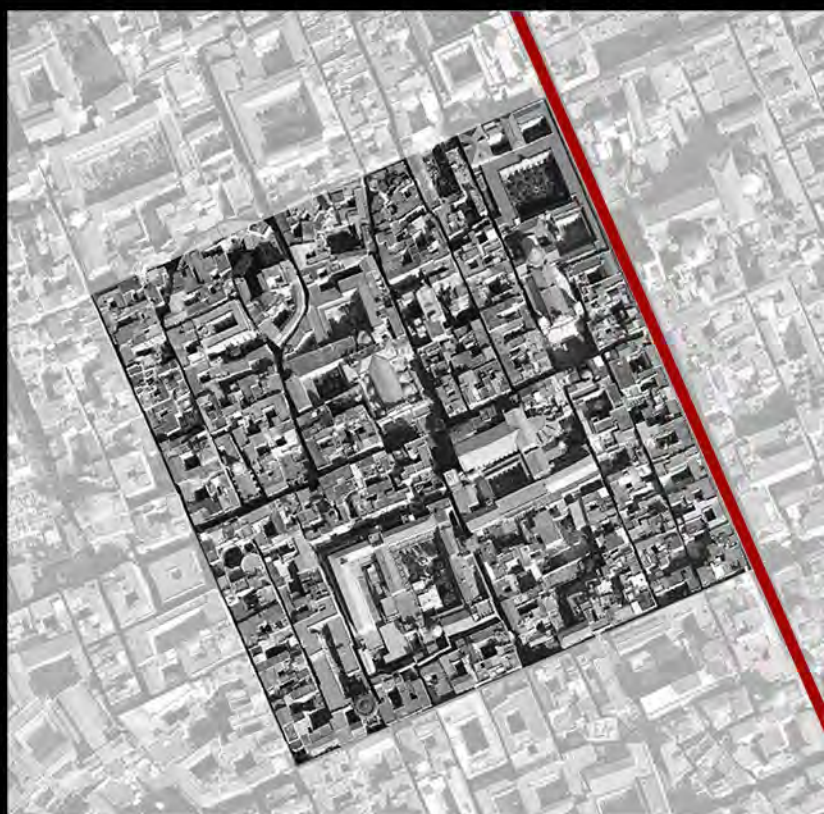


# **La Città Palinsesto**

## **The City as Palimpsest**

**Tracce, sguardi e narrazioni  
sulla complessità dei contesti urbani storici**

Tracks, views and narrations  
on the complexity of historical urban contexts



**Tomo primo**  
**Memorie, storie, immagini**  
**Memories, stories, images**

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### ***La Città Palinese***

*Tracce, sguardi e narrazioni sulla complessità dei contesti urbani storici*

Tomo I - *Memorie, storie, immagini*

a cura di Francesca CAPANO e Massimo VIGONE

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## *The façade of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua as palimpsest*

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### **Abstract**

*The façade of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua seems simple, yet almost every feature is unusual. It was designed as part of a coherent urban space but also served as a backdrop for a sacra rappresentazione. Over three hundred years the representation developed into a more complete drama, and the facade and the Arena were adapted to accommodate it. The façade bears traces of its origins and subsequent adaptations, as well as modern attempts to recall its past and, unfortunately, also to erase it.*

### **Keywords**

Padua, Arena Chapel, medieval architecture.

### **Introduction**

The Roman amphitheatre known as the 'Arena' of Padua was substantially remodelled during the medieval and early modern periods, most evidently by the addition of a palace and a chapel between 1300 and 1305. The chapel is famous for its frescoes by Giotto, but in this paper I will consider the apparently plain and unremarkable façade (fig. 1a). I will concentrate on two aspects of the façade: its role within a set-piece of urban planning, and its role as the stage-set for a *sacra rappresentazione* of the Annunciation. Both aspects have been almost totally erased from the plain exterior we see today. Nevertheless, the signs are there once we know how to see them.

