excavated under the foundations of the chateau. I have deposited my mines and set the fires..." The plan worked; the mines exploded, and with them the chateau and much of the city of Hesdin. Oratio was killed in the explosions. Doria wrote triumphantly to Queen Mary: "Tonight you camp in Hesdin."[33]

The French and Italians who had made up Oratio's army were slaughtered or taken prisoner. While France and the court mourned the death of the young, beloved Oratio, three lesser-known Italian noblemen marched into Imperial imprisonment: Vicino Orsini and his close friends Torquato Conti and Giacomo Antonio di Fontanellato. All three had been part of Oratio's army.

Vicino, a Farnese cousin by marriage, had once again played the part of the good and dutiful soldier and had taken up arms for a cause he more or less believed in. Conti, also married to a Farnese (Giulia's sister Violante) had accompanied him, and their friend Fontanellato, a nephew of Giulia's sister Girolama Farnese, went along. This military mission went no better for Vicino and his comrades-in-rams than the last one they had participated in. Miraculously escaping death in the exploding city, they became prisoners of Charles V and his minions.

Giulia Orsini and Violante Conti, Farnese both, wrote letters imploring the Emperor to set their husbands free. As well as the mental burden of having their spouses imprisoned, the women now also had to endure an added financial burden: Imperial prisoners were expected to pay for their own keep, including food, drink, their guards' salaries, and even extra money for their guards' families. The furious Giulia and Violante wrote to Annibale Caro, secretary to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, complaining about this insult added to injury. Caro coolly replied that it was much better to have an imprisoned husband than a dead one.[34]

The fate of these three Italian nobles is mentioned in several letters which passed back and forth between various principal players in this small drama. Dandino, Cardinal of Imola, wrote a coded cipher letter to the Pope on August 3, 1553, and alluded to Vicino, Torquato, and Giacomo. The Cardinal was not at all troubled by their predicament; he affirmed that "the prisoners were immediately sent to a beautiful, comfortable house, and are being maintained there honorably."[35]

This "beautiful house" was actually the citadel at Namur, situated

high above the confluence of the Sambre and Meuse Rivers. From their windows the prisoners could look out on a lovely panorama, but the Namur fortress was still a dismal place for them. As winter approached and the days grew colder, chilling fogs rose from the rivers and permeated the walls of the citadel. Vicino began to suffer attacks of rheumatism and would continue to be plagued by them for the rest of his life.

On August 21, 1553, Vicino and Giacomo wrote directly to Cardinal Farnese, who was then at Fountainbleau. They implored that a ransom be paid for them so that they might regain their freedom. It is interesting that Conti did not sign this letter. Perhaps he, a more experienced and realistic soldier than the other two, had reasoned that the Emperor would want to keep them prisoner as long as he could, to put pressure on Cardinal Farnese. Conti had spoken out against the ill-advised entrenchment at Hesdin; his grasp of military matters was down-to-earth and probably more practical than that of either Vicino or Giacomo.

Cardinal Farnese apparently replied to this letter (Theurillat provides a handwritten note from the camp of Charles V at Malines which mentions the reply), but his letter has not been recovered. He was evidently unable to effect their release, and the three remained at Namur.

All of them wrote to the Cardinal of Imola, and that prelate wrote back on September 21, 1553, assuring them that he would intercede and pleading with them to have patience. He promised that he would present their case to Cardinal Granville, who was first councillor to Charles V.

The three waited; nothing happened. In fact, Charles V was writing to Queen Mary and to the commandant of the fortress at Namur, insisting that the Italians be kept prisoner and that precautions be taken so that

they would not escape.

The years at Namur were long and hard, and Vicino suffered incessantly from his arthritis. In the early months of 1555 the three prisoners endured a new insult: they were taken to the town of Ecluse, near Douai, chained in the back of a wagon. They could stand no more of such ill treatment. This time they wrote directly to Queen Mary, asking her to find them a safer prison more worthy of their rank (and also, they implored, less expensive). The queen responded, and in February 1555 the three were installed in the town of Enghien as prisoners on parole (still, however, paying their own expenses).

Finally, in July 1555, there was new intervention on their behalf, this time from Monsignor Sebastiano Gualterio, bishop of Viterbo and nuncio to France. Gualterio addressed both the Council of Six and the ministers of the Emperor about the three Italian prisoners. Whether or not it was because of his aid, at the end of the month Vicino, Torquato, and Giacomo were given their freedom.[36]

Giacomo Antonio di Fontanellato returned at once to his home, and was married shortly thereafter. He and his wife, Emilia Pallavicino, had three daughters, and he died in 1563. Torquato Conti went back to Poli and his wife Violante for a short time, and later left for Rome again to take up his duties as a captain in the papal armies.

Vicino Orsini arrived in Bomarzo around the end of August 1555, exhausted and ill. His poor spirits can be judged from the letters he wrote during this period: he complained about the way Giulia had managed the palace and garden while he was away, and he spoke of not feeling "at home" in Bomarzo any more.[37] He apparently left Bomarzo

for a short time around the first week of September; a letter from him to the Duke of Parma, Ottavio Farnese, is written "from a hostelry in the mountains of Viterbo."[38] In this letter Vicino speaks of a message he had received from the King of France, asking him to rejoin the King's service. "I don't know what to do!" Vicino frankly told Ottavio. The Pope had decided to try to free Naples and Sicily from Spanish control, and the King of France had agreed to aid him. Vicino did not have a lengthy time to worry about this, however; the Treaty of Vaucelles between Charles V and Henry II was signed on February 3, 1556, effectively removing any French threat to the Hapsburg empire.[39]

Vicino's preambulations continued. In early 1556 he went to Paris, although the reasons for this trip are unknown. He apparently remained in France for some time; we hear from him later in 1556, writing from Rambouillet, where he visited Charles d'Angennes, a future cardinal.[40] In January 1557 he was in Rome, writing to Ottavio Farnese, giving him news of a gold ring Ottavio had asked him to bring back, and also telling him of certain complaints he had made to Cardinal Farnese and to Cardinal Sant'Angelo.[41] Vicino still harbored a great deal of rancor toward many people regarding his captivity in Flanders; he supposed that certain cardinals and legates should have helped to bring about his release much sooner, and he was angry at those he felt had been remiss in their duties.

His anger during this time carried over into his feelings about the garden at Bomarzo. In several letters he speaks of his irritation with his wife for attempting to carry on certain works in the garden in his absence. He speaks of the three priors of Viterbo, whom he supposed to have influenced Giulia and to have encouraged her to continue with

several projects in the garden (it is never clear exactly which projects he is speaking of), and he complains of the expense she had incurred.[42] It is clear that Vicino thought of the garden as his singular property, his alone to work on and create, and that he would not tolerate any outside interference, even from his wife.

After 1557 Vicino's letters do not mention Giulia again. It is not clear exactly when she died, but Vicino remarried around 1559, to a woman named Clementina "from the valley of the Tiber."[43] His second wife did not live long, though, and it is not certain if the children of Vicino's later years, Leonide and Oronthea, were children of his second marriage or were illegitimate. Theurillat claims that one letter shows evidence that Oronthea was indeed illegitimate, though the child was fully accepted as an Orsini by Vicino.[44]

In 1558 Vicino traveled to Trent and was hosted by his friend Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo, who had offered hospitality twelve years before to Vicino's contingent on the ill-fated march to Germany.[45] From 1558 until 1561, no letters or documents pertaining to Vicino are extant. We hear from him again in 1561, writing from Bomarzo to Cardinal Farnese, asking him to intervene in favor of a notary named Bernardo Morelli of Amalia, a village near Bomarzo. Again, it is unclear what sort of business or affairs this involved.[46]

On April 30, 1561, in another letter to Cardinal Farnese, Vicino makes what may be thei first mention of his garden in a long time. He refers to a legend of a man who was entombed alive in a wall near a lake an "suffers day and night," and, in connection with this fantastic story, adds a passage about a "monster of Tartary" (which could be a tortoise,

since the word "tortoise" is derived from the same root as "Tartar"). The reference is vague, but may have something to do with the sculpted tortoise in the Sacro Bosco.[47]

Two days later Vicino wrote to the Cardinal again; he regretted not being at home in Bomarzo when the prelate had come to visit. Vicino had been ill and had been "at the surgeon," but he "prayed to return to his bosco as soon as he could, to show the marvels that he had made for all of the fools."[48]

