

**ABSTRAKT:** Pałac Królewski w Casercie, wystawna rezydencja dynastii Burbonów, jest złożonym systemem muzealnym – oprócz monumentalnego pałacu w skład kompleksu wchodzi rozległe ogrody: od najstarszej części ogrodu włoskiego, poprzez osiemnastowieczny ogród inspirowany Francją, aż po ogród krajobrazowy. W 1750 r. Karol Burbon postanowił wybudować nową rezydencję królewską jako idealne centrum Królestwa Neapolu. Projekt imponującego budynku, mającego rywalizować z innymi europejskimi rezydencjami królewskimi, powierzono Luigiemu Vanvitellemu, architektowi pochodzenia holenderskiego. Pomysł Vanvitellogo urządzenia parku zawarty jest w *Dichiarazione dei disegni*, zbiorze tabel i opisów, które przedstawił rodzinie królewskiej w 1756 roku, aby zilustrować swój plan. Po śmierci Luigiego Vanvitellogo w roku 1773 jego wielki projekt został zrealizowany przez jego syna Carla i innych architektów. Budowa parku rozpoczęła się w 1753 roku i trwała ponad 50 lat. Tekst dotyczy Pałacu Królewskiego w Casercie jako miejsca, w którym architektura i zieleń zawsze stanowiły jednolitą całość.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Burbon, Vanvitelli, ogród włoski, barok, ogród angielski, akwedukt Carolino

# THE GARDENS OF THE ROYAL PALACE OF CASERTA: THE DREAM OF LUIGI VANVITELLI. THE CREATION AND EVOLUTION OF AN EXTRAORDINARY HISTORICAL GARDEN

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**ABSTRACT:** The Royal Palace of Caserta, a sumptuous residence of the Bourbon dynasty, is a highly articulated museum system: in addition to the monumental palace, the complex also includes the large gardens: from the oldest part of the Italian garden through the eighteenth-century French-inspired garden to the landscape garden. In 1750, Charles of Bourbon decided to build a new royal residence as the ideal centre of the Kingdom of Naples. The project for the imposing building, destined to rival other European royal residences, was entrusted to Luigi Vanvitelli, an architect of Dutch origin. Vanvitelli's idea for the park is contained in the *Dichiarazione dei disegni*, a set of tables and descriptions he presented to the royal family in 1756 to illustrate his project. After the death of Luigi Vanvitelli in 1773, his grand project was carried out by his son Carlo and other architects. The construction of the park began in 1753 and lasted for over 50 years. The article focuses on the Royal Palace of Caserta as a place where architecture and greenery have always constituted a unified whole.

**KEYWORDS:** Bourbon, Vanvitelli, Italian garden, Baroque, English garden, Carolino Aqueduct, management



## Introduction

The Royal Palace of Caserta, a sumptuous residence of the Bourbon dynasty, is a highly articulated museum system: in addition to the monumental palace, the complex also includes the large gardens which, in turn, lend themselves to further classifications: from the oldest part of the Italian garden through the eighteenth-century garden inspired by French garden art to the landscape garden. Museum use and conservation needs, aspects that are not always easily reconciled, cannot be separated from the reconstruction of the history of the creation of these gardens and their evolution over time. Also, their management must be adjusted to both aesthetic and functional needs.

## Historical notes

The main documentary sources that allow us to reconstruct the genesis and evolution of the Royal Palace gardens have been found in the Archivio Storico (Historical Archive) of the Royal Palace of Caserta and the dedicated bibliography, as well as in the documentation available from the Administration, especially as regards the history of the last decades and the restoration and enhancement interventions.<sup>1</sup> Particularly rich in contributions are letters, such as the ones sent by Luigi Vanvitelli to his brother Urbano, which contain information on the construction phases of the palace and gardens.<sup>2</sup>

In 1750, Charles of Bourbon decided to build a new royal residence as the ideal centre of the Kingdom of Naples, now autonomous and free from Spanish domination. The plain of Terra di Lavoro, the *Campania felix* of the ancient Romans, and a site dominated by the sixteenth-century palace of the Acquaviva family were chosen as the location for the new administrative capital of the kingdom. Designing the imposing building, destined to rival other European royal residences, was entrusted, after various events, to Luigi Vanvitelli (1700–1773), an architect of Dutch origin who was inspired by well-known models such as the Escorial, Aranjuez and, of course, Versailles. The construction of the Royal Palace of Caserta began with the laying of the first stone on 20 January 1752 and proceeded energetically until 1759, the year in which Charles of Bourbon, after the death of his father, King Philip V of Spain, left the Kingdom of Naples for Madrid. After the death of Luigi Vanvitelli in 1773, his grand project was carried out by his son Carlo and other architects of his school.

1 A. Gianfrotta, *Manoscritti di Luigi Vanvitelli nell'archivio della Reggia di Caserta* (Caserta, 2000); A. Gianfrotta, M.R. Iacono, 'Venti documenti dell'Archivio delle Reggia di Caserta', in: *Il giardino inglese nella Reggia di Caserta. La storia e i documenti, le piante, le fabbriche* (Napoli, 1987).

2 F. Strazzullo, *Le lettere di Luigi Vanvitelli della biblioteca palatina di Caserta* (Napoli, 1976), letters nos. 181 (1753), 191 (1754), 1249 (1766).

At the Royal Palace of Caserta, architecture and greenery have always constituted a unified whole. The construction of the park began in 1753 and continued for over fifty years. The part on the floor closest to the Palace, which includes the Gran Parterre with the large expanses of lawn overlooking the counter-façade and surrounded by groves, and the so-called Bosco Vecchio (Old Forest) were arranged during the first phase, between 1753 and 1773. In 1773, after the death of Luigi Vanvitelli, the works in the park slowed down and in 1777 Luigi's son Carlo, who took over the works of the factory, presented to Ferdinand IV of Bourbon a new design, in which his father's original idea was scaled down; this was owed to both the economic difficulties that occurred and to the need to finish the work fast and to adapt it to new trends in garden art. Luigi's design was maintained in its main lines and the so-called Via d'Acqua was built, a spectacular sequence of waterfalls, fountains, pools and basins arranged along a longitudinal path in a slight slope about 3 km long, up to the Briano mountain. The Park covers an area of about one hundred hectares, to which later were added the twenty-three hectares of the English Garden, forming an articulated and evocative landscape system (Fig. 1). In 1997, the Royal Palace of Caserta was declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO.