Today the outline of Padua's Roman Arena can barely be traced in the oval shape of a municipal park, and a ruined stretch of its outer walls. Once, it would have resembled the Arena of Verona. In 1090 it was given by the Emperor Henry IV to the Bishop of Padua, for whom it was a valuable quarry for building materials. The Middle Ages saw the gradual settlement of the area, but the Arena was still sufficiently remote for a community of hermits to choose to settle there around 1242. By the end of the thirteenth century, ownership of the site had passed to the Dalesmanini family, and the amphitheatre contained a clutter of domestic buildings. In 1300, the site entered the annals of art history when it was bought by the immensely wealthy financier Enrico Scrovegni, who began building his palace and its famous chapel there.

Enrico cleared and developed the site to reveal its ancient outlines and the central space more clearly. He placed his new palace on the central longitudinal axis of the oval space, with his

LAURA JACOBUS



1: 1a. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, c. 1301-5 (photo: Massimo Catarinella, Creative Commons <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CappelladegliScrovegni.jpg>); 1b. detail of Giotto, *Dedication Scene*, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua c. 1304-5 (photo: author); 1c. Barnaba Lava, *Prospetto della Chiesa dell'Annunziata dell'Arena*, 1871 (Musei Civici di Padova) BCP. XXXVI 7380.

new chapel to the right of it, and he remodelled an entrance gate opposite it to create a grand approach to his new domain. This was an unparalleled piece of medieval urban planning. It revived Padua's physical Roman heritage, making a proto-antiquarian statement at a time when the city's literary proto-humanism was in its infancy. The grandeur of the newly developed site asserted Enrico Scrovegni's claims to be one of Padua's most prominent citizens, and the city's claims to be an intellectual powerhouse. Views drawn by Marin Urbani c.1800 give an impression of the effect, although both palace and chapel had been modified by that time (fig. 2a). The views show the chapel with a portico and the palace with wings, neither of which were part of the original buildings.

To understand the original design of the chapel façade we can consult Giotto's 1305 fresco painting of a model of the chapel (fig. 1b). Every aspect of this façade was strikingly novel. It had a classicizing portal of white marble, with a round-headed arch surmounted by a pediment. This was a piece of proto-renaissance design. Three semi-circular steps led to the door, which is an unusual formation. A lunette contained three half-length figures of the Madonna and Child with Angels, which was an unprecedented composition at that time. It seems likely that Giotto himself introduced this motif as a response to the compositional problem of filling a semi-circular lunette. It was seldom seen again until the Renaissance, when such sculptural ensembles were popularised by the della Robbia workshop. The fresco is insufficiently detailed to tell us whether the figures, painted in white paint on a blue background, were executed in fresco or relief sculpture. If the former, they were painted in grisaille, if the latter the white marble was left largely unpolychromed. In either case, they would have been innovative in their use of media as well as in compositional terms.

Looking at the façade today, we see a palimpsest that is still legible (fig. 1a). The doorway's pediment and marble facing have been lost, but the brick substructure of its marble surrounds is still visible. The three steps were uncovered during excavations and subsequently restored. A fresco replaces the Madonna and Angels in the lunette. Only the great triple-lancet window



2: 2a. Marin Urbani, *Arena in Padova*, c.1800, *Biblioteca civica, Padova (BCP)*, *Iconografia Padovana RIP 1897*; 2b. Unknown artist, *Circus patavinus*, interleaved plate from Francesco Scoto, *Nuovo Itinerario d'Italia*, 1669.

