

## Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and La Scarzuola

PIETER BOOGAART

[This article was published in *FOLLIES* magazine #67;16-19 (summer 2007). With the publication of Journal 16 we arranged to make this article digitally available on the Folly Fellowship website, as promised on page 51. We revisited La Scarzuola in the company of a group of Folly Fellowship members on an outing in September 2014. Now we can make minor adjustments [in brackets] and illustrate Pieter's original article with many new pictures. At the end we will add the lines about La Scarzuola in Journal 16, page 84-85, and Peter Godfrey's lines about the 2014 visit in *FOLLIES* magazine #90;10 (Spring 2015). All photographs by us unless otherwise stated.]

## Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and La Scarzuola

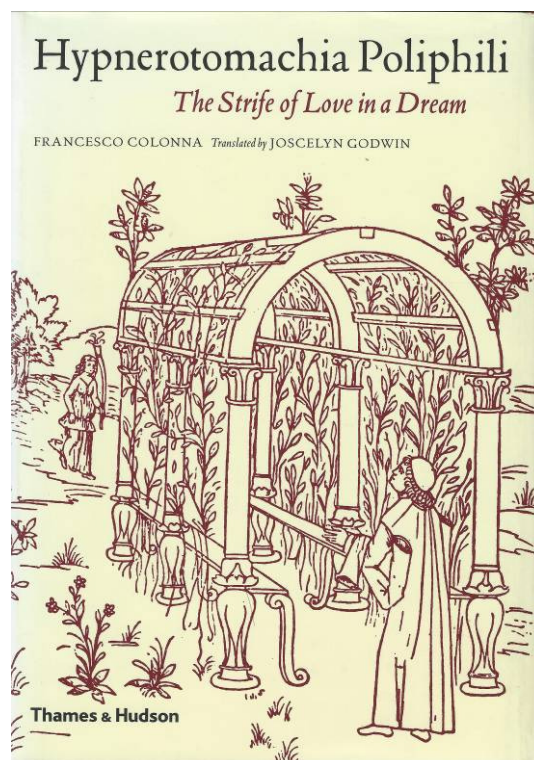
PIETER BOOGAART

### Hypnerotomachia

The book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* was written by the Italian friar (of questionable reputation) Francesco Colonna in 1499 and published in an English translation by Joscelyn Godwin 1999. Rita and I bought the new and slightly smaller version, but with all the woodcuts and the original layout of the pages, published by Thames and Hudson in 2003. We had come across this elaborate title several times because so many garden designs seemed to have been inspired by the contents of this book. Bomarzo for one, La Scarzuola for another. Maybe you don't know the latter that well, but that will be better after reading this article, hopefully. Over the centuries the book had also inspired individual architects. To mention just one remarkable example: Thomas Willson got his idea for a huge pyramid from its pages – its base was supposed to cover eighteen acres and the whole pyramid to hold five million bodies on the General Metropolitan Cemetery in London (in 1831). And then it had an obelisk on top of that, as on page 26 of the book. Can you imagine it? Have you seen it? It wasn't built in the end.

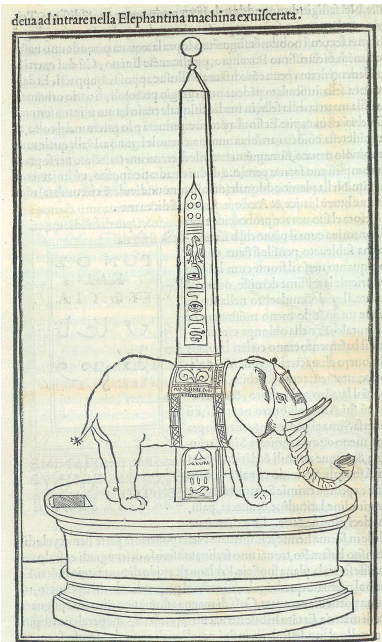
So we bought the book and we have had it in the house for a few years now. Rita wanted to read it first together with Ludovico Ariosto's novel *Orlando Furioso*, which had also been inspirational for gardens, or so we were told by several sources. Then after reading these two books Rita was to write an article about La Scarzuola. I didn't like to interrupt her preparation by starting on them myself. But the reading proved to be slow work and the article was delayed several times because she was so busy. I sometimes had a look at the book *Hypnerotomachia*, however. That's how it goes when a book looks not only old, but fascinating as well: I can't leave it alone. The title too had its own irresistible lure. Three Greek words are the source: hypnos (sleep), eros (love) and mache (contest) of the first part, and Poliphilo is a name, meaning either a lover of Polia or a lover of many. Indeed he loves the maiden Polia and many other things too, such as gardens and architecture, but also music, fabrics, fine metalwork and antiquity. So the title means: a dream of love's struggle, dreamt by Poliphilo, or as it says on the book: The Strife of Love in a Dream.