### The design by Luigi Vanvitelli

Vanvitelli's idea for the park is contained in the *Dichiarazione dei disegni*, a set of tables and descriptions presented by the architect to the royal family in 1756 to illustrate his project. The delimitation of the area and the first plantings took place in 1753 with the collaboration of the gardener Martin Biancour.<sup>3</sup> The iconographic program, linked to mythological episodes important to the culture of Arcadia, was defined with the support of the scholar Porzio Leonardi,<sup>4</sup> who drew on ancient literary sources such as Ovid and Pausanias.<sup>5</sup> The architect had studied the projects of his Dutch, German and French colleagues,<sup>6</sup> and was well acquainted with the parks and gardens of Versailles, Fontainebleau and the Tuileries;<sup>7</sup> he therefore designed an avenue which led from the Royal

3 Vanvitelli's correspondence contains many testimonies about the development of the project and his difficult relationship with the chief gardener Martin Biancour († 1793). Previously employed in Capodimonte, Biancour arrived in Caserta in 1751 and retired in 1770.

4 Strazzullo, *Le lettere di Luigi Vanvitelli*, letter no. 97 (1752).

5 C. De Seta, *L'Olimpo venatorio. Il parco della Reggia di Caserta*, FMR, CXXXVI, 1999.

6 P. Cornaglia, J.L. Sancho, 'La diffusione del giardino francese in Europa tra Sei e Settecento', in: *Viaggio nei Giardini d'Europa. Da Le Nôtre a Henry James*, exhibition catalogue, La Venaria Reale, 5 luglio – 20 ottobre 2019 (La Venaria Reale, 2019).

7 Strazzullo, *Le lettere di Luigi Vanvitelli*, letters nos. 181 (1753), 191 (1794), 1249 (1766).

### Main Components of the Royal Park and the English Garden

1. Basin of Venus
2. Old Wood
3. Main waterfall
4. Castelluccia
5. Entrance from centre of the city
6. Garden of Flora
7. Margherita Fountain
8. Gran Parterre and Exedra - Theater of greenery
9. Wood of old Labyrinth
10. Big Fishpond
11. District of Liparoti
12. English Garden - Upper Grasslands
13. English Garden - Lower Grasslands or Stage
14. Greenhouses and Botanical School
15. Pine Forest
16. Green Hall
17. Large water Channel | Monumental Fountains
18. Aperia