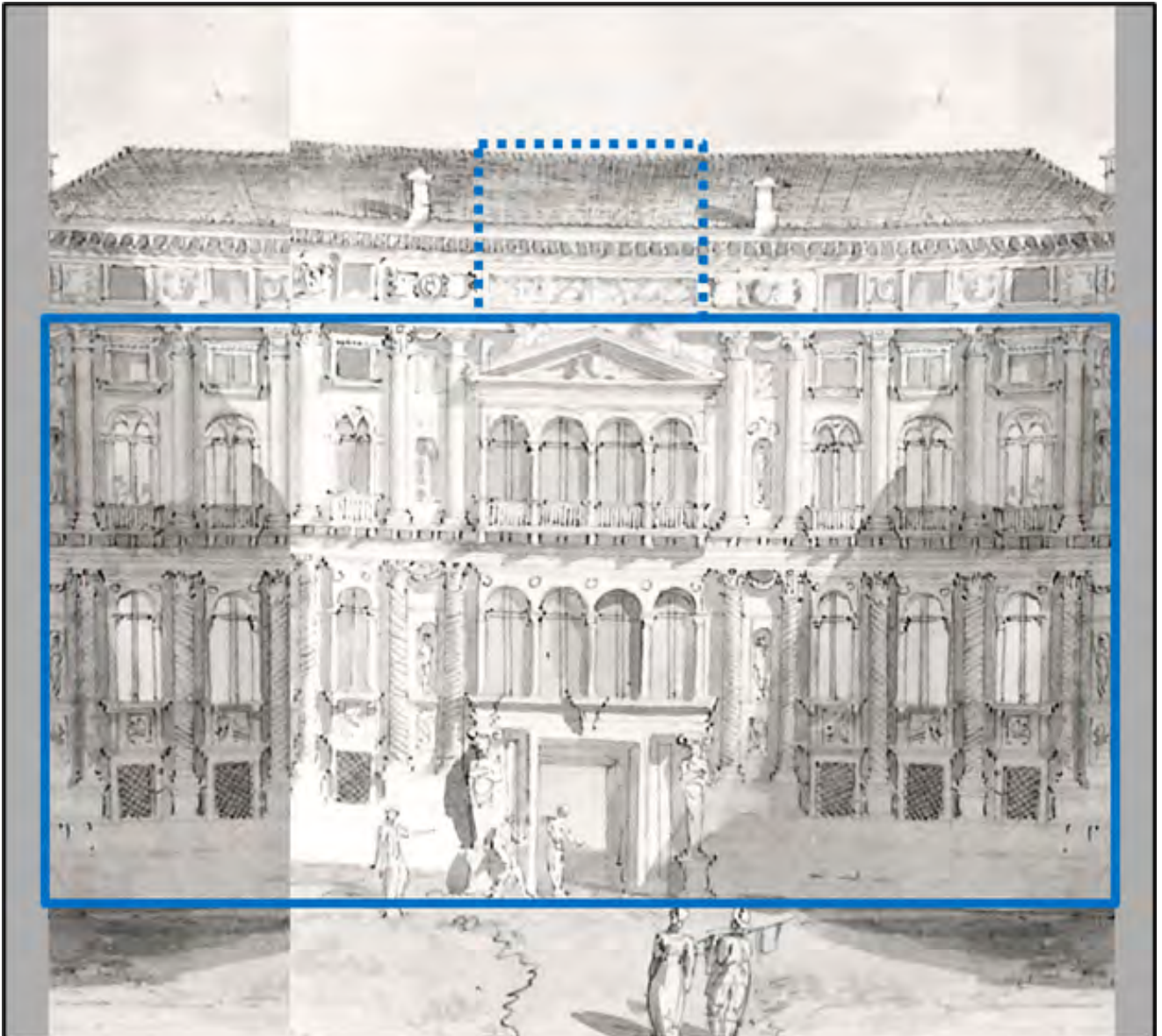
survives untouched. It too, is a very unusual feature, placed high on the façade within a semi-circular marble surround. It has no known precedents and has inspired no obvious copies. The dimensions of the semi-circular lunettes of the portal and window match each other exactly, revealing a coherence of design that would have been more apparent when both features had their marble surrounds.

To understand the design further, we need to think of the façade in conjunction with the neighbouring palace. Marin Urbani made accurate studies of the site using a camera obscura, (although he did embellish his finished drawings with imagined compositional features). They show the palace as it was remodelled, mostly in the sixteenth century, and they show that the Arena Chapel was attached to the Scrovegni palace before it was demolished in 1827 (fig. 2a). The palace façade is another palimpsest. Albertino Mussato's contemporary description tells us the original palace was 'very lofty and extensive', while Michele Savonarola added in 1445 that it had 'a superb portal decorated with squared marbles, and above it is built a tower, not of great height' [Mussato 1903, 89; Savonarola 1942, 50]<sup>1</sup>. With these descriptions in mind we can see Enrico's palace beneath the later accumulations (fig. 3).

The central ten bays seen in Urbani's drawing have a distinct roofline which reveals the width of the original building, and much of the palace's original fenestration is seen in the three bays to either side of the central section. The palace was two storeys high, with round-arched windows with pierced plate tracery throughout, including two-light tricuspid lancets on the upper floor. At its centre, the palace incorporated the gate of the ancient Arena, beneath the low tower described by Savonarola. This central four-bay section was remodelled in a late-renaissance style by its later Foscari owners and has lost its tower.