Meanwhile I have had a much closer look at *Hypnerotomachia*. Through the centuries it has always been regarded as a somewhat erotic romance. Well now, I must say at the outset that it isn't pornographic at all. Disappointing perhaps, but that's how it is. Having said that, the fantasies of the main character are full of scantily clad nymphs, satyrs and little nude spirits or putti in paradisisally lush gardens in the midst of art objects and interesting architecture, where they eat exotic fruit and ride animals sometimes. The copious illustrations late medieval rather than early Renaissance. The characters are dressed more often than not, as they stroll in their bowers or read texts on gravestones or strut in festive processions. It is a book full of lengthy descriptions of flora and fauna and you need to be retired perhaps to fully appreciate it at leisure.



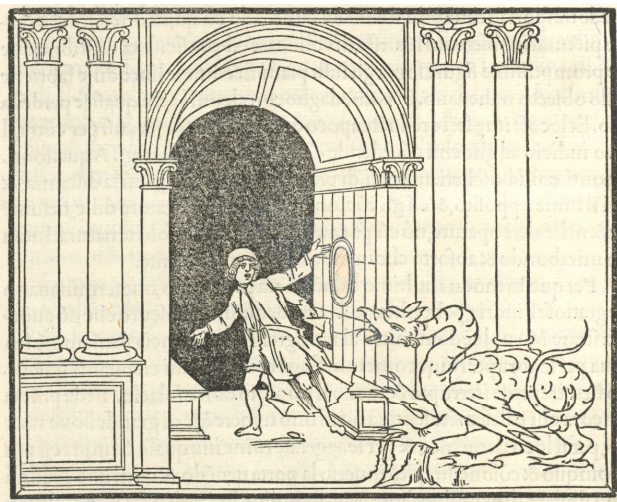
Our copy of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*



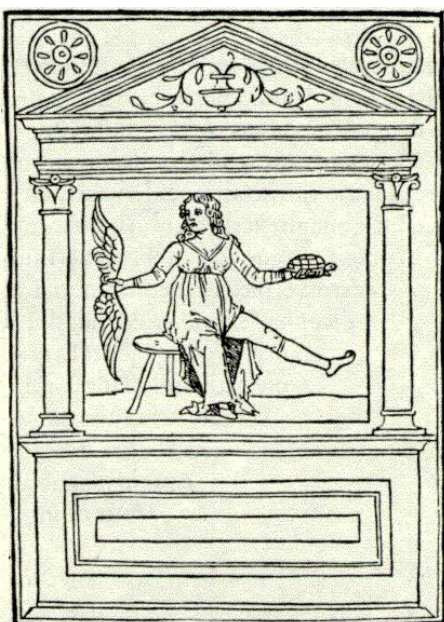


Left: Elephant in Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Right: Elephant and Castle at Bomarzo

Below left: Dragon in Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (WKR 3.5.4, Houghton Library, Harvard University), Right: Dragon at Bomarzo



Below left: Woman with turtle (Festina Lente: “make haste slowly” or “more haste, less speed”) in Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. Right: Turtle with woman (Victory) at Bomarzo



But this is on the surface. Underneath it all *Hypnerotomachia* is as full of symbolism, metaphorical and allegorical allusions and illusions as you might wish – or more probably not. You have to be a bit of an enthusiast to delight in that sort of thing. And saying something like this is much like stating *Die Zauberflöte* is a Masonic work. Immediately people start interpreting things or looking for

clues, not only regarding the music as such, but also the costumes, the stage-sets and all the mythical background to it. Ambiguity reigns more often than not. I am saying this to point out that architects and garden designers can easily say that they have been inspired by *Hypnerotomachia* (which is a big book of 474 pages), but it is not always easy to recognise elements of the source of inspiration when walking around in a garden or studying a building.

In the garden created by Vicino Orsini at Bomarzo references to *Hypnerotomachia* are not difficult to find at all. The elephant with castle tower instead of an obelisk (on page 38), the dragon (on 62), the turtle with woman or the woman with turtle (on 133),





Above left: Pegasus in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, right: at Bomarzo  
Below: Echidna in the Sacred Wood at Bomarzo, right in woodcut



Pegasus (on 168) and even the architectural remnant (on 246) in *Hypnerotomachia* have all found a place in Bomarzo, it might be said. Especially the siren Echidna, with her legs splayed sideways (on page 206), is a copy of the one in the book. But less literally speaking the idea of travelling round in the world past beautiful or remarkable places must have inspired both Colonna and Orsini. It is the stuff of myths and legends that lies at the root. Otherwise *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is an extraordinary



and precious book that in contrast to many writers of the day mentions hundreds of plants and flowers by name instead of saying, like Boccaccio, 'a thousand different flowers'. That is why it is important for the history of garden descriptions and for architecture. It must have greatly influenced the furthering of Renaissance ideas.

[In 2018 we can add that *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is still very much an inspiration and an object of study, as one can find on the WorldWideWeb. Several novels are reportedly inspired by the story, and in some books the main character studies or writes about *Hypnerotomachia*.