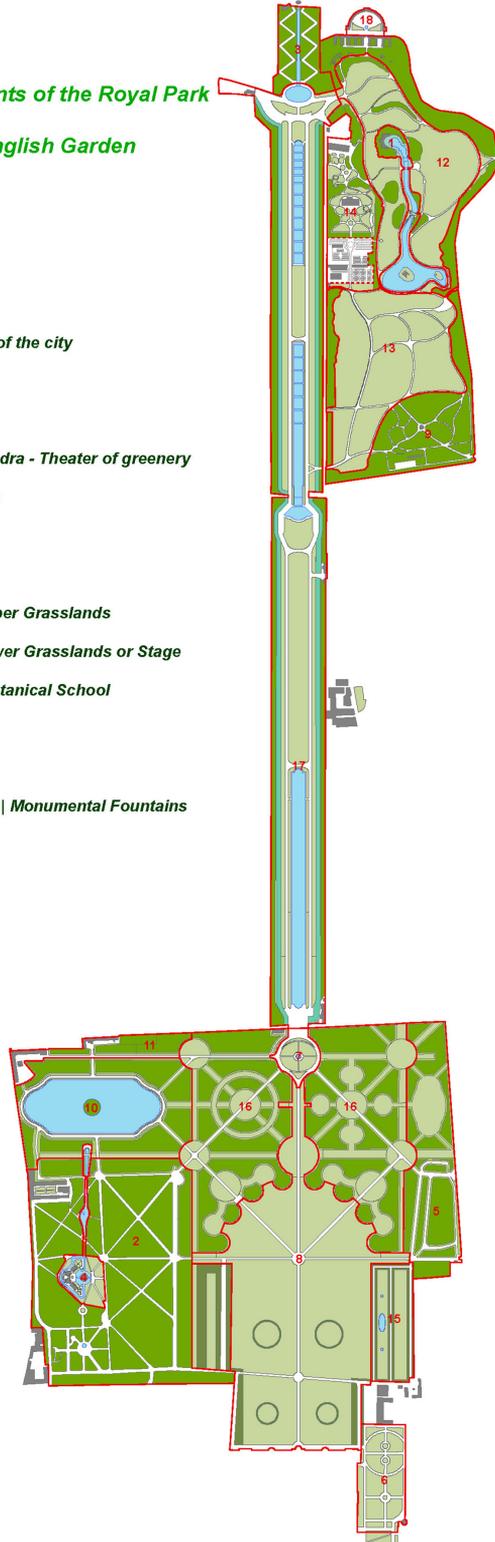


Fig. 1

A map of the gardens

Palace to the waterfall. It was three kilometres long, flanked by trees, with vast meadows surrounded by groves, parterres and plants in flower beds and around pools of water. Economic reasons reduced the original idea, so the garden with a French inspiration became a park divided into two parts, simplified into a series of areas in a formal taste which were never completed. Two *giardini segreti* with two pools dedicated to Flora and Zephyr were inserted in a parterre adorned with *broderies* ('embroideries') inspired by the French manual by Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville (1680–1765) *La théorie et la pratique du jardinage* (1709).<sup>8</sup> An unroofed equestrian racecourse, a large quadrangular space intended for the practice of level riding, was located to the east. To the north of the latter, along the border of the Royal Park and behind the ancient palace of the princes Acquaviva of Aragon, was a set of gardens with the Fountain of Vertumnus. Beyond the Acquaviva palace, the *Dichiarazione dei disegni* placed the Pomario (Fruit Garden), later known as the Fruttiera, with the Spring of Pomona. The gardens and the Fruttiera were separated from the rest of the park by covered avenues, with double rows of trees divided by two longitudinal flowerbeds treated as lawns, interrupted in turn by a central lobed basin. The present-day Pineta (Pine Forest) with its three twentieth-century pools corresponds to these avenues and small fishpond. The avenues would have concealed the land used for productive purposes from view, distinguishing it from the elegant surfaces of the central parterre, with the Fountain of the Royal Rivers, the *broderies* and the theatrical façade with an apse. Further north of the Fruttiera, Vanvitelli imagined two green areas to which he gave the name of Saloni (Halls). In the first of those, a vegetable portico embraced an English parterre with the fountains of Amor and Psyche: this area, now wooded, is known in the oral tradition as the Nursery. The second Salone, rhomboidal in shape, was in the last area before the border of the royal park: according to the *Dichiarazione dei disegni*, its chariot-shaped pergola was adorned with statues, seats and vases arranged around the fountains of Narcissus and Echo. The axis that defined the west side of this area and the previous one was to be interrupted by a circular basin of the Atlanta Fountain and ended with the quadrilobate basin of the Hippocrene Fountain, referring to the sacred spring of the Muses (Fig. 2).

## Evolution of the project

After Luigi Vanvitelli died, further arrangement works in the park and the completion of the fountains were done under the direction of his son Carlo who, while simplifying it, retained the his father's project, as Luigi had already laid out avenues, dug basins, planted rows of trees

<sup>8</sup> Table: *Disposition general d'un magnifique jardin tout de niveau*, 1709.



Fig. 2

The project as envisaged in the *Dichiarazione di disegni*: one of the tables made by Luigi Vanvitelli to illustrate his design for the park to the king; ultimately, however, a different design was put into effect. The initial flat part of the gardens is shown with the Grand Parterre. From the Archivio Storico della Reggia di Caserta

and outlined the appearance of the gardens. The colossal waterfall required ever greater expenses, forcing the eastwards and westwards extension of the park to the limit. The number of fountains was reduced from nineteen to five; the remainder was replaced with herms and statues copied from ancient models. The Gran Parterre at the entrance with the surrounding groves was organized as a vast grassy expanse, large and orderly, divided into four large squares that housed the pheasants. The perimeter was delimited by groves of holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*), hornbeams (*Ostrya carpinifolia*, *Carpinus betulus*) and lime trees (*Tilia spp.*) pruned neatly to the height of ten metres, forming a vegetal wall with the foliage free to grow. The paths on the left, with their backs to the counter, lead to the Bosco Vecchio, built between the end of the sixteenth century and the first decades of the seventeenth century by the princes Giulio Antonio and Andrea Matteo Acquaviva.<sup>9</sup> In 1577, Giulio Antonio Acquaviva had succeeded in elevating the county of Caserta to the rank of principality; the new status occasioned a restoration of

9 After leaving Casahirta, the ancient city on the hill, between 500 and 600 AD, Caserta expanded on the plain, in place of a village tower mentioned as early as in the 1102 bull of the Metropolitan of Capua Senne. The princes Acquaviva transformed the ancient feudal tower into a Renaissance residence with Italian gardens, fishponds, water features and statues of such splendour that in 1667 Guicciardini compared it to the Tuscan villas for elegance. The formal garden that included an ancient holm oak grove extended up to the summer casino made by Andrea Matteo Acquaviva to commemorate his marriage to Isabella Caracciolo. On the site of the ancient garden, still called Bosco Vecchio, Luigi Vanvitelli created the first part of the 'delights' destined for the garden of the Royal Palace.

the ancient residence called Palazzo Vecchio (Old Palace), providing it with a scenic integration thanks to a walled garden completed in 1582.<sup>10</sup> The engineer Giovanni Antonio Nigrone was entrusted with the plans for the fountains.<sup>11</sup> Only three of those were ever completed: one with four pools superimposed in the shape of a boat, another depicting Orpheus bewitching animals, the last consisting of three polylobate tanks. The ancient Acquaviva gardens extended up to the Palazzo al Boschetto (Grove Palace), about 800 metres from Palazzo Acquaviva. Built in the early 1600s, it was a place of recreation and rest with rich and well-kept Italian gardens in the Renaissance taste that included a labyrinth ‘divided and fenced with laurels’, a citrus garden, several flower gardens, herb gardens with medicinal plants, numerous statues and fountains, a fishpond bordered by slender arches with seven statues with musical instruments, a theatre surrounded by niches with statues of Apollo and the nine Muses, a circular theatre, and a large grove planted with numerous tree species: walnuts, chestnuts, cypresses, laurels and oaks.<sup>12</sup> The area featured many iconographic symbols, such as herms and statues inspired by Greek mythology, astrology and cultural trends of the time, with references to Arcadia.<sup>13</sup>

In the first project, Vanvitelli had retained a part of the pre-existing gardens: on the right-hand side, he left three small gardens of the Acquaviva Palace and included the grove on the left-hand side of the large garden developed in the back of the Royal Palace. The reasons for this initial recovery may have gone beyond the possibility of restarting the old water systems, dating back to the time of the princes Acquaviva and restored in the Bourbon period. In fact, the themes initially chosen by Vanvitelli for the fountains and the statuary seem to be connected with those present in the Acquaviva gardens, creating a continuum that traced the legendary history of the place back to Antiquity. The grove maintained its original structure until 1747: statues, fountains and gardens were, with a few variations, still those of the seventeenth century and Vanvitelli’s subsequent interventions: they respected the formal elements constituted by the tree species and by the course of the avenues. In skilfully combining the pre-existing natural elements of the land with the cultural suggestions and exotic taste of his royal client, Vanvitelli united the past and the future. Documents in the Historical Archives of the Royal Palace of Caserta contain information about the arboreal composition of the Bosco Vecchio after Vanvitelli’s plantings: *Quercus ilex*

10 E. Barletti, *Giovan Antonio Dosio da san Gimignano architetto e scultor fiorentino tra Roma, Firenze e Napoli* (Firenze, 2011).

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.