Urbani's views show that the facades of the palace and chapel both stood on the rim of the Arena, resting on its ancient foundations and linked by a stretch of its walls (and this has been

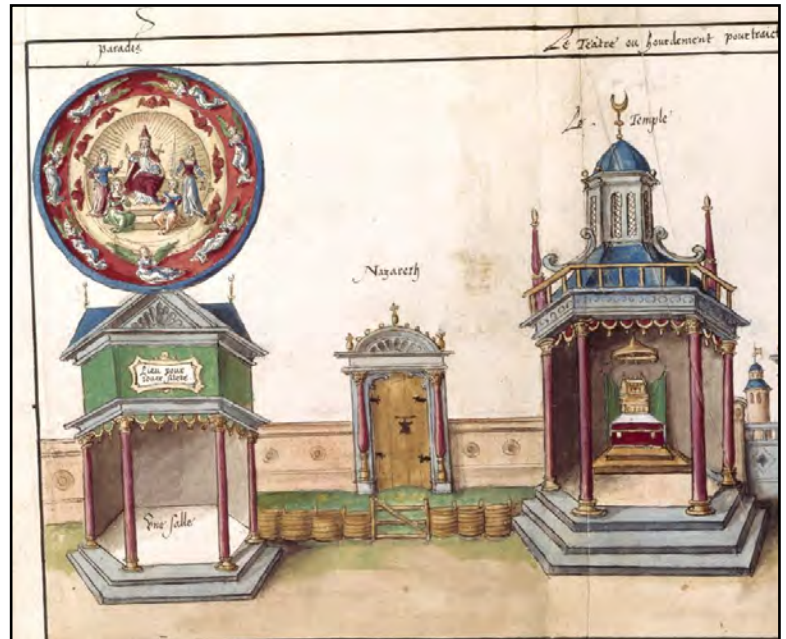
<sup>1</sup> The Mussato's the description dates back to around 1320); the Savonarola's description dates back to around 1445.



3: Composite view of the central ten bays of the Scrovegni Palace (Marin Urbani, *Arena in Padova* c. 1800), with dimensions of original palace superimposed (author).

confirmed by subsequent archaeological examinations). The wings of the renaissance palace seen in Urbani's drawings are also built on these walls, and the section of ancient wall between the palace and the chapel was incorporated into the same medieval building complex, as it enclosed a courtyard linking the palace and chapel. Moreover, the fenestration of the palace and the attached chapel aligned at the same level and used the same architectural vocabulary of plate tracery, tricuspid lancets (and possibly also pedimented doorways). Through these visual links and concordances, the palace, chapel, and the cleared Roman Arena in front of them constituted an aesthetically unified urban enclave which was remarkable for the period. For contemporaries, the common ownership of palace and chapel was clearly visible to all who entered the Arena and the status of the patron, Enrico Scrovegni, was accordingly magnified in the eyes of the citizenry (fig. 2a).





4: 4a. Attributed to Paolo Uccello Annunciation (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Creative Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paolo\\_uccello\\_annunziata\\_ashmolean.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paolo_uccello_annunziata_ashmolean.jpg)); 4b. detail The theatre or pictorial hoarding as it was when the Mystery of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ was played in the year 1547 from *Le Mystere.... en la ville de Vallenchiennes, 1547* (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) Paris Bibl. Nat. Rothschild 3010 (1073 d.) (I, 7, 3 Armoire VI bas), Bv-1r Rothschild 3010 (1073 d) - I, 7, 3 (armoire VI bas). (<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc374649>).

However, the Arena Chapel was not just a private household chapel, it was also built as an estate church dedicated to the Virgin of Charity. Although it was initially licensed for limited purposes, the patron had larger ambitions for the project. One of his earliest acts was to secure papal indulgences in 1304 for visitors to his church on the four Marian feasts. This considerably advanced the status of the site, as Padua's patron saint was the Virgin and her feasts were traditionally held at the Cathedral. Enrico arranged an exceptionally grand consecration ceremony on the Feast of the Annunciation in 1305, for which he borrowed textiles from San Marco in Venice.

