Julius III’s Tower of the Winds: A Forgotten Aspect of Villa Giulia

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Among the little-discussed topics concerning Villa Giulia in Rome, built for Pope Julius III del Monte (r. 1550–55), is the form and function of some of the smaller buildings originally scattered on the grounds of its immense park. Some of these structures had a direct impact on the significance and visual features of the estate as a whole.¹

After the pope’s death in 1555, the property was gradually dismembered and there is little surviving evidence concerning its original topography.² One of the most valuable remaining sources is a rather clumsy landscape fresco attributed to the circle of Taddeo Zuccari, painted around 1551 in the pope’s apartments at the Vatican (Fig. 1).³ Despite some inaccuracies, it provides a fairly comprehensive and exact plan of the vineyard, or vigna, with its most significant buildings.⁴ In the center of the fresco and prominently placed on a high promontory is an imposing pyramid four stories high, topped with the arms of the Del Monte pope, the so-called trimonzio. In his description of the villa of 1559, the French antiquarian Jean-Jacques Boissard confirms the existence of this pyramid, which he describes as being accompanied by two obelisks: “There are other buildings on the adjacent hills. For summer walks, there is a very famous one on the top of a hill, with two obelisks and a very high pyramid topped by a spherical clock indicating with the greatest art the direction of all the winds, including instructions for how to distinguish between them”.⁵


2. The pope’s estate was confiscated at his death in 1555 by his successor Paul IV and there is little surviving evidence concerning its original topography.¹


The building mentioned by Boissard was located on Monte Parioli in the so-called vigna del Monte, the former vigna Poggio that Pope Julius III bought from the papal treasurer Giovanni Poggio on 26 February 1551. Poggio received 6,000 scudi from the sale of his estate and was later made a cardinal by the grateful pope. In 1971, Tilman Falk published a seventeenth-century plan of the vigna Poggio from the Medici archives in Florence showing its main casino (Villa Poggio, today’s Villa Balestra) and other minor structures (Fig. 2). From this plan, it is clear that the pyramid does not correspond with the Villa Poggio (“A”), but with the smaller building indicated as “F” described as “A garden pavilion with a small tower, containing cellars, stables, and other service rooms for the estate of his Excellency the Cardinal” (“Un casotto con una Torretta, dove sono Tinaie, stallo, et altre stanze per servitio della Vigna dell’Ill.mo S.re Cardinale”). It has a loggia with five arches to the south, corresponding exactly with what is shown in the Vatican fresco. The building, which retains some of its former pyramidal shape, is also visible in a view of Rome dated 1685, taken from Monte Parioli by Cornelis Meyer engraved by Giovan Battista Falda, where a second smaller belvedere facing the Tiber can also be seen (Fig. 3). It is again noticeable in Giuseppe Vasi’s 1765 panoramic view of Rome, with an added staircase providing access to the loggia from the valley below. In the nineteenth century a very large building is documented on the site on several maps of the area, such as Paul Marie Letarouilly’s plan of the former papal vigna del Monte, which still retains some of the ancient atmosphere of the vigna del Monte, with wide pathways bordered by cypress trees, and splendid views of Rome and the Tiber valley. From these various sources, then, it must be inferred that the pyramid stood in its original state, as depicted in the Vatican fresco, only for a brief period. It lost its raison d’être after the death of Julius III in 1555, and although it was still visible at the time of Boissard’s visit in 1559, it must have been rapidly transformed into a farming structure, and subsequently destroyed to make room for a new, more modern, edifice.