The most interesting project with full focus on the subject matter I have found is by Esteban Alejandro Cruz. According to his own website (<http://1499.blogspot.nl/>) Cruz has a degree in Architecture in California, with post-graduate studies in Venice. His fascination with *Hypnerotomachia* dates from 1995, before his graduation. Using his architectural skills and modern techniques he produced no fewer than three volumes of Artist Reconstructions of Monuments and Landscapes described by Poliphilus during his Journey through Antiquity under the title: *An Architectural Vision from the First Renaissance* (2006, 2012). His research is still going on. In his design-study project *Formas Imaginisque Poliphili* he aims to understand the whole text and the woodcuts and all their implications so thoroughly that he can explain them in colour and in three dimensions.]



## La Scarzuola

La Scarzuola is the name of a convent in a mountainous area in Italy. Saint Francis of Assisi himself founded it in the year 1218 near Montegabbione, in Umbria, north of Rome. Its tongue-twisting name is derived from the marsh plant scarza (not that this piece of information is any help – the stress is on the o). In 1956 the complex was bought by a highly successful architect from Milan, Tomaso Buzzi (1900-1981). Between 1958 and 1978 he planned and built there his own ideal city, in the shape of seven theatres. Now that is a very bizarre thing to do. Where did he get his ideas? From *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, he himself said. He wanted to create a symbiosis of architecture and nature, just as in the book.



Buzzi's Scarzuola was built beside the convent (1) as a profane city, Città Buzziana, next to a Sacred City. We had made an appointment for a visit as reporters for this magazine and were personally guided round by Brian Pentland, who took his time for us. He had come from Australia about 18 years ago and made friends with Marco Solari, Buzzi's nephew, heir and present owner of La Scarzuola. Brian restores embroidery for the convent beautifully (he showed us the whole collection), makes models for the restorers of the buildings and is the guide. The Città Buzziana is being rebuilt at the moment, for Tomaso Buzzi was a man full of ideas but an incredibly sloppy builder. After his death it appeared that few of the buildings had foundations and would by now have collapsed if restorations hadn't been started.



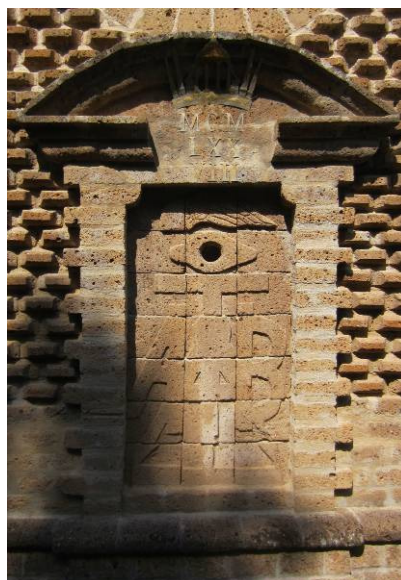
I could not find any map of the place, so Rita sketched one herself with the help of Google Earth, our 2014 notes and our photographs. The red numbers correspond with numbers in the text.

- 1 Convent
- 2 Golden Boat
- 3 Grand or Classical Theatre
- 4 The Acropolis
- 5 Theatre of Bees (La Scala)
- 6 Crystal Tower or Glass Pyramid Tower
- 7 Tower of Babel
- 8 Cypress Theatre or Temple of Jupiter
- 9 Angel Tower or Clock Tower
- 10 Jonah's Whale
- 11 Herbal Theatre
- 12 Water Theatre
- 13 Theatre of Purification or Mirrors
- 14 Tower of Solitude or Meditation (Desert de Retz)
- 15 Bees Gate
- 16 Temple of Flora and Pomona
- 17 Step Pyramid of Echo
- 18 Triangular Tower
- 19 Giantess



What else can we say about the creator of La Scarzuola? He worked as a designer of glass, ceramics, embroidery and furniture and wrote a cookery book when he was young. His architectural work was generally considered eccentric and aristocratic – he called himself the ‘prince of architects’. He was vain and tyrannical, a disagreeable man. He forbade his sisters to marry outside the nobility, so they stayed single. He was an arrogant man to the point of being a pain in the Buzzi. But he had wonderful ideas about the heaping together of monsters, monuments and buildings, the profane and the sacred, the symbolic and the secret, disproportionate, surrealistic, evocative, magical. And everything with the lovely scenery of Umbria in the background. He was quite a man (for his 5'3").

What strikes the unsuspecting visitor immediately is the scale of La Scarzuola and the weirdness of the idea to build seven theatres. A whole complex of seven theatres, imagine that. It is the folly of follies. But he started only after having had a whole career and must have realised that he didn't have all the time in the world. Hence perhaps the sloppiness in the building process. Most of what you see and recognise as individual buildings are disproportionate and empty. The Scala opera of Milan, the Parthenon in Athens and the Ruined Column in Désert de Retz for instance are all smaller than their actual sizes on mutually unrelated scales, more primitive and empty shells. They are only suggestions of their originals. The theatres are hardly real theatres. Only the main amphitheatre (3) can be used as such, or else one can improvise. There was no running water or electricity; it was built for Buzzi's personal amusement only, hence the poor quality of the building, probably. But an ideal city consisting of ‘una macchina teatrale’, a theatrical machine, of seven theatres! I can't get over it. The folly of follies.