Fig. 3

Castelluccia: a construction resembling a small fortress present already in the Acquaviva garden, before the construction of the Royal Palace. With the Bourbons, it became a place of recreation with a beautiful Italian garden

and *Laurus nobilis* were the prevalent species and are dominant to date, together with the *Carpinus spp.* and *Fraxinus ornus*.<sup>14</sup> In his volume *Platea dello Stato di Caserta del 1826*, Cavalier Antonio Sancio, administrator of the Royal Site of Caserta, also mentioned *Quercus cerris* and a rich undergrowth of creeping ivy.<sup>15</sup> No longer suited to the tastes and fashion of the early nineteenth century, the ancient statues and fountains, described by Sancio as bad: ‘cattive statuette di marmo’, were destroyed and the gardens were transformed into groves. Only some statues survived this radical phase of renovation, including a Shepherd playing the flute, an Atlas and a Sphinx, brought to the English Garden possibly in the first half of the twentieth century.

A small octagonal tower called Pernesta or Prenesta had been built on three levels in the Acquaviva gardens, in the middle of the ancient grove, and this was also preserved and modified in the Bourbon era. After his second marriage, to Francesca von Perstein in 1609, Andrea Matteo Acquaviva built a lodge for ‘delights’ (called Pernesta in honour of his wife), originally decorated with fifteen small tanks, sixteen figures and statues of Adam and Eve inside. Today, after various reworkings

14 *Archivio Storico Reggia di Caserta* (hereinafter: ASRC), series: Incartamenti delle Reali Amministrazioni (Royal Administration Files, hereinafter: I.R.A.), 1821, fasc. 325; ASRC I.R.A. 1835, fasc. 382; ASRC I.R.A. 1852 bis, fasc. 80; ASRC I.R.A. 1908, fasc. 193; ASRC I.R.A. 1932, fasc. 492; ASRC I.R.A. 1999, fasc. 258 and 287; ASRC I.R.A. 2023, fasc. 306; ASRC I.R.A. 2050, fasc. 508 and 509; ASRC I.R.A. 2066, fasc. 615; ASRC I.R.A. 2176, fasc. 377.

15 ASRC, *Platea dello Stato di Caserta del 1826*, vol. 3558.

and transformations, the old lodge is profoundly different. The building was extensively described in some reliefs dating from 1634 and 1635 and in the *Apprezzo* written by the engineer Costantino Manni in 1749. To satisfy the wishes of the young sovereign, Ferdinand IV, the architect Francesco Collecini (1730–1804), Vanvitelli's collaborator, restored the lodge on the foundations of the ancient Pernesta, giving it the features of a small fortress surrounded by a moat, called Castelluccia (Fig. 3). In order to train the young king in the military arts, bastions, barracks, an esplanade, reduced-size *cavalieri*<sup>16</sup> and all the other necessities to simulate a fortified square were built, replacing gardens decorated with vases, statues and birds. Starting from 1818, this part of the park was redeveloped again, assuming, in substance, the current configuration; the numerous interventions of extraordinary maintenance, promoted in this phase, responded to the need, strongly perceived by the Bourbon monarchy, to reaffirm their identity after their restoration to power.<sup>17</sup> The restoration of the Castelluccia involved a radical change: on the upper esplanade, a formal garden with flower beds, hedges and citrus plants was recomposed; the bastion was lightened and the corner sentry boxes were demolished and replaced by balconies with marble and iron revolving seats; one of the barracks was converted into a delightful dining room and the other into a kitchen; the gatehouse became a coffee pavilion with interior paintings that simulated rich draperies; one of the *rivellini*<sup>18</sup> was transformed into a belvedere and the other began to feature an artificial cave and a Chinese dome in tin, decorated with painted scales, hieroglyphics and brass bells; the esplanade in front of the Torretta (Small Tower) was embellished with exotic plants: magnolias, araucarias, palms and camellias; the Torretta, surrounded by a moat, was rearranged and furnished to offer temporary refreshment to the court. The last significant restoration of the Castelluccia, carried out at the beginning of 2000s, has allowed to recover the nineteenth-century layout of the site.<sup>19</sup> The restoration of the plants was particularly complex due to the need to free the garden from the incongruous changes suffered since the Second World War, which resulted more from neglect and poor attention than a precise plan of transformation. The body of documents relating to the management of the gardens is small and it was necessary to operate by analogy, that is, to evaluate the occurrence of the species found on site by analysing botanical catalogues of the English Garden

16 Fortifications consisting of land elevations, used in the defence of military fortresses.

17 F. Patturelli, *Reali Delizie di Caserta e San Leucio* (Caserta, 1826).

18 In fortification works, a *rivellino* is a masonry element erected in front of the gates to defend them from enemy fire and bullets and to facilitate the sorties of the defenders (in use since the fourteenth century).

19 *Il Governo dei Giardini e dei Parchi Storici: restauro, manutenzione, gestione* (Napoli, 2001).



Fig. 4

The Peschiera Grande: a large tank designed by Vanvitelli to host simulations of the king's naval battles and raise fish for the royal table

drawn up between 1803 and 1873. Based on these considerations, the area of the *Cycas revoluta* has been reorganized and the citrus orchard, whose presence is historically attested, has been replanted. Careful phytosanitary interventions have improved the conditions of the *Camellia japonica* collection that boasts specimens dating back to the early 1800s. To recreate the atmosphere of the place, the perimeter bands of flowers with bright colours were revived and the area of the cacti was reconstituted. The most complex intervention concerned the waterway with a moat, a canal, bridges, artificial islets and false ruins, altogether an expression of the picturesque taste that characterized the garden art of the late 1700s.