On July 4, 1563, comes the next surviving letter, again to Cardinal Farnese. Vicino celebrated his fortieth birthday that day, and he appended to the letter a list of "my projects," which included "marrying off my children, male and female," selling my new harvest," "to repair the fountains of my bosco," and other resolutions of a man who was entering middle age.[49]

All apparently ws not well between Vicino and his eldest son, for in August 1564 he writes to Cardinal Farnese complaining of Oratio's "bestial nature." "One day I lost all my patience with him," Vicino stormed. "My servant will explain this affair by word of mouth."[50] Two days later the Cardinal wrote back with a solution: send Oratio into the service of Don Garcia, a Spanish courtier in Naples. Vicino took the Cardinal's advice and sent Oratio to Naples. The young man was unhappy there, however, as Theurillat discovered when she found a letter from the archdeacon of Spoleto to Cardinal Farnese: the archdeacon knew Oratio, and told the Cardinal how Oratio blamed him (Farnese) for sending him, an Italian, to live among the Spaniards. Oratio reamined in Spanish service, however, and, according the Theurillat,

eventually became captain of a galley which sank during the Battle of Lepanto. Theurillat believes that this connection between Vicino's family and Lepanto "without doubt gave birth to the legend of Turkish prisoners sculpting the garden" at Bomarzo.[51]

The younger son, Marzio, probably spent quite a bit of time with his uncle Maerbale, according to Theurillat's findings. Vicino speaks of Marzio for the first time in 1573, when both Maerbale and Marzio lay ill in the grip of a malignant fever. Vicino wrote to Cardinal Farnese to ask for the use of his litter to bring Marzio back to Bomarzo from Maerbale's estate.[52] Marzio recovered, and on July 7, 1575, he married Porzia Vitelli in a grand ceremony at Caprarola, in the presence of Cardinal Farnese and Cardinal Madruzzo of Trent. The bride's father, Vicenzo Vitelli, was a famous soldier who had commanded the Tuscan militia against the Turks in 1556 and had participated in the Battle of Lepanto. Vicenzo was another good friend of Vicino's; one of Vitelli's fifteen children had even been born at Bomarzo.[53]

Of his children, his third son, Corradino, was probably Vicino's favorite, according to Theurillat's interpretation of the letters. Corradino, named after Vicino's father Gian Corrado, served as Vicino's secretary, and married a daughter of another great Roman family, Margaret Savelli, in 1580.[54]

Vicino arranged good marriages for his daughters, too. He gave one to be espoused to Fabio Mattei, a nobleman of Paganica. The Mattei were another rich Roman family; like the Orsini, they had lived in the neighborhood of the Theater of Pompey, and had built palaces in the Flaminian Circle. The architect Pirro Ligorio had worked for the Mattei,

restoring ruined buildings and statues for them. These works are described in a book by Cardinal Farnese's librarian, Onuphre Panvinio, the Vetera Monumenta Mattheiorum. Among the statues are a Hercules, nymphs, and various other works which, Theurillat points out, are not dissimilar to the works at Bomarzo.[55]

Another of Vicino's daughters, Faustina, went into the service of Marie of Portugal in 1566. Yet another daughter, Octavia, wed Antonio Marescotti, Count of Vignanello. She may have had a hand in the design of the Count's garden; her initials still appear inscribed on statues throughout the wood.[56] The last-born child, the illegitimate Oronthea, married a Montemellino of Perugia.[57]

Vicino makes another reference to his garden in a letter to Cardinal Farnese dated October 9, 1565. He is concerned about the effect the steep hill in his garden will have on the appearance of the cupola of his tempietto, which he wants to have the same effect as that of the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. He also states, "I've discovered that the loggia of my fountain is collapsing; it is well that Vignola knows more than I do about placing iron keystones in the loggia." This is the first reference Vicino makes to the architect Vignola, designer of the gardens of the Farnesiana, Caprarola, and many others. Vicino "borrowed" Vignola from Cardinal Farnese, whom Vignola served as chief architect. This does not prove that Vignola designed any of the works at Bomarzo; he may simply have been called in to counsel Vicino on how best to stop the crumbling and shifting of the works in his garden. The connection Vignola had with Bomarzo remains unclear. Theurillat doubts that Vignola had a hand in any of the plans for Bomarzo.[58]

In a letter to Torquato Conti from Vicino in 1565, Theurillat finds, perhaps, a proof that Vignola was indeed not the creator of the garden at Bomarzo, for Vicino tells his friend that he wants his garden to be inspired by Vignola's works at Caprarola.[59]

A friend who apparently had a profound influence on Vicino, and one from whom many letters were discovered by Theurillat, was Giovanni Drouet. Theurillat could not determine exactly who Drouet was; she agrees with Arnaldo Bruschi that Drouet was either a Frech physician who advised Vicino about his health problems, or a prelate.[60] His correspondence with Vicino begins in 1570, when Drouet was serving as undersecretary to Cardinal Matteo Contarelli in Rome. Drouet and Vicino had many things in common, including a passion for astrology, which would indicate that they also shared an interest in the study of the bizarre and the fantastic. Drouet also wrote poetry, and he dedicated some of it to his friend Vicino. One such poem tells of a fantastic wood, which delights "relatives and friends" and makes "the women themselves pause, mute with admiration." "The bosco pleases all the world," wrote Drouet. "An infinite pleasure, which costs but little."[61] It cannot be proved, of course, that Drouet was writing about Vicino's garden at Bomarzo, but it seems likely that this is so. This would indicate the popularity and notoriety of Vicino's strange bosco, at least among his friends and acquaintances.

Vicino, for his part, wrote to Drouet about many things: his children, his unsteady health, his travels. He mentions the garden in passing, along with all the rest of the news. He tells Drouet of his fascination with stories of voyages to faraway lands, which might

indicate one of the influences at work on the garden at Bomarzo.[62]

Vicino also admired the astrologer-scientist Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576), who wrote many treatises and claimed, among other things, that all objects in the world possessed souls. He wrote numerous studies on subjects such as dreams, precious stones, and colors, and these were read avidly by Vicino.[63]

Around 1580, Vicino decided that he wanted to "color" certain of the statues in his bosco. Theurillat believes that he wanted to paint the statues to protect the crumbling peperino.[64] I believe, however, that Vicino's active imagination was at work again; Theurillat mentions that the "odd" colors used in Etruscan paintings intrigued him, and perhaps he wished to emulate such colors and thereby achieve a still more fantastic overall effect. The feet of the tortoise and the scales of the dragon were apparently painted red, and the twin tails of the "siren" painted pink. Vicino probably wanted to have all of the statues painted, but found that the peperino absorbed most of the color, and he was finally forced to give up the project.

Vicino's health worsened; like many of his peers, he was afflicted with gout and kidney stones, and arthritis had bothered him since Namur. One day he wrote that he had passed a kidney stone "as big as the obelisk in front of the Pantheon." His discomfort did not stop him, however, from mounting his favorite horse, Ragazzino, and riding down from his palace to the bosco as often as he could.[65]

Still, the constant bad health probably took its toll. For a period of time Vicino went through a depression which is reflected in his letters.

To Drouet he writes in 1583, "I have lost all of my friends," and he said that there was no point in continuing with life. "If my bosco did not exist, I would be dead to the world!" he added presciently.[66] These letters are without a doubt the most melancholy he ever wrote, and there is no clue as to what provoked him to write them. Vicino apparently soon regained his customary good spirits, however, which are reflected again in the subsequent letters Theurillat collected. He returned to the punning and word-games beloved by him and his friends. To Drouet, shortly thereafter, he even quotes a line from Petrarch, which should probably be of interest in the study of possible allusions in his garden: "A small space, filled with marvelous things..." A perfect description of the Sacro Bosco![67]

Vicino was evidently not, then, the orgiastic reveler imagined by the novelist Mujica-lainez and others. His gout, he writes, "prevents me from taking the joy of Venus," though he appreciated women and probably had a mistress throughout his last years. He did, however, write that he preferred "farm girls" to the sophisticated city woman.[68]

Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo had died in 1578, leaving Vicino with the friendships of Cardinal Farnese and Giovanni Drouet. He wrote to them that he was plunging into the study of Seneca, but he was also reading country almanacs, remaining essentially a country gentleman at heart. His letters are frequently humorous, harping upon his age and the gout and kidney stones which tortured him; he treated these things lightly and jokingly. He entreated Drouet to come and visit him at Bomarzo, to enjoy the "marvels" and the comfortable rooms of his palace.