The original pyramid was not only “very famous” (“celeberrimum”) but also monumental: the scale of the building in both the Vatican fresco and the Medici plan, although neither of them perfectly reliable documents, confirms Boissard’s description of the pyramid as “altissima”. The Vatican fresco shows the southern façade of the building with its loggia looking towards the city, which must have been visible to any traveller leaving Rome from the Porta del Popolo via Flaminia (Figs. 1, 5). In all probability, the two obelisks mentioned by the French scholar flanked

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the pyramid on either side, framing the entrance to the north, at the end of one of the long alleys dividing the *vigna*, thus creating a magnificent approach (Fig. 6). When they reached the monument, visitors would have had to enter the building in order to discover the splendid views of Rome and the Villa Giulia available from either the loggia to the south or the roof terrace. The ascent was made possible by two stairways or *chiocciola di pietra*, situated near the entrance of the building, and probably by a final staircase providing access to the terrace at the top. This arrangement is quite close to that of the second belvedere, consisting of a small loggia flanked by two high towers, each containing a staircase giving access to the different terraces (Figs. 2, 3).

By being placed at the end of long alleys, and perched up above the cliff tops, these belvederes helped create a theatrical experience for promenading visitors. Drawing the eye with their high silhouettes, they hid, revealed, and framed in a dramatic sequence the views of the surrounding landscape. Considered in the context of the park as a whole, the pyramid’s function was to provide the pope and his court with a striking panorama of the city, invisible from the main *casino* built at the bottom of the valley, but also to serve as a mark for proudly broadcasting the papal presence. In a famous letter describing the park, Bartolommeo Ammannati, inspired by one of Martial’s celebrated epigrams, stressed the importance of these views: “The view from this hill is as beautiful as one might desire since one sees the whole of Rome, the Tiber, the beautiful via Flaminia with the seven hills of Rome and the Vatican with the great building of Saint Peter’s and the pope’s palace.”

The location of the pyramid was highly significant, not only for its lofty position, but also because it was aligned with the longitudinal axis of the villa, situated in the valley below. Thus, it must have made for an impressive and meaningful sight from the windows of the main reception room, the so-called Sala dei Sette Colli (Fig. 4). More significant still, the pyramid and the villa were connected iconographically: as its name reveals, the Sala dei Sette Colli contained a frieze with painted views of the seven ancient hills (*sette colli*, or *sette monti*) and an additional view representing the Villa Giulia, praised as the eighth hill of Rome (*ottavo monte*). This playful juxtaposition was based on a famous pun on the name of the pope: Giovanni Maria del Monte. Several poetic verses composed by Annibale Caro as possible subjects for the villa decoration derived from this play on words, as did countless poems and frescoes celebrating Julius III. Seen in this light, the “pyramide altissima” on top of the *vigna del Monte* can be read as yet another unmistakable allusion to the pope’s name, Monte, a word which was also the common name given

11. Like this second belvedere, the loggia on the southern side was probably one story lower than the ground floor on the *vigna* side. A close reading of the topography also seems to indicate that whilst the northern façade and the main building were perpendicular to the alley leading to them, the southern loggia was slightly off axis, looking south west towards Rome and the Porta del Popolo. This slight distortion of the building’s axis may be explained by the fact that the loggia, built like an ancient crypto-portico, followed the natural orientation of the hill on this side, which is not exactly perpendicular to the *vigna’s* alleys, nor to the via Flaminia in the valley below. On the typology of the loggia in Rome in the sixteenth century, see Claude Mignot, “Les loggias de la Villa Médicis à Rome”, *Revue de l’Art*, XIX, 1973, pp. 50–61.

12. “La veduta di questo monticello è tanto bella, quanto si possi desiderare; per che vede tutta Roma, il Tevere e la bella strada Flaminia, con tutti i Sette Colli, e il Vaticano con la grande fabricha di S. Pietro, e il Palazzo del papa; et è scoperto alle quattro regioni, e più a quella di levante”: BARTOLOMMEO AMMANNATI, letter dated 2 May 1555 to Marco Benavides in Padova (Pesaro, Bibli. Oliveriana, MS 374, II, fols. 91–96), complete text in Falk (as in n. 2), appendix III, pp. 171–173, esp. 173. I believe Ammannati’s description of the view from the Monte Parioli was modelled on Martial’s poetic praise of the view of Rome from the villa of Julius Martialis on the Janiculum hill (*Epigrammata*, IV.64.11–24): “Hinc septem dominos videre montis / et totam licet aestimare Romam, /.../ illine Flaminiae Salariaque / gestator patet essedo tacente, / ne blando rota sit molesta sommo, / quem nec rumpere nauticum / et totam licet aestimare Romam, /.../ illinc Flaminiae Salariaque / gestator patet essedo tacente, / ne blando rota sit molesta sommo, / quem nec rumpere nauticum celeuma / nec clamor valet helciariorum, / cum sit tam prope Mulvius sacrumque / lapsae per Tiberim volent carinae.” Like Ammannati’s description, Martial’s text is probably an idealized “view” of Rome, containing its most identifiable topos, rather than the description of an actual view. See MIKA RAJX, “Villa Lante al Gianicolo e la villa di Giulio Marziale”, in *Villa Lante al G. G. (Villa Lante al Gianicolo. Storia della fabbriana e cronaca degli abitatori, ed. TANCREDI CRUNCHIO e ANTONIO ORGIA, Rome 2005, pp. 11–15.