In the same area, following the Bosco Vecchio, Vanvitelli designed the construction of the Peschiera Grande (Large Fishpond), an artificial basin with an islet in the centre (Fig. 4). Like the Castelluccia, the Peschiera was destined for the sovereign's military exercises, so the two buildings were connected. In fact, the Peschiera was used by the young Ferdinand IV of Bourbon as a scene for staged naval battles. The land and sea battles staged for the amusement of the young Ferdinand IV and his very young wife Maria Carolina of Austria took place between the ancient Pernesta and the Peschiera, the land ones in the esplanade in front of the Castelluccia, equipped as a fortress. Each time the king chose the theme for the war exercises: night sorties, simulations of fires, sieges of forts, with great expenditure of men and means (cannons, mortars, rifles). Naval battles staged near the Peschiera consisted in an assault that the king himself, at the head of a flotilla of boats, led against the

*pagliara*, a small straw construction on the islet, equipped with cannons and darters like a real fortress and meant to be attacked during such a mock battle. Fish and freshwater crustaceans coming from the lakes and rivers of the territory were bred in the Peschiera, to be used for the royal table. This confirmed the utilitarian as well as the leisure character of the *fabriques*<sup>20</sup> and the Bourbon sites. The park of the Royal Palace, remarkably simplified compared to the monumental formal garden envisaged by Vanvitelli, had over time preserved its purpose as a place of recreation of the royal family and the court, but at the same time it was administered as a productive unit, following the example of other royal sites intended for the profitable and sometimes even experimental economic activities, such as the silk factories at San Leucio or the farm at Carditello. The Royal Palace of Caserta could be considered, in many respects, a self-sufficient and sustainable system. The Carolino Aqueduct itself was an expression of this policy: on the one hand, it fed fountains and water features that delighted the court, on the other, it constantly guaranteed water resources for the life in the palace and for productive activities.<sup>21</sup> This also includes the decision to allocate the park's pools and the large fishpond to fish farming, to create pheasant enclosures and to introduce game to be hunted, as well as the decision to consider the lawns not only as architectural features of the park, but

20 Starting from the nineteenth century, thanks to the strong impulse given to agriculture by the Bourbon rulers, in particular Francis I and Ferdinand II, the royal estates of Caserta, San Leucio and Carditello were to provide most of the food for the kings' tables: San Leucio and Caserta supplied noble wines, fine oil, delicious fruits and vegetables; Carditello, thanks to the exceptional richness of its pastures, offered large quantities of wheat, legumes, milk and meat from herds of buffaloes and cows. Pheasants were particularly appreciated among the wildfowl and in the early 1800s, some areas in the Caserta Grove were used for the reproduction of these birds kept in 'cages covered with tarred rope nets'. The hatching of eggs, two thousand at a time, was done several times a year. In Caserta, not only the presence of local pheasants is attested, but also that of American and Chinese pheasants: three American specimens arrived from Lyon in 1830 as a gift to the king from the duke of Orleans. The supply of fresh eggs and white meat was guaranteed by the royal poultry farms in the Boschetto of Caserta and in San Silvestro. The chicken houses functioned as true companies: after deducting the products necessary for the royal canteen, the excess was sold to external customers; the overseer was obliged to show a precise statement of the income and expenses. Goat meat (Tibetan goats were raised) and pork were also served on the king's table. Hunting in the park of the Royal Palace of Caserta included hares, Numidian chickens, peacocks, domestic ducks, and woodcocks for hunting trips in winter. Fish dishes were particularly appreciated by the sovereigns. In winter, when sea fishing was less profitable due to adverse weather conditions, freshwater fish were mainly served: trout, capitals and tench obtained from the rivers and lakes of the kingdom or directly from the royal *peschiere* of Caserta: carp were kept in the Fountain of the Dolphins, mullet in the Big Fish, trout in the Fountain of Aeolus, crabs in the Fountain of Venus and Adonis, capitals at the Castelluccia, mullets and eels in the English Garden. Fish raised in the tanks of the park were processed in service rooms located, for logistical reason, right by the Peschiera.

21 G.M. Bagordo, *Le architetture per l'acqua del Parco di Caserta* (Roma, 2009).



Fig. 5

Via d'Acqua: a large water channel and the Monumental Fountains designed by Luigi and Carlo Vanvitelli as a succession of basins, fountains and waterfalls fed by the Carolino Aqueduct, with sculptures inspired by mythological themes

also as a source of forage thanks to the sowing of *Medicago sativa* and *Lolium perenne*.

The first part of the park is closed by an exedra consisting of laurel espaliers in which there are niches that housed the so-called Termini, sixteen herms in Carrara marble, each of them 2.1 metres tall. The exedra area corresponds to the Circular Theatre with rows of lime trees and hornbeams designed by Luigi Vanvitelli to delimit enclosures crossed by straight avenues and adorned with vases, fountains and statues; today, they look like large meadows surrounded by groves of hornbeams, lime trees and holm oaks and are called Stanze del Verde (Green Rooms). The second part of the park with the monumental Via d'acqua, as seen today, was remodelled by Carlo Vanvitelli, forced to simplify his father's idea for economic needs and in order to adhere to new tastes that moved away from the concepts of the Baroque garden (Fig. 5).<sup>22</sup> The number of fountains was reduced to only five, and where Luigi Vanvitelli had planned the installation of a baroque basin with the Reggia di Nettuno (Neptune's Palace), a large flower basket in plastered masonry with interweaving motifs, for this reason called Canestro or Fioriera (Basket or Planter), was installed, enriched, like in the Renaissance gardens, with small yellow marble supports for the vases of citrus trees. In

<sup>22</sup> Carlo Vanvitelli submitted the new project to the marquis of Sambuca on 14 March 1777. The document is held at the Historical Archives of the Royal Palace of Caserta, series: Dispatches and Reports (Dispacci e Relazioni, hereinafter: D.R.), ASRC D.R. 1619, fasc. 30/88.

1871, a fountain was built there which in 1878 – the year in which Margherita of Savoy became Queen of Italy – took the name of Fontana Margherita. The reasons that led to the installation of this fountain were strictly pragmatic: the *praterie al canestro* (meadows in the area of the Basket) were manually watered using canvas pipes and during the short time of nine years starting from 1862, the administration of the Royal House had to buy new pipes three times. It was therefore decided to create a direct source of water by installing a fountain, which was done with the approval of Nicola Terracciano, Director of the Royal Botanical Garden of Caserta, and for the expense of 150 lire. The ramps of the Bridge of Hercules, on the sides of the current Fontana Margherita, were interrupted by two wooden railings that served to confine pheasants, peacocks and other species of hunting animals in the lower part of the park. Numerous examples of *Rosa mutabilis*, an ancient rose variety called ‘butterfly rose’ because when moved by the wind, the blooms of its five-petalled flowers look like a flight of butterflies, stand out among the vegetation of the meadows surrounding the Fontana Margherita. The Carrara marble herms around the Fontana Margherita depict Apollo and the Muses, protectors of the arts; they arrived in Caserta in 1763. From here began the water route, conceived as an uninterrupted series of parterres and basins flanked by two wide driveways. For the waterway, Luigi Vanvitelli had envisaged the planting of two large rows of Indian chestnuts (horse chestnuts) and avenues of elm trees to the outside of the park. The complexity of the project led Luigi, and later also his son Carlo, to simplify the composition by planting side trees – holm oaks shaped *a sedia* (in the form of a chair) – to create a formal detachment element at double height, above which the highest vegetation retained the natural form. Beyond the main rows, a thick wooded belt allowed to hide the walls from view, thus achieving Vanvitelli’s goal of increasing the visual perception of the depth of the park in order to make it seem more extensive than it really was.<sup>23</sup>