But visitors to Bomarzo became fewer and fewer, and Vicino, in the midst of his "marvels" at home in his palace, was a lonely man. He died at Bomarzo on January 29, 1585.[69]

Theurillat claims to have discovered several likenesses of Vicino Orsini and his family. One, an engraving entitled "Portrait of a Warrior," which once was attributed to Titian and later to Taddeo Zuccari, is actually a portrait of Vicino, she says (see Illustration 25). Zuccari's connection with Vicino is not clear, except that he designed a gate for his own Roman palace which resembles the open-mouthed Mascherone of Bomarzo.[70] Theurillat claims that this proves the connection, but offers little other evidence besides saying of the portrait, "Tout dans son attitude, dans son air, dans son vetement le designait: un homme qui resemblait a ses lettres!"[71] Theurillat did discover a bust at La Penna, the estate of Maerbale Orsini, which strikingly resembles the engraving; the stone bust adorned a fountain created for Maerbale. The strong features and Michelangelesque pointed beard are much the same in the bust and in the engraving. Moreover, there were three other busts on the fountain; Theurillat theorizes that these portray Maerbale, Giulia Farnese, and the young Marzio, who apparently had been close to Maerbale (see Illustration 26).

Theurillat's research has made the life of Pierfrancesco "Vicino" Orsini less mysterious, and has contributed much toward studies of the garden at Bomarzo. It is only through understanding the life and mind of its creator that the Sacro Bosco can fully be appreciated. Theurillat's discovery of the letters of Vicino offers the most complete excursion yet into the mind of this complex Renaissance nobleman. Though she, like

the novelist and popular writers, may romanticize some facets of Vicino's life, the letters themselves remain, strong testimony to the many influences at work on Vicino's creation of the garden at Bomarzo.

NOTES--CHAPTER THREE

[1]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, passim.

[2]Manuel Mujica-Lainez, Bomarzo (Buenos Aires: Editorio Sudamerica Sociedad Anonima, 1967; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969). The musical cantata Bomarzo, by the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, was commissioned by the Coolidge Foundation of the U.S. Library of Congress, and was premiered there on Nov. 1, 1964. Ginastera later wrote a grand opera based on this cantata and on Mujica-Lainez's book; the opera Bomarzo was commissioned by the Opera Society pf Washington, D.C., and was premiered in the city on May 19, 1967. The opera was banned in Ginastera's native Argentina on the grounds of its "overt sexuality," but finally was permitted a triumphant premiere at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires on April 29, 1972.

[3]Bruschi, "L'Abitato," 3-5.

[4]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 6.

[5]Ibid.; Theurillat, 24-25.

[6]Theurillat, 25.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 8.

[9]See Theurillat's account of this in Les Mysteres, 38; I capsulize her account later in this chapter, 57.

[10]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 25.

[11]Ibid., 25-26.

[12]Ibid., 26.

[13]Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco, 9; Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 26, 47.

[14]Near the entrance to the "leaning house" or casetta; see Chapter One above, 18.

[15]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 26.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., 27.

[18]Ibid., 28.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 29.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.; see also Athanasius Kircher, Mundus subterraneus (Amstelodam: Joannem Janssonium a Waesberge & Filios, 1578 ed.), 103, and Joscelyn Godwin, Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 91.

[28]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 29-30.

[29]Ibid., 30-31.

[30]See photograph in Bruschi, "L'Abitato," 5, and map on 4.

[31]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 32.

[32]The following account of Vicino's years of imprisonment is based on Theurillat, 33-36, and Recupero, 9-10.

[33]Theurillat, 34.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., 35.

[36]Ibid., 36.

[37]Ibid., 37.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., 38.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 40.

[44]Ibid., 56-57.

[45]Ibid., 40.

[46]Ibid., 41.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Ibid., 42.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid., 43.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ibid., 44.

[55]Ibid., 44-45.

[56]Ibid., 45.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid., 46.

[60]Ibid., 50.

[61]Ibid., 51.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Ibid., 52.

[64]Ibid., 53.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid., 54.

[67]Ibid., 56.

[68]Ibid., 57.

[69]Ibid.

[70]See Ernst Guldan, "Das Monster-Portal am Palazzo Zuccari in Rom: Wandlungen eines Motivs vom Mittelalter zum Manierismus," Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 32, 1969, 229-261, for a discussion of this work and the evolution of the "hell-mouth" motif.

[71]Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 58.

CHAPTER FOUR

USES OF WILD AND FANTASTIC ELEMENTS IN RENAISSANCE GARDENS

There was little of the wild or fantastic in early Italian Renaissance gardens. In Leon Battista Alberti's De re aedificatura, largely completed c. 1450, which includes his views on garden design as well as architecture, the author took as models garden descriptions by ancient writers, notably Pliny the Younger. Pliny, obviously a garden-lover, had described his gardens at his villas at Laurentum, Tusculum, Praeneste, Como, and Tuscany at great length and in careful detail. He advocated, among other things, that the house and garden be treated as a unity, that no "somber notes" be included, and that everything give off an aura of "good-humored welcome."[1] To Pliny, the garden was a place of repose and peace, light and beauty, and the earliest Renaissance gardens would follow this view. Darkness and shadows were only to be used as a backdrop for light, to heighten its effect.[2] Any hint of the unknown or supernatural was avoided; the garden was a civilized, controlled place, full of light and pleasantry. Almost everything was subjugated to the hand of man. Even these ancient Roman gardens, however, included some hints of the Roman-Italian love of natural wonders: in Pliny's description of his Tuscan villa at the foot of the Appenines, one finds, in the midst of "elegant regularity," what was probably a wild garden composed of "the careless beauties of nature."[3]

The early Renaissance garden designers, however, took as their ideal the ancient admiration for order and symmetry, control and restraint.

Villa gardens such as Cosimo de Medici's at Fiesole, in the hills above Florence, designed by Michelozzo between 1458 and 1461, still included many medieval carryovers: walls, enclosures, herb beds. But these patrician or princely gardens also possessed a sense of order derived very likely directly from the ancient classical garden descriptions. Nature was made to appear as though subjugated to the hand of man. In his garden a man might think of himself as a god of sorts, his garden a microcosm of the world he wished to control. Topiary was apparently widely used (Pliny had spoken of topiary works in his gardens, so the idea had the stamp of classical approval): a perfect instance of the desire to control, and thus give artificial shape to natural forms. Box hedges and bushes were carved into shapes of animals, birds, people, mythological creatures, geometric designs; even the garden owners' names were often shaped from the hedges.[4] The Medici villa at Fiesole demonstrated a civilizing control over nature, with calculated effects such as the complex topiary and mathematically-laid-out beds of vegetation intended perhaps to symbolize the Ideal Garden or, even, the Ideal State.[5] The garden by this time could be interpreted as an image of power: if Cosimo de Medici could weild such influence over wild Nature, he could thus effectively control a political entity such as a city or state.

In the Medici villa at Careggi, designed again by Michelozzo for Cosimo, we see the Renaissance beginnings of an appreciation for wild, "careless" nature, similar to that probably found as an aspect of some ancient Roman gardens, if we may believe Pliny. Careggi featured groves of trees recalling the "groves of Academus" of the ancients: the woods sacred to Apollo and the Muses.[6] Lorenzo de Medici's immersion in

Neoplatonic thought may have had something to do with the design of his gardens; he would stroll through these groves as he contemplated philosophy and literature, much as the ancients had ruminated in a garden setting. Perhaps, as Mastrorocco has suggested, Lorenzo wished his rule to be associated with a new "Age of Gold," and the garden setting recalled that antique, happy time of legend; thus, the Careggi garden (which had become Lorenzo's) functioned as a political implement, much as had the Fiesole garden of Cosimo il Vecchio.[7]

In the late Middle Ages Florence grew as a center of trade and wealth, and as it continued to expand and become more powerful, rich families were building villas on the hillsides surrounding the city. It was the beginning of the end for the old medieval enclosed garden; the eye was now encouraged to look out over the walls of the garden and sweep over the surrounding countryside. Sloping sites became highly coveted; the eye could now look outward and take in the vastness of nature outside the walls.