to ancient and prestigious high structures in sixteenth-century Rome, such as the Monte Augusto, the mausoleum of Augustus, or the Monte Savello, the ancient theatre of Marcellus. The thematic link between Ammannati’s description of the view of the seven hills and the painted views of the ancient monti in the pope’s main reception room could hardly have been casual.

The shape of the building corresponds closely with the ancient funerary pyre. In ancient literature, pyres are also likened to towers and to lighthouses. Through Roman consecration medallions and coins Renaissance scholars were familiar with their shape (Fig. 7). However, the association of the pyramid with the two obelisks mentioned by Boissard clearly indicates that the building was meant to evoke the mausoleum of Augustus in the Campo Marzio. In all Renaissance reconstructions of that famous building, it is shown as a pyre-like pyramid flanked by two obelisks and topped by a statue of the emperor (Fig. 8). In truth, such reconstructions were incorrect, but the mistake had a certain logic since both the mausoleum and the pyre were linked in Roman times with the ceremony of consecratio or apotheosis, a ritual going back to the funeral of Augustus, when an eagle was seen carrying the soul of the deceased into heaven, confirming his divine status.

The appropriation of this model of imperial apotheosis was very common in the papal milieu. Catafalques of popes, princes, and emperors were modeled on this prototype in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, starting with Michelangelo’s first project for Julius II’s tomb. The imperial concept of apotheosis was thus syncretically linked at Villa Giulia with the Christian idea of the Assumption of the Prince of the Church, the papal arms visible on top of the pyramid in the Vatican fresco having replaced the Augustan eagle as the main heraldic device. The fact that the pyramid alluded to Augustus’ mausoleum is not surprising: while the Vatican fresco was painted, Julius III asked Michelangelo to erect a new palace for him and his family buttressed upon the remains of the

16. See Dio Cassius, Roman History (Historia romana), LXXV.5.3; Herodian, History of the Roman Empire, IV.2.8.
18. Renaissance reconstructions of Augustus’ mausoleum show a conical pyramid, not a square pyramid as at the Villa Giulia. Yet most ancient ustrina are reconstructed as square pyramids in sixteenth-century engravings such as the one in Pietro Valeriano’s Hieroglyptica, or Girolamo Porro’s engraving in Porcacchi (as in n. 17).

