

**FOR SOME TIME I HAD FELT THE NEED TO WRITE A HISTORY THAT, TRACING THE ANCIENT TIES THAT MY FAMILY HAS WITH THIS TERRITORY, WOULD RECOUNT THE ORIGINS OF THE VILLA AND THE EVENTS THAT HAVE LED US TO THE PRESENT.**

**CERTAIN THAT I AM DOING SOMETHING PLEASING FOR OUR GUESTS AND FRIENDS, I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO ALL THOSE WHO LOVE AND HAVE LOVED VILLA VIANCI.**



It is not possible to write a history of Villa Vianci without starting from the territory in which it is located. Documented historical and archaeological references closely link it to the Rocca di Staggia and demonstrate how the area in which it stands has always been affected by the presence of numerous settlements and communities. The particular morphological and geographical characteristics of the area have made it repeatedly a place of meeting and strategic connection between different peoples and cultures.

## Before the villa, history of the territory

The captivating story of **Villa Vianci** unfolds across the sweeping backdrop of history, as it traces its roots from **prehistoric times to the modern age**. Nestled in a **strategic location**, the area surrounding the villa has borne witness to the rise and fall of various civilizations, from the **Etruscans and Romans** to the **Middle Ages and Renaissance**.

In terms of chronological ages, an interesting archaeological discovery took place right in the **park of the villa**. At the end of the last century, a fragment of decorated ceramic belonging to the populations of the

*Apennine facies*<sup>1</sup> that populated the area during the **Middle Bronze Age (XVII-XII century BC)** was found. During the Ancient Age, we know that many **Etruscan villages** existed on the surrounding hills. Already then, the territory was a **vital connection** for trade between the great cities of *Etruria marittima* (Populonia and Volterra) and the internal markets of the powerful *Lucumoni* of **Fiesole** and **Chiusi**. The discovery of the [Necropolis of Poggio](#), not far away, allows us to date these settlements to the end of the **VIII century BC**<sup>2</sup>.

The construction of the current **Via Cassia**, located at the foot of the villa, dates back to the **Roman period**. Initiated in the **II century BC**, it brought together and connected the various pre-existing **Etruscan paths**. There is not much information that comes to



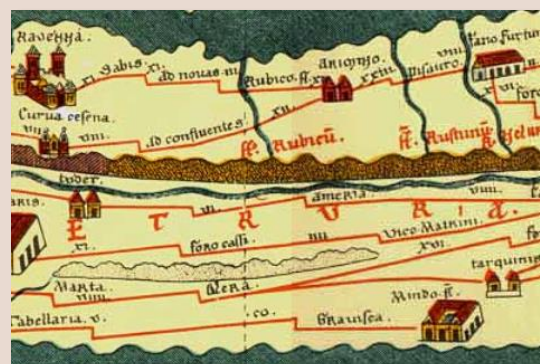
<sup>1</sup> Archivio della Soprintendenza Storica della Toscana, n. 127, De Marinis, 1977

<sup>2</sup> Miscellanea Storica della Valdelsa, E. Fiumi, 1964

The manuscript page is divided into several sections. At the top, there is a large illustration of a seated figure, possibly a deity or ruler, flanked by two smaller figures. Below this is a complex diagram of interconnected circles and lines, resembling a network or a map. The middle section contains a drawing of a castle or fortress with a central tower and a smaller structure to the right. The bottom section is divided into several columns of text in the Voynich script, interspersed with small drawings of architectural elements like towers and walls.

In the **Early Middle Ages**, we find the first direct reference to the [Rocca di Staggia](#). The *Chartula de Morgengabe*, preserved at the nearby church of [Abbadia a Isola](#), describes

It is probable that the structure which eventually evolved into **Villa Vianci** was initially in response to the need for accommodating pilgrims traveling along the *Via Francigena*.



<sup>4</sup> Chartula de Morgengabe, 994 Preserved at the church of Abbadia a Isola

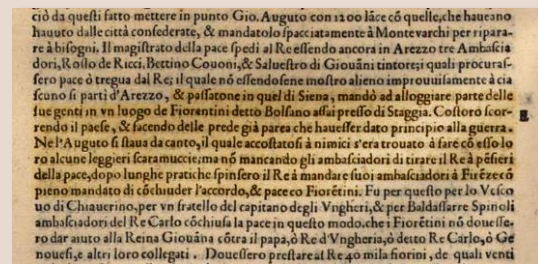
This significant medieval route, frequented by travelers on their spiritual and cultural quests, required adequate facilities to accommodate the influx of such visitors across Europe.