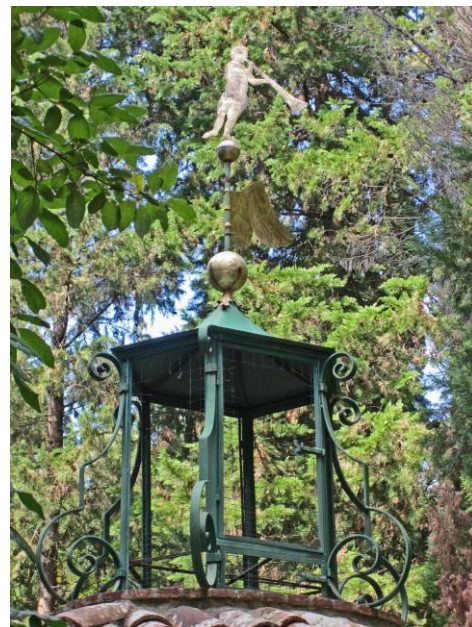
Back to the Città Buzziiana with our guide Brian. He begins by pointing out symbolism with Buzzi's name, and Masonic emblems of which there are quite a few dotted round (for instance suns and stars with rays, compasses, wings, pyramids, couples of columns, bees [in this case also referring to the buzzing, alluding to Buzzi's name] and all-seeing eyes are all favourite Masonic symbols). And lots of initials ATB, Architetto Thomaso Buzzi.

Symbols and Buzzo's initials are all over the place. Pics 2014.





Left: the Golden Boat  
Right: its lantern with the wing and trumpeting angel, modelled after a woodcut on page 81 of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Pics 2014.



And there is more before we come to the theatres proper. In the wood a boat made of stone carrying a greyish pavilion, the Golden Boat (2), reminiscent of the boat of the souls, a symbol of the Divine City, we are told. The roof of the pavilion later appears to sport a curious weather-vane (a wing and a trumpeting angel) on a sort

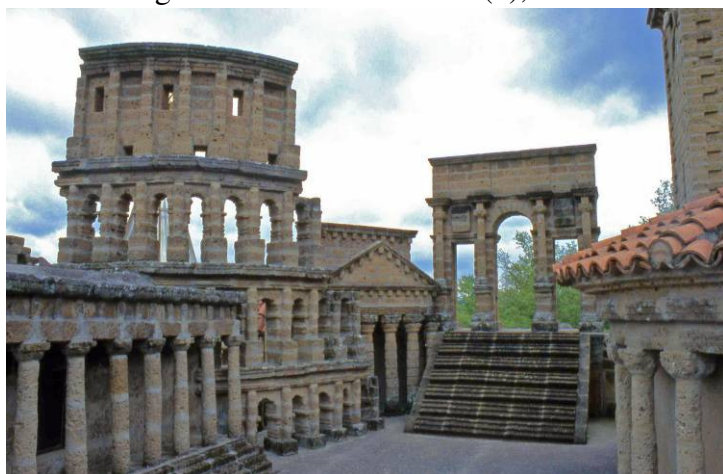
of lantern. You see my difficulty? It cannot very well be clear to you what we saw exactly without using five hundred more words and it is easy to say things like: this is reminiscent of that. A Golden Boat that's made of stone stands for the boat of souls, a symbol of the Divine City. A tenuous connection and highly ambiguous, to say the least. *Die Zauberflöte* is a Masonic opera. I must try and avoid these references and you will have to believe that the place abounds with them and their openness to various interpretations. So I won't mention *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* again. Things are complicated enough as they are.



We come to the Grand Theatre (or Classical Theatre) (3) and descend between two round towers with a black sun and a black moon painted on their viewing



platforms. Central on the actual stage is Buzzi's Third Eye or All-seeing Eye. Up on the left-hand side behind the stage is the Theatre of Bees (5), which looks like the Scala building in Milan, and up on the right



is the Acropolis (4). This is a veritable mountain of buildings. There are various bits of Italian architecture in the Renaissance and Baroque styles below, and the classical Colosseum on top with a Pantheon, a Vesta Temple, a Parthenon, a Triumphal Arch and a (square!) Tower of the Winds besides, all in bricks and tufa stone, and with steps leading everywhere in between. Towers and arches are everywhere too. It's perhaps best to say that it is sheer poetry in stone and brick.

Middle: Grand Theatre and Theatre of the Bees, 2014.  
Bottom left: detail of Acropolis, 2004.