These authors took inspiration for their reconstructions from ancient Roman coins that show square pyramids rather than conical ones. Augustus’ mausoleum was reconstructed as a conical pyramid because the round base of the mausoleum was still extant. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no other structure but Augustus’ mausoleum combines the shape of the ancient pyre with two obelisks. On the history of Augustus’ mausoleum during the Renaissance, see Anna Maria Riccomini, La ruina di si bela cosa. Vicende e trasformazioni del mausoleo di Augusto, Milan 1996, pp. 30–69. See the maps of ancient Rome with the reconstructed mausoleum in Pietro Amato Frutaz, Le pianta di Roma, Rome 1962, II, pl. XVI, Tav. 25; pl. XVII, 4, Tav. 30; pl. XXII, 6, Tav. 43. On Pirro Ligorio’s reconstruction, see also Samuel Ball Platner and Thomas Ashby, A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome, Oxford 1929, pp. 332–335, and Cesare D’Onofrio, Gli obelischi di Roma, Rome 1992, fig. 41, p. 91; fig. 43, p. 92. One of the earliest and most famous reconstructions of the monument in the Renaissance is in Giulio Romano’s fresco of The Vision of Constantine (Sala di Constantino, Vatican).
20. See Alfred Frazer, “A Numismatic source for Michelangelo’s First Design for the Tomb of Julius II”, The Art Bulletin, LVII, 1975, pp. 53–57; Fagiolo (as in n. 17); Schraven (as in n. 17). Giovanni Maria Ciocchi del Monte chose the name Julius to honor the memory of Julius II.
ancient monument. The residence, which was never completed, would have transformed the Monte Augusto into a new Palazzo del Monte.21

That the ideogrammatic Monte of Villa Giulia was meant to celebrate the apotheosis of Julius III as Divus Iulio, providing visual and phonetic proof of a genealogical, if fantastical, link with the prestigious Gens Iulia, is made even more probable if one recalls its main function as a tower of the winds. Indeed, the representation of the winds is traditionally associated with the ancient ceremony of consecratio and apotheosis.22 The pyramid-monte was, according to Boissard, “topped by a spherical clock [sphaericum horologium] indicating with the greatest art the direction of all the winds, including instructions for how to distinguish between them”.23

During a recent visit to the site, I unexpectedly found this ancient clock, a polyhedral sundial corresponding exactly to Boissard’s description, still standing, lost in the vegetation, beyond the enclosure of the public park on via Ammannati, a short distance from the site of the ancient pyramid (Figs. 9, 10). Made of marble and mounted on a column two meters high, it is a rhombicuboctahedron, a polyhedron with 26 sides. Holes for the sundials’ gnomons are clearly visible on the eight sides of the intermediary zone, although there are no hour lines visible.24 However, the Latin names of the eight principal winds are skillfully engraved on the lower zone: sbsolanvs / levante (East); vvltvrnvs (South-East); avsler / ostro (South); afrivs (South-West); favonivs / ponente (West); corsvs (North-West); septentivro / tramont (North); aqvilo (North-East).25 The four principal winds on the larger squared sides are each associated with the name of the corresponding cardinal direction written in Italian, thus bearing out Boissard’s text to perfection. The horologium is topped by a wind-vane or banderola composed of a moving part triangular in shape pivoting on a vertical shaft.

This type of sundial was very fashionable in the mid-sixteenth century, especially in Florence. Julius III’s horologium is comparable to the famous polyhedral sundials made some decades later by Stefano Buonsignori for Ferdinando de’ Medici (Museo della Scienza, Florence). Several contemporary treatises explain how to build such instruments, from Sebastian Münster’s 1533 Horolographia, to Jean Bullant’s 1561 Recueil d’horologigraphie.26 Also, the fact that this horologium was installed on top of the winds, during Augustus’ reign (Suetonius, Divus Iulius, LXXXVIII), was used in several poems and biographies celebrating Julius III. Compare Divus Iulio III Pontif. Max. (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. 1351); Cesare Barbetta, Liber Primus super Fastis Divo Iulio III Pont. Max.‘ Dedicatus (British Museum, MS Additional 17, 515).

21. See Henry Millon, “A note on Michelangelo’s Façade for a Palace for Julius III in Rome: New Documents for the Model”, The Burlington Magazine, CXXI, 1979, pp. 770–775; Giorgio Vasari, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti, 9 vols., ed. Gaetano Milanesi, VII, Florence 1880, p. 233: “Fecegli fare un modello d’una facciata per un Palazzo, che Sua Santità desiderava fare allato a San Rocco, volendosi servire del mausoleo di Augusto per il resto della muraglia...” The Mausoleum of Augustus was called Monte Augusto during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. See Platner and Ashby (as in n. 18), p. 335; Gnoli (as in n. 14), p. 173. In Tacitus, Annales, XVI,6, it is also called “tumulus Iuliorum”, i.e. the Mausoleum of the Gens Iulia, providing the possibility of a further pun on the pope’s name.