The ancient route followed the top of the hill on which the building stands, and remnants of the original paving stones can still be found on the path leading to the *Staggia* cemetery. The *Church of Santa Lucia in Bolsano*, which stands behind the villa, is mentioned in the *Rationes Decimarum*<sup>5</sup> of 1221 and in an administrative act regarding the election of the village's procurator in 1329. It is highly likely that by that time, the small village around the church had already been established for some time.

The *Istorie Fiorentine* mention the village of *Bolsano*, of which the villa was a part, as the site of a meeting between **Carlo di Durazzo**, the future king of Naples, and **Sir John Hawkwood**, a mercenary in the service of Florence, in 1381.

The purpose of this embassy, which was not without tension and minor skirmishes, was to obtain permission to cross the territories of the **Florentine Republic** in preparation for the conquest of the **Kingdom of Naples**. Carlo's army, composed entirely of **Hungarian troops**, camped

on the surrounding hills and probably even inside the villa itself. The *Histories* also mention the existence of a "*large farmhouse, known to few, which is part of a small village of which there are no traces*"<sup>6</sup>.



*Istorie Fiorentine, Scipione Ammirato, 1600.*  
"Et passatone in quel di Siena, mandò ad alloggiare parte delle sue genti in un luogo de' Fiorentini detto Bolsano presso di Staggia. Costoro scorrendo il paese et facendo delle prede già pareva che havessero dato principio alla guerra. Né l'Auguto si stava da canto, il quale accostatisi a' nimici s'era trovato a fare con esso loro alcune scaramucce; ma non mancando gli ambasciatori di tirare il Re a' pensieri della pace, dopo lunghe pratiche spinsero il Re à mandare e suoi ambasciatori cò pieno mandato di còchiuder l'accordo et pace co' Fiorentini."

During the **XIV and XV centuries**, the area became fully part of **Florentine influence**, and the conflict with **Siena** for control of **Tuscany** made *Staggia* and the surrounding territories a center of crucial importance for maintaining the borders. There are numerous testimonies regarding the *Rocca* during this period. One of these recalls how in 1303, **Chevalier Nogaret**, minister of **Philip IV the Fair**, King of France, stayed there and was sent to capture and imprison **Pope**

<sup>5</sup> Historical records of church tithes in 13th and 14th century Italy, detailing ecclesiastical

tax collections and providing insights into the socio-economic conditions of that era.

<sup>6</sup> *Istorie Fiorentine*, vol. IV, S. Ammirato, 1600



**Boniface VIII** in what would be remembered as "*the Slap of Anagni*".

In **1300**, the significance of the village of *Staggia* is further underscored by the fact that **Dante Alighieri**, who was not only a supreme poet but also a powerful and skilled political figure, stayed within the walls of the castle. This location, where Dante once resided, is likely what today houses the [\*Ristorante il Nostrano\*](#) in *Staggia*.

As the conflict against **Siena** intensified, demonstrating the importance of the defensive position of the castle, **Florence** sent **Filippo Brunelleschi** in **1431** as a consultant in the design of a tower capable of withstanding deadly bombardments. The *Brunelleschi Rondella* is still perfectly preserved today and represents one of the major attractions of the castle.



With the end of the conflict and the surrender of **Siena**, the entire area entered a period of decline, becoming

increasingly marginal compared to the interests of the **Grand Duchy**.

The area underwent a gradual depopulation. Among those who emigrated from *Staggia* was a particular character who moved to **Florence**, named **Amerigo Vespucci**. This Amerigo, who later became a distinguished notary, was none other than the grandfather of the **famous navigator**, from whom the latter took his name<sup>7</sup>. It is truly striking how history sometimes presents such curious aspects; no one today could imagine that the name that baptized the **American continent** originated from such a small town as *Staggia*.

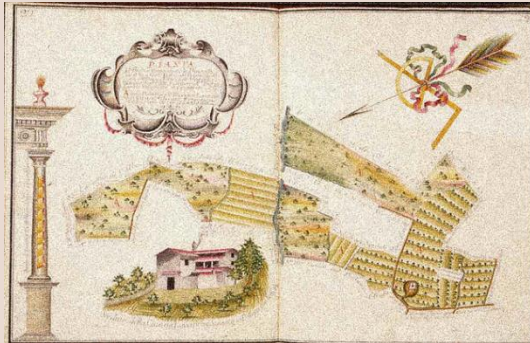
In the **XVI and XVII centuries**, we have no significant information regarding the territory of the villa. However, a note from **1576** mentions the transfer of some **Augustinian friar** near the *Church of Santa Lucia in Bolsano*, and we assume that they lived here for at least two centuries.

A drawing from **1771** found within the *cabreo* (church inventory) of the **Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova** in Florence illustrates a map of the hill with a building very similar to the one facing the villa, also owned by our family. Even today, in front of this building, it is possible to observe the barn with particular windows, with a pointed arch, a certainly unusual shape for a simple warehouse, which

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<sup>7</sup> Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria, Anno XXI, 1914

leads us to believe that the friars adapted the pre-existing constructions to their worship needs.



In *Staggia*, the gradual depopulation led to the abandonment of the *Rocca*. As a result, without regular maintenance, the structure began to deteriorate, leading to its partial collapse. The *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria* reports that in 1697, after **Gian Gastone**, the last **Medici Grand Duke**, abandoned the fortress, a significant transformation occurred. The **Venturi family** repurposed the debris and ruins from the castle's courtyard, using them to construct what would become the “*first version*” of **Villa Vianci**.



Fig. 41. — Castello di Staggia (Fol. d'Elia).

This event marks the first explicit mention of the villa's name and

establishes its connection with the *Rocca*. The stones from the *Rocca* were used not only to remodel an existing farmhouse but also to construct the rectangular building that stands today.

The villa was also very likely inhabited by the **friars**, although there are no clear architectural traces of their presence. A small plaque still visible on the north wall of the villa bears the phrase “*Pio passed by on his way to Siena*”. It refers to **Pope Pius VI**, who in 1798 was taken prisoner by **Napoleon** and exiled to *Siena*. It is almost certain that with this inscription, the friars wanted to leave a testimony of the dramatic event.

This rich tapestry of events, characters, and epochs make the story of **Villa Vianci** an enthralling journey through time, a testament to the **resilience** and enduring significance of this remarkable place.

## History of the Villa

Now we need to take a step back to tell the story of the origins of *my grandmother Maria Avanzati Bernardi's* family and how they came into possession of **Villa Vianci**.

The **Bernardi family** was a modest family from Siena, who in the seventeenth century owned a barber shop in *Piazza del Campo*. In 1686, Francesco Bernardi, also known as **Senesino**, was born.



*Francesco Bernardi il Senesino*

He was noticed for his sweet voice from a young age and directed towards the study of music and singing. As was customary at the time, in order to strengthen his voice and keep it pure, he was castrated. After moving to **Rome**, Francesco began a dazzling career that took him to the major Italian and European theaters of the time. In 1717, he met **Georg**

**Friedrich Händel** in **Dresden**, who was so impressed by his singing abilities that he exclusively hired him as a performer for his music. **Senesino** debuted in **London** in 1720 at the *King's Theatre in Haymarket*. The success was enormous and thirty consecutive performances were held. Francesco was so impressed that he decided to honor the London theater by building a noble palace in *Siena* that imitated its architectural style. Due to a fire, the *King's Theatre* was destroyed, so it is no longer possible to compare the two buildings. It is certain, however, that the façade of that palace served as inspiration for the embellishment of **Villa Vianci**.



*Palazzo Avanzati Bernardi in Piazza della Lizza a Siena*

Having spent almost his entire life in **London**, he only returned to **Italy** in his old age and passed away in his palace in 1758. With his death, **Senesino** left his family an invaluable fortune, making the **Bernardi family** one of the wealthiest and most noble families in Siena. They showed remarkable

political and entrepreneurial skills, acquiring vast lands in the vicinity, numerous houses, and the majestic **Villa San Giovanni a Cerreto**.

About a century later, during the **Wars of Independence**, the *Bernardis* were among the leading figures of the republican and *Mazzinian* movement in Siena, so much so that they sacrificed their lives for the *Risorgimento* ideals. A commemorative plaque in Piazza della Lizza in Siena celebrates the memory of Giuseppe Bernardi, a lieutenant following **Garibaldi**, who was killed by the papal guards in 1867 at the age of 27. It was during those years that the *Bernardis* forged a strong alliance with the noble English **Newton family**, one of the oldest in British aristocracy, which, according to its members, even boasted direct descent from *Prince Caratacus of Britain*. The **Newtons** were hosted at *Palazzo Avanzati-Bernardi* in Siena and some of its members sacrificed their lives in the fight for Italian independence. This sacrifice brought the two families even closer together, and they remained deeply connected for many generations to come.

When my *paternal grandmother Maria Avanzati Bernardi* was born in 1907, the family was in a condition of great wealth. My great-grandfather *Francesco Avanzati Bernardi* was a prestigious entrepreneur, administrator of *Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena*, and owner of 40

**farms** for a total of over **2,800 hectares** of land. My grandmother's mother was *Marta Orsini Baroni*, belonging to a noble family of political dignitaries of Pisan origins, whose brother would be an ambassador to the **Weimar Republic** in Germany. My grandmother was born from generations of great *artists, patriots, landowners, and diplomats*, and throughout her long life, she always humbly and decisively demonstrated her awareness of such a rich heritage. Being the fifth of **ten siblings**, her childhood was full of playfulness and carefreeness.



*Maria Avanzati Bernardi*

She loved the countryside more than anything, and I remember her telling me how she enjoyed riding horses with her sisters in the large estate of the *San Giovanni* villa and how, looking at the horizon, she could not



see the boundaries of her property. A woman of **indomitable and tenacious character**, she always worked to keep alive the ancient agricultural traditions, believing that the bond with the land was as noble and precious as one could hope to obtain in life.

On the other hand, my grandfather **Mario Puccioni**, her husband, came from a family of merchants and industrialists who founded a factory for chemical fertilizers near *Castelfiorentino* in **1888**. His mother, *Alice Brandini*, belonged to a noble family of bankers. My grandfather Mario was part of that new generation of *industrial bourgeoisie* that was forming in Italy in the early **1900s**, whose wealth was based more on *urban production centers* than on agricultural holdings. He did not like the countryside, and in fact, I believe that the idea of dealing with agricultural issues was unbearable for him. That is why, as we will see later, the purchase of **Villa Vianci** was a true **act of love** for my grandmother. The strong social tensions that exploded in Italy between **1916** and **1918**, during the so-called *Red Biennium*, induced the **Puccioni** family to transfer the production of fertilizers to the newly born **Castellina Scalo** railway station. If the choice was certainly dictated by the advantages that rail transport could bring to industrial production, the memory of social conflicts had embittered my great-grandfather *Cesare* to such an extent that he did

not want to return to *Castelfiorentino* anymore.



My grandfather *Mario* was then managing the factory in *Castellina Scalo* and during lunchtime, he used to take the train to go eat in Siena. During one of these breaks, he had the chance to cross paths with the *Avanzati Bernardi* family who, with their procession of **ten children, servants, and governesses**, were crossing the city in great pomp to attend *Mass*. When he saw my grandmother, it was **love at first sight** for him. He started going to Siena more and more often to have the chance to follow her on these long

walks. She had noticed this young man and once decided to surprise him with a glance: "*all I remember from the first time I saw him,*" she said, "*were his black mustache and thick eyebrows with two embarrassed eyes behind them.*" After some time, my grandfather gathered his courage and went to talk to *Francesco Avanzati Bernardi* to ask for his daughter's hand. On that occasion, the *official introduction* took place, but as was customary at the time, after a short while, the women were made to leave the room to allow the men to discuss the proposal. My grandmother could not stand being sidelined regarding events that concerned her so intimately, so she went up to the top floor of the building and climbed onto the roof to observe the progress of the conversation from a high window. Initially, her father did not accept the proposal and said that it would be necessary to wait for *Maria's older sisters* to be married before granting her hand. The reason for the rejection was probably dictated by the fact that the ancient *landowning aristocracy* of the *Avanzati Bernardi* family looked with some suspicion at the emerging *industrial and urban bourgeoisie* of which the Puccioni family was an expression, and it was likely that he wanted to *test my grandfather's intentions*.

He did not lose heart and continued to regularly visit the *Avanzati Bernardi* palace to ask for my grandmother's

hand. Many months passed and *Francesco Avanzati Bernardi* had to convince himself of the sincerity of his feelings, finally giving consent to the marriage. It was a **grand ceremony** attended by the most *eminent families* of *Florence* and *Siena*.



Once married, my grandmother moved to Florence to live in our family palace in **Piazza dell'Indipendenza**. Although her marriage was happy and full of affection, she suffered greatly from the separation from her sisters and felt a strong longing for *open spaces and country life*. My grandfather, who loved her sincerely, decided that the dowry received on the occasion of the marriage should *be invested to satisfy this longing*. He therefore searched for an estate that could fill this **nostalgia**, with the idea of recreating that *rural condition* to which she was so attached. By chance, he found it near his industrial establishment, on the site of **Villa Vianci**. The villa was then purchased by the *Ticci* family in the early **1930s**, and a series of works were immediately designed to make it similar both to the *Avanzati Bernardi*



palace and to the villa of *San Giovanni a Cerreto* where my grandmother had spent her childhood.



The initial project was certainly *too ambitious* and was not completed, also due to the outbreak of **World War II**. During the war, the family took refuge in *Vianci*, which was considered safer than *Florence*. With the end of hostilities, *restoration and expansion* work resumed, and the **barn and farmhouse in front of the villa** were purchased, as well as numerous surrounding lands and farms.



The *Puccioni* family contributed greatly to the *economic development* of the area and to the *reconstruction* of many buildings destroyed by bombings, including the rebuilding of the *church of Castellina Scalo*, behind the altar of which a stained glass

window depicting the *Puccioni* and *Avanzati Bernardi* family crests stands as a sign of gratitude.



For much of her life, my grandmother devoted her heart and soul to managing the agricultural activity, loved to vacation on the estate, and personally oversaw various productions, particularly *wine* and *olive oil*. Towards the **mid-70s**, with the end of *sharecropping*, the company entered a period of decline and many of the productions were ceased. Over time, some of the farms and lands were sold, but the *villa* remained the *country residence* where she loved to spend entire days taking care of what remained of the agricultural business. It was precisely the *elegance of the villa* and the *charm* it exerted on friends who stayed there that led her and my

father to decide to **open its doors to guests visiting Tuscany**.

The *success was immediate*, and travelers from all over the world began to request **Villa Vianci** for their stays. We immediately realized that people did not live in the villa as a simple vacation home, but as an **intimate and personal place** where they could welcome family and friends *as if they were at their own home*. For this reason, in **2009** my father decided to renovate the interior of the villa, making it even more *comfortable and welcoming*, and it was then that I realized what *Vianci* really was. Having lived in *Florence* for my entire youth, I didn't have such a conscious image of the villa. My grandmother spoke about it often, but personally, I always felt more *attached to the city*. This changed when I met my wife **Chiara**. Her great-grandfather was a manager for the *Guicciardini Strozzi* family at the *Villa di Cusona*, which had allowed her family to accumulate a *deep knowledge of agricultural affairs for generations*. Her father and uncles were *wine producers*, and like my grandmother, she was born with the *countryside in her heart*. We met in Florence in **2004** when we were both attending university, and after a few years, during which *Chiara* always expressed her love for the outdoors without hesitation, we decided to leave the city and come to live at *Villa Vianci*, with the idea of *continuing my*

*father's work of sharing and welcoming guests*, but also with the intention of *restoring the villa* to be the *point of reference* for the **protection and care** of the territory that it once was. As soon as we arrived, we immediately realized that we were not in a *new place*, but we *had come back home*, to a place that needed *life, care, and attention*. We embarked on a *long and exciting journey* that has allowed us to achieve *great satisfaction* over the years, first of all, our **marriage**, which was organized in the **villa's hall**, allowing friends and family to *share the affection* we have for this place, but even more wonderful was the arrival of little **Miriam**, born at *Villa Vianci* just as it used to be.





My grandmother *Maria Avanzati Bernardi* passed away at the end of **2012** at the enviable age of **104**, which gave her the opportunity to see the seed for which she had worked her entire life *come to life again*.



After a decade of *hard work*, we know that our *journey has just begun*. The birth of **Miriam** in **2015** fueled our *determination* to create a *harmonious and stimulating environment* in which to raise her and to share with our *international family of guests*.

In **2017**, we *reopened the farm and resumed the production of extra virgin olive oil*. In **2019**, we lovingly renovated the barn to accommodate our cherished "pets," *Tilde the cow and Lucio the donkey*. Unfortunately, in **2020**, we had to pause our activities due to the pandemic. However, *Villa Vianci* became a **safe place** for our entire family during the darkest days of the **first lockdown**. Amidst such a *challenging period*, our second daughter, the sweet **Aurora**, was born right here at *Vianci*.

Although these past years have been **incredibly difficult**, we remain *steadfast and hopeful*. We are dedicated to making our guests feel at

home, even when they are far from their own.



Through *love and resilience*, we continue to welcome *visitors* and *share the beauty of Villa Vianci* with those seeking a place to enjoy their *friendships* and embrace the *love of family*.

Because ultimately what unites all the stories told so far is precisely this, the *deep bond* with the *culture of exchange and sharing*, of the *union between the affinities of the past and the surprises of the future*, of the *correspondence with the different and belonging to one's roots*, all things that, combined for centuries in my family in this territory, offer precious testimony to the *beauty of meeting the other*.