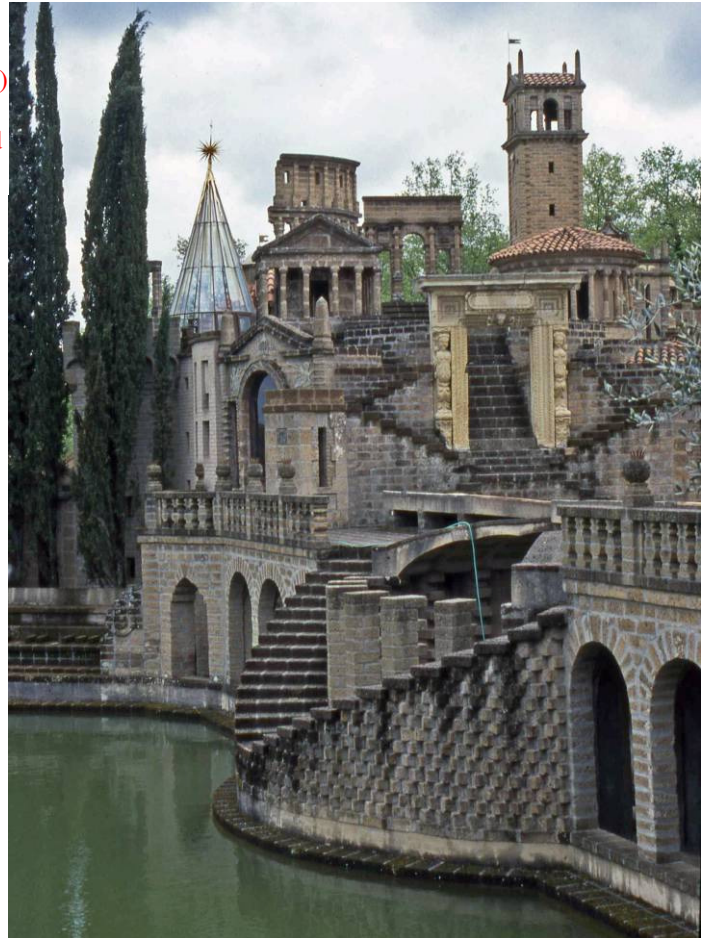
Top left: backside Acropolis, 2014, by Peter Godfrey.

Top right: platform with sun, and Acropolis, 2004.

Right: Acropolis with Gate of Heaven and Crystal Tower (left) from Water Theatre side, 2004

Below: Tower of Babel from forecourt, and through decorated gateway in Cypress Theatre (dead Cypress at right), 2014

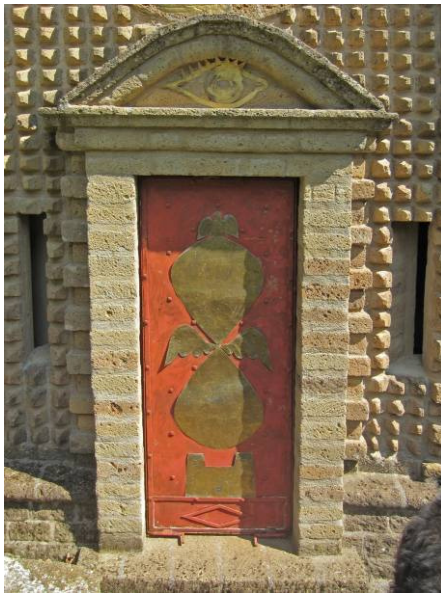
But there is glass as well. The Crystal Tower or Glass Pyramid Tower (6), with the three-dimensional multi-pointed star on top, was meant as a library. Bookshelves follow the steps of the Musical Staircase of the Seven Octaves. It is enveloped by the open Tower of Babel (7) that contains some of the finest and boldest brick-laying I have ever seen. You can get the best view of it perhaps from the decorated gateway inside the Cypress Theatre round the back. There are Piranesian dungeons below, so that if one goes up the steps one ascends from darkness to the lighter and brighter spheres with the buildings on top. If you can't follow all this, I won't blame you. I can hardly follow it my-self. It's endlessly impressive.







Brian takes us to a quieter area, or rather to the grassy slopes round the back of the Acropolis. We study the Angel Tower, or Clock Tower (9) with its huge clock-face and sundial round the side. And on we walk to Jonah's Whale. To the left is the Temple of Jupiter or Cypress Theatre (8), a round, roofless temple with a dead cypress



(descending from the time of St Francis, struck by lightning in 1970) in the middle, the Tree of Memory behind the Wall of Memory.

- Top left: Angel Tower or Clock Tower, 2014, by Peter Godfrey.
- Above right: Temple of Jupiter or Cypress Theatre from Herbal Theatre, 2014.
- Left: door of Clock Tower, 2014
- Bottom left: Intricate hidden entrance into Cypress Theatre 2014
- Bottom right: Cypress Theatre from Herbal Theatre, 2014







Top left: Mouth of Jonah's Whale, 2014.

Top right: Herbal Theatre, 2004

Middle: Water Theatre with Gate of Heaven, Theatre of Purification or Mirrors (behind the steps), and Theatre of the Bees, 2014

Bottom left: Water Theatre, 2014

Bottom right: Interior of Theatre of Mirrors, 2014

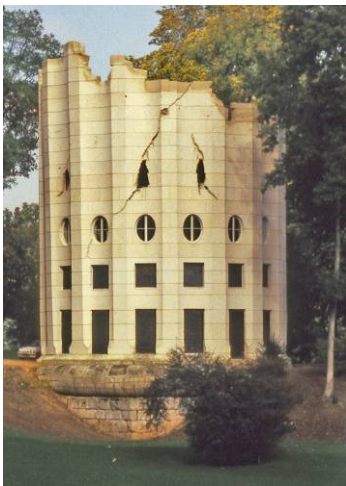
We stroll through the mouth of Jonah's Whale (10) and take the paved path between the rows of half-columns. Left of us is the big expanse of grass that is called Herbal Theatre (11). It borders on the Water Theatre (12) beyond, which reflects the Acropolis and a series of arches below the Scala building with the Theatre of Purification or Mirrors (13) in the middle. Behind it is the Gate of Heaven, which comes from the palace of Diocletian in Split on the Dalmatian coast. But we are now among the main theatres again.