The tradition is that the bowling green in the French garden suggests the shape of the first large fishpond or gully, which was a stretch of water arranged as a flat surface embedded in a grassy parterre on a slight slope along all sides, except for the front one occupied by the cave and the first fountain seen upon entry, the Fontana dei Mostri Marini o dei Delfini (Fountain of Sea Monsters or Dolphins), called so because the water comes out of the mouths of three large sea monsters carved in stone. The conception for and the realization of the whole composition are to be ascribed completely to Carlo, any reference attributable to his father being absent in the *Dichiarazione*. The second fountain, Fontana di Eolo

23 F. Canestrini, M.R. Iacono, ‘Progetto e realizzazione del Parco della Reggia. L’Opera di Luigi e Carlo Vanvitelli’, in: N. Spinosa, *Alla corte di Vanvitelli: i Borbone e le arti alla Reggia di Caserta* (Milano, 2009).

(Fountain of Aeolus), also conceived as a connecting element between terraces, is entirely by Luigi. It consists of a large exedra in which there are several caves that evoke the home of the winds, represented by the statues of zephyrs. The statue of Juno on a chariot pulled by two peacocks, shown in the act of asking Aeolus to unleash his winds against Aeneas's ships, was never placed in its intended location. The entire composition of the rustic cave of the winds was made with sponges, stactites and natural seats. It constituted the starting point for Carlo Vanvitelli's considerations concerning the reinvention of natural elements, whose most direct reference are the fountains of Bagnaia, of which there exists a sketch,<sup>24</sup> attributed to his father, in the corpus of Vanvitelli drawings held at the Royal Palace.<sup>25</sup> The strong Renaissance connotation is expressed in the creation of an ancient nymphaeum – a place where to stop for a rest during the torrid southern summers. The whole composition was enriched with innumerable statues of zephyrs and tritons. Even the water veil of the central waterfall seems inspired by the complex architecture of the Fountain of the Flood, placed at the end of the garden of the villa of Cardinal de Gambara.<sup>26</sup>

A sequence of waterfalls that start from the Fontana di Cerere (Fountain of Ceres), equipped with the typical water tricks used to spray unsuspecting visitors or to allow them to cool off during the summer, is also in the Renaissance style. The Fontana di Cerere, a tribute to the fertility of Sicily, was built between 1782 and 1783. The scenic layout is arranged on three levels, at the top of which there is statue of a seated Ceres holding, with the help of a Cupid, a medallion with the symbol of Sicily. The fountain which evokes the myth of Venus and Adonis as narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* was built between 1783 and 1789. Luigi Vanvitelli was responsible for its innovative hydraulic arrangement and the arrangement of the overlapping pools, all able to be emptied independently into a lateral underground channel to allow cleaning and repairs. Below the waterfall of the Briano Mountain, in a basin known as the Bagno di Diana (Bath of Diana), two important marble groups depict the myth of Diana and Actaeon, also taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here the water, coming from 38 km away, makes a jump of 80 metres. A careful prospective study has ensured that the basins are clearly visible from the entrance vestibule of the Royal Palace: sections treated as a lawn act as a detachment and prevent a visual overlap between the tanks and their sculptural groups. The entire area adjacent to

24 The drawing attributed to Luigi Vanvitelli (Royal Palace, inv. no. 1659), consisting of a grey ink watercolour, represents the garden of Villa Lante in Bagnaia seen from the Fountain of the Moors, with twin buildings in the background. The Fountain of the Flood is barely visible in the distance.

25 C. Marinelli, *L'Esercizio del disegno. I Vanvitelli* (Milano, 1993).

26 *La Villa Lante di Bagnaia* (Milano, 1961).



Fig. 6

A map of the Royal Park with the main attractions

the waterfall was completed by Carlo Vanvitelli when the contemporary assignment for the construction of the English Garden, in collaboration with the gardener J. Andrew Graefer, suggested a new interest in the study of the natural world and the creation of an extremely realistic, albeit completely artificial, landscape. The composition was wholly based on a new configuration of the landscape, obtained with the planting of holm oaks, oaks and boxwood bushes and the creation of false rocks in tuff material. In the waterfall, artificial rocks create a series of bumps and reliefs that enliven the entire composition and make a rough and suggestive path that ends in the calm of the vast basin – a background to Actaeon’s unhappy love for Diana. The transformation into a hunting forest, the modification of the ramps and the construction of the waterfall completely changed the original design, giving it a greater landscape value, also attested to by the attention lavished on the preparation of stops and points of view and the preparation of ascent paths (Fig. 6).