There was an implicit theatricality in the 1305 consecration ceremony. The Bishop arrived with a procession of all the town's clergy in full pomp, winding through the city, entering the Arena through its newly refurbished gatehouse, and crossing the wide space of the Arena on its longest axis. In front of the chapel he mounted the three semi-circular steps leading to its classically styled portal, (which was possibly framed by the precious textiles of San Marco), and there he ceremoniously knocked three times at the west door to gain entry.

As well as the consecration procession and ceremony on the feast-day, Enrico also arranged for a *sacra rappresentazione* to take place in front of his chapel. This was a lay performance representing the Annunciation and is distinct from the liturgical performance of the Annunciation (called a Golden Mass), which I have argued took place *inside* the chapel. Earlier scholarship, including my own, has assumed that the *sacra rappresentazione* in the Arena was a traditional event that had been taking place for many years, but my recent research argues that it was in fact a new event. Its first performance coincided with the consecration ceremony on the Feast of the Annunciation 1305, and in 1306 a statute was passed to make it an annual event.



5: Unknown artist, *Annunciation*, Oratory of San Michele, Padua.

Variants of the statute were issued when the format of the festivities changed, with surviving copies dated 1362 and 1420 [Jacobus, 2008]<sup>2</sup>.

Using textual sources, our knowledge of the performance itself is limited compared to our knowledge of the procession which preceded it. The statutes tell us that, following a joint procession of all the principal office-holders of Church and State, in which boys dressed as the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary were carried on thrones through the city, a performance of 'the Angelic Salutation' took place. The original statute of 1306 is lost, but a revised statute dating from c.1404-1420, tells us that by that date 'other things' had been introduced into the performance and had become customary, and that the *sacra rappresentazione* took place at 'prepared places' in the Arena. This is tantalizing information. The palimpsest of the chapel's façade can tell us more, especially when considered in conjunction with visual sources.

Three of Marin Urbani's drawings show a façade which is a mirror-image of the Arena Chapel on the left of the image (fig. 2a). A schematic woodcut of 1669 shows that such a 'building' did exist, but was really no more than a sham façade (fig. 2b). This is extraordinary. I know of no instances of such sham buildings being built, except those created as temporary structures for festivities such as triumphal entries. This one was a feature that survived until c.1800, so it is likely that it was built to endure. Its function must have been to serve as a permanent backdrop in an annual festivity. The effect of doubled chapel facades bracketing the palace recalls the *scenae frons* of ancient theatres. Whether or not that is intentional, I propose that the chapel façade and its sham counterpart were employed in the staging of the *sacra rappresentazione*. They are the 'usual, prepared places' mentioned in the city statutes compiled in 1420.

We know from Giotto's fresco (fig. 1b) that the chapel's own façade was first built without a portico, but that one was added later. It was there by 1421, when Maddalena Scrovegni requested burial beneath it and it stood until collapsing in 1817 [Medin, 1896].<sup>3</sup> The balustrade and balcony on this portico's flat roof, seen in Urbani's drawings, show that it was intended for use on its upper and lower storeys. It could be reached by stairs from the Arena and from the palace. In the drawing, the portico's roof served as a vantage point for onlookers; it may always have been used simply as a kind of VIP's box, affording an exclusive view of the *sacra rappresentazione* in the Arena. However I think it more likely that the portico played a more

<sup>2</sup> BCP, B.P. 1237, *Statuta communis Padue*, 1362, fol.104v; BCP, B.P. 1236, *Volumen statutorum mag. civit. Padue reformatorem sub anno 1420*, fol. 304r-v.

<sup>3</sup> *Archivio di Stato, Venezia (ASV), Notarile, Testamenti, B486 fasc. 2.*

significant part in the staging of the drama, by providing a wide, raised stage for a performance under its arcade, and by supporting a staged scene of God in Heaven on its roof.

Many early Renaissance Italian images of the Annunciation show it taking place in a portico, often with a figure of God above despatching the Holy Spirit. An *Annunciation* from the Ashmolean evokes the sequential stages of an outdoor performance, showing a God in Heaven located above a portico, with the angel sent down to visit Mary beneath it. (fig. 4a). The ubiquity of similar imagery suggests that actual stagings of the Annunciation utilised porticoes in a similar manner. A record of the more developed staging of a multi-act French mystery play in 1547 includes a '*Paradis*' over a porticoed stage labelled 'for silent playing' (fig. 4b). This stage probably accommodated a mimed Annunciation, with a Heaven above, reflecting the earliest traditions of *sacre rappresentazione*.