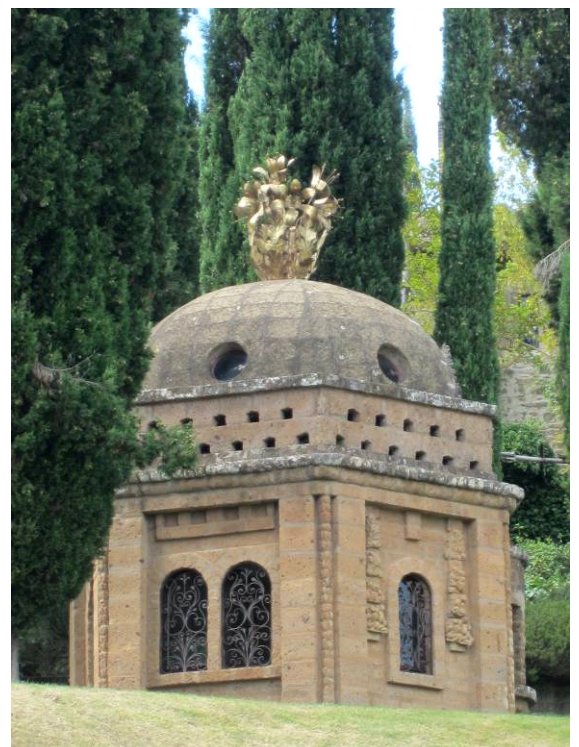
Back to the quiet area. We come to the Tower of Meditation or Tower of Solitude (14). This was built in admiration for



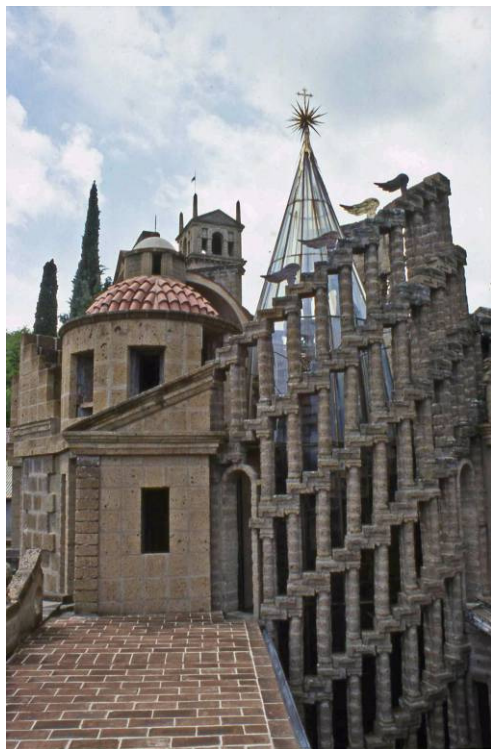
Top left: Tower of Solitude or Meditation, 2004.  
Top right: Herbal Theatre, 2004  
Left: Ruined Column, Desert de Retz, France  
Right: Bees Gate, 2014.  
Bottom left: Step Pyramid of the Nymph Echo, 2014.  
Bottom right: Temple of Flora and Pomona, 2014.



and imitation of the Ruined Column of Désert de Retz, but it is just a shell. A row of columns leads us back past the Bees Gate (15) in the direction of the main cluster of buildings and the little Temple of Flora and Pomona (16), an octagonal domed pavilion. It is next to the Step Pyramid of the Nymph Echo (17), which is not a real pyramid but the beginning of one. And we can well imagine that there is an echo here. It echoes in our heads by this time. We are dazed, stunned. And we stammer goodbye to our guide Brian.







Top left: Tower of Babel from roof forecourt, 2004  
 Top right: Acropolis from Grand Theatre, 2004  
 Right: Water and Herbal Theatre, 2014  
 Below: entrance to Piranesian dungeons 2014



La Scarzuola is an experience. After we had been there we tried to find books about it, or at least magazine articles. There were some. There is for example a book by Marco Nicoletti with about 20 pages about the place. It is called *Costruzioni Animate*, and subtitled *Sacro, fantastico e demoniaco nell' architettura della casa*, which sounds just the ticket for folly-lovers. But it is very personal, non-committal and name-droppingly confusing and I am sure this is nothing to do with my command of the language.

I have read a few other articles in Italian and a few in Dutch), but they were equally slapdash and inaccurate. (Plus one excellent and fun one in the Newsletter of the DonderbergGroep by fellow FF member Joop van der Vaart.) La Scarzuola deserves more and better attention than it has got so far in Britain.