At the end of the eighteenth century, an English Garden, an informal or landscape garden inspired by a new fashion that spread throughout Europe from England, was created on the eastern side of the park (Fig. 7). In April 1786, John Andrew Graefer, a British gardener of German origin, arrived at Caserta following a request sent by Sir William Hamilton, Minister of His British Majesty in the Kingdom of Naples and a true promoter for this garden, to Joseph Banks, president of the Royal



Fig. 7

A map of the English Garden with the main attractions

Society of London. The collaboration between Graefer, a gardener, and Carlo Vanvitelli, an architect, resulted in the emergence of one of the first romantic gardens in Italy (Fig. 8).<sup>27</sup> New scientific-botanical interests embedded in the conception of the informal garden or landscape found correspondence in the wealth of specimens of exotic and rare imported species the gardeners tried to acclimate. Graefer and Vanvitelli interpreted this new concept perfectly and in the subsequent development of the garden of Caserta, next to the search for picturesque effects with the alternation of meadows, flower parterres, groves, canals, ponds and false ruins, a botanical experimentation activity was started thanks to the construction of cold and warm greenhouses to acclimatize, study and produce plants to spread throughout the Kingdom of Naples, at royal sites and in public nurseries. Over the years, expert gardeners such as the father and son Geremia and Francesco Ascione, and important botanists from Campania such as Giovanni Gussone and Nicola Terracciano, took turns in the care and direction of the garden.<sup>28</sup>

27 F. Canestrini, 'Il restauro del Giardino Inglese ovvero del Real Orto Botanico', *Bollettino d'Arte MIBAC*, vol. 97, 2012, no. 15.

28 N. Terracciano, 'Cenno intorno al giardino Botanico della Real Casa in Caserta ed a certe piante rare che vi si coltivano, con pianta topografica', in: C. Knight, *Il Giardino Inglese di Caserta. Un'avventura settecentesca* (Napoli, 1876, reprinted 1986).



Fig. 8

The English Garden of the Royal Palace of Caserta owes its uniqueness to the undeniable monumental and landscape value. With its groves, grasslands, greenhouses for exotic plants, canals and charming architecture, the garden fulfilled Queen Maria Carolina's wish, encouraged by Lord Hamilton, to have a place of delights that surpassed the rigor and formalism of the Italian garden.<sup>29</sup> In the conception for the garden, it was to be maintained as a space of botanical interest for the knowledge of the exotic flora discovered in the numerous scientific expeditions that throughout the eighteenth century departed from Europe to distant lands. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the typical activity of a botanical garden or an experimental laboratory to acclimatize, study, research and reproduce plant species has been established in the English Garden at Caserta. For this purpose, a catalogue was periodically produced; its oldest printed copy dates to 1803. Despite the turbulent historical and political events experienced by the Kingdom in this period, the catalogue of 1816 increased in comparison to that of 1803: by then, camellias of the *Camellia japonica* type, botanically recognized only in 1784, were already among the cultivated species. In this garden

The Water-Lily Lake in the English Garden: a pond filled with water lilies is one of the areas most evocative of the landscape garden (and concurrently a botanical garden) built at the end of the eighteenth century in contrast to the formal garden. The temple is one of the garden's false ruins

<sup>29</sup> Soprintendenza per i Beni Ambientali, Architettonici, Artistici e Storici di Caserta e Benevento, *Il Giardino Inglese nella Reggia di Caserta, la storia e i documenti, le piante, le fabbriche* (Napoli, 1987).

planted was the very first specimen of this species that came from the Far East, via England, to continental Europe; suckers born from that mother camellia still grow there today. Also, not only the catalogue disseminated new botanical knowledge: seeds of plant species and varieties were regularly put on sale. Soil conditions were optimal for the plants and the variety of species was additionally guaranteed by the political relations with other European states. Some species acclimatized, were described for the first time, and were classified with the Linnean binomial by naturalists at Caserta. Many of the specimens planted in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still growing here.<sup>30</sup> The exceptional character of this garden is confirmed by the presence of plants that have entered Europe for the first time and are still alive, of exotic plants, of plants of notable size and acquired shape, and of native plants of great size and age. At the greenhouses, the area allocated to the Botanical School is still recognizable. The ancient vegetable garden, called Orto di Maria Carolina (Queen Maria Carolina's Vegetable Garden), has given way to a forest of young holm oaks. The products of the garden included vegetables and medicinal herbs intended mainly for the royal canteen, and flowers in bloom. Among the edible species were lemons, oranges, tangerines, strawberries, persimmons, bananas, pomegranates and pineapples. Among the aromatic species were camphor, lavender and sage. Today, the English Garden is a treasure chest of biodiversity, even more so because it is located in the city centre, which makes it an indispensable site for fauna: butterflies, cicadas, hoopoes, ducks, robins, moorhens, egrets, dragonflies, geese, white dancers, mallards, kingfishers, grey herons and swallows.

The romantic spirit that hovers in the English Garden had its origin in a variety of cultural ferments that, especially during the eighteenth century, had led to the rediscovery of human dignity and nature. In addition, descriptions of Chinese gardens, which seemed to correspond to the new ideas of respect and love for nature, had spread in the West. Italian gardens, which with their geometric composition defied the spontaneity of the natural world exalted by philosophers, poets and artists of the time, could no longer attract a public fascinated by the picturesque and the exotic. The landscape was never neglected; for instance, pruning of the trees motivated by, among others, the need to preserve points of view was a part of ordinary maintenance works for the year 1830. It was the twentieth century that witnessed a slow but progressive deterioration, with the decommissioning of nursery, the decrease in production and scientific research activities, and the loss of some views and perspectives following the disappearance of numerous botanical specimens important to the Garden's landscape composition. The recovery and

<sup>30</sup> F. Canestrini, M.R. Iacono, *Gli Alberi Monumentali del Giardino all'inglese di Caserta* (Caserta, 2006).