Perhaps it was this atmosphere which encouraged the rebirth of the boschetto or bosco as an accepted element in garden design. The evolution of the boschetto, according to Derek Clifford, may be traced back to classical times: to the groves of Academus, and to the sacred temple precincts in ancient Greece, where trees were at times venerated and worshiped, and to the stories of sacred woods and groves in Greek and Roman mythology.[8] The studies being made of Hadrian's villa near Tivoli during the Renaissance were another possible source for the introduction of rustic, wild elements into Renaissance garden design: Pirro Ligorio (whose name has been linked with the design for the garden at Bomarzo),[9]

designing the garden of the Villa d'Este for Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, surveyed and studied the ancient garden of Hadrian, noting rustic pumice-stone decorating the garden grottoes, "apartments decorated with rustic stone-work to look like artificial rocks,"[10] and the use of wild, wooded hills as dramatic backdrops for temples, pavilions, and fountains. The close connection of theater-set architecture with Hadrian's garden settings has been cited; apparentlt Hadrian wished to create for some of his temples a "sacred landscape" of the type often found in theater sets. The so-called "Vale of Tempe" in Hadrin's villa garden was probably just such an "artificial landscape," recreating a beautiful wild valley as a setting for the temple of Venus.[11] The actual valley was artificially deepened, with the rocks removed being used to build the villa. This valley served as "a link between the ordered beauty of the formal gardens and the wild, mountainous landscape of the Tiburtine Hills," according to Georgina Masson.[12] Thus the ancients probably treated the boschetto idea in much the same way that the garden designers of the Renaissance would: as a link between order and disorder, the point at which the lovely but chaotic world of nature meets the formal, harmonious world of man.

We know little about ancient gardens other than that of Hadrian's villa and the small courtyard gardens of Pompeii and Herculaneum; plus the possible information offered by Roman wall paintings, which often show wild landscapes, huge rocky outcrops, and wilderness areas. The Renaissance itself knew even less about classical gardening; it had to content itself with a handful of texts on the art of the garden: the writings of Pliny the Younger, Cato's De agri cultura, Vitruvius's De architectura, Varro's Reum rusticarum, Palladius's De re rustica, and Columella's Res rustica.

The planting of boschetti evidently faded away during the Middle Ages, when gardening became primarily an agricultural art, devoted to the growing of edible plants and medicinal herbs. The classical enjoyment of natural beauty was, seemingly, forgotten for a time; it was with a sense of wonder and astonishment that his contemporaries watched Petrarch ascend Mount Ventoux merely to view the scenery.[13]

Francesco Colonna's Hypnerotomachia Poliphili of 1499 gives some evidence of a new appreciation for wooded areas, but the only real instance of a wild wood in the book is the one in which Poliphilio awakens, frightened, before he begins his journey--and this was evidently inspired by the similar scene at the beginning of Dante's Inferno. The wood is used as a symbol for disorder, disharmony, and frightening chaos; only as the hero moves on does he discover delightful woods of aromatic trees such as laurels, cypresses, and junipers. These latter woods through which Poliphilio travels are civilized. If, as has been suggested, Colonna described aspects of some actual gardens of his day in his book,[14] then the use of some sort of "tame" boschetto may have been more widespread by the 1490's than has previously been believed.

With the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1492, Florence ceded pride of place as the leader in garden design to Rome, home of the Church and its attendant rich princes. The glory of Renaissance Rome began with Pope Julius II and his scheme to aggrandize the Church and everything connected with it. With the new attitude toward gardens which had reached Rome via Florence, this plan certainly included landscape design. The first example of this new feeling about Roman urban garden design is seen in the Cortile del Belvedere, laid out by Bramante at the order of Julius II

beginning in 1502. The entire plan of the Cortile del Belvedere, which was conceived as a link between the small villa of the Belvedere and the Vatican Palace below it, took many years to complete, in the course of which Bramante's scheme for it was finally almost obliterated. In his design Bramante proposed the first monumental use of terraces in the Renaissance, planned to ascend in a series and to draw the eye upward to the level of the Belvedere. It would seem, again, that the focus of the Belvedere garden was the representation of the victory of man over nature, with the terraced slope symbolizing human supremacy in re-shaping natural forms into manmade ones. Evidence has been found, however, of a natural grove associated with a garden mount within the bounds of the Belvedere gardens, which would seem to indicate a tenuous continuation of the boschetto idea.[15]

In 1516 the garden of the Villa Madama, constructed outside Rome for Cardinal Giuliano de Medici (later Pope Clement VII), included not only the familiar giardino segreto held over from medieval times, but also displayed tendencies toward the rustic and the wild. A fountain, thought to be the first in the Renaissance to be placed in a wooded setting to simulate a natural water cascade, was one of the focal points of the garden.[16] Vasari wrote of this fountain as being "surrounded by a wood...and was made to fall with fine artifice over rough stones and stalactites dripping and gushing so that it really appeared natural."[17] It is said that the plan for the Villa Madama garden was originated by Raphael, but was later carried out by his pupils Giulio Romano and Antonio Sangallo; this would seem to indicate that important artists were not only taking an interest in the design of gardens but also had a hand

in the growing appreciation for the beauty of nature in its natural state (no matter with what artifice the imitation of nature was carried out).

Another grand step forward in garden design was accomplished with the construction of the Farnese Gardens in Rome. The Farnesiana, as they were called, were no doubt inspired by the great project of the Belvedere. The innovation here was that the garden stood alone, without a villa attached, on the slope of the Palatine Hill. Though there is no evidence that there were "natural" or "artificially natural" areas within the Farnesiana (the gardens are now destroyed because of architectural excavations on the hill), the fact that such a garden stood alone is proof of the status now held by the art of gardening. Bomarzo's Sacro Bosco would follow this same idea; though there is a villa, it is so widely separated from the wild, natural area of the garden as to be not associated with it at all in any artistic sense. Thus, the natural area at Bomarzo stands on its own.

By the 1540's the Medici villa at Castello, with a garden designed by Tribolo for Grand Duke Cosimo, boasted scattered boschetti, though it was basically a formal garden with the old-style giardino segreto within it. The focus of the entire garden was the simple square behind the house, wherein stood a circular foutain. Surrounding this fountain were trees, in an arrangement which Masson has called "a bosco or labyrinth."[18] It was a touch of the wild within the boundaries of tame, ordered beds. The Castello villa garden also featured Ammanati's famous statue of "The Appenines," represented as a huge, bearded giant who seems to be emerging from the earth itself: another instance of wildness and fantasy, this

time taking the form of large-scale sculpture and therefore important as a precedent for the mostri at Bomarzo.

The Boboli Gardens of the Palazzo Pitti in Florence were another site which displayed many elements of the fantastic, scattered among the ekements of order. Tribolo, who was responsible for the design of this entire garden, began the project in 1549; when he died in 1550 the plan was taken over by Bandinelli, Vasari, and Ammanati. Tribolo and Ammanati included a rustic grotto, statues of fantastic-looking creatures (such as the famous dwarf, "Baccho," by Valerio Cioli), a few boschetti, and a basically-asymmetrical plan. There is still much that is formalized in the Boboli Gardens, and the plan shows that nature was artificially controlled with extensive landscaping. The Boboli Gardens demonstrate a Renaissance tendency to "represent" nature by ordering and controlling nature; thus, rustic or natural elements are actually represented by man's artifice. While it is probable that the major works in the Boboli Gardens were begun subsequent to the works at Bomarzo, it is not unreasonable to postulate a continuing trend in garden design toward the fantastic, evidenced by the works in both gardens, though different approaches were used.

Possibly the garden most important as an influence on Vicino was the famous Villa Lante garden at Bagnaia, which was only a short distance away from Bomarzo, Though the works at Bomarzo were begun (1551) before the works at Bagnaia (c. 1560's), their completion overlapped, and it is fair to suppose that the owners of both villas knew each other and visited one another's gardens. Derek Clifford has stated that the Villa Lante garden may be the first in Europe to combine woodland and garden, but it is clear that others, probably including Bomarzo, preceded it.[19]

Cardinal Giovanni Francesco Gambara was named apostolic administrator of Viterbo in 1566, and purchased the overlordship of Bagnaia. Like Vicino Orsini's great friend Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, whose garden at Caprarola was also well-known, Cardinal Gambara was a lover of art and literature, a cultivated man who wanted to create the best and most beautiful of surroundings for himself. The Villa Lante garden has been called the most refined of Renaissance gardens, but it, too, possessed wild and fantastic elements. Here, man "dared to enjoy his littleness and acknowledged that he could not live without a sense of it."[20]

The wonder of the Villa Lante is its water, springing from a source high on the top of the garden's hill, flowing down to feed fountains and pools and to issue forth in lively, sparkling jets until it comes to rest, finally, in the static, formal pools of the parterre. The architect Vignola, who was responsible for Cardinal Farnese's Caprarola gardens, may well have designed the Villa Lante garden, for it reflects the style he demonstrated at Caprarola with its lovely geometric hedges and topiary work, flower beds and ornamental terraces. But among these restrained formal works are other works of a vaguely disquieting nature: old plane trees which have been pruned so often they have formed grotesque shapes, a terrace of vases which is similar to that at Bomarzo (though not as odd-looking), the "water chain" which has as links the sculptured claws of crayfish (a play on the name of Cardinal Gambara, as the Italian word for prawn is gambero). These works form a kind of counterpoint to the almost unrelenting pleasantness of the Villa Lante garden, introducing wonderment and strangeness into the midst of a rationalized whole.

Vignola's design for Cardinal Farnese's Caprarola was undoubtedly an influence upon Vicino Orsini, as there are documented visits by Vicino to Farnese's grand villa.[21] The site of Caprarola is itself magnificent: placed to gain full benefit of the splendid view out toward wild Mount Soracte. Masson has called Caprarola the first garden which "exemplifies Stendhal's beautiful description of garden art in Italy as a place 'where architecture is wedded to the trees.'"[22] Caprarola, even more than Lante, is a garden which melds wild nature and formal creation into a balanced, vibrant synthesis. The great garden seems to merge into the wooded hillside, becoming one with the uncontrolled, uncontrollable nature "outside." Paths lead into and through the forests, taking one deeper into the silence and shadow of the woods; and then, suddenly, a clearing appears, complete with sparkling fountains and classical statues. There are, too, statues of strange beasts and mythic creatures which seem oddly at home here; Masson quotes Queen Christina of Sweden as saying, on her visit to Caprarola, "I dare not speak the name of Jesus lest I break the spell."[23]

Mention must be made here of a garden which was begun about eighteen years after the commencement of Vicino Orsini's Sacro Bosco project, but which reflects the ongoing influence of this movement towards the natural, the rustic, the wild, and the fantastic. The villa and grounds at Pratolino, begun c. 1569 by Bernardo Buontalenti for Grand Duke Francesco I de Medici, have been described as "a place for wild nature, surrounded by mountains and full of woods."[24] Pratolino actually included a formal garden area as well as rather extensive "natural" areas. many rusticated grottoes, and the ubiquitous water-jests. It is important to remember that, unlike Bomarzo, the villa at Pratolino occupied the center of the

grounds, thus adding a civilized aura of human occupation to the area as a whole.[25] Nevertheless, there are more than a few similarities between Bomarzo and Pratolino. A small mount built at Pratolino represented "Mount Parnassus" and apparently included statues of the nine Muses and a Pegasus, as well as a water-organ constructed within the mount itself.[26] Francesco no doubt shared Vicino's appreciation for poetry and literature, though this is represented by his Muses and Pegasus in a much more straightforward fashion than Vicino's rustic Pegasus Fountain. An echo of Vicino's "Fortuna," if we may so call the mysterious woman riding the tortoise, is also found at Pratolino: there, a statue representing the goddess "Fame," winged and carrying a golden trumpet, appears in one of the grottoes.[27] Again, however, the presentation is clear and without ambiguity; though "Fame" is found in a rustic grotto, there is no doubt as to who she is or what she represents, and no reference to local folklore or half-forgotten jokes as may be seen in the Bomarzo "Fortuna" (cf. Chapter One above, page 14).

Buontalenti's Pratolino represents an odd sort of juxtaposition of man and nature, for here nature, though subject to the whim of man, is allowed to flourish freely in some areas while being artificially molded in others. Stands of wild fir trees abounded in certain sections of the garden, while there is evidence that trees were artificially planted in other areas. Rustic statuary such as Giovanni Bologna's "Appenino" (probably based on the similar statue by Ammanati at Castello) shared the grounds with clever water automata and classicized sculptures. Pratolino reflects an eclectic taste, a wide appetite for art and beauty which ranged from appreciation for the elegant balance of the villa itself to the crude water-jokes, to the <u>capricci</u> of the automated statues in the

grottoes, and the "Appenino" statue, and on to the clipped, formal beds and hedges of the domesticated garden. It was "committed to its wild surroundings, to the world of Nature, rather than to the artificial world created, and thickly populated, by men,"[28] but it also was unabashedly created by the hand of man. The architect and patron worked to both suppress nature and to enhance it, building woods, pools, mountains, and grottoes which recalled nature and yet were built by artifice. Like Bomarzo, Pratolino was affected by its particular site: "an isolated spot far from the busy world" which lent itself particularly to the creation of a place of escape and solitude.

The trend toward wildness reached another sort of expression in the gardens of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, which, as Smith has pointed out, "imply neither a contest between art and nature nor a clear predominance of one over the other, but rather a sort of reconciliation."[29] The works at the Villa d'Este were dependent upon their site and water supply, which allowed for numerous large fountains, massive and monumental terraces, and grand displays of lively statuary. The "wild" at the Villa d'Este was patently a product of man's ingenuity, and no attempt was made to disguise that fact. Art and nature worked here in tandem.

To a great extent, gardens such as Bomarzo, Pratolino, and the Villa d'Este reflected the trend during this period to seek a balance: a balance which could not be achieved without introducing "wildness" to contrast the "tameness." This was an age which confronted head-on issues such as contemplation of the bizarre and the fantastic, and the gardens of this period reflected this as surely as did other arts. The irrational, the unbounded, the odd and the unconventional contrasted with the controlled and the conventional. The senses and the intellect, rather than battling

for supremacy, achieved a harmonious counterpoise. In gardening, indeed, for a time, at was rather conventional to be unconventional, as the acceptance and acclaim given gardens like the Villa d'Este, Pratolino, and Bomarzo show.

In these Italian gardens of the mid- to late sixteenth century, the last barriers between nature and art have come down; wild nature has become an integral part of garden design, no matter how fantastic its forms might be. As Renaissance culture and the acquisition of knowledge progressed, the "outside" world of nature became less frightening and more intriguing; the garden could then open up and include natural wonders in its boundaries (and the very "boundaries," indeed, were disappearing).

Vicino Orsini's Bomarzo, then, was not such a strange place as has been imagined, especially when taken into consideration along with its now-vanished formal garden. Orsini merely borrowed ideas which had been developing for a long time in Renaissance thought, and applied them to the particular site of his villa garden, guided by his own eclectic knowledge of literature and culture. The result was a garden which perhaps owes as much to its predecessors and peers as it does to its creator.

NOTES--CHAPTER FOUR

[1]King, Quest for Paradise, 87; see also discussion of Pliny the Younger's garden commentaries in Derek Clifford, A History of Garden Design (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 17-47 (the chapter "Pliny and the Renaissance Garden).

[2]Clifford, History, 34.

[3]Ibid., 30.

[4]Eugenio Battisti, "Natura artificiosa to natura artificialis," in The Italian Garden, David R. Coffin, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks and Trustees for Harvard University, 1972), 15-16; Clifford, History, 34.

[5]Mastrorocco, Le Mutazioni, 14.

[6]Ibid., 17.

[7]Ibid., 16.

[8]Clifford, 26.

[9]Theurillat's Les Mysteres de Bomarzo is primarily concerned with proving Ligorio's connection with Bomarzo.

[10]Georgina Masson, Italian Gardens (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 32.

[11]Ibid., 33.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Battisti, "Natura artificiosa," 26.

[14]King, Quest for Paradise, 91; Masson, Italian Gardens, 66.

[15]Elisabeth MacDougall, "Ars hortulorum: Sixteenth-century garden iconography," in The Italian Garden, David R. Coffin, ed.

[16]King, Quest for Paradise, 98.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Masson, Italian Gardens, 80.

[19]Clifford, History, 40.

[20]Ibid., 41.

[21]See Theurillat, Les Mysteres, 43, for one example; Vicino's son Marzio was married at Caprarola (see Chapter Three, page 54 above).

[22]Masson, Italian Gardens, 162.

[23]Ibid., 165.

[24]de Vieri, Francesco, Discorsi delle Marauigliose Opere di Pratolino e d'Amore, 1586, quoted by Webster Smith, "Pratolino," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XX, 1961, 166.

[25]Webster Smith, "Studies on Buontalenti's Villas," I, Ph.D dissertation, New York University, 1959, 63.

[26]Smith, "Pratolino," 157.

[27]Ibid., 158.

[28]Smith, "Studies," 63,

[29]Smith, "Pratolino," 168.

CONCLUSION

The Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo, long viewed as a garden which falls "outside" the process of development of Italian Renaissance gardens, actually falls well within the normal boundaries of this process. The gardens of Renaissance Italy for the most part reflected their particular sites, and any "oddities" or fantastic elements were often products of the unique site chosen for the villa and the villa garden. The Villa d'Este made the most of its abundant supply of water by featuring extravagant fountains and fabulous water-jests; other Renaissance villa gardens fortunate enough to have adequate water supplies also made use of them in various means of water-play. Great inequities of landscape were often sought for the intellectual-scientific pleasure of creating a garden which was strikingly lovely or awe-inspiring out of the materials at hand; thus, hillsides, valleys, and cliffs were used and became integral parts of the garden, often representing "wild" areas. The boschetto idea was a part of this concept; natural woodlands were no doubt the most common element of wild nature used in the design of Renaissance gardens, and it is no accident that boschetti were found in so many otherwise "formal" gardens. Virtually every garden, depending on its site, possessed its own "peculiarity," whether it was a great water supply, an imposing hillside, or a wild wood. Bomarzo, with its wood and its giant tufa rocks, fits well into this scheme. To say that Bomarzo is "odd" is, then, to say that it is typical, for most gardens of

its time were "odd" in their own peculiar ways.

This starting point in nature is important to understand when viewing the Sacro Bosco. When Vicino's Bosco is seen as the boschetto of the formal garden of the Palazzo Orsini, which it no doubt was, much of its nature becomes clearer. Orsini and his architects or garden designers worked with the materials they had available to them: a forested valley, a small river, and outcroppings of porous tufa rock. They shaped these in much the same way that Ippolito d'Este's designers must have shaped the water at the Villa d'Este: with a fanciful, imaginative touch, inspired by literature and the intellectual pursuits of the nobility and the learned circles in which many of the nobles moved. Had there been a vast supply of water at Bomarzo, or an odd cliffside, or some other such peculiarity, the Sacro Bosco might have looked quite different. As it was, the formal garden of the Palazzo Orsini was not attached to the villa itself; the placement of the palazzo on top of the steep hill made this impossible. Thus, Bomarzo's garden began with an initial peculiarity based on its site, and this continued with Vicino's development of his Bosco.

Many elements coalesced in the design for Vicino Orsini's Sacro Bosco. The site of the garden may have been one of the most important of these elements; equally influential was the particular background and psychology of the garden's creator-owner. Orsini was, according to the newly-discovered letters and documents which have dispelled much of the mystery of his biography, very much a man who reflected his time. He was a student of literature and a collector of books, a

sometime soldier and courtier who had traveled outside Italy, a Roman noble who absorbed the life and events of the great capitol, a gentlemen farmer who retained a closeness to the land and a longing for the "escape" which he found in rural Bomarzo. Vicino was undoubtedly familiar with the great discoveries in science and in world exploration; he was fascinated by stories of travel and voiced at least once the desire to journey to strange lands. He probably owned at least some Etruscan objects which had been excavated in the area around Bomarzo, and he was familiar with what was known of Etruscan history at that time. His Roman background and the influences of his time would have inspired in him an admiration for the "picturesque" quality of ruins and the evocation of the passage of time which they invited. Many forces and interests were at work within the mind of Vicino Orsini, and many of these no doubt influenced the creation and the design of his Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo.

The combination of the particular site of the Sacro Bosco and the mind of its creator responding to the physical and evocative nature of this site are the most important considerations behind the odd appearance of the garden. There is room for much more speculation about particular statues in the Sacro Bosco and their derivations from literature, folklore, or previous art; and there is room for more research on the life of Vicino Orsini and connections between certain events in his life and certain designs in his garden. It is probable, however, that we will never fully understand the Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo; it is probable that we were never meant to. Rather, we are meant to react, as Vicino's visitors did, with surprise and delight at the marvels of his garden, to stare in astonishment at the monsters, to

watch them as they emerge from the earth with fierce energy or disappear back into it with languid grace. This capacity to amaze and to inspire wonder is very much a part and a product of the Renaissance trend in garden design; Vicino and his designers found magic in the shapes of the rocks and in the depths of a wild wood, where other garden designers had amazed with water or with other natural elements. In any case, whether the site was the Villa d'Este, the Villa Lante, or the Sacro Bosco, the idea was to delight the senses, to revel in the wonders of nature, and to wonder at the mysteries hidden beyond nature, in the realm of the supernatural.

In the novel Bomarzo by Manuel Mujica-Lainez, Vicino Orsini walks through the wood which will be the site of his Sacro Bosco. "Every rock," he mused, "had an enigma hidden in its structure, and every one of those enigmas was also a secret of my past and my character. I had to uncover them. I had to remove the crust that covered the essential image in each rock."[1] Though this novel is a fictional and romantic account of Vicino's life, this particular excerpt is probably not too far from the truth. Vicino Orsini may well have walked among the rocks in the bosco, scrutinizing them and visualizing figures in them (this idea was well-known in the Renaissance, having been proposed by Alberti in his treatise On Sculpture, where he notes that he suspects the beginning of art was in noticing representational shapes in nature).[2]

There is, then, a sort of unity in the Sacro Bosco, a kind of order underlying the apparent disorder: the community of monsters which exist on a level other than our own, and which also reflect the

mind of Vicino Orsini in their inspiration from the marvelous, the fantastic, and the otherworldly. Although the Sacro Bosco can be shown to fit the general pattern of development in Renaissance garden design, it will finally remain as mysterious and strange as its owner intended it to be. A visit to the Sacro Bosco, and a walk among the monsters as the last mist lingered under the trees in the wood, convinced me of that fact, as it must convince any visitor to Vicino Orsini's garden at Bomarzo.

NOTES--CONCLUSION

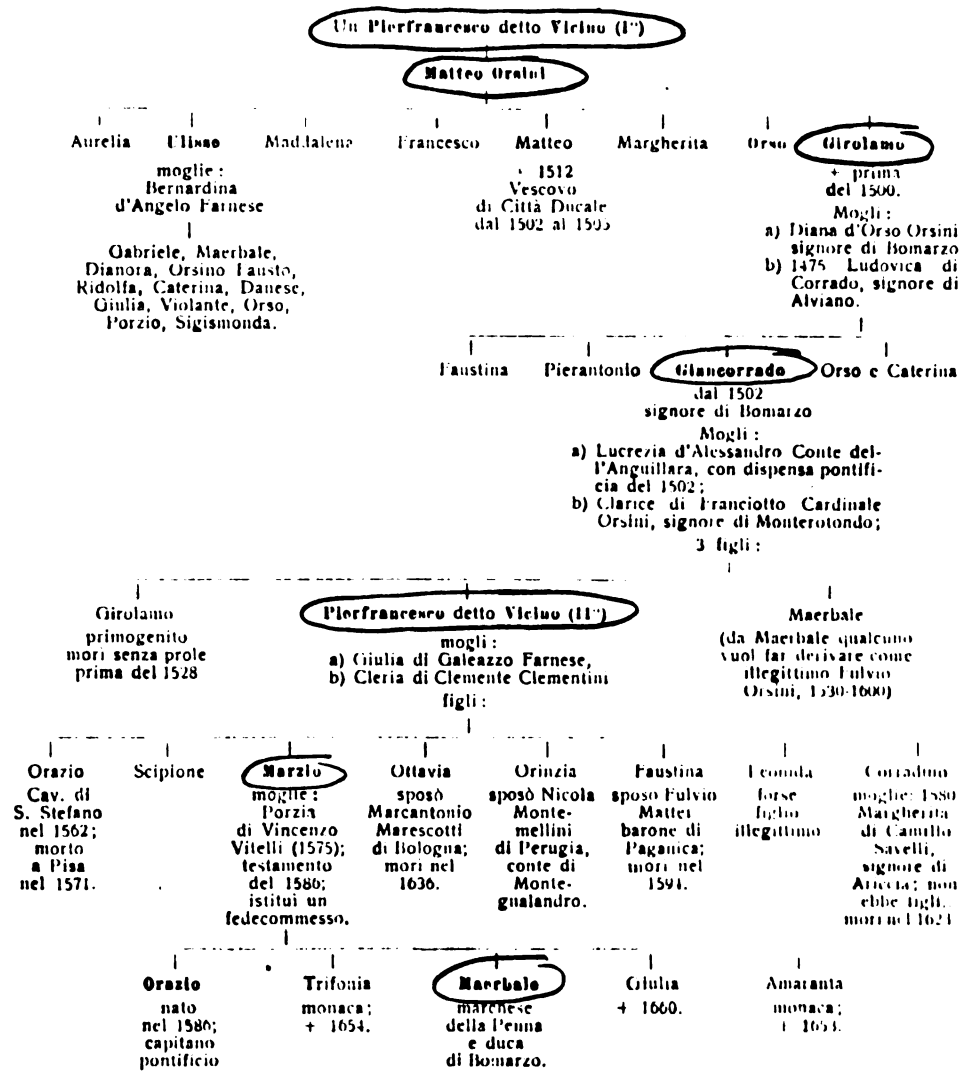
[1]Manuel Mujica-Lainez, Bomarzo, quoted in an excerpt from the novel in FMR, 11, 1985, 85.

[2]Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua, Cecil Grayson, ed. (London: Phaidon, 1972), 120-121.

APPENDIX:

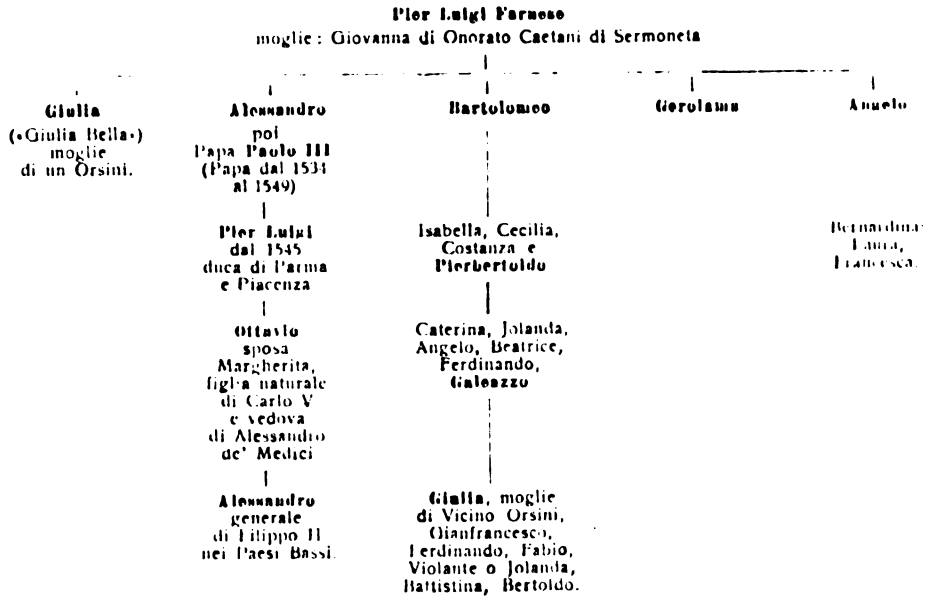
Geneology of the Orsini of Bomarzo and the Farnese of Parma.

THE BRANCH OF THE ORSINI FAMILY OF ROME WHOSE MEMBERS WERE DUKES OF BOMARZO (INDICATED BY CIRCLED NAMES):



From A. Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 28).

FAMILY OF THE FARNESE OF PARMA (FAMILY OF GIULIA FARNESE, FIRST WIFE OF VICINO ORSINI):



From A. Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell'Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 28.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

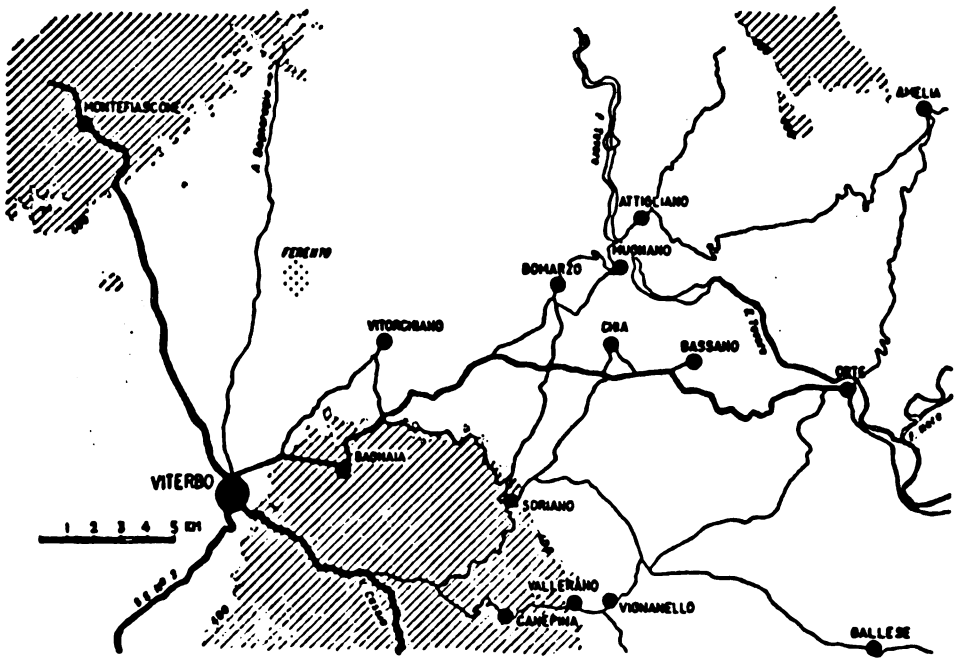

Illustration 1: Map of the area around Bomarzo. (From Arnaldo Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell' Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 3.

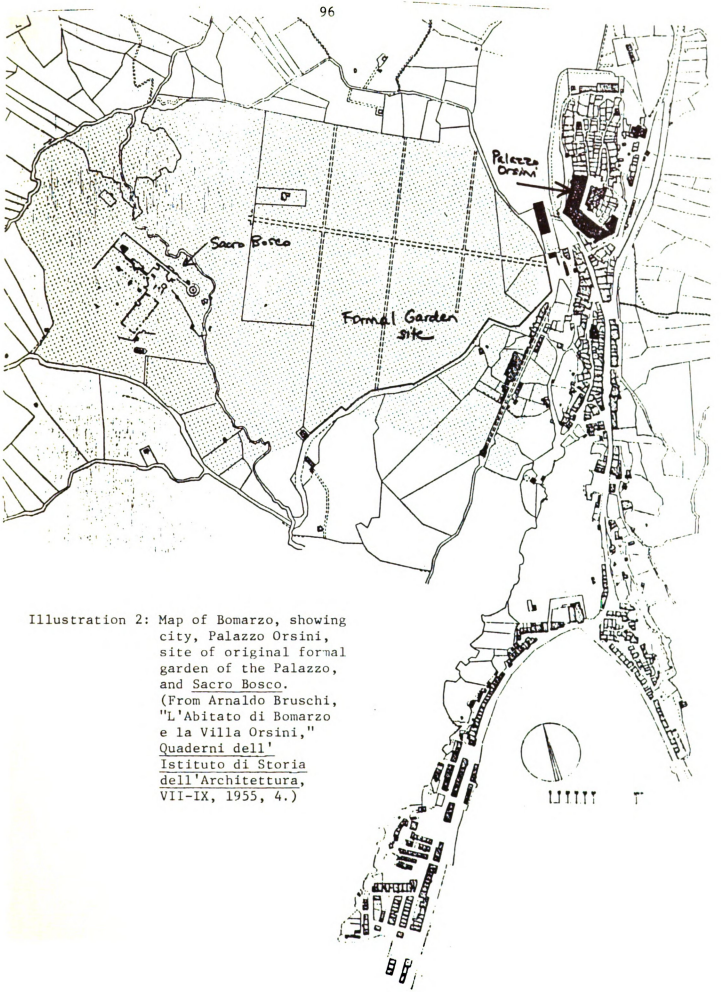

Illustration 2: Map of Bomarzo, showing city, Palazzo Orsini, site of original formal garden of the Palazzo, and Sacro Bosco. (From Arnaldo Bruschi, "L'Abitato di Bomarzo e la Villa Orsini," Quaderni dell' Istituto di Storia dell'Architettura, VII-IX, 1955, 4.)

Illustration 4: Sphinx, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Illustration 5: Battling Giants,
Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.
Photo by Mary Platt.

Illustration 6: Tortoise with robed woman on its back, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photo by Mary Platt.

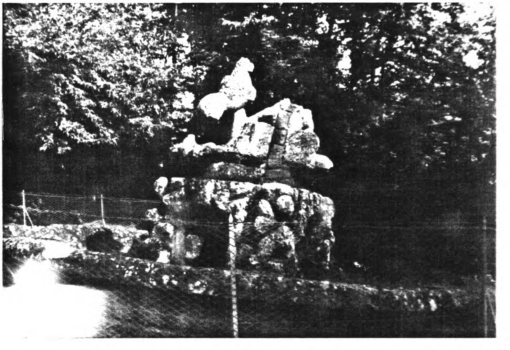

Illustration 7: Pegasus "Fountain,"
Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photo by Mary Platt.

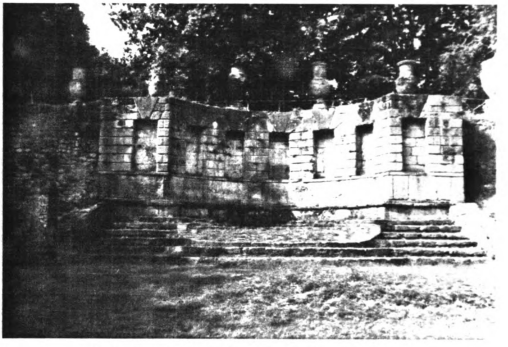

Illustration 8: "Grand Nymphaeum,"
Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photo by Mary Platt.

Illustration 9: "Nymph" or "Hermaphrodite," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (From the photograph by Jacqueline Theurillat.)

Illustration 10: "Casetta" or "Leaning House," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.
Photo by Mary Platt.

Illustration 11: Two views of row of urns or vases, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Photos by Mary Platt.

Illustration 12: Sleeping woman or nymph, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.
Photo by Mary Platt.

Illustration 13: "Sea monster,"
Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.
Photo by Mary Platt.

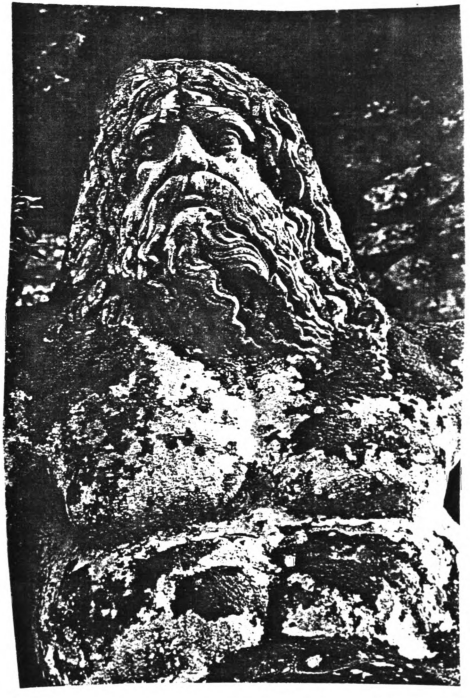

Illustration 14: "Neptune" or "river god," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo from J. Recupero, Il Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo.)

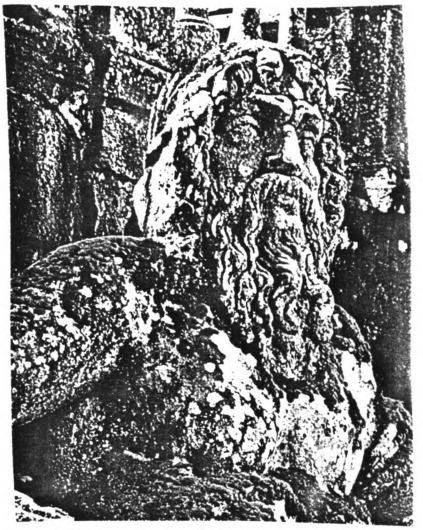

Illustration 15: "River god" from a fountain at the Villa Lante, Bagnaia. (Photo from R. King, The Quest for Paradise: A History of the World's Gardens.)

Illustration 16: Two views of the dragon sculpture, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Photos by Mary Platt.

Illustration 17: Leonardo da Vinci:
Dragon fighting a lion (drawing).
(Uffizi Gallery, Florence.)

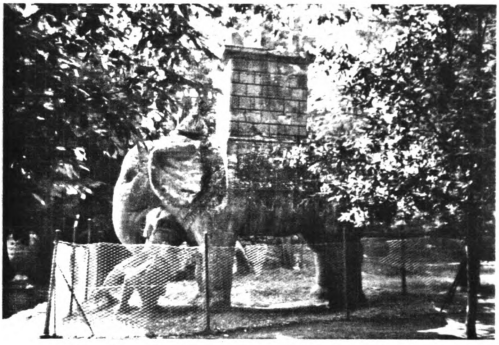

Illustration 18: Two views of elephant holding armored soldier, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photos by Mary Platt.

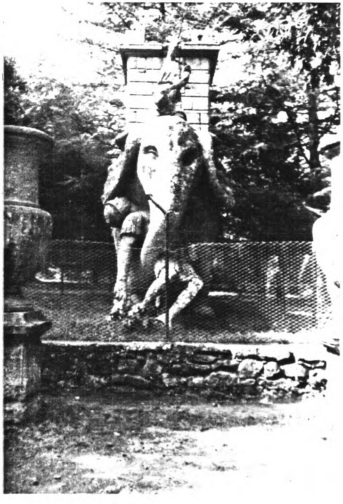

Illustration 19: Two views of woman bearing a vase on her head, Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photos by Mary Platt.

Illustration 20: "Mascherone," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Photo by Mary Platt.

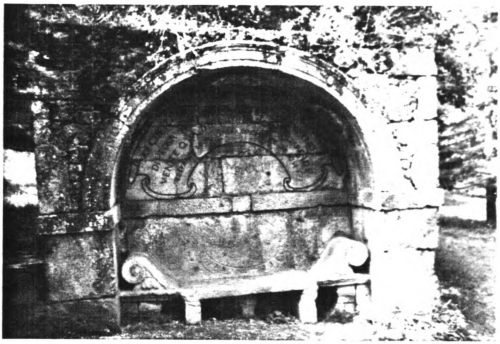

Illustration 21: Bench in the Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. Photo by Mary Platt.

Illustration 22: "Etruscan pediment," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Photo by Mary Platt.

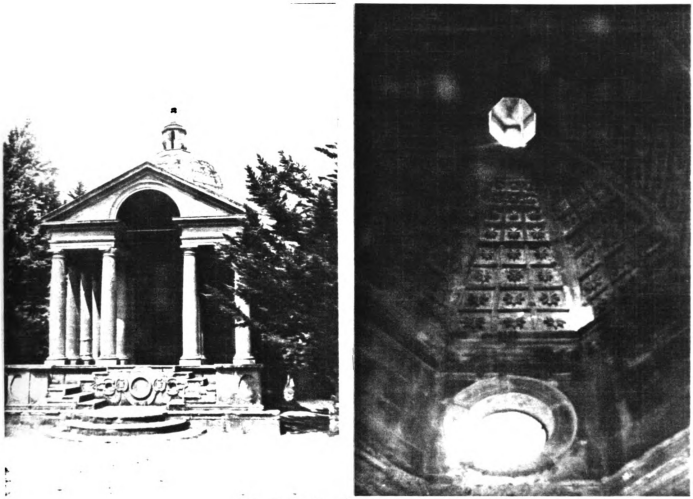

Illustration 23: Exterior (l.) and interior (r.) of the "tempietto," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.

Photos by Mary Platt.

Illustration 24: "Time," Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo. (Photo by Jacqueline Theurillat.)

Illustration 25: Heraldic bears,
Sacro Bosco, Bomarzo.
Photos by Mary Platt.

Illustration 26: Engraving attributed to Zuccari, purportedly a portrait of Vicino Orsini (cf. J. Theurillat, Les mysteres de Bomarzo, 52-53).

Illustration 27: Busts discovered by J. Theurillat at La Penna, the estate of Maerbale Orsini. She claims that these busts portray (top l.) Vicino, (top r.) Giulia, (bottom l.) Marzio, and (bottom r.) Maerbale Orsini. (Cf. J. Theurillat, Les mysteres de Bomarzo, 58.) Photo by J. Theurillat.