You might call it a dreamscape or an esoteric Disneyland if that wouldn't carry the wrong sort of connotations. It is a grandiose experiment in architecture that took twenty years to build and immediately needed restoring. It is a huge, almost unimaginable folly.

Literature:

*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, The Strife of Love in a Dream*, by Francesco Colonna, translated by Joscelyn Godwin (London, Thames and Hudson, 2003).

*Orlando Furioso*, by Ludovico Ariosto (Oxford University Press 1998).

*Tomaso Buzzì, Lettere, pensieri, appunti 1937-1979* (Milano 2000).

*Costruzioni Animate, Sacro, fantastico e demoniaco nell' architettura della casa*, by Marco Nicoletti (Perugia: Edizioni Era Nuova, 2000).



[2018 additions to Pieter Boogaart's 2007 article]

The *Follies Journal* 16, *Facets of Continental Europe, Follywise*. From *Explorations in Italy*, page 84-85:  
*Umbria*

### Montegabbione: La Scarzuola

The cover of F66 and Pieter's extensive article *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and La Scarzuola* on F67;16-19 give a decent picture of **Tomaso Buzzi's** dream to create a symbiosis of architecture and nature, in the form of seven open air theatres, between 1958 and 1978. We don't need to repeat it here. But we have to add that on our second visit not only were the original



features like the architectural samples as stage backdrop, the Tower of Solitude (model Desert de Retz Ruined Column) and the Tower of Babel/Crystal Tower stabilized and restored, but more Buzzi designs had been executed in the meantime: a Triangular Tower (18) and the **Giantess** (19) or Great Mother Earth between gigantic architectural details round the corner

of the Tower of Time. The two Monster Heads, a horned one opposite the stage of the Grand Theatre and an open Jonah's Whale mouth as entrance to the walk up to the tower of Solitude, were more striking on account of the cleaning work. It was not for nothing that the Italian weekend excursion (September 2014) of the richer or luckier FF members included this site. We were duely overwhelmed.

Top: view with new Triangular Tower, 2014

Middle: Triangular Tower and detail door with floral TB initials, 2014

Right: Giantess between architectural details, 2014





## The Folly Fellowship goes to Italy

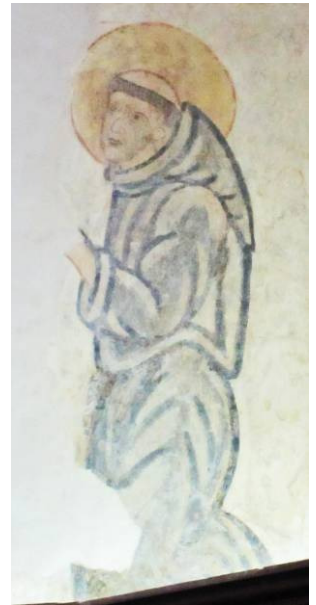
PETER GODFREY

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On Saturday morning [6-9-2014] we went to **La Scarzuola**. Set in remote country well off the beaten track down a long dirt road, this was the work of a Milanese architect Tomaso Buzzi (1900 -1981). Buzzi described it as a 'theatrical complex'. Others have described it as: 'two sacred and profane 'cities'', a vast architectural allegory for the physical and existential journey through life', and: 'a trip down a rabbit hole, transporting visitors from the bucolic hills on the Tuscan-Umbrian border to a parallel universe'. Pieter



and Rita had visited some years before and Pieter's essay in *Follies* #67, 'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and La Scarzuola' is an excellent description of the place, its maker, and the philosophy behind his creation, and I would strongly advise you to look it up. We were shown round by Brian Pentland who has lived there for 20 years and, together with the owner, Marco Solari, has worked to maintain the buildings, for Buzzi's contractors didn't always use the best materials or proper foundations).



We began in the 'sacred city'. The site was originally a convent founded by St Francis in 1218 and long since abandoned – Buzzi himself had used the church as a store. Brian and Mario have restored the church to an amazing baroque confection, in the process rescuing original wall paintings, including one thought to be a portrait of St Francis done during his lifetime. From there



Above left: Saint Mary, restored and dressed in 2014 by Brian Pentland  
Above right: Probably 13thC fresco of Saint Francis, partly hidden by wainscot  
Left: the tasting of the waters, 2014, photo Peter Godfrey  
Below right: Brian guiding us into the Grand Theatre, 2014

we walked through the gardens accompanied by the sound of trickling water, and drank from the local spring some of the most delicious water I have ever tasted.