22. See Alessandro Nova, Il libro del vento. Rappresentare l’invisibile, Genoa 2007, pp. 32–34. The expression Divus Iulio, recalling the name given to the deified Julius Caesar during Augustus’ reign (Suetonius, Divus Iulius, LXXXVIII), was used in several poems and biographies celebrating Julius III. Compare Divus Iulio III Pontif. Max. (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. 1351); Cesare Barbetta, Liber Primus super Fastis Divo Iulio III Pont. Max.‘ Dedicatus (British Museum, MS Additional 17, 515).

23. Boissard (as in n. 5).
the papal pyramid is consistent with what we know of such instruments. According to Leon Battista Alberti (De Re Aedificatoria, VIII.5), high towers were often used as both watch-towers and observatories during the Renaissance, especially for the practice of astrology.

Julius III’s tower of the winds probably belonged to this tradition. We know that the pope, who, like his predecessors, believed in astrology, appropriated Augustus’ astrological sign, Capricorn (as did several other important Renaissance rulers), thus celebrating his destiny as a result of divine will. This interest in astrology is also attested by a preparatory study for a lost fresco by Niccolò dell’Abbate, which may ultimately shed some light on the significance of the Pope’s Tower of the Winds (Fig. 11). It was created as an emblem celebrating Julius III’s election, and shows from bottom to top the papal trimonzio, the altar of consecratio, the papal tiara, and Jupiter and the Sun in Capricorn, the Augustan conjunction strategically adopted by the new Divus Iulius.


1. **Antonio Tempesta**, *Map of Rome*, 1593, etching, detail with the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina and the Palazzo di Portogallo.

2. Plan of the former *vigna* Poggio on Monte Parioli, seventeenth century. Archivio di Stato di Firenze.

5. The Tower of the Winds in the Vigna del Monte, hypothetical reconstruction of the southern façade, by Denis Ribouillault.

Denis Ribouillault has assembled a number of documents which enable us to reconstruct the possible appearance of a pyramidal building in the park of the Villa Giulia.

On the side of Monte Parioli, facing towards the south, the pyramid of the Villa Giulia enjoys a privileged position, and thus calls attention to the papal estate from the city of Rome. The construction of the pyramid in tiers exploits the hillside location by creating a number of terraces and loggias. It is possible to identify four distinct levels. The first was most certainly created in part by digging into the rock, while its upper portion was aligned with the level of the garden. The plan in the Medici Archive and the Vatican fresco indicate the presence of an open loggia onto the landscape and the city of Rome.

The second level, smaller than the first, is installed at the garden level. This space, whose function is difficult to reconstruct, probably served as a passageway between the garden and the lower level on the one hand, and between the upper levels on the other. The third and fourth levels gave the ensemble the shape of a pyramid. Probably cylindrical in form, the fourth level gave access to a terrace on which a large spherical sundial had been installed. The vertical élan of the building is accentuated by this structure, mounted on a column, topped by a thin rod supporting a weathervane. The symbolic dimension, an image of the mastery of natural forces, is staged by a construction whose dramatic form makes reference to a variety of architectural archetypes.


6. The Tower of the Winds in the *vigna del Monte*, hypothetical reconstruction of the northern façade, by Denis Ribouillault and Elias Guenoun.

7. Roman coins with an *ustrinum*, 2nd century BCE.

9. Polyhedral sundial found near the site of Julius III’s Tower of the Winds. Marble block mounted on a granite column; for measurements see n. 24.

10. Polyhedral sundial found near the site of Julius III’s Tower of the Winds. Detail with the inscriptions of the winds.


1. Bartolomeo, Francesco, and Antonio Verdi (attr.), Saints Macarius, Sebastian, and Vincent Ferrer, with Two Angels Bearing a Crown of Martyrdom, ca. 1527–28, main panel 186.5 × 177.5 cm. Church of San Lorenzo, Borgo San Lorenzo.