

Among greenery, water and architecture.

The landscape of the Aventine hill in the Baroque Age

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Abstract: The Aventine Hill, located at the southern limit of the ancient urban fabric of Rome, close to the left bank of the Tiber, stands out both in the history and landscape of the city for its eminent position dominating the river and for its leafy character, that still survives today, despite an intense twentieth-century edification. Although having housed a populous neighborhood in Roman times, close to the port and merchant infrastructure, the Aventine Hill remained almost empty for a long period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the early twentieth century. A series of ancient plans and views testify to this image of the hill, based on an intimate relationship with the Tiber and the large vineyards and gardens, marked with ruins of the Roman era, among which only the great ecclesiastical complexes of Santa Sabina stood out, of Saint Alexios, of Saint Prisca, and of the Priory of Malta, surrounded by lush vegetation facing the water. This paper briefly traces the historical-urban events of the hill using the graphic sources (engravings and paintings), focusing on the large conventual complexes that dominate the top of the hill, called «Aventinus Maior».

Keywords: Rome, Aventine hill, Architecture, urban landscape, archeological surveys

Among the hills on which the city of Rome lies, the Aventine² is the one that most of all, today, maintains a verdant character, despite the 20th-century urban development reduced the extent of the green areas³ (*fig. 1*). Its naturalistic character is a consequence of the peripheral position with respect both to the imperial city, and – even more – to the pontifical Rome. Its location outside the city center made it a lonely, mysterious and

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2. My thanks to Iacopo Benincampi for inviting me to present the contents of this study at a conference on 30 April 2024, as part of the class of *History of the garden and landscape*, and to Antonio Russo for his important suggestions. The subject of this contribution is the *Aventinus Maior*, overlooking the Tiber, while it will not be treated the *Aventinus Minor*, the smaller hill, located at the extreme southern end of the city. I am also grateful to the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani for allowing me to take photographs at its seat, the former Convent of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio.
3. The 20th-century urbanization of the district has not been addressed in this article. On this topic: BRIOTTI 1988, pp. 47-83.

silent place. The numerous paintings and engravings made between the 17th and 19th centuries effectively return the ancient wild character of the hill, a sort of natural stronghold characterized by an intimate relation with the Tiber River, that flows at its foot. Making use of the existing graphic sources, in this article the ancient landscape values of the hill will be treated, with specific regard to the Baroque period: a period in which the appearance of the hill was consolidated by a remarkable series of works, with the participation of relevant architects, such as Carlo Fontana and Giovan Battista Piranesi.

Introduction to the Aventine: historical notes on the Hill in Antiquity

The legend tells that the Aventine Hill was chosen by Remus as the site on which to found the city of Rome, opposed to the Palatine, preferred by his twin brother Romulus. According to the Etruscan ritual, the choice was entrusted to Fate, observing the flight of birds. Romulus saw twelve vultures flying over the Palatine Hill, while Remus only six over the Aventine. Romulus, the winner, plowed the perimeter of the city on the Palatine and swore he would kill anyone who tried to cross that border. Remus disobeyed: thus, he was killed by his brother, and Romulus became the first king of Rome. According to ancient historiography, this happened in 754 BC.

Beyond the legendary origins, the Aventine Hill was not included within Rome's initial foundation. Towards the middle of the 8th century BC, the town was formed by tiny villages of round straw huts, perched on top of the hills. Until the 1st century BC, Aventine laid outside the *pomerium*, the ancient sacred boundary of the city; this exclusion caused an isolation from the city, from both the structural and juridical-religious point of view. At least until the reclamation carried out by King Tarquinius Priscus, it was separated by a swamp from the Palatine, so that, to reach it, it was necessary to cross the water and perhaps the slopes of the hill were even steeper than today. However, a first suburban settlement arose on the hill in the last royal period, under King Ancus Marcius or Servius Tullius⁴. The latter built the first city walls in stone blocks, which also includes much of the Aventine.

4. On the beginnings of human presence on the Aventine Hill: MARCHETTI LONGHI 1947, p. 5; BRIOTTI 1988, p. 7; DI GIOIA 2004, pp. 10-16.

Urbanization was rather slow: a first phase characterized by sporadic settlements inserted in a still wooded environment, followed by a second phase in which the main roads were defined: the *Clivus Publicius*, which went up the hill coming from the *Forum Boario*, and the *Vicus Armilustri*, corresponding to the current road of Santa Sabina⁵. Then, only in the late Republican age a more complex urban layout was created⁶. The walls were enlarged after the looting by the Gauls, in 390 BC. In the new walls there were four doors that gave access to the hill⁷.

For centuries, the Aventine was a working-class neighborhood after the assignment of its territory to the plebeians, through the *Lex Icilia de Aventino publicando* (456 BC) in contrast to the Palatine, the favourite seat of the patricians⁸. The main architectural emergencies were the temple of Diana, built by Servius Tullius, the nearby temples of Minerva and Juno Regina (392 BC), and, again, on the slope above the Circus Maximus, the sanctuary of Ceres (493 BC)⁹ (fig. 2).

Since the first century AD poorer population migrated to the plain land nearby (where the new fluvial port, called Emporium was rising¹⁰) and to the opposite bank of the Tiber, the present-day Trastevere. Thus many noble families made their entry into the Aventine neighborhood, especially after the inclusion of the hill in the *pomerium*¹¹. In this period numerous rich dwellings were built, including the private houses of Trajan, Hadrian, Septimius Severus and Vitellius, before they became emperors. The commercial development of Ostia and Porto meant that the merchant class moved from the Aventine Hill towards

5. The *Clivus Publicius* was traced in 238 BC. Before this event, the hill had no roads for wagons. ASTOLFI 2004, p. 15.

6. BRIOTTI 1988, p. 9; ASTOLFI 2004, pp. 12-13; DI GIOIA 2004, pp. 38-40.

7. The *Porta Naevia* gave access to the *Aventinus Minor*, the *Porta Raudusculana* was located in the current Viale Aventino, the *Porta Lavernalis* at the current church of Sant'Anselmo and the *Porta Trigemina* at the *Forum Boario*. ASTOLFI 2004, p. 15. On the republican walls, of which conspicuous remains survive in Piazza Albania and under the church of Santa Sabina: QUARANTA 2017.

8. On the urbanization of the neighborhood in the Republican era: MIGNONE 2017.

9. CHINI 1998, pp. 11-12. On the sacred buildings on the Aventine hill, see in particular *Ibidem*, pp. 15-34. On the temple of Diana, where Gaius Gracchus hid himself, trying in vain to escape death in 122: D'ANGELO 2017.

10. Since the beginning of the 2nd century BC the economic and demographic development of Rome made the old river port of the Forum Boarium totally insufficient. Moreover, it could not be enlarged due to its vicinity to the hills. Therefore, in 193 BC the censors Lucius Aemilius Lepidus and Lucius Aemilius Paulus established to face the problem by building a new port within a free area, south of the Aventine Hill. On that occasion the Porticus Aemilia was also erected (BRIOTTI 1988, pp. 11-12).

11. MARCHETTI LONGHI 1947, p. 5.

the sea. On the other hand, a great architectural renovation wanted by Augustus, and then by Trajan, led to the demolition of the old central districts and the consequent migration of the poorer classes¹². During the Imperial period, new temples dedicated to exotic cults were built, such as *Jupiter Dolocenum* (corresponding to the Syrian Baal), Mitra and Isis¹³ (fig. 3).

On the top of the hill, among the aristocratic residences, two small thermal complexes were built: the *Thermae Decianae* and *Thermae Surae*.

The first one was built in the 2nd century AD by Licinius Sura, friend and collaborator of the Emperor Trajan. We know the plan of this building because it is portrayed in the *Forma Urbis*, next to the *domus* of Sura. For this reason it is believed to be actually a private bath, accessible to a small circle of friends of Sura and only later open to the public. In fact, the building differs from the classical typology of the imperial baths as a result of its condition as a place reserved for the highest social classes, as well as the *Thermae Decianae*, built in 250 AD by the Emperor Decius. Both complexes in fact missed the large gardens and rooms for recreation and culture, present instead in the great baths of Trajan, Caracalla, and Diocletian¹⁴.

This interesting building today is almost totally destroyed, but in the 16th century, enough of it was intact to allow Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) to sketch a free-hand plan, including dimensions that he measured personally¹⁵.

Palladio's sketch shows two symmetrical ranges of rooms that open through diaphragms of column onto the south-west façade. Some rectangular rooms are roofed with cross vaults, while the two large rooms were square on the exterior, circular inside, and presumably domed. These were probably cold bathing rooms, provided with four semi-circular niches which may have held basins or small plunge baths.

12. *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7, BRIOTTI 1988, pp. 12-19; ASTOLFI 2004, p. 17.

13. The temple of Jupiter Dolocenum, built in the second half of the 2nd century AD, was found in 1935. Its site is indicated very clearly as close to the church of Sant' Alessio, at the western corner of the Aventine. Nearby there was the temple dedicated to Isis, while the *mithraeum* was found at the church of Santa Prisca. ASTOLFI 2004, p. 14.

14. CHINI 1998, p. 12; ASTOLFI 2004, p. 17.

15. The plan, preserved in the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, was probably sketched on the occasion of Palladio's last trip to Rome in 1554. On the drawing: LA FOLLETTE 1994.

Monasteries, castles, fields and ruins: the landscape of the Christian Aventine

Its status as an aristocratic and prosperous neighborhood probably caused the destruction of the Aventine during the sack of Rome by the Visigoths, led by King Alaric in 410 AD¹⁶. In the following years many owners of the area preferred to donate their possessions to the Church, rather than pay for the reconstruction of the destroyed buildings.

As a result, the first churches arose in the 5th century, including those of Santa Sabina, San Bonifacio and Santa Prisca¹⁷, still existing in the district. The first two sacred buildings rose by the ruins of the temple of *Jupiter Dolocenum*, the other one at the house of Trajan. These churches also shared ownership of the large abandoned areas, which, like other parts of ancient Rome including the Roman Forum, became cultivated fields¹⁸.

Around the 10th century, the Crescenzi family built a small castle at the north-eastern end of the ridge of the hill which, about three hundred years later, passed to the Savelli family¹⁹. Fortifications were indispensable because of the isolation of the site from the rest of the city, exposed to attacks from the sea. At the opposite end of the ridge of the hill was founded a monastery that the 12th century passed to the Knights Templar; after the ignominious suppression of the Order in 1312, the convent came to the Knights of Rhodes (called, after 1530, of Malta), who dedicated the church to the Virgin. This church, called Santa Maria in Aventino or *del Priorato*, is today a remarkable artistic emergency and, with the adjacent 7th-century villa, characterizes the landscape of the hill.

The layout of the *Aventinus Maior*, with the fortified block of convents and the Savelli castle on the ridge facing the Tiber and the cultivated fields at their feet, remained substantially unchanged for many centuries.

With the election of Giacomo Savelli to the pontificate, who became Pope Honorius IV in 1285, the Aventine, as a stronghold of his family,

16. DI GIOIA 2004, pp. 46-50.

17. The church of Santa Prisca, although interesting from the artistic point of view, is not treated in this article because it is less relevant from the landscape point of view and because it is far from the ridge of *Aventinus Maior*, the main object of this study. For the same reason the church of San Saba with the annexed monastery, located on *Aventinus Minor*, has been excluded.

18. For the historical events of the Aventine hill during the Middle Ages: MARCHETTI LONGHI 1947, pp. 8-20; DI GIOIA 2004, pp. 51-72, 89-107.

19. MARCHETTI LONGHI 1947, pp. 21-24. On the architecture of the castle: FIORINI 2023.

experienced a new splendid phase with the installation of the papal court and a lively resumption of building activity. In that period, the presence of the Dominican friars on the Aventine is recorded, precisely in the convent of Santa Sabina, and the churches are restored or rebuilt, as in the case of the Benedictine church of San Bonifacio, now also dedicated to Sant'Alessio and more often called by this name. At the death of Honorius IV, when the Savelli family saw a phase of decline, the hill depopulated again and the monasteries remained the only forms of human presence²⁰.

In the 16th century, the defensive bastions were built, designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger²¹, commissioned by Pope Paul III: the Bastione Ardeatino, near Porta San Sebastiano, and the Bastione Aventino, between the Tiber and Porta San Paolo. A third bastion, near Porta San Paolo, was not completed.

Under Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590), the Aventinian churches were restored and modernized, and the connections with the city center were improved through to the restoration of the ancient procession that from the Vatican went right to the Aventine, on the first day of Lent. For this purpose the access roads to the hill are arranged²². In the same period, the Knights transformed their convent in a villa, surrounded by a luxurious Italian garden, but above all in the 18th century the great architectural complexes of the Aventine Hill change their appearance, especially Sant'Alessio and the Villa of the Priory of Malta, radically renovated.

There are many representations of the appearance of the Aventine in past centuries. In fact, many painters and engravers depicted the hill, especially from the Tiber, emphasizing the close relationship between nature (the Tiber river and vegetation) and human life (churches, villas, warehouses, boats).

One of the most famous is the picture by the French engraver Etienne Du Perac (*fig. 4*): in the background the convents of Santa Sabina, Sant'Alessio and the Priory of Malta are depicted, and in the foreground the port of Marmorata. The slope of the hill is partially supported by powerful brick substructures, whose vaulted rooms are used as

20. MARCHETTI LONGHI 1947, pp. 25-28.

21. BATTAGLIA 1942, pp. 16-19; DI GIOIA 2004, pp. 111-113.

22. ROCA DE AMICIS 2018, pp. 323-324.

warehouses for timber and salt²³. Also in the bird's eye view by Antonio Tempesta (part of his famous plan of the city), from the bank of the river the streets depart that rise on top of the hill, on which the churches with their bell towers stand²⁴.

Many 17th-century paintings, such as that one by the Dutch painter Isaac de Moucheron²⁵, highlight the wild character of the hill (*fig. 5*). Along the ridge facing the Tiber, like a fortified citadel, the convents of Santa Sabina and Sant'Alessio are placed, as well as the Villa of the Priory of Malta. All around, the luxuriant vegetation that covers the steep slope of the hill and almost reaches the Tiber. In this and other scenes, such as the 18th-century painting by Paolo Anesi, the river is the vital element of the scene, sailed by boats transporting all kinds of goods to the large and lively city of Rome depicted in the background, with its bell towers and turrets (*fig. 6*).

A look at the convents of the Aventine Hill in the Baroque period

As shown by the 18th-century Plan of Rome printed by Giovan Battista Nolli, the Dominican friars were among the main owners of the hill, possessing not only the early Christian basilica of Santa Sabina and the annexed convent but also a vast vineyard on the southern side of the hill (*fig. 7*). The friars came into possession of the religious complex in 1222. Saint Dominic of Guzman (1170-1221), founder of the Order, lived there and his cell is still existing, transformed into a small chapel by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680)²⁶. In Rome they also owned the convent of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, located in the heart of the city. It was not by chance that they chose to establish their general house and novitiate at the Aventine Hill, far from the chaos and suitable for spiritual recollection.

The Dominican friars are responsible for much of the conventual complex' aspect, as we see it today, except the church, a splendid example of early Christian architecture²⁷. Originally the 5th century sacred build-

23. D'AMELIO 2010, p. 113.

24. On the engravings by Du Perac and Tempesta: BATTAGLIA 1942, pp. 19-21; JATTA 1998.

25. LATTUADA 1998.

26. The current chapel, located in the mezzanine of the convent, consists of the simple cell of San Domenico, deliberately left in its bare poverty, and an anteroom richly decorated by the Berninian school. On the work, reported to Mattia De Rossi under the supervision of Bernini: RUSSO 2016; ROBERTO 2016.

27. The church has been reworked over time, especially in the 18th century; what we see today is the result of

ding was preceded by a narthex and a *quadriportico*, today no longer existing. During the Early Middle Ages some buildings were added: the house for the cardinal holder next to the apse, and another body leaning against the narthex. These buildings were later incorporated into the 13th-century convent (*fig. 8*).

A plan designed by the architect Carlo Fontana (1638-1714) in 1700²⁸ (*fig. 9*) shows the monastic spaces around the church and the large green spaces of the cloister, the 'vegetable gardens' and the orange grove, where according to the legend, saint Dominic planted an orange tree from Spain, his native land. We see it depicted in the view of Giuseppe Vasi, surrounded by a simple wall that protrudes forward at the entrance porch of the church. The Orange grove today is much smaller than its origins because many buildings have been built inside it²⁹. We can see its original extension in the ancient plans, such as the map of the Gregorian Cadastre (1816-1824). Originally, the convent was articulated around a single cloister which gives access to the cells, the refectory and the chapter house. At the end of the 19th century, other bodies were built to expand the living space of the convent; then the garden assumed the appearance of a secondary courtyard.

The vast cloister, a typical example of *hortus conclusus* regarded to be the largest in Rome, was the heart of the friars' life (*fig. 10*). Its architectural features are very simple, according to the customs of the mendicant orders. The squared open area is surrounded by porticoed walkways, with couples of columns that support small arches, gathered in groups of four. This simplicity highlights the green of the lawn and the large cypresses, planted in the middle of the uncovered area.