The first view of the 'profane' city is astonishing, looking down from the top of the site across the 'Grand Theatre', an open-air theatre based on Greek and Roman models. As Pieter writes: 'what strikes the unsuspecting visitor immediately is the scale







Above: listening to Brian in the Grand Theatre, 2014

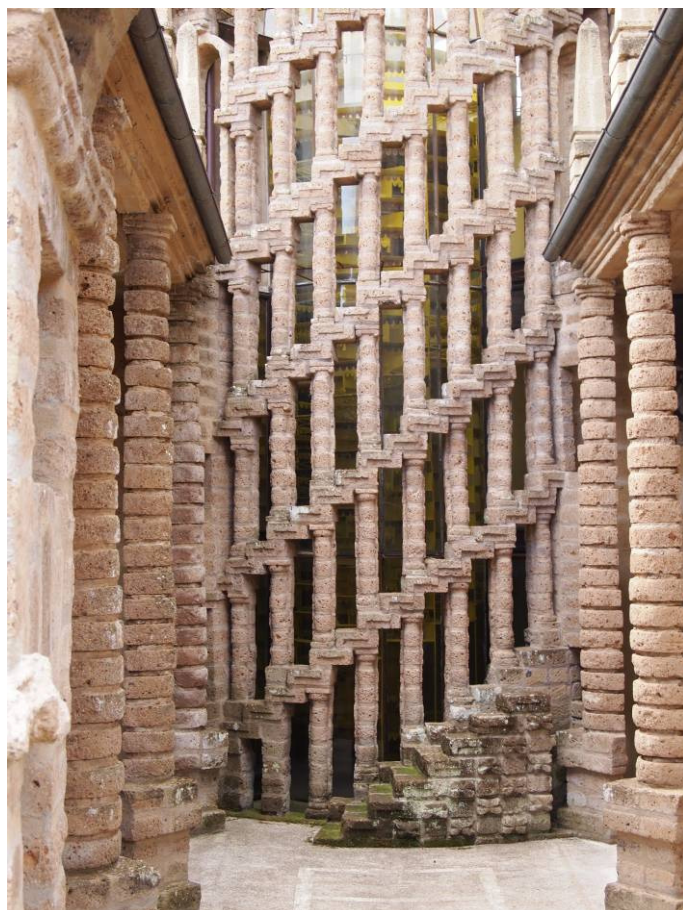
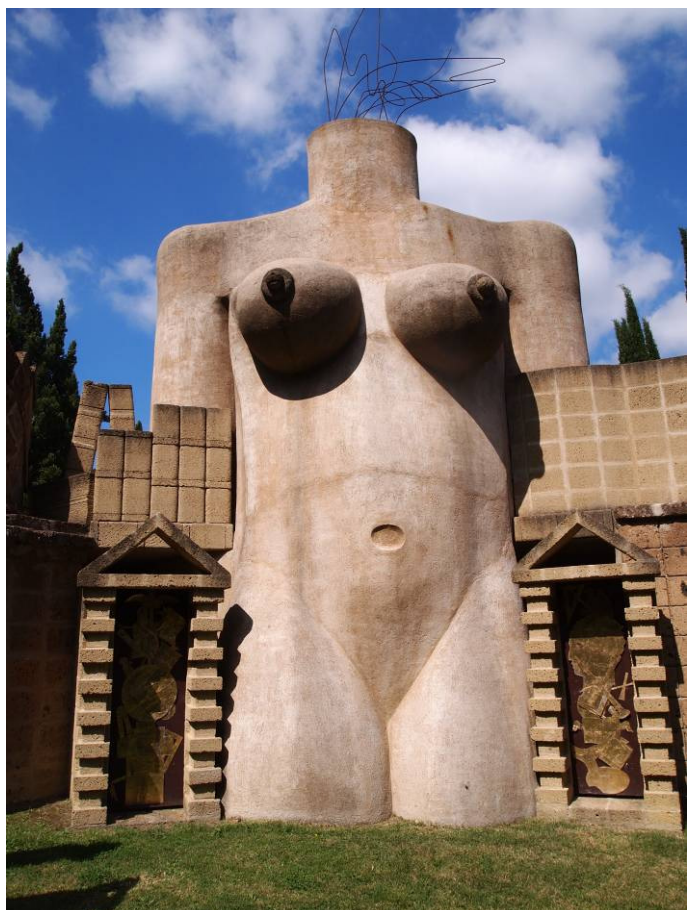
Below left: the Giantess

Below right: the Tower of Babel from forecourt, with just visible the musical stairs of the Crystal Tower behind it

These three pictures by Peter Godfrey

Theatre of Mirrors, a glass pyramid, the Tower of Babel, the Gate of Heaven, and a giant naked woman. On the hillside below is a large grass amphitheatre, in one corner of which is Jonah's whale, in the other a representation of the Column at the Desert de Retz. And there is much more – see Pieter's article for a full description. We were all amazed and moved by the place, by its size, its weirdness, its remoteness, its ambition, its magic and yes, its beauty.

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and the weirdness of the idea of seven theatres. A whole complex of seven theatres, imagine that.' Looking out across the Grand Theatre, to the left is the 'Theatre of Bees', modelled on La Scala in Milan, and to the right is the Acropolis with a hodge-podge of buildings inspired by, amongst many others, The Colosseum, The Parthenon, The Temple of Vesta and a Manhattan skyscraper. And the Grand Theatre has been used – the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra have played here, although it is hard to imagine their coach making it down the winding 2km dirt track from the nearest road – and where did the audience come from and where did they all stay?

From here Brian led us down through layer after layer of buildings and theatres including the Cypress Theatre, the