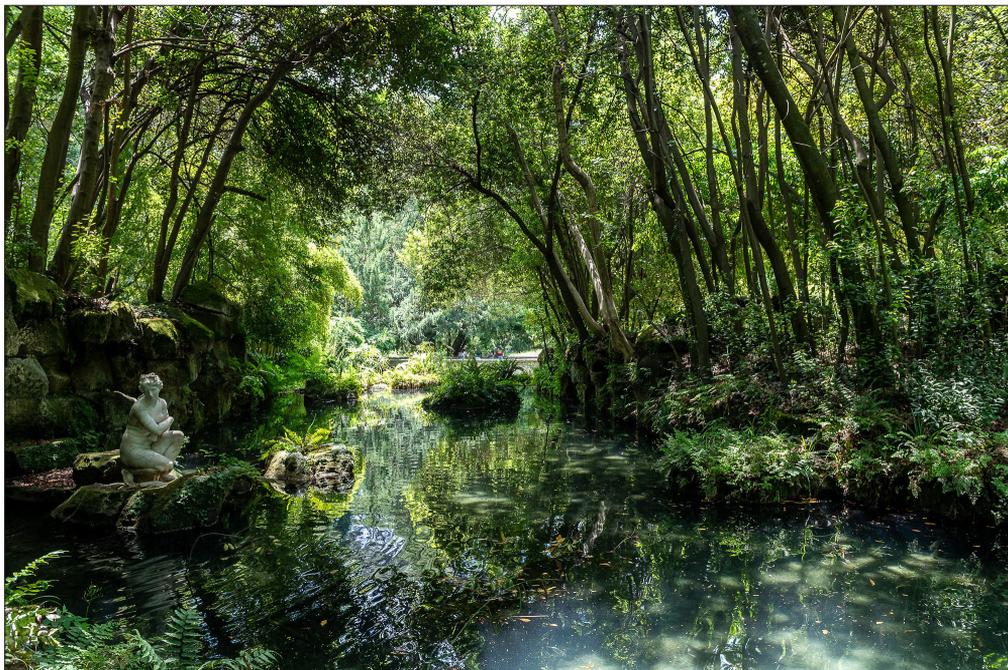


Fig. 9

The Bagno di Venere lies in the heart of the romantic garden, which is full of vegetation and false ruins. It features an evocative eighteenth-century statue of Venus emerging from her bath

reorganization of the Garden began in 1982. In its final configuration, the Garden is divided longitudinally into two parts: the wild part in the east and the cultivated one in the west. The evocative views and the typical elements of the landscape garden have also been recovered: the false ruins of a Doric Temple with the collection of succulent plants, the paths lined with groves and botanical collections of trees, the Fountain of the Shepherd, a nymphaeum at the ancient Cryptoportico, and a small lake called the Bagno di Venere (Bath of Venus) (Fig. 9). From there, the water, following the valley, reaches a wonderful lake of water lilies on which there are two islets, with false ruins of a temple on the larger one and a small shelter for the swans on the other. Elements related to freemasonry: a neo-Gothic false chapel, a pyramid and a temple of the ancient labyrinth contribute to making the atmosphere of this garden more evocative.

### The Royal Gardens today

Over time, the Gardens of the Royal Palace of Caserta lost their productive function, but preserved their original purpose as a place of leisure. Today, they are a green lung for the city of Caserta and constitute a complex and delicate ecosystem with refined artefacts and many ancient plant specimens. The balance of this ecosystem can be compromised by museums and the large number of tourists (nearly a million visitors before the COVID-19 pandemic), who visit the Gardens every year fascinated with their grandeur and landscape value. The park has an articulated layout that includes areas

for visitors to stop and relax in, and a restaurant. To facilitate the visit, a shuttle service has been established with electric buses to reduce pollutant emissions. The relationship with the city and the surrounding area has always been very strong, because the Gardens are located in the city centre and are, therefore, enjoyed daily. The coexistence of various types of use and a range of needs of various target audiences require diverse forms of protection and enhancement. For these reasons, it is necessary to develop conscious management processes that would preserve the aesthetics and the essence of the Gardens reconciling them with functionality. The need to manage the ‘museo verde’ (green museum) in an innovative way also stems from the awareness of having to prevent the effects of climate change that increasingly frequently cause very serious damage to the plant heritage of the Royal Palace of Caserta, and from a greater sensitivity towards the issues of sustainability and respect for the environment accompanied by environmentally correct decisions. The goal is to achieve optimal technical management with which to preserve the original idea of the garden in a more sustainable way, in line with the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda. The mitigation of air pollution, thermoregulation, psycho-physical well-being, are some of the advantages related to the presence of greenery; moreover, the garden has always represented a connection between man and the landscape, facilitating the integration of one into the other. Based on this awareness, an in-depth plan of expanding the historical knowledge of the gardens – their facilities and architectural elements as much as their arboreal heritage – has been launched. In order to optimize the study and research activities, a detailed Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with some Italian universities. The presence of scientific institutions guarantees proper support during the consultation phase for the drafting of new restoration projects. The aims that we propose to achieve consist essentially in a more functional and rational management of the gardens that would respond to the typical needs of the museum institution (aesthetic enjoyment, educational enhancement) as well as to economic and ecological needs (proper management of water resources, optimisation of maintenance practices, rationalisation of economic commitment, respect for biodiversity and ecological balances, compliance with the sustainability objectives of the 2030 UN Agenda).

Even more important is the need to make visitors and citizens sensitive to, and respectful of, the essence of the historic gardens. The beauty of the Palace’s gardens has fascinated painters, including landscape painters, such as Jacob Philipp Hackert, and writers who visited them during their Grand Tour. One of the travellers to express their admiration was Goethe: ‘The gardens are beautifully laid out, and suit well with a district which itself is thought a garden’.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Goethe’s Travels in Italy* (London, 1885), p. 196.

## Conclusions

The Royal Palace of Caserta, one of the most sumptuous royal residences in the world, owes its magnificence to the foresight of King Charles of Bourbon, who in 1752 wanted it to be a centre of the new administrative capital of the Kingdom of Naples, and to the creative genius of architect who carried out the project, Luigi Vanvitelli. Inhabited from 1780, the Palace was embellished by monumental gardens that included the pre-existing Renaissance park and the French-style arrangement with sculptural fountains, parterres, groves and meadows adopted by Luigi Vanvitelli, even if simplified compared to his first project presented to the monarch. At the end of the eighteenth century, thanks to the perseverance of the English ambassador to Naples, Sir William Hamilton, a friend of Queen Maria Carolina of Habsburg-Lorraine, an English garden, one the first landscape gardens in Italy, was created in the eastern part of the park. Inspired by a new philosophy that contrasted with the rigor of the Italian and French formal gardens which forced nature into rigid and artificial forms, the Romantic garden celebrated the spontaneity of nature itself in a system that was to seem as free and authentic as possible. During the nineteenth century, the English Garden also made room for a Botanical Garden intended for the acclimatization of exotic and unknown species, and for an agricultural garden. After the unification of Italy, the Royal Palace of Caserta and its gardens experienced turbulent historical events until the museum was opened in 1919. The Royal Palace and the Carolino Aqueduct were included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites in 1997.

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## PAOLA VIOLA

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