A *trecento* fresco from the oratory of S. Michele in Padova is evocative of the Arena's *sacre rappresentazione* (fig. 5). It takes place across a courtyard near a building which bears a typological likeness to the Arena Chapel. The building's facade has a portico, a large window high on its facade, and red-and-white voussoirs around its door. All were unusual features in Paduan architecture at this time, all seen at the Arena Chapel. The painting also shows the dove of the Holy Spirit flying on a trajectory which originates in the upper part of this building's facade.

This detail is especially suggestive, as when Michele Savonarola described the *sacre rappresentazione* in 1445, he stated that the Holy Spirit descended 'through a high aperture'. And such an aperture did originally exist in the gable of the Arena Chapel; its bricked-up remains were discovered during restorations in 1990s. This suggests that the facade was designed from the outset to facilitate the release of the dove of the Holy Spirit from an aperture high in its gable. That dove probably took the form of a firework. From c.1331, the drama was arranged by a confraternity, and in 1597 this confraternity was castigated for interrupting the celebration of mass by 'firing the dove' on 'the festival of the dove' [Giovagnoli 2008, 109-110]<sup>4</sup>. Within a few years, the festivities were suppressed entirely.

So far, documentary evidence and pictorial clues, combined with the palimpsest of the chapel's facade, tell a story of a statutory civic-religious cult fostered by a private citizen on his property. It began in 1305 and developed from a single-act performance into one with 'other things' added. By 1421 a permanent stage set had been built in the form of a portico, and a more developed spectacle was being staged, possibly also utilising the sham facade further along the rim of the Arena.

In 1443, the Scrovegni family was exiled. The performance in the Arena survived their departure because it was now supported by a confraternity and had become a focus of civic pride and local identity. Michele Savonarola recorded in 1445 that 'all the clergy and all the populace' gathered within the walls of the Arena to watch the show. The Scrovegni palace retained its social cachet, sold for enormous sums first to the Patriarch of Aquilea, and thence to the powerful Foscari family of Venice. A processional banner in the Museo Civico marked with the arms and initials of Zuanne Foscari, and dated 1595, bears witness to the continued association of the *sacre rappresentazione* with the high-status occupants of the palace. Yet only two years after the banner was made, the *sacre rappresentazione* in the Arena was censured and soon after, shut down. Rowdiness and theological unorthodoxy were cited by the Bishop as reasons for his decision.

With the demise of the crowd-pleasing 'festival of the dove', the chapel entered a slow decline. The facade, which would always have been covered with plaster, underwent occasional

<sup>4</sup> ASV Gradenigo Rio-Marin 85 BIS fasc. 2.

renovations over the ensuing centuries. A souvenir of its former role persisted in the form of a frescoed scene above the portico showing the Annunciation. Urbani's views show the figures of the Angel and Virgin sketchily, while a drawing made by Barnaba Lava in 1871 also shows traces of cloudy forms and God's halo in the gable where once the firework dove sailed forth (figs 2a.,1c). Beneath the portico, figures in classical niches were added shortly before 1795 by the local artist Domenico Zanella, but these appear unconnected to the façade's earlier role as a theatrical backdrop. The building's medieval past was becoming forgotten, eclipsed by the interest in the Arena's Roman and Renaissance past that drew the fashionable sightseers in Urbani's drawings.

When the Commune bought the chapel in 1880, it was in the light of a renewed interest in Giotto and the city's medieval glories. Restorers stripped away the frescoed surface of the façade in the mistaken belief that to do so would recreate the original surface (fig. 1a). This last scraping of the palimpsest brought us to the neo-medieval bare brick façade we see today. It is only in conjunction with the visual records and documents examined here that we are able to understand how this simple façade encapsulated so much of the city's cultural life in the medieval period; how it expressed the individuality and aspirations of its patron; how it presaged the city's cultural renaissance; and how it played a role in fostering the collective experience of all Paduans who, over the course of three hundred years, gathered in the Arena to watch the spectacle played out in front of it.

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