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WHAT ON EARTH IS PALLADIO'S "LE TERME DEI ROMANI"?

When I started this little series on the Baths of Constantine, one of my references (from Wikipedia) was "Palladio, *Le Terme*, pl.XIV". A quick search revealed that this was *Le terme dei Romani disegnate da Andrea Palladio e ripubblicate con la giunta di alcune osservazioni da Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi giusta l'esemplare del lord co. di Burlingtonon impresso in Londra l'anno 1732*, Vicenza: Francesco Modena, 1785; or a reprint thereof.

The 1785 edition can be viewed online [here](#), but not downloaded. This example is a double volume, first in Italian and then in French, with the plates at the end. A version scanned by the Getty – the plates were done badly – may be found at Archive.org [here](#). Some useful notes on the volume are at the Soane Collection [here](#).

But Palladio lived in the 16th century. One web page suggested that his plan of the baths should be dated "after 1570". He certainly wasn't publishing material in 1785. So what on earth was this volume? Was it really Palladio's material?

To add confusion, this volume is also sometimes listed as "volume 5" of *Le fabbriche e i disegni di Andrea Palladio*, as for instance in this 1843 edition at Archive.org [here](#).

So what do we have here?

Palladio based himself in the Venice area, so he did not live in Rome. Instead he made visits at various points in his career to sketch monuments. He produced ground plans, and also reconstructed elevations and sections. The latter are not archaeologically accurate. The buildings were in ruins, and his reconstructions are just that. The plans vary. While many are based on Palladio's own survey of the remains, at least some are based on previous drawings, earlier sources that Palladio studied and copied in the studio.^[1]

Palladio himself worked in three stages. Firstly he sketched the building freehand on the site, with measurements. Secondly the field sketch was transcribed back in the studio to produce a clean copy. Finally this preparatory drawing was translated into a reconstructed plan of the complex. Alterations could take place at each stage, as Palladio studied what he had. Not all of these stages are preserved. The freehand sketch of the Baths of Constantine has not survived, for instance.

The sketches, plans, elevations and sections of the Roman baths were something that Palladio worked on throughout his career, with the intention of publishing. But he never did. A four volume set of works on architecture did appear, the *I Quattro Libri dell'Achitettura* (Venice, 1570). These were translated into English and French, and did much to help those who wanted to build in the classical style. Interestingly he had little influence in Germany; a translation into German only completed two volumes before being abandoned.^[2]

Meanwhile unpublished material by Palladio still circulated. In 1613 architect-to-be Inigo Jones visited Italy for several months, carrying with him a 1601 reprint of Palladio's book. During the tour, he acquired a large number of drawings by Palladio. Some he acquired from Palladio's pupil, Vincenzo Scamozzi, others from Palladio's surviving son Silla.

These passed through a series of hands until they were purchased by Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington in 1721 as part of a purchase of drawings and books for which he paid £170.

But Burlington had already gone to Venice himself in 1719, when he acquired a group of drawings by Palladio from someone. These came, directly or otherwise, from Barnardo Trevisan, who owned the Villa Barbaro at Maser, believed to be the place where Palladio died.

Burlington then pasted these into seventeen albums. When he died in 1753 they passed by marriage into the family of the Dukes of Devonshire. In 1892 the 8th Duke lent them to the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and in 1894 converted that to a gift in trust. Curiously the deed specified that, if the RIBA ceased to exist within 25 years of the death of the last surviving great-grandchild of Queen Victoria, then the drawings should revert to the Devonshire family. The last descendant, born in 1916, turned out to be Count Carl Johan Bernadotte, Count of Wisborg, who died in 2012.

A few drawings were overlooked and still remain at Chatsworth. Another drawing from the Inigo Jones set, which Burlington accidentally did not purchase, has been in the library of Westminster Abbey since 1939. The Burlington volume are held by the RIBA, who number the drawings using a Roman number for the volume and an Arabic number for the drawing within that volume. I was unable to find a list of the drawings with their numbers, however.^[3]

Burlington did more than just collect the drawings. He published them. The volume bears the title, *Fabbriche antiche, diseguate da Andrea Palladio Vicentino; e date in luce da Riccardo Conte' di Burlington* (London, 1730), with an Italian preface by his lordship. An excellent scanned copy can be downloaded in PDF from the ETH-Bibliothek in Switzerland [here](#).^[4] The Baths of Constantine are on p.41-42 of the PDF.

The volume bears the date 1730, but it is unclear when it actually appeared, or how many copies were produced. The Soane Collection suggest that it was privately printed in 1735 and copies from a print run of 20-100 copies were given as gifts by Lord Burlington.^[5]

What the volume did NOT contain were any notes by Palladio, any explanation of the items, any key to the letters that Palladio had placed on the drawings. These seem to be lost.

The next stage of the creation of *Le Terme* was taken by a Scottish adventurer and occasional charlatan named Charles Cameron. In 1772 he self-published a handsome volume entitled *The baths of the Romans explained and illustrated. With the restorations of Palladio corrected and improved. To which is prefixed, an introductory preface, pointing out the nature of the work. And a dissertation upon the state of the arts during the different periods of the Roman empire*. This may be found at Archive.org [here](#). This reprinted only 25 of the plates of Lord Burlington's volume, as well as much other material, and added text in English and French, giving a key for Palladio's annotations.^[6] The volume was not a commercial success, but it did establish Cameron's reputation as an architect - he had been refused admittance to the Architects Club in London because of his dodgy financial dealings -, and he ended up building perfectly good, if cold, Palladian buildings in the colder Russian climate for Catherine the Great.

During the same period, between 1776-1783, an Italian neo-Palladian named Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi - he took the last name as a condition of a legacy left by Palladio's pupil of

that name – was issuing a “rationalised” version of Palladio in four volumes.^[1] It was he who created the “fifth volume”, our book *Le Terme*, in 1785. He seems to have used Burlington’s book for the plates – the elevations are printed the same way round. He refers a lot to “Signor Chameron”, gives the French title of his book, and Bertotti Scammozzi’s key to the plan of the Baths of Constantine is a translation of Cameron’s.

And there we have it. Bertotti’s 1785 book is where we started, with its curious title, and its curious contents. The plates are indeed from Palladio; the text is guesswork two centuries later.

There is one further question that I came across, while reading, which I will mention here. How accurate are Palladio’s drawings?

The study by La Follette that I have footnoted already states that his measurements are very accurate. But there is an interesting article at the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art which discussed ways in which Palladio’s drawings fell short. Calder Loth, “Can we Trust Palladio? Antoine Desgodetz Details Palladio’s Inaccuracies”, [here](#), details the way in which a subsequent architect, Antoine Desgodetz, demonstrated that not all of Palladio’s drawings of column capitals were exact – in some cases he gave a standard form while the monument itself deviated from the norm. Loth suggests that perhaps the use of assistants is to blame, and ends up by recommending the use of Desgodetz instead. I did come across an article somewhere which recounts that similar criticism was levelled at Desgodetz by those who came after! But I think we can leave that question to others.

1. ^[1]For this and much else I am indebted to Laetitia La Follette, “A contribution of Andrea Palladio to the study of Roman thermae”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52 (1993), 189-198. [JSTOR](#).↵

2. ^[2]Many more details of editions and translations and adaptations may be found in Deborah Howard, “Four centuries of literature on Palladio”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39 (1980), 224-241.↵

3. ^[3]These details I owe to the fascinating preface, “Provenance of the Palladio drawings in the British Architectural Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects” in Charles Hind & Irena Murray (ed.), *Palladio and His Legacy: A Transatlantic Journey*, an English translation from the Italian (2010), ISBN 978-88-317-0652. Parts online [here](#).↵

4. ^[4]I only came across this copy while writing this very article. The scanned copy accessible to me earlier, which has a letter at the front, is at the Hathi site [here](#). Sadly that scan comes from the Getty and once again the plates have been done badly.↵

5. ^[5]See notes to the Soane Collection copy of the 1730 volume [here](#).↵

6. ^[6]See the Soane collection’s notes on its copy of Cameron [here](#).↵

7. ^[7]See Howard, “Four centuries”, 231.↵