The convent of Santa Sabina borders with that of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, belonged first to the Basilian monks, then to the Benedictines, who in 1216 rebuilt the old church on a three-aisled latin cross plan,

a restoration carried out between 1914 and 1936 by Antonio Muñoz, superintendent of the monuments of Lazio, who attempted to restore the building to its original appearance, removing the not-original decorations and reconstructing the lost parts, such as the altar and the fence of the choir. DARSY 1961, pp. 44-50; BELLANCA 1999, pp. 9-24.

28. In January 1700, Carlo Fontana was engaged by the Dominican fathers as expert in a legal dispute that saw them opposed to the Costa family, owner of the timber warehouses located on the slopes of the hill towards the Tiber. The reason for the dispute was the cracks that had opened in the walls of the monastery, after the Costa had carried out excavations and demolitions in the ancient substructures of the hill. Fontana drew up a report accompanied by many drawings, including a general plan of the *Aventinus Maior*, with the monumental complexes that rise above. D'AMELIO 2010.

29. On the events related to the transformation of the Orange grove: GIANANDREA 2016.

and added the bell tower, one of the highest in Rome³⁰. In the following two centuries the complex went into decline and was abandoned by the Benedictines, so in 1426, by the will of Pope Martin V, it was entrusted to the Hieronymites, who restored again the basilica and the convent. As shown by ancient plans, the monastery was arranged around a rectangular cloister and surrounded by gardens³¹ (*fig. 11a*).

From descriptions and engravings we know that the church was internally decorated with precious Cosmatesque furnitures in contrast to the simple exterior. The gabled façade was preceded by a narthex with arches on columns, surmounted by the massive Romanesque bell tower³²; in its upper part, a 16th-century thermal window opened under the pediment (*fig. 12*). The opposite façade facing the Tiber, characterized by the imposing apse flanked by the humble body of the convent, clearly stood out in the skyline of the Aventine.

In 1743 the Hieronymites, with the financial help of Cardinal Angelo Querini, began a radical renewal of the complex, entrusted to the architect Giovan Battista Nolli (1701-1756)³³.

The plan of the convent was kept substantially unchanged³⁴, but the old monastic buildings were reinforced and modernized (*fig. 11b*). In the project great importance was given to the relationship between architecture and its naturalistic context, evident in the creation of a panoramic loggia facing the Tiber, which completes and makes regular the rear façade of the convent (*fig. 13*). The enjoyment of the extraordinary panorama of the city, dominated by the dome of St Peter's Basilica, seems to have affected the 17th-century renovation of the convent, having been created a series of openings designed for this purpose³⁵. Moreover, an Italian garden was created along the rear façade of the convent.

30. On the architectural features of the medieval church: RICHIELLO 2004, pp. 47-49.

31. The structure of the convent before the 15th-century works carried out by the Hieronymites has not yet been clarified. It has only been shown that the cloister, corresponding to the current one, had a single porch adjacent to the left side of the church, which was made with reused ancient columns. *Ibidem*, pp. 49-50.

32. Perhaps originally this church also had an entrance courtyard, according to the early Christian architectural custom: *Ibidem*, p. 40.

33. Giovan Battista Nolli is famous above all for having designed the famous Map of Rome (1748), but he was also an engineer and architect. Among his main works is the church of Santa Dorotea in Rome (1751-1756), he restored the Franciscan convents in Ferentino and Sezze and designed the churches of Santa Chiara in Ferentino and of San Giovanni Battista in Ceccano: BEVILACQUA 1998, pp. 145-171; BEVILACQUA 2013.

34. On the renovation of the convent: BEVILACQUA 2002, pp. 103-105; BEVILACQUA 2010, pp. 121-125.

35. BEVILACQUA 2010, p. 124.

In his renewal of the cloister, Nolli shows a respectful approach to the pre-existing architecture. In fact, he maintained the arches at the ground floor and just regularized the alignments of the windows in the upper level. He also added simple stucco frames to mitigate the humble character of the monastery. Even today, except for the cornices, the cloister does not look very different from what it was in the 16th century³⁶ (fig. 14). The columns (some with smooth shaft, others with flutings and different capitals), probably come from ancient ruined buildings that in those days still stood out in the endless fields of the Aventine Hill, as well as the epigraphs inserted in the perimeter wall.

After renovating the convent, in 1747 began the restoration of the church. The works started under the direction of Nolli, who wanted to reinforce the ancient walls without substantial modifications on the structure, perhaps keeping the ancient colonnades inserting new pillars between them³⁷. However, static problems soon occurred and in 1748 Nolli was fired and replaced by Tommaso De Marchis (1693-1759)³⁸, who opted for the complete demolition of the ancient colonnades. Substantially, De Marchis kept unchanged the ancient three-aisled scheme of the church, with transept and apse, but radically changed the structure by replacing the ancient rows of columns with new strong and widely spaced pillars (fig. 15). Nolli's approach, cautious and reverential towards the ancient building, is replaced by a *modus operandi* that privileges static safety before anything else and creates a completely new architectural organism, with solemn and powerful forms. De Marchis also designed the new stucco decoration that clads all the walls of the church, in an elegant late baroque style, as well as the new façade, equipped with a narthex like the medieval one. In the masonry pillars of the new portico he inserted the ancient columns as relics of the old church, to show the antiquity of the sacred building. The only unchanged part of the church is the magnificent Romanesque bell tower. Work ended after 1751³⁹.

36. The medieval cloister of the convent was renovated in the mid-16th century. The works were completed in 1570, as declared by a plaque in the cloister, but payments continued until 1577: BEVILACQUA 2010, p. 124.

37. BEVILACQUA 2002, p. 108; BEVILACQUA 2010, p. 122.

38. Tommaso De Marchis, pupil of Carlo Francesco Bizzaccheri, worked mainly in Rome, his hometown, and in other towns of the Papal States such as Tivoli, Ferentino, Albano, Tarquinia, Genzano. Among his main works are the Mellini palace and the college of the Scolopi fathers in Rome, the hospital of Tivoli, the Lercari palace in Albano, as well as many works for aristocratic families such as Bolognetti, Muti Papazzurri, Massimo, Barberini. In 1748 and 1749 he was elected director of the prestigious Accademia di San Luca. CARBONARA 1995; CARBONARA-PISTOLESI 2022.

39. CARBONARA 2004, pp. 56-66; CARBONARA 2022, pp. 91-116. The tempera paintings that decorate the barrel

In the second half of the 18th century an entrance courtyard was built, as a further early Christian reminiscence⁴⁰. Initially the outer façade consisted of a single level and was pierced by four large windows that made it transparent, allowing you to overlook the interior façade of the basilica (*fig. 16*). After 1823 the windows were walled and the entrance body was elevated, making the façade of the church invisible from the street and modifying the relationship between the sacred building and its surroundings, that once was much more harmonious⁴¹.

Villas and gardens on the Aventine hill

During the Renaissance, large plots of lands of the Aventine hill were bought by aristocratic families who used them not only for agricultural purposes but also as site for suburban dwellings. Together with the indispensable service buildings, casinos began to punctuate the vast gardens, vineyards, citrus groves, orchards⁴².

Among the owners, there were the families Massimo, Porcari, Cenci, Santacroce, Capizucchi; then Lisca, Amodei, Peroni, Cavalieri and Maccarani; finally Rossi, Ginnasi, Vivaldi, Specchi, Cavalletti.

At the time the ancient ruins still characterized the landscape and in some cases were incorporated into new buildings. This is the case of the *Thermae Decianae* on which a farmhouse was built that belonged to the Massimo family, then to the Vitelleschi⁴³. In 1636 the property was bought by the Jesuits, who transformed it into their Professed House. The building, surmounted by a viewing tower and including a chapel and dormitories, was surrounded by vast agricultural areas, partly arranged as a rectangular shaped Italian garden, as it appears in the Plan of Rome by Giovan Battista Falda in 1676 (*fig. 17*). The estate was crossed by a tree-lined avenue that led to a rectangular farmyard and ran alongside to the villa, then crossed a long pergola. At the corner between the two avenues there was a squared Italian garden, with four flower beds around a round fountain. Everything else was farmland, mainly

vaults and the central dome, were made in the Fifties-Sixties of the 19th century.

40. CARBONARA 2022, pp. 98-100.

41. BATTAGLIA 1942, pp.38-39. We do not know the name of the designer of the external porch, nor who made the nineteenth-century changes.

42. BATTAGLIA 1942, p. 9.

43. MAZZA 2010.

used as vineyards and orchards (trees, pears, plums, hazels, laurels), as we know from some documents of the late 17th century⁴⁴. Of this large property only the farmhouse remains⁴⁵, remodelled at the end of the 19th century by the Torlonia family, flanked by a garden of modest size, the only green area of the vast estate survived the destruction, which began in 1924 when the residential district Aventino was established⁴⁶.

During the Renaissance and Baroque age, at the two ends of the ridge of the hill rose two green spaces that still characterize the area. At the northern end, the medieval Rocca Savella, built in the 10th century, had been gradually abandoned already in the late Middle Ages⁴⁷. In 16th century, only a terrace remained of the fortress surrounded by defensive walls, that began to be used for recreational purposes: since 1588 it became the meeting place for the members of the *Arcadia della Valle Tiberina*, a literary circle founded by the site owner Fabio Orsini.

This use continued in the following two centuries, when the site, passed to the Ginnasi family, hosting the meetings of the *Accademia degli Arcadi Infecondi*⁴⁸. As shown in ancient engravings, the garden was divided into two parts, both embellished with artfully cut hedges and rich in valuable trees such as cedars and pomegranates. Part of the garden was occupied by a circular open-air theatre where the *Arcadi* met and hold poetry declamations, with the amazing background of St Peter's dome (*fig. 18*). Next to the apse of the church of Santa Sabina, a small casino was built, equipped with a protruding loggia. This arrangement was dismantled in the early 19th century, when the casino was demolished and the area was turned into a farmland⁴⁹.

The green area was finally reorganized around 1932 by the landscape architect Raffaele De Vico (1881-1969). In fact, after the unification of Italy, it was decided to turn the area into a public park: a garden-belvedere on the city, alternative to the Pincio and the Janiculum⁵⁰.

44. This appears in the 1782 report attached: MAZZA 2010, p. 199.

45. In the building you can clearly see medieval elements while in the underground levels richly decorated rooms have been found, with stucco and frescoes, belonging to the ancient *Thermae Decianae*.

46. The Society of Jesus retained possession of the vineyard until its suppression in 1773. The estate was then taken from the Apostolic Chamber and sold in 1782 to Stefano Brandi. Giacinto Brandi, son of Stefano, is the owner of the property in the Gregorian Cadastre. Giacinto's daughter, Giustina Brandi, sold the vineyard to the Jesuits in 1837, who sold it to the Torlonia family about thirty years later. The area was parceled out in 1926, with the construction of the current residential district (MAZZA 2010, p. 202).

47. BATTAGLIA 1942, p. 9.

48. About the use of the site as a venue for literary meetings: GUERRIERI BORSOI 2010, pp. 194-195.

49. In fact, in the plan of the Gregorian Land Registry no longer appear the regular flowerbeds nor the theater, but the area is arranged in cultivated land.

50. On the 20th-century arrangement of the green area: DE VICO FALLANI 2010.

De Vico set a strongly symmetrical plan, with the only exceptions of the main entrance, towards Piazza Pietro d'Iliria, and the fountain on the right of the path that regularly divides the garden in two halves. The off-axis position of the main entrance has the function of dilating the time between the entrance to the garden and the perspective view of the belvedere: a device implemented by De Vico both to increase the suggestion of the view and to reduce the rigidity of the symmetry of the plan. In the middle, in line with the belvedere there is a square in which was, originally, a fountain was placed. This central space is underlined by the trees that surround it, placed on both sides of the path, fully emphasizing the space towards the viewpoint.

During the Renaissance, on the opposite side – the south end – of the hill, the ancient convent of St. Mary (passed to the Knights of Malta), was transformed into a villa, because the charitable activity of the Knights was no longer needed. In 1566, at the behest of Pope Pius V, the Knights moved their priory from the Forum of Augustus⁵¹ to the old convent on the Aventine Hill, which was completely renovated to become the home of the Grand Master of the Order.

The transfer of the Magistral Residence happened at the same time as the aristocratic families began to buy properties on the hill, to make their vineyards and build their suburban dwellings. The Aventine at that time had become a prestigious place, for its silent and naturalistic character, among the Antique ruins.

From the defensive function certainly derives the need to turn the façade towards the river, but this feature was exploited to establish a harmonious relationship between the building and the natural environment⁵². The first works to transform the old convent into a more comfortable residence were commissioned by Cardinal Marco Barbo at the end of the 15th century and Cardinal Michele Bonelli between 1568 and 1598⁵³. The decorous, but still rather rustic and simple appearance

51. Since 1312, the headquarters of the Knights of Rhodes was in fact located in the remains of the *Forum of Augustus*, where in the Early Middle Ages a Basilian church had risen, then passed to the Templars. The transfer of the house of the Grand Master from the *Forum of Augustus* to the Aventine Hill, is a consequence of the loss of power of the military order, which in 1522 had seen the island of Rhodes conquered by the Ottoman Empire. On lands once belonging to the Knights, Cardinal Michele Bonelli built the Alessandrino district, demolished between 1924 and 1932. GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 21-22; DI GIOIA 1998a, p. 24.

52. BELLI BARSALI 1970, pp. 421-423.

53. Cardinal Michele Bonelli, great-grandson of Pope Pius V, ordered the renovation of the complex immediately after his appointment as Prior Commander, in 1568. GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, p. 22.

assumed by the buildings with these works, is represented by the engraving by Alò Giovannoli (*fig. 19*)⁵⁴.

Then, at the end of the 17th century, under Cardinal Benedetto Pamphilj, the building changed its face again: between 1678 and 1681 the villa was elevated with the arched loggia designed by Matthia De Rossi (1637-1695), favorite pupil of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (*figg. 6, 20*). Internally, the spiral staircase and the decoration of the rooms were carried out, with the noble coat of the Pamphilj family awarded with the Maltese Cross, which decorated the windows, ceilings and doors of the Grand Prior's apartment. At the same time, the snow pit, the hen house and the dovecote were built, and a hall for the ball game was created by rearranging old stables⁵⁵.

Simultaneously the land around the building was completely reorganized by the prelate, lover of flowers and plants (*fig. 20*)⁵⁶. The documents show the planting of daffodils, anemones, violets, water lilies; in addition, a lush citrus grove with cedars, oranges and lemons, stretched on the slope of the hill, up to touch the Tiber. The orchard was crossed by paths along which jasmine, mortelle and junipers were planted. Under Cardinal Benedetto Pamphilj, the villa became a venue for parties, meetings between artists, writers and scientists and the entire Aventine became one of the brightest centers of Roman and Lazio culture of the late 17th century⁵⁷.

But the appearance of the complex changed again between 1764 and 1766, as the Venetian architect Giovan Battista Piranesi (1720-1778)⁵⁸ was entrusted to modernize the entrance of the villa and radically restore the church, which was rather modest in appearance⁵⁹.

54. *Ibidem*, p. 31.

55. Starting in 1681, the work was continued by Carlo Fontana, who was mainly responsible for the church. On the renovation of the villa: MONTALTO 1955, pp. 270-274, 346-348.

56. *Ibidem*, pp. 355-357.

57. *Ibidem*, pp. 350-352. Worldly events became more frequent after 1681, when Benedetto Pamphilj became cardinal: until 1690 illustrious figures such as Pietro Ottoboni, the Marquises Santacroce, Cardinals Mellini and Rospigliosi and many others attended the Magistral Villa.

58. On the famous engraver, architect and theorist from Veneto, a figure of crucial importance in the transition between late Baroque and Neoclassicism whose only architectural work is the renovation of the complex on the Aventine Hill, at least BEVILACQUA 2022; GARMS 2016; PINTO 2012; KANTOR-KAZOVSKY 2006; SCOTT 1975.

59. The gabled façade of the church, outlined by four pilasters supporting the pediment, was characterized by a central oculus. Inside, the sacred space consisted of a single nave traversed by four diaphragm arches supporting the roof. In front of the altar, there was an iconostasis with four architraved columns, closed by a gate. The apse was frescoed with the figures of the Virgin, the Saviour, Saints and Apostles. Before the transformation carried out by Piranesi, Mattia De Rossi and Carlo Fontana intervened on the church, commissioned by Benedetto Pamphilj (1678-1684). GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 34-42; BARRY 2010, pp. 141-142.

In addition, until that time the property was accessible only along a steep path that climbed along the hill from the bank of the Tiber (*figs.* 5, 6, 19). It was therefore necessary to provide the villa with a more comfortable access, worthy of its importance⁶⁰. Piranesi regularized an existing widening at the end of the road and transformed it in a sort of entrance courtyard, to emphasize the access to the villa⁶¹ (*fig.* 21). This space is unique because it is not bordered by buildings, but only by the boundary walls, on which obelisks rise in the sky and slabs are adorned with reliefs and sculptures. On the right side of the square, the monumental entry to the villa opens⁶².

The arched gate is flanked by two pilasters and crowned by a pediment. The wall is decorated with two large epigraphs containing war trophies, which allude to the history of the Knights, along with elements – like crown, tower, cross, eagle – belonging to the coat of arms of cardinal Rezzonico, who ordered the renovation of the villa. In the side sectors, windows should have been opened to allow you to look into the garden.

In front of the majestic entrance of the villa, there is an original decorative apparatus referring to the enterprises of the Knights: a sequence of symbols, emblems, insignia, coats of arms, and plaques. The steles show the cross of Malta, emblem of the Knights, and the tower, symbol of Cardinal Giovan Battista Rezzonico (1740-1783). In the back wall, the memorial plaque⁶³.

The casino and the church form an irregular complex around which the garden tightens, surrounding it on three sides (*fig.* 22). The main part of the house looks towards the Tiber, superimposed by the loggia on the top floor⁶⁴. A low wing surrounds the apse of the church and leans forward, and there are fountains. In front of this body there is the small building of the coffee-house of Benedetto Pamphilj (1653-1730).

60. DI GIOIA 1998b, p. 5.

61. On the renewal of the entire complex designed by Giovan Battista Piranesi: BATTAGLIA 1942, pp. 34-35; GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 43-73; BARRY 2010, pp. 142-155.

62. On the architecture of the square: GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 47-58; BARRY 2010, pp. 142-145.

63. DI GIOIA 1998b, p. 5.

64. About the construction of the building of the Magistral Villa: GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 113-118.

The layout of the garden corresponds to its depiction in Nolli's plan of Rome (1748), therefore it predates the work of Piranesi. On the contrary, today the low wing is longer than it was in the 17th century, this suggests that it has been prolonged. The green space is set on two main and parallel axes: the main longitudinal path and the hedge gallery that seems to be designed to visually frame the dome of St Peter's basilica; the view of the dome from the keyhole of the main door makes the villa famous worldwide.

Another important part of Piranesi's work is the church, completely renovated in the decorations, while maintaining the plan unchanged⁶⁵ (*fig. 23*). Its unique façade⁶⁶ and interior were conceived by Piranesi to commemorate the Knights of Malta: the architectural style is only apparently classical, because the fine iconographic design repeats everywhere – from the outside square, to the church, to the garden furnishings – symbolic elements such as the snake, the ship, the cross, and then weapons and military emblems that recall the history of the Knights.

Internally, the church consists of a single nave with a semicircular apse preceded by a little pronounced transept⁶⁷. Along the nave there are three large niches on each side: this layout, given to the building by late 17th-century works directed by Carlo Fontana, was left unchanged by Piranesi, who encrusted the whole masonry structure in a fine stucco covering, that integrates the baroque fantasy with the classicist memories⁶⁸ (*fig. 24*). A solemn apotheosis of the military Order spread out everywhere along the nave, on whose sides there are no altars but tombs, marking the way to the scenic high altar at the center of the apse⁶⁹.

65. Piranesi not only redecorated the church but reinforced its walls and foundations: in the excavation, he found remains of some buildings and a paved road: see GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI, p. 9.

66. The façade designed by Giovan Battista Piranesi was originally crowned by an attic on the pediment: this element was demolished after the damage suffered during the French siege of Rome in 1849. This crowning is depicted in the multiple engravings published before this date, like that of Giuseppe Cassini. GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI, pp. 25-26, 59-65. On the conception of the façade: BARRY 2010, pp. 145-147.

67. On the architectural and decorative layout of the interior of the church, see GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI, pp. 66-73; DI GIOIA 1998b, p. 10.

68. BARRY 2010, pp. 147-153.

69. On the altar, the sepulchral monuments and other decorative elements: GAVALLOTTI CAVALLERO-MONTINI 1984, pp. 74-122.

Conclusions

As we have seen, the Baroque age shaped the group of buildings on the top of the Aventine hill, with a spirit perfectly integrated with the naturalistic values of the site. The architects who worked on those sites, in particular Matthia De Rossi and Giovan Battista Nolli, seem to have conceived their projects taking into account the relationship between the buildings and the surrounding environment, especially as regards the enjoyment of the Roman landscape. Moreover, the splendid architectural expression of Piranesi in the complex of the Knights of Malta can be considered the end point of this route, creating an environment whose balances will remain intact for over a century. The following urban events, especially those of the 20th century, have greatly reduced the extent of greenery but have not affected its charm, due to the perfect combination of architecture and nature.

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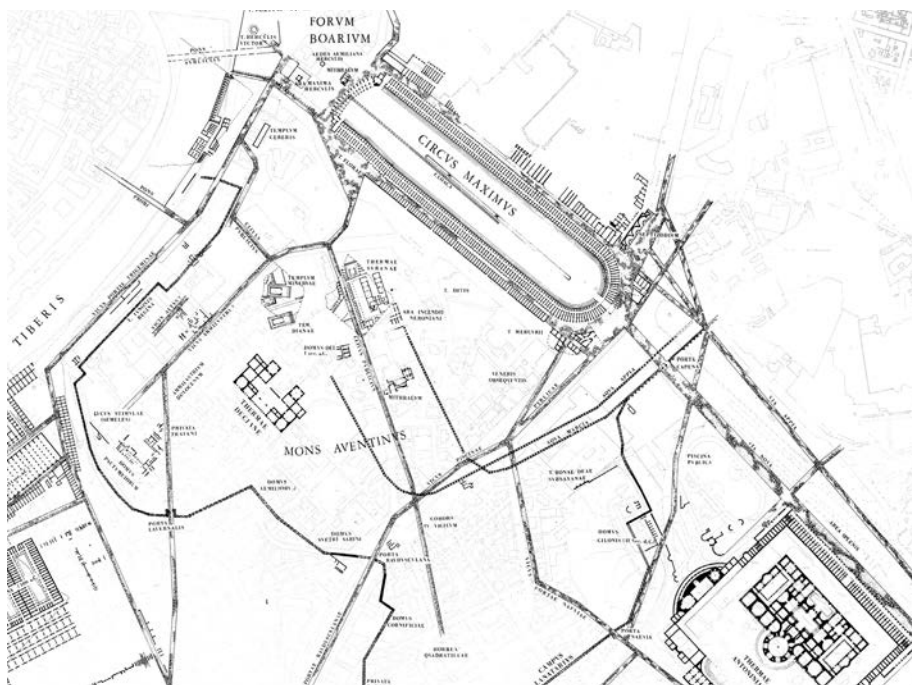


Fig. 1 – View of the Aventinus Maior as it looks today. From left to right: basilica and convent of Santa Sabina, basilica and former convent of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, Magistral Villa of the Priory of Malta (photo by Luciano Scuderi).

Fig. 2 – The area of the Aventine Hill, detail of the Forma Urbis Romae by Rodolfo Lanciani.



Fig. 3 – The area of the Aventine Hill in the Imperial Age, detail of the model of Rome, made by Italo Gismondi (1937), placed at the Museo della Civiltà Romana in EUR.

Fig. 4 – Étienne Dupercac, Aegidius Sadeler; The Aventine Hill from the Tiber, 1569-1575, engraving.



Fig. 5 – Isaac de Moucheron, called Ordonnance, View of the Tiber, with the Aventine Hill and the Magistral Villa of the Priory, 1694-1697, oli on canvas. Rome, Sovereign Military Order of Malta (JATTA 1998, p. 131).

Fig. 6 – Paolo Anesi (?), View of the Aventine Hill, with the church of Santa Maria del Priorato, first half of the 18th century, oil on canvas. Rome, Sovereign Military Order of Malta (JATTA 1998, p. 135).

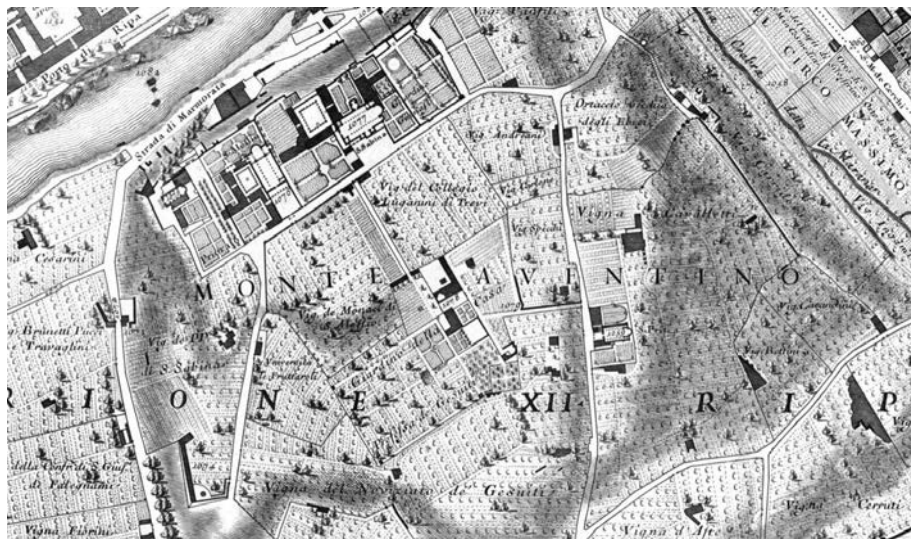


Fig. 7 – The area of the Aventine Hill, detail of the plan by Giovan Battista Nolli, engraving, 1748.

Fig. 8 – Apsidal view of the basilica of Santa Sabina from the Orange garden (photo by Marco Pistolesi).

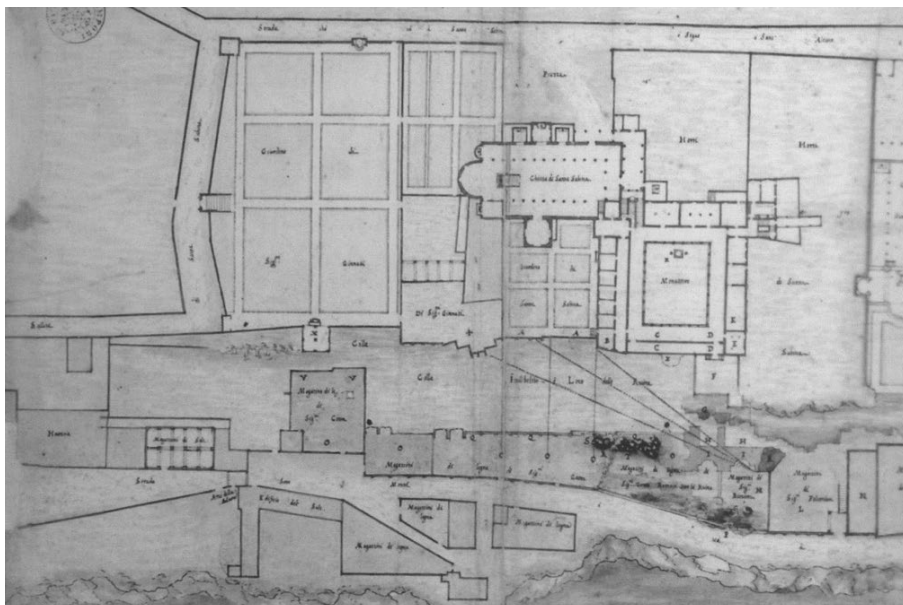


Fig. 9 – Carlo Fontana, *Plan of the Aventine Hill with its buildings*, drawing on paper, 1700 (D'AMELIO 2010, fig. 9, p. 8).

Fig. 10 – Convent of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill in Rome, view of the cloister (from <https://iviaggidiraffaella.blogspot.com/>).

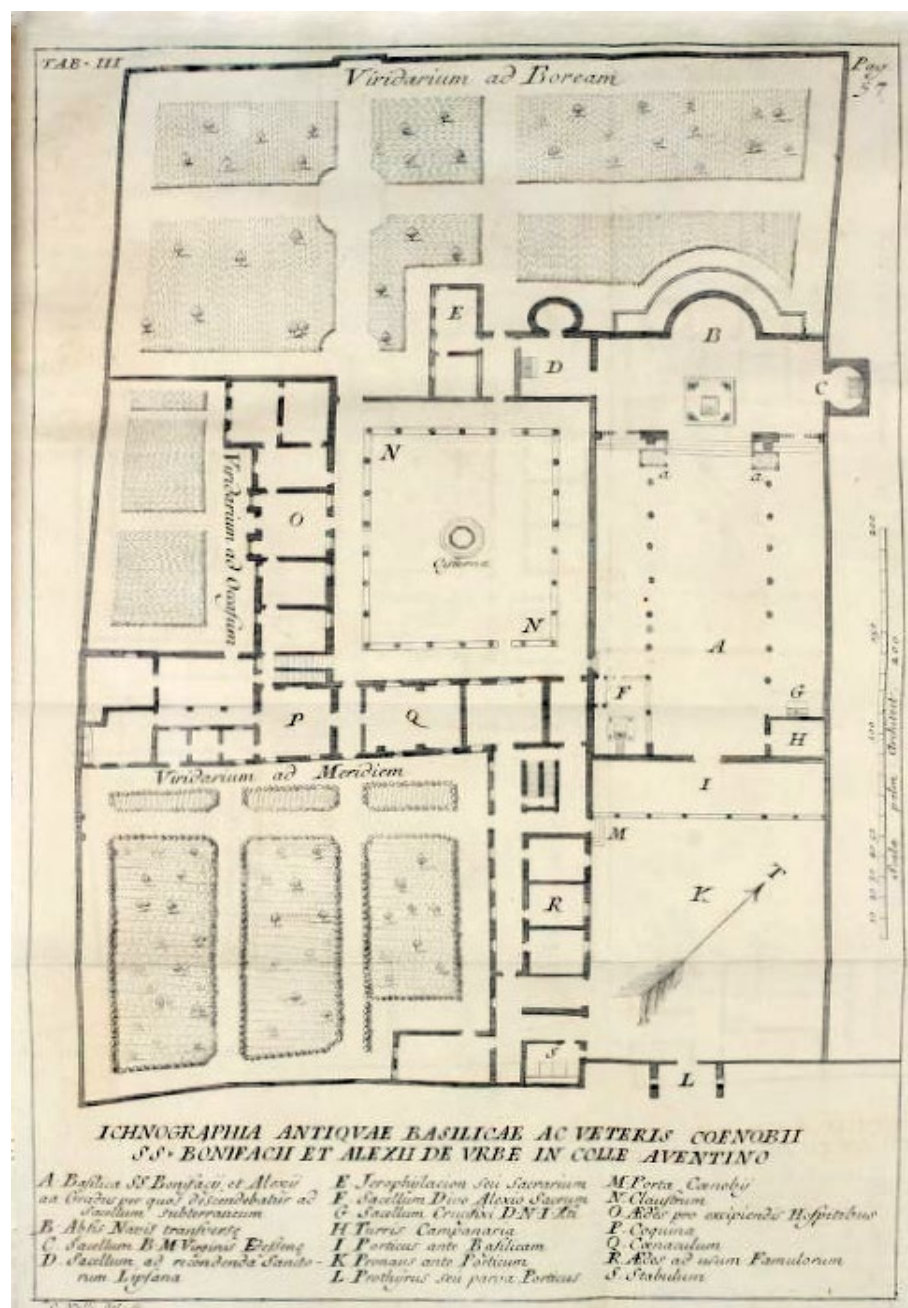


Fig. 11a – Convent and church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, ground floor plan: before the 18th-century renovations by Giovan Battista Nolli and Tommaso De Marchis, engraving (NERINI 1752, tav. III, p. 57).

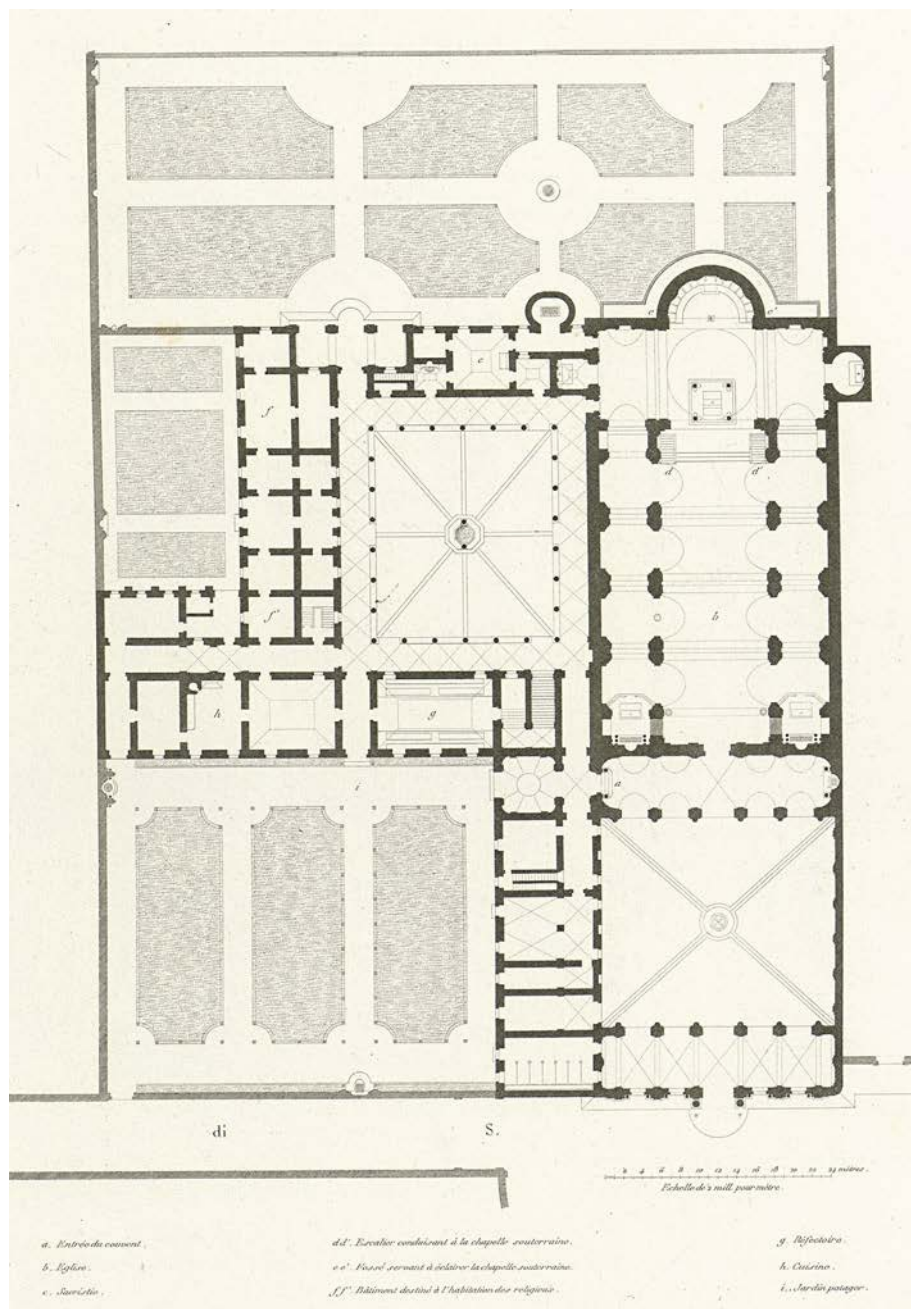


Fig. 11b – Convent and church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, ground floor plan: after the 18th-century renovations by Giovan Battista Nolli and Tommaso De Marchis, engraving (LETAROUILLY 1874, t. 2, pl. 150).

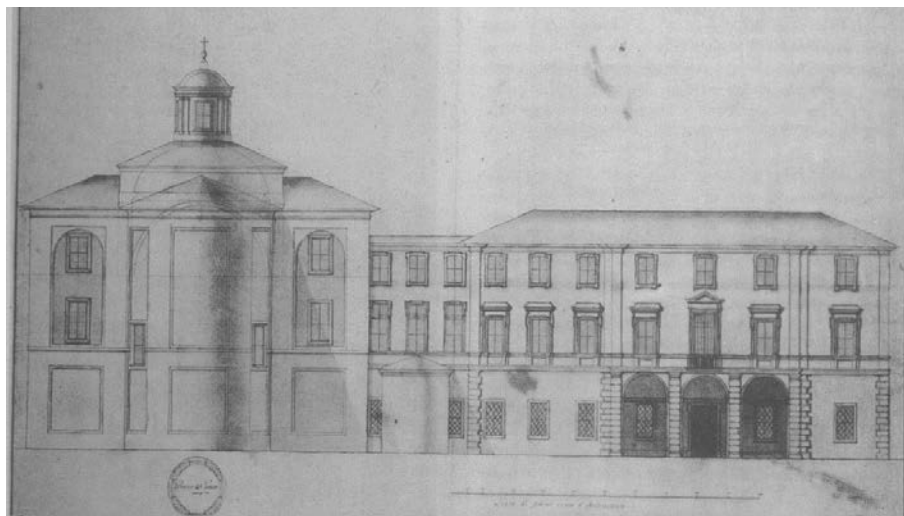


Fig. 12 – Convent and church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, external view before the 18th-century works by Nolli and De Marchis, engraving (NERINI 1752, tav. V, p. 61).

Fig. 13 – Giovan Battista Nolli (attr.), Rear façade of the convent and church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, drawing on paper (BEVILACQUA 2002, fig. 5, p. 106).



Fig. 14 – Convent of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio on the Aventine Hill in Rome, view of the cloister (photo by Marco Pistolesi).



Fig. 15 – Church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio on the Aventine Hill in Rome, internal view of the nave (photo by Marco Pistolesi).

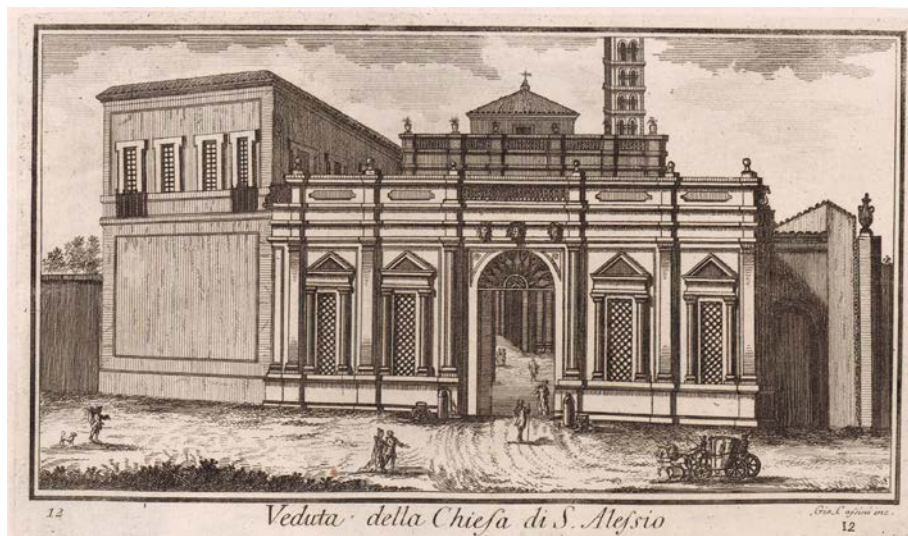


Fig. 16 – Giovanni Maria Cassini, Façade of the church of Santi Bonifacio e Alessio, engraving (CASSINI 1779, tav. 12).

Fig. 17 – The area of the Aventine Hill, Detail of the plan of Rome by Giovan Battista Falda, engraving, 1676.

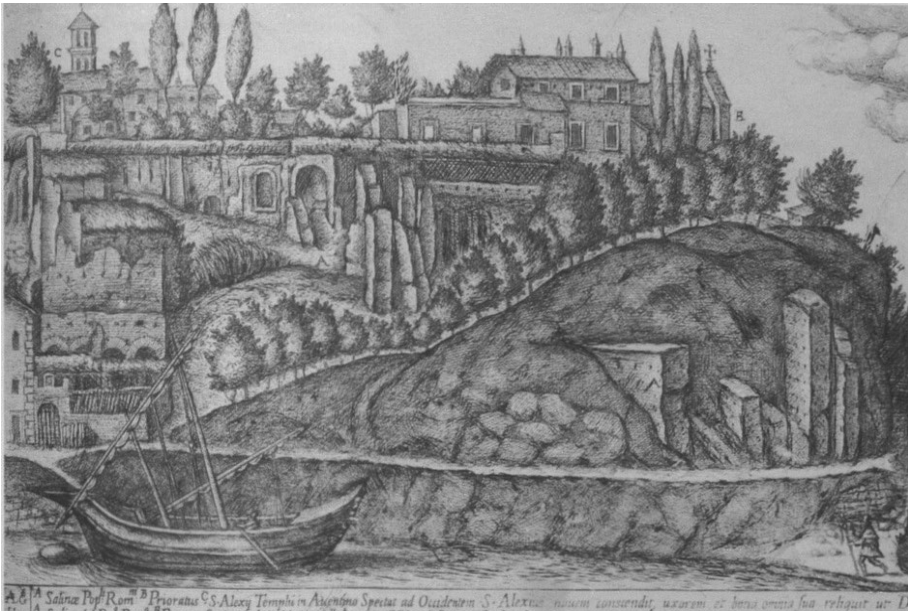
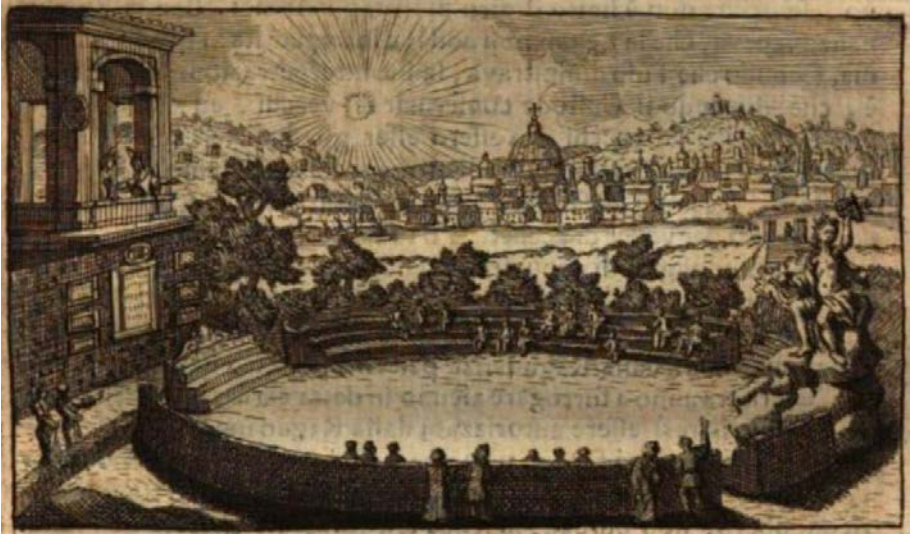


Fig. 18 – Giralmo Odam, The theatre of Arcadia at the Aventine Hill, engraving (CRESCIMBENI 1719, p. 131).

Fig. 19 – Alò Giovannoli, The western end of the Aventine Hill and the Priory of Malta, engraving, 1616.

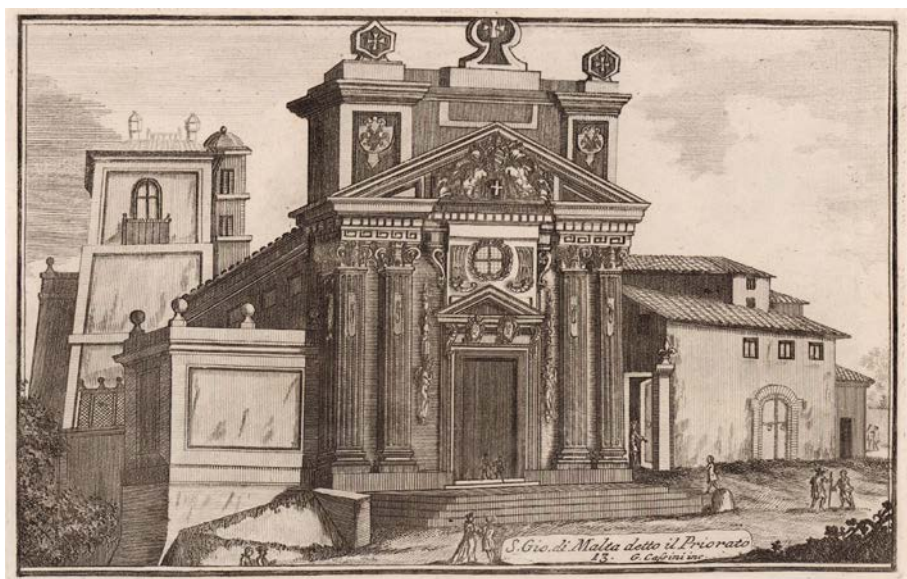
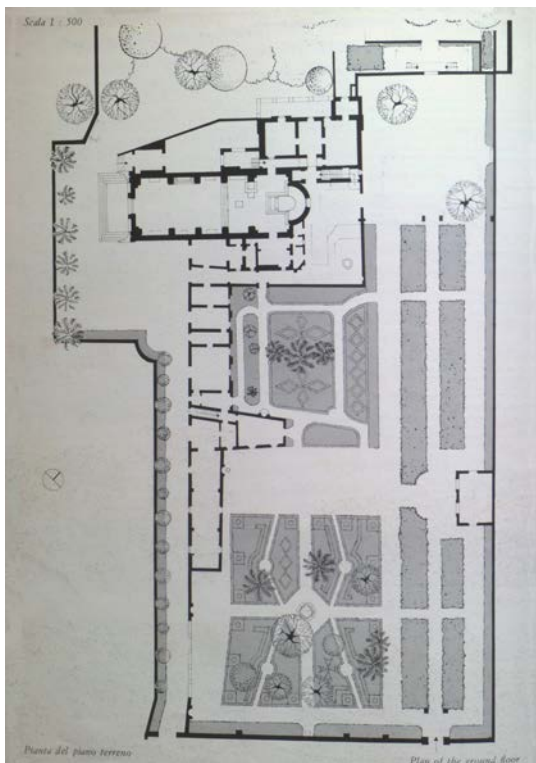


Fig. 20 – The Magistral Villa of the Priory of Malta, Current view from the late 17th-century Italian garden (photo by Patrizio Mario Merge').

Fig. 21 – Piazza del Priorato di Malta and entrance portal to the Magistral Villa in Rome (photo by Marco Pistolesi).

Fig. 22 – Magistral Villa of the
Priory of Malta, plan (BELLI BARSALI
1970, p. 422).

Fig. 23 – Giovanni Maria Cassini,
View of the church of Santa Maria
del Priorato, engraving (CASSINI
1779, tav. 13).



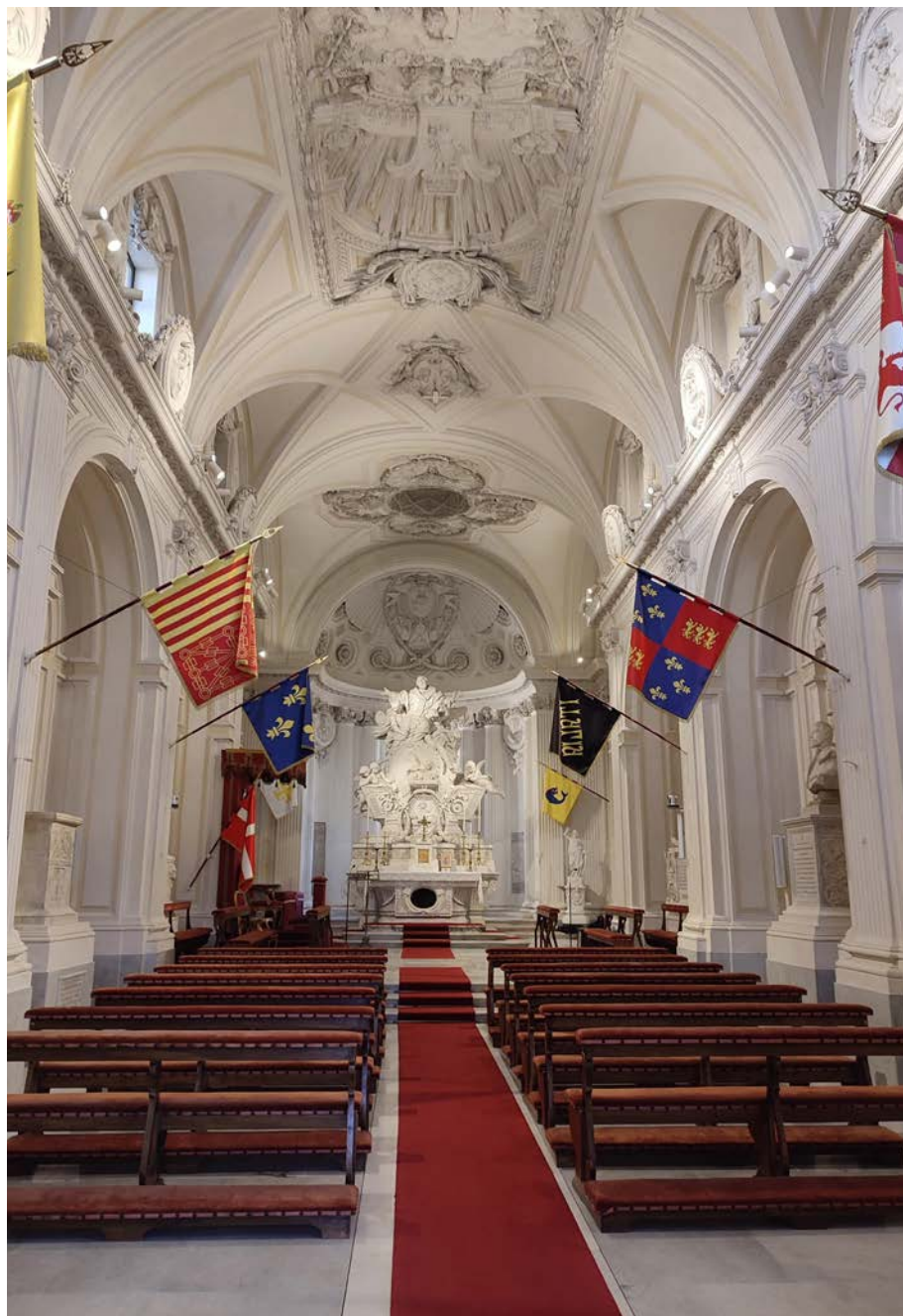


Fig. 24 – Church of Santa Maria del Priorato, interior (photo by Patrizio Mario